



# **PALIMPSEST:**

Writing Advice from the Augustana Writing Center Tutors

**2015**

Editor

SEPTEMBER SYMENS

Assistant Editors

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Dear fellow Augustana students seeking writing advice, tips, and tricks,

I am so excited to share *Palimpsest* 2015 with you. Inside, you will find words of wisdom from some of the best writers and people I know: the 2014-2015 Writing Center tutors. They poured their hearts into creating these valuable pieces of writing so that you, the reader, could refer to this publication for their thoughts about everything from using commas properly to reading terrible literature purposefully. Reading through these pieces has served to remind me that the Writing Center is one of the best academic resources available to Augustana students, not only because it's free and staffed by internationally certified tutors, but also because the people who work there are knowledgeable, kind, non-judgmental, and funny to boot. #shamelessplug

Anyway. These pieces are intended to help you with some of the most common problems we all struggle with when writing academic papers, so it's our hope that the *Palimpsest* can be a quick resource for you when you're in a hurry and don't have time to come see a tutor in person/when the Writing Center is closed for the night and you still have three pages left to draft. I hope you enjoy reading the tutors' words as much as I have. Write on!

I'd like to thank my fellow editors, Matthew Housiaux and Sarah Kocher, and Dr. Gerling, director of the Writing Center, for all their help with the editing process.

—SEPTEMBER SYMENS, EIC



Photo by Danny Gerling.



## MIXING IT UP: SENTENCE STRUCTURE, VARIETY, AND PATTERN

*Sarah Kocher*

I have a personal rule that I cannot wear the same outfit on the same day of the week two weeks in a row. This is partially because I am inherently lazy, and if the people I see on Thursday see me wearing an outfit I wore on Wednesday last week (which they did not get to see, because they are my Thursday people and not my Wednesday people), they won't know that I'm secretly recycling the same seven outfits, and, perhaps, expending far too much brainpower on garment rotation theories.

But there is another, much more important reason: I am anti-rut. For those of you unaware of this term, it is because I just made it up. Think of it as anti-establishment for wagon wheels. Basically, we, as humans, tend to search for things like meaning, order, and logic. We like lists. We make plans. We eat a bagel and 1.5 grapefruits for breakfast every weekday, except for Fridays, when we can splurge on two whole grapefruits because, gosh darn it, it's the weekend, and we can go crazy if we want. But all this routine goes to our heads, and we find ourselves walking through each day

with nothing new to look forward to. One and a half grapefruits every day is delicious, don't get me wrong. But it's also predictable.

Predictability is precisely what we want to avoid in writing. We write to explore new ideas, and how we write should mimic this adventurous exploit. You can achieve this through snazzy word choices, innovative concepts, and a unique voice.

You can also achieve a less repetitive style through sentence structures that dictate the pace and flow of your piece. In fact, I would argue that sentence structure is the most crucial area in which to explore variety and expose ruts. Because you can have as many six-syllable words as you want, but if each of your sentences has 24 words in it, your reader is going to feel the monotony. Sentence length can either make or break your piece; it can work for or against you. Shakespeare, for instance, gave each of his lines a similar cadence called iambic pentameter. The beauty of this structure is its flow, how it plays with the rigidity of syllable counts, and the cadence of the human voice to construct an aurally pleasing rhythm. Shakespeare pulls it off.

But for the rest of us—those of us not working on tragedies about poison, infidelity, and mental instability—a diverse sentence structure is usually more effective. Look through the paragraph above this one and count the number of words in each sentence. Now count the syllables. Notice

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how the sentences alternate between longer and shorter durations? A large part of achieving flow is realizing that our writing, in whatever form it may take, is often most successful when it is able to imitate the natural fluctuations of the human voice. This is why Shakespeare's pattern and our nonexistent one are both effective ways to write.

Another piece of sentence construction that will catapult your writing to the next level is the alteration of the sentence's physical order. When you feel your sentences are repetitive, try playing with the order in which you choose to put the words. For instance, if I said to you, "I went to the store yesterday. I picked up bananas. I ate one in the aisle because #pacman. I got yelled at by the store clerk. I was kicked out of the grocery store. I will go back tomorrow and try again with the grapes. I will not be stopped. I am PacMan," you would very likely ask me if I, in addition to being PacMan, am a robot. Instead, try this on for size: "When I went to the store yesterday, I picked up some bananas. I ate one in the aisle because #pacman. The store clerk yelled at me for eating said bananas and kicked me out of the grocery store, but he cannot stop me. Tomorrow, I will go back and try again with the grapes. I am PacMan." I may still be clinically insane, but at least I can write about it with more gusto.

Nevertheless, there are moments when a pattern can work for you. Like lists, not all ruts are ineffective. Sometimes, they help you get important things done; this is true of the parallel sentence structure. When you write with parallel structure, you are effectively telling your reader, "Yes, reader dear. I am acutely aware of the fact that these sentences are similarly constructed. Guess what? I did that

on purpose because I am, in fact, an excellent writer and can do things like add emphasis to ideas by making them stand out just for being so similar. Inception ain't got nothin' on me."

Again, you may sound a little wack-a-doo if you choose to actually say these words out loud. Nevertheless, the implication is true. When you begin to understand what it means to vary your sentence structure, you can begin to play around with what it means to keep it the same. Repetition can be boring, but it can also drive a point home with the same poignancy as any other rhetorical tactic. For instance, my mom has, for the entirety of my PacMan existence, told me to clean my room. Is that repetitive? You bet. Is it effective?

That's maybe a bad example.

Nevertheless, I think you get my point. Variety is exhilarating. It's scintillating. It's intoxicating. It's funky fresh. (See what I did there?) Yes, variety is wonderful, but it can also be enhanced by the occasionally well-placed similarities of a parallel-structure sentence set. Don't confuse ruts with continuous effectiveness. That's why we have things like outlines: because they work. Also, things like outlines provide us with the flexibility to expand, grow, shift, change, and develop. They are dynamic.

And dynamism is the desired outcome of an essay. Successful sentence formatting will bring your essay into new territory by letting your writing enrich your ideas. When you can wrangle a sentence with the best of them, it makes your voice that much easier to listen to.

Ruts are for wagon wheels. Go make someone listen to your voice.

# WRITING A COVER LETTER

*Erin Williams*

Let's play with a scenario. It's finally time to start applying to jobs. You zip through the easy questions (name, address, education), and you're not even phased by the line requesting a resume upload because yours is perfected and edited to a T. But wait, there's more? You stumble a bit at the additional requirement—since when do you need a cover letter?!

While that scenario might be slightly melodramatic, it's an experience I have been through a few times. I've been thrown off more than once while racing to meet an application deadline and having nothing to submit. Not every job application specifically asks for a cover letter, but learn from my mistakes and have one prepared, or at least be equipped with a format you can modify for each position, scholarship, or grad school application. A little preparation can save you a lot of stress.

So, we've established that a cover letter is important, but what exactly is it? Think of it as a way to introduce yourself

to those reviewing your application. The letter lets them know who you are, tells why you're interested in the position, highlights your skills and experience, and demonstrates your communication skills. It is also an opportunity to request to meet in person. Since interviews are your best bet to getting the job, internship, scholarship, or acceptance into grad school, the cover letter should encourage such a meeting.

Before starting your letter, think about why you're writing. Why would you be a great fit for this position? What makes you perfect for this grad school program? You're trying to convince someone else to choose you, so it's best to know why you want to be chosen in the first place. If you're creating a more general letter, go broader. How did you know you wanted to be a teacher? Why are you suited to business? You get the idea. Once you've considered your motives, assess the tone and format of the letter. These traits often differ between disciplines and professions, but, in general, aim for a positive, slightly formal tone and a business letter format.

To begin your letter, decide who will be reading it. If you know the professional's name, address the letter accordingly; however, the ultimate recipient of your letter may be unknown to you, so starting with "To Whom It May

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Concern” is a safe bet. From there, the first paragraph should include your name, what position you’re interested in, and how you learned about the opening.

The second and third paragraphs give you the opportunity to tell about your skills. This is one of the few times in life it’s beneficial to humble brag. State why you are interested in the position and how it suits your particular strengths. Keep your examples and experiences relevant to the position you’re applying for, and refer the reader to your resume for even more details. Additionally, explain how you can improve the company or add to the graduate program. What specific attributes do you have that make you indispensable? Share them.

The fourth paragraph is the close. You want your letter to spur action, and the last paragraph is your chance to push the reader in the right direction. Ask for the call back, interview, or scholarship. If possible, ask a question that requires a response, such as when the hiring decision will be made or where the recruiters will be located. Finally, be sure to thank the reader for his or her time spent considering your application. End with a professional close such as “Sincerely,” “Truly,” or “Best.”

Congrats! You wrote your cover letter! But you’re not done yet. A cover letter is often the employer’s first impression of you. Don’t let an unruly sentence fragment or misplaced comma cloud his or her ability to see how awesome you are. Double-checking the company’s or reader’s name is worth the time. Using one template and modifying it for each different position is a great strategy, but don’t forget to change the organization’s name and the job

title every time. Check to make sure you mention the correct position throughout the letter. Additionally, if you referred to any information about the company or graduate program in the letter, verify the information before sending. The takeaway here is to proofread your letter carefully and maybe even bring it to the Writing Center—I hear those tutors can be pretty helpful with that sort of stuff. Good luck!



Photo by Danny Gerling.

# VOICE

*Katie Retterath*

Establishing your voice can be one of the most difficult aspects of writing. Especially in academic writing, students have a habit of sprinkling their papers with large, impractical words because they want to impress their professors. However, using bigger words can distract your reader from what you are trying to say. Therefore, using a large vocabulary is not always impressive, and, if used incorrectly, it can disturb the flow of your writing.

Your voice is unique. When speaking, the flow of your voice happens naturally. Whether having conversations with your friends, family, or even your professors, your voice already has a natural flow. This is the voice you need to apply to your writing. With your vocabulary, you already know what you want to say. Sure, you may have to spice the writing up a little bit, but you don't want to disguise the real thing. Say you were out on a first date. You'd like to impress the new guy or girl, but most importantly, you need to be yourself. Though you may clean up and wear your best clothes, you make yourself comfortable with what you have instead of showing up in last year's Halloween costume. The

same is true for your writing: in order to be honest with your words, you need to be honest with your voice.

If you are unsure of what your natural voice is in writing, a good way to find it is by free writing. All of your professors have suggested it at one point or another, but it's true. Do it. Get all of your thoughts and ideas on the page first. Write whatever comes to your mind about the topic you have chosen. Yes, it's hard, and you'll be tempted to go back and edit right away. Don't! By free writing about your topic beforehand, you'll get a better sense of your voice. You'll better understand what you are trying to say and what your take on the subject is. By the end of your free-writing session, you'll have both a clearer direction and a better understanding of your natural voice to get you started.

The key to further developing a strong voice is through careful word choice. Writers often search long and hard for the correct word, which isn't always easy to find. The important thing to keep in mind, however, is finding the words that feel comfortable. When the right word is found, it will snuggle in next to the other words in the sentence rather than stick out like a sore thumb. The transition between the words should feel seamless.

In academic papers, your writing, though more formal in style, still has to flow. If you have to look up the definition of the word that was not already in your vocabulary, it's a good

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A CONSISTENT VOICE CREATES HARMONY AND MOVEMENT THROUGHOUT A PAPER. THOUGH THE TOPIC OF THE PAPER MAY INITIALLY DRAW YOUR READER IN, IT IS YOUR VOICE THAT MAKES YOUR READER WANT TO STAY.

sign you shouldn't be using it. Unless the word is absolutely perfect in that sentence and describes exactly what you want it to say, don't use it. While cooking, a chef wouldn't add a spice to a food simply because it looks nice. Looking nice should be left to the garnishes or punctuation. Instead, a spice, when added to a dish, should taste right. The words you write, when spoken aloud, should also taste right. Reading your paper aloud will help you to catch and eliminate the words that feel out of place. If you stumble over a word you wrote, you should change it to one that feels more natural—change the word to one that flows.

Despite all of the other elements that go into writing a successful paper, your voice is important because it's what holds your work together. A consistent voice creates harmony and movement throughout a paper. Though the topic of the paper may initially draw your reader in, it is your voice that makes your reader want to stay.

True, the task of sitting down to write will always be intimidating at first. But, once you find your voice—the strong, conversational, natural voice that is uniquely you—the process will hopefully be less daunting. In order to do so, you have to let yourself go. Let go of the restraints of unnecessarily big words. Release your thoughts onto the page through free writing. And, most importantly, surrender to the guidance of your own voice.



Photo by Ariana Birondo.

# REVIEW WRITING

*Matthew Housiaux*

Critics are notoriously underappreciated. To many, those who make their livings writing reviews of works of art and entertainment—i.e. books, movies, music, television shows, even restaurants—are simply parasites who leech off other people's achievements. As Theodore Roosevelt once said: "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds."

Pay him no mind. When writing a review, your job is to take a long, hard look at the "doer of deeds" and see where he or she could have done better. You also should aim to shake people out of their entrenched preconceptions and make them look at things like books, albums, and movies in a new light. You won't always be loved for it. But in many cases, the fact that your opinion goes against the grain simply means that you are doing your job right.

Every good review requires two things: the writer's personal touch, or "voice," and his or her expertise on the subject at hand. The first is generally what attracts readers to a particular critic or reviewer, so let's start there. Legendary *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael won over legions of devoted readers by writing about movies with wit and cultural sophistication on par with that of Mark Twain or Oscar Wilde.

Her reviews were often rife with droll one-liners, such as this one about the flop Fred Astaire-Cyd Charisse musical *Silk Stockings*:

"When the bespangled Miss Charisse wraps her phenomenal legs around [Fred] Astaire, she can be forgiven everything—even the fact that she reads her lines as if she learned them phonetically."

Kael's style proved highly influential in the world of film criticism. So much so, in fact, that it inspired a group of imitators known collectively as "Paulettes." Her greatest strength was her voice, and it was this, more than anything, that made her a favorite among *New Yorker* readers and young cinephiles. Your writing should, in essence, be an extension of your personality. So find a style that works for you and stick with it.

Before Kael, film criticism was not taken too seriously. Indeed, how could one say anything profound about the usual Hollywood fare, which, according to her, could at most aspire to be "Great Trash"? But Kael changed that by

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treating movies themselves seriously. Besides focusing on whether or not a movie was interesting or competently made, she also tried to suss out what it *meant*. In other words, she tried to situate what she was watching within a broader social, political and cultural context. To do that, you need to have some expertise.

Expertise could best be characterized as specialized knowledge—stuff that the average reader isn't going to know unless you tell them. It's what gives a reviewer credibility when he or she deems a work of art or entertainment to be good or bad (like a when a doctor diagnoses an illness, except the stakes aren't as high).

Having expertise allows you to make greater insights about whatever you're reviewing. Take, for example, a film like *Milk*, the 2008 biopic of famed gay rights activist Harvey Milk. To begin, you could assess more basic things, like the acting and the story ("Sean Penn delivers a heartwarming performance;" "the narrative delivers every step of the way"). Then, you should dig deeper. How does *Milk* compare to previous movies featuring gay protagonists? Is it significant that it was released in 2008—the same year that California voters approved a state constitutional amendment banning gay marriage?

Thus, as a reviewer, you can inform the reader in two ways. First, you can tell them whether a work of art or entertainment is bad or good. Second, you can make connections between this work and others like it, as well as with the broader sphere of contemporary culture and politics. By doing so, you help both readers and yourself engage with the movies you watch or the music you listen to on a deeper

and more satisfying level.

But perhaps this schtick doesn't really work well for you. Perhaps you prefer to think of movies (or books or music) as entertainment rather than great art. That's fine, too. Most people go to movies or listen to music to be entertained, not to reflect on philosophical profundities. So when writing a review, you should never forget that. Nevertheless, it can be nice to engage with your favorite music and movies on a deeper level, and that's what a great review (and a great reviewer) should do.



Photo by September Symens.



# CONQUERING THE FEAR OF WRITING

*Jaime Johnson*

Fear can be defined as an intense feeling of agitation, dread, or distress. Many of you may experience this unwelcome sensation when it comes to writing, and I am here to tell you not to fret. It is a tricky task trying to perfectly and precisely position your thoughts into words. You may have a deep thought inching its way to the surface, only to find that, once it is out and in word form, it is no longer as impactful. I urge you not to be discouraged, because the truth is that everyone can write. When it comes to writing, there is no wrong answer; you can't round the wrong way or confuse your formulas. The solution is always present—present within you.

So how might you quell the angst and anxiety that comes with writing? One suggestion is to write for you. I don't condone disregarding your professor's stipulations for your essay or foregoing consideration for your audience (these are important strategies), but I'm encouraging you to find joy in writing. Write because you want to and not because you have to. Sit down and free write about your thoughts, feelings, dreams, goals, and hopes. Let the words flow. This may not

get you the grade, but it will help you become comfortable with what you have to say, which is a step in the right direction. Not to infringe on Nike's slogan, but just do it. Don't let fear paralyze you. No one ever got anywhere not trying, and writing follows suit.

Make it simple. Writing doesn't have to be difficult. One way to simplify it is by planning and brainstorming. Most of the time, the most challenging facet of the writing process is getting started. Writer's block plagues the minds of many, and that's where brainstorming becomes a useful tactic. The truth is that you may not be ready to write the second you sit down. Let your thoughts percolate and put them on paper in any form you choose. Your ideas are as good as gold—don't let them enter your mind and slip away. Seize them so that you can use them.

It is easier to get organized than you think. Being organized will make writing less of a burden and more manageable. Imagine your ultimate goals for your paper, write them down, and make sure they are made clear in the introduction and conclusion of your piece. This will help the reader to initially know where you are going with the paper and, in the end, be satisfied that you got there. The rest is just filling in the details.

Don't get caught up in the words. Yes, they are important, but don't let your initial thoughts get lost in translation and become improperly converted into words. Oftentimes the way

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OFTENTIMES THE WAY YOU MIGHT EXPLAIN SOMETHING TO YOUR FRIEND OR PROFESSOR IS  
CLEAR, CONCISE, AND COMMUNICATES YOUR POINT TO A T.

you might explain something to your friend or professor is clear, concise, and communicates your point to a T. Unfortunately, it isn't always easy to make that explanation as convincing on paper. The good news is that you are the expert on your thoughts, and ultimately, on your writing. Try reading your sentences out loud as you write or even recording yourself explaining what you want to say and then copying it down after.

Don't be afraid to challenge yourself. Writing may not be your strength, and that's okay. Sometimes the things that challenge you are the things that you find most rewarding. So give this art a chance. If you really think about it, you find that some of the greatest successes in history started with agitation, dread, and distress. Take the formation of this country, for example. Unrest in England gave rise to what is now considered by some to be the greatest nation in the world. Let the challenge of writing be fuel for successful communication and embrace it.

People say that with power comes opportunity. I say that with words come both power and opportunity. It is natural that people fear uncontrollable circumstances in life, such as natural disasters or disease. This truth makes apprehension about writing less justifiable. Why fear something that you have total influence over? Have the courage to write and be heard without reservations. After all, according to Maya Angelou, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."



Photo by Ariana Birondo.

# THE EVOLUTION OF SCIENTIFIC WRITING

*Meg Thacker*

Processes, organisms, and, particularly, works of art are in a constant state of flux. Gradual change, modification, and alteration contribute to the progressive enhancement (also known as evolution) of a species, piece of writing, or gadget. By specifically analyzing this evolutionary process in living creatures, one can begin to appreciate the capacity for the theme to exert influence in other disciplines. Take, for instance, the extraordinary story of the endemic Kiwi bird species of New Zealand. Due to the unique mammal-free nature of the island, natural predators on the ground did not threaten the kiwi birds. In an effort to save energy that would be expended by flying, they evolved into flightless birds that safely foraged on the forest floor. Over time, subsequent selective advantages led to an increased ability for the organism to not only survive, but also to thrive and fill a certain niche in the island's habitat.

The evolution of the different parts of a biology lab report is evocative of the kiwi birds' plight. Through a systematic order, scientific papers gradually acquire the sections needed to coalesce into a piece of writing that is both

specific to a niche in the scientific realm and one that disseminates research of enduring quality.

Thus, we come to the first step of writing a lab report: the introduction. It is typically several paragraphs in length, and it focuses on the significance of the particular research. The specific hypothesis(es) or objective(s) should be clearly stated. The main thing to remember is that the introduction ushers in a broad view of how the research is relevant to the world and why it is necessary. Comparably, when the kiwi first arrived in New Zealand, it absorbed the big picture, wondering how it could fit into this new environment. Its evolution story had only just begun.

Continuing to progress, the paper now needs a set of instructions: the materials and methods. This section is traditionally the

shortest, due to the succinct nature of the procedural explanation. Consolidate multiple steps into one sentence and, if utilizing a scientific kit, simply reference the manufacturer's protocol instead of reinventing the wheel.



<http://www.roughguides.com/photo/native-bird-little-spotted-kiwi-eggs-new-zealand-oceania/#>

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THE MAIN THING TO REMEMBER IS THAT THE INTRODUCTION USHERS IN A BROAD VIEW  
OF HOW THE RESEARCH IS RELEVANT TO THE WORLD AND WHY IT IS NECESSARY.

After initially scanning the environment, the kiwi bird began to understand the requirements necessary for survival and adaption. It saw that the mammal-free existence of the island habitat encouraged land travel over costly air travel. Additionally, the divaricate ground shrubs pressured the kiwi bird to change. The new land specified a new set of instructions for the kiwi bird to follow.

The significance of the paper is revealed with the inclusion of the results. The purpose of this section is to present and illustrate the findings in a completely objective manner. Any interpretation must be saved for the next section. Summarizing findings with figures and tables is often helpful. Remember to always use past tense. Finally, the adaptations selected by the pressures of the environment came to fruition. The ramifications for the kiwi included losing the capability to fly and growing a long beak in order to obtain the fruits from the branched, tangled mess of the divaricate plants on the forest floor.

The biology lab paper evolution ends with the discussion. In this section, the interpretation of the results is paramount. Explanations should put data gathered in the context of previous studies to strengthen the credibility. The most common mistake seen in this section of a lab write-up is a superficial re-statement of the results. It is imperative that the conclusion suggests why certain results were seen and what the possible mechanisms were that led to them. As a kiwi bird, the conclusion of its new adaptations over the course of time was always the most exciting part of its evolutionary history. With the flightless adaptation, the kiwi

realized the potential for saving energy and accessing the plentiful fruits on ground shrubs that had previously gone unnoticed.

Finally, the last step with any piece of writing is meticulous editing and read-throughs. Scientific literature can be convoluted, as it is filled with technical jargon and complex ideas. Thus, peer reviewing and numerous re-reads are critical for an articulate and intelligible paper. Biology lab reports need to be continually modified and added to so that they effectively communicate results that pertain to a certain scientific niche. Likewise, the kiwi bird continued to refine its adaptations over time in order to thrive in its place as the climate and biomes of New Zealand fluctuated. If executed appropriately, methodically, and with plenty of kiwi inspiration, laboratory manuscripts have the capacity to provide vital, relevant information for many years to come (until selective pressure calls for adaptive change once again).

# INTROS AND CONCLUSIONS

## *September Symens*

Your paper was going so well until now. You wrote and double-spaced the heading and you came up with a killer title, but now you're stuck. How, you ask yourself, are you supposed to introduce your topic in a way that immediately engages the reader and gets you an A before the end of the first page?

OK, maybe it's not that easy. But remember that the introduction is your reader's first impression of your paper, so it really is important to spend some quality time refining it until it achieves your desired effect.

How do we get to the refining step from a blank page, though? First, remember that there is no rule saying "thou shalt write thine introduction before any other content." Sometimes, if you have a clear idea of how you want a certain body paragraph to function, it's best to write as much of that as you can before you introduce it. Having some content already written will not only make writing the introduction feel less like the beginning of a mountain climb, but it will also help you find the right tone for the paper. Writing the introduction before you've written anything else can sometimes make it sound detached, too, since you started before you weren't 100 percent sure about how you wanted to proceed.

Once you're ready to start writing that daunting first paragraph, though, following a certain formula can prove helpful. And it will prove helpful again when you're ready to wrap up the entire paper. I call it the "triangles" method, and I've found that it works well for the introductions and conclusions of academic papers and essays. Disclaimer, though: you are by no means limited to one way of writing an introduction. What the "triangles" method helps with is clarity right from the start, so if you feel that clarity is not your weak point, then feel free to experiment with other formulas.

### **The "triangles" method for introductions and conclusions**

Formulate your thesis. Remember that your thesis is the most important sentence in your paper, since it sums up your entire argument. The word "argument" is essential here, because your thesis is not valid if someone cannot find a way to argue against it. For example, a bad thesis might read, "*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is about a boy who finds out he's a wizard and then proceeds to have lots of adventures at a school called Hogwarts." No one is going to argue with the basic plot points, so a stronger thesis would state a matter of opinion, like "*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* explores the importance of friendship, the meaningfulness of acceptance, and the power of love through its main storyline." Once you've written an acceptable thesis (it doesn't have to be perfect; you'll

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AFTER A FEW SENTENCES ABOUT HOW HARRY POTTER DOES WHAT YOU DESCRIBED IN THE PREVIOUS SENTENCES, BAM—HIT THE READER WITH YOUR STELLAR THESIS SENTENCE



probably tweak it as you write anyway), stick it at the bottom of the page. Yes, at the bottom.

Next, start thinking about your introduction paragraph like a triangle that has its flat end at the top and is pointing down toward the bottom of the page, like this:



Using the triangle as a guide, start with a broad statement relating to your topic, then gradually narrow your statements until you reach your pointed (no pun intended) thesis at the end of the paragraph. If you're using that *Harry Potter* thesis, say something at the beginning about how children's literature influences young minds or about how fantasy novels can, sometimes, sneak moral messages into their plots better than other fictional works. Narrow it down after about 2-3 sentences and talk about *Harry Potter*, specifically. After a few sentences about how *Harry Potter* does what you described in the previous sentences, BAM—hit the reader with your stellar thesis sentence (or sentences). Don't hold back if you need more room to make your point).

The reason the “triangle” method works is that it draws readers in without them even noticing. If each sentence flows into the next, creating a streamlined path to your thesis, all of a sudden, the reader has digested the entire paragraph and is now, hopefully, intrigued enough to hear your argument in its full glory.

Now, you're free to write your body paragraphs, always

using your thesis as your guide. It can be easy to forget your main argument as you're writing, so you might find it helpful to copy and paste it above whatever paragraph you're currently drafting. That way, your thesis will be well incorporated within your paper, making you less likely to drift away on tangents.

Once you've made your points through body paragraphs and are ready for your conclusion, you might want to start tearing your hair out and gnashing your teeth again. But don't, because the triangle method can help with this part of the writing process, too.

This time, flip your triangle so that it's pointing up, like this:



Now, do exactly the opposite of what you did to write the introduction. Begin by restating your thesis, but don't use the exact same phrasing—reword it so that the argument is still clear, but fresh. Proceed to progressively broaden your closing statements, so that you begin with specific examples and conclude with generalities. The final statement is undoubtedly the most difficult sentence you will write, because you want it to have a final, positive impact on your reader. My favorite piece of conclusion-writing advice (that I found on the internet, oddly) goes like this: “If the final sentence of your conclusion doesn't make you want to drop the mic, then it needs to be stronger.” So be bold with your final sentence. Say something so profound that there's nothing left to say, drop the mic, and walk away satisfied with your clear and effective conclusion.

# USING QUOTATIONS EFFECTIVELY

*Jenna Albers*

Mehmet Murat ildan, a Turkish playwright and novelist, once said, “Since you cannot experience everything, you need the experience of others, especially the Beluga Caviar, the quotations! They are the most precious egg of big life experiences!” Now, ignoring Mr. Murat ildan’s excessive use of exclamation points, he stresses an important concept: effectively incorporating quotations is valuable in writing. But beware—quotations can easily be misused. Rather than support your thoughts, as they are intended to do, the incorrect use of quotations can quickly muddle your points and distract your reader.

Since I am a high school student teacher, I know that the most common mistake my students make is forgetting to introduce their quotations. They write a sentence relating to their topic, and then they just drop a quotation after. Who said that? Where did it come from? Quotations cannot exist on their own. The reader needs to know two things: one, who said it? And two, in what context? Let us examine the quotation at the beginning of this essay. I began by telling you who said the quotation, and

since this particular quotation was not in any essay or novel, I provided extra information so you could rest assured that Mehmet Murat ildan was not some guy in apartment 4B. I proved that my source could be trusted. In college writing, you often use quotations we find in scholarly articles. The first time we ever use a quotation from an article, we need to first tell the reader the name of the author and, sometimes, the article title. Now that your quotation is introduced, we need to finish it.

At this point, my high school students are perfectly capable of introducing a quotation correctly. They tell me the author’s name and the text from where it came, they write their quotation...and then they move on to something entirely unrelated. But I’m still stuck on that quotation, thinking, “What was the point of that?” And this, my friends, is why you have to finish the quotation by, as I like to say, “unpacking” it. Imagine your quotation is a suitcase. I’m sure there is a plethora of really awesome things in it, but I’ll never know for sure unless you show me what’s inside. The whole point of using a quotation is to support your writing. But unless you explain how that quotation supports and is relevant to the point you are trying to make, then its entire purpose is lost. A tip: don’t be skimpy with your unpacking. Allot at least two or three sentences to fully explain each quotation. Do not give your professor an excuse to write “expand” anywhere in your paper.

Now that you know how to introduce and finish your

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A TIP: DON’T BE SKIMPY WITH YOUR UNPACKING. ALLOT AT LEAST TWO OR THREE SENTENCES TO FULLY EXPLAIN EACH QUOTATION. DO NOT GIVE YOUR PROFESSOR AN EXCUSE TO WRITE “EXPAND” ANYWHERE IN YOUR PAPER.

quotations, there are a few ways to incorporate them into your writing. I have two favorites, so we're going with those. The first way to tie in your quotation is to insert it into the middle of your sentence and let it flow with your own words. If someone notable said something you wish you would have said, then plunk quotation marks around their words and let them say it in your paper. For example, I know these rules can be difficult, because "anyone who says writing is easy isn't doing it right" (Joy). I wanted to say something about how writing is tricky, and hey, there's Amy Joy, a noted science fiction novelist, saying exactly that. So I'll go ahead and insert her words into my sentence, remembering (of course) to give her credit.

The second way to incorporate a quotation is to use a colon to show support. Let me explain. When we write, we are really just voicing our opinions in a way that sounds official. But we want our opinions to be taken seriously, and one way to do that is to show that noteworthy people agree with us. When we use a quotation, we are simply showing that someone else supports what we said. So, when we write, we need to make our statement, insert a colon, then place the supporting quotation. This colon basically says, "Don't believe me? Well, here's my proof." For an example, I will make the random yet unfailingly true statement that *Harry Potter* is the most incredible book series ever written: "The *Harry Potter* books are distributed in over 200 territories, are translated into 68 languages, and have sold over 400 million copies worldwide" (scholastic.com). See what I mean? Statement, colon to show support is on its way, and then quotation. Boom.

You now know how to effectively introduce and finish a quotation, and you have two reliable ways to incorporate them into your writing. So go make bold statements! Just make sure you support them correctly.



Photo by Danny Gerling.

I have a confession: I am a serial over-comma-er. Despite my intense and unabashed love for punctuation and grammar, I always struggle with extraneous commas. Honestly, I think that my mother is to blame for my addiction. She raised me to always second-guess myself, saying, “If someone’s wrong in a situation, assume it’s you.” This psychological complex manifests itself in all kinds of ways (ask my therapist), including my comma addiction. The thing is, I am always so worried about making my writing as clear as possible that I tend to overuse commas to guarantee that my reader knows which words go together. Before you start writing my mom anonymous, accusatory letters, I should probably point out that my problem is not unique; I’ve never read a paper, professional or otherwise, that didn’t struggle with its comma usage. On the off chance that my mother isn’t to blame for everyone’s issues...what is?

The root of our comma confusion is the existence of two separate schools of thought. The first school of thought mandates that commas be used to provide utmost clarity for the reader. In this school, commas often surround things like prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and appositives—extra stuff. Contrarily, the second school dictates that comma usage ought to mimic speech patterns. If you’re reading something and naturally pause, throw in a comma!

Writers in the first school employ commas to tell the reader exactly which words go together. I like to think of these commas as making little word packets. These little

word packets tell the reader what the essential parts of the sentence are; words contained by commas might as well be eliminated, and what you’re left with is the main sentence. So, let’s look at an example: “Before you went home, on the 13th, for spring break, you cleaned your room.” If we take out the little word packets enclosed by commas (“on the 13th” and “for spring break”), we’re left with, “Before you went home, you cleaned your room.” Have we *really* lost anything by ditching those word packets? No—the point of the sentence is that you cleaned your room before spring break. It isn’t necessary to know the rest of the information, though they are nice details.

The second school of thought is much simpler than the prior. Self-proclaimed “Comma Queen” Mary Norris compares writers in the second school to musical conductors who feel the need to personally orchestrate a sentence. For you musicians out there, I’ve also heard people in this school call commas “the breath-mark of a sentence.” So, look again at our example sentence. Someone used to this comma-by-sound method would probably hate this construction because they would think that you should pause at every comma. Try reading it like that—it doesn’t sound very natural, does it? Though someone using commas to make word packets wouldn’t read this sentence with pauses at every comma, someone using commas as breath marks would, and would, therefore, find the punctuation annoying.

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SO, WHO GIVES A...DARN... ABOUT AN OXFORD COMMA? I DO!

## Serial/Oxford Commas

So, who gives a...darn... about an Oxford comma? I do! But, unsurprisingly, not everyone does. Generally, journalists are required to forego this fabulous punctuation mark. Here's why I like it: There's a difference between saying, "We invited the strippers, JFK, and Stalin to the hotel room," and "We invited the strippers, JFK and Stalin to the hotel room." The lack of comma risks rendering "JFK and Stalin" as an appositive for "strippers." (If you want a visual, a quick Google search will reward your curiosity.) Though, if it truly were an appositive, it would look like this: "We invited the strippers, JFK and Stalin, to the hotel room." But a foregone serial comma can result in such ambiguity that I always use it, just to be safe. Journalists typically skip it because it is technically unnecessary, because it is AP style, and because it might break the movement of a news story.

So, in short, I prefer the first method because it is the most grammatically explicit. But the second method will typically fit a college writer's needs. I often recommend that my tutees use this second strategy. Unless a student is really, really concerned with grammatical structure, the by-sound technique is typically sufficient. I also always use the Oxford comma, and I always suggest that my tutees do as well (though, as with all writing, style comes down to preference).



Photo by Ariana Birondo.



# READ TERRIBLE BOOKS

Sam Williams

Most writers love to read. In today's world, you need to have a deep affection for stories to devote even a few hours of free time a week to reading for fun, much less to devote your life to crafting tales yourself. That's why English courses exist as we know them: so impressionable minds can have exposure to the wonders of the language's finest works and be inspired to love words and provided examples of what great writing looks like.

Here's the thing, though: a lot of the highly lauded literary classics you'll be asked to read in your English courses are gonna suck. Just because critics and literary historians think they're important doesn't make them fun to read. *The Old Man and the Sea* is a 120-page novel that reads like it's 900, and *Moby Dick* is a 900-page novel that reads like it's a million. Beyond the classics, your professor will have some pet picks they ask you to read that you just won't share their appreciation for. Beyond the classroom entirely, every casual reader has picked up and started on a book that, about halfway through, they realized was an utter waste of time.

The trick to surviving the slog that reading against your will can become is to recognize that this is as good an opportunity to learn as you could ask for. Focus on forming an awareness of

what it is about the writing that turns you off. Maybe the characters are unlikable or underdeveloped, or the plot is cliché or nonsensical, or the book is a living, snarling mouth that's trying to kill you, like that one in *Harry Potter*. Once you've identified the aspects of the writing that are disappointing you, you'll know to avoid using similar techniques and devices in the future. Even better, it can serve as a training exercise. You know what's bad about it, now how would you fix it? Don't stop at thinking, "That character was so bland that his death had no impact," or "Wow, there were far too many jellybeans in that sex scene." Instead, consider how you could make that character's death the most gut-wrenching ever, or how many jellybeans would have been an appropriate number.

As helpful as identifying the worst missteps of bad writers—things like vague words, clichéd phrases, or even major grammatical errors—it's also a good idea to scan there stuff for diamonds in the rough. Even the most amateurish of writers can stumble headfirst into a beautiful turn of phrase or an intriguing observation, and, while it might not make the ordeal entirely worthwhile, it can at least make your reading a learning experience.

Obviously, no one should set out to read terrible books just to learn what not to do—life's too short and too filled with fantastic stories to allow making time specifically for the drivel—but eventually you're bound to end up reading something you'd

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EVEN THE MOST AMATEURISH OF WRITERS CAN STUMBLE HEADFIRST INTO A BEAUTIFUL TURN OF PHRASE OR AN INTRIGUING OBSERVATION, AND, WHILE IT MIGHT NOT MAKE THE ORDEAL ENTIRELY WORTHWHILE, IT CAN AT LEAST MAKE YOUR READING A LEARNING EXPERIENCE.

rather not, even if just for the brief period before you form an opinion. When this happens, don't shut your brain off; keep awareness in general, and of what sorts of writing you love or hate in particular, is one of the best ways to enrich your own work.

## CONCISION: HOW TO CUT THE CRAP

*Jasmin Fosheim*

There is something about writing that is extremely difficult. In order to please readers, writers need to use enough words to explain thoroughly to readers their ideas, but writers also need to use few enough words to keep readers from slowly falling asleep from boredom. Personally, I really hate reading papers, books, and articles that I can truly understand, but that I cannot stand to undergo reading because the author is so long-winded that I feel my brain running out of oxygen as it tries to read a sentence that runs all the way to the bottom of the page. To write effectively means you have to pack as much punch as possible with as few words as you can manage. It's simple—the thing you

have to remember is that writing has to be concise and short, but the words writers use must be powerful and strong.

Here's how to cut the crap:

1. "*There*" is an empty word; what does it mean? Without the rest of the sentence, *there* has no meaning. Rework the sentence so it is no longer necessary.  
EXAMPLE: There is something about writing that is extremely difficult.  
Writing can be an extremely difficult thing to do.
2. Words such as *thing* and *something* mean nothing to readers. What kinds of *things* are you referring to?  
EXAMPLE: Writing can be an extremely difficult thing to do.  
Writing can be an extremely difficult task.
3. Be selective when using adverbs in your writing; adverbs have a place, but many times they prevent writers from harnessing the most powerful words, and other times, they are just fillers.  
EXAMPLE: Writing is an extremely difficult task.  
Writing is an onerous task.

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ALL WRITERS COULD BENEFIT FROM A LESSON ON CONCISION;  
EFFECTIVE WRITING REQUIRES BREVITY AND OOMPH.

EXAMPLE: I really hate reading papers...  
I despise reading papers...

EXAMPLE: ...that I can truly understand...  
...that I understand.

4. Avoid phrases like *personally* or *in my opinion* as well as the use of *I* or *me*. If you're the writer, readers will assume that what you've written expresses your opinion.

EXAMPLE: Personally, I really hate reading papers.  
Most readers really hate reading papers.

5. Carefully consider listed words. If each item is not unique, one item will usually suffice.

EXAMPLE: I despise reading papers, books, and  
articles that...  
I despise writing that...

6. Use your gut when considering a phrase, but in most cases, remember that less is more.

EXAMPLE: ...because the author is so long-winded  
that I feel my brain running out of  
oxygen as it tries to read a sentence  
that runs all the way to the bottom of  
the page.  
...because of the author's long-  
windedness.

EXAMPLE: ...to keep readers from slowly falling  
asleep from boredom.  
...to prevent readers from dozing off.

7. Writers often fill their sentences with many short words rather than utilizing one word that encompasses everything they wish to convey.

EXAMPLE: To write effectively means you have to...  
Effective writing requires...

EXAMPLE: Writers need to...  
Writers must...

8. Watch out for introductory phrases. Sometimes they help with the flow of the paper. Other times, they gunk up your writing without adding much value.

EXAMPLE: It's simple—the thing you have to  
remember...  
Writers must remember...

9. When using two or more adjectives to describe a word, person, or phenomenon, be sure that each adjective is unique, so as not to be repetitive.

EXAMPLE: ...writing has to be concise and short,  
but the words writers use must be  
powerful and strong.  
Effective writing requires brevity and  
oomph.

Look at the transformation of the first paragraph after utilizing all the tips given above. After simply swapping and deleting words, the paragraph has retained the same meaning, but it now flourishes with strength and simplicity:

Writing is an onerous task. To please readers, writers must use enough words to convey their ideas thoroughly, but

few enough to prevent readers from dozing off. Most readers despise writing that they understand but that they cannot stand to sift through because of the long-windedness of the author. All writers could benefit from a lesson on concision; effective writing requires brevity and oomph.

By employing these same tips in your writing, it will become a more powerful, elegant, and enjoyable, guaranteed.

## HOW TO WRITE COMPARE-AND-CONTRAST PAPERS

*Jukka Rysgaard*

Every day we compare and contrast. For instance, you might burst out phrases like the following: “Coca Cola tastes so much better than Pepsi” or “Let’s eat at Qdoba because it is so much better than Chipotle.” We often have to explain and clarify our reasons, though, like why Coca Cola is so much better than Pepsi. Moreover, if you have younger siblings, nieces, or nephews, you have definitely have been through the never-

ending “Why questionnaire.” Why do you have glasses? It is so I can see better. Why? Because my eyes are not working optimally. Why? Why? Why? What the child is looking for are reasons. For instance, why do I have to go to bed when I’m not even tired, and Joey, who is also 10, can stay up until 10 p.m.? Without realizing it, throughout your growth, you have used similarities and differences to support your reasoning. Even though we compare and contrast on a daily basis, students often struggle with writing compare-and-contrast papers; however, by following three easy steps, I promise that you will feel more comfortable writing compare and contrast papers in the future.

When writing a compare-and-contrast paper, there are three main things to always keep in mind:

1. Purpose and supporting details
2. Organization and structure
3. Transitions and coherence

The most important parts of the paper are purpose and supporting details. Always make sure that

- a) The purpose of the assignment is clear.
- b) The paper compares and contrasts items clearly.
- c) Your paper highlights specific examples and arguments to support the similarities or differences.
- d) Your paper only includes information relevant to the comparison or contrast.

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GOOD TRANSITIONS ARE CRUCIAL BECAUSE IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE READER KNOWS THAT YOU ARE GOING FROM ONE IDEA TO ANOTHER.

- e) You include a short summary of the work you include.

Our first objective is to determine the purpose for writing the paper and to find objects to support our purpose. To do so, we must

- 1) First find objects or subjects that have similarities and differences, such as Coca Cola and Pepsi. Find things that you will compare: similarities. Find things that you will contrast: differences. Make sure that you balance the information about the points you are comparing and contrasting.
- 2) Then decide what you are going to compare and contrast. For instance, I am going to compare and contrast the way Coca Cola and Pepsi advertise their products.
- 3) Decide on how you are going to structure your paper.

To structure your paper, I recommend using one of these three structures:

- 1) Whole-to-Whole
- 2) Similarities-to-Differences
- 3) Point-by-Point Structure.

- 1) Using the Whole-to-Whole strategy, you first present all your information about one item, then present all your information about the other. For instance, you might compare Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. You

would say everything about Arnold, and then you would say everything about Stallone:

Introduction

Arnold Schwarzenegger (say everything about Arnold)

Sylvester Stallone (say everything about Stallone)

Conclusion

- 2) Another structure strategy could be the Similarities-to-Differences structure: you highlight all the similarities between Apple and Microsoft, and then you highlight all the differences between Apple and Microsoft.

Introduction

Similarities between Apple and Microsoft

Differences between Apple and Microsoft

Conclusion

- 3) Lastly, you could choose the Point-by-Point strategy, where you explain one point of comparison before moving to the next point. For instance, you could write about the similarities and differences between the structures of high school classes in comparison to college classes in one section; then you could write about similarities and differences between tests in high school compared to tests in college in the next section. Point-by-Point comparison and contrast uses a separate section or paragraph for each



point. To stay consistent, begin with the same item in each section. For instance, for each point that you discuss, first explain the information about high school and then about college.

Introduction

Point 1

Point 2

Conclusion

For clarification and consistency, make sure your paper follows a consistent order when discussing your comparison. Moreover, make sure that you divide the information supporting the similarities and differences into appropriate sections or paragraphs. Using graphs to illustrate similarities and contrasts can be a great tool to overview and create clarification.

A vital point in your compare-and-contrast paper is good transitions and coherence. To better support your ideas, give the reader a better overview, and make the paper flow better; it is important that you transition smoothly from one point to another. Good transitions are crucial because it is important that the reader knows that you are going from one idea to another. To do this, I recommend using comparison and contrast transition words to relate your ideas:

- a) Comparison transitional words: *also, as, as well as, both, in the same manner, in the same way, like, likewise, most important, same, similar, similarly, the same as, and in comparison to.*

- b) Contrast transitional words: *although, but, however, differ, even though, in contrast, instead, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, unless, unlike, while, yet, and different than.*

In conclusion, by following these simple three easy steps

- 1) Purpose and supporting details
- 2) Organization and structure
- 3) Transitions and coherence

you have the tools to construct a well-written compare-and-contrast paper. Do not forget to proofread your paper and bring your paper into the Writing Center. Lastly, keep this in mind: writing is a process that takes time and patience to master, but using these steps every time creates good habits and, most importantly, good writing.

# BENEFITS OF BILINGUALISM

*Quinn Jacobs*

When I was a child, my parents took me to church every Sunday. I was enrolled in Sunday school, where I listened to stories from the Bible while doing crafts and eating sugar cookies. One of my favorite Bible stories concerned the folly of humankind and a very annoyed God:

There was a time when every human spoke the same language and lived in the same place on Earth. One day, the humans decided to build a huge tower reaching as far as they could build into the sky because they wanted to create a monument to themselves.

God saw them build the tower and said to Himself, "These humans are too powerful. Nothing will be impossible to them because they all understand each other's words."

To fix this problem, God created thousands of languages and stuck them in the humans' mouths. Humans suddenly could not communicate. To add insult to injury, God plucked up the humans and scattered them to distant lands. Not only did humans speak different languages, but now they were physically separated as well. The place where the humans initially lived, where the unfinished tower sat, was henceforth called Babel due to the confused babbling of these now

"native speakers."

Nowadays, it's not unusual for the average person to at least know a few words from another language. It's also not unusual for people to speak a second language, with some knowing multiple. Learning a new language is a part of many school curriculums, and technology makes it easy to communicate with people no matter where they are. The world is shrinking, and humankind is living in Babel once more.

One of the many awesome things about learning and speaking a new language is the effect it has on one's first language. When I first started taking French classes at Augie, I didn't anticipate that I would learn things about English in the process, but I did! It turns out that, in order to understand a second language, being knowledgeable and being aware of the mechanics of one's first language is essential. Therefore, learning a new language helps one become better at their first language, too.

A major part of learning a new language is understanding the different ways of expressing tense. For example, "I go" is different than "I'm going," "I will go," and "I went." This seems obvious when saying it in English, but all it takes is mispronunciation, misspelling, or misunderstanding in a foreign language to create confusion. When I look at papers during tutoring sessions, I always

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NOW THAT I'VE SEEN HOW ESSENTIAL IT IS IN FRENCH TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN  
"I WILL GO TO THE STORE" AND "I WENT TO THE STORE," I'M AWARE OF HOW IMPORTANT  
IT IS IN ENGLISH.

make sure the tenses match. Now that I've seen how essential it is in French to know the difference between "I will go to the store" and "I went to the store," I'm aware of how important it is in English.

Another important component in learning French is knowing pronouns. My French professor once said that native French speakers will recognize when a non-native French speaker is skilled by the way he or she uses pronouns. Instead of having to explain every little detail, he or she can use pronouns to shorten his or her sentences. For example, instead of having to say "I helped the student with his paper in the Writing Center," one can say "I helped him with it there." Knowing the importance of pronouns in a foreign language is a sign of mastery; knowing it in English helps shorten sentences and delete non-essential words.

When I try to speak and write eloquently in French, I draw upon what I know in English. This constant symbiotic relationship goes both ways. In English, I choose my words more carefully than I did before, and I'm sensitive to matters of grammar and tense. Learning a new language has helped me become better at my own, and I think that others would be helped as well.

## BREAKING THE RULEZ

*Sarah Kocher*

The speedometer on my car is four miles slow. It is an oddly specific amount by which to be off. If I want to go 75 miles per hour, my speedometer must read 79. As you may now recognize, I am well aware that the speedometer on my car is four miles slow. Nevertheless, when I drive in a 75 mile-per-hour zone, my speed needle reads 75. For those of you who struggle with math, that means I am traveling at 71 miles per hour.

It is safe to say that I am not a risk-taker.

However, there is one area of my life in which I break the rules almost every day, and I do so with relish. I am a punk of a writer. If my appearance matched my writing style, I would have a hot pink Mohawk, brass knuckles, and seven and a half tattoos (because one of them was done using a sharpened earring in the back of a van during a police raid, so my prison roommate didn't have time to finish).

At this point, many of you would say that I am exaggerating, and you would be right.

I would only have four tattoos.

Nevertheless, successful criminals and successful writers

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WHEN YOU BREAK RULES WITH SUCH A LEVEL OF CARE, YOU WILL MAINTAIN  
YOUR CREDIBILITY AS A WRITER AND STAY OUT OF GRAMMAR JAIL.

IT'S A WIN-WIN-WIN: REBELLION, CREDIBILITY, AND FREEDOM, ALL IN ONE.

have a lot in common. You have to know the rules in order to break them just right; that is the difference between breaking the rules and getting punished and breaking the rules but getting away with it. When you break the rules, you have to be able to make the crime so effective, so flawless, that it works in your favor.

Disclaimer: please do not use the information in this piece to become a career criminal. Then I would definitely get in trouble with the police, and it wouldn't be for going 71.

In writing, there is a difference between breaking the rules and just being wrong. For instance, when you write "your going to get caught," that does not make you a kewl, risk-taking, non-helmet-wearing biker. That just makes you wrong. You become that kid who rolls up on a recumbent bike and tries to play with the Harleys. Learn the rules first. Get your spelling down. Get your grammar down. Get your punctuation down. Get your syntax down. Understand flow, clarity, and cohesion. Learn how to write the best kick-butt, rule-following essay the world has ever seen.

And then we can get to the good stuff.

You get to choose which rules you're going to break, but start slow. In fact, go slowly permanently. Drive 71, but do it on the biggest, baddest Harley the world has ever seen. In writing, this means realizing that sometimes, in order to break the rules most effectively, less is more. Breaking rules every other sentence does not make you kewl, either. It just makes you look a little desperate. And then by the thirtieth time the grammar police come for you, you've earned an unflattering nickname and your own personal cell.

Instead, break one rule. Break it neatly. Break it with the same amount of care you would put into constructing a very

large, very unstable bomb. Make it meaningful. And when the reader stumbles into it, all he or she can do is revel in the wonderful aftermath of the explosion of awesomeness in his or her brain. Then, your reader will move on to all the other things you can execute suavely, elegantly, and precisely. If things go just right, you will have broken a rule in a way that enhances the voice of your piece. If things go just right, you will have broken a rule in such a way that the sentence is more effective for having been thusly treated. When you break rules with such a level of care, you will maintain your credibility as a writer and stay out of grammar jail. It's a win-win-win: rebellion, credibility, and freedom, all in one.

So hit the open road, you rule-breaker, you. Start at 71 miles per hour and see where it takes you.



Photo by Ariana Birondo.

## AFTERWORD

Finally, in this second volume of *Palimpsest*, we have achieved what the title alludes to: a layer of advice from our 2014-2015 tutors over the advice of the 2013-2014 tutors. In this volume our tutors have written on new topics, and some have taken a different angle on topics already covered from the previous year. This was our intent. Each of our tutors brings their own experiences, voices, and fresh perspectives to writing—and that's what I find so inspiring about reading these essays.

Writing is a craft—an important and empowering one, but also a difficult one. At the Writing Center we understand how challenging writing can be, and we work to demystify the writing process. We also understand that good writers don't exist and can't grow in a vacuum. Rather, we become better writers by practice, collaborating, learning from each other, discussing subtle nuances, sharing beautiful passages, and considering advice from others.

Many thanks to all of the tutors for taking the time to contribute to *Palimpsest*. Special thanks to September Symens, Sarah Kocher, and Matthew Housiaux for editing this collection and to Katie Retterath for designing the cover. Thanks as well to Peg Ustad and Central Services for layout, design and printing.

Dr. Daniel Gerling  
Writing Center Director

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