

## Style

Paul Spickard

It is only fair to warn you that I care about the English language. I come from a grammatically conservative family. If as a lad I had done something terrible—murdered someone, or committed rape or arson—my family would have been distraught but they would have stuck by me. They would have hired a lawyer for me, come to my trial, visited me in jail, comforted me on the night of my execution. But if I split an infinitive or dangled a participle in public I was *not to come home*. So, please, humor me. Do these things.

1. Construct sentences out of their basic parts: noun, verb, object. Learn to love verbs, dislike adjectives, and shun adverbs.
2. Use the active voice wherever possible.
3. Use simple, Anglo-Saxon words, with broad vowels and hard consonants:  
Not “occupation” but “job” or “work.”  
Not “possessed” but “had.”  
Not “flatulate” but “fart.”
4. Avoid jargon, be it social scientific, postmodern, or any other. “Lisible” is a lousy word, and “discourse” is not much better. “Site of contestation” is terrible writing. Your language should be accessible to any interested lay person, yet your ideas challenging to the very best people in the field. No thinking person will be impressed by a lot of big words that are hard to understand. If you must use an unfamiliar word (and sometimes you must), take care to define it and give an example that will clarify its meaning.
5. Do not use diacriticals, such as slashes and parentheses within words.
6. Do not coin new words. Do not engage in the sloppy American habit of turning nouns and adjectives into verbs. “Impact,” “center,” “gender,” and “access” are nouns; they are not verbs. Use up our fine collection of words before inventing new ones.
7. Do not use quotation marks, italics, or boldface type promiscuously. Let your words be your words. If you use quotation marks, you should have an endnote telling your reader whom you are quoting. If you’re not quoting someone, don’t use quotation marks.
8. Be concrete. Do not just pass out abstractions or references and expect your reader to fill in the details. Tell stories. Nail down each point with a concrete example. Be generous with details.
9. If you mention a person in the text, give his or her full name the first time you refer to him or her. In later references you may use just the family name. Thus, “Albert Einstein” in the first usage becomes “Einstein” in subsequent references, and “Mao Zedong” in the first usage becomes “Mao” subsequently. This is a politeness issue.
10. Use nonsexist language.
11. Spell out numbers under 100 unless you are referring to percentages, and in that case always spell out “percent,” or, better yet, “per cent.”
12. Take care that subject and verb and sequential sentences agree as to tense and number. Let the past stay in the past.
13. Contractions are okay, but do not use them promiscuously.
14. Use a comma after each item in a series except the last, thus:  
Not “a, b and c” but “a, b, and c.”
15. Capitalize proper nouns and adjectives, including “Black” and “White” used as names of races. They are not descriptive terms: almost no one is actually black or white. Capitalize “the U.S. Army,” a proper noun, but not “the army,” a simple descriptive reference.
16. Be thoughtful, be clever, but don’t be cute.

Thank you for your care with these issues.