How to Do Things with Words
Freshman Writing Seminar:
Kravis 166
Fall 2014

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Office Hours:
MW 4-5 PM
or by appointment

Texts (paper versions of these editions required):

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Dover Thrift)
Honoré de Balzac, *Père Goriot* (Norton Critical)
Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (Scribner's)
Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (Viking)
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Patience, trans. Marie Boroff (Norton)
Mark Griffith, et al., eds., *Greek Tragedies* (Book 1) (Chicago)
August Kleinzahler, *Sleeping It Off In Rapid City* (FSG)
Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* (Folger Shakespeare Library)

E-Texts on Sakai:

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" and "Shooting an Elephant"
Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal"
William Johnson, "Punctuation" (from The Handbook of Good English)
Farrell, "Technical Aspects of Writing"
Farrell, "Terms for Tragedy"
Farrell, "Thirteen Steps toward a Successful Literary Analysis"

Meetings (no computers or other electronic devices permitted):

Introduction: Sept 3
Epic: *The Iliad*: Sept 8, 10, 15, 17, 22 & 24 (essay due noon Friday, **Sept 26**)
Tragedy: *Oedipus the King*: Sep 29, Oct 1 & 6 (essay due before class **Oct 6**)
Adventure: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Oct 8 & 13
Satire: "A Modest Proposal": Oct 15
FALL BREAK: Oct 20
Essay: Orwell, "Politics & English Language" & "Shooting an Elephant": Oct 22 (personal essay due by email at noon on Friday, **Oct 24**)
Comedy: *Much Ado About Nothing*: Oct 27 & 29
Novel: *Pride and Prejudice*: Nov 3, 5, & 10
Novel: *Père Goriot:* Nov 12, 17 & 19 (essay due noon Friday, **Nov 21**)
Novel: *The Sun Also Rises*: Nov 24, 26, & Dec 1
Lyric: Introduction (essay due by email before class): **Dec 3**
Lyric: *Sleeping It Off In Rapid City*: Dec 8 & 10

Requirements: Essays of one thousand words will be due on Sept 26, Oct 6, Oct 24, November 21, and Dec 10. One will be a personal essay (Oct 24) and one a fiction-writing assignment (Dec 3). For class meetings, students will write 250-300 words (double-spaced) on a topic assigned at the previous class. These essays will be the basis for a brief talk given by students chosen at

random at the beginning of each class. Longer essays will be submitted by email, short essays on paper. There will be no final exam.

Grading: Longer essays: 60%. Short essays and talks: 25%. Class participation: 15%. Later essays will be weighted more heavily than earlier ones.

Maxims on Style[1]

1. Save the point of a sentence for the end.

2. Get to the main verb as quickly as possible.

3. Make the topic of your paragraph the grammatical subject of as many sentences as possible.

4. Make the main action conveyed in each sentence the main verb of the sentence.

5. Use the passive voice when it keeps the topic in the subject position.

6. Avoid nouns made out of verbs (nominalizations) unless to sum up the previous sentence. *Nominalizations (like this one) clog the brain.*

7. Avoid adjectives and adverbs unless they are crucial to the point of the sentence.

8. When you feel tempted to stick an extra thought inside a sentence, ask yourself if it deserves a sentence of its own. If it does, give it one. If not, cut it.

9. *Take the obvious for granted!*

10. Subordinate evidence to argument.

11. Once you've drafted your essay, go back and cut every unnecessary word.

12. When you have a choice between sounding smart and being clear, be clear.

13. Don't try to sound like a book. *Dare to be simple, clear, and direct!*

14. Mix short and longer sentences.

15. Break all these rules when an improvement results.

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[1] Partly based on Joseph Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

How to Give a Talk

1. Greet the audience
2. Address the subject directly
3. Propose a significant thesis
4. Provide evidence from the text to support your thesis
5. Subordinate evidence to argument and avoid summary
6. Comment on the quotations you have made
7. Address apparent counter-evidence or potential objections
8. Finish with a trenchant recapitulation or by widening the perspective of your discussion
9. Invite questions effectively
10. Conduct discussion fluidly and democratically
11. Keep eye contact
12. Maintain a still posture whether you are standing or sitting
13. Avoid filler ("like," "you know," etc.)

Key to "Technical Aspects of Writing"

1. Apostrophes
2. Colons
3. Commas
4. Compound Predicates
5. Dashes
6. Footnotes
7. Hyphens
8. Infinitives
9. Italics & Underlining
10. Parenthetical marks
11. Participles
12. Passive Voice
13. Quotation Marks
14. Quotations
15. Semicolons
16. Subj-Verb Agreement
17. Subordinate Clauses

18. Tense
19. Titles

Favorite Student Errors

20. Adjectives and adverbs made from nouns
21. Ambiguous referent
22. Blind comparisons and contrasts
23. Colloquialism
24. Commas before *but*
25. Compound adjectives
26. Conjunctions beginning sentences
27. Definitive and parenthetical phrases and clauses
28. Journalese
29. Legalese
30. Misnumbered pronouns
31. Mixed metaphors
32. Possessives
33. Psychobabble and sociobabble
34. Quoting yourself
35. Tautology

Frequently Misused Words

36. *Be* and *exist*
37. *Between* and *among*
38. *Disrespect*
39. *Fewer* and *less*
40. *Human*
41. *Impact*
42. *In* and *within*
43. *Infers* and *implies*
44. *Lifestyle*
45. *Like* and *as*
46. *Majority* and *greater part*
47. *Mindset*
48. *Moral* and *immoral*; *ethical* and *unethical*
49. *Novel* and *poem*
50. *Quotation*
51. *Reference*
52. *Simple* and *simplistic*
53. *Society*
54. *Story-line*, *scenario*, and *plot*
55. *Through*
56. *Throughout*
57. *Transform*
58. *Transition*
59. *Use*
60. *Utilize*
61. *Who* and *that*

Plagiarism

Selected Favorite Student Errors

4. Commas. The comma is the most discretionary and multifarious mark of punctuation, and only five of its uses will be mentioned here:

(1) Separating an opening adverbial clause from the body of a sentence:

> **From the time Luther launched the Reformation until the end of the Thirty Years' War, Europe was in turmoil.**

For briefer opening clauses, the comma can often be omitted:

> **Since yesterday I have received three offers of employment.**

(2) Separating interpolated attitudinal gestures from the rest of the sentence:

> **He will arrive, I'm sure, in his own good time.**
>
> **It's true, on the other hand, that she got there first.**
>
> **On the contrary, I loved trout-fishing at the time.**
>
> **There remains, to be sure, a considerable task ahead.**
>
> **It came, alas, no more.**

(3) Separating the elements of a list, as in this great line from Samuel Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes," listing human evils:

> **Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail.**

Note that if the list ends with a conjunction such as *and*, the next-to-last entry should still have a comma after it, as with the list containing *Aristotle, Joan of Arc, Oscar Wilde, and Virginia Woolf.* (But note also that many American writers prefer to leave off the comma and that some even take the final comma to be incorrect.)

(4) Opening up a parenthetical space in order to add information (modification) to a subject, verb, or object. Unless this modification comes at the beginning or the end of a sentence, you will need two commas. *Most errors with commas involve the omission of one of the pair.* Think of commas in pairs as weak parentheses and you will avoid this error. To place one comma between subject and verb, or verb and object, is a mistake; to place two, with some additional information inside them, is correct:

> **Anthony, answering his mother's call, went, with all of his baggage upon him, lazily and meanderingly home.**

(See also the item on confusing definitive and parenthetical clauses.)

(5) Preceding a coordinating conjunction in linking two independent clauses (ones that could stand on their own as sentences). The most common coordinating conjunctions are *and* and *but*:

Commas are grand, but they'd better be planned.

If there is no conjunction separating independent clauses, use a semi-colon. A comma is not enough. Correct:

Commas may be a girl's best friend; you can't use them, though, to come to an end.

Incorrect:

Don't put a comma here, those who do so will be crying in their beer.

Note: *because* is not a coordinating conjunction and so need not have a comma before it. It is fine to say,

He lost the job because he was late.

English teachers, alas, often correct this, adding a comma where it isn't needed.

14. Quotations. Quotations can be integrated with your own syntax by using such words as *writes* or *states*, in which case commas separate the quotation from your own sentence:

"Religion," Marx tells us, "is the opium of the masses."

Quotations can also be run into your own syntax without punctuation:

Charles Dickens called the late eighteenth century both "the best of times" and "the worst of times."

Quotations can also be introduced without a verbal signal.

The report was brief. "Someone had blundered."

Use single quotation marks for quotations within quotations. If you are quoting poetry use a slash (/) with one space before and after to mark the end of each line: "**The expense of spirit in a waste of shame/ Is lust in action. . . ."**

A quotation of more than two and a half lines should be set as a block (indented ten spaces from the left margin), preserving its original line breaks just as they appear in the text:

Of man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world and all our woe. . . .

(*Paradise Lost*, I, 1-3)

Note that when poetry is quoted, as in this example, you should cite the title (if this is not clear from the text), the book number, and the line number. Obviously, if you are setting off a quotation from the text in a block, there is no need of quotation marks unless the excerpted material is within quotation marks in the original text.

See also "Quotation" below for misuse of this word.

30. Misnumbered pronouns. Pronouns must agree in gender and in number with what they represent. *When a person raises the cover of a book, they often have no idea what risks they are taking.* In this sentence, *they* is incorrect because the referent of the pronoun, *a person*, is singular rather than plural. We shift instinctively into the plural nowadays in order to avoid the gender problem; we do not want to use *he* as a universal pronoun, but we are also too lazy to say *he or she. One* is an option:

When one raises the cover of a book, one often has no idea what risks one is taking.

This is better, but a little cumbersome. (Note that it is incorrect to write that *When one raises the cover of a book, he often has no idea. . . .* If you start with *one*, you must stick to it). Frequently, the best solution to this problem is to shift into the plural:

Those who raise the cover of a book often have no idea what risks they are taking.

This is much less awkward than using *one*.

Plagiarism refers to the use of the words or ideas of others without giving them explicit credit for what has been borrowed. Whenever the ideas you express in writing (or, in most cases, public speaking) are not your own, you must explicitly acknowledge your sources. In scholarly writing, this acknowledgment must take the form of a citation of the author, title, and other bibliographical information about the work in question, including the pages where the cited material can be found. Generally it is best, when making use of information you have gained from others, to deploy your own words. If, however, you find it more effective to use the words of another author, you must show that they are not own your by putting them in quotation marks or setting them off from your own text by indentation. All quoted words must be identified as quotations: footnoting alone is not an adequate form of citation in cases where you are importing words as well as ideas. This means that you must be very careful, when taking notes on your sources, to mark all quoted words as quotations. And the accuracy of quotations should always be double-checked.

Plagiarism is cheating. It is a serious breach of intellectual ethics, and those who commit it at the Claremont Colleges are subject to the gravest academic penalties, typically including suspension for the first offense. Because of the entrance statement that all CMC students sign, none can plead ignorance as to the nature or significance of plagiarism.

As a wise Frenchman once observed, "We are never so easily fooled as when we set out to fool others."[2] The internet has made it easier to pilfer other people's words; it has also made such pilfering easier to catch. There is an expanding number of Web resources for locating printed or electronic materials on the basis of just a few words, and I along with many of my CMC colleagues make use of them, too often with unpleasant results. We also keep searchable banks of past papers in order to help us identify recycled material. The ingenuity you will need to make even a weak attempt at frustrating this system would be better spent in the development of your own powers of thought and expression, an activity that poses nothing but benefits for your future and no risks of disgrace before your family, friends, and fellow students.

2. Duc de la Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, ed. Jacques Truchet (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1976), no. 117, p. 32, my own translation.