

## **GUIDELINES FOR ESSAY WRITING AND PRESENTATION**

*The suggestions that follow have been prepared in consultation with undergraduates and lecturers in the English Faculty.*

### **1. WRITING**

Perhaps the first thing to be aware of is that you have a style; all writing does: good style is what allows you to represent your ideas as precisely and as persuasively as possible. Everything else leads to varying degrees of confusion and frustration, both for you and for your reader. So one of the most useful things you can do is to become aware of some of the features of your own writing style and how they help or hinder your expression. Do you, for example, tend to write in long, involved sentences, unfolding a thought as its ramifications occur to you; or is your prose characterised by a series of short staccato declarations of the 'subject-verb-object' type? How flexible is your use of verb forms or your vocabulary? How do you use paragraphs (do you use paragraphs at all)? To what extent do these features reflect - or fail to reflect - how you are thinking about the subject, and what you are trying to communicate?

One very important way of expanding the resources available to your own writing is to read how others have written about similar subjects: what features of their style do you admire, find confusing, wearisome or antagonistic? (See the section on 'Secondary Reading' below.) Try some of them out for yourself. Remember that 'success' is to do with communication and effectiveness, not length or esoteric jargon or improbability.

Be alert to the importance of vocabulary: getting exactly the right word can transform your entire argument, making do with a rough approximation may wreck it. Accurate spelling and punctuation are an intrinsic part of the complex process of trying to express one's thoughts on paper. If you know your spelling is poor, always use a dictionary, and use the spell check on your word processor - with caution (many packages use American conventions).

### **2. CONTENT, STRUCTURE AND PRESENTATION**

#### **Structure and Planning**

Contrary to mythology, all essays need not conform to a formal structure of introduction, middle and conclusion (in this they differ from technical reports, which always adhere to such a structure). The purpose of the introduction is to set the scene for the reader - those that say nothing, other than repeat the title, are waste of space. It is much better to pose a problem, ask a question, or make an assertion that the remainder of the essay will go on to probe. Don't over-use paragraphs of one or two sentences; they can be rhetorically effective if used sparingly to isolate a particularly important point, or a change of direction in your argument. Equally, don't allow paragraphs to spread over entire pages: a paragraph normally corresponds to the discussion of a particular point or stage in your argument; a new paragraph indicates that you are moving on to a new thought, or developing a previous one in new directions. Check that the connection and flow between paragraphs will be clear to your reader; they are not isolated units of thought.

### 3. GRAMMAR

This section is intended to serve as reference for basic grammatical points, which are common sources of confusion. As a guideline, you should be able to:

- Use correctly, and understand the function of nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, and use different verb tenses effectively and consistently.
- Use who and whom correctly.
- Use apostrophes for both possession and abbreviation.
- Understand the syntax of complex sentences, distinguishing between 'clause' and 'phrase'.
- Write clear, complex sentences combining a range of subordinate clauses.
- Use conjunctions and paragraphs effectively.
- Punctuate sentences with 90% accuracy, using commas to represent pauses and to separate clauses.

If you feel your grasp of grammar is shaky, use these guidelines and refer to one of the following until you are confident of being able to express your meaning precisely:

*David Crystal, Rediscover Grammar (London: Longman, 1988)*

*Loreto Todd, English Grammar (London: York Handbooks / Longman, 1985.)*

### 4. SOME BASIC SPELLING

1. 'i' Before 'e' except after 'c' when the 'i' and the 'e' make the sound double 'e', as in:

➤ ceiling, achievement, deceitful, siege, receipt.

This rule always works except for the few exceptions, which you have to learn:

➤ Weir, weird, protein, seize.

2. When you add an 's' to a word that ends in 'y' the 'y' changes to 'ie' unless there is a vowel before the 'y', for example:

➤ try, tries;      ➤ annoy, annoys;      ➤ fly, flies;      ➤ horrify, horrifies

3. Prefixes

In a compound word formed by adding a prefix like dis- or un-, it is often helpful to think about how the word was originally spelt:

dis + appear = disappear  
dis + appoint = disappoint  
dis + satisfied = dissatisfied

un + necessary = unnecessary  
un + inspiring = uninspiring

4. Words commonly mis-spelt include:

advise (*verb*)  
advice (*noun*)  
caricature  
definite  
definitely

humour  
humorous  
practise (*verb*)  
practice (*noun*)  
separate

simile  
soliloquy  
who's (*only use as an abbreviation for 'who is'*)  
whose = (*belonging to whom*)  
*See Section 5 on the apostrophe*

## 5. PUNCTUATION

See also the *MHRA Style Book*. What follows is an abbreviated handy guide only to a few common misunderstandings and mistakes.

### The Apostrophe

1. Use of the apostrophe in the singular. The apostrophe may be used in the singular. (The test in all cases is that you can put the phrase into other words using 'of'):

- my wife's father (the father of my wife)
- his family's support (the support of his family)
- the prisoner's release (the release of the prisoner)

2. When a singular noun ends in /s/. There are a number of nouns, often names, which end in /s/, e.g. Burns, Jones, Dickens. The writer has a choice when making the genitive.

Thus either form within the following pairs is correct:

- |                   |    |                  |                          |
|-------------------|----|------------------|--------------------------|
| ➤ Dickens' novels | or | Dickens's novels | but not: Dicken's novels |
| ➤ Burns' poetry   | or | Burns's poetry   | but not: Burn's poetry   |
| ➤ Barnabas' nose  | or | Barnabas's nose  | but not: Barnaba's nose  |

To form the plural possessive, these add an apostrophe to the /s/ of the plural in the normal way, e.g.

- |                    |                            |
|--------------------|----------------------------|
| ➤ Bosses           | ➤ the octopuses' tentacles |
| ➤ the Joneses' dog | ➤ the Thomases' dog        |

3. The apostrophe in the plural /s'/. With plural nouns the apostrophe comes after the /s/. (Again, you can always test whether to use the apostrophe, and where, by rephrasing the expression with 'of'):

- ten days' absence (an absence of ten days)
- the lecturers' common room (the common room of the lecturers)
- nun's habits (the habits of a nun)

4. The apostrophe with irregular plurals. English has a number of irregular plural forms, e.g.

- child/children
- man/men
- woman/women.

In the plural, these forms take apostrophe + /s/ and not /s/ + apostrophe:

- children's shoes
- a women's college.

5. Plural nouns used as adjectives. This is a source of potential confusion and, in some cases, a grey area. A number of expressions use a plural noun as an adjective to modify a following noun; in these cases the plural noun is not in the genitive case (in an 'of' relationship) and therefore no apostrophe is required. Some examples will make this clear:

- the arms race (This cannot really be rephrased as 'the race of arms'; it is analogous to 'the egg and spoon race', although metaphorical)
- a sports car (Again, we cannot say 'a car of sports'; 'sports' is being used here as an adjective, as opposed, say, to a 'family' car.)

6. French names ending in silent /s/ or /x/ add /'s/ which is pronounced as /z/,  
e.g. Dumas's (Dumah's) Cremieux's
7. Names ending in -es pronounced iz are treated like plurals and take only an apostrophe, e.g.
  - Bridges'                      ➤ Moses'
  - Hodges'                        ➤ Riches'
8. It is customary in classical works to use the apostrophe only, irrespective of pronunciation, for ancient classical names ending in /s/,  
e.g.
  - Ceres'                        ➤ Herodotus'                      ➤ Venus'
  - Demosthenes'              ➤ Mars'                              ➤ Xerxes'
9. Jesus' is an accepted liturgical archaism, but in non-liturgical use, Jesus's is acceptable (used, e.g. in the NEB, John 2- 3).
10. Traditionally, expressions in the form: 'for --sake' take the apostrophe without the /s/:
  - for goodness' sake
  - for conscience' sake
12. After -x and -z, use -'s, e.g. Ajax's, Berlioz's music, Leibniz's law, Lenz's law.
13. Some other uses of/s/. In the following sentence:
  - My car is faster than John's 'than John's' means 'than John's car is'. The apostrophe here indicates an omission of more than a single letter.
 Cf. also:
  - I'm going to the dentist's
14. The difference between 'It's' and 'Its' is quite a separate issue, but it also relates to the use of the apostrophe. Again, the apostrophe is used in 'it's' to indicate that a letter has been omitted. Here it is the /i/ of 'is' (It's = it is). In all cases when you can rephrase the expression to say 'it is', you can use 'it's' with the apostrophe:
  - It's a long, long way to Tipperary
  - I wonder whether it's going to work

Its, on the other hand, is the form of the third-person singular possessive adjective used with 'things' (the neutral). The other third-person singular forms are 'his' and 'her'.

- The chair was in its usual place
- The pound held its own against the mark

In both cases, 'its' cannot be rephrased to 'it is'.

Finally, do not use the apostrophe:

- a) with the plural non-possessive -s: notices such as 'CREAM TEA'S' are often seen, but are wrong
- b) with the possessive of pronouns, hers, its, ours, theirs, yours. The possessive of 'who' is 'whose'.

There are no such words as: her's, our's, their's, your's.

## The Colon

1. Links two grammatically complete clauses, but marks a step forward, from introduction to main theme, from cause to effect, or from premise to conclusion, e.g.
  - 'To commit sin is to break God's law: sin, in fact, is lawlessness.'
2. Introduces a list of items (a dash should not be added), e.g.
  - 'The following were present: 3. Smith, J. Brown, P. Thompson, M. Jones.'

It is also used after such expressions as:

- for example
- namely
- the following
- to resume
- to sum up

**The semicolon** separates those parts of a sentence between which there is a more distinct break than would call for a comma, but which are too closely connected to be made into separate sentences. Typically these will be clauses of similar importance and grammatical construction, e.g.

- 'To err is human; to forgive, divine.'

## The Comma

The least emphatic, and most over-used, separating mark of punctuation. Its proper uses include:

1. Between adjectives which each qualify a noun in the same way, e.g.
  - 'A cautious, reticent man.'

When adjectives qualify the noun in different ways, or when one adjective qualifies another, no comma is used, e.g. ➤ 'A distinguished foreign author,' ➤ 'a bright red tie.'

2. To separate items (including the last) in a list of more than two items, e.g. 'Potatoes, peas, and carrots;' 'Potatoes, peas, or carrots,' 'Potatoes, peas, carrots, etc.'
3. To separate co-ordinated main clauses, e.g. 'Cars will turn here, and coaches will go straight on.' But not when they are closely linked, e.g. 'Do as I tell you and you'll never regret it.'
4. To mark the beginning and end of a parenthetical word or phrase, e.g.
  - 'I am sure, however, that it will not happen.'
  - 'Fred, who is bald, complained of the cold.'

A common mistake is to begin a parenthesis with a comma, but fail to complete it in the same way, e.g. ➤ 'Fred, who is bald complained of the cold.'

5. After a participial or verbless clause, a salutation, or a vocative, e.g.
  - 'Having had breakfast, I went for a walk.'
  - 'The sermon over, the congregation filed out.' or 'The sermon being over, the congregation ...'
  - 'My son, give me thy heart.'

Not ➤ 'The Sermon, being over, the congregation filed out.'

No comma is necessary with expressions like 'My friend Lord X' or 'My son John.'

6. To separate a phrase or subordinate clause from the main clause so as to avoid misunderstanding:

- 'In the valley below, the villages looked very small.'
- 'He did not go to church, because he was playing golf.'
- 'In 1982, 1918 seemed a long time ago.'

A comma should not be used to separate a subject from its object (predicate), or a verb from an object that is a clause:

- 'A car with such a high-powered engine, should not let you down.'
- and
- 'They believed, that nothing could go wrong.'

are both incorrect.

7. Following words introducing direct speech, e.g.

- 'They answered, "Here we are."

8. Following 'Dear Sir,' 'Dear John,' etc., in letters, and after 'Yours sincerely,' etc.

No comma is needed between month and year in dates or between number and road in addresses, e.g.

- 'In December 1982',      ➤ '12 Acacia Avenue.'

### **Full Stop**

1. Used at the end of all sentences which are not questions or exclamations. The next word should normally begin with a capital letter.

2. Used after abbreviations: 'see pp. 18f.' If a point making an abbreviation comes at the end of a sentence, it also serves as the closing full stop, e.g.

- 'She also kept dogs, cats, birds, etc.'
- but
- 'She also kept pets (dogs, cats, birds etc.).'

3. When a sentence concludes with a quotation which itself ends with a full stop, question mark, or exclamation mark, no further full stop is needed, e.g.

- 'He cried "Be off!" But the child would not move.'

But if the quotation is a short statement, and the introducing sentence has much greater weight, the full stop is put outside the quotation marks, e.g.

- 'Over the entrance to the temple at Delphi were written the words "Know thyself".'

### **Question Mark**

1. Follows every question which expects a separate answer. The next word should begin with a capital letter. Not used after indirect questions, e.g.

- 'He asked me why I was there.'

2. May be placed before a word, etc., whose accuracy is doubted, e.g. 'T. Tallis ?1505-85'

## Quotation Marks

1. Single quotation marks are used for a first quotation, double for a quotation within this; single again for a further quotation inside that.
2. The closing quotation marks should come before all punctuation marks unless these form part of the quotation itself; e.g.
  - ‘Did Nelson really say “Kiss me, Hardy”?’but
  - ‘Then she asked “What is your name?” ’
3. The comma at the end of quotation, when words such as ‘he said’ follow, is regarded as equivalent to the final full stop of the speaker’s utterance, and is kept inside the quotation, e.g.
  - ‘ “That is nonsense,” he said.’

The commas on either side of ‘he said,’ etc., when these words interrupt the quotation, should be outside the quotation marks, e.g.

- “That,” he said, “is nonsense.”

But the first commas go inside the quotation marks if it would be part of the utterance even if there were no interruption, e.g.

- ““That, my dear fellow,” he said, “is nonsense.”

4. Quotation marks (and roman type) are used when citing titles of articles in magazines, chapters of books, poems not published separately, and songs (that is, any work which is published as part of a collection or within a larger whole). Quotation marks are not used for titles of books of the Bible, or for any passage that represents only the substance of an extract, or has any grammatical alterations, and is not a verbatim quotation.
5. Underline or italicise titles of separately published works: this practice is essential to discriminate between Hamlet, the play, and Hamlet, the character. Titles of books and magazines are usually printed in italic typeface. In handwritten essays titles may be underlined; this would signal to a printer to set the words in italics.

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