

## Colleen McDannell's Ten Commandments of Writing

### 1) Be Aware Of These Editing Abbreviations:

art=article (a, the)	sp=spelling	s.o.=spell out
g= grammar	st=style	w=wrong word
p= punctuation	t=tense	id= wrong idiom
prep= preposition	v=vocabulary	lc=lower case
w. o. = word order	awk=awkward	uc=upper case
= capitalize	? = don't understand what you mean	=connect
sup= superfluous, not needed	red= redundant	
^ =insert	=delete	
=paragraph	= reverse	

### 2) Be Organized

Number each page of your essay.

Essays need to have a beginning, middle, and an end. The beginning paragraph should introduce your topic or argument. Your thesis statement should be in the first part of your essay. The middle paragraphs should cover the main points of your essay. The end paragraph should make final conclusions.

Each paragraph should have a strong topic sentence and a series of sentences supporting that major topic. If you change topics you must change paragraphs. Do not make paragraphs one or two sentences long. They need to have evidence (supporting details) to prove your idea. Likewise, do not make paragraphs a page long. If they are too long, you probably have too many ideas. Give each idea its own paragraph. Transition sentences link paragraphs together and help the reader move between thoughts.

### 3) Assemble Evidence

Do not merely state conclusions. Give the reader some evidence to eventually make the same conclusion that you have made. Evidence will lead the reader to your conclusions. Such supporting details make up the sentences in a paragraph.

Supporting details come from either the materials you are reading in class or from the research you have conducted in the library. Try to find the details that will support your argument. If you are writing a research paper, make sure you have spent enough time in the library and have read enough to thoroughly understand your topic. *Use the internet sparingly.*

#### 4) Get Creative

An important part of any essay is the narrative. Try to tell your story in an interesting and exciting way. Show your enthusiasm and command of your subject by enlivening your description with sensory experience. Details let us imagine what an historical event or person may have been like. Be a colorful storyteller. Try to use exciting vocabulary but make sure you know what your word means.

Strive to develop your own thoughts and ideas. Your essay should not merely repeat the thoughts of others. Make sure that your own voice is heard strongly throughout your piece and not merely in the conclusion. Lead us to accept your conclusions by including persuasive supporting details.

#### 5) Eliminate Garbage Words and Phrases, Colloquial writing

You are writing an academic essay; not a letter to Auntie Em. Write in a manner that shows you are an educated individual with ideas, not merely opinions and feelings. If you do not know what the word “colloquial” means—look it up!

Avoid words that are vague, weak, dull, and have little meaning.

Examples: nice, a lot, pretty, a whole lot of, I think, kind of, sort of, seems to, **it was interesting**

Your writing should be concise. Avoid using several words when one word is sufficient.

**Wrong**: They are not able to read or write English.

**Right**: They cannot read or write English.

**Wrong**: Gardeners are the ones who prepare the ground for others.

**Right**: Gardeners prepare the ground for others.

#### 6) Write in the Active Voice with Strong Nouns and Verbs

Avoid the passive voice where the verb acts on the subject. In the active voice, the subject acts through the verb. The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive. Many a tame sentence or description or exposition can be made lively and emphatic by substituting a transitive in the active voice for some such perfunctory expression as *there is* or *could be heard*.

Writing in the passive voice oftentimes masks the fact that you really do not understand who the actors are or what is happening. Using the active voice tightens up sentences and helps eliminate garbage words and phrases.

**Wrong**: The decision was made to invade Cuba.

**Right**: John F. Kennedy made the decision to invade Cuba.

**Wrong**: There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.

**Right**: Dead leaves covered the ground.

**Wrong:** It was determined that the individual's continued presence is the organization should be terminated.

**Right:** He was fired.

## 7) Use Inclusive Language and Eliminate Religious Bias

It is standard in modern English to use inclusive language. This means that you should avoid using "he" and "man" to mean "he and she" and "people." One easy way to avoid awkwardness, and to still be inclusive, is to use the plural—but make sure your numbers agree.

**Wrong:** If man was aware of all the negative influences of TV watching, then he should be able to reduce his viewing time.

**Right:** If a person is aware of all the negative influences of TV watching then he or she should be able to reduce his or her viewing time.

**Better:** If people were made more aware of all the negative influences of TV watching then they would be motivated to reduce their viewing time. **BUT NOT** If **one** were made more aware of all the negative influences of TV watching then **they** would be motivated to reduce their viewing time.

Frequently, when students write essays about religion they momentarily forget that they are in a classroom at a state university where they are learning about religions different from their own. They filter religion through their own religious beliefs and categories. All religions are not the same. A synagogue is not a church. A Catholic sacrament is not an LDS ordinance. More importantly, not everyone does things the way you do. Be aware of your own faith commitments and try to understand other religions *on their own terms*.

## 8) Eliminate Common Punctuation Errors

Don't use a semi-colon (;) when you should be separating phrases into sentences.

Commas are used to separate **independent** clauses (clauses that have their own verbs and nouns). You should not put a comma between dependent clauses.

**Wrong:** She notes that medical technology has increased the average life span, and removed death from being an everyday event. (needs no comma)

**Right:** She notes that medical technology has increased the average life span and removed death from being an everyday event.

**Wrong:** She notes that technology has increased the average life span but she continues to wonder about the long-term cost to society.

**Right:** She notes that technology has increased the average life span, but she continues to wonder about the long-term cost to society. ("She continues to..." is an independent clause; it needs a comma)

Quote marks go after the punctuation point. **Ex:** Methodist James Hervey mused, “death with its icy arms never failed to cut short the enjoyment of the living!”

### 9) Draft, Revise, Draft, Edit, Proofread

Few writers can sit at the computer and compose an elegant, informative, and provocative text at the first go around. The production of any piece of writing takes writing and rewriting. After beginning your essay, you might need to return to your source materials to clarify content questions. You will need to make sure that the narrative flows properly; that events are described in chronological order. Most importantly, you will need to make sure that your voice is being heard in the essay. Have you put in your own ideas and insights?

Give your self enough time to revise and rewrite. Sometimes it helps to read your essay out loud to make sure it sounds smooth and makes sense. Use a dictionary! Remember, computer spell checks can only go so far in helping your writing. **Never turn in an essay without carefully proof reading it for typos.**

### 10) Use the Chicago Manual of Style for Notations

The best student guides to help you master this style are the famous “Turabians”:

Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (sixth edition) or  
Kate Turabian, *Student's Guide for Writing College Papers* (third edition)

#### Bibliography:

Goes at the end of the essay and includes all of the books and articles that you used to help you write the paper. A bibliography tells me how much research you did in order to support your conclusions. The style is different than for end or footnotes

Woodthrus, John R. *Songs My Father Taught Me*. New Haven: Birdwathchers Press, 1985.

Smith, Amanda. “Treatise on Dante’s Idea of Hell.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 2 (1987), pp. 56-78.

#### End or Footnotes

Citations used when quoting passages verbatim. Quotes longer than five lines must be indented five spaces. No quote marks are used on long quotes.

Colleen McDannell, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 18.

Frances Fitzgerald, “A Word to the Wise,” *International Review of Critical Studies* 45 (1990), pp. 145-200.