Writing Guidelines for Course Assignments
Joseph Heathcott

Writing is a craft. Like any craft, it takes practice. Even the best authors continually work to improve their prose. In rare cases, writing comes fully formed from the highest spheres, crystalline and perfect, like an Emily Dickinson poem, a James Baldwin novel, a story by Jorge Luis Borges, or a Shakespeare soliloquy. If you are mortal like me, however, your writing is rough, uneven, unpolished--ever a work in progress.

This sheet provides suggestions for successful writing in this course. It is intended primarily to guide you in your completion of assignments, but will help you on all writing projects. There is no simple formula or straightforward approach to good writing. However, these guidelines provide a point of departure, a kind of baseline, for crafting a solid piece of work.

1. This first point has nothing to do with good writing, but does matter in terms of presenting your work. Please be sure to adhere to the minimum format requirements. I cannot accept papers that do not follow the requirements below:

    - Use 1.25" side margins and double-spaced, 12-pt. Times or Times NR font.

    - Head your paper with three lines of single-spaced text in the upper left corner that includes your name, course number/name, and date.

    - Center the paper title above the intro paragraph.

    - Paginate your paper, unless it is only one page. Use format shown in this document, including last name and page x of y.

    - Staple your pages together before turning in the paper.

2. Above all, it is essential that you proofread and edit your work; do not just rely on spell-check. At the very least your paper should be free of grammar and spelling errors. I am not an editorial assistant; the more time that I have to spend on basic editing, the less time I have to evaluate your ideas.

3. Writing assignments in this course require a CRITICAL and INTERPRETIVE perspective. They are NOT opinion papers. Critical means that YOU are the critic, you are the one who evaluates sources, weighs evidence, exercises informed judgment, and provides the reader with a way to think about the material. Your voice will be an important part of your writing.

4. I am less concerned with "right" or "wrong" answers than with how you make your case. Much of the material we cover is complex and open-ended. I want to see you use the readings as sources for your own argument. Thus, you will be graded foremost on your ability to use the material to marshal evidence, to create a coherent argument, and to raise pertinent questions.

5. Clear writing is essential. Use direct language and complete sentences, and avoid run-on sentences. Each paragraph ought to play an effective part in your argument. Do not write paragraphs that jumble ideas or lack transition. Avoid using fancy words if there are simpler words that say the same thing--why say 'utilize' when you can just say 'use'?

6. Shun the passive voice (ex: The passive voice *is to be shunned*.) The passive voice obscures the subject and dilutes agency. Use active sentence and try not to overuse the verb 'to be.'

7. Use precise language when making your claims. Avoid vague, unsubstantiated assertions. Subject every claim to the warrant of evidence, and do not assume something is "common knowledge."

8. Avoid cliché phrases. These are always lazy and usually incorrect. For example, instead of saying "in times gone by" or "throughout history" or "since time immemorial," say "since the mid-nineteenth century" (or whenever).

9. Avoid metonyms, such as using the name of a city to stand for all activities that unfold there. For example, instead of saying "In 1929, Paris adopted slum clearance provisions," say "In 1929, the French national government vested the Prefect of the Seine with the authority to move forward with slum clearance." Instead of saying "In the U.S., the government built public housing" say "In the U.S., the federal government funded state-chartered housing authorities to build public housing."

10. Use non-sexist language, unless quoting or referencing. For example, use "people" or "humanity" instead of "man" or "mankind." Pronouns are more complicated, as there is no established convention for the impersonal pronoun. Instead of using "he/him/his" for an impersonal referent, either use "their" or "theirs" (increasingly acceptable) or alternate using "he/him/his" and "she/her/hers."

11. Watch out for common grammatical, spelling, and editorial errors, such as:

    - Verb tense consistency

    - Pronoun agreement

    - Pronoun drift (make sure reader knows the pronoun reference)

12. EDIT, EDIT, EDIT !!!

13. REPEAT 11.