

# Basics of Academic Writing

A Guide for Navigating the Perils of Mechanics, Punctuation, Grammar, and Style

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## MECHANICS

"You want to make sure when you go out there that the tag on the back of your collar isn't poking up—unless, of course, you are deliberately wearing your clothes inside out" (Norris 2015, 36).

Mechanics includes the most basic—some might say the most automated—aspects of writing. However, students often take it for granted that writing software will catch all the errors. This section covers the most common problem areas in writing mechanics: spelling and word choice, spacing, capitalization, italicization, number formatting, compound words, and parentheses.

## SPELLING/WORD CHOICE

"A misspelling undermines your authority. And an eye for the misspelled word can give you an edge in the workplace" (Norris 2015, 30).

It is so easy to run on autopilot, but avoid the temptation. Follow this checklist for accurate spelling and word choice:

- ✓ Run the spell check before submitting your draft.
- ✓ Remember that Microsoft Word does not catch homophones, words that sound the same but have different meanings.
- ✓ If you use a thesaurus to dress up your regular vocabulary, make sure to double check the usage of the word in a dictionary.
- ✓ Keep Merriam-Webster.com up at all times for reference while you are writing.
- ✓ Allow enough time to have a writing coach, friend, or spouse review your paper.
- ✓ Read your paper aloud. This is sometimes the only way to catch a spelling or word choice mistake.

### Commonly Confused Words:

affect	(v): to create an impact upon
effect	(n): the result of an action
brake	(n): a mechanism that disengages a machine / (v): to use this mechanism
break	(n): a pause in activity / (v): to cause a malfunction
comprise	(v): to contain; to include
compose	(v): to bring together
consist	(v): to be made up
continual	(adj): ongoing in cycles
continuous	(adj): ongoing without interruption
disinterested	(adj): impartial; unbiased
uninterested	(adj): indifferent; unconcerned
e.g.	Latin-derived: <i>exempli gratia</i> ; "for example"
i.e.	Latin-derived: <i>id est</i> ; "that is"
farther	(adv): to a greater distance
further	(adv): to an increased degree / (v): to promote a cause
irregardless	NON-STANDARD USAGE!
regardless	(adv): despite everything; nonetheless

### Commonly Confused Words Continued:

it's	contraction of <i>it</i> and <i>is</i>
its	singular pronoun, gender neutral
lay	(v): to place something on a surface
lie	(v): to recline (oneself) / (v): to make a false statement / (n): a false statement
lose	(v): to misplace something
loose	(adj): unsecured; relaxed
method	(n): a technique for doing something
methodology	(n): a system of procedures
principal	(adj): primary; fundamental / (n): an administrative authority of a school
principle	(n): a rule or maxim to follow
there	(adv): indicates direction
their	plural possessive pronoun, gender neutral
they're	contraction of <i>they</i> and <i>are</i>
theirs	plural possessive pronoun, gender neutral
there's	contraction of <i>there</i> and <i>is</i>
to	(prep): toward
too	(adv): also / (adv): very
two	number
your	2nd person possessive pronoun
you're	contraction of <i>you</i> and <i>are</i>

\*This list has been streamlined to indicate which definitions of the aforementioned words are commonly confused. Please consult a dictionary for more detailed definitions.

## SPACING/PAGE LAYOUT

For thesis formatting at NPS, follow this guideline:

- ✓ Use just one space after periods, commas, semicolons, and colons.

The following are recommendations for sentence spacing in academic papers:

- APA:        Use two spaces after a period.
- Chicago:    Use just one space after periods, commas, semicolons, and colons.

Spacing and page layout may not seem like a big deal, but getting them right shows your instructors you care about the details. Follow this checklist for spacing consistency and formatting:

- ✓ Know which citation style you are required to use before you start. It will determine the look of your paper.
- ✓ Follow your style's guidelines for margins, as well as sentence, paragraph, and block quote spacing.
- ✓ Include a properly formatted coversheet if required.
- ✓ Turn on pagination and format according to style.
- ✓ Properly format headers and footers.
- ✓ Do not use spaces after or before dashes, hyphens, en dashes, or slashes.

## CAPITALIZATION

It is common in the military, in business, and in technological fields to capitalize EVERYTHING—well, that may be slightly exaggerated. In academic papers, capitalize only proper nouns, major words in publication titles, special ranks or titles in conjunction with a person's name, and compass directions when they name a specific region.

Use the following guidelines for capitalization:

- ✓ Capitalize the names of all proper nouns.
  - DO THIS: The invention of the Internet has revolutionized commerce.
  - DO THIS: The Democratic Party and the Republican Party are the primary political forces in the U.S. legislative branch.
  - NOT THIS: The Regional Manager and Vice President met today.
- Capitalize major words in titles and headings.
- APA: Capitalize within the text major words in titles and headings include all verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, and any other words four or more letters long. Capitalize the first word of a title, no matter its length.
- Chicago: Capitalize within the text major words in titles and headings include all verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns. Do not capitalize prepositions of any length. The first word of a title, no matter its length, should also be capitalized.
  - DO THIS: Dr. Sanders published his seminal work *The Beginning of the End* in 1958.
  - NOT THIS: When did the founders sign The Bill Of Rights?
- ✓ Capitalize compass directions when they name a specific region rather than a general direction.
  - DO THIS: Students from the West often melt in eastern humidity.
  - DO THIS: Students from western Oklahoma often melt in eastern humidity.
  - NOT THIS: Students from Western Oklahoma often melt in eastern humidity.
- ✓ Do not capitalize names of scientific laws, theories, models, statistical procedures, or hypotheses; however, capitalize words that are proper nouns.
  - DO THIS: The surveyor used the Pythagorean theorem to calculate the perimeter and square footage of the property.
  - DO THIS: Use the scientific method to determine a course of action.
  - NOT THIS: Use the Scientific Method to determine a course of action.

## ITALICS

Italicization has a short list of uses. Use italics only to format linguistic examples, to introduce key terms, to set off titles of long works, and to specify mathematical symbols:

- ✓ Use italics to format a letter, word, phrase, or sentence used as a linguistic example.
  - DO THIS: The following chart explains the difference between *effect* and *affect*.
- ✓ Use italics to indicate foreign language terms.
- ✓ Follow the term with a translation in parentheses or in a footnote.
  - DO THIS: Guatemala's *mano dura* (firm hand) approach has led to an increase in gang activity.
- ✓ Use italics to introduce a new, technical, or key term.
  - DO THIS: The term *commercial off-the-shelf* is an important marketing concept.

- ✓ Use italics to set off the names of magazines, newspapers, and journals and the titles of books, films, and reports.
  - DO THIS: Film critics gave *American Sniper* mixed reviews.
  - DO THIS: Ryan’s favorite book as a child was *The Wind in the Willows*.
  - DO THIS: His most recent article in the *Journal of Psychology* was well received.
  - DO THIS: Analyst Marshall Erwin drafted *Intelligence Issues for Congress* while working for the Congressional Research Service.
- ✓ Use italics to indicate letters used as statistical symbols or algebraic variables.
  - DO THIS: This graph illustrates the *y* variable over time.
- ✓ Do not use italics to emphasize a point because the writing itself should do this.
  - DO THIS: He wanted the report written in the orderly way he had instructed in the meeting.
  - NOT THIS: He wanted the report written *that way*.
- ✓ Do not use italics to set off foreign phrases that are common in English.
  - DO THIS: The employee’s ad hoc approach led to problems for the company’s reputation.
  - NOT THIS: The employee’s *ad hoc* approach led to problems for the company’s reputation.

## NUMBERS

Consistency is key when formatting numbers in an academic paper. Follow these guidelines for numbers at the sentence level:

- ✓ Write numbers out in words for whole numbers zero through nine.
  - DO THIS: Over the course of one week, four participants sent in their surveys.
- ✓ Use numerals for numbers 10 and greater.
  - DO THIS: Our office went through 100 pencils in a week.

## COMPOUND WORDS—HYPHENS AND EN DASHES

Use hyphens to avoid ambiguity, to join prefixes, to form single ideas from two or more words, or to create compound adjectives:

- ✓ Use a hyphen if *not* doing so creates confusion or ambiguity.
  - DO THIS: President Obama met with small-business owners during his recent visit to Oklahoma City.
  - NOT THIS: President Obama met with small business owners during his recent visit to Oklahoma City.
- ✓ Use a hyphen to form a single idea.
  - DO THIS: Daniel’s mother-in-law is visiting from out of town.
  - TRY THESE: post-war, anti-Marxist, pre-planning
- ✓ Use a hyphen to indicate widely accepted compound adjectives.
  - DO THIS: Joan made a disability claim for a work-related injury.
  - DO THIS: Consulting a subject-matter expert ensures the final document meets industry standards.
  - TRY THESE: twenty-year-old, decade-long, mathematics-based, global-centric, power-driven, accident-prone, level-headed
- ✓ Do not use a hyphen to link adverbs ending in *ly* to an adjective.
  - DO THIS: The handbook warned against mishandling highly explosive material.
  - NOT THIS: The handbook warned against mishandling highly-explosive material.
- ✓ Do not use a hyphen if the compound adjective follows the noun, unless it is necessary to add clarity to the sentence.
  - DO THIS: Her reputation as a leader was well renowned.
  - NOT THIS: Her reputation as a leader was well-renowned.

Don't confuse the en dash with its siblings, the hyphen and the em dash! Use en dashes only for the following types of compounds:

- ✓ Use an en dash to indicate words of equal weight, either in proper names or relationships.  
**DO THIS:** The Mason–Dixon line makes up the southernmost border of Pennsylvania.  
**DO THIS:** The executive–legislative dynamic puzzles most Americans.
- ✓ Use an en dash to extend a compound over more than two words.  
**DO THIS:** The post–Cold War era is still a precarious time for international relations.
- ✓ Do not add space on either side of an en dash.
- ✓ Do not use the en dash as a form of punctuation within a sentence.

Some citation styles prefer that you use en dashes to indicate time and page spans:

- ✓ Use an en dash to express a span of time, either in years or hours.  
**DO THIS:** Queen Elizabeth's reign (1558–1630) has been designated England's Golden Age.  
**DO THIS:** Our modeling class, usually held 1:00–2:30 p.m., has been cancelled on Wednesday.
- ✓ Use an en dash to indicate a page span.  
**DO THIS:** This thesis will explain the concept in more detail (see pages 20–25).
- ✓ Consult your favorite style guide to learn more about en dashes in citations and reference lists.

## ABBREVIATIONS

I'll try to make this section short.

- ✓ Always spell out your abbreviations in text the first time they appear in a paper or chapter of a thesis/capstone.  
**DO THIS:** The Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) is located in Monterey, California.  
**DO THIS:** Leadership requires that documents be submitted by close of business (COB) Friday.
- ✓ Use periods after a shortened form of a person's name.  
**DO THIS:** A. W. Birmingham conducted the meeting.
- ✓ Spell out *United States* when it appears as a noun; use the abbreviation *U.S.*(with periods) only when it appears as an adjective.  
**DO THIS:** The United States provided assistance to the earthquake victims.  
**NOT THIS:** The U.S. provided assistance to the earthquake victims.  
**DO THIS:** U.S. troops provided support to civilian law enforcement.  
**NOT THIS:** US troops provided support to civilian law enforcement.
- ✓ Use periods surrounding Latin abbreviations.  
**DO THIS:** a.m., p.m., i.e., e.g., et al.  
**DO THIS:** Greg detested the poor work habits of his subordinates, **e.g.**, tardiness, inefficiency, and sloppiness.
- ✓ Do not use periods to abbreviate state names, acronyms, initialisms, or measurements (except in. for inches):  
**DO THIS:** CA, WV, NASA, DOD, GAO, OPM PhD, MBA, cm, nm  
**NOT THIS:** C.A., W.V., N.A.S.A., D.O.D., G.A.O., O.P.M., Ph.D., M.B.A., c.m., n.m.
- ✓ Do not add additional spacing after periods in correctly formed abbreviations.
- ✓ Consult the U.S. Navy's and the Naval Postgraduate School's style guides for a list of standard acronyms, initialisms, and abbreviations.

## PARENTHESES

Parentheses confine information within a sentence. If you overuse parentheses, chances are you're restricting the flow of your writing. Use parentheses only for the following, and your instructor will thank you for it:

- ✓ Use parentheses to introduce an abbreviation or acronym that will be used in the body of the paper.  
**DO THIS:** The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) employs more than 18,000 workers.

- ✓ Use parentheses to set off structurally independent elements such as references to a graph or an appendix.  
**DO THIS:** Profits increased significantly during the 1990s (see Figure 1).
- ✓ Use parentheses to attribute a quotation to its original source:  
**DO THIS:** Johnson’s research concluded that “right-brain learners need special consideration in the classroom” (Adams, 2003).
- ✓ Do not use two or more sets of parentheses back to back. Instead, join pertinent information with a semicolon.  
**DO THIS:** For further information, consult the study (Carter, 2004; see Figure 2).  
**NOT THIS:** For further information, consult the study (Carter, 2004) (see Figure 2).
- ✓ Place the period outside the closed parentheses for in-text citations, with the exception of block quotes.

# PUNCTUATION

## APOSTROPHES

"Think of apostrophes as jewelry—maybe that's what would make us handle them properly. The apostrophe is possessive: it will hang in" (Norris 2015, 156).

Erroneous apostrophe usage appears everywhere. Don't fall prey to it in your academic papers. There are only two primary uses for apostrophes:

- ✓ Use an apostrophe to indicate possession.  
**DO THIS:** The president's new policy enthused and displeased representatives in equal measures.
- ✓ Use an apostrophe to indicate where letters have been omitted in a contraction. However, in formal writing, limit use of contractions altogether.  
**DO THIS:** I can't remember where I left my glasses.
- ✓ Use an apostrophe to indicate where numbers have been omitted in an era.  
**DO THIS:** The tacky fashion of the '80s has returned.
- ✓ Do not use an apostrophe to indicate a decade.  
**DO THIS:** The tacky fashion of the 1980s returned in the 2010s.  
**NOT THIS:** The tacky fashion of the 1980's returned in the 2010's.
- ✓ Do not use apostrophes to indicate plural nouns.  
**DO THIS:** The company purchased 100 cases of paper.  
**NOT THIS:** The company purchased 100 case's of paper.  
**DO THIS:** Prior to the Iraq War, the United States feared WMDs.  
**NOT THIS:** Prior to the Iraq War, the United States feared WMD's.
- ✓ Do not use apostrophes to indicate plural family names.  
**DO THIS:** We spent the summer with our neighbors, the Williamses.  
**NOT THIS:** We spent the summer with our neighbors, the William's.  
**NOT THIS:** We spent the summer with our neighbors, the Williams'.

## EM DASHES

Em dashes—not to be confused with hyphens or en dashes—can create dramatic pauses or shifts in the middle of a sentence, that is, if you execute them correctly. They also work nicely to insert a series in the middle of a sentence when commas don't quite do the job.

- ✓ Use dashes to denote abrupt changes in thought or to create emphatic pauses:  
**DO THIS:** The bill will create thousands of new jobs—if it ever passes the Senate.  
**DO THIS:** The company instituted a new policy—it was widely unpopular—that required all employees to work holidays.
- ✓ Use dashes within a sentence to set off an internal series separated by commas:  
**DO THIS:** In Don's resume he listed strengths—leadership, cleanliness, organization, creativity—that set him apart from his peers.
- ✓ Insert a dash between two words without any additional spacing.
- ✓ Use em dashes in pairs in the middle of a sentence; single em dashes may appear too informal for academic writing.
- ✓ Use em dashes sparingly in academic writing as overuse minimizes dramatic impact and sentence variety.

## COMMAS

For some reason, commas are some of the most difficult punctuation marks to master. This section provides guidance for commas relating to lists and non-essential phrases. Comma placement involving conjunctive words and phrases begins on page 11.

- ✓ Use commas to separate each element in a list.
- ✓ Use a serial, also known as the Oxford comma, to indicate the final list item and to eliminate ambiguity.  
**DO THIS:** The Marine expressed gratitude to his parents, the president, and his platoon leader.  
**NOT THIS:** The Marine expressed gratitude to his parents, the president and his platoon leader.
- ✓ Use commas to set off non-essential information, details that do not change the meaning of the main clause.  
**DO THIS:** The House and Senate, despite the impending hurricane, reconvened to pass the resolution.  
**DO THIS:** Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States, is nearing the end of his second term.
- ✓ Do not use commas to set off essential phrases.  
**DO THIS:** Walt Whitman’s collection of poetry *Leaves of Grass* has become a standard in the classroom.  
**NOT THIS:** Walt Whitman’s collection of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, has become a standard in the classroom.  
**DO THIS:** Daniel Day-Lewis, my favorite actor, just won another Academy Award.
- ✓ Use commas to set off introductory elements, including single words and phrases, from the main clause.  
**DO THIS:** Toward the end of the conflict, the economic growth had become stagnant.  
**NOT THIS:** Toward the end of the conflict the economic growth had become stagnant.  
**DO THIS:** Since its inception, the Department of Homeland Security has faced funding challenges.  
**NOT THIS:** Since its inception the Department of Homeland Security has faced funding challenges.  
**DO THIS:** First, I will summarize the latest research in the field.  
**NOT THIS:** First I will summarize the latest research in the field.
- ✓ Use a comma on either side of the year when giving a month-day-year date.  
**DO THIS:** On September 17, 1787, the founders signed the U.S. Constitution.  
**DO THIS:** The original founders signed the U.S. Constitution on September 17, 1787, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- ✓ Do not set off the date with commas if any element of the date is missing, e.g., July 4.
- ✓ Use commas to indicate a city/state or city/nation within a complete sentence.  
**DO THIS:** Steve began his cross-country journey in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and concluded it in Los Angeles, California.  
**DO THIS:** Miguel lived in Madrid, Spain, his entire life.

## PERIODS

A period signals the end of an idea; just make sure it is a complete idea. Use a period to punctuate both sentences and bulleted lists containing sentences.

- ✓ Use a period to end a complete sentence.  
**DO THIS:** The committee will not meet today.
- ✓ Differentiate independent clauses with either a period or a semicolon, not a comma.  
**DO THIS:** I have given you instructions; please follow them closely.  
**NOT THIS:** I have given you instructions, please follow them closely.
- ✓ Use periods after bulleted or numbered items of a list when each item is itself a complete sentence.  
**DO THIS:** Each person in the organization has a specific function:
  1. The manager supervises daily tasks.
  2. The sales staff promotes the products.
  3. The HR department handles individual employee problems.

## COLONS

- ✓ Use a colon to draw a connection between the information in an independent clause and another clause or phrase.  
**DO THIS:** Ideally, U.S. airmen demonstrate three core values: integrity, service, and excellence.  
**NOT THIS:** Ideally, U.S. airmen demonstrate three core values integrity, service, and excellence.

- ✓ Use a colon *only* after an independent clause.  
**DO THIS:** The writing process includes brainstorming, outlining, drafting, proofreading, and revising.  
**NOT THIS:** The writing process includes: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, proofreading, and revising.
- ✓ Capitalize the first word after the colon when it is a proper noun, but check your style guide for other guidelines.

## SEMICOLONS

Don't "use the semicolon to join things that really have no relation to each other; it is a bald maneuver to make you keep reading" (Norris 2015, 142).

- ✓ Use a semicolon to create a distinctive connection between two independent clauses.  
**DO THIS:** The furlough affected all government positions; even the postal service suspended services.
- ✓ Differentiate independent clauses with either a period or a semicolon, not a comma.  
**DO THIS:** I have given you instructions; please follow them closely.  
**NOT THIS:** I have given you instructions, please follow them closely.
- ✓ Use a semicolon to separate elements of a series when the segments can stand alone as independent clauses.  
**DO THIS:** The commission initiated an investigation because the accounting department's audit had a negative outcome; inventory showed inaccuracies; communication between departments crumbled; and important documents went missing.  
**NOT THIS:** The commission initiated an investigation because the accounting department's audit had a negative outcome, inventory showed inaccuracies, communication between departments crumbled, and important documents went missing.
- ✓ Use a semicolon to separate elements in a series when individual segments contain material that also must be set off by commas.  
**DO THIS:** The committee included Leslie Knope, Pawnee city-council member; Ron Swanson, parks department manager; and Ben Wyatt, Indiana state auditor.  
**NOT THIS:** The committee included Leslie Knope, Pawnee city-council member, Ron Swanson, parks department manager, and Ben Wyatt, Indiana state auditor.

## EXCLAMATION POINTS

An exclamation point is a punctuation mark used to create special emotional emphasis at the end of a sentence. Do not use an exclamation in academic writing unless it already exists in a quotation. In that case, enclose the exclamation point *within* the quotation marks and add a period *after* the parenthetical citation.

## QUESTION MARKS

A question mark is a form of punctuation used to indicate an interrogative sentence.

- ✓ Use a question mark outside quotation marks to pose a question regarding that quote.  
**DO THIS:** Who said the objective was "unattainable"?
- ✓ Follow your citation style's guidelines for quotations used as part of interrogatives.  
**DO THIS:** When Anderson claimed "the proof was in the pudding," what did he really mean? <sup>2</sup>  
**DO THIS:** When Anderson (2005) claimed "the proof was in the pudding," what did he really mean (p.34)?  
**DO THIS:** When Anderson [2] claimed "the proof was in the pudding," what did he really mean?
- ✓ Use a question mark inside quotation marks to indicate that the quote itself is an interrogative.  
**DO THIS:** John asked his supervisor, "How long will this meeting take?"
- ✓ Follow your citation style's guidelines for quotations that are also interrogatives.  
**DO THIS:** Anderson wonders, "How did we not see this coming?" <sup>2</sup>  
**DO THIS:** Anderson (2005) wondered, "How did we not see this coming?" (p. 50).  
**DO THIS:** Anderson [2] wonders, "How did we not see this coming?"

- ✓ Do not rely on a question to make a simple statement in a paper:
  - DO THIS: It is unclear whether this poses a problem for the industry.
  - DO THIS: Questions remain as to whether this will pose a problem.
  - NOT THIS: Does this pose a problem for the industry?

## QUOTATION MARKS

We use air quotes when speaking and double quotation marks to express sarcasm in our text messages and emails. It's no wonder, then, that we have problems using quotes academically. Follow these guidelines closely.

Follow these rules for double quotation marks (" "):

- ✓ Use double quotation marks to introduce a coined or invented expression the first time it is used.
  - DO THIS: The corporate office called the micromanaging behavior of the district managers "performance stifling."
- ✓ Use double quotation marks to enclose the title of an article (the shorter work within a journal), a chapter in a book, or another short work mentioned in text.
  - DO THIS: His article "The Lure of Sugar" made waves among the medical community.
- ✓ Do not use double quotation marks to introduce a word or phrase used ironically, euphemistically, or as slang.
  - DO THIS: The group members considered themselves tough guys.
  - NOT THIS: The group members considered themselves "tough guys."
- ✓ Use single quotation marks solely to indicate a quote within another quote.
  - DO THIS: "As the president stated yesterday, 'Shareholder confidence is down,' but I believe we can turn things around," declared the confident VP.
- ✓ Use single quotation marks inside double quotation marks to indicate material that was originally cited in another source, but do so only when you cannot locate the original source of the quotation.
  - DO THIS: Sandra Hendricks assured the board things would turn around after the president had commented that "'shareholder confidence is down'" (Anders, 2012, as cited in Hendricks, 2013, p. 59)

## GRAMMAR

The term *grammar* refers to all the parts of speech and the way they relate to each other to form sentences. This section provides an overview of some of grammar's common pitfalls.

### ARTICLES

An article signals whether a noun has a general or specific connotation. Generally, you can insert articles *the*, *a*, or *an* before a noun when no other modifiers are present or before modifiers. However, correct article placement may be a little tricky. Follow these guidelines and refer to your favorite grammar guide for more exceptions to the rules:

#### The Definite Article—*The*

- ✓ Use the definite article *the* to modify specific singular or plural nouns.
  - DO THIS: Did you see the accident on the freeway this morning?
  - DO THIS: That was the best meal I have ever had.
  - DO THIS: The right thing is not always the easiest thing.
  - DO THIS: The national parks draw millions of tourists.
- ✓ Use the definite article *the* to modify most initialisms abbreviated words for which you pronounce the individual initials, if they stand alone.
  - DO THIS: The DOD oversees the armed forces of the United States.
  - DO THIS: That investigation falls within the FBI's purview.
  - NOT THIS: The NASA is leading space exploration in the twenty-first century.
- ✓ Do not use the definite article *the* to modify acronyms, abbreviated words that you pronounce phonetically, if they stand alone.
  - DO THIS: NASA is leading space exploration in the twenty-first century.
- ✓ Use the definite article *the* in conjunction with the following types of geographical terms:
  - Names of bodies of water, points on the globe, specific geographical areas, major land masses or formations
  - DO THIS: the Danube, the South Pole, the Orient, the Gobi, the Gulf of Mexico
- ✓ Do not use the definite article *the* in conjunction with the following types of geographical terms:
  - Names of countries; names of cities, towns, or states; names of streets; names of lakes and bays; names of mountains; names of continents; names of islands

#### Exceptions to the rule

- ✓ Do use *the* for certain countries with plural-sounding names.
  - DO THIS: the United States, the Netherlands, the Philippines
- ✓ Do use *the* for a group of lakes.
  - DO THIS: the Great Lakes
- ✓ Do use *the* for mountain ranges.
  - DO THIS: the Rocky Mountains, the Himalayas
- ✓ Do use *the* for a chain of islands.
  - DO THIS: the Aleutian Islands, the Virgin Islands

#### Indefinite Articles – *A* and *An*

- ✓ Use indefinite articles to modify non-specific singular or collective nouns.
  - DO THIS: The little girl wants a pony for her birthday.
  - DO THIS: He hopes to receive a promotion within one year.
  - DO THIS: Sharon is an exceptional leader.
  - DO THIS: He viewed the media as a pack of wolves.
- ✓ Select either *a* or *an* depending on the first sound of the word that follows it. Sometimes the vowel *u* mimics the consonant *y*.
  - DO THIS: a university, a unified cause, a unicorn

- ✓ Sometimes the consonant *h* is silent.  
**DO THIS:** an honorable mention, an hour, an honest man
- ✓ Use an indefinite article to indicate an affiliation with a group.  
**DO THIS:** a firefighter, an Englishman, a banker, a democrat
- ✓ Omit articles before most non-count nouns.  
**DO THIS:** Soldiers must use logic and intuition.  
**NOT THIS:** Soldiers must use the logic and the intuition.
- ✓ Omit articles before languages and nationalities.  
**DO THIS:** The students are learning English.  
**NOT THIS:** The students are learning the English.
- ✓ Omit articles before names of sports.  
**DO THIS:** Brett Favre retired from football, again.  
**NOT THIS:** Brett Favre retired from the football, again.
- ✓ Omit articles before academic subjects.  
**DO THIS:** Shannon is majoring in anthropology.  
**NOT THIS:** Shannon is majoring in the anthropology.

## CONJUNCTIONS

The term *conjunction* applies to any one of the following categories: coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, and conjunctive adverbs. Information on correlative conjunctions appears in the *Style* chapter under *parallelism*. Conjunctions are unique parts of speech that enhance a writer's overall style and illustrate relationships between ideas within a special set of grammatical rules. Mastering the use of conjunctions reveals your sophistication and makes your writing more interesting. Conjunctions are used to connect dependent and independent clauses, to adjoin one idea with another, and to create parallel sentence structure:

### Coordinating Conjunctions: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so

- ✓ Use a coordinating conjunction to connect an independent clause to a dependent clause without a comma.  
**DO THIS:** Lower management understood the corporate directive but failed to comply.  
**NOT THIS:** Lower management understood the corporate directive, but failed to comply.  
**DO THIS:** Upper management understood their concerns yet ignored them anyway.  
**NOT THIS:** Upper management understood their concerns, yet ignored them anyway.
- ✓ Use a coordinating conjunction to connect an independent clause to another independent clause with a comma.  
**DO THIS:** The company president resigned, and the vice president took his place.  
**NOT THIS:** The company president resigned and the vice president took his place.  
**DO THIS:** He did not accept the media's interpretation of events, so he avoided watching the evening news.  
**NOT THIS:** He did not accept the media's interpretation of events so he avoided watching the evening news.
- ✓ Use a coordinating conjunction to group like items or to make a list within a sentence.  
**DO THIS:** Fishing, sailing, and skiing are Ted's favorite activities.  
**DO THIS:** Susan will bring Yahtzee, Monopoly, or Catchphrase to her company retreat.

**Subordinating Conjunctions: after, although, as, as if, as though, because, before, even if, even though, if, if only, in order that, now that, once, provided, rather than, since, so that, that, though, till, unless, until, when, whenever, where, whereas, wherever, whether, which, while** —*The Scott Foresman Handbook for Writers* Eighth Edition.

- ✓ Use subordinating conjunctions to create logical relationships between two ideas.
- ✓ If the sentence begins with a subordinating conjunction, use a comma between clauses.  
**DO THIS:** Provided that his promotion interview goes as planned, Steve should advance in rank by the end of 2015.

**DO THIS:** Whereas most employees prefer to take vacation during the holiday season, Jake prefers to vacation in the spring.

**NOT THIS:** Whereas most employees prefer to take vacation during the holiday season Jake prefers to vacation in the spring.

- ✓ If the sentence begins with a subordinating conjunction, do not follow it with a comma.

**DO THIS:** Although the employees were upset about the new policy, morale remained high.

**NOT THIS:** Although, the employees were upset about the new policy, morale remained high.

- ✓ If the subordinating conjunction appears between the two clauses, do not use a comma.

**DO THIS:** She will read the book whether she is required to read it or not.

**NOT THIS:** I will not speak to you, until you speak to me.

Conjunctive adverbs function as transitional words in a body of work, serving primarily to connect ideas from one sentence to another or from the end of one paragraph to the beginning of another.

**Conjunctive Adverbs:** *accordingly, also, besides, consequently, finally, for example, for instance, furthermore, however, indeed, instead, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, subsequently, then, therefore, thus*

- ✓ Use a conjunctive adverb to make transitions between independent clauses.

- ✓ Always use a comma after a conjunctive adverb.

**DO THIS:** Private Young neglected to follow his chain of command; consequently, he received a letter of counseling from his superior officer.

**DO THIS:** The village suffered an influx of mosquito-borne infections. Thus, the World Health Organization provided aid in the form of mosquito nets and immunizations.

- ✓ Use commas to set off conjunctive adverbs in the middle of a sentence.

**DO THIS:** The company president, consequently, took an impromptu trip to South America.

## PRONOUNS

These seemingly miniscule words create ongoing dilemmas for students everywhere. This section attempts to demystify the most common pronoun errors. Three primary pronoun categories are discussed here: relative, personal, and indefinite pronouns.

Pronouns are used in place of nouns to prevent repetition within the same sentence or within consecutive sentences, to differentiate subjects from objects, and to achieve sentence variety throughout a body of work.

**Relative Pronouns:** *who, whoever, which, that, whom, whomever, whichever*

- ✓ Use relative pronouns to define nouns in more specific terms.

- ✓ Use *who, whom, whoever, or whomever* to refer to people:

**DO THIS:** Please find the person who won the lottery.

**NOT THIS:** Please find the person that won the lottery.

"The correct use of 'whom' is easier than you think. When it is right, it is sublime. When it is wrong, it blocks your passage" (Norris 2015, 91).

- ✓ Use *who* to replace a subject and *whom* to replace an object of a sentence.

**DO THIS:** The person to whom you wrote the letter never responded.

**NOT THIS:** The person who you wrote the letter to never responded.

- ✓ Use the pronoun *that* to introduce essential information.

**DO THIS:** The company that signed the agreement is based in Chicago.

**DO THIS:** The company, which signed the agreement, is based in Chicago.

**NOT THIS:** The company, that signed the agreement, is based in Chicago.

Use a set of commas and the pronoun *which* to introduce nonessential information

**DO THIS:** His new book, which is much funnier than his last one, was released today.

**NOT THIS:** His new book that is much funnier than his last one was released today.

**Personal Pronouns (Third Person): she, he, it, they; her, him, them**

**Possessive Pronouns (Third Person): his, her, hers, its, their, theirs**

- ✓ Ensure personal and possessive pronouns agree with the nouns they are replacing in number.

**DO THIS:** Congress is at a stalemate; as usual, it can never pass a bill.

**DO THIS:** Members of Congress are at a stalemate; as usual they can never pass a bill.

**NOT THIS:** Congress is at a stalemate; as usual, they can never finalize a bill.

"I hate to say it, but the colloquial use of 'their' when you mean 'his or her' is just wrong. It may solve the gender problem, and there is no doubt that it has taken over in the spoken language, but it does so at the expense of number" (Norris 2015, 69).

- ✓ If the noun is gender neutral, ensure the pronoun at least agrees in number.

**DO THIS:** A sailor has to remain alert on his or her watch.

**DO THIS:** A sailor has to remain alert on his watch.

**DO THIS:** A sailor has to remain alert on her watch.

**NOT THIS:** A sailor has to remain alert on their watch.

- ✓ Use gender neutral pronouns to refer to vessels, i.e., ships and aircraft; consult military style guides for military-specific, non-academic conventions.
- ✓ Use singular pronouns when referring to an individual organization.

**Singular Indefinite Pronouns: anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, much, neither, nobody, no one, nothing, one, somebody, someone, something**

**Plural Indefinite Pronouns: both, few, many, several**

**Either Singular or Plural Pronouns: all, any, most, none, some**

- ✓ Use an *indefinite pronoun* to indicate non-specific subjects and objects.

**DO THIS:** Someone needs to pick up the mail.

**DO THIS:** Someone needs to pick up his (or her) mail.

**NOT THIS:** Someone needs to pick up their mail.

**DO THIS:** Each class has a different midterm schedule.

**DO THIS:** Each class has its own midterm schedule.

**NOT THIS:** Each class has their own midterm schedule.

**DO THIS:** No one knows the answer.

**DO THIS:** There were two possible definitions. Both were correct.

**DO THIS:** Though many are capable, few actually vote.

**DO THIS:** All (the teachers) review class material at midterm.

## PREPOSITIONS

Prepositions create relationships between nouns (or pronouns) and other words in a sentence. Each preposition falls within a prepositional phrase:

Prepositional phrase construction: Preposition + (modifiers) + Object(s)

**Common prepositions:** about, above, across, after, among, around, before, behind, beneath, beside, between, down, during, following, for, in, in which, including, inside, like, near, next to, off, on, onto, outside, past, since, though, to, toward, under, underneath, until, up, upon, via, when, where, with, without

Prepositions are easily confused because many have nuanced meanings. Use the following tips adapted from [www.grammar.net/prepositions](http://www.grammar.net/prepositions) to prevent confusion and to promote clarity:

- ✓ Use *at* for current locations; use *to* for other locations.

**DO THIS:** Jason works *at* Disneyland.

**DO THIS:** She took a flight *to* Paris.

Use *for* for measuring periods of time; use *since* to reference a past event.

**DO THIS:** I have lived in Monterey *for* one year.

**DO THIS:** You have eaten lunch *by* yourself *since* July.

Use *in* and *for* to indicate general measurements; use *on* and *at* to indicate specific dates or times.

**DO THIS:** I vacation in Yosemite *for* several days *in* the fall.

**DO THIS:** Harold receives his award *on* November 5 *at* the Lincoln Memorial.

- ✓ Use *about* and *around* to estimate quantities.

**DO THIS:** Shannon ate *about* 20 pieces of licorice *today*.

**DO THIS:** Derek arrived home *around* 5:00 p.m.

- ✓ Use *in* when referring to geographical locations.

**DO THIS:** I experienced the best hospitality *in* Bavaria.

- ✓ Use *on* when referring to road or street names:

**DO THIS:** The worst traffic is *on* Fremont Street.

Sometimes the presence of a prepositional phrase tricks writers into mismatching their subjects and verbs. Problems with subject–verb agreement are some of the most common.

- ✓ Ensure your verb agrees with your subject despite the presence of a prepositional phrase.

**DO THIS:** Experts *in* the field explain this phenomenon.

**NOT THIS:** Experts *in* the field explains this phenomenon.

- ✓ Ensure subject–verb agreement in the presence of a non-count or collective noun.

**DO THIS:** Literature about civil–military relations has been expanding.

**DO THIS:** Faculty from the business and engineering schools have coordinated their efforts.

**NOT THIS:** Faculty from the business and engineering schools has coordinated its efforts.

## STYLE AND CLARITY

### VERB TENSE

Passages that shift dramatically in verb tense can be jarring for readers. Follow these simple guidelines to improve the flow of your papers.

- ✓ Use the simple past tense to describe a specific or definite past action.  
**DO THIS:** Each incumbent received the report.  
**NOT THIS:** Each incumbent receives the report.
- ✓ Use the present perfect to describe an indefinite past action or one that is ongoing.  
**DO THIS:** Subsequent to the accident, industry leaders have attempted to make changes.  
**NOT THIS:** Subsequent to the accident, industry leaders attempted to make changes.  
**DO THIS:** Since the end of the Cold War, Western nations have focused on nuclear disarmament.  
**NOT THIS:** Since the end of the Cold War, Western nations focused on nuclear disarmament.
- ✓ Use the simple present tense to describe contemporary themes.  
**DO THIS:** Tension in the South continues.
- ✓ Consult your style guide for APA- or Chicago-specific verb tense requirements.

### ACTIVE VOICE

Active voice in academic writing places emphasis on the doer of an action and makes your writing more easily accessible to the reader.

Active construction: Subject + Verb + Object.

Passive construction: Object + Form of verb *to be* + Past participle verb (+ Prepositional Phrase + Subject).

As you can see, passive constructions nearly double the length of a short sentence and hide the doer of the action. The following examples will help you practice your active writing skills:

- ✓ Emphasize the doer(s) of the action.  
**DO THIS:** The analyst assessed the risks.  
**NOT THIS:** The risks were assessed by the analyst.
- ✓ Bring the doer(s) back to the sentence.  
**DO THIS:** The department store chain permanently laid off one hundred workers.  
**NOT THIS:** One hundred workers were permanently laid off.
- ✓ Use passive voice when the doer of the action is unknown or not the focus of the sentence.

### MODIFIERS

Modifiers—either words or phrases—should provide more information about a subject or object within a sentence. A dangling modifier—usually in the form of an introductory element—does not connect definitively with either the subject or the object. Here are a few tips for revising these pesky phrases:

- ✓ Turn the introductory element into a subordinating clause or a prepositional phrase.  
**DO THIS:** As the inspectors toured the facility, the damage became apparent.  
**NOT THIS:** Touring the facility, the damage became apparent.
- ✓ Revise the passive construction in the main clause to an active construction.  
**DO THIS:** To recognize this problem early, scientists have studied erosion.  
**NOT THIS:** To recognize this problem early, corrosion has been studied.

**DO THIS:** After scrutinizing the problem, the inspectors think that corrosion is the culprit.

**NOT THIS:** After scrutinizing the problem, corrosion is now thought to have been the culprit.

- ✓ Ensure that your introductory element has a subject and a verb.

**DO THIS:** When corrosion is present, inspectors know that it will likely break down infrastructure.

**NOT THIS:** When present, inspectors know that corrosion is likely to result in infrastructure breaking down.

## PARALLEL SENTENCE STRUCTURE

If you think of parallel sentence structure in geometry terms, you're bound to get confused. Instead, think of parallelism in writing as setting a pattern and sticking with it, either within sentences, paragraphs, or the entire body of a paper.

- ✓ Use commas in bulleted or numbered lists when the entire list forms a complete sentence; make sure to include the serial comma.

**DO THIS:** The hiring process entails

1. interviewing applicants,
2. weighing the strengths of each applicant , and
3. selecting the best applicant for the position.

- ✓ Achieve parallelism in a sentence containing a list of words or phrases beginning with the same part of speech.

**DO THIS:** running, biking, and jumping

**DO THIS:** the hospital, the conservatory, or the museum

**DO THIS:** intelligent, creative, and resourceful

**NOT THIS:** highly motivated, management, team player

- ✓ Achieve parallelism by ensuring list items follow from the same verb.

**DO THIS:** Daniel's main concerns included receiving his paycheck on time, getting along with his co-workers, and earning a promotion within the year.

**NOT THIS:** Daniel's main concerns included receiving his paycheck on time, getting along with his co-workers, and his boss.

**DO THIS:** The author illustrated the reasons behind climate change, the impact climate change will have on our future, and the steps companies can take to reduce their carbon footprints.

**NOT THIS:** The author illustrated the reasons behind climate change, changing our habits, and that companies contribute to the problem.

**Correlative Conjunctions:** both ... and, between ... and, either ... or, neither ... nor, not only ... but also, as ... as, not ... but

- ✓ Achieve parallelism between two nouns or between two phrases in a sentence using a pair of correlative conjunctions before the same parts of speech.

**DO THIS:** both at bat and at second base

**DO THIS:** the difference between the teachers and the administration

**DO THIS:** Neither the meal nor the dessert arrived promptly.

**DO THIS:** Either the department supervisor or the store manager will have to find employment elsewhere.

**DO THIS:** The foreign publications were impossible both to read and to translate.

**NOT THIS:** The foreign publications were both impossible to read and translate.

## SIGNAL PHRASING

Before you put pen to paper, or cursor to screen, familiarize yourself with your department's preferred citation style. A citation style dictates not only the way you format citations but also the way you format your document. Stop by the Graduate Writing Center for a complete list of citation styles by department; then, make sure to check out a handbook from the library or purchase one before you begin writing. This section will illustrate properly cited quotations using the most common citation styles: APA, Chicago, and IEEE.

A combination of punctuation marks—quotation marks, commas, periods, brackets, and ellipses— and attribution elements—context, signal phrasing, blending, and in-text citations or footnotes—form a perfectly executed quotation.

There are three primary ways to introduce a quote, also known as signal phrasing:

- ✓ Introduce a quote with the author's name, a verb, and a comma. (Example is in Chicago author/date.)  
**DO THIS:** Bradbury's Montag laments, "'Nobody listens any more. I can't talk to the walls because they're yelling at me. I can't talk to my wife; she listens to the walls. I just want someone to hear what I have to say'" (1953, 82).
- ✓ Introduce a quote with an independent clause containing the author's name and a colon. (Example is in APA.)  
**DO THIS:** Hammett's gloomy atmosphere materializes: "Cold steamy air blew in through two open windows, bringing with it half a dozen times a minute the Alcatraz foghorn's dull moaning" (1929, p. 11).
- ✓ Introduce a quote without extra punctuation and blended into the sentence. (Example is in IEEE.)  
**DO THIS:** The message that "you forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget" resonates throughout McCarthy's tale [1].
- ✓ Never start or end a paragraph with a quote.
- ✓ Always provide analysis after a quote. In other words, do not let the quote speak for itself.
- ✓ Provide citations for summarized, paraphrased, and quoted work.
- ✓ Consult your style guide for help with punctuation and citation requirements.

Brackets and ellipses help blend a quote into a sentence or promote clarity and concision.

- ✓ Use brackets to insert words or parts of words that are not original to the quotation.  
**DO THIS:** Montag "just want[s] someone to hear what [he has] to say" (Bradbury 1953, 82).
- ✓ Use brackets around the word *sic*, to indicate typos, misspellings, or non-standard English present in the original quotation  
**DO THIS:** Jameson (1995) demonstrated "there were to [*sic*] many problems with the proposal" (p. 23).
- ✓ Use an ellipsis to indicate where words have been omitted from an original quotation.  
**DO THIS:** Bradbury's Montag [4]expresses his frustration: "'Nobody listens any more. ... I just want someone to hear what I have to say.'"  
**DO NOT THIS:** Montag laments, "'I can't talk to the walls because they're yelling at me'" (Bradbury, 1953, p. 82).  
**NOT THIS:** Montag laments, "'... I can't talk to the walls because they're yelling at me ...'" (Bradbury, 1953, p.82).
- ✓ Do not use an ellipsis at the beginning or end of direct quotes because it is assumed that every quotation is an excerpt of a larger body of work:  
**DO THIS:** Montag laments, "'I can't talk to the walls because they're yelling at me'" (Bradbury, 1953, p. 82).  
**NOT THIS:** Montag laments, "'... I can't talk to the walls because they're yelling at me ...'" (Bradbury, 1953, p.82).
- ✓ Do not use an ellipsis as punctuation for a sentence within a quote. Instead, punctuate the sentence, add a space, insert an ellipsis, add another space, and then begin the next sentence:  
**DO THIS:** Montag laments, "'Nobody listens any more. ... I just want someone to hear what I have to say.'" <sup>3</sup>  
**NOT THIS:** Montag laments, "'Nobody listens any more ... I just want someone to hear what I have to say.'" <sup>3</sup>

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