

# How to Improve Your Writing

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Good writing is a fundamental skill. Economists, engineers, and humanists—all must communicate well to do well. One must write well to communicate. More important, perhaps, is that good writing is a signal that the author is intelligent and has something worthwhile to say. In this way, writing well is similar to having a Berkeley degree: while not proving that you know anything in particular or have a predetermined set of skills, it shows that you are someone who is intelligent and should be taken seriously—a member of a highly-trained and thus elite subset of the population, and likely to accomplish intellectual tasks well.

To help you in your next short paper assignment, I here present a list of writing guidelines:

First, overall format: When you turn in your next paper:

1. Do not use a cover sheet: not for a three page paper.
2. Be sure to staple in the upper left corner: paperclips get lost, and folds are worse.

Second, substance:

1. State a thesis and prove it.
2. Each paragraph should have a distinct purpose that advances the argument.
3. No sweeping unsupported generalizations. Supported generalizations only.
4. Your introduction is not a warm-up. You can warm-up in your prose, but delete the warm-up before you hand in the paper. Do not explain that the subject of your paper is the topic of a furiously raging debate.

Third, style and grammar:

1. Indent the first line of each paragraph.
2. Omit needless words: “very,” “arguably,” “undeniably,” “it goes without saying.”
3. Avoid “thing” as much as possible.
4. Use indefinite pronouns—“somebody,” “everyone”—sparingly.
5. Use correct punctuation and grammar.
6. Offset subordinate clauses with commas!
7. Pronouns must have clear antecedents.
8. No artless sarcasm: fulsomely saying the opposite of what you mean is ineffective. Artful sarcasm only.

9. Do not use “etc.” as a substitute for analysis: only use “etc.” to terminate lists.
10. Avoid “I think” and “I believe.” Your reader should do well to assume that you do think or believe your thesis.
11. No typos. Proofread. Spellcheck.

I suggest that you read as many as you can of the following:

1. For a fun way to brush up on your punctuation skills, Lynne Truss (2004), *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves* (New York: Gotham Press).
2. William Strunk and E.B. White’s classic *Elements of Style*, online at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>.
3. The style guide of the *Economist* magazine, at <http://www.economist.com/research/StyleGuide/>.

Much less readable, but very useful, are:

4. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, online at [www.chicagomanualofstyle.org](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org)
5. *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*

Last, the Student Learning Center has writing tutors. Make sure that they are fully employed.

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