

## Writing, Reading & Speaking for Fun, Clarity, & Profit

Ronnie D. Lipschutz

### I. Writing

I place a great deal of emphasis on good writing. It is important to be able to communicate your ideas in clear, coherent, well argued prose, especially when writing for your professor, superior or the public. But I'll let you in on a professional academic secret: you are much more likely to receive a positive evaluation on a paper if your writing is of high quality, even if it does not make all the "correct" arguments or is not comprehensive. Therefore, you will have a leg up in life if you put some extra time into your paper, and I am likely to give you a much better evaluation. So here are some pointers.

**Audience:** For whom (or to whom) are you writing? Obviously, your style will be different if your audience is a professor, a scholarly crowd, or the general public. This does not mean, however, that an academic audience deserves unintelligible writing (although you might think this the case).

**Organization:** My dissertation advisor used to say: "Whenever you write a paper (or speak), first tell your audience what you are going to write about, then write it, then tell what you have just written." Although I don't always follow his advice, I consider it invaluable. Keep paragraphs relatively short. Use section headings to break up the monotony of continuous text.

**Style & grammar:** Best thing to do is run right out and find a copy of *Elements of Style*, by Strunk and White. Let that be your Bible.

If you cannot find a copy, at least do the following. Keep your sentences to a manageable length; don't let them carry you away.

- Alternate longer and shorter sentences (Stephen Krasner does this very well; take a look at one of his books, e.g., *Defending the National Interest*, Princeton, 1978).
- Try not to be too florid or verbose, unless you have mastered the art of wordiness.
- Don't dangle participles or prepositions.
- Don't begin or end a sentence with "however." For that is a mistake.
- Don't use the preceding construction; unite the two sentences with a comma (the second is a dependent clause).
- **Lead** is a heavy metal; **led** is the past tense of "to lead."
- **Their** is possessive; **there** is a place; **they're** is a contraction of "they are" (same for your and you're).
- **Its** is the possessive of it; **it's** is a contraction of "it is."
- Make sure that the number of your noun and verb agree (singular with singular, plural with plural).

- Make sure that your verb tenses are consistent (all present, all past within single sentences and paragraphs).
- Make sure your antecedents are clear (to what does a pronoun refer?).

**Spelling & Typos:** Use the spell checking utility on your computer. Sometimes they also note double occurrences. Otherwise, use a dictionary. If you have doubts about the spelling of a word, look it up. Please note that a spellchecker will not pick up a misspelled word if it matches the correct spelling of another word. This means that you should proofread your paper very carefully. Better yet, proofread it from end to beginning, or have a classmate exchange papers with you for this purpose.

**Quotations:** Any direct quote of three printed lines or less should be put within quotation marks ("...") and run within the text of the paper; a longer quote should be separated from the text as in the following:

**Punctuation:** Note that I put a colon at the end of the text, single space the quote (as opposed to double spacing the paper text), insert a blank line between text and quote, and indent the quotation so that it is distinct from the text. Note the source of the quote, as explained below.

**Sources & Citations:** Any piece of writing that is more than an opinion piece should have appropriate citations or sources. You should cite data (numbers), anything that is someone's specific opinion or a direct quote from another text, or any statement of "fact" that is not easily verifiable. You would not, for example, have to provide a source for the date Pearl Harbour was attacked; you would have to provide a source if you were telling the reader about a specific foreign policy decision that was not generally known. Sources should be inserted in the text either as a footnote or endnote, or in brackets specifying last name, year of publication, page numbers, e.g., [Smith, 1987: 22324]. If you are citing from a chapter in an edited volume, be sure to cite the chapter author within the brackets, and not the editor of the book (see below for how to put this in a bibliography).

**Footnotes & Bibliography:** If you choose to put citations in footnotes<sup>1</sup> or if you are quoting from a chapter in a book, do the following (see below).<sup>2</sup> (By the way, footnote numbers should be outside the period.) If you have multiple citations from the same source, you can do the following. If the multiple citations are consecutive, after you have used the complete citation once, you can write: *ibid*, page number of cite.

If the citations do not follow one after another, you can write: author's last name, (short title only if multiple sources from the same author), *op cit.*, page number.

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<sup>1</sup> You should use the following form: Last name, first name, Book title (underlined), City of publication: Publisher, year of publication.

<sup>2</sup> Last name, first name, "Title chapter," page numbers of chapter, In: editors name(s), ed(s)., Book title, City: Publisher, year of publication, page number of actual citation.

You can use the same form in endnotes (notes at the end of the paper). If you use footnotes, you do not need a bibliography; if you use the form suggested above, you must have a complete bibliography (a list of sources you consulted is not considered a bibliography). There are many different forms for a bibliography; a preferred one follows.

**Thesis or dissertation:** Hamilton, W.R., Jr. 1963. *The President's Materials Policy Commission (Paley Commission): A History and Analytical Inquiry into Policy Formation by a Presidential Commission*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, Dept. of Political Science.

**Unpublished paper:** Kapstein, E.B. 1983. "The Sterling-Dollar Oil Problem." Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. May. (Unpublished paper.)

**Book:** Rosenberg, E.S. 1982. *Spreading the American Dream—American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945*. New York: Hill & Wang.

**Journal article:** Rosenberg, D. 1979. "American Atomic Strategy and the Hydrogen Bomb Decision." *Journal of American History* 66, #1 (June):62-87.

**Newspaper article:** Rostow, E.V. 1986. "Where Will the Libyan Episode Lead? Toward Global Order." *New York Times*, April 27 (national ed.). p. E23.

**Chapter in a book:** Ruggie, J.G. 1983. "International regimes, transactions, and change: embedded liberalism in the postwar economic order." pp. 195-232. In: S.D. Krasner, ed. *International Regimes*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

**Web site:** Santoli, Al. 2000. "China's New War Fighting Skills," Sept. 20 (Washington, DC: American Foreign Policy Council), at: [www.afpc.org/santoli\\_9.20.00.html](http://www.afpc.org/santoli_9.20.00.html) (accessed: 1/5/01).

Finally, be sure to number the pages of whatever you write. If you have any questions about what this guide, or about style, grammar or form, you have three options. Consult me, *Elements of Style*, or a writing tutor (drop by the Politics office at 27 Merrill to find out more about the writing tutor).

## II. Reading

Reading is usually thought of as an easy and straightforward task, although reading assignments may often seem boring or pointless. Even boring or pointless readings can be educational, if only to instruct you on how not to write. While you are reading something, make note of the following.

1. **What is the thesis or hypothesis of the book or article?** That is, what is the author trying to get across? What is the main idea? To say "this article is about Somalia" is not very informative; Somalia might be the subject of the article, but such a response gives

no sense of why the article was written. "The author argues that Somali clan politics must be the basis for the reconstruction of the Somali state" is a thesis. "The author believes that resettlement and arming of Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs could restore peace to Bosnia" is an hypothesis.

**2. What kinds of arguments does the author present?** Having provided a thesis or hypothesis (usually, but not always, in the opening paragraphs of an article, or the first chapter of a book), what evidence does the author offer in support? Does she give examples (historical or current) that suggest her argument is a reasonable one? Does she cite "experts" in the field although, be cautious of accepting at face value what experts say to support her fears, concerns or proposals? Does she present quantitative data or "thick description?" Each involves a different type of methodology and each comes in a somewhat different form.

**3. What conclusions does the author reach?** Does the author believe that the situation is hopeless, and nothing can be done? Is the future bleak, but amenable to some solution? Do the author's conclusions or proposals follow from the arguments presented in the article? What do you think about the author's arguments and conclusions?

**4. Why did the author write this article?** Who is her audience? Who is she? Good writers have an objective and an audience in mind when they sit down to write something. Toward whom is the reading directed? What type of writing style does the author use? Who is the author? Whom does she represent? Are opinions and biases distinguishable from evidence? Knowing this will also help you to evaluate the arguments presented in the reading.

**5. How would you summarize the reading, either in writing or orally?** If someone were to ask you what the reading was about, could you provide a brief, cogent response? Write down the gist of the reading in no more than four or five sentences. Think about what you would say if you were asked to give a spoken summary.

### **III. Speaking**

In the "old" days, Politics students were required to take an oral examination in order to graduate (this is now an option, once again). Many students found the experience thoroughly demoralizing; still, the chance to speak to an audience about books and articles in even a semi-organized fashion was a useful one. This is a skill that we now tend to downplay in favor of writing but, in some ways, it is more important than being able to write well.

Oral presentations are always unnerving, especially when you have to give them in front of an audience of potential critics (aka, classmates). Let us assume, however, that your scholarship and logic are sound, and the only question is how to best present the material. While you want to be precise and accurate, this alone will only put your listeners to sleep or cause their attention to wander. So, your best bet is to charm your audience with your wit, wisdom and commitment to your subject. Not only will that give

you command of the group (an admittedly hegemonic move), your audience is more likely to remember what you said.

Keep these objectives in mind:

1. You want to inform your listeners about your topic;
2. You want to provoke your listeners to pay attention; and
3. You want your listeners to ask questions after you are finished (if your audience is a small one, you might wish to accept questions during your presentation, too).

Now, what about the presentation itself?

1. Try to begin with a joke or anecdote. As long as your topic is not excessively serious, start with a joke or story related to your talk (this is fine advice, so long as you have a relevant joke or story; don't tell one that has nothing to do with your research). This helps to put your audience in an attentive mood and tells them that they won't be bored by what you have to say.
2. If a blackboard is available, write down a short outline or summary of the major points, or use an overhead or provide a handout. This helps your audience follow your presentation. A handout ensures that they will watch you and not spend time taking notes. An outline also keeps you focused and on track.
3. Use visual aids, if appropriate. If you are giving a long presentation, illustrations or graphics help to refocus periodically your audience's attention, in case it has wandered. Visual aids should be in large, dark type; a table or diagram that cannot be read from the back of the room is next to useless.
4. Present your material assertively. Speak with confidence—clearly and audibly—and make frequent eye contact with members of your audience.
5. Be organized. (i) Begin by stating the main thesis, theory or hypothesis of your research or the reading; (ii) Briefly summarize what you intend to say (3 or 4 main points); (iii) Provide details about the main points, and matters still to be looked into; (iv) Close by summarizing what you have just said.

It never hurts to practice. You can give a mock presentation to your housemates, classmates or some other audience. This helps to highlight any unsuspected weaknesses or problems in your talk.

Questions? Don't hesitate to ask.