**Learning to Write, Writing to Learn**

According to Berkley’s School of Information Management and Systems, human civilization created about five exabytes (37,000 Libraries of Congress) in 2002 alone.[[1]](#footnote-1) As the Information Age accelerates, this number continues to increase at a pace unthinkable by those of even just a generation ago. But as anyone remotely familiar with the Internet knows, information is very different from knowledge. Sifting through all that countless data is tiring and expensive so being able to communicate it well is an increasingly critical skill in today’s world.

Writing is one of the most common ways modern society tries to pass on information—no, *knowledge*—and countless professionals rely on their skills to do it well. Writing well is not merely about knowing the difference between conveying knowledge and conveying information. It’s about demonstrating authority. It’s about being succinct. It’s about holding interest. And it’s hard.

In writing, there are no laws like one might see in physics or economics. But there are rules of thumb. Below are some that I’ve picked up over the years and have seen many people fall prey to. Don’t be one of those people.

1. **Be Correct**

Obviously this should be your number one priority. All good arguments are based on solid facts and sound reasoning. An astonishing large amount of publicly used claims fail at least one of these criteria. Always makes sure your logic is sound and your sources are cited.

*Sound logic*. Avoid logical fallacies and remember some are more insidious than others. In my experience personal attacks, appealing to pity, and appeal to popularity are particularly common. A complete list of fallacies can be found at <http://www.logicalfallacies.info/>

*Cite your sources*. If you reference an argument, declare a statistic, quote a passage, or repeat a claim, cite the source. If you’re not sure if you should cite something, cite it anyway.

*Keep it real*. Stick with credible sources. Wikipedia is great as a starting place, it’s great to help organize your thoughts, but that’s where its usefulness ends. Not only do you not know who wrote what, not only does the citation constantly change, economic topics tend to attract a lot of sloppy arguments. You don’t want to repeat nonsense thinking it’s a good argument. Also be aware that people fabricate sources so verify them yourself and make sure they are reputable. Nothing tears down an argument like exposing a false claim.

*Don’t plagiarize*. Copying words and claiming it as your own is not only unethical and violates essential academic standards, it undermines your argument. Copying even a small section without citing it tells a lie to your reader, suggesting you wrote something you didn’t.

1. **Be Clear**

The purpose of communicating is to convey information, a difficult feat when the reader has trouble understanding what you’re writing. It sounds silly to mention this but clarity is easy to get wrong when you don’t know a few basic rules.

*Have a thesis*. A thesis is a one or two sentence summary of what you’re trying to demonstrate. Make sure you have one; it will add focus to your writing and make it clear why people would read your paper.

*Review and rewrite*. The first draft is never very good and second is rarely anything other than lacking. Once it’s done, read what you wrote all at once or better yet, have someone else read it. Make the revisions and then do it again. Be tough on yourself, too.

*Outline carefully*. Your argument should flow smoothly and intuitively. I’ve found that breaking it down by explicit sections help keep similar ideas in similar places. For example the relevant background should all be within the same section—don’t introduce important ideas after you’ve started your argument.

*Don’t get flimsy*. If you sound unsure of your argument, your reader won’t be convinced. Avoid phrases such as “I think that…” or “it seems that…” You should be confident in your writing. This is not casual conversation; buffering your argument against offense or counterargument in this way is not wise. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t allow for the possibility that you might be wrong. But don’t neuter your own argument. Note the importance of confidence makes the first rule all that much more important.

1. **Be Concise**

Good writing is not the same as long writing. In fact it’s often the opposite. Don’t ramble, don’t waffle, and don’t add a bunch of unnecessary words. Recall the words of Antoine de Saint Exupéry: “Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.” (*Wind, Sand, and Stars*, 1939)

*Justify yourself*. Help keep your writing focused by informing the reader why they should care about your argument and why they should read what you have to think. Keep the thesis concise as well (writing an abstract helps). It’s a lot easier to know what you’re writing about when you can cut out the things that aren’t relevant.

*Echo, don’t repeat*. It’s occasionally required to reiterate a point or your thesis for emphasis. Use a sentence or a phrase. Don’t use a paragraph. If you find yourself writing a paragraph, go back to the first time you mentioned the point and see if you need to add to it.

*Don’t fear the Reaper*. This is one of the more difficult lessons to learn. Don’t be afraid of dropping a section even if it’s good. Over the course of your paper you’ll end up writing something that doesn’t support your thesis but it’ll be really good. Cut it out. Put it in another file for another time it if helps, but don’t keep it when it doesn’t contribute to your argument.

1. **Be Courteous**

Remember your reader is a real person and they don’t have to care about what you’re telling them. To get them to care your first rule should be politeness. Don’t insult them (explicitly or otherwise) and don’t patronize them. At the same time don’t go the other way—attempts at impressing will fall on deaf ears.

*It’s about communication*. A lot of people think you have to add obscure words to your prose so people will care about what you have to say. What a paradox that is—looking up words to add so people will be impressed when they have to look up words to understand. Writing is about communicating. Respect your reader by using words they are likely to know and define the word when nothing else will do.

*Know what “it’s” about*. “It’s” is the contraction of “it is.” “Its” is the possessive. (Remember this by recalling “he’s” is “he is” and “his” is the possessive. Note the symmetric use of the apostrophe.) In general, keep your grammar and spelling straight. Run spell check *and* review your work (to/two/too; there’s/theirs; angel/angle; from/form are all examples of why spell check isn’t enough). Watch for too few or too many commas, too.

*Avoid the passive voice*. It’s not always possible but make your sentences active when you can. “He has lost” is not as good as “He lost;” “A six-year-old was burned to death” is not as well-written as “Mugabe’s men burned a six-year-old to death.” With this in mind, don’t forget that you exist. Some authors avoid mentioning themselves in their papers and it makes for awkward sentences. If you need to mention yourself, don’t dance around it.

1. **Be Compelling**

Remember you are taking the reader on a journey and it’s your job to keep them wanting to continue. Good works are hard to put down. They get the reader excited and drawn into the argument. A good paper is interesting to read.

*Start with an illustrative story*. Grabbing the reader is critical to any work of writing. If they’re not interested by the first paragraph, you have a problem. There’s lots of ways to meet this challenge but I’ve found that if you start with an illustrative story of your point, you can get a lot of things done at once. They not only keep reading, they start to care and become interested in what you have to say on the matter. (It also helps getting past that blank page stage.)

*Lead by example*. Humans are natural storytellers—that’s the best way we learn. Statistics and theory all help but few things are as vivid as the right example. In conveying your argument, elaborate with a real world instance where what you were talking about actually happened. If no real world example exists a hypothetical one can work just as well (but real ones are much stronger).

*Diversify your writing*. Vary your sentence length and word choice (but do so with caution so you don’t sacrifice clarity). The same descriptors over and over get boring and the same goes with symmetric sentences. Remember shorter sentences are powerful—and single sentence paragraphs more powerful—but it doesn’t work when all sentences are short. I personally like to follow a few long sentences with one short one. Diversification makes the writing powerful. Just make sure the short sentence earns its keep. If you want it to hold a profound slot the sentence itself has to convey something critical. A restatement of thesis is a good bet.

*Quote with caution*. Over-quoting is a common sin in writing, especially by students trying to fill a page requirement. Any professor will tell you content is more important than volume and that goes double with quotations. Over-quoting leads the reader to ask “Why am I bothering to read this when he just quotes X? I should just read X.” Quote only if (a) you need to convince your reader that this person believes a particular idea or (b) if you really can’t say it better than him or her.

*Avoid the weak*. No two words are more annoying in a paper than “in conclusion.” It’s predictable, it’s boring, and it adds nothing. Keep away from such phrases, particularly clichés (which are weak because they suggest a lack of imagination). You can find some common weak phrases and clichés at <http://www.writing-life.com/style/cliches.html>

1. “How Much Information? 2003.” School of Information Management and Systems, 2003. Downloaded February 2, 2008. http://www2.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info-2003/execsum.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)