

IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS

1. In general, **AVOID the first person** pronouns, unless otherwise instructed; this includes the pronouns -- *I, me, mine, we, us, our*.

AVOID the second person pronouns -- *you, your*. The only time *you* is acceptable is in a process paper in which the writer is giving directions to the reader.

Most assignments should be written in the **third person** -- *he, she, they, one* -- unless the assignment specifically asks for a personal narrative.

2. **AVOID vague expressions**. For example, the word *thing* is ambiguous. This also applies to the words *anything, nothing, and something*.

weak: *One must do three things.*

better: *One must take three steps.*

3. **AVOID** using *there is, there are, there was, there were, there will be, and here is, here are, here were, here will be*: this is considered weak construction. Instead, use the subject in place of those words.

weak: *There are three reasons I want a college education.*

better: *I want a college education for three reasons.*

4. **AVOID writing fragments and run-ons**. These are very common writing errors and are considered serious by essay evaluators. They are indicators of sloppy writing and must be avoided. Specific information sheets are available in the WRITING LAB.

5. **DO NOT use abbreviations** except in certain instances. In formal writing, do not use abbreviations such as "&" and "etc." Abbreviations such as *M.D.C.C.* are acceptable to use only after the words have been spelled out.

These abbreviations are permitted:

- titles before proper nouns: Dr. Hart, St. Mary, Mrs. Jones
- titles after proper nouns: Jon Nash, Jr., Fred Hart, M.D.
Sara Lee Sanderson, Ph.D.
- specific dates and numerals: 50 B.C., 700 A.D., 6:30 P.M.

6. **DO NOT use contractions**. Contractions are used in conversation in which words are condensed for speedy communication. In formal writing, contractions are not acceptable except in direct quotations.

7. **DO NOT use informal conversational expressions**:

- the interjection *well*
- the word *guy* to mean a male person
- the word *kid* to mean a child
- the word *like* as a substitute for *as* or *as if*
- the words *a lot (of)* to mean *much* or *many*

8. **DO NOT use announcements** in a topic sentence or thesis statement.

wrong: *This paper is going to be about..., I am going to write about..., The topic of this paper will be...,* or other similar wording.

9. **FOLLOW these general rules for spelling out numbers:**

Spell out:

- any number that is the **first word** of a sentence
- the numbers *one* through *ten*
- rounded numbers such as *hundred, thousand, or million*

Do not spell out:

- numbers in addresses
- numbers with a dollar sign (\$)
- numbers in lists or in scientific and technical writing (except the number one)

Examples: Twenty-five items were missing from my order of April 1, 1987. Please send the following to 19 Broadway, Ames, Iowa: 6 Pilot pens, 10 legal-size Pads, 8 reams of paper, and one ball of twine. I am enclosing \$7.00 to be applied to the balance of my account.

10. **BE CONCISE.** Do not use unnecessary words. (See “Revising for Language Awareness” in Evergreen or “Effective Word Choice” in College Writing Skills.)

- Do not write -- *In my opinion, smoking should be banned from all public buildings.*
Instead, write -- *Smoking should be banned from all public buildings.*

- Do not write -- *We learned the true facts about the robbery.*
Instead, write -- *We learned the facts about the robbery.*