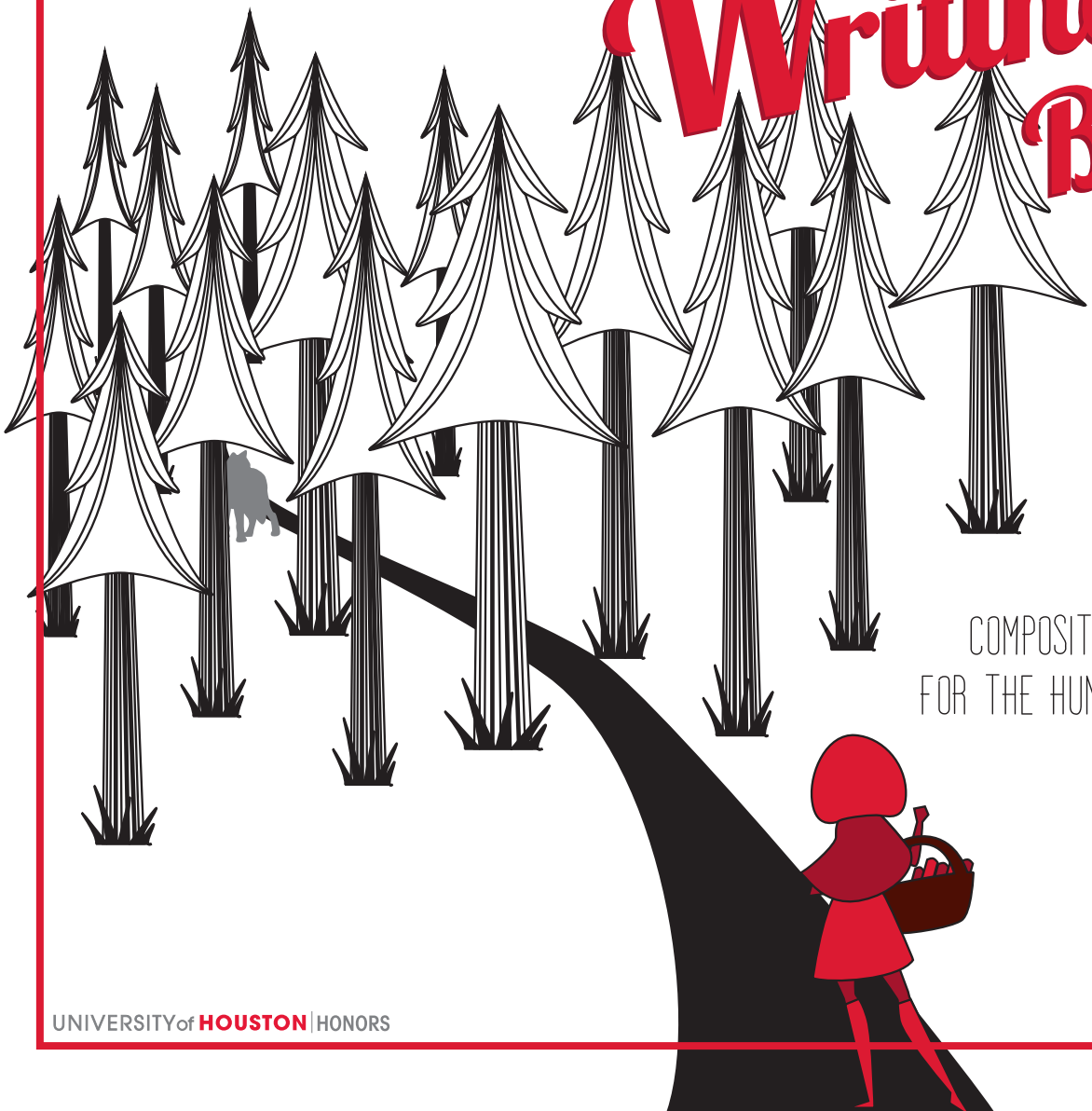
# The Little Red Writing Book



COMPOSITION BASICS
FOR THE HUMAN SITUATION

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON | HONORS

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# The Little Red Writing Book:

## Composition Basics for the Human Situation

# Introduction

Writing well in the Human Situation is about learning to be the author of interesting, original, creative, and well-reasoned ideas. It is also about learning to present these ideas in concise, precise, and compelling ways.

In this first semester of the Human Situation, you will begin to read and think like a scholar. You will use writing not only to communicate ideas, but also to explore and develop them. By the end of this year you will have engaged deeply with great thinkers and great books, and you will also have learned an entirely new set of reading, writing, and thinking skills.

The Human Situation Faculty Team put this *Little Red Writing Book* together to help you on your way. Some of what is here might seem too basic to bear repeating. We know you know that subjects and verbs should agree. We have noticed, however, that sometimes the basics get overlooked as students work to find their voices in academic writing. Student mistakes most often stem not from unfamiliarity with grammar, but from working in this unfamiliar idiom for the first time. A stumble with a word choice spirals into a run-on sentence, or worse. That sentence undoes a paragraph, and soon there is real trouble.

As you develop as a thinker and writer you will almost certainly find yourself struggling for clarity, precision, and concision — with *how* to say what you want to say. Section 1 alerts you to problem cases in the application of seemingly basic rules and offers examples of how new academic writers go wrong. Sections 2 and 3 build toward important lessons about word placement in sentences, about setting paragraphs up for maximum effect, and about the work paragraphs do in papers.

We suggest that you read this whole guide before class starts, and then consult the relevant sections of it as you work through your first writing assignments.

Our best advice is Mark Twain's wisdom, passed on to an aspiring young writer in 1880:

> *I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English. ... Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. ... An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice.*

We are looking for simple, direct, declarative sentences that you can use to build well-organized paragraphs and then well-reasoned interpretive papers. Think through the advice here and you will do fine. We are here to help.

# *Section 1:* Choosing Your Words

*"I have someone else read my paper out loud to me. This is probably the single most critical tool I have ever found to help with writing."*

— Shane Pennington (Human Situation, 2002-2003)

*This section reminds you of some important rules of grammar. We know you know these rules, but they are quite often broken through haste, carelessness, and confusion. Such "errors of execution" (as opposed to "errors of ignorance") can ruin a great paper.*

### I. Subject-Verb Agreement

Consider the following student sentence, which is typical for new writers:

> **Yet as the arguments continues and again the subject of morality is reintroduced Gorgias states that rhetoricians are experts in morality and Gorgias himself can teach others to be moral experts.**

There are several problems with this sentence, but the most glaring is the disagreement in number between *arguments* and *continues.* This is symptomatic of a writer who has not taken care to reread the whole sentence in order to detect such basic errors. Careful editing would also address the overall wordiness and lack of clarity. If we tighten up the sentence, we can not only fix the grammatical error, but also make the point immediately clear.

> **As the subject of morality is introduced, Gorgias states that rhetoricians are experts in morality and that he himself can teach others to be moral experts.**

As you know, nouns and verbs have to agree in number. Thus, if you have a singular noun for the subject of your sentence, you must have a singular verb to go with it. A common error of execution is when you have a compound subject — that is, two nouns linked by *and* — and forget to use a plural verb. Be careful during the editing process.

If the verb is active, the subject performs the actions. If it is passive, the subject has the action performed upon it. So, for example, "Odysseus brutally murders the suitors." Here "Odysseus" is singular and so is "murders." But, if you said "The suitors are murdered by Odysseus," the subject is now "suitors" and the verb must become plural, "are murdered." A singular subject *is*, but plural subjects *are.*

### II. Noun-Pronoun Agreement

Noun-pronoun agreement follows the same rules as subject-verb agreement, but can be tricky to get right. Pronouns stand in for nouns, so pronouns must agree with the nouns they stand in for, both in number and gender. Generally you have a choice of "he, she, it" for singular nouns, and "they, these, those" for plurals. Most of the time, this will not give you problems. Everyone knows that "Odysseus" is "he" or "him" and Penelope is "she" or "her": "Odysseus made Penelope a bed out of a tree. She questions his recollection of this bed as a test of his love for her."

But agreement can be difficult when you use the indefinite pronoun "one" for a hypothetical reader. If you do this, the important thing to keep in mind is that "one" is *always singular* and that "they" cannot refer to a singular noun. So, you might want to say this: "When one interprets the political aspects of *Hamlet*, their interpretation must take Polonius into account." But this sentence includes a disagreement. Instead, write: "When one interprets the political aspects of *Hamlet*, one's interpretation must take Polonius into account." You should not turn "one" into "they," or "one's" into "theirs."

If you are concerned about using "gendered" pronouns for hypothetical readers, simply use "she" instead of "he." This is a widely accepted practice and will not alarm your reader. You can certainly say something like this: "When a reader interprets the political aspects of *Hamlet, her* interpretation..."

### III. Inflection

Inflection is the marking of words to express grammatical information. If you took a language course in high school, you conjugated verbs. When you did, you were inflecting them for person, number, tense, and so on. So: I *am*, but you *are*, and he *is*. Declension does a similar job for nouns: it modifies words to express grammatical case, number, and gender. When you distinguish cougar from cougars, you are inflecting a noun to communicate information about number. Inflection is how we form subject-verb and noun-pronoun agreement.

"He," "she," and "it" are pronouns that refer to the subject of a sentence. "Him," "her," and "it" refer to the object—that which the subject acts upon. "His," "hers" and "its" are inflected to show possession by a single subject. "Their" and "theirs" are plural forms, meaning that they are inflected to show more than one possessor. If your parents own a car, it is *theirs*, though your sibling might regard it as *his* or *hers* when no one is looking. The sentence "What did Rudolfo and her say?" contains an inflection error that substitutes an object pronoun for a subject pronoun. It should be "What did Rudolfo and she say?"

A very common difficulty with inflecting pronouns comes with "who" and "whom." "Who" is a subject, "whom" is a direct object. Both can introduce questions, but while "who" asks for the subject of a verb, "whom" asks for its direct object. The same is true when these are used to introduce relative clauses. Thus: "*Who* stole the cookies from the cookie jar?" "I did, but for *whom* did you intend them?" Or, as Sideshow Bob once corrected Krusty the Klown, "Children, *whom* do you love?" A handy way of telling if you are using who/whom correctly is by switching in she/her for who/whom. If the sentence makes sense with "she" then it is "who," and if it makes sense with "her" then it is "whom."

### IV. Parallel Structure

Parallel construction uses the same grammatical pattern to show that words, phrases, or clauses within a sentence all have the same weight. Student-authored sentences often feel cluttered and unclear when they lack parallelism. Take this sentence as an example:

> **Achilles rages when Briseis is taken away, is seen withdrawing from the war while he wants to grieve by his ships.**

There is a lot wrong with this sentence. One way to get it into better shape is to impose a parallel structure on ideas that have equal importance. We might more clearly say:

> **Achilles rages over Briseis's loss, withdraws from the war, and grieves by his ships.**

Here, the pattern of each clause is "present tense verb-preposition-noun."

Parallelism can also be used to link sentences of equal weight together. An unparalleled use of parallel structure can be found in Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*. Take, for instance, the famous line, "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, *conceived* in liberty and *dedicated* to the proposition that all men are created equal."

### V. Homophones

Homophones are words that sound alike but do not share meanings. There are numerous homophones in English and, while it takes some time to distinguish them in writing, it is crucial! Otherwise, instead of making *sense*, your sentences might make *cents* or *scents*. Familiar homophones include:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| aisle/isle | genes/jeans | seam/seem |
| base/bass | road/rowed | to/two/too |
| dual/duel | right/write | which/witch |

We often see that students confuse "lead" with "led." "Lead" is a metal; "Led" is the past tense of "to lead." So, "I *led* a horse to water, but then it turned out the water was contaminated with *lead*." It is good to remember that lead is a metal, but in oral finals you will test your mettle (i.e., your courage).

A common type of homophony occurs between possessives and contractions. So, for example, "Its" is a possessive pronoun. "It's" is a contraction for "it is." So, if we were speaking of Odysseus' ship, we might say that "*Its* sails are red, and *it's* the quickest ship around." We may say the same for "your" and "you're." "By George, I think *you're* improving *your* writing already!"

Another example is the infamous trio, "there," "their," and "they're." "There" is an adverb, "their" is a possessive pronoun, and "they're" is a contraction for "they are." So you could say of the characters in *Bleak House:* "*They're* seeking *their* inheritance with the lawyers over *there*."

### VI. Grudge Matches

Here are some commonly confused, similar-sounding terms that we see a lot.

Then v. Than: "Then" is a conjunction that tells you something comes after something else, either in time or logically. "Than" makes a comparison between two items. "If Odysseus is really smarter *than* the Cyclops, *then* his men may have a chance of escape."

From v. Than: This is a tricky one. You will see sentences that say "different from" and others that say "different than." Which is right? Well, in certain circumstances, either can be correct. The technical explanation is that both "from" and "than" are means of comparison, but that "from" requires an explicit object of comparison. So, you could say, for example, that "Plato's theory of forms is noticeably different from Aristotle's theory of forms." Or you could say that "Plato's *Parmenides* demonstrates that his mature theory of forms is noticeably different *than* it was in the *Meno*."

British writers often say "different to" while American writers use "different from." We encourage the latter.

### VII. Colloquialisms

Colloquialisms are words and phrases used in informal communication. They should generally be avoided in academic writing, which calls for more formality. Certainly you will not be using contractions like "can't," and you will not be referring to your reader as "you." More insidious yet, some things we frequently say in conversation are not good English usage. Have you ever said "irregardless," or "one of the only," or "a whole nother"? These are (incorrect) colloquialisms. Just as you must distinguish homophones, so you must avoid colloquialisms in academic writing.

In Human Situation papers, students often write "one in the same," instead of the correct "one and the same." We often see "could (or should) of" instead of the correct "could (or should) have." And, of course, it is "for all intents and purposes," not "for all intensive purposes." "All in tents and porpoises" is hilarious, but also wrong. In each of these cases, the first example is good usage, while the others are similar-sounding mistakes.

Many other colloquialisms involve correct usage, but do not work well in formal writing. Clichés, for example, are often detrimental, as are what we call "stock phrases"—that is, phrases so familiar that they have lost their punch. As a rule, if you can imagine a phrase on a Hallmark card, or if you have actually seen it on a Hallmark card, it will not convey your ideas powerfully.

# *Section 2:* Composing Your Sentences

*"If I wouldn't say it in conversation, then I shouldn't write it. This can be dangerous advice; conversations are informal and conversational grammar usually is not perfect. But this advice aims at eliminating fluff and flowery language."*

— Katherine Fischer (Human Situation, 2012-2013)

*This section is largely about how to realize the ideal Twain described: simple, short, declarative sentences. In the Human Situation you will use these to build arguments and interpretive essays. Starting with great sentences will save you a lot of time and aggravation.*

**I.** Every simple sentence has two pieces of prime real estate: the subject position and the verb position. The verb position may have an action verb ("to ignore") or a verb of being ("is"), both of which are called by the general term "predicate." All the other words in the sentence occupy less desirable, less powerful, less prominent positions.

In well-crafted sentences, the most conceptually important words tend to occupy the main subject and verb positions. Consider the following sentence from a student paper on the *Epic of Gilgamesh:*

> **Although he does not fulfill the duties of a good king nor does he pay attention to the needs of his people, lofty expectations are still present.**

What is the sentence about? It is about a king who does not do what he is supposed to do, thus disappointing his people. In terms of intended meaning, which words are most important? The main agent of the sentence is "the king," and the main actions in view are "(not) fulfilling duties" and "(not) attending to his people."

Now let us look at the grammar of the sentence as it is written here. Grammatically speaking, the main subject is "expectations," and the main predicate is "are present." "Expectations are present." The king and his actions are relegated to a subordinate clause, and made almost an afterthought. When we boil the sentence down to its main subject and predicate, it turns out the real meaning is lost. We could rewrite the sentence so that the most important figures are properly highlighted:

> **The king ignores his duties to his people even though they continue to expect a lot from him.**

Even though this sentence still falls short in that it does not specify what the people's expectations are (and specificity is always better than generality), the revision we have made is very helpful in that it relocates the central idea of the sentence in the main subject and predicate slots: "The king ignores." And instead of the passive and impersonal "Lofty expectations are still present," we now have a clause that builds directly on the main clause, since its object "his people" becomes the subject of "they continue to expect." Almost all of the real meaning of the sentence has been packed into a very small amount of prime real estate. "The king ignores his people. They continue to expect …"

The good news is that in order to write effective sentences, you do not need to guess whether your reader will understand your meaning, and you do not need to be able to parse and diagram every single word in your sentence. If you can locate the main subject and predicate, and if you can intuitively identify the central agents and actions, you should be able to predict the effectiveness of the sentence in communicating your intended meaning to the reader. "Did I put the most important words in the most important positions?" One way to determine this is to read the sentence aloud to yourself. Is it economical, and does it make good sense?

**II.** Another piece of good news is that if you follow our advice you will be able to eliminate a significant number of those grammatical and stylistic corrections that your professors write in the margins of your papers. For example, in the original sentence above, that troublesome final clause "lofty expectations are still present" violates an important rule of good writing: avoid dangling modifiers. A dangling modifier is a word or group of words that are intended to modify or refer to some other

word but do not do so clearly. In this case, the whole clause dangles precariously. It is supposed to modify the "people" but this is not as clear as it could be. In theory, the lofty expectations could be the king's. Our approach will help you eliminate most of these potential confusions.

**III.** Sentences structured in the way we are suggesting will also tend to be written in the active voice. Sentences written in the passive voice put the subject of the sentence in a state of patiency rather than agency. To be a patient is to have something happen to you. To be an agent is to do something. It is almost always preferable to have the subject of your sentence be an agent and not a patient. Consider the following sentence: "The chariot is broken in two by the boulder." The subject of this sentence is "the chariot." But the chariot is a patient; it has something done to it. It is better to say something like: "Diomedes breaks the chariot in two with a boulder." Putting the most important words in your idea in the subject/predicate slots will naturally lead you away from the less clear and direct passive voice without you having to think too much about it.

**IV.** Finally, Human Situation professors have always dreaded long, convoluted run-on sentences. A run-on sentence is a sentence with two or more independent clauses that are stuck together without the appropriate punctuation or conjunctions. Here is a particularly trying example—one that also contains poor word choice, odd use of verb tense, and an ungrammatical clause:

> **The etiological tales are being told by men in the Phrygian villages to the public; the stories are being spread around like rumors do, but they are told with an aura of caution and the men are telling them to the public as acts of wisdom.**

If you write as we are encouraging you to write you will avoid long, convoluted sentences like this. Keep your sentences to a manageable length and if in doubt remember to ask yourself: "Did I put the most important words in the most important positions?" Then, read your sentence aloud. If it does not sound right, it probably is not.

# *Section 3:* Structuring Your Paragraphs

*"After I have written a paragraph, I always ask myself, 'what was the point of this paragraph? What evidence does it provide for my overall claim?'"*

— Safa Ansari-Bayegan (Human Situation, 2009-2010)

*We read from beginning to end, and our ability to understand a paper, or a paragraph, or even a sentence, is based on the expectations we have from the beginning. As a writer, you want to make your reader sympathetic, and that means giving clear signposts at the beginning of your paper and even in individual paragraphs, about what he or she can expect in terms of its scope and its claims.*

**I.** Paragraphs can be thought of as miniature essays. They stake a claim at the beginning. They offer evidence to support that claim. They have analysis to explain the evidence. They sometimes conclude with a sentence that sums up the paragraph or sets up the next one. Each paragraph is a necessary step in your argument, and each paragraph is also a small argument with its own steps to take.

Just as your thesis goes at the beginning of the paper, so your paragraphs should begin with the claim that they will make. Inexperienced claim writers tend to work up to the main point of a paragraph, which they then "backload" near the end of the paragraph. Experienced writers tend to "frontload" their claims near the beginning of their paragraphs and then provide evidence and argumentation to support them.

The problem with "backloaded" paragraphs is that they are confusing to readers. The reader of the backloaded paragraph encounters evidence and arguments without knowing the claim(s) they are intended to support, and as a result experiences the evidence and arguments as an unfocused, disconnected stream of information. "Backloading" forces your reader to treat each paragraph like a detective novel, which is both frustrating and exhausting. Why? Because, essentially, you are asking the reader to work through each paragraph twice in order to experience its effect. Only at the end of the paragraph does he or she find out where it was going.

**II.** Consider, for instance, these two similar, but differently "loaded" paragraphs.

> **When Agamemnon decides to take away the captive Briseis just because he himself had to give away his captive to Apollo, Achilles sees himself divested of honor he has legitimately earned, and he removes himself from the whole project of war. Until the fight with Agamemnon, he had been operating on the premise that honor mattered the most and that it was measured by war prizes and captives. He had even made a choice to live a short life in which such honor was guaranteed, rather than a long one in which it was not possible. Thus, the rage of Achilles is a reaction to what he perceives as a breach in the honor system.**

> **The rage of Achilles is a reaction to what he perceives as a breach in the honor system. Until the fight with Agamemnon, he had been operating on the premise that honor mattered the most and that it was measured by war prizes and captives. He had even made a choice to live a short life in which such honor was guaranteed, rather than a long one in which it was not possible. Thus, when Agamemnon decides to take away the captive Briseis just because he himself had to give away his captive to Apollo, Achilles sees himself divested of honor he has legitimately earned, and he removes himself from the whole project of war.**

The second (frontloaded) paragraph works better because it is tailored to the reader's needs. Because a claim has been put on the table at the outset of the paragraph, the reader is prepared to absorb supporting evidence in real time, and to weigh supporting arguments by recalling the claim made at the outset. Frontloading relieves the reader of the work of guessing about the relevance of the parts of the paragraph.

**III.** Of course, there is no single correct formula for effective writing. Some "backloaded" paragraphs can be effective, and there are times when suspense can actually arouse a reader's attention in an essay just as it does in a detective story. We are not trying to formulate an iron rule as much as suggest ways of easing the burden you place on your readers.

If we had to formulate a rule it would be: "Paragraph structure should anticipate the reader's experience, rather than narrate the writer's thought process." You have had to work through a lot of false starts, dead ends, and failed experiments in interpretation to arrive at your conclusion. Your work is real, but it is never helpful to your reader to make them share that burden. As much as it hurts, the delete button is often your best friend. When you write your argument, you want to make the reader's experience as simple and painless as possible. In doing so you enable them to understand your reasoning and be more sympathetic to your argument. Our advice is that you should frontload your paragraphs, unless you have a compelling reason to backload.

# *Section 4:* Citing Your Sources

*"Plagiarizing ruined my life."*

— Anonymous

*Citing sources is an important part of academic writing: your reader wants to be able to evaluate the evidence you provide for your interpretation. When you cite your sources appropriately, you not only give credit where it is due, you also give your reader the information necessary to reconstruct your thinking and to check your arguments.*

Though we want you to cite your source every time you quote a piece of text or refer to a specific passage in the text, we do not need a separate bibliography at the end of the paper. Consider the main syllabus for the course a shared bibliography. If you quote from or refer to a text that is not on the syllabus, then please include a bibliographical reference immediately after your essay.

Use parenthetical citation rather than footnotes when quoting or alluding to a passage in a text. This type of citation takes different forms for different types of text. The underlying principle is that you should refer to the text with the highest level of specificity allowed for by the way in which the text is numbered. Of course, if you are discussing an event that unfolds over the third act of a play, for example, it is acceptable to cite (Act 3) without further specification.

I. Fiction, Essays and Histories:

Simply cite by (Author Pg#). For translated works, cite the original author. For example, after quoting a line from page 45 of Kafka's *The Trial* you would write (Kafka 45). If your quotation covers two pages then you would cite the text as (Kafka 45–46).

II. Philosophical Texts:

Cite philosophical texts by title (or an abbreviated version of the title) rather than by author. Some philosophical texts have numbered paragraphs or sections that allow for more specific citation. Use those rather than the page numbers when they are more specific. For example, Platonic dialogues have specialized section numbers in the margins called "Stephanus Pages." So, when quoting Plato's *Phaedo*, you might cite (*Phaedo* 57b). In other cases, you might have book (or chapter) numbers and paragraph numbers. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* would be cited as (*Essay* II.37) for paragraph 37 of Book II.

III. Plays:

When citing a play you should refer to the act, scene, and line(s). Thus, for Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be …" speech you would write (*Hamlet* III.1.1–21), because that speech comprises the first 21 lines of Act III, Scene 1. For the Ancient Greek and Roman "plays" cite by title and line number. For example, it would be (*Antigone* 50–55).

IV. Poetry:

You will cite by poem title and line number in most cases. Thus, when citing Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for death" you would not write (Dickinson 123) but, rather ("Because I could not stop for death" ln#). When citing Homer and other poets whose work is divided into books please include the book number. So, it would be (*Iliad* 9.23–33).

V. Religious Texts:

When citing the Bible, give the book title, chapter, and verse, separated by periods. For example, it is (Matthew 25.41), or (Genesis 1.9). In the case of the *Qur'an*, give the name of the sura and italicize it, followed by the equivalent of chapter, verse: (*The Overturning* 81.6).

When quoting text, retain as much as possible its original format. Brief quotations of prose (less than four lines) should be part of the running text of your essay. If the quotation is four lines or more, it should be set apart from your text: a line before and a line after, two tabs in on the left, single spaced, with a parenthetical citation at the end.

Notice that the titles of modern poetry are put in "quotations" while book titles are italicized. The biblical book titles are an exception to this rule.

**Links and resources:**

Diana Hacker, *A Pocket Style Manual*, 4th edition. New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004.

The Purdue Online Writing Lab: https://owl.english.purdue.edu

The Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric: http://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu

Amherst College Writing Resources:
https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/writingcenter/resourcesforwriters/

Kansas University Writing Center: http://www.writing.ku.edu

# Faculty Wisdom

“Each word has an important job to do. Make sure you know what that job is, and make sure it's getting done.”

—Gabriela Maya

“Always aim for clarity over complexity. It does not matter how sophisticated the point you are making is if it cannot be understood.”

—Hayan Charara

“Deeply explore one or two related ideas. Don’t just throw in several underdeveloped, unrelated bits and pieces. It’s not vegetable soup you’re making.”

—Iain Morrison

“To be a good writer you must be a good reader. Books are not meant to be chastely adored, their pages kept a virginal white. Take books to bed with you. Get intimate with them. Tattoo your ideas all over their empty, yearning margins. Your parents aren’t watching. It’s okay.”

—Kim Meyer

“Your task is to create an argument that not only chases up the implications of the text, but also tracks down the implications of your own initial thinking. Question the text, question yourself. Then you’ll be engaged in a writing process.”

—Robert Cremins

“We tend to fall in love with our own words. But this is a form of narcissism. Resist it. Instead, waken yourself to that critical voice which leads to the right words; open yourself to a true lover.”

—Jonathan Zecher et al.