Tips for Writing Papers and Some Common Mistakes to Avoid

[This document is an expanded and heavily revised version of a set of guidelines originally written by Prof. Gary S. Morson of the Northwestern University Slavic Department.]

A. *How to Hand in Papers*

1. Final drafts of all papers must be turned in as word processing printouts on 8.5 x 11 white paper using only black and white fonts. To keep page length and paper length uniform among students, use a 12-point font *double-spaced.* No papers will be accepted by e-mail. Bring a printout to class on the due date and save a copy for yourself.

2. First drafts for peer editing should be sent as a MS Word e-mail attachment to your assigned partner by 8pm on the night before the class when the peer editing discussion will take place. Try to make your draft as complete as possible, because you'll get the most useful comments from your partner if you have a complete paper with an introduction, a middle section, and a conclusion. Each member of each pair should bring two printouts to class on "peer editing" day, a copy of your partner's paper with your comments marked on them, and a copy of your own paper so that you can take notes on his/her comments.

3. Be sure to save your work frequently, at least after each paragraph. I've heard more than one story about a student who loses half a paper due to some freakish computer event.

B. *General*

1. Papers should be clear, well-organized, have a main point, and be well-supported.

2. When writing your first draft, prior to "peer editing," go over each paragraph and each word several times. Read it aloud to yourself. You will be surprised how your ear will catch awkward phrasing and mistakes that your eye may miss.

3. Do not expect just to have an idea and write it down. Ideas change in the process of careful writing, as you have to choose particular words, find some good way to connect paragraphs, and make other decisions. That is why writing is also a learning experience in itself, and why it is necessary to go over the paper several times.

C. *Audience*

1. Write for a general audience, not just for me. Imagine that I am a *representative reader*, and that you have many readers who have not taken this course. Therefore you should avoid phrases like: ″as we discussed in class″ or ″the works we read this term.″

2. Imagine your audience as a group of intelligent people who have a basic familiarity with the issues in your paper. You should not include a chronological recitation of facts.

3. You may assume that your readers have thought of obvious things to say about the issues, and that you need to find something important that may not have occurred to them.

D. *Paper Titles*

1. Do not underline your own title. Underlining is a form of quotation, and since the title and paper are your own, there is no need to use underlining (or quotation marks) for your own title.

2. Titles should indicate the main idea, theme, or problem of the paper. Try to bring your major conclusion into the title if you can, to avoid being trite or boring.

   Bad titles: World War I. Causes of World War I. Why World War I Happened.

3. A good title requires thought, because you must really have a main idea in order to compose a title that reflects the main idea. Sometimes, as your paper evolves, you may need to rethink your initial title.

4. The first page of your paper should be preceded by a cover sheet that includes the title and author of the paper (centered in the middle of the page) and the course number, instructor, and date (centered or flush right near the bottom of the page). Don′t forget to reset page numbering so that your first page of text is page 1, not page 2. You can emphasize the title of your paper by making it bold-faced, or in a slightly larger font than the rest of the title page.

E. Organization

1. Before starting to write your paper, make an outline, either with your word processor or by hand.

2. Papers should be well-organized. They should ask a clear question and should go about answering it. They should have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

3. Paragraphs should also have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Each paragraph should follow from the one before and lead on smoothly to the one after. Avoid list transitions, such as: ″Another reason World War I happened is . . . "

4. Be sure your paper has an introductory paragraph and a concluding paragraph. Find a way to ″create a circle″ by which the introduction anticipates the conclusion, and the conclusion refers back to themes previewed in the introduction. As your paper evolves, the themes may wind up differing from your initial outline, and you should be prepared to rewrite your introduction after completing the paper.

F. Quotations and Citations

1. The basic rule about documentation in college courses is that you may never copy anything verbatim from any source without putting that quotation within quotation marks and providing a source in parenthesis (see parenthesis style, below). You cannot say Author X asserts that World War I was caused by cannibals; if that actual phrase is used by Author X – you must quote it.

   Short quotations (two to three lines) should be included in the text. Longer quotations should be indented ten spaces and set off from the rest of your paper. When you indent a quotation, do not enclose it in quotation marks, because indentation already indicates quotation.

2. Each quotation should correspond exactly with the original in wording, spelling, and interior punctuation. A capital or lower-case letter at the beginning of a quotation may be altered if it is incorporated into your own sentence. If you italicize a word or phrase for emphasis, you must indicate this in parentheses following the quotation (emphasis mine). If you need to add a clarifying word to a quotation, place it in square brackets to indicate it is your word, not the original author′s. Example: if the original is ″bluff those he scorned″ and the reference ″he″ is not clear, you could change it to ″bluff those [Hitler] scorned.″

3. Do not sandwich a long quotation within two parts of your own sentence.
    Wrong: When Hitler thinks about the British Empire,
                   [indented quote]
    he is guided by both envy and resentment.

4. In this seminar we will use the standard citation style used in all economics articles. Do not use footnotes with their clumsy "ibid" and "op. cit." Limit your use of footnotes to a qualification or an extra detail that does not fit into the flow of your paragraph. Instead of using footnotes, you place in parenthesis at the end of the quote the author, short title (only if you are citing more than one work by the same author), and page number. Put the period to end your sentence outside the parenthesis, not inside. Here are two examples, one for an author cited once and the next for an author more than once.

    Ferguson argues to the contrary, "quotation" (Ferguson, p. 145).
    Keegan argues to the contrary, "quotation" (Keegan, *The Second World War*, p. 15).

5. You are allowed to begin and end a quotation anywhere you like, for instance, by quoting only a few words from a long sentence in the original.

6. When omitting words in the middle of a quote (this is called "ellipsis"), use three periods with one extra space in front of each period:

    "If the British cabinet had voted the other way . . . the rest of the twentieth century would have been totally different" (Ferguson, p. 145). as the matter with him." *(BJ*, 336)

7. Using the parenthetical style for citations, you save the full details of the citation for a list of "Works cited" or "References" at the end of your paper. Your entry in the list of "Works cited" includes the author, title, and any other details included on the class syllabus, but not the page number or numbers you cited. This list at the end of your paper should be alphabetical by author's last name in the format:

    Keegan, John, *The Second World War,* London, Hutchinson, 1989.

G. Tenses

1. Use the present tense to describe what an author does. Use the past tense to describe what happened in history. And use the past perfect ("had previously envied") when something happens before the past.

    Example: Ferguson argues that a decision by the British Cabinet to stay out of World War I would have totally changed the rest of the twentieth century.

    Example: Kaiser Wilhelm approved of the naval arms race, because he had long envied the strategic latitude possessed by the British on account of their powerful navy.

H. Technicalities about Fonts, Font Changes, Spell Check, and Grammar Check

1. Your entire paper should be doubled-spaced and you should choose a 12-point font size. Do not use unusually large or small fonts. A standard font such as Palatino (in which this memo is written), Garamond, or New Century Schoolbook, will produce about 300 words per page. Avoid unusual or decorative fonts, such as old English or old German. Always use a standard margin of 1 inch on the top, bottom, and both sides.

2. When you indent a quote, shift from double spacing to single spacing. This looks better on the page by compressing the space taken by the quote and lessening the chance that it will spill over to a second page.

3. You should use italics to designate the titles of all separately printed books or pamphlets. Quotation marks, not italics, should be used for titles of articles or chapters within books.

4. Learning to write easily and fluently is perhaps the single most important talent you can carry away with you after college graduation; this talent will make an enormous difference in your life as you proceed through graduate school and your career. You must learn to spell correctly, if you already have spelling weaknesses, and you must learn from your own mistakes and by paying attention to what you read to acquire a natural grammatical style. You cannot expect to lean on the spelling and grammar-check features of MS Word as a crutch — in future life (starting in other Northwestern courses) you will have to write essay exams by hand and in other situations will not have the ability to have your work checked by a computer program.

5. For the above reasons, I emphatically suggest that you turn off the spell-check and grammar-check features in MS Word when you write your initial draft. When finished with your first draft, you can turn those features back on and *thereby learn from your mistakes* as MS Word highlights words that it thinks you have misspelled and grammatical phrases that it thinks are awkward or wrong.

6. To turn off spell-check and grammar-check in MS Word, click on "Tools"then "Options"and then on the tab labelled "Spelling & Grammar." Uncheck "Check spelling as you type", check "Hide spelling errors in this document," uncheck "Always suggest corrections". For grammar, uncheck "Check grammar as you type" and check "Hide grammatical errors in this document" and "check grammar with spelling." After you do your best to write a first draft with which you are pleased, you can reverse these settings and study those errors that MS Word finds in your document.

7. The grammar check feature of MS Word will NOT find many of the most common defects of student papers, including incorrect word choice, and many types of awkward phrasing. Even after you have tried to fix everything to which MS Word objects, you still need to print out your paper and read it carefully, preferably reading it aloud, to catch the more subtle errors that make the difference between an excellent paper, a good paper, or a merely passable paper.

8. As stated at the beginning, save your paper frequently on your hard drive as you write it. An extra precaution would be to save it to a floppy disk or other backup medium everytime you finish a page, just in case you should suffer the disaster of a hard drive failure. After you turn a printout of your paper in to me, be sure you have it backed up somewhere else besides your hard drive, either on an extra copy or a floppy or backup drive.

9. Remember to staple your paper and number your pages. You can create a header with the page number embedded, or simply instruct MS Word to insert page numbers somewhere (you can specify the upper right corner or lower center or right corner).

I. Punctuation Rules

1. Never place a comma between a subject and a verb unless a separate clause has been inserted between them.

    Example: wrong "Kaiser Wilhelm's day spent reviewing his naval fleet, gave him great joy."

Example: right "Kaiser Wilhelm's day spent reviewing his naval fleet, during which he shook hands with every admiral, gave him great joy." [Note that when you set off the phrase starting "during", there must be commas at both the beginning and end of the phrase.]

2. A comma is inserted between clauses if the second clause has a new subject but not if there is no new subject.

3. Certain introductory words and phrases must be followed by a comma and some others *must not be* followed by a comma when they begin a sentence.

Examples of phrases that must be followed by a comma: however, on the one hand, on the other hand, by contrast, unfortunately.
Examples of phrases that *must not be* followed by a comma: and, or, for, but, yet, nor.

4. Use exclamation marks sparingly (they convey shouting). Avoid excessive use of italics for emphasis; instead manipulate your language and structure to create the emphasis you want. Also, use parentheses sparingly, as they convey nudging or whispering at your reader.

J. Common Mistakes

1. Watch common spelling mistakes that can be missed by MS Word spell check. Don't mix up "their" instead of "there" or "your" instead of "you're" or "its" instead of "it's".

2. Watch for non-sentences. All sentences must have a subject and a verb.

3. Avoid run-on sentences.

4. Tone. Avoid colloquialisms and slang (lifestyle, hang-up, turn-on, grossed out). Avoid anachronistic words and phrases. When writing about an event that happened 60 or 90 years ago, do not use phrases like the "interface" between the political leaders.

5. Do not split infinitives. Wrong: "to consciously choose." Right: "to choose consciously" or "consciously to choose."

6. Avoid ending sentences or clauses with prepositions whenever possible. Wrong: "a point to end on." Right: "a point on which to end." However, remember Churchill's mockery about taking this rule too far "placing a preposition at the end of a sentence is a practice up with which I will not put."

7. Avoid contractions. Don't use "don't."

8. Word choice. Make sure that the word you choose says what you want it to say. Sensitivity to word choice must be acquired constantly; it is one of the main elements distinguishing good writers from bad writers. Look up words to make sure they mean what you think they mean.

9. Avoid mixed metaphors. George Orwell gave this example: "The Fascist octopus has sung its swan song." Watch for ill-chosen metaphors: "God let Jonah off the hook" or "The seduction scene reached its climax."

10. As a rule, do not use "this" or "it" as the subject of a sentence. Include your reference in the subject, as in "this idea," "this concern," "this problem."

11. Never use "etc."

12. Watch repetition of subjects and verbs in consecutive sentences. Example: "The confrontation between de Gaulle and Montgomery sickened Eisenhower. This confrontation so sickened Eisenhower because he hated confrontations."