

## Hints for writing papers

### Substantive hints

1. Make a clear argument in the first paragraph (or second paragraph if you start with an anecdote to draw in the reader). Then present evidence to support that argument.
2. Do not ignore contrary evidence. Either acknowledge that such contrary evidence limits the generality of your argument or show why it is not actually contrary to your argument.
3. Draw on all the potentially relevant readings.
4. Be skeptical of web-based sources. [Wikipedia](#), for instance, is not an authoritative source.<sup>1</sup>

### Stylistic hints

1. Avoid contractions in formal writing. In informal writing, they're OK.
2. Avoid the passive voice (e.g., "it was done by him") where possible.
3. In formal writing, never use the second person as a substitute for impersonal or general references. Thus you should not write: "living in a democracy makes you less likely to be arrested for political reasons." You might write instead: "People in democratic countries are less likely to be arrested for political reasons."
4. Consider avoiding the first person singular. If using that format, however, stick with it throughout. Do not switch back and forth between impersonal presentation of your argument and the first person singular. Thus, you could write: "In the first section of this paper, I discuss the reasons for the collapse of Chilean democracy in 1973. In the second section, I discuss how General Augusto Pinochet was able to consolidate a personalistic dictatorship." You could also write: "The first section of this paper discusses the reasons for the collapse of Chilean democracy in 1973. The second section describes how General Augusto Pinochet was able to consolidate a personalistic dictatorship." But you would not write: "In the first section of this paper, I discuss the reasons for the collapse of Chilean democracy in 1973. The second section describes how General Augusto Pinochet was able to consolidate a personalistic dictatorship." The same point holds for the first person plural ("we").
5. "It's" is a contraction of "it is". "Its" is the possessive of "it". As you will not be using contractions in formal writing, you won't be using "it's".
6. Do not use impersonal pronouns when the referent is unclear or nowhere in sight. An "it" should refer clearly to a specific noun used in the preceding clause, rather than a general concept contained in the previous clause or a specific noun two or more clauses away.

<sup>1</sup>See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>,  
[http://corporate.britannica.com/britannica\\_nature\\_response.pdf](http://corporate.britannica.com/britannica_nature_response.pdf).

Similarly, avoid using “this” and “that” as subjects or direct objects. Thus, you would not write: “Dahl and other scholars have advanced the argument that democratization depends little on international factors. But this ignores important exceptions, such as Greece, Argentina, Taiwan, and the Eastern Europe.” Instead, write: “Dahl and other scholars have advanced the argument that democratization depends little on international factors. But this argument ignores important exceptions, such as Greece, Argentina, Taiwan, and Eastern Europe.”

7. If your first language is not English, check for common mistranslations. For instance, if you are a native speaker of Portuguese or Spanish you should make sure to write “make decisions” instead of “take decisions”, “soccer” instead of “futbol” or football”, “commitment” (for *compromiso*) instead of “compromise”, etc.
8. Do not worry about split infinitives. If Captain Kirk can do it (“to boldly go...”), so can you.
9. If in doubt about style and grammar, consult Strunk and White<sup>2</sup> or some similar volume.
10. Always include page numbers on your papers.
11. Spell check and proofread your paper before handing it in.
12. If your footnotes are abridged or you are using the academic journal style of including citations in parentheses, be sure to include a list of references cited. Make sure the formatting of your bibliography and references corresponds to one of the appropriate styles. Stick with ONE style and use it throughout. If in doubt about formatting issues, consult the *Chicago Manual of Style*.
13. For your first paper, allow at least an hour after that paper is written to your satisfaction to go back through it and check to make sure that you have covered all these points. For subsequent papers, check through your paper both for these points and for any hints you have received on previous papers.

<sup>2</sup>William Strunk Jr., E.B. White, and Roger Angell, *The Elements of Style*, 4th Edition (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999).

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

17.50 Introduction to Comparative Politics  
Spring 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.