

Guidelines for Effective Professional and Academic Writing¹

R. G. Easterly III, Brian E. Myers, Alison E. Lutz, and Nick T. Place²

Introduction

There are many instances in one's professional or academic career when producing a professional written document is necessary. The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide a few tips to keep in mind while composing professional documents. Specifically, this article will address the level of formality needed to communicate in a professional/academic environment, the use of third person in writing, and how to improve writing quality and structure. In addition, this article will address how to identify and properly cite scholarly sources to incorporate into professional writing.

Formality

Maintaining a professional and serious tone in professional writing is important. Writing in a familiar or friendly style should be avoided. Jokes, personal anecdotes, and colloquial expressions are not appropriate. The purpose of professional writing is to convey information in a clear, succinct, fluid way. Avoid using exclamation points, contractions (such as "can't"), emoticons (smiley faces), or acronyms with which the reader may not be familiar.

Person

One should use *third person* almost exclusively in their professional writing. Avoid addressing the reader (i.e., using "You should know...") or using first person (i.e., "I think this is..."). The use of third person is an important part of retaining a formal tone in writing. Use of first and second person may render a document lacking the professionalism required in business and academic writing.

Writing Quality

Proofreading/self-editing (Table 1) is an important part of any writing process, particularly that of the professional or academic. Read the paper through with deliberation and care, focusing on different aspects with each pass. Small details may be overlooked if the paper is only proofread once. The four main aspects to focus on when self-editing are content, clarity and conciseness, spelling and grammar, and citation accuracy.

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2. R. G. Easterly III (Ph. D. UF/AEC, 2016); Brian E. Myers, professor; Alison E. Lutz, alumna (M.S., Extension Education, 2006); and Nick T. Place, professor and dean for Extension; Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Table 1. Proofreading issues and questions to ask

Self-editing your manuscript	Questions to ask
Content	Does the paper flow well? Is the big picture clear? Does the order of the sections make sense?
Clarity and Conciseness	Are the sentences clear? Are any sentences or sections redundant?
Spelling and Grammar	Is the paper free of spelling errors? Are the words used correctly? Is the punctuation correct?
Citation Correctness	Are all of the sources cited correctly? Is the reference list formatted correctly? Is everything cited in text in the reference list and vice versa?

Content

Is the content accurate? Do the topics logically flow together? Are the sub-topics clustered together rather than spread throughout the paragraph? Is the sentence construction varied throughout the document, or is the same cadence repeated throughout? Try experimenting with diverse sentence styles. This will keep the reader involved and interested in the document, rather than becoming bored with the same sentence type repeatedly. Imagine that the paper is a painting. If someone reads it, can they see the picture?

Clarity and Conciseness

The second editing issue is clarity and conciseness. Are the sentences clear? Does the text speak in the active voice rather than the passive? For example, it is clearer to write, “The researcher analyzed the data,” rather than “The data were analyzed.” Editing for conciseness is important to the readability of the paper. Are there words in the sentences that could be removed while retaining the integrity of the thought? Also, look for extraneous words like “quite,” “definitely,” “very,” and “somewhat.” Imagine each word costs a dollar. Where best to cut costs?

Spelling and Grammar

Next, it is important to proofread for spelling and grammar. Proofreading involves checking the writing for spelling mistakes, typos, and grammatical errors. These are never acceptable in professional writing. The best-written paper loses all of its credibility if riddled with mistakes. Be sure to check for capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and word choice. Remember to take out contractions (can’t, don’t, etc.) and to watch for words like where, were, and wear. Having someone else proofread for spelling and grammar could be worthwhile.

Citations and References

It is also important to check the paper to make sure that the sources are cited correctly in text and in the reference list. It might be beneficial to have someone look over the citations section, especially for people new to academic writing. Finally, make sure that all the sources cited in text are in the reference list and vice versa.

Structure

It is acceptable to be a little repetitive in professional writing. The same information can often be appropriate in more than one place in your assignment or document. When writing a paper, start with an introduction that gives the reader a clear map of what to expect from the beginning of the paper to the end. Remember, this is not a mystery novel—it is okay to give away the ending at the beginning of the paper.

Outline the paragraphs before writing to make sure your thoughts flow logically from one to the next, rather than giving the impression of free association. Make sure each paragraph starts with a thesis statement or a topic sentence that lets the reader know what the topic for that paragraph will be.

End the document with a conclusion that acts as the reverse of the introduction. The conclusion should sum up the point of the paper. It is acceptable here to draw conclusions, make comments, or make suggestions.

Sources/References

In professional and academic writing, it is expected that sources for the text are scholarly, referred to, and cited correctly. Scholarly sources are those that are written by experts in the field, for experts in the field. The second part of this definition is an important distinction—since the intended audience is experts in the field, scholarly publications go through a peer review or “referee” process in which experts in the field examine them for quality and validity so that the experts in the field are getting the best information possible. The following is a quick checklist to determine whether an article or book is scholarly. A source is most likely scholarly if it meets the following criteria:

1. If the source is an article, it comes from a peer-reviewed journal.
2. If it is a research article, it should it should be written in the IMRaD format (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion). These are known as empirical studies. Literature reviews (meta-analyses), theoretical articles,

methodological articles, and case studies may also be considered scholarly.

3. The author of the source should cite specific theories and their sources.
4. The source should include specialized vocabulary that is intended for a scholarly audience. (Newspapers and magazines are not intended for scholarly audiences.)
5. The source provides author name(s) and institutional affiliations.
6. The journal or book should be published by a professional organization or academic institution.

Examples of scholarly sources:

- Journal of Agricultural Education
- Journal of Extension
- Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education
- Adult Education Quarterly
- NACTA Journal
- International Review of Education
- Journal of Continuing Higher Education

Examples of *non*-scholarly sources:

- Newsweek
- New York Times
- Time
- USA Today
- Christian Science Monitor
- National Geographic
- Wikipedia
- Most websites

Finding Scholarly Sources

Google is a great way to find all kinds of content on the Internet, and it is a useful tool. However, Google is not a good way to find scholarly sources for professional or academic writing. There is a Google Scholar feature, but the most effective search engine for scholarly sources is the through a university library's website. The Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (CSA), ERIC, and Web of Science are among the finer examples of database resources provided by an academic library. Librarians are available in person,

on the phone, and online to ask questions about finding and citing sources.

Conclusion

Writing in professional and academic settings can be challenging, but it is important to maintain a level of professionalism when communicating with these audiences. The tips provided here will help you to achieve clear, effective writing that will impress your audience in any context.