A Guide to Writing in Classics and History

http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/WritingGuide/00intro.htm

Part 1 (Style): Sections 1-20

A. The General Tone of Your Writing

B. Words and Word Choice

C. Grammar and Spelling

D. Organizing Your Work

E. The Presentation of Your Work

General Tone

1. Informality
2. Definitive Statements
3. Overstatements
4. Meaningless Words and Non-Statements
5. Choppy Sentences

General Tone

1. Informality: Do not write casually. Show respect for the reader.

- Humor, sarcasm and slang are inappropriate in formal writing

- Avoid abbreviations, especially "etc."

General Tone

1. Informality: Write out numbers which can be expressed in one or two words, e.g. "two hundred"

- Express numbers requiring three or more words as numerals, e.g. 234

- Always write dates in a numerical form, e.g. 44 BCE

General Tone

1. Informality: Avoid first-person forms, e.g. *I, me, my, we, our, us*. Never use second-person forms, e.g. *you, your*.

- Do not speak personally or directly to the reader, e.g.

  - In my opinion, the Greeks were fools

  - Note how the Romans treated foreigners

  - Take, for example, my wife

General Tone

2. Definitive Statements: Employ bold assertions of verifiable fact.

- Avoid wishy-washy terms and words that undercut the force of your argument, e.g.

possibly

probably

might / may

seem

could / would

General Tone

3. Overstatements: Do not use overly general terms. Allow for exceptions.

- Avoid unsupportable assertions, e.g.

INSTEAD OF	WRITE
always	most often
never	rarely ever
all / every	most / almost
only	on the whole
completely	with few exceptions

General Tone

4. Meaningless Words and Non-Statements: Formal writing requires the use of clear and precise terms.

- Know what words mean

- If uncertain, look them up in the dictionary

- e.g., "incredible" means literally "unbelievable" (not "really great")

General Tone

5. Choppy Sentences: Avoid writing many small sentences.

- Instead, use subordinate clauses
- Link smaller sentences together with conjunctions, e.g.

when

since / because

although

if

and / or

Words and Word Choices

6. Phrasing

7. Repetition of Words

8. Noun Clusters

Words and Word Choices

6. Phrasing: Use language which is appropriate in formal writing.

- Avoid local or dialectal expressions, e.g. "just *barely*," "speak *of*," "often*times*"

- Use the correct preposition, e.g. "connect *with*," "different *from*"

- Do not use "big words" if you do not know what they mean (so as not to make unintentional ejaculations)

Words and Word Choices

7. Repetition of Words: Avoid repeating words again and again and again.

- Repetitious writing makes a writer's writing look simplistic (and repetitive)
- Conversely, varied and richly textured phrasing creates an atmosphere of learned sophistication

Words and Word Choices

8. Noun Clusters: Avoid using nouns as descriptors. Instead, turn noun clusters into phrases with prepositions or adjectives.

INSTEAD OF	WRITE
succession line	line of succession
army strategy	military strategy
economics matters	matters pertaining to economics

- Standard noun clusters found in dictionaries (e.g., history textbook, class attendance) are acceptable.

Grammar and Spelling

9. Subject-Verb Agreement

10. Dangling Participles

11. Pronoun Referents

12. Spelling

13. Possessives and Plurals

14. Present-Tense Verbs

Grammar and Spelling

9. Subject-Verb Agreement: Subjects and verbs must agree, e.g.

- 3rd singular (-s): Caesar has won the battle

- 3rd plural (no -s): The Romans have won

Compound subjects with "and" are plural and require plural verbs, e.g.

- Caesar and Augustus have won the battle

Grammar and Spelling

9. Subject-Verb Agreement: Singular subjects linked with "or" or "neither/nor" require a singular verb, e.g.

- Neither Caesar nor Augustus has won the war as yet

Grammar and Spelling

9. Subject-Verb Agreement: If subjects linked by "or/nor" are mixed in number (one singular and one plural), the verb agrees with the one which is closer, e.g.

- Neither Caesar nor the Gauls have won the war as yet

- Neither the Gauls nor Caesar has won the war as yet

Grammar and Spelling

10. Dangling Participles: A verb form ending in -*ing* must be next to (or very near) the noun it goes with.

WRONG: **Considering** the world today, the Romans made many important contributions to modern life, according to many historians

RIGHT: **Considering** the world today, many historians agree that the Romans made many important contributions to modern life

Grammar and Spelling

11. Pronoun Referents: Check that each pronoun -- especially "they" and "it" -- references the appropriate noun, e.g.

WRONG: When Rome attacked Gaul, they won.

RIGHT: When the Romans attacked Gaul, they won.

Grammar and Spelling

11. Pronoun Referents: Check that each pronoun -- especially "they" and "it" -- references the appropriate noun, e.g.

WRONG: When Caesar's army attacked the
Gauls, they won.

RIGHT: When Caesar's army attacked the
Gauls, it won.

Grammar and Spelling

12. Spelling: Correct spelling shows the care and precision an author has taken in writing. Use SpellCheck *and* proofread!

("in that place") there   vs.   their ("belonging to them")

("at that time") then   vs.   than (as in "more than")

("a heavy element") lead   vs.   led ("directed, guided")

("belonging to") of   vs.   have (past tense marker, e.g. "have led")

Grammar and Spelling

13. Possessives and Plurals: Most possessives and contractions use an apostrophe, whereas plural nouns do not.

No Apostrophe		Apostrophe
(plural) the sons	vs.	the son's ("belonging to the son")
(plural) the Romans	vs.	the Romans' ("of the Romans")
("of it") its	vs.	it's (= it is; contraction)
("of whom") whose	vs.	who's (= who is; contraction)

Grammar and Spelling

13. Possessives and Plurals: The possessive form of names ending in -s may be formed with just an apostrophe (or an apostrophe plus -s), e.g.

- Euripides' (or Euripides's)
- Augustus' (or Augustus's)

Grammar and Spelling

14. Present-Tense Verbs: Use past-tense verbs to describe historical action, e.g.

WRONG: Caesar comes, sees, and conquers

RIGHT: Caesar came, saw and conquered

Grammar and Spelling

14. Present-Tense Verbs: Use present-tense verbs in reference to modern scholarship and writers, e.g.

- To understand better why Caesar conquered Gaul, historians read and study his memoirs.

Grammar and Spelling

14. Present-Tense Verbs: Do not mix past and present tenses in writing about historical events:

WRONG: Only seven years after he arrives in

Gaul, Caesar conquered it.

RIGHT: Only seven years after he arrived in

Gaul, Caesar conquered it.

Grammar and Spelling

14. Present-Tense Verbs: When summarizing what happens in a work of literature, use the present tense.

WRONG: In Book 22 of *The Iliad*, Achilles killed Hector.

RIGHT: In Book 22 of *The Iliad*, Achilles kills Hector.

Grammar and Spelling

14. Present-Tense Verbs: On the other hard, refer to the activities of a historical author with past-tense verbs.

WRONG: The Greek tragedian Sophocles

writes about Oedipus' horrible fate.

RIGHT: The Greek tragedian Sophocles

wrote about Oedipus' horrible fate.

Organizing Your Work

15. Paragraphs

16. Punctuation

17. Run-ons and Fragments

Organizing Your Work

15. Paragraphs: Avoid making paragraphs which are too long or too short.

- Paragraphs should be at least three sentences long

- They should not run shorter than four lines or longer than two-thirds of a page

- They should come at logical divisions in the argument

Organizing Your Work

16. Punctuation: Stick to the period (.), comma (,) and colon (:).

- a colon (:) should be used mainly when the writer is introducing a list

- in formal writing, it is best to avoid questions (?) and exclamations (!)

- I prefer that you avoid semicolons (;) and long or numerous parentheses ()

Organizing Your Work

16. Punctuation: Run-ons and sentence fragments are usually the result of improper punctuation.

- to avoid run-ons, make sure there is a period between independent verbs*

- to avoid fragments, make sure there is an independent verb* between periods

*for more about independent verbs, see Section 17 in the Writing Guide

Presentation

18. Neatness

19. Quotes

20. Proofread

Prepositions

Plagiarism

Presentation

18. Neatness: Make your writing look presentable.

- No smudges or dog-eared corners

- Italicize the titles of works (e.g. *The Iliad*)

- Indent paragraphs

- Read over your work and look for extra blank spaces or words run together.

- Follow the directions in the Writing Guide

Presentation

19. Quotes: Do not quote other works at length.

- Original Works (e.g. Homer)

  1. Quote only as much as is salient and necessary for you to make your point

  2. Instead, summarize the passage in your own word and cite it by using line numbers

  3. Assume the reader is familiar with the work

Presentation

19. Quotes: Do not quote other works at length.

- Modern Scholarship and Criticism

  1. it is better to paraphrase than quote because it shows you understand the author's point

  2. make sure to reference the source, e.g. (Wilson, *Notes on The Iliad*, p.18)

Presentation

20. Proofread: Read your paper several times before you turn it in.

- If *you* cannot stand to read it, why would anyone else feel differently?

Presentation

Prepositions: It is a natural feature of English to end sentences with prepositions. As far as I am concerned, you can do it over and over.

Presentation

Plagiarism: If your paper uses more than three words in succession taken from another's work, you *must* cite the source.

- This is part of the University's Honor Code

- You may not turn in another's work -- in whole or in part -- and claim it as your own unless you cite the source you have used

Presentation

Plagiarism: You may not collaborate on writing assignments with other students in this class.

- Your papers must be entirely your own work

- <u>Be warned</u>: I have and will prosecute academic dishonesty to the fullest extent allowed by the University