David Novick's Field Guide to Errors in College Writing:
How to Detect and Correct Common Problems

David Novick
Department of Engineering Education and Leadership
The University of Texas at El Paso
novick@utep.edu

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Practices to avoid

Avoid using the passive writing style.
Instead, use the active writing style, which emphasizes:
- Active voice
- Present tense
- Consistent use of terms
- Parallel construction
- Short rather than long words
- Second person
- Defined acronyms
- Conciseness

The most effective writing style for technical material is the active writing style. Using the active voice means rewriting sentences such as

“The results were displayed in less than ten minutes.”

as

“The computer displayed the results in less than ten minutes.”

Avoid trying to sound impressive.

Example: “Our project involved the research and development of an integrated system for comprehensively managing user-initiated of instances of requests for attention to tasks that that the users had identified in their on-site processes” could be written as “We built a system for managing work orders.”

Handy rule: Say what you mean.

Avoid excess words.

- “In order to find the best algorithm...”
- “Many past research projects have...”
- “Despite the above described this difference, ...”

Handy rule: Edit ruthlessly.

Avoid avoid sexist language.

Example: “Each student should pay attention to his work” should be either

“Students should pay attention to their work.”

or
“Each student should pay attention to his or her work.”

Handy rules:
- Try using the plural.
- Do not use “they” or “their” to refer to individuals and what they possess.

**Avoid British expressions.**

Instead, use American expressions

Examples:
- “Sarah drove a lorry truck.”
- “Whilst While the previous work relied on two processors, our approach...”
- “The package will arrive two days hence from now.”

Handy rules:
- Avoid language that sounds pretentious.
- If unsure, check the dictionary to see if the usage is American or British.

**Avoid non-parallelism in lists.**

In lists, whether the items are set out in bulleted lines or are separated by commas, express the items in parallel form. Typically this means making sure that all the items in the list are things or that all the items in the list are actions; for actions, all should have the same grammatical construction – nouns should be parallel with nouns, imperatives with imperatives, gerunds with gerunds, and so on.

Examples:

List of errands (imperatives):
- Pick up dry cleaning
- Recycle
- Birthday card

Tasks in writing a paper (gerunds)
- Designing your paper
- Laying out pages
- Preparing your text
- Creating your bibliography

Handy rule: Reread lists and tables of contents for parallelism.

**Avoid misuse of commas.**

Separate independent clauses with a comma and use commas with conjunctions.
Examples:

- Tina went to the game, and Ellen visited friends.
- Tina went to the game and visited friends.
- There were five crayons in the box: red, green, yellow, and purple.

Handy rule: If the second clause has a different subject than the first clause, use a comma. If the subject is the same for both clauses, do not use a comma. In a list, include a comma before the last entry that starts with ‘and’.

Avoid overuse of semicolons.

Use a semicolon to separate clauses that already contain commas or that could be complete sentences that are related or connected.

Examples:

- There were five colors on the palette, blue, green, orange, white, and black; and seven tubes of paint on the table, blue, green, orange, white, black, red, and purple.
- It was nearly noon; we could not reach the beach before the tide went out.

Avoid misspellings.

Check your spelling. Use your spell-checker and learn the vocabulary of your field. For example, kernel, not kernal; separate, not seperate; hexadecimal, not hexidecimal.

Avoid turning in papers that you have not checked and re-checked.

Proof your papers three ways:

1. Read for typos and grammatical errors
2. Read for appropriate structure or organization
3. Read for content – your message

Do each of these separately. Before your final pass, let the material sit and come back to it later. If you have time, leave it for a day; if not, for at least an hour. You will look at it with a fresh eye.

Avoid arguing from belief.

An author's beliefs do not constitute proof of the thing believed, except in some narrow philosophical cases. If you claim something to be true, say it and support it.

Example: rewrite

“I believe that most users will not use documentation, even if available.”
“Most users will not use documentation, even if available (Novick et al. 2006).”

Handy rule: Do not use “I believe” in a technical or scientific paper.

**Avoid tautologies.**

Examples:
- Geographic location
- Mutual cooperation
- Past history

Handy rule: Be ruthless in eliminating unnecessary modifiers, particularly when the modified noun can't be anything else.

**In formal writing, do not use contractions.**

Examples
- Don’t Do not
- Wouldn’t Would not

Handy rule: Do not use contractions. Note that ‘cannot’ is not a contraction and can be used in formal writing. Contractions are most commonly used in dialogue.

**If you are the sole author, avoid the editorial “we.”**

> “Only presidents, editors and people with tapeworm have the right to use the editorial ‘we’.” – Mark Twain

Example: “We I found that...”
Alternatively, use ‘this author’ or ‘this investigation’.
Example: “This investigation found that...”

**Rarely use the word “it.”**

“It” can be ambiguous, so use “it” only if there is no better word to use in the sentence. Note that “it’s” means “it is” and is not the possessive of “it”, which is “its.”

Example: to be better and more accurate, rewrite

> “A control character is received and it generates a core dump.”

as

> “The application receives a control character and halts; the application then generates a core dump.”
Avoid foreign abbreviations and phrases.

Other than in citation and reference where indicated by the style guide you use, avoid abbreviations or phrases from Latin and French such as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For</th>
<th>Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>compare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g.</td>
<td>for example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>et al.</td>
<td>and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td>and so on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.e.</td>
<td>that is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>per</td>
<td>in each, for each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.v.</td>
<td>see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>via</td>
<td>through, with, by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vice-versa</td>
<td>conversely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vis-à-vis</td>
<td>opposite to, face to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viz.</td>
<td>namely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vs.</td>
<td>instead of, rather than, against</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that several of these abbreviations and phrases have more than one meaning, so be sure you select the correct alternative.
Usage of Words and Phrases

Use allow and enable properly.

- “Allow” means permit, or let have.
- “Enable” means provide with means, power or opportunity to do something.

Examples:
- “This tool enables the user to build new data models.”
- “Purchasing a license for this tool allows the user to use the tool.”

Handy rule: Unless the context involves giving permission, you should use “enable” instead of “allow.”

Use “begs the question” sparingly.

“Begs the question,” means to support a conclusion by assuming the conclusion is true. “Begs” does not mean “raises.”

Examples:
- “This painting is trash because it is obviously worthless.”
- “The defendant must be guilty because he’s a criminal.”

Both of these are examples of begging the question because they assume the conclusion is true.

Handy rule: If you are not clear on what is meant by the phrase “begs the question,” do not use it.

Use “compose” and “comprise” correctly.

- The word *compose* means that some number of elements join together to make a larger thing.
- The word *comprises* means that a thing is made up of a number of sub-things.

Handy rule: The whole comprises the parts, and the parts compose the whole.

Use “data” as a plural.

Examples:
- “The data indicate that...”
- The instrument generated only a single datum.”

Singular: datum (or data point)
Plural: data
“Hopefully” is almost always misused.

Example: “Hopefully, the ship will arrive tomorrow.” Rewrite as:
“I hope that the ship will arrive tomorrow.”
or
“With any luck, the ship will arrive tomorrow.”
Correct use: “Snoopy gazed hopefully at his supper dish.”
Handy rule: Use “hopefully” only when the actor is actually hopeful.

Use “I,” “me,” and “myself” carefully.

- *I* is a first-person pronoun. It is the subject or actor: “I went to the store.”
- *Me* is also a first-person pronoun. It is the object: “Then it hit me!”
- *Myself* is a reflexive first-person pronoun. It covers exactly the case where the actor is “I” and the object would otherwise be “me.”

Examples:
- Correct: I caught myself.
- Wrong: He told Harry and myself. Correct: He told Harry and me.

Note: *Myself* can also be an intensifier as in: I painted the car myself.

Handy rules:
- Never use *myself* as the subject.
- Use *myself* as the object only when the subject is *I*.

Use “impact,” “effect” and “affect” correctly.

*Impact* is a noun, not a verb, meaning (a) a physical collision of an object or (b) a significant or major effect. Note that *impacted* has a specific technical meaning for teeth (see examples).

*Effect* is almost always a noun, meaning (a) something that inevitably follows an antecedent (as a cause or agent) or (b) an outward sign. *Effect* has a narrow meaning as verb: to bring about; for example, “The state effected the policy by levying fines on persons not complying.”

*Affect* is almost always a verb, meaning to produce or have an effect upon. *Affect* in psychology has a narrow meaning as a noun: the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion (“The subject lacked affect.”)
Handy rules:

- *Effect* is a noun.
- *Impact* is a noun, meaning a big effect.
- *Affect* is a transitive verb.

Examples:

- Adding computer memory will affect performance.
- Removing computer memory will have a serious impact on performance.
- Using this application will have a positive effect on performance.
- The dentist removed Jane’s wisdom tooth because it was impacted.

**Infer vs. imply** *(Adapted from* [http://www.grammartips.homestead.com/imply.html]*).*

Often, “infer” is mistakenly used for “imply.”

“Are you inferring implying that I am crazy?”

If someone gets the idea from your behavior that you are crazy then he or she is inferring that you are crazy. But if he or she is subtly letting you know that he or she thinks so, then he or she is implying that you are crazy. You, of course, can infer from his implication that he or she thinks you are crazy.

- Imply: To put the suggestion into the message (the sender implies)
- Infer: To take the suggestion out of the message (the receiver infers)
- Implication: What the sender has implied
- Inference: What the receiver has inferred

Handy rule: *writers or speakers* imply; *listeners or readers* infer.

**Distinguish “like” and “such as.”**

Example: “Artists like Andy Warhol can lead surprisingly mundane lives.” Rewrite as “Artists such as Andy Warhol can lead surprisingly mundane lives.”

Handy rule: Use **such as** when your examples are instances of what you are describing, and use **like** when your examples are merely similar to, but not actually instances of, what you are describing.

Correct uses:

- “Flavors such as cherry and peach can enhance tropical drinks.”
- “Biscuits like rocks can cause indigestion.”
“Media” is the plural of “medium.”

Examples:

- “Television is an audiovisual medium.”
- “The medium is the message.”
- “The classroom provided many audiovisual media including a VCR, 2 DVD players and a TV.”

Handy rule: Think carefully about what you mean.

Avoid using “nowadays.”

College writers often begin their introduction of the current state of affairs with something like “Nowadays, people are ditching their land lines, relying exclusively on their mobile phones.” The use of nowadays, which brings to mind a person in 1910 sipping sarsaparilla, effectively contradicts the spirit of the point the author is trying to make.

Handy rule: Unless writing period conversation, avoid using nowadays to mean contemporary times.

Put “only” in its proper place.

Sloppy placement of only can lead to meanings that the author surely did not intend. For example, “I only watch superhero movies” means that the sole thing that the person does with superhero movies is to watch them, when the person probably buys, rents, talks about, or recommends them, too. What the author likely meant to write was “I watch only superhero movies,” which means that person watches superhero movies to the exclusion of action, western, romance, comedy, horror, and other movies.

Examples:

- “Sarah only ate her pasta.” As written, this means Sarah did not look at, taste, etc., her pasta, while possibly eating other foods in additional to pasta. The writer likely meant to say that pasta was the only food that Sarah ate. The correct way to say this is “Sarah ate only her pasta.”
- “Joseph only saw flowers.” As written, this means that Joseph did not smell, touch, pick, etc., flowers, while seeing other sorts of things. The writer likely meant to say that flowers were the only things that Joseph saw. The correct way to say this is “Joseph saw only flowers.”
“On the other hand” requires “on one hand.”

Use of the expression “on the other hand” is an error if it is not preceded by a contrasting section marked by the expression “on one hand.”

Handy rule: Use “on one hand/on the other hand” only in cases where there are exactly two alternatives, and if you're going to mention one hand be sure to mention the other one, too.

Example:

- “On one hand, the car was fairly new; on the other hand, it had suffered an accident.”

Avoid using “said” as an article

Students too often use “said” in place of “the,” as in “Sarah drank from said bottle.” This usage derives from outmoded legalese and reflects a reluctance to believe the meaning of “the.” This use of “said” has no place in contemporary writing. The word “a” introduces a new concept, and the word “the” refers to a concept that is already known.

Handy rule: Anytime you are tempted to write “said” as an article, use “the” instead.

Example:

- “Sarah picked up a bottle of soda and she drank from the bottle.”

That and which are not the same.

“That” helps identify the thing that is being introduced; “which” introduces a comment on something already identified.

Examples:

- “The sea that I sailed stretched clear and blue to the horizon.”
- “The sea, which stretched clear and blue to the horizon, beckoned with...”

Handy rule: If the phrase needs a comma, use which—just remember “comma which.” Otherwise, use that.
Short List of Books to Consult


*Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.*

*American Heritage Dictionary.*
