

Smooth Draft Writer's Workshop

The instructor will match you with a workshop partner or two, depending on class size. The duos (and/or triads) will work together to improve the writing of each. Past semesters of this course have shown this exercise to be very helpful, and from both perspectives: that of being critiqued and that of critiquing.

Be sure you have at your disposal a writing handbook. It does not matter which one; they cover the same general topics. Each student will use the handbook to analyze his or her own writing and that of the assigned workshop partners. Students also will use the handbooks as a resource for solutions to specific writing problems.

Feel free also to have an email conversation in addition to the formal workshop, asking clarifying questions, perhaps, and/or exchanging multiple versions of the piece.

Need help on what to look for? I have plenty to guide you.

First, use the following list of common problems to inform your critiques. This list was adapted from *Reporting for the Media*, by Fred Fedler, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2004).

I. Sentence Structure

Simple sentences need only a subject, a verb and a direct object: The suspect robbed the bank. Varying sentence structure is recommended, for variety and unpredictability, but simple sentences are the clearest. They also keep writers from stumbling into a host of other potholes, like ...

II. Passive Voice

“The suspect robbed the bank” is far better than, “The bank was robbed by the suspect.” The former is active; the latter is passive. Passive voice sentences are typically longer and lend themselves to grammatical errors.

III. Agreement

Nouns, pronouns and verbs are either singular or plural. Nouns and pronouns also indicate gender. Nouns and verbs should agree, both in gender and in singularity or plurality. The pronoun later in the sentence should agree with the noun to which it refers, both in gender and in number. Sound easy?

- A team of runners have been training for months.
- A team of runners *has* been training.
 - Economics are a required course.
 - Economics *is* a required course.
 - The jury were applauded for their courage.
 - The jury *was* applauded for *its* courage.

IV. Ambiguous Pronouns

Look for ambiguity everywhere it may lurk. For example: “Mary and Martha went to her house for dinner.” Whose house? Mary’s? Martha’s? Did they live together? Limit the number of pronouns. “The committee took its recommendations to the board. It discussed it before returning to it for further consideration.” What?

V. Plurals and Possessives

When do you use *it’s* and when do you use *its*? *Its* is possessive. *It’s* is not. *It’s* contracts “it is.”

When do you add an apostrophe and where? The estate took control of Childress’ business. The dress’ button dangled below the hem. The dog’s water dish ... the geese’s formation ... the children’s Christmas stockings ... the monkeys’ bananas. When in doubt, look it up.

VI. That and Which and Who; Who and Whom

For “that” v. “which,” here’s a rule: If the sentence is read without the subordinate clause and the meaning does not change, then “which” should be used. Otherwise, use “that.” Example: “Highway 17 is the road that is under construction.” Remove “under construction” and the sentence has no meaning. Contrast it with, “Highway 17, which is the road being constructed south of town, will make rush-hour congestion a thing of the past.”

For “that” v. “who,” here’s another rule: If the subordinate clause refers to a person (or animal with a name), use “who.” Otherwise, use “that.”

For “who” v. “whom,” remember that “who” is the subject of a clause and “whom” is the object of a verb or preposition. “Ask not for *whom* the bell tolls,” because of the preposition “for.” But it would be, “*Who* gave you the ball peen hammer” because “who” is the subject of the clause.

VII. Misplaced Modifiers

Another common problem in student writing, misplaced modifiers make sentences confusing. Example: “She described the ordeal of being held hostage with tears running down her cheeks.” Was she crying the entire time she was held hostage? Try: “She described, with tears running down her cheeks, the ordeal of being held hostage.”

From Fedler, look at how the following sentences change in meaning by moving the word “only”:

- Only Jenkins’ farm produces the best apples in the country.
- Jenkins’ only farm produces the best apples in the country.
- Jenkins’ farm produces only the best apples in the country.
- Jenkins’ farm only produces the best apples in the country.

- Jenkins' farm produces the best apples only in the country.

VIII. Dangling Modifiers

A related problem, dangling modifiers pop up when the word or phrase they are supposed to modify does not appear in the sentence. They are very common.

Examples:

"Jogging around campus, a thorn bush ripped a hole in Jill's shirt." Have you ever seen a jogging bush. It was Jill who probably did the jogging.

"On their arrival, the hotel manager took the guests' bags to their rooms." The first *their* modifies the hotel manager. The guests themselves do not appear in the sentence.

"In the hope that the sun would come out, the baseball game drew a large crowd." Baseball games cannot hope.

Make sure the modifier is modifying the *noun* being described:

- A thorn bush ripped a hole in Jill's shirt as she jogged around campus.
- When the guests arrived, the hotel manager took their bags to their rooms.
- The baseball game drew a large crowd who were hoping the sun would come out.

IX. Personification

Do not treat inanimate objects or abstractions as if they were human. The White House cannot utter a word. A hospital does not treat patients. Roads do not have intentions:

- "The White House said today that Iraq ..."
- "The hospital treated them for burns before releasing the patients ..."
- "The intention of the road was to help farmers ..."

X. Parallel Structure

When linking similar ideas, use parallel structures. Grammatically parallel structures create harmony and balance, and they help readers compare and contrast the ideas being linked. This goes for all forms, including nouns, verbs and prepositional phrases.

- Wrong: "She enjoys writing, body surfing and to garden around the yard."
- Right: "She enjoys writing, body surfing and gardening."

- Wrong: "The football player said the padding was less bulky, not as expensive and that another person is not needed to remove them after the game."
- Right: "The football player said the padding was less bulky, less expensive and less difficult to remove."

And a quick hit list for diagnostics:

1. Use subject-verb-object order for sentences in most cases.
2. Use active-voice verbs.
3. Use singular verbs with singular subjects, and plural verbs with plural subjects.
4. Make sure pronouns agree with their antecedents.
5. Spell plurals and possessives correctly.
6. Note the use of that/which and who/whom and that/who.
7. Place modifiers immediately before or after the noun they describe.
8. Avoid personification; do not suggest that inanimate objects can talk, think or feel.
9. List items in parallel form.
10. Do not depend on spell-checkers. Re-read your writing several times.

Second, as adjuncts to No. 1 above, focus on clarity and conciseness by looking for ways to:

- reduce complicated words into simple terms
- use specific details instead of general terms
- use concrete terms over abstract terms
- keep sentences short but pacing them with a variety of lengths
- eliminate long clauses

Third, a few general questions to ask of the writing you are critiquing:

1. Are there sentences or sections where the writer strays off topic?
2. Is there a thesis statement or nut graf that focuses or summarizes the piece? Should there be?
3. What points does the writer make that you want to hear more about? Where could s/he expand the text to make his/her meaning clearer or more convincing?
4. Do paragraphs bridge or transition from the previous paragraph? If a paragraph lacks a transition, suggest transition words or ideas.
5. Are there sentences don't fit?
6. What passages somehow strike you? Why? Which section(s) seems the most important?
7. What is almost said? What do you want to hear more about?
8. Could the piece be improved in terms of organization?
9. What kinds of voice(s) do you hear in the writing? Is the language alive, or dead, bureaucratic, difficult to read?

Fourth, take a look at the following catalog of common writing problems in undergraduate student writing. The list is in no particular order.

1. **Media** is a plural term. **Medium** is singular. So media **are**; a medium **is**. Senior communication students struggle with this basic usage.
2. Avoid ethnocentric references, such as "we" or "our" or "us" or "our country." It assumes too much, and it communicates exclusivity. We should try to assume as little as possible. Many of your readers might not consider

themselves members of your “us” or “we” or “our.” What of immigrants, green card aliens, and international students? What does “us” even mean?

3. Singular-plural agreement is perhaps the most common problem. Example: “The government is wrong when they tell us what to do.” The government is an “it.” People who work for governments are a “they.” Be specific and precise. Example 2: “A, B and C are a predictor of future behavior.” No, they are predictors. There are three of them. Example 3: “The surfer is able to read the article themselves.”
4. Beware of imprecise and even reckless use of personal pronouns like “they,” “their,” “them,” and “it.” Often these are used at the sacrifice of specificity and clarity. Which “they” is being referenced since most articles include discussion of more than one group? Which “them”? What “it”? “Their” refers to ownership, but by whom? You, the writer, are familiar with the words’ meanings because you are the one doing the writing. The reader, however, likely will be confused. A second reading or edit would reveal the vagueness of many of these usages. Night-before writing is notorious for producing this kind of carelessness and imprecision.
5. Use the right word not just a good word (precision!). Examples:
 - a. “a sense of trust was **induced**” >> no, trust is enabled or rewarded or encouraged, it is not induced.
 - b. “put into **affect**” >> no, put it into effect, though A might affect B.
 - c. “she was **surrounded** by messages” >> perhaps she was inundated with messages, or drowning in information, but surrounded? No.
 - d. “he was **anxious** to go to the game.” >> he was probably eager, not anxious, unless he was playing in the game, in which case it’s possible he indeed was anxious, or worried.
 - e. “he watched a **random** TV show” >> he probably arbitrarily chose a show to watch, but it likely wasn’t “random” at all; a broadcaster determined with great precision what to air and when.
6. Related: imprecision with adjectives. “a lot” ... “more and more” ... “massive amounts” ... “very detrimental” ... “a great deal” >> None of these suffice. Instead be specific, precise, and show supporting evidence for such statements.
7. Prevent semi-colon (and em dash) abuse! Semi-colons, colons, commas, hyphens and dashes each have their own specific purposes. A writer’s handbook is valuable. The comma, for example, is “a small crooked point, which in writing followeth some branch of the sentence & in reading warneth us to rest there, & to help our breth a little” (Richard Mulcaster, writing in his 1582 volume, *The First Part of the Elementarie*). Common apostrophe problem: “its” v. “it’s”. “It’s” is a contraction. “Its” is possessive.
8. After beginning a quote, make sure you end it, somewhere, sometime. It is common to begin a quote but to forget the close quotes, effectively putting the rest of your treatise into the quotation. This is the writing equivalent of

flicking on your turn signal, turning, then leaving it blinking all the way down the highway. Other motorists will be laughing.

9. Related: Don't orphan your quotes. Quotes all have parents so be sure to identify this parentage. Orphan quotes are quotations dropped into an article without identifying the speaker or writer or source (and in research, the citation alone is not enough). There should be a source in the narrative.
10. Related, part II: Another night-before habit is loosely stringing quotations together not unlike like stringing a pearl necklace. The article becomes a very thin piece of string holding other people's work together. You should be providing some pearls, as well, which means taking the time to integrate and weave the parts into a coherent, meaningful whole. Rarely is there benefit in merely grafting in quoted material just because it's about your topic and seems worded more ably than you think you could pull off yourself.
11. Remember: hyphens pull together; dashes separate. "Twin-engine plane" >> hyphen. "She was - if you can believe this - trying to jump out of the car!" >> dash.
12. Editing. After you've written something, even a single blog post, walk away from it. Go to Starbucks. Go for a run. Then, fresh, return to the writing and edit. Revise. Re-work. Improve.



"And if you don't have an attorney, we've got millions of them."