WRITING HINTS

(being the suggestions of Adam M. Sowards,
learned from experience of many years and influence of many others)

Writing persuasively and coherently enhances one's ability to communicate effectively. As you learn to write well, you clarify your ideas and present them in a way more comprehensible to others. This improvement, no doubt, will aid you in this class and beyond. This handout is meant not as an exhaustive resource. Instead, it offers some general suggestions about constructing a paper. These recommendations should improve the presentation of your argument and its clarity. Of course, feel free to use other resources or discuss these ideas further with me. Finally, this handout discusses some personal "pet peeves" in writing so that you can avoid them when writing for me.

I am somewhat of a constant consumer of writing books. Here is a short list of books that I've benefited from over the course of my student, teaching, and writing career.

- Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style* (good basic primer on many grammar issues and style)
- Joseph M. Williams, *Style* (this comes in a variety of editions; probably the most formative book for me)
- Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing* (author has developed a helpful online tool that helps you identify problems: http://writersdiet.com/?page_id=4)
- Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style* (contains explanations of many challenging grammar issues)
- Stephen J. Pyne, *Voice and Vision* (for the ambitious, looking for assistance on book-length projects)
- Arthur McEvoy's Writing Heuristics (an informal/formal handout with rules that seem harsh, but they work well; McEvoy mentored one of my mentors, so you will see some common advice here)

CONSTRUCTING YOUR PAPER

Meta-Issues.

You cannot separate your ideas from your presentation. In other words, what you write reflects what you think. If your writing is unclear or incoherent, you probably have not thought through your ideas yet. Similarly, you will not write successfully if you have nothing significant to express. So conveying your analysis in clear prose is your central task.

There are many ways to draft a paper. Some people prefer outlines, while others jump right in writing freely. Although there is no single way to write, several common attributes characterize strong finished products. Effective papers present clear and significant arguments and interpretations, use appropriate and sufficient evidence that is analyzed, and maintain a tight and coherent organization. You should strive to meet these goals for effective papers.

The Structure.

A paper, of course, should begin with an introduction. In that opening paragraph, readers expect you to introduce the topic and your argument—ideally in an engaging way. You should use your opening paragraph to orient the reader to your paper. That is, establish what this essay will address and why that is significant. Most importantly, you need to provide a thesis statement. **Your thesis should be a single sentence in the active voice and with strong verbs that pulls together all the disparate information in your paper and makes it into an argument.** This statement grounds your entire paper; it provides the writer and the reader with the essence of the paper's argument. It should be specific and direct, so that readers can understand it easily. If you have not supplied a strong thesis, your reader will wonder what the paper is about and after reading it will not remember your paper's point. However, if you write a clear thesis and advance a strong argument, readers likely will

remember your essay.

Each paragraph needs to support your thesis and embody a complete, coherent idea. If you have too many ideas within a paragraph, its point will dissipate; if you have too few, its point will not seem to matter. Choose an aspect of your argument that you must substantiate and provide the necessary evidence and analysis. Begin your paragraph with a general statement (i.e., a topic sentence) that introduces the topic of the succeeding passages. Then provide the specific evidence and support for your point; here, you must convince the reader of your point of view. Remember that evidence does not speak for itself, so when you present it, you must also explain what it means and how it supports your argument. **One effective way to end your paragraph is with a "clincher" statement that summarizes the paragraph, relates it to your thesis, and provides a transition to your next point.** "Clincher" statements provide the reader an important reminder of your argument and go a long way to creating a coherent essay. Finally, a paragraph should not be too short or too long. If you can say all you need to say about a topic in a sentence or two, you are probably not making a significant point. If you need over a page to construct your paragraph, you are probably trying to say too much. Be sure to build your paragraphs carefully, logically, and coherently.

After writing your introduction and supporting paragraphs in a logical order, you should conclude your paper. A conclusion reiterates your argument without becoming redundant. It clarifies your thesis and argument a final time and emphasizes the significance of your interpretation. If you write a strong conclusion, your reader is left with a clear sense of your perspective and the implications of your analysis. Alternatively, if your conclusion remains incoherent, your entire paper unravels. In essence, the concluding paragraph is the "clincher" of your essay, so be sure to develop an effective concluding paragraph.

OTHER THINGS, or THE SAME THINGS RESTATED

An Argumentative Thesis

Your thesis statement must state an argument. Many students write descriptive theses. Instead of describing something, argue something. Compare the following examples:

> EXAMPLE 1: Women's roles and religion were important during inter-cultural contact in colonial America.
>
> EXAMPLE 2: During the colonial period, women's social roles and Christianity structured the ways in which Europeans and American Indians shared and challenged each others' cultural ideals.

These examples both discuss women and religion in colonial times. The first example is a vague description, whereas the second example advances an argument that anticipates the succeeding paragraphs' purposes. Also, note the difference in verb choice. In the first example "were" is difficult to envision, but in the second "structured" and "challenged" are more concrete verbs. So, pay attention to your verb choice and try to use verbs that you can "see."

Writing as an Attorney

When writing your papers, think of yourself as an attorney, and your reader (me) is the judge and jury. Your task is to convince me of your case. To do so, you must build a persuasive argument based upon expert and eyewitness testimony. Your "experts" are historians; your "eyewitnesses" are those who lived through events and wrote or otherwise reported on them. If you build your case with only one, you will be less persuasive. Just like a lawyer you must cross-examine your sources, making sure they are accurate, trustworthy and able to provide the information you need. When you have conflicting or incomplete information, you must acknowledge that and explain how you understand

these challenges. Finally, you must avoid hearsay and conjecture. In other words, you cannot expect to offer a convincing case if you do not provide substantive evidence that fits together in a coherent way. If you marshal enough evidence and build an argument from it that is coherent, you are likely to convince the jury and you will be vindicated.

Quotations

Avoid excessive quotations. When you quote others' work too often, your paper loses your voice. Use your own words as often as you can to explain others' ideas. Otherwise, your paper becomes a medley of other people's prose. If you use block quotations, several quotations per paragraph, or quotations of many sentences, you likely are employing others' words too much. So try to limit your quotations to one or two per paragraph and try to avoid block quotations altogether.

Moreover, quotations cannot stand alone. When using them, be sure to introduce and contextualize quotations. That is, the reader should know where the quotation is coming from and why you are using it. Most importantly, you need to explain the quotation. After quoting (occasionally before is acceptable), write a sentence or two that interprets the quotation. This practice will ensure readers take your meaning from the quotation. Compare the following examples:

> EXAMPLE 1: Public land controversies have produced competing factions who appeal to higher forces. "[T]he public has retreated to sometimes battling, sometimes cooperating, fundamentalisms: Nature knows best and the market knows best." (We do not know who said this, or in what context, what it means, or why the author is including it.)
>
> EXAMPLE 2: Public land controversies have produced competing factions who appeal to higher forces. In an essay, "Contested Terrain: The Business of Land in the American West," the historian Richard White wrote, "[T]he public has retreated to sometimes battling, sometimes cooperating, fundamentalisms: Nature knows best and the market knows best." (We now know who wrote it and in what context, but we do not know what it means or why the writer has included it.)
>
> EXAMPLE 3: Public land controversies have produced competing factions who appeal to higher forces. In an essay, "Contested Terrain: The Business of Land in the American West," the historian Richard White wrote, "[T]he public has retreated to sometimes battling, sometimes cooperating, fundamentalisms: Nature knows best and the market knows best." Here, White suggests that people rely on nature or the market to explain their positions concerning public land. The problem with appealing to such fundamentalisms, however, is that it avoids a careful consideration of political and social issues, as well as vastly oversimplifying both nature and the market. This point further supports the argument that public land controversies often avoid the scientific and economic realities governing grazing. (Now we know who wrote it, what its context is, what it means, and why the author has included it.)

Proofread

Remember to proofread. if I hav too read pappers that ar nott profread spelt corectly or puntuated proply I becom iritated and when I am iritated I mite garade mor harshly?

> Pay special attention to homonyms (e.g., they're/their/there).
>
> One good way to proofread is to read your paper aloud, slowly. Having a friend read it also helps.

"PET PEEVES"

Most of these items are not technically incorrect, but avoiding them will improve your writing's clarity and accuracy. (And following them will make your professor much happier than if you do not.)

Passive Construction

Writing in the passive voice plagues many writers. It obscures agency and causation. Since historians spend their time figuring out who did what to whom and to what effect, obscuring that is a problem. Passive construction results when you make a sentence's object into its subject. Identify the verb in your sentence. The person doing it ought to be the sentence's subject.

EXAMPLES:
Passive: The dog was walked by my aunt.
Active: My aunt walked the dog.

Passive: Mistakes were made.
Active: I made a mistake.

If you use the word "by," there is a good chance you have written in the passive voice. Other signals that you may be using passive constructions included helping verbs, such as "was written" instead of "wrote." If you have to ask "by whom," you probably are reading a passive sentence (Who made the mistake?). The active voice is more clear and direct, and it usually decreases wordiness. There are times when using the passive voice works well, but those times are rare.

Nominalizations

Nominalizations are verbs that the writer has turned into a noun. Occasionally, these words are useful and sometimes unavoidable. Often, though, they simply sap your writing of an active verb and tend to make your writing wordier. If you see the suffix -ation, you likely have used a nominalization (which is itself one).

EXAMPLES:
The dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. was to have a society of equality for black and white children.
Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed of an equal society for black and white children.

The construction of the legislation was time-consuming because of lobbying by special interest groups.
Legislators consumed much time legislating because of lobbyists' tactics.

This and These

These words generally require nouns following them, lest the sentence be confusing.

EXAMPLES:
John F. Kennedy was Catholic, and he resided in Massachusetts. This caused farmers to mistrust him. (Did farmers mistrust Kennedy because he was Catholic or because he lived in New England?)
Kennedy was Catholic, and he resided in Massachusetts. This religious preference caused farmers to mistrust him.

Exclusive Language

As a matter of accuracy, use inclusive language. The generic male is usually inaccurate and irritatingly sexist. This is not a matter of "political correctness"; it is a matter of accuracy and discriminatory language. If you find yourself resisting this instruction, consider why.

EXAMPLES:
Inaccurate: The white man destroyed much of American Indian culture.
Accurate: Europeans destroyed much of American Indian culture.

Inaccurate: Man has always migrated to different regions of the world.
Accurate: Humans have always migrated to different regions of the world.

First Person

Avoid the first person (usually). The reader will know that it is you, the writer, making the argument.

EXAMPLES:
Poor: In this paper, I argue that the Bill of Rights protects religious freedoms for Muslims.
Better: The Bill of Rights protects religious freedoms for Muslims.

Contractions

Avoid contractions in academic writing.

EXAMPLE:
can't → cannot

Decades and Centuries

Since "1680s" means the years 1680-1689, "1600s" represents the years 1600-1609. Please do not use "1600s" to represent the seventeenth century.

"Time Period"

Time period is redundant. Use time or period or era or some other description.

Names

In most cases, when introducing a person, use their full name (e.g., Phyllis Schlafly). Subsequently, use last names (e.g., Schlafly) only. First names are not used in practice except in rare cases when confusion is likely, such as a paragraph about family members who share the same last name.

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

Economical

Economical means prudent, thrifty, or not wasteful. It is not a synonym for economic, which means of or relating to the production, development, or management of material wealth.

Affect/Effect

Affect is a verb that means to influence or change. Effect is usually used as a noun meaning result.

Then/Than

Often when comparing, people write "more then" rather than "more than."

Lead/Led
Led is the past tense of lead (or it is a chemical element).

Lifestyle
This word has come to mean so much that it means nothing. It can describe preferred foodways, subsistence strategies, political arrangements, and who one sleeps with. Surely such a wide range of things cannot be described effectively by the same word. So, avoid it and be specific.

Novel
A novel is a fictional book. It is not a synonym for book.

SAMPLE RUBRIC

I tend to adapt rubrics every semester and for each assignment. Yet, the basic to the writing part of my rubrics remain fairly similar. Below is one way I have articulated the principles outlined above into a rubric. If you are interested in what characterizes a good paper, read through the Exemplary column.

	Exemplary	**Competent**	**Developing**
Introduction / Thesis / Argument	Introduction frames the paper's interpretation clearly and explains its significance. It includes a clear and original answer or interpretation in a thesis that is clearly written in a single sentence in the active voice using strong verbs. It grabs the reader's attention and is well-written.	Introduction mentions or describes the interpretation but incompletely or without a clear sense of significance. It includes a thesis that is clear and adequate, if not especially original. The writing is somewhat clear but may include the passive voice and weak verbs.	Introduction does not explain the issue well. It includes no thesis. It does not grab the reader's attention and is unclearly written
Analysis	Overall argument is clear and convincing based on the thorough use of evidence and clarity of presentation. It completes the assignment's task well. The argument pushes beyond superficial analysis to original thinking and connections, demonstrating a willingness to stretch intellectually.	Overall argument is clear and uses relevant and mostly sufficient evidence. The presentation is usually clear. The argument basically completes the assignment's task but perhaps not thoroughly. The analysis is mostly a summary or statement of fact instead of an argument or interpretation.	Overall argument isn't clear. Evidence is inadequate or non-existent. It is not presented well. It fails to address or answer the assignment's purpose.
Words into Sentences	Sentences have no grammar problems, primarily use active and strong verbs, and express ideas clearly and concisely in an appropriate tone. Syntax	Most sentences (i.e., more than 85%) have no grammar problems and are complete and coherent. Verbs are a mix of active and passive constructions and weak and strong	Frequent (e.g., once a paragraph or more) sentence fragments or incoherence. Verbs are mostly (i.e., half or more) weak or passive. Wordiness, poor diction or syntax, and wrong tone

	and diction are clear and effective.	verbs. Other style problems may be occasionally present, such as wordiness or poor diction or syntax that confuses ideas.	are frequent problems that make ideas unclear or style distracting.
Sentences into Paragraphs	Paragraphs embody a complete and coherent idea that develops logically and clearly with both general and specific statements.	Paragraphs mostly capture a complete and coherent idea but may not fully complete the idea or may include an unrelated idea. Their order may not always develop logically. Occasionally, they rely too many specific or general statements.	Paragraphs frequently (i.e., several times in the paper) do not capture a complete idea—either by including too many or an incomplete one. Sentences seem in an almost-random order. Frequently, either too general or too specific (e.g. more than 75% of one or the other is too much).
Paragraphs into Papers	The paper has a recognizable introduction and conclusion that function effectively and will stick with the reader. The body develops in a way (e.g., sequentially, thematically) that makes sense.	The introduction and conclusion function but are not memorable. The body develops mostly smoothly but may have some abrupt transitions or jumps in logic.	The introduction and conclusion do not function as they should. The body's order follows minimal or no discernible pattern. Paragraphs could be rearranged without much change in the paper's meaning.