READING, WEEK 1
Introduction; Chapters 1-4

Introduction

Good writing communicates ideas clearly. It's that simple.

You're reading these words right now in order to be a good writer and communicator in college. And when you read this book all the way through, you can make it happen.

What's so different about college writing? Ah—now that's the question of the day. College writing has a specific purpose. And that purpose is simple: You write to show what you know, while following specific guidelines in format and style. That's it.

The problem is, college writing is full of rules and secrets. Some rules are spoken, some are not. Professors look for specific items, style, and substance to show up and smile in your writing—yet those grinning bits and pieces that are required aren't always shared with the students. "Not fair!" you shout, "I agree!" I join in. And yes, there are secrets to writing well that most of us don't know. I don't like secrets. I have one strong, overriding belief that it's about time that we make writing simple.

I don't like rules; I don't like secrets; I don't like making life complicated. I've long believed that you don't need to read a thousand-page textbook to learn the keys to writing. We don't need to be left out in the barnyard with little chicken scratchings on what's supposed to be a map to college success. College writing success is not as hard as we make it. We need a detailed yet easy-to-follow map. Relax. That map's in your hands.

In fact, the pages that you're holding right now contain what I believe to be the answers to the most common errors and issues in academic writing. What you're about to read originated from moments with real students, like you, in real learning situations, like yours. As a college writing instructor, year after year, the same student mistakes surface. I find myself saying the same things over and over, scribbling the same comments, filling up one more red Word comment box with the phrase, "Avoid ambiguous pronouns; use specific nouns"…over and over (and over). Yes, I unabashedly have an ulterior motive: to lighten my workload because you now know how to write better. But I also have an altruistic idea that writing can be easier than we make it out to be. Let's be honest about the issues. And let's be simple about the answers.

The format of *Simplified Writing 101* is simple: Each chapter has one idea to grasp, and only one—so that you can truly understand and use the idea. Common, real-life college academic writing problems lurk about, ready to pounce and devour your good grade. No worries, guys. With this book, I've got a gun, and it's not aimed at your back.

Excerpt from *Simplified Writing 101: Top Secrets to College Success*
By EB Conroy
For Homeschool Connections, Advanced High School Writing

I'm sure you've noticed: my writing voice is, shall we say, not of the typical how-to-write book. I'm simply not that way. I say, forget the high-fallutin' vocab that English teachers wade through (said tongue in check, because I teach English). Please don't be offended, but writing should be fun. Heck, life should be fun. So enough already with stiff-faced intensity. Contrary to many instructors' beliefs, we can gain knowledge, laugh, and love the experience.

As you read, I have one request: Promise me that you'll ask yourself, *what's the one idea that I'm going to take from this chapter and use in my own writing?* If you can grasp one idea—and *use it*—then you're going to get better.

You see, every semester, two types of students enter (and leave) my writing courses. The first student reads the book, learns the ideas in each chapter, and tries out the ideas. He or she may struggle to execute the ideas, but I can tell that the student *tried*. The first student tends to get the better grade, because the writing gets better over time. The first student can't help but revel in the success. Success begets success.

Not so, for the second type of student. The second student reads the book, puts the book down, and then goes on his or her un-merry way, writing the same way that he or she has written all along. Right up to the final paper in the course, I find the student using the word *this* (my pet peeve) and making me meander through non-linear paragraphs that put the reader into a comatose state or make the reader poke at the paragraph with a stick to see if it's still alive. I wonder, *what happened?* Was the TV blaring? Was she updating her status on Facebook? Did he think that moving his eyes across the lines constituted reading—forgetting that the brain has to engage, mull and muse, make connections, hypothesize where such brilliance could be used in real life, make a bookmark in the brain, and place the new idea at the front of the line so that it can see where to jump in, the next time the fingers run around on the keyboard together?

Please don't be the second, non-changed student. I'm restraining myself from begging. Instead, I'll say one last, "You can do it!"…because I know you can…and reiterate:

Seriously, when you read a chapter, get the idea, and use the idea—you can't fail. And don't follow through to simply humor your instructor, or me, or anyone else. Do it for you. You deserve to be an absolutely fantastic writer who succeeds not only in college—but also in all that you do. Implementation gets you there.

Your writing can be logical, moving, engaging, powerful, and clear. Enjoy the process. Trust me. Learning how to write can be fun, and that's what we're going to do, in the next pages together.

Excerpt from *Simplified Writing 101: Top Secrets to College Success*
By EB Conroy
For Homeschool Connections, Advanced High School Writing

SECTION 1

Word Choice:
The Basic Building Blocks for Superb Sentences

Chapter One

Eradicate Sundry Words of Silliness
(a.k.a. Never use "Never")

For your academic writing to be effective, there are a few words and phrases you'll need to avoid. No, I didn't say, *avoid like the plague*—for that would be a cliché . . . which leads us directly to the first of today's two tips that has to do with words not to use.

First, an excellent writer avoids clichés. The writing universe is full of words. Some words are simple, others are terribly complex, and most words fall in between. Clichés are on the bottom end of the spectrum of an academic writer's skill. To write a cliché, you don't have to work hard (or at all), because a cliché is a worn-out phrase that everyone knows. Clichés have a place in a special kind of writing called copywriting (which is when the writer is trying to purposefully connect to his or her audience in a chummy, cup-of-coffee kind of way). But in academia, clichés don't belong.

As an effective writer, your job is to use our language to its fullest—while still keeping your points and ideas clear and linear. Years ago, you learned that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. As in the line, you must make your writing straight. You must lead the reader along an unswerving path of thoughts that are written out in logical, point-by-point sentences—sentences that are unambiguous and direct. Your writing must be understandable…but not simplistic, mind you. Academic writers write with a certain amount of precision that's neither meager nor lavish. And while traveling along the straight line of academic writing, it's important that while using language to its fullest, you aren't afraid of making the line a different color through a more descriptive word choice.

Second, excellent writers know "The List." Yes, there is a list of words and phrases to avoid. Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style* book uses an entire chapter (the fourth) for "Words and Expressions Commonly Misused" (that's their list). I fondly call my list the no-no word list for academic writing. In comparison, my list is short and sweet. In the university and college programs where I've taught and continue to teach today, no-no list words garishly pop out onto the pages of academic writers—making the students' writing ambiguous, awkward, and flat. You don't want your writing to be ambiguous, awkward, and flat, so you'll want to avoid the words on the list. By all means, it's your duty and privilege to read Strunk and White (at least once every six months). And along with memorizing Strunk and White's wisdom, take note of The List here. Because, with the exception of *very*, *this,* contractions, and redundancy issues, the following list of commonly-misused words and phrases is new.

- **Very.** Nothing needs to be *very* something. It isn't *very big;* it's big. It isn't *very complicated*; it's complicated. It's not *very unfavorable;* it's unfavorable. Be direct. *Very* is a useless word. Take out *very*.
- **Really.** *Really* is similar to *very*; *really* makes an object, action, or descriptor super-sized. We don't need to super-size our writing (think of the word *really* as extra calories). It's not *really exciting*; it's exciting. Again, be direct.
- **Just.** We might as well call *very, really,* and *just* the Three Musketeers. *Just* is the same as its cohorts; we don't need the word. (Notice that I didn't write, *we just don't need the word.*) Copywriters and those who are purposefully trying to build a bridge of warmth between the reader and the writer have special permission to use *just* because the word is used as a technique. As an academic writer, no emotional connection is needed. So avoid the use of the word, *just*.
- **Always and never.** Unless quoting a documented source or noting a proven scientific fact, avoid using *always* and *never*. If need be, qualify issues with *perhaps* or *may*. By all means, if the fact you're citing is truly *always* or *never,* then say so (with the cited source). Be sure.
- **You know.** Actually, the reader may not know. Such a phrase is what's called a *colloquialism*—meaning that most everyone uses such words culturally, as common slang. In academic writing, unless you're purposefully writing a phrase that qualifies as an essay or paper's hook (such as in using a story or personal event), avoid colloquialisms.
- **Like.** *Like* is a colloquialism. The source in your paper isn't *like the best*; it's the best. Many years ago, the word *like* whipped itself into a cultural frenzy with the California Valley Girl trend. Whatever the phrase's family tree, we, as academic writers, need to dig out those roots and throw them away. And if you're using *like* for comparison in a simile ("her skirt flowed like running water"), you're fine.
- **Got or Gotten.** I don't *got* anything. I *have* something. I had not *gotten* it. I *had* it…or owned it…or held it…or discovered it…or something—anything—other than *gotten*. No, he didn't *get it*; he understood. It's not that the CEO of the corporation *got* an answer; she *received* an answer. If you like the word *got* and want it to be part of your life, that's okay with me; I only ask that when you step into academic writing, leave *got* at home, in your everyday conversation—never to appear on your academic essays.
- **A lot.** How much is *a lot*? Perhaps *a significant amount* may do…but then, how much is *a significant amount*? No one knows. The terms are ambiguous. If available, put in a clear and distinct number; if not, change your words. Besides*, a lot* is far from academic terminology. Stay away from writing *a lot* of something.
- **Several.** Here we have the same problem as *a lot*: how much is *several*? Even though the word *several* sounds as if it's academic, it isn't…because *several* is imprecise. Be precise. Use another word.
- **Obviously.** Don't start a sentence with the word, *obviously* (or put the word anywhere else, for that matter). What's obvious to you may not be obvious to the reader. Besides, the word leans toward the writer's superiority, as in, "I get it – don't you?" Nothing is obvious in academic writing. Write with concise, direct, non-personal language.

- **Of course.** Like *obviously*, *of course* smacks of self-righteousness and a holier-than-though attitude from the writer to the reader. Nothing is *of course*; we must clearly write our reasons and explanations, with no assumptions toward the reader. And, to tell you the truth, *of course* is vernacular that takes us out of academia and into shop talk at the back of the factory, hearsay at the water cooler, or, at the minimum, casual how-ya-doin' language in the lounge chair. Leave *of course* out of your papers.

- **Naturally.** Like *obviously* and *of course*, *naturally* makes it sound like anything other than what you're about to say is un-natural, so if your reader has a differing opinion, he or she is left with a feeling of being weird. Your reader is not weird. We simply need to not imply a natural or unnatural relationship. Leave the word *naturally* out.

- **Basically.** *Basically* is a nonsense word. The word makes no sense, in an academic paper. Nothing is *basically* summed up in a conversational statement that includes *basically*. Please—take the word out.

- **Being that, seeing that.** Consider the two phrases not appropriate…and not good grammar. Instead, write *since.*

- **Because.** You've got me here: I know that I'm using *because* throughout this book. Let me explain. The use of the word *because* is a device for something called *Neuro-Linguistic Programming* (NLP), which has to do with persuasive writing. If you're interested in persuasive writing, do find out about NLP—and the power of the word, *because.* The word will help your reader to quickly own your words as truth. But for academic purposes, leave the word *because* out.

- **Felt or feel.** If you're asked to write a paper that includes personal opinion, you might be tempted to write something such as, "I feel that the topic was applicable to current military affairs." Actually, you didn't feel anything (unless you had the hiccups when you were writing). You *believe* the topic is applicable. Use *believe* instead of *feel.* Kinesthetic (or body-oriented) people may take issue with my putting *feel* on The List. That's because, for such persons, life is filtered and processed through touch—and it's hard to talk or write in a non-feely mode. Trust me on this one: take out *feel.* Use *believe.*

- **Think or thought.** "I thought that the topic was applicable" may be acceptable in a journal entry or personal reflective paper. However, for sharing a personal opinion within an academic paper, *believe* is still your best bet for good word choice.

- **Done or do.** Save the word *done* for when you're cooking something in the oven. The Christmas turkey is *done*; everything else in your writing is *complete* or *finished.* In the same way, you don't *do* something; you *accomplish, create,* or *complete* it.

- ***Contractions.*** Contractions are informal; we want formal. Simply write out all contractions into two words. *Don't* becomes *do not. Can't* becomes *cannot. Isn't* becomes *is not.* You get the picture.

- **All of, the fact that/the fact is.** *All of what is needed* can be simply *what is needed. All of the scientists* is simply *all scientists*. And make sure you're physically referring to *all*—and that you can back up the verifiable fact that you're indeed referring to *all* with statistics. Speaking of *the fact that*, we never need to say something like, *the fact that engineers are well educated is important*…or *the reporters stated the fact is—the reporters stated. Engineers are well educated* is concise (and quite sufficient), and

reporters stated is clear and to the point. *All of* and *the fact that* are redundancy issues. In general, use the least amount of words that make your point.

- **This, these, those…and sometimes that.** *This, these, those*…and sometimes *that*…are what I call *pointing words.* Bear with me as I spend a lot of my own words describing why *this, these, those,* and *that* should be avoided. I want to make myself perfectly clear because I can't tell you how many students (and adults) want to cling to using their pointing words. Hear me out. I want you to be an amazing writer. And to be an amazing writer, you'll want to leave *this* home.

  A *pointing word* is an *ambiguous pronoun* that points to words previous (we'll talk about ambiguous pronouns in the next chapter). We avoid ambiguous pronouns because such words make the reader's mind go on a wild search to find the answer, to have the reader go back and ask, *What was "this"? What were "these"? What were "those"? And who or what was "that," anyway?* In academic writing, we don't want the reader's mind to ask a question unless we're going to *answer* the question in the reader's next breath.

  Here's the bottom line reason to avoid pointing words: When our reader asks internal split-second questions ("What is *this*?"), our reader is slowed down. Using the word *this* creates a hitch—a glitch—a bump—a pause—a hold up or delay—in the reader's smoothly-flowing understanding. Granted, one bump is not bad. But if your paper has a bunch of little bumps throughout, the little bumps add up to a lot of uncomfortable-ness for the reader. Unless you can guarantee me that your paper borders on flawlessness, with no other bumps, I can assure you—you can't afford to use *this, these, those,* and sometimes *that.*

  Unless writing a web blog, a conversational trade book, or copy for a sales letter for a bulk mailing or the Internet, save the words *this, these, those*, and *that* for the moment when you can literally point to something.

Right now, as you're sitting there reading, I'm going to point out something that might irritate you. But that's OK. Because I know you're going to get it in a second. Are you ready? Read this:

Don't write like me. I mean, don't write like me, in the way that I'm writing on the pages of this book (yes, I just used the word *this*…and *just*). Because right here, I don't write like I'm telling you to write. There's a reason for my inconsistency . . . and it's not that I want to trick you, offend you, or throw you into confusion. Here's the reason:

All writing is specific to an audience. You are my audience. I'm assuming that you want to get the facts—the tips, tricks, and requisites to great academic writing—in a prompt format, in your own language. Forget the educationese or academicese…because who wants to struggle when trying to learn how to write clearly? I imagine that you're sitting there right now, saying, "Put it to me straight." So, in light of who you are, who I am, and what we're trying to accomplish, I'm using a style designed especially for you, right now, sitting right here, reading these words. I'm putting it straight, in your own day-to-day language, for the highest understanding.

So what *is* this book's style? This book's style is a light but direct, friendly but matter-of-fact, and straight-up—as if I've pulled you aside and said, "OK. Here's the deal…." The word choice, phrases used, and approach are specific and purposeful, with the goal of you and me quickly connecting. Believe me, my *academic* writing style is oh-so-different. If I'm writing an academic paper to a peer review board, or if I'm putting together curriculum for the dean of the university where I teach, I use higher language and follow the content of this book. Always write to your audience. This book helps you to write to *your* audience. And who is your audience? The professor. Simply follow the academic audience's rules.

So remember the list of off-limits words and apply that knowledge to writing for your academic audience. Hone the skill of zapping sundry words of silliness. If your professor is half-good and honest, the grade given reflects your skill. It's true: Professors don't give grades; students earn them.

And though we all enjoy the "A," we know that, in the end, growing our skills as a writer isn't about the grade. It's about communicating well, sharing a piece of ourselves with others, and the meeting of our minds and hearts together.

Chapter Two

Avoid Ambiguous Pronouns
(a.k.a. Keep "Them" Out of It)

Do you remember the definition of a pronoun? Pronouns are words used in place of nouns. Pronouns, by nature, are ambiguous and non-specific. They're fuzzy, unclear, vague, indistinct, indefinite, imprecise, blurry, hazy, unfocussed, and…well, you get the point. When a reader comes upon an ambiguous pronoun, his or her mind automatically asks, "What?" "Who?" or worse yet, "Huh?" If anything (and I mean *anything*) in your academic paper is unclear for the reader, the brain seeks to clarify the information at hand. Questions pop into the reader's mind. Questions can be good or bad. In this case, they're bad. Why? Because. . . .

Ambiguous pronouns clog your paper. The reader's mind has to submit back to the original word that the pronoun stands for. "Submitting back" slows the reader down. That's no good. We want the reader to keep the reading-and-processing momentum flying forward. We don't want the reader to hop, skip, or jump within his or her thoughts, waggling back and forth within a sentence or paragraph. If our work is to capture our reader – grabbing and emotionally pulling and wrapping the reader up into an invisible web that "makes" our reader enthralled and immersed in the page – then it's important to avoid ambiguous pronouns.

Here's a Pronoun Master List, including personal, demonstrative, indefinite, intensive, interrogative, and reflexive pronouns. You don't need to know what all of those strange terms in the previous sentence mean; you do need to know which words *are* the pronouns – and how to cleverly and clearly rearrange your paper without these pesky little guys.

one, few, several, all
another, others
many, any, anybody, anyone, anything
both, each
either, neither
everybody, everyone, everything
he, his, him, himself
she, her, hers, herself
it, its, itself
I, me, mine, my, myself
Nobody, none, no one, nothing
our, ours, ourselves
Some, somebody, someone, something
that, these, this, those
their, theirs, them, themselves, they

us, we
what, which, who, whom, whose
you, your, yours, yourself, yourselves

Here's an example of a sentence with ambiguous pronouns: "When we pray for those who mistreat us, our perspective changes. He shows us his compassion for them."

Hmmm. . . In those two sentences, I see nine pronouns: we, those, who, us, our, he, us, his, and them. That's quite a few. So tell me: Who exactly is "He"? *Whose* compassion are we talking about? Who are "them"? We can guess that the word "them" refers to those who mistreat us…but it might take a moment to realize the exact owner of the ambiguous title, "them."

While reading the ambiguous pronoun sentence above, did your brain subtly double back, to gain clarity? The doubling-back process might take a millisecond, but that millisecond is wasted time. Put too many of these millisecond-wasting ambiguous pronouns in your paper, and the reader's brain feels uncomfortable from the "extra work." The reader may not know why he or she feels uncomfortable, but the discomfort is distinct. And in that discomfort, you professor yawns and the grade goes down.

How do we fix the ambiguous sentence above? Try this cluster of sentences: "When we pray for those who mistreat us, what happens? Our perspective changes. While in prayer, God shows us *His* compassion for the person who wronged us. That compassion filters down into our own hearts, ultimately changing our minds toward God's thoughts. What a totally revolutionary concept: God's thoughts in us! God's thoughts create in us new understanding, new emotions, and new attitudes. Within that implanted newness, we are free to act differently – free from the "old" way of thinking. We can now choose to respond in love and integrity. The original "wrong" that plunged its blade deep into our heart no longer hurts us."

You might be thinking, "Whoa! We went from two sentences to nine!" Yes, the second cluster of sentences uses many more words than the first two sentences. More words aren't always better. However, in this case, it is better. How do we know? The writer's intent is now clear. Isn't clarity our goal? Yes.

But now we open a new box of questions: For optimum clarity, how many words do we use? We know that ambiguous pronouns clog up the page. But too many words lose the reader in la-la-land, too. How much is too little? How much is too much? Yikes!

Here's the answer: Use only the amount of words that allow you to connect with your reader – no more and no less. How do you know if you have "enough" or "too many" words? Let a few people read your work, then ask. Most people readily share an opinion. Put the writing away for a while, then go back later and read it out loud. Does the line of thinking skip a point? Would adding a word make your reader understand your point more clearly? Then put more words in. Or, when you read your work again, do you feel like you're wandering around, wallowing in

extra words? Then take some words out. Go back to the intent of your writing: clear communication of ideas for understanding.

When it comes to ambiguous pronouns, the bottom line remains: In order to create clarity, we must find those scrawny ambiguous pronoun weeds and zap them out of our papers.

Does that mean we *never* use pronouns? This is one of those times when we "never say never." The simple answer is "no." Take a look at the sentence in the last paragraph. The word "them" is close to the phrase, "ambiguous pronoun weeds"; because of the words' close proximity, it works.

I know what some of you are asking: "But what happens when I take out the word "them" (my ambiguous pronoun) and put in the specific word again and again? Won't that make my writing simplistic and repetitive? Ah, think again; I believe you to be much cleverer than that.

Let's get to the nitty-gritty and look at this example. The sentences are a part of a paragraph that uses too many pronouns:

> The company was founded in 1965. Its goals and vision changed in 1982 and again in 1991. In 2004, they returned to their roots, forming its present "Statement of Purpose."

(Did you find yourself "doubling back" to figure out the meaning of "its" "they" and "them"?)

Now look at the following. It's a "fixed version" that takes out the pronouns – and puts in one specific phrase, "the company":

> The company was founded in 1965. The company's goals and vision changed in 1982 and again in 1991. Then, in 2004, the company returned to its roots. Bringing back its original goals and vision, the company formed its present "Statement of Purpose."

Now I can hear you saying under your breath, "Isn't using the same phrase ("the company") over and over ridiculously repetitive?" Yes, it is. You're right: We exchanged one problem (ambiguous pronouns) for another (too much repetition of a word or phrase). *Now* what?

Well, who says you have to use the words, "the company" so many times? What if you use the *specific name* of the company? What if you write "the company" once, and the next time the word comes around, you use the word "organization" or "corporation" (which is another way to say, "the company")? And finally, what if you get downright daring and restructure the whole thing to include a few clauses. Giving specifics to "set up" the information more clearly, taking out the need for pronouns *and* repetition?

Let's see what the information looks like now:

Founded in 1965 by Peter J. Smith, the National Widget Corporation developed foundational goals that guided the business for many years. In 1982 and again in 1991, the organization's goals and vision changed to incorporate concepts originating from Total Quality Management (TQM). Finally, in 2004, the company returned to its organizational roots by sculpting a "Statement of Purpose" designed around the original writings of the company's founder.

What makes the previous paragraph well-written? The ambiguous pronouns are few. There are new details that clarify information. The "flow" of the information is linear. And there's a "bookend" technique used, where a specific phrase or word (in this case, "founded" and "founder") is placed in both the first and last sentence. The result? Continuity and a feeling of completion in the reader.

So your ongoing assignment is clear: The more you practice "finding" ambiguous pronouns in your writing (and eradicating them), the clearer – and less redundant – your papers will be.

Go back to the beginning of the chapter and read the Pronoun Master List again. Commit the list to memory. Next time one of these fuzzy words pop onto your page, you can hit the delete button and write something more specific.

Chapter Three

Don't "You" Do It; Keep Proper Formal Distance
(a.k.a. "It's Nothing Personal")

When addressing your audience, word choice matters.** Words can draw our reader in or push the reader away. Certain words in our language are "pushy" words. "Pushy" is not polite. "Pushy" is definitely not endearing. And "pushy" does not create the mental and emotional connection that we want with our reader. This chapter identifies academically-flawed, stylistically-improper, sometimes potent and forceful, and even loud-mouthed words that give our reader the wrong perception – and take our work out of the realm of "academic."

The first culprits are the words "you" and "your." In academic writing, leave these two words out. Why? It's simple: "You" and "your" are too personal. Academic writing is not meant to be personal. Academic writing keeps a formal distance from the reader. As academic writers, we have to be "proper" (think, "talking to the Queen of England"). In particular, the word, "you" is a highly-direct word, as if pointing to a person and saying, "Hey – you!" The word can create defensiveness, causing a "Who – me?" response. We don't want defensiveness. We want to write within the academic perspective: upper-level without condescending haughtiness, refined and well-mannered, separate emotionally yet intellectually connected at the highest levels of communication.

For academic papers and essays, we write in a straightforward manner. We address our reader and our topic by "stepping back" and referring to the issues *outside of ourselves*. We speak about "the problem," not "your problem." As an academic writer, because we're purposefully fashioning a place of "proper positioning," we write without "you" and "your."

The words "I" and "we" are the same: personal. For upper-level academic writing, close-and-personal is "out," professional and emotionally separate is "in." In your academic work, unless quoting a source's verbal communication, "I" and "we" don't exist. I don't refer to myself; I refer to "the researcher." I didn't come to a conclusion; I simply state, "The results indicate…." Now, if you're reading current research, you'll notice that there's a new trend toward personal language. When you're a rich-and-famous researcher, a celebrity of academia, or a writer transmitting your heady information into text for a popular magazine, feel free to "go personal" with "I" and "we."

Of course, in higher learning institutions, there are two exceptions to this personal-language thing. First, if a professor asks you to write a personal opinion, you absolutely have to use the words "I" and "we." Because in an opinion paper, *I believe* certain things to be true, so *I* have to speak. Second, in an essay's "hook" or "send off statement," we can use personal language as a technique. We'll cover that in another Chapter. For now, remember this: Within the non-quoted material – that material that you mentally conjure up and plunk down onto the keyboard – avoid "I" and "we."

Another word to generally avoid is "must." When you tell someone he or she "must" do something (whatever that something is), the typical response from your reader is defensiveness. That's human nature. Even if the reader experiences an itsy-bitsy feeling of discomfort, it behooves us to not give the reader *any* reason to balk. I want my reader to be with me all the way – don't you?

Are there circumstances where "must" works? There *are* rule-breakers – situations where a writer must use "must"…such as describing instructions for a scientific experiment that could blow up if you don't carefully follow steps one, two, and three. However, for the most part, take "must" out of your papers and essays.

"Should" is a cousin to "must"; therefore, take it out. "Should" also creates defensiveness. When someone tells us that we *should* do something (even if we *really* should), we get ruffled. And then, when someone who we *don't know very well* (or *at all*) tells us that we *should* do something – watch out! The reader becomes oppositional. He or she puts a stiff arm out toward the exact point that we're trying to make. Oy! That's no good. We want the reader on our side, nodding his or her head up and down while reading. If the word "should" takes our reader's hand and leads our reader into the defensiveness camp, it's wise to keep the reader from meeting "should" in the first place. I consider "must" and "should" loud-mouthed words that I don't want my paper to spend time with.

"Need to" creates even more defensiveness. The reader says, "Who *says* I *need* to?" Again, unless quoting a source, better words and phrases include "so-and-so recommends," "research suggests," and "considerations may include."

Now here's an interesting fact about "should" and "need to": You can – and should – quote a reputable source stating that the reader *should* or *needs to* do something (There – I just did it, didn't I? And I wrote "just" too, within this book's style…but let's get back to the material at hand). In quoted material, "should" and "need to" become our best friends. How? Statements from reputable sources – telling us that something *should* happen, we *should* do something a certain way, and that we *need to* follow steps A, B, and C for best results – sturdily support our argument. It's good to know that the stronger the statement, the more broad-shouldered the support stands under our ideas. Remember: We allow experts to state the imperative, not us. In an argumentative paper or research report, the expert's opinion is the end-all. Well-researched material creates the pillars under our argument; the strong quote can be the keystone in the arch of our argument.

Last, avoid taking an elementary teacher's posture, telling the reader what you're going to write. "In this paper, I will…" is a no-no. And on the opposite end of our paper, at the conclusion, don't state, "In this paper, I have shown you." We know what we read.

Why not use this "technique" for starting and ending a paper? First, for reasons already discussed, that personal word ("I") doesn't belong. Second, as my favorite high school drama teacher used to say, "Just spit it out." Don't tell me that you're going to start the paper. Start the

paper. Don't tell me what you showed me. I know. Give me credit. And give all of your readers credit.

The moment of reading another's writing is a moment of conversation. Right now, you and I are "talking together" (figuratively, of course). This creation of a moment in time together is a dynamic that's truly amazing. It's a conversational moment that makes reading and writing fantastically timeless. Within the timeless conversational dynamic between a writer and a reader, I can "have a conversation with" Abraham Lincoln, discuss theology with St. Augustine, and cry out to God with King David of the Bible. The written word is powerful. Let's choose words that communicate well. Let's "speak together" directly. And with academic writing, let's choose words that allow us to relate fittingly within the scholastic realm.

Chapter Four

Use the "Higher" Word
(a.k.a. "Be a British Broadcaster")

In academic writing, take word choice to a higher level. What do I mean by "higher level"? Let's talk about it.

Have you ever held a mongo-sized dictionary? You know the kind that I'm talking about; it's the kind of dictionary that, if raised and lowered in repetitions, qualifies as training equipment for Olympic weight lifting. It's the dictionary with the brittle brown cover that sits on the pedestal at the old library in town and smells a bit of must. If you open the pages and randomly stick your finger onto a page, the chances that you *don't* recognize the word under your digit (let alone know its definition) are super high. When viewing the mongo dictionary, we either stand in awe or want to run away.

The point is, the English language is full of an incredible amount of words from which to choose. Our range of word choice runs along the scale from back-alley slang to scientific audiences (where individual members hold, at a minimum, three PhDs). In verbal and written communication, each audience has its own word bank. Within that word bank, "acceptable" words sit, ready to be withdrawn.

Scholars have a word bank too. The sooner you learn which words are stashed in the bank, the sooner you can withdraw and use them. And the better your papers and essays will be.

In general, scholarly writing uses "higher" words. A good way to determine whether or not a word qualifies as "higher" is to take the word through what I call "The British Broadcaster Test." Imagine this: A proper gentleman and a pencil-suited woman – our British Broadcasters – sit side-by-side in front of studio cameras. The pair is perched straight-backed and tall, each with hands clasped politely. Smiling with pursed lips, slightly cocked heads, and deliberate blinks, the two broadcasters perform perfectly: the man and woman alternately address the cameras with purposeful word choice – pronouncing each carefully-chosen word in a beautifully-articulated British accent. One word describes it all: proper. If the word you're thinking of writing on your page is proper enough to be used by these two, your word probably leans toward "higher language." The British Broadcaster method of checking word choice is simplistic and far from scientific. But, as a "quick test," it works.

Another key principle lies in the British Broadcaster analogy: Broadcast language is precise. No matter what your word choice, don't say the same thing over and over again, only in different ways, using different words, re-phrasing your point, repeating your position, re-stating information, duplicating expressions and terminology, turning the phrase and the idea in, out, and around on the paper because you found one more "cool" way to say it in Roget's Thesaurus (like I purposefully did in the previous sentence). You're boring the reader. Be precise.

Here are some examples of "higher word choice":

- The man didn't *talk about it*; he *communicated.*
- The woman didn't *go somewhere*; she *traveled.*
- The building wasn't *all right to use*; it was *an acceptable facility.*
- The graph didn't *come with* the report; the graph *accompanied* the report.
- The evidence wasn't *pulled together*; *the source gathered* or *assembled* the evidence.
- The *newspaper* didn't *run* an article; the *news publication* (or the specific newspaper's name, such as *The Washington Post) published* the *specific* (name it here) article.
- The *person* didn't *quit*; the *individual ceased to be employed within the organization* (OK, that one might be stretching it a bit…).
- The book didn't *tell us* (after all, books don't talk); the *source* is *quoted as stating.*

Which brings us to an important point: When quoting a source, the word "stated" is a key word. The source didn't *say*; the source *stated*. Quotations from reputable sources are vital – intended to be waving flags of importance. Excerpts from experts are our written work's head-turners and turning-points. Properly placed within a well-sculpted paragraph, academic writers skillfully fashion the placement of quoted material into places within the text that make the reader's eyebrows lift in thoughtful consideration. Yes, the passage from the reliable source *works* for us; it is the foundational evidence leading the reader into a conclusion – *our* conclusion. So….In this paragraph about the word, "stated," why am I going on and on, singing the praises of first-class citations? Here's why: Because of the pivotal influence of solid citations, every word counts. The words within the phrases *around* the quote taint or polish our quote. If Mr. Peter Smith, President of the Excellence Company, *said* something, that's fine. But if he *stated* it, that's better. Believe it or not, that little detail-of-a-word gives a new aura to the atmosphere of your cited content.

However, writers beware! We can get carried away with using "higher words" and lose touch with the reader and reality. If it's easy to "write under" our academic audience, it's just as easy to "write over." In fact, with the worldwide explosion of Internet accessibility, academic writing may be changing. The Internet is setting the pace and tone for many aspects of a written work's style and readability. Declaring that scholarly writing is too heady, some academic writing sources (including university help stations) are heralding a call for conciseness and clarity. Horrified of what is feared to be the "dumbing-down" of writing style and content, purists stand toe-to-toe against change. Undoubtedly, time will sift the debate and conclusions will remain.

Remember: *Anyone* can "get by" using that right-click-on-"Synonyms" thesaurus. But there's something better. It's called growing your skills and abilities. Read others' academic writings. Read an academic peer-reviewed journal article or two (or ten). Ask professors for examples of "A" papers and see what words "work well" in others' scholarly works. As an academic writer, expand and master a higher vocabulary.

In the meantime, use appropriate "higher language" and write like a British Broadcaster. Concomitantly, circumvent supercilious inscriptions responsible for perplexing wording and excessive phraseology. You'll lose the reader. And besides, it taxes the brain. If your reader has

to re-read your text in order to understand a string of "big words," then change your word choice. We have plenty of words to choose from.