A *Management* Writer's Reference
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"Marketing is not an isolated function; it is the whole business as seen from the customer's point of view."
---Peter Drucker (1909-2005)

Introduction

We might re-write the quote above as follows--"~~Marketing~~ *Writing* is not an isolated function; it is the ~~whole business~~ *totality of effort* as seen from the ~~customer's~~ *professor's or executive's* point of view."

The purpose of this document is to articulate the writing requirements for successful students. Good writing as a student begets good writing as a professional, manager, or executive. This document is based partly on Hacker (2007). It is my understanding that this college textbook is the best-selling college textbook of all time. In general, the writing score for your assignments or other writing will be largely based on the composition, prose, and rhetoric issues discussed in that book. This document is a distillation and adaption of that book. Think of it this way--your current professor's requirements are a proxy for your future supervisor's requirements.

In general, the word "syntax" refers to structural elements such as spelling and grammar. In general, the word "semantics" refers to holistic elements such as interpretation and meaning. Business professionals need to be highly proficient at both.

English is a difficult, and occasionally, inconsistent language. English is also an extremely rich language in the sense that there is almost always more than one way to say something. This richness comes with a price—you must practice and refine your writing skills in order to overcome the inconsistencies in the language syntax and cultivate the vibrancy inherent in the language semantics. One persistently popular book on how to write clearly is Strunk and White (2007).

English can be especially difficult for English-Language-Learners (aka "English-as-a-Second-Language" learners), partly because some students need to learn English later in life when the physiological/cognitive skills that language skills require have already been formed. English is also difficult because it has—by far—the largest vocabulary of any contemporary language (even more than Russian or German).

Composing and Revising

1. **Distinguish between "freewriting" and "revising."** Freewriting is simply "non-stop writing." This is usually the first words in the first draft of your writing. The upside to freewriting is that it keeps the fingers moving—the downside to

freewriting is that you have only inched towards the final version. The writing process is really more about "rewriting" than it is about "writing" *per se*. As to revising, double the amount of time you initially allocate to this task. You'll need every minute of it to revise effectively.

2. **Consolidate your paragraphs wisely.** An essay cannot consist of a single, long paragraph. This is true even of a "1 page" assignment. For one thing, paragraphs are the best method for structuring your thoughts and balancing breadth and depth. For another, essays without paragraph breaks will lead to reading fatigue and therefore poor communication with the intended reader. Additionally, "paragraphs" without both a topic sentence and a transition sentence are, in effect, not really paragraphs at all. Spend extra time and take extra care with topic and transition sentences.

3. **Always follow the layout and format instructions.** Early in your career you will not have much choice in document formatting conventions. You might be surprised to learn that many well-educated individuals, including professors, doctors, lawyers, architects, journalists, and novelists, utilize established strict writing norms and conventions. As you build professional credibility and work in a variety of settings, you will have more opportunities to vary your document formatting.

4. **Use headings appropriately.** Using headings can be extremely helpful to the reader. However, headings are typically not a substitute for transition sentences.

Academic Writing

5. **Practice summarizing the text materials that you read.** This helps in two ways. First, this provides an opportunity to write concisely. This is harder than it sounds. Second, this is "one less thing" that you have to do to help study for an exam. This is especially true if you are studying in a group and need to share background reading materials.

6. **Anticipate counter-arguments.** Again, this helps in two ways. First, can be an impetus to strengthen your own arguments or thesis. Second, this effort helps contribute to a "pro-active" management mindset over time. Or put differently, you have a better understanding of the contingencies of the situation and alternative perspectives.

7. **Avoid hasty generalizations.** Words such as "all," "ever," "always," and "never" can be troublesome. At root, management is about people—those words don't generally describe people.

Sentence Style

8. **Watch verb tenses.** Readers can be distracted or confused if the verb tense shifts within a sentence. Consistent verb tenses is one of the many types of grammatical errors that a word processing may miss.

General Word Choice

9. **Some words in general writing are commonly confused.** And worse, a spelling checker is of no help. Some examples are "affect" and "effect," "conscience" and "conscious," "explicit" and "implicit," "fewer" and "less," "like" and "as," "precede" and "proceed," and one of the most common problems--"there," "their," and "they're." Slow down and take your time.

Grammatical Sentences

10. **Subject-verb agreement is a persistent problem.** An incorrect phrase is "he teach"; the correct phrase is "he teaches." This looks so obvious when written this way or said out loud. Leaving off verb endings (such as in "purchased") is also common. Again, slow down and take your time. Also, don't fall victim to poor speaking, even "street slang." If you do, this will just make it that much harder to write well. Don't write like you speak; but do try to speak like you write—or at least, try to speak slightly more formally than a non-college-educated individual.

11. **Irregular verbs are tricky.** An example of a common irregular verb is "choose" (base form), chose (past tense), and chosen (past participle).

12. **Pronouns and their antecedents must agree.** An example of a pronoun is "he." If a pronoun refers to a masculine noun, use the masculine pronoun (that is, "he"). Also, make sure that the pronoun reference is clear.

13. **Distinguish between adverbs and adjectives.** Adverbs (such as "smoothly") modify verbs; adjectives (such as "smooth") modify nouns.

Punctuation

14. **Commas, semi-colons, and colons require special care.** The best students will always have a printed dictionary at hand. Good dictionaries have a section devoted to good writing, including how to use (or at least, not "misuse") commas. The list of rules regarding commas and colons is too long to reprint here. Please read a good text on this subject and practice at some point during the course. An amusing book devoted to this subject (and more) is Truss (2006).

15. **Apostrophes, quotation marks, and other grammatical marks also require special care.** As you may have guessed by now, even the best grammar checkers do not catch these kinds of errors.

General Writing Tips

16. **Understand that your writing is your marketing "face."** Professors and supervisors do not tend to judge motives. Often, we evaluate results or outcomes. Occasionally, we evaluate productivity. If your writing is poor, it will matter little that your "effort" is "brilliant." Also, motivated professionals strive to improve their writing (or rather, re-writing). It is just that even purposeful professionals don't tend broadcast that learning objective vocally and widely.

17. **Make sure you answer the question.** This is difficult to do for homework and even more difficult to do on an exam. You need to read the question more than once.

18. **Only use words for which you personally know the meaning.** Not everyone knows what the word "facet" means or what the phrase "theory of liquidity preferences" means. Often, a dictionary of business terms (e.g., Friedman, 2007) is helpful. It is perfectly acceptable, and often preferred, to use a deeply technical term for some types of writing; just make sure you know what the term means (and can explain it if you are asked). This can get tricky in "group" assignments, because often, a selected individual studied and completed "that part" of the "group" work. A group member's challenge, therefore, is to learn from each of the other members of the group. This is much easier said than done. And moreover, doing this well requires different skills (such as "active listening" and "emotional intelligence") than simply researching a topic and summarizing it in a written artifact. Successful student professionals need to be good at both sets of skills.

19. **Be consistent in your professional deliverables.** For business presentations, use the same terms in your oral deliverable (e.g., MS-PowerPoint presentation) as you do in your written deliverable (e.g, MS-Word document).

20. **Don't write like you speak**. This is a common trap. Writing, or rather, re-writing, is part art and part science. Take your time. Start each project early and leave enough time to review and rewrite. If you rush, you are more likely to write like you speak. Speaking is important and there are some overlapping characteristics with successful writing. However, speaking is typically less formal and less precise than writing. You need to do well at both types of communication. Further, you will do better at writing if you aim to speak well.

21. **Spend extra time around "connecting" words, such as "and," "but," "yet," "although," and "therefore."** For example, put a comma before "but," but not between two parts of sentence connected by a single "and." It is extremely easy to make a "comma-splice" error in English. If you are unsure of your writing, consult a dictionary.

22. **Always spell out abbreviations once.** The exception to this is when you are positively sure of your target reader or audience. And even then it is probably still sub-optimal. In a globally-connected economy, you must be precise. If you have questions about which particular assumptions you should make in any particular writing assignment, ask the instructor.

23. **The "Internet."** "Internet" (upper case) is different from "internet" (lower case). You probably mean the former (i.e., the global connectivity platform), not the latter (i.e., a locally-connected set of computers).

24. **In general, try not to end sentences with the words "of," "for," or "to."** Actually, I think it is fine in management writing if the use and placement of the term improves clarity. But for different writing, say, for the CSUN Upper Division Writing Proficiency Exam (a *very* important exam), you might want to avoid the use of those terms at the end of the sentence (if for no other reason than that academics, especially English teachers, grade the exam). Remember—find out how to be successful and then do those things.

25. **First Person (me), Second Person (you), Third Person (someone)**. Be consistent. Occasionally, an assignment will be in first-person. Management writers don't often write in the second person. Management writers usually write in the third-person, but don't make your words sound indifferent, impersonal, or passive.

26. **Plurals**. English is a difficult, complex language. And one of the most difficult elements of English is getting the singular and plural words correct. Also, be careful of the possessive (that is, the use of the apostrophe at the end of a noun).

27. **Contractions**. If you are unsure of the correct contraction (such as "don't"), then simply write out the phrase (such as "do not"). Occasionally, this requires a lookup in a standard dictionary.

28. **Double-Space**. This requirement is typically in the explicit instructions. Double-spacing makes it easier for the instructor (and the student!) to read the work and intertwine comments as required.

Management Writing Tips

29. **Eliminate the use of the phrase "a lot."** Nobody really knows what is "a lot." Either use some other (clearer) term or simply eliminate the phrase "a lot" altogether. Besides, "a lot" has a specific meaning in the Real Estate industry.

30. **Try to avoid the use of the term "pretty" as an adjective.** A better term might be "mostly," "relatively," or "fairly." Reserve the word "pretty" for other (more social, less economic) situations, and even then only use it as a noun**.**

31. **Avoid the use of the vernacular term "okay."** Choose "fine" or "adequate" or perhaps even "acceptable."

32. **Avoid the use of the vague phrase "don't care."** For one thing, you *do* care. For another thing, the phrase is overused. Choose "neutral" or maybe even "indifferent."

33. **Long sentences are asking for trouble**. Long sentences run the risk of comma splices and run-on sentences. If you are in doubt, break up one long sentence into two smaller sentences. But yes, you need to vary the length of sentences, particularly for longer essays, in order retain the interest of the reader.

34. **Avoid "trite" sentences**. This is similar to "don't write as you speak." A trite word is a word that is street slang or nonsensical. Even though other people use the word, that doesn't mean you can use it in your management writing. Trite words don't add additional value to the sentence. Therefore, leave them out. This sometimes just takes experience to know which words to exclude. With forethought and attention to the matter, you'll know what to do.

35. **Use "such as" instead of "like."** The word "like" is both overused and misused. "Like" can be used occasionally, but is symptomatic of superficial (poor) writing ability. Another alternative for management writing is to use the phrase "similar to."

36. **Use "advantange" instead of "pro" and "disadvantage" instead of "con."** This really just another example of using trite (or "street") language.

37. **Be careful with pronouns such as "it," "they," and "we."** In contemporary society where even many pre-teenagers have cell phones and use social software to form/abandon online communities almost on a weekly basis, the definitions of these terms are far too vague. Do not use these words unless the reference is absolutely clear (which, for example, is unlikely to be the case in any type of electronic communications, such as email). If in doubt, use the specific noun and only use the pronoun to change the pace of your writing a bit.

38. **Try to avoid using vague, abstract words such as "get", "got", or "go."** English is a rich language—choose words that are clear, lucid, and concrete.

Word Processor Limitations

39. **Understand the limitations of a word processor.** While software does indeed improve iteratively and incrementally, the improvements to date do not approach the level needed for quality academic and professional writing. For example, a word processor cannot "process" (i.e., check the validity of) a word if you leave the word out. Also, word processors are not good at either synonyms or antonyms, and more important, have extreme difficulty distinguishing between

homonyms at all. In addition to learning the mechanics of your word processor, you need to focus your energy on doing for yourself what the word processor cannot do for you (and is unlikely to do for you in the time required in school before you graduate).

40. **Homonyms are especially tricky.** Homonyms are words that sound alike, but mean different things (such as "there/their" and "weather/whether"). Word processors are often not yet sophisticated enough to catch this distinction—a distinction that reduces the number of points you earn on an essay and will demonstrate your lack of due diligence to a future boss.

41. **Misspelled words are also tricky.** I often see the following misspelled word anomalies—"fist/first" and "on/one." And again, word processors are often not sophisticated enough to catch this distinction.

42. **Missing Periods**. Periods are small and difficult to see on paper (e.g., at approximately 1200 dots per inch) and even more difficult to see on the screen (e.g., at approximately 100 dots per inch). And word processors may not "catch" this error either.

Interpreting My Proofreading Comments

43. **Awkward/Rewrite/Trite.** If I write this on your essay or exam, this means that the sentence doesn't read correctly to me for one reason or another. My recommendation is to rewrite either that part of the sentence or the entire sentence. Successful student professionals are experts at re-writing their work.

44. **"Switch."** If I write this on your essay or exam, this means that two parts of the sentence (or two sentences in a paragraph) should be switched. Such a rearrangement would either help with subject-verb-object agreement or improve the overall clarity of the paragraph theme.

References

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