

A Few Basic Writing Tips

While the technical part of writing is important, there are many readily available resources that provide detailed content on the subject. During CE writing programs, I have always given a few tips but encouraged anyone uncomfortable in writing content to use the readily available resources such as books, websites, and writing labs. If you are in academia (student, faculty, maybe even preceptor) and have access to a writing lab or an editor, USE THEM. Make sure they do not change the context while suggesting an alternative term, etc. They do not always understand discipline-specific language, they know how to write.

Professional writing requires a grasp of grammar, knowing how to choose the right pronoun or punctuation, and how to develop paragraphs. Of the many websites available, be sure to visit the website for *Nurse Author & Editor*. In addition to websites, labs, and editors, use the spelling, punctuation, and grammar checker components of your word processing software. Finally, there are wonderful apps/software such as Grammarly that were developed specifically for this.

Generative AI is broadly available. Be cautious when using it as a writing aid. While it is excellent in helping you locate information, you must VET EVERYTHING. AI simply pulls from the internet, and not all that content is accurate or understood by the AI system. They can “hallucinate” to fill in voids.

So on to a FEW basic writing tips as reminders: (These are things I find critical.)

Limit each paragraph to ONE major point. If not, you have 2+ paragraphs.

Referring to subjects, people, or items, use the same noun or name to avoid confusion.

Vary verbs to help eliminate sense of redundancy (asserts, observes, indicates, explains)

Use plural nouns to avoid gender issues

Understand use of abbreviations, especially these two biggies: e.g. and i.e.

Abbreviation **e.g.** means “for example” (I remember this as e.g.=example given).

Abbreviation **i.e.** means “that is” (I remember i.e.=in essence)

Use PLAIN language: Plain language means:

Simple words and language e.g. write “use”, not “utilize”

Shorten sentences when possible (no stray words, fewer phrases)

Plain language adheres to the 4 Cs of Writing:

- Clarity
- Coherence
- Conciseness
- Consistency

Plain language uses active voice (not passive voice)

- ✓ The committee reworked the project vs
- X The project was reworked by the team

Vigorous Writing Quote: No writing content is complete without this quote by William Strunk (co-author of *Strunk & White Elements of Style*, 1919). I have bolded words for impact.

*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 subject only in outline, **but that every word tell.***

Remember, it isn't how long a phrase, sentence, or paragraph is, but that it excludes anything unnecessary. No extraneous, redundant, or obtuse words. Heavy editing can be required to meet this objective. As with plain language, "every word should tell".

Using Tables & Figures as Helpful

A picture or table can be worth many words. As you are thinking of your content flow, consider what content can be conveyed via tables or figures. Both can convey much information in a way easily grasped by readers. However, each table or figure should stand alone—not require extensive explanation. Otherwise, they are not helpful. Text should refer to the table's content, not repeat everything in the table.

Manuscript Style

Once you know where you will submit your manuscript, you must identify the writing style they use. Typically, this will be either APA or MLA. These differ in several ways including how quotes are blocked, in-text references are noted, and end references are formatted and ordered (alphabetical vs numerical). This will play into your overall style, but not the grammar, paragraph topics, etc.

Referencing

Review your draft matching every in-text citation and the reference list. I insert notes where references go as I write to avoid later sorting to find where the reference fits. When referencing, limit direct quotations. Sometimes the quotation is needed to adequately convey what the other has written, but this should be rare. Paraphrase but not just replacing a word or two. Instead, consider the relevant quote and find a way to convey the meaning, but without original author's words—even though it takes time. The following table describes instances in which references are needed and when they are not needed.

Always Reference	Reference Not Expected
Someone else's idea, thought, or work	Your own unique thought
Direct quotes	Examples based on your experience
Facts that are controversial or not commonly known	Specific facts, findings, statistics, processes from your work
Another's theory, model, or instrument	Your own conclusions, syntheses, analyses
Highly specific percentages, numbers, statistics	Commonly known information

Writing the Manuscript

You might expect after completing your initial draft, including references, that you are almost done. That is rarely the case.

Once you have a “completed” draft, set it aside and take a break for a day or so. When you return with “fresh eyes” you should do a thorough review. Expect to continue working on the manuscript through a few or several iterations--each will move you closer to a refined manuscript. Each time you make a change, be sure to save each version. There will be times you will want to recall and even revert to the original or intermediate wording. Sometimes you can inadvertently make a major change in context by replacing one word or important point. Take a break between revisions and keep all versions in one folder.

You need to review the manuscript carefully each time you have made edits. I start by silently reading the full manuscript, word-for-word. Next, I read it aloud. I may “hear” gaps, repetitions, poor sequencing, or other issues that I did not catch visually. Always use spell-check and grammar-check options of your word processing program. Do not forget to save every version of the manuscript, regardless of the changes made.

If you have access to an editor, they can help enhance your work. Some authors hire an editor if they do not have access through. Alternatively, ask a colleague who is an experienced author and/or is knowledgeable in the manuscript’s topic. An extra set of eyes can be helpful in identifying questions, redundancy, etc. that we don’t see in our own work.