

Habits of Effective Writers

1. **Organize and argue.** Good writing is about raising important issues, making persuasive arguments, and marshalling evidence. The key to expressing your ideas effectively is sound organization. Follow a logical design and build your paper with clear sentences and coherent paragraphs. See *The Elements of Style*, Rules 12, 13, Reminder 3, and Chapter II, on paragraph unity; see *The Essentials of Writing*, “The Writing Process” (1-6), and on unity (50).

“u”
unity

“ev”
evidence

2. **Be concise.** William Zinsser writes, “Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.” Ruthless editing of unnecessary words, phrases, and sentences will improve your writing dramatically. See *The Elements of Style*, Rule 17, Reminders 6, 11, 14; *The Essentials of Writing* on jargon (27); the Writing Center handout “Sentence Revision.”

“w”
wordiness

3. **Write what you mean.** Know what you mean, know the meaning of words, and choose the words that precisely express your thoughts. See *The Elements of Style*, Reminder 16, and Chapter 4; *The Essentials of Writing* on diction (24); the Writing Center handout “Commonly Confused Words.”

“d”
diction

4. **Write with force.** Express your ideas directly and gracefully. Vague words hide good arguments, but they don't camouflage bad ones. Using strong verbs in the active voice will make your writing more forceful. Keep subject and verb close together. See *The Elements of Style*, Rule 14, 15, 22, Reminder 8; *The Essentials of Writing* on active voice (31); the Writing Center handout “Sentence Revision.”

“awk”
awkward

5. **Write for a reader.** Your professors are a captive audience. In your professional life, you will not have this luxury. Most readers are busy and impatient, and you will lose them quickly if you make their job difficult. Develop the habit of reading your writing as another person might read it. Read your sentences aloud. Test your work on readers, including the peer tutors at the Writing Center. See *Essentials of Writing* on audience (7) and primer style (35).

6. **Revise and rewrite.** The bad news is that writing is hard work. The good news is that with hard work you will become an effective writer. Make drafts a habit, even when they are not required. In addition to editing on screen, edit hard copies of your drafts in the cold light of day. Use the Writing Center. See *The Elements of Style*, Reminder 5; *Essentials of Writing*, “The Writing Process” (1-6); the Writing Center handout “Revision: First to Final Draft.”

7. **Avoid common errors.** Rules of grammar organize communication, and your readers will judge you by your knowledge of these rules. **On the reverse side of this page are common errors. Learn to avoid them,** and you will be a long way toward becoming an effective writer. Learn other rules of grammar by paying careful attention to comments on your paper and asking questions about comments that you do not understand.

Common Errors

- 1. Sentences.** A sentence has a subject and a predicate. Do not link two sentences with a comma or run together two sentences with no punctuation. See *Essentials of Writing* on fragment (26) and run-on (41).
“f” fragment
“r” run-on
- 2. Punctuation.** Use a comma to separate two independent clauses separated by *and, but, for, nor, or, so,* and *yet*. Use a comma after an introductory phrase or clause. Use a semicolon between two independent clauses not separated by one of these conjunctions. See *The Elements of Style*, Rules 2-8; *Essentials of Writing* (21-45); the Writing Center handouts “Punctuation Patterns,” “Sentence Revision,” and “Five Comma Rules.”
“p” punctuation
- 3. Agreement.** A singular subject takes a singular verb; a plural subject takes a plural verb. Use a singular pronoun with a singular antecedent and a plural pronoun with a plural antecedent. Some singular pronouns to remember: anyone, each, either, everyone. See *Essentials of Writing* (18); the Writing Center handout “Sentence Revision.”
“agr” agreement
- 4. Parallel Construction.** Sentence elements connected by idea should be expressed in similar form. See *The Elements of Style*, Rule 19; *Essentials of Writing* (30); the Writing Center handout “Sentence Revision.”
“pll” parallelism
- 5. Tense.** Use verb tenses correctly and consistently. See *The Elements of Style*, Rule 21; *Essentials of Writing* (49); the Writing Center handout “Tense.”
“t” tense
- 6. Voice.** Use the active voice, in which the subject acts, unless you have a good reason to use the passive voice. See *The Elements of Style*, Rule 14; *Essentials of Writing* (31); the Writing Center handouts “Sentence Revision” and “Use Active Voice.”
“pv” passive voice
- 7. Pronoun Reference.** Avoid the vagueness of pronouns, especially at the beginning of sentences and paragraphs. Rather than write “This is” or “It is,” use as subject the noun that is the actual subject of your sentence. See *Essentials of Writing* (35); the Writing Center handout “Sentence Revision.”
“p.ref.” pronoun reference
- 8. Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers.** Misplaced modifiers are words or phrases that, due to incorrect placement, refer to the wrong word in the sentence. Dangling modifiers do not refer to any word in the sentence. See *Essentials of Writing* (23, 28); the Writing Center handout “Sentence Revision.”
“mp” “da” misplaced or dangling modifier
- 9. Citation.** Use citations in the proper form to document your use of other writers’ words and ideas. Plagiarism is a violation of the Hamilton College Honor Code. See *Essentials of Writing* (53-54); the Writing Center handouts “MLA Documentation,” “Footnotes,” and “Using Sources.”
“cite” citation
- 10. Other errors.** “X” marks the spot for other errors. Ask your professor what’s wrong, or do the detective work yourself.
“x” other errors

All of these topics are discussed in detail in “Essentials of Writing,” Hamilton’s hard copy and on-line style sheet. It and many other writing resources are available at the Writing Center and at its homepage: onthehill.hamilton.edu/academics/resource/wc/