

## D. General Style Sheet\*

The following is a short list of more complex recurring problems. It is not intended to be exhaustive. A good reference book is Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, which contains similar, but more comprehensive, advice.

### 1. Distinguish between action verbs and linking verbs.

NO: She said that she felt well.

YES: She said that she felt good.

NB: Linking verbs must be followed by adjectives, not adverbs. These adjectives are called predicate adjectives because they follow the linking verb. In the example above, “well” indicates that the verb is an action verb that takes a direct object; “good” indicates that the verb is a linking verb. The first sentence means that she has the ability to feel something with particular skill. The second means that her general feeling about her health is good.

### 2. Avoid “Windy” and “Fluff” words/phrases (slow wind-ups)

**In general, avoid the “. . . is that . . .” sentence structure (mixed constructions).**

**Replace a noun with a verb.**

This sentence structure is wordy and superfluous; it replaces subjects directly acting on verbs with the verb “is” (turning action into stasis!).

*It is the case that . . .*

The reason why *is that . . .*

*It can be shown that . . .*

Most people know *that . . .*

*It is almost always true that . . .*

*There is no doubt that . . .*

*It is clear that . . .*

Since the dawn of time . . .

It is evident that . . .

This being the case, . . .

Everyone has his own opinion, but . . .

The fact that . . .

Perhaps . . .

Surely . . .

We/I feel that . . .

For the most part . . .

More or less . . .

For your information . . .

Of course . . .

As the case may be . . .

People need to choose for themselves, but . . .

Replacing the cumbersome “[X] is that . . .” structure with a subject actively doing something (ignoring) makes the sentence robust, clear, and less wordy (8 words instead of 16).

NO: *The problem with computer technology is that it isn’t mindful of the needs of normal people.* [16]

YES: *Computer technology ignores the needs of normal people.* [8]

### 3. Never place an adverb after a linking verb (because; when).

NO: The reason for the condition was *because* there was not enough money.

YES: The condition *occurred* because there was not enough money.

NO: His glance upward was *when* she began to hope.

YES: She began to hope when he *glanced* upward.

#### **4. Noun – pronoun agreement.**

NB: each, every, anyone, everyone, anybody, everybody, no one, nobody, none, someone, somebody = SINGULAR pronouns (not plural!)

NO: *Everyone* has *their* own opinion but . . .

YES: *Everyone* has *his* own opinion but . . .

NO: *Each student* wants *their* own car, regardless of whether *they* can afford it.

YES: *Each student* wants *his* own car, regardless of whether *he* can afford it.

#### **5. Avoid vague nouns when more precise ones are appropriate.**

Examples:

*Aspect* - a word often used when a writer cannot think of anything specific

*Thing* – a word whose vagueness needs no explanation

*Problematize* – again, a word writers use when they cannot think of something really precise to say

#### **6. All pronouns should have clearly identifiable antecedents.**

When using a pronoun, be sure the noun to which it refers is close by and clearly associated with the pronoun. The ambiguous “this” is a paramount instance of a vague pronoun whose antecedent is never clear or obvious.

NO: Bob, Jim, and Joe went to the pool. It was, after all, *his* idea.

YES: Bob, Jim, and Joe went to the pool. It was, after all, *Joe’s* idea.

#### **7. Avoid the comma splice: separating two independent clauses with a comma.**

NO: It was raining out, I ran to the car to get my umbrella.

YES: It was raining out; I ran to the car to get my umbrella.

YES: It was raining out, so I ran to the car to get my umbrella.

#### **8. Generally, a main clause (MC) is followed by a dependent clause (DC) with NO comma:**

NO: They said they would come, although they were not sure about the time.

YES: They said they would come although they were not sure about the time.

MC DC

#### **9. A dependent clause (DC) is always separated by a comma from the main clause (MC).**

NO: Although they were not sure about the time they said they would come.

YES: Although they were not sure about the time, they said they would come.

DC, MC

**10. As a general rule, circumstances should be presented first, then the main idea. Circumstances could be adverbs, adverb phrases, participles, gerunds, prepositional phrases, etc.**

This rule follows the general principle of remembering the needs of the audience. By establishing the circumstances before stating the main idea, the conditions are set for readers to make the necessary transitions from idea to idea. Sometimes this sort of placement is referred to as “flow.”

NO: Not all black Southerners were slaves in the United States in 1860.

YES: In the United States in 1860, not all black Southerners were slaves.

Circumstances, MC

**11. Separate non-restrictive clauses or phrases by commas; do not use commas for restrictive clauses or phrases.**

Logic supports this rule: a restriction is information that is necessary to an understanding of the whole grammatical unit; the lack of restriction means that the information is “nice to know” but not necessary.

NO: Sinclair Lewis’s novel, *Babbitt*, helped him win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

YES: Sinclair Lewis’s novel *Babbitt* helped him win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The title is restrictive because Sinclair Lewis wrote a number of novels.

NO: Jill’s house located in the country has a lot of trees.

YES: Jill’s house, located in the country, has a lot of trees.

The location of the house is not necessary to the meaning of the sentence as a whole.

**12. Use the appropriate case form of who / whom.**

“Who” is the subject case.

“Whom” is the object case; it is used as the direct object of a verb or the object of a preposition.

NO: I wonder whom will be chosen as the next CEO.

YES: I wonder [who will be chosen as the next CEO.]

“who” introduces subject of a noun clause after “wonder”

NO: Whomever is organizing this project is performing poorly.

YES: [Whoever is organizing this project] is performing badly.

NO: I will give the raise to whoever I please.

YES: I will give the raise [to whomever] I please.

**13. Avoid ending a sentence with a preposition.**

NO: She pointed to a painting that she was proud of.

YES: She pointed to a painting of which she was proud.

**14. Avoid the ambiguous “this”!**

Never use “this” as a pronoun, especially when there are multiple antecedents to which it may refer. Use “this” as an adjective to modify something specific.

NO: If we reduce overhead costs, freeze hiring, and cut out overtime, we will remain within our budget for the rest of the year. This will cause unrest among our employees.

YES: If we reduce overhead costs, freeze hiring, and cut out overtime, we will remain within our budget for the rest of the year. These changes will cause unrest among our employees.

**15. Avoid faulty parallelism of two or more items.**

In a list of two or more items, each term should be grammatically identical to the others.

NO: The boys enjoyed playing music, eating ice cream and when they had time they went to the movies.

YES: The boys enjoyed playing music, eating ice cream, and watching movies.

YES: The boys enjoyed music, ice cream, and movies.

**16. Watch placement of modifiers as introductions to the main clause (misplaced modifiers).**

NO: To please the children fireworks were set off.

YES: To please the children the parents set off fireworks.

NO: Upon entering the office a skeleton caught my attention.

YES: Upon entering the office, I saw a skeleton.

**17. Spell out numbers to and including twenty (some grammar books say fifty). Always spell out a number if it is the first word in the sentence.**

NO: There are 6 verses in the poem.

YES: There are six verses in the poem.

NO: 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

YES: Fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

**18. Avoid misuse of “however.”**

*Adverbial Conjunction*

NO: However, he wrote it, the fact is it was finished.

YES: However he wrote it, the fact is it was finished.

*Transitional Adverb*

NO: The ticket is expensive, however, I will purchase it.

YES: The ticket is expensive; however, I will purchase it.

NB: When using *however* as a transitional adverb it is a postpositive, referring by contrast to a previously mentioned point. For the sake of clarity, it should **not** be the first word in a sentence.

NO: However, they said that they would come to the reception.

YES: They said, however, that they would come to the reception.

NB: The word “also” is postpositive; the word “plus” should be eliminated from all academic writing.

**19. Avoid shifts.**

Shifts can occur at all levels of the writing process. Some of the more common sentence shifts are the following:

Point of view (I, we, you, one, they) (see 20 below)

Verb tenses

Mood and voice

Singulars and plurals (see 3 above)

NO: Many people read books that told you about the twenty-first century.

YES: Many people read books about the twenty-first century.

NO: I could not fight the current of the river. Just then a stranger *jumps* in and *swims* toward me.

YES: I could not fight the current of the river. Just then a stranger *jumped* in and *swam* toward me.

NO: When the tickets are ready, the agent notifies the client. Each ticket is then listed on a form and a copy of the itinerary is filed.

YES: When the tickets are ready, the agent notifies the client, lists each ticket on a form, and files a copy of the itinerary.

**20. Do not use “you” to refer to a) the *reader* or b) *people in general* in formal writing.**

NO: When you read Poe’s fiction, you get a distinct feeling of gothic horror.

YES: Poe’s fiction exudes a distinctly gothic mood.

**21. When a quotation is FOUR LINES OR MORE of text, set the quotation off from the text by indenting it ten (10) spaces, but do NOT use quotation marks. All quotations are double-spaced; no exceptions.**

Such dreary streets! blocks of blackness, not houses, on either hand, and here and there a candle, like a candle moving about in a tomb. At this hour of the night, of the last day of the week, that quarter of the town proved all but deserted. . . Moving on, I at last came to a dim sort of light not far from the docks, and heard a forlorn creaking in the air; and looking up, saw a swinging sign over the door with a white painting upon it, faintly representing tall straight jet of misty spray, and these words underneath- -  
- “The Carpet Bag,” *Moby Dick*

**22. A period ALWAYS goes inside a quote when the quote ends a sentence.**

**23. A footnote or endnote always goes outside the period at the end of a sentence.**

NB: the colon and semi-colon go OUTSIDE the quotation, and the comma and period always go INSIDE.

NO: Bob stated: “I will prevail”.

YES: Bob stated: “I will prevail.”

YES: Bob stated: “I will prevail.”<sup>2</sup>

**24. Placement of the qualifying words “only,” “almost,” “merely” must be carefully considered.**

Consider the differences in meaning among the following sentences:

- A.
1. Only Jamie said that the novel was inspiring.
  2. Jamie only said that the novel was inspiring.
  3. Jamie said only that the novel was inspiring.
  4. Jamie said that only the novel was inspiring.
  5. Jamie said that the only novel was inspiring.
  6. Jamie said that the novel was only inspiring.
- B.
1. Almost everyone was in tears.
  2. Everyone was almost in tears.
- C.
1. Merely sweeping the floor once a week is satisfactory.
  2. Sweeping merely the floor once a week is satisfactory.
  3. Sweeping the floor merely once a week is satisfactory.
  4. Sweeping the floor once a week is merely satisfactory.

\*Style Sheet is adapted from Dr. Aaron Urbanczyk’s Style Sheet for the Writing Center, 2004.