

NINE

The greatest source of ‘marker distress’: language, grammar and expression

It’s a damn poor mind that can think of only one way to spell a word.
(Andrew Jackson, US President 1829–1837, cited in Cook, 2005: 20)

In the survey of tutors, problems with language, grammar and expression were listed as the most common source of ‘marker distress’. And when the tutors were specifically asked ‘what’s the worst thing a student can do in an assignment?’, ‘poor language, grammar and expression’ came a close second after ‘failing to answer the question’. Paying a great deal of attention to how you write your assignment is, then, very important. In this chapter we’ll be looking at:

- the importance of rewording and editing your text to make it clear and concise
- Grice’s ‘maxims of conversation’ to ensure that what you say clearly expresses what you think (not *always* a good idea...)
- how to avoid being nominated for the Bad Writing contest
- some common spelling and punctuation mistakes (and websites to help with writing)

There’s also advice about the use of quotations, acronyms, writing in the impersonal voice, and dangling modifiers.

Tip 55

Be clear and concise – avoid obfuscatory language

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) once wrote ‘I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead’, the point being that it takes extra effort to produce a document that is concise and to the point. But, as the comments from the survey of tutors emphasise, this is what you need to do in your assignments.

What tutors like:

- Concise and articulate writing
- Clarity of writing, making it easy for me to read and follow

- Well written – clear, lucid and meaningful expression. No fluff, just lots of relevant, well-referenced points that connect and form a greater whole

What tutors dislike:

- Lack of clarity and obfuscation
- Obfuscation: use of obscure language that fails to communicate in simple terms what the topic is about

Spending time rewriting your work is important, since your first attempt will rarely be the optimum way of communicating ideas. The art of writing is a skill which is learned with practice but, as with most things, it's probably 5% talent and 95% time and effort. In Box 9.1 I've provided an example of how a rather wordy paragraph might be revised to make it more clear and concise.

Box 9.1

How to make a paragraph more concise

In the following example, I've revised the original text to make it more succinct:

Original version

The research project envisages the significant utilisation of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, namely questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. In order to collect, measure, and interpret the data, it is necessary to utilise a number of data analysis methods. It is for the achievement of this necessity that the research project plans to use descriptive and inferential statistics as a set of techniques that organise, summarise, and provide a general overview of the data. The research project will execute these methods of data analysis through an important statistical tool, namely SPSS.

Revised version

In this research project I will be using qualitative and quantitative methods, specifically: questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. The data from the questionnaires will be entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Basically, I've edited the original text by removing unnecessary words and phrases (like 'envisages the significant utilisation', 'for the achievement of this necessity') and reduced the number of words by over half to provide a much simpler and succinct passage. Notice also that I've provided an explanation for the acronym SPSS – see *Tip 63* later.

Note: If you're one of those students who complains that they're struggling to get anywhere near the word count because you've 'run out of things to say', then you'll be wanting to work the other way round by *adding* unnecessary words and phrases, i.e. waffle. Some

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other strategies you might consider are to use a larger font size than recommended (or a different font which takes up more room), make the margins abnormally wide, and add an extra line-space between paragraphs.

Tip 56

Aim for a high signal to noise ratio

When I hear students saying ‘I need to find another 500 words for my assignment’, my heart sinks. It suggests that they’ve run out of things to say and are simply looking for ways to increase the word count with ‘waffle’ or ‘padding’. A good assignment, which receives a high mark, will not include waffle, padding or unnecessary repetition: it will have a high signal to noise ratio...

Tip 57

Follow Grice’s Maxims

In your efforts to achieve clarity and conciseness In order to be clear and concise, it might help to be aware of Grice’s (1975) maxims of conversation – a set of rules that we should abide by if we wish to communicate effectively and efficiently. In Table 9.1 I’ve listed the maxims, accompanied with comments about their relevance to assignments.

Table 9.1 Grice’s maxims of conversation

Grice’s conversational maxims	Relevance to assignments
Quantity:	
• Say no less than is required	Explain/justify
• Say no more than is required	Don’t waffle
Quality:	
• Don’t say what you believe to be false	Check your facts
• Don’t say things for which you lack evidence	Check supporting evidence
Manner:	
• Be clear	Don’t be obscure
• Be specific	Don’t be ambiguous
• Be brief	Don’t waffle
• Be orderly	Pay attention to structure
Relevance:	
• Be relevant	Only include what’s relevant to the case you are making

Fortunately, we don't always abide by these maxims in everyday conversation:

Example: Don't say what you believe to be false?

Girlfriend: Does my bum look big in this?

Boyfriend: Massive.

Tip 58

Assume nothing

The issue of clarity raises the idea of writing for a particular audience: at what level should you be pitching the assignment? Well, my own advice is to assume as little as possible, making sure that you explain any unfamiliar terms.

Some study skills guides suggest that you should address your assignment to an 'expert audience', but this rings alarm bells for me, especially if the assignment requires you to apply the principles of a theory or a model to a context that may be unfamiliar to your tutor. But even when you are discussing subject matter that your tutor knows well, it's still important to provide a clear account to demonstrate your knowledge of the subject. So my advice would be to make your assignment accessible to as wide an audience as possible, otherwise it may come back riddled with question marks and requests for clarification, or be submitted for a prize in a competition (see Box 9.2).

Box 9.2

How wonderful to be so profound...

Those who know that they are profound strive for clarity; those who would like to seem profound ... strive for obscurity.

(Friedrich Nietzsche, 1844–1900)

Want to impress your tutor with some obscure words in long and complicated sentences demonstrating complex and profound thoughts? Well, don't! Here's an example:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

This sentence, from Professor Judith Butler (University of California at Berkeley), won first prize in a competition: the *Bad Writing Contest*, held by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. It appeared in an article published in the journal *Diacritics* (cited in Lieberman, 2005).

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Second prize went to a Professor of English at the University of Chicago, Homi Bhabha, for the following sentence (in his *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994):

If, for a while, the ruse of desire is calculable for the uses of discipline soon the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities, and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to 'normalize' formally the disturbance of a discourse of splitting that violates the rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality.

Eh?

Tip 59

Check you're spelling, grammar and punctuation

Dr Bernard Lamb, a tutor at Imperial College London and member of the Queen's English Society, collects spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes made by his students and then publishes them in the newspapers so we can all be outraged at the declining standards in British universities. They include confusing 'compliment' and 'complement', 'holy' and 'holey', 'way' and 'weigh', and 'seamen' and 'semen' (Lamb, 2007):

'...the gene products compliment each other'

'...holy cheese' (for a cheese with holes)

'...have to way up the costs'

'...insemination of these cows at the age of 3 with their fathers [sic] seamen'

Problems with punctuation included missing apostrophes, for example, 'its' rather than 'it's' (for 'it is') or, as in the above example, 'fathers' rather than 'father's' (each cow presumably only had one biological 'father'). Incidentally, the [sic] in this quote has been inserted after 'fathers' to indicate that the mistake (the missing apostrophe) was in the original quote – it is not the author's oversight.

Lack of attention to spelling, grammar and punctuation will not only give a poor impression of you as a writer, it may also confuse and frustrate the marker who is trying to read your assignment. As Dr Lamb (1998) points out: 'Spelling is important. Bad spelling gives the impression that the writer is ignorant, careless and unintelligent. It can mislead, confuse and frustrate the reader, and delay or prevent comprehension.' Not a good thing to do to someone who is marking your assignment.

These were some of the most common concerns in the survey of tutors:

What tutors dislike:

- Lack of spell-checking and proof-reading
- Work not spell-checked (just lazy – its one click of a button)
- Incorrect use of words, particularly mixing up 'their' and 'there', 'were' and 'where', 'been' and 'being'

- 'It's' when it should be 'its'
- Poor/lack of any proof-reading leaving careless mistakes and unreadable sentences – for example, I've encountered discussion about patients who've had cancer of the bowl
- Incorrect use of colons and semi-colons

What makes these issues particularly distressing is the fact that many of the errors are easy to address, either by using a spell-checker or proof-reading the document prior to submission.

Incorrect use of colons and semi-colons is a common problem. My *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines them as follows:

Semicolon: a punctuation mark (;) of intermediate value between a comma and a full-stop.

Colon: a punctuation mark (:) used especially to introduce a quotation or a list of items or to separate clauses when the second expands or illustrates the first.

So, you would use a colon as I have done above (after 'defines them as follows') to introduce a list. Unfortunately, many students use the semi-colon instead, which is wrong. You would use a semi-colon to link two clauses without connecting words, as in the following example:

The reader shouldn't turn the page and suddenly be confronted with a figure floating in the air; introduce the figure in the text and then explain it.

There's a lot more that can be said about the conventions of punctuation, grammar and how to write generally. I've listed some useful websites below:

Learnhigher (Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning)

Available at: www.learnhigher.ac.uk/students.htm (accessed April 2010)

Bradford University School of Management Effective learning Booklets

Available at: www.bradford.ac.uk/management/els/elsbooklets/ (accessed April 2010)

University of Toronto Advice on Academic Writing

Available at: www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice (accessed April 2010)

BBC Skillswise

Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/ (accessed April 2010)

Incidentally, when I asked a group of students in the transition from school to university to list features of a poor assignment, the written comments included:

- poor spelling and grammer
- poor spelling/grammer/punctuality

It's the school teachers I blame...

Tip 60

Avoid very long paragraphs (and very short ones)

Comments from the survey

Tutors were *distressed* by:

- Paragraphs which are far too short (or too long): for example, paragraphs consisting of one or two sentences or, at the other extreme, the absence of paragraphs

Tutors were *impressed* by:

- Attention to paragraphing – I loathe whole page paragraphs!
- When the author understands when to start a new paragraph

A paragraph should contain one idea, a point you are making. Try to keep each paragraph to less than half a page and more than three sentences. A page full of one or two sentence paragraphs usually signals a problem in structure.

Paragraphs can take many different forms, but they are often structured along the following lines:

- the first sentence introduces the subject/topic of the paragraph
- the following sentences expand/develop the topic
- and the last sentence concludes the paragraph (or perhaps leads into the next paragraph)

The paragraph below, in *Tip 61*, provides an illustration of this. The first sentence introduces the subject (bullet points), the issue raised about using bullet points is expanded on in the following sentences, and the final sentence concludes with ‘So...’.

Tip 61

Don't lapse into listing

Listing bullet points can be a good way to present information clearly, but be careful not to use this as a substitute for discussion in the text. As one tutor in the survey complained: ‘Presenting lots of bullet points instead of discussion’. Remember, it's discussion that gets the marks, not bullet points. So, make sure you introduce the list of bullet points in the text and then add some reflective comments directly after the list.

Tip 62

Avoid using too many direct quotes – especially long quotes

Tutors were *distressed* by:

- Overlong direct quotations
- Filling the assignment with lots of quotes – rather than paraphrasing

- Too many direct quotes when they should be putting things into their own words
- Quotes included but no page numbers given

Quotations should be used in moderation, and only where they are relevant to enhance a point you are making. They shouldn't be used as a substitute for your own interpretation of ideas, especially where the information you are quoting is not saying anything you couldn't have said yourself. If they are used extensively, this can give the impression of laziness – that it has been easier to simply copy the text from somewhere else. So, it's often better to paraphrase the text in your own words and 'originalise' it with your own interpretation and perspective, and reference the source. If you're not sure what 'paraphrasing' is, Box 9.3 provides an illustration.

One of the worst things you can do in an assignment is to copy and paste a few quotations and then just add a few linking sentences as a bridge between them. If quotations are included they should be discussed, analysed and reflected upon.

Box 9.3

Paraphrasing: how to do it and how not to do it...

When you come across a passage of text that you want to use in your assignment, you can either copy it as a quote or paraphrase it in your own words. If you simply copy the text as a quote, then it needs to be referenced, including the page number from where the quote was taken (see Chapter 10, Box 10.1). But since we know that tutors don't like to see lots of quotes in assignments, it's usually better to paraphrase the text by putting it in your own words – remembering to acknowledge the source, since this shows that you have been reading the relevant literature. In the example below I've paraphrased the main passage in *Tip 62*.

Original text

Quotations should be used in moderation, and only where they are relevant to enhance a point you are making. They shouldn't be used as a substitute for your own interpretation of ideas, especially where the information you are quoting is not saying anything you couldn't have said yourself. If they are used extensively, this can give the impression of laziness – that it's been easier to simply copy the text from somewhere else. So, it's often better to paraphrase the text in your own words and 'originalise' it with your own interpretation and perspective, and reference the source.

Paraphrase

Quotes can be important in an assignment when they are used to illustrate a point, but some students use them too much when they should be paraphrasing, using their own words. Using too many quotes can give an impression of laziness from the tutor's perspective (Greasley, 2011).

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Paraphrasing is about summarising the essence of what was said in your own words. It's *not* about changing a few words here and there, like those highlighted below:

Quotations should be **employed** in moderation, and **just when** they are relevant to **make** a point. They **should not** be used as a substitute for your own interpretation, **particularly** where the information **quoted** is not saying anything you couldn't have said yourself. If **quotes** are used **a lot** this **gives** the impression of laziness – that it's easier to **just** copy the text from **someone** else. So, it's **usually** better to paraphrase the text in your own words, and reference the source.

I've highlighted the substituted words to give you the tutor's view of this passage when he runs it through the plagiarism software that virtually all universities are using today (see Chapter 11).

Tip 63

Explain all acronyms and TLAs

Tutors were *distressed* by:

- Acronyms used without full explanations being given first
- Not giving a glossary for TLAs

This is a common problem in assignments, partly reflecting an assumption by the student that the tutor who is marking the assignment will be familiar with acronyms and abbreviations. This may or may not be the case, but either way you should always provide an explanation with the *first use* of an acronym or abbreviation (as I added earlier, in Box 9.1, for SPSS). Now obviously there are some acronyms that you might get away with (e.g. BBC, USA, DNA, KFC), but if you think there's a chance that the marker won't know what the acronym stands for, spell it out in the first instance. (See how annoying it is: Three Letter Abbreviations.)

Tip 64

No person preferred

When writing academic essays and reports you should usually opt for the 'impersonal' voice rather than 'first person' or the rather cumbersome 'third person singular':

- I conducted a literature review... (first person)
- The author conducted a literature review... (third person singular)
- A literature review was conducted... (impersonal)

This may depend on the assignment and the preferences of your tutor, but unless it requires an account from your personal experience, the impersonal voice is usually preferred.

Tip 65

Avoid colloquial language and clichés like the plague

Assignments should be written using a formal style of language rather than the more chatty ‘colloquial’ language of everyday conversation. Here are two examples which appeared in an assignment (I’ve highlighted the offending words):

Whether osteopathy can be integrated into the NHS alongside *the likes of* physiotherapy and occupational therapy is debatable...

It comes across that osteopathy was developed with sound medical thought...

In the first example, ‘the likes of’ may simply be removed or replaced by ‘treatments such as’; in the second example, ‘It comes across’ might be replaced with ‘It would appear’. Nigel Warburton (2007) provides a more extreme illustration of colloquial language in the following extract:

Essay question: What were the main causes of the First World War?

At the end of the day, the First World War was the last century’s biggest fiasco. A real mudbath, with the generals making a dog’s dinner of the tactics and bottling some serious decisions. You may well ask what caused this pig’s ear of a war. There were several dodgy things going on at the time...

Tip 66

Watch out for dangling modifiers

If you have any dangling modifiers they’ll need to be rephrased. For example:

Even though he was inebriated, the tutor agreed to see the student.

Who was inebriated – the tutor or the student? The meaning is left ‘dangling’.

Tip 67

Read it out loud?

This tip was suggested to me by another tutor and I initially thought it was a bit naff (‘really, like I’m going to read it out loud to myself’), but then I noticed it was recommended by a few famous authors when asked to provide their writing tips in *The Guardian* (20 February 2010). So, if writing well-constructed flowing sentences is not your strong point (perhaps it’s been pointed out in feedback on previous assignments?), try reading what you’ve written out loud to yourself (or to someone else if they’ll listen). If nothing else, this will ensure that you’re putting some time and effort

into checking that your assignment reads well, remembering that this was the *Number 1* source of marker distress... The problem is, of course, that most of us don't want to go over what we've written because it probably means more work. It's a bit like examining the ceiling after you've just painted it.

Conclusion

How you communicate using written language is not just important for university assignments – it's also important in 'real life'. For example, one survey found that 'written communication skills are among the least satisfactory attributes of graduates' (Winch & Wells, 1995: 76). Employers expect high standards of accuracy in written communication, so your employment prospects may depend on your mastery of these skills. A written application form is the first impression a prospective employer has of you.

All marking schemes allocate a percentage of the marks to language, grammar and expression. It may only be 10–20% of the overall mark, but this may have a significant impact on the grade. For example, in borderline cases this may be the difference between a fail or a pass, a first or a second. But if an assignment is difficult to understand and follow, this inability to communicate clearly may have a more profound effect on the grade. It may be difficult to gauge the real impact of these factors on the mark, but if they do cause undue frustration, and certainly if they prevent comprehension, this may be quite substantial.

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