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Some Matters of Style: Some Suggestions for Writing in PPT and Philosophy

1. Sentence fragments

Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences, i.e., phrases that fail to state a proposition. Sentence fragments may have their place in poetry and informal contexts. For papers in this course, however, use complete sentences.

Avoid: Plato wrote the *Lysis*. An aporetic work of philosophy. [“An aporetic work of philosophy” is a sentence fragment.]

Avoid: Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of friends. Utility friends; pleasure friends; and virtue friends.

[Instead, use a colon at the end of the first sentence.]

2. Comma splices

A comma splice consists of two complete sentences that are joined, or spliced, with a comma. Either recast comma splices into one complete sentence, or break them into two complete sentences. (Similarly, avoid splicing two sentences together with a dash.)

Avoid: Confucius’ model of humanity is the *junzi*, he thinks that one develops ethically through ritual practice.

3. Run-ons

A run-on sentence is a combination of complete sentences that lacks proper punctuation.

Avoid: *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* was a major influence on Daniel Defoe thus it influenced modern European literature. [Instead: *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* was a major influence on Daniel Defoe. Thus, it influenced modern European literature.]

4. Overlong sentences

Give your reader a break. Break up longer sentences into shorter, more easily parsed sentences. Generally, avoid sentences that go on for four or more lines. Even shorter sentences, however, are punchier when you break them up.

Avoid: Although Baier contends that love is an emotion-complex that holds between two or more people, Brogaard, by contrast, insists that love is simply an emotion and thus, she denies Baier’s view on the grounds that a single individual can feel the emotion of love, as happens in cases of unrequited love, and in cases in which the lover feels love for a dead person or a hallucinated object.

[Perhaps: Baier contends that love is an emotion-complex that holds between two or more people. Brogaard, by contrast, insists that love is simply an emotion. She denies Baier’s view on the grounds that a single individual can feel the emotion of love. In making her case, Brogaard considers cases of unrequited love, and cases in which the lover feels love for a dead person or a hallucinated object.]

5. Unclear referents

When using words like “it” and “this,” clarify the referent. What is clear in spoken speech (with the help of hand gestures and vocal intonation) often confuses in written speech.

Avoid: Being too dependent on one’s computer makes it difficult to maintain one’s lifestyle if it breaks down. [What is “it”? The computer? The lifestyle?]

Avoid: Mengzi argues that human nature is good. He thinks that certain predispositions are inherent in human nature. This is controversial. [What is “this”? Mengzi’s view about human nature? The thought that certain predispositions are inherent in human nature? The conjunction of those views? The claim that Mengzi, in particular, held both of those views?]

Avoid: The creation of property led to the destruction of equality, causing a disordered society in which conflict became increasingly widespread. Rousseau argues that this disadvantaged both the rich and the poor. [What exactly disadvantaged the rich and the poor? Was it the creation of property? The disordered society? The resulting widespread conflict? All of the above?]

6. Comma issues

Review proper use of commas. A guide:

<http://www.grammarly.com/handbook/punctuation/comma/>.

Avoid: The law should be established to reward works beneficial to the state, e.g. farming and military service and to punish unruly behaviours such as laziness. [A comma after “service” sets off the examples of farming and military service.]

Avoid: Hobbes however argues that the state of nature is a horror show. [Set off the “however” with commas: “Hobbes, however, argues....”]

7. Dangling modifiers

Modifiers are words or phrases that regulate the meaning of other words or phrases in a sentence. *Dangling* modifiers lack referents elsewhere in the sentence. Make sure that your reader knows who is doing what in your sentences.

Avoid: Gandhi would argue that Singapore is plagued by modern civilization, causing unhappiness in society. [Who or what exactly is causing unhappiness? Not Gandhi, right? “Causing” is a dangling modifier. Recast.]

Avoid: Based on Kant’s lecture on friendship, Baier argues that Kant is a misamorist. [Baier herself is not “based on” Kant’s lecture. Instead: use “on the basis of.” For Kant’s lecture provides the basis for Baier’s arguing for the position she holds.]

8. Wordiness

Cut needless words. Avoid too many editorializing expressions, e.g., indeed, in fact, to be sure.

Avoid: Nevertheless, it is not strictly accurate to dismiss technology as wholly disadvantageous. [Perhaps: Technology, however, has its benefits.]

Avoid: Indeed, according to the Confucian model, there are seven cultural arts that the *junzi* should practice. [Perhaps: Confucians hold that the *junzi* should practice the seven cultural arts. Generally, “there is” and “there are” add extra words.]

Avoid: The increase in our lack of happiness is caused by the fact that technology has advanced rapidly. [Perhaps: Technology’s rapid advances have increased our unhappiness. See also (10) on the passive voice. Generally, avoid “the fact that.”]

Avoid: The reason why Descartes doubts the validity of the senses is because he seeks certain knowledge. [Perhaps: Descartes doubts the validity of the senses because he seeks certain knowledge. Generally, avoid sentences of the form “The reason why . . . is because . . .”]

9. Nominalizations

Nominalizations are nouns made from verbs. They usually end in –ion, -ness, and -ment. Writing teacher Helen Sword calls them “zombie nouns” (http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/zombie-nouns/?_r=0). While nominalizations are syntactical and have their proper place in academic writing, too many of them can suck the life out of your prose. If your sentences include lots of words that end in –ion, ness, and –ment, aim to rewrite. (Nominalizations, wordiness, and the passive voice live in the same dreary neighborhood.)

Avoid: The dissolution of the instantiation relation occurs on the condition that the particular no longer has participation in the Form.

Avoid: This view on when unilateral dissolution of friendship is justified is consistent with Aristotle’s other views. [Instead, perhaps: This view on when one may unilaterally dissolve a friendship coheres with Aristotle’s other views.]

10. Passive voice

It has its place. But for the sake of clarity and concision, you can often avoid it.

Avoid: In Mill, opinions are categorized as true, false, and partly true. [Perhaps: Mill categorizes opinions as false, true, and partly true. The rewritten version clarifies exactly *who* is doing the categorizing.]

Avoid: Allusions to *Alcibiades* 133c can be seen in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9. [Perhaps: *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9 alludes to *Alcibiades* 133c.]

11. Singular/plural agreement

For a singular noun, use a singular pronoun and verb. For a plural noun, use a plural pronoun and verb.

Avoid: Liang Qichao believes that the weak often fail to defend its rights. [“The weak” here functions as a plural. The plural verb is okay, but the “its” is singular. Change “its” to “their.”]

12. Pronoun agreement

Keep the person and number of your pronouns consistent. Be careful how you use the impersonal pronoun “one.”

Avoid: When you think about friendship, one wonders about love. [Instead: When you think about friendship, you wonder about love.]

Avoid: When one wonders about love, they think about hate. [Instead: When one wonders about love, one thinks about hate.]

Avoid: You must see yourself as existing to serve the needs of society. Only then will our lives have meaning. [For the second sentence: Only then will your life have meaning.]

13. Argument lingo

Validity: Arguments are valid when they logically entail their conclusion. If all the premises of a valid argument are true, then the argument's conclusion must be true. Arguments are invalid when they do not entail their conclusion. Hence, an invalid argument is a chain of reasoning whose premises can all be true, but whose conclusion can be false.

Soundness: Arguments are sound when they are valid arguments with all true premises. Arguments are unsound when they are invalid or when any of their premises are false.

Premises: An argument's premises are true or false.

One argues for a thesis, view, position, conclusion, etc. One criticizes a thesis by raising objections against it. Or, one can criticize an argument for a thesis. One defends a thesis or argument against objections.

For further discussion, see <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/vocab/validity.html>.

Avoid: Premise #3 – “Zebras are reptiles” – is invalid. [Instead: premise #3 is false.]

Avoid: In reply, Mill can defend that he would actually forbid incitement to violence. [Perhaps: “Against this objection, Mill can respond...”]

Avoid: Aristotle's argument on the existence of a first mover proceeds as follows. [Similarly, avoid “argument of.” Instead: use “argument for.”]

Avoid: Aristotle's argument for the existence of a first mover is illogical. [Instead: specify whether the argument is invalid or unsound.]

Avoid: Mill's philosophy on free speech is that non-violent expression is permissible. [Perhaps: Mill holds that non-violent expression is permissible. Avoid “philosophy on.”]

Avoid: Butler's argument is that gender is performative. [Perhaps: Butler's thesis is that gender is performative. Or perhaps: Butler argues that gender is performative. Distinguish (i) an author's claim, view, or conclusion from (ii) the premises and chain of reasoning—the argument—with which she defends that claim, view, or conclusion.]

Deconstruct: Deconstruction is a school of French literary theory popularized by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). To deconstruct a text is to analyze a text using methods like Derrida's. To analyze or criticize an argument or position is not necessarily to deconstruct it.

Avoid: In this paper, I will deconstruct Mozi’s “caretaker argument” for inclusive care. I argue, contrary to Mozi, that we do not have better reason to choose an impartial caretaker over a partial one. (Instead of using the flashy “deconstruct,” use the simpler and more accurate “criticize.” If, however, you’re offering a Derridean reading of Mozi, that’s another story!)

Refute: In philosophy, to refute is to offer a convincing, knock-down rebuttal to, or objection against, a view. To refute a view is not simply to contest or oppose a view. (*The Straits Times* often uses “refute” in a looser way. Thus, the headline of an article about Manchester United football players: “Pellegrini refutes Neville claim on defence strategy.”)

14. Contentious phrasing

Avoid rhetorical boosts like “clearly,” “obviously,” and “surely.” A professor of mine used to circle these words when he came across them in books and papers. As he observed, they usually introduced their authors’ fuzziest, least obvious, and most controversial claims.

15. Unnecessary hedging

You don’t want to be too controversial. Fair enough. But make determinate claims.

Avoid: Against Descartes’s view of human nature, it could be argued that one cannot bifurcate the world into extended and non-extended substance. [Yes, this point “could be argued.” But if you’re pressing this worry against Descartes, press it confidently.]

Avoid: Arguably, then, Descartes’s view of human nature is problematic. [If you’re criticizing Descartes’s view, criticize it. Cut the “arguably.”]

Avoid: Therefore, Descartes’s view of human nature might seem to be untenable. [If you’re arguing that Descartes’s view *is* untenable, then argue for that point.]

16. The historical present

When you’re presenting a view, even a view from the ancient past, use the present tense.

Avoid: In *On the Soul*, Aristotle held that a living organism was a composite of form (the soul) and matter (the body).

[Instead: In *On the Soul*, Aristotle holds that a living organism is a composite of form (the soul) and matter (the body).]

17. Patchwork quoting

Instead of quoting lots of small chunks of text, quote selectively. Paraphrase less important points.

Avoid: Since “the natural aspiration of the people” is to “move toward security and benefit and avoid danger and poverty” (349), a good ruler must “use the people’s strength” and “prohibit useless activities” so that “people exhaust every ounce of their strength in obedience to their superior” (347).

Avoid Zagat restaurant review prose style. See, e.g., <https://www.zagat.com/r/pearl-oyster-bar-new-york1>.

18. Indentation

Indent each new paragraph of your paper. In an essay, there's no need to insert spaces between each paragraph.

19. Words to note

Rationalize: To rationalize is to attempt to justify some questionable belief or behavior retroactively with the veneer of good reasons. For instance: "The boorish host rationalized his rude behavior by insisting that his assaultive questions built character."

To rationalize is not necessarily to explain. *Avoid*: The biologists rationalized why fruit flies lay so many eggs. Likewise, to rationalize is not simply to use reason. *Avoid*: In *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, Aristotle argues that the human function is to rationalize.

As such: Don't use as a substitute for "hence," "thus," or "therefore."

Okay: President Tan is the chief executive of Yale-NUS. As such, President Tan has the authority to direct institutional policies. [The "as such" here has an identifiable antecedent, namely, "chief executive of Yale-NUS." *As the chief executive of Yale-NUS*, in other words, President Tan has a certain authority.]

Avoid: Vasubandhu must establish the truth of that controversial premise. But he simply assumes it. As such, Vasubandhu's argument is unpersuasive. [As what, exactly? Here, the "as such" has no identifiable antecedent.]

Due to/because of: Because of (not: Due to) our parents' care for us, we owe our parents filial obligations. [Actually, I'd probably just rewrite to avoid wordiness.]

Okay: The persuasiveness of Hursthouse's argument is due to her compelling, real-life examples. [Here, "due to" is synonymous with "attributable to."]

20. Citation

Italicize the titles of whole works. (Italicize, e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics*.) Do not italicize book or chapter numbers. (*Avoid*: In *Book VIII*, Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of friendship.) Refer to journal article or chapter titles in quotation marks. (Thus: In "Unsafe Loves," Annette Baier asks whether love is worth the risks.) Hence, do not italicize journal article or chapter titles. (*Avoid*: In *Unsafe Loves*, Annette Baier asks whether love is worth the risks.) In your bibliography, adopt the same practices.

When using parenthetical in-text citations, cite first, and then use a period. For example: As Tan asserts, "the teacher-learner relationship involved is nevertheless far from one-directional" (Tan 118).

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