PS 343 Political Economy of Developed Democracies
General Tips for Common Errors

Direct Quotes

Direct quotations should only be used when you cannot present information any better or more concisely than the author did, *or* when the identity of the speaker matters. If your direct quotation from a single source is more than 40 words or four lines of type, it should be presented in block quote format: begin the quotation on a new line, indented ½" on both sides, reduce the font size by one point, and single-space. Quotation marks are not used on block quotations.

Punctuation of quotes—In general, punctuation associated with a quotation (the final period or comma, usually), or a period or comma closing a sentence/clause ending with a quote, belongs inside the quotation marks. The exceptions to this are semicolons (;) and footnotes, which belong outside the final set of quotation marks.

Quotation marks are not *used for emphasis.* Use italics or underline; if you have an expression that is not yours, but for which you do not have a source, you can use single quotes (‘’), but *do so sparingly*.

Excisions from quotes—On occasion, you may wish to use part of a sentence, or two or more separate parts of the same page or paragraph. Indicate excisions from the original text with "…" (three periods) if your excision is within a single sentence; use "…." (four periods) if your excision eliminates one or more end-of-sentence punctuation marks.

- "The survey data…suggest that both politicians and voters perceive election strategy in terms of allocating pubic works, jobs, and various other payoffs to maximize votes." Three ellipsis points (quoted in Tufte, *Political Control of the Economy*, pp. 13-14)
- "All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed….National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature." Four ellipsis points (more than one sentence-ending mark eliminated; from Marx and Engels, "The Communist Manifesto")
- "War is not to be avoided, but is only put off to the advantage of others […. A] blunder ought never be perpetrated to avoid war, because it is not to be avoided, but is only deferred to your disadvantage." Four ellipsis points, brackets used because a capital A was needed to begin the new sentence. (from Machiavelli, *The Prince*)

Editorial additions to quotes—If your choice of quotation includes a foreign language term, a pronoun whose antecedent becomes unclear out of context, or an excision which changes the location of the start of a sentence, include the editorial remark in square brackets ([]). The bracket term may be used to replace words (delete the unclear pronoun and insert the bracket in its place), or it may supplement existing text, as is usually the case with non-English terms.

Bonus Quotes

Fight the urge to insert quotations from your sources which restate information you just presented. Students often try to argue that these quotes provide evidence for their own arguments, but the same supporting effect could be obtained by simply citing the passage rather than quoting it. The reader's sense at seeing a bonus quote is something along the lines of hearing the writer say, "Look! I can say this since my author said it too!"

Agreement in Numbers

Agreement in numbers is particularly important for pronouns, though occasional quirks with helping verbs like *have/has* and *is/are* crop up.

- "The price of the bananas is $0.39 per pound," not "The price of the bananas are $0.39 per pound."
  While 'bananas' is plural, that word is also the object of a preposition; 'price' is the subject of the sentence. Prepositional phrases can obscure the true subject of the sentence, so look out for them.
- "The United States is going to war," not "The United States are going to war."
  AND "The United States fought for its independence in 1776," not "The United States fought for their independence in 1776."
  'United States' is *not* a plural noun, even though there are 50 states; it's a collective noun, since all the states act together through the federal government. It wouldn't make sense if Nebraska, for example, didn't go to war when the rest of the country did. Use singular verbs and pronouns when 'United States' is your subject or antecedent.
- "When a person wants to express her opinion, she writes to her senator," not "When a person wants to express their opinion, they write to their senator."
  'Person' is singular, so any pronouns and verbs must agree. Depending on the author's intention, a simpler switch would have been to change 'person' to 'people,' 'individuals,' or 'voters,' depending on the appropriate context.

In compound subjects, the conjunction 'and' requires a plural verb or adjective, *even if both of the subjects are individually singular,* while the conjunctions 'or' and 'nor' take singular verbs *if and only if both subjects are singular*.

- "The war and the economy drive this year's election campaign."
  → "The war drives this year's…," and "The economy drives this year's…," but the conjunction 'and' in the compound subject takes the plural verb 'drive.'
  INCORRECT: "The war and the economy *drives* this year's election campaign."
- "Tufte or Hibbs discusses that issue."
  → "Tufte discusses," and "Hibbs discusses"; when combined with 'or' or 'nor', the singular verb remains. (Think about it: only one of those authors discusses the topic, not both.)
  INCORRECT: "Tufte or Hibbs *discuss* that issue."
- "Wars or scandals cause the government to lose popularity."
  → "Wars cause," and "Scandals cause," so keep the plural verb. Also correct: "Major scandals or a war cause the government to lose popularity." [NOTE: This sentence is passive voice; technically, "The government loses popularity from major scandals or a war," is better, but the new version changes the emphasis from the causes to the victim.]

Verbs and Verb Choice

'To be' is not the world's most exciting verb. Quite often, forms of 'to be' and 'to have' serve as the main verb of the sentence when the sentence's true topic does not serve as the subject. Look at the bananas example in the previous section. The grammatical subject is 'price,' but the sentence is actually about bananas. The issue of agreement in numbers could have been avoided, and the sentence enlivened, by making the topic of the sentence the grammatical subject, rather

than the object of a prepositional phrase. “The bananas cost $0.39 per pound,” has an active verb as well as a consistent subject-topic.

Verbs paired with a preposition—The single most common source of dangling prepositions is weak verb choice. Many common expressions in English are verb-preposition combinations: "to put up with,” “to deal with,” “to point out,” etc. Each of these has a substantially more powerful alternative which removes the trailing preposition: “To put up with” becomes “to tolerate”; “to deal with” is “to address,” “to handle,” “to resolve,” etc.

Passive Voice

The passive voice occurs when the topic of the sentence, the main idea or actor under consideration, is the grammatical object of the sentence rather than the grammatical subject. The true subject of the sentence is the recipient of the sentence’s action, rather than the actor of the sentence.

Iraq may be punished by the United States for its behavior. (p)

→ The United States may punish Iraq for its behavior. (a)

The flaw would have been noticed by the researcher if he had plotted the data first.

→ The researcher would have noticed the flaw if he had plotted the data first.

When working to reduce word count, eliminating passive voice sentences is normally a very efficient approach. Passive voice sentences almost always involve helping verbs and/or prepositional phrases which are eliminated in the active voice.

The next example is somewhat different. Using the passive voice changes the focus of the sentence. Depending on the choice of voice, the meaning of the sentence shifts.

The United States was attacked by terrorists. (p)

Terrorists attacked the United States. (a)

Passive voice *is* appropriate when the sense you wish to convey is that the object is the main focus. These sentences should be used *very* sparingly, and you should always ask yourself if you absolutely cannot convey the same meaning otherwise.

Some instructors extend the concept of passive voice to include any sentence in which the verb occurs before the subject. (This is formally an inverted sentence structure, but its effect on comprehension is the same.)

Sad was the day when the war began.

Had the author looked at his data, he would have noticed the flaw.

There are conceptual reasons to doubt such a finding.

In the third case, ‘reasons’ is the subject (and the topic), but the weak verb ‘are’ proceeds it in the sentence structure and the functional verb ‘to doubt’ is relegated to the sentence’s object. A better version might be, ‘Conceptual reasons [or arguments] cast doubt on [or argue against] such a finding.’

The final category of passive-voice-like sentences includes sentences starting with “It is found that,” and other similar expressions. Formally, this is an issue of unclear antecedence (to what exactly does ‘it’ refer?), but the remedies are closer to those for passive voice. ‘It’ is the grammatical subject of the sentence, but ‘it’ is certainly not the topic of the sentence. Instead the

sentence's topic, the part that interests your reader, is buried in a (usually passive voice) subordinate clause which serves as the grammatical object.

It is found that only three of the five variables are significant in the complete model.
→ Only three of the five variables are significant in the complete model.
→ → Davidson finds only three of the five variables significant in the complete model.

Split Infinitives

English is unique among many Western languages in how it handles the infinitive form of verbs. Most other languages have a single word which encompasses the 'to' and the substantive sense of the verb, but English needs two separate words to express the same concept. (For example, the French *manger* translates as 'to eat'; the Italian *camminare* translates as 'to walk.') In general, no words should intervene between the two components of the infinitive.

- 'To boldly go where no man has gone before.' Apparently the Star Trek authors mixed Vulcan grammar with English. Grammatical correctness calls for 'To go boldly where no man has gone before.'

Events in a Sequence

Students are often tempted to list sequential actions using 'first,' 'secondly,' 'thirdly,' etc. This is an odd shift from an adjective to an adverbial form; the adverbial form is considered correct in British English but is rarely used in American English. At a minimum, the forms should not be mixed.

- "First, Santa Claus lands on the rooftop. Second, he takes his bag and slides down the chimney. Third, he leaves presents for good boys and girls. Finally, he goes back up the chimney and departs."

  You would never say, "Firstly, Santa Claus lands on the rooftop," so why would you say 'secondly'?

Contractions and Possessives

Contractions are generally inappropriate in formal writing, as is any use of the second person ('you'). You should avoid 'it's,' 'they're,' 'won't,' and other similar forms. The general rule is that apostrophes should only be used to indicate possession: 'The President's,' 'Smithers' argument,' etc. Note that the exception is that 'its' is the appropriate possessive form of 'it,' *not*, as many often think, 'it's.'

Nerd Words

The "Nerd Words" are a set of words abused by undergraduates at a phenomenal rate in vain attempts to make their papers sound 'more academic.' These words should be used sparingly: rarely more than one per paragraph or two per page. Any sentence beginning with a Nerd Word is immediately suspect; any sentence containing two or more Nerd Words should normally be rebuilt from scratch rather than salvaged. Some of the Nerd Words are much more common in languages other than English; if you are a non-native speaker of English, please be aware of this. The most commonly abused Nerd Words are: however, thus, therefore, due to, hence, as to,

given, likewise, moreover, utilize (and forms), and arise (and forms). A full list and handout are available on the web site.

Latin expressions—You should generally avoid Latin abbreviations and expressions, such as *ex ante, de novo,* e.g., and i.e. Should you desperately need to use one, be sure your usage is correct. Full words like *ex ante* and *de novo* should be italicized as any other non-English terms. The other two are both abbreviations. A period follows *each* letter, and the expression is followed by a comma. Formally, e.g. means 'for example,' and 'i.e.' means 'that is.'

- "The group of concluded agreements is subdivided into agreements which are successfully ratified and implemented, and those which fail either ratification (i.e., involuntary defection) or implementation (resulting in enforcement action by the other parties."
- "No theoretical reasons predict substantial cooperation between, e.g., Malawi and Ecuador."

Rhetorical questions—Rhetorical questions are in the category of Nerd Words, and should be used even more sparingly: one or two *maximum* in the entire paper, and none if possible.

<u>Redundant and Misused Words</u>

- Delete the redundant "or not" in "whether or not"; the "or not" is the default implication and is never necessary.
- In most cases, delete the redundant "in order" in "in order to." About 95% of the time, it is not necessary to make the point; the other 5% of the time, the point is insufficiently clear, often because the 'to' is mistakenly sounding like a preposition rather than part of an infinitive verbal construction.
- Quite often, "that" as a conjunction is unnecessary. Use the "find" command on your word processing program to locate and consider deleting *all* uses of 'that.' You will be surprised how many there are.
- Populace/populous. 'Populace' is a noun; 'populous' is an adjective. "The king extracted much wealth from the populace." "California is the most populous state in the Union."
- A lot/allot. Please note, 'a lot,' as in 'many,' is two separate words. Some auto-correct features will correct erroneous one-word spellings of 'a lot' (i.e., "alot") into 'allot.' 'Allot' is a verb meaning to allocate. In any case, 'a lot' is a colloquialism and should be used sparingly if at all in formal writing.
- US/United States/American. One of my personal pet peeves is the use of 'U.S.' as a noun. 'U.S.' is *not* a noun, but it is acceptable as an adjective. Likewise, 'America' is not an appropriate noun to use to refer to the United States; 'American' is, however, an appropriate adjective.
    - "U.S. soldiers are the best equipped in the world."
    - "The United States will no longer be the world's largest economic market after the European Union expands in May 2004."
    - "American presidents have substantially more powers than their French counterparts."