

chapter and resist “being beguiled down fascinating byways and side-tracks” only marginally related to your topic. Get to your point. Trust your readers. Moreover, trust yourself. Do as much as you can in as few words as possible. Your essays will be more persuasive if you do!

SIMPLE AND DIRECT WRITING

Thinking about these four modes of expression as you begin will help you clarify your writing task. You can then define more precisely your reason for writing an essay, plan your research, and organize what you will write. Having these in mind will also help you in giving voice to your ideas and improving the style of what you write. We have appreciated the advice about writing summarized in the title of a book on the subject by the respected American historian, Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct*. Of course, it is not always that simple. Among historians, writing conventions—which are neither laws nor strict rules, but rather simply customary practices—are important. If you depart from the conventions, you run the risk of not being taken seriously. Your readers may even turn hostile toward what you write because you seem to insult them by refusing to live up to their expectations. It makes no sense for a writer to irritate readers.

In seeking your writing voice and striving for a consistent style, you may be tempted to follow the all too common advice to “write as we speak. That is absurd,” as Barzun plainly writes.

Most speaking is not plain or direct, but vague, clumsy, confused, and wordy. This last fault appears in every transcript from taped conversation, which is why we say “*reduce to writing*.” What is meant by the advice to write as we speak is to write *as we might* speak if we spoke extremely well. This means that good writing should not sound stuffy, pompous, highfalutin, totally unlike ourselves, but rather, well—“simple & direct.”⁸

⁸ Jacques Barzun, *Simple & Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 12–13.

in: Richard Marius and Melvin Page,
A Short Guide to Writing about History
(Longman, 7th ed. 2010), 131-149

You will be better able to reach this goal as you revise your essay. In addition to the sensible advice that you read your essay carefully—even reading it aloud to be sure you have written what you intended—there are several key areas to keep in mind as you prepare even the first draft. Following these conventions will help you develop a distinctive voice and personal writing style, which will serve you, and your readers, well.

Write in Coherent Paragraphs

Paragraphs are groups of sentences bound together by a controlling idea and intended to help readability. Indentations break the monotony of long columns of type. They help readers follow the text with greater ease, signaling a slight change in subject from what has gone before and announce that the paragraph to follow will develop a thought that can usually be summarized in a simple statement. A good rule of thumb is to have one or two paragraph indentations on every typed manuscript page. It is only a rule of thumb—not a command. And for historical writing it is also a good idea to avoid the one- or two-sentence paragraph common in journalism.

All paragraphs are built on the first sentence, and the following sentences in the paragraph should run in a natural flow from it. Although the paragraph is a flexible form, most readable paragraphs depend upon connectors, sometimes a word in one sentence that is repeated in the next. The connectors tie your sentences together—and therefore link your thoughts. You can often test paragraph coherence by seeing if every sentence has connectors that join its thought in some way to the previous sentence all the way back to the first sentence in the paragraph. Similar patterns of repetition hold all prose together. Each sentence both repeats something from previous sentences—a word, a synonym, or an idea—while adding something new to the information readers already possess.

Even in this short paragraph by Robert C. Post you can see a pattern of connectors at work:

New Yorkers always had a keen appreciation for transportation innovations, and in fact the first locomotive built in the United States came from the West Point Foundry in New York City. But New Yorkers had just celebrated the opening of the Erie Canal, tapping a western hinterland. Thus, enthusiasm for railways was strongest in cities which had not yet done so with their own hinterland, including Boston, Charleston, and particularly Baltimore, the third largest city in the country with a population nearing 80,000. For none of these cities did a canal like the Erie appear to be a viable option. A railroad was.⁹

Look for similar connectors in the paragraphs of historical accounts as you read, and think about them when you write. Doing so will help you develop greater coherence to your thought, and you can develop a feel for what should be in a paragraph and what should not.

Keep Sentences Manageable

Your sentences, too, should always focus on the most important idea you want to make in that statement. Try not to entangle your sentences with other information you cannot readily develop or that is not related directly to some previous information in your essay. One way to keep sentences manageable is to avoid multiplying dependent clauses, which act as adjectives or adverbs and modify other elements in a sentence. We do not want to suggest you should avoid dependent clauses altogether, rather that you should not make them so numerous they cause you to lose control of your sentences and make your prose difficult to read. You will help keep your thinking clear if in writing sentences you think first of the subject, then of what you want to say

⁹ Robert C. Post, *Technology, Transport, and Travel in American History* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2003), 44; we have deleted source citations.

about it. It seldom improves your writing to bury your real subject in a dependent clause. Indeed, most readable writers use dependent clauses only once or twice in every three or four sentences.

Here is a fine, readable paragraph by historians Oscar and Lilian Handlin, from their book, *Liberty in Expansion*; note the close relation between subjects and verbs in the sentences—even in the dependent clauses.

The healing image meant much to a government, not all of whose statesmen were pure of heart and noble of impulse. On January 30, 1798, the House of Representatives being in session in Philadelphia, Mr. Rufus Griswold of Connecticut alluded to a story that Mr. Matthew Lyon of Vermont had been forced to wear a wooden sword for cowardice in the field. Thereupon Mr. Lyon spat in Mr. Griswold's face. Sometime later, Mr. Griswold went to Macalister's store on Chestnut Street and bought the biggest hickory stick available. He proceeded to the House, where, in the presence of the whole Congress and with Mr. Speaker urging him on, he beat Mr. Lyon about the head and shoulders. An effort to censure both actors in the drama failed.¹⁰

Making sure you connect the subjects of your sentences closely to the verbs which describe the actions they are taking—and that you use singular subjects with singular verbs, and plural subjects with plural verbs—will also help you focus on another important stylistic element of good writing.

Avoid the Passive Voice

In sentences using the passive voice, the verb acts on the subject. In the active voice, the subject acts through the verb. Here is a sentence in the active voice:

President John F. Kennedy made the decision to invade Cuba.

¹⁰ Oscar and Lilian Handlin, *Liberty in Expansion: 1760–1850* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 160.

And here is a sentence in the passive voice:

The decision was made to invade Cuba.

You can see at once a problem with using the passive voice. It often hides the actor in the sentence. In the active voice we know who made the decision. In the passive voice we do not know who made the decision unless we add the clumsy prepositional phrase by *President John F. Kennedy* at the end.

Readable historians use the passive only when they have a reason for doing so. Use the passive when the obvious importance of the sentence is that the subject is acted upon:

Bill Clinton was elected to a second term as President of the United States in November 1996.

The passive may also help keep the focus of a paragraph on a person or group where the agent is understood throughout. In the following paragraph from a history of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and afterward, the passive is used several times. We have indicated clauses using the passive in italics. Study them to understand how the author, Orlando Figes, uses the passive voice:

The Kronstadt Naval Base, an island of sailor-militants in the Gulf of Finland just off Petrograd, was by far the most rebellious stronghold of this Bolshevik vanguard. The sailors were young trainees who had seen very little military activity during the war. They had spent the previous year cooped up on board their ships with their officers, who treated them with more than the usual sadistic brutality since the normal rules of naval discipline did not apply to trainees. Each ship was a tinderbox of hatred and violence. During the February Days the sailors mutinied with awesome ferocity. *Admiral Viren, the Base Commander, was hacked to death with bayonets, and dozens of other officers were murdered, lynched or imprisoned in the island dungeons. The old naval hierarchy was completely destroyed* and effective power passed to the Kronstadt Soviet. It was an October in February. *The authority of the Provisional Government was never really established, nor was military order restored.* Kerensky, the Minister of Justice, proved utterly powerless in his repeated efforts to gain

jurisdiction over the imprisoned officers, *despite rumours in the bourgeois press that they had been brutally tortured.*¹¹

The focus of the paragraph is the consequence of the uprising of the sailors at Kronstadt. Thus, in this paragraph, the passive helps to keep that focus.

Our best advice is this: When you use the passive voice, ask yourself *why* you are doing so. If you do not have a clear reason for the passive, rewrite your sentence using the active voice.

Write About the Past in the Past Tense

Inexperienced writers also sometimes strive for dramatic effect by shifting their prose into the historical present. They may write something like this:

The issue as Calvin Coolidge sees it is this: The government has been intervening too much in private affairs. He is now the head of the government. He will do as little as possible. He keeps silent when people ask him favors. He says things like this: "The chief business of the American people is business." He does not believe the government should intervene in the business process. Within a year after Coolidge leaves office, the Great Depression begins.

Such an effort is usually intended to provide life to the drama of history, to make it seem that it is all happening again as we read. But the effort is frequently counterproductive; overuse of the present tense can become tedious after a while and is often confusing. In American, as well as British historical convention, it is most appropriate to use the past tense to write about the past. It is, however, permissible to use

¹¹ Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1997), 394–395.

the present tense in describing a piece of writing (even the transcript of a speech) or a work of art because such works are assumed always to be present to the person who reads it or observes it.

However, you may often do better using the past tense. This is especially true when you do not intend to give an extended summary of the work, as in this example:

In his "Cross of Gold" speech delivered at the Democratic National Convention in 1896, William Jennings Bryan took the side of the impoverished farmers who thought that inflation would help raise the prices they received for their crops.

In this case, the emphasis is on Bryan rather than on the speech itself; thus the simple past tense seems more appropriate. Again, keeping the focus on what is most important in your writing is your best guide.

Sometimes our students copy a similar pattern from what they hear on television, and in particular from sportscasters who have adopted dramatic phrasing in an attempt to make their reports more exciting. The football play-by-play announcer who describes a touch-down run ("he would go all the way!") seems to have influenced the misuse of conditional statements concerning the past in too many student essays. Much better simply to use the past tense in the historical stories you write. Take special care only to use conditional statements in an appropriate historical context, as did Professor James Grehan in beginning his essay, which we quoted at the beginning of Chapter 1:

This tolerant consensus did not emerge all at once. After its first arrival in the Ottoman Middle East at the end of the sixteenth century, tobacco would ignite intense debates about its legality and morality. The altercation in the streets of Cairo highlights these divisions of opinion.¹²

¹² Grehan, "Great Tobacco Debate," 1352.

When helping your readers understand the sequence of historical events, such constructions can occasionally be useful. But you will help them most when writing about the past by using the past tense in your essays.

Connect Your First and Last Paragraphs

You will also help your readers keep the central message of your essay clear in their minds if you make sure the first and last paragraphs have some obvious relations. In most published writing—the first and last paragraphs of a book, or chapters in a book—have such coherence. You can read them without reading the intervening material and have at least a fairly good idea of what comes between. Now and then you will find a piece of writing where the first and last paragraphs do not have a clear verbal connection. But writers wishing to be sure that their work holds together can help their efforts by seeing to it that each essay ends in a paragraph that reflects some words and thoughts appearing in the first. Notice how Penny Sonnenburg's essay in Appendix A is constructed in this way. Turn through the pages of *The American Historical Review* or the *Journal of World History*, or even popular journals of opinion such as *The Atlantic* or *The New Yorker*, and you will see that first and last paragraphs mirror each other in most of the essays.

WORD FORMS AND PUNCTUATION

Careful attention as you read historical works will also provide examples of the careful use of words and punctuation. And it should be readily apparent, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, that simple and direct writing is more difficult than speaking. Sometimes in the physical labor of writing, our minds wander, and we make errors using words and punctuation. That is, we violate conventions. Most people can spot such errors by reading their work carefully aloud. You can usually trust your ear. When something does not

sound right, try changing it. Having someone else read what you have written can also be invaluable, whether informally at your invitation or as part of a peer editing process. We would also encourage you to seek advice, not least from your instructor. For many years, American college students also have benefited from the suggestions of William Strunk and E. B. White in *The Elements of Style*, now in a fourth edition,¹³ and we recommend it to you. But the following suggestions about a few common writing difficulties will provide a start as you seek to improve your writing and develop a readable style and voice for your essays.

Keep Modifiers Under Control

Adjectives modify nouns, while adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Both adjectives and adverbs can sometimes weaken the concept of the words they modify. A good adjective or adverb, however, when well used in a necessary place, can brighten a sentence. Our best advice is to use both sparingly. The proportion of one adjective to every 12 or 13 words is fairly constant among published writers in America. The proportion of adverbs to other words is somewhat less. Of course, these proportions are not absolute; for some purposes you may have to use more. But be sure you need the adjectives and adverbs you use.

You may also use descriptive participial phrases, often to open sentences. But you must be sure they modify the subject you intend; otherwise you run the risk of making your prose incomprehensible and perhaps even ridiculous to readers. For example, consider this sentence:

Living in a much less violent society, the idea that every man, woman, and child in the United States has a right to his or her very own assault rifle seems ridiculous to most Canadians.

¹³ William Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999).

Who or what lives in that less violent society? The idea? The sentence is much clearer if rewritten like this:

Living in a much less violent society, Canadians find ridiculous the idea that every man, woman, and child in the United States has the right to his or her very own assault rifle.

Keep such qualifying phrases close to the words they are intended to modify, just as you would with adjectives and adverbs.

Be Certain Pronouns Refer to Antecedents

Pronouns stand for nouns that are said to be the *antecedent* of the pronoun. Definite pronouns, such as *he*, *she*, *it*, *him*, *her*, *they*, *them*, and *their*, stand for nouns that usually appear somewhere before them in a sentence or paragraph. Be sure to make the pronoun reference clear even if you must revise the sentence considerably. You will confuse readers if you write:

The Czechs disdained the Slovaks because they were more cosmopolitan.

To whom does the pronoun *they* refer? Were the Czechs or the Slovaks more cosmopolitan? You would do better to rewrite the sentence, like this:

The more cosmopolitan Czechs disdained the more rural Slovaks.

While the original may be perfectly clear to you, your readers will much appreciate the revised version.

Form Plurals and Possessives of Nouns Accurately

Be sure to note differences between plurals and collective nouns. For example, the singular is *peasant*, the plural is *peasants*, but the collective class in European history is called the *peasantry*. We may call a

man or woman who works in a factory a *proletarian*, and a group of them on an assembly line might be called by Marxists *proletarians*. But Marx called the whole class the *proletariat*. We may speak of a *noble* or an *aristocrat* when we speak of highest social ranks in some societies, and a group of such people would be called *nobles* or *aristocrats*, but the whole class is called the *nobility* or the *aristocracy*.

Take care not to use an apostrophe to form a plural. Do not write,

The Wilsons' went to Washington.

The correct form is

The Wilsons went to Washington.

The plurals of dates and acronyms do not use the apostrophe. So you should write about the 1960s or the NCOs (noncommissioned officers such as sergeants) in the armed forces.

The apostrophe is used for the possessive, showing ownership or a particular relation. Some writers and editors add only an apostrophe to singular nouns ending in *s*. But we believe the better practice is to make the possessive of these words as you would do others, like this:

Erasmus's works
Chambers's book

For plural nouns that end in *s*, add just an apostrophe to form the possessive:

the Germans' plan
the neighbors' opinions

For plurals that do not end in *s*, form the possessive as you would for singular nouns:

women's history
children's rights

Distinguish Spoken and Written Versions of Common Words

The contraction *it's* stands for *it is* or, sometimes, *it has*. The possessive pronoun *its* means “belonging to it.” Here are some examples:

It's almost impossible to guarantee safe travel.

It's been hard to measure the effects on the country.

The idea had lost *its* power before 1900.

Similarly, you should distinguish appropriately between the contraction *you're*, which stands for *you are*, the possessive *your*, and the noun *yore* occasionally used to describe the past. Each of these should be used as in the following examples:

You're going to the picnic, aren't you?

Will you take *your* umbrella?

We'll have a good time, just as we did in days of *yore*.

You will recognize that these distinctions are ones your word processor's spell checking program will not recognize, so they require you to be especially diligent in proofreading. Similar confusions abound with the words *site*—as in *Web site* or *historic site*—and *sight*, which describes what we do with our eyes; the verb *cite* can also cause confusion with these, especially since it is coming into unfortunate use as a noun in place of a *citation* you would make to document your sources. Perhaps the most common such error we see in student essays is the accidental confusion between plural possessive *their* and the noun or adverb *there*, specifying a particular place, and occasionally the contraction *they're* (for *they are*). Pay careful attention to these differences! Your failure to do so will often mark your essay as particularly careless.

Use Objective Case Pronouns Appropriately

The nominative or subjective forms of pronouns include *I*, *we*, *he*, *she*, *who*, *they*, and *those*. The objective forms include versions such as *me*, *us*, *him*, *her*, *whom*, and *them*. The nominative is used as the subject of a sentence or a clause:

I read Huizinga's books.

The Prince said *he* was not the king's son.

The objective should be used for the object of a preposition:

It was a matter between *him* and *me*.

Between you and *me*, I made a mistake.

And the objective should be used in an indirect object:

The President gave *her* a cabinet position.

Objective forms should be used as the subject or an object of an infinitive verb. The infinitive is the verb form that includes the infinitive marker *to* and the dictionary form of the verb. Thus *to go*, *to be*, *to dwell*, and *to see* are all infinitives. The subject of the infinitive is a noun or pronoun that comes before the infinitive in a sentence, that does the action the infinitive expresses:

King Leopold wanted *him* to go at once to Africa.

In the preceding example, the person designated by the objective pronoun *him* will go to Africa. Since he will do the going—the action expressed in the infinitive *to go*—the pronoun *him*—is the subject of the infinitive and is in the objective case.

Maintain Parallel Form for a Series

English and American writers often use words or phrases in a series, but the units in the series must stand as grammatical equals. Therefore, you should *not* write sentences like this:

Richelieu wanted three things for France—
authority for the king, an end to religious strife,
and he also wanted secure “natural” frontiers.

This series begins with nouns modified by prepositional phrases, but the last element is a clause. The sentence should be rewritten something like this:

Richelieu wanted three things for France—
authority for the king, an end to religious strife,
and secure “natural” frontiers.

Similar attention to the details of your writing apply to matters of punctuation, and will likewise help readers understand the intentions of your essays.

Use Commas and Semicolons Appropriately

Independent clauses—which could stand alone as sentences—can be separated from one another by commas, but only when you use linking words. Without the linking words, you should use semicolons. Do not join independent clauses with commas alone. Study these appropriate examples:

The McNary-Haugen bill would have provided subsidies for American farmers, but President Coolidge vetoed it in 1927.

The people of the United States decided that they must give up Prohibition; the law brought about too many social disruptions.

You should, however, use commas to set off long introductory phrases:

Even after the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1867, some pioneers still made the trip West by covered wagon.

Also use commas to separate items—whether words or phrases—in a series:

President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved to solve problems of unemployment, banking, and despair.

William Jennings Bryan campaigned for the presidency in 1896 by traveling 18,000 miles, making 600 speeches, and attacking the “moneyed interests.”

However, if the series follows a colon, the items should be separated by semicolons:

William Jennings Bryan campaigned for the presidency in 1896 while insisting on several key positions, which included: attacking the “moneyed interests”; supporting farmers; and promoting the silver standard.

Similarly, you can use commas to set off nonrestrictive words and phrases, when you can substitute the word *and* for the comma and still have a sensible sentence:

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a tall, frail, and elegant man.

In this case you could write instead, “Ralph Waldo Emerson was a tall and frail and elegant man.” But do not use commas between adjectives where you cannot sensibly replace the comma with *and*. You can say:

The three old maple trees stood on the hill.

But you *cannot* say:

The three and old and maple trees stood on the hill.

Carefully Present and Punctuate Quotations

When you use quotations in your essays, you should take special care in your use of punctuation, as well as lowercase and capital letters. If the quotation is to blend into the text of your essay, change lowercase and capital letters, as well as punctuation, so that the quotation will fit into your own sentence.

Kipling urged Americans "to take up the White Man's burden."

You do not need to use brackets to indicate you have made such changes, nor should you use ellipsis marks (three dots, like this . . . ; some word processing programs may insert them automatically, without spaces, like this ...) at the beginning or end of the quotation. The quotation marks are sufficient to indicate you are beginning your quotation at that point. However, you *should* use ellipsis marks to indicate any words you have left out in the middle of a quotation; but if the deleted material includes a period, you should use four ellipsis marks.

Commas and periods, no matter whether they were in the original or you insert them as a part of your own sentences using quotations, should go *inside* the quotation marks. This will make what you write clearer to readers, which should be the goal for all that you write. However, a question mark at the end of a quotation goes within the final quotation marks only if the quotation itself is a question. If you are using the quotation as part of a question which you wish to pose, then the question mark should go outside the quotation marks. The same is true of exclamations. Semicolons and colons always go outside the final quotation marks, no matter if they were in the original quotation or not.

Any quotation longer than four or five lines in your essay should be indented five spaces and set up as a block within your text. Double-space such block quotations, and do not enclose them with quotation marks. The only quotation marks you should use with block quotations are those that appear within the original source you are quoting. Your instructor may want you to put block quotations in single-space text as your essays usually will not be for publication. Since it is difficult to edit single-spaced text, you would, however, always double-space any material intended for publication. The quotations we have used from the works of other historians in this book should serve as models of how you can use quotations from your sources in your own essays.

THE FINAL PRESENTATION

No matter how diligent you are in developing an appropriate writing voice and finding a consistent style, the appearance of your essay—in either an electronic or print version—tells readers many things about you as a writer. A slovenly, scarcely readable version signals a writer who cares little for the subject or for readers. As a writer you may care deeply; make sure your readers can see this from the final version you present to them. Computers make things easier for writers and readers alike, and most writers and students nowadays use computers with word processing programs. Take advantage of the capabilities of the computer and create a clean copy of your essay.

Using your word processing program, take special care to eliminate typographical errors, misspellings, words left out or duplicated, and other such mistakes. Also number the pages of your essay, even if it will be submitted only in an electronic version. Every word processing program will allow you to do so; figure out the steps your program uses to number pages, and use them to insert page numbers into your essay. Your instructor may give you other specific directions.

about formatting your essay. Follow them. Lacking instructions, you usually will not go wrong if you follow the format of the model research paper in Appendix A of this book. Once you have completed these final corrections and formatting, you can save the final version of your essay—making sure to keep several copies, not all of them saved on your computer alone!

If a printed version of your essay is required, once you have saved the electronic file you can finally print a clean copy. Again, follow any instructions you have been given, but if you have none, here are some suggestions. Use a good quality 8 1/2 × 11-inch white bond paper. Double-space the essay and print it on one side of the page only. Leave margins wide enough for comments your instructor may wish to make, no less than one inch on the top, bottom, and each side. Use Times New Roman, Bookman Old Style, Courier, or some other clean, easy-to-read type font and be sure the ink from the printer is dark enough to be read easily. If you must, and if your instructor will accept a handwritten essay, use lined white paper and write in dark blue or black ink on every line. Use a cover page giving your name, the name of your instructor, the name of your course, and the time your class meets. Fasten the pages of your essay with a paper clip or with a staple in the upper left-hand corner. Binders, however, are almost always a nuisance to the instructor, adding bulk and making it awkward to write comments in the margins. It seldom is helpful to use them.

The presentation of your essay—as an electronic file or a printed paper—is the last place where your adherence to historians' conventions is evident. But it is the first impression your instructor will have of your essay! Take advantage of that opportunity. But remember, if you ignore the conventions, you may discover that the grade you receive may be less than you desire.

Writer's Checklist for Expression and Conventions

- _____ ✓ What must I include in my narrative? What might I leave out?
- _____ ✓ Have I based my descriptions on sound evidence?

- _____ ✓ Do the descriptions bring sensory experience to mind?
- _____ ✓ Are my inferences credible and clearly explained?
- _____ ✓ Have I argued persuasively?
- _____ ✓ Are my paragraphs coherent and sentences manageable?
- _____ ✓ Does my writing favor active voice and past tense?
- _____ ✓ Does my conclusion mirror my opening argument?
- _____ ✓ Have I taken care to use words appropriately?
- _____ ✓ Is punctuation used according to common conventions?
- _____ ✓ Are quotations clearly and appropriately set apart?