

## On Writing in a Graduate Program

*Say what you mean, mean what you say, and always respect your interlocutors*

By M. E. Kabay

The Master of Science in Information Assurance (MSIA) is an online graduate program taught over 18 months in six 11-week seminars that require students to study assigned readings, participate in online discussions, and write one short (approximately 1,000 word) essay a week based on research in their own place of employment. At the end of the seminar, students also submit a more extensive term paper. I have answered questions from students and faculty about the amount and style of writing in our program and have now compiled the resulting essays (originally posted on the MSIA Graduate Portal) into this document. I hope that ACM Ubiquity readers will find the ideas interesting, stimulating and useful.

### **The MSIA Term Paper**

I've received queries from new students in the MSIA program about the nature of the end-of-seminar ("term") paper we require in each of the six seminars. The Student Handbook states,

Throughout the seminars, you will be applying what you learn to your workplace environment. Based on the subject matter of the seminar, you will conduct interviews, read policy documents, summarize the current situation, and, when appropriate, suggest improvements. Your term paper will report your findings and, if appropriate, recommendations to the manager who has agreed to read your report. Your paper should be 5,000 to 10,000 words long (approximately 10-20 pages of single-spaced text). Your term paper may freely incorporate any relevant portions of the texts you wrote as weekly essays during the Seminar. However, the final paper must not be a simple compilation of your existing short papers; it must be a coherent management-level report that reflects your professionalism and serious commitment to improving security in your workplace. Because you must submit your paper to your managers, writing a less than competent paper may not only affect your grades: it may seriously damage your career. Conversely, we find that well-written term papers are well received by management; some of our students have received promotions because of their work in the MSIA.

Now, managers don't see the weekly assignments, so why not simply compile those papers into a single document and be graded on that work without having to add any new material to speak of? As one of our

professors pointed out to a student who advanced this point of view, it doesn't make any sense to grade you on the short papers and then give you a separate grade for sticking them together, does it?

This is a Master's program: an advanced degree in a tradition whose roots go back to the 12th century, when the terms "master" (from Latin "magister," chief) and "doctor" (Latin, "teacher") were terms of great respect and were associated with rights and privileges in the practice of specific professions. Today, many master's programs require students to write a thesis or dissertation as part of their study; such documents can run to many hundreds of pages of scholarly writing. In our program, we have chosen to break up the writing into six documents to be presented not only to our faculty but also to your managers. The weekly papers are intended to stimulate your research within your organization (and using appropriate external resources such as your books and readings) on important topics that are discussed in each seminar; however, the capstone project for each seminar is the term paper, where your weeks of digging, discussion, arguing, researching and above all, thinking are organized and presented in a document that helps you and your managers.

The term paper helps you by forcing you to articulate your thinking, thus making it yours forever. There's no better way to learn something than by explaining it clearly to someone else. In this case, you're explaining it to people who (we hope) genuinely matter to you. As part of the agreement that qualified you to join the MSIA, they have agreed to discuss your work with you, so you get the benefit of having their responses to think about after you have written your term paper. Some of you will want to improve your reports after those discussions so that they can be even more useful.

Ultimately, we also hope that your serious efforts will benefit your colleagues at work so that they will be proud to have supported you in your work at Norwich. When instructors give your term paper a 100 percent, they are telling you that, were you an employee who had given them such a report, they would be proud to pass it on to their managers.

### **Strunk & White's Rules from The Elements of Style**

Here is a list of the seven elementary rules of English usage and 11 elementary principles of composition from William Strunk, Jr.'s classic work, *The Elements of Style*. In addition, we list the "reminders" for writers added by E. B. White in his edition of Strunk. The complete text of the original Strunk edition is available on the Web at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/index.html>.

### **Strunk's Seven Elementary Rules of English Usage**

1. Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's.
2. In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.
3. Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas.
4. Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.
5. Do not join independent clauses by a comma.
6. Do not break sentences in two.
7. A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.

### **Strunk's 11 Elementary Principles of Composition**

1. Choose a suitable design and hold to it.
2. Make the paragraph the unit of composition.
3. Use the active voice.
4. Put statements in positive form.
5. Use definite, specific, concrete language.
6. Omit needless words.
7. Avoid a succession of loose sentences.
8. Express coordinate ideas in similar form.
9. Keep related words together.
10. In summaries, keep to one tense.
11. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.

### **White's List of 21 Reminders to Writers**

1. Place yourself in the background.
2. Write in a way that comes naturally.
3. Work from a suitable design.
4. Write with nouns and verbs.
5. Revise and rewrite.
6. Do not overwrite.
7. Do not overstate.
8. Avoid the use of qualifiers.
9. Do not affect a breezy manner.
10. Use orthodox spelling.
11. Do not explain too much.
12. Do not construct awkward adverbs.
13. Make sure the reader knows who is speaking.
14. Avoid fancy words.
15. Do not use dialect unless your ear is good.
16. Be clear.
17. Do not inject opinion.
18. Use figures of speech sparingly.
19. Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity.
20. Avoid foreign languages.
21. Prefer the standard to the offbeat.

## **On Having Your Papers Edited**

An instructor and I were discussing the case of a student who presented a thorny problem: noticeably erratic writing style. From paper to paper, the writing varied considerably -- sometimes quite good, sometimes awful. The question arose of whether the work was all by the student or whether we were seeing the results of external help.

Should you, as a student, be relying on external help in writing and editing your papers? Well, it depends how much help you're getting and how much you're learning from that help.

Clearly, presenting other people's writing as your own without acknowledgement is plagiarism. It's plagiarism whether the materials are from published materials, from unpublished term papers, or from writing done on your behalf by an employee, a friend or a relative. Plagiarism even extends to presenting other people's ideas without mentioning the source; thus, one writes, "As so-and-so suggested [footnote]... " rather than simply reporting so-and-so's ideas as if they are one's own.

But what about editing? Is it OK to give your draft essay to a friend, your husband or wife (definitely a friend!), a fellow student or a colleague for corrections and ideas?

Yes, definitely, if you are thinking about their suggestions and integrating their ideas and corrections into your knowledge and your work. No, definitely not, if you are merely allowing someone else to improve your work for you and then passively transmitting their efforts to your instructor without further involvement.

The first process is an honest, realistic engagement in the creative process. You are challenged by your editor; you think about the corrections and learn from them. You extend the suggestions with additional research and you articulate the ideas yourself, thus making those ideas your own.

The latter is plagiarism by another name. The only proper way to present such a work would be to put the other person's name on as second -- or maybe even first -- author to indicate their level of contribution. Leaving out their name is dishonest.

By the way, it is customary in academic work to include an acknowledgements section to thank people who have reviewed one's drafts. It's a nice touch and in no way detracts from your own authorship and sense of responsibility or credit for what you are presenting.

## **Why We Cite Sources**

*Written in collaboration with Prof. Stephen Cobb, CISSP*

Students sometimes express or simply evince bewilderment at the emphasis academics place on citations in essays. Why all the fuss? Why should anyone go to the trouble of providing a source for quotations, facts, and ideas?

The habit of providing references is deeply rooted in the psyche of the academic. At heart, everyone in academia is concerned with ideas. Researchers help discover and articulate ideas; teachers help others learn ideas. When we cite the source for information, we are doing much more than complying with an arbitrary rule that some students perceive as just another hurdle put in their way to trip them up. We are contributing to a long tradition of shared intellectual exploration.

By providing an attribution and a reference ("As So-and-So suggested, blah-blah-blah [footnote]") we are giving our readers the privilege of exploring our sources for themselves. They don't have to rely solely on our filtered version of what So-and-So said -- they can judge the meaning of So-and-So's writing on their own. Our readers can go beyond our interpretation and contribute new ideas based on their own responses to our sources. Instead of hoarding our knowledge or sequestering our sources, we are making a wonderful gift to the world: a list of the places we found useful in our own quest for understanding.

Intellectual life is not about grabbing credit for ideas. The best of us give away our ideas freely, glad to stimulate someone else into thinking up something even better than we conceived. But the history of an idea, the interwoven threads of thought from which it was created, is sometimes as important as the thought itself. By documenting that path with references and citations, we enable any observer to understand not only the idea, but its genesis. And should the idea prove faulty or inadequate, others may back track along that path and use some of the work we have done to reach, perhaps, a different, more robust conclusion.

Nothing is lost by citing sources and much is gained. Indeed, one way to "sell" students on proper referencing is to point out that it adds to their work. A well-referenced paper demonstrates that the student has consulted numerous sources. By citing authorities in the field and either agreeing or disagreeing with them, students participate in, and become part of, their field of study.

Not that citing sources is an optional embellishment; it is an academic requirement. Failure to cite sources is, at its worst, plagiarism: academic dishonesty. Although much has been written in recent years about the ease with which Internet-equipped students can perpetrate plagiarism, and the ease with which

Internet-savvy professors can detect the more obvious offenders, very little attention has been paid to the effect that this act of dishonesty has on the parties involved.

The student who is discovered often feels a deep sense of shame, and a powerful sense of failure, of foolishness and self-loathing for committing such an utterly indefensible act. The act of plagiarism also takes its toll on the professor who is the target of the deception. Any sense of accomplishment at having discerned the deception quickly evaporates as you realize that the student will need to be confronted. Then you start to feel resentment that this extremely unpleasant task has been forced upon you, by the student, with whom you sometimes become quite angry. After all, students who try to pass off someone else's work as their own are displaying an inherent lack of respect for their instructors, both as teachers and as people. You start to ask yourself some unpleasant questions. Did they think you were too stupid to notice? And what about their previous work? Did that contain plagiarism you missed? Unfortunately, the unpleasant emotions do not end after you have confronted the student. If the student reacts with shame and remorse you are likely to find yourself wondering how they are going to cope with this episode in their life, hoping that they don't do anything foolish.

Avoiding the problem in the first place is clearly the preferred approach. Let students know what is expected in terms of citing sources. Sadly, we can no longer assume that everyone who has already obtained a degree knows how to cite sources or even why they should. The sooner we make sure they know how, the better, for everyone's sake.

*Stephen Cobb adds:*

For examples of essays with citations, I would give folks anything by Montaigne, the father of the art itself, such as this:

<http://eserver.org/philosophy/montaigne-essays.txt>

and in the security genre, perhaps this, by Cliff Stoll

<http://cne.gmu.edu/modules/acmpkp/security/texts/HACKER.PDF>

### **On Communicating Precisely**

I was listening to National Public Radio news a few days ago and muttered something under my breath as the reporter spoke.

"What did you say?" asked Deborah.

"I said that the reporter ought to know better than to say, 'The reason for the decline in suicide attacks are the better surveillance by the army.'"

She understood me at once. I was referring to what we both call "the American disease;" i.e., according the number of a verb with that of the proximate noun instead of with the number of the subject.

Does that sound like gibberish to you? Or if you understand what I've written, does it seem like pedantic persiflage to you? I hope not, because there's a sound reason for the irritation.

First, an explanation for the grammar-impaired: the number of a noun and verb can be singular or plural. The subject determines the number of the verb. The proximate noun is the noun nearest the verb. In the sentence that irritated me, the subject of the sentence is "reason" and the verb should be "is:" "reason...is." The speaker was misled by the nearer (proximate) noun "attacks" and thus said, "attacks are."

Who cares?

Anyone who uses words professionally should care. There's no more excuse for a professional to blunder like that than for a concert pianist to hit the wrong notes in the middle of a recital. Mistakes happen, but consistent sloppiness is unprofessional. More important, solecisms interrupt the smooth flow of communication by diverting the listener or reader into the wrong avenue of thought. Even if it is only momentary, every such diversion is an irritant that reduces concentration, interferes with the development and consolidation of ideas, and breaks the bond between minds that is the highest achievement of good speaking and writing.

Does attention to precision simply imply pig-headed resistance to change? Should new speech and writing forms be respected simply because they're new? For example, is the persistent repetition of "like" as a substitute for most verbs simply a generational shift that must be accepted or is it a loss of skill that must be resisted? The latter, I think. Consider the gormless usage, "I was, like, Oh wow, and he was like, yeah, really." It's so imprecise it's comical, but it's also sad. Why not enjoy the distinctions among "I said / announced / proclaimed / whispered / cried / shouted / exclaimed / muttered / admitted?" I feel that changes that increase the power of language to express subtle distinctions are good; those that decrease the ability to express nuance are not.

Granted, colloquial speech is naturally less precise than scholarly discourse, but the habits carry over into our work. I know professionals who write, "Send the reply to Bob and I" and don't even notice the error. The problem is that their inability or refusal to write "Bob and me" as the object of the preposition "to"

interrupts the flow of thought with a moment of confusion as the reader backtracks, recognizes that "and I" is not the start of a new clause (e.g., "Send the reply to Bob and I will get it from him") but a sloppy version of a simple phrase. Yes, the delay lasts only a fraction of a second, but that sloppiness is unprofessional.

The person who speaks and writes precisely in a professional context is not being pedantic: she is being respectful of her interlocutors. She's being a professional by thinking clearly about exactly what she means and then expressing herself as exactly as language will allow.

I wish people would spend as much time and effort on their choice of words as they do on their choice of clothes and cars. Clothes and cars communicate very little of value about people; words can open a universe of thought.

For yourself even if not for others, say what you mean!

For more information about the MSIA, see <http://www3.norwich.edu/msia> and <http://grad.norwich.edu/msia>.

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