



Guidelines for Effective Professional and Academic Writing¹

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Introduction

There are many instances in your professional or academic career when you will be expected to produce a document written in a professional style. The purpose of this document is to provide a few tips to keep in mind while composing professional documents. Specifically, this article will address the level of formality you will need to use, the use of third person in your writing, and how to improve the quality and structure of your writing. In addition, this article will address how to identify and properly cite scholarly sources to incorporate into your professional writing.

Formality

The tone of your writing in assignments or documents where professional writing is appropriate should be formal and without much emotion. You should not assume any level of familiarity with your reader. In this way, jokes, personal anecdotes, and colloquial expressions are not appropriate. The purpose of your writing will be to convey information to your reader in a clear, succinct, fluid way. Avoid

using exclamation points, contractions (such as “can’t”), or acronyms with which the reader may not be familiar.

Person

One should use third person almost exclusively in their professional writing. Avoid addressing your reader (e.g., using “You should know...”) or referring to yourself (e.g., “I think this is...”). The use of third person is an important part of retaining a formal tone in your writing. The use of first and second person can make a document seem more casual. Since you are not assuming any familiarity with your audience, you should stick with third person.

Writing Quality

This paper will address two ways you can examine your writing for quality. The first way is by proofreading. When you proofread, you check your writing for spelling mistakes, typos, and grammatical errors. These are never acceptable in professional writing. Often, it is hard to see your own mistakes simply by reading over your work. You can try to

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read your work out loud to make sure you are reading each word while checking for sentence construction. You can also have a friend, coworker, or instructor look at your work for errors of this type. It is easier to see mistakes that are not your own.

The second way you can examine your writing quality is by editing. You can examine your writing for style issues after you have checked your assignment or document for technical errors. There are three main issues in editing. The first is fluency. Do the topics in your document logically flow together? Are the sub-topics within your paragraphs clustered together rather than spread throughout the paragraph? Is your sentence construction varied throughout the document or do you find yourself repeating the same cadence throughout? Try experimenting with diverse sentence styles. This will keep your reader involved and interested in your reading, rather than becoming bored with the same sentence type over and over again.

The second editing issue is clarity. Are your sentences clear? Are you using active voice rather than passive? For example, it is clearer if you write “the researcher analyzed the data,” rather than “the data was analyzed.” Writers often use passive voice, so it is hard to identify in your own writing. You may want to ask someone to edit your writing specifically for issues such as passive voice. Clarity and sentence construction are particularly important when writing for an audience for whom English is a second language.

Finally, you can edit for conciseness. Are there words in your sentences that you can remove while retaining the integrity of the thought? Avoid starting sentences with “I think” or “I believe.” Also, look for extraneous words like “quite,” “definitely,” and “somewhat.” Imagine each word you use costs you a dollar. Where can you cut costs?

Structure

It is acceptable to be a little repetitive in professional writing. The same information can often be appropriate in more than one place in your assignment or document. When writing a paper, start with an introduction that gives the reader a clear map

of what to expect from the beginning of the paper to the end. Remember, you are not writing a mystery novel – it is okay to give away the ending at the beginning of the paper.

You can outline your paragraphs before you start writing to make sure your thoughts flow logically from one to the next, rather than giving the impression of free association. Make sure each paragraph starts with a thesis statement, or a topic sentence, that lets the reader know what the topic for that paragraph will be.

End your document with a conclusion that acts as the reverse of the introduction. Your conclusion should sum up the point of the paper. You can also draw conclusions, offer comments, or make suggestions in your conclusion. You should sum up for the reader what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then sum up what you just told them.

Sources

You will be expected to reference scholarly sources to support the information you are presenting to your reader. Scholarly sources include works that go through a peer review or “referee” process in which experts in the field examine them for quality and validity. The following is a quick checklist to help you determine whether an article or book is scholarly. Your source is probably scholarly if it meets the following criteria:

1. If the source is an article, it comes from a peer-reviewed journal.
2. If it is a research article, it should include an introduction, the researchers methods, the study's results, and a discussion of the study's implications to the field or to society.
3. The author of the source should cite specific theories and their sources.
4. The source should include specialized vocabulary that is aimed at a scholarly audience. (Newspapers and magazines are not aimed at scholarly audiences.)

5. The sources authors are named and their institutional affiliations should be included.
6. The journal or book should be published by a professional organization or academic institution.

Here are a few examples of scholarly and non-scholarly sources to give you an idea of the distinction:

Examples of scholarly sources:

- Journal of Agricultural Education
- Journal of Extension
- Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education
- Adult Education Quarterly
- North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture
- International Review of Education
- Journal of Continuing Higher Education

Examples of non-scholarly sources:

- Newsweek
- New York Times
- Time
- USA Today
- Christian Science Monitor
- National Geographic
- Many websites

Finding Scholarly Sources

There are a few ways in which you can start searching for scholarly sources to cite in your professional writing. If you have a GatorLink ID, the University of Florida library website is a terrific way to start. A few steps to get you started through the University website are listed below.

1. Go to the University of Florida website – "http://www.ufl.edu."
2. Click on "Libraries" under "Academics."
 - Make sure you are using a UF-connected computer.
 - If you are not using a UF-connected computer, click on "Remote Logon" and use your GatorLink ID and password to logon to the system.
 - If you do this, click on "Project Starters" and skip to step 5.
3. Click on "Articles" under "Find."
4. Click on "Project Starters."
5. You can explore each of the search engines listed on this page. They will provide a good start for finding scholarly sources on your research topic.
 - Keep in mind that newspapers and popular magazines are not scholarly sources, so you may want to stay away from any search engines that seem like they specialize in these types of sources.
6. Once you choose a search engine, type in one or more of your key words. In addition, narrow your search by checking "Peer Reviewed" or "Refereed Publications."
 - These options will increase the chances that your search results will be scholarly. However, you can still utilize the checklist above to double-check.
 - Check "Full Text" or "Articles with Text" so you can get the whole article, rather than just the description or citation for the article.
7. Tips:
 - When looking through the results of your search, look in the bibliographies for related articles and more references.

- Also, look at key words related to the article. Often, they are linked to similar articles.
- You can also chat with UF librarians online. Click on “Ask a Librarian” on the upper right hand corner on the UF Libraries website and then click on “RefExpress.” This will allow you to “instant message” a librarian with questions about your research.

Conclusion

Use these professional writing tips in academic papers or assignments, professional written communication, and published documents. Always strive to improve your writing and communication skills. Your writing often represents you in academic and professional settings. You want your writing to communicate your thoughts in a way that everyone can understand and use. These tips will help you to achieve clear, effective writing that will impress your audience in any context.