Some Common Writing Problems and Advice on How to Avoid Them

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Some common errors and problems on papers trouble me. I want to explain why some of these errors and problems are so troubling to me, why they should be troubling to you, and how you can avoid them.

◆ Introduction

The reader deserves to know from the start what you will discuss and how your discussion will be organized. Thus, you must provide immediately a clear and explicit statement of your purpose (e.g., a thesis to be analyzed or an hypothesis to be tested) and a brief indication of the topics that you will discuss along the way. Think of the paper as a voyage; you need to specify a destination and provide a map, or your readers may not want to join you on the trip.

◆ Transitions

Paragraphs should be connected clearly and explicitly so that your overall argument is clear. Making these connections requires explicit transitional comments that tell the reader how the new paragraph relates to the previous one(s) and thus how it advances your argument. Having an explicit conclusion at the end of one paragraph can make the transition to the next one easier.

◆ Paragraphs

The paragraph is the basic unit of a paper. Extremely long paragraphs often include more than one main idea and confuse the reader. Extremely short paragraphs often say too little or are incomplete. A good paragraph is unified (consistently develops one idea), complete (provides enough information), ordered (has a logical structure), and coherent (links sentences into an integrated whole).

Tell the reader what each paragraph is about (usually, in a topic sentence); provide sufficient explanation of conclusions you reach for the careful reader to understand the logic of and evidence for your argument; take more time (and care) with arguments which are likely to be difficult or troubling for your readers.

◆ Citations

Citations help the reader to know the sources of your claims, to judge their reliability and validity, and to investigate those claims further. As the author of a persuasive argument (which you hope your paper is), you have a responsibility to cite sources for all claims, whether you quote directly or not. Neglecting this duty leaves you open to charges of laziness, inadequate scholarship, or plagiarism.

Pay attention to when sources were published, locate articles from journals as well as books, and be appropriately skeptical or critical of what those sources say. Do not rely on just one or two sources. Don’t refer continually to the authors of your sources in the body of your text (e.g., “Tiger and Fox report...”), unless you want to focus your reader’s attention on the authors, and not on what they say. Instead, cite the source at the end of the sentence (but include the citation within the sentence, before the period).

◆ Reference form

Readers deserve to get citations offered in a standard format, one that includes all the relevant information. Your readers do not deserve idiosyncratic and inadequate formats, or incomplete listings. I prefer that you use the ASA style sheet I have provided you; but I will accept the APA style (which is quite similar) or the MLA style (which is more traditional). In any case, cite all sources and punctuate quotations properly.

◆ Use of “it,” “this,” and “there”

Never begin a sentence with a pronoun that has no clear referent. Using such a pronoun as the subject conceals the real subject of the sentence, confuses your reader, and obscures your argument. You can find a subject hiding somewhere in that sentence, if you look long enough. Don’t force your reader to waste time searching for the subject.

◆ Rewriting

Write a draft of every paper and rewrite each with enthusiasm. Your writing is never as clear as you first suppose; your reader is never as much like you as you may believe. Let each draft sit for a time before you reread it, so you can read it with greater objectivity. Read your paper out loud, or have someone else do so, and really listen to it. Get a friend to read your paper and tell you what you said in it (not whether the paper is “good”). Then revise.

◆ Further Advice on Writing

For further advice on improving your writing, discuss a draft of your paper with a member of the Writing Lab staff at least three days before the paper is due. Remember to acknowledge (in a footnote or endnote) the fact that you have received assistance from the Writing Lab or from anyone else.

For more detailed insight into good writing, look at:


For advice about the process of writing, see:


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