Expository writing: A short guide

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Contents

Chapter 1 Classic style

Writing is a strange business. It is like talking, but no audience is present except for those who may flash upon that inward eye, to borrow a poetic turn from William Wordsworth. No sounds, or gestures, in the case of sign languages, emanate except for what may chime upon that inward ear. Talking, most often, flows naturally. Writing can be a struggle for students, with the blank space of the electronic page sometimes foisting an insurmountable barrier to the flow of words. At other times, "flow" hardly describes the writing process, with the jumble of keyboard strokes stumbling and staggering incoherently on the page. To switch metaphors again, this little guide aims to set university students of all writing calibres on a basic course of smooth sailing in writing, to navigate around common obstacles, and to ease the angst in writing. For all students, writing is a most—perhaps the most—important generic skill to develop in university.

We begin with overarching style in this chapter, followed by a short guide on two units of writing at different levels, the paragraph and the sentence. Chapter 2 delves into nitty gritties. Common problems in student writing will parade on the pages, flagged with warnings and exercises for avoiding and fixing them. The pageant of mishaps features run-on sentences, their opposite, sentence fragments, subject–verb (mis)agreement, accompanying words for nouns (or their lack), ambiguities in pronouns and other deictic words, and errors in punctuation. Some students might consider the last issue to be small fry, but errors in punctuation do tarnish style, and sometimes mess up the intended meaning. Exercises are sprinkled in the book. Improving writing is like improving tennis playing. Both these activities will not improve much from spectating, watching a

tennis superstar play or reading writing guide after writing guide. To improve in tennis, the player must get out on the court and hit tennis balls. To improve writing, the writer must write.

Classic style: a window to the truth

Our journey must begin with overarching style, an aesthetic philosophy for writing. Style in this sense does not concern nitty-gritty rules such as how to format references or what sections and subsections to include in a work, the stuff of instructions for authors on journal web pages or sometimes instructions for assignments. Rather, style concerns broad principles, fundamental aesthetic stances, and, as already said, overarching philosophy. A variety of styles have evolved in the history of writing. For academic writing in university, the style that I recommend, along with other scholars (Brown 2016; Pinker 2014; Thomas and Turner 1994), is classic style. This is not to say that classic style is the best style, *tout court*. As in styles of painting over the ages, one cannot legitimately say that one style is best overall. Of all writing styles, however, classic style suits university academic writing best.

The basic stance of classic style is the presentation of a window to the truth. Writing presents a window to the truth, a view that the writer has come to after her travails of research. (Following Pinker's (2014) conventions, the writer takes the female gender in this chapter and the reader takes the male gender, while in the next chapter, gender roles are reversed. My apologies to those who identify themselves as some other gender.) The writer and the reader come to the party with different backgrounds. In expository writing, the writer has read literature on a topic or sometimes conducted as yet unreported research, on the basis of which she has formulated her views. The reader is not privy to that background. The writer's job is to

convey her intellectual journey to him, culminating in the views of the truth that she has arrived at. As much of the journey should be related as is needed to make those views comprehensible.

In related tenets, classic style takes the reader to be competent and language to be adequate, sufficient for describing anything, no matter how complex or abstract, from principles of history to quantum physics to aesthetic philosophy to cognitive science. If the writer leads the reader on the path by which she, the writer, has come to her views, the reader will understand as well, and writer and reader end up sharing a chunk of the universe, like two friends watching a sunset together.

This view of truth is an aesthetic stance in classic style, not a philosophical claim about truth. Whether objective truth is out there and whether we can arrive at it are other questions, claims of which are difficult to defend. The writer does not need to broach that difficult turf, unless, of course, she is writing about the philosophy of truth. For the sake of presentation, classic style takes the stance of presenting the truth. Like a well-trained umpire, the writer, well trained after her scholarly labours, calls it as she sees it.

The call-it-as-you-see it stance implies direct writing without fussing, pussyfooting about, and humming and hawing over matters, a theme that will reappear in discussions about paragraphs and sentences. This directness contrasts with the amount of dress-up and CYA (Pinker, 2014, used this abbreviation for “cover your anatomy”) language that adorns some styles of academese, bureaucratese, and legalese. ~~It just might be the case that, well, in the minds of a good number of~~

~~scholars on writing,~~ “To the point” makes a useful catchphrase for budding classic stylists to keep in mind.

Yet another stance, going metaphor, or idiom (Brown 2016) of classic style is conversation. In the presentation, the writer talks to her reader to make him share a view, perhaps more elegantly and eloquently than in everyday conversation. Flow, naturalness, and spontaneity all make up the metre and rhythms of classic style.

For the classic writer, “easy to read” could make another overarching stylistic mantra. After all, the going metaphors are easy activities for neurotypical people: talking and seeing (although cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, and roboticists tell us that these natural competencies are incredibly complex and difficult from the perspective of engineering an artifiically intelligent system to master them). In what is coming, we will take the metaphor of going on a journey to see views.

Paragraphs

A catchphrase that the university student can follow in every writing assignment is: one paragraph, one theme. A paragraph introduces one topic and reveals something about it to the reader. In our metaphor of journeys and views, a paragraph takes the reader on a logical journey to view one scene. The reader should know early in the paragraph where he is being taken to. Staking out the itinerary within two sentences, although often in the first sentence, is a good rule to follow. Two sentences of theme introduction might sometimes work better because the first sentence might be needed to link the current journey to the one in the preceding paragraph. The development of the paragraph then travels the necessary chain of reasoning to get to the view.

The dictum of one paragraph, one theme means that the writer should not simply introduce a theme and then leave it. A one-sentence, or sometimes two-sentence paragraph as well, may leave the reader scratching his head and wondering why this theme is introduced. It is akin to announcing that the tour is going to visit the pyramids, and then the tour bus simply staying put. This rule has its exceptions because a one-sentence paragraph can be used to highlight a dramatic point by letting it stand by itself. Students' university assignments, however, usually furnish no occasions for such dramatic proclamations.

In the opposite direction, the rule of one paragraph, one theme means that a journey should not contain side trips or worse yet, like the mighty moose in the Canadian song *Land of the Silver Birch*, wander at will. A wandering paragraph is hard for readers to keep track of, leaving him wondering: where the devil are we going? If a different but perhaps related point cries out to be expressed, the writer should plan to make it the theme of its own journey (paragraph).

Within a paragraph, sentences need to progress in a connected chain to make a smooth journey for the reader, flowing in what Pinker (2014) called an arc of coherence. Not only must sentences on their own make sense (next section), but they must link with one another in a logical fashion. The classic writer makes it easy for her reader to follow along. I have taken what was a well written paragraph from an actual student paper and doctored it to show what tortuous flow is like with sentences that are perfectly good on their own:

> Finally, this research spans beyond just depression. Such models are crucial for understanding what can go wrong in the mind. Montgomery (2018) proposes that in mismatched

> environments, painful emotions activate reward pathways in the brain. This powerful cycle of addiction and imbalance, he warns, is responsible for a host of mental disorders. In his model of psychological dysfunction, Montgomery (2018) links evolutionary psychiatry to neuroscience, and this triggers the release of dopamine and endorphins, acting like an emotional addiction and wrenching the individual's internal state out of balance. In the fight for mental wellbeing, it remains to be seen where this insight can take us.

The journey starts and ends in a sensible fashion, as I have not doctored those parts. But in between, the journey is bewildering. While it looks like one theme about something to do with addiction, emotions, and mismatch, the reader would probably have a hard time making out the scene. Some pointers, using words such as "this" or "such", have been wrenched from their anchors, so that it is unclear what they are pointing to. In reading "this powerful cycle", the reader could legitimately wonder what cycle we are talking about. In "this triggers the release", the reader again cannot pinpoint what "this" is referring to, as key ideas in the preceding phrase, *link*, *evolutionary psychiatry*, and *neuroscience*, do not make sense when it comes to releasing dopamine. The enterprising reader might try to remedy the paragraph, breaking up clauses and joining other clauses if that works better.

Sentences

In parallel to the paragraph, a dictum may be applied to the sentence as well: one sentence, one idea. A sentence moves one station along a journey that is the paragraph. Having multiple ideas mixed in a single sentence usually confuses the reader,

taxing his cognitive resources to make out what is written. The writer should make the journey as smooth and easy as possible for her readers.

To get a taste of such mixed-up sentences, try to parse the following doctored examples inspired by uninspiring student writing:

> The invention of prosthetic devices controlled by the brain which has had a history in the 21st century and has increased in technological sophistication, certainly assists disabled people with mobility although the technology needs to mature with a major fault that the bulk and cost of the machines make it hard to deliver in needed numbers to those needing them, in order to be useful at a meaningful scale.

> New and genetically engineered foods, by which I include all domestic plants and animals as well because we have shaped their genetic paths by selective breeding, and plants as well have been around for centuries however with a fast changing world full of problems such as climate change and pollution, problems with anthropogenic contributions whose ethical dimensions are of great concern, we need new techniques to develop more sustainable resources for the world and its inhabitants.

A number of grammatical errors in these head-spinners contribute to their confusing character in addition to multiple ideas pulling the reader in different directions. The first sentence speaks of prosthetic technology assisting people, an increase in the sophistication of such technology, and faults in the

technology, all mixed up. Such detouring sentences lack flow. In our travel metaphor, they take side trips on rickety carts and risk leaving readers behind who have fallen off the wagon of comprehension.

> Exercise
>
> List the ideas contained in those two sentences above.
>
> Then reformulate each sentence into multiple sentences making up a part of a paragraph.

A part of what makes the multi-idea sentences difficult and unstylish is that they are hard to process. Sentences that are too long or convoluted are to be shunned by the classic writer even when they stick to a single idea, just because they are too difficult to process. The classic writer takes a conversational stance, considers the cognitive limitations of readers, and makes sentences that are easy to take in. An example featured in my earlier book on writing (Cheng 2020) serves well as illustration:

> Because intersexual selection relies on female choice, and not on male choice, this because females usually have much more at stake in choosing a sexual partner since it costs them much more to produce an egg, and sometimes to take care of the fertilised egg after copulation as well, compared with males, female animals have driven the course of the evolution of animals.

The ideas in this convoluted concoction are all good and interesting to tell, but the classic writer would break such a sentence into smaller, friendlier chunks.

A common comment levelled at student writing is that a chunk of writing is awkward. No general remedy for this issue can be offered in the space of a paragraph as sentences may be awkward in many different ways. The dictum of one sentence, one idea should help to reduce awkwardness. Those who think that they often produce awkward writing might also keep sentences short; it is typically long sentences that turn awkward. Yet another bit of advice is to heed the basic grammatical structure of a sentence. Basically, a sentence contains a subject, some entity that the sentence says something about, and a predicate, what is said about the subject. Understanding this structure should let the writer write predicates that are appropriate for the subject of the sentence, rather than something else that is typically related to the subject but not about the subject itself. An example inspired from actual student writing illustrates.

> Attraction to food and to recreational drugs share similarities; both stimulate the dopamine reward system.

The sentence is grammatical but comes across awkward because it is food and drugs that stimulate the dopamine reward system, not the attraction to them.

A sentence should tell a story. And as in a story, the most dramatic part usually sits best at the end. Compare the following two sentences:

1. Alexander Fleming discovered the first antibiotic, penicillin, in 1928.
2. In 1928, Alexander Fleming discovered the first antibiotic, penicillin.

Which packs a better sense of drama? Appearing as isolated sentences without context, the discovery of penicillin is more dramatic than the date. But context might change matters. Dates could become the focus of drama if, for example, the writer tracks the invention of a plethora of antibiotics, or the history of bacterial resistance to antiobiotics. Thus:

> Penicillin was discovered by Alexander Fleming in 1928. The first sign of bacterial resistance to penicillin was discovered in 1940.

What emerges as most dramatic depends on the story that the writer has to tell.

On a related topic of drama in writing, the classic writer usually opts for strong words, especially verbs. Training in formal writing might lead some students to use bland formulations, but, like a good conversation partner, the classic writer livens up her writing. Use of phrases such as *there is*, *occurs*, or *involves* dulls the palate, and the classic writer can usually offer tastier fare. As examples:

> There are two forms of sexual selection, intrasexual selection and intersexual selection.

can be changed to:

> Sexual selection comes in two forms: intrasexual selection and intersexual selection.

or even more dramatically:

> Sexual selection forks into two branches, intrasexual selection and intersexual selection.

The writer cannot always avoid the use of verbs such as *be* or *occur* but should look to minimise their use.

Particularly dull language can be fashioned by combining bland verbs with nominalisations. This latter bunch arises from turning verbs into nouns, for example, *initialisation*, *crystalisation*, *formalisation*, and other words ending in "ation". Here is one example in a sentence:

> Calcium ions are involved in the initialisation of the release of neurotransmitters from the axonal bulb.

The sentence can be rescued by converting the nominalised word, *initialisation*, into a verb:

> Calcium ions initialise the release of neurotransmitters from the axonal bulb.

To be even more dramatic, the writer could replace *initialise* with more colourful verbs such as *drive*, *kickstart*, or *spark*, verbs that convey different nuances.

Rewrite the following sentences.

1. There are two rules in the tit-for-tat strategy, the first of which is to play cooperate on the first move and the second of which is to play whatever the opponent played in the previous round.
2. There are many ways described in the paper about changing human behaviour, but a conclusion is that there are many cases in which people behave based on unconscious, emotional choices, not thinking about sustainable options.

The call for putting drama at the ends of sentences does not mean that the beginnings of sentences should be packed with uninformative words, which I often unkindly call fluff. Such

uninformative words might sound formal but usually do not add useful information or elegance to writing. This kind of supposed loftiness or seriousness might begin something like:

> For decades now, scientists from a variety of disciplines have conducted research on the important topic of …

A lot of words have had to be parsed by the reader, and after all that cognitive expenditure, he still does not know what the sentence is about. The classic writer strikes a conversational tone, the conversation being a key aesthetic stance of classic style. She gets to the point. The legendary boxer Muhammad Ali is credited with the catchphrase "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee". The classic writer discards the first command, and makes her writing sting like a bee. Perhaps she might adopt novelist Philip Pullman's version of this pair of commands: read like a butterfly, write like a bee.

Rewrite the following sentences.

1. After many years of research in educational practices and cognitive psychology, the interest in linking the all-important topic of stress in testing situations to the study habits of students has finally been realised recently by a team of researchers (Smith et al. 2016).
2. More and more these days in the study of neuroscience in trying to understand various complex functions of the intricate organ of the brain, a host of new neuroscientific techniques are being put to use.

Other issues

The classic writer presents matters as she sees them. When she, based on her efforts and research, sees a point in the literature that she disagrees with, she calls it out, but does so professionally. The conventions of academic writing and the stance of classic style agree on keeping writing professional, discarding personal attacks, sarcasm, and tones that could be called ranting. If an argument in the literature does not seem to follow logically from accepted principles, the classic writer does not call that argument or its authors "ludicrous" or "stupid"—it being all too easy to trip up on a chain of reasoning in complex academic issues. Rather, she points out how the reasoning fails, and in the direct fashion of classic style, leaves it at that, without packing in invectives that do not inform the reader any more about the point at issue. The classic writer could take this professional stance as part and parcel of the aesthetic stance of direct, to-the-point writing.

In conclusion, classic style is what I recommend for all academic writing. This style takes the reader on a direct, conversational journey to views of the truth as the writer sees it. The classic writer takes much effort to make the journey as smooth and easy as possible for her readers, so that none of them fall off the wagon en route. In the dictum of one paragraph, one theme, she presents one scene in each paragraph, logically structured in an arc of coherence. The style works well for essays, lab reports, commentaries, opinion pieces, and even talks, the stuff of assignments in university.

References

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Chapter 2 Nitty-gritties: Fixing common problems in students' writing

While Chapter 1 sketched broad aesthetic principles and outlined key structural elements of paragraphs and sentences, Chapter 2 focuses on common problems that I have encountered in students' writing and from writing by professional scientists whose command of English is not the best. The selection features grammatical foibles from run-on sentences to sentence fragments, subject–verb agreement, and accompanying words for nouns, the latter a problem for many for whom English is not the first or dominant language. Other problems include the use of pronouns and any word that points to some aforementioned entity, and punctuation. A few commonly misused words round out the chapter.

Run-on sentences

A sentence runs on when what should form two or more sentences are jammed together without a proper break. Breaks that separate sentences or sentential clauses of sentences include the fullstop (.), the semi-colon (;), and words that serve to join sentential clauses, such as *and*, *or*, *although*, but not *however*. Run-on sentences are formally ungrammatical, with ungrammatical writing indicated in this chapter by asterisks before and after the ungrammatical portion. These grammatical foibles are writing mistakes and make it hard for readers to make out what is said. Here are some concocted examples inspired by actual student writing, with an arrow indicating where a run-on starts.

> *In evolution, when a predator gets better, so does its prey, ⬇this is called an evolutionary arms race.*

> *Humans gamble today because their ancestors took risks in hunting behaviour, ↓X (2014) states that dopamine functions as a reward signal in gambling.*
>
> *Focusing on killing pests outright with poisons has detrimental effects, ↓it may be better to use benign means to control their numbers.*

These run-on sentences can be easily remedied with a small amount of editing, and readers might want to take on the exercise of fixing these examples.

One particularly common variety of ugly ungrammatical run-on sentences misuses the word *however*, using it to join sentential clauses. Words such as *and*, *or*, *although*, and *but* may be rightfully used to join sentential clauses, but not the word *however*. The following concocted lot featuring *however* are all ungrammatical.

> *Genetically engineered foods have been around for centuries ↓however in a fast-changing world we need new techniques and sustainable resources.*
>
> *Many people may enjoy the feeling from alcohol or drugs, ↓however when they sober up, they face reality again.*

Run-on sentences with the word *however* may be fixed in two different ways. One way is to break the run-on into two sentences separated by a fullstop; after all, a run-on sentence consists of what are two sentences unwisely jammed together into one sentence. This might produce something like:

> Many people enjoy the feeling from alcohol or drugs. When they sober up, however, they face reality again.

This rendition has changed the position of the word *however*. For stylistic reasons, *however* usually has the most dramatic effect in the middle of a sentence. This tack-on word adds some emphasis or drama, a mini-drumroll. It is thus best placed just before the drama, which in the example in question comes with people facing reality again. The second way to fix a run-on sentence containing *however* is to use a different and proper connecting word. This might result in something like:

> Genetically engineered foods have been around for centuries, but in a fast-changing world we need new techniques and sustainable resources.

The sentence is now at least grammatical although the quality of what it expresses is another matter.

Rewrite the following sentences.

1. Traumatic events in life cause stress responses, sometimes this is a fight-or-flight response, if the response is unsuccessful, a human adaptation is post-traumatic stress disorder.

2. Strategies such as changing environmental cues and economic incentives are important in reducing the consumption of products with high carbon footprints, environmental cues include presenting sustainable options prominently to attract consumers' attention, for example, when green energy was set as the default, its usage increased.

Sentence fragments

A common form of ungrammatical writing that is in a sense opposite to the run-on sentence is a sentence fragment. These foibles do not contain enough components to make a grammatical sentence. Here are some concocted cases based on student writing.

> *Essentially limiting social interactions and thus the risk of spreading infection.*

> *Such as; species ability to adapt to environments and available resources.*

These fragments are missing a head, some noun phrase that forms the subject of a sentence. Fragments feel like after-thoughts tacked on carelessly in writing. Two major approaches to fixing sentence fragments are to 1) tack them onto the sentence before as a phrase, or 2) add a noun phrase as a subject. Taking tack 1) might turn out something like:

> Feeling sick usually also makes people feel lethargic and disinclined to socialise, essentially limiting social interactions and the risk of spreading infection.

Taking tack 2) might produce something like:

> Animals' capacity for coping with human-induced changes depends on a number of factors, such as species' ability to adapt to environments and available resources.

Again, these sentences are now at least grammatical, but their quality is another matter.

Rewrite the following sentences.

1. Excessive intake of energy predisposes the body towards obesity. Resulting in a harmful metabolic cycle. With increasing levels of circulating fatty acids.
2. Thus, economic incentives can be targeted to lower the consumption of products. Such as increasing the price of meat. Or taxes implemented to limit consumption of products harmful to the environment.

Subject–verb (mis)agreement

A surprisingly common problem in grammar that is easily remediable is subject–verb (mis)agreement. A sentence typically consists of an entity that the sentence is about, the subject, and some statement about the subject, the predicate. The verb in the predicate must agree with the noun phrase in the subject. Thus:

> Jill runs for exercise.
>
> Jill *run* for exercise.
>
> Jill and Jack run together for exercise.

Almost no student makes subject–verb misagreements with such simple cases, but academic writing is sometimes adorned with complex noun phrases with the main noun in the noun phrase a good distance from the verb in the predicate. Those are situations in which subject–verb misagreements pop up. Here are some examples inspired by actual student writing:

> Depression caused by traumatic events often *lead* to post-traumatic stress disorder.

> An increase in pro-inflammatroy cytokines often *result* in altered moods, loss of appetite, and fatigue.

In both cases, the noun phrase is singular, the head being *depression* in one and *an increase* in the other, but nearby plural nouns, *events* and *cytokines*, may inveigle the writer into treating the noun phrase, incorrectly, as plural. Mindfiul attention to the structure of a noun phrase helps writers to avoid such misagreeing foibles.

Accompanying words for nouns

Nouns and noun phrases come with another requirement that is often flubbed by writers, that of accompanying words for nouns. I have found this especially common in writers whose dominant language is not English. In English, nouns often need some accompanying word. In fact, it is best to think of nouns as always needing accompaniment, with sometimes the guardian being invisible like a spy. Rules for accompaniment depend on whether a noun is proper or not, and whether it is countable or not, so that we must first take these grammatical distinctions in stride.

Proper nouns are names of particular entities, entities both abstract and concrete; they are written in capitals. Thus, *Fifi* might name a canine mammal living in someone's house, *Justin Trudeau* denotes the prime minister of a certain country, and *University of Toronto* denotes an institution of higher learning. The names of most entities do not have accompanying words with them. It is ungrammatical to write: *Susan went to the park with *a* Fifi* or *The press met *the* Justin Trudeau*. Nevertheless, a bewildering bunch of proper names take on the definite article *the*. Names in plural forms, names with

prepositional forms, most typically in the form *of X*, and geographical terms toss in complications.

When the name is in plural, even if the entity in question can be conceived as one entity, *the* typiclly accompanies the name. We write *the United Nations*, *the Galápagos Islands*, and *the Toronto Raptors* (a basketball team), but *Manchester United* (which is in singular form).

Proper names with prepositional phrases have *the*, a definite article, as accompaniment. Thus, we write *the Bank of America*, but *Citibank*. To add some twists, if the word *the* appears in the name of an entity with a prepositional phrase, then the definite article is also capitalised. For example:

> They published their article in the *Journal of Experimental Biology*, which is published by The Company of Biologists.

To add nuance to these rules, in a form of exceptions to exceptions, names of created works do not take on any articles, unless an article is part of the name (such as *The Rite of Spring*). No accompanying words are used even when plural forms and prepositional phrases appear in the title of some created work. Thus, we write:

> Robert Schumann composed *Scenes of Childhood*, a suite for piano.
>
> Hedy West wrote the song *500 Miles*.

Not:

> Hedy West wrote the song *the* *500 Miles*.

Oftentimes, such titles are in quotation marks or italicised to indicate that they refer to titles of created pieces.

An array other capitalised names of abstract entities also take on *the* as accompaniment. Examples include *the United States Senate*, *the Federal Reserve System*, *the Kremlin*, and *the People's Liberation Army*. It is hard to discern a rule concerning such organisations; it seems to depend on the individual cases. Thus, the web site of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (http://www.fao.org/about/en) writes: *The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations …* In its acronym form, *FAO*, however, the name parades without accompaniment. The web site also writes that *FAO works in over 130 countries worldwide*. The organisation Gapminder, on the other hand, is simply called *Gapminder*. When the writer is in doubt about the proper way to formulate an organisation's name, he should check an organisation's web site.

The realm of geography boggles the mind because grammatical rules depend on seemingly arbitrary distinctions between land and water and between different scales of geographic space. Cities, towns, states, provinces, and countries generally do not have accompanying words, unless the plural form or a prepositional phrase, or both, comes with a name, such as *the Pyrenees* or *the People's Republic of China*. These latter forms, as we have already seen, require the word *the* to accompany them. For cities, towns, states, and provinces, it is ungrammatical to write sentences such as: *she studied in *the* Boston*, whose correct form is *she studied in Boston*. Nevertheless, terms for land regions often take on the definite article *the*, for example, *she studied in the Northeast of the United States of America*, but *she studied in New England*. Rivers, seas, and oceans take on *the*, but not lakes as singular entities—see what I mean by mind-boggling. Hence, we write *Lake Ontario is one of the Great Lakes*. Note that *Lake Ontario*

does not take *the* as accompaniment. And we write *the Mississippi River*, as in *Let me go away from the Mississippi*, from the song *Old Man River*. If the song were to run *Let me go away from Mississippi*, that would mean leaving the state of Mississippi rather than getting away from the river.

But wait, more nuances are afoot with proper names. Some proper names denote a whole class of entities even though they are capitalised. Then they are more like the rest of the garden-variety English nouns. Thus, we write: *Boeing halted production of their 737 MAX because two of those planes had crashed*. The word *their* serves the accompanying role in the sentence; the writer could also use *the* in place of *their*. The term *737 MAX* denotes a category consisting of a bunch of planes made by Boeing. (By the way, it is *Boeing*, but *the Boeing Company*.) It is ungrammatical to write *Boeing stopped production of *737 MAX** or *she took *Macbook Pro* on board the flight in *Airbus 380**.

More distinctions must be made when it comes to the rest of the English nouns. These come in categories of countable and uncountable, the latter group also called mass nouns. Countable nouns, the more common variety, are treated as discrete entities, so that numerical tags may be added to them; examples include *dog*, *tree*, *hypothesis*, *explanation*, thus encompassing abstract as well as concrete entities. The writer may write *one dog* or *three dogs*. The last example shows that countable nouns have plural forms. Mass or uncountable nouns are treated as a single undifferentiated entity. They have no plural forms and numerical tags may not be added to them. The writer may not write **two waters** or **one coffee**. This mass/countable distinction is a grammatical distinction and does not always depend on whether the entity in question can be counted. The word *rice* is

grammatically uncountable, even though readers can readily count grains of rice. The phrase *grains of rice* shows how a mass noun can be turned into a countable noun phrase, by packaging the mass noun into some 'container word', with additional examples such as *bags of rice* or *bowls of rice*.

Rules of accompaniment for nouns depend on yet another grammatical distinction, between definite and indefinite nouns. This distinction maps onto a key semantic distinction and keeping this matter cogent is critical to clear writing. An indefinite noun conveys an entity whose identity is uncertain to readers; the noun or noun phrase proclaims the kind of entity it is. For example, the phrase *a woman of distinction* describes one member of a category, women of distinction. The word *woman* serves as an indefinite noun in the phrase. The reader does not know which woman she is (or for that matter how the woman is of distinction). On the other hand, the phrase *the woman of distinction* describes a woman whose identity the reader already knows about; this knowledge must have been conveyed in earlier sentences if the writer is clear in his writing. Any noun may serve as definite or indefinite; here the grammatical distinction points to different semantic roles, whether the reader can identify the particular entity that a noun is referring to.

Our distinctions give us six categories, each with its own crew of accompanying words (Table 2.1). Of the six categories, indefinite countable plural nouns and indefinite uncountable nouns (always in the singular) may be left without accompaniment, shown as square brackets in Table 2.1. The rest of the noun categories must have accompaniment, with common accompanying words shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Some common accompaniment that may be used with different kinds of nouns. Blanks are indicated by square brackets. Reproduced from Cheng (2020).

noun countability	how many	definite or not	suitable accompaniment
countable	singular	definite	the, this, that
countable	singular	indefinite	a, one
countable	plural	definite	the, these, those
countable	plural	indefinite	some, [ ]
uncountable	singular	definite	the, that, this
uncountable	singular	indefinite	some, [ ]

What is in Table 2.1 does come with a few caveats by way of exceptions. Sometimes, the writer uses the word *the* to point to some generic member of the kind in question. In fact, the previous sentence exemplifies such a case. In this book, *the writer* and *the reader* do not refer to any particular writer and reader, but stand for a generic writer and generic reader among the intended audience of this book. It is like saying "the species of writers". In neuroscience, neuroanatomical entities are sometimes written without the definite article, as if such entities are treated as proper names. One might see sentences such as:

> The signal travels from entorhinal cortex to hippocampus.

Pronouns, deictic words, the words *that* and *which*

Definite noun phrases point to something that the reader should already know about; she must be able to figure it out from previous sentences in the writing. Pronouns and other 'pointing' words, called deictic words, also point to some antecedent that the reader should both know about and be able to figure out. Such deictic words include some of the accompanying words for definite nouns that we have encountered: *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*. These words, along with pronouns such as *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they*, replace definite noun phrases as shorthand. If the writer is writing about the political system in the province of British Columbia in several sentences, it becomes tedious for readers to read the phrase *the political system in the province of British Columbia* over and over again, even if that is perfectly grammatical. It is more stylish to use the word *it* to replace this phrase. The writer must be careful, however, to make sure that the path of pointing for deictic words and pronouns is clear, and that the reader can unambiguously make out what these pointers are pointing to. If a preceding sentence has referred to multiple entities, then using the pronoun *it* in the next sentence might well leave the reader wondering which of those entities the word is referring to. Here are some ambiguous antecedents inspired by student writing:

> Other reasons for the increase in obesity in modern society include a sedentary lifestyle and the poor quality of food. Interestingly, it (??) is unusual in hunter–gatherer societies.

> Greenhouse gas emissions in the USA have decreased in recent years, perhaps due to new attitudes towards fossil fuels. Associations with

> them (??) are becoming more negative as concerns about climate change increase.

Such examples are grammatically well formed, but where the question marks appear, the reader faces ambiguity as to what the pronoun is referring to. In the first example, the word *it* might refer to obesity, increase in obesity, or perhaps even sedentary lifestyle or poor quality of food. In the second example, does the word *them* point to emissions, fossil fuels, or perhaps even attitudes? The writer must spell things out in these cases to make his writing clear. Clarity is important in any expository writing and certainly a desideratum in classic style. When it comes to pronouns and other deictic words, writers should err on the side of repetition rather than on the side of ambiguity: when in doubt, spell it out.

Two particular pointing words, *that* and *which*, deserve special consideration not because their antecedents are often unclear, but because of grammatical foibles that come with their use. These words describe the noun that typically appears just before *that* or *which*, so that their referent is rarely in doubt. They add more information to the noun or noun phrase that they are describing. But along with the humble comma, these two words add descriptions in two different ways. In one way, the description is integral to the noun phrase; the description serves to pick out one definite entity from a host of possibilities. In the second way, the description adds more information but is not integral or crucial to understanding the noun phrase that it is describing; a by-the-way phrase could be a catchphrase for these added descriptions. The comma plays a vital grammatical role in differentiating these two types of added descriptions. The by-the-way phrase is always marked off by commas, before and

after the phrase, and it must use the word *which*, and not *that*. Thus, we write:

> The theory of general relativity, which Einstein formulated, predicts the existence of black holes.
>
> The book called *The Wealth of Nations*, which Adam Smith published in 1776, is a classic in economic theory.

The by-the-way flavour becomes obvious if the writer actually uses the phrase *by the way*, which, by the way, would make the sentence less elegant:

> The book called The Wealth of Nations is a classic in economic theory and by the way, Adam Smith published it in 1776.

It is ungrammatical to use *that* in place of *which* in such sentences:

> The theory of general relativity, *that* Einstein formulated, predicts the existence of black holes.

The commas are vital for indicating by-the-way phrases. Without the commas, the descriptive phrase becomes integral to the noun phrase being described. Sometimes, such added phrases are necessary for picking out one particular individual entity out of many possibilities. To turn one of our examples into a sentence illustrating this notion, we might write:

> The book that Adam Smith published in 1776 is a classic in economic theory.

In the example, the phrase following *that* serves to pick out the book in question out of millions of possibilities. The phrase is integral to the noun phrase, serving to pick out one particular

book in the abstract sense of a book being a collection of words, as opposed to one concrete instance of a physical book on someone's bookshelf. Note that such integral phrases have no commas before or after them. It is ungrammatical to add a comma just because the descriptive phrase is getting long and the writer feels that he and his readers need to take a metaphorical breath after it. Thus:

> The book that Adam Smith published in 1776*,* is a classic in economic theory.

A traditional grammatical rule states that in such added integral descriptions, the writer should use the word *that* and not the word *which*. Grammatical usage has now changed (Pinker 2014) and both words are used in such integral descriptions. Thus, the writer may write:

> The book which Adam Smith published in 1776 is a classic in economic theory.

This change in grammatical habits means that the humble comma is now all important for differentiating these two types of added descriptive phrases. The writer striving for clear writing must use commas carefully.

The use of the two types of added descriptions that we have been dealing with is not arbitrary. The two types convey different meanings, differences that sometimes matter. To go back to our example of general relativity, it is grammatical to write:

> The theory of general relativity which Einstein formulated predicts the existence of black holes.

But this sentence conveys something different without the commas, and it will likely confuse readers. The sentence now

suggests that among theories of general relativity, it is the one that Einstein formulated of which we write. This leaves the reader searching her cognitive resources for other theories of general relativity and wondering if she might be ignorant of some common general knowledge. In fact, it is the writer who has been imprecise.

Note that in the case of persons, the commas do all the work in differentiating the two types of added descriptions because both types call on the word *who* (or *whom* for the case of grammatical objects). In the following sentence, the phrase after *who* picks out the entity that we are writing about:

> The Prime Minister who came to power after the 2017 election in New Zealand was 37 years of age at the time.

The *who* phrase, without commas, delineates the Prime Minister about whom the writer is saying something, out of the many Prime Ministers across nations and across the ages. In contrast, if we already know which Prime Minister the sentence is about, commas would be used to mark out a by-the-way description headed by the word *who*. For example:

> Prime Minister Jacinda Kate Laurell Ardern, who came to power after the 2017 election in New Zealand, was 37 years of age at the time.

This sentence says that Jacinda Ardern was 37 years old when she came to power, and adds the information that this transpired after the 2017 elections in New Zealand. The *who* phrase has also saved the writer from adding a phrase such as "when she came to power" at the end of the sentence because that information is already in the *who* phrase. The humble comma is even more important in such cases.

Punctuation

Punctuation might seem like too trivial a matter to worry about. But the careful writer must pay attention to details of punctuation not only because they matter to style, but also because clarity is often at stake. We have already seen the importance of the comma in the use of the words *that*, *which*, and *who*. In other cases, the misuse of commas makes ungrammatical sentences or foul up the intended meaning. Consider the following set of simple sentences.

a) *Let's, eat Fatima.*
b) Let's eat Fatima.
c) Let's eat, Fatima.

These sentences differ in the presence and placement of a comma. Sentence a) is ungrammatical. While sentence b) is perfectly grammatical, its meaning is profoundly affected by the lack of the comma found in sentence c). Sentence b) suggests that Fatima should be eaten while sentence c) beckons Fatima to partake in eating. What a difference a comma makes. Besides commas, punctuation for breaks in clauses and the horizontal lines, hyphens and dashes, figure in this section.

Commas

A comma serves to separate phrases, but not sentential clauses, in which case it creates a run-on sentence. The comma should also not be used just because the writer feels that a sentence or noun phrase is getting long, as if thinking that his readers need a breath. While in some instances, the use of a comma seems more like a matter of fashion, at other times, it really matters.

We have seen that in some cases featuring the words *who* or *which*, commas before and after a phrase separates off a by-the-way comment providing some added description. The rule of

commas before and after applies to all by-the-way phrases, many of which do not have the words *who* or *which*. Examples are easy to concoct:

> The President of Ethiopia, currently Sahle-Work Zewde, plays a ceremonial role in the country's politics (Wikipedia).
>
> Abiy Ahmed, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia at the time, won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.

The by-the-way phrases provide what the writer thinks is useful information although grammatically, these sentences may stand without the added descriptive phrases, for example:

> Abiy Ahmed won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.

The added phrases add words for readers to read, so that the writer should have good reasons for writing by-the-way phrases. In any case, what is not allowed grammatically is the absence of either of those bracketing commas. Thus:

> *The President of Ethiopia currently Sahle-Work Zewde, plays a ceremonial role in the country's politics (Wikipedia).*
>
> *The President of Ethiopia, currently Sahle-Work Zewde plays a ceremonial role in the country's politics (Wikipedia).*

The reader likely finds these ungrammatical versions harder to parse.

On the other hand, commas should not be added when it violates grammar, even when a sentence or noun phrase gets long. Commas should not be added just because the writer thinks that somewhere in a long sentence, it is good to add a

break, as if to let the readers sneak a breath. Thus, the following sentences are not grammatical.

> The winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize*,* was Abiy Ahmed.
>
> The Prime Minister emerging from the federal elections in 2017 of the island nation of New Zealand*,* was Jacinda Ardern.

In the second sentence, the noun phrase serving as the subject runs on for considerable length, but grammatically, it still should not have a comma after it. This rule is starting to bend, with some publications (some journals, for instance) allowing a comma after long noun phrases in the subject position. But I recommend that all student writers stick to the grammatical rule because flaunting it will irk a good number of readers.

A lot more can be said about the humble comma (see Pinker 2014), but I will stick to just one more topic, a list of noun phrases separated by commas. This use of commas is common, and commas are needed, as—besides being ungrammatical without any commas—it is hard for readers to make out noun phrases without separating commas. Examples are again easy to come by.

> The ingredients of spaghetti bolognese include pasta, some kind of tomato-based sauce, minced meat, garlic, onion, and various herbs.
>
> A healthy diet should include lots of fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, especially nutritious leafy greens, legumes, and whole-meal grains.

The second example includes a by-the-way phrase amplifying fresh vegetables. Note that the examples include a comma

before the last ingredient. This comma is also called the Oxford comma, and some writers opt to dispense with it, perhaps for a more minimal use of commas. The sentences would still be grammatical:

> A healthy diet should include lots of fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, especially nutritious leafy greens, legumes and whole-meal grains.

One might think then that it is simpler to dispense with the Oxford comma, but along with Pinker (2014), I recommend using it because on some occasions, it clarifies matters. The list of items includes not only nouns on their own, such as *legumes*, but also noun phrases with multiple words, such as *some kind of tomato-based sauce*. The list may also be adorned with by-the-way phrases. In some possibly ambiguous instances, the Oxford comma may serve to keep the items clearly separate. Consider the following pair of sentences, both grammatical.

a) At the costume party last night, I met two sad-faced clowns fully decked out in clown costumes, Maria-Luisa Rodriguez and Tianying Chung.
b) At the costume party last night, I met two sad-faced clowns fully decked out in clown costumes, Maria-Luisa Rodriguez, and Tianying Chung.

Sentence a) might suggest that the writer met just two characters, two persons in clown costumes whose last names are Rodriguez and Chung. But it could also be four persons, two in clown costumes, plus Maria-Luisa and Tianying, two other persons. The classic writer would rather avoid such ambiguities in writing. Sentence b), with the Oxford comma, clearly

delineates four characters. Habitual use of the Oxford comma minimises ambiguity.

Punctuate the following sentences.

1. When people stumble over the roots of truth which trips us up most often at unexpected times most just pick themselves up and keep going
2. Cole slaw basically consists of shredded cabbage carrots and mayonnaise although one could add some mustard vinegar or other kinds of vegetables

Hyphens and dashes

While good copyeditors clean up little writing mistakes, including mistakes in the use of these horizontal lines, the student writer does not have the services of a copyeditor and should take care of even little matters himself. While some writers put in the smallest of the lot, the hyphen, as a dash, the English language has three different horizontal lines whose functions differ: the hyphen (-), the en dash (–, the short dash), and the em dash (—, the long dash). The hyphen sits readily at hand on the keyboard of a laptop computer, while the en dash and em dash need to be called up with special commands. In the word processing software *Word*, the incantation is to Insert Advanced Symbol; in the ensuing dialogue, both the dashes are found on the display of "(normal text)". The ease of injecting a hyphen, however, does not mean that it should be indiscriminately used. The careful writer uses dashes when they are the proper symbols to use.

Some words and morphemes (a unit of meaning) often join up with other words via the hyphen. Words with the morpheme *co* provide examples: *co-adaptation*, *co-tenancy*. But the use of this morpheme also shows that language use evolves. When a term is used often enough, the direction of linguistic evolution is to simplify and cut out the hyphen, giving us words such as *cooperation*, *codependency*, or *coevolution*. And sometimes, in a transitional phase, one might find both hyphenated and unhyphenated versions, as in *co-evolution* and *coevolution*. This is where style fashion might dictate which form appears. A publisher might decree, for example, that hyphen use should be minimised, and that authors should use the morpheme *co* without hyphens. Other morphemes typically get tacked on to other words without a hyphen, for example, the morpheme *over*. The convention is to write words such as *overreact*, *overindulge*, and *overemphasise*, all without a hyphen. The careful writer should check online dictionaries and word-use guides when in doubt.

The hyphen also provides the means for much freer creation of word phrases. Words in English may be strung together to make a phrase that serves in the role of an adjective. Words in such a phrase are joined together by hyphens. While some of these phrases are run-of-the-mill clichés, others are spur-of-the-moment creations. The hyphens serve to group the words together for the reader; the hyphenated bunch provides a description of clichés in one case and of creations in the other. Without hyphens, it can tax the reader in trying to figure out which words have been lumped together. Adverbs added on to adjectives, however, generally do not come with hyphens. The dazzlingly brilliant writer would not put a hyphen between *dazzlingly* and *brilliant*.

Moving up in horizontal length, the en dash is used to join two words or noun phrases that are in various senses connected, temporally, spatially, or conceptually. It also serves as the minus sign. The following examples illustrate the en dash in these realms.

5 – 2 = 3.

John F. Kennedy served as President of the USA 1961–1963.

But note:

John F. Kennedy served as President of the USA *from 1961–1963.*

An alternative formulation is to forego the en dash altogether:

John F. Kennedy served as President of the USA from 1961 to 1963.

Other examples of the use of the en dash include:

I prefer the Sydney–Dallas flight to the Sydney–LAX flight because the customs procedure is saner at Dallas.

The New Orleans Pelicans defeated the Houston Rockets 127–112.

Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd propagated the doctrine of gene–culture co-evolution.

Note the en dash between *gene* and *culture*, conceptual partners in the doctrine, but the hyphen (which is sometimes dispensed with) in *co-evolution*. The careful writer uses the en dash in all cases of conceptual partners.

Finally, the long em dash provides one means of injecting some by-the-way clause or phrase—an addition that is often meant to add some drama and colour to the writing. The added clause or phrase may come at the end of a sentence, in which case only a single em dash is used, or the added material may appear in the middle of a sentence, in which case the em dash appears both before and after the clause or phrase. The em-dashed material may be something akin to an entire sentence or a part of a sentence, a phrase. Here are some examples from a published article.

> Schulz et al. … break new ground in showing how the specific practices of a branch of one of the world's largest religions—Christianity—can in part explain widespread variation in human psychology around the world. (Gelfand 2019, p. 686)

> Illuminating the ways in which cultures vary—and why they have evolved in different ways given certain socioenvironmental forces—can help us to empathize with those who are different. (Gelfand 2019, p. 687)

Michele Gelfand used the em dash on 5 occasions in the short commentary of a little more than one journal page in *Science Magazine* to clarify and dramatise various noun phrases. Note that *Science Magazine*, along with many other publications, does not leave any spaces before or after the em dash. The em dash adds spice to writing, but should be treated like a spice: good when sprinkled here and there but not when it is overused.

Punctuate the following sentences.

1. A head on collision with the boss is a gut wrenching experience because boss employee relationships have been frosty an experience that should be avoided at all costs
2. The Super Bowl in 2020 between San Francisco and Kansas City watched by about 100 million people featured a fourth quarter comeback by Kansas City. The 49ers Chiefs clash also exhibited a not to be missed blockbuster half time show starring Shakira and Jennifer Lopez
3. The sensorimotor tasks that animals routinely accomplish are actually highly complex just try to make a robot that does the same rather than basic behavioural responses (from Keijzer 2017)

Breaks of sentential clauses: fullstops, semi-colons, colons, brackets, em dashes (again)

Grammatically, sentences must be separated by punctuation, the most common means of which is using the fullstop, ".". Other means of separating sentences include the other items in the subsection title. Generally, for sentences expressing different ideas—remember our advice of one sentence, one idea—a fullstop is used. On other occasions, however, one of those other means of punctuating may seem more appropriate or add elegance or colour to the writing.

Semi-colons (“;”) work much like fullstops. Their usual role is to link up two separate sentences that are closely connected. In a sense, the writer thinks that they work better as a single sentence, but he chooses not to join them with joining words such as *and* or *but*. Note that when the two components being joined are each a sentence in its own right, a comma may not be used as a mark of separation. This creates a run-on sentence called a comma splice. This grammatical error is readily fixed by converting the offending comma into a semi-colon. Here is a concocted example.

> José likes to throw parties for his friends; for example, he enjoys decorating his place for hosting a birthday party.

Because the second, related component is a full sentence, the two parts are punctuated with a semi-colon. If the second part is simply a noun phrase, a comma should be used:

> José likes to throw parties for his friends, for example, birthday parties.

A colon (“:”) works like a punctuation mark of announcement. What follows it is usually something, whether a list or a single point, that the sentence in progress has announced. What follows the colon may be a bunch of sentences or a list of noun phrases. Here are two examples of a list of noun phrases from Gelfand (2019, p. 667).

> The intensity of kin-based institutions was defined using two measures: a Kinship Intensity Index … and a measure of the prevalence of cousin marriage …

> Psychological variation—the main outcome of interest—was captured by previously collected data

> … grouped into three categories: individualism and independence, conformity and obedience, and impersonal prosociality.

In the second example, note also the use of the em dash as well as the Oxford comma before the last item in the list. With the Oxford comma, the reader knows that conformity and obedience bunch together into one category, while impersonal sociality forms another category. Without the Oxford comma, ambiguity would reign. What follows the colon may be an entire sentence rather than just a noun phrase. Here is an example from Wehner (2019).

> … Pauline Fleishchmann and Robin Grob made a completely unexpected discovery: when the ants perform their learning walks prior to foraging, they employ a geomagnetic compass.

Brackets and the em dash both serve to cordon off a chunk of words from the main flow of a sentence, but with different effects. What is in brackets comes across as more mundane information, perhaps there in case the reader does not know the meaning of a phrase being used. What is marked off by the em dash is typically bolder and more dramatic. Neither form of punctuation should be overused, in order to avoid too much distraction to the main flow of sentences.

Commonly misused words

Pinker (2014) warns writers about many commonly misused words, but this little section features just two sets that I have seen with some frequency in students' writing. Each set concerns a confusion between two words.

Words affect *and* effect

This confusable pair are spelled and even pronounced similarly, with the weak first syllable often morphing into a nondescript "uh" sound (called a schwa in linguistics). To make matters more complicated, each word may be used as either a verb or a noun. Because this set of words is often good to use, the careful writer should be sure to use them correctly to avoid embarrassment. Their brief meanings are given in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2. Meanings of the words *affect* and *effect*.

Word	Pronunciation	Brief meaning
Affect (noun)	Stress on first syllable	Feeling, emotion
Affect (verb)	Stress on second syllable	To influence
Effect (noun)	Stress on second syllable	Consequence, result
Effect (verb)	Stress on second syllable	To carry out some procedure

As a noun, *affect*, with the stress on the first syllable, means emotion or feeling. It has an adjective form as well: *affective*. As a verb, *affect*, with the stress on the second syllable, means to influence or play a role in some outcome. An example is:

> Using the words *affect* and *effect* incorrectly will affect the grade you get for style in your writing adversely.

The word *effect* also comes in verb and noun forms, both with the stress on the second syllable. As a noun, *effect* means some consequence or result of something. An example is:

> One effect of misusing the words *effect* and *affect* is that your grader will think less of your writing.

The word *effect* may also be used as a verb to mean carry out. Sometimes, the word is used in describing procedures, as in the following examples.

> We effected a manipulation to prepare the students for the testing phase of the experiment.

> We carried out a manipulation to prepare the students for the testing phase of the experiment.

These two sentences convey the same meaning.

Verbs lie *and* lay

Both of these words have meanings as nouns as well as verbs, but it is in the verb form that they get confused; I do not recall any mistakes in the noun forms of these words. The word *lie* has two different senses as a verb, to tell something false or to assume a horizontal position, typically in the phrase *lie down*. The word *lie* is often confused with the word *lay* because *lay* is also the past tense of *lie* (Table 2.3). Both *lie* and *lay* have something to do with putting things down, but a key difference is that *lie* is an intransitive verb whereas *lay* is a transitive verb. What this in turn means is that the verb *lie* does not come with a grammatical object. One simply lies down. Grammatically, one may not *lie something down*. In contrast, the verb *lay* must have a grammatical object. Something must be there in the sentence that is laid down, whether concrete or abstract and metaphorical, as in these examples.

Fatima laid the cake down on the picnic blanket carefully and then lay down on the blanket herself.

The team leader laid the rules of the dormitory down before the team lay down in their beds to sleep.

Hopefully, this little paragraph along with Table 2.3 will suffice for getting all students to use this pair of tricky verbs correctly.

Table 2.3 Past forms of the verbs *lie* and *lay*.

Verb	Past tense	Past participle
Lie (intransitive)	Lay (I lay down to sleep.)	Lain (I had lain down to sleep.)
Lay (transitive)	Laid (I laid the baby down in her bed.)	Laid (I had laid the baby down in her bed.)

Final words

To come back to the start of this little book, writing is a strange business because it is like talking to an absent audience. No one is around to ask you to clarify if matters are not clear. That is why it behooves the writer to make his writing as clear as possible. Clarity is a desideratum for most writing styles, certainly including classic style. Reading this little book, even a few times over, will not magically make a writer write better. Improvement comes mostly from practice. But hopefully, heeding the key points in this book may let student writers avoid awful foibles and put down grammatical sentences that form coherent paragraphs. My hope is that getting rid of a number of common errors could improve the lot of student writing.

Common errors include disorganised paragraphs from which it is hard to discern a theme, sentences that run on, sentences that form only a part of a sentence or a sentence fragment, pronouns and other pointing (deictic) words whose reference is ambiguous, convoluted sentences that are hard to make out, sentences adorned with uninformative fluff, punctuation errors, and various grammatical errors that have not received attention in this book because they do not fall into neat categories. The section headings, summarised on the Contents page, give a checklist.

Students should make the effort to improve writing, beyond the immediate academic reason of getting better grades in university assignments. We live in a fast-changing digital age with new technologies popping up regularly and at an increasing pace. The job market is also fast changing, with the future worker expected to partake in multiple professions in her or his employment. Despite all these current and projected changes, the need for writing has not diminished. If anything, it has increased because digital media often call for written communication. Just think of emails, for example. The need to communicate in writing to fellow workers and to people beyond one's place of employment will not disappear. Those who can communicate clearly in writing stand to gain better employment options. Writing is perhaps the most important generic skill to hone in university.

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