Chapter 11

Guidelines on Style, Mechanics, and Language Usage

The previous two chapters dealt with general issues involved in writing a literature review. This chapter presents guidelines that focus on more specific issues related to style, mechanics, and language usage. These issues are important in producing a draft that is free of mechanical errors.

✓ Guideline 1: Compare your draft with your topic outline.

The topic outline you prepared after reading Chapter 8 traced the path of the argument for the literature review. Now that your first draft is completed, compare what you have written with the topic outline to make sure you have properly fleshed out the path of the argument.

✓ Guideline 2: Check the structure of your review for parallelism.

The reader of a literature review, especially a long, complex review, needs to be able to follow the structure of the manuscript while internalizing the details of the analysis and synthesis. A topic outline will typically involve parallel structural elements. For instance, a discussion of weaknesses will be balanced by a discussion of strengths, arguments for a position will be balanced by arguments against, and so on. These expectations on the part of the reader stem from long-standing rhetorical traditions in academic writing. Therefore, you need to check your manuscript to make sure that your descriptions are balanced properly. This may require that you explain a particular lack of parallelism, perhaps by stating explicitly that no studies were found that contradict a specific point (see Guideline 10 in Chapter 9 if this applies to your review).

✓ Guideline 3: Avoid overusing direct quotations, especially long ones.

One of the most stubborn problems for novice academic writers in the social and behavioral sciences is the overuse of quotations. This is understandable, given the heavy emphasis placed in college writing classes on the correct use of the conventions for citing others' words. In fact, there is nothing inherently wrong with using direct quotations. However, problems arise when they are used inappropriately or indiscriminately.

A direct quotation presented out of context may not convey the full meaning of the author's intent. When a reader struggles to understand the function of a quotation in a review, the communication of the message of the review is interrupted. Explaining the full context of a quotation can further confuse the reader with details that are not essential

for the purpose of the review at hand. By contrast, paraphrasing the main ideas of an author is usually more efficient and makes it easier to avoid extraneous details. In addition, paraphrasing eliminates the potential for disruptions in the flow of a review due to the different writing styles of various authors.

Finally, it is seldom acceptable to begin a literature review with a quotation. Some students find it hard to resist doing this. Remember that it is usually very difficult for the reader to experience the intended impact of the quotation when it is presented before the author of the literature review has established the proper context.

✓ Guideline 4: Check your style manual for correct use of citations.

Make sure you check the style manual used in your field for the appropriate conventions for citing references in the text. For instance, the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2010) specifies the following guidelines for citations.

a. You may formally cite a reference in your narrative in one of several ways. At the conclusion of a statement that represents someone else's thoughts, you cite the author's last name and the year of publication, separated by a comma, set off in parentheses, as in this example: (Doe, 2012). If you use the author's name in the narrative, simply give the year of publication in parentheses immediately following the name, as in "Doe (2012) noted that…."
b. When you cite multiple authors' names in parentheses, use the ampersand (&) instead of the word *and*. If the citation is in the narrative, use the word *and*.
c. Use semicolons to separate multiple citations in parentheses, as in this example: (Black, 2011; Brown, 2012; Green, 2011).
d. When you cite a secondary source, be sure you have made it clear, as in this example: (Doe, as cited in Smith, 2012). Note that only Smith (2011) would be placed in the reference list.

✓ Guideline 5: Avoid using synonyms for recurring words.

The focus of a review of empirical research should be on presenting, interpreting, and synthesizing other writers' ideas and research findings as clearly and precisely as possible. This may require you to repeat words that describe routine aspects of several studies. Students who are new to academic writing sometimes approach the task as though it were a creative writing exercise. *It is not!* Literature reviews should include information about many studies (and other types of literature), all of which readers should be able to internalize quickly. Therefore, it is important to adhere to the use of conventional terms, even if they should recur. Clarity is best achieved when the writer consistently uses conventional terms throughout, especially when referring to details about a study's methodology or some other technical aspect of the research.

In general, it is best not to vary the use of labels. For instance, if a study deals with two groups of participants, and the researcher has labeled them Groups 1 and 2, you should usually avoid substituting more creative phrases (e.g., "the Phoenix cohort" or "the original group of youngsters"). On the other hand, if alternative labels help to clarify a study's design (e.g., when Group 1 is the control group and Group 2 the experimental

group), use the substitute expressions instead, but remain consistent throughout your discussion. Example 11.5.1 illustrates how the use of synonyms and "creative" sentence construction can confuse readers. At various points, the first group is referred to as the "Phoenix cohort," as "Group I," and as the "experimental group," which is bound to cause confusion. Example 11.5.2 is an improved version in which the writer consistently uses the terms *experimental group* and *control group* to identify the two groups.

Example 11.5.1
Inconsistent use of identifying terms:

The Phoenix cohort, which was taught to correctly identify the various toy animals by name, was brought back to be studied by the researchers twice, once after 6 months and again at the end of the year. The other group of youngsters was asked to answer the set of questions only once, after 6 months, but they had been taught to label the animals by color rather than by name. The performance of Group I was superior to the performance of Group II. The superior performance of the experimental group was attributed to....

Example 11.5.2
Improved version of Example 11.5.1:

The experimental group was taught to identify toy animals by color and was retested twice at 6-month intervals. The control group, which was taught to identify the toys by name, was retested only once after 6 months. The performance of the experimental group was superior to the performance of the control group. The superior performance of the experimental group was attributed to....

✓ Guideline 6: Spell out all acronyms when you first use them, and avoid using too many.

So many acronyms have become part of our everyday lexicon that it is easy to overlook them during the editing process. Some examples are school acronyms, such as UCLA and USC; professional acronyms, such as APA and MLA; and acronyms from our everyday lives, such as FBI, FDA, and GPA. As obvious as this guideline may seem, it is quite common to find these and other examples of acronyms that are never spelled out. Make sure you check your document carefully for acronyms and spell them out the first time you use them.

Sometimes, it is useful to refer to something by its acronym, especially if its full title is long and you need to refer to it several times. For instance, the Graduate Writing Assessment Requirement for students in the California State University system is commonly referred to as the GWAR. In general, you should avoid using too many acronyms, especially ones that are not commonly recognized, like GWAR. In a complex literature review, using a few acronyms may be helpful, but using too many may be confusing.

✓ Guideline 7: Avoid the use of contractions. They are inappropriate in formal academic writing.

Contractions are a natural part of language use. They are one example of the natural process of linguistic simplification that accounts for how all languages change, slowly but surely, over time. Many instructors, even some English composition instructors, tolerate the use of contractions on the assumption that their use reflects the changing standards of acceptability in modern-day American English. In spite of such attitudes, however, it is almost always *inappropriate* to use contractions in formal academic writing.

✓ Guideline 8: When used, coined terms should be set off by quotations.

It is sometimes useful to coin a term to describe something in one or two words that would otherwise require a sentence or more. Coined terms frequently become part of common usage, as with the noun "lunch," which is now commonly used as a verb (e.g., Did you *lunch* with Jane yesterday?). However, coined terms should be used sparingly in formal academic writing. If you decide to coin a term, set it off with quotation marks the first time it is used to indicate that its meaning cannot be found in a standard dictionary.

✓ Guideline 9: Avoid slang expressions, colloquialisms, and idioms.

Remember that academic writing is *formal* writing. Therefore, slang, colloquialisms, and idioms are not appropriate in a literature review. While many slang terms such as *cool* (meaning "good") and *ain't* are becoming part of our conversational language repertoire, they should be avoided altogether in formal writing. Colloquialisms, such as *thing* and *stuff*, should be replaced with appropriate noncolloquial terms (e.g., *item*, *feature*, and *characteristic*). Similarly, idioms, such as "to rise to the pinnacle" and "to survive the test," should be replaced by more formal expressions, such as *to become prominent* or *to be successful*.

✓ Guideline 10: Use Latin abbreviations in parenthetic material. Elsewhere, use English translations.

The Latin abbreviations shown below with their English translations are commonly used in formal academic writing. With the exception of et al., these abbreviations are limited to parenthetic material. For instance, the Latin abbreviation in parentheses at the end of this sentence is proper: (i.e., this is a correct example). If the word or phrase is not in parentheses, you should use the English translation: That is, this is also a correct example. In addition, note the punctuation required for each of these abbreviations. Note especially that there is no period after *et* in et al.

cf.	compare	e.g.,	for example	et al.	and others
etc.	and so forth	i.e.,	that is	vs.	versus, against

✓ Guideline 11: Check your draft for common writing conventions.

There are a number of additional writing conventions that all academic disciplines require. Check your draft to ensure you have applied all the following items before you give it to your instructor to read.

a. Make sure you have used complete sentences.
b. It is sometimes acceptable to write a literature review in the first person. However, you should avoid excessive use of the first person.
c. It is inappropriate to use sexist language in academic writing. For instance, it is incorrect to always use masculine or feminine pronouns (he, him, his vs. she, her, hers) to refer to a person when you are not sure of the person's gender (as in, "the teacher left her classroom...," when the teacher's gender is not known). Often, sexist language can be avoided through use of the plural form ("the teachers left their classrooms..."). If you must use singular forms, alternate between masculine and feminine forms or use *he or she.*
d. You should strive for clarity in your writing. Thus, you should avoid indirect sentence constructions, such as, "In Smith's study, it was found...." An improved version would be, "Smith found that...."
e. In general, the numbers zero through nine are spelled out, but numbers 10 and above are written as numerals. Two exceptions to this rule are numbers assigned to a table or figure and measurements expressed in decimals or in metric units.
f. Always capitalize nouns followed by numerals or letters when they denote a specific place in a numbered series. For instance, this is Item f under Guideline 11 in Chapter 11. (Note that *I*, *G*, and *C* are capped.)
g. Always spell out a number when it is the first word or phrase in a sentence, as in, "Seventy-five participants were interviewed...." Sometimes a sentence can be rewritten so that the number is not at the beginning, as in "Researchers interviewed 75 participants...."

✓ Guideline 12: Write a concise and descriptive title for the review.

The title of a literature review should identify the field of study you have investigated as well as tell the reader your point of view. However, it should also be concise and describe what you have written. In general, the title should not draw attention to itself. Rather, it should help the reader to adopt a proper frame of reference with which to read your paper. The following suggestions will help you to avoid some common problems with titles.

a. **Identify the field but do not describe it fully.** Especially with long and complex reviews, it is not advisable that you try to describe every aspect of your argument. If you do, the result will be an excessively long and detailed title. Your title should provide your reader with an easy entry into your paper. It should not force the reader to pause in order to decipher it.
b. **Consider specifying your bias, orientation, or delimitations.** If your review is written with an identifiable bias, orientation, or delimitation, it may be desirable to specify it in the title. For instance, if you are critical of some aspect of the literature, consider using a phrase such as, *A Critique of...* or *A Critical Evaluation*

of... as part of your title. Subtitles often can be used effectively for this purpose. For instance, "The Politics of Abortion: A Review of the Qualitative Research" has a subtitle indicating that the review is delimited to qualitative research.

c. **Avoid "cute" titles.** Avoid the use of puns, alliteration, or other literary devices that detract from the content of the title. While a title such as "Phonics vs. 'Hole' Language" may seem clever if your review is critical of the whole language approach to reading instruction, it will probably distract readers. A more descriptive title, such as "Reading as a Natural or Unnatural Outgrowth of Spoken Language," will give the reader of your review a better start in comprehending your paper.

d. **Keep it short.** Titles should be short and to the point. Professional conference organizers will often limit titles of submissions to about nine words in order to facilitate the printing of hundreds of titles in their program books. While such printing constraints are not at play with a term paper or a chapter heading, it is still advisable to try to keep your review title as simple and short as possible. A good rule of thumb is to aim for a title of about 10 words, plus or minus three.

✓ Guideline 13: Strive for a user-friendly draft.

You should view your first draft as a work in progress. As such, it should be formatted in a way that invites comments from your readers. Thus, it should be legible and laid out in a way that allows the reader to react easily to your ideas. The following list contains some suggestions for ensuring that your draft is user-friendly. Ask your faculty adviser to review this list and add additional items as appropriate.

a. **Spell-check, proofread, and edit your manuscript.** Word-processing programs have spell-check functions. Use the spell-check feature before asking anyone to read your paper. However, there is no substitute for editing your own manuscript carefully, especially because the spell-check function can overlook some of your mistakes (e.g., *see* and *sea* are both correctly spelled, but the spell-check function will not highlight them as errors if you type the wrong one). Remember that your goal should be an error-free document that communicates the content easily and does not distract the reader with careless mechanical errors.

b. **Number all pages.** Professors sometimes write general comments in the form of a memo in addition to their notes in the margins. Unnumbered pages make such comments more difficult to write because professors have no page numbers to refer to in their memos.

c. **Double-space the draft.** Single-spaced documents make it difficult for the reader to write specific comments or suggest alternate phrasing.

d. **Use wide margins.** Narrow margins may save paper, but they restrict the amount of space available for your instructor's comments.

e. **Use a stapler or a strong binder clip to secure the draft.** Your draft is one of many papers your instructor will read. Securing the document with a stapler or a strong clip will make it easier to keep your paper together. If you use a folder or a binder to hold your draft, make sure that it opens flat. Plastic folders that do not open flat make it difficult for your professor (or editor) to write comments in the margins.

f. **Identify yourself as the author, and include a telephone number or e-mail address.** Because your draft is one of many papers your instructor will read, it is important to identify yourself as the author. Always include a cover page with your name and a telephone number or e-mail address in case your professor wants to contact you. If you are writing the literature review as a term paper, be sure to indicate the course number and title as well as the date.

g. **Make sure the draft is printed clearly.** In general, you should avoid using printers with ribbons unless you make sure the print is dark enough to be read comfortably. Similarly, if you submit a photocopy of your draft, make sure the copy is dark enough. Always keep a hard copy for your records! Student papers sometimes get misplaced, and hard drives on computers sometimes crash.

h. **Avoid "cute" touches.** In general, you should avoid using color text for highlighted words (use italics instead), mixing different size fonts (use a uniform font size throughout except for the title), or using clip art or any other special touches that may distract the reader by calling attention to the physical appearance of your paper instead of its content.

✓ Guideline 14: Use great care to avoid plagiarism.

If you are uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism, consult your university's student code of conduct. It is usually part of your university's main catalog and is reprinted in several other sources that are readily available to students. For instance, the University of Washington's Psychology Writing Center provides a writing guide titled *Academic Responsibility* (http://web.psych.washington.edu/writingcenter/). On the main page, click the "Writing Guides" link, which will take you to a list of handouts in PDF format. Under the "Avoiding Plagiarism" heading, you will find a statement on academic responsibility prepared by the university's Committee on Academic Conduct (1994),[1] which discusses six types of plagiarism.

(1) Using another writer's words without proper citation;

(2) using another writer's ideas without proper citation;

(3) citing a source but reproducing the exact words of a printed source without quotation marks;

(4) borrowing the structure of another author's phrases or sentences without crediting the author from whom it came;

(5) borrowing all or part of another student's paper or using someone else's outline to write your own paper; and

(6) using a paper-writing service or having a friend write the paper for you.

It is easy to quarrel about whether borrowing even one or two words would constitute plagiarism or whether an idea is really owned by an author. However, plagiarism is easily avoided simply by making sure that you cite your sources properly. If you have any doubt about this issue with respect to your own writing, ask your instructor. Plagiarism is a very serious matter.

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[1] Committee on Academic Conduct. (1994). *Bachelor's degree handbook*. University of Washington.

✓ Guideline 15: Get help if you need it.

It should be obvious from the content of this chapter that the expectations of correctness and accuracy in academic writing are high. If you feel that you are unable to meet these demands at your current level of writing proficiency, you may need to get help. International students are often advised to hire proofreaders to help them meet their instructors' expectations. Most universities offer writing classes, either through the English department or in other disciplines. Some offer workshops for students struggling with the demands of thesis or dissertation requirements, and many universities have writing centers that provide a variety of services for students. If you feel you need help, talk with your instructor about the services available at your university. You should not expect your instructor to edit your work for style and mechanics.

Activities for Chapter 11

1. Examine the titles of the model literature reviews near the end of this book.
   - How well does each title serve to identify the field of the review?
   - Do the titles of the articles specify the authors' points of view in the review?

2. Now consider the first draft of your own literature review.
   - Compare your first draft with the topic outline you prepared. Do they match? If not, where does your draft differ from the outline? Does this variation affect the path of the argument of your review?
   - Find two or three places in your review where your discussion jumps to the next major category of your topic outline. How will the reader know that you have changed to a new category (i.e., did you use subheadings or transitions to signal the switch)?