

Tips for Avoiding Common Writing Errors

Hillary S. Gell, Writing Specialist

Lewis & Clark Law School

Summer 2020

Use a checklist, but remain mindful!

A list will help you keep track,
but the list will not make corrections for you
or tell you whether you made the correction correctly.

*Do you write
the way you talk?*

Formal/Professional Tone

1 | Transitions

- Help reader identify relationships between ideas (cause/effect, similarity/contrast, chronology, etc.)

2 | Parenthetical asides

- Conversational
- Interrupt flow of text
- Does information belong in footnote or in body of paper?

3 | Length of quotations, sentences, and paragraphs

- Block quotations (50+ words): indent, single-space, avoid if possible
- Sentence: three lines maximum
- Paragraph: half to two-thirds of page

Formal/Professional Tone

4 | Contractions

- Write out can't, won't, don't, shouldn't, etc.

5 | Abbreviations

- Define first time
- Use consistently

6 | It

- Use a clearer term instead!

Prioritize

1 | Revising

Large-scale: Look for gaps, inconsistencies, and redundancies in content. Evaluate the organization of your project. You might need to cut and paste sections of your writing project to group content that should be discussed together or insert new content to fill in missing links.

2 | Editing

Focus on style: Consider your word choice and whether the phrasing you used creates an appropriate tone. For example, did you use contractions, idiomatic expressions, or casual language? Review your grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Also evaluate the format of the body of your paper and your citations.

3 | Proofreading

Print a hard copy: Use colored pens to mark up the document; subsequently you will transfer your mark-ups to the digital copy. You cannot look for every type of writing issue simultaneously, so give yourself the opportunity to read your paper several times, with each round focused on different writing issues. Take a break between rounds.

Common Errors

1 | It is, There is, and There are

Avoid empty phrases - use more precise language instead.

Additional examples:

- An argument can be made that...
- Needless to say...
- It goes without saying...

2 | Parallel Construction

Each chunk of a list must have the same grammatical form.

No: When I have free time, I enjoy watching movies, to go for a walk, and call my friend back home.

Yes: When I have free time, I enjoy watching movies, going for a walk, and calling my friend back home.

3 | Dangling Participles

Every modifier must clearly connect to the proper referent.

No: Looking out the window, my neighbor's cat ran across the street.

Yes: Looking out the window, I saw my neighbor's cat run across the street.

More Common Errors

4 | Ambiguous Pronouns

Being repetitive is better than creating ambiguity.

No: Alex and Taylor agreed to trade desserts at lunchtime, so he gave her a brownie and she gave him a cookie.

Yes: Alex and Taylor agreed to trade desserts at lunchtime, so Taylor gave Alex a brownie and Alex gave Taylor a cookie.

5 | Nominalizations

Using a noun in place of a verb.

No: The student came to the conclusion that she had conducted sufficient research when she made the determination that the same references kept appearing.

Yes: The student concluded that she had conducted sufficient research when she determined that the same references kept appearing.

6 | Active Voice versus Passive Voice

Consider reader's expectations and comprehension.

Active = Subject > Verb > Object

Passive = Object > Verb > Subject (sometimes missing)

Note: VOICE is not the same as TENSE.

And More Common Errors

7 | Punctuation - Apostrophe

Singular noun: before “s”
The cat’s paws.
The child’s books.

Regular plural noun: after “s”
The cats’ paws.

Irregular plural noun: before “s”
The children’s books.

8 | Punctuation - Semicolon

Connect two full sentences
(two complete ideas).
No: The weather report
predicted five days of heavy rain;
a warm, sunny day instead.
Yes: The weather report
predicted five days of heavy rain;
however, the next day was warm
and sunny instead.

9 | Punctuation - Colon

Preceded by a full sentence
(complete idea) and followed by
list, fragment, or full sentence.
No: The very hungry caterpillar
ate many different kinds of food
on Saturday, such as: chocolate
cake, ice cream, pie, sausage,
salami, cheese, and candy.
Yes: The very hungry caterpillar
ate many different kinds of food
on Saturday, such as chocolate
cake, ice cream, pie, sausage,
salami, cheese, and candy.

And More Common Errors

10

Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices

Run-on: Emma forgot her umbrella she arrived to class soaked.

How to fix?

Comma Splice: Emma forgot her umbrella, she arrived to class soaked.

How to fix?

Can you think of others that you would like to discuss?

Bluebook Rules

1 | According to [authority]..., and In [authority]...

- Avoid redundant phrases; get to the point as quickly as possible.
- Shift citations into citation sentences to clean up textual sentences and make document easier to read.

2 | Pincites

- Locate starred numbers immediately before and after target text; the number immediately before the text is the page number where the text appears in the reporter.
- If the opinion appears in multiple reporters, then you will encounter multiple sets of starred numbers.

3 | Short-form Citations

Provide full citation information the first time authority is cited. Use short-form citation for subsequent references to same authority:

- Party A, Volume Reporter at Pincite
- Id. [Only used when citing the same authority multiple times in a row]

Bluebook Rules

4 | Parallel Citations

- Opinions appearing in multiple reporters have multiple citations.
- Consult TABLE 1 to determine preferred source in relevant jurisdiction.

5 | Jurisdiction

- Abbreviation for jurisdiction must appear in parentheses with date of decision when reporter's name does not reveal jurisdiction.

6 | Numbers

- RULE 6.2: Write out numbers in words up to and including ninety-nine...but there are many exceptions!