

Checklist for writing—essays and news writing.

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Before handing in your work, read this list and edit yourself. Assume you've made at least three of the mistakes below.

Checklist to identify weaknesses in writing

Goal: Accuracy, Brevity, Clarity.

1. Use active voice. It has more vigor than the passive.
2. Rely heavily on strong nouns and verbs. Powerful verbs create pictures in a reader's mind.
3. Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly.
4. Write mainly with simple declarative sentences: subject, verb, object.
5. Use simple, short words.
6. Remove all unnecessary words and non-critical digressions. Vigorous writing is concise.
7. Avoid fad words, buzz words, clichés, bureaucratese, legalese and other jargon.
8. Try for short sentences, but vary their length so as not to be staccato. Limit one idea to a sentence. Keep average sentence length under 18-25 words.
9. Be sure verb tenses agree, and that all grammar and punctuation (American

usage, not British) are perfect.

10. Avoid clutter, especially at the top (lead). Move details to later paragraphs.
11. Use specific, telling detail. Take the reader to the scene.
12. Supply necessary background. Each story should stand on its own feet.
13. Define/explain any terms some readers may not understand.
14. Use analogies/metaphors to explain complicated concepts.
15. If a person is introduced early in the text, re-identify the person later on.
16. Leave no unanswered questions. Try to answer a question as soon as it is raised.
17. Raise no hopes you don't fulfill. If you speak of a person's wit, give an example.
18. Place the most important words in a sentence at its beginning and end. Use topic sentences to set up your main ideas in a paragraph.
19. Show, don't tell. Not "He was angry," but "He hammered the desk with his fist, and his eyes flashed."
20. Use direct quotes sparingly. Don't put factual statements in quotes. Quote only when something is said in a distinctive manner or exact phrasing is important. Otherwise paraphrase.
21. When quoting, identify the source first if the source is more important. If the information the source gives is more important, give the information first.

22. Do not strain. Some stories should be told simply, briefly.
23. Use transitions to signal readers when you shift directions.
24. Finally, read the story aloud. The ear will detect rough spots.

Extra notes from Anya Schiffrin

ESSAY WRITING: begin with a pithy argument. Then take the reader through the argument using information from the reading to back up your points. Cite page numbers.

Here is an example of an opening paragraph for a KLG essay: (written by me)

“Newspapers were effective in raising awareness about the atrocities committed in the Belgian Congo during the rule of King Leopold. However generating public outrage was not enough to fix the widespread labor abuses and torture that ultimately caused the deaths of an estimated 10 million people (Hochschild)”

If you are writing about KLG or another book with lots of characters then do a bit of scene setting . Do not assume your reader knows who anyone is. Always give a short description when introducing a new person into your essay. On the first reference, say that E.D. Morel was an activist or that George Washington Williams was a freed slave who founded a newspaper.

Don't say “the Casement report” . Give the name and the date and some context so we know why you are bringing it up.

Provide some sort of chronology so it's clear what happened and when but don't take up your whole essay with a summary of events. Make an argument and give us information/examples to support your argument.

Finish with a fulsome conclusion that alludes to points made earlier in the essay.

Remember: you are not writing a book report or a book review. The point is not to summarize what the book said but to use parts of it to back up an argument. Or use theory from the reading and apply it to different examples (“salience” as a goal in the KLG campaign).

Before you write anything/include information in your essay, ask yourself what it adds and why are you including it.

CLARITY

- 1) Proof read repeatedly. Once will not catch all the errors. Read backwards looking just for spelling, not meaning.
- 2) Don't assume your reader knows the things you know so think of ways to quickly tell them key information without bogging down the flow of your piece. (Newspapers do this all the time. Read the *Wall Street Journal* for good examples).

Don't make the reader work:

- Spell out acronyms on first reference eg School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA)
- Say what something is and where it is based eg instead of saying “Columbia” say “Columbia University in New York City:
Or “the New York-based social impact investment firm Acumen”
- If you tell us something happened, then tell when eg Facebook's acquisition of Whatsapp. Just add in the year. You probably don't need the complete date.

- If you mention someone new to the story then identify them on first reference eg Professor Anya Schiffrin, Columbia President Lee Bollinger. 18th century crusading journalist E.D Morel or avaricious tyrant King Leopold.

Attribution, Cite your sources!

- 3) If you do an interview say where and when: “in a phone interview” “in an email interview last April” “in her California office”.
- 4) If you are quoting from a report then say so.
- 5) When you quote directly say so, eg after the closed quote mark, write ", Schiffrin said. “
- 6) If you are writing an essay based on reading, then cite the relevant page number. Use MLA style or footnotes as you wish. Choose one method and be consistent.
- 7) Avoid sweeping generalizations that are not backed up by information from the text.

One example: “One of the men to start paying attention was Edmund Dene Morel, who worked in France and England supervising ships from the Congo. He was one of the first people to notice that slavery existed in Congo.” [It’s hard to believe he was one of the first so cite a page number “.

“...and was successful in forcing Leopold to give up “his beloved colony (Hochschild257) by selling the Congo to Belgium. This brought a change in working conditions and improved services such as a healthcare.” [Hard to know if this is true so please cite a paper number”]

A BONUS TIP

If you are writing about anything that involves money:

- 8) First rule of journalism: if you mention something like spending on r&d or an acquisition, or an IPO you have to tell us how much money was involved.
- 9) If you are writing about a company then you need to give two years ' of revenue and profit figures. Talk about what market share they have and how big the overall market is so the reader can see where the company you are writing about fits in.