

# Swarthmore College Writing Center

## Common Stylistic Concerns

Here is a list of some of the most common stylistic issues that writers of academic papers must consider. For more specific questions, consult the Writing Center or your professor.

### ***Sentence Structure***

In order to keep your reader attentive, mix long sentences with short ones. When you are writing, be on the watch for extended sentences that will slow your readers down to the point where they may lose the thread of your argument. At the other extreme, avoid strings of short sentences that will make your writing sound choppy or childish. Use artful punctuation – periods, commas, semicolons, colons and dashes – to your best advantage in order to control the mood of your writing and to emphasize important points. Excellent writing often mimics the rhythms of speech. Try reading your paper aloud to yourself to help catch awkward phrasings and grammatical problems.

### ***Punctuation***

Most students feel comfortable using periods and commas in their writing. Somewhat trickier are semicolons, colons, and dashes: punctuation marks that fall somewhere in between a period and a comma. Of those three, colons imply the longest pause, followed by semicolons and dashes. Semicolons are used to separate two short sentences; they can be quite useful. Colons can introduce quotations or lists, but the fact that they create long pauses makes them useful for another purpose as well: drawing attention. Dashes should be used sparingly, especially in academic writing. Single dashes can be used to tack on an afterthought – like this. Pairs of dashes can be used in the same way as parentheses, but they give your “parenthetical” thought more emphasis. *Should probably have some more obvious examples here.*

### ***Vocabulary***

A good dictionary and a good thesaurus should be your best friends while you are writing. Thoughtful attention to word choice will allow you to write as descriptively as possible without rambling.

Consider these sentences:

1. The United States lacked a clear sense of the purpose of the occupation or how long it would be there.
2. The United States lacked a clear sense of the purpose or duration of the occupation.

In this example, inserting “duration” makes the sentence clearer and more concise. When you are choosing words, make sure you are familiar with all the connotations of the word you pick. Otherwise, your reader may be misled. On a final note, remember that bigger words are only better if they contribute to the meaning of your sentence. If a simpler word will suffice, use it. Cramming your paper full of large words will make you look like you’re feigning intelligence.

### ***Passive Voice***

Passive voice is inappropriate when you want to emphasize the doer of an action. At best, it necessitates wordiness; at worst, it clouds the meaning of your statements.

For example:

1. The paper was written by John.
2. John wrote the paper.

The first sentence is unnecessarily wordy. There is also no reason to take the action (writing) away from the actor (John). Try to use active voice to limit needless phrasing and keep your language clear.

However, if you want to emphasize the action itself, passive voice can be the right choice. This is especially true in some types of scientific writing, where the steps performed in an experiment are more important than the person performing them.

For example:

1. The solution was heated to 37°C.
2. We heated the solution to 37°C.

Some science professors want lab reports to omit any reference to the doer of the action. This is not a universal rule, so check with your professor if you have any questions.

### ***Gender-neutral Language***

Students often ask WAs about how to use the pronouns “he” or “she” when referring to a subject without a specific gender. Generally, it is best to pick one gender and stick with it, because switching in mid paragraph can be confusing to your reader. However, some professors or readers may require you to rework your language to avoid all possible gender references. Here are some ideas to help you eliminate gender from your writing:

1. *Whenever possible, avoid pronoun problems by reworking your sentences to use the plural “they.”*

For example:

- a. Every student should know how to avoid plagiarism in her writing.
- b. Students should know how to avoid plagiarism in their writing.

2. *Eliminate useless prepositional phrases that require the use of gendered pronouns.*

For example:

- a. The student must finish the reading assigned to him each week.
- b. The student must finish the assigned reading each week.

3. *Avoid clauses that require pronouns.*

For example:

- a. If a student needs extra writing help, he may consult the WAs.
- b. For extra help, a student may consult the WAs.