

Writing: Rules and Guidelines

John Bullock

2019 July 05

This document is a guide to my prejudices about usage and style. Please attend to it when you write papers for me. Feel free to ignore it at all other times.

This document is not a guide to good writing. I am not capable of writing that sort of guide. Still, with this document, I am trying to save you from gross errors and infelicities that have marred my students' writing in the past. I often find that students write so poorly that it becomes impossible to think about their ideas as I read their papers. Not because their ideas are hard to discern, but because their mistakes are so numerous and so distracting.

We all make mistakes when we write. I make writing mistakes all the time; you will find mistakes in this document. But try anyway to submit mistake-free papers. You will fall short of that goal, but your papers will be better for the effort.

Rules

1. Never use a word whose meaning you don't understand.
2. Use a dictionary.
3. Use short words.
4. Write simple sentences. If you want to say something complex, write multiple sentences.
5. If you must choose between a clear sentence and a formal one, choose the clear one.
6. Cultivate an allergy to cliché.
7. When you finish a draft of a paper, don't edit it right away. Put it aside for a while.
8. Do edit your papers. Review them and revise them. Read them as a stranger would.
9. Get others to read your drafts. Even if most of their comments are bad, their good comments may be very valuable.
10. Never show me a draft that you have not edited.

Vision and Conversation

Your writing should be guided by the ideals of vision and conversation. *Vision* means that you know what you want to convey and how you want to convey it. You have a claim that you want me to believe, and you have a plan for getting me to believe it.

Your plan is represented by the structure of your paper. You have thought about which arguments you will make and the order in which you will make them. Your paper will typically have sections, and you will have a reason for ordering the different sections as you do.

Conversation means that you are writing for another human being. And as in a real conversation, you do not want to bore that other person or to make him suffer. As an ideal for your writing, conversation means that you will avoid the extreme and stilted formality that one finds in bad academic writing. It is entirely acceptable, for example, to use the first person and to use contractions. Doing so won't make you seem sloppy or glib. It will only help you to impart something invaluable to your writing: a tone of relaxed sincerity.

When you judge your own writing, you may benefit from adopting a common test. Read the sentence that you have just written and ask yourself whether you can imagine saying those words, in that order, to a fellow student. If you can't even imagine doing so, something is probably wrong.

Minimal Prose

When you write for me, write minimally. This means using short and simple sentences when you can. It also means sacrificing words and ideas that aren't important to your argument, even when those words and ideas are very good. And it means structuring your sentences, paragraphs, and papers in transparent ways, so that the sequence of points that you are making is always easy to follow.

I make no claim that minimal prose is always best. But it is usually best for social scientists, who need to read many pages and absorb much information as quickly as possible. We do care about beauty, but the beauty that is right for social-science papers is an austere beauty, not a lavish one. Think Raymond Carver, not Henry James.

Dictionaries and Usage Guides

The main purpose of a dictionary is not to help you figure out how to spell. It is not even—not exactly—to help you learn the meanings of words. It is to help you learn about the subtle differences between similar words, words whose meanings you already understand to some extent, so that you can choose the words that best express what you have in mind.

Good dictionaries contain ample, careful definitions that help you to tease out the differences between words that have similar meanings. They contain usage notes for many

particular words—notes that alert you to ways in which the words may be confusing or to other tricky aspects of usage. They contain recorded pronunciations of many words. And they make it easy for you to bookmark certain entries that you will want to return to again and again—perhaps because you like them, but more likely because they contain usage notes that you find especially helpful.

Cultivate a sense of doubt about the meanings of words. And when you feel that sense of doubt, turn to your dictionary. Turn to it often. If you use your dictionary only once or twice a month, you're not using it enough.

You should also own a guide to usage. There are many such guides. They work by providing you with usage notes—notes more numerous and more ample than the ones in your dictionary. I've used several usage guides, and I've found that one is better than the others: *Garner's Modern English Usage* (formerly *Garner's Modern American Usage*). Get a recent edition.

I also recommend Steven Pinker's *The Sense of Style*. It's an engaging guide to the principles that underpin notions of good style in expository writing.

Sentences and Paragraphs

Please bear these ideas in mind as you write:

1. *Parallel structure*. You wrote the first part of your in a particular way. Consider writing the second part of your sentence in the same way. That is, consider using some of the same words, and using them in the same order.
2. *Use synonyms sparingly*. You are trying to make me understand something complex. You are defining your terms carefully. Capricious use of synonyms will make your work harder to understand. I will ask myself: does this new term refer to the concept that she has already defined, or is she trying to direct my attention to something new? And I won't be sure of the answer. To avoid this problem, you should generally use the same name or label when you refer to a given concept.
3. *Light before heavy*. You will often need to list several phrases in quick succession, or to write about several ideas in quick succession. In these cases, put the "heaviest" phrase or idea—the one that is longest or most complex—at the end. Doing so will make your argument easier to understand. See Pinker (pages 108 and 130-31) for more on this point.
4. *Paragraph length*. Is your paragraph a page long? Then it's almost certainly too long.

Pitfalls

acknowledge. Not a synonym for *concede*.

affect, effect. They're not synonyms.

and/or. Unacceptably ambiguous. Choose one. If neither word alone seems to suffice, see Garner for additional advice.

and nor. These words don't go together. You might consider using *nor* on its own.

APSR PARAGRAPHS. Reviewers and editors sometimes push authors to make their articles sound "bigger." Authors sometimes respond by throwing up their hands and starting their articles with grandiose passages, typically involving a reference to antiquity or to the human condition. ("Since the dawn of mankind, people have wondered about the effects of party identification.") These opening paragraphs are called *APSR paragraphs* even though they may appear in any journal, not just the *American Political Science Review*. See Gerber et al. (2010) and Bullock (2011), both of which did appear in the APSR, for examples.

You should never aspire to write paragraphs like these. Recognize them for the forced jokes that they are.

argumentation. The word refers to the act or process of arguing. Most uses of the word are errors; authors should typically use *argument* and *arguments* instead. See the related note about **methodology**.

as per. *Per* on its own may be appropriate, but *as per* never is. See Garner for a discussion.

ask. Do not use this word as a noun.

ATTITUDES, PREFERENCES, IDEOLOGIES. These words are not interchangeable. An attitude is a summary evaluation, and a statement like "Donald Trump is great" is an expression of an attitude. A preference is a selection of one object from a set of at least two; if I vote for Trump instead of Clinton, you may infer that I prefer Trump to Clinton. Critically, I may prefer Trump to Clinton even if I have a negative attitude toward Trump, or even if I have a positive attitude toward Clinton. (But I probably will not prefer Trump to Clinton if I have a negative attitude toward Trump *and* a positive attitude toward Clinton.)

Many variables are mistakenly referred to as attitudes even though they are not attitudes. In political psychology, these variables include authoritarianism, efficacy, and party identification. In some cases, it will be appropriate to call such variables *traits* or *dispositions*. But you must not call them attitudes.

An ideology is a constrained belief system—that is, a system of beliefs that are related to each other. See pages 857-63 of Robert Luskin's "Measuring Political Sophistication" for more on ideology and related concepts.

CAPITALIZATION. Understand when you should capitalize words like “congressional,” “president,” and “party,” and when you should not. The *Chicago Manual of Style* maintains excellent pages on the capitalization of [civil titles](#) and [political divisions and place names](#).

causal effect. Redundant. If it isn’t causal, it’s not an effect.

caveat. Please use this word only in the sense of *caution* or *warning*. Do not use it as a substitute for *qualification* or *reservation*.

certainty. [Certainty is absolute conviction](#). Some social scientists do write of “low certainty,” “high certainty,” and so forth; but in doing so, they abuse the language. If you are ever tempted to write phrases like those, you should probably be writing of “confidence” rather than “certainty.”

concede. Not a synonym for *acknowledge*.

constitutes. On rare occasion, this will be the right word. But *is* is usually the better choice.

COPYEDITORS AND PAGE PROOFS. Undergraduates probably don’t need to worry about copyeditors and page proofs. Graduate students do.

Some copyeditors are good. But you must watch your back, and your prose. Bad copyeditors will rewrite sentences and entire paragraphs, and the result will be ugly prose that is published under your name.

You keep an eye on copyeditors’ work by inspecting the page proofs of your articles. But some editors will tell you that you are permitted to see only the first page proofs of your article—not the final proofs. This is a trap, and you should fight back. If you do not, copyeditors may rewrite your prose just before the article is printed. You will see, in print and under your own name, sentences that you find revolting and that you never had a chance to review. And at this point, you will be helpless: once the article has been published, there is nothing that you can do. (I was once in this situation.)

could possibly. Redundant.

could potentially. Redundant.

data set. Omit the space: write “dataset.”

dependent variable; independent variable. Do not use these terms. Not one reader in five understands the sense in which “independent variables” are independent.

Don’t believe me? See Gelman and Hill (2006, 37) for a second opinion. Then see [Frank Harrell](#) for a third opinion. And [Michael Chernick](#) for a fourth.

You will do better to replace “dependent variables” with *outcomes* or *response variables*, and to replace “independent variables” with *regressors*, *predictors*, *covariates*, *control variables* or *explanatory variables*.

different than. You will typically want *different from*, not *different than*. See Garner for a discussion.

differential. Please use the word only in its mathematical, biological, or mechanical senses. Do not use it as an all-purpose substitute for *different* or *difference*.

discredit. It doesn't mean *reject*. You will often reject propositions without discrediting them. See also **refute**.

disinterested. Do not use it as a synonym for *uninterested*. See the usage notes in Garner and AHD.

distinct; distinctive. They're not synonyms.

dubious. If a proposition is doubtful, it is dubious. But if you doubt the proposition, you are only doubtful: you are not dubious.

DV; IV. Just as you should never use the terms "dependent variable" and "independent variable," you should never use "DV" and "IV" as shorthand for those terms. See **dependent variable; independent variable** for details.

It's fine to use *IV* as shorthand for *instrumental variable*.

e.g. Not the same as *i.e.*

enormity. It doesn't mean *enormous thing*.

equal with; equivalent with. One thing may equal another. It may be equal to another. But don't write that it is "equal with" or "equivalent with" another.

evidence. Do not use this word as a verb.

exist. Outside of proofs and formal-theoretic work, it is usually ridiculous to write "there exist." Try "there are" instead.

extant. It's a tic in the speech and writing of Northwestern students. It doesn't mean "prior" or "previous" or "existing." It means "*still* existing." It may make sense to write "extant manuscripts," but it almost never makes sense to write "extant research."

the fact that. Occasionally useful, but more often a waste of space. Consider omitting it.

Firstly, Secondly, Thirdly. Use *First*, *Second*, and *Third* instead. See also **PREFIXES AND SUFFIXES**.

focus mainly; focus primarily. When you say that you focus on a particular question, you do not suggest that you attend exclusively to that question. You suggest only that you attend mainly to that question. With this in mind, it's usually redundant to say that you "focus mainly on X" or that you "focus primarily on X." Just say that you focus on X.

FOOTNOTES. Footnotes are interruptions. When you add a footnote to your prose, you interrupt yourself. The interruption may not be stark; it may be mild; but it is an interruption all the same. So use footnotes sparingly.

This is not to say that you should use citations sparingly. Just include citations in your main text, in the normal political-science way: “Smith says X (Smith 1990, 442-43).”

forego; forgo. They’re not synonyms.

grandiose. Please don’t use it as a synonym for *grand*. Use it only to mean “characterized by feigned or affected grandeur.”

have an effect on. Consider *affect* instead.

HYPHENATION. You typically should not place a hyphen between an adverb and another modifier: *closely watched trains*, for example, demands no hyphen. Nor do *demographically comparable responses*, *nationally representative samples*, *normatively important concept*, *politically relevant facts*, *strongly held views*, *thinly veiled attempt*, or *widely cited studies*.

On the other hand, phrasal adjectives typically do require hyphenation. Examples: *Asian-American population*, *between-category differences*, *climate-change policies*, *college-educated parents*, *community-building efforts*, *control-group subjects*, *domain-specific knowledge*, *dual-process model*, *easy-to-understand diagram*, *a forty-year history of desegregation*, *a four-year-old charter school*, *group-threat condition*, *gun-control supporters*, *high-education voters*, *higher-order categories*, *in-your-face politics*, *issue-specific questions*, *lower-bound estimate*, *middle-class families*, *minimum-wage jobs*, *perspective-taking approach*, *post-treatment-bias concerns*, *public-opinion data*, *right-wing parties*, *self-proclaimed “SAT experts,”* *short-term results*, *single-peaked preferences*, *Wave-1 data*.

Think about the way that hyphenation may change the meaning of your sentences. *Two party systems* and *two-party systems* don’t mean the same thing.

ideology. See **ATTITUDES, PREFERENCES, IDEOLOGIES.**

idyllic. Not a synonym for *ideal*.

impacted. Unless you are writing about meteorites or teeth, please do not tell me that something has impacted something else. Consider *affected* or *changed* or *influenced* instead.

impactful. Please don’t do it. Consider *effective* or *influential* instead.

impactfulness. Barbaric.

implicate. Not a synonym for *affect*.

implications on. You can derive implications *from* something. And one thing may have implications *for* another. But do not speak of deriving implications *on* something or of one thing having implications *on* another.

In order to. It is almost never appropriate to start sentences this way. Stop clearing your throat, and start your sentences with “To” instead.

individual. It is a deeply clunky word. You almost never have reason to use it as a noun; instead, consider *person*. By the same token, you should almost always prefer *people* to *individuals*.

ITALICIZATION. In ordinary prose, you should use it sparingly. When you *frequently* use *italicization* to *emphasize words*, you *treat your readers as though* they are *four years old*.

just-so. Not a synonym for *implausible*. (Not all implausible stories are just-so stories.)

likelihood. In social science, it often has a technical meaning that you probably don’t intend. Please use another word, like *probability* or *chance*, when you can.

litany. *A litany* does not mean *a lot of*.

litter; littered. These words have negative connotations. You generally should not use them unless you are trying to criticize.

lived experience. It’s a cliché, and it’s redundant. Unless you are trying to draw a contrast with un-lived experience—are you studying zombies?—just write “experience.”

may or may not. Redundant and unacceptable. You must choose: write “may” or “may not.”

methodology. Methodology is the study of method. You probably want to tell me about your method, not your methodology.

might potentially. Redundant.

myriad. It is more concise as an adjective (*myriad mistakes*) than as a noun (*a myriad of mistakes*). Please don’t use it as a noun.

NAMES OF AUTHORS. You must spell authors’ names correctly, and on this point, there is no margin for error. The names are on the syllabus and in the reading—they’re right there in front of you.

nature. This word appears frequently in social-science research: *the nature of the conjoint experiment involves the randomization of each attribute*, and so on. The word is occasionally legitimate, but it’s most often a garbage word, neither clarifying your sentences nor adding meaning to them. If you are inclined to use the word, consider whether you can do just as well (or better) by dropping it from your sentences.

notorious. The word is not a synonym for *famous*, and it has a negative connotation. Do not write that someone is “notorious for writing clearly” or “a notoriously good person.”

nuance. Not a verb.

only. Be careful about where you place this word in your sentences. Typically, you should place it just before the words that you want to limit. The further it is from this position, the more awkward and ambiguous your sentence is likely to be. Example: compare “You’d only need an apostrophe if you used a noun after the possessive” to “You’d need an apostrophe only if you used a noun after the possessive.”

See the Garner and AHD usage notes for more on this point. The Garner note is especially good, and it’s where I found the example given above.

overly. Do not use this word. Consider *too* instead.

PARENTHESSES. Some scholars are fond of parenthetical interjections that reverse the meaning of a passage when they are “switched” on or off. Example: “If partisans hold negative (positive) feelings toward members of the opposite (same) party, then they may perform low (high) quality work due to lesser (greater) motivation. This need not be due to a deliberate attempt at sabotage; rather, it may be an unconscious process of shirking (effort) in response to an un(wanted) boss.”

Do not use parentheses in this way. In doing so, you sacrifice a lot of clarity to gain only a little concision.

pioneering. See **seminal**.

place importance on. One does not “place importance on” anything. One may “place great weight on” something or “place emphasis on” it—but if the latter phrase seems appropriate, you’ll probably do better to simply write “emphasize.”

is predictive of. Consider *predicts*.

preference. See **ATTITUDES, PREFERENCES, IDEOLOGIES**.

PREFIXES AND SUFFIXES. Before you plant a prefix or suffix at the beginning or end of a word, consider whether it will add any meaning. Students often use prefixes and suffixes that serve only to lengthen their words and to tire their readers. *Inter-* is an example: *interconnected* and *interrelated* are usually ridiculous. (If you are tempted to use those words, consider *connected* and *related* instead.) The suffix *-age* is another trap: for example, do not use *linkage* when *link* will suffice. So too with *-y*: for example, you should prefer *competence*, *congruence*, *relevance*, and *saliency* to *competency*, *congruency*, *relevancy*, and *saliency*.

quality. Please don’t use this word as an adjective. Consider *high-quality* or *good*.

RACIAL ADJECTIVES. Do not capitalize *black* or *white* when referring to racial groups.

reek. The word has a negative connotation. For example, you probably do not want to write that someone “reeks of integrity” unless you are trying to capture the voice of a supervillain.

reference. Please don't use it as a verb. Consider *refer* instead.

refute. It does not mean *to rebut* or *to reject* or *to deny* or *to counter with an argument*. Refutations are dispositive: to refute a claim is to prove it false or erroneous.

regarding. It may be the word that you need, but consider using *about* instead.

relative, relatively. Use these words only when you need them to establish that you are making a comparison. In phrases like *relative increase* and *relative decrease*, for example, *relative* is almost always superfluous, because *increase* and *decrease* themselves imply a comparison between two states.

For the same reason, *relatively more*, *relatively less*, *relatively harder*, *relatively easier*, and related phrases are almost always inappropriate. Words like “more,” “less,” “larger,” “smaller,” “harder,” and “easier” already imply comparisons between different things: you have more than I do; this course is easier than that one. When you use these words, you do not need to prepend “relatively” to show that you are making a comparison.

represent, represents. They aren't synonyms for *are* and *is*, and it's pretentious to use them as such. (Example: *community service represents a nonpartisan activity*.) If you find yourself writing that X “represents” Y when you simply mean that X is Y, change “represents” to “is.”

research. A fine noun, but typically an ugly verb. Do not tell me that your goal is to “research” a topic or that someone else “researched” it last year. Consider “study” and “studied” instead.

reticent. Not a synonym for *reluctant*.

reveal. Do not use this word as a noun.

scatter plot. Omit the space: write “scatterplot.”

seminal. In student papers, it's most often verbal waste. Do not try to signal that you know a literature by telling me that an article is seminal. Do not use the word at all unless you think that I might be surprised to read it—surprised, for example, by the claim that a given work is seminal.

a set of; a series of. These phrases are sometimes useful, but they're more often a waste of space. Compare “respondents answered a series of factual questions about economic conditions” to “respondents answered factual questions about economic conditions.”

singular. Please use it only in the sense of *unusual* or *extraordinary*. Do not use it as a substitute for *single*. See Garner for a discussion.

so-called. Please use this term only to suggest that something is falsely or incorrectly named.

that being said. Replace with *that said*.

this. “This shows that voters are irrational”—this what? “This” should usually be followed by the object to which it refers. Thus, “this regression shows that . . .” is fine, but “this shows that . . .” is usually to be avoided.

The problem is that there are often multiple things to which a naked “this” might refer. And even if “this” has only one sensible referent, you shouldn’t make readers pause to figure out what it is. As John Cochrane has it, you should usually “[clothe the naked ‘this’](#).”

ubiquitous. It does not mean *common* or even *very common*.

umbrella. Please don’t use this word as an adjective.

upon. It may be appropriate. But if you are indifferent between *upon* and *on*, please use *on*.

US. If you want to abbreviate *United States*, write “U.S.,” not “US.”

utilize. If you use *utilize* instead of *use*, you’d better have a good reason.

VARIABLE NAMES. If you want to discuss a specific variable in your analysis, give it a meaningful English-language name. Computerese—for example, *conditionBlackMan* or *EQINCOME* or *PID* or *yearsOfSchoolingByAge14*—is never appropriate in a paper, save in an appendix that contains the code that you used to analyze the data.

variance. This word has a specific statistical meaning. Please do not use the word unless that is the meaning that you intend. If you have something else in mind, consider *variety* or *variation* or *diversity* instead.

whether or not. Unless the *or not* is essential, please use *whether* by itself.

would. This word is overused and misused in student papers. Please use it only when you are shooting for the subjunctive mood—for example, when you are writing about counterfactual conditions. Do not tell me that you “would predict” something unless you are not actually predicting it. In the same spirit, “I would argue” should typically be “I argue”; “it would seem” should typically be “it seems”; and so on.

YEARS. Don’t use apostrophes when naming decades or centuries. Write “the 1970s,” not “the 1970’s.”