



Doing History

Research and Writing in the Digital Age

MICHAEL J. GALGANO

J. CHRIS ARNDT

RAYMOND M. HYSER

James Madison University

THOMSON

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Michael J. Galgano, J. Chris Arndt, Raymond M. Hysler

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ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE WRITING

Writing well is not a trait one is born with, although some individuals may have more innate ability in this area than others. Effective writing is the result of drafting, editing, rewriting, and polishing. While effective writing is difficult to describe, most readers know it when they see it. Most good writers developed an eye for good writing through a love of reading. The more that an individual reads the more attuned they become to clear writing. A beginning researcher might improve his or her writing skills by emulating the writing style and tone of a favorite historian.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE WRITING

Effective Writing Requires Hard Work While there is no simple set of suggestions that can easily turn a weak writer into a good one (except practice through repetition), all types of effective writing share certain elements in common.

Know the Audience It is essential for a writer to have a clear sense of the audience. Writing that might be appropriate in some venues might not be acceptable in others. Most historians assume that their audience consists of academic peers with an interest in scholarly deliberation. This requires writing in a serious tone and in a style that conforms to accepted scholarly practice. Scholarly journals or monographs provide clues to this standard.

Be Clear and Concise Although many inexperienced writers attempt to impress their readers with flowery or obscure language, such writing belabors and clouds the point being made. Successful writers use clear, simple language, making even difficult concepts easy to understand. The active voice is the best means for making writing clear and more concise. Sentences that begin with a subject followed by a verb that acts upon an object are examples of the active voice; conversely, the passive voice places the object first in the sentence, followed by the verb, with the subject coming toward the sentence's end. While many novice writers may believe that the active sentence "He loved her" is too simple and brief, the passive version of this sentence "She was loved by him" indicates how wordy and occasionally confusing the passive voice becomes. The increase in the number of words adds nothing to the concept expressed and, indeed, in more complicated sentences can be confusing. One of the easiest ways to identify passive voice is to look for tenses of "to be" or "to have" as modifiers for other verbs. While these verb tenses are perfectly fine alone and are among the most used in the English language, when they stand in front of or near another verb, trouble lurks. For example, the above passive sentence includes the phrase "was loved." All writers should use sentences that clearly indicate the subject.

Be Organized One of the most difficult tasks for any historian is to write in an organized, logical manner. It is important that an essay proceeds logically from sentence to sentence, from paragraph to paragraph, and from section to section. Whether a sentence, a paragraph, or a section of the paper, each is simultaneously discreet and connected with what came previously and what follows. One of the important aspects of creating a well-organized paper is to offer transitions from one point to another. This may require a clause at the end of one sentence or the beginning of the next to ease the transition, or sentences at the beginning and end of paragraphs that make the transition to the next paragraph.

Write in Sentences and Paragraphs This point may seem almost too obvious to state, but many writers fail to follow this essential adage. All sentences should contain a subject and verb. Many sentences also include an object. Sentences which lack these essentials are known as **sentence fragments**. Perhaps more problematic are those sentences that have too many subjects, verbs, and objects. The **run-on sentence** is one which does not know when it is time to stop. A good rule of thumb to avoid run-on sentences is to place a period after a sentence that contains two clauses connected by the words “and,” “but,” or “however.” The additional points may be closely connected, but they deserve a sentence of their own. Indeed, two sentences may reinforce an important point. It is also essential to have proper transitions between sentences. In some cases this can be accomplished by including a clause at the end of one sentence or the beginning of the next that makes for easier reading. Sometimes an entire sentence may be necessary to achieve this end.

Paragraphs are somewhat more problematic. Paragraphs are like sentences in that they have a central point to make, but beginning researchers often do not know when to stop. Each major point deserves its own paragraph. One of the best means for making a paragraph a self-contained entity is through the use of topic and concluding sentences. A **topic sentence** in a paragraph serves as an introduction to the topic of the paragraph and is followed by sentences that illustrate this point. A **concluding sentence** briefly summarizes the paragraph. Not only are these useful for setting limits for a paragraph, but topic and concluding sentences are helpful to make the transition from one point to another.

Vary Words, Sentences, and Paragraphs Even technically correct prose may not be especially good writing if it lacks variety. Most historians recognize when writing their first essay that some words are essential, but writing can become repetitious and boring if the same words are used over, and over, and over again. A **thesaurus** is a valuable tool that enables a writer to find words with the same meaning, thus adding variation to one’s language. Similarly, the length of sentences should vary. A string of grammatically correct, short, declarative sentences is exhausting to read. Good writing varies between short sentences, long sentences, and compound sentences to maintain a reader’s interest. Paragraphs should also vary in length for similar reasons. When writing, think of the reader; it should not be a chore or difficult to read history.

Words Matter Effective writers take great care to select the right word for the occasion. Writers who try to impress by using longer, flowery, or obscure language often confuse their readers. They use inappropriate words, or, even words which if used correctly, may offend their readers with an approach that seems patronizing. Even the most experienced historians must regularly consult a dictionary or thesaurus to find just the right word that conveys precisely the point being made. Be sure to avoid words that suggest uncertainty or doubt. Historians often are tentative in what they can assert, but they should never write, “It appears that maybe it is time to possibly change strategies.” Effective use of the language also means that even the most inexperienced scholars must avoid clichés (such as “a stitch in time saves nine”), colloquial, conversational language, or slang. One would never write, “When James Madison first met his future wife Dolley, he thought she was a hottie.”

Word choice should also be precise. One of the most misused words in the English language is “feel” or “felt”; for example, “The beginning scholar felt she had written an excellent paper.” But to feel is a sensory perception, such as a bee sting or a cold breeze; it is not thought. A more appropriate sentence might read, “The beginning scholar believed she had written an excellent paper” or perhaps, “The beginning scholar knew she had written an excellent paper.” Effective writers are also economical in the use of language; never use ten words if fewer convey the point clearly. Finally, avoid contractions and abbreviations in all formal writing.

Avoid First and Second Person in Academic Writing Writing in the third person provides two important benefits to an essay:

- It provides a sense of scholarly detachment from the subject that sets a tone of academic seriousness and evenhandedness.
- It avoids the first person. Authors, especially inexperienced authors who use the first person, often slip from clear prose to conversational language that is inappropriate for the task at hand.

Check for Agreement Effective writing exhibits agreement and parallel construction. A singular noun must be accompanied by a singular verb, and a plural noun must be accompanied by a plural verb. For example, “The beginning historian was busy with her research” is grammatically correct, but “The beginning historian were busy with her research” is not. Authors should also attempt to be as consistent with tenses as possible. Most historians write about the past, so they make almost exclusive use of some form of the past tense in their writing. For example, “Mr. Lincoln determined to supply Fort Sumter after assuming the presidency. South Carolina officials responded by firing upon the fort” is grammatically correct, but “Mr. Lincoln determined to supply Fort Sumter after assuming the presidency. South Carolina officials respond by firing upon the fort” is not.

Quote Appropriately Experienced historians use quotations to provide their readers with a sense of how a historical figure thought about or reacted to a specific situation. Many beginning researchers are much less effective in the way they use quotations. Quotations should be used to illustrate or provide specific

evidence, not to make a point. The following hypothetical example highlights this issue. In discussing Robert E. Lee's reaction to the death of Stonewall Jackson, it would be better to write "Jackson's death stunned the general. Lee remarked, 'I have lost my right arm,'" instead of "Jackson's death led Lee to remark, 'I have lost my right arm.'"

Direct quotations should come from primary sources, and the writing should clearly identify the author or speaker of these words. Extensive, excessive, and awkward quotations should be avoided. Remember, quotations exist to enhance the narrative, not to take up space or make it more cumbersome.

Use Proper Punctuation Poor punctuation can mar otherwise fine writing. Overuse of commas or semicolons often indicates poor punctuation, generally the result of an inexperienced writer. All writers regularly consult a grammar manual for appropriate use. Over-punctuation can often contribute to choppy writing that is painful to read.

Proofread and Edit The most important piece of advice for beginning researchers is to proofread and edit. And proofread and edit. And proofread and edit. Proofreading and editing requires looking at different aspects of the paper. A beginning researcher might initially proofread for organization, then proofread for content, then proofread for writing and grammar. The final proofread should be done aloud as the ear picks up errors often missed by the eye. A more detailed examination of proofreading and editing can be found in Chapter 6.