



NOTE: This lesson supports the following core skills and assignments:

- *G26.3*
- *L12.6*
- *R10.6*
- *R16.6*
- *R18.6*
- *R23.6*

Style: The Final Draft

This week's assignment

The assignment this week, of course, is to complete your final draft! To do this, first make corrections to your rough draft based on all tutor comments, then make stylistic edits of your own based on the ideas below.

Some important stylistic guidelines

All other things being equal, an essay that boasts a smooth and elegant style makes its point more effectively than an essay with stylistic weaknesses. Here are three important stylistic guidelines that will help you smooth the rough edges of your style and polish up your presentation.

1. Use the active voice

Failure to rely upon the active voice plagues student writing more often than any other stylistic error.

We say that a sentence, clause or phrase is “in the active voice” when the SUBJECT performs the ACTION of the sentence, clause or phrase:

Harriet's dog bit the mailman. Panicking, he threw his letter bag into the air, frightening several passing children.

When the ACTION of the sentence, clause or phrase is performed by anyone other than the SUBJECT (named or unnamed), we say that it is “in the passive voice”:

The mailman was bitten. His letter bag was thrown into the air in a panic, and several passing children were frightened.

Passive voice constructions have the effect of hiding the actor in a sentence and making the sentence vaguer and more imprecise. If you omit “by Harriet’s dog” from the second paragraph above (which is grammatically correct, by the way), you’ll be left with only a vague notion of what really happened!

Notice also the difference between the verbs in these two paragraphs. In the first, we have “bit,” “threw,” and “frightened.” Each of these is an ACTIVE verb – that is, each one takes a direct object in the sentence, clause or phrase in which it appears. *Bit* takes *mailman*, *threw* takes *letter bag*, and *frightened* takes *children*.

In the second paragraph, however, none of the verbs takes a direct object. You may also notice that each of these verbs is actually a combination of a “to be” verb and an adjective: *Was bitten*, *was thrown* and *were frightened*. We call these passive verb constructions.

In general, you should AVOID passive verb constructions and sentences in the passive voice whenever possible. Go through your paper and circle all of the instances of the “to be” verb. In each of these cases, see if you can re-write the sentence or clause to include an active verb instead.

2. Use strong, precise verbs (and nouns, too!)

Verbs are the most important words in any sentence and choosing them carefully can do wonders for improving your style. Check the verb in each sentence in your essay to make sure that it says *exactly* what you mean in the most evocative way possible.

John went into the forest.

Is *went* what the author really meant to say here? What does *went* even mean? This sentence is a gigantic missed opportunity for strong, precise language! Here are a dozen better verb choices:

John sprinted into the forest.
John sidled into the forest.
John ambled into the forest.
John staggered into the forest.
John careened into the forest.
John trudged into the forest.

John skipped into the forest.
John loped into the forest.
John trotted into the forest.
John stalked into the forest.
John marched into the forest.
John pranced into the forest.

Notice that each of these verbs means something slightly different! Each one carries specific, unique information about the manner and means of John’s going into the forest, and each one evokes a different response from the reader. Choose your verbs carefully and your readers will thank you for it!

Try this exercise by substituting evocative synonyms for “forest” in the sentence above.

3. “Eschew surplusage!”

This quote from Mark Twain reminds us of one of the most important rules of style: never use three words when two will do the trick. This is a technique at which you will improve as you mature in your writing, but now is a great time to begin working on it. Go through your essay and find places to eliminate unnecessary words, edit phrasing to shorten sentences and clauses, and even eliminate whole sentences that don’t advance the point of a paragraph. This principle is so important that another famous writer, E. B. White, once put it into an ironic dictum of his own: “Condense! Condense! Condense!”

Your assignment should look like this:

Student Name

Age (in years)

Book Title

Assignment #

Due Date

Essay Title

Your final draft should be formatted according to MLA guidelines found at <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/> and summarized in your Writing Procedures document. These include 1" margins left and right; double spaced paragraphs of 12 point type in a readable font such as Times New Roman; a 5-space indent at the beginning of each paragraph with no extra lines between paragraphs; and author-page style citations in parentheses at the end of each quotation.

The first time a text is cited, please include the author's last name and the "page number 'before final punctuation, like this'" (Andrews 65). After you have mentioned the author's name once, don't do it again – simply "include the page number" (43). Use inline quotations unless the quotation will take up more than four lines of your paper; in that case, put the quotation in its own indented paragraph without quotation marks. In a paragraph quote like the following, the parenthetical citation goes AFTER the punctuation, like this:

At the end of your paper, include a separate "Works Cited" page in MLA format. This must be a separate page, even if it seems like a waste of space! You'll only have one work listed, of course, but this is the format you will always use when writing papers at any level, whether high school, college or beyond. (76)

Works Cited

(For a work in translation, use the following format):

Author1Lastname, Author1Firstname, and Author2Firstname

Author2Lastname. *Title of Book*. City of Publication: Publisher, Year
of Publication. Medium of Publication.

Homer, , and Robert Fitzgerald. *The Odyssey*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

Print.

(For a work in English, use the following format):

Lastname, Firstname. *Title of Book*. Year of Original Publication. City of

Publication: Publisher, Year of Publication. Medium of Publication.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Black Arrow*. 1888. New York: Penguin Classics,

2011. Print.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. 1850. New York: Penguin Classics,

2004. Print.