

# Thoughts on Writing

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First of all, academic writing is *hard*. Really hard. You have to take years of work and summarize it in a brief format for people who will have no other engagement in the project. Most of the difficult decisions are about what to leave out. To make it easier, we have a set of specific structures that we use to make it easier to communicate your work. Learn to use these really well before you think about violating them.

You should read several books on writing. Strunk and White you should read every year. Deirdre McCloskey's *Economical Writing* is a great resources, as is Christopher Lasch's *Plain Style*. Another recent book that I highly recommend is McPhee's "Draft 4".

Here are some tips, in no particular order.

- Go back to basics: make sure every paragraph has a topic sentence, and that each of the sentences in the paragraph support that topic sentence. This sounds dumb, but I see way too much academic writing that doesn't follow this seventh grade rule.
- Use the active voice constantly. You will be amazed at what this does to your writing.
- Consistent with above, make sure you can identify the subject, object, and verb in every sentence. Who/what is doing what to whom/what? E.G. "Lower test scores are associated with less use of proper instruction techniques" vs. "Students whose teachers use small group instruction score higher on end-of-year exams." The first example doesn't mention students, teachers or scoring better on exams, all of which are key elements to the thought being conveyed.
- It's perfectly acceptable and indeed preferable to use the first person "I." Don't say "we" unless it's a multiple authored paper.
- Citations: cite every assertion of fact that does not come directly from the research you are reporting in the paper. This should be daunting at first. If it's not, you're probably not citing enough. You're almost certainly not citing enough. Cite more.

- Citations: cite every theoretical proposition that does not come directly from your brain. Unless your name is “John Nash” this will constitute the vast majority of theoretical propositions you make in a paper.
- More a rule of thumb: I regret every sentence I’ve written that’s longer than twenty words. I regret a lot of my sentences. Break up convoluted sentences into smaller, easier-to-understand chunks.
- Don’t get fancy. You’ll hear this in Strunk and White and McCloskey and from everyone else. Most readers find rhetorical flourishes annoying. They’re trying to figure out what you did and why it matters. Save the fancy stuff for other types of writing. Remember Samuel Johnson: “Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out” State what you have to say plainly.
- Organize carefully. You should be able to answer the questions: Why does this section appear here and not earlier or later? Why is this paragraph here and not earlier/later? Why is this sentence here and not earlier/later?