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Academic Writing Principles

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A List of Academic Writing Principles

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I teach a course I designed entitled Academic Writing. Attached to the syllabus for this course is the following Academic Writing Checklist. My students refer to this checklist to edit their final drafts. I hope you find this document valuable for your writing and your students' writing.

Academic Writing Checklist

1. Above all else write in active voice (e.g., “I (or we, or they) collected the data” rather than, “Data were collected by me (or them). If you have to ask, “By whom?” You have composed a passive voice construction. Use of passive voice takes the researcher/writer out of out of the text and makes the writing awkward and the reading slow (Gephart, 1986).
2. Limit use of weak ‘ing’ verbs (e. g. “He was reading”; “He was running”). (Write “He read”; “He ran”).
3. Limit use of adverbs, such as brilliantly, decidedly, and lovely, and adjectives, such as, great, bad, and good.
4. Delete unnecessary use of the word, **that**. Count the number of times you use the word, **that** in your manuscript and delete when you can. I think you will be surprised. Also note how few **that’s** there are in this chapter.
5. Refer to people as who – not as that (e.g., “People **who** ate the hamburgers were hungry”).
6. Avoid wordiness. Delete unnecessary words.
7. Always place a comma before the word, which unless you write, “In which case.”
8. Use the words that or what in place of the word, which if you can. An editor told me when I wrote my first book, “Which is not an attractive word.”

9. Remember -- good writing is good thinking.

10. Start off with a simple on-topic sentence. Don't digress. Don't take forever to get to the point. My linguistics professor, John Barnitz, once crossed off the first three pages of a manuscript I turned in for a grade. On the fourth pages he wrote, **FINALLY!!!**

11. Avoid jargon and acronyms unless you first explain their meaning. Acronyms are special words, initials, phrases, or expressions used by a particular profession, or group and are difficult for others to understand (e.g., ADHD for a chronic condition marked by persistent inattention, hyperactivity, and sometimes impulsivity).

12. Vary vocabulary, but if you begin your manuscript using the term student stick with that term. Don't switch to children or pupils.

13. Be writer hot – reader/critic cold. Put your writing away for a day or two. Then, review your work with a critical eye.

14. Monitor your writing at every word. Know exactly what you say and why.

15. Remember time spent revising and editing is time well spent.

16. End a sentence with something other than a preposition. Prepositions include the words, 'are', 'to', 'under', 'over', 'at') (see <https://www.talkenglish.com/vocabulary/top-50-prepositions.aspx>).

17. Erase these words from your writing vocabulary: **very**, or **really**.

18. Always begin a new paragraph after dialogue, such as in a conversation indicated by quotation marks.

19. Consider your audience at all times. Guide your audience through your report with subheadings.
20. Data are always plural.
21. Remember in qualitative research we **explore** phenomena. We do not **examine** phenomena.
22. Keep in mind that studies cannot explore anything. Only researchers can explore phenomena. Do not anthropomorphize your inquiry and write, “This study explored...” The study is inert. Studies cannot think. Write, “In this study I (or we) explored ...”
23. Always write “We (or I) believe (or perceive, or think”). Remove the word **feel** from your academic writing vocabulary (e.g., “I **feel** our study was appropriate”). Remember we only **feel** in love, ill, heartbroken, mad, or confused. We also **feel** with our hands.
24. Do not switch back and forth between active and passive voice.
25. Edit one problematic writing issue at a time.
26. Write, “It is likely” or, “In all probability” rather than make absolute statements.
27. - Write the Abstract that follows directly after the title page of a manuscript after you have completed your final draft. The Abstract is a succinct summary of your purpose, research questions, methods, discoveries, and conclusions. (Note-not the paper’s purpose, etc.).
28. Remember: Either/Or, Neither/Nor. Either is always paired with or, and neither is always paired with nor.
29. Create a final title when your draft is complete and revised and edited. The title reflects the content of your manuscript to help scholars find topics of interest. Your *APA* titles should contain around 12-15 words.

