

COMMON WRITING MISTAKES AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

Prof. Eve Bratman



WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

- **The stakes are high.** A simple mistake can raise a red flag and get someone else the job you wanted.
- **You never know who is reading.** And most people assume you are dumb if you use bad grammar. Most of this stuff is expected to be mastered by 6th grade.
- **Defy low expectations.** Let's face it, you're in the ROTFLMAO generation. Older folks will often assume that millennials will write emails that start with 'hey' and end with Thanks, or "tty soon." You will likely delight someone with your charmingly old-fashioned etiquette.
- **All-around strength!**
Being a careful writer can also help you become a more careful reader. It is actually pretty fun to catch typos in the *New York Times*, and once you hone these skills, you can edit other people's work more effectively.



1. QUOTE & PARAPHRASE CONFUSION

A paraphrased citation looks something like this:

Falgotta (2014) explained the importance of using citations.

To directly quote citations, it should look something like this:

“ Citations may be paraphrased or directly quoted” (Hamilton, 2014, p. 1).

- Use quotes. Note author’s last name, date, page number. (list n.d. if no date is listed).

A bibliography at the end of your paper should encompass both paraphrased and quoted sources. “Works Cited” is different from “References”

APA style is a good standard for bibliographic sources to use.

Consistency is key, no matter which format you choose.



WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS HERE?

Falgotta's work (2014) was the definitive statement on writing with appropriate sources. Falgotta says in *How to Write Well* that citations should always be used for direct quotes (2014). "Using citations is a fundamental part of substantiating argumentation and convincing readers that there is scientific and scholarly support for novel evidence or non-intuitive statements." (Falgotta, 2014, p. 23).



CITING ENOUGH (AND TOO MUCH)

Don't use full titles in your text unless in exceptional circumstances. Citations function like a shout-out. Give your props and move on.

There's usually no need to paraphrase *and* quote. Lead up to your quote with summary or an analysis, then use the quote to richly illustrate the point.

Amount of citations – Citations are used to demonstrate your research and back up facts and evidence-based points. It is important to cite even if you are a subject expert. Students usually have too few citations, not too many.

Patchworking: Every single sentence should not be a citation. It is important to make a point – one you yourself thought of, through synthesis and analysis – and then back it up with citations to demonstrate your research.



(IN)APPROPRIATE SOURCES

Blogs: Blogs may sometimes contain news-worthy information, and reading blogs is usually fun. Don't stop reading them. Remember, usually they contain opinions, and other information that has not been peer-reviewed.

DO NOT use blogs as a source in your research papers. Exception: they could be a good first-hand source if you are doing a research paper, say, about social media and the Arab Spring.

Also avoid:

- Wikipedia, Dictionary, eHow, Q & A sites
- Going to Google before going to the library website in search of scholarly sources.

Long direct quotes have unique indentation requirements. I recommend avoid any long direct quotes. They are usually used by students to fill up space.



2. GET COMFORTABLE WITH THE THIRD PERSON

- Do not write a paper that begins with something like:

I chose to write about this because blah blah blah.

There is no need to mention the author (aka the student). Just write about the topic.

- In a reflection, first person is fine, but you still need to be mindful of when to situate yourself in the work, and when to be an observer.

Taking in Rio's culture by walking its streets, eating its food and trying to pick up the local language has made me grow in ways I can't put into words but the feeling of which is felt very strongly by me.

Tip: Reword. E.g. "but I feel these changes very strongly." ('the feeling of which' is too passive) (you only need to put your "I" into the sentence once).



3. GOOFY APOSTROPHES

- Its: a possessive pronoun
- It's: It's can be possessive, but it's really a conjunction.
 - It's is a merging of 'it' and 'is.' (or it has, in past tense).
- S' is possessive for a word that ends in S.
 - Eg.: Jeffrey Sachs' book, *The End of Poverty*...
 - and: The Kuznets curve predicts...
- Example: It's the Alot's turn to speak. No one can take its place.
 - Tip: Try replacing your "its" with "his" in the sentence. If it comes out sounding right, "its" can stay



WHAT'S WRONG HERE?

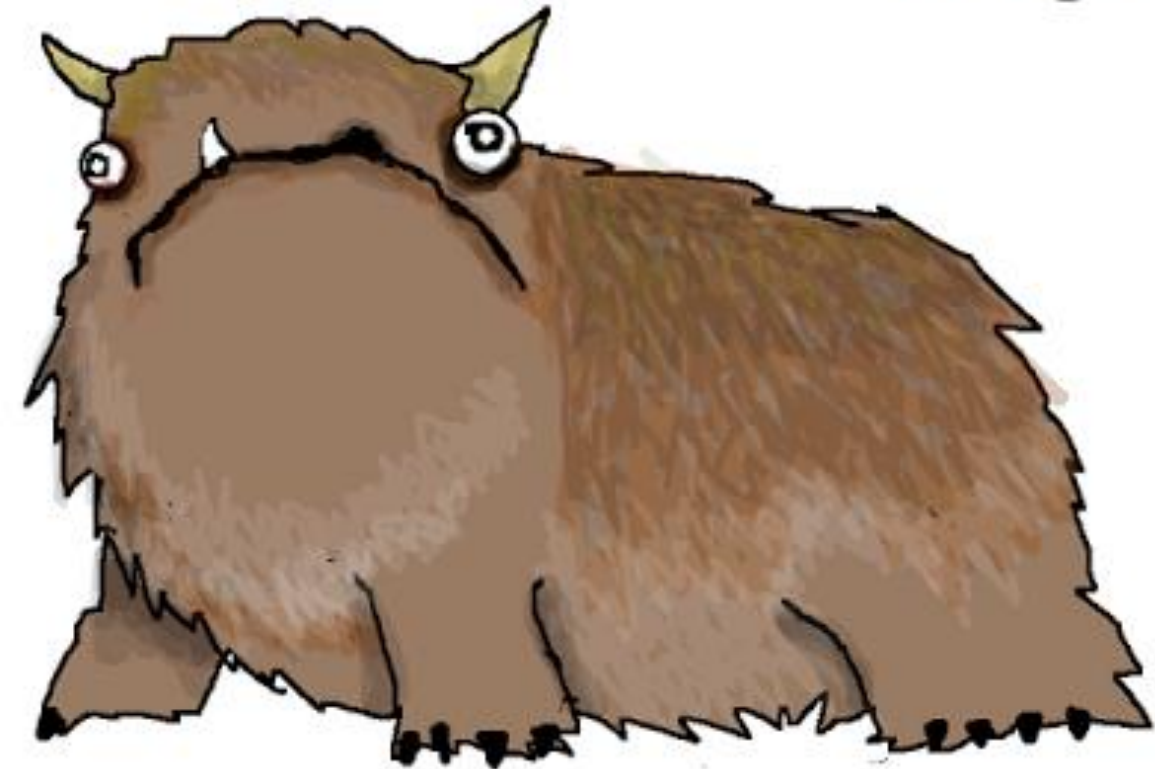
Since the return to power of the old-guard authoritarian Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) with Peña Nieto on December 1st, 2012, Mexico has experienced a systematic unravelling of the rule of law and human rights. Mexico is today one of the most dangerous country's in the world for the press, with frequent assassinations and threats against journalists. Freedom of assembly is also systematically under attack, with the number of political prisoners and arbitrary detentions of activists skyrocketing in recent years. Plurality in the media has also been significantly reduced with the recent arbitrary firing of Mexico's leading independent news anchor, Carmen

John M. Ackerman, Professor, UNAM-Mexico City; Editor-in-Chief, Mexican Law Review; Columnist, Proceso and La Jornada. "Toward the 'Normalization' of US-Mexico Relations," *Huffington Post* Blog. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-m-ackerman/toward-the-normalization-of-us-mexico-relations_b_7789804.html

Posted: 07/14/2015 1:40 pm EDT Updated: 07/14/2015 2:59 pm EDT

3. CONJUNCTION ABUSE

ALOT



It has become almost fun for me to come across people who take the phrase "a lot" and condense it down into one word, because when someone says "alot," this is what I imagine:



I CARE ABOUT THIS ALOT



ALOT OF FIRE

ALOT OF BEER CANS



ALOT MORE DANGEROUS



...baby less dangerous

I HEAR THAT ALOT...



4. OVERLY-ENTHUSIASTIC CAPITALIZATION

A photograph of a sign with excessive capitalization. The sign is mounted on a wall and has a light-colored background. The text is written in a dark, bold, sans-serif font. The first line reads "Quiet Please!" in a larger font size. The second line reads "Others Are Working" in a slightly smaller font size. The third line reads "Sounds in the stairwell can be" in a smaller font size. The fourth line reads "Disturbing to those working" in a smaller font size. The fifth line reads "in the Offices Nearby." in a smaller font size.

Quiet Please!
Others Are Working
Sounds in the stairwell can be
Disturbing to those working
in the Offices Nearby.

- Capitalizations should **NOT** be used for emphasis.
- UNLESS YOU USE ALL CAPS AND WANT TO CONVEY A SORT OF SHOUTING VOICE TO YOUR READER (!)
- Try **bold**, instead. Or *italics*. Or, underlines.
- ***Or, all of the above.***



Be

DIP

F

Everyo

Each caplet contains:

ANTI-HISTAMINE
Diphenhydramine Hydrochloride

Non-medicinal ingredients:
dicalcium phosphate, D&C
polyethylene glycol, polysorbate, starch, stearic
acid, titanium dioxide, wax, zinc stearate.

gerard-gay:

there is A REASON I TYPE LIKE THIS

it builds UP THE EXCITEMENT

this is too boring

THIS IS OBNOXIOUS

look itS THE PERFECT BALANCE

McNeil Consumer Healthcare, division of Johnson & Johnson Inc.,
Markham, Canada L3R 5L2. © J&J Inc. 2012

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Not recommended for use. Use
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1 to 2 caplets every
4-6 hours. Do not exceed
8 caplets in 24 hours.

Âge :

Enfants de
moins de 12 ans

Adultes et
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12 ans et plus

Posologie :

Emploi déconseillé. Utiliser un
produit BENADRYL® pour enfants.

1 à 2 caplets toutes les
4 à 6 heures. Ne pas dépasser
8 caplets en 24 heures.



CAPITALS ARE APPROPRIATE IN:

Months, days,
holidays

- November (NOT: november)
- Thanksgiving, Thursday

I

- Just the pronoun “I”, not you, not me.

Names

- JFK, John F. Kennedy, European Union (EU)
- Chicago, Bangladesh
- British, Indonesian, Muslim, Jewish, Urdu, Creole
- Directions: lowercase, unless describing a group or region: Global South, or Midwest

Titles

- Professor Bratman, Dr. Martin Luther King
- NOT: Economist Jeffrey Sachs
- Cry Me a River: Blues and sorrow in the American South

Sentences

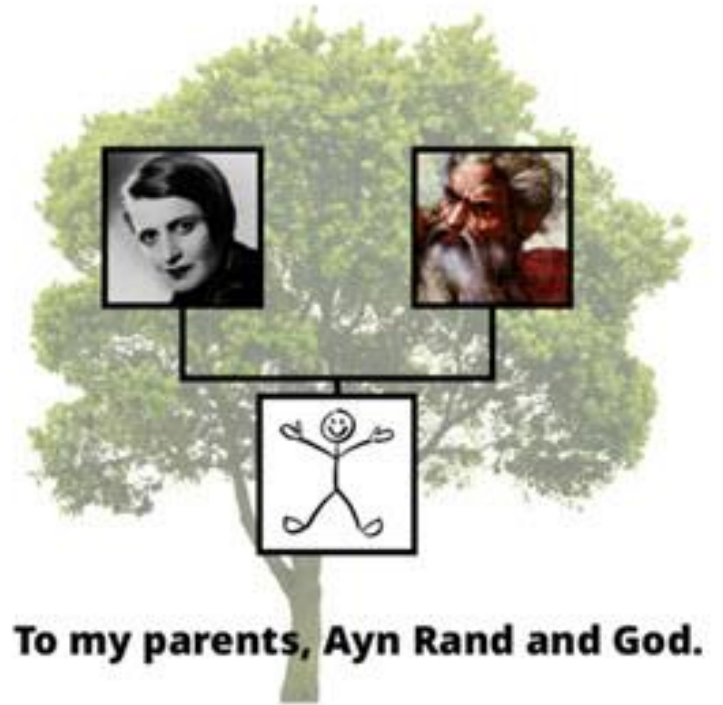
- Dear Mrs. Grammar,
- Each sentence should begin with a capital letter.
- Cordially Yours,



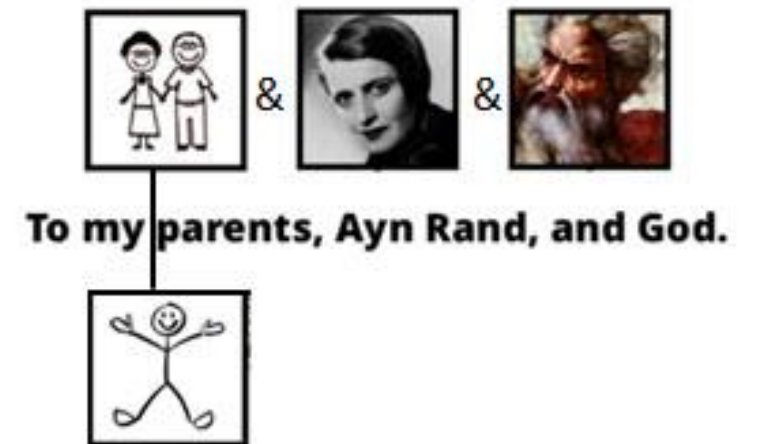
5. WAIT, WHAT? STRANGE COMMAS

Let's eat grandpa.
Let's eat, grandpa.

**correct punctuation can
save a person`s life.**



OR



6. BAD WORD CHOICES

Insipid vs. Insidious
vs. Insinuating vs.
Insolent

Tenant vs. Tenet



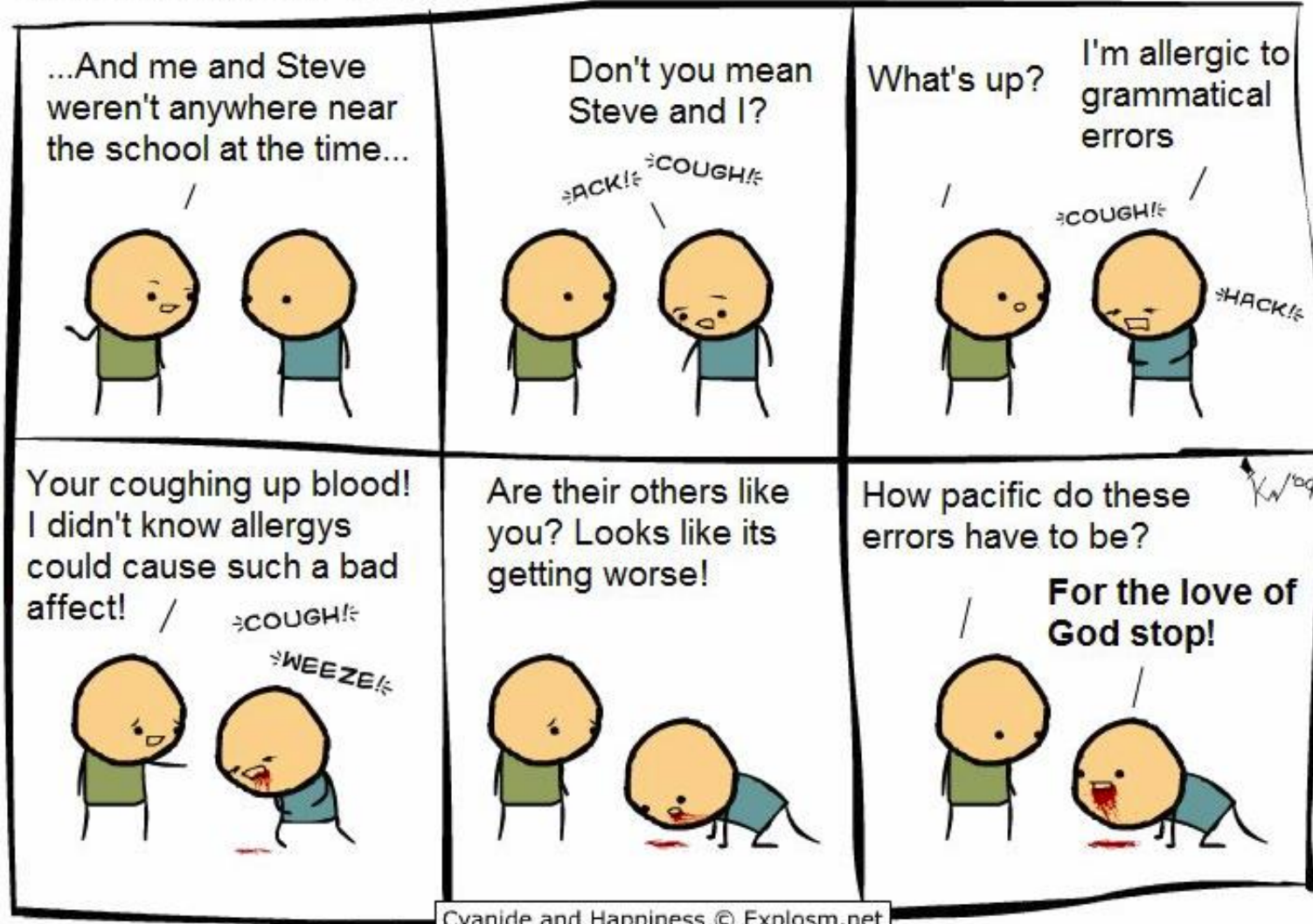
AVOIDING THIS MISTAKE:

- **Intelligible content and good prose go hand-in-hand.**
 - Careful not to exaggerate or undermine your case by choosing a word that is extra punchy. Also, being elusive does not help your writing.
- **Don't try to sound so darn smart. Use words you are comfortable with.**
 - A 10 cent word correctly used is worth more than a \$1.00 word, incorrectly used.
- If you're in doubt, **look it up!**
- Use a thesaurus if you need to avoid repeating the same word over again repeatedly.
- *Clarity is the key to good academic writing.*
 - For a reader, it's a lot harder to figure out what you mean than when you're speaking to someone. What you write tends to stay put as the written record. Choosing the wrong word can confuse – or mislead – your reader.



7. TORTUROUS GRAMMAR

COMIC REWRITE CONTEST



SOME REAL LIFE EXAMPLES FROM MY STUDENTS...

- The Kuznet's Curve is Simon Kuznet's graphical representation of inequality ...He speculates that nations transitioning into industrialized nations are like slinkies (that's the way I interpret it).
- Stiglitz? I forget his first name....James? John? Joseph? I know it started with a J.
- It doesn't explicitly assert that people at this level of income or purchasing power may at all be engorging their leisure on the work and circumstance of the people on the left.
- "The bankers consider women loonies as higher risk than men loonies."
- Countless intergovernmental bodies have erected as a result of these debates; a way to properly measure and implement change.
- ...the Plutonic River, in Washington DC...
- However the United States became a main player in the developing of the Iraqi constitution and other tenants of freedom that they thought the Iraqis needed.



HOW TO WRITE GOOD

By Frank L. Visco

My several years in the word game have learnt me several rules:

1. Avoid alliteration. Always.
2. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
3. Avoid cliches like the plague. (They're old hat.)
4. Employ the vernacular.
5. Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.
6. Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are unnecessary.
7. It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
8. Contractions aren't necessary.
9. Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.
10. One should never generalize.
11. Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know."
12. Comparisons are as bad as cliches.
13. Don't be redundant; don't use more words than necessary; it's highly superfluous.
14. Profanity sucks.
15. Be more or less specific.
16. Understatement is always best.
17. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.
18. One-word sentences? Eliminate.
19. Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
20. The passive voice is to be avoided.
21. Go around the barn at high noon to avoid colloquialisms.
22. Even if a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.
23. Who needs rhetorical questions?



SOME FINAL TIPS:

- **Titles are important.** Titles help get the reader excited and let the reader know what you plan to say.
 - “Paper 3” is a really lousy title.
 - Subtitles are handy in helping to specify your topic.
- **Tone makes a difference.**
 - E.g.: They’re often confused, but there’s still a difference between ontology and epistemology, and it’s important! Vs: They are often confused, but there is still a difference between ontology and epistemology, and the difference is important.
 - Using the first person is sometimes a lot less awkward than trying to avoid using the first person.
- **Trust your natural voice.** If you can explain something clearly verbally, you should strive to write it that way as well.
- **Read your writing out loud, or at least in a loud whisper.**

