

Examples of Problematic Writing

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Being too vague/general with course material

Why avoid it: Remember that the purpose of ALL your writing assignments, including the midterm and final exams, is to evaluate that you (1) Have done the work and (2) Understand the material. If you reference the material in a very vague or general way, it signals that you haven't done one (or both) of those things.

How to be better: Rather than make a general statement, try to target something specific about that concept/reading that helps you make a more focused statement.

Examples: Sport from the order perspective

- Bad: From the order perspective, this represents harmony and agreement.
- Better: The order perspective is about social harmony and agreement, and sport offers a form of social integration.
- Best: The order perspective assumes social harmony and consensus. From this perspective, sports serve as a form of social integration because they bring diverse groups together, reinforce cultural values, and establishes a division of labor.

Drawing the dots but not connecting them

Why to avoid it: Saying that "this is related to that" but not giving me exactly *how* they are related is an example of what I call "drawing the dots without connecting them." Remember: it is YOUR job as the writer to make logical connections that are explicit; the reader can't read your mind.

How to be better: Don't rely on the phrase "this relates to" unless you plan to map out that connection explicitly. When you explicitly map the connection, the phrase becomes relatively obsolete.

Examples: Socialization and sport

- Bad: Socialization is the way we learn culture. This is closely related to sports.
- Better: Socialization is the process by which we learn culture. Sports is related to socialization because it teaches people important cultural values.
- Best: Socialization is the process by which we learn culture. Sport is an agent of socialization because, through participation and spectatorship, individuals learn important cultural values.

Reviewing course material without using it as evidence

Why to avoid it: This is a combination of both the mistakes discussed above. I see this mistake a lot – students will be asked to "use" course material but instead of using the material in a specific way to make a specific point, they simply review/summarize the material without connecting it to anything. While these summaries do show that you have done the work, they show that you are not able to think about the concepts critically or with the kind of fluency we are looking for.

How to be better: Think about WHY that particular reading/chapter is useful in answering this question. What, precisely, can you take from the chapter to serve as evidence? Which material from the chapter can you use to "back you up?"

Writing words imprecisely

Why to avoid it: Anytime you use the thesaurus to find a word that "sounds smarter," you are doing yourself a disservice. All words have precise meanings. You should choose the word that most accurately conveys what you're trying to say, not the word that sounds the best. The same goes for adding in phrases that don't actually help you or that don't make sense.

How to be better: Stop worrying about if your writing "sounds smart" and instead worry if your writing: is clear and explicit, answers the question, is thorough and complete, and uses specific course material as evidence.

Examples: Sport from the conflict perspective

- Bad: Furthermore, by the fact that sports convey feelings of patriotism and solidarity, we have to interrogate the recipients of these beliefs.
- Better: Sports create feelings of patriotism and other forms of commonality, but who benefits from that development?
- Best: Though sport may create social integration through conveying values such as patriotism, a conflict theorist would question who benefits most from these values. Eitzen et al argue that "cultural values often reinforce powerful groups and their interests" (pg #).

Writing sentences/paragraphs without an endpoint in mind

Why to avoid it: All of the sentences in your essay are independent elements that, when put together, combine into a total product. Thus, each sentence should flow coherently into the next sentence in order to build a paragraph that makes a particular statement, and those paragraphs should all fit together to make a particular argument. Think of a puzzle: the individual pieces are independent, but each one fits closely with the ones around it. These pieces form a coherent section of the puzzle, and all the sections of the puzzle combine to make a total picture.

How to be better: PLAN YOUR ESSAY (down to the smallest unit possible). You need to make sure you have a clear map for your writing BEFORE you start writing, that way you can tailor your sentences and paragraphs as you are writing.

Using vague subject terms and pronouns

Why to avoid it: Words such as they, this, and it are examples of vague pronouns. These vague words can often be confused (at best) and misleading (at worst). Vague subject terms are often used as a substitute for the subject word of the preceding sentence (or sentence fragment), but students often fumble in executing this substitution properly, leading to confusing and misleading sentences. The confusion occurs because (1) there is more than one word the pronoun could be applying to, or (2) the pronoun is *implying* a word/concept that isn't actually being stated explicitly.

How to be better: There is a simple solution to using vague subject terms – avoid them as much as possible.

Examples: Sport from the order and conflict perspectives

- Bad: Sports convey values, and they teach them that strong character is important in their lives. But how do they reinforce power?
- Better: Sports are supposed to build character, convey values, and bring people together. However these are not realistic from the conflict perspective because they reinforce power.
- Best: Sport is an agent of socialization, but also an agent of social control. While sports do convey values and encourage social solidarity, these functions ultimately reinforce the interest of those in power, such as wealthy owners of sports teams.

Passive voice

Why to avoid it: Passive voice is using certain words and verb tenses to “soften” the claims being made by the writer. Passive voice is the death of good writing because it weakens the writing and, often, is used to absolve parties of responsibility or avoid making claims about responsibility in the first place. While passive voice is grammatically acceptable, you should learn to avoid it in your writing.

How to be better: when you write a sentence, be sure there is a clear subject-verb relationship. Passive voice usually takes the form of implying that the verb just kind of “happened,” so be sure there is a clear subject doing the verb.

Example:

- Passive voice: Advertisements are designed to draw upon the rigid distinction between masculine and feminine.
- Active voice: Product companies and marketers design ads that draw upon the rigid distinction between masculine and feminine.

More Resources

Common Writing Weaknesses in College

https://www.butte.edu/departments/cas/tipsheets/style_purpose_strategy/weaknesses.html

Common Grammar Problems You Don't Realize You're Doing

<http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/writing-resources/common-writing-mistakes>

More Information on Passive Voice

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/passive.htm>

A BUNCH of Material on Writing More Effectively

<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/started.html>