Write It Right
A Handbook for Student Writers
2nd Edition

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Introduction

The English language is superbly nuanced, allowing us to express ourselves eloquently and effectively. It is also wildly complex. But don't worry—this handbook is designed to demystify writing and grammar and to help you become a stronger writer.

Writing well comes in handy no matter where life takes you. No one ever regretted learning how to write well, and no one who writes well ever takes it for granted. Expressing yourself clearly in writing is hard work! It takes time and effort and is an art that develops slowly with practice. It may take real talent to be a great writer, but anyone can learn to be a good writer.

In this handbook, you'll find information about the elements of good writing, the subtleties of grammar, and the complexities of style. You'll learn to use words correctly, craft clever sentences, and create literary works that fully express your vision and message. You have a unique voice and perspective; writing well will help you communicate your ideas in a way that attracts the attention of your reader.

Write It Right is designed for quick reference with brief, info-packed segments. Its small size makes it easy to keep by your side as you write, and each section can be read as needed, in any sequence. Make this handbook your own—write in the margins, underline things that you want to remember, draw

arrows, highlight sections for quick reference, and add to it as you come across new facets of writing technique and style.

You'll probably want to acquire several writing books as you progress through high school and your college and professional years, and you'll find some excellent suggestions on the works cited page. In particular, we recommend *A Pocket Style Manual* by Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers, and Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, which has become a classic. (Fun fact: E. B. White, who coauthored *The Elements of Style*, is the author of *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little*, and other beloved children's books.)

Writing is not a skill we learn once and are good at forever; it is an art that we can continue to develop throughout our lives. The essence of writing is communication. *Write It Right* will help you learn to communicate your own unique message to the world.

Part I
Writing Basics

In this section, we'll look at the elements of good writing, starting with the basic building blocks of the sentence and paragraph. This may sound too elementary, but don't underestimate the power of a well-crafted sentence. We'll look at the writing process and give you tips that will help you add professional polish to your written work.

Elements of Good Writing

All good writing shares certain elements, including a sense of authenticity, clarity of communication, and economy of words. Let's look at how to incorporate each of these elements into your writing.

Authenticity

Being authentic means being true to yourself. Writing with authenticity encompasses issues of academic integrity and plagiarism—using someone else's words without giving them credit is dishonest—but it is more about expressing yourself in a genuine way. Are you communicating your own ideas, or are you writing what you think the teacher wants to read? Your knowledge, thoughts, and opinions are unique to you. Writing with authenticity means expressing yourself with honesty and originality.

Clarity

The purpose of writing is to communicate. If your writing isn't clear, you might not be able to get your message across. Whenever you write a rough draft, look it over to check for clarity. Are your sentences purposeful and understandable, or are they meandering or contradictory? Is your language precise, or do you use multiple

synonyms when one or two words will have more impact? Are you using words that are specific, descriptive, and accurate? Mark Twain said, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning." In addition to conveying your ideas clearly, present them in a logical sequence so they make sense to the reader, and create transitions between paragraphs that help one idea flow into the next.

Economy

Wordy, convoluted passages are confusing and cause readers to lose interest. Strive for quality over quantity. Avoid repeating yourself or restating your ideas. When revising, find ways to streamline your writing. Are there places you can eliminate phrases that are a little off topic? Do you see words that don't really add substance to the message? Each word, phrase, and sentence should have a purpose. Writing with economy means each word is necessary, and none are superfluous. For example, in the previous sentence, the same idea was expressed in two ways: *each word is necessary* means the same thing as *none are superfluous*. We don't need both to get the idea across. If you can spot redundancies like these and get rid of them, your writing will become clearer and more powerful.

Keep these elements of good writing in mind as you write, and use them to guide you in every rewrite. Write them on a sticky note, and put the note where you will see it often as you write. Once you find yourself automatically including them, you'll be on your way to mastering the art of writing well.

Writing Style

You probably wouldn't wear the same outfit to a job interview as you would to a rock concert, right? Just as people have certain styles of dress in different social settings, your style of writing should change based on the the subject matter, who will be reading it, and what you are trying to accomplish.

Subject

The first thing to consider is what you are writing about. Are you writing a personal essay with a social justice theme? A report about different types of cancer treatments? A children's book? A blog about alt-rock? The subject will, in part, determine your writing style. The terminology or vocabulary, the tone, the level of formality or informality, and other writing decisions are guided by the subject matter.

Audience

Next, consider your audience. Who will read what you write? If you are writing about motorcycle maintenance, you will write one way for the casual motorcycle owner but a different way for experienced mechanics. There are certain assumptions every writer makes about their audience, but these should be intentional assumptions. If you are writing about the theater, will your audience know basic stage directions (upstage, downstage, stage right, etc.), or will you need to explain them? Your goal is to meet your audience where they are and take them a little further.

Purpose

Finally, think about your intent. Why are you writing this piece? Are you sharing a personal experience in hopes that it helps someone else? Are you sharing knowledge? Are you trying to make people laugh? Maybe you are hoping to change someone's mind or convince them to support something you feel passionate about. Your purpose will shape your writing style.

If you keep in mind your subject matter, and know who your audience is and what you are trying to accomplish with your writing, you can vary your writing style to make it more effective.

Sentences and Paragraphs

The basic building blocks of writing are sentences, which are usually organized into paragraphs. Writers often fall into a rut of using a consistent sentence length and type. On the surface this seems like a good idea, but the writing quickly becomes monotonous, plodding along without variation like an old cow on the way to the barn. (Cows are so predictable that they'll come to the barn to be milked at the same time every day whether you call them or not.) Sentences, unlike cows, greatly benefit from change.

Varied Sentences

There are four basic sentence types and four types of sentence construction. These eight sentence categories give you a lot of choices for expressing yourself with variety and style.

Four Basic Sentence Types

Declarative: makes a statement (ends in a period).

The concert is tonight.

Imperative: gives a command (ends in a period).

Drive me to the concert.

Interrogative: asks a question (ends in a question mark).

Will you drive me to the concert?

Exclamatory: expresses strong emotion (ends in an exclamation point).

I'm going to the concert whether you drive me or not!

Four Types of Sentence Construction

Simple: a single independent clause (can be very long or very short).

The costume party was a huge success.

Compound: multiple independent clauses.

The costume party was a huge success, and just about everyone I knew was there.

Complex: one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses.

The costume party, which included over-the-top decorations and a giant buffet, was a huge success, better than I ever imagined.

Compound-complex: multiple independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses.

The costume party, which included over-the-top decorations and a giant buffet, was a huge success, and just about everyone I knew was there, including my cousins who came into town to surprise me for the party.

When you begin to put sentences together to form paragraphs, using a variety of sentence types will spice up your writing.

Here is an example of a paragraph without much variety in sentence types and structures:

> *The American Library Association (ALA) awards a Newbery Medal each year for the most outstanding children's book. The Newbery is a high honor and many distinguished authors have won it. There are also honor books chosen each year, which are those that were shortlisted to win the prize. The Newbery Medal has been awarded every year since 1922. The list of Newbery Medal winners is available on the ALA website, and the books on it are definitely worth reading.*

Here is the same information conveyed with sentence variety, resulting in a much more readable style:

> *Each year, the American Library Association (ALA) awards the Newbery Medal for the most outstanding children's book. Many distinguished authors have received the coveted Newbery, and many more have had their books designated as Newbery Honor Books (books that were shortlisted to win the prize). The Newbery Medal has been awarded every year since 1922. View the complete list on the ALA website. How many Newbery winners have you read?*

Putting together sentences of varying lengths and types will lead to more interesting paragraphs.

Dependent and Independent Clauses

A complete sentence is called an **independent clause** because it has a subject and verb, and it can stand by itself. A **dependent clause** has a subject and a verb, just like a complete

sentence, but it depends on something else to get its full meaning. It often includes a relative pronoun (*who, which,* or *that*) or a subordinating conjunction (*when, if, because, although,* etc.). Look at the following sentence:

The squirrel hid in the tree because it was afraid of the cat.

Independent clause (can stand alone as a complete sentence): *The squirrel hid in the tree*

Dependent clause (cannot stand alone as a complete sentence): *because it was afraid of the cat*

Dependent clauses are always part of a larger sentence. Below are some examples of how a dependent clause can be linked to an independent clause to create a complete sentence. Notice that sometimes the dependent clause is before the independent clause (at the beginning of the sentence) and sometimes it is after.

Dependent clause	**Complete sentence**
ever since she learned to play the guitar	Ever since she learned to play the guitar, she takes it with her everywhere.
although she doesn't like to play in front of others	She's really talented although she doesn't like to play in front of others.
when she works up her courage	She plans to join a band when she works up her courage.

Sometimes it works best to change a dependent clause into an independent clause so it can stand on its own:

Dependent clause	**Independent clause**
ever since she learned to play the guitar	She learned to play the guitar.
although she doesn't like to play in front of others	She doesn't like to play in front of others.
when she works up her courage	She wants to work up her courage.

When a dependent clause follows an independent clause, there is no need for a comma. When a dependent clause is at the beginning of a sentence, it should be followed by a comma to prevent misreading. Consider this sentence:

When Dad entered the room became quiet.

Without a comma, the sentence can be confusing. We might read it as, "When Dad entered the room . . ." and try to put a pause after *room.* Add a comma, however, and we know where to put the pause:

When Dad entered, the room became quiet.

If the dependent clause was after the independent clause, the meaning is clear without the comma:

The room became quiet when Dad entered.

When a sentence begins with a dependent clause, always use a comma to avoid confusion.

Part II
Expository Writing

Expository writing encompasses all types of writing that explain or describe something. Essays and research papers are the two main types of expository writing that students are asked to do. There are different rules for different kinds of expository writing, and there are different ways to write depending on your purpose. A comparative essay is different than a persuasive essay. The way you cite a source within the text itself is different than how it is cited at the end of your work. In this section, we'll look at some of the common types of writing you can expect to find in high school courses.

General Formatting

When submitting typed work, it's always best to stick to typical formatting conventions. This will make your teachers (and future editors) happier than you can imagine. You can't go wrong using Times New Roman font in 12-point type and 1-inch margins all around. This is a very readable format and so common it will not draw attention to itself.

You want your words to shine, not your font. Using colors, large and small fonts, specialized fonts, or any other formatting that is noticeable for being different gives the impression that your writing is not strong enough to stand on its own. The only exception to this is when you are producing a visual presentation (poster, multimedia presentation, diagram, advertisement, infographic, etc.).

Here are the formatting guidelines for most writing purposes:

- Times New Roman font in 12-point type
- 8½ x 11-inch paper
- single-spaced lines for assignments, essays, and reports, unless a teacher requests otherwise (double-spaced lines are usually only used for manuscripts being submitted for publication)
- margins of one inch on the top, bottom, and sides of the page

- writer contact information and the title of the paper on the first page
- header or footer with the page number, title, and author's name from page 2 onward

If you are using Google Drive to share your school assignments, the margins, font, line spacing, etc., are all preset so you don't have to change anything.

Essays can be formatted with the first line of each paragraph indented (and no spaces between paragraphs) or block-style, using a space between paragraphs but no indentations. Either indented or block-style formatting is fine, but don't mix the two.

Essay Writing

Different assignments require different types of writing. Below is a list of the kinds of essays you may be asked to write. In order to write with intention and in an effective style, you have to consider the purpose of the piece: What is it meant to do?

Persuasive essay: These papers express a point of view in an effort to convince others to support your ideas or persuade them to share the same opinion. Persuasive writing often relies on reasoning as well as dramatic speech that appeals to the emotions.

Analytical essay: These papers divide a topic into parts in a logical way and examine how the parts relate to one another. Analytical writing focuses on objectivity and fact rather than emotion or opinion.

Comparative essay: This type of essay is sometimes called a "compare and contrast" essay since that's exactly what it does. When you compare the elements, you find similarities. When you contrast the elements, you highlight the key differences between them. (More on the comparative essay in the next section.)

Opinion piece: This writing invites your opinion or personal response to the material. This is a very subjective (as opposed to objective) style of writing. Opinion can

be based on facts and reasoning, but it can also be based on experience, emotions, and values.

Personal narrative: Narratives tell a story, and personal narratives tell your story. Students are sometimes asked to write a personal narrative around a certain theme or topic, such as cultural traditions or friendship. This type of writing asks you to share your own life experience.

Summary: Summaries present the salient features of a text in a general overview. These are often very short and require the writer to distill the original work down to its basic ideas. When writing a summary, look for the key ideas and themes rather than specific details.

Investigative writing: These papers explore a topic in order to reach an objective conclusion. Journalism is a form of investigative writing. This type of writing focuses on facts and often uses extensive interviews or document research.

Before you begin writing, always clarify your intended audience as well as the purpose of the piece. This will help guide the direction, tone, and format of your writing. Consider the type of writing each of these different writing assignments would require:

- Defend a choice of vegetarianism to a cattle rancher. (opinion piece)
- Explain sustainable logging practices to middle school students. (analytical essay)
- Choose one side of a controversial topic to argue with your parent. (persuasive essay)

- List the problems the main character faces in a story. (analytical essay)
- Compare and contrast the film version of a story with the original novel. (comparative essay)
- Summarize the key events leading up to the American civil rights movement. (summary)

Each of these assignments requires a different approach with your writing. The more carefully you adapt your writing style to the purpose and intended audience, the more effective your writing will be.

Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences

A **thesis sentence** (or thesis statement) introduces your essay and expresses the goal or purpose of the paper. A **topic sentence** states the idea of an individual paragraph. Learning how to use these tools will add purpose and clarity to your writing.

A thesis sentence orients your reader to what you hope to accomplish in the essay. It can be extremely helpful to craft a working thesis sentence early in the writing process because it will help you stay focused on your goal. If you review your thesis sentence periodically as you write your paper, it can keep you moving in the right direction.

You'll want to craft a thesis statement that is worth exploring. Create a beginning that intrigues, provokes, and surprises—write something that captures the reader's attention. Read it aloud and ask yourself whether someone listening would be interested. Would they want to read on, or would they think, "So

what?" If your thesis statement doesn't have much appeal, look for a more specific or significant idea.

Your thesis statement should always be included in your introductory paragraph, but it doesn't have to be the first sentence. Your thesis sentence might evolve as you develop your essay and learn more about your topic. As you continue to focus and revise your paper, you may find that your thesis statement needs to be revised as well.

There is only one thesis statement in a report or essay, but each paragraph will have its own topic sentence. Your introductory paragraph expands on the thesis statement by touching on related topics you will cover in your paper. Sometimes this is done in the form of questions or introducing a realistic scenario that highlights the relevance of the topic. Subsequent paragraphs are organized around key ideas. Starting each paragraph with a topic sentence lets your reader know which key element you will be focusing on next.

It is good to refer to your thesis statement in some way in your concluding paragraph. This helps tie everything together in a meaningful way. For instance, if your thesis statement in the introductory paragraph is "Good nutrition can lead to a longer, happier life," then you might conclude your report in this way: "Eating nutritious food can help you maintain good health as you grow older so you can have the energy to enjoy your life."

Comparative Essay

A comparative essay highlights both the similarities and the differences between two literary elements, historical events, books, philosophies, etc. You might compare the different

motivations of two characters or the mood of two different scenes. You might compare two different religions or two educational methods. You might compare the relative merits of controlled scientific study versus empirical data collected in the field. By comparing elements, we learn more about their roles and their effect on our lives.

When writing a comparative essay, there are two main structures to choose from: **block format** or **alternating format**. Both of them show the ways in which the two elements being compared are alike and the ways in which they are different.

Both techniques lend themselves well to a four- or five-paragraph essay. Whichever technique you use, make sure to keep the points you are comparing and contrasting in the same order each time. For instance, if you first discuss one character's personality traits and then his behavior, make sure to use the same order and points (i.e., personality traits and then behavior) when discussing the second character.

Here is how each format breaks down the four or five paragraphs of the essay:

Block format

Block format discusses each element in turn before comparing them.

> **Paragraph 1:** Introduce your topic with a thesis sentence, stating clearly what you intend to prove or explain (make it sound interesting).
>
> **Paragraph 2:** Discuss in depth Element 1.
>
> **Paragraph 3:** Discuss in depth Element 2.

Paragraph 4: Highlight the similarities and differences between the two.

Paragraph 5: Summarize your argument and draw conclusions based on your opening thesis.

Alternating format

Alternating format goes back and forth between elements, discussing similarities between elements in one paragraph and differences in another.

Paragraph 1: Introduce your topic with a thesis sentence, stating what you intend to prove or explain in a way that draws readers in.

Paragraph 2: Discuss the similarities between the two elements.

Paragraph 3: Discuss the differences between them.

Paragraph 4: Summarize your argument and draw conclusions based on your opening thesis.

Five-Paragraph Essay

The structure of a paragraph, with a topic sentence, supporting details, and a conclusion, can expand to become the structure for an essay. A common format is the five-paragraph essay.

Here is a description of the five-paragraph essay:

- The **introductory paragraph** includes a thesis statement, which introduces the overall theme or intent of the essay. The opening paragraph clarifies the perspective or scope of the essay and often touches on the subtopics that will be covered in the essay. The thesis statement can go

anywhere in the introductory paragraph. Generally, you want to hook your reader with an interesting first line and then build toward your thesis statement.

- Each of the paragraphs in the **main body of the essay** follows the typical paragraph form. In a five-paragraph essay, this section contains three paragraphs. The concluding sentence of each paragraph either relates the subtopic to the thesis statement or leads into the next subtopic.
- The **final paragraph** summarizes the topic, draws conclusions based on what has been explored, or connects the subtopics cohesively. The final sentence usually includes a reference to the thesis statement.

The five-paragraph essay helps you organize your information and present it in an effective way. It is easy to see how the five-paragraph essay can develop into a longer and more complex paper by adding as many paragraphs as necessary to the main body of work. Once mastered, this essay format will be your new best friend (figuratively speaking).

Outline for a Five-Paragraph Essay

Here is an outline of the structure for a five-paragraph essay. You can use this template to help you organize your essays. It can easily be adapted to a shorter three-paragraph essay or to a longer work.

Paragraph 1: Introduction

Thesis statement

Subtopic 1

Subtopic 2

Subtopic 3

Concluding sentence

Paragraph 2: Subtopic 1

Topic sentence

Supporting detail

Supporting detail

Supporting detail

Concluding sentence

Paragraph 3: Subtopic 2

(same format as paragraph two)

Paragraph 4: Subtopic 3

(same format as paragraph two)

Paragraph 5: Conclusion

Restate thesis

Summarize findings

Make relevant connections

Draw conclusions

Finish with concluding sentence

Part III
Writing Fiction

Fiction writing is an art form that combines the mechanics and style of good writing with creative storytelling. Dynamic characters, a compelling plot, and an evocative setting are not enough—you still have to write well in order for your story to really grab the reader. There are many books on creative writing, but in this section of the handbook, we'll focus on a few basic elements that will help you tell a good story.

Story Elements

There are many things to think about when writing fiction. Here are the basic elements of a story:

Characters: the people, animals, or objects who are acting out the story

Plot: the series of events in the story

Setting: when and where the story takes place

The plot describes the story problem, climax, and resolution:

Story problem: the problem or goal the characters have

Climax: when the problem reaches a crisis and the outcome is most uncertain

Resolution: when the obstacles are overcome and the goal is attained

Some authors begin planning a story by thinking of the plot first while others start with a strong character and develop a story from there.

Character Development

When developing your characters, first consider who will be in your story. Who is your main character (the protagonist)? How old is this character? What is this person like? What are your main character's likes and dislikes? What are their flaws or

weaknesses? What makes this person unique or interesting? Figuring out these things is called creating a **character sketch**. You'll need to do this for each significant character in your story. Once you know your characters well, you will have a good sense of how each might talk, feel, act, and react.

Plotting the Tale

Next, think about the plot of your story. What is happening to your main character that is worth telling? There must be a good reason to tell a story, such as something important that is going on. What is the main problem or goal of the main character? What obstacles are put in the way of achieving this goal or solving the problem? The obstacles are important—that's what makes a story entertaining, thought-provoking, or intriguing. If it were easy for the main character to solve the problem, the story wouldn't be very exciting. How does the main problem get resolved? How and when does the story end?

Setting the Stage

Finally, picture the setting, both the time period and the place. Where does the story take place? In Hong Kong? On a spaceship or another planet? On a farm? Think about when the story happens. Is it long ago or modern day? Does your story take place in one day, or maybe over the course of a week, a year, or longer? The setting should be described well enough for readers to picture it. (More on this in the next section.)

Planning Stage

Spend some time thinking about your characters, plot, and setting before you begin writing. It can be very helpful to discuss your story with others as you work on the plot. Talking about it

can help you find weak spots and brainstorm ways to fix them. Of course, some writers prefer to keep their story ideas to themselves in the early stages; in that case, writing down your ideas or drawing them will help you ponder, think creatively, brainstorm, and make decisions about what will work best for the story you want to tell.

Writing an outline of the story can help you keep all the parts of your story in order. It's fine for you to change the order of the story as you are writing if it starts to unfold in another way, but it's often helpful to have an idea of where your story is going before you begin. As you write the outline, you will need to consider how you plan to elaborate on each of the elements of your story. Take notes on your ideas so you don't forget them.

Writing the Story

Once you have a good idea of the story you want to tell, you are ready to begin writing. Make sure to use vivid descriptive writing to help your reader see the story in their mind's eye. Use conversations between characters (dialogue) to reveal important story details.

Give your characters interesting and important things to do—show lots of action! Having your characters do things is just as important as having them say things. Dialogue and action in a story need to have a purpose; they need to advance the plot in some way. If your characters are doing and saying things that aren't relevant to the plot or don't reveal the character's thoughts or motivation in some way, those sections probably need work. If a character walks into a room, they must have a good reason for doing so; it can't just be because they need to be there for the next scene. Just as you wouldn't normally

wander around your house for no reason, your characters shouldn't wander purposeless throughout your story.

One of the tricky parts of writing a story is knowing when to end it. It's easy for a story to go on and on, almost as though the characters keep living their lives after the important parts of the story are over. This is where an outline can come in handy to keep you from getting off track. Keep in mind how your story will end, and make sure your characters are moving toward that point with purpose.

Creating an Effective Setting

In fiction writing, creating an effective setting can be as important as creating a believable character. It helps the reader draw a mental picture. The setting can enhance your story by developing the mood (an empty dirt road stretching for miles feels different than a sunny playground full of noisy children), revealing the character (how your bedroom looks right now reveals something about who you are), and advancing the plot (throwing your character into the middle of a natural disaster can change everything).

It's important to weave the setting into the story so that the plot continues to move forward. If the narrator pauses to describe something that isn't relevant to the immediate action in the story, the pace falters and the reader can easily get bored. Telling the story while revealing the setting keeps the reader interested. Using characters—both their actions and their dialogue—to offer glimpses of the setting also works very well.

In *The House of the Scorpion,* author Nancy Farmer shows the vastness of the opium farm while giving the sense of how isolated Matt's house is in the following scene, when Matt has cut his foot and Stephen and Emilia are carrying him back to the main house:

> *The poppies, now blue in the long shadows of the hills, stretched away in all directions. Steven and Emilia were jogging along a dirt path.* (19)

Notice how the action continues ("jogging along") as the main character notices his surroundings. Later, when Matt is taken to the tiny room in the servants' quarters, the setting reflects how Matt is being treated:

> *Matt was deposited onto a hard, bare mattress. The room was long and narrow. At one end was the door and at the other a window covered with iron grillwork.*
>
> *"I need more light," the doctor said tersely.* (27)

The narrative is used to describe the room briefly, and then the doctor's dialogue furthers the description by giving the impression the room is dim. All of these setting details give a sense of the character's experience while setting the tone, allowing the plot to unfold, and painting a very clear picture in the reader's mind.

First Sentences

The first sentence of a story can be evocative, mysterious, or confounding. It can draw you in, and it can introduce people and places. Readers often love sharing their favorite first

sentences with each other, and some classic novels have become famous for their first sentences. Here are a few great first lines:

> *Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.* (Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, 1877)
>
> *I'd never given much thought to how I would die—though I'd had reason enough in the last few months—but even if I had, I would not have imagined it like this.* (Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, 2005)
>
> *We went to the moon to have fun, but the moon turned out to completely suck.* (M. T. Anderson's *Feed*, 2002)
>
> *There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.* (C. S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 1952)
>
> *"Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.* (E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, 1952)
>
> *You better never tell nobody but God.* (Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, 1982)

First sentences often give the reader a taste of the tone and writing style as well as a glimpse into the story, like the following opening from William T. Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels* (1987):

> *Just because they found Martin Bormann's skull doesn't mean he's dead, my best beloved; for everyone knows that competent observers from every neutral country have reported sighting an old man in Argentina whose head is wrapped in bandages, and only the hunted eyes show, winking and blinking beneath the*

> *thousands of cranial splints; — and Anastasia Romanoff, I know her: when Yurovsky and his Cheka men were murdering her family she fainted and they took her for dead; they piled her into a truck with the others, and while they were getting the hatchets and caustic acids ready she came to herself, ran into the deep dark taiga, and flung herself into the arms of the Whites just in time, where she was treated as befitted her nobility; and that's how the leopard got his spots.* (3)

After making it through this single sentence, you know you are in for a wild ride in the rest of the novel.

Of course, great first lines are not always easy to write, but, then again, neither are truly awful first lines. The Bulwer Lytton Fiction Contest, offered by the department of English at San Jose State University, provides us with some of the best examples of terrible first lines. Authors work tirelessly, poring over each word, vying for this honor. One of the 2019 contest winners, Robert R. Moore, penned this noteworthy first line:

> *Emile Zola wandered the dank and soggy streets of a gloomy Parisian night, the injustice of the Dreyfus affair weighing on him like a thousand baguettes, dreaming of some massage or therapy to relieve the tension and pain in his aching shoulders and back, and then suddenly he thought of his Italian friends and their newly invented warm water bath with air jets and he rapturously exclaimed that oft misquoted declaration—"Jacuzzi!"* (Bulwer-Lytton.com)

Look through some of your favorite books, and reread the first sentence. Think about how that sentence opened the door to the adventure within. Whenever you write a story, give some thought to how your first sentence can invite the reader in and give a taste of what is to come.

Part IV
Writing Rules and Conventions

Writing comes in many forms, and each seems to have its own rules and conventions. In this section, we demystify some commonly confused words, look at punctuation conventions, and offer guidelines for multimedia presentations.

Misused Words

Learning to use the English language with skill and expressiveness takes many years, and even experienced writers have trouble with certain words or writing rules. Here are some common word pairs that are frequently confused and misused, along with tips that can help you when deciding which word to use.

Affect vs. effect

Quick tip: *Affect* is (almost always) a verb and *effect* is (almost always) a noun.

Affect: verb meaning to influence.

Example: *I wonder how the weather will affect our picnic.*

(Exception to the rule: *Affect* can be used as a noun to denote a feeling or impression, as in, *With his silk waistcoat and pocket watch, he displayed a sophisticated affect.*)

Effect: noun meaning a result.

Example: *The quiet music had a calming effect.*

(Exception to the rule: *Effect* can be used as a verb meaning to bring about, as in, *The enthusiastic letter writing campaign finally effected a change in city regulations regarding dogs on the beach.*)

Among vs. between

Quick tip: The *M* in *among* is for "many"; the *T* in *between* is for "two."

Among: used when referring to a group or many.

Example: *Among the Native American tribes, there are many different customs.*

Between: used when referring to two groups, people, or things.

Example: *Between the boy and the gate stood a big, red bull.*

Bring vs. take

Quick tip: You bring toward or take away.

Bring: describes an action moving toward something.

Example: *I will bring my dog to the beach.*

Take: indicates an action moving away from something.

Example: *I will take my books with me when I leave.*

Farther vs. further

Quick tip: Farther is used when talking about actual distance (how far?).

Farther: refers to physical (measurable) distance.

Example: *How much farther is it to the ice cream store?*

Further: refers to a comparative or figurative distance; it is a matter of degree.

Examples: *After working all weekend, she was further along in her Great American Novel than she had expected to be. She*

insisted that further additions to the story would have to wait until the following weekend. There was no sense in arguing further with her about it.

I vs. me

Quick tip: Turn the sentence around to see which word fits in.

I: pronoun to use when you are the subject (the person taking action).

Example: *James and I are building a guitar together.* (James is building it and I am building it. You would not say, "Me is building it.")

Me: pronoun to use when you are the object (the person being acted upon).

Example: *A master woodcarver is helping James and me.* (He's helping James and he's helping me. You would not say, "He is helping I.")

Lay vs. lie

Quick tip: We lay things down but lie down to rest.

Lay: a verb meaning to set or put; followed by an object (which is called a transitive verb).

Example: *Lay down your magazine and help me with the groceries.*

Lie: a verb meaning to recline or rest; not normally followed by an object (an intransitive verb).

Example: *"I'm going to lie on the couch," she said after the groceries were carried up three flights of stairs.*

Less vs. fewer

Quick tip: Fewer coins equals less money.

Fewer: not as many; refers to things you can count, such as *fewer cars*, *fewer classes*, and *fewer mistakes*.

Example: *Having fewer hours of sleep makes me feel sluggish.*

Less: not as much; refers to noncountable or mass nouns, such as *less freedom*, *less integrity*, *less sunshine*, and *less confusion*.

Example: *I always seem to have less energy when I oversleep.*

May vs. can

Quick tip: You may jump over the fence, but whether or not you can is another question.

May: used when asking or giving permission.

Example: *May we go to the park today?*

Can: used in expressing ability to do something.

Example: *She can play the piano.*

That vs. which

Quick tip: Use *that* when what follows is essential, and *which* when what follows is merely interesting (or not).

That: introduces an essential or restrictive clause (if you remove it, the meaning of the sentence changes) and doesn't need a comma before it.

Example: *I threw away all my T-shirts that looked like they had seen better days.* (This means I threw away only those

T-shirts that looked worn out—my actions were restricted).

Which: introduces a nonessential or nonrestrictive clause (you can leave it out and the sentence still makes sense) and is always set off by commas.

Example: *I threw away all my T-shirts, which looked like they had seen better days.* (This means I threw away all my T-shirts, without exception.)

Who vs. whom

Quick tip: Who? He. Whom? Him.

Who: pronoun to use when referring to the subject of a clause (the person or thing doing something).

Example: *I framed a picture of my dog, who is my best friend.* (Who is my best friend? He is [the dog].)

Whom: pronoun to use when referring to the object of a clause (the person or thing having something done to them).

Example: *I gave the picture of my dog to the vet, to whom I'll always be grateful for saving my dog's life.* (To whom am I grateful? To him [the vet].)

Confusing Word Pairs

Here is a list of pairs of words commonly mistaken for each other. These words often have very close (or identical) pronunciations, which makes them especially tricky.

Confusing word pairs	Meaning
accept except	allow not including
access excess	entry to too much
adverse averse	harmful, unfavorable opposed to
advice advise	recommendation to give counsel
allude elude	to refer to to avoid or evade
allusion illusion	a reference a false impression
anecdote antidote	a story or example a cure
conscience conscious	internal moral guide aware of
desert dessert	abandon; hot dry region sweet treat served after a meal
device devise	a thing made for a certain purpose to invent or make

Confusing word pairs	Meaning
elicit	to prompt or provoke
illicit	illegal
eminent	famous
imminent	about to occur
loose	not fastened
lose	to misplace
medal	a medallion or award
metal	a solid material like iron
moral	virtuous
morale	spirit, feeling
personal	private
personnel	people in a workforce
pedal	what you do on a bike
petal	a part of a flower
shudder	to shake
shutter	window covering
than	compared with
then	at that time
whether	in any case
weather	climate