

On Writing Well: Guidelines for the Course

Rafe Kinsey

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One of the main goals of this course is to teach you to write effectively. In this document, I'll explain what I mean by "good writing," and I'll outline the pedagogical¹ approach we'll be taking in learning to become better writers. I'll also explain more precisely what my criteria for assessing your writing will be. Take these ideas and keep them in mind as you work on improving as a writer.

So let me try to explain what I mean by "good writing." I should note from the start that when I'm talking about good writing, I'm focusing particularly on non-fiction prose in standard contemporary written American English. What do I mean by this? I mean the sort of writing that you'd expect to see in publications like the *New Yorker* or *Slate*, in a paper written by college professors or (hopefully) students in an academic setting, and in a variety of other contexts where serious, carefully-edited non-fiction writing appears. There is a certain set of standards that this writing conforms to, ranging from concrete rules about spelling and punctuation to less tangible² norms about style and structure. Of course, there are myriad examples of writing that *don't* fit into this category: writing in other languages (or even in British English, which has slightly different norms), creative writing in fiction or poetry, journal entries, text messages, tweets, and so on. There's nothing at all wrong with these types of writing. For the purposes of this class, however, and for much of the writing that you'll do in college and beyond, the norms and standards of contemporary written American English are what matters.

Let me begin by introducing two analytical constructs for discussing writing. The first is the fundamental dichotomy³ of *form* and *content*.⁴ In what follows, I'll divide my focus between the *formal* aspects of writing—the language, structure, punctuation, etc.—and the *content*, that is, the ideas you are expressing. Of course, this oversimplifies. Form and content are in many ways intertwined; your content will determine the formal decisions you make.

The other thing to keep in mind is *audience*. Whenever you write, you should think about who your audience is, and you should tailor both the formal aspects of your writing and the content you discuss to the needs of your audience. Sometimes, it will be clear who your audience is, especially if you are writing in a non-academic context. In academic writing, while instructors sometime will specify what audience you should write to—I have tried to do this in all of our assignments—often they won't be as explicit, and you will have to infer what they want.

¹ *Pedagogy*: the method and practice of teaching, esp. as an academic subject or theoretical concept. From the Greek *paidagogos*, denoting a slave who accompanied a child to school (*paid-* "boy" + *agogos* "guide").

² *tangible*: perceptible by touch; clear and definite; real. (From the Latin *tangere*, "to touch.")

³ *dichotomy*: a division or contrast between two things that are or are represented as being opposed or entirely different.

⁴ Sometimes this dichotomy is expressed in terms of *form* versus *function*.

Content

Of course, the content of what you write is what matters fundamentally. There are two main things you should focus on: (i) interestingness and importance and (ii) truth and intellectual sophistication.

Interestingness and Importance

Recall Kurt Vonnegut's advice⁵:

Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

You should only write things that are somehow interesting and/or important. This isn't literally true—after all, you might someday have a job where you have to write less than interesting reports, and perhaps you might even have a writing assignment in college that needs to get done but feels like drudgery. Still, you should strive whenever possible to make your writing about something interesting and important. Otherwise, why should the reader bother?

How you do this depends on the task at hand. In an ideal situation, you write something because you feel an urge to say something. But even in situations where you don't have that spark—say in a paper for a class—you should try to find something exciting, so that you will have interesting things to say.⁶ In either case, if there's a spark, your caring will probably come through, but you should always think about your reader: is the interestingness/importance of this self-evident to the reader, or do you need to justify it?

An important stylistic corollary⁷ of this: your writing shouldn't be overly long, since filler is uninteresting.⁸

Truth and Intellectual Sophistication

When you write, especially in academic contexts, you should be seeking to explain and uncover truths about the world. If you don't succeed at this, whatever those truths may be, you have failed. The method of discovery will vary greatly—whether it's the logic of mathematical proof, the more empirical inquiry of the natural and social sciences, or the story-telling and narration of more humanistic endeavors—but you should always strive for truth.

The world is a complicated place, and if you're writing about serious issues, you will often discover that truths more often come in grays than blacks and whites. Therefore, you shouldn't be afraid of sophistication and nuance. None of this means that you shouldn't

⁵ From his *How to write with style* article from earlier this semester.

⁶ Think, for example, about the Directed Self-Placement prompt this summer. You were given an article to respond to. Much of the challenge of the assignment was in finding something interesting and compelling to say.

⁷ A *corollary* in math is a proposition that follows from one already proven. In non-mathematical contexts, it means "a direct or natural consequence of or result."

⁸ Note the *overly*. Sometimes, especially if you have an important or subtle point, it is appropriate to write at length, but this must be warranted.

forcefully advocate for a strong position when appropriate, nor should you overly hedge and qualify every statement you make. But academic writing requires an intellectual honesty that demands that you acknowledge the subtleties of life.

Form

George Orwell once said that “good prose is like a windowpane.” To avoid any risk of misinterpretation, let me explicate⁹ this analogy. What purpose does a windowpane serve? It allows you to see through to the outside. When do you notice the window pane? Only when it isn’t working well—when the window is dirty, or there are imperfections or other problems that draw your attention.

This, to a first approximation, is how you should think about the form of your writing: the language and punctuation you use, the structure you follow, the words you choose, etc. Of course, this window pane theory isn’t literally true—there are cases where writers do want language and form to stand out and be noticed.¹⁰ But especially as you start out as a writer, and especially for the relatively conventional standards of academic prose, this should be your goal.

How to accomplish this sort of prose? Part of this task is simply a matter of learning and following rules. For example, most punctuation rules you have to follow,¹¹ and you should format your writing appropriately. But many aspects of writing unobtrusive prose aren’t as formulaic. Rather, they are a matter of developing an *ear* for what sounds good.¹² Does your writing flow naturally, or is it stilted? Is it appropriately concise or too wordy? Is your tone appropriate for the task and audience? This includes both *micro* issues—choices of words and sentences and transitions—and *macro* issues like how you structure your paper.

A Caveat about the Windowpane Theory and a Word on Creativity

This theory of prose as a windowpane might strike you as boring or even pernicious, ignoring the importance and beauty of style in writing. I don’t mean this at all! As I said, the prose-as-windowpane theory pane should be a first approximation. Yes, the formal and stylistic decisions an author makes do play a crucial role in affecting the reader’s perception of the content, and you should think about these. As you develop as readers and writers, I hope you’ll notice the formal techniques great writers deploy to powerful effect.¹³ You may certainly experiment with these! You should especially try to develop a strong *voice* as a writer, since this will make your writing compelling.¹⁴ But to start, especially in the academic context, you

⁹ *explicate*: analyze and develop (an idea or principle) in detail (from the Latin for “unfold”)

¹⁰ Certainly, this is true in poetry, where the better analogy might be stained glass windows.

¹¹ There are some punctuation rules, though, where you still have choices, such as the Oxford comma.

¹² There’s a literal truth to this phrase: reading your writing out loud can be a very effective way of determining if your prose flows naturally.

¹³ The rhetorical figures we discussed earlier this semester are great examples. If you haven’t already, do take a look at Farnsworth’s rhetoric book, available in the library reserves.

¹⁴ Note that “interestingness” comes up in these formal areas, too. Is your writing fun/compelling to read, or boring? Not just *what* you write about but *how* you write it determines this.

should focus on making your windowpane relatively transparent.

Genre

Genre is a word used by literary scholars to group different types of writings into categories. When you write a composition in a certain genre, it's important to be aware of the conventions and norms of that genre. For example, most newspaper articles follow a convention called the "inverted pyramid": they have the most important information at the start of the article, and the least important information at the end.¹⁵ An argumentative essay in an academic context, by contrast, tends to start with an introduction containing the thesis (and sometimes an outline of the argument), a body consisting of the argument, and then a conclusion. Every sort of writing has its own norms—even text messages have their own norms, and it would be unusual to circumvent them. And for all sorts of writings, you should be aware of your tone and register,¹⁶ which will vary depending on the genre. Of course, sometimes you might choose to stray from the conventions of a genre, but you should be aware of when you're doing it and why.

¹⁵ They do this so that a reader who's less interested and stops halfway through will still get most of the information.

¹⁶ *register*: a variety of a language or a level of usage, as determined by degree of formality and choice of vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax, according to the communicative purpose, social context, and social status of the user.

Clarity

When you write, you should be clear in what you're saying.¹⁷ A brilliant and original argument, even if true, does no good if it's too hard to understand. A few suggestions along these lines:

- Always keep your reader in mind as you write. What will or won't make sense?
- A particularly important aspect of this, especially if you're explaining difficult or unusual concepts, is coming up with good *examples*.
- Think a lot about the structure of your writing. Sometimes, though not always, you'll want to signal this structure to your reader (e.g., by outlining your argument in an introduction, by using subheadings, by using good transitions between paragraphs, ideas, or sections).

¹⁷ Depending on how you interpret the categories, this section fits into both the "form" and "content" categories. Literally speaking, some of what I'm discussing here—e.g., the examples you choose—is a matter of "content", but it's about the *how* rather than the *what*, so it can still be considered "formal" in a broader sense.

How To Learn To Write: The Pedagogical Philosophy of this Course

So, how can you learn to write? As I've outlined with my dichotomy above, there are two aspects of this: first, developing the *what*, the ideas that you want to relay in your writing, and then figuring out *how* to express these in your writing. The quick answer is the same,

though, for both: you need to read, write, and think a lot—and this is precisely what I’m making you do in this course!

Let me go into a bit more depth. First, about the content, it’s relatively self-explanatory. To come up with interesting ideas, you should expose yourself to interesting ideas, by reading the great thinkers out there, contemporary and historical. Challenge yourself by reading the best publications with the smartest writers. And push yourself to understand new disciplines and types of reasoning. When you have ideas, write them down, play with them. It’s fine if most ideas go in the (digital) trashcan; keep thinking about things.

Now, how to figure out the formal aspects of writing? Here’s my theory, which has determined how I’m teaching the course. It’s based on the premise that humans are pretty good at learning from patterns—so exposing ourselves to the patterns we want to emulate is the key thing to do—but that we can benefit from some added information and structure. You should:

- Read lots of good writing. This will give you lots of models of what you’re trying to do. You should spend vast amounts of time just reading this type of writing for pleasure without worrying too much about the form—the patterns will seep in by osmosis—but occasionally you should look more closely at how these pieces are put together.
- Develop linguistic awareness, so that you have the tools to understand certain patterns and constructions of language that come up in writing.
- Get bits of explicit advice about writing, from a diverse set of writing books and people (all of which you should consider with a critical eye). You should also certainly be consulting resources like dictionaries as you write.
- (Maybe) see a few examples of *bad* writing, so you can see what *not* to do.¹⁸
- Develop your own *theory* of good writing—i.e., a system in your mind that explains why some writing is good and other writing isn’t.¹⁹
- Practice writing *a lot*.
- Remember that good writing requires *revision*, so you should both edit your own works critically and practice editing others’ works. (And you should also ask other people whom you trust to look at your work and offer advice.)
- Think about the process of writing—brainstorming, outlining, writing, revision, etc. More generally, be self-reflective about your

¹⁸ But this is safe only if you can identify why this writing isn’t good, and if it’s not too high a percentage of your reading—otherwise, you will follow its patterns!

¹⁹ It’s better for you to develop your own theory than simply to follow someone else’s.

writing: what works for you?

- For any given writing task, you should read many *models* of excellent writing in that genre.²⁰

You'll see many of these activities are core parts of this course. I'm having you do the extramural reading project to give you a bare minimum exposure to good writing, but you should be doing far more than that if you want to become successful writers. (And you should see my handout on extramural reading for great sources of that reading, e.g., *The New Yorker*.) The linguistics we're doing will help you develop the linguistic awareness. And the revision we're doing in peer reviews will help you develop the crucial editing skills.

As I've said several times in the course, you should be *proactive* about improving your writing. If you want to succeed in this course and become a great writer, you should go beyond the requirements of the syllabus and practice these steps all the time.

Grading Criteria

Now that I've explained what I'm looking for in your writing, I can give you my grading criteria. This applies both for the formal and for the informal writing assignments.

An A paper is a paper that accomplishes the following:

- In content, it is both interesting/important and intellectually sophisticated. What each of these means depends, of course, on the specific assignment. An essay where you have to develop a novel argumentative thesis is going to have different expectations of interestingness than an assignment where you are summarizing someone else's article. And the intellectual sophistication you show in a math proof differs from that of a literary analysis.
- In form, it (a) passes the windowpane test; (b) is clear, and appropriately written for your intended audience; (c) follows the conventions of the genre you are writing in; and (d) where appropriate has a strong and compelling voice.
- It follows the directions of the prompt.

To the extent that your paper doesn't satisfy these conditions, it will have a lower grade. For example, a paper that has compelling ideas but has many problems with form and writing, or a paper that is well-written but lacks intellectual substance, might lie somewhere in the B range. Papers with significant problems in both categories (or even with severe enough problems in just one category) might receive a C or lower.

²⁰ This poses a challenge for many forms of writing assigned in schools. Have you ever seen a good model of a five paragraph essay? These things don't exist in the real world; they're artificial. So I've chosen assignments where good real-world models do exist, and I'm encouraging you to see those.

Let me emphasize that the windowpane test really is a *sine qua non*²¹—if problems with your writing and mechanics distract readers from your ideas, no one will read your ideas, no matter how good they are. Some writing courses underemphasize this, but I can't in good conscience let you finish this course with these problems.

²¹ A *sine qua non* is an essential condition, something that is absolutely necessary. It comes from the Latin for "without which not."

Directions, Sources and Formatting

As I said above, following directions is important. (You will find that most instructors and certainly most people in the real world will be far less forgiving than I am about this.) For almost all writing assignments, I've carefully documented the instructions, so you should follow them. (When in doubt ask, but consult the instructions first.) A few specific things:

- I'm not a stickler for the precise format or order you put these in, but you should make sure to have your name, the date and if relevant the assignment name or version (e.g., specify if it's the draft). Your pages should be numbered, and you should staple things together.
- Unless otherwise specified, I'd prefer that your final versions be single-spaced.²²
- For informal emailed assignments, you should pay attention to good email etiquette and formatting. (As I've said in class, I'm doing this because it matters in the real world.) Make sure to have spacing between your paragraphs, make sure your name is next to your email address, and make sure the font, size, and color are reasonable.
- Unless otherwise specified, please send any attachments in *pdf* form.
- You should follow the instructions in the assignment prompt for sources and acknowledgment. Because most of the models for the assignments we're doing come from real-world writing in journalism, most of our assignments won't require academic-style citations like MLA, but you should be comfortable learning any given citation format, as appropriate.

²² Why do I do this? All the good writing that I read—in newspapers, magazines and books, in print and online—is single-spaced, whereas double-spacing reminds me of bad five-paragraph essays. It's fine if you want to use double-spacing for drafts, because it might be easier to mark up with revisions.

Prescriptive Rules

We've discussed prescriptivism in class a bit, and we'll do so more soon. As I said then, it's important to make decisions about which prescriptive rules you do or don't follow based on the context. I'm not bothered by most of the more contentious prescriptive issues (e.g., *hopefully*, split infinitives, singular *they*, ending sentences with

prepositions, Oxford commas, starting sentences with *and* or *but*); in fact, in many cases, I think those prescriptions are nonsense. But there are a few constructions that I think are really bad, and which I think you should avoid.²³ We'll be talking more about these in class, after we learn more linguistics, but you should also feel free to consult other resources—e.g., writing guides—to learn more about them.

The following are proscribed²⁴:

- Incorrect punctuation—especially misplaced commas.
- Dangling modifiers
- Hypercorrected whom
- inappropriate use of restrictive versus non-restrictive clauses
- Certain violations of parallel structure.²⁵

One other thing to be aware of is the use of sentence fragments. These are fine when done well; you'll see them in much of the best writing, and I certainly won't proscribe them. But I've noticed that a few of you overuse them and might not be aware of this. So if you're using sentence fragments, it should be a conscious and intentional decision.

Finally, one last word on prescriptivism: even if it is silly, it does have an influence on ear and style. For example, there's no justification for the rule against split infinitives, but it's been so ingrained that often the non-split infinitive sounds more natural than the split infinitive. That doesn't mean you shouldn't split infinitives; there are many situations where splitting sounds better. But to deny the role of the rule on English prose is naive.

Still, when thinking about prescriptivism, it's best to remember Churchill's response to the rule against ending sentences with prepositions: *This is the sort of rubbish up with which I shall not put.*

²³ I think most people would agree with me on these.

²⁴ From *New Oxford American Dictionary*: The verbs *prescribe* and *proscribe* do not have the same meaning. *Prescribe* is a much more common word than *proscribe* and means either 'issue a medical prescription' or 'recommend with authority': *the doctor prescribed antibiotics*. *Proscribe*, on the other hand, is a formal word meaning 'condemn or forbid': *gambling was strictly proscribed by the authorities*.

²⁵ I'll be explaining this in class. An example that's bad is: "He was an NFL head coach at 31, a head coach in the Southeastern Conference at 33 and became USC's head coach at 34." Instead, this should be "He was an NFL head coach at 31 and a head coach in the Southeastern Conference at 33, and he became USC's head coach at 34." Unfortunately, if you look online, you'll find some grammar resources that offer overly restrictive advice on this. I'll either find a good resource that spells out a reasonable set of guidelines, or else I'll write one myself.