Student Prose

(draft 16.3.08)

The "D" April 14, 2000 p. 1
A trustee is quoted as saying: "Our goal is from a directional standpoint to make it clear where we are heading." Sigh.

Introduction: This is a *personal* view of what makes (and breaks) good writing, based on reading 25+ years of undergraduate and other academic prose. While some of what I emphasize is more important to me than to some others, all of these guidelines will help to improve your prose.

One point needs to be clear. While you are at Dartmouth, you will be assigned to read a lot of otherwise valuable work whose prose will be dreadful. How to read it is not the problem here; but you should not aspire to emulate bad academic prose. You should expect to write better than many of the works you read. It's pretty easy to do so.

All examples here are taken from student prose, sometimes changed to protect the guilty, sometimes slightly altered to make the point clearer.

I believe that while not everyone can write brilliantly, everyone can write well.

It may be that brilliance requires inspiration; all that good writing requires is perspiration. What first comes out onto your screen or paper is never good; no one writes good first drafts, but anyone can re-write well. Print out your drafts; revise them, re-enter them, and repeat. As Dr. Johnson said, "What is written without effort is generally read without pleasure."

What follows, in no real order, are problems that catch my eye as I read student papers. Of course a prudent student will want to eliminate these problems in papers he or she hands in to me, but I think attention to these points will generally improve your writing in every circumstance.

Topics

Introduction

Premises

General Principles

Grammatical points

Usage, Nonce Words, Word Trends

Gaffes

Tricks of the Trade

Reference Works

Two General Premises

Premise one: Papers are not email. Papers are in prose that is clear, expressive, precise. You must take the time and mental effort to say it right, to choose the right word, to make the sentence precise and interesting. "She sat languidly," it is not the same as saying "she sat lazily." "He proposed a plan," it is not the same as saying "he elaborated a plan." Almost well said is badly said. So say it well!

Premise two: The mind of reader should be exercised only by the ideas being presented. Work in cognitive psychology shows that the mind cannot effortlessly keep track of the subject when it is imbedded in clause after clause, in overly passive-voice sentences, or when the level of abstraction rises into the ionosphere. It seems to be a physical fact that the brain stumbles when it has to traverse too much syntax to arrive at the idea.

This research also shows that for the native speaker, there is a difference between a noun and a verb and among other parts of speech. For this reason it is important to *use strong nouns and strong verbs*, rather than lots of adjectives and adverbs: "He made negative progress," is a common sentence in student papers. It is much weaker than, "He failed," or "He regressed," or "He went backwards." "He wolfed his food," is stronger than, "He ate really fast and sloppily."

Likewise [quote from student paper] "[The text] illustrates categories of negative human instinct through the Kufans." The brain goes forward and then has to stop and re-compute to understand the meaning of the sentence. Among other things, "negative human instinct" might better be "flaws in human character," one doesn't "illustrate *through*" but *by*, (not to mention "illustrates categories of instinct," whatever the heck <u>that</u> means!) and so on. This is a sentence that is dashed off; it is *fine* for a first draft, *wretched* for a final paper.

Always, when given a choice, <u>use the grammar of the sentence to provide more information and precision rather than less</u>. For this reason, it is good to retain some distinctions that otherwise are collapsing in demotic prose [if you don't know the word "demotic," do what you should do when you don't know key words: look it up]. For example, see below, under "that/which," "that/who," for example.

Principles

First sentences and first paragraphs: These should generally be written toward the <u>end</u> of the composition process. Begin your <u>draft</u> with an initial sentence or two that guides your composition. "I think Muhammad is best thought of as an Arabian shaman. Here's why." Then, after you have drafted and revised, write a first paragraph that guides the reader into your argument, and interests her. The first sentence should be particularly engaging. It should not be terribly long, passive-voiced, or wordy!

Somewhere in that first paragraph will be your <u>thesis</u>. Most of your written work at Dartmouth should have a thesis. A thesis could, in theory, be written out in one or two sentences. It has to be

an assertion, an argument, something that can be proven or contested. "I'm going to tell you all I've found out about Islam in Uzbekistan," is not a thesis. Nor is a thesis a list: "Islam in Uzbekistan is widespread, developing, and different from Islam in Turkey." An essay is not "about" anything; it argues, suggests, defends. "In this paper I argue that student writing needs improving," is a (draft of a) thesis.

Religion Department papers: A widespread fault in religion papers is the cosmic beginning: "Ever since mankind has been on the planet, he has wondered what life is about." Oh yeah? Prove it! "The role of women and society has been disputed through history." Oh really? What about May 12, 1317 in Mainz? I say it wasn't contested there. Prove me wrong!

Just because the paper is about religion doesn't mean it has to be Genesis in its scope, or, in its prose. Too many papers and exams in religion sound like the King James Bible after a few beers: Actual quote, "And according to Islam, God gave the Quran unto Muhammad." Unto? Would that be used in a Government paper? "President Bush gave the budget unto the Congress"? I don't think so. "Righteous," also appears far too often. Would you write a paper for government saying that polls showed that Bill Clinton was insufficiently righteous for Mothers Against Drunk Driving? "Will of God; trust in God," are used as clichés that impede understanding what a text actually says. "Called forth" is another archaism that creeps into papers. There are others.

At Dartmouth, the Study of Religion is a field in the Liberal Arts—like Philosophy, History, or Economics. Your writing should be scholarship, not scripture.

☞Finally, it is an important methodological point that abstractions, including religious abstractions, don't act. Islam doesn't believe anything; it doesn't teach anything; it doesn't grow. Muslims believe, scholars teach, the scope of Muslim political control grows. Muslim understandings of what God requires, grow, perhaps. More bad thinking in the Study of Religion results from this mistake than any other. I will find these mistakes and not be happy when I find them. I can help *you* avoid this mistake; if only I could do the same for many colleagues in the Study of Religion!

Grammatical Points

Put words next to the words they affect: "Ahmad is poised to make some changes in not only Iran, but also, in the way Islam is received." Obviously, it should be "not only in Iran."

Failed parallel: More importantly, note the failed parallel: "Changes **in**" leads the reader to "Iran"—a place. The next, and parallel, "**in**" however, leads the reader to "the way Islam is received"—an abstraction. Iran is not conceptually parallel to "the way Islam is received."

"He criticizes some leaders, although failing to mention names as falling into the same trap and substituting religion for "a series of mental habits." At the least, this sentence should read, "He criticizes some leaders, although he fails…" so that both verbs are in equivalent, or parallel, forms. The dangling clause is discussed below.

Run-on sentences. Two sentences can't be linked by a comma, or, in American English, by a word like "thus" or "however." 'He lost the election, he is going to run again.' is grammatically incorrect. But so are 'He lost the election, thus he will run again,' and 'He lost the election, however he will run again.' If you must put the two sentences together, use a semi-colon. "He lost the election; he will run again," is acceptable, if not strong. This error is shockingly common in Dartmouth prose, particularly in first paragraphs and even first sentences. It often results, I think, from reading prose only on the computer screen, instead of printing out a draft and revising the hard copy. This mistake is not unique to Dartmouth students of course. This example is from ESPN's website: "Johnson only completed 13 of 29 passes for 90 yards, however Tampa Bay didn't allow a sack or commit a turnover for the second straight week and controlled field position with a solid kicking game." The man or woman who wrote that should be fired, or at least sentenced to English 5 for a month.

The right preposition is crucial. There are idioms in English, and just as one can't say "He hit him off the head" or "from the head" one also can't say "he has a mandate by the people of Iran." One has a mandate from someone—that's just the way it is. "These reasons are connected around one central idea." No, they are "connected to" a central idea. [And I wonder if "central" is doing any useful work here.] "His doctrine is tied in with his opinions on government." Sorry, it's "tied to" and in the process a word is eliminated, which streamlines the sentence. Sometimes the right preposition is no preposition. A common (and erroneous) idiom is "advocates for". This is actually superfluous, since one can't advocate ("speak for") against something. One simply advocates reform, ecological mindfulness, or letting the market do it's work. Often, thinking about the image will help you; but otherwise, you must consult a dictionary, find the word in some prose source, or just know what preposition to use. (One can be an advocate for, but it is good not to confuse nouns and verbs.)

-ing: This ending is slightly ambiguous in that it marks a continuous aspect ("He is going to fish.") and also a verbal noun and gerund ("The pleasure is not in the arriving, but in the going.") As a result, when you can eliminate an –ing from a sentence, it often improves it. "His choosing to convert to Islam was a difficult decision," reads better as "His choice to convert to Islam was a difficult one."

Dangles: Consider the reformed sentence from above: "(1) He criticizes some leaders, (2) although he fails to mention names **as** (3) falling into the same trap and substituting religion for 'a series of mental habits.' Everything after "as" is a dangle. Why? Because the subject of its verb(al) (that is, the verbal of clause (3)) differs from the subject of the prior verbs (in clasues (1) and (2)), and there is no signal of the change. He "criticizes", he "fails", but it's not he who is "falling" and "substituting."

To restore grammar (never mind style), one might say: "Although he fails to mention names, he criticizes some leaders for falling into the trap of substituting religion for mental habits." Now the last clause is the object of a preposition-phrase (it begins with "for falling"). Now there are no dueling subjects in different parts of the sentence. (The order of the first two verbs had to be changed so that "falling into the trap" was close to "criticizes some leaders" rather than having the two ideas separated by "fails to mention names.")

"Traditionally a bastion of Roman Catholicism, in recent years Latin Americans have been turning to Protestant denominations in unmatched numbers." The subject of the first clause (presumably Latin America) is not the same of the second clause (Latin Americans). This too is a dangle. Part of the problem may be using an image ("bastion") that is unclear. What is a bastion?

This is a very common error; it is a serious one. It requires a bit of work to recognize the dangle when it appears in a draft, but you really have to make the effort. Everyone's drafts contain them; good writers' final versions don't.

That and which. This distinction appears to be collapsing, yet prose that observes the distinction still reads more smoothly. One of my teachers gave the following example:

Go to the first door, which is red.
Go to the first door that is red.

The two sentences impart quite different information. If you are trying to figure out the right word to use, note that "which clauses" give information about the word or phrase just used, and can usually take a comma before the "which."

That and who(m). Another distinction that is beginning to collapse. But again, observing the distinction makes for better prose. "The man that hit the ball" seems less graceful than "the man who hit the ball." "Who" restores his humanity. "I got an autograph from the man that hit the ball," is deficient in two ways: it does not mark the humanity of the actor in the second clause, and it doesn't mark clearly enough that the subject of the second clause is "the man."

Split infinitives. It is true that "to go" is not really an infinitive. The two words idiomatically go together, however, and it is best not to separate them if you can avoid it. "To boldly go where no man…" reads perfectly well, perhaps better, as, "to go boldly…." This "rule" matters to some people, and so, out of courtesy, you might try to avoid this habit. Occasionally, the modifier absolutely needs to go with the verb. When that happens, by all means, split the "infinitive."

Images, similes, metaphors, and clichés: "Iran was never able to break free of the stain of colonialism." Does one "break free of a stain?" "Ooops, I've spilled coffee on my shirt; how can I break free of the strain?" This sentence makes the reader smile or grimace or puzzle.

"The role of women in Islam is a much debated topic by the peering eyes of the West as well as Muslim intellectuals." To test this sentence reduce it to its elements: "The role is debated by eyes." Huh?

As a paper is revised, the most important thing for the writer to do is to stop and test the images, similes and clichés. Does this convey what I want? Is it trite? Does the image itself make sense? Is the metaphor mixed?

There are lots of other clichés or (often trite) phrases that lead to confusion: "bastion," (what is a bastion?); "trappings of power" (What is a trapping?") etc. "violently reaped havoc…" The idiom is "wreaked havoc." "Peaked his interest…" It is "piqued his interest." As a general rule,

don't use an image or metaphor if you are not first absolutely certain what the literal meaning of the word, phrase, or image, is.

In addition, try to avoid clichés. A cliché is a phrase which, if the first word is said, the second comes almost automatically. "People in glass houses…" "a _ wound" (gaping), and so on. As White says, every cliché is a little drop of chloroform. Don't anesthetize your reader!

Weak verbs: Several verbs show up in student prose far more frequently than they should. Most are attempts to avoid perfectly useful verbs, such as "was." "<u>There occurred</u>," "<u>there existed</u>," are two examples; "<u>holds importance</u>," is another; "<u>put forth</u>," is equally lame.

Strong Verbs and Nouns: English prose reads best when the work within it is done by strong verbs and strong nouns. A strong verb is one that can be visualized: "hit" as opposed to "exist;" a strong noun is a concrete one: "table" as opposed to "association." It is a peculiar feature of contemporary English that indifferent (in both senses) writers tend simply to string nouns, adverbs, and adjectives together like boxcars, with a feeble verb pulling them along. "Personal motivations existed and were highly affected by political and religious aspects of their worldviews." The verbs in this atrocity of a sentence—existed and affected—are pretty ineffectual. To give this sentence some force, one might begin by inverting the word order and substituting verbs for nouns: "Political and religious aspects of their worldviews motivated them to…" It's still far from a good sentence, but using a verb helps. In general, joining verbs—was , is—plus nouns or adjectives can often be replaced with strong verbs. "He was hurt," could be "he suffered;" "the castle was big" could be "the castle dominated the landscape" and so on.

This point is hard to describe in the abstract but if you hunt through your paper for places where such substitutions can be made, you will soon see your prose improve.

The passive voice: Some people, <u>including many academics</u>, believe prose to be more academic or objective if it uses the passive voice. Perhaps, but it is also more boring, more vague, and often more deceptive. The active voice forces the writer to decide who is, in fact, the agent. "The Berber Dahir was resisted," allows the writer to escape saying who actually resisted it. "Berbers and Arabs, townsfolk and farmers together resisted the Berber Dahir," makes clear who acted. Revise your prose toward the active voice (which is not to say you should never use the passive voice—just make sure you <u>choose</u> to use it) by looking for verb combinations with "was" or "is" before the verb: was-chosen, is-perceived, was-hit, is-hit etc.

I can't SAY it. For some reason, many believe that the word "say/said" should be avoided. The result is a series of colorless verbs like "put forth." Worse, some assume that *any* synonym of "say" can be followed with a "**that**" clause. So we get just plain wrong combinations, like "So and so advocated that", or "Bob purported that". "As Smith clarified…" is equally unacceptable. This is often found in magazines and newspapers, but it should be avoided in your writing. If "said" is going to be replaced, the substitute must be used grammatically.

Domesticating quotes. A quotation must conform, grammatically, to the sentence in which it appears. This may require changes in the quoted prose, using ellipses (…) or square brackets ([ ]). Suppose you want to quote these sentences: "Foreign languages are unnatural. Why don't they

just speak English? If it was good enough for Jesus, why should anybody waste their time using French?" You might write,

Bob Smith wonders, "why [foreigners] don't just speak English?" He believes, "[English is] good enough for Jesus," so "why should anybody waste their time using French?" He asserts that English is "good enough for Jesus."[1]

Long quotes: When quoting a long passage, there is no need to italicize the quote. It should be indented .5 inches from the left and right margins, and single-spaced. If you want to be fancy, justify the long quote (but not the rest of the paper).

Adverb comma clause; adverbial clause, comma clause. Especially When/In –ing, blah blah Example: "When writing about something, students use this form." This is a tired way to start a paragraph and especially a paper. "When studying medieval society, the evidence that the Crusades left a lasting mark on the mindset of Western culture abounds." The "when –ing" construction tends to push the real verb far to the end, it begins the sentence with –ing which is generally not strong, and it elides over the question of who is studying medieval society. (Plus "mindset" is jargony.) Why not "It is evident that the Crusades left a lasting mark in the minds of Westerners?"

This habit, perfectly fine from time to time, begins to grate when it is over used. It is used, far too often, to begin paragraphs in student papers. Often, students are simply thinking aloud when they write. In the end, they don't bother to revise. While this sentence reflects common usage in speech, it is often tiring on the page.

Usage, Nonce words, word trends

In respect to/with regards to, (and other variations) These are almost always signs that the sentence needs recasting. When we speak casually, we often just glue chunks of thought together: As an example, in conversation I might say: "I am satisfied with his performance with regards to the exam." The first idea in my head, the first thing that I want to get across, is that I am satisfied with his performance. I also want to narrow that down, or help the listener understand that I am talking about the exam. So, I just slop some verbal mortar between the two ideas and *voilá*, my spoken sentence.

A reader of an essay, on the other hand doesn't have the voice, the face, the ideas, the hand gestures to carry her along the curvy road of this sentence, and across the bridge stuck between the two ideas. So, revise this bureaucratic prose to a concise English sentence: "His performance on the exam was satisfactory," or, better, "He performed" (choose a strong verb over a week verb and an adverb) "satisfactorily on the exam."

---

[1] Now there is a handy little book on how to do quotations: *They Say, I Say* by G. Graff and C. Birkenstein. New York: Norton, 2006.

-**istic and other pretentious endings**. "Communist" not "communistic." "Simplistic" is not the same as "simple" though students often try to use them interchangeably, with "simplistic" seeming the more academic. But "simplistic" means "too simple" "overly-simplified" and is pejorative. "Simple" simply means "not complex, not manifold." "Elitist education" is not the same as "education of the elite."

Noun-noun constructions. Under the influence, particularly, of *Time* magazine, it has come to seem "snappy" to omit the definite article when a defining noun precedes another noun, or a name: "Historian Edward Gibbon asserted that Byzantium fell due to its internal corruption." This is grating, and illogical: "Tree oak is famous for having acorns," might be the logical next step. Keep the definite article: "<u>The</u> historian Edward Gibbon…"

By the way, not every person mentioned in your work needs a snappy ID before his or her name: e.g., "Alleged-discoverer-of-America Columbus landed in Brazil." Scholar Kevin Reinhart promises that teacher Kevin Reinhart will get snappish if he finds too much of this in student Mary Smith's paper.

When one speaks of *Islam*, it is useful to…A tired phrase. In general, it is *very* undergraduate to begin sentences, "When –ing about X," or the equivalent.

As: this word is ambiguous, and may lead the reader in the wrong direction. We use the word mostly as a either an element in comparisons ("As big as a house,") or to indicate simultaneity, more or less meaning "while," ("He ate as he read the newspaper.") When it is used instead to replace "since" or "because" the reader has to stop and figure things out—if only for a moment. **<u>Readers should never have to stop and figure things out</u>**. "As he was going to the store, he decided to buy socks also." Is it "since he was doing to the store," or "While he was going to the store"? "As Eliade was a member of the Iron Guard, he can be presumed to have been a fascist." Use "since" instead.

"**Greatly**" as an all-purpose adverb is much overused. ("<u>Highly</u>" is too.) "He greatly favors an integration of Western culture with Islamic doctrine," would better read "He emphatically favors" or "He ardently favors," and so on, so that the adverb actually provides information, not merely emphasis. If you need an emphatic adverb, try "quite" or "very much."

Thus (or thusly) is often misused as a kind of glue between two ideas, to mean something like "consequently." "They spent all their money thus being unable to buy dinner." (read "and were, consequently," or "and were, as a result,"). Thus is also frequently used to form a run-on sentence. "The Muslims share the five pillars, thus they are a single religion." "All men are mortal. Thus Socrates is mortal (or Thus, Socrates is mortal)" is fine. The English often allow the "thus" run-on; they also eat "spotted dick." Avoid both.

Equally as. This is a solecism, which is a polite word for just flat wrong. "A definition of the term is equally as elusive as a definition of ritual," should read "A definition of the term is as elusive…" or "A definition of the term is just as elusive…"

Over-used words: "concrete" results, facts, outcomes etc. Often mistakenly used as an emphatic.

Singular has suddenly cropped up to mean "unique" perhaps because "unique" has been gutted of meaning by the use of modifiers before it ("very unique") when its meaning is "one-of-a-kind" (so something can't be very unique, or somewhat unique). "Singular" has three meanings: unique, eminent or distinguished, and strange. You can see how all three meanings connect, but when you mean "unique," use that nicely unambiguous word. Save singular for other meanings like "He has a singular talent for mangling syntax," or "The feeling I got as I entered President Wright's office was singular."

Poignant: It's main meaning is "arousing or expressing deep emotions", not "pointed" or "powerful."

Impact is used increasingly as a verb, when nine times out of ten, affect will do the job. In general, the reader wants to know immediately whether a word is a noun or a verb, and so it's best to avoid nouning verbs or verbing nouns. Keep "impact" as a noun. Of course there are many words that function as both noun and verb—'record' for example. But a curious feature of English is that words that are *fully absorbed* as both nouns and verbs often differentiate between functions using a stress shift. Record is a verb; record is a noun. Conduct is a noun; conduct is a verb. And so on. If the word doesn't have this stress-shift to differentiate the two functions, you might reflect on whether to use it in an unconventional way.

Lifestyle This word was coined in 1929 by a psychologist named Alfred Adler and taken up in the 1960's by Madison Avenue. It retains more than a whiff of psychobabble and the trendy. In the first case, it seems to mean not a whole lot more than your personality as it is established in the first five or so years of your life. In the second case, it refers to the whole, the image, *constructed of all the things you consume*. You have a Jeep' lifestyle, or a Porsche' lifestyle. Neither of these is appropriate for describing, say, monasticism or Sufism. Neither monasticism nor Sufism is a mere "style" of life. They are *lives*, they are *vocations*, they are practices. Please, make your instructor happy and eschew this voguish, imprecise, and anachronistic word.

Negative. This word is used lazily to give some vitality to lifeless verbs and nouns. "Inflation had a negative effect on the daily life of Germans." How about, "Inflation sabotaged/harmed/made difficult Germans' daily lives." As always, prefer strong verbs and nouns to weak verbs sauced with adverbs.

Among vs. between. It may be a lost cause, but on the principle that precision always helps the reader, it's worth noting that if there are three or more objects, the preposition ought to be "among;" for two objects, it is "between" as the root ("tween"="two") suggests. Thus: "The struggle among Germany, Britain, and France for the Middle East was resolved only temporarily by the First World War." But: "The war in 1870 between France and Germany ended weeks after it began." If there are really two sides, even though there are three or more protagonists, then between is correct: "The war between Israel, and Syria and Egypt, ended with Arab defeat of 1967." The comma designates the two parties governed by "between."

Holds for. Wildly overused. It is best to use it only in situations like, "The rule that people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones holds for Democrats and Republicans alike."

"personal" for "own": "It is my personal car." As opposed to what? Your impersonal car? Use "own" here. I know, I know: a "personal car" might be opposed to a "company car." If that's the idiom, use it. But "personal" friend, (are there "impersonal friends," or "company friends"?) and many other uses suggest that "own" is mostly a better choice than "personal."

Less/few: It's worth repeating: Less is used for things that can't be counted; few for those that can. Using these adverbs correctly is just a little help to the neurons as the brain reads along. The express line sign at the grocer's ought to read "Twelve items or fewer." I have less reading left than he does. I have fewer than two pages to read.

Tense sequence. English has a rich set of tenses and a good writer will exploit that feature. "George Bush was going." "George Bush had been going." "George Bush was gone." "George Bush had been gone;" All these are resources you can use when you write to be more precise, and to help the reader understand a sequence of events.

"The Crusaders arrival was generally interpreted in positive terms rather than as a calamity as was (read: "as had been") the case with the arrival of the Turks." The Turks arrived before the Crusaders, and that fact needs to be noted in the construction of the sentence. "Was" is in the past, "had been" is in the 'paster.' The sentence is now clear but not strong. "The Crusaders arrival was generally interpreted in positive terms, where the arrival of the Turks had been seen as a calamity." That is "betterer."

Gaffes

ellicit/illicit To confuse them is a solecism. The first means to "tease out," or somehow "bring forth." The latter means, illegal, or otherwise in need of concealment due to violation of some norm.

Effect/affect. An eff́éct is a consequence. An áffect is a feeling—in psycho-jargon. As verbs, effect is to cause, as in "to efféct change," to cause change. Afféct is to alter, to transform. It can also mean to cause one to have feelings: "I was much affected by her sad tale of hard disk failure." "The religious commitment of the British affected the quality of the food they ate."

Elaborated for described: "He elaborated Islam's requirements," would mean that Islam's requirements were X, and he made them more elaborate, X plus something. That is not what the student meant.

Purport that… Another failed attempt not to use "say," "He purported that Islam was always violent." "Alleged" would be good here.

Similar to : This is a solecism when it begins a clause. "Similar to the battle of Nicopolis, the Crusade of Varna was a failure." Use the simple, unpretentious word, "like." "Like the battle…"

Thusly. Ugh. "Thus" is already an adverb, so if you add an adverb, you are working for the Department of Redundancy Department. "He did it thus." "Thus, the Crusaders left in a snit."

Tricks of the Trade

Too many prepositions: In general, construct sentences so that there aren't a lot of prepositions to confuse the reader. Often you can remove one or more prepositions by using that wonderful feature of English, the possessive. "Reinhart's bad temper" often reads better than "the bad temper of Reinhart." For example, "The argument of Cromer that Egyptians required governance by a stronger civilization than their own, even in terms of its general principles, is not precise enough to be right." This is not a very good sentence, and one reason is that it goes on and on stringing clauses together with prepositions. "Cromer's argument that…" is already an improvement. Try substituting the possessive for a preposition (Argument of Cromer=Cromer's argument) when a sentence seems wordy.

Citing. The footnote must refer precisely to the source. So, when citing an article in a collection of articles, the cite must be to the article, not the book. Thus Bob Smith's article, "Studying Foreign Languages as a Step on the Road to World Communism," in the book, *They're at the Door; They're under the Bed: Studies in New Hampshire Politics*, edited by Gordon Humphrey, should be cited in the footnote as, "Smith, "Studying Foreign Languages" p. 32." In the bibliography it would be something like "Smith, Bob. "Studying Foreign Languages as a Step on the Road to World Communism," in *They're at the Door; They're under the Bed: Studies in New Hampshire Politics*, Gordon Humphrey, ed. Manchester: Union Press, 1985."

Lots people (like my wife) care deeply about the form of citations. I think this is fetishism, but some of these people (like my wife) are very powerful. Make them happy by following whatever form they suggest. There is software for this (now built into *Word*). I like another program, *Endnote,* very much. For a thesis, I think bibliography software is indispensable.

Screen Reading, and Revising a paper. Prose has structure and texture, and it is hard to perceive either when it is **on the screen of a computer**. Imagine a surly secretary who required that, when you examined 1/3 of a page, you had to surrender the rest of the paper. Choose another 1/3 page and you had to give back the one you were looking at in order to see the new 1/3 page. That is what working solely on the computer screen is like. You end up writing little two-paragraph units of good prose that do not go together to create an argument, but read like bullet-points in a *Powerpoint* presentation.

You must print out the paper, repeatedly, and read it, *aloud even*, to see how it is working. For long papers, try taking scissors and scotch tape and literally cutting and pasting paragraphs into shape, then enter the results back into your file. For difficult sentences or paragraphs, take a pencil or pen and recompose the offending item: you'll be astonished at how easily a better one comes out, and how much better it will be!

You must use spell-check. It will not catch everything, but it will catch "hte" for "the." Not to correct the spelling in a paper, even in ink, signifies either that you think the paper is worthless, or that the reader is.

Reference works:

Fowler (*Modern English Usage*). 1st or 2nd editions. This is one of the masterpieces of prescriptive grammar and style. It is very British, very turn-of-the-20th-century. Reading it makes one think about language. That's good. It is infallible, and sometimes it is arbitrary. Still, it makes one think about language. That's good. The 3rd edition, alas, is flabby and Anglo-centric without being interesting. Random in its coverage, it is a disgraceful mutilation of one of the 20th-century's great classics of High Tory prose.

Bill Bryson, *Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words*.

Theodore Berstein, *The Careful Writer*.

Claire Kehrwald Cook, *Line by Line; How to Improve Your Own Writing* (particularly good on errant parallels).

"Collegiate" dictionaries are misnamed. They are collections of words that, for the most part, if you don't know them, you shouldn't be in college. Buy a large dictionary: the big *American Heritage*, the *Random House Unabridged*. They cost about a meal or two at Murphy's, and they will stand you in good stead the rest of your life.

A thesaurus. The ones that come with *Word* for instance are ok, but limited. *Roget's* is the standard. The dictionary format for a thesaurus is fine, but once you figure out how to use it, the traditionally-arranged one is much richer and more suggestive.

Read good prose. There is no way to learn to write if you do not read. *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, mostly *National Review*, and above all *The New Yorker* have good prose. Put them by your bedside, or take one of these to lunch and read it, and stop every so often when something is really nice reading, and try and sum up what the writer is doing; why is it so palatable? You can go online and get a year's subscription to the *New Yorker* for less than a dollar a week! Few things you do at Dartmouth will be so consistently profitable.