

## Some Guidelines for Formatting, Mechanics, and Style

The details of your presentation immediately establish your stance. A reader quickly decides if you know what you are doing and if he should take you seriously. Your inattention can be reason enough for a reader (your professor, your employer, the classmate you're hoping to impress) to suspect your dedication and acuity. Don't give them the chance to pass you by.

Instructions for formatting your conference drafts and revised essays are in the **Formatting** section below. The **Mechanics** section refers to common errors in punctuation and citation. The **Style** section contains recommendations for improving the clarity and overall readability of your academic writing.

If I've checked a box, you should consult a rhetoric (*Norton Field Guide* or *Bedford Handbook*) and/or take a trip to the Writing Center to understand the issue and attend to it throughout your revised and future essays. Questions? Ask them in class—you're probably not alone!

### Formatting

- Use a 12-point serif font.
- Double-space between all lines of type, including your header, the title, and the bibliography.
- In the left corner head of your first page place your name, course, my name, & date (no cover page).
- Center the title of your essay.
- One-inch margins, left and right; do not justify the right margin.
- Insert a header (upper right) with your last name and page number (no comma between).
- Indent at the start of each paragraph; leave no white spaces between paragraphs.
- Use block quotes for quotations occupying four or more lines of type (double-space these, too).
- Format in-text citations in MLA style (parenthetical citation at end of sentence: author & page).
- Use correct MLA formatting in your bibliography (hanging indent; title it "Works Cited").

### Mechanics

- Double quotation marks:** in American English, commas and periods go *inside* the quotation marks; colons and semi-colons go *outside* the quotation marks.
- Single quotation marks:** use them only for quotations *within* quotations.
- Comma:** Use it to set off introductory phrases and dependent clauses; to separate simple items in a series; to join independent clauses with conjunctions (FANBOYS: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*); to separate city, state, and country; and to set off coordinating conjunctions (*however, therefore, furthermore*, etc.). Consult Trimble for more.
- Semi-colon:** Use it to separate complex elements in a series and to separate two or more independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction. If you can use a period to separate closely related complete thoughts, you can use a semi-colon.
- Single-space:** Tap the space bar just once after periods, question marks, and exclamation points, commas, colons and semi-colons, and before and after parentheses (double-spacing was a typewriter convention).
- Hyphen/Dash:** Use a hyphen (-) to connect words to form a single adjective ("hard-hitting song," "nineteenth-century novel"); use a dash (— or --) to emphasize—or to dramatize—parts of a sentence.
- Ellipsis:** Use three dots to tell your read that you have eliminated words in a quotation (. . .); use four dots if the elided words occur at the end of the original sentence (the fourth is a period).
- Block quotes:** Use a block if you're quoting 4+ lines; drop the quotation marks around the entire quote; use double quotation marks for quotes within the quote; double-space; cite it in parentheses *outside* the final punctuation mark of the quotation.
- In-text citations of other peoples' words and ideas:** In MLA style, parenthetical citations appear *inside* the period that ends the sentence it refers to. Provide your reader the author's last name and page number or page range without a comma (Harvey 37-38); if you've just named the author in your text, give only page number(s). If an author you're quoting has more than once source in your bibliography, also provide a short version of the title so your reader knows which source you're quoting (Harvey *Sources* 43). If what you're quoting comes from a lecture, use (Lecture Notes date).
- It's/Its:** "It's" is a contraction for "it is" ("It's happening again!"). "Its" is a possessive ("Its resolution is near.")

## Style

- ❑ **Word choice:** Does that word really mean what you think it means? Is there another word that better expresses exactly what you mean? Consult a good Dictionary and a Thesaurus. You'll find both online at <http://www.merriam-webster.com> You can find the OED online via LORA: <http://libraries.ou.edu/LORA>
- ❑ **To Be:** Avoid using forms of the verb "to be" (is, are, am, were, being, etc.); get used to choosing vigorous verbs.
- ❑ **Orphan quotations:** You've chosen an especially productive quotation from your source. Don't just leave it there—make it produce! Engage it, talk back to it. Take your reader from the quotation back into your own thinking about what it means, implies, suggests, etc. for your own argument.
- ❑ **Fragments:** Usually reading aloud to yourself will quickly reveal the incomplete sentence. You're missing a subject (headless sentence) or you're missing a verb (tailless sentence).
- ❑ **Which/that:** use "that" if you possibly can, which means that you'll use "which" only after a comma. More technically, "that" introduces a restrictive clause (something the sentence can't do without) whereas "which" introduces a non-restrictive clause (it's addition but not essential information).
- ❑ **Who/that:** use "who" when referring to persons; use "that" for inanimate objects, places, situations, etc.
- ❑ **Parallel structure:** Whenever you write a series of two or more things, each element of the series must appear in the same grammatical structure and perform the same grammatical function.
- ❑ **This/that:** Make sure the reader can identify the antecedent to these demonstratives. "This is significant." "That is part of the story." *What* is significant? *What* is part of the story? Prefer the demonstrative adjective ("This common misunderstanding is significant.") over the demonstrative pronoun.
- ❑ **Vacant assertion:** Avoid phrases like "It is interesting to note that" and "I want to point out that." If it should be pointed out, point it out! If it's interesting, *make* it interesting.
- ❑ **Passive construction:** Avoid the passive by asking: *Who* did what to whom? If you can't come up with an active subject of the sentence, you're probably not certain about what you're saying.
- ❑ **Tense:** Write about past events in the past tense ("Audre Lorde wrote poetry, essays, and novels."); write about literature in the present tense ("Audre Lorde writes, 'Your silence will not protect you.'")
- ❑ **Cut the deadwood:** Eliminate [any and all] words that clutter up your sentences. If I've bracketed words or phrases, your sentence will probably be clearer without them.
- ❑ **Signal your transitions:** You don't need a signpost at every paragraph, but mark the important turns in your argument. *First, second, third* are useful if a bit coarse. Conjunctive adverbs (from *nevertheless* to *importantly*—see Trimble) are more subtle instruments.
- ❑ **Comma Splice/Fused Sentence (Run-on):** Two independent clauses stuck together (either with a comma to "splice" them or "fused" without punctuation) constitute a run-on sentence (a run-on is not merely a long sentence; Cf. Henry James). Separate these clauses into separate sentences, or employ a conjunction (with a comma)—or a semi-colon.
- ❑ **Subject/Verb Agreement:** A subject matches its verb in their number: if the subject is singular, the verb takes the singular, and if the subject is plural, the verb takes the plural (My friend *awakes* at noon. The hens *awake* at dawn.)
- ❑ **Dangling/Misplaced Modifiers:** Be sure that a word or phrase modifying a noun is near the noun you intend to modify: e.g., "Most American see the cowboy in a good light, riding on a white horse with a white hat." Why is this horse wearing a white hat? Perhaps the writer means: "Most Americans see the cowboy in a good light, wearing a white hat and riding on a white horse." Dangling modifiers often create a comic impression where none is intended.