

Holliston High School English Department Style Guide

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Guidelines for Writers of Formal Essays

1. Use the technological tools at your disposal frequently and critically.

- ✓ Choose typing an assignment over handwriting.
- ✓ Employ the features of word-processing programs. Spellcheck is only helpful if you use it!
- ✓ More student-friendly websites appear every day, and many are dedicated to spelling, grammar, citing sources, and all sorts of helpful academic areas.

2. Your paper is not ready to be submitted until it has been proofread for errors.

- ✓ Consult the other resources in this handbook, especially the formatting and usage guides.
- ✓ Read the paper out loud. This will allow you to notice obvious errors and awkward phrases.
- ✓ Engage another proofreader, preferably a parent or person with strong communication skills.
- ✓ If your paper has more than one page, flip through it and be sure there are no missing pages, upside-down pages, or blank pages.
- ✓ A crumpled or coffee-stained paper sends the wrong message to a teacher.

3. Be critical of when to quote, paraphrase, or summarize. Always cite your sources.

- ✓ When the particular language of the author is essential to your literary analysis, use a quote. Use only the relevant text.
- ✓ Paraphrase when you need to highlight a certain point in the text that supports your argument.
- ✓ Summarize lengthy sections of text to provide basic background information.

4. Use the third person. Avoid the use of “I”, “we”, “you”, “your”, “my”, etc.

- ✓ Avoid “In my opinion”, “I think”, and similar phrases. Let the ideas in your paper speak for you. Your name is on the paper, so of course your teacher knows the paper presents your opinion!

5. When discussing literature or a work of art, use the literary present tense.

- ✓ Artistic creations exist in an eternal present, so use the present tense when analyzing them.
- ✓ For example, even though *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written many years ago and takes place in the 1930s, a sentence from a critical essay reads: “Boo Radley’s house creates an ominous mood in the neighborhood.”
- ✓ The same rule applies for films, paintings, sculptures, and other works of art. For example, an art critique reads: “Picasso’s *Guernica* illustrates the suffering that war inflicts on innocent civilians.”

6. Be consistent with tense usage.

- ✓ For example, if you've begun a narrative in the past tense, make sure any tense switches are logical and easy for the reader to follow.

7. Maintain a formal voice.

- ✓ Avoid contractions (don't, won't, can't, etc.) in formal writing.
- ✓ Avoid abbreviations (w/o, b/c, etc.) and slang.
- ✓ Never treat your schoolwork like a text message! Never use terms like LOL, ROTFL, IMHO, 2nite, OMG, L8R, BTW, etc.
- ✓ Acronyms are formed from the first letters or recognizable parts of a compound term, such as National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). On the first occurrence of an acronym, spell out the whole term and follow it with the acronym. From this point, it is acceptable to use the acronym in place of the longer multiword term.

8. Avoid commentary sentences that start: "This quote shows that..."

- ✓ Delete these words from the beginning of the sentence. Doing so will likely not change the significance of your commentary. In addition, your writing will be more direct and bold.

9. Use punctuation correctly.

- ✓ The most common punctuation errors relate to the use of plurals and possessives. Remember that plurals are commonly formed by adding "s" or "es" to a word (one pen → two pens; one watch → two watches) and possessives are commonly formed by adding an apostrophe plus "s" to a word (Dave's wallet, the team's victory, the car's tires).
- ✓ There are many more punctuation rules, including more rules and exceptions for plurals and possessives, but there are far too many to list here. Consult an online guide to grammar and writing for a comprehensive experience.

10. Compare your finished product to a writing rubric.

- ✓ Consulting the rubric before you submit the assignment will provide an expectation of your grade for the draft.
- ✓ Examining the rubric critically alongside your paper will highlight areas of your paper that can still be improved.

Effective Writing

The following information was borrowed from/adapted from: Hacker, Diana. *A Writer's Reference*, 4th edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.

For further information visit, www.bedfordstmartins.com/hacker/writersref

I. Parallelism

If two or more ideas are parallel, they should be written in parallel grammatical form. Single words should be balanced with single words, phrases with phrases, clauses with clauses.

-Balance parallel ideas in a series

1. Hooked on romance novels, Mary learned that there is nothing more important than *being rich, looking good, and having a good time*.

-Balance parallel ideas presented in pairs

With a coordinating conjunction such as *and, but, or or*

1. At Holliston High School, vandalism can result in *suspension* or even *expulsion* from school.

With a pair of correlative conjunctions such as *either...or or not only...but also*

1. Leonardo da Vinci was *not only* a prolific artist *but also* an accomplished engineer.

2. Kate was advised *either to change her flight or to rent a car*.

*Note: Your computer will not correct problems with parallelism. Because computer programs are not able to assess whether two or more ideas are parallel in meaning, they are unable to identify faulty parallelism.

II. Modifiers

Modifiers, whether they are single words, phrases, or clauses, should point clearly to the words they modify. As a rule, related words should be kept together.

-Put limiting modifiers in front of the words they modify.

Limiting modifiers such as *only, even, almost, nearly, and just* should appear in front of a verb only if they modify the verb. If they limit the meaning of some other word in the sentence, they should be placed in front of that word.

1. Lasers destroy *only* the target, leaving the surrounding healthy tissue unharmed (not *only* destroy).

2. Our lacrosse team didn't score *even* once (not *even* score).

-Place phrases and clauses so that readers can quickly see what they modify.

Make sure your meaning is clear.

1. There are many pictures of musicians who have performed at Kelly's on the walls.

The musicians weren't performing on the walls; the pictures were on the walls. Revise the sentence to *On the walls are many pictures of musicians who have performed at Kelly's*.

2. The thief was described as a six-foot-tall man with a beard weighing 200 pounds.

The thief, not the beard, weighed 200 pounds. Revise the sentence to *The thief was described as a 200-pound, six-foot-tall man with a beard*.

-Do not split infinitives needlessly

An infinitive consists of *to* plus a verb: *to read, to run, to write*. When a modifier appears between these words, the infinitive is considered "split": *to thoroughly read*. If a split infinitive is awkward, it should be revised.

Example: Students should try to *if possible avoid* writing their essays the night before they are due.
Corrected: *If possible, students should try to avoid writing their essays the night before they are due.*

-Repair dangling modifiers

Dangling modifiers are usually word groups that suggest but don't name an actor. When a sentence opens with a modifier, readers expect the subject of the next clause to name the actor. If it doesn't, the modifier dangles.

1. Opening the window to let out a huge spider, the handle accidentally broke off.

The handle didn't open the window; the student did. *When the student opened the window to let out a huge spider, the handle accidentally broke off.*

III. Point of View

The point of view of a piece of writing is the perspective from which it is written. The third-person point of view, which emphasizes the subject, is appropriate in formal academic writing.

-Maintain consistent verb tenses

Consistent verb tenses establish the time of the action being described.

1. During the presentation, John's cell phone *rings* and he *leaves* the room.

Do not shift tenses when writing about literature. Use the present tense when writing about literature, and when quoting, summarizing, or paraphrasing an author's views.

1. The scarlet letter *is* a punishment placed on Hester's chest by her the community, and yet it *is* an extremely decorative and imaginative product of Hester's own needlework.

IV. Active vs. Passive verbs

Active verbs express meaning more forcefully and enthusiastically than verbs in the passive voice. Forms of the verb *be* (*be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been*) lack strength because they express no action. Verbs in passive voice are weak because their subjects receive action instead of doing it.

BE VERB: A surge of power *was* responsible for the destruction of the coolant pumps.

PASSIVE: The coolant pumps *were destroyed* by a surge of power.

ACTIVE: A surge of power *destroyed* the coolant pumps.

-Replace *be* verbs that result in dull or wordy sentences

1. Burying nuclear waste in Antarctica would *violate* (instead of *be in violation of*) an international treaty.

2. Entering a world of freedom in college, I rebelled against (instead of *was rebellious against*) every rule established by my parents.

*Note: Your computer may identify some passive verbs. However, because passive verbs are sometimes appropriate, YOU must decide whether to make a passive verb active.

V. Subject-Verb Agreement

In the present tense, verbs agree with their subjects in number (singular or plural) and in person (first, second, or third).

-Make the verb agree with its subject, not with a word that comes between

1. High *levels* of pollution *cause* damage to the o-zone.

The subject is levels, not pollution.

-Treat most subjects joined with *and* as plural

1. *Trish and Selina* often walk together.
Trish and Selina are the subject.

EXCEPTION:

When parts of the subject form a single unit or when they refer to the same person/thing, treat the subject as singular.

2. Joan's natural ability and her desire to help others *have* led to a career in counseling.

-With subjects connected by *or* or *nor* (or by *either...or* or *neither...or*), make the verb agree with the part of the subject nearer to the verb.

1. A driver's *license* and credit *card* *is* required for the purchase.

2. A driver's *license* and two credit *cards* *are* required for the purchase.

-Treat most indefinite pronouns as singular

1. *Everyone* on the team *supports* the coach.

2. *Each* of the plants *has* been watered.

3. *None* of these careers *requires* a college education.

-Treat collective nouns as singular unless the meaning is clearly plural

Collective nouns such as, *jury, committee, audience, crowd, class, troop, family,* and *couple* name a class or a group. Collective nouns are usually treated as singular because they emphasize the group as a unit. Occasionally, when there is some reason to draw attention to the individual members of the group, a collective noun may be treated as plural.

1. The *class* *respects* the teacher.

2. The *class* *are* debating among themselves.

To note the individuality in the second sentence, writers may add a plural noun: *The members of the class are...*

3. The dance *troop* *meets* in the gym on Thursdays.

4. A young *couple* *were* arguing about text messages while holding hands.
The meaning is plural. Only individuals can argue and hold hands.

-Make the verb agree with its subject even when the subject follows the verb

1. There *are* surprisingly few *students* in this class.

-Make the verb agree with its subject, not with a subject complement

1. A major *force* in today's economy *is* women- as earner, consumers, and investors.

Force is the subject, not women.

VI. Pronoun-antecedent agreement

-Make pronouns and antecedents agree

The antecedent of a pronoun is the word the pronoun refers to. A pronoun and its antecedent agree when they are both singular and plural.

SINGULAR: The teacher completed her grading.

PLURAL: The teachers completed their grading.

Indefinite pronouns refer to nonspecific persons or things. Even though the following indefinite pronouns may seem to be plural, treat them as singular: *anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, nether, nobody, none, no one, somebody, someone, something.*

1. In this class everyone performs at his or her own pace.

To repair plural pronouns used as singular indefinite pronouns:

1- Replace the plural pronoun with he or she (or his or her).

When *someone* doesn't proofread, *they* (change to *he or she is*) are more likely to miss mistakes.

2- Make the antecedent plural.

1. When *someone doesn't* (change to *students don't*) proofread, *they* are more likely to miss mistakes.

3- Rewrite the sentence so that no problem of agreement arises.

1. When *someone* (change to *Someone who*) doesn't proofread, *they are* (eliminate comma and change to *is*) more likely to miss mistakes.

A generic noun represents a typical member of a group (typical student) or any member of a group (any lawyer). Although generic nouns may seem to be plural, they are singular.

1. Every *gymnast* must practice rigorously if *he or she* (not *they want*) wants to get to the Olympics.

Collective nouns such as *jury, committee, audience, crowd, class, troop, family, team, and couple* name a group. If the group functions as a unit, treat the noun as singular; if the members of the group function individually, treat the noun as plural.

AS A UNIT: The school *committee* granted *its* permission to create new curriculum.

AS INDIVIDUALS: The *committee* put *their* signatures on the document.

When treating a collective noun as plural, some writers prefer to include a clearly plural antecedent to the sentence:

The members of the committee put their signatures on the document.

Write compound antecedents joined by *and* as plural

Cathy and Paul went to the basketball game, where *they* had courtside seats.

With compound antecedents joined by *or* or *nor*, make the pronoun agree with the nearer antecedent

VII. Sentence Fragments

A complete sentence contains one full independent clause. An independent clause contains a subject and a verb and it can stand alone. A sentence fragment is a word group that pretends to be a sentence. When fragments appear next to related sentences, they can be hard to recognize.

Ask yourself:

Is there a verb? NO -> It is a sentence fragment.

Is there a subject? NO-> It is a sentence fragment.

Is the word group a subordinate (or dependent) clause/phrase? YES-> It is a fragment.

To repair a fragment either put the fragment into a nearby sentence or turn it into a complete sentence.

Fragment- On the old wooden stool in the corner of my grandmother's kitchen.

Revised- On that morning I sat in my usual spot, on the old wooden stool in the corner of my grandmother's kitchen.

VIII. Run-on sentences

Run-on sentences are independent clauses that have not been properly joined together. When two independent clauses appear in one sentence, they must be joined in one of the following ways:

1- with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*)

2- with a semi-colon

There are 2 types of run-on sentences: fused sentences and comma splices

Fused sentence- when a writer puts no punctuation and no coordinating conjunction between independent clauses

1. Gestures are a means of communication for everyone they are essential for the hearing-impaired.

Comma splice- when a writer joins two or more independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction (the comma appears alone).

1. Gestures are a means of communication for everyone, they are essential for the hearing-impaired.

2. Gestures are a means of communication for everyone, however, they are essential for the hearing-impaired.
(However is NOT a coordinating conjunction)

To repair a run-on sentence:

1- Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction

1. Gestures are a means of communication for everyone, *but* they are essential for the hearing-impaired.

2- Use a semi-colon. A semi-colon can be used alone; it can also be used with a transitional phrase.

1. Gestures are a means of communication for everyone; they are essential for the hearing-impaired.

2. Gestures are a means of communication for everyone; *however*, they are essential for the hearing-impaired.

3- Make the clauses into separate sentences.

1. Gestures are a means of communication for everyone. *They* are essential for the hearing-impaired.

4- Restructure the sentence.

1. *Although gestures* are a means of communication for everyone, they are essential for the hearing-impaired.

IX. Word Choice

-Eliminate redundancies

-Avoid unnecessary repetition of words

-Cut empty or inflated phrases

-Simplify the structure

-Reduce clauses to phrases, and phrases to single words

Use exact language!

A good dictionary and thesaurus will help you find words to express your meaning clearly and exactly.

-Select words with appropriate connotations

-Favor specific, concrete nouns

-Do not misuse words

-Use standard idioms

-Avoid clichés

-Use figures of speech carefully

The Top Twenty-Five Usage Errors Your Computer Can't Correct For You!

This section of the handbook was written to reflect students' most common usage errors. These errors are common for many reasons. First, these words are used frequently in English, so there are plenty of opportunities to misuse them. Also, students making mistakes using these words have probably been making them for a long time. Therefore, the incorrect usage is long-lasting in students' memories, and they'll need to unlearn the incorrect usage and replace it with the correct one. Finally, while computers can do wonderful things for spelling and grammar, the computer cannot read minds and know which term is needed in any situation.

How to Use This Reference: The majority of problems students experience when trying to choose the correct word are due to homophones. Homophones are words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings. There are hundreds of homophones in English; only the most common are listed here. Definitions of the words listed below are provided, but since these words are so common, students likely know the definitions already. The example sentences, which appear in *italics*, will be far more helpful in determining which word to choose. Compare the context of your own writing to the contexts in the example sentences, and choose the appropriate word.

1. Their, There, They're

Their = possessive pronoun meaning "belonging to them": *Their books are under their desks.*

There = that place: *The band will set up over there.*

They're = contraction for "they are": *They're making dinner.*

2. Its, It's

Its = possessive pronoun meaning "belonging to it": *The crab had an unusual growth on its shell.*

It's = contraction for "it is" or "it has": *It's still raining; it's been raining for three days.*

3. We're, Where, Were, Wear

We're = contraction for we are: *We're glad to help.*

Where = location: *Where are you going?*

Were = a plural past tense form of the verb "to be": *They were walking side by side.*

Wear = a verb used with clothing. *What will you wear tonight?*

4. Your, You're

Your = possessive pronoun meaning "belonging to you": *Your shoes are untied.*

You're = contraction for "you are": *You're walking around with your shoes untied.*

5. To, Too, Two

To = a preposition, and the first part of the infinitive form of a verb: *They went to the lake to swim.*

Too = used to show degree; very, also: *I was too tired to continue. I was hungry, too.*

Two = the number 2: *Two students scored too low on the exam to pass the course.*

6. Than, Then

Than = used in comparison statements: *He is richer than I am.*

➤ used in statements of preference: *I would rather dance than eat.*

➤ used to suggest quantities beyond a specified amount: *Read more than the first paragraph.*

Then = a time other than now: *He was younger then. She will start her new job then.*

➤ next in time, space, or order: *First we must study; then we can play.*

➤ suggesting a logical conclusion: *If you've studied hard, then the exam should be no problem.*

7. Accept, Except

accept = verb meaning "to receive" or "to agree": *He accepted their praise graciously.*

except = preposition meaning "all but": *Everyone went to the game except Alyson.*

8. Affect, Effect

Affect = a verb meaning “to act on, produce, or impress”. The sad scene in the film affected her mood. The weather will affect our vacation plans.

Effect = a noun meaning “a result or consequence”. The effects of the medication won’t be noticeable for six weeks. The experiment did not have the desired effect.

9. Seen, Saw, Scene

Seen = used with “have” or “had”. *I have seen the new movie.*

Saw = used with “I” alone. *I saw the new movie.*

Scene = a place where something occurs. *The criminal returned to the scene of the crime.*

➤ a section of a film or play. *My favorite scene occurs near the end of the play.*

10. Woman, Women

Woman = singular. *That woman is my aunt.*

Women = plural. *Those women are my aunts.*

11. Whole, Hole

Whole = entire. *I ate the whole thing!*

Hole = a void or space. *There is a hole in my shirt.*

12. Know, No, and Now

Know = a verb meaning “to acquire and retain information”. *I know the results of the game.*

No = a negative response. *I told her, “No!”*

➤ “No” also negates words that come after it, and means “not any”. *You have no homework tonight.*

Now = used for time order and means “currently”. *Now open your books.*

13. Should have, could have, would have, might have

Use **should have**, **might have**, **would’ve**, **could’ve**, etc. Many students use the incorrect **should of**, **might of**, **would of**, etc. *He should’ve consulted his handbook for an example.*

14. Supposed to, used to

Use **supposed to** and **used to**, and not “suppose to” or “use to.” *I used to go to the office for a pass, but the new policy says I am supposed to go to the nurse.*

15. Are, Our

Are = a form of the verb “to be”. *Are you late? We are going to win!*

Our = possessive. *Our goal is to win. Our meeting starts at three.*

16. Choose, chose, loose, lose

“Choose” and “chose” are different tenses. Use “choose” for commands and present tense. *We choose to compete. Choose ice cream or cake now!* Use “chose” for past tense. *He chose to take yesterday off.*

Loose = an adjective meaning “unrestrained”, or the opposite of “tight”. *My pants are too loose.*

Lose = a verb meaning “to misplace”, or “not to achieve victory”. *If you lose your keys, how will we get in? Did you lose the game?*

17. Here, Hear

Here = “this place”. *I need you here immediately.*

Hear = “to listen to”. *Can you hear the announcements?*

18. Right, Write

Right = the opposite of “left”; “correct”. We took a right turn. Her answers were right.

Write = “to form words”. We had to write a page for homework. Her writing is exemplary.

19. Brake, Break

Brake = “a device for stopping a vehicle”. *He applied the brakes and stopped the car.*

Break = “to smash, destroy, or fracture”. *I’m afraid I’ll break my leg if I get on that motorcycle.*

20. Piece, Peace

Piece = “a portion or fragment”. *Can I have a piece of cake?*

Peace = “lack of war; tranquility”. *The 1980s were a time of relative peace for the United States.*

21. Roll, Role

Roll = “to revolve or turn over”. *The ball rolled down the hill.*

➤ “Roll” is also short for “scroll” and used to denote a document or list. *She made the Honor Roll.*

Role = “a character played by an actor”. *Atticus Finch was actor Gregory Peck’s most memorable role.*

22. Which, Witch

Which = used to represent a specified antecedent. *The novel, which I read over the summer, influenced my own writing.*

➤ “which” also means “what one?” *Which flavor do you prefer?*

Witch = “a woman who practices magic”. *She dressed as a witch for Halloween.*

23. Knew, New

Knew = past tense of “to know”. *I knew the answers to the quiz.*

New = “recent or fresh”; the opposite of “old”. *I needed new shoes.*

24. Sight, Site

Sight = one of the five senses, “vision”. *I rely most on my senses of sight and hearing.*

➤ Sight also means “a view”. *The riots downtown were quite a sight.*

Site = “a position or location”. *Our Beatles tour took us to the site where Lennon and McCartney first met.*

➤ “Site” is also commonly used in compound words. *We met at the jobsite. What’s the name of that website again?*

25. Through, threw, though, thorough, thru

Through = “in one side and out the other”. *We passed through the security check. The rain came through the roof. He rolled through the stop sign.*

Threw = past tense of “to throw”. *She threw the ball to first base.*

Though = “although; even if”. *Though Sarah did not make the Honor Roll, her parents were still pleased with her grades.*

Thorough = “complete; very attentive to detail”. *This is a very thorough list of homophones and usage difficulties.*

Thru = an informal, simplified spelling of “through”. “Thru” and other forms of “textspeak” should never be used in a paper for school, but they are acceptable to use in notes or a text message.

MLA Format

This information was adapted from the California State University (Los Angeles) University Library webpage. Please see the following link for more information:

<http://www.calstatela.edu/library/styleman.htm>

Updated Information

- MLA no longer requires underlining. Titles, such as books and periodical titles, are now *italicized* rather than underlined.
- All entries in a reference list, whether print or electronic, must now include the medium in which they have been published (Print, Web, DVD, Television, etc.)
- URLs are no longer required in citations. MLA recommends that writers only include a web address if the audience is unlikely to find the source otherwise.
- New Abbreviations: Some sources do not have a date, publisher or pagination. MLA advises, where applicable, to write n.d. for no date, n.p. for no publisher, and n.pag. for no pagination given.

Basic Formatting

- Double space throughout paper, with no extra spaces between paragraphs.
- Top, bottom, and side margins should be one inch.
- Indent the first word of each paragraph by ½ inch or 5 spaces (use the “Tab” key).
- Do not use a title page for the paper: instead simply type your name, instructor’s name, course number, and date. This should be on the left side of the page.
- Center the title of the paper. Do not underline the title, or put in “quotation marks,” or set in ALL CAPITALS. Underline the title only when the title of the literary selection is used.
- Number all pages consecutively in the upper right-hand corner, ½ inch from the top and flush with right margin. Type your last name before the page number, and do not use “p.” before the number.

Works Cited: MLA style requires that the list of Works Cited start on a new page at the end of your paper. Formatting rules include:

- Continue page numbering from the body of your paper.
- Center the title “Works Cited,” one inch from the top.
- Alphabetize entries by the author’s last name. If no author, alphabetize by the title (ignore A, An, & The).
- Indent any line after the first line of an entry.

Online tools for citing sources:

<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/academic1/bibbuilder/>

<http://www.easybib.com/>

Proofreading Symbols and Abbreviations

Use this sheet to make sense of all those marks your teacher made on your paper!

Circled word, letter, or punctuation mark=These are errors that should be really obvious to anyone, especially the student who wrote the paper!

25=one of the 25 common usage errors from the reference sheet you have been provided in this handbook.

AWK=Awkward sentence or phrasing. Rewrite the sentence, making it easier to understand.

AGREE: S/V=Lack of subject/verb agreement. Example: The men goes to work. Corrected: The men go to work. OR The man goes to work.

AGREE: P/A=Lack of pronoun/antecedent agreement. Example: Everyone performs at their own pace. Corrected: Everyone performs at his own pace.

WC=Word Choice. Pick a better word to go here.

R-O=Run-on sentence. Rewrite the sentence with appropriate conjunctions or split the sentence into two shorter ones.

CAPS=Capitalize

SP=Spelling

T=Tense of verbs (past, present, future, etc.) problem.

FRAG= Sentence fragment. The sentence is not complete and does not make sense. Rewrite.

BS=No, it doesn't mean what you think it does! It means Be Specific!

MW=Missing word

PL=This word should be plural. Chances are you need to omit the apostrophe.

POS=This word should be possessive. Chances are you need to add an apostrophe.

REP=Repetitious. You've already said this! You've already said this! You've already said this!

WO=Write it out! This is used for unacceptable acronyms and abbreviations. Students should also write out all numbers under ninety-nine.

¶=Start a new paragraph here.