

Style

for students

*The craft of writing university assignments
that won't give your tutor apoplexy*

Allan Charlton

Style for Students

Writing university assignments that
don't give your tutor apoplexy.

Allan Charlton

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Allan Charlton
July 2009

Acknowledgements

This book exists because some good students asked questions and some students didn't, but should have.

To those students who asked questions, I extend my thanks. I am particularly thankful to my reviewers, who gave helpful, constructive comments that improved my little book immensely. I am also thankful to the many students who have made suggestions and asked for additions, and thanks are also due to the many academic and professional colleagues who offered helpful comments and encouragement.

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Foreward

Several Bachelor of Communication students asked me to write this little book because their secondary school experience had left them short of writing skills. “I know that this paragraph is letting me down, but I don’t know how to fix it.”

Many students asked me where they can look up this stuff, and of course it’s all in dictionaries, thesauruses, style guides, grammar books and the like. That, however, was not an acceptable answer for them; they wanted a small, cheap handbook they could tuck into a pocket or bag. Something that had what they needed, but was easy to use. So that was the genesis of this work and to make sure it did what they wanted, I had some students review it for me. They were great reviewers.

There are no dark secrets hidden in these pages. Have faith in your tutors, lecturers, class materials and recommended readings. This little book is not a replacement for any of those; it is only a supplement. Read widely, and think about what you read. When you write, think about your audience.

Writing assignments is sometimes a drag, but it is an opportunity for you to pursue your studies a little further than you otherwise might; it is also an opportunity to demonstrate that you have been listening, reading, making notes and following your tutor’s lead. More importantly, it is an opportunity for you to hone your communication skills, and your writing skills in particular.

You are welcome to send comments, suggestions and complaints to me. I won’t promise to do everything you ask, but I do promise to read and consider what you have to say.

Note to the third edition

The first edition was a handout of about 11,000 words and the second edition was a small book of about 22,000 words. This edition is more than 46,000 words and contains four new chapters and additions to the existing chapters. New material includes new chapters about writing for research, preparing presentations, planning assignments and writing reports, while the popular Words chapter has been expanded with sections about the problems students find in compound words, plain English and plural possessives, among others. Like its predecessor editions, it is based on requests from students and difficulties they have had in assignments.

Some remarks are repeated and that is not accidental. I am content to repeat myself if nagging my students makes better writers of them.

1

About Style

Generally, school texts don't teach much about writing style – they just assume that you know what it is and how to deal with it. Maybe they believe that it's one of the things that we will acquire by osmosis, but unfortunately most of us don't. We have to learn. So what is writing style?

When we talk of the style of a musician, dancer or artist, we mean the many small details that are often unnoticed but which build to a distinctive manner or presentation. A writing style is like that; it is a combination of details that make one writer's work distinctly different from the next.

Your personal style is the way you write when you are not constrained by a set of rules. It's the way you would write to a close friend or relative, and often reflects the way you speak. Understanding it is important because it sends messages about the sort of person you are and your readers will think of you that way. If your readers like your style they'll read other material you've written, and that's especially important if you earn your income from writing, as most communication professionals do.

In his book *On Writing Well*, William K. Zinsser says: "Writing is like talking to another person on paper. If the reader likes the writer's personality he will follow that writer anywhere."

Your style is a reflection of your taste. It's as personal as colour; some people like bright colours, some people wear black every day. And just as you might use colour to influence the mood of a meeting, you can use your words to influence your readers' moods. However, we have obligations about the way we use our language, and although we may bend the rules a little, there are limits beyond which we risk writing nonsense.

Your style can also demonstrate courage. If you make yourself clear in simple but strong, unambiguous language, you make it easy for your readers to agree or disagree with you. If you use the the formal, mushy language of business and government, nobody will be quite sure what you mean, so nobody will take sides, for or against you. That corporate language style doesn't make commitments and doesn't promise anything, although it might give its authors a feeling of safety. Maybe that's why it's popular – except that great writers and great speakers do not use that kind of language. Language that's free of commitment is also free of any compelling reason to be read. It doesn't reach out and grab you by the throat and hang on. It just lays there.

William J Brandt makes some helpful remarks in his book *The Craft of Writing*. He says that every style has a way of relating to its subject and that “style does not exist apart from what is being said.” We take different attitudes with our conversations – firm with one, fun with another – and we do the same in our writing. It’s not just the grammar and punctuation; it’s the spelling, too – and the choice of words, and their order in each sentence, and the sequence of sentences in the paragraph and the structure of the document. Brandt summed it up by saying “The function of the style is to make the reader experience that possibility [that you’re writing about].”

The importance of style is universal, and has been since the days of great classics like the King James Bible and Shakespeare. Chaucer did a very good job of it about 900 years ago and so did Aristotle when he taught rhetoric more than 2,300 years ago. Whoever eventually put *Boewulf* into writing used a story-telling style that had been refined for generations.

It is style that sets one writer apart from the next. It is style that enables your reader to experience what you are describing. Your style will develop as you work on it.

If your style is confident and easy to read, you will be perceived as confident and knowledgeable. If your style is clumsy, the perceptions about you will not be as positive. If your work leaves your readers confused, they will probably not bother to read your next report, proposal or magazine article. If your readers have to work hard to uncover the meaning you’ve hidden in your text, they may not make the effort.

In an interview reported in the Sydney Morning Herald on 15 July 2004, Jerry Bruckheimer said “I don't like an audience to have to work too hard.” Producer of such classics as *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Bruckheimer knows his audiences well. “I want them to sit back with their popcorn and enjoy.” We all need to write like that – so that our readers can sit back and enjoy what we have to say.

Learn to write well

Our species took millions of years to evolve. Archaeologists have found stone tools that are more than a quarter of a million years old, and we can reasonably assume that the people who made them also spoke to each other. Perhaps there was enough time for gesture and verbal communication to build itself into our DNA. However, we have only been writing to each other for about five thousand years, and that’s nowhere near long enough to modify our genetic structure.

Writing well is not a natural action that’s built into our DNA. We have to learn it.

No matter what part of the communication industry you join, you will be judged on how well you write. People will read your work, and they will judge it as readers; they will hear your words inside their heads, and they will compare your work with that of other writers.

Some people build quite successful careers on their charisma and natural communication abilities but they are rare. Great insight is not much value if you can't share it and many good people have very ordinary careers because they do not learn to communicate effectively.

For more than 50 years, communication research has been leading us to realise that writing something down does not necessarily communicate the message to the reader. Many things can get in the way and interfere with the reader's attempts to understand what we have to say. We must never fall into the trap of thinking that "if I can understand it, my reader can". We need to study our readers and make it easy for them to derive the intended meaning.

In spite of what some people will tell you, there is not one single, all-purpose, one-size-fits-all way to write. As a communication professional you need to understand the difference between your natural style and the style required by your employer. You have to think about it and you have to work at each piece individually. You must be flexible and fit the style to the occasion.

Zinsser says that writers are entertainers and we need to approach our work the same way that entertainers do. They practice their craft, honing their skills relentlessly, and if we approach our craft the same way we will be able to produce work that our readers enjoy reading.

If you want to write well, you must practice writing well. Practice is so important that some teachers base their writing classes on a two-step process:
step 1: buy lots of paper.
step 2: write on the paper.

Is your writing so clear that it persuades, informs or entertains without preparation, revision and rewriting? Probably not, but if you make a special effort to make all of your work the best that it can be, then eventually your natural style will become more compelling, doing the job of persuading, informing or entertaining that you intend.

Learning to write well is that simple – and it's also that difficult. As Zinsser says, "If you think that writing well is difficult, it's because it *is* difficult. It's one of the most difficult things we do."

If a movie has Jerry Bruckheimer's name on it, we know that it will be a good movie and we'll happily pay to see it. That's because Bruckheimer has carefully associated his name with quality work. His name is a brand that attracts people. As professional communicators we can improve our careers by creating a brand; a reputation for quality work.

Technical writers, the people who write manuals and operating procedures for a living, often use a PAD method to improve the communication between the writer and the reader. The PAD method examines the Purpose of the document, the Audience for whom it is written, and the Delivery method (hard copy, web, online help, telephone support, classroom) before writing anything at all.

Write for your audience

Writing is a one-to-one, person-to-person affair. Whenever you're writing, you are alone. And when you read, you are alone in your head, even if you are standing in the middle of a crowd. You write to one person at a time.

To communicate well with your readers you have to know as much as possible about them. What you learn will help you decide on many important matters such as how much jargon you can use, whether acronyms are acceptable and what level of introductory detail you need to add. Sometimes it's helpful to know the reader's background and interests, depending on the subject matter.

Let's take a simple example.

Suppose a whale washed up on a beach. If all your readers live in the area near the beach, you would not need to give details of the locale, but you would be able to use local landmarks such as '... near the old jetty south-east of Henry's Rock'.

It's important to find out how much your reader knows about the topic. In our example of the whale, we might say it's a cetacean or even a baleen cetacean, if it's the kind of whale that strains seawater through sieve-like plates in its mouth. And if some of our readers are field officers, they will need to know the species, length and girth so that they can estimate how heavy the whale is and therefore how hard it will be to move the animal off the beach. The language we use depends on the language our readers expect to see.

I saw this bad example on a software CD:

"By clicking on 'I Agree', you agree and consent to our terms and services." If you don't click the button you can't continue with the software installation, but it didn't say which terms and services you agree to and which ones you consent to. Is there a difference or has someone dreamed it up in an attempt to make himself and his work look important? Should I speak to my lawyer before installing this software?

Writing style

What language and style is appropriate? What degree of formality is required? Many employers, especially in finance, health and the public service, like some degree of formality, while others prefer a more relaxed style. One useful rule of thumb is that reports are generally the most formal documents in the office, except for contracts. Put more effort into accuracy than style, but don't let your report-writing get too familiar. The tone used in this document is too relaxed for a report. You probably won't be criticised for being too formal in your report, but you will almost certainly be criticised if you are too informal.

Many people equate formal writing with sentence constructions in the passive voice. They might have picked up that opinion from a school teacher a long time ago, but it's not right. Passive voice is discouraged in every style guide and writing text, but there are times when it's hard to avoid, especially if you are trying to be gender-neutral. It's usually worth the effort.

What is the passive voice? Here is an example: “The passive voice is to be avoided by writers of reports.” That sentence is less clumsy and much easier to read if it says “Write your report in the active voice.” You can read more about active and passive voice on page 36.

Spelling and grammar

Spelling and grammar are not just subjects you had to study in your English classes at school. They are very important components of written communication and getting them wrong can be devastating.

Often people will recognise that something is wrong, but won't know why. If you have an error in your work your reader might not pick it up specifically, but if they notice that something isn't quite right their reading hesitates and there's an interruption in the flow of the communication. That's serious, because it becomes harder to negotiate the meaning of the message that's so important to your reader.

If someone copies a section of your report with an error in it, there's a good chance the error will be distributed with the report.

Accuracy is another good reason to get your spelling right. It's quite easy to use an incorrect term and have your reader believing something that is not right.

So those are three good reasons to put some effort into your spelling and grammar.

There are lots more good reasons to use correct spelling and grammar, but those three should at least encourage you to make an effort to get it right. Don't rely on the spelling checker in your word processor, because that doesn't take any notice of the context of the words you use. For example, it's very easy to type 'skipped' instead of 'slipped' or 'shipped' and the word processor won't notice, because the spelling is correct and the grammar probably is too. The meaning, however, is dramatically different. A common error is found in references to identification. If a person or a thing has an identifying number, it's referred to as an ID, in block capitals. It's not lower case, because the id is a part of the psyche that resides in the unconscious mind and is the source of instinctive energy. Your spelling checker won't be able to tell them apart, but you can, and you should.

The grammar checker is likely to waste your time for virtually no benefit. Sometimes a grammar checker can make a document worse, by trying to apply some inappropriate artificial style to your work.

Use your words properly. There is no sense in carefully preparing your case and talking nonsense. Remember that you learnt conversational English before you learnt formal English and conversational English is often easier to understand, but you have to put a limit on the extent of your conversational language. Don't descend to the jargon of the streets if you are trying to present serious material in a university assignment. On the other hand, it is often a mistake to write too formally.

So how formal is too formal? What is too formal for one person might be just right for another. But it depends on the situation too. What is too formal for a magazine article might be just right for a report.

Fortunately there is a simple test: imagine yourself in the situation in which your work is being read, stand up and read it out loud. If your writing sounds a little stiff when read out loud, if it has a lot of third person and passive voice, it might be too formal. When you stand and read your work out loud it should flow comfortably, and if it does that you don't have a lot to worry about. Just make sure it is formal enough for its intended use.

You and your style

Your natural style of writing is often known as your **voice** and many writers speak of their voice in a personal, possessive way. Your personal style – your voice – is your particular, characteristic mode of work, and the way to develop it is to study the style of a practitioner you admire and try to produce work in the same style. Your own style will emerge in time, as the words go by. It is usually quite distinctive and although it will change a little during your career it will not go away completely.

As your writing style develops you will experiment with many stylistic elements, retaining some and rejecting many. Try to keep these few things in mind:

- Treat your readers with respect.
- Visualise your readers.
Find out their age, gender, level of education, interests, and anything else that is important. When you know them well enough to have a conversation with them, you can start writing to them.
- If you don't understand your reader's needs, you don't know what to say or how to say it.
- Meet your reader's expectations.
Your readers will expect a certain layout and writing style, so make it easy for them.
- Keep your promises. If your title makes a promise, your text must keep that promise.
- Reading is something you do alone.
In a one-to-one communication between you and your reader, do the best you can. You owe your reader at least that much.
- Think about why you are writing this material.
Are you writing to educate, inform, amuse, or entertain? Your reader will notice.
- Think about what it is that you want to say.
Say it to yourself, write down what you said and then read it back. It might not even be a first draft, but it's a good place to start.

- The essence of good writing is revision. Each new document is an original work, and you can't expect to get it right on the first try. Good writers review their work many times.
- Are you writing this because you have to, or are you writing it because you really want to tell someone about something? If you are enthusiastic about your topic your reader will see and share your enthusiasm.
- What you write and how you write it is not about you and your interests. It's all about your readers. Write for *them*.

Components of style

What are the things that define an individual's style? The individual differences between writers are subtle, but one of the biggest contributors to a writer's style is rhythm, which we will discuss a little later. The other components include the following:

- Choice of words in the context of the document purpose
- The tone – conversation, journalese, or formal
- The way questions and answers work together
- The way ideas and thoughts are separated from each other
- The variation in paragraph length
- The way information flows from one paragraph to the next
- The balance of long and short words
- The use of commas, semicolons and other punctuation
- The balance of long and short sentences
- The structure of sentences, paragraphs, and the document
- Considerate use of active and passive voice
- Topics linked to each other and to a central theme
- Closeness or familiarity with the reader
- The ease with which information can be found

Obviously there are many more components, and ultimately they combine to create a reading environment. The extent to which this environment engages the reader depends partly on the skill with which you use style to present content.

The other meaning of style

To a writer or editor, the word 'style' has two meanings. We have been discussing your personal style, and the other meaning is equally important. The word 'style' also refers to formal matters of structure, layout, spelling, grammar, orthography, punctuation, design and so on, as mandated by a style guide for authors and editors.

There is nothing about a person's natural writing style in a style guide, and there is a lot more to a writing style than the formal matters described in the style guide. However, your personal writing style, no matter how attractive, will not be enough to get you by because the publisher and employers have formal stylistic requirements that you must meet. It is important that you

understand the difference between those requirements and your personal style.

Corporate styles

In your professional life you will probably work for many employers, each of whom will have a corporate style you must comply with, and you must pick it up quickly. Don't complain about it, just accept it. Communication professionals face a lifetime of it.

The **house style** injects a few rules about how certain things such as caveats or technical terms will be phrased and mechanical details that determine how the finished work will look. It might have a list of spellings for particular words, and special rules for hyphenation and capitalisation. Do we write Internet or internet? Is it Email, email or e-mail? Don't try to change even a single word of their mandated text; just accept it and get on with your work.

The house style is usually supplemental to a more general style guide that gives advice about spelling, punctuation, grammar, word usage and other basic details. For example, an Australian firm might say that matters not covered by their house style guide should be referred to the *Guide for Authors, Editors and Publishers*. Similarly, a US firm might defer to the *Chicago Style Guide*.

In this book we refer to the *Manual for Authors, Editors and Publishers* as 'the Style Manual' or 'the Australian Style Manual'. It's an excellent text and every communication professional should own a copy. Keep one on your desk and refer to it often.

An identifiable look and feel gives corporations a recognisable image that helps set them apart from their competitors. They also need consistency in the way they treat items such as copyright statements, user agreements and caveats, and they spend a lot of money getting lawyers to draft standard statements. For example, a caveat might say, "This document was correct at the time of writing, but [the firm] cannot be held responsible for changes made since publication."

University assignments generally need to be in a semi-formal, detached style that shows the student to be a dispassionate observer, asking questions and reporting the answers. Every university library has a good stock of style guides, and many universities have a preference for the APA style. However, you are likely to find that some tutors have their own ideas about how assignments should be written and presented. It might be a little frustrating, but it's good training, because you can expect employers to be inconsistent.

There is generally more consistency in your journalism work, although there may be wide variation between publications. Although many publishers defer to *The Associated Press Stylebook* for general matters, they usually have a style guide of their own for local or special-interest matters and defer

to the *Manual for Authors, Editors and Publishers* for formal matters. Some publications make their style guides publicly available.

Blending styles

Does your natural style clash with the corporate style? You put a lot of effort into refining your natural style so that it looks good and reads well, and you need to realise that a house style does not replace it. While you look as if you are writing in a corporate style, you actually write in your own natural style and the corporate style exists as a layer over it, setting the format, changing the way you use a few certain words and inserting special blocks of text about patents, copyright, and so on. It imposes house rules where necessary but generally does not interfere with the way you say whatever it is that needs to be said.

The best writing is a carefully-honed voice, written to an appropriate style guide. Writing without a style guide is like walking with your eyes shut; you will be OK for a while, but you run a serious risk of some clumsy blunders. When you pause, thinking about the best way to write this or that, would it help to have notes beside you? Of course it would. Style guides help.

Every magazine or newspaper you write for has its own style, developed to suit its readers. Do not ignore your customer's requirements, for no publisher will buy material from you if it has to be rewritten.

Your writing will always be better if you refer to an appropriate style guide while you write and review your work.

The good news is that your own natural style won't go away. The corporate style can't take it away or destroy it, but you must look after it by exercising it regularly and refining it as you work.

Style and grammar

Lots of students get very concerned about their knowledge of grammar, but you probably know more grammar than you realise. Many philosophers believe that you already know some grammar when you are born and linguists who have experimented with this notion have discovered that very young children who are just learning to talk will often make mistakes with their vocabulary, but they almost always get their grammar right. If you have a three-year-old relative, you could try it for yourself with a simple game. Write some simple statements on pieces of cardboard; things like 'get me the ball' and 'ball the me get'. Read the statements one at a time, and ask the child to say 'good' if the sentence is OK, or 'silly' if it's nonsense. After a while you'll realise that small children really do know quite a bit of grammar. Maybe you have been forced to un-learn some.

But your grammar is part of your style, and improving your grammar will refine your style. Using the parts of speech correctly is important, but knowing the names of all the parts of speech by name is probably not a necessary skill for you to have unless you want to become a linguist. If you find phrasing a sentence difficult, the comments on page 30 might help. If

you are still worried about your grammar, go to a newsagency or bookshop and buy one of the cheap books they publish for schools and do the exercises. That will help a lot.

Think sensibly about grammar, but stop worrying. The annoying thing is that some people have very fixed ideas about what is right and what is wrong, and those people can make life miserable for others. If you get a job working for a boss like that, just smile, give them what they want, and take the money. It isn't worth obsessing over, and the training in flexibility will be good for you while you find another employer.

On your journey as a professional communicator you will meet people who insist that you must never end a sentence with a preposition. That rule is intended to add elegance to the language, but there are times when it just makes the language clumsy.

Example:

“What are you talking about?”

Try rewording that sentence without a preposition at the end and then think again. There are times when it is perfectly acceptable to end a sentence with a preposition.

That nonsense about not ending a sentence with a preposition is in the same class of rubbish as the rule that you should never split an infinitive. You can, and sometimes you should. You can also use ‘their’ in the singular, as respected writers have for centuries.

The grammar checker

Word processors have built-in grammar checkers, and there are stand-alone grammar checkers available from software suppliers. **Do not make the mistake of thinking that they can fix your grammar for you.**

Although linguists have spent many years trying to model a natural language, they are still unable to analyse existing texts. Probably the biggest obstacle is the fact that even very competent native speakers can easily misunderstand something said or written by someone else. But there are many factors, including context, alternative word meanings, ambiguous syntax, idiom, jargon and unintended meaning. Often we need a great deal of background knowledge to make sense of something and until computers can properly understand text, they cannot reliably check grammar or spelling.

The grammar checker is an electronic toy and it will let you down at least once every time you use it. Turn it off and leave it off.

Style and spelling

We tend to be harshly critical of poor spelling, and if you ask around, you'll find that a surprisingly large number of people will tell you they are bad at spelling. What they are really saying is that they don't care.

The really stupid thing about this is that many students write an assignment, run the word processor's spelling checker over it, and then send it off without reading it through carefully and critically.

A contributor to a *Sitepoint* newsletter said "One client threatened to cancel their account with my business because an employee of mine continued to spell their business name incorrectly. They saw this as inattention to detail – they simply didn't trust us to be thorough because we were too stupid or too lazy to spell their name right." He estimated the account was worth \$25,000 a year, and that's a lot of money to lose through poor spelling or laziness.

The spelling checker is an excellent tool for getting a quick check of a draft, but *relying* on a spelling checker is a certain path to documents full of errors. You need to read through your work and review it critically.

You need to be warned about the ultimate trick of spelling checkers: they are often set to a default of US English. Before you use your spelling checker for first-pass proofing, task number one is to set the language to Australian English.

The spelling checker can tell you whether a selected word is spelt correctly, but it doesn't know which of several spellings you meant to choose. **If you rely on the spelling checker you will almost always leave errors behind. Read through your work critically.**

It is very important to spell people's names correctly. In assignments in 2008 and 2009 a surprisingly large number of students spelt Barack Obama's name incorrectly. That is a terribly unprofessional blunder – he is the US President and his name is in the news almost every day.

It's not only in written work that people are making silly spelling mistakes. In an article in *USA Today* newspaper, Yahoo editor Vera Chan said "When people use sites like Google and Yahoo to get to other websites they often make mistakes such as 'Mysapce', 'utube', and 'Gogle'." "When a new phenomenon makes news", she said, "this is when we notice things like 'swan flu'".

Mark Paskin, senior engineer at Google, gave some commonly misspelled search words: definitely (definatly, definetly, definatly); stilettos (stilletos, stillettos); convenient (convient, convenient, convinient); nauseous (nautious, nauseas, nausious); and mischievous (mischevious, mischievius).

Australian English

In some word processors the language is set for each individual document. In Word the default language is set by the keyboard you selected when you installed Office. In Word 2003 you set the language in the Tools menu, and in Word 2007 the control is on the Review tab, in the Proofing group. Look it up in the word processor's Help and follow the directions. For a quickie job,

select all of the text in the whole document and set it to Australian English, then set that as the default.

Dictionaries

If you want to get your spelling right, you need to use a **hard copy** dictionary. One with paper pages and cardboard or plastic covers, and words printed in ink. You had one when you were at school, and now is the time to drag it out from under the bed, dust it off, and make friends with it. If you decide to buy a new dictionary, buy the best one you can afford. The official Australian English dictionary is the Macquarie, but there are some excellent Australian dictionaries available from other publishers.

There are some good dictionaries on line, but be very careful. Some of them might refer to Standard English (which doesn't exist), many of them are in US English and some are in British English. Using your own copy of a good Australian English dictionary is the only way to be sure.

In a little notebook, make a list of words you get wrong. Here are some common examples, and you can find more on page 62.

guarantee	warranty	
though	through	thorough
bow	bough	
leisure	pleasure	
conscious		
loose	lose	
break	brake	
steak	stake	
principle	principal	

Look them up in your dictionary (or one at the library) and write them down in your little book with their meanings so you know when to use which word and how to get the spelling right. Stuff the book into your pocket or your bag and carry it around with you; it's easier than carrying a dictionary, and you can add more words to it. When those troublesome words come up, look them up. After a while you won't need that little book. You'll still need your dictionary though, so keep it on your desk and use it often.

Of course, I'm making the assumption that you know which word you want to use. If not, you need more help than I can give you in this little book.

The thesaurus trap

You will probably find a thesaurus useful, and the one built into Word works quite well. But there is a danger – when you look up a term in the thesaurus it will give you a list of terms to choose from, and you will be tempted to assume that they all mean the same as the word you looked up. That is not necessarily so, depending on the context. The fact that a word is

a synonym in one context does not mean that it will be synonymous in other contexts.

The thesaurus will offer many potential synonyms. Not all of them will be synonyms in the context of what you have written, so you must choose carefully.

Plain English

Plain English is a **style** of writing. It avoids difficult words and long sentences, but there is more to it than that. Plain English has a history of saving huge sums of money by making forms and other official documents easy to read, easy to understand and easy to use. If a form is well-designed and written, it doesn't need expensive follow-up, checking and correcting.

Many writers have discussed Plain English, some in praise of its successes and some in criticism of its failings. Reading some of these works is worth the effort, but they all seem to say the same thing: keep the message simple and clear.

Basically, there are two components:

- Avoid convoluted constructions
- Choose your words carefully

Some people and some books will tell you that you must focus on using short words in short sentences. Many more will insist that you must use simple words in simple sentences. Many will tell you that you must not use jargon.

That is not necessarily good advice.

If you insist on keeping your words, sentences and paragraphs as short as humanly possible, your work will be hard to read because it's unnatural. You need a balance of long and short, with a natural rhythm.

You also need to pitch the complexity at the level your reader expects. If you insist on keeping your work as simple as possible, you will alienate those of your readers who expect some complexity. An engineer will not be comfortable with material written at the level of Bob The Builder or Thomas the Tank Engine. Academic readers need material that will lead them to consider the matters that are important to you.

Use simple but accurate language that speaks directly to your readers.

See if you can decipher the following sentence, which I copied it from an otherwise excellent text.

The ideas and language formations formalised or deflated by the rhetorical interchanges of the election campaign act on individual consciousness to produce a collective outcome expressed in the election results that themselves legitimise the changed realm of discourse.

How would you rewrite the sentence? Here is one attempt:

The ideas and language used in a campaign lead to an election result, and that result legitimises post- election discourse.

In an address to the National Press Club on 23 April 2009, author and journalist PJ O'Rourke said "unnecessary complexity is fraud". Although he was speaking in the context of tax legislation he paused and said that his rule applies to any document at all.

When the issue was debated online by a group of technical writers, a form of agreement was reached when one writer said, "Just find out what word your intended audience would best understand and use that. Your eventual readers are, after all, the whole purpose of what you are doing."

Consider your readers. Write at a level of complexity that will make your readers comfortable and use the jargon they expect.

On ABC radio a prominent Australian politician was quoted as saying "The proposed legislation would cause the diminution of workers' rights" Why did he say 'diminution'? Why didn't he say 'lessen' or 'reduce'?

Is it necessary to fuss over our language so much? Can't intelligent people read properly? In a discussion on the New York Times editorial blog one respondent referred to "prepositional phrases, negatives, passive language and other verbal potholes that slow readers to a crawl". He pointed out that it's really only necessary to take care with our work if we want someone to read it.

Figures of speech

Our language is wonderfully robust and flexible, with a huge vocabulary. It gives us the freedom to choose particular ways to make things clear to our readers, but that same flexibility also makes it easy to confuse our readers. It is an offence to use that flexibility to make things less clear than they should be, but unfortunately people do it much too often.

Sometimes they do it to make themselves look important, sometimes they do it to avoid responsibility for what they are saying, and sometimes they are just trying to be proper and formal without knowing what they are doing. Often the result is a fake pomposity, which does not sound good, does not read well and can be very confusing or even misleading.

In professional communication we are not trying to write lyrical works of fiction and we are not trying to be funny or harshly formal. We are simply trying to communicate certain things to a reader.

To do so we must produce work that has a high **usability** – that is, it must be well suited to its task. It must be easy to read, easy to understand, ethical and interesting. The layout and structure must be suitable, contributing to the sense and intent of the text.

As the author of an assignment you are not in the happy position of being able to negotiate meaning with your reader; you have just one chance to transmit a message to your tutor or lecturer, and you need to get it right. However, you can take your time over it and think it through carefully.

The fact that a statement is made on TV by a politician or a journalist doesn't make it right. They are often misled by poor attempts to sound smarter or more important than they are. Some develop habits such as saying the same thing many times so the audience won't forget it, or talking for a long time so the camera stays on them.

Sports journalists have the problem that sometimes there's nothing happening on the field, but they must keep talking while they wait. Often they have nothing of value to say and can only read statistics from a sheet in front of them, and they use tricks to lengthen their sentences. They say things like "20 years of age" for example, instead of "20 years old". If you were talking to a friend, you would probably say, "he's only 20", but in the TV broadcast someone says "he's only 20 years of age". What would you write?

It's quite fair to argue that this is the jargon of sport and therefore sports commentators should speak that way. I reject the argument, and use this quote from ABC radio in support of my case: "They went down to Tasmania yesterday, New South Wales."

There are many possible meanings for that sentence, and the context of the piece only went part way to an explanation, leaving me wondering whether the NSW cricket team went to Tasmania on that day, or whether they were beaten by a Tasmanian team on that day. Good communication doesn't leave its audience wondering and PJ O'Rourke would be very harsh about it.

The point is that sentence construction can leave the reader doing mental gymnastics trying to derive meaning, and sometimes getting the information wrong or putting an incorrect interpretation on it. Simpler, clearer sentences will be more enjoyable for your reader and probably result in fewer arguments. In university assignments, the jargon of politics and sport will not win marks for you.

Don't copy the style of politicians and radio or TV sport commentators.

Police, ambulance and fire officers have serious matters to report, and their language must reflect that seriousness. They need to use plain, simple words, but those words need to be chosen carefully to support a serious tone in the delivery. One of the tools is the rhythm in the writing; it needs to be a little slower and more deliberate than normal speech. Removing contractions also helps. Unfortunately they often make poor word choices and the result sounds pompous.

Often the most senior officers and their PR people speak well, but lesser officers, still highly respected people who have great technical and leadership

skills, often have poorer communication skills. Unfortunately, many other people copy their formal style.

If it sounds silly in a conversation, why would you speak that way in public?

It's even worse to write like that and thankfully, most of our print journalists avoid it. So why do people use that language? I asked a few, and this is what they said:

"I thought that was the correct way to speak in public."

"I was trying to be formal and correct".

"I just said what I thought sounded important."

Persuasion

For our work to be persuasive it must argue logically, using reason supported by well-recognised facts. It must do its work without unethical treatment of its opponents or resorting to any fallacies or half-truths. And even that's not enough. For it to persuade it must be read, and to be read it must have a simple and inviting appearance. And when someone picks it up it's not enough to look good – it must reach out to the reader and grab. Can you write something like that and get it right without reviewing and rewriting? Most of us can't, and the best writers recognise the inevitable need for revision and rewriting. That's how they get it right.

ooo0ooo

You will have noticed that although I have suggested that academic work should be in a restrained, formal style, I have used a conversational style in this book. That is because I believe that my readers prefer to discuss this material in a conversation rather than a lecture. If I am wrong about this, please email me and say so.

That is the end of our generic discussion of writing style. The rest of this book contains more specific discussions.

2 About Your Assignment

Marking assignments is a big job, and you can forgive tutors for getting a bit cranky when they see Communication students making basic writing errors. Those mistakes can cost you a few marks, but they could be much more costly when you enter professional life and start building a career.

Before you start work on an assignment, go to the unit web page or the library and get a copy of the unit learning guide.

- Check what the learning guide says about this assignment. Make sure you know its due date; as a general rule, assignments are due **in class**, not at the end of the week.
- Extract the assignment cover page from the unit learning guide or from the vUWS page. You will need it later.

To gain entry to university you have passed a lot of exams. You know perfectly well how to pass exams and you use the same principles to get good marks for your University assignments.

The first law of assignments is the same as the first law of exams:

Answer the question you are asked.

Assignment requirements

Read through the assignment requirements carefully. A surprisingly large number of assignments do not address the requirements, at least in part. Can you afford to throw marks away like that?

Analyse Describe the 'why' or 'how' of the event or issue. An analysis is not a summary, but it might contain one.

Compare Find and discuss the similarities and differences between two theories, ideas or events. If you are asked to 'contrast', then you should focus on the differences.

- Define** Give a concise and authoritative meaning, and support it with a good reference. Don't just give a dictionary definition.
- Describe** Be thorough in your description, and emphasise the key points or issues. Support your description with references.
- Discuss** Present a point of view that you have developed by studying the literature or readings. Support your opinion with references.
- Evaluate** Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of opposing theories or ideas. Explore their advantages and disadvantages, and present some kind of judgement.

Now you can start thinking about your assignment content, but not in detail. Either on paper or in your word processor, scribble down a list of topics you will cover. With that list, write a list of the recommended references you will explore.

Now re-read the assignment in the unit learning guide. Will your notes lead you to a good response to the assignment?

- What unit topics does the assignment cover?
- Does the assignment seek to test your knowledge of these topics, or does it lead you to examine texts and references?
- Will your assignment contain pictures, charts or tables?
- Does your assignment need a summary? What will you put in it? When?

Audience Analysis

The audience analysis is often the most important part of an assignment. Unfortunately audience analysis is frequently little more than a poor guess and it can lose marks for you.

If you can't accurately define your audience

- you don't know what they *want* you to say.
- you don't know what they *need* you to say.
- you don't know who you will be writing to, the level, or the content. You will only have guesses.

Sometimes you see a vision of your argument so clearly that your assumptions might be quite wrong. Sometimes you might aim at a very diverse audience, a dangerous thing to do.

Write to interest your readers, not yourself.

Problems in reports

If you are writing a report for a manager, you might need to highlight certain areas in which problems exist. This is a topic that needs to be handled with care and sensitivity and in many cases you may be wise to avoid a heading that says 'Problems' or even saying that the organisation has problems.

Most people, managers in particular, don't like to be told that they have problems, especially when it's their job to make sure that problems don't arise. There's a good chance they will get huffy and deny that the problems could exist because their management structures trap issues before they become problems. They will probably tell you that you don't know what you're talking about as they politely guide you out the door.

Managers are expected to know all about everything they manage, and accepting that there are problems is like an admission of failure.

If you plan to tell a manager that he has problems, find a way to say it that puts the whole thing in a positive light and doesn't use the word 'problem'. Be careful of the word *issue*, too, because in manager-speak, issues grow up to become problems.

It's OK to tell a manager that your proposed changes have problems, but make sure you include solutions to the problems.

Plan your assignment

It often helps, particularly on long assignments, to write up a simple work plan. It doesn't have to be detailed, but if you have some sort of time-line to work to, you are more likely to get your assignment submitted on time without a last-minute rush – and still have time for the other important things in your life. A short chapter about planning starts on page 23.

While you are planning your work schedule, make sure you allow some time for researching your assignment topic. You will need library time and perhaps some of that can be on line from home. Make sure you allocate sufficient time – and use it wisely. You will improve your chances if you set goals for yourself and write them down. Make the goals realistic, so that you don't get discouraged, but force yourself to 'stretch' to achieve them. When you do, simply cross them out and move on.

Think about the structure of your assignment. Often you will need some sort of introduction at the beginning and some sort of summary at the end, packaged around a discussion in the middle. The introduction and summary can often be written after you have written the main body, to make sure that they do what they are intended to: lead the reader to invest time thinking about what it is that you have to say. Don't make the mistake of writing a long introduction, because long introductions drive readers away. Say what needs to be said and stop writing.

Now that the planning is done, you have your thoughts organised and it is safe to start writing. But before you do, go to chapter 9 and set up your word processor. It's easy, it doesn't take long, and it will save you time. Best of all, it will remove a lot of frustration and annoyance. Besides, it's

just silly to let your word processor mess up your work and waste your time. Invest a few minutes and take control.

Don't be afraid to offer your own opinion in an assignment. You don't have to agree with everything that your tutor says, and you can disagree with the material in your class materials and texts. However, if you disagree, make sure you back up your statements with referenced facts.

A literature review for an essay should be no more than about 10% of the word count, and may lead you to take a particular line of discussion or argument. It should be a narrative of key findings of other researchers.

Generally your summary should be in the past tense and briefly describe your findings. If your assignment is a report, the summary should say what you set out to investigate, what you found, what you are able to conclude, and perhaps your key recommendations.

When you have finished your assignment, go over these points:

- Is your assignment fact or opinion?
- Have you properly referenced your work?
- Have you checked the spelling *with a dictionary*?
- Have you checked your grammar?
- Have you purged run-on sentences and fragments?
- Are your ideas properly sequenced?
- Have you read your assignment out loud?
- Do you have your name, student number and page number on every page?
- Will you be proud to sign your name to this assignment?

But you are not quite finished.

Justified text

Justified text is sometimes used in expensively-typeset documents, and if it's done well it can look good. Microsoft Word is not a typesetting tool (it's not even a DTP tool) and it makes a mess of justified, or *blocked* text.

Don't try to use Word to right-justify text. Use the default, which is left alignment, sometimes called 'ragged right' for obvious reasons (this page is 'ragged right').

Footer

The footer of your assignment should contain your name, your student number, and the page number. Some people put this stuff in the header and that doesn't matter much, depending on the preferences of the person who is marking your assignment.

Review your assignment

To improve your chances, give careful attention to a clear writing style. Construct each assignment carefully and review it critically. If you are getting low marks for your assignments, a good review will probably find things to fix.

For a quick fix, read your work *out loud*. Whenever your reading hesitates, mark the spot and come back to it later. Usually there will be a spelling mistake or a grammatical error for you to fix. Sometimes it will be because an explanation is not clear. If you run short of breath, it's probably a good place to start a new sentence.

For a slower fix, get someone else to read your work out loud and mark the places where it doesn't work. That is often not as effective as reading your own work out loud unless your reader is another student doing the same assignment in the same unit.

Alternatively, just run the spelling checker over it and expect to lose marks.

Binding the assignment

Think about the binding for a moment. Realise that in most of your classes, a pretty and expensive binder or folder will not get you any extra marks.

Your tutor will probably have given you some guidelines on the expected presentation, and it will vary with the nature of the assignment. Some should have a plastic folder, some should be comb bound, most should simply have a staple through the corner.

Remember that tutors carry armloads of assignments, and slippery covers make unstable loads. You don't want your assignment to be the one that causes the others to fall. If your tutor just says that it should be presented in a professional manner, ask for details. 'Professional presentation' means different things to different people. Most of all, don't rely on what they told you in high school or TAFE college.

When you are satisfied, print the final copy and bind or staple it. Don't forget to put the correct cover page on it; there is one in the unit learning guide, and you downloaded a copy of that a couple of pages ago. You might also be required to attach the first page of a Turnitin report.

This is what one lecturer tells his students:

Assignments must be word processed using 1.5 line spacing, 12 pt font, and A4 format, with cover sheet, reference list and appendices. Provide student number on the bottom of each page (footer), and secure the document properly together. Loose pages presented in plastic sleeves will not be assessed. A full reference list must be provided. Do not encase pages in plastic.

3

Planning Your Assignments

Remember the basic principle of modern Resistantialism: *computers can smell fear*. The closer the deadline, and the more important the assignment, the harder the machine will bite you. Do not put off your assignments until the last minute.

Planning is all about making sure that when things go wrong, as they often do, you can still hand in your assignment on time. It's a matter of understanding the size of the task and what you need to do to get it done. It's not just a matter of how many words or how many pages, but it includes library time, reading time and web research time. Don't think you can write a good university assignment the night before it's due.

Being a university student is a job like any other job. What's more, you are paying for it, so you should get the best value for your money by putting in an honest amount of time and work.

Make your university work the regular part of your day – the part of your life that you plan other things around. If you're a part-time student you already have the disadvantage that your degree will take longer than full-time, so don't make it worse.

Invest your time wisely and you will get a satisfying return. If you waste your time you will regret it.

Start early

Project management is a natural part of every professional's life, and you will probably have to read and understand project plans in your first year of professional employment. There is nothing magic or secret about it, although project managers like to think there is. Project planning is a matter of knowing what tasks are to be done, by whom, in which order, and how much time is required for each. This information is then assembled in a project plan. You could use your student diary to plan your uni work, but a plan works better because it has all the information on one page.

However, it must not become a straitjacket that locks you into an inappropriate program. It's a *plan*, and plans can change.

When you know what the project is and when it's due, you have enough information to start your plan. To begin, use a sheet of paper and a pencil so you can erase stuff and change it; later you might prefer to use Excel, but it shouldn't matter what tool you use. Many workplaces use Microsoft Project to track project plans, but it is not simple software to learn and this is not the place to discuss it. Just be aware that you could meet it one day.

Base your planning on 'when do I need to hand it in?' If you base your planning on 'when do I want to write?', there's a good chance you'll be putting in some late nights under stress. Remember the principle of Resientialism; it's at the beginning of this chapter and repeated at the end.

Let's work with a simple example of a basic essay.

Step one

Rough out a list of tasks and beside them, write how long you expect each to take. Write out a list of other things you have to do at the same time, so that you can fit the tasks together. Also list things that might slow you down; things like waiting for a library book, for example; and get dates for them.

Step two

On the far right of your sheet of paper, write the date you will deliver the essay to your tutor. To the left of your delivery date, write the date you'll edit your essay after the review. Now you have a date when the writing must be finished.

Now enter a date when you'll start your essay. To find it you'll have to estimate how long it will take you to write the essay, and you'll have to decide that from your essay-writing experience. After a good research effort you might write 500-1000 words in a day. If you only put in a couple of hours at a time, adjust the number of days accordingly, but don't push yourself, because sometimes things go wrong. Write up the researching and planning in the same way. Investing half an hour doing that will give you something that might look like this:

2 May	3 May	12 May	18 May	19 May	20 May	23 May
Plan essay project	Research essay. Get books from library. Download online materials.	Plan structure and start writing essay	Finish writing essay.	Thoroughly review essay. Return books to library.	Edit essay	Submit essay

It's a simple, basic plan. You'll get the essay written, reviewed, edited and delivered on time, and you'll have some free time as well.

Each university unit contains a lot more than an essay though, and if you're a full-time student you're probably doing four units. Your project plan needs to be a bit more complex, although the same principles apply.

Plan the whole unit

Look at the unit learning guide and write out what the tasks are over the semester and the order you can do them. Take a guess at how much time you can allocate to each. Start putting this information into a plan immediately and add new tasks as they come along. If you work with that plan every day you will be able to stay on track all the way through your semester. Although the University gives you a mid-semester break, there is plenty of work to keep you busy. Don't slack off.

You will improve your chances if you set goals for yourself and write them down. Make the goals realistic, so that you don't get discouraged, but force yourself to 'stretch' to achieve them. When you do, simply cross them out and move on.

Do the maths

There will always be times when someone wants you to go out during time you've set aside for study. If you work your plan assiduously you can probably just put down your pen and go, knowing that you have an allowance built in. This is where the mathematics pay off.

This table makes assumptions that might be nothing like your situation, but it will help you get the idea.

Task	Details	Hours per week
	Hours in a seven-day week	168
Work	8 hours a day each Friday and Saturday	16
Meals	3 meals a day, 40 minutes each	14
Travelling	One hour each way to and from uni or work	24
Sleeping	8 hours a day	56
Uni work	10 hours each for four units	40
	Subtotal	140
	Hours available to do everything else you need to do	28

You'll also need time for taking a shower, hugging your mum, walking the dog and buying petrol. You do lots of other things too, so you'd better write them down if you want to save enough time for beaches, bars and football matches.

Think in terms of managing your workload and your time right from the start of the semester.

Be busy at the beginning of the semester, because you might get sick, or catch a cold and slow down. Or your car might break down. Or a friend might need some help. Or you might fall in love. That stuff happens all the time and you need room in your plan to accommodate it. As the semester progresses the workload increases, and that's another reason to start early. If you get free time at the end of the semester you can party while your friends try to catch up with their work.

Remember that it's *your* plan and you construct it to help you pace yourself through the tasks facing you during the semester. You can adjust it any way you like, increasing or decreasing time allowances, adding more tasks or adding detail between tasks. If you load it into Excel, you can split the weeks into days. You can put in the class times, travelling times, meal allowances, study time and work time. If you have group projects, you can add extra rows to show that certain tasks are to be done by others and then you can easily see where you risk getting behind if someone else drags the chain a bit. You can also see study opportunities that you might otherwise miss, and if you take advantage of them you make time you can enjoy later.

You can add information detail to your plan by breaking up the tasks vertically. Get into Excel, mess around, and see what you can do.

Every bit of information you put into your plan helps you to define how best to allocate your time week by week. And the better you allocate your time the easier the workload becomes. An occasional hour of planning makes your life much easier at the end of the semester, and if you form a habit of planning your work, your professional life will be a bit smoother.

Remember that not everyone will lay out a plan the same way, on the same scale or with the same level of detail, and you will meet lots of people who will insist that you're doing it wrong and theirs is the only right way to do it. You'll also see dozens of tired old clichés like 'plan the work, then work the plan.' Do what is useful for *you*.

Remember the principle of Resistentialism:

Computers can smell fear. The closer the deadline, and the more important the assignment, the harder the machine will bite you. Do not put off your assignments until the last minute.

4 Structure

Go to your study and find the notes you made during Myra Gurney's unit *Writing for the Professions*. Bind them carefully and put them where you can refer to them often. Everyone – absolutely everyone – should do that unit.

While cutting my hair yesterday the hairdresser said, "I could write a book about ..." and that's a remark I hear often. I'm pretty sure that most people could **not** write a book. Although people like my hairdresser have undoubtedly had enough experiences to fill a book, they would start writing chapter 1, get halfway through it, and never finish. People tend to rush into tasks without thinking them through first.

In the previous chapter we talked about planning your workload. Each document also needs careful planning to make sure that the components fit into a structure that will educate, inform or entertain as well as possible.

Building a document

Before you start writing your assignment, think about the purpose of the document you are writing and what your readers might learn from it.

It often helps to write a clear sentence or two that encapsulate the focus of the document. Keep that statement beside you as you work; it can help keep you on track and within the scope of your assignment.

If your assignment is a report, it has a clearly-defined structure – the aim or research question, the method, the results and a conclusion. Lay out the headings in your word processor and you have a good start. If you are writing a report you might find advantage in writing the Abstract first. If you are writing an essay, you might find that your Introduction contains the structure of the essay.

If you are writing an argumentative essay, you need to examine points for and against your argument so that you can take a position and argue it on facts. Fiction writers use conflict effectively and it can also be a useful tool in non-fiction essays. Think like a lawyer – present your case, argue your case, and win your case.

Scribble a series of notes, and then arrange them in a sequence that leads your reader in a direction that will help understand the material. That set of notes might be all the things you can think of on the spur of the moment, or

a summary of your class notes, or a brief description of the completed assignment as you would describe it to an imaginary listener.

When you work from a set of references and notes it can often be difficult to see a structure through your notes. A matrix will solve that problem for you in minutes. Refer to page 88 to see how to use a matrix.

As you assemble your thoughts, keep them separated and you will soon see that some of them can be major headings, and others can be subheadings. You will identify material that links certain thoughts together. Work over that list until it can become your table of contents, and then all you have to do is fill in the blanks. That is the essence of the design process, and it works well in short documents. In longer documents the structural issues can become more difficult.

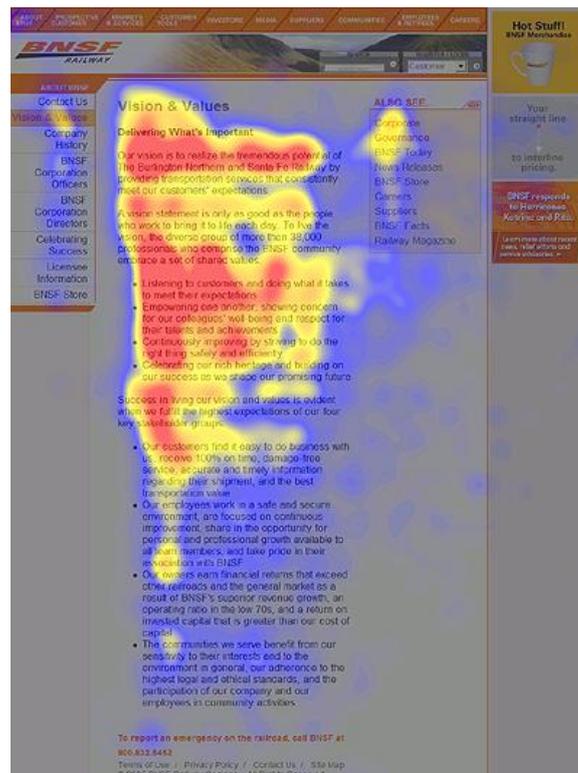
However you arrange your thoughts, you need to put them in a helpful sequence, one thought at a time, clearly separated. The sequence is important because we tend to pick up a document and start reading at the top of the first page and continue to the bottom of the last page. As a way of testing this behaviour and the need to provide for it, American author Walter Sorrells wrote some hypertext fiction that is presented as a set of linked web pages. This approach puts the reading sequence in the hands of the reader and provides a different, more flexible way of approaching the story. The trouble is that although you can enter and leave the narrative at many places you don't know when you have read it all. It's rather unsettling, because you never know if there is something you've missed. You can see it for yourself at <http://www.waltersorrells.com/1.html>.

Designing the structure of a document contains some of the same tasks as designing anything else, whether it be a web page, a software tool or a kitchen. One important consideration is that most people cannot and will not build elaborate mental maps and will become lost or tired if they are expected to do so, as demonstrated by Walter Sorrell's experiment with hypertext fiction. Because of this human failing, the thoughts you express in your document must reflect a structure that your reader will find logical and easy to follow. That structure might not be one that immediately appeals to you, but you are writing this piece for a reader, not for your own pleasure.

For a long time, newspaper editors have been interested in the way that people read. The editors' interest is in how to make the best use of the space available in the newspaper and they discovered that a convenient approach is to put a summary first, then the supporting material after it. Journalists use the five Ws and H (who, what, when, why, where and how) to help them prioritise the information and write their stories with the main details in the first paragraph and the supporting information below in order of importance. That structure, called the inverted pyramid, grabs readers as they scan the page and holds them long enough for them to pick up the information that is important to them.

Traditional writing is structured like a report, which starts with a statement, broadens to a full discussion, and narrows to a conclusion. This traditional approach is diamond-shaped. The smallest part is the abstract, the ‘widest’ part is the discussion and the document ‘narrows’ to the recommendations, bibliography and appendixes.

More recently there has been research into the way that people read web pages, and usability guru Jakob Nielsen has used eye-tracking equipment to show that people read web pages in an F-shaped pattern. This is similar to the inverted pyramid, but demonstrates a pronounced preference for lists. An eye-tracking screen showing the F-shaped reading pattern is illustrated below.



F-shaped reading pattern. Source: <http://www.useit.com/eyetracking/>

Each of these structures is perfectly valid, but each has its place. As you assemble the thoughts you will discuss, consider the kind of document you are writing and the type of structure that is appropriate – pyramid, diamond, or F-shaped. Then assemble your table of contents.

As you fill in the blanks, you will inevitably see that your initial structure was not quite right, but because you have that structure, it's easy to use the word processor to change it. As you work you may find that the perceived importance of certain information changes, and new information comes along and requires a logical place.

As you work, keep referring to your original statement of purpose. Use that to guide you as you present your material and argue your case. Don't tell your readers things that they already know, but lead the argument from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

A common error is to address a report to the founding CEO of a business, and use two pages of the Introduction describing the history of the firm. That effort is not just wasted, it's likely to drive your reader away with boredom. The CEO was there, living through the history of the firm, and he can probably describe it much better than you can.

Sentences and paragraphs

Try to stand back a bit from your work and read each sentence separately. Make sure it can stand alone, saying what it needs to say, without needing to be connected to some other statement. Check that you have chosen the right words, put them in the right order, and punctuated them correctly. Fix the bugs before you move on to the next paragraph.

It often helps to put the topic of the sentence – the familiar information – at the beginning (in the active voice) and the new information in the stress position at the end of the sentence. Associated material can go in the middle or, preferably, in the next sentence. Once you give the reader the topic of the sentence, they are ready for the action – the verb of the sentence – and you should not make them wait. This structure takes your reader by the hand and leads them where you want them to go, but don't waste their time by giving them options that you don't want them to consider.

The sequence is important for many reasons, most important of which are the ways that it provides perspective for your arguments and a context for what comes next. It helps to set reader expectations that can be helpful to your argument.

Remember that your readers have certain expectations of their own about your work and the things you have to say. They will interpret your sentences their own way, and may not derive the meaning you intend. If the issues are complex, you might need to simplify down to black-and-white issues to define a valid starting point.

Read this example sentence, taken from the newspaper of another university: "The child's body was embalmed after death in the usual manner." Did you read that the child died in the usual manner? Did you pause for a moment to decide what the writer really meant?

The next paragraph contains this monster: "[He] discovered a papyrus fragment amongst the bandages containing hieroglyphs which was translated as Haranth, leading to the assumption that the body was that of a young girl." How many times did you have to read that sentence to figure out what the writer meant? A very simple rewrite clarifies it: "Among the bandages [he] discovered a papyrus containing hieroglyphs which were translated as Haranth, leading to the assumption that the body was that of a young girl."

Although people are very good at multi-tasking, our minds can only process one thought at a time, so structure your arguments in a simple, linear fashion. Treat each sentence as a step in your argument, leading your readers from familiar ground where they are comfortable, to less familiar ground where they may read what you have to say in a constructive

environment. Only explain background if it helps them on their journey of discovery.

Read the paragraph as a whole, making sure that the sentences work together to say what you want said, with the right emphasis and the right rhythm.

Some writing books talk about assembling a sentence word by word as if we were picking parts out of a box. That's not how it happens; we don't select a suitable verb, then go looking for a noun. As Brandt says, "Sentences come to us fully formed. They occur to us spontaneously and cannot be arrived at by conscious, logical processes."

That arrival is the **art** of writing. The revision, the rewriting, is the **craft** bit, in which the conscious mind reworks what the unconscious mind has produced, so as to produce the desired result. The revision includes the ordering of ideas, breaking up complex things into smaller ones – the structure of the piece.

Argument

Aristotle wrote about rhetoric and the way that logos, ethos and pathos could ensure a good hearing for a speaker in their political assemblies and courts.

He was talking about the use of logic (logos), ethics (ethos) and empathy (pathos) to construct arguments, and those components are as important today as they were three thousand years ago. To argue persuasively, we need to

- Be logical
- Be ethical
- Empathise with our audience

So what is the relationship between argument and rhetoric? Rhetoric is often defined as the art of persuasion, but it is actually the art of detecting the persuasive aspects of the material. When you can do that, you can use the principles of logic, ethics and empathy to build persuasive arguments.

The use of logic is where many students fall down, because there is a tendency to use intuition and emotion instead of cold, hard logic. Use reasoning to examine the logic and supporting evidence of your arguments and establish their validity. Search for traces of bias. Make sure that you rely only on facts and valid information, and be prepared to comment on information that does not support your argument.

Try to build a logical flow into your work, starting with material or concepts that will be familiar to your reader, and moving to material or concepts that are less familiar to your reader.

Sometimes a bullet list is a helpful way to summarise a few points. If they occur in a particular sequence, you might consider using a numbered list.

Be aware that a busy reader might just read the list items and put your work aside, believing that all the important points are in the list.

However, some busy readers will only scan the first few words of each list item, especially if the document is delivered on line. That scanning behaviour is one of the things that makes parallelism so important. Read about parallelism on page 73.

Using reason

Be critical of the way you use reason. Using reason in the wrong way might weaken your argument and leave your strengths unexposed.

Inductive reasoning argues from the particular to the general. If you float a piece of wood in water, you reason that any other piece of wood would also float. Not all of them do.

Deductive reasoning argues from the general to the particular. When you observe that CDs are a source of music, you reason that the CD in your hands will play music. It might not.

Both induction and deduction are important tools, but they can both lead to faulty reasoning. The way you use them depends entirely on the material, and there are no quick and easy rules for me to give you.

Emotive argument

It's important that emotion plays no part in the discussion because strong feelings make rational debate impossible. Absolute terms, such as 'always' and 'never', are usually illogical, and an appeal to common sense or an analogy is of no value unless it is supported by fact.

"He's *always* late for class."

"Magazine editors are *always* unpleasant."

"I *never* have more than three drinks when I go out."

Those terms might work in a conversation, when the words are gone as soon as they are spoken, but when you write them they are more permanent and you must be able to back them up with evidence.

Common sense

Appeals to common sense often have no sense in them at all, like this one:

"There's no point in studying every weekend. You need to do your study immediately before the exam. It's just common sense."

We all know that it's nonsense and saying that it's common sense doesn't achieve anything positive. Common sense is the least used of all the senses and we should not rely on it.

Reported facts

Be very careful with reported facts, because sometimes they do not show how the information was gathered, when it was gathered, or in what context it was gathered. If you can't support your reported facts with good references, either say so in your discussion and accept that they might have no basis in fact, or leave them out.

This is one of the problems with Wikipedia. Although some of the material is sound, other material is to some degree incorrect, while some is biased and some is put there by a contributor with an advertorial intent. Unfortunately we are often left in doubt over what can be trusted and what can't, so it's best to not trust it at all. Wikipedia is a good place to start looking, but don't ever rely on it.

Readers can be very fickle. If you publish something that gives people false information, you can be sure they will find out. And when they do, you will suffer for it.

If your reasoning is sound and based on solid facts, your arguments will be sound. The next issue you have is to make sure that your material is treated ethically and with empathy.

5

Words

“A large part of your personal style comes from the vocabulary you use, so choose wisely.” – *BBC News Styleguide*

Because you will be judged by how well you write, you must *care* about your writing. If you produce work that has errors of spelling, grammar or word choice, your work will make a poor impression and you must fix it.

If you don't care about your work, why should someone else?

If you want your readers to believe that you can think clearly, you must show them some evidence by writing clearly. Errors and awkward constructions interrupt your reader's flow and every time that happens you lose your reader, if only for a moment. If it happens often, you can expect your reader to put your work down and not pick it up again. To a communication professional, that is disastrous.

No matter how brilliant your insight, the world will not notice you unless you express your insight in language that grabs your readers by the throat and refuses to let go.

Your reader is a captive audience, and you should take advantage of the situation. Give it your very best shot. Be clear, be concise; say exactly what you mean. When you find yourself saying “you know what I mean”, know that you have failed.

Think about what you are saying. When you write university assignments you are showing your tutor what you have learned and to what extent you have achieved the learning objectives. You are also exploring the material, exercising your knowledge and perspective of issues. You have only one chance at this assignment and you must make sure that your reader has no difficulty understanding you.

Think it through carefully and review it thoroughly.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations can be confusing and that is a good reason to avoid them. Although there are some rules for abbreviation in the style guides, applying those rules can produce abbreviations that your reader might not recognise.

Don't use an abbreviation unless it is a natural part of the jargon that your readers are familiar with and use frequently. It is always safer to give the word in full.

Acronyms

Acronyms are a common part of our life, and we write them almost as often as we say them. In Australian English we do not put in the punctuation, so we always write US, not U.S. Most UK writers do not punctuate acronyms either, but Americans still punctuate their acronyms.

Like abbreviations, acronyms can be confusing, so don't use an acronym unless you are certain that your reader is familiar with it and will expect it.

Active voice and passive voice

The voice of a verb indicates whether the subject of the sentence does the action (active voice), or whether the action is done to it (passive voice). Many writing texts will tell you to always use the active voice and ruthlessly get rid of every passive statement in favour of an active one. The active voice is simpler and clearer, enabling your reader to read without having to re-read unnecessarily complex constructions.

Active: *A dog brought the ball to me.*

Passive: *The ball was brought to me by a dog.*

It's easy to pick active voice from passive voice, and spotting them is a good habit to develop. The subject acts, the verb expresses the action, and the object receives the action.

Here's a real example, from the ABC-TV news, announcing the death of World War I veteran Ted Smout on 22 June 2004.

"A state funeral is expected to be held next week."

It was said much better by the news commentary that followed:

"He will be honoured with a state funeral next week."

Both sentences are ten words, but the second one, which is in the active voice, is easier to follow. We find the active voice easier to read because it follows the way we think and process information. If the sentence is in the passive voice, we semi-consciously rearrange it before moving on to the next sentence. That process slows us down and introduces potential for confusion. If the sentences are long and if the material is complex, passive voice makes the material unnecessarily difficult.

Sometimes the passive voice is useful. It can be an aid to gender neutrality and it can be used to indicate a necessary vagueness. If the actor is obvious or is not known, the passive voice works very well. The following example expresses a general belief that cannot be ascribed to a particular person:

“It is believed that recent rain is insufficient to improve pastures.”

The sentence could be improved by introducing an actor:

“Authorities believe that recent rain is insufficient to improve pastures.”

The passive voice can also be useful when it is convenient to put the actor in a subordinate position at the end of the sentence. This fictitious example is from the *BBC News Styleguide*:

Active:

A rhinoceros trampled on Prince Edward at a safari park today.

Passive:

Prince Edward was trampled on by a rhinoceros at a safari park today.

In this case, there is a clear advantage to be had by stressing the receiver of the action because it puts the focus of the story, Prince Edward, at the beginning of the sentence, where the name will grab the reader’s attention.

Sometimes it can be useful to use the passive voice to slow your reader down a bit. If the preceding paragraph has too many short words and too many short sentences without longer ones to balance them, the reader will be rushing along and is likely to find the section tiring. At times like these a sentence in the passive voice can be a very convenient way to slow the pace, particularly if the content needs a slow and deliberate presentation. An occasional passive sentence can also be used to add contrast, especially at the end of a paragraph.

Writers of formal and business documents often over-use the passive voice, probably because it tends to be vague and can be used to hide the writer or speaker from responsibility. Most of the time, however, the active voice is simpler, clearer and easier to read, enabling your reader to follow what you are saying without having to re-read unnecessarily complex constructions.

The decision of whether to choose active voice or passive voice is not as simple as some high school texts would have you believe. It is a stylistic choice that can make a significant contribution to the way you keep your reader’s attention or lose it. As you develop your writing style you will become more aware of choices like this and you should develop the habit of constantly looking for ways to keep your reader interested.

Americanisms

To understand Americanisms it helps to have a short history lesson.

The country we now call the USA was settled by Englishmen, starting with John Smith in 1607 and the Pilgrims in 1620. By 1790 there were four million English-speaking people in the thirteen colonies and during the next sixty years another three million arrived, about half of them from Ireland. The English spoken by those seven million people formed the basis of

modern American English. When Australia was settled in 1788 the settlers brought a newer, younger English with them and it is no surprise that American English is slightly different from Australian English.

By today's standards early Americans and Australians had little contact with England but England had considerable contact with Europe. As a result the English spoken in England developed, but the English spoken in the colonies changed little and the differences between British English and colonial English grew. The differences increased in 1828 when Noah Webster published his *American Dictionary of the English Language*, in which he introduced many spelling reforms but refrained from others, including *nabor, hed, proov, hiz, giv, det, ruf, and wel* instead of *neighbour, head, prove, his, give, debt, rough, and well*. The differences reached a peak in about 1880, then declined as communication was improved by the introduction of the telegraph and the telephone. Later technological changes including radio, TV and the internet have brought the versions of English closer together, but some differences remain. Today we can read the online edition of the current day's newspaper from almost anywhere in the world and as the differences slowly fade away we notice them less. For example, *jail* replaced *gaol* in Webster's American English, and today it is the preferred alternative in the Macquarie Dictionary. New Zealanders also use *jail*. My Oxford dictionary shows *gaol* as the preferred word in England, with *jail* as an acceptable alternative, but BBC News and other news services use *jail*.

The word *fortnight* is a shortening of *fourteen nights* and is widely used in British and Australian English, but not in American English.

In our routine work we meet many words that originated in the US and have been accepted world-wide. We also meet many words that originated in the US and have not been accepted elsewhere. An example is their use of '-or' endings where we use '-our' endings in words such as 'colour' (they write 'color') and 'favour' (they write 'favor'). In other words, we use a double character in a place where Americans use a single character. An example is the word 'travel'. We would write 'travelled' where Americans write 'traveled'. Many of these differences are from Noah Webster's spelling reforms, but some are old spellings that had become unfashionable by the time Australia was settled.

If you are writing material for publication in Germany, Japan or the Philippines, you might find they use American spellings because they had very large American military bases for a long time after World War II, and they learnt their English from Americans.

Alternative words

Many well-meaning English teachers insist that we should not repeat words in a sentence – or even in a paragraph. They tell us that we should make our work more interesting by using alternative words. Whereas the idea has some merit, it should be well down your list of priorities. Here is an example of the clunkiness that can creep into your work if you refuse to repeat yourself:

“We should treat *clients* with respect because without *consumers* we will have no business and it is our *customers* who pay our wages.”

Our clients, consumers and our customers are the same group of people, and we could re-use the word ‘clients’ successfully. However in a sentence as short as this one we should probably just rewrite it. This rewrite is a bit easier to read and does a better job of delivering the message:

“We should treat our clients with respect because they pay our wages and without them we will have no business.”

“When I drove to the university this morning there was a heavy fog so I turned my headlights on. When I came back to my car the headlights were still on and the car battery was flat so I called the mechanic. He sent a man out and I bought a new car battery from him.”

In that simple example ‘headlights’ and ‘car battery’ were both repeated without harming the paragraph at all.

There is nothing elegant or clever about insisting on alternative words. If you need to repeat terms, do so. At least your reader will know what you are talking about.

Anglo-Saxon words

There is a common belief that all the simple, single-syllable words in our language came from Old English and the Anglo-Saxon base of our language, and the more difficult, polysyllabic words came from Latin. It’s a good theory, but it is simply not true. It’s also not true that all our swear words come from Anglo-Saxon or Old English. Some do, but probably not even half of them.

In 1940, during the darkest days of World War II, Winston Churchill said, “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.” With one exception, All those words came from Old English. The exception is *surrender*.

All languages borrow words from other languages, and English does so more easily than other languages, which is one reason for its remarkable flexibility. For example, there is a claim that there are 40,000 Greek words in the English vocabulary of many hundreds of thousands. Many of us could recognise a few words of Greek origin without realising the Greek connection. If you want to communicate your message clearly, pick out the common words that people understand and use those. But be sure to check with a good Australian English dictionary.

AutoCorrect

Some people like this idea of setting up the word processor to trap our bad habits and fix them automatically, because it takes the worry away with the mistakes. It is not a good idea to use the AutoCorrect feature like that.

If we want to become communication professionals, we won’t do it by expecting our tools to do our work for us. AutoCorrect is an excellent tool, but it encourages our bad habits, and we need something that will **fix** our bad habits. Leave AutoCorrect to the amateurs who need it.

Don't use AutoCorrect. It reinforces bad habits.

Bibliographic terms

When you are studying texts and papers for an assignment you will see Latin bibliographic terms that can be quite confusing. You might not need to use them in undergraduate work, but you will use them when you write your thesis for your research Honours, Masters or PhD and your librarian will help you find a reference.

et al

et al causes more confusion than I thought it would. It is **not** *et all*. *Et al.* is an abbreviation of the Latin expression 'et alii', which means 'and others'. It is used to indicate that the author of a work was not the only author, but was the lead author in a team.

op cit

op. cit. is the abbreviation for the Latin expression *opere citato*, which means 'in the work cited'. It is used when a work has already been noted, but this reference is to a different page.

ibid

ibid. is the abbreviation for the Latin term *ibidem*, which means 'in the same place'. It means that this reference is from the same work or book as the one immediately before, but on a different page.

id

id. is an abbreviation of *idem*, which means 'the same'. It is used to indicate that the author of this note is the same person who wrote the previous note.

loc cit

loc. cit. is an abbreviation of *loco citato*, which means 'in the place cited'. It is used when this reference is from the same text as a previously-noted text by the same author.

Corrigendum

Corrigendum is a set of corrections to published information or data. It's from the Latin word *corrigere*, which is also the origin of 'correct'.

These and other terms are discussed in the *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers* and any other good style guide.

Affect and effect

When do you use ‘affect’ and when do you use ‘effect’? It’s not hard to confuse them and people do it all the time, so drag out your dictionary and look them up. You’ll find that ‘effect’ is a noun, while ‘affect’ is a verb.

Don’t try to remember ‘affect the effect’ because you will get it the wrong way round and it will confuse you. To have an effect on something means to affect it, and that’s confusing too. Just try to remember that ‘effect’ is a noun, and the other one isn’t.

Allow

To allow is to grant permission, so don’t use ‘allow’ unless you mean that permission is granted. For example, your newsletter won’t be granting permission to anyone, so don’t say it will “allow better communication between staff and management”. It might ‘enable’, ‘support’, ‘provide’, ‘facilitate’ (ugh!) or ‘encourage’ communication, but it can’t grant permission for communication to be improved. Check your dictionary and use some other word, depending on the context.

Apostrophes

Get your apostrophes right!

If you’re having difficulties, consult a style guide; there are plenty of them about. The bookshop has a cheap one, and there are several good ones in the Library. As a communication professional you should become proficient in the use of style guides.

A notice from the IT department of a large NSW Government authority referred to “Monday’s and Tuesday’s” and if the author had read the notice they would have seen the mistake and fixed it. How can the IT department expect the staff to have faith in them if they can’t get a simple notice right?

The apostrophe is there to indicate that we have deliberately left some letters out. For example:

You’re = you are

David’s coat = coat belonging to David

Although it’s easy to make mistakes about plurals and plural possessives, there is nothing difficult about it. Where you can get confused is the use of the apostrophe to replace a letter in a word.

The most common example is *it’s*, meaning ‘it is’ and the apostrophe is simply used to shorten the word.

It’s not it’s, it’s its, unless you mean it is, when it’s it’s.

Between

We all know what *between* means – if you’re between rugby players, you have someone big and beefy on each side of you. If you’re *between* jobs, you

have just left a job and you're ready for the next one. A ham sandwich is a slice of ham – and perhaps some other items – *between* two slices of bread.

The word 'between' indicates that you have an item on each side of the main item. You cannot have a number of items and compare between each one. Unfortunately we often hear expressions like "...problems between each department ..." on radio and TV. It's illogical and often delivered by people who should know better.

'each' refers to objects one at a time; 'between' requires more than one.

You cannot have *between each page* because it to do that you would have to write inside the paper. Instead, you put your bookmark between one page and another; that is, 'between the pages'.

It's clear, it's simple, and it's fewer words to type.

Example

Australian Standard AS1742.3–2002 is the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices. Section 4 refers to the installation and operation of traffic control devices. Section 4.8.2 is *Work between gaps in traffic*.

It seems to me that the traffic is between the gaps, and that is not where workers should be – they should be in the gaps between the vehicles in the traffic stream. The first sentence of the descriptive text says "within gaps", so it was obviously a simple error and has probably been fixed.

Biannual and biennial

Biannual means twice a year, *biennial* means every two years. They are almost always misused, so to avoid confusion use the alternative of 'twice-yearly' for *biannual*, or 'two-yearly' for *biennial*.

Clientele

I have been surprised at the number of students who spell it *cliental*. That's the Old English spelling, which changed to *clientele* in the 17th century. Perhaps there is a very old spelling checker out there somewhere.

Clumsy structure

I heard a respected radio host say, "I'd think they would be interested in architecture, as far as environmental design is concerned." What should he have said? Perhaps something like this would be better:
"I think they would be interested in environmental design in architecture."

He also said "The fire authorities are getting interested in house design and architecture as far as fire prevention is concerned." Perhaps he could have said this:

"The fire authorities are getting interested in fire prevention in house design and architecture."

The same man was guilty of "He's very interested in his cricket, at least as far as his bowling is concerned." This cumbersome construction is worse in

print and runs the risk that your reader may lose interest before the end of the sentence. Perhaps “He’s very interested in his bowling.” would be easier to understand.

“He had a lot to say as to the cost of the game.” Using the *as to* construction is not at all helpful. Use ‘about’ or something else that really means what you say. It’s very simple to write and easier to follow: “He had a lot to say about the cost of the game.”

On 22 May, 2008, on ABC Local Radio Deborah Cameron interviewed a police communications duty officer, who said that “A man ... was taken to hospital but was unable to be revived.” When he was asked again later in the interview, the officer said that “He was pronounced dead on arrival at hospital.”

The original statement – ‘he was unable to be revived’ – puts the victim as the actor in the sentence, suggesting that it’s the man’s own fault he died. It also had other failings, about who found the man (police patrol), who took him away (ambulance), and the nature of the medical facility (hospital). The story was only told properly because of the professionalism of the radio host.

Twice a year the ABC style editor posts a document discussing style issues. This comment is from the post of April 2009.

http://www.ling.mq.edu.au/news/australian_style/v16_no1/scose_notes.htm:

“Another thing that’s creeping into journalists’ copy is a kind of double passive construction consisting of the adjective ‘unable’ and a verb in the passive form. A story about a man and his two children drowning at the Tathra wharf said that the man ‘*was unable to be revived*’. This is illogical, and again the construction seems to be taken from police statements. ABC journalists have been encouraged to use the standard English one: ‘he *could not be* revived’ or ‘(paramedics, etc.) *could not* (or *were unable to*) revive him’.”

If it is your job to write news that some presenter will read, write news that is easy to read. It will be easier to listen to and it won’t do your career any harm at all.

Compound words

Compound words are words we make up by joining other words together. It’s a useful trick, and most other languages do it too – especially German. The trouble is that although it’s simple, people get confused with it and if you’re confused, your reader will also be confused. Count on it.

Compound words often join a noun and an adjective together to form a new adjective, but some students have admitted that they weren’t sure about nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, so let’s try to make it clear.

A *noun* is a person, animal or thing:

‘cousin’; ‘car’; ‘coat’; ‘hairdo’; ‘textbook’; ‘meal’; ‘hangover’; ‘kiss’; ‘essay’

An *adjective* is a modifier for a noun:

young cousin; *fast* car; *warm* coat; *expensive* hairdo; *old* textbook; *short* meal; *huge* hangover; *warm* kiss; *brilliant* essay

A *verb* is an action:

‘write’; ‘sleep’; ‘eat’; ‘run’; ‘pay’; ‘travel’; ‘wash’; ‘read’; ‘argue’

An *adverb* is a modifier for a verb:

write *well*; sleep *soundly*; eat *hungrily*; run *fast*; pay *cheerfully*; travel *badly*; wash *quickly*; read *carefully*; argue *strongly*

Some words, like *work*, can be both a noun and a verb:

‘That essay was hard work.’ (noun)

‘My computer won’t work.’ (verb)

‘That’s a pretty dress’ (noun)

‘Where did he learn to dress so well?’ (verb)

‘My mum is a great cook.’ (noun)

‘How did you learn to cook like that?’ (verb)

This multiple usage of words is a result of the remarkable flexibility of our language, developed over the last thousand years or so.

Counterpart

A *counterpart* is a duplicate or a part that fits another and complements it. ‘Counterparts’ are common, but ‘counter parts’ are not, unless you are in the business of setting up shops. When you write ‘counter part’ your spelling checker will accept it, but it might not be what you mean. Check it.

Everyday

Another common example of a compound word is *everyday*, which is rather obviously made up of ‘every’ and ‘day’ and is widely used by a supermarket chain to advertise “everyday low prices”. In this use, *everyday* is an adjective, describing the low prices as an ordinary, or everyday, occurrence.

They come unglued when they say “low prices everyday” because what they mean to say is “low prices every day” – ‘day’ is the noun, and ‘every’ is the adjective. ‘Everyday’ is not a noun and it’s a shame that this error is such an everyday occurrence.

This is a classic case of the way that advertisers can affect our language. Advertising copywriters must find new and creative ways to write for their clients, but they also have a responsibility to the language. And they should learn to recognise adjectives.

Login

Login is made up, rather obviously, from the term ‘log in’, which is a very old term from the world of mainframe computers (and ships before that). The computer industry has been using ‘login’ for fifty years or more and it originally meant that you would enter your name in a log book or register of

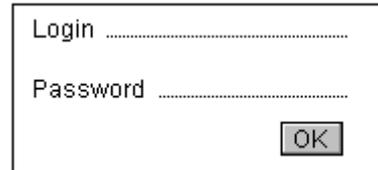
operations before you started work. Today your login is the user name or code that you use when entering software or a software-controlled security system. Using these terms is easy, but they seem to confuse some people, especially programmers.

Login is a noun; it's a name or code that you use. It's really a shortening of the term 'login code' but its use has become very common. You can use *login* as the term for the name of a software user.

Log in is a compound verb; it's the action of entering your user name or code and password to enter a system or unlock security controls.

"Enter your login name and password"

"Click here to log in."

A rectangular box containing a login form. At the top, it says "Login" followed by a dotted line for text entry. Below that, it says "Password" followed by a dotted line for text entry. At the bottom right of the box is a small rectangular button with the text "OK" inside.

How did I decide that login – or logon, it doesn't matter which – is a noun? We speak of *logging on*, which clearly shows that 'log' is the verb. We log on, log in, log off, log out – all these terms work the same way.

The same reasoning works with 'sign on', 'sign off', and 'sign out'.

'Signoff' is a noun and to get a signoff on something means that someone will 'sign off on', or give assent to, an agreement or decision.

Newspaper

Although 'news' and 'paper' are both valid words, 'newspaper' is a combination and is one word. Don't let the spelling checker convince you otherwise.

On line

Another common example is the term we use to indicate that a person or a system is connected to the internet or a network. We go 'on line' to get access to online services. 'Online' is an adjective, just like 'everyday'. When we print a copy of an online document, the printed copy is called a 'hard copy' and we might call it a 'hardcopy version' of the document.

Other common errors include 'leader ship' (should be 'leadership'), 'goings on' (should be hyphenated: 'goings-on') and 'wrong doings' (should be 'wrongdoings'). In an essay, a student referred to a public outcry and when she referred to several incidents, she used the term 'out cry's'. There are three errors in that one term, the first of which is that 'out' and 'cry' should be joined. (The student meant to say 'outcries'.)

Coupled words

Don't use and/or combinations. Say what you mean, and don't leave your readers guessing. They might make the wrong guess, or stop reading.

Interviews and reviews (not interviews/reviews)

New products and services (not products/services)

Jerry Bruckheimer said “I don’t want my audience to work too hard. I want them to sit back with their popcorn and enjoy.” We should write so our readers don’t have to work too hard. Let them enjoy reading your work with their popcorn or coffee.

Comparisons

Comparisons are really simple, but again the writers of many public documents try to overcomplicate our lives.

“This year’s enrolment is more, when compared with last year’s.”

There are too many words and we should write something simpler, something like

“This year’s enrolments have increased over last year’s.”

We might prefer something even simpler:

“Enrolments are up this year.”

“There are more enrolments this year.”

There are lots of simple, clear ways to say it, and they are all easier to type than the long, clunky statements.

Comprise

Comprise means *to include* or *to contain*. Nothing is *comprised of* anything.

Example:

The group *comprises* 24 shops, a warehouse and a head office.

Check your dictionary.

Countable words

People is a countable noun, like bricks or cars or dogs or pineapples and many others. You can’t have an ‘*amount*’ of people. You can have a number, a crowd, a lot, a group, a few, a mob, and so on. But not an amount.

Don’t **ever** say “that is the most amount of people ...”

Not even politicians talk about an *amount of people*. Talk about the *number* of people reading your newsletter, or even *increase the readership*.

We would never talk about the *least amount of readers*, because we would say *a minimum of readers* or *the smallest number of readers* or *the fewest readers* or *the most readers*.

amount means quantity or extent, as in *the amount of resistance*. We could talk about the *large amount* of sauce on a pie or the *small amount* of froth on your coffee or the *amount* of beer at a party.

Amount is sometimes used with the noun *money*, so you could have an amount of money, but you could also have an amount of time, a volume of soup (litres), a number of bowls of soup, a pile of dirt, or a truckload of dirt (*truckload* is countable), or a number of tonnes of dirt (tonne is countable).

While we're on the subject of quantities, we never say that something is *sufficient enough*. *Sufficient* and *enough* mean the same thing, so saying *sufficient enough* is like saying *enough enough*. Just choose one word or the other, and check your dictionary in case you really mean *adequate*.

etc

etc is an abbreviation for 'et cetera', which is Latin for 'and the others'.

Ferraris, Jaguars, Porsches, Citroens, Renaults, etc

We know they're cars, but readers can't guess what sort of cars the 'etc' would be.

If you have other things in your list, say so and name or describe them. If necessary, break them up into kinds or types and have several lists.

If there are no other items in your list, stop writing.

If you leave your readers wondering what you're talking about, they are likely to stop reading in confusion. What would Jerry Bruckheimer say?

Evacuate

Another word with confusion potential is *evacuate*. Cities can be evacuated and buildings can be evacuated. When people evacuate they defecate, and you don't do that in polite company. However, recent practice permits people to be 'evacuated from' a building, a city or a place.

'When the fire alarm sounded, the firm was evacuated from the building.'
'The building was evacuated because of the fire alarm'.

Fill and fulfil

Fulfil gets used too often by journalists and politicians. It means to bring to consummation, or to carry out a promise. *Fill* means to supply or satisfy an order.

You can fill a role (or a roll, for that matter). If you're a sales person, you fill a customer order. If you're successful, you might fulfil your wants and desires.

Say what you mean and if you're not sure, look it up in your dictionary.

Hard copy

This is a compound word, made up of two words joined together with a space. Your assignments are usually submitted in *hard copy*. In this use, 'copy' is a noun, and 'hard' is an adjective.

Sometimes you can use 'hardcopy' as an adjective. For example, you can have a hardcopy edition of a newspaper.

Hard copy means 'printed', usually on paper. So what do you call the copy of your assignment that's still in your computer? Some people call it a 'soft copy', but it's more often called a 'magnetic copy'.

ID

ID is interesting because so many people get it wrong. It is a well-known acronym that has become an acceptable term meaning 'identification'. It always has both characters in upper case.

id

id is not a Latin abbreviation, and it is not your identification. The id is a part of the psyche residing in the unconscious mind, and it is responsible for instinctive energy.

Do not confuse your ID and your id.

Junk words

A very commonly-used junk word is *whereby*. It means 'by what' or 'by which' and that's usually not what you meant, so it doesn't help your argument. Find a better way of saying what you mean. Fashionable cliches and thoughtless words seem to be a misguided attempt at thoughtful communication, but they don't help at all. There are lots of junk words and although this list looks big, it is certainly not all of them.

Junk word	Alternative
Facilitate	Make <something> easy, or easier
Opt for	Choose
Debilitate	Weaken
Participate	Take part
Utilise	Use
Shelve	Put aside
Adjacent	Near or beside
Prior to	Before
Numerous	Many

Words

Ameliorate	Improve
In excess of	More than
Formulate	Express
Via	Through
Forwarding	Putting forward
Amongst	Among
Whilst	While
Arguably	We could argue that
Efficacious	effective

Avoid these monsters:

Ongoing	Shakeup
Grass roots	Uptight
Total package	Benchmark
In the final analysis	At this point in time
Orientate	Update
Literally (or worse, 'almost literally')	Societal

Mathematicians sometimes refer to 'a priori' and a 'posteriori' estimates. These terms for 'before' and 'after' are accepted in mathematics but should not be accepted anywhere else.

Terms like 'basically' and 'as it were' mean nothing and only slow your reader down. Lesser crimes are terms like 'just' or 'and then'. For example: 'Just as the car arrived ...'
'As the car arrived ...'

The second phrase, the one without the word 'just' is cleaner and easier to read, but says exactly the same thing.

Saying 'true facts' is an absurd redundancy because if it wasn't a fact it wouldn't be true. How can you have a fact that is untrue? It's like 'free gift' – if it wasn't free, it wouldn't be a gift.

Your reader should not have to take guesses at what you mean to say and will not thank you for your clumsy verbosity. PJ O'Rourke would accuse you of being unnecessarily complex, Jerry Bruckheimer would accuse you of making your audience work too hard, and William Zinsser would tell you to simplify your text.

Look through your work, particularly the cliches, and if they don't make a serious contribution to the discussion, delete them.

Latin and foreign words

It's easy to get a bit confused about how to handle plurals of Latin words and words descended from Latin or other languages. The Style Manual says to use English plurals except for special circumstances where we are using foreign words. For example, in an Italian reference we might use the word *concerti* but everywhere else we use *concertos*. *Opera* is the plural of *opus* and literally means 'works', but we still refer to *an opera* and *two operas*.

Singular	Use this plural	Do not use this plural
<i>appendix</i>	<i>appendixes</i>	<i>appendices</i>
<i>index</i>	<i>indexes</i>	<i>indices</i>
<i>formula</i>	<i>formulas</i>	<i>formulae</i> (but do use it in a scientific text)
(computer) mouse	mouses	mice (unless they are the furry variety)
<i>phenomenon</i>	<i>phenomena</i>	

Circa

Circa means 'approximately' and although it is easier to spell, it often causes confusion among readers. Use 'approximately'.

Vice versa

Vice versa is a Latin expression that means 'the opposite way round' or 'converse to the preceding arrangement'.

It is **not** 'visa versa'

It is **not** 'vise versa'.

If you decide to use 'vice versa', use the correct spelling.

You might be better off to avoid the Latin and use 'opposite'.

Virus

Virus is usually not a problem word, because if you get sick you are not likely to have caught more than one virus. But your computer can catch more than one, and some people will tell you that the plural is *virii*. It's not. There's an old joke that the plural of virus is 'epidemic'.

After seeing Greek and Latin scholars debating the issue with English linguists, the best advice I can give is to use the made-up English plural: *viruses*.

Vis à vis

Vis à vis means ‘about’, but it is not particularly well known and will cause confusion in some readers, especially if they are stressed or in a hurry. Use ‘about’.

Latin Abbreviations

There are many Latin abbreviations in use, and generally, using Latin abbreviations is a bad habit to get into. Conversational Latin has not been used for hundreds of years (not since it morphed into French, Spanish and Italian), and we professional communicators should not be using it in our work. The worst part of it is that people often get them mixed up and are not sure which one means what.

You will do yourself and your readers a favour if you just stick to the good, simple English words that people understand.

Ad hoc

ad hoc is a Latin term meaning ‘to this’. It is used when something is for one particular purpose and will not be used again. For example, an *ad hoc* decision would apply to only one particular set of circumstances; an *ad hoc* committee might be set up to consider one particular topic. This is one Latin term that is acceptable in written documents and presentations.

Ad hominem

ad hominem is Latin for ‘personal’, although a literal translation would be ‘to the man’. It’s used to describe a person’s personal prejudices, and an *ad hominem* attack would be a personal attack. Terms like ‘*ad hominem*’ are not a path to clear communication.

Ad infinitum

ad infinitum is, at least, clear and easy to understand. It means ‘to infinity’. There are some other Latin words that are clear in meaning, but are not Latin: *ad nauseum* is easy to understand, and so is *ad absurdum*, but they are both made-up terms. They might work well in a jest but they are not suitable for serious assignments.

eg

eg is an abbreviation for *exempli gratia*, which is Latin for ‘for example’. The trouble with ‘*eg*’ is that people get confused by what it means, and often write ‘for *eg*’, which means ‘for for example’, which is silly. Some folks also get confused between ‘*eg*’ and ‘*ie*’, so we will do everyone a favour if we just forget about them and use the English term ‘for example’ or ‘such as’.

ie

ie is an abbreviation for the Latin term *id est*, which means ‘it is’. The English term ‘that is’ is clear, is not likely to be confused with some other

term, and is not much longer. You can afford a few keystrokes in the interests of clarity and better communication. Use ‘that is’ instead of ‘ie’.

A surprising number of people get ‘ie’ and ‘eg’ the wrong way round. Don’t leave your readers wondering. Say what you mean.

Via

via is a Latin word, and when it’s used in the ablative case, it means ‘road’ or ‘way’ or ‘by way of’. It’s often used instead of the good English word ‘by’, which is one character shorter and easier to type. In most cases you can use ‘by’ or ‘through’ instead of ‘via’.

While we’re at it, ID and id often get confused. Neither of these terms is Latin and we have listed them earlier in the book, but I decided to repeat them here because it’s a convenient place and the reminder might help someone.

Your ID is your identification.

Your id is a part of your psyche and is the source of instinctive energy.

Upcoming

Many people refer to ‘up and coming events’ when they really mean ‘coming events’ or ‘upcoming events’. Perhaps they are just parroting something they heard someone say on radio or television.

‘Up-and-coming’ means ‘becoming successful’

‘Coming events’ are planned and you can put them in your diary.

‘Upcoming events’ are the same as ‘coming events’ but they might happen sooner.

Use either ‘coming events’ or ‘upcoming events’. Either will do, but forget about ‘up and coming’ events.

Less and Fewer

Use *fewer* when you talk about items that can be counted, and use *less* when you are talking about a quantity.

‘You can make a pie with fewer than six apples.’

‘I would like less milk in my coffee.’

‘There is less mess in the library on weekends, when there are fewer students about.’

You can read more about countable nouns on page 46.

Linguistic bad habits

I’m sure you remember that *ATM* is an acronym for ‘automatic telling machine’ and that’s why we don’t say ‘ATM machine’. It would be saying ‘automatic telling machine machine’, which is nonsense. The same thing applies to ‘7 AM in the morning’. It’s like saying ‘7 in the morning in the morning’. Nobody would be that silly.

And while we're at it, *on a daily basis* is long-handed double-speak that means 'daily'. The newsagent delivers the paper daily. The same thing goes for 'a weekly basis', 'a weight basis', 'a height basis', 'a cost basis', and so on.

The word 'basis' has come to stay, and is used for all sorts of linguistic crimes including the term 'basis points', which has been dreamed up to confuse people who can't understand basic arithmetic. 'The interest rate has been raised by 25 basis points' means the same thing as 'The interest rate has been increased by a quarter of one percent.'

Too many people say 'in regard to' when they mean 'about'.

Thinking about what you really mean to say will produce clearer, cleaner text.

This example is from an old UWS form that has now been updated:
"Students are advised that they are responsible for ensuring they have met all the relevant pre and/or co-requisites for any unit/s in which they are currently enrolled."

We could revise it to something like this:
"You must ensure that you have met the prerequisites for this unit."

Which would you use? I'm sure you would choose something that is easy to read and easy to understand. You would be guided by people like Zinsser, Bruckheimer and O'Rourke.

Simplify! Be clear! Cull unnecessary complexity from your work.

Maybe

Don't get confused between *maybe* and *may be*.

'Maybe' means perhaps.
'May be' means 'might be'

'Maybe I can have a coffee before class if I arrive early enough.'
'The cafeteria may be closed between semesters.'

Method and methodology

You might get tempted by *methodology* when 'method' is the right word. A methodology implies study of a process and the underlying principles. A methodology may include many methods. If you want to describe a relatively straightforward process such as those in a recipe book, use 'method'. Look it up in your dictionary.

Morale and morals

I am often surprised at the number of people who leave the *e* off *morale*. Perhaps there are lots of workplaces with low morals, but I prefer to think that it's a spelling mistake and they mean that morale is low.

‘Moral’ is concerned with proper conduct and the distinction between right and wrong.

‘Morale’ refers to a mental condition of cheerfulness or zeal.

Look it up in your dictionary.

And while we’re on the subject, some students write ‘spirale’ instead of ‘spiral’. It’s a simple error and one that the spelling checker should have caught during the first-pass check before you read your work out loud. Just don’t rely on the spelling checker to know what you meant to say.

Mouse, mice and mouses

By the time your children are grown up, the world might have settled on the plural form of the word ‘mouse’. Not the furry kind – they’re ‘mice’. If we have two of the computer kind, are they ‘mice’ or ‘mouses’? The Microsoft Manual of Style says to call them ‘mouse devices’. Ugh. That term won’t last.

Dictionaries, style guides and learned works have been disagreeing for about twenty years on this topic, and they will disagree for a long time yet. On this and other silly issues, use whichever term your employer prefers and let the pedants fight among themselves.

Myself

Misuse of the word ‘myself’ is another thing we learn from TV personalities and petty bureaucrats who have never learnt how to make themselves clear, but spend considerable amounts of time trying to make themselves look important.

I heard a man say “My teenage son got drunk and myself and my wife had a good talk with him about it.” The ‘myself’ construction was not only clumsy, but it put the speaker in front of the other important person in the sentence – his wife. “... my wife and I had a good talk with him” would have been a much better statement from him.

I saw this in an office memo:

“If you have questions, send them to myself.” Why couldn’t the author say “Send questions to me.”?

Another memo that was just as bad, said:

“Questions should be directed to the undersigned.”

That stuff is horrible and its perpetrators should be punished horribly – in public.

Toni Bowers, the head blogger at *Tech Republic*, had this to say about the ‘myself’ construction:

“Another incorrect use of language that occurs because people think it sounds more correct or more polite is the use of ‘myself’ or ‘yourself’ when you really should say ‘me’ or ‘you’. The word ‘myself’ is really only used to emphasize a point of view, e.g., “I, myself, liked the movie.” But it should be neither the subject nor the object (unless the object is the subject — “I am giving myself a pat on the back”), and it’s not a substitute for ‘me’ or ‘I’. You

would be incorrect in saying, “I have enough for you and myself.” The sentence should be “I have enough for you and me.””

In a television interview I heard the interviewer say “I have brought the question to yourself.” The news editor would have made him suffer for that.

If you want to say that you went out with John, there are lots of ways to say it. There are at least two ways that will lose you marks:

‘Me and John went to the pub’
‘John and myself went to the pub’

That sort of sentence pushes the self in front of other people, something that most of us would consider to be un-Australian. If you write like that your publisher will send your work back, and so will I.

This example was heard in class:

Heard: “... a conversation between myself and a friend who is a DJ.”

Better: “... a conversation I had with a friend who is a DJ.”

Toni Bowers also wrote about another common mistake: “Incorrect use of ‘I’ instead of ‘me’ in an objective case. This is another very common error. For example, people will often say, “She gave the money to him and I.” when it should be “She gave the money to him and me.” They think the first version sounds more correct. A simple way to remember the rule is to take out the first object and see if the sentence makes sense without it, i.e., “She gave the money to him and I.” “She gave the money to I” doesn’t sound right, does it? That’s because it’s not right.”

Nominalisation

Nominalisation is the matter of making a noun out of a verb. People do it all the time and although it works sometimes, it tends to produce long, vague sentences, so it’s a bad habit to get into. The following example has three nominalisations:

‘Failure to make allowance for completion of assignments may result in an inability to pass the unit.’

That ghastly piece of work would confuse anyone, and it’s much clearer and easier to say something like this:

‘To pass the unit you must complete all the assignments.’

Sometimes nominalisation can be helpful when we refer to something – a decision, perhaps – in a previous sentence. Then we might say, ‘This decision supported our long-term goals.’

Nominalisation has a cousin: making verbs out of nouns. It has the same problem as nominalisation – that it can be hard to read – and often your

reader will struggle to figure out what you really meant to say. It's important to remember that usually your readers don't care how much craft and care goes into your work; they just want the facts that you are paid to give them. Make it easy for them.

Noun Phrases

We make a noun phrase when we use a noun as an adjective to modify another noun. For example, the term 'brick wall' is a simple noun phrase in which the noun 'brick' is used as an adjective. We do it much more often than we realise and noun phrases are one of the reasons that corporate documents are often hard to understand.

Two-word noun phrases are generally not difficult to understand, but a third word will slow your reader. If you find a four-word noun phrase, rewrite the sentence.

Numbers

There is a convention on numbers:

Write numbers one to nine (or ten) in words.
Write numbers 10 and up in numerals.

Examples:

'I called her three times but she didn't answer.'

'By the time holidays are accounted for, most people only work 46 of the 52 weeks in a year.'

Dates are usually expressed with numerals unless it's a quote in which someone used a construction such as 'the first of July' or 'the twenty-sixth of January'.

OK

OK is an interesting word. Nobody seems to know where it came from, but there are lots of theories, most of them American. This is all that we can say with any authority:

- OK is always unpunctuated. It is never O.K.
- OK is always upper case. It's never ok and it's never Ok, but it can be okay.
- Some people will insist that OK is not suitable for formal documents, academic work, or your essays.
- Some magazines and newspapers refuse to use OK but may use 'okay'. The Associated Press Stylebook accepts OK but not 'okay'.

Think about what your reader expects, and check the style guide you're using before you decide whether it's OK to use OK.

One of the only

‘Mr Turnbull is one of the only shining lights of the Liberal Party.’
That’s an absurd thing to say. Is he one of the shining lights, or is he the only shining light?

You can be ‘one of’ or you can be ‘the only’. You can’t be both.

Over

Over means ‘above’.

It does **not** mean ‘more than’. If a gate is locked you might be able to climb over it. You can be over the age of 18. If you are sick, there is a good chance you will get over it.

Yes \$25 is more than \$12.

No \$25 is over \$12

Generally, ‘more than’ goes with countable items, and ‘over’ goes with quantities.

Examples:

“He earns more than me”.

“He is more than 1.8 metres tall” (*metres* is countable).

“The cask holds more than three litres” (*litres* is countable).

Over and Above

‘Over’ means ‘above’, or ‘higher in place or position’. Sometimes the term ‘over and above’ is used to express someone performing duties far beyond the requirements of their position. It’s generally better to say what you really mean and avoid jargon that might give a wrong impression. Your readers shouldn’t have to guess at what you’re trying to say.

Examples:

By rescuing the child the tour guide performed over and above expectations.

By winning the open competition while only 17, he performed over and above his coach’s expectations.

The roof over your head will cost half your pay.

The water over the road stopped traffic.

They blamed us for the noise, but it came from the flat above us.

If you mean ‘more than’, say so:

We do write ‘The firm employs more than 200 people.’

We do not write ‘The firm employs over 200 people.’

‘More than’ is often used with countable nouns, but can be used more generally. Read about countable nouns on page 46.

Overweight

Overweight is one word. A person, their dog or their luggage can be overweight. They can also be 'over the weight limit', which means the same thing. Underweight, heavyweight and lightweight all work the same way.

Pick up

If you can't work out the difference between *pick up*, *pick-up* and *pickup* you should look them up in a dictionary. A big one, like the 23-volume Oxford English Dictionary in the university library.

Pick up	He bent down to pick up the coin
Pick-up	Turntables that play vinyl records have pickups
Pickup	Tape recorders have pickup heads. In the US a utility is a pickup truck

Plurals

There is a simple, old-fashioned rule:
To make a word plural, put an 's' after it.

One car, two cars.
One goat, two goats.
One drink, two drinks.

Sometimes that would be clumsy, so we add an 'e'. One box, two boxes. Sometimes we add 'ie'. One baby, two babies. The variations come from the history of our language, which is quite complex. Don't try to reason with it, and don't try to fight it. If you're not sure about a plural, just look it up in your dictionary or style guide.

Some difficult plurals are so common that often we don't even notice that the phrase doesn't make sense. Here's one:

'There are a number of practical items to be considered.'

What we mean is that there are *many* practical items, but we confuse ourselves by putting 'a number' – which is singular – in the middle of a plural sentence. Our work is clearer and easier to understand if we use 'many' or 'several' instead of 'a number of'.

The example comes out like this: 'There are many practical items to be considered.' It is shorter, easier to type, easier to read and actually makes sense.

Possessives

Possessives are simple: we use an apostrophe and an 's'.

'It's John's bat.'
'This is Caitlin's assignment.'

When used for the possessive, the apostrophe can be considered as a replacement for the word 'has'. Thus 'David has a shirt' becomes 'David's shirt'. I don't know if that's the way our language developed, but it sort of makes sense and it might help you to remember how to use the apostrophe.

Generally, organisations don't possess things (although they legally can and do), so we generally don't talk about 'the company's policies' – we refer to 'company policy' or 'assets of the company'.

Plural possessives

Now that you know about plurals and possessives, plural possessives shouldn't be difficult. We make a plural by putting an *s* at the end of the word, and we use an apostrophe and an *s* for a possessive. We could do both in a plural possessive, but it can look untidy, so the convention is to leave the second *s* off.

You have one dog	singular <i>dog</i>
You have three dogs	plural <i>dogs</i>
You prepare the dogs' lunch	plural possessive <i>dogs'</i>

Australian	You and me	Singular
Australians	We are all Australians	Plural
Australian's	Voting is every Australian's responsibility	Possessive
Australians'	When the other delegates had been fed, the organisers brought out the Australians' lunch.	Plural possessive

Repeated

To repeat something that has been said is to say it again. That means it has been said two times. To repeat it again means that it has been said three times altogether.

If it has been said and repeated, don't say it has been repeated again unless it has been said three times altogether.

Sexism and Gender

People making public statements are often not brave enough to use a word that someone might not like, and sexism terrifies them. That's probably why they refer to a 'female person' or just a female rather than a woman.

The terms 'male' and 'female' are not nouns, they are adjectives. We can have male and female horses, sheep, goats, budgerigars and sea horses. Female people are *women*. Male people are *men*. If you are talking about people, call them 'women' and 'men'. Don't call them 'females' and 'males'. Say what you mean.

So far I have never found an adult female person who objects to being called a woman, and I have never found an adult male person who objects to being called a man.

Just don't call adult women 'girls', because that can offend them, although generally men don't mind being called 'boys'.

Some people who suffer from feminist cringe use silly terms like 'he/she' or 's/he' that don't look natural and are often clumsy when read aloud. Fortunately, modern usage usually permits the use of 'their' or 'they' in the singular.

If you are talking about adult people, call them 'women' or 'men'. Do not call them 'females' or 'males'.

Gender-specific terms

You need to be careful about the way you use gender, to ensure that your word use does not make unfair assumptions. Not all nurses are women, and not all mechanics are men.

We need to be careful about sexist language, but don't go overboard. Our problem is that English does not have a third person singular pronoun that is gender-neutral and in the 1960s people tried to manufacture one. We should all be grateful that 's/he' failed.

Using 'he or she' is acceptable, but although 'he/she' is used in some places, it has never been particularly popular.

Occasionally a writer will ignore the masculine completely and only use the feminine, which is just as wrong as only using the masculine.

Since the mid-1990s, 'they' and 'their' have been acceptable third person singular pronouns in conversation, but not in writing. Many people still argue that they are plural pronouns, not singular. However, the tide is turning and a little at a time, they are slowly gaining popularity in print. History is on their side – three hundred years ago, 'they' was a common singular term. Respected writers from Jane Austen to the King James Bible use those terms. The banning of 'their' as a singular term belongs in the

same rubbish bin as the bans on splitting infinitives and ending sentences with prepositions.

The best, and often the easiest, way to avoid the problem of gender-specific terms is to recast the sentence so that it uses plurals. You might also try these alternatives:

- If the gender-specific term is a pronoun, repeat the noun (although sometimes this sounds clumsy)
- Recast the sentence to use 'you', 'I', 'we' or 'they'
- Recast the sentence

The issue gets sticky when we talk about a chairman, a fisherman, a fireman, or one of those other occupations that use the term 'man'.

When referring to the person who chairs a meeting you can use 'chairperson' or 'chairwoman' if you like, or you might prefer to use 'the chair', but you can't always use that remedy.

You can often come up with suitable alternative terms; 'firefighter' works well, as does 'policewoman' (and 'police officer'), but 'spokesperson' and 'spokeswoman' both sound dreadful and we should find a better term. You can often recast the sentence, though:

"The *spokesperson* said that refusing to comment is now illegal." (clumsy)
"The *official statement* said that refusing to comment is now illegal." (better)

Doing that depersonalises the sentence, but gives us a temporary reprieve until our language resolves the issue.

SMS shorthand

SMS, the Simple Messaging System on mobile phone services, is a wonderful tool, used extensively by all of us.

The shorthand we use on mobile phones was not developed for or by SMS users; it is at least ten years older than the introduction of SMS on mobile phones. However, the fact that it is in common use doesn't mean that it's an accepted replacement for the real thing. You need to know the difference between formal text and casual text, and SMS shorthand is definitely casual.

If you mean 'you', don't type 'u' – unless you have set up the AutoCorrect feature to fix it for you.

Can you imagine Shakespeare writing this?

Juliet: Fakn death. C U Latr.

Romeo: Gud plan.

It doesn't have the impact of the original. Perhaps someone will write some modern theatre in SMS that would have the right feel and convey the right images. But if you're writing an assignment, use appropriate language for the task and your reader.

Sometime

Sometimes ‘some time’ gets shortened to ‘sometime’.

On weekends you can have some time to yourself, or you might give some time to your employer, your family or your friends. You might ask your friend, “Can we have lunch together sometime?”

Stakeholder

A *stake holder* is someone holding a stick while you bash it into the ground to support your tomato plants.

A *stakeholder* is someone who holds shares or some other stake in a decision, project or plan.

There’s a good chance that you’ll need to get your stakeholder to sign off on your project plan, because without signoff the project can’t proceed.

A *steakholder* is someone you meet at a barbecue.

Time

The terms we use to write down the time of day are quite old. ‘Four o’clock’ literally means ‘four of the clock’ and comes from a time when clocks were not common and watches hadn’t been invented. So why don’t we write ‘four o’clock’? We say it, so why not **write** it? It’s one of those silly fashion things, probably set by people who have no idea what ‘o’clock’ means or how to spell it.

When is 12 o’clock?

AM is an abbreviation for the Latin term ‘ante meridian’, which means ‘before noon’.

PM is an abbreviation for ‘post meridian’, which means ‘after noon’. So when is 12 PM? Is it the split second between late night and early morning, or is that 12 AM? When is the split second between morning and afternoon? Obviously, 12 AM is neither and both, and so is 12 PM. It’s a silly term to use because it is always confusing.

We should use ‘12 noon’ or ‘12 midnight’ or even leave out the ‘12’ and just say ‘midnight’ or ‘noon’. Then our readers will know exactly what we mean. ‘High Noon’ was a great movie title, but ‘High 12 AM’ sounds stupid.

Typing errors

We all make simple errors of typing, and some of them can be embarrassing. If we type ‘teh’ instead of ‘the’, the spelling checker will pick it up and it will be fixed before anyone sees the document.

Sometimes students ask “Surely anyone who sees that error would know what the word is, wouldn’t they? If the reader knows the context, is correct spelling important?”

Correct spelling is very important and the reason is simple. Most students in this course will build a career in public relations or journalism, writing

news, press releases, policy, public opinion and so on. Our readers do not have time to puzzle over our words and we must make them as clear as we can. As communication professionals, we are judged by how well we write.

Try this simple test: pick up a newspaper or magazine and read an article in it. Do the words flow easily? Did you have to re-read any phrases? How easily could you read and understand it while travelling in a train? Readers tire easily, especially when the meaning is hidden behind poor spelling.

I saw a seafood restaurant advertise 'roast leather jacket' and I imagine it would taste terrible. Roast leatherjacket would be delicious.

If we type 'if' instead of 'of', the spelling checker won't know we chose the wrong word and since the wrong word is spelt correctly, it won't tell us we've made a mistake.

We can't rely on either the spelling checker or the grammar checker to fix this kind of error, so the best thing to do is get out that little notebook we talked about on page 12.

On a fresh page, write a list of the mistakes you make most often and before you print your assignment, use the word processor's Find tool on the possible errors and, if they occur, fix them. It takes only a few minutes and can earn you valuable marks. (Find is sometimes called Search, but that is an issue for pedants.) Here are some common examples. Which did you type, and which did you mean to type?

affect	effect	
a lot	alot	
any	an	
background	back ground	
been	bee	
college	colleague	
comma	coma	
disk	dick	
does	odes	
filed	field	
first	fist	
flair	flare	
from	form	
hair	hare	
here	her	
if	of	
inquires	inquiries	
leader ship	leadership	
lose	loose	
management	managment	
manager	manger	
marital	martial	
principal	principle	
prise	prize	price
public	pubic	
quite	quiet	
some thing	something	

strong	string	
suit	suite	
than	then	the
that	than	
their	there	they're
them selves	themselves	
though	through	
through out	throughout	
use	sue	
vain	vane	vein
were	we're	
where	ware	
whereas	where as	
whether	wether	weather
work	wok	
you're	your	yore

Sometimes a word form can be confusing. Here is one example:
The person who said he worked for an 'upstart' company really meant that he was working for a 'start-up' company. Would the spelling checker find that error? If there's even a hint of doubt in your mind, look it up in your dictionary or style guide.

That and Who

When we're talking about people, we use 'who'. When we're talking about objects or animals, we use 'that'.

Example:

People *who* climb trees ...

Dogs *that* bite people ...

Trees *that* jump in front of cars ...

Their and there

It's amazing how many people don't know the difference between 'there' and 'their'. A spelling checker won't find this error, because both words are spelt correctly. To fix errors like this you need to read your work with a critical eye. It's the only way.

'There' is related to the 'where'. "It's over *there*."

'Their' is related to 'they'. "They brought *their* own ball."

'Their' is developed from Old English words that mean 'it belongs to him' and it still means the same thing. We have had a problem with the singular version of that word, and the related word 'they'. Many old-fashioned people will tell you that you are stuck with 'him' and 'her' or 'his' and 'hers' but 'they' and 'their' are widely used in the singular.

The student who wanted their assignment returned put a stamped envelope with it.

During your career you will find many employers and tutors who refuse to accept 'their' in the singular. Don't try to win that battle, just rewrite the sentence.

There is related to *where*. 'Where is it? It's over *there*.' *There's* a tavern in the town." The apostrophe in 'there's' indicates a shortening from 'there is'

Theirs has no apostrophe. "Whose is it? It is *theirs*."

They're is a contraction of *they are*. We remove the space and the *a*, and replace them with an apostrophe. Like other apostrophe words, it's simple. *They're* = *They are*.

Under way

We often see, "Plans for the review are currently *underway*, and ..."
It should be, "Plans ... are under way."
You can have a 'highway', 'waterway' or 'doorway', but not 'underway'.

Use and Utilise

When do you use *use* and when do you use *utilise*? Like too many other terms, people use 'utilise' to try to make themselves look important or educated. Forget 'utilise'. The word is 'use'.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is one word and means 'a good or satisfactory state of existence', which although something rather like good health, does not necessarily mean 'being well'.

'A warm sun always seems to improve my health and wellbeing.'

Which and that

When do you use *which* and when do you use *that*? There is a simple rule: 'which' goes after a comma, to introduce a further comment about something. Often you can leave it out completely, although you might get some complaints.

Examples:

The book, which I bought yesterday, is out of date.

The book that I bought yesterday is out of date.

The book I bought yesterday is out of date.

Who and Whom

Some students use 'whom' in the mistaken belief that it is the correct term to use in formal language. It is not.

Generally, use 'who'. There is a cheap and easy rule:

Use 'whom' after 'for', 'to', 'from', 'at' and 'of'. At other times, use 'who'.

Examples:

David, *who* was present, was the student to *whom* the praise was directed.

Emily was the student to *whom* the message was sent, but she did not know *who* had sent it.

The audience *for whom* this newsletter is written is quite diverse.

The man *to whom* she spoke paid for the child *who* was playing nearby.

The students of *whom* I speak all know *who* they are.

Whose and who's

'Who's' is another apostrophe word –it's a contraction of 'who is' or 'who has'.

'Whose' is the possessive of 'who' and sometimes 'which'.

Examples:

She's the student *who's* most likely to get Ds and HDs.

Whose is this book?

The *James Craig* is a sailing ship whose crew are all volunteers.

Many students use 'who's' instead of 'whose'.

Will and shall

Many people are very confused about which of these words to use, and some people insist that 'shall' should replace 'will' in every usage in a legal document. As with many other words, people tend to make up their minds without referring to a dictionary. The reality is that these two words mean almost the same thing but in opposite contexts.

Will

When it is used in the first person, 'will' denotes a promise or determination to do something. When it is used in the third person, it denotes a likelihood and willingness to do something in the future.

Shall

When it is used in the first person, 'shall' denotes that an action is in the future. When it is used in the third person, it denotes a promise and determination to do something.

Without

Without is always spelt without a space in the middle. It's one word.

Your and you're

You're is a contraction of 'you are'. We remove the space and the 'a', and replace them with an apostrophe. Like other apostrophe words, it's simple.

'Your' indicates possession. 'Is that your lunch?' Because you have your dictionary beside you, you can look up 'yore', but it's an old-fashioned word and you're not likely to use it.

Zeds and esses

Is it *organisation* or *organization*? Australians generally prefer esses, so you would expect 'organisation'. The (British) Oxford dictionary prefers 'organization' but accepts 'organisation'. The Macquarie dictionary prefers 'organisation' but accepts 'organization'. In assignments it shouldn't matter which you use and if you rely on your spelling checker you might find that it makes the decision for you. The important thing is to be consistent.

You can expect some employers to be quite fussy about their esses and zeds, one way or the other. Be flexible, and give them what they want. Whatever you do, don't rely on the spelling checker.

A final word about words

The Elements of Style (Strunk and White) was written about a hundred years ago and has been edited and updated a few times since then. It is widely used as a text wherever English is spoken. Geoffrey Pullum, head of linguistics and English language at the University of Edinburgh called it "the overopinionated and underinformed little book that put so many people in this unhappy state of grammatical angst." ... "[English syntax] is much too important to be reduced to a bunch of trivial don't-do-this prescriptions by a pair of idiosyncratic bumlbers who can't even tell when they've broken their own misbegotten rules."

Don't forget that our language, like other languages, has evolved over a long time, and it is still evolving. The language you use today is much different from the language your grandparents used when they were young, and if we travelled back a hundred years we would have serious communication difficulties. What will your grandchildren think of the way you speak?

6

Punctuation

Punctuation can make a stark difference to the meaning in your work. Consider the following two lines, in which the words are identical but the meaning is dramatically different:

A woman, without her man, is nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.

Punctuation isn't hard, but somehow people manage to make a dreadful mess of it. One of the problems seems to be that students are reaching university without understanding what a sentence is.

A sentence must have a verb, and it must be a complete statement. Normal English construction requires a subject, then a verb, then one or more objects, modifiers, subordinate clauses or main clauses.

How do you check for this stuff without having a degree in English? Read it out loud. If what you've written cannot stand alone without the sentence before or after, check its punctuation.

Commas

A surprising number of students don't understand commas, even after six years of high school education. Some students even use commas to write run-on sentences, which can lead your reader away from the thread of your paragraph. Read about run-on sentences on page 75.

Contractions

Contractions are joined words, using an apostrophe to indicate the presence of a letter. Common examples include 'haven't' for 'have not', 'can't' for 'cannot', 'they're' for 'they are' and 'it's' for 'it is'. Some people will tell you that you must never use contractions in formal writing, and generally that's good advice, except that sometimes a contraction improves the rhythm of the sentence.

One common contraction is *it's*, and many people have difficulty deciding when to use *it's* and when to use *its*.

Use **its** in a possessive sense:
The dog chewed its bone.

The boat sank at its mooring.
My hair has a mind of its own.

Use **it's** as a short form of *it is*.
'It is very cold today' can become 'It's very cold today'.
My wardrobe needs attention; it's full of scruffy clothes.
This book is so old it's falling to pieces.

This summary of the rule comes from John Brownie, of Ukarumpa, in Papua New Guinea, quoted in Column 8, The Sydney Morning Herald, on 16 January, 2006:

It's not 'it's', it's 'its', unless it's 'it is', when it's 'it's'.

Got that?

So are contractions acceptable in university assignments? Some tutors, lecturers and employers will forbid them through long-held beliefs, long-practiced habits, general crankiness, or through being old-fashioned. That's their prerogative, so learn to put up with it.

Let me remind you of what I said at the beginning of this book:

In spite of what some people will tell you, there is not one single best way to write.

Sometimes contractions work well, sometimes they don't.

You will have noticed that I have used contractions in this book. I have carefully considered every case and I have made a judgement about rhythm, readability and fitness for purpose.

So how did I decide? It's not a secret, and there is nothing clever about it.

Step 1. Write what you want to say.

Step 2. Read it out loud.

Step 3. Consider what you said. How does it sound? Imagine yourself face to face with your reader, speaking out loud. In the context of your piece, would you prefer the contraction, or do you think that the more deliberate tone of the full term is more appropriate?

As you ponder the use of contractions, think about your reader. What does your reader want to hear? Write that.

Ellipsis

The three dots that live together look like this ... and are called an *ellipsis*. You use it to indicate that you have deliberately left some information out of a sentence. Put a space after the previous word, type your three dots, and

then another space, then continue. The word processor will combine the three dots into one character. If you are putting an ellipsis at the end of a sentence you can use four dots, but the word processor might not recognise them as an ellipsis.

Don't think that these three dots ... are three full stops; although they might look like that at first, they're actually one character. Treat them as if they are a word; put a space in front and a space after.

To insert an ellipsis automatically, press Ctrl+Alt+. (the full stop key).

Hyphen

The general (and easy-to-use) rule is that a term is only hyphenated if it's an adjective. Here are some examples:

We will print our newsletter *in house*, using our *in-house* printing facility.

Keep *up to date* with developments by reading an *up-to-date* text.

Use just one hyphen at a time. Don't use two, as some people do in emails; anti- -smoking just doesn't look right. And don't hyphenate with a space beside the hyphen (which is the strange hyphenation habit discussed below).

It's easy to confuse hyphens with dashes, which are discussed on page 100.

It's amazing how many advertising copywriters are confused by hyphens. The hyphen is a useful way to build a compound adjective, but to do it you need to be able to recognise an adjective. You can read more about compound adjectives on page 43.

Strange hyphenation habit

When I first saw this I thought this was just one student with a strange habit, but it wasn't. Many students do it, probably without realising it.

Don't do this

a long- term relationship

a non- profit organisation

multi- national corporation

day/ night party

and/ or

up/ down

Do it like this

a long-term relationship

a non-profit organisation

multinational corporation

day/night party

and/or

up/down

Don't put in the extra space.

Lists

Putting information in lists is a very helpful way to present information that might be confusing if presented in prose. Lists clearly set out options that might otherwise be missed, but there is the danger that a reader might scan the list and not bother to read the supporting detail. For this reason you need to exercise some care with lists.

There are numbered lists (sometimes called ordered lists) and there are bullet lists, sometimes called unordered lists. If the sequence is important, use a numbered list, but be aware that the built-in numbering system in Word can let you down.

The automatic numbering in Word is so unreliable that many professional writers prefer to do the numbering manually.

If there are more than two items, your information might be easier to follow if you put it in a bullet list. In the lead to the list, you might use the word *following*. If you do, then use a colon, as in this example:

The following strategies were tried:

- Food and drink was provided at a fixed charge
- Food and drink were offered as an option

Otherwise, have the list follow the sentence as in this example:

- We tried many strategies, including
- Food and drink was provided at a fixed charge
- Food and drink were offered as an option

Regardless of the list type, parallelism is vital. If some start with a verb, make them all start with verbs. If some start with nouns, they should all start with nouns. Many lists start with words derived from verbs by adding the '-ing' ending, such as 'starting', 'closing', 'writing', and 'eating'. Parallelism is discussed on page 73.

Another key item about lists is the punctuation. Style guides often set rules about punctuation in lists, but this is the general rule:

Start every list item with a capital letter, but leave the list items unpunctuated unless one list item contains two sentences. In that case, punctuate the whole list with a full stop at the end of each item.

Do not put a semicolon or the word 'or' after each item in a list.

Parallelism

Parallelism sounds more complicated than it is, but it only means making sure that parts of a sentence that are parallel in meaning are also parallel in structure. A non-parallel sentence sets a pattern of dialogue and then breaks it, interrupting the information flow. Often, non-parallel sentence structures are confusing enough to require re-reading.

Parallel	Not parallel
Aristotle's writings teach us about using logic, empathy and ethics.	Aristotle's writings teach us about using logic and empathy and he also wrote about ethos.

We also use parallelism in lists. If one list item starts with a noun, make sure they all do. Keeping the list items parallel in structure makes them much easier to read and understand.

In a sentence, make sure the verb and its subject agree in number and tense. Occasionally you might be tripped up by a word that looks plural but isn't.

'Measles', 'electronics' and 'mathematics', for example, look plural but are not; you can't have one measles, or one electronic, or one mathematic. You can be sick with measles, you can be studying electronics, and you can be stuck on a mathematics problem. You can, however, have an electronic toy or a mathematical toy.

Be aware that some of these things are changing, and sometimes you need to show extra care.

Calling someone an 'electronic engineer' might suggest that they are a robot, but if you check their business card you might find that it actually says 'electronic engineer', not 'electronics engineer'.

Yes, these are fine details, but attention to detail is often the difference between average work and good work.

Colons and Semicolons

Colons and semicolons cause more grief than they are worth. They are not symbols of some mystic cult.

Use a semicolon to separate two thoughts that are so closely related to each other that you don't want to break them into two sentences, but that need a stronger break than that provided by a comma.

'The students in this class are a cut above the average; they can write, and they can spell correctly.'

The colon has many uses. It is used in formally introducing a quotation, and after the word 'following' in a list. It is also used in plays, mathematical ratios, and Biblical references. These examples are from the Style Manual:

The colon has many uses, including the following:

- Formally introducing quoted speech
In his third session, Mr Keating said: "Those Balmain riesling-sipping trendies think they know."
- Separating the player from the lines in a play
Smith: Do you think he heard us?
Jones: No. Yell louder.
- Biblical quotations such as *John 10:9*

Quote marks

I said, "Don't use quote marks unless you are repeating something that someone actually said."

Only use quote marks for direct quotes. That's what they're for, and it's why they're called quote marks. If you have a quote inside a quote, use inverted commas for the inner quote:

"I asked them about the party and Dave said 'We'll be there for sure,' but he didn't turn up."

Don't use quote marks for emphasis. If you want to add emphasis, use **bold** or *italics*. The same thing goes for other punctuation marks – don't use them for emphasis.

Don't use quote marks unless you are repeating something that someone actually said.

Rhythm

Rhythm is important in written work; much more important than many people realise.

When we speak, the tone, volume and rhythm of our voices vary with what we are saying and how we are saying it. When we read out loud, our voices rise and fall to the tone, punctuation and rhythm of the text. For best comprehension the rhythm of a text needs to be close to the natural rhythm of a reader's voice.

Staccato texts are often very hard to read, as are texts that are written in a monotone. A regular, sing-song rhythm will be dull. The rhythm in your text needs to be the way it would be if you were in an animated conversation with your reader. Rhythm can be a powerful tool for helping to keep your reader awake and interested.

How do we control the rhythm of our writing? Look critically at the way professional writers build their paragraphs. Look for the way they use a mix of long and short words to put life into a sentence. Look at the way they use

long and short sentences to put rhythm into a paragraph, and soon you'll see how it's done.

Pronounce the words 'long' and 'short' and listen for the way that the soft sounds in 'long' make it a long sound. The word 'short' is one character longer, but the sharp, hard sounds make it sound shorter. The consonants K, T, Q and X all make words sound short and are often read faster.

Long words, long sentences and long paragraphs slow readers down. Short words, hard consonants, short sentences and short paragraphs make the reading faster.

The best writers are good at it. They use it to control the way you read and to keep you reading. If the pace didn't vary you would get bored and put the book down.

This is probably the hardest aspect of professional writing, and it takes a lot of practice to come to grips with it. But if you work at it, soon you will see a rhythm appearing in your work. Experiment. Listen to your words.

Read a paragraph of this book out loud and see if you can hear any rhythm in it. Read your own work out loud. Once you get the hang of it, you will feel as if you are in control and that's the way it should be.

Sometimes you can improve the rhythm by omitting words. William Shakespeare did it from time to time, as in this example:

I came, I saw, I conquered.

When read out loud, its rhythm gives it a powerful effect. Pedants would like to see it as

I came, I saw and I conquered.

Read it out loud and see what you think.

As always, the use of rhythmic tools depends on what you are writing, who your audience is, and what effect you want.

Run-on sentences

Run-on sentences are a major impediment to clarity. They just go on and on and on, and it's one thought after another, and they don't seem to be following a thread, and they are boring and you lose track of what the writer was trying to say.

A run-on sentence goes on and on, and you keep going from thought to thought without even a pause, and you just use commas to join the thoughts together, and it feels OK because you're writing as you think, and it will be OK when you print it because you've got that new paper and it makes great photos from your printer and your friends just love those photos so you should really print a few more and Uncle Bob has a printer like yours and you should tell him about this paper, ...

Do you want to go back and read that again? No, of course you don't.

If you find yourself writing unrelated concepts in one sentence, you have a bug to fix with a new sentence or perhaps a new paragraph. Say what needs to be said, clearly and simply, then move on. Don't ramble, but don't use commas to link separate thoughts.

If you are writing run-on sentences, the first step to a cure is to limit yourself to one comma per sentence.

Here's a particularly bad example. It was written by Eric Rice and won the Detective division of the Bulwer-Lytton contest for 2009:

"She walked into my office on legs as long as one of those long-legged birds that you see in Florida - the pink ones, not the white ones - except that she was standing on both of them, not just one of them, like those birds, the pink ones, and she wasn't wearing pink, but I knew right away that she was trouble, which those birds usually aren't."

You can read about the 2009 Bulwer-Lytton contest winners at <http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/2009.htm>

Sentence fragments

One of the most common mistakes that students make is to write fragments as if they were whole sentences. The following sentence is from a student essay:

'By scrapping the last representative for young people in Federal Parliament.'

The paragraph was very confusing because the student had written several thoughts down and had not rewritten his notes to connect the thoughts properly. It's a quick way to lose marks.

'Head office send it to the managers. Who then distribute it to staff.'

That second fragment is not a sentence. Neither are these:

'Leading to less confusion.'

'Keeping everyone informed.'

'The full backs and goalie forming a formidable defence. As one might expect.'

None of those fragments is a complete sentence. Use this simple test: Can they stand alone? No, they can't, especially the last one:

'As one might expect.'

If those fragments were joined together into a real sentence, that sentence would be closer to what we originally meant to say. While we're at it, let's change 'forming' to 'formed'.

'The full backs and goalie formed a formidable defence, as one might expect.'

That's much closer to the way we might write in an assignment.

How do you find sentence fragments? Read your work out loud. If you have left a sentence fragment behind, you will stumble over it when you read it out loud. Every time you hesitate or stumble in your reading you have found something to fix.

You might want to close the door when you read your work out loud because your family might think you're a little strange. It helps to walk along a beach as you read because other beach users don't care.

The benefit you get from reading your work out loud is well worth the effort.

To get the best marks, edit your work ruthlessly.

Sentence length

We keep being told to write short sentences, and generally that's good advice. In 1990, Flesch claimed that a sentence with eight or fewer words was very easy to understand, and that sentences with 29 or more words were very difficult to understand. Tests based on Flesch's scale are still used in software that claims to evaluate text.

Used in conjunction with other tests, Flesch's work is still valid, but by the end of the 1990s it was obvious that the number of words is, of itself, not a good indicator of the difficulty of a sentence.

However, sentences can be too short and too long. A common error is to have more than one topic in the early part of the sentence, which leads readers to make their own judgements about what is important. You must maintain control, and you must keep your sentences long enough to be interesting.

Your best solution to this dilemma is to provide a balance of short and long sentences to give your work some rhythm. As a general rule, let your sentences vary between 5 and 35 words.

A final word about punctuation

Punctuation marks are symbols used to indicate quite specific things. Some are used at the end of a sentence to indicate that the sentence is ended; an exclamation mark adds emphasis and a question mark indicates that the sentence is a question.

If you think that you need an exclamation mark and a question mark on one sentence, the fault is not with the punctuation system. The fault is in your writing and if it needs more emphasis you need to rewrite it.

Never use more than one punctuation mark at the end of a sentence. *Never!*

7

Writing a Report

Writing a report is an accepted part of many people's jobs, having evolved over the last hundred years or so. It's no surprise that many university study units expect you to write reports.

People write reports for formal transmission of information in a standardised format that makes the information easy to find and use. When a report is filed, it can be emailed directly to several people at once for processing or follow-up. And because the report is a file on a network server, it won't be lost or accidentally destroyed. It's an important part of modern organisational process.

Your employer is likely to provide a set of word processor templates, so the report has the correct structure before you start writing. Your template will also have the corporate logo and legal statements automatically inserted. It can even insert the correct date. All you have to do is write.

Unfortunately it's not easy to write a good report. Each report is different, so you can't even copy a good one and change a few details. There are skills to learn and practice.

A report is not an essay

The key differentiating item is the structure of the document. Because everyone in the organisation has seen and written lots of reports, the structure is familiar. Everyone understands the structure and people are comfortable with it.

It's often a hard thing for report writers to accept, but the truth is that most people are very busy and may not be interested in your report. Almost nobody will read it all, and that's one of the reasons for that structure. Most people will quickly read through the summary and that will tell them how much they need to read.

The structure of your report lays out your information in easily-usable chunks in easily-found places. Your information can be used over and over again because it's a report. Some of your readers will be writing reports of their own, and they might grab chunks of your report to go in one of theirs. Often that mechanism is the way that information finds its way from the organisation's front line to the top of the management tree.

Every organisation works differently, and report structures vary slightly between organisations. Business reports are slightly different from scientific reports and other uses are slightly different again, but the basic structure is always the same and for good reasons. One of those reasons is that, having gained good report-writing experience in one job, you will recognise the

report structure you see in your next job and that will make life a little easier for you.

The content of a report

Examine the material at hand. Decide on a central theme and write one sentence that encapsulates the theme; what the thing is about. Keep it in front of you as you write the report. If there are lesser, subsidiary points, write them down in descending order. They will provide some of the headings in the body of the report.

You might decide to put all the material in the report, or you might decide to selectively move material to the appendix. Only you know your readers and your material.

What your readers *want* to know, and what they *need* to know, are not necessarily the same thing. There may be supporting information or other details that your readers would ask for if they thought of it, and it's your job to think of it first. Sometimes you will put that supporting information or reference materials in an appendix, or you might choose to just give a lead to a reference. Often, you'll just deliver the information at hand, unadorned. It's your decision, and no-one else can make it for you.

When you have your theme sentence, your material organised and your audience analysed, you're ready to write. But which bit will you write first?

Structure of a report

The report structure can vary, depending on its content, its intended size, its readership and other factors. If the report is very small you might leave out a few items. The following table gives a general guide, and there's a graphical representation on page 83.

If you are tempted to change the structure of your report, think of what would happen if the newspapers decided to take the sport off the back pages and move it to page five. Nobody would be able to find it and there would be a revolution among newspaper readers.

The following table illustrates the structure of a business or scientific report. A research report is subtly different and is described on page 91.

Item	Comment
Title page	Absolutely essential. It should include your name, the topic, the date and the name of the person who commissioned or asked for the report and to whom it is addressed.
Letter of transmittal	Optional and somewhat old-fashioned, but occasionally still used. It is a copy of the letter that goes with the report, addressed to the person who commissioned the report. Most modern reports are accompanied by an email.

Item	Comment
Table of contents (TOC)	Almost mandatory. Some writers suggest that a TOC is not necessary unless the body of the report is more than ten pages. I suggest a TOC for all reports. The TOC is a very valuable page and it is often the page the reader goes to first.
Table of figures and illustrations	Optional. If you have a chart or illustration on every second page of the discussion, a table of figures will be useful.
Table of tables	Optional. If you have a table on most pages of the discussion, a table of tables will be valuable to your reader.
Summary	Mandatory. This is the section that most readers go to first.
Introduction	Mandatory. This is the background for the report and explains why the report was written. If the report is small and simply presents a simple enquiry to be followed up, you might incorporate the introduction into the Summary or the Discussion.
Aims and Objectives	Optional, depending on what you write elsewhere. The aims and objectives are usually in the Introduction.
Scope	Optional, but the scope must be documented somewhere, usually in the Introduction.
Method	The body, or discussion, is the largest part of the report and will usually have many sub-sections. You will describe your investigation method or how the information came to you; you will give the data; and you will give a discussion and an analysis of the results. You might need more or different sub-sections, depending on your work.
Conclusions	Rarely an optional section, you draw your Conclusions from your analysis of your data or results.
Recommendations	This section is optional for reports in which you merely report matters as they are. If you are expected to make recommendations, this section is not optional.
References and Bibliography	List all the references you used. Use a recognised format, such as APA or MLA. It is optional if you did not use references but simply reported on an enquiry.
Appendixes	Optional. Appendixes are useful for extra information that might interest your readers but which does not have a place in the report.

When it's time to write

The report structure is set, so start by putting your headings into position. If your raw material has come to you in email or other electronic documents, your beginning is a simple matter of copying and pasting chunks of text. While you do that, keep an eye on the writing style that emerges. You will have to edit your text to smooth it out, so while you're at it, adjust the style.

There are some decisions to be made, though. At this stage of the process you will make decisions that affect how long you will spend on the report and its value to your readers.

How much research needs to be done? Now is a good time to put some kind of limit on it. This is also the time to define the scope — how much ground you will cover — by setting some kind of limits on it. This setting of boundaries is very valuable, because without the boundaries you might just waffle on; getting nowhere, wasting your time and wasting your employer's time. It's easy to lose direction and produce work that doesn't add value.

How much do you need to write? Are you expected to produce a hundred-page monster or a five-page quickie? Your material might tell you, or you might need to ask the person who has commissioned the report.

How much information is to be balanced with how much opinion, judgement or advice? That depends to a large extent on the degree to which your authority or expertise is accepted, and to what extent you must prove your arguments with evidence or persuasion. The answer to this question affects the matter of how much research is to be done and that affects the size of the report. Everything affects everything else.

What happens next? We write the report in a sequence that supports the task. Since you have already read, re-read and digested the information, and you have written a theme sentence from it, and you understand which are the important bits of it, it makes no sense to write the title page. The sensible thing is to go straight to the body, or discussion, section of the report.

Writing sequence

The sensible thing to do is to write your report in a sequence that supports the task.

Write the Discussion first, because you've been reading and organising it and it is fresh in your mind.

Write the Recommendations next, then write the Introduction. This will fix the scope in your mind, so you don't wander off the track and write about items outside the area of interest.

Write the Conclusion, then write the Summary and write the Title Page last. This sequence makes report writing less of a chore, and makes it feel a lot more logical in the sequence of tasks.

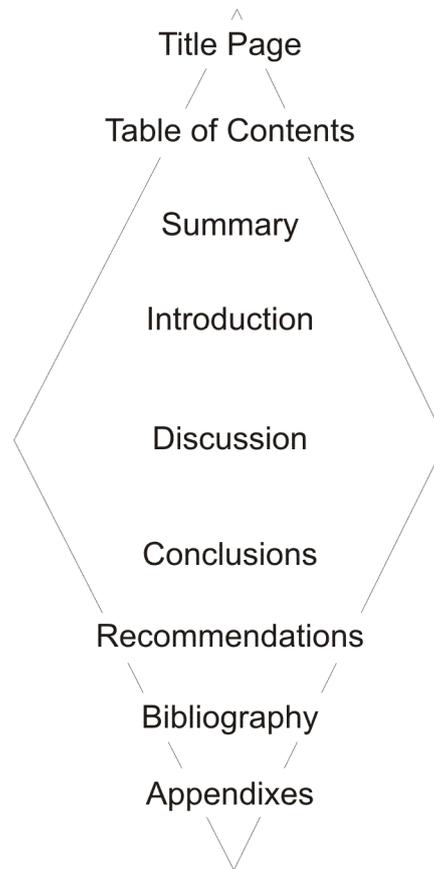
The information diamond

Your report is structured to support the needs of the majority of your readers, putting information where they can find it.

The most-asked first questions are covered in the Summary, but by putting the conclusions and recommendations towards the back of the report, you encourage your readers to read the Discussion and not jump to conclusions without proper consideration.

This diamond-shaped representation of parts of a report gives an indication of the relative size of the sections.

The wider the area of the diamond that is assigned to the section, the more text you could expect to put in it. This diamond has the basic report components and the table on page 80 has the full set.



Headings and sub-headings

The way you use headings and sub-headings makes a big difference to the usability of your report. They point to informational detail; they are the gestures that you would put in the document if you were speaking it rather than writing it. They are signposts and they are extremely important.

Your headings and sub-headings appear in the table of contents with the page number, so they direct the browsing reader to the corresponding part of the text. They also illustrate the structure of your report; areas with many sub-headings generally point to areas of deeper discussion and finer detail.

Writing the Discussion

The discussion, or body, of the report discusses what you did and presents the results of your work.

One of the most important features of the discussion is its narrative style. Your readers have read the summary and the introduction, so they know what the report is about. They need to be led through the sequence of what you did, step by step, and the best way to do this is to make sure that your discussion has a logical beginning, a middle, and an end.

Naturally, you will write in your best formal style, but often that's not enough. If you have data, put it in tables. If it's appropriate to do so, and if it supports the theme of the report, graph the data. Using line graphs shows trends clearly, but multiple-line graphs can be confusingly difficult to read. Bar charts show simple proportions quite clearly. Pie charts can be confusing.

Graphs and charts can be extremely helpful to your readers, but if they are not done well they can mislead. Have a look at the TV financial news on any evening and you'll see financial charts that have wildly different scales, in an effort to clarify what the presenter is saying. The TV people are not trying to mislead — quite the reverse, but the casual or disinterested viewer can easily get the wrong impression. When you draw your graphs and charts, make sure the scales are right, and where time is a variable, put it on the X axis. Don't leave gaps in your graphs if you can avoid it.

If you have them, pictures and diagrams can be very helpful. Sometimes it's convenient to use a photograph or two, and sometimes it's necessary to draw diagrams. Flow charts and structure diagrams are relatively easy to draw and can make a significant improvement to your explanations. Put a caption over every table and under every illustration, and refer to them in the text. If you have many illustrations, consider making a table of tables and a table of illustrations to go with the table of contents.

Although a picture might be worth a thousand words, it is only of value if it is worth a thousand *good* words, and it will take just as long to prepare. It is not a quick-and-easy fix for a poor report.

Make sure the grammar and spelling are as good as you can make them and don't rely on the word processor spelling checker or grammar checker. Spelling and grammar are discussed on page 62.

Writing the Conclusions

You will be expected to draw some conclusions from your work. Others may draw their own conclusions and the Conclusions section of your report will probably be open on their desks when they do so. Make sure that you cover all the conclusions that could be drawn, and comment on them.

If you decide that someone may draw a conclusion that could not be justified by the data, say so. Don't leave anything out.

Writing the Recommendations

Make your recommendations clear and reasoned. When you are considering them, have your conclusions in front of you, and consider the issues you used when you set your scope. Don't go overboard, but don't leave out any reasonable recommendations.

Appendixes

The modern world accepts 'Appendixes' as the plural. If your tutor or employer insist that you use 'appendices', give them what they want and don't let it get to you. If someone challenges you, have a dictionary and style guide ready.

Appendixes are there to hold information that is relevant but too detailed for the body of the report. If the report was compiled from a few original documents, you might like to add the documents in their entirety. If you have tabular data from which you extracted material for the discussion, put the tables in an appendix. If someone has done some interesting research or development work in an associated field that you think might interest your readers, put an extract from it or a reference to it, in an appendix.

Bibliography

The bibliography is a list of the references you've used. It's not just a simple list, because you will assemble it according to a convention used in your workplace. The APA system is probably the most popular, has a simple structure and is easy to use.

If you only used one or two references, cite them in the text and leave it at that. If you have used more than two, it's a good idea to put them in a bibliography.

Check your unit learning guide, your tutor or your employer about the bibliography. There are many options, and some people get very old-fashioned about them. When you know the requirements, get onto the library and look up Citations. Download the rules, probably an excerpt from the APA guide, and you're ready to start building your bibliography.

When it's all done

When you've finished writing, read your report through *out loud*. That's the best way to find obvious errors, but some people might think you're a bit strange if you start talking to yourself, so you might want to be alone when you do it.

Make sure that your layout meets the requirements of the unit learning guide or your tutor and that you have made good use of white space around your text and graphics.

I could make lots of recommendations about margins, paragraph spacing, line spacing, fonts and so on, but that information should be locked up in the word processor template you've been given. If you're in doubt, check other reports and if you don't have an example to check with, use the defaults in your word processor. Layout and formatting are discussed on page 95.

There's a general principle: you are going to a lot of trouble to write this report, so it's worth taking a little extra trouble to make it useful.

This is not a course in fine writing. Such a course would take much longer than the time we have, and some people don't become good writers even after many years of study. You can, however, learn the basic skills and apply them to report writing without a long and difficult training course.

We have already seen that writing is a one-to-one communication, in which you use the written word to transmit information to another person. And as everyone knows from experience with conversation, anything that gets in the way of the communication can confuse the message. Although we take more time over our writing than our conversation, written communication is a minefield of possible interferences with the communication.

Having put in all this work on a report, you don't want to interfere with the flow of information from you to the next person. If you were in face-to-face conversation you could use non-verbal cues such as eye contact, gesture, movement and tone of voice, but in your writing you don't have those tools. It's just you and your keyboard.

Above all, take your time. Do lots of planning, and produce reports that give you a sense of satisfaction. If they satisfy you, especially after wading through this booklet, then they will satisfy your readers. And that, after all, is why you write reports.

8

Writing for Research

During your university career you will be expected to conduct good but basic research and report on your findings. This is good training because no matter where you work, you will be required to research stories, situations and markets for your employers. Formal training in scholarly research is a very valuable tool for a student who wants to build a career in public relations, journalism or advertising and Dr Ray Archee's unit *Communication Research* is an excellent introduction.

Research is about finding answers to questions in order to discover new knowledge, and the researcher's first goal is to pose a specific question that follows in a logical way from something that is already known. Deciding what research question to ask is often the most difficult part of the project.

Research generally follows a basic pattern:

- Gather recent papers and texts about your topic and study them. Be fussy with your choice of references, because readers of your work will judge you by your association with others. If your references are all to websites and newspapers then you may be judged as an amateur, not a serious researcher.
- Using a filtering process, arrange the materials so you can see how each paper leads to new questions and ultimately to your research question.
- Write a literature review.
- Decide on what you will do to find an answer to your research question. For example, you may decide to conduct a survey.
- Write a research proposal and when it is approved, conduct the research.
- Analyse your results.
- Report the research.

This is a book about writing style, so we will not describe research methods or the analysis of the results.

Filtering research material – the Matrix

When you have gathered sufficient research material you start by reading abstracts, and you learn very quickly that many people write very poor abstracts that are hard to read and either too long or too short. Often, it's difficult to see detail in the literature, you very quickly become confused by the sheer volume of it and a grey fog settles on your work. This is when you are tempted to leave your desk and go to a beach or a pub.

What you need is something to help you organise your material, and you won't find it at the beach or the pub. The solution is a simple matrix and it will take you less than five minutes.

This matrix will clear the fog quickly as it displays threads in the research materials you have gathered. You can scribble it on a sheet of paper or use a spreadsheet – it doesn't matter how you do it because you're the only one who will see it.

Start with a simple blank grid. In the second row of the left-hand column, write some code to indicate the first paper you tackled. Smith, 2004, for example. You won't be submitting your matrix to anyone, so as long as you can understand it, it's OK. In the columns beside it, write the two or three (or maybe only one) key points that you noted when you read the abstract, one point per column. Be brief; just write enough so you can recognise it. You might even like to add columns for the points that particularly interest you; put labels for them in the top row.

Then add the rest, one row for each paper. The example below lists five papers, with a brief note on how much each has to say on each of three topics affecting teenage pregnancy. Obviously your matrix would be much bigger, but the example shows how it works.

	Alcohol	Peer pressure	Illegal drugs	Family relationships	[more]
Smith 2004	brief		lots		
Jones 2001		lots		lots	
Watson 2006	brief	lots		brief	
Henty 1999	lots	brief	brief		
[more]					

When you've entered them all you can see what points have been addressed by most researchers, and the gaps show what has been poorly covered or even left undone. Now, with the matrix in front of you, you are ready to consider your literature review.

Literature review

A literature review for a research proposal is neither an essay nor a list of references. It is a narrative of relevant sections of your selected texts, structured in a way that leads your reader to conclude that your research question logically proceeds from previous research. By placing your research in the context of previous research, your literature review supports your assertions about the value and importance of your research.

A literature review is not an annotated bibliography. You can expect to lose marks if you write an annotated bibliography when the assignment asks for a literature review.

Your literature review should not be a point-by-point listing of your reference materials. Rather, it should be in paragraph form, describing the relevant points you listed in your filtering matrix and leading your reader from relatively early research to more recent research. A strict chronology is not always necessary, but it often helps.

Make your literature review relatively brief. Two paragraphs is usually plenty for most undergraduate work and it's possible that one paragraph will suffice. Write clearly, have faith in your matrix and you will know when you have said enough.

The literature review briefly describes the relevant parts of each paper, as in this part of a fictitious example.

Smith and Brown (2001) reported SMS usage against telephone and face-to-face communication and separated their data by gender preferences. Zhou et al (2003) showed that while many people readily accept the use of SMS as a dating communication tool, many people of the 25-40 age group, and women in particular, oppose it. Harries (2002) suggested that the opposition is related to the unromantic nature of SMS and Norris (2002) showed a belief that SMS is considered insufficient for the business of finding a mate for long term cohabitation and reproduction. Jones et al (2003) also reported SMS dating across age groups. Cruikshank and Johnson (2001) said that arranging dates by SMS was readily accepted by ...

Research proposal

When researchers write a proposal they are writing the document that supports the formal application for funds to conduct the research. For this reason your proposal must be well-structured, clear and persuasive. It needs to clearly demonstrate the value and importance of the research from a dispassionate, scientific perspective.

Writing a good research proposal is not a simple exercise. It introduces your audience to the purpose and direction of your proposed research project with the purpose of persuading them that the research will be worthwhile. Your proposal will contain two major parts: a review of the relevant scientific literature, and a description of the proposed research. Although individual organisations might have some particular preferences, the basics are the same.

The structure of your research proposal is as follows:

- 1.1 Overview (provide background and context)
- 1.2 Literature review
- 1.3 Need for investigation (compelling, specific, and based on references from your literature search)
- 1.4 Purpose (research question with hypotheses or objectives)
- 1.5 Value
- 2.0 Method
- 3.0 Research plan and timeline
- 4.0 Discussion or Conclusions
- 5.0 References
- 6.0 Appendix (important supporting material)

Remember that the document is a proposal. You have not done the research yet, so much of your text is in the future tense. Your 'Discussion' or 'Conclusions' section indicates the expected direction of outcomes.

Never write "this study aims to prove that ..." because you introduce bias with statements like that and you will lose marks immediately.

Write a document proposing that certain research be conducted. Do not try to write an essay debating the desirability of what you want to do or why you think it's a good idea. Write in a style that is clear, firm, and formal.

Just say what needs to be said. Don't leave out anything important, but don't waffle. Be clear, be accurate, and treat your reader with respect.

Abstract

When you write your abstract you are trying to say "this is why you should invest some time in reading this document", but it's not an advertisement and it's not just a summary.

A researcher reads your abstract for one particular purpose: they have a research interest and they need to know whether your paper addresses their interest. It is not recreational reading, so don't waste their time.

Readers of abstracts have piles of them to wade through, and they will thank you for being brief and clear. If your work is not exactly what your reader is looking for, a long and detailed abstract wastes their time and they won't thank you for it. If your abstract is too short your reader may decide they are too busy to search through your report and put it aside. Either way, you lose out by not being referenced in the new work.

An abstract contains four things:

- What the research question was
- What you did
- What you found out
- What you were able to conclude

You will be told how many words to write, and usually it will be in the range of 200 - 500 words. Generally, you will write your abstract last.

Research report

When you consider your reader's perspective, it's easy to see that a report is not an essay. Your reader has a particular interest in your work and has particular questions in mind. Your report needs to address those questions directly. The report structure is familiar to everyone and supports your reader's search for specific information.

The scientific report format is widely used in the physical sciences and the social sciences. It is also imitated by government, industry and business report writers. It has a logical structure that is well known and widely used; departures from the expected style are usually seen as unprofessional mistakes.

The report has the following structure:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Method
- Results
- Discussion or Conclusion
- References
- Appendix

You will notice that this structure is the same as the structure of your proposal, and you can copy substantially from it. Each section should start on a new page.

One very important part of the report is the Method section, which details what you did, with whom. The purpose is to enable another researcher to replicate your work to see if they get the same results, so it's important to give a clear, structured description of how you did your research.

Describe the sample and say how you selected it, any special considerations, and the key characteristics of the people in your sample. You might need to mention any ethical considerations that affected the way you selected your sample.

Describe the instrument you used, but don't go into too much detail. If you have conducted a survey, which is the most common instrument in the

social sciences, describe how you decided on the questions and perhaps you could draw a comparison with the groupings for age and other items used by other researchers. It is a good idea to put a copy of your questionnaire in the appendix.

Your Method section should also discuss the way you will treat your results. Discuss the statistical tools you will use and the software you will use for your calculations.

In the Results section, publish the summarised data but not the raw, unprocessed data. Use tables to present the data, making sure that you label and name each table and chart. You will find that displaying data in bar charts or line graphs will make relationships easier to see. Although they can be attractive, pie charts are generally not helpful. Briefly describe the findings, with comments on the meanings of the charts and tables.

Do not suggest that your results offer proof of anything.

Use the Conclusions section to expand your use of charts to draw conclusions from the data. If you cannot draw definite conclusions, call it the Discussion. Comment in detail on the most significant findings, making reference to your research question and other research that you consulted and discussed in your literature review. Discuss the extent to which your findings do or do not support your hypothesis and comment on the desirability of further research using your findings as a starting point.

In general,

- Do not use personal pronouns (I, we, our)
- Argue only on the basis of your results
- Avoid flowery text; focus on structure and organisation of thought
- Do not assume every unexpected result is an error
- Put yourself in the position of the person reading your report and read it out loud before you submit it

Annotated bibliography

Most research reports do not contain an annotated bibliography. It is mentioned here simply because this is a convenient place to discuss the annotated bibliography.

An annotated bibliography is a bibliography with a brief comment, an annotation, entered after each bibliography item. You write an annotated bibliography for a particular purpose or for a particular reader, and that purpose determines the size and content of the annotations.

Annotations vary greatly, some being only one sentence and some being thousands of words. Generally, a useful annotated bibliography will have something between a paragraph and a page for each item.

The content does not vary much except for its depth and breadth. The topics usually include

- The main subject areas covered by the text
- The authors main perspective on the material
- The intended audience
- The extent of graphical elements such as tables, charts and lists
- Your personal response to the text – whether you find it useful, or perhaps you doubt its accuracy in certain respects

Use formal language in your annotated bibliography. You are trying to stand back from the texts, and formal language helps you show that distance.

Citing references

Students are often surprised at the importance of referencing, but it's easy to understand if you look at it from the author's perspective.

Suppose that you have written a few thousand well-researched words, and they were published in a journal. If someone quotes from your work, you deserve the credit, especially if it can help your career.

That is the essence of copyright protection – looking after the rights of the author. But when you are writing your assignments you have another good reason to cite your references: the citations are evidence that you have done your research, and you are not making it all up. Well-referenced work will usually get more marks than poorly-referenced work. Poor referencing is an easy way to throw marks away.

Unfortunately there are several methods of referencing, and you might have to use more than one of them from time to time. Fortunately, the university library is aware of this issue and will give you lots of help, including guides to the five most commonly used methods.

The School of Communication Arts generally prefers the APA citation method, but check your Unit Learning Guide or your tutor before you start work.

Go to the university library and download the citation guide you need. The APA guide is six pages and well worth getting. While you're at it, get any others you might need.

Full details of referencing systems can be found at <http://library.uws.edu.au/citing.phtml>.

A full range of resources for searching and citing references is available at <http://library.uws.edu.au/training.phtml>

In the body of your work, resist the temptation to simply quote the referenced text word for word. It is far better to paraphrase the key information for two reasons:

1. By paraphrasing the work you mentally regurgitate it, sorting it out in your mind and making sure that you understand what has been said and its relevance to your work.
2. By paraphrasing the work you make it clearer to your reader in the context of your topic.

It is important that you do not pepper your work with quotes from your references. Only use them when the author has used particularly fine language and you are sure you could not paraphrase the comment well. In any event, do not use more than one quote per page.

When you are preparing your references, be sure to get the spelling right. Surprisingly, many students fail to check the spelling of authors' names, which makes difficult the task of checking the references. If you make this blunder in a published article your credibility will take a serious nosedive.

Choosing References

Be fussy with your choice of references, because readers of your work judge you by your association with others. If your references are all to websites and newspapers then your readers will judge you as an amateur, not the serious and educated social science reporter that you are.

Now go back to your notes from *Communication Research* and read them through, especially the bits about writing the Proposal and the Report.

9

Formatting Your Document

Most people spend much more time formatting their documents than actually writing them. It's a terrible waste of time and it's frustrating, messy and unnecessary, especially if you learn how to use styles properly. But I'm getting ahead of myself; we don't discuss styles until page 104.

We are not talking about fancy fonts, page borders, colours or clip art. They are just surface effects that merely litter the landscape of your work and make it hard to read. In this context we're talking about

- Layout
- Spacing
- Sensible use of fonts
- Dashes and spaces
- Headers and footers
- Sensible use of your word processor

Your word processor

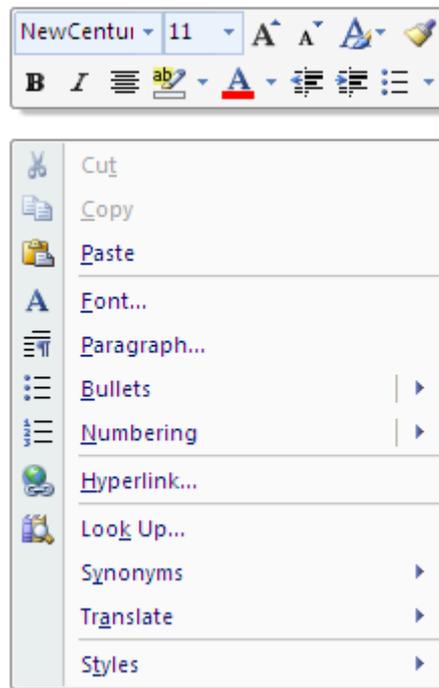
Your word processor is not a fancy typewriter. It's a sophisticated tool and if you make friends with it, it will serve you well. If you abuse it you can expect trouble. As a communication professional, you need to know your word processor and what you can do with it.

This book assumes Microsoft Word 2003 on a PC, but you might have Word on a Mac, or you might be using Corel Office, Star Office, or Open Office. They all do the same things and the differences are not large. Once you get the concepts straight, you will be able to apply them to any word processor. Open Office, which is free, is a bit limited on some features but is still a powerful tool. Although the features in Microsoft Word 2007 are substantially the same as those in Word 2003, Word 2007 has a completely new interface and may confuse some people. Where some tasks are described for Word 2003, the descriptions are repeated for Word 2007. All use the Windows XP operating system, which should make no difference to the Word tasks.

Word 2007 documents are saved with a file name extension of *.docx* and they cannot be read by readers using Word 2003 unless they have the converter tool.
Save your assignments as Word 2003 documents.

Note for Word 2007 users

In the default setup for Word 2007 Microsoft hid some of the useful features from Word 2003, although they might change the default as time goes by. Some of these features are displayed when you right-click on text in a paragraph, and some of them are only available if you modify the interface.

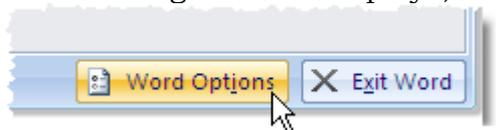


Right-click menu in Word 2007

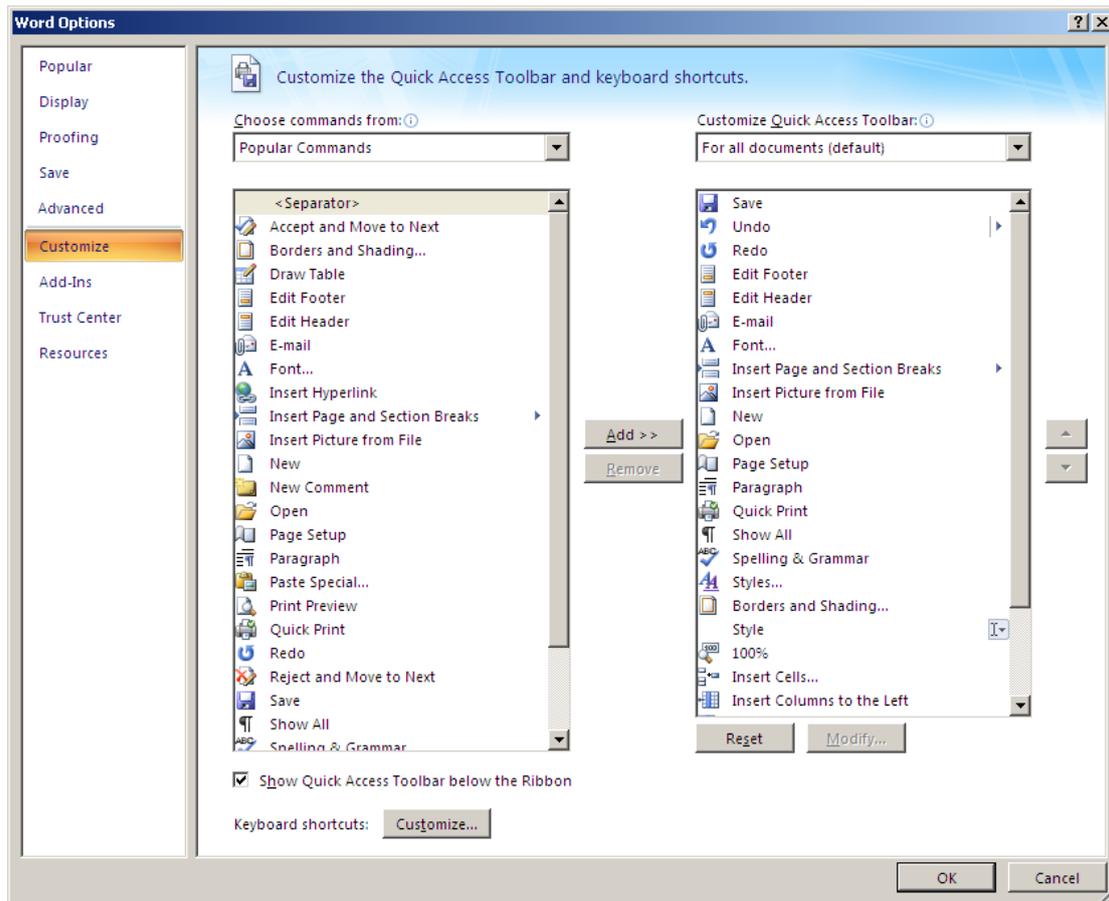
You can modify character and paragraph attributes from the right-click menu, but the Styles option on the right-click menu does not enable you to modify a style. To do that you need to display the Styles button on your Quick Access toolbar, using the procedure described below.

To display these features on your Quick Access toolbar at the top of the screen, click the Office button .

In the dialog box that displays, click the Word Options button



In the Word Options dialog box that displays, click the Customize button.



Word Options dialog box

To add a feature to your Quick Access toolbar, click on the feature in the column on the left and click the Add button. Click OK to return to your document. One important feature to add is the Styles shortcut, which looks like this: . We use this button to modify a style, which is described on page 107.

Fonts

A *font* is a combination of typeface and size. The terms get confused because of the way they are used, and they are becoming interchangeable. Don't concern yourself about it unless you have to work closely with graphic artists.

The fonts you use are a part of the style of the document and they reflect your personal style, taste and discipline.

Quoted in the Los Angeles Times, typographer Tobias Frere-Jones said “We see type as the clothes that words wear. You have more than one outfit in your closet because you don't wear the same thing to the office that you'd wear to the beach.”

During the 2008 US Democrat nomination process, Barack Obama's use of the Gotham typeface was likened to an Armani suit. Hillary Clinton used New Baskerville, and John McCain used Optima. In that particular

campaign at that particular time, Obama's typeface was fashionable. At some other place, at some other time, it might have worked against him.

Fancy fonts do not make your work easier to read or understand. In fact, they detract from your work, making it harder to read and less usable. It's hard to take professional pride in written work that is hard to read.

For formal work, use a formal font. For your body text in hard copy, use a serif font like those in the table below. The serif is the little turned-over part at the ends of the risers and it is claimed to improve readability. For your headings, use a sans-serif font and set them bold. For less formal work you can use an informal font like Comic Sans, but avoid script fonts that try to imitate handwriting.

If your document will only be read on line, use a sans-serif font for your body text.

Use a serif font for body text in hard copy documents.	Times New Roman Garamond	Century Schoolbook Goudy	Bookman Old Style Book Antiqua
Use a sans serif font for headings.	Arial	Tahoma	News Gothic
Use fonts like these for less formal work.	Comic Sans	Avant Garde	Century Gothic

You will notice that font designers vary the amount of white space around their fonts. That is why 12 pt Times looks smaller than 12 pt Schoolbook or Bookman. This book uses Bookman Old Style for the body text and Arial for the headings.

Font attributes

The size of a font approximates to its height, usually measured in *points*. A point is about 1/72 of an inch, which is about a third of a millimetre. 6 point text is generally considered to be the smallest you can comfortably read. For university assignments, body text should be about 10 point to 12 point. The body text in this book is 11 pt.

- Heading level 1 should be about 14 to 16 pt.
- Heading level 2 should be about 12 to 14 pt.
- Heading level 3 should be the same size as your body text.

Three heading levels should suit all your university assignments. Make your headings bold, but **do not underline them**.

Sentence attributes

A few badly-executed attributes can mess up an otherwise good document. They are among the small details that add up to professional work.

Emphasis

Sometimes you will need to draw attention to a particular word or phrase and many students tend to over-emphasise. The more emphasis you use, the more you hide the rest of your text.

- If it's a word, use bold or italics.
- If it's a name or a title, use initial capitals or italics or both.
- If it's a whole sentence, use italics.
- If it's a paragraph, indent it; you may also put a single line above it and below it (use the Borders feature to do this).

This is a paragraph indented on both its left and right sides, so it stands out from other text. This is an acceptable way to emphasise something important but still keep it readable. To apply the indentation, use the Indentation feature in the Paragraph dialog box. In Word 2003 it's in the Format/Paragraph menu option. In Word 2007 right-click, then select the Paragraph option. It is associated with the  button.

Upper case is harder to read than lower case, especially if it's a whole sentence or, worse, a paragraph.

DO NOT USE ALL CAPITAL LETTERS.
USING ALL CAPITAL LETTERS IS LIKE SHOUTING,
ESPECIALLY ON LINE. IT IS HARD TO READ AND
PEOPLE DON'T LIKE IT.

Underlining

Never underline text, for two perfectly good reasons.

1. You make it harder to read.
2. For more than 15 years, underlining has been used to indicate hyperlinks. Don't confuse your reader by underlining text that is not a link to some other page.

Back in the days of typewriters, underlining was the only form of emphasis available, but we've been writing with word processors on PCs since about 1983 and that's long enough to get out of the underlining habit. Learn to make good use of italics and bold face type.

Some texts insist that you should not underline anything in a document that will not be delivered online. This is because you can't click on a sheet of paper, and URLs and email addresses often have an underscore character in them that will be hidden by the underlining.

Got that? **No underlining!**

Dashes

There are en dashes and em dashes, both of which are different from hyphens. Depending on how your word processor is set up, it might choose the correct kind of dash for you. Although most people can't tell the difference, a communication professional can: an en dash is the width of the letter 'n', and an em dash is the width of the letter 'm'. To insert an en dash, press Ctrl and the – key on the numeric keypad. To insert an em dash, press Ctrl, Alt and the – key on the numeric keypad. If you have a laptop you probably don't have a numeric keypad, so select Symbol from the Insert menu in Word 2003 or the Insert tab in Word 2007.

You may use word – dash – word.
You may use word-dash-word.

Do **not** use a space on just one side of the dash, like these:

word- word
word -word

Some people confuse dashes with hyphens. They are quite different, and used for different purposes. We use hyphens to join words together, as in *three-day weekend*, or *four-course meal*. How silly it looks, when we see a space used with a hyphen: *three- course meal*, or *four- year course*. We don't need the space and it doesn't help in any way, so don't put it in.

Formatting lines

Sometimes a two-word term breaks on a line break, and it can be embarrassing if it's an amount of money. This is the classic error:

*He said that they were prepared to pay \$5
million for the house.*

It reads much better if we glue the amount together:

*He said that they were prepared to pay
\$5 million for the house.*

The invisible 'glue' that holds the '\$5' and 'million' together is a hard space. Put the cursor where you would normally have a space between the '5' and the 'm' and press Ctrl+Shift+Space. The hard space is also of a fixed width, which can be handy sometimes. On the screen it looks like a little circle ° and you will soon learn to recognise it.

Here is another example of the error:

*The information may be found on pages 47
and 53.*

The repair is made by putting a hard space between the ‘7’ and the ‘a’:
*The information may be found on pages
47 and 53.*

Here’s another, in a longer sentence:
*The PR team at the Toongabbie branch of
Greasy Joe’s restaurant and sporting
goods emporium introduced a newsletter
and annual turnover has increased to \$1
million.*

It’s easy to misread it as ‘annual turnover has increased to \$1’. That would be absurd and a reader would pause and go back to check. In this case the fix is to either rewrite the sentence so it fits the space better, or adjust the line breaks to make the text fit better.

*The PR team at the Toongabbie branch of
Greasy Joe’s restaurant and sporting goods
emporium introduced a newsletter and annual
turnover has increased to \$1 million.*

In Word, a line break is Shift+Enter. Experiment with it. As a communication professional you’ll be writing a lot and this bug will bite you from time to time. Adjusting the line breaks is a strategy that can be very handy at times when the text won’t line up the way you want it.

The ability – and the patience – to fix things like this will probably never be noticed, except that your work will appear to be error-free. It’s among the details that mark a communication professional.

Spaces

Some people get agitated if they see two spaces between sentences. It’s an old-fashioned habit left over from the days of typewriters, when it was used to separate sentences a bit more clearly.

Modern desktop publishing software and good word processors detect the end of a sentence and increase the space, so the double space should not be necessary. However, some people still like the double space between sentences because they think it improves readability. This topic often develops into heated arguments.

Some people put a space between the last word and the punctuation like so . Don’t do it; it looks ugly in a block of text and it doesn’t help your reader at all. What’s more, your editor is likely to send it back to you for correction.

Paragraph attributes

Paragraph attributes are important components of the appearance and readability of the document because they define the white space around the text. The key items are space between paragraphs, paragraph alignment and indenting.

The spacing between a block of text and the next heading defines the end of one line of thought and the beginning of the next. Uneven word spacing (caused by trying to justify text) interrupts the flow of reading and indenting draws attention to particular passages.

Click the ¶ button in the formatting toolbar so you can see the spaces and paragraph marks. (It's in the Home tab in Word 2007.) Don't hide from your work.

Paragraph spacing

Add space between paragraphs automatically. Don't get talked into using the 'double-enter' method because you'll waste time trying to fix up the appearance of your document and it will never look as good as one set with styles. You can set the 'above' space and the 'below' space separately to control spaces between paragraphs and other objects such as headings, tables, graphs and charts.

We measure the spacing in points, which we discussed when we were talking about fonts. There are about 72 points to the inch, which means that a point is about a third of a millimetre.

How much paragraph space should you add? Corporate style guides vary, but probably the most popular is 6 points before the paragraph and 6 points after it. I have used a government template that used 4 points above and 4 points below. Some use 6 points before each paragraph and no space after. The default in Word 2003 is 0 points before and 0 points after, so we need to change it. The default in Word 2007 is 0 points before and 10 points after, which works acceptably well.

I prefer 3 points before the paragraph and 9 points after it, and the reverse for the headings (9 points before and 3 points after) and that is what I used in this book. It gives plenty of white space around the text but keeps the headings close to the paragraph they refer to. There are no fixed rules, so experiment and see what you like.

When you've tried it, go to **Modify a style** on page 104 and read about how to add the spacing by using styles. Learning to use styles in Word 2003 is quick and easy and once you learn you will never go back. Modifying styles in Word 2007 is not much more complicated.

Justified text

Justified text is sometimes used in expensively-typeset documents, and if it's done well it can look good. Microsoft Word is not a typesetting tool (it's not even a DTP tool) and it makes a mess of justified, or *blocked* text.

Don't try to use Word to right-justify text. Use the default, which is left alignment, sometimes called 'ragged right'.

Designing spaces

To some people it's not obvious that 'pt' is an abbreviation of 'point' and in this context it means a space about a third of a millimetre high. 6 pt is 6 points, which is about two millimetres. Putting 3 points before a paragraph means that there will be about a one-millimetre space at the top of each paragraph. Putting 6 points after the paragraph means that there will be a two-millimetre space after each paragraph. If one paragraph follows another, there will be 9 points, or three millimetres, between them.

Since my headings have 6 points before and 3 points after, there will be $3+3=6$ points ($1+1=2$ millimetres) of space between a heading and the paragraph that follows it. There will be $6+6=12$ points ($2+2=4$ millimetres) of space between the heading and the paragraph before it.

Have a look at a page in this book; the space between a heading and the text that follows is much smaller than the space between the previous paragraph and the heading that follows it. That is so that the heading identifies the content of the paragraph and stays separate from other paragraphs. I only had to set it up once, and it took less than a minute.

This is a good place for a reminder that there are no fixed rules about spacing and you should use something that works for you and your readers. Don't use a particular spacing regime just because someone else uses it – unless that someone is your employer and you are required to use it.

Paragraph alignment

On the previous page I advised you to left align your body text. It's sometimes called 'ragged right' and it's generally the best alignment choice. Most newspapers justify their columns, and some people like the idea. However, doing text justification well is difficult, and the desktop publishing software used by newspapers and magazines is very powerful. Microsoft Word is not desktop publishing software and does not justify text well.

Centred text is good for headings in tables, but it is bad for blocks of text. If you want to publish a one-page poem or an advertisement, centred text might work well in an arty sort of way, but for the kind of text we write, centred text should be reserved for table cell headings, page headings and captions.

Line break

A line break starts a new line without adding the paragraph spacing and we discussed it on page 101. Sometimes it's useful if you want to group a few short lines together, and it can be useful if you want to push a character or a word on to the next line.

To insert a line break, press Shift+Enter. On the screen it looks like this bent arrow: ↵.

Indenting

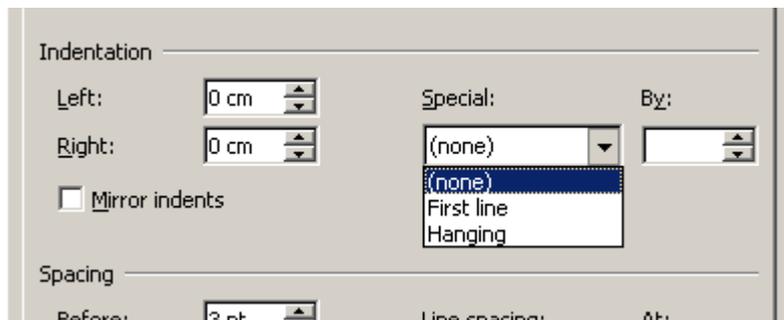
Don't use tabs to indent text. Either use the default indenting in Word or set the indent in the Format Paragraph settings.

Don't apply extra indenting to lists; use the Word defaults.

If you quote two or more sentences from a source, make them a paragraph and indent them. If you are likely to do it more than once, make a style. It only takes a few seconds and can save a lot of time, frustration and messing around.

How much should you indent a block of text? Enough so it's obvious, but at least 1.2 cm. The actual amount will vary with your layout and the font you use.

The easy way in Word 2003 is to use the  control near the button for bullet lists. It's on the Home tab of Word 2007. It indents a paragraph by 1.27 cm. Try it.



The Indentation part of the Paragraph dialog box

To indent a block of text, use the Left and Right boxes to specify how far you want the text indented from the margin.

You will notice that the indentation part of the Paragraph dialog box contains a Special By option. If you choose a hanging indent, the first line starts in its usual position and the rest of the paragraph is indented by the distance you set in the By box. This feature is very useful if you want to set up special lists.

When you understand what you're doing, you're ready to use Word styles. They will save you so much time and frustration that you'll wonder why they are not taught in primary school. So read on.

Word Styles

The old days of doing all your layout with the Enter key are over, and it's a good thing. You will use styles to specify the way you want your text to look – the font, spacing between paragraphs, indenting, and so on.

Why should you do this? Here are four reasons:

1. Consistency
Your word processor will format all your headings and lists and things the same way without you having to check and re-check.
2. Time
Using styles will save you time that you could spend on other assignments or with your family and friends.
3. Frustration
Double-enter formatting is repetitive and can be very frustrating, especially when you're trying to get the pagination right. Using styles puts an end to all that.
4. Usability
A document formatted with styles usually follows design rules that provide better readability and usability.

You will have no pages starting halfway down, no headings on the bottom line of a page, and your formatting of paragraphs, headings, lists and things will be consistent. You will have fewer annoyances, and no wasted time reformatting over and over again. Your document will print correctly, and it will be more attractive and easier to read.

If you want to create professional documents, you need to know how to control your word processor. Get into the habit of setting up your template before you start, and focus on the writing, not the formatting. Don't put it off; start now and get used to it, because your employers will expect it of you.

There is a simple rule:
Apply a style to every paragraph in your document.

If you use a Word default and you apply a heading style, the next paragraph will automatically be Normal text (body text) and you do not need to do anything but write. The heading will be kept with the text and the spacing will be consistent. When you press the Enter key at the end of the paragraph, the next paragraph is also Normal style.

Modify a style

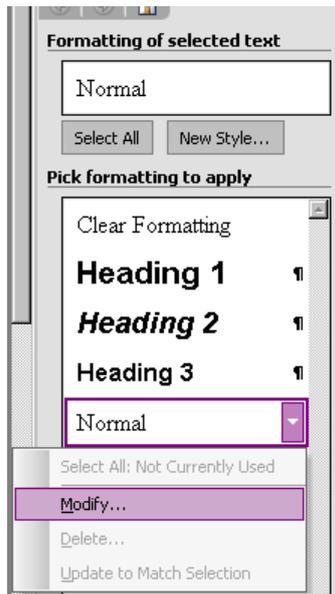
There is a big difference between Paragraph styles and Character styles. Do not confuse them. Paragraph styles set the attributes for the whole paragraph. Character styles only apply the style attributes to selected text.

In the exercise below we modify the **whole paragraph** at once by setting some paragraph attributes in a style. We start with the cursor inside or at the end of a paragraph. When we modify a style this way, the modification to the style will apply to **all** text assigned to that style, in this or other paragraphs. Do **not** select text in the paragraph – not even one character.

Word 2003 Style Exercise

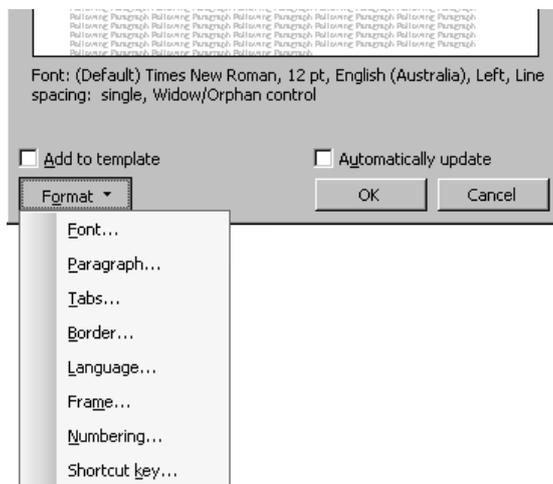
To start with, open your word processor and start a new document. Type a couple of words, then Enter, then a couple more words, then Enter again, then a couple more words. A total of six words in three paragraphs is plenty. With the cursor at the end of the last sentence in the document, look at the Style box at the left hand end of the Formatting toolbar, and there's a good chance that it says Normal.

Click in the Format menu, and select Styles and Formatting. This opens a style bar at the right of the screen, and the Normal style (at the top of the list) has a box around it. Put your mouse cursor on the ¶ character at the right hand end of that box, and it changes to a down arrow ▼. Click on it, and select the Modify option.



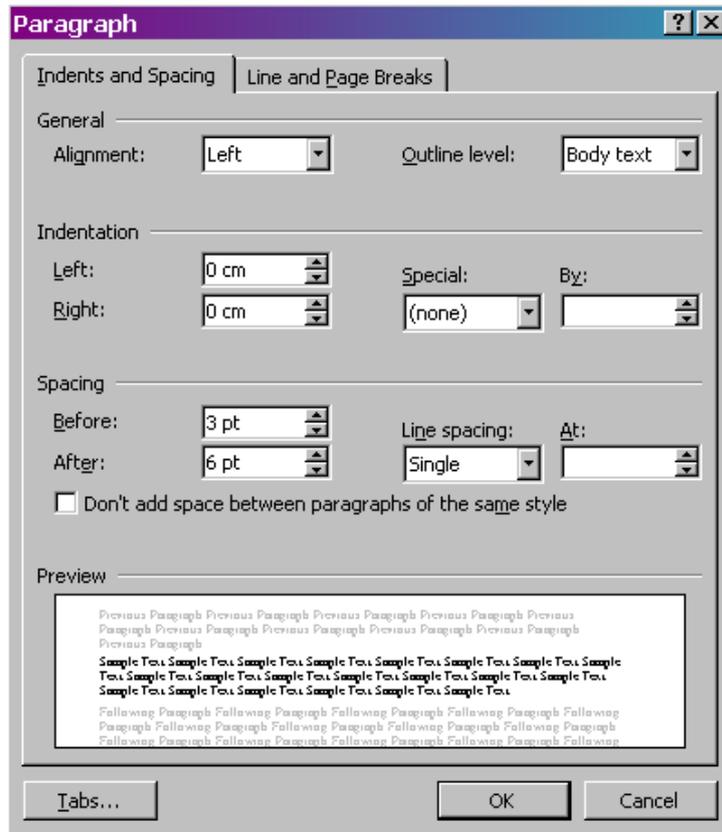
Modify a Style

In the dialog box that opens, click the Format button, and select Paragraph.



Select the features of a style to modify

In the Paragraph dialog that opens you can set the Spacing Before to 3 pt and the Spacing After to 6 pt.

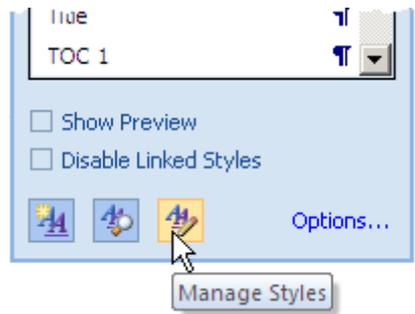


Modify the paragraph features of a style

Click OK. You'll have to click OK again to close the Modify Style window, but when you do, your text will adjust itself so that all the Normal paragraphs now have 3 points before them, and 6 points after. No more double Enter between paragraphs.

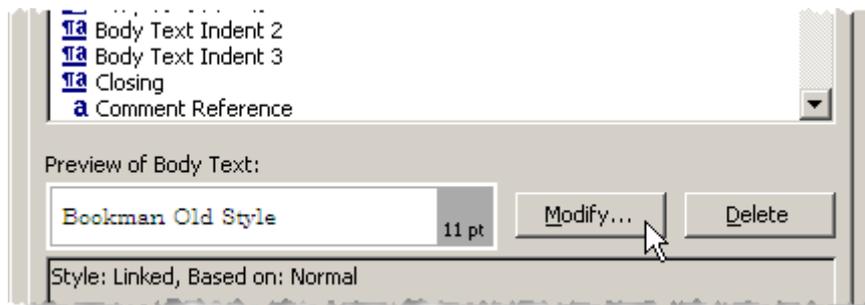
Word 2007

To modify a style in Word 2007 you use the same Paragraph dialog box, but getting there is slightly different. The first thing is to put the Styles button  on the ribbon, as described on page 97. Click in some text that has been set to the style to be changed and click the Styles button you put in the ribbon. In the dialog that appears, click the Manage Styles button.



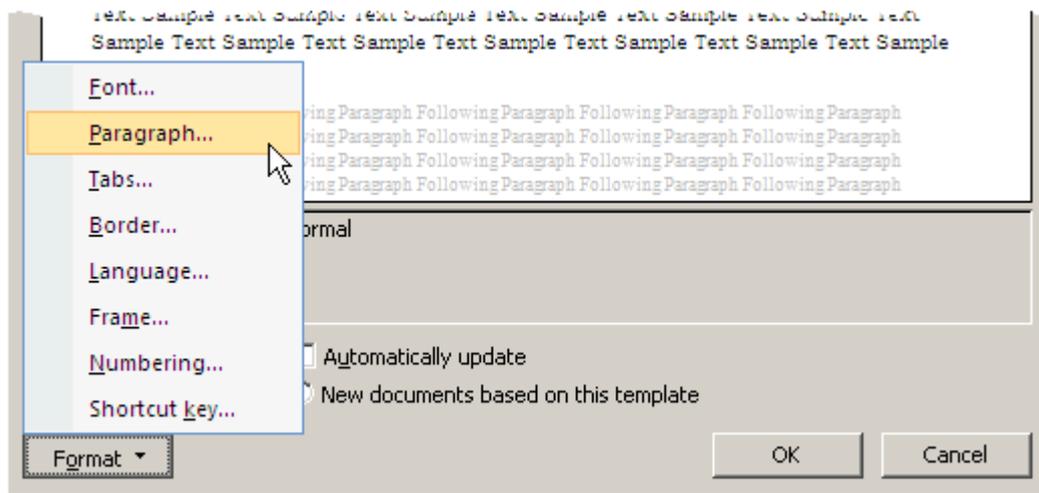
Click the Manage Styles button

In the Manage Styles dialog box, click the Modify button.



Click the Modify button

In the Modify Style dialog that displays, click the Format button and select the Paragraph option



Select the Paragraph option

This displays the Paragraph dialog box as illustrated on the previous page. Set the Spacing Before to 3 pt and the Spacing After to 6 pt.

The changes you make in this dialog box are reflected in every paragraph in your document, so all the Normal paragraphs now have 3 points before them, and 6 points after. No more double Enter between paragraphs.

Congratulations! You have set up your first style. You can modify your styles as much and as many times as you like. Generally, though, you'll get a set of styles the way you like and not change them. Yes, a **set** of styles. The default template has three headings, and you can modify those too, putting say six points above and three points below. You might want to modify the Table Grid style to put two points of spacing above and two points below so the text fits in table cells with a little white space around it. Experiment. Have some fun.

You can use the same process to change the fonts, tab spacings and so on, to suit yourself.

Hint: Ignore the numbering until you get much more familiar with Word.

Word stores style changes in your document, and you probably won't want to go through this process to set up your styles for every new document. The easiest way to re-use your style settings is to make a copy of your document, delete the text, and use a copy of the blank document (a 'boilerplate') in which to type each of your future assignments.

Templates

A template is a set of styles that you might want to use often. For example, a letter to your mum would not use the same template as a university essay or a newsletter. A template has its own page setup and might have special features such as macros, AutoText, and so on. Word is supplied with some standard templates that you can modify, or you can create new ones of your own.

As a university student you will write a lot of assignments and it's possible that you can use one template for all of them, but you might need more, depending on the requirements of the assignments and the preferences of your tutors and lecturers.

Word 2003 has a relatively simple template system that's easy to learn, but Word 2007 has a more complex template system and in most cases the default will be adequate. There are many default paragraph styles and they have paragraph spacing built in so you might not need to modify them at all.

When you save a document the template information is saved inside the document file so you don't have to attach it again. You can carry a document between PCs or between a Mac and a PC and the styles remain unchanged.

For more information about templates, read the Word Help (open Word and press F1). There are many books available about Word.

Character styles

Word can – and does, in some versions – automatically create styles that will apply certain character attributes to selected text. Although it can be a very useful feature, it is usually a nuisance.

In Word 2003, go to the Tools menu and select Options. Go to the Edit tab and locate the checkbox marked 'Keep track of formatting'. Clear this checkbox.

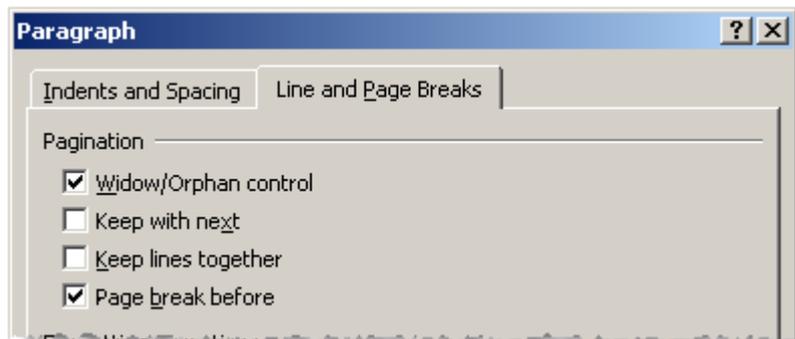
Next time you have some text that you need to emphasise with bold or italic text, Word will do what you want **without** creating new styles.

You might need to check through the styles in the Styles and Formatting pane to make sure you do not have any character styles that you don't want.

Start on a new page

Some items, such as a table of contents, an index, or an appendix, should start on a new page and it's easy to make it automatic. You can set the automatic new page in the style or you can set it in individual paragraphs. Go to the Paragraph dialog box (from the Format menu in Word 2003 or the right-click menu in Word 2007) and select the Line and Page Breaks tab.

Click the checkbox for 'Page break before'.



Start a paragraph on a new page

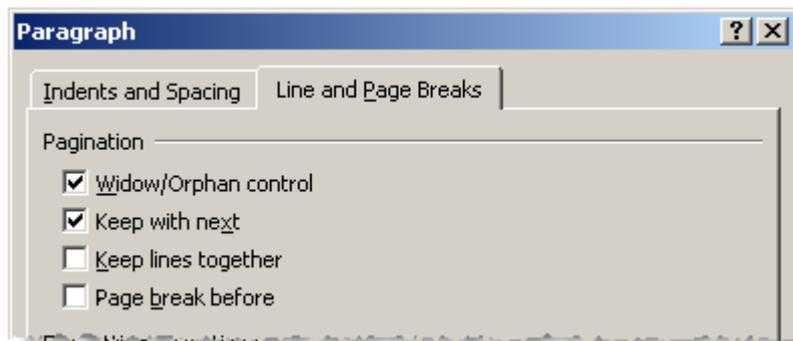
Keep a heading with its text

It's annoying and embarrassing when a heading appears on the bottom line of the page, with the text of its following paragraph on the next page. What's worse, every time you edit some text you run a chance of pushing a heading to the bottom of the page, so you have to check every page.

Not any more, you don't.

It's very easy to glue the heading and the text together so that the paragraph text always follows the heading text, on the same page. Heading styles always have this feature. Go to the Paragraph dialog box (from the Format menu in Word 2003 or the right-click menu in Word 2007) and select the Line and Page Breaks tab.

Check the box for 'Keep with next'.



Keep a heading with its text

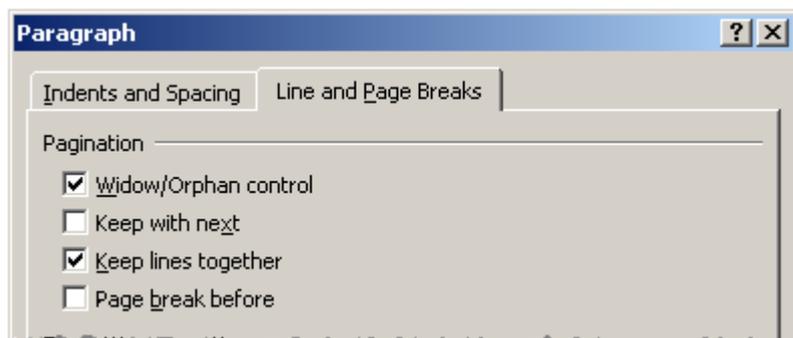
This feature can be used to keep any two items together – for example, a caption can be made to stay with a graphic or table. It's very handy.

Control page breaks

If a paragraph is only a few lines, you don't want it split over two pages because reading it becomes disjointed. You can ensure that a paragraph never breaks across a page with the 'Keep lines together' option.

Go to the Paragraph dialog box (from the Format menu in Word 2003 or the right-click menu in Word 2007) and select the Line and Page Breaks tab.

Check the box for 'Keep lines together'.



Prevent a page break

Page setup

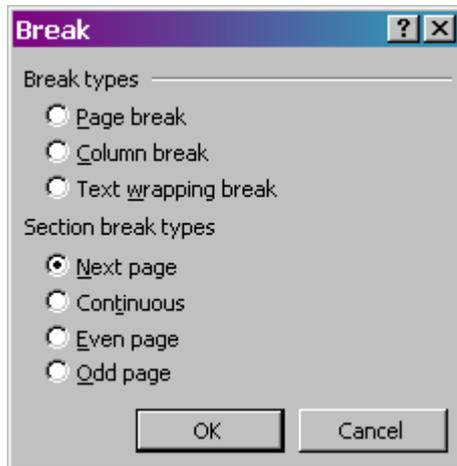
Don't mess about with margins. The default margins work well for the vast majority of documents, and probably for all your university assignments. There are more important things for you to concern yourself with.

Changing page orientation

If you need to put a landscape page in a document, first insert a Section Break (Next Page), then go to the Page Setup and choose Landscape. In Word 2003, go to the Insert menu and you'll find the Breaks are the first option.

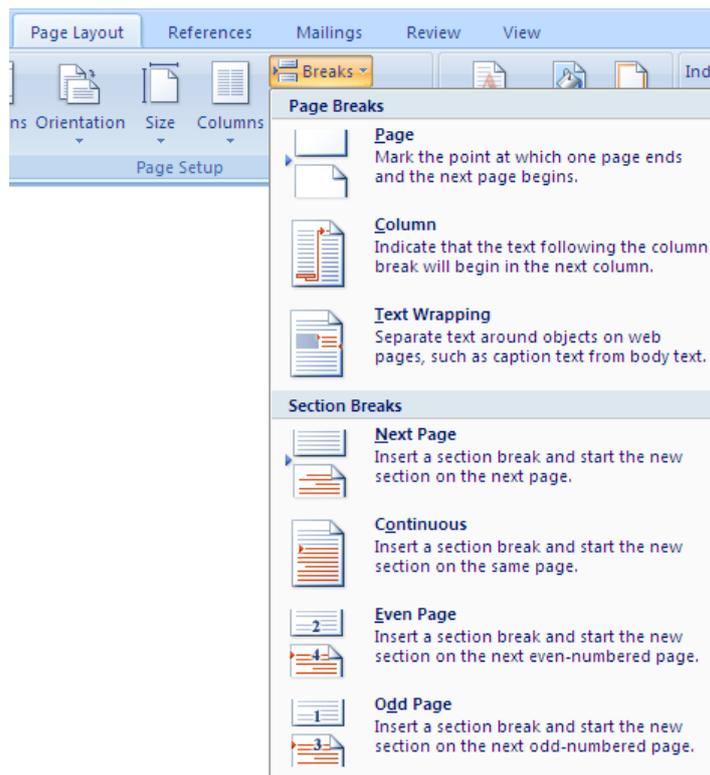
When you are ready to go back to your portrait page layout, insert a Section Break (next page), then go to the Page Setup and choose Portrait.

In Word 2003 you will find Breaks in the Insert menu.



Selecting a break in Word 2003

In Word 2007, go to the Page Layout tab, in the Page Setup group.



Selecting a break in Word 2007

Headers and Footers

Assignments should have the student number, name and page number in the footer. However, some tutors might have different preferences for headers and footers, so ask.

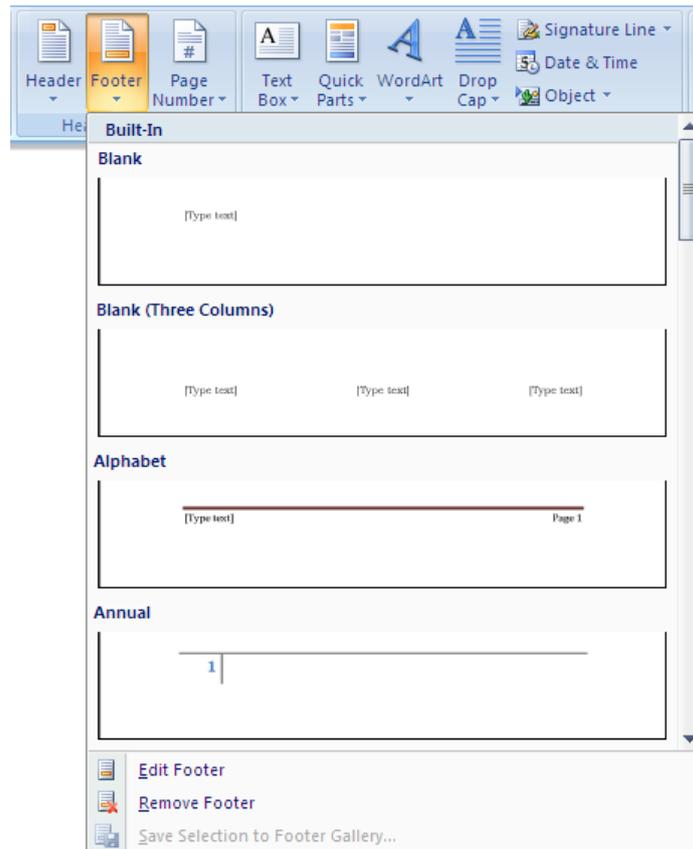
To insert your headers and footers in Word 2003, go to the View menu and select Header and Footer. The text in your document cannot be edited in this mode, but you can type your header and footer and you can select the page number. You can even use the Format menu to set the font, spacing and so on. Some people like to set the footer font a point smaller than the body text. Putting a line above the footer (or below the header) is easy if you choose the Format menu and select the Borders and Shading option.



Word 2003 Header and Footer options

It's a good idea to set the paragraph spacing for the header and footer while you're at it. There is spacing set up in the page layout, so unless you particularly want extra spacing around the header or footer, set them to zero. To return to your document, click the Close button in the floating Header and Footer toolbar.

To insert headers and footers in Word 2007, select the Header option or the Footer option in the Insert tab. The Footer option is illustrated below.



Selecting a footer in Word 2007

Headers and footers can be set up to work for left and right facing pages, as I did for this book. It's not likely that you will ever need to do this for a university assignment, but there's no harm in playing with it, if you feel so inclined. Go to the Layout tab of the Page Setup window and start by setting

the Section Start to 'Odd Page'. This will ensure that the first page of any new section will start on the right-hand page. Check the box for 'Different first page' so it doesn't put the header and footer on the front page, and set the box for 'Different odd and even' so that the right page has an odd page number and the left page has an even page number.

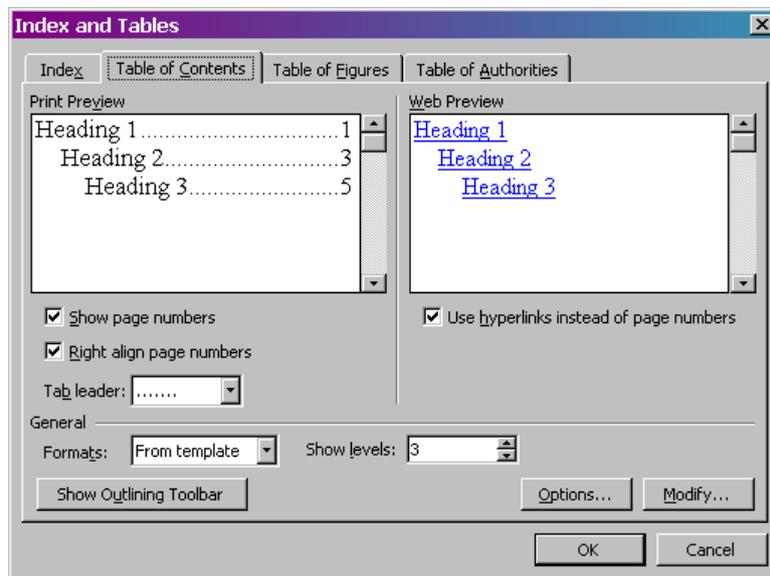
Table of Contents

Lots of university assignments need a table of contents, and if you've been using styles, a table of contents is a breeze.

Put in a blank page between the cover page and the first page of text, and give it a heading of 'Contents' or 'Table of Contents'. Do not assign it a style of Heading 1, Heading 2 or Heading 3, because if you do that the Table of Contents will appear in the table of contents, which is a bit dumb. Use Title or Heading 4 or some other style. Press Enter to put a blank line after the heading and leave the text insertion point (I) there.

In Word 2003, go to the Insert menu and select the Reference option, then the Index and Tables option. Select the Table of Contents tab. These are the default settings and they will serve you well:

- Show page numbers is checked
- Right align page numbers is checked
- Tab leader
- Formats: From template
- Show levels: 3



Setting up a Table of Contents in Word 2003

This will build a table of contents of three levels, corresponding to your three heading levels. And that is that. If the table of contents is not quite the way you wanted it, just do it again, selecting different options in the Table of Contents tab.

To update your table of contents, select it and press F9. That's a lot faster and easier than re-typing your entries!

In Word 2007 the feature is the very left-hand option in the References tab.



Setting up a Table of Contents in Word 2007

The simplest choice is to select either of the first two options in the list. Typing your chapter titles manually is not a good option unless you have a special reason for having your chapter titles in the table of contents different from those in the text.

TOC Field code

The tricky bit about the table of contents is that Word builds it by inserting a field code on that blank page you made, where you left the insertion point. The field code looks something like this:

```
{ TOC \o "1-3" \z \t "Heading 1,1" }
```

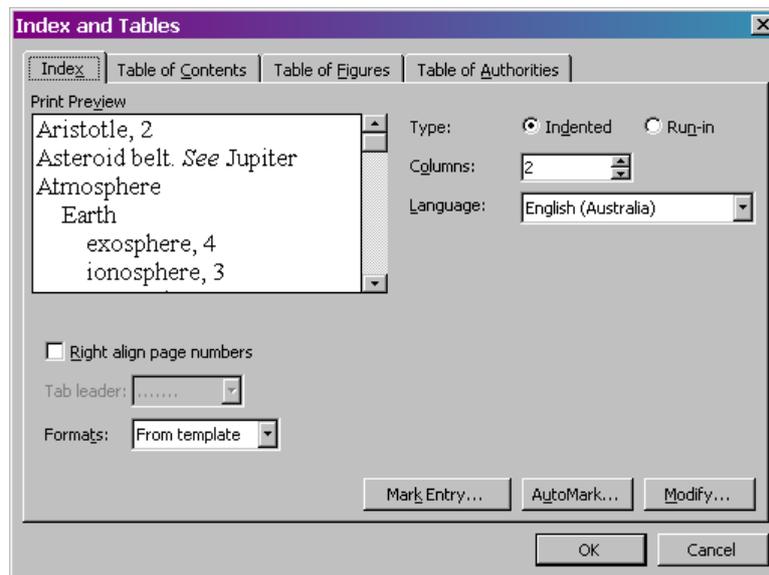
A field code is a hidden string of text that works like programmer's code. You can use them for lots of things, but a study of field codes is beyond the scope of this book. They are only mentioned here so that you will know that they exist, and you will not be surprised when you see them used. You can view field codes at any time by pressing Alt+F9. Press Alt+F9 again to return to the normal view.

You can edit the field code. For example, if you change "1-3" to "1-2" you will have a two-level table of contents, built from Heading 1 and Heading 2. There is an explanation of all the codes in the Word Help.

Index

You probably won't need to create an index for a university assignment until you do a research Honours or Masters degree, but I decided to write a little about the index so you can see how easy it is.

At the back of your document, create a new page for your index and type the heading. Set it to Heading 1. Press Enter to put a blank line after the heading and leave the text insertion point (I) there. Go to the Insert menu and select the Reference option, then the Index and Tables option. Select the Index tab. The default settings will serve you well.



Setting up an index in Word 2003

Click OK. You now have an index, but there are no entries in it. You have to mark them manually, one at a time, and it's best to not do so until you have completed your first draft, or even later.

To mark a word for your index, you use a dialog box and the same dialog box is used whether you use Word 2003 or 2007. Only the method of displaying it is different.

Word 2003

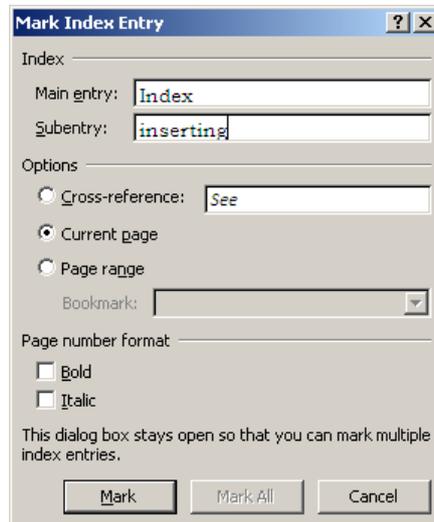
Place the insertion point beside the word and go to the Insert menu. Select the Reference option, then the Index and Tables option. This is exactly the procedure you used to create the index.

Select the Index tab and click Mark Entry. The Mark Entry dialog box displays. Type the index term in the Main Entry field and click the Mark button. The window doesn't go away; you can move on to the next word you

want to put in your index. When you have made all your entries, press the Close button.

Word 2007

In the Index group of the References tab, click Mark Index. The Mark Index Entry dialog box displays, exactly as for Word 2003.



Marking an index entry

When you make your index entries, Word displays the code for them in hidden text. You will see each entry as something like { XE "Index:marking entries" } but they do not display when the ¶ button is clicked, and they will not print.

Sometimes you will have two levels in your index. For example, you might have a general term 'Index' and other entries for 'creating an index' and 'updating the index'. In this case, 'Index' is the Main Entry for each, then type 'creating' or 'updating' in the Subentry field.

To update your index, click anywhere in the index and press F9.

The field code for an index is something like this: { INDEX \c "2" \z "3081" }. If you change the c "2" to c "1" you will have a one-column index. (You can view field codes at any time by pressing Alt+F9. Press Alt+F9 again to return to the normal view.)

10 Reviewing Your Work

Having written your assignment, how do you tell if it's OK? Reading it through on screen won't help much, because you're too close to it. Getting someone else to read it is not a good idea for a first draft.

The problem is that we tend to write as if we are our own audience, explaining our thoughts to ourselves. We need to review our work as if we are not ourselves, but the real audience. Doing that requires a shift of perspective, but it's not impossible. Using the review procedure outlined in this chapter is a big step in the right direction.

Review procedure

Take these three steps:

1. Print a copy of your assignment.
2. Taking your printed copy and a pen or pencil with you, go outside to your garden, a park, a beach, or some other place. You might not want a lot of people around you, so it helps if you go early in the morning.
3. Read your essay or assignment **out loud** to whatever audience you have. Read the sentences just as if you were saying them to a class in a presentation.

Review audiences

A tree is an excellent audience because it is passive – it will just stand there and listen sympathetically. If a tree applauds, you know that you have done particularly well.

Dogs, friends and family might not be a good audience, because they get distracted too easily, and they sometimes offer comments that are not at all helpful.

Seagulls can be a good audience, but they are unsympathetic and they heckle.

This method is simple but particularly effective, which is why I have repeated it so many times. It is even more helpful to presentations, so I repeated it in full there.

Read it out loud

The important thing about reading your work out loud is that you enunciate the words and as you do so you find most of the errors. Every time you hesitate in your reading, or pause to check or re-read something, you have found something to fix. If you find something that's not clear, mark it and make sure it gets fixed.

It's not good enough to say 'They will know what I mean' because there is a good chance that they won't. Zinsser and O'Rourke are adamant about that. Your reader should not have to guess at what you mean and if you make a habit of being clear in your written work at university, you will write clearly when you gain professional employment. Clarity in your writing won't harm your career at all.

When you have finished your reading you will have a stack of marks and comments to take back to your study and your assignment will be much better as a result. You might want to get your mum to read it when you're satisfied with it, but you need your reviewer to be critical and you should be the most critical of all your reviewers.

When I go over assignments with students, they often say "but I read it through", but they didn't read it **out loud**. Reading your work out loud makes a **huge** difference, and this advice is so important that I repeat it often. I have no shame about nagging my students if it makes better writers of them.

Read to a tree or on a beach. You will feel foolish the first time you do it, but that feeling will pass as you see your work improve.

Be critical

New writers pour sweat into their work and naturally feel disheartened when an editor or reviewer sends the work back with marks all over it. It takes most of us quite a while to accept the edit or review without feeling offended, but we must.

It might help to remember that no matter how much it gets changed it's still yours, written in your inimitable style. Consider that the editor or reviewer has given you suggestions, and you are usually not forced to accept them all, depending on the situation. Also remember that your reviewer is not just looking for faults. They are trying to offer helpful suggestions about things to fix, things to add, and things to remove.

Try to stand back from your work and view it critically and dispassionately. Try to pretend you're a stranger reading it for the first time. Now how do you feel about it?

Another useful exercise is to exchange work with a friend. As you and your friend review each other's work you get a different perspective, and that helps when you go back to your own work.

11

Electronic Toys

There is one – just one – electronic authoring tool that is worth using extensively. It's only of value if you are writing a very long document; an Honours thesis could be 15,000 words or more, and a PhD could be more than 100,000 words. If you are tackling a project that big, you should talk to the library staff about getting a copy of EndNote bibliographic software. Don't put it off; get it right at the start of your project and learn to use it. It will save you a lot of agony.

Beware of the other electronic toys around you. Although plenty of people will disagree with me, my experience is that generally, they will cause you more grief than they are worth and you should keep a good distance from them. Why not use them? Here are three good reasons, and I can find more reasons if you need them.

1. As a communication professional you are expected to take responsibility for your words.
2. No software tool can read your mind.
Software written by a programmer on the other side of the world cannot possibly know what you mean to say or how you mean to say it.
3. No matter where you go, you will be judged by how well you write. Don't think that you can get away with the excuse that the spelling checker didn't find anything so you thought it was OK. That is usually regarded as having an unprofessional attitude.

Authoring software

Authoring software inserts heading markers in a given structure after you tell it what sort of document you are writing. It's a very convenient tool in many ways, including the capacity to enforce a particular structure, insisting on a particular copyright statement, inserting the table of contents and index, and so on. It usually also provides a spelling checker, a grammar checker and a range of readability checking tools.

However, your needs will almost certainly be a little different – especially if you are writing to a corporate style. It is wise to be very wary of authoring software until you know how well it fits your needs. And if you can structure a document well enough without it, then perhaps it's only extra baggage to slow your computer down.

Some corporate writing environments, especially newspapers, magazines and Defence organisations, have special authoring software customised to their particular environments. If they are paying you to use it, they will have good reasons for doing so. Use it, smile, and accept their money.

Spelling checker

A spelling checker is good for checking for typographical errors and it is essential for first-pass checking before you review your work and read it out loud. However a spelling checker cannot tell which of many possible spellings you mean to use and you need to check your work with a good hard copy dictionary.

A spelling checker is not a replacement for a dictionary.

Which is spelt correctly:

their or there
wether or whether
rain, rein or reign
whales, wales, Wales or wails
principle or principal
your or you're

They are **all** spelt correctly, but you can only be really sure when you check with a good dictionary. Make your own list of words that you keep getting wrong, and carry it with you. Whenever you're writing something, check your list. When we were talking about confusing words on page 12, I suggested using a little notebook. These spellings go in the same notebook.

When we talked about spelling and the spelling checker on page 10 I suggested that the spelling checker is an excellent tool for getting a quick check of a draft, but *relying* on a spelling checker is a certain path to documents full of errors. Don't forget that many spelling checkers default to US English.

I have said this all before, and I repeat it here because so many students use the spelling checker to throw marks away.

They are your words and you must take responsibility for them.

Thesaurus

A thesaurus is a very useful tool, but some people claim that it can reduce your vocabulary. Sometimes it will give you incorrect spellings if you have your system set to the wrong version of English. Always check the new words with your dictionary.

If you're a communication professional, you will keep a good hard copy dictionary and thesaurus on your desk. Use them.

Grammar checker

We talked about the grammar checker on page 10. It will accept poor grammar and will reject good grammar and is not to be trusted. Do not make the mistake that a grammar checker can fix your grammar for you.

If your grammar is below average, the grammar checker will find some faults, but it will also direct you to checking text that has nothing wrong with it. Sometimes it will tell you to make changes that make your text worse. If your grammar is good, the grammar checker is likely to find things that do not need to be fixed, but it will expect you to check them anyway.

I ran the Word grammar checker over this book and it did not find even one genuine grammatical error, although I found three that it ignored. However, it marked as errors many things that were correct, forcing me to invest about an hour checking my work against the *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*. I also checked its claimed errors against *A Manual of Style*, the book we call the Chicago Style Guide. Although my word processor is firmly set to Australian English, it relies on US grammar.

Generally, the grammar checker is likely to return very little benefit, wasting a lot of time that you can use in better ways. Turn it off and leave it turned off.

The grammar checker will let you down every time you use it. Turn it off and leave it off.

Although linguists have spent many years trying to model a natural language, they are still unable to analyse existing texts. Probably the biggest obstacle is the fact that even very competent native speakers can easily misunderstand something said or written by someone else. But many factors influence the meaning in text, including context, alternative word meanings, ambiguous syntax, idiom, jargon and unintended influence from something in a previous sentence. Often we need a great deal of background knowledge to make sense of something and until computers can properly understand text, they cannot reliably check grammar or spelling.

A final word

“We should keep in mind why we're writing and who's reading, and under what circumstances. And we should avoid the temptation to display our erudition at the reader's expense.” – Philip B Corbett, deputy news editor and Style Manual editor of The New York Times.

<http://topics.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/big-fancy-words/>

12

Preparing a Presentation

Your professional life will require you to make presentations from time to time, and your university training will help you develop your ability to present with impact and purpose. But your presentation skills are not just for addressing large groups of people.

If you need to convey an idea to more than two people at once, you need engaging presentation skills.

Developing your presentation skills in the classroom will also help you when you need to speak on the spot without preparation.

Overcoming fear

The fear of speaking to a group can make you quite ill and there is no magic cure.

Many books say that the fear of public speaking arises from a fear of looking foolish or from a feeling of not being in control over how your audience will receive you, or what to do if your mind goes blank. Sufferers have told me that it's none of those things or maybe a confused combination of all of them.

One thing is clear: you will improve with guided practice and you will feel a little more comfortable each time. Put your faith in your ability to take a disciplined approach and prepare well. Preparation is everything.

Three reasons to relax

1. You probably know more about your topic than anyone else in the room. If you make a small mistake, there's a good chance that nobody will notice.
2. Your audience is not your enemy. They want to hear what you have to say and they want to see you do well at your presentation.
3. You have done your homework, you know your topic and you have one or more presentation tools to help you: PowerPoint, video, overhead

projection, 35mm slides, movie or sheets of butcher's paper. You might even have a handout.

Communicate with your audience

It's important to speak to your audience, to *communicate* with them.

Don't just put a stack of slides full of notes on the wall and have your audience writing furiously while you talk. They won't hear much of what you say and they probably won't remember any of it. Many speakers put slides up and then read the slides out loud but it's very difficult to get much benefit from that style of presentation.

Your task is to engage your audience and have them take part in your presentation.

There are lots of books available on how to make presentations and if you are really troubled, get one from a library and read it. There's no need to read many of them, because they all say the same few things, which you will also find in the following list. The list also contains some items that I have not seen in books.

- Relax. You have done your homework, you know your topic and you have one or more presentation tools to help you: PowerPoint, video, overhead projection, 35mm slides, movie or large sheets of butcher's paper.
- Put just the salient points on your slides. Some people suggest no more than one slide for each five minutes of presentation, but that might be a bit extreme.
- Don't rely on fancy transitions, animations and decoration. They are distractions that you don't need.
- Don't read your slides. Speak from the information in them.
- Don't fidget. Gesture is good, but not too much of it. (Next time you watch a movie or TV, look for groups of people away from the centre of the action and focus on their hands. You will often see them fidgeting.)
- If you are really nervous, clutch a piece of paper or a textbook, but don't wave it about.
- Take a deep breathe before the presentation. It will lower your heart rate and reduce nervousness.
- Speak to your audience – all of them. Don't hide your eyes, and don't present to one particular person. Sweep the room with your eyes, so that you are speaking to everyone. If you have to focus your eyes somewhere, focus on the wall at the back of the room, just above the heads of your audience.

- In particular, don't present to your tutor; present to the class.
- Using PowerPoint is a common way of illustrating presentations, but it is not essential and sometimes it is a handicap.
- Leave nothing to chance and don't try to wing it. Lay out your strategies, have your material ready, and line up a contingency plan in case an important explanation doesn't work.
- Practice what you're going to say often and out loud. Go to a park or a beach and practice out loud. It makes a huge difference.
- Keep it slow and steady. If you pause when you need to take a breath, you will think clearer.
- Telling stories can help get your idea across better than charts and graphs and numbers. They also help to engage your audience.
- Prepare more material than time will allow. Time flies when you're up there, and you may speak quickly out of nervousness.
- Have some kind of alternative strategy ready in case the hardware doesn't work. For example, if you are relying on a video to illustrate a particular point, have an alternative illustration ready, such as still pictures in an extra slideshow. Have some notes and whiteboard markers ready in case the data projector doesn't work.
- Realise that your audience is not your enemy. They want to hear what you have to say and they want to see you do well at your presentation.

Most important of all, know your material and practise with it. You can be going over your presentation in the bus and in the train, while other people are wasting valuable time plugged into an mp3 player or reading about last weekend's sport. Commuting time can be very valuable.

Go to a park or a beach and practice out loud. But don't learn it parrot-fashion. If someone asks you a question you must be able to take a moment out of your presentation, answer the question and move on.

The best practice audience is a tree. Your family and friends are usually not a good practice audience because they tend to interrupt with suggestions that they think are helpful but which are usually unhelpful distractions. Sometimes they will get bored and turn on the TV. Dogs get bored and walk off, or try to interrupt you. Seagulls are OK, but they heckle. Trees are best, and if one applauds, you know you're doing well.

There is an old saying that practice makes perfect, but unless someone can observe and correct you, your practice might only make your errors permanent. It can be helpful to work with someone else in your class, reviewing each other's work. That person might have additional pointers for you or correct any mistaken ideas you have.

In summary

- Prepare your presentation well.
- Map out your presentation and structure it carefully.
- Make use of non-verbal language to enhance your message.
- Develop your voice a little in order to make a positive impression. Vary your speaking speed, pitch and tone to suit the content.
- Use silence to add emphasis in the same way that you use white space on a page.
- Close your presentation in a memorable way.
- Rehearse your presentation out loud.

Give yourself a more professional look:

PowerPoint has a useful Notes section for each slide that doesn't display when you present the slideshow. It's a wonderful tool. Print a set of slides with the Notes pages and bind them into a set of notes that only you will see, and speak from those notes with the slides behind you on the screen. Set the notes in 14 pt and with paragraphs of no more than five lines so if you lose your place you can find it quickly and easily.

Convert your presentation into a show (a .pps file) and create a desktop shortcut from it. When it's your time to speak, all you have to do is double-click the shortcut and the slideshow displays. No waiting for Explorer, no hunting around for your presentation file, no hunting for the menu option to display your presentation as a slideshow. It's all automatic, fast and easy.

Things like these make you look experienced and professional, and they help you relax.

Bibliography

Although I used all of these sources in the preparation of this book, this is not a complete bibliography. Treat these references as useful extras that might be helpful from time to time and get to know the university library. None of these should replace any of your class texts or readings.

Any university library is a very useful resource.

<http://library.uws.edu.au>

The BBC News Styleguide

<http://www.bbctraining.com/styleguide.asp>

The Guardian style guide

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/styleguide>

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation doesn't give access to their style guide, but Blair Shewchuck, Editor of Journalistic Standards, writes a wonderful column. Don't try to read it all at once.

Words Woe and Wonder

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/indepth/words/index.html>

The ABC does not allow public access to its style guide, but it does discuss matters of style on the internet. *Australian Style* is a twice-yearly website posting by a style editor at the ABC:

http://www.ling.mq.edu.au/news/australian_style/v16_no1/scose_notes.htm

The New York Times doesn't give access to their style manual, but Philip B. Corbett, who is a deputy news editor and keeper of the style manual, runs a weekly newsroom critique and an extract from it is published in a weekly blog called *After Deadline*

<http://topics.blogs.nytimes.com>

Wikipedia is really just a big open access blog and you wouldn't want to quote it in serious work, but it can be a handy place to get some introductory information that can point you to more serious sources. If you use Wikipedia, cite it.

<http://www.wikipedia.com>

Some information about spelling mistakes in web searches came from an article in the newspaper USA Today of 14 June 2009:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-06-14-misspellings_N.htm?csp=Tech

There are lots of online dictionaries available. Some of them are good, many are not. Don't judge them by the number of hits they get, because the number of hits says nothing about their accuracy or value. They will tell you that a lot of people visited the site, but they tell you nothing about whether those people read anything, learnt anything, or found the site to be a complete waste of time.

<http://www.onlinedictionary.com>

These three sites list commonly-misspelt words:

<http://www.yourdictionary.com/library/misspelled.html>

<http://www.rinkworks.com/words/misspelled.shtml>

<http://www.esldesk.com/esl-quizzes/misspelled-words/misspelled-words.htm>

You'll find some articles about Australian news reporting style if you search the Press Council web site.

<http://www.presscouncil.org.au>.

A good critical reading checklist is at

<http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/critical/2b.html>

Texts I used include the following:

Trask, R.L. (1995), *Language: The Basics*, Routledge, London

Bryson, Bill (1990), *Mother Tongue*, Penguin, London

Brandt, William (1969), *The Craft of Writing*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs

Bragg, Melvin (2003), *The Adventure of English*, Hodder and Stoughton, London

Classic texts I use include *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White and *Fowler's Modern English Usage* by H.W. Fowler. I also refer to works by David Crystal, Robert Burchfield, Julian Burnside, Sir Ernest Gowers, Eunson, Eagleson, Hall and many others.

I recommend Mohan, McGregor, Saunders & Archee, *Communicating as Professionals*, which you will find in the UWS Library.

The style manuals I used include

Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Writers, John Wiley & Sons, Sydney

The Cambridge Australian Style Guide, Cambridge University Press

A Manual of Style, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago

Oxford Guide to Style, Oxford University Press, London

Words Into Type, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River

I also used dictionaries from Macquarie, Oxford and Webster.

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About the Author



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