

## Stylistic and Substantive Hints for Writing Papers

### Stylistic hints

1. Avoid contractions in formal writing. In informal writing, they're OK.
2. Avoid the passive voice (e.g., "it was done to him") where possible.
3. In formal writing, never use the second person as a substitute for impersonal or general references. Thus you should not write: "living in a democracy makes you less likely to be arrested for political reasons". You might write instead: "Citizens in democratic societies are less likely to be arrested for political reasons."
4. Consider avoiding the first person singular. If using that format, however, stick with it throughout. Do not switch back and forth between impersonal presentation of your argument and the first person singular. Thus, you could write: "In the first section of this paper, I discuss the reasons for the collapse of Chilean democracy in 1973. In the second section, I discuss how General Augusto Pinochet was able to consolidate a personalistic dictatorship." You could also write: "The first section of this paper discusses the reasons for the collapse of Chilean democracy in 1973. The second section describes how General Augusto Pinochet was able to consolidate a personalistic dictatorship." But you would not write: "In the first section of this paper, I discuss the reasons for the collapse of Chilean democracy in 1973. The second section describes how General Augusto Pinochet was able to consolidate a personalistic dictatorship."

The same point holds for the first person plural ("we").

5. "It's" is a contraction of "it is". "Its" is the possessive of "it". As you will not be using contractions in formal writing, you won't be using "it's" ever.
6. Do not use impersonal pronouns (e.g., it) when the referent is unclear or nowhere in sight. The "it" should refer clearly to a specific noun used in the preceding clause, not to a general concept contained in the previous clause, nor to a specific noun two or more clauses away.

Similarly, avoid using "this" and "that" as subjects or direct objects. Thus, you would not write: "Dahl and other scholars have advanced the argument that democratization depends little on international influence. But this ignores important exceptions, such as Greece, Argentina, Taiwan, and the Eastern Europe." Instead, write: "Dahl and other scholars have advanced the argument that democratization depends little on international influence. But this argument ignores important exceptions, such as Greece, Argentina, Taiwan, and the Eastern Europe."

7. Do not use "and/or", as in "they fought for God and/or country". Instead, you might try "they fought for God, country, or both".

8. Be careful not to use “which” when you mean to use “that”. Use “which” when the phrase or clause set off is parenthetical to noun it qualifies. Thus, you would write: “U.S. pressure pushed the Salvadoran government toward democracy, which it probably would have favored in any case.” By contrast, use “that” when the phrase or clause it introduces is integral to the noun described. Thus you would write: “U.S. pressure pushed the Salvadoran government toward the kind of democracy that Salvadoran civilian leaders already favored.”
9. Avoid using “while” as a compromise between “and” and “but”. Normally “while” should be confined to temporal expressions, such as: “While my wife read abstruse papers on neuro-endocrinology, I watched re-runs of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on TV.”
10. If your first language is not English, check for common mistranslations. For instance, if you are a native speaker of Portuguese or Spanish change you should make sure to write “make decisions” instead of “take decisions”, “commitment” as opposed to “compromise”, “sensitive” as opposed to “sensible”, “soccer” instead of “futbol” or “football”, etc.
11. Do not worry about split infinitives. If Captain Kirk can do it (“to boldly go where no one has gone before”), so can you.
12. If in doubt about style and grammar, consult Strunk et al. <sup>1</sup> or some similar volume.
13. Always include page numbers on your papers.
14. Spell check and proofread your paper before handing it in.
15. Pick an acceptable style for citations and stick to it. If your footnotes are abridged or you are using the academic journal style of including citations in parentheses, be sure to include a list of references cited.  
  
Make sure the formatting of you bibliography and references corresponds to one of the appropriate styles. Stick with ONE style and use it throughout. If in doubt about formatting issues, consult the [\*Chicago Manual of Style\*](#).
16. For your first paper, allow at least two hours after that paper is completely written to your satisfaction to go back through it and check to make sure that you have covered all these points. For subsequent papers, check through your paper both for these points and for any hints you have received on previous papers.

---

<sup>1</sup> William Strunk Jr., E.B. White, and Roger Angell, *The Elements of Style*, 4th Edition (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999).

## **Substantive hints**

1. Near the beginning of the paper, offer your reader a “road map”. For example, after introducing your subject, you might write: “This paper will first describe the logic of Marx’s argument and then critique that logic. Next, it will discuss several empirical problems with Marx’s claims. Finally, it will suggest two ways to revise Marx’s framework so as to take into account these objections without sacrificing its admirable parsimony and intellectual punch.”
2. Make a clear argument in the first paragraph (or in the second paragraph, if you start with a story). Then present evidence to support that argument.
3. Do not ignore contrary evidence. Either acknowledge that such contrary evidence limits the generality of your argument or show why it is not actually contrary to your argument.
4. Draw on all the potentially relevant readings.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

17.588 Field Seminar in Comparative Politics  
Fall 2013

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.