

WRITING WELL¹

“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler” (Albert Einstein)

“Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly” (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

Writing well involves thinking. It is not possible to separate the quality of one's thinking from its written expression. In this course, no distinction will be made between good "communication" and good "content." To perform well on your essays, you must both think and write well. Here are some things to work on in your writing, followed by a key to symbols I will use when evaluating your essays.

General imperatives/suggestions for your writing:

- Carefully write your introductory paragraph, indicating your purpose and how you plan to approach it.
- Make sure there are transitions between paragraphs. New paragraphs should not, as a general rule, come "out of nowhere."
- Write a clear summary and conclusion to each essay.
- Do not use contractions in most non-fiction writing (e.g. write out "do not" instead of "don't").
- Make antecedents clear: every time you use pronouns such as this, these, it, his, her, their, etc., make absolutely certain the referent is clear.
- Make sure the speaker is clear: When are you summarizing someone else? When are you speaking for yourself? (Hint, inject phrases such as: "she continued," "she concluded," "she builds this argument on...". Such phrases make it clear that you are still describing somebody else's thought, rather than launching into your own analysis. Phrases such as "it seems to me" can also be used to indicate your own thinking.)
- Usually punctuation comes before quotation marks, but you should also learn the exceptions.
- Do not make statements of opinion without explaining your assumptions with regard to moral principles, or the facts which you believe back up your views. Ask yourself, if someone else was reading your essay, could that person legitimately ask you questions such as "Why?" or "How do you know that?" If such questions are unanswered, answer them, or explain why such answers are beyond the scope of your essay.
- Proof read carefully. Also have a friend proof read your essays and tell you about any sections which are unclear. Give yourself enough time to rewrite each essay, preferably several times. Good writing almost never results from first drafts.

The symbols on the following page refer to the major mistakes I expect you to avoid in your essays. These symbols will also serve as a key to some of my comments.

¹ See Strunk, White, and Angel, *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed., and Williams, *Style*, 7th ed., 2003, both published by Longman.

AC	Avoid contractions.	patriotism and nationalism can themselves become religions phenomena” (correct).
AF	Avoid “filler” and “fluff” – do not waste time – get directly to the central issues.	
AI	Avoid intensifiers (such as “very”).	
ANT	Antecedent Unclear	
AP	Avoid passive constructions. It is usually best to write in the active voice.	
AWK	Awkward – The sentence structure is awkward, although the meaning is not completely lost.	
DEF	Define	
DEV	Develop this section – more discussion needed.	
DP	Dangling participle/preposition – Do not end sentences with words such as: of, about, with (by inserting the word earlier in the sentence and including the word “which,” you can usually solve the problem).	
EX	Explain	
IS	Incomplete sentence/sentence fragment (usually has no verb)	
MA	Misplaced adverb – Generally speaking, do not separate a verb from the adverb. Wrong: He wrote about the ethics of ingestion carefully. Right: He wrote carefully about the ethics of ingestion. (The verb, “wrote,” is adjacent to the adverb, “carefully.”)	
MI	Misuse of verb “is” – Do use the verb “is” when you should use a phrase such as “refers to.” E.g.: “The civil religion thesis is religious nationalism” (wrong); “The civil religion thesis refers to the idea that	
NRQ	Not (or inadequately) responsive to the question	
OS	Overstatement (avoid statements such as “never” and “always” unless no exceptions exist, i.e., unless you have defended them)	
S	Simplify sentence – Your sentence(s) are too long or use unnecessarily obscure words. (Solutions: divide the section into more sentences and/or simplify the language. Generally speaking, use the simplest words that can express what you wish to convey.)	
SP	Spelling	
SU	Speaker unclear (see comments above)	
TFT	Delete “the fact that” and similar unnecessary phrases.	
UC	Unclear – Something is missing, or the sentence structure is poor, which has confused the meaning	
URQ	Unresponsive to the Question	
WT	Wrong Tense (or the tenses are inconsistent) – Make the singular and plural agree (e.g. between subject (noun), pronoun, and verb). Or, make past, present and future tense agree.	
WW	Wrong word (or better word choice is possible)	

IF YOU DO MAKE GRAMMATICAL ERRORS AT LEAST DO NOT MAKE THE ONES THIS PAGE REMINDS YOU TO AVOID.