

Tips for Improving Your Prose

1. Outline before you begin writing.
 - a. The best outlines have at least one line for each paragraph in the paper
 - b. Use the topic sentences for each of the paragraphs included in the outline
 - i. You should be able to trace the logic of your argument through the outline; this is a good way to make sure that your paragraphs flow together to make the point you wish to convey.
2. Use simple words and sentence structures.
 - a. The easiest prose to read – and therefore the kind that is the most effective in conveying the author’s message – is that which relies on relatively simple language and presentation.
 - b. Using big, fancy words often leads to misuse.
 - c. If you are going to use colons and semicolons, make sure that you know the rules for their usage (Use colons in sentences only when you list or describe items; ideally, the list or description should be presented in a complete sentence. Use semicolons when you want to connect two complete thoughts; both parts of the sentence MUST be complete sentences).
 - d. Ernest Hemingway rarely used words with more than three syllables and relied on complex sentence structures even less frequently yet very few who have read his work would dispute the claim that he wrote excellent prose conveying his message quite effectively.
3. Provide citations for all information that is not ‘common knowledge.’
 - a. I don’t care what citation style you use, but be consistent.
 - b. If you are unsure as to how to format your citations, use the library’s reference page on the topic: <http://gethelp.library.upenn.edu/PORT/documentation/>
4. Proofread
 - a. Does your paper answer the question?
 - b. Does your thesis match your conclusions?
 - c. Does the argument flow logically?
 - d. Spellcheck!
 - i. Don’t rely on spellchecking alone; read to make sure that you have typed the correct words (e.g. have you typed ‘fist’ where you meant to type ‘first’?).
 - e. Read the text aloud; you are more likely to notice typographical, spelling, usage, and grammatical mistakes when you hear them.
5. Number your pages!
6. Proofread again!