

Common writing mistakes that I hate

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The point of writing is to communicate. Following conventions is usually an aid to this because the reader expects things to be done a certain way, or because the conventions have codified rules of good writing that are nearly always true. Where convention fails, drop it. But the following rules nearly always hold. One must have good reason, an unusual situation, and an understanding reader to not follow these.

When I have understood and agree with a paragraph or point, I'll often put a checkmark (✓) by it.

Date your papers. Author your papers.

Use Latin abbreviations correctly. When writing (e.g., your seminar papers), be sure to use Latin abbreviations, that is, *i.e.* and *e.g.*, correctly. Big examples, for example, this reference, get set off by commas, and I suggest using *for example*. Smaller examples, for example, the one in the first sentence, can be put in parenthesis.

Be careful with which and that. Clauses that define an object must use *that*. Clauses that don't define an object, which may merely tell the reader a tasty tidbit about it, may use *which*. If you use too many *which's* your writing is not telling a direct story, or you are using *which* incorrectly.

Put page numbers on each page.

Since is time-based, Because is causal. You can make your writing more clear by using since only for time-based and because for causality. Since I have used this rule, because I use this rule, would then have two meanings instead of one having two and one having one.

Provide adequate margins. If you don't leave room it makes it harder to read (particularly with small fonts), and there is no room for comments.

Its and It's. 'Its' refers to the possessive of a gender neutral pronoun. 'It's' is a contraction for it is. Contractions are discouraged in formal writing, so you should probably only use 'its'.

Use a spelling program. There are programs on most platforms for checking spelling. On the Mac, Word has it under Tools. On Unix, "spell *filename*", in Emacs, ispell is often installed.

Feel free to use headings. This can be done by centering, changing fonts (be careful), changing font sizes, and underlining. Color can also be used, but for work to be graded avoid the color red. Note that items here can be found through the underlined headings.

Check words and word limits. Include a word count and check the spelling of every word. If this drives you to a word processor, good. This also means that I expect you to stick to the limit.

In order to write vs. To write. It is often useful to use the phrase "in order to X", where X is some verb. It helps you get the prose going and helps avoid writer's block. But, it has two extra words. Upon revision, go back and strike it out to make the prose clearer, shorter, and clearer.

Use references appropriately. If you reference an important point or one that is not your own, the referenced paper should be in your references. If you didn't actually read the paper, note this somehow, either in the text or in the reference section. Some references I can follow, but others I need help with. Are you willing to assume you know what I'll know and what I won't?

For further suggestions on writing 'good'

American Psychological Association (1983).

Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (3rd edition).

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Tells you how to label a figure, itemize, and so on. Not the only set of conventions, but a common one even outside of America. There is also a workbook version of this in library. Before embarking on a third year project I would read this if I were you.

van Leunen, M-C. (1978). *A handbook for Scholars*.

NY, NY: Knopf. A good book if you are going off to graduate school and can afford it.

Strunk, W., & White, E. B. (1979, and various later versions). *The elements of style*. NY, NY: Macmillan. Short and sweet 90 pages of pithy comments. I've read it 4 times.

On computers there are numerous programs to check spelling and a few that will check grammar. The spelling programs are always worth it, the grammar ones are sometimes a useful adjunct. On Unix machines, the command 'wc *filename*' will count the words in your file.

- ⌘ delete
- ⌘ close up (close up)
- ⌘ delete and close up (delete and ~~close up~~)
- ^ insert something (His name ^{is} Bill)
- # insert a space (thecat)
- set -- let original ~~stand~~
- ~ transpose (transpose or change order the)
- ⌈ set farther to the left
- ⌋ set farther to the right
- ¶ begin new paragraph
- ⊙ spell out (set ⊙ as five; set ⊙ as and)
- ≡ set in capitals
- ≡ set in small caps
- Ⓟ set in lower case
- cat set in italic type
- cat delete italic; set in roman
- cat set in boldface type
- ≡^ hyphen (selfconcept)
- $\frac{1}{N}$ en dash (1965¹/_N 1972)
- $\frac{1}{em}$ em dash (em¹/_{em} or long¹/_{em} dash)
- √ superscript (r[√])
- ^ subscript (H₂O)
- ⌘ comma
- ⌘ apostrophe
- ⊙ period
- note correction in body of text
- ⌘ λ u spc insert space