Technical Aspects of Writing

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Technical Aspects of Writing

1. **Apostrophes (').** To form the possessive of a singular noun, add an apostrophe and an *s* (*dean's list*). To form the possessive of a plural noun ending in *s*, add only an apostrophe (*terrorists' luggage*). To form the possessive of any singular proper noun (name), add an apostrophe and an *s* (*Agamemnon's armor*) unless the name already ends in *s*. Then you must uses discretion. In some cases, such as *Achilles's shield*, the sound of an apostrophe and an s is simply too awkward. To form the possessive of any plural proper noun, add only an apostrophe (*the Argives' sufferings*). [1]

2. **Colons (:).** The colon is the mark of anticipation or expectation. It means *Here comes. . . .* Use it to introduce a list:

    > **There are three possible explanations: greed, carelessness, and stupidity.**

    Also use a colon to separate titles from subtitles or to introduce any quotation that is not integrated with the structure of your own sentence:

    > **Remember the words of Sir Edward Mallory: "Because it was there."**

3. **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, <u>I'm sure</u>, in his own good time.**

    > **It's true, <u>on the other hand</u>, that she got there first.**

    > **<u>On the contrary</u>, I loved trout-fishing at the time.**

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1. In this document, I have used italics for words that are mentioned rather than used (as an alternative, in other words, to quotations marks), and I have used underlining to draw the reader's attention to the words that are aimed in the examples. I have put correct examples in bold, while examples of error remain in ordinary type

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.

4. **Compound predicates**. When two verbs share a single subject and are separated by a conjunction, there should be no comma before the conjunction:

> **They kicked and punched each other mercilessly.**

> **The manner of his death shocked his admirers and saddened the world.**

5. **Dashes (—).** Do not confuse a dash with a hyphen. A dash is typed as two hyphens with no space before, between, or after. I discuss the parenthetical uses of the dash under "parenthetical marks." You may also use a single dash to indicate a suspension of grammatical order, particularly when summarizing an introductory series:

> **Incorruptibility, nonchalance, and perfect grammar— these are the marks of a successful student.**

Do not overuse the single dash as a nondescript way of indicating a break—a vice much practiced by social scientists. In most cases, a comma, a semicolon, or a colon will be more appropriate.

6. **Footnotes.** It is not generally necessary for students to provide a footnote when referring to required readings in a course. The pages can be given parenthetically in the text. The first reference to other works should be cited in the following form: Author's first and last name, *Title* (Place of publication: publisher, date of publication), page number.

> **Nicholas O. Warner, <u>Spirits of America: Intoxication in Nineteenth-Century American Literature</u> (Norman, OK : University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 108.**

7. *Hyphens (-).* A hyphen is a single stroke separating the parts of compound words. Compound adjectives require a hyphen, as in:

> **eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history**

> **she was well-respected but not well-liked**

> **an upper-class education**

> **that hurt, where-have-you-been expression**

Note that the related noun expressions do not typically require the hyphen: we don't need a hyphen to refer to *the nineteenth century* or the *upper class.*

Some compound nouns also take a hyphen: *dining-room, dry-cleaning, drive-in, drop-out*. Unfortunately, there are no good rules for telling which ones.

In some cases, hyphens separate prefixes from the main word: *anti-Freudian, re-covering* (as opposed to *recovering*), and, recently, *re-gift*. Frequently, when a new, hyphenated compound becomes familiar, the hyphen disappears, as in *postmodern* (which started off as *post-modern*), whereas, in other cases, such as *pre-industrial*, the hyphen remains because it is useful in separating two vowels.

8. **Infinitive.** Grammarians once considered it incorrect to put a modifier between *to* and the infinitive form of the verb, as in the phrase *To boldly go*, a well-known split infinitive from outer space. Split infinitives are now so common even in scholarly writing that one may use one's judgment and one's ear about them on a case-by-case basis. It will never be acceptable, however, to put *not* or *never* inside the infinitive, as in colloquial usage such as *I decided to not go.* Neither can *even* come inside the infinitive, as in *Achilles refused to even eat.*

9. **Italics and Underlining.** In addition to the titles of books, italicize or underline any word referred to as a word (you may also use quotation marks), and any foreign word or phrase unless it is a proper noun, is in a quotation, or has become an ordinary part of English usage (use a dictionary to determine this). You may also italicize or underline, but very sparingly, for emphasis. Underlining on a typewriter is used to indicate italics in print, so if your word-processing program has italics, you may use it in place of underlining, but do so consistently.

10. **Parenthetical marks.** There are three ways to open up a parenthetical space within a sentence in order to add supplementary information: the comma (','), the dash ('—'), and the parenthesis proper ('( )'). The comma is the weakest, a mere sprinkle, a glimmer of elegance; the dash is more dramatic—a salt shaker pouring out in the middle of a sentence—which can be helpful if you want to take your reader a bit by surprise; parentheses are the strongest (coping with them is often like trying to hold a thought in the middle of a train wreck), and so they are to be used very sparingly. As with commas, if you use one parenthetical dash or one parenthesis, you must use another one unless, in the case of a dash or comma, the parenthetical clause comes at the beginning or the end of a sentence.

11. **Participles.** A participial phrase must be clearly attached to the subject that it modifies. If there is no identifiable subject in the sentence, or if the subject is not immediately adjacent to the participle, the participle is said to be "dangling." Example:

Hanging from the trees, we saw the monkeys.

Who was hanging, we or the monkeys? In my opinion, sentence-opening participles are generally to be avoided, except where the person or thing to which the participle refers has been established in the previous sentence. I would not write, for instance:

Playing polo during the day but reading history late into the evening, Churchill made good use of his time in India.

It takes too long to get to the subject. It is fine, however, to write,

Churchill made good use of his time in India. Playing polo during the day but reading history late into the evening, he made up for the years he had wasted at Sandhurst.

12. **Passive Voice.** When an action is described in the passive voice, the agent or specific cause of the action is left out, sometimes producing unnecessary vagueness. There are times, though, when it is advantageous to leave the agent or cause out of the question. In the first sentence of this paragraph, I used the passive voice because the agent involved in the action described there is irrelevant; my sentence covers all uses of the passive voice, no matter who the agent may be. Under other circumstances, the agent may be unknown, making the passive quite natural: **My bicycle was stolen** is just as natual, and just as informative, as **Someone stole my bicycle**, and it conveys a slightly different, more detached, tone.

In cases where you want to emphasize the recipient of an action more than any other feature of it, the passive may be the most effective voice to use:

During the course of his adventure, he was mussed up by tornadoes, inconvenienced by pirates, outraged by mosquitos, tickled by snakes, discolored by birds, hassled by gorillas, demoralized by monkeys, cheated by tourists, and very badly fed.

13. **Quotation Marks.** In American usage (British differs), periods and commas always go inside quotation marks; colons and semicolons go outside; question and exclamation marks go inside or outside depending on whether they belong to the quoted material or to your own sentence. The placement of the exclamation point makes *They said "No!"* quite different from *They said "No"!* Note that when you are using an indented, block quotation, you don't need quotation marks unless they are there in the original.

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 <u>unless the excerpted material is within quotation marks in the original text</u>.

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

15. **Semicolons (;).** In current American usage, semicolons separate main or independent clauses without a conjunction:

    It may have been there; I, however, did not see it.

    They also separate items in a series when the individual items contain commas or come before certain weak conjunctions: *then, however, thus, hence, indeed, accordingly, besides,* and *therefore*.

    Emma contacted me; therefore, I will reply.

    These conjunctions can, of course, begin a sentence, and then they are followed by a comma, but if they are joined in a sentence with a preceding clause, they should be linked by a semicolon, as in the example above, and not merely by a comma.

16. **Subject-Verb Agreement.** A verb must agree in number with its subject: h*e talks, they talk*. A compound subject is plural even though its component elements may be singular: *Fred and John stand.* Nouns linked by disjunction, though, are singular: *Either one or the other <u>is</u> here.* Though there are two possiblities mentioned in a disjunction, we typically assume that only one is the case.

17. **Subordinate Clauses.** A subordinate or dependent clause differs from a main or independent clause in that it begins with a relative pronoun (*that, which,* or *who*) or a subordinating conjunction (*after, although, as, because, before, if, unless, until, when, where, while,* and so on).

The man <u>who came to the door</u> was blind.

A subordinate clause modifies or adds information to a noun or verb in the main clause of a sentence, and it must be clearly attached to that element. It cannot be a sentence on its own and must not be punctuated as one (e.g. *Because she wanted to. That it was stupid.* These are not sentences.).

18. **Tense.** Write of words, texts, and the things authors do in them, in the present tense:

> **Marx <u>identifies</u> three stages of historical and economic development.**
>
> **The author of *The Odyssey* <u>takes</u> a knowledge of *The Iliad* for granted.**
>
> ***Orlando* <u>is</u> a work of feminist imagination.**
>
> **This episode <u>unsettles</u> our notion of Emma's pure motives.**
>
> **The word "neeze" <u>appears</u> only once in Shakespeare's work.**

Use to the past, however, when you go outside of the text to make historical statements:

> **Homer, we are told, <u>was</u> blind.**

When the reference to the past within the narrative is made relative to a particular moment, use the present perfect:

> **At our first sight of Odysseus, he <u>has been dallying</u> with Calypso for seven years.**

Completed past action takes the past perfect:

> **Before that, he <u>had suffered</u> shipwreck and the loss of his comrades.**

There is also, of course, a future time in texts and also occasion for the future perfect:

> **Odysseus <u>will return</u> home, but not before undergoing a few complications. By that time, he <u>will have experienced</u> many more adventures.**

The present of the text, however, should be described in the present:

> **While his comrades are dying, Achilles <u>sits</u> by his ships.**

Everything in the world of discourse, apart from the exceptions noted above, takes place in an eternal present, just as it does in a work of visual art set out before us. You would not say or write, looking at the *Mona Lisa*, that *the lady on Leonardo's canvas knowingly smiled.* Stay in the present tense unless you have a compelling reason not to do so, and be consistent.

19. **Titles.** When quoted in your own text, titles of books should be underlined or italicized: Rousseau's <u>Confessions</u>, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Middlemarch.* The Bible and its books, such as the Book of Genesis, are exceptions. Titles of articles, chapters, essays, shorter poems—anything that is not a book in its own right—should be placed in quotation marks. Since you are not quoting it, <u>your own title should not be underlined, italicized, or given any other special emphasis</u>.

Favorite Student Errors

20. **Adjectives and adverbs made from nouns.** Do not use nouns as modifiers of other nouns or of verbs, as in *a hero society*, or, even worse, *a hero-type society*. The proper forms are: noun=*hero*, adjective=*heroic*, adverb=*heroically*:

    Had our <u>hero</u> lived in <u>heroic</u> society, he would undoubtedly have behaved <u>heroically</u>.

21. **Ambiguous referent.** Pronouns must have only one referent, and that referent must be clear.

    Through an extended series of questions, God explains to Job that he is almighty and not to be questioned.

    In this sentence, the referent of the pronoun *he* is ambiguous. Is it God or Job who is almighty and not to be questioned? We know, of course, that it must be God, but the author has made us pause to think about it.

22. **Blind comparisons and contrasts.** *Theseus is a more rational king.* In this sentence, the *more* promises us a contrast, a *than,* but the *than* is missing. Sometimes a contrast may be left out because it is understood from what has gone before. <u>Generally, though, every *more* (as well as every *less)* calls for a *than.*</u>

    Theseus is a more rational king <u>than we would have expected</u>.

    This fixes the problem, but is it really what we meant to say? Is the comparison with our expectations apt? It may be, or perhaps we would have been better off just saying ***Theseus is a remarkably rational king.***

    The same is true of comparisons formed with the -er suffix: *higher, lower, thinner, fatter, richer, poorer* <u>than</u>. *Too* also requires

specification: *Theseus is too rational*—too rational for what?—*to be wise.* It is the same with *so* and *such a,* usually leading to a *that,* as in

> **It was <u>so</u> remarkable for Achilles to give Patroclus his armor <u>that</u>. . . .**

To say *It was such a great victory* is acceptable in speech, but in writing the <u>that</u>-clause must be added:

> **It was <u>such a</u> great victory <u>that</u> everyone rejoiced.**

Beware, also, of using *different* without indicating what the differing entity is different <u>from</u>: "Achilles is different because of his swiftness"—different from whom?

23. **Colloquialism.** There are expressions of many different kinds that are acceptable in ordinary speech but not in formal writing. *Try and* in place of *try to* is a common one. You should not write "Leander decided to try and swim the Hellespont." Profanities or vulgar descriptions like *lousy* also fit into the category of colloquialism.

24. **Commas before *but*.** There's no need to stick in a comma before *but* in a *not only . . . but also* construction or in other cases where *but* does not separate complete clauses:

> **The meal was <u>not only exquisite but</u> also expensive.**

> ***Come <u>after seven but</u> not later than nine.***

> **It was <u>cold but delicious</u>.**

None of these requires a comma.

25. **Compound adjectives.** Do not invent compound adjectives unless they are truly necessary. *Edenic*, for instance, is far better than *Eden-like.* For words such as *human* that do not have a simple adjectival form, avoid at all costs such constructions as *human-like* that do not fall plausibly upon the ear.

26. **Conjunctions beginning sentences.** Many conjunctions and other connecting phrases are best embedded within the internal structure of a sentence rather than standing at the front.
> **This rule, <u>however</u>, like all rules, must be applied with discretion.**
But, <u>of course</u>, cannot be embedded, though, *moreover*, *furthermore*, *on the other hand*, and other such expressions certainly can.

27. **Definitive and parenthetical phrases and clauses.** Take the sentence *My sister, Jane, belongs to the ages.* Is this sentence correct? You can't tell just by looking at it unless you happen to know how many sisters I have! Separated by a comma, *my sister* and *Jane* have exactly the same identifying force, and the name *Jane* is given as a mere parenthesis telling us what her name happens to be. The

sentence is correct, then, <u>providing that I have only one sister</u>, so that the mere mention of a sister is enough to identify the person I am talking about. If I have two sisters, though, Jane and Cassandra, then the phrase *my sister* on its own is ambiguous, and I should write *My sister Jane* to distinguish her from Cassandra. Without the comma between the two words, *Jane* serves to specify which sister I am talking about; with the comma it would be merely parenthetical. <u>What is true of names is also true of relative clauses</u>, which sometimes identify and sometimes do not. So in the sentence *The man who killed Lincoln was an actor,* the phrase *who killed Lincoln* specifies the person meant. It answers the questions *Who?* or *Which?* and therefore should not be separated by commas before and after. If I write, on the other hand, *John Wilkes Booth, who killed Lincoln, was an actor,* I employ the commas to create a parenthetical clause because a definitive clause is unnecessary. The questions *Who?* and *Which?* have already been answered by the use of the proper name *John Wilkes Booth.* The parenthetical *who killed Lincoln* merely tells us something more about him.

28. **Journalese**: Journalists write so much and so quickly they often find themselves straining for doubtful resources of vocabulary: *Shakespeare <u>garnered</u> so much applause through the ages, it was no <u>miscue</u> he was <u>dubbed</u>"The Bard."*

29. **Legalese**. *Legalese* refers to diction that might be at home in legal documents but sometimes finds its way out into the extra-legal world. Make no reference to *said allegations,* to the *aforementioned instance*, or the *above contention.*

30. **Misnumbered pronouns.** Pronouns must agree in gender and in number with what they represent. *When <u>a person</u> raises the cover of a book, they often have no idea what risks <u>they</u> 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 <u>one</u> raises the cover of a book, <u>one</u> 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 <u>one</u> raises the cover of a book, <u>he</u> 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:

> **<u>Those</u> who raise the cover of a book often have no idea what risks <u>they</u> are taking.**

This is much less awkward than using *one*.

31. **Mixed metaphors***. The more we think about <u>Hamlet</u>, the more deeply faceted the work becomes.* This is a poor sentence because a

facet is the surface of an object, especially a gem. One of the common ways of indicating that a thing is complex is to say that it is multi-faceted. It is impossible, though, for a thing to be <u>deeply</u> faceted because facets are inherently superficial and flat. They simply cannot have depth. Where two metaphors are in play—in this case depth and facetedness—they must be compatible. Consider the following sentence: "She had reached a place where the human hand had never set foot."

32. **Possessives.** Confusing the possessive pronoun *its* with the contraction *it's*, which means *it is.* Save yourself trouble by simply avoiding *it's* altogether (unless you have a cousin named *It,* in which case you may wish to refer to the grammatical foibles of *It's* relatives).

33. **Psychobabble and sociobabble.** The coinages of sociologists and psychologists have also strayed byond their proper bounds. When not writing a psychology paper, we refer to people's *behavior,* not to their *behaviors.* The adjectival form of society is *social*, not *societal.*

34. **Quoting yourself.** Quotation marks should surround words that have been spoken or written by others. When you put your own words between quotation marks, you are signaling the reader that you are not sure you are using an appropriate expression; it is as if you were trying to pawn your own ill-chosen words off onto someone else. For example, *In the embassy scene, Phoenix is trying to "guilt trip" Achilles*. *Guilt trip* is too colloquial an expression to be used in formal writing. The author of the sentence knows this but wants to get away with it anyway. Quotation marks used in this manner are sometimes called "scare quotes." (Note that it's okay for me to put "scare quotes" in quotation marks because I am referring directly to the fact that they are the words other people use.)

35. **Tautology.** *Some goals of his will be achieved by his accomplishments*. The problem of this sentence is that it tells us nothing because all accomplishments achieve a goal; that is part of the definition of an accomplishment. A statement that does not tell us more than what is implied by the definition of its terms is a *tautology.*

Frequently Misused Words

36. *Be* **and e***xist. Exist* is a narrower word than *be*. *Be* is used to ascribe qualities as well as existence to things, whereas we use *exist* to contrast objects or categories as whole with what does not exist. So we say, *Unicorns do not exist*, but we don't say *Mr. Bennett's good marriage does not exist.* We might ask, *Can there be a happy story about a delusional character?* But we wouldn't ask, *Can a happy story about a delusional character exist?*

37. *Between* **and** *among. Between* is appropriate only when there are <u>two</u> people or things in question, *among* when there are three or more. Thus we choose between two options but among three. Paris chose among three goddesses, but Helen chose between two lovers.

When you say *Let's keep this between us*, you should be speaking only to one other person.

38. ***Disrespect.*** This is also a noun, referring to a lack of respect, and not a verb. Good English speakers may lack respect for some people, but they do not *disrespect* them.

39. ***Fewer*** **and** ***less.*** *Fewer* applies to a reduction in the number of individuals in a group, while *less* refers to a reduction in a continuous quantity or some other aspect of a thing: *The club has* fewer *members this year and therefore* less *revenue.* This distinction requires care: *Modern people have* fewer *friends than did people in the middle ages because modern life offers* less *in the way of companionship*

40. ***Human***. Refer to the members of our species as *human beings,* not merely as *humans.* The temptation to refer to ourselves as *humans* arises from the frequently made comparison with machines, but the temptation is to be avoided.

41. ***Impact.*** *Impact* is a noun. It refers to what happens when one physical object strikes another (they undergo *impact*) and it can be used metaphorically: *What Ghandi said had an undeniable impact on me.* In recent years, popular usage has made *impact* a verb, *to impact*: *The rise in interest rates has* impacted *the market heavily*. This is to be avoided by educated speakers and writers. One should say that the rise in interest rates has *had a great impact on* the market or *has affected it* heavily. Do not replace *to affect* with *to impact* in your vocabulary.

42. ***In*** **and** ***within.*** *Within* has a narrower range of uses than *in*, appropriate only when the noun to which it applies is specifically contained *within* a definite space or time. Unlike *in, within* can usually be replaced by *inside: within the confines of the yard* or *within three minutes*; but not, *within North America*, *within Paris*, or *within* The Iliad*.*

43. ***Infers*** **and** **i***mplies.* To *imply* is to communicate meaning indirectly, anticipating the reader's or listener's normal patterns of inference. Examples: *"I'm going home now," he said, "*implying *that he wasn't going to the party." "The proposition "All men are created equal" should have* implied *that one person could not enslave another."* The act of discovering implications is called *inference*. It refers to the reader or listener's side of the process: "*When he said he was going home I* inferred *he wasn't going to the party." "We can* infer *from the proposition 'All men are created equal' that one person should not enslave another.'"* Words, authors, and texts *imply*; readers and listeners *infer.* (*Inference,* of course, also takes place in contexts other than the interpretation of words—with regard, for instance, to data, observations, states of affairs, etc., from which we may *infer.*)

44. ***Lifestyle.*** This is a twentieth-century coinage that refers to the kinds of choices modern people make about how to spend their time. To use it is to imply that there are a range of alternative *lifestyles* from which

each person can choose among and that the choice is a matter of fashion or aesthetic value. It is thus rarely applicable in discussing any period earlier than the eighteenth century. Achilles and Odysseus are warriors, but that does not mean they are living the warrior *lifestyle.*

45. ***Like* and *as*.** Use *like* to compare things, as in the title of Ernest Hemingway's story "Hills Like White Elephants" or the poem that begins, "Chicago, like a sprawling industrial town." Use *as, as if,* and *as though* to compare modes of subjectivity or states of being: "*It felt* as *cold* as *ice*." "*It was* as if *chocolate had never existed*." "*She felt* as though *the world had begun spinning much faster.*" Even when you feel as if you are about to die, you shouldn't say, "I feel like I'm about to die."

46. ***Majority* and *greater part***. *Majority* means the greater part of a group, and cannot be used to refer to the greater part of something that is not a group. *The Iliad,* for example, is not a group but an individual poem. It cannot be divided into a majority and a minority. It is incorrect, therefore, to write that *the* majority *of* The Iliad *is devoted to fighting.* You might, however, correctly write that *the* greater part *of* The Iliad *is devoted to fighting.* Note that the words used in *The Iliad* do form a group, so you may say that *the* majority *of the words in* The Iliad *are drawn from the Ionic dialect.*

47.*Mindset.* The problems of *mindset* are similar to those of *lifestyle. Mindset* is a sociological term. It refers to fixed sets of attitudes that we associate with certain modern professional, intellectual, or cultural groups. We may refer to a radical or a conservative *mindset,* a hippie *mindset,* the bourgeois *mindset,* or the psychoanalytic *mindset,* but not the Greek *mindset,* the peasant *mindset,* the Christian *mindset,* or the philosophical *mindset.* The ways of thinking named here came into existence before the culture that invented sociology. Also, note that a *mindset* belongs to a group, not an individual. Thus it is incorrect to say that a person has a confused *mindset*. It is one of the privileges of individuality that each of us is confused in his or her own way.

48. ***Moral* and *immoral*; *ethical* and *unethical*.** *Immoral* and *unethical* both apply quite appropriately to bad people and bad behavior: *He is an* immoral *person. That action was* unethical*.* But it is poor English to say, conversely, that good people or behavior are either *ethical* or *moral. Ethical* and *moral* refer to the general categories of character and behavior. All people and all behavior are moral and ethical, either good, bad, or neutral. The phrase *moral behavior* is therefore redundant, and does not tell us whether the behavior was good or bad. Our sense of these distinctions is gradually weakening, though, and *ethical* can in some cases be used in a general way to refer to acceptable behavior: *Would it be ethical to do so?*

49. ***Novel* and *poem*.** A novel is a substantial work of prose fiction. We do not use *novel* to refer to a play like *Oedipus the King* or a poem like "Kublai Khan," not even an epic poem like *The Iliad.*

50. **Quotation**. A *quotation* is a passage in your work that has been drawn from another work, and *quote* is the verb that conveys the act of quotation. (In truly correct English writing, there is no such thing as a *quote*.) Be careful not to make it sound as if the words, speeches, or passages you quote were already quotations before you exerpted them from their original sources: "When Hamlet speaks this quotation, he has already seen the ghost." Hamlet does not speak in quotations. Call this a speech or refer to it simply as *words*:

> **When Hamlet speaks <u>these words</u>, he has already seen the ghost.**

51. **Reference.** Like *impact, reference* is a noun that has lately been squirming towards verbal status in the vocabularies of many people—to *reference* something or someone. There is no need to use *reference* when the faithful old soldier *refer to* is standing by. We do not *reference* the works of Emily Dickinson, we *refer to* them.

52. **Simple** and **simplistic**. *Simple* is a rather colorless term of description. To call something *simple* is to say that it has only one part or is organized without complexity. There are *simple* sentences, sentences with only one independent clause, and there are compound sentences, which have more than one. To call an act *simple* is to say that it can be achieved without difficulty or complication. *Simplistic*, by contrast, is a derogatory term. It refers to ideas of various kinds that are inadequate because they do not take account of the relevant complexities—*simplistic* statements, *simplistic* attitudes, *simplistic* solutions.

53. **Society.** Since the mid-eighteenth-century it has become common for intellectuals to think of the social groups in which they live as an object of criticism and, frequently, a force to be opposed. Thus we can say that the characters of Ibsen, Strindberg, George Eliot, and D. H. Lawrence frequently stand in opposition to society. To speak this way about literature before the eighteenth-century, however, is an anachronism. Ancient cultures can indeed take the form of a society—a richly articulated and typically urban social organization—but to speak of *society* in the sense in which it can be opposed to the *individual* is to use the word in a distinctly modern sense, one that cannot be attributed to ancient, medieval, or Renaissance authors. It is not true, then, that "Odysseus tells Achilles he is going against the norms of society": Odysseus does not consider his ideas about how to behave merely as the norms of a specific social group.

54. **Story-line, scenario**, and **plot**. A *story-line* is the outline of a proposed movie script, a *scenario* the synopsis of the plot of a play or a movie; but the events of a completed narrative should be referred to as the *plot.*

55. ***Through.*** There is a tendency to use *through* in places where *in, with, by*, or even *during* are more natural. *Through practicing my bicycle, I learned to ride. Through Shakespeare's example he took to the stage. Through high school he learned to cope with the other*

people's views. Through growing old, she became wise. These sentences would be better with *by*, *with*, *in* or *during*, and *by*, respectively, in place of *through.*

56. **Throughout.** We say that something occurs *throughout* something else when the first can be found in every part of the second, so that the two are virtually coextensive: It is correct to say that *The Ionic dialect is employed throughout* The Odyssey*.* But we do not use *throughout* to refer to things that merely occur with great frequency or make a large portion of the entity that contains them: *Fighting is described throughout the poem*—not quite true of *The Iliad*; *Odysseus wanders throughout the narrative*—close again, but not quite true of *The Odyssey.*

57. **Transform.** This word cannot be used intransitively. It must have an object. Thus you can say that you have *transformed something* or *been transformed by it*, but <u>not</u> that you have *simply transformed* or that something *has transformed into* something else.

58. **Transition.** We make a *transition* when we move from one state of affairs to another. This word is a noun. It cannot be used as a verb, as in the following sentence: *If you insist on misusing this word, please transition to another college!*

59. **Use***.* Words have existence outside of and prior to being incorporated into the fabric of a literary work. Thus writers can take them up and *use* them in the same sense that bricklayers take up and *use* a level and a trowel when they work. Characters, however, come into existence with the literary work itself. They are an inextricable part of it, and this is how you should refer to them. You would not say that a builder *uses* a foundation to support a house, but rather, simply, that the foundation supports the house. By the same token, you should not say that an author *uses* Achilles' rage to unify his story, but rather, simply, that Achilles' rage is the unifying theme of *The Iliad.* Integral parts of a thing should simply be described in terms of their function: the wall keeps the house together, while Achilles' rage stands at the center of *The Iliad* and holds it together.

60. **Utilize.** *Utilize* is a term that belongs to managers and planners. It is at home in discussions about the best allocation of resources, how to *utilize* them. Writers, however, do not *utilize* words, paragraphs, or any other of their instruments. They simply *use* them. Similarly, Jane Austen's characters may have different priorities when seeking a marriage partner, but that does not mean they *prioritize*. Only business men and women after the mid-twentieth century do that.

61. **Who** and **that**. When the object of a relative pronoun is a person, the pronoun should generally be *who*, not *that. The woman* who *waved to me was my cousin* sounds much better than *The woman* that *waved to me was my cousin.*

Plagiarism

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 that 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. <u>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</u>. This means that you must be very careful, when taking notes on your sources, to mark all borrowed words as borrowed. 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, no CMC student can plead ignorance as to the definition or significance of plagiarism.

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, sometimes with unpleasant results. We also keep seachable 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.

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