

WRITING TIPS:

Good science writing should first and foremost be good *prose* writing. Good prose is like a clean window; syntax and word choice should be “invisible” in that readers see your ideas, not your writing. Always remember that because writing is designed to communicate an idea from one person to another, the effort to write well signals your respect for readers, who should always remain your primary concern. So everyone should care about, say, their Oxford commas.

In support of the Oxford comma:

Highlights of Peter Ustinov’s global tour included encounters with Nelson Mandela, an 800-year-old demigod and a dildo collector.

(Who would have thought?)



Now moving on to other tips:

1. Omit the word “very” from your papers. If you’re tempted to use “very” (e.g., “very angry”) either excise “very” or find a word that means “very angry” (e.g., enraged).
2. Also omit the word “utilize.” To “utilize” means to “use,” so use that simpler one syllable word.
3. “This” can also likely go. Typically, it is too vague. It is difficult for the reader to know which “this” you are referencing so just save everyone time and if you are referencing “this splendid writing tips list” just say “The writing tips list.”
4. “That” and “Which” and “Who”

“That” is an adjective (e.g., that book) or a pronoun used to introduce a subordinate clause, and is used when what follows is essential to the full meaning of a sentence. A comma seldom if ever precedes a string of words starting with “that.”

Example: “The class that meets in 391 Elliott Hall at 11:15 is very demanding.”

What class is very demanding? The one that meets in 391 at 2:30.

“Which” is relative pronoun that provides nonessential information about what preceded it. A string of words starting with “which” is typically bounded by commas.

Example: “PSY 8613, which is taught by Colleen Sinclair, is designed for advanced students.”
The point is that PSY 8613 is designed for advanced students; the meaning of the sentence would not be lost were you to omit “which is taught by Colleen Sinclair.”

"Who" vs. "That" . . . One more thing that is a common error with regard to the use of that: "that" refers to things, "who" refers to people.

Example: “Those are the students *who* are taking PSY 3902.” NOT “Those are the students that are taking PSY 3902”

5. “Since” and “Because”

“Since” is an adverb used to communicate about what happened before “now” or about what happened between “then” and “now.” It’s strictly an adverb of time: Since when?

Example: “I haven’t seen him since last August.”

“Because” is a conjunction used to express cause or reason.

Example: “Because the experimenter did not include a control group...” **not** “Since the experimenter did not include a control group...”

6. “While” and “Whereas”

“While” is conjunction that means roughly, “during the time that.”

Example: “Nero fiddled while Rome burned” or “It was great while it lasted.”

“Whereas” is another conjunction that means roughly “to the contrary” or “inasmuch as.”

Example: “Whereas participants assigned to the control group were bored, those assigned to the experimental group were frustrated” or “Whereas both parties have agreed to the terms of the contract, you are now an incorporated entity.”

7. “On the other hand” should only be used when “On the one hand” precedes it. When you’re tempted to use “on the other hand” alone, try “in contrast” or “alternatively” or “to the contrary.”

8. First person pronouns (i.e., “I” and “we”) are perfectly acceptable in papers written for this course. Were you to write “the author,” you wouldn’t fool me or any other reader one bit in terms of how “objective” or “scientific” you are, and why use two words when one one-letter word will communicate more clearly?

9. Whenever possible, use the active voice, and avoid the passive voice. “Participants were asked to complete a survey” is of far less value in advancing your plot than is “Participants completed a survey.” The bottom line is that they completed the surveys. Unless participants were asked and then *refused*, what’s the point of the passive voice sentence? And even then, it’s better to write “Participants refused to complete the surveys.”

10. “Who,” “whose,” or “whom” are pronouns used to refer to people. “That” or “which” is used to refer to things.

11. Adult female humans are “women;” young female humans are “girls.” Adult male humans are “men;” young male humans are “boys.” The use of “males” or “females” doesn’t make your writing any more scientific than does the use of “men” or “women,” and it actually makes it more distracting to readers.

12. Because we write “in some situations,” you should write “Situations in which...” **not** “Situations where...” “Where” is for spatial or geographic locations, not situations.
13. “Data” is a plural noun, and should be followed by “are” or “were,” **not** “is” or “was.”
14. The abbreviation “i.e.” means roughly “that is”; the abbreviation “e.g.” means “for example.” Both—and the words that immediately follow them—should appear *only* in parentheses. Neither should be used with “etc.,” which should be used sparingly, if at all.

Example: “She recited her sins (i.e., greed, sloth, gluttony, lust) before leaping to her death.” Notice that there’s no “etc.” (and so on) after the “i.e.,” because “i.e.” should be followed by an exhaustive list that corresponds to the general referent (i.e., her sins).

Example: “Consumers are less loyal to brands of toothpaste (e.g., Crest, Colgate, Aquafresh) than to brands of soap (e.g., Zest, Lever 2000).” Notice that because you are only giving a few examples, there is no need to use “etc.” to mean “and so on.” People know not to expect an exhaustive list.

15. I don’t mind split infinitives (e.g., “to vaguely recall”) but sentences that end in prepositions irritate me (e.g., “He forgot the room he was supposed to report to”); instead, try “He forgot the room to which he was to report.”).
16. Please make sure that nouns on the one hand, and pronouns and possessive pronouns on the other hand, agree in number. Singular nouns (e.g., teacher, kite, scoundrel) should be followed by singular pronouns (e.g., he, she, her, his, it, its). Plural nouns should be followed by a plural pronoun “they” and the plural possessive pronoun “their.”

Example: “When *a professor* [singular] loses *her* [singular] temper in class, *she* [singular] should apologize,” **not** “When a professor [singular] loses their [plural] temper in class, they [plural] should apologize.”

“When *a person* [singular] is in a hurry, *he* or *she* [singular] is likely to make mistakes” or “When *people* [plural] are in a hurry, *they* [plural] are likely to make mistakes,” **not** “When a person [singular] is in a hurry, they [plural] are likely to make mistakes,” and **not** “When people [plural] are in a hurry, he or she [singular] is likely to make mistakes.”

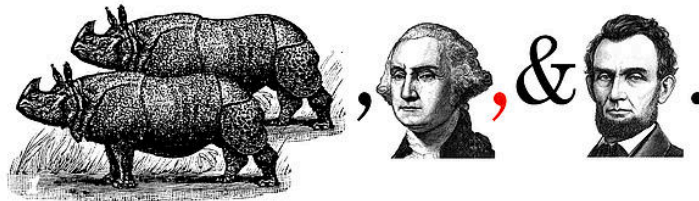
17. Don't get long-winded. Realistically a sentence that goes on for four lines can be split into multiple sentences and read so much clearer! You can also determine whether your sentence is multiple sentences in one by counting the "ands," "buts," and "because" - only one per sentence is preferable, two at most.
18. Avoid redundancy. You might think that adding two adjectives stresses a point, but really it just stresses the reader. So if you want to point out that "this study was flawed and had many shortcomings" just pick one or the other "this study was flawed" or "this study had many shortcomings."
19. If you have 'em, use 'em - if you have spellcheck and grammar check features on your word processor by all means use them. If you turn something into me with obvious spelling errors, it just tells me you didn't care enough to take three minutes and run a spellcheck.

20. Proofreaders can be your best friends - literally. Ask a friend to read your paper, and make sure that you are making sense! Offer them a brownie or something for the big paper!
21. Variety is the spice of life: Don't have all of your sentences start with the same word (e.g. "The" or "Research") and use your thesaurus - if you find you are using a word too much, substitute a synonym. It will keep you and your reader more attentive to your message. However, when substituting a synonym be sure you know what that synonym means. Too often I have seen people fall victim to the thesaurus, where they think they are putting in a word that means the same thing when it really doesn't. So when in doubt, use the dictionary.
22. Affect vs. effect
- * affect a verb that means "to have an influence on"
 - * effect a noun that means "a result" or "something brought about by some cause"
- So, you can affect an effect, but you cannot effect an affect.*
23. Floating quotes
- * If you quote someone, make sure the quote is tied into your text. Do not simply insert a quote without a preceding and following sentence indicating its relevance.
 - * *Reminder on quotes:* Best not to use them, and if you do, keep them brief.
24. Numbers
- * If a sentence begins with a number, spell out the number don't start a sentence with "23."
 - * APA style requires that any number smaller than 20, in general, be spelled out (so "ten" instead of "10")

Oh, and again, about that Oxford comma matter...

With the **Oxford Comma:**

We invited the rhinoceri, Washington, and Lincoln.



Without the Oxford Comma:

We invited the rhinoceri, Washington and Lincoln.



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...kind of a pet peeve.