

Editing Key and Writing Tips

Redundancy (RED)

Avoid using the same word/expression multiple times in the same paragraph.
Avoid using redundant synonyms: “Schaffer’s writing and prose is terrible.”

Passive Voice (PV)

The passive voice allows the writer to avoid saying who did what, which are crucial questions for historians. Watch out for the passive voice, often lurking in conjunction with the verb *to be*.

Passive: The cane was harvested.

Active: The field workers hacked down the cane.

Passive: The decision to add beef fat to the cookies was made last week.

Active: Last week, the pastry chef decided to add fat to the cookies

[**To be**] + noun; adjective; gerund (i.e. -ing words as nouns); preposition = often OK

[**To be**] + verb = usually **NOT** OK

Verb Tense (VT)

Avoid using the present tense for historical action [Ex. “Stalin is paranoid”]. When discussing the past, use the past tense. However, with writers/artists, verb tenses can get tricky:

When referring to Benedict Anderson as a “textual actor” (a voice in his “still-living” text) --> use the **present** tense (“Anderson *argues* that imagined communities are important”)

When referring to Benedict Anderson as a “historical actor” (a person in history) --> use the **past** tense (“Anderson was a professor at Cornell in 1980.”)

When discussing the historical effect of a text, the reception or interpretation at the time --> use the **past** tense (“Anderson’s work was not popular upon its publication”).

When discussing a text as a text per se (tone, structure) or your own interpretation --> use the **present** tense (“Anderson’s text is an incomprehensible rant”)

Again, the best rule of thumb is when discussing the past, use the past tense. And

Linking Verbs (LV)

Although linking verbs are often useful and sometimes necessary, try not to use them too frequently.

Run-on Sentences (R-O) or Incomplete Sentences (INC)

Avoid run-on sentences. Sometimes long sentences are useful and necessary, but be careful of run-ons (two independent clauses not distinguished within the same sentence). *Tip:* Vary your sentence structure (after a few long sentences, try using a short, simple sentence for emphasis and force).

Remember, there are three ways to split up a run-on: a period, a comma and conjunction, a semi-colon:

Incorrect: The Cult of Washington emerged in the late eighteenth century, people were excited.

Correct: The Cult of Washington emerged in the late eighteenth *century*. *People* were excited.

Correct: The Cult of Washington emerged in the late eighteenth *century*, *and people* were excited.

Correct: The Cult of Washington emerged in the late eighteenth *century*; *people* were excited.

Note that “however” is NOT a conjunction:

Incorrect: George Washington cut down the tree, however he refused to tell a lie about it.

Correct: George Washington cut down the tree. However, he refused to tell a lie about it.

Correct: George Washington cut down the tree; however, he refused to tell a lie about it.

Don’t ever write an incomplete sentence! Have a subject and a verb.

Use of First or Second Person (1st P, 2nd P)

Avoid using first or second person—use them only sparingly. For example, in academic writing it's generally not a good idea to write "I believe..." or "I think..." The reader knows that it's you who thinks these thoughts. Also, don't overuse second-person commands, like "Consider the idea..." or "Note the difference between..." Finally, don't use "one" to talk about people in general, like "One can see..."

Misplaced Modifiers (MM)

Misplaced modifiers are the bane of any writer's existence. Make sure that your descriptive phrases (especially participial phrases and prepositional phrases) are placed next to the noun they modify:

Incorrect: As commander-in-chief, people saw George Washington as a great leader.

Correct: As commander-in-chief, George Washington earned a reputation as a great leader.

Incorrect: Running through the forest, the wind cooled the sweaty Davy Crockett.

Correct: The wind cooled the sweaty Davy Crockett as he ran through the forest.

Parallel Structure (||)

Parallel structure is a nice way to spice up your writing. However, make sure to keep your structure consistent (by maintaining the words/phrases with which you begin your clauses, or by maintaining the grammatical sequence with which you begin your clauses, or both).

Incorrect: As general, George Washington fought the British; he defeated the Republicans when he was president; as symbol, he united a nation.

Correct: As general, George Washington fought the British; as president, he defeated the Republicans; as symbol, he united a nation. ["As" + noun ... x's 3]

Incorrect: George Washington rallied the colonists' spirits, defeating the British, and maintained his republican values, in order to become a national icon.

Correct: By rallying the colonists' spirits, defeating the British, and maintaining his republican values, George Washington became a national icon. ["By" + participle + something ... x's 3]

Other Shorthand:

¶ = paragraph

Ø = no, not, none

ital = italicize [remember that newspaper titles, plays, movies, books get *italicized* ... chapter and article titles get "quotation marks"]

WC = word choice [use a more appropriate word]

AWK = awkward construction or phraseology

Contractions

As a general rule, **I'd** like you to avoid contractions.

Expletives

Avoid using expletives ... both the grammatical structure ("there" + form of "to be") and the swear words.

Indirect: There were many people that admired George Washington.

Direct: Many people admired George Washington.

Quotations

Quote someone only when paraphrasing could not possibly do justice to their idea or their phraseology. Otherwise, paraphrase and cite.

Don't leave quotations hanging on their own. Be sure to introduce the quotation *and* the author (using first and last name).

Incorrect: "More important than the speed with which they spread ... is the very generic quality of the commentary around these celebrations."

Correct: As historian David Waldstreicher notes, "More important than the speed with which they spread ... is the very generic quality of the commentary around these celebrations."

Hyphens in adjectives

If a noun phrase (adjective-noun) is used as an adjective, you need to add a hyphen. This problem often arises with centuries:

"Newspapers from the nineteenth century praised George Washington" --> phrase used as a *noun*,
no hyphen

"Nineteenth-century newspapers praised George Washington." --> phrase used as an *adjective*,
hyphen

"This" as a noun

Where possible, avoid using "this" as a noun—doing so is generally imprecise and weak. Use it as an adjective or rephrase.

Weak: George Washington surprised the British by crossing the Delaware in mid-winter. This made him a hero

Strong: George Washington surprised the British by crossing the Delaware in mid-winter. His daring strategy made him a hero ["This strategy made him a hero" could also work, although it's a bit weaker]

Listing

There are two accepted methods of listing:

- Snap, Crackle and Pop [OK: No comma before "and"]
- Snap, Crackle, and Pop [Better: Comma before "and"]

Strunk, White, and I prefer the second method. (See *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White for general writing guidelines.)

Page Numbers

Use page numbers on any paper over two pages.