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Subject: [GOV 40] Clarity Matters and the CIA Style Guide
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DH

Dear Students in My Friday Sections,

I wrote the following recommendations for my Gov1732 students. I thought it might be helpful advice as you continue your studies.

When you write Term Papers, be sure to copyedit your work. There are no excuses for grammatical or spelling errors.

Clarity Matters

I am finicky about writing because ideas matter. Mistakes get in the way of ideas. Don't make me drop my highlighter and pick up a red pen. Clumsy writing is distracting. I want to read what you have to say not edit how you say it.

Read Your Work Aloud

If you read your work aloud, then every time you trip up over your own writing make a note or highlight and keep reading. Those moments tend to be caused by run-on sentences with too many clauses or clunky sentences with grammatical issues. At the end, go back to your notes or highlights, break the clunky long sentences into shorter ones and fix the grammatical issues.

CIA Style Guide

I have attached the recently released style guide from the Directorate of Intelligence. It is both ruthless and brilliant.

Directorate of Intelligence, [Style Manual and Writers Guide for Intelligence Publications, 8th Edition](#) (CIA 2011). Declassified (b)(3) from [Official Use Only]. Approved for Release: 28 Feb 2012. CIA FOIA Archive: C05757260.

Six Elements of Style

I have also copied below some of my favorite guidelines from [Strunk and White's classic prescriptivist handbook](#) on concise and cogent composition.

1. Topic Sentences: Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence; end it in conformity with the beginning

"The object is to help the reader quickly discover the purpose of each paragraph and to retain the purpose in mind at the end. Effective paragraphs in exposition and argument are those in which: (a) the topic sentence comes at or near the beginning; (b) the succeeding sentences explain or establish or develop the statement made in the topic sentence; and (c) the final sentence either emphasizes the thought of the topic sentence or states some important consequence. Ending with a digression, or with an unimportant detail, is to be avoided."

2. Paragraphing: Make the paragraph the unit of composition: one paragraph to each topic

"Ordinarily a subject requires subdivision into topics, each of which should be made the subject of a paragraph. The object of treating each topic in a paragraph by itself is, of course, to aid the reader. The beginning of each paragraph is a signal to him that a new step in the development of the subject has been reached."

3. Active Voice: Use the active voice

"The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive: 'I shall always remember my first visit to Harvard.' This is much better than: 'My first visit to Harvard will always be remembered by me.' The latter sentence is less direct, less bold, and less concise. This rule does not, of course, mean that the writer should entirely discard the passive voice, which is frequently convenient and sometimes necessary."

4. Concision: Omit needless words

"Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."

5. Coordinate Ideas: Express co-ordinate ideas in similar form

"This principle, that of parallel construction, requires that expressions of similar content and function should be outwardly similar. The likeness of form enables the reader to recognize more readily the likeness of content and function.

6. Coherence: Keep to one tense

"Whichever tense the writer chooses, he should use throughout. Shifting from one tense to the other gives the appearance of uncertainty and irresolution. In presenting the statements or the thought of some one else, as in summarizing an essay or reporting a speech, the writer should avoid intercalating such expressions as "he said," "he stated," "the speaker added," "the speaker then went on to say," "the author also thinks."

or the like. He should indicate clearly at the outset, once for all, that what follows is summary, and then waste no words in repeating the notification."

Three Other Elements of Style:

7. Precision: Cut unnecessary adverbs

Cut unnecessary adverbs. Search for "ly" in your papers. Then, most of the time, hit delete. Alternatively, find a single word which combines the meaning of both the adverb and verb. The English language is, after all, powerful enough to be precise.

As my colleague in the English Department, William Baldwin, notes:

"Not only will this make your prose more concise, it will make it sound livelier and fresher. Adverbs are, as a rule, the weakest and least evocative words in English; replacing them with more carefully chosen verbs and adjectives will do wonders for your writing. "A colossal building" sounds better than "a very tall building;" "He strolled down the street" is better than "He walked casually down the street;" and "The tax code is perplexing" is better than "The tax code is hard to understand.""

The CIA Style Guide makes a similar point: "Be frugal in the use of adjectives and adverbs; let nouns and verbs show their own power."

8. Brevity: Avoid future tense words like "will"

Instead of, "In this essay, I will argue," try, "In this essay, I argue."

9. Cogency: When you write expository essays in the humanities and social sciences, incorporate a roadmap in your introduction to let the reader know the content and structure of your essay.

You aren't writing a murder mystery. You should aim to make your papers as cogent as possible, so don't hide the structure; outline it from the start, then your reader can anticipate the ideas and themes.

In short, roadmaps substantiate your thesis by outlining the logical order of the essay.

Problems with Prescriptivism

Descriptivists dislike these prescriptivist guidelines. After all, rules and guidelines are there to be broken. So don't feel too constrained. These are just useful suggestions for clear and concise writing.

Kind Regards,

David

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