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WRITING GUIDLINES FOR ECONOMICS (AND PRETTY MUCH ANYTHING ELSE)

First, always remember the following two points:

- Your goal is to **persuade** your reader of the validity of your argument. Think of every piece of prose as an argument, and visualize having to persuade someone who disagrees with you. Put yourself in your reader's position, and try to think in advance of potential criticisms so that you can argue against them before the reader has the chance to make them. This focus will make your argument stronger and therefore more persuasive, which is your goal. The last thing you want to do is distract your reader from the argument, and poor writing will do exactly that.
- Style and substance are **not** separate aspects in writing. Analogously, writing and thinking are not separate. How you construct and communicate your argument affects the persuasiveness, and the substance, of the argument. Layering the argument in dense, turgid prose will convince no one of anything, except of your inability to communicate your argument. Your argument will therefore not be persuasive, no matter how much time or research you have put into it. If you cannot communicate your argument in writing, you have not thought it through fully enough. Writing **is** thinking, and you will benefit from using it as such a tool.

Second, you will find the following list of dos and don'ts generally useful.

DO:

- Use active voice as often as possible. The more involved you are with your subject via your prose, the more persuasive your argument. Be direct; say "Adam Smith shaped modern economics" instead of "modern economics was shaped by Adam Smith".
- Keep sentences fairly simple. By this I do not mean simple subject-verb-object sentences, which will give your writing a staccato tone. I mean avoid heaping modifying clauses on top of one another until

your reader loses the main thread of the sentence.

- Similarly, keep the subject and the verb in the sentence close together. By separating them you create cognitive dissonance in your reader's brain, which is looking for the word to tell it what the subject **did**, not the modifying conditions under which it did it. Relay those conditions to your reader after you have told the reader the action (i.e. the verb). *COROLLARY*: don't split infinitives. When you do it is dramatic and does make a strong impression (like "to boldly go where no one has gone before"), but as a rhetorical device splitting infinitives is generally distracting and weakens the connection between your subject and your verb. Any lessening of action in your writing diminishes its effectiveness.
- Check your paragraph breaks to make sure that each paragraph contains one fully articulated idea. Anything else should be in other paragraphs. No rule exists for the optimal length of a paragraph, other than that it should be long enough to articulate one idea, and one alone.
- Use transitions between paragraphs. Communicate to your reader via these transitions why the point you are making in this paragraph follows from the previous one, and then at the end why it leads to the next one. Transitions give your writing polish and make it elegant. They also make your argument easier to follow for the reader, and therefore more persuasive.

DON'T:

- Use words like "impact" or "interface" as verbs unless they are correct in context. If you are discussing a meteorite striking the earth, "impact" is correct in that context. In other uses, the English language already provides a good substitute: "affect". Use it (remembering that the noun form is "effect"). The same holds for "interface", which is only correct in computer or audio-video-tele-communications contexts; instead use "interact" or some other good synonym.
- Rely on weak phrases, such as "there is," "it seems to be that," "it has been argued that," "it has been shown that," "evidence has been found such that," and so on. These constructions diminish the directness of your argument, which therefore decreases its

persuasiveness. The only possible exception comes in the discussion of, for example, econometric results as evidence in trying to prove an argument. They don't really prove anything (except that you know how to do econometrics); they **are consistent with** the argument (also see next point).

- Which brings up the next point: don't overstate your case. Saying you have proven something is misleading when you have really only shown that your argument is consistent with reality as we know it. Overstatement will undermine your argument by immediately giving a critical, disagreeing reader an easy way to dismiss your argument. Such a reader could probably come up with contradictory arguments, or even contradictory evidence that you may have omitted (which is why you should try to nip potential criticisms in the bud). Once these contradictions of your argument surface, your argument loses validity.
- Rely on "to be" verbs. (Yes, this point is slightly redundant.) "Is," "are," "was," "were," "am" are empty verbs, truly devoid of meaning. Use them with caution. You obviously cannot eradicate them entirely from your writing, nor should you; but don't use them as a crutch when a more punchy, active verb with personality will inject life into your argument. Active verbs make an argument more persuasive. *COROLLARY:* Use passive voice with caution (as mentioned above). In some cases you will want to emphasize the object of a sentence, not the subject. In that case, you are correct to use passive voice. *EXAMPLE:* "The wager of law **has been used** in societies outside of medieval Europe. During the late nineteenth century, for example, **it was used by** the Montenegrans, the Bedouins, and the Albanians."
- Use more complicated words or pompous phrases when simpler ones convey your meaning just as well.
- Use "because" and "since" as synonyms, because they are not. "Because" implies a causal relationship, while "since" implies an intertemporal relationship.
- Confuse "that" and "which". Use "that" in restrictive clauses and "which" in unrestrictive clauses. *EXAMPLE:* "The bicycle that is in the garage is broken" has a different meaning from "The bicycle, which is in the garage, is broken". If you can remove the clause following the "that" or "which" without changing the meaning of the sentence, then it

is an unrestrictive clause and you should use "which". Otherwise, use "that".

- Start sentences with "This" unless you follow it with the associated noun; in other words, don't start sentences with phrases like "This indicates that . . .". Instead say, for example, "This evidence indicates that . . .". Retaining this connection to your noun serves as a transition from sentence to sentence and makes your writing more elegant, and therefore more persuasive.

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