

Ten Rules for Good Writing

Avoid the Word *it*

- *it* is vague.
- Vague writing is bad writing.
- Both the writer and the reader are confused by vagueness.
- Usually *it* stands for some noun. Use the noun; avoid *it*.
- Examples

Bad: *We hold it to be self-evident...*

Good: *We hold these truths to be self-evident...*

Avoid Dangling Articles

- The words *this* and *these* are dangling articles.
- Like the word *it*, dangling articles are vague.
- Always include the noun that the article modifies.
- Examples

Bad: *That to secure these, governments are instituted among Men.*

Good: *That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among Men.*

Use Strong Verbs

- In English, verbs are the key words.
- Use strong verbs.
- Try to avoid: *to be, to have, to get, to obtain.*

Strong Verbs

create

build

generate

construct

derive

demonstrate

prove

Weak Verbs

is, are

has, have

get, obtain

Use Strong Verbs (continued)

Examples

Weak: *All men are equal.*

Strong: *All men are created equal.*

Weak: *That they obtain from their creator...*

Strong: *That they are endowed by their creator...*

Use the Verb NOT the Noun

In English, many words have two forms: a verb form and a noun form. Often a noun can be generated from a verb by adding a suffix such as *ion*. For example:

Verbs

create

construct

derive

demonstrate

solve

Nouns

creation

construction

derivation

demonstration

solution

Verbs are the strong words in English. Whenever you have a choice between a verb and a noun, *use the verb not the noun*.

Use the Verb NOT the Noun (continued)

Weak: *All men are equal by creation.*

Strong: *All men are created equal.*

Weak: *That they have an endowment from their creator...*

Strong: *That they are endowed by their creator...*

One Idea Per Sentence

- Do not cram all your ideas into one sentence.
- Each sentence should contain one main idea.
- If you have two good ideas, use two sentences.
- Examples

Bad: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, and excessive bail shall not be required nor excessive fines imposed.*

Good: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. Excessive bail shall not be required nor excessive fines imposed.*

Write in the Present Tense

Examples

Bad: *All men were created equal.*

Good: *All men are created equal.*

Quotation Marks

- *Never Never Never Never Never use quotation marks, unless you are quoting a person or a book.*
- Putting quotation marks around a word does not alter the meaning of a word.
- Do not be lazy. Find an appropriate word or phrase to express your thoughts.

Good Writing is Mostly Rewriting

- Do not hand in your first draft.
- Proofread all your work, at least twice.
- Use a thesaurus.
 - Repeating the same word over and over again is boring.
- Use spell check.
- Correct all grammatical mistakes.

Bad grammar is difficult to read and understand. You appreciate reading a clearly written text; you dislike trying to understand vague, ambiguous, obscure, and incoherent writing. Do not inflict these impediments on your fellow students, teachers, or colleagues.

Organize Your Thoughts

- Write an outline.
- A collection of good ideas connected haphazardly is difficult to understand.
- Try to make your ideas flow together naturally.

Avoid Proofs by Surprise

- A proper proof is like a good murder mystery: you must prepare your reader with all the necessary clues.
- Bringing in new suspects or fresh evidence in the final paragraph is forbidden.
- Proofs with a surprise ending are impossible for readers to follow because the readers will have no idea where they are headed.
- If you need to invoke a result from somewhere else to complete the proof, mention this result before you start your proof.