

Style Guide

These notes contain my personal suggestions for style improvement (suggestions = commandments for 6xxx assignments). These suggestions overlap considerably with the suggestions offered in a terrific book written by my developmental editor, Lyn Dupré. The title of the book, *BUGS in Writing*, suggests that the text is for computer scientists and engineers, but I recommend it for all people who write technical material.

Use of Quotations

Use quotations to support your conclusions, rather than to tell your story. After all, it is your thoughts about which the reader wants to learn, rather than those of the quoted person.

Quote supports your conclusion:

Patrick seems to be deeply attracted to Saab automobiles: "I've driven Saabs for 20 years."

Quote co-opts your story:

Patrick has "driven Saabs for 20 years."

Use of Trivial and Simple

When in doubt, use a dictionary. Random house says this:

<i>Trivial</i>	of very little importance or value
<i>Simple</i>	easy to understand

Simple ideas are often presumed, incorrectly, to be trivial.

Use of We

We means *the author and the reader or the authors*. Unless you are a king or queen, or you are one of multiple authors, avoid using *we* when you are referring to yourself. Someone, somewhere, decided it was egotistic to use *I*, but the *I* proscription can lead to confusion about who is actually responsible for the work.

Former and Latter

Avoid *the former* and *the latter* and related phrases. They force your reader to stop reading, to scan back, and to reread previous material. Use an unambiguous reference instead.

Ugh:

I like fast cars and cold beer. I like the former because

Nice:

I like fast cars and cold beer. I like fast cars because

Above and Below

When you refer to another place in your writing, use the most precise pointer possible.

Often vague:

I could have committed the *below* blunder above.

More precise:

I could have committed the *below* blunder in the first paragraph of this file.

Since and Because

Because means that there is a causal connection. *Since* means that time has passed.

Wrong choice:

He took 6.xxx since it is a gut course.

Correct choice:

He took 6.xxx because it is a gut course.

Ambiguous:

He has taken gut courses since he decided to go to law school.

That and Which

That introduces phrases that identify referents. Do not use *that* if the referent is already unambiguous; use *which* instead. *Which* adds information. Do not use *which* to introduce a phrase that is helping to disambiguate a referent.

Provides disambiguation:

Patrick lives on Creepy Street in the house *that* has a Saab parked in the driveway.

Adds information, house already unambiguous:

Patrick lives on Creepy Street in the third house on the left, *which* has a Saab parked in the driveway.

Whenever I write a book, I do a query-replace, after everything else is done, to replace all misused *which* instances. Many authors and editors refer to this process as the which hunt.

When Nothing but Your Maximal Effort is Good Enough

Hire a developmental editor, or at least a good copy editor, to go over your theses or book or other great opus. I always do.