

Style Sheet

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Do's and Don'ts for essays written for my courses:

Formatting

- Head of first page (or title page):
 - o Name, Course, Date (instructor, WU – optional)
 - o Word Count (not including heading/title, notes, or works-cited page)
 - o Title: for a title page, the title goes above everything else. Otherwise, place it above your first paragraph.
- Page numbering: place at the bottom of the page; not necessary on the first page; title page is not counted.
- Spacing: double space the body of your essay.
- Quotations: indent anything more than three lines.
- Footnotes: if you use them, I prefer footnotes to endnotes.
- In-text Citations: follow MLA, Chicago, or APA format. Be consistent.
- Works Cited: this goes on a separate page. Follow MLA, Chicago, or APA format.
- Grammar: your essay must be written in correct, grammatical English.

Introduction

- The purpose of the introduction is to introduce your thesis to the reader. The introduction should include enough information for the reader to understand the thesis of the essay. Avoid beginning your essay with the beginning of time.
- Thesis: you must state your thesis clearly in the introduction of your essay. (Your thesis is the main idea of your essay, what you are trying to convey to your reader.)
- Summary of Essay: you must include in your introduction a summary of the overall line of thought (aka, logic, argument) of your essay. This should include reference to the main claims of the body of your essay.

Body

- You should organize the body of your essay around what I call its Main Claims – these are the primary claims that you make in support of your thesis. The primary business of the body of your essay is to state and explain these claims, indicating clearly, throughout, how they relate to your thesis.
- The body of your essay must clearly guide the reader through the overall logic (line of thought) of your essay. Having established in your introduction what will be the organization of the essay, continue to refer to this organization as you progress through it in the body of the essay. This will make the essay as a whole clear.
- Terminology: if there are important terms to define and explain in your essay, consider devoting a preliminary section, in the body of the essay, to this task. Alternatively, these may be dealt with as part of an introductory section.

Conclusion

- Restate your thesis and summarize the overall line of thought (main claims, argument) of the essay. That is, now that you have completed the more detailed exposition of the essay's argument, restate that argument in brief, so that the reader can see it in whole, again, in light of that more detailed account.
- If further comment on the significance or importance of your remarks – your thesis, its being true – are warranted, make them here. Otherwise, you're done.

Clarity and Precision

- In philosophy, especially, you are trained to say exactly what you mean and to mean exactly what you say. If you write two words, I will expect you to understand them both and have a reason for writing both. If you can say in one word what you say in two, then you should ask yourself why you are using two.¹

Formal Tone

- In most cases, and unless otherwise stated, your written work for my courses should be *formal* in tone.
- This means, roughly, to adopt a writing “voice” that is neutral, objective, and serious, and free of undue emotion or personal perspective. So:
 - o Avoid slang and informal expressions, such as “outside the box” and “jeeppers”.
 - o Avoid references to the occasion of your writing, unless these are germane to your topic, such as ‘this class’, ‘this assignment’, ‘my last assignment’, etc.
- This does not mean that you cannot use first person (singular), though third person and first-person plural are generally to be preferred. Avoid second person.

Grammar and Diction: Words and constructions to avoid/get right in formal writing

- THEY/THEIR: beware of replacing singular subjects with plural pronouns. The following is ungrammatical:
 - A student might lose their shoes.In such cases, you must use a singular pronoun or alter the sentence form:
 - A student might lose his or her shoes.
 - A student’s shoes could go missing.
 - We might lose our shoes.
- IF v. WHETHER: Students frequently use ‘if’ when they should be using ‘whether’. A test for usage is this: The order of an *if...then* statement can be reversed, while the order of a *whether* statement cannot.
 1. She’ll go if I go.
 2. If I go, she’ll go.
 3. She wants to know if I’ll go.
 4. If I’ll go she wants to know.In (1) and (2), we find sentences with the same meaning. (3) and (4) don’t have the same meaning – (4) makes no sense at all. (3) should be written as:
 5. She wants to know whether I’ll go.
- THEN/THAN: be sure that you know which one to use.
- COMPRISE/COMPOSE/CONSTITUTE: Many writers misuse ‘comprise’. It doesn’t mean the same thing as “constitute” or “compose”. In fact, it means the reverse.
 - o Compose: many >> one
 - E.g., the three women composed the team. Or, the team was composed of three women.
 - o Comprise: one >> many
 - E.g., the team comprised three women.
 - o NEVER use ‘comprised’ with ‘of’.
 - o ‘Constitute’ and ‘compose’ may be used interchangeably. Neither may be interchanged with ‘comprise’.
- *Foreign language words*: these go in italics

¹ “Words are like a certain person: don’t say what they mean; don’t mean what they say.” T. Weymouth, C. Frantz, S. Stanley, “Wordy Rappingood.” *Tom Tom Club*. Island Records, 1981. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsGFH_Q7KMs

- PRINCIPLE/PRINCIPAL: also commonly confused
- LIKE/SUCH AS: If you merely want to compare, you may use 'like'. If you want to place one item in the **same class** another, use 'such as': "Grammatical errors, like/such as these, should be avoided."
- AVOID METAPHOR: your goal is always to be clear and precise, so find a literal way of saying what you want to say.
- Meant **that**, thought **that**, believed **that**, etc. I.e., don't leave out the 'that'.
- <Author> discusses, talks about, says. Do not tell your reader THAT your reader discusses or talks about or says whatever s/he says, talks about, or discusses. DO tell your reader what your author DOES SAY. This construction is *weak* and *awkward*: make the subject of your discussion the subject of your sentence.

Forbidden Words

- Avoid the use of empty qualifiers or intensifiers, such as 'very', 'really', 'basically', etc. Such terms typically weaken your prose, making it less precise.
- Rationalize: this word means *to make excuses*. It doesn't mean to reason or to think rationally.
- People: this is a plural noun of the same kind as 'set' or 'collection' or 'race'. In formal settings, it should not be used, to refer to numbers of individuals. Use 'persons' or some other construction.
- You (second person): avoid using 'you' etc. in settings where you are making general statements. You should use third person, instead. E.g., instead of writing, This theory means that you have no rights, write, This theory means that the individual has no rights. In some cases, first person can be substituted: This theory means that we have no rights.
- Also (connective): not a good way to connect paragraphs or sentences. In most cases, it fails to indicate the relationship between one idea and the next. This relationship, of course, should be made clear by you to the reader.
- This Course; Our Book. In formal writing contexts, it is not appropriate to include such references, since your reader won't know anything about the course you took or what was "your" book. Your remarks should be delivered at a general level, accessible by any intelligent reader.

Other Advice

- Purple prose: Don't make your writing overly complex or "sophisticated". Don't puff it up with fancy words. This inevitably makes your prose inexact and difficult to understand.
- *Don't use dictionaries* to define key philosophical terms. Dictionaries simply indicate how the given word is generally understood, as commonly used. They do not attempt a philosophical specification of the meaning of a word.
- The thesis and overall logic of the essay may require the most careful thought. We might think that the details require more care and thought; and certainly we must take pains to make these exact and correct. But the overall thought is more abstract, nebulous, and resistant to precise formulation. Correspondingly great care must be taken, throughout the writing process, to formulate the overall thought of the essay and to preserve and develop that thought over the course of the essay. Thus the need for careful organization of the essay: thesis and main supporting claims must be clearly stated and must drive the whole of the essay's discussion.

What your grade means to *Me*:

- A: Superior, well-executed work showing full understanding: outstanding
- A-: Excellent, mistake-free understanding and/or good if not perfect execution: impressive

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B+	Very Good, mistake-free understanding of central ideas; good ability to apply them to individual cases: clearly above average
B	Good understanding of basic ideas; good if imperfect ability to apply them; above average
B-	Fairly good understanding of basic ideas; some difficulty in expressing them clearly and/or applying them: just adequate
C	Limited understanding; some elements of correct understanding of basic ideas; significant weaknesses in understanding or expression – plus and minus as warranted
D	Significant deficiencies in understanding or communication or both; clear failure to provide wholly adequate response – plus and minus as warranted
F	Fails to meet minimal standards of success

Some factors influencing your grade:

Central:

Breadth and depth of understanding
Accuracy in representing the views of others
Cogency of your overall position
Clarity of presentation

Positive:

Creativity
Passion (but not blazing)
Reader-friendliness

Negative:

Poor Organization
Poor Grammar and Spelling
Obscure expression; purple prose
Dogmatism; manifestos; ranting and raving
Disregard for terms of assignment

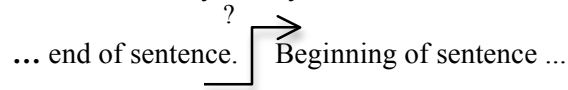
Marks

- Questions: I raise questions on your essays where some point is unclear or needs further elaboration. Questions from me are intended to do several things. For one, they are intended to indicate to you questions that your reader may have, given what you've said at that point. Also, they are intended to invite you to think more closely about what you are saying.
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Some Marks that I use on your papers (if hand-written)

- **Thesis?**: This means either that I cannot find your thesis where I would expect it to be, or that I cannot find it at all, or that a sentence looks like it might be your thesis, but I cannot be sure.
- **✓** (check-mark): this means, roughly, "yes." I use this mark to agree with a point you are making or to signal a point well-made or correct representation of someone else's views.
- **X**: this means, roughly, "no." I use this mark when you say something which is false or mistaken.
- **Unclear**: this means that you haven't stated your point clearly so that I don't know what you mean. I usually use this mark when you appear to be making an important point but the point is not clear.
- **?** (question mark): I use this mark more frequently than 'unclear,' but it means essentially the same thing: I don't understand. Sometimes I don't understand what you are saying; sometimes I don't understand why you are saying it. If you see this mark, then you should look to see how it is that you have failed to make yourself clear.

- **Vague:** this means that you haven't provided sufficient detail. Usually, it is due to stating your case at too-high a level of generality. Usually, it can be repaired by adding one or more illustrative example.
- ~~~~~~ (wavy line as sidebar or underscore): this means "badly put" or "in need of cleaning-up." If you don't put a point well, if you use the wrong word or phrase, or if your line of thought, though clear enough, is scrambled and difficult to make out, I mark it with the wavy line.
- **Direction?:** I use this mark when I have lost the sense of why you are saying what you are saying. Usually, this means that you have failed to indicate to the reader where, in the overall structure of your paper, your present line of thought falls – what is its overall purpose in your paper.
- **Organization?:** often accompanied by a wavy side-line, this means that you have not organized your remarks well, so that the line of thought is confusing or unclear to the reader.
- **Circling:** I circle words to indicate either misspelling or incorrect usage. If I circle a punctuation mark, then it is the wrong mark.
- **Awk.:** short for 'awkward.' This means that your writing is unnecessarily difficult to read.
- **Frag.:** short for 'fragment.' This means that you have not constructed a complete sentence.
- **Trans.? or Transition?:** This means that you need to say something to transition from one idea to the next, usually as between sentences, and often by reference to your thesis. Between sentences, you may also see the mark as follows:



- _____ (straight underline or sideline): I simply use these either to highlight a passage, either for your reference (when accompanied by marginalia) or for my own.
- **c.s.:** comma splice – you've used a comma to connect what should be two independent sentences; an option is to use a semi-colon.
- **P.D.:** pronoun disagreement – you've used a pronoun that disagrees with the item that the pronoun replaces – usually because you've replaced a singular subject (e.g., one, a student) with a plural pronoun (e.g., they, their).
- **w.w.:** wrong word – you've used the wrong word; find the correct one.