

## Basic Writing Guide: Rules, Style Tips, and Common Errors

*Before you hand in a paper, you should proofread it to make sure you have followed basic grammar rules and avoided common grammar errors. This basic guide was put together by the History Department at Western Kentucky University.*

### 1. A FEW BASIC RULES

#### A. Dates:

Either “On 10 June 1911, the sky fell” or “On June 10, 1911, the sky fell.” Be consistent.

Spell out centuries: “the thirteenth century” and “eighteenth-century literature.”

For decades and years, use figures: 1968; the 1960s (**no apostrophe**)

#### B. Names:

Use a person’s full name the first time you refer to him or her. After that, use the last name: “Mary Wollstonecraft,” then “Wollstonecraft.”

\*\* Plurals of names do not need apostrophes:

“The Smiths ate dinner,” NOT: “The Smith’s ate dinner.”

#### C. Numbers:

Spell out all numbers through one hundred (e.g. “sixty-five”), and all round numbers that can be expressed in two words (“five thousand,” “one million”).

Write out all other numbers as figures: “The people ate 5,328 pounds of wheat.”

*Exception:* Spell out numbers that start sentences: “Ten students passed the exam.”

\*\*Plurals of numbers do not have apostrophes:

RIGHT: “Most guests came in ones and twos.”

WRONG: “Most guests came in one’s and two’s.”

#### D. Quotation marks:

Punctuation almost always belongs inside quotation marks:

“The cat drank a cup of coffee.”

#### E. Paragraphs:

Paragraphs should have at least three sentences and should not go on for a full page or more.

Paragraphs should not be separated by extra spaces. (In later versions of Microsoft Word, look under Format>Paragraph to remove these additional spaces, which Word will otherwise automatically insert).

## 2. STYLE TIPS

### How to write clear, concise sentences:

A. Use the active voice, not the passive:

Active: "The king ate his subjects."

Passive: "The subjects were eaten by the king."

B. Put the action in the verb

Good: "The Committee for Public Safety had to approach it differently."

Bad: "The establishment of a different approach on the part of the Committee for Public Safety became a necessity."

C. Avoid wordy phrases:

Wordy: "This paper will discuss *issues concerning the matter of* the decline of the Roman Empire."

Less wordy: "This paper will discuss the decline of the Roman Empire."

D. Reduce wordy verbs:

Wordy:

has knowledge of

is taking

are indications of

are suggestive of

Concise:

knows

takes

indicate

suggest

E. Reduce prepositional phrases

Prepositional phrases make your sentences more wordy than they need to be (see "wordy verbs" above). Often, you can be more concise by using an **apostrophe + s** to denote possession of an object.

Too many: The writers of the eighteenth century in France wrote with pens of peacock feathers.

Better: France's eighteenth century writers wrote with peacock feather pens.

F. Use fewer words where you can:

Instead of "subsequent to," use "after."

Instead of "as a consequence of this series of events," use "therefore."

G. Minimize or avoid "It is," "There is," "There were," and the like.

Instead of "There were many factors that contributed to the Revolutions of 1848,"

Write, "Many factors contributed to the Revolutions of 1848."

H. Avoid starting sentences with conjunctions (such as "And," "But," "Or," "Therefore," and "So.")

- I. When possible, avoid parentheses: explain what you mean in the body of the sentence if it is important.
- J. Explain your ideas in your own words, rather than relying on a pseudo-quote, an adage, or other informal phrase to hint at what you mean.  
Instead of: "It is like 'an eye for an eye'"  
Try: "These laws tried to make the punishment match the crime that had been committed."
- K. Avoid using two words separated as a slash as a shortcut: Figure out how to say what you mean.  
For instance: "popular and modern" instead of "popular/modern"

### 3. COMMON ERRORS TO AVOID:

- A. Apostrophe where one does not belong:  
Apostrophes indicate possession for nouns ("Ellen's sock," "several years' work") but not for personal pronouns (its, your, their, and whose).  
Apostrophes also indicate omissions in contractions ("it's" = "it is").  
In general, apostrophes are not used to indicate plurals: "The Smiths," NOT "The Smith's" to refer to a family called Smith.  
Apostrophes do not belong on dates or decades: "The 1800s," NOT "The 1800's."
- B. Bias vs. biased: The first is a noun, and the second is an adjective.  
WRONG: "The author's biased towards the Ottoman Empire is clear in this source."  
RIGHT: "The author's bias towards the Ottoman Empire is clear in this source."  
WRONG: "It is clear that this source is bias in favor of the Ottoman Empire."  
RIGHT: "It is clear that this source is biased in favor of the Ottoman Empire."
- C. Contractions: avoid the use of contractions. Do not use them.  
That's right, we said "do not use them," NOT "don't use them."
- D. Comma splices, or run-on sentences. If a sentence that has two parts that could stand alone as sentence, you need to either link them with a conjunction ("and," "or," "but") or a semi-colon, or break the two parts into two sentences.  
WRONG: "This seems to be the case with Abu'Fazl Allami when he describes Akbar, he writes about the leader with a tremendous level of fervor."  
RIGHT: "This seems to be the case with Abu'Fazl Allami when he describes Akbar; he writes about the leader with a tremendous level of fervor."  
ALSO RIGHT: "This seems to be the case with Abu'Fazl Allami when he describes Akbar. He writes about the leader with a tremendous level of fervor."

E. Sentence fragments: Make sure each word group you have punctuated as a sentence contains a grammatically complete and independent thought that can stand alone as an acceptable sentence.

WRONG: “Life in seventeenth century Europe was difficult for most people. With food shortages, a countryside ravaged by war, and a complete lack of bubble-gum.”

RIGHT: “Life in seventeenth century Europe was difficult for most people. Some contributing factors include food shortages, a countryside ravaged by war, and a complete lack of bubble-gum.”

F. Inconsistent tense: Use verb tense consistently (all past tense or all present tense). Usually, the past tense is most appropriate in a history paper.

G. “Its” and “it’s” confusion:

“Its” means “belonging to it or pertaining to it.”

“It’s” means “It is.”

H. Their/there/they’re confusion:

“Their” means “belonging to or pertaining to them.”

“There” refers to location (try to avoid the weak construction “There were...”)

“They’re” means “They are.”

I. Men and Women: Refer to men and women, not man and woman, when you are making generalizations.

“Women had few rights in this period,” NOT “Woman had few rights.”