

# Writing Tips: A Brief, Informal Style Guide

By

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## Introduction

We will argue that there are two types of people in the world: those who like to write and those who do not. If you are the latter, then writing journal articles, even those in your chosen discipline, will make your heart sink every time. This document is not intended to make you writing experts, but it will assist with logic, style and other ways to make your work better and help you have a better chance of an acceptance. We see mistakes repeated by many, time and time again, and this guide addresses just a few of those issues.

Proofreading and careful editing are the keys, and these are not easy tasks. They are, however, worth the effort. Everyone makes writing mistakes. Even newspaper editors have slip-ups, and these professionals are paid to prevent errors reaching print. A famous one, who we will keep anonymous, approved the following headline:

*Students Cook & Serve Grandparents*

We all know what the editor meant, but we can easily interpret differently. We would hope it was a school's "Grandparents' Day" luncheon rather than a horrific act of cannibalism.

Another quotation that shows lack of thought is the following, reported by the Teaching Unions in England:

*We dispute the government's statistics that half of all teachers in schools are below the average.*

Writing should be clear, but it should also display the writer's education and intelligence. This did not do the author any favors on either front and must have been quite embarrassing when published nationally. Half of all is below average, of course. Statisticians will say that is only true if the data are symmetrical, but most readers are not statisticians and would find such an observation laughable.

The following is a guide, suggestion and reminder of what is expected from authors. In each essay, you have one chance to shine and make your writing count. Why put effort into something that is not achieving its goal? As you gain writing experience, you will find that your work becomes more precise and powerful. You might even find that you enjoy writing. After all, remember author Edward Bulwer-Lytton's famous observation that "The pen is mightier than the sword." Good writing has the power to inform, to persuade, to change minds and to change the world.

Technology changes quickly, and much of what you learned while studying for your degree has now become obsolete. This is not true of writing skills, which will always be of use in your professional and private life. A good writer is an asset to any organization in any profession. You do not even have to have neat handwriting now; the computer gives us a multitude of fonts in which to express ourselves.

Join us in this selection of tips to improve your writing and, ideally, the chances of your article submissions being accepted. We cannot promise success, but we can share important tools and techniques that will enhance the professional presentation of your writing projects.

### **A Quick Note: Reading Makes Better Writers**

Dr. McAndrew visited Jane Austen’s house (of *Pride and Prejudice* fame), and her diary stated: “...my brother’s visit was spoiled by his constant slamming of doors and demanding glasses of water from the servants.” This one sentence allows you to picture the brother, his attitude and the atmosphere in the house. We are not suggesting that we can all write this colorfully, but if we could even come close, our work will be read extensively in the future.

How does one become a Jane Austen, a Stephen King or even a Shakespeare? We are often asked the quickest way to improve writing. Our answer is always the same: read more. Read extensively in multiple genres—everything from newspaper articles, to novels to technical documents. Reading will improve your vocabulary and expose you to a variety of writing styles. You will find your own writing increasing in sophistication.

### **What Not to Do: An Example of Error-Filled Writing**

Can you spot at least 10 errors in the sample below?

*I did the research and me have shown that this facts fit theory and my hypothesis is totally correct with no errors and furthermore I had proved this is fare and accurate. I will try and expand too fully justify why anxious researchers are different to me. This set of results is well good for the old equipment used and available. If I can truly thank the technician which helped I.*

Hint: There are issues with point of view, use of pronouns, spelling, sentence construction and more. You can probably determine what this writer is trying to say, but the errors compromise both the message and the credibility of the author. Even the most cursory attempt to edit would likely have eliminated many of these issues. Do not forget this important step in your own writing: Editing and proofreading are best accomplished with a printed copy of the assignment. You will often find errors on the physical copy of the assignment that eluded you on the computer screen. Reading your paper aloud will also help you catch problems with diction, repetitive wording and other things that do not sound “quite right.”

## **Style Matters**

### **Difference between Speaking/Informal Writing and Academic/Technical Writing.**

Students, and even professors, often make the mistake of writing exactly as they speak. This problem has been exacerbated by the increasing popularity of texting, a communication method that relies on rapidity over accuracy in grammar and spelling. As a result, we are observing an increase in students who shun proper capitalization and who are unable to correctly use apostrophes (see below). Even in informal correspondence, your writing should adopt academic tone. Avoid text-speak, slang, colloquialisms and clichés (e.g., “back in the day” or “pass the buck”) in your writing. You should also avoid contractions (don’t, won’t, can’t) in academic writing. Conversational language can be difficult for those from other cultures (or even from

other regions) to understand, as many clichés and colloquialisms are not easily translated. Be as straightforward as possible to ensure your writing is clear and precise.

### **Academic Point of View: Avoiding the Use of First and Second Person**

Writers are often confused about the point of view to adopt in their academic work. We have all had an instructor admonish the use of “I” in an assignment. Why are we typically not allowed to use personal pronouns in academic writing? This has a long history entwined with legend. It was reported that when Homer (not of “The Simpsons” fame) recited *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in ancient Greece he never used personal pronouns outside of his invocation to the muse. In fact, the formal dialect used in these works became known as Homeric Greek. The initial universities in Europe at the start of the Middle Ages used Ancient Greek as the preferred language (probably to keep out those that were of the lower class). They never used personal pronouns, and this has since followed into custom at all future universities. Like it or not, this is here to stay.

On a more practical note, the use of first person (I, me, mine) diminishes the objectivity that researchers must establish. It also makes your work sound less formal. Third person will be, almost without exception, demanded in research-based assignments.

Similarly, avoid the use of second person (you) in academic writing. Typically, we do not directly address the reader. Most uses of second person can easily be replaced by third person. Therefore, instead of saying “You will understand,” write, “The reader will understand.”

- *Note:* As you will undoubtedly note, this guide uses both second person (you) and first person plural (we). If you noticed this, congratulations! You have already learned something. The selection of a more causal point of view is a deliberate attempt by the authors to keep the tone friendly and conversational as we provide these tips. There are many stuffy, formal writing guides out there; we wanted to speak directly to authors about how to improve their writing in very real, easy, and practical ways.

### **Adding Flourish to Your Style**

Below is the opening from *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, c. 1881:

The Old Sea-Dog at the "Admiral Benbow"

*Squire Trelawney, Dr. Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the whole particulars about Treasure Island, from the beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island, and that only because there is still treasure not yet lifted, I take up my pen in the year of grace 17— and go back to the time when my father kept the Admiral Benbow inn and the brown old seaman with the sabre cut first took up his lodging under our roof.*

This is one sentence, carefully crafted with detail. It flows beautifully. If we were this descriptive then we might all be bestselling authors. There are ways to add “flourish” to your writing, even within the confines of academic papers such as case studies and research papers.

Remember that the rules apply to us all, but there are areas where we have freedom to create an individual style. Some ways to polish your writing include the following:

- **Vary wording.** Use the full extent of your vocabulary when writing. If you need additional options, make use of a thesaurus, either by “right-clicking” a word in the document (if using MS Word) and selecting “Synonyms,” by using online resources such as [www.thesaurus.com](http://www.thesaurus.com) or even by using an old-fashioned “hard copy” thesaurus. One note of caution: make sure the word you select means exactly what you intend. Some words in a thesaurus only approximate the meanings of the original word.
- **Vary sentence length.** Not all of your sentences should be five words, but neither should they all be 35 words. Variety in sentence length keeps your writing interesting. Overusing short sentences can make your writing sound choppy and disconnected. Too many long sentences can try a reader’s patience. Using some of each provides an excellent mix.
- **Vary sentence structure.** Additionally, vary the structure of your sentences. You want a variety of simple sentences (one independent clause), compound sentences (two independent clauses joined by a semicolon or comma and coordinating conjunction) and complex sentences (with at least one dependent and one independent clause).
- **Consider your audience.** Avoid jargon, overly technical language and unexplained abbreviations, especially when the audience could contain those unfamiliar with the subject matter.
- **Strike a balance between intelligent and overly ornate.** If you try pointlessly to use long and complex words, your writing will sound verbose and staid. Write in detail but with words you are comfortable using. Would the reader understand or follow something like this: “I could gasconade about my skills and how the writing is seen as an iconoclastic example for all”? Always remember that clarity is your main objective. To “show off” without depth is crass and fake.

You will have a personal style developed over your lifetime, influenced by your education, social group, experiences and even travel. This is, of course, a process that does not occur in one semester. There are some ways to immediately impact that style to give it polish, however. Be original when you can, but always adhere to the established rules of formal standard written English in your academic pursuits. Be stylish, but remain professional.

### **Paragraph Length and Structure**

Writers often ask how long a “fully developed” paragraph should be. The answer is not an easy one. APA suggests between three and five sentences per paragraph. Others consider six to eight sentences a minimum. Most importantly, paragraphs are meant to be sections with a focus on one subject. Although you will sometimes see single-sentence paragraph in newspaper articles, this practice is highly uncommon in academic writing. A paragraph should provide sufficient evidence to support its main point.

Paragraphs should be guided by a strong topic sentence. This topic sentence is typically the first sentence of your paragraph and should be easily identified by your reader. As part of your

revision, take some time to review every sentence in a paragraph to ensure that each supports the topic sentence. When you find yourself moving to a new topic, it is time to begin a new paragraph because separate subjects need separate paragraphs. A good outline can help you to avoid organization problems in your writing.

### **Latin: One Way to Make Your Work More Erudite**

Even if you did not suffer through years of declining nouns and conjugating verbs in Latin class, you can use a few common Latin phrases in your writing. Be sure to use them correctly. Latin phrases are typically italicized.

***circa***, *c.* is used to express an approximate time or date

*c.* 2016 (around 2016).

***e.g.*** means *exempli gratia* and loosely translates to “for example” or “including.” You will often see this in parenthetical attempts to provide examples of a point. This abbreviation is often confused with *i.e.* (*id est*, or “that is”) which should only be used to clarify or restate a phrase in different words.

*There are several Asian nations (e.g. Singapore and Malaysia) where aviation has become a rapidly growing industry.*

***et al.*** (“and others”) is used for a list of names. In APA format, *et al* is used when there are more than five authors. Other styles require *et al.* for as few as three authors. In each case, place the phrase after the first author to substitute for the rest.

*Smith et al. (2016) observed . . .*

***etc.*** (*et cetera*, “and the rest”) used in lieu of giving a complete list. Use sparingly, only when recounting the entire list would be unwieldy.

***ibid.*** (short for *ibidem*, “in the same place”) An adverb and an academic shortcut to quote a reference used on a previous page. Using *ibid.* avoids repetition in bibliographic notes and appear as *Ibid.*, 27. It is infrequently used in APA format.

***i.e.*** (*id est*, “it is” or, loosely “in other words”) is used for alternative phrasing of a point you are making.

*Many Americans are unable to identify the Sixth Amendment (i.e. the right to a speedy and public trial).*

***inter alia*** (*i.a.* or “among others”) This is a wonderful way to state that there are a number of references that could have been used to support your argument or justify your point. Use sparingly and maybe only twice in any work.

*The strength of this argument is supported by Brown (2009) inter alia.*

***nota bene*** (*n.b.*, *NB*, or “mark/note well”) is used to highlight an important point.

*NB: The researcher did not have access to the participants' names and other identifying information when conducting the study.*

**quod erat demonstrandum** (*Q.E.D.* or “what was to be demonstrated”). This phrase is used when something has been proven mathematically. You may see it at the bottom of a mathematical proof or even a philosophical argument showing it has been completed.

### **Verbs: Passive and Active Voice**

In active voice, the subject of the sentence is performing the action of the verb. In passive voice, the subject is the recipient of the verb's action.

Active: *The aircraft crossed the runway.*

Passive: *The runway was crossed by the aircraft.*

Many writing professionals will caution you against too much use of passive voice in your writing. Indeed, active voice is easier for a general readership to understand because it is more direct. The use of active over passive voice is a hotly debated topic, however, and discussions will likely continue. You will also note that “grammar checkers” such as those found in MS Word will often advise you to eliminate sentences with passive voice.

This controversy does not mean you should completely avoid passive voice. In fact, passive voice is widely found in scientific writing. Phrases such as “The data were analyzed” or “The hypothesis was supported” are common and even preferred by those who insist on the objectivity that the passive voice seems to provide. As a writer, it is probably best to maintain a balance between the use of each voice in your writing.

### **Phrases That Neutralize**

Writers sometimes compromise the strength of their own assertions by using words that “soften” phrases by making them sound inexact. Sometimes you will hear these words called “hedgies.” Avoid these words in your writing:

*Sort of, kind of, slightly, like, somewhat, could be, maybe, perhaps, might, generally agreed, feel, think, reckon, suppose*

### **Dangling Participles**

The dangling participle is an error that is often invoked but rarely understood. Participles are phrases that act as adjectives in a sentence. Sometimes the noun to which they refer is missing, and the phrase is left to “dangle” or, more often, to attach itself to the closest noun creating a possible confusion in meaning. Dangling participles can be fixed by placing the correct noun in the sentence so the participle can “attach” to that correct word.

Dangling participle: *Drifting through the clouds, the airport came into view.* Here, the participle has attached itself to the airport, but clearly the airport is not what is drifting.

Corrected sentence: *Drifting through the clouds, the airplane approached its destination.*

Dangling participle: *Forgetting about their capstone, the weather at the beach was perfect.* The weather did not forget about the capstone, clearly, but the participle is left to dangle without its noun.

Corrected sentence: *Forgetting about their capstone, the students enjoyed the perfect weather at the beach.*

### **Banning the Exclamation Point? You Don't Say!**

One of the inspirations for this guide, Dr. McAndrew's mother, argued that you could use an exclamation point only once a year. The novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald agreed, quipping, "Cut out all these exclamation marks. An exclamation mark is like laughing at your own joke."

There are no actual rules limiting the use of this particular punctuation, but it is important to set standards in your development of a personal style of prose to communicate to fellow academics and beyond. Because there are no reasons in academic work ever to use exclamation points, they should be avoided. Save exclamation points for creative writing and communicating with friends.

### **Split Infinitives**

Infinitives are two-word verb formations, usually beginning with "to" such as *to go*, *to run*, *to write*, *to argue*. Ideally, writers should avoid "splitting" (or placing something between) the two parts.

The most well-known split infinitive is *Star Trek's* infamous "to *boldly* go where no man has gone before." Here, the adverb "boldly" splits the two parts of the infinitive. The correct phrasing would read: "To go *boldly* where no man has gone before."

### **Numbers in Writing**

Generally, the following will apply when using number in APA format:

Spell out all numbers beginning a sentence: *Forty-seven percent of all respondents disagreed that they were motivated by their job.*

If a number is below 10, write out in full: *five people, eight candy bars.*

For numbers 10 and above, numerals can be used: *11 people, 23 candy bars.*

If a number is used with a precise unit of measurement, numerals should be used: *1.25 inches*

Hyphenate numbers from *twenty-one* through *ninety-nine* if these words must be spelled out.

### **Ending Sentences with Prepositions**

A preposition is a word usually dealing with location or time, such as *to*, *after*, *under*. The acceptability of ending a sentence in a preposition is a grammar controversy that is best avoided. You will find that some have strong feelings about this issue. As a result, it is best to reword any sentences ending in a preposition unless doing so creates a construction that is exceptionally awkward.

Problem: *Which conference was your paper accepted to?*

Better: *To which conference was your paper accepted?*

## Content Tips

### **Introduction, Body Paragraphs, Conclusion: Every Part of the Paper Has Its Role**

All writing needs structure, or it is no more than a list of disconnected comments. This is just as true of academic work as it is of a business letter. The basic structure of a paper includes an introduction, body paragraphs and a conclusion. Each section has a specific role to play, and it is vital that you allow each to do its job.

*The introduction* should capture the reader's attention, reveal the paper's topic, and preview the structure of the body. Do not delve too deeply into the evidence in the introduction; save that information for the body. An introduction often ends with a thesis statement--the writer's main claim about the topic. Upon reading the introduction, the audience should be fully oriented to the paper's topic, why this topic is important, and how you will approach this topic.

*The body paragraphs* should present your evidence point by point. Include citations where needed. You might also include visual representations of your data.

*The conclusion* is where you restate your main points now that you have provided convincing evidence. You can also show the larger implications of your work. Authors sometimes do not write a conclusion or do not put significant effort into its contents. That is a mistake, as you are squandering an opportunity to make a powerful final impact on the reader.

Writing in academic contexts may also contain other pieces including a literature review, research methodology, discussion of results and recommendations for future study. Each of these sections will require specific information. All still fall under a basic introduction-body-conclusion umbrella, however.

### **Writing an Effective Title**

Your paper title should be clear and concise and should creatively capture the topic of the work in a way that catches the audience's attention. Ideally, the title should contain keywords that will make it easier for future researchers to find your work.

Because the title should accurately reflect the content of your work, it is best to save writing the title as one of the last steps of your process.

A title that is bland or overly generic (such as "Essay Two") does not inspire an audience to want to read your work. Additionally, it does not reveal enough about the paper's contents. If you choose eventually to submit the work for conference presentation or publication, a reviewer will not be inspired to consider your work.

Titles that start "An Investigation Into..." or "A Study of" are classic and acceptable.

Academic titles are sometimes long, but they should not be unwieldy. Consider this example: “Low Speed Aerodynamics in High Altitude Flight using Taguchi Analysis to Determine Robust Parameters with Larger-the-Better for Unmanned Twin-Wing Aircraft at High Altitude.” This overly complex title accurately reflects the paper’s topic, but is too lengthy and would challenge the attention span of your reader.

Here is a title that both reveals the topic but remains an acceptable length: “Principal Failure Modes of Titanium Alloys in Acidic Environments.” Additionally, using the word “principal” hints that there may be issues that remain largely undiscussed, leaving space for you to make your mark as a researcher.

## Basic Grammar Reminders

### Comma Splices and Fused Sentences

Comma splices and fused sentences are often called “run-on sentences” because, in each case, the sentence runs on where there should be punctuation. A comma splice indicates that there is a comma between two independent clauses. A fused sentence occurs when two complete sentences are “fused” together with no punctuation at all. We find that writers often commit this error when trying to create longer sentences from choppy ones.

There are three quick ways to fix this error:

- Place a period between the two sentences.
- If the two thoughts are closely related, place a semicolon between the two sentences.
- Use a comma plus a coordinating conjunction between the two sentences.

Comma Splice: *The article was interesting, it was very long.*

Correction with period: *The article was interesting. It was very long.*

Correction with semicolon: *The article was interesting; it was very long.*

Correction with comma and coordinating conjunction: *The article was interesting, but it was very long.*

Fused Sentence: *He did not know he did not care.*

Correction with period: *He did not know. He did not care.*

Correction with semicolon: *He did not know; he did not care.*

Correction with comma and coordinating conjunction: *He did not know, and he did not care.*

### Apostrophe Errors

**Do not** use an apostrophe in the following cases:

- To make a word plural (*two cats*, not *two cat’s*)
- When writing years (it is *1990s*, not *1990’s*)
- With possessive pronouns (*your, their, its*)

**Do use** an apostrophe in the following cases:

- When abbreviating years: (1990s becomes '90s)
- When using contractions (*can't, won't*). Remember: typically avoid contractions in academic writing.
- When indicating possession with nouns. (*a cat's food, two cats' food*)

### **Subject / Verb Agreement Errors**

We most frequently observe subject/verb agreement errors with writers at your level in two distinct cases:

- With the use of *each, either, or neither*, all of which require a singular verb.

Problem: *Each of the students are expected to use quantitative analysis.*

Correct: *Each of the students is expected to use quantitative analysis.*

Problem: *Neither of the routes were free of traffic.*

Correct: *Neither of the routes was free of traffic.*

- In sentences where a prepositional phrase comes between the subject and verb. In this case, you are tempted to have the verb agree with the noun closest to it. Remember, however, that the object of the preposition cannot be the subject of the sentence.

Problem: *The analysis of the artifacts reveal the secrets of an ancient civilization.* In this case, the prepositional phrase *of the artifacts* comes between the subject (*analysis*) and verb.

Correct: *The analysis of the artifacts reveals the secrets of an ancient civilization.*

### **Pronoun / Antecedent Agreement Errors**

A pronoun is the substitute for a noun and, as such, must match that noun in number. A pronoun agreement error occurs when one is singular, but the other is plural. We observe this most often in academic papers with a singular noun and a plural pronoun.

Problem: *A student should make sure their papers are well written.*

In this case, the pronoun is plural (their), but its antecedent is singular (student). The solution is to make both words singular or both words plural.

Correct: *All students should make sure their papers are well written* (both plural).

Correct: *A student should make sure his or her papers are well written* (both singular).

### **Fragments**

A sentence must have at least one independent clause. If not, it is considered a sentence fragment. Fragments are considered a major grammar error and can seriously compromise your ethos as a writer.

In most academic writing at your level, a fragment typically occurs when you follow an independent clause with a dependent clause. Fortunately, this is typically an easy fix.

Problem: *The university offers many diverse degree programs. Such as aeronautics, management and even communication.*

Here, there is no subject and verb in the second phrase. The easiest way to correct this error is by adding it to the independent clause before it.

Correct: *The university offers many diverse degree programs, such as aeronautics, management and even communication.*

The following is another problem where a subordinating conjunction begins the phrase, making it a dependent clause. This is an exceptionally common error, and is often found with *although, because, since, whereas* or *whether*.

Problem: *I need to find a new lab partner. Because the one I have refuses to work.*

Here, you have the option to either connect the fragment to the independent clause before it or to remove the subordinating word.

Correct: *I need to find a new lab partner because the one I have refuses to work.*

Correct: *I need to find a new lab partner. The one I have refuses to work.*

### **Quotation Marks**

Use double quotation marks to set off a direct (word-for-word) quotation.

*"I wanted this finished," he said.*

Capitalize the first word of a complete quotation, even when it occurs in the middle of your sentence.

*Hamlet pondered his own existence, stating, "To be or not be."*

You do not need to capitalize quoted material that is not a complete quotation, especially when you have worked it into your own sentence.

*Hamlet speaks of death as an "undiscovered country," a place from which "no traveler returns."*

Use single quotation marks for a quotation within a quotation.

*Critic Ian McAndrew states, "Hamlet's 'To Be or Not to Be' soliloquy is the most important contemplation of existence in the English language."*

Keep periods and commas inside of quotation marks.

If a direct quotation is more than 40 words, indent the entire quotation ½ inch from the left margin. No quotation marks are needed this kind of "blocked" quotation.

Quotation marks are also used for journal article titles, short story titles, poem titles and song titles.

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## Diction

### A Brief Glossary of Commonly Misused Words

The list below is not complete by any means but represents problems we have observed as common.

#### Affect or Effect?

*Affect* is usually a verb, meaning to influence something. Conversely, *effect* is usually a noun.

*Weather affected the landing schedule.*

*Flight cancellations were an effect of bad weather.*

#### Anxious to or Eager to?

*Anxious* relates to being frightened or wary. You are *excited* or *eager* to analyze results, not anxious to analyze.

#### Can or May?

*Can* indicates ability while *may* requests permission or, sometimes, suggests something is possible. You may recall this common exchange:

*Student: Can I sharpen my pencil?*

*Teacher: I don't know. Can you?*

*Student: May I sharpen my pencil?*

*Teacher: Yes, you certainly may.*

The student clearly meant to ask permission, but used the incorrect word. The teacher, as a result, jokingly questions whether the student possesses the ability. When the student uses the correct construction, permission is granted.

#### Conscience or conscious?

*Conscience* is the inner voice that tells you right from wrong. *Conscious* means being aware or alert.

*My conscience prevented me from keeping the wallet I found.*

*By the time we found the lost hiker, he was no longer conscious.*

#### Could of or Could have? Would of or Would have? Should of or Should have?

*Could of*, *would of* and *should of* are incorrect. The correct forms are always *could have*, *would have* and *should have*.

#### Different than or Different from?

In almost every case, use *different from*. It is more formal usage. *Different than* can be used when a clause follows, but this is unusual.

### Farther or Further?

*Farther* implies a measurable distance. *Further* is reserved for abstract length.

*I threw the ball farther than before*  
*The financial problem caused further delays.*

### Fewer or less?

*Fewer* is a countable noun and *less* a non-countable noun. You might need fewer troops (you can count them) and you need less sugar in your coffee (you cannot count how much sugar).

### Its or it's or its'?

This error is extremely common, but can be solved by remembering a simple rule. *It's* is a contraction for it is, and *its* is possessive. *Its'* does not exist but is sometimes used by writers who are unable to decide between the other two constructions. Remember, if you can substitute "it is," *it's* is the correct form.

*The team agrees that it's (it is) a good idea.*  
*The company celebrated its twentieth year in business.*

### Since or Because?

Typically, *since* refers to time (specifically, a time in the past until now). *Because* refers to causation. While these words are becoming interchangeable, there is still some distinction in usage.

*Since I quit smoking I have run two marathons.*  
*Because I quit smoking, I no longer cough in the morning.*

### That or Which?

This is another very common error found in writing. These words are not interchangeable. *Which* should be used when the clause is not required to understand the sentence's meaning. *That* should be used when the clause is essential to the sentence's meaning.

*The festivals which occur each season are always a family event in the small town.* In this case the clause "which occur each season" are not essential to the understanding of the sentence. *Which* would be the correct choice.

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*The short stories that are written by Poe are my favorite examples of the horror genre.* In this case, the phrase “that are written by Poe” is essential to the understanding of the sentence.

### *They’re, there or their?*

*They’re* is a contraction for “they are.” *There* is giving position/direction (over there), and *there* is a possessive pronoun (belonging to them).

*They’re* (they are) *working diligently on the project.*

*You can find the lab materials over there.*

*Their ideas for the project were well received.*

### *Try and or Try to?*

Often, you will see the conversational phrase “*try and*” substituted for the grammatically correct *try to*. You always *try to* solve and never *try and* solve.

### *To or Too?*

*Too* is an adverb meaning *additionally* and *also*. *To* is a preposition that shows direction.

*Make sure you bring your laptop to the meeting.*

*I would like a new iPad too,*

### *Whether or If?*

These two are not typically interchangeable. *Whether* expresses situation where there are two or more possible alternatives. *If* expresses a condition with no alternatives.

*I do not know whether to collect data or analyze what I already have found.*

*I can go on vacation if I have enough money.*

### *Your or You’re?*

*Your* is a possessive pronoun, belonging to you.

*Your car is newer than mine.*

*You’re* is the contraction for “you are”:

*You’re* (you are) *my best friend.*

If you can substitute with “you are,” *you’re* is the correct choice. In the above “You are my best friend” is the intended meaning, so the usage is correct.

## **A Final Word of Advice**

In 1750, Benjamin Franklin composed a letter describing his experiments involving electricity and sent it to a member of the Royal Society in London. Franklin excused the length of his report as follows: “I have already made this paper too long, for which I must crave pardon, not having now time to make it shorter.” Franklin understood editing, rather than writing itself, is the most time-consuming part of the writing process. Writing concisely is difficult, another truth that Franklin understood.

Editing is a complex process that takes time, but this effort will result in better quality writing. That said, when you have a word limit we suggest you write more and then reduce accordingly. Get the ideas from your head onto the paper--then focus on crafting excellent sentences and well-supported paragraphs. Devote most of the writing process to revision. Revision literally means “re-seeing” and is the perfect opportunity to look at the paper with fresh eyes to determine whether you have employed the most effective organization, the strongest evidence and the most precise working. Ask yourself, “Is this work, without a doubt, my best effort?” We hope this guide has provided some practical advice for improving your writing in your quest to produce excellent academic work.