Academic Writing Do:s and Don’t:s

**Alignment** – if you’ve been asked to work on alignment, it means that the argument that you’ve presented in your introduction is not the same that you’ve argued for or have concluded with. Make sure that all three parts of the essay are *aligned* and that you’re consistent: introduction, body, and conclusion should fit together into one whole.

**Clarity** – if you’ve been asked to work more on clarity, it means that your argument is a bit muddled and needs some polishing to be communicated more effectively. This problem might be connected to your over-all argument or just to individual sentences or one or more supporting points. It might also be related to language: can you make it simpler? The comments in your essay will hopefully give you some more specific advice.

**Close reading** – be careful when you refer to what is said in another text or in the novel that you’re writing about. Are you sure that your analysis/summary fairly reflects what is said in the text? Could it be understood in some other way? The skill of close reading is very important for literary analysis.

**Cohesion –** all your sentences within each paragraph must relate to one another, together forming a unity. Use pronouns to refer back to previously mentioned noun phrases (but make sure that it’s obvious to what they refer), determine what your key words are, and use synonyms for variation (a good rule is to never use the same word twice in the same sentence if you can avoid it – preferably not more than once in a paragraph, but that can be hard to achieve when you’re writing about something very specific). Repeat yourself *with variation*. Read your paragraph out loud to hear what it sounds like – repetitiveness and problems with pronouns often become more obvious when we hear a text than when we read it.

**Colloquialisms** – a colloquialism is a word or turn of phrase that sounds too much like spoken, informal language. Typical examples would be starting a sentence with ‘well’ or ‘so’. Remember – these essays should be written in formal English.

**Commas for clarity –** well-placed commas can make your text easier to read, especially if you have a tendency to write long and complicated sentences. Dashes work beautifully, too. Read up a bit on punctuation and see if you can help your reader by adding commas, dashes, and semicolons to your next text.

**Contractions** – avoid contractions in formal English. Write ‘he is’ instead of ‘he’s’, etc. Note also that the correct form of ‘can’t’ in formal English isn’t ‘can not’, but ‘cannot’. (Word’s spell-checker will mark this for you. Activate your spell-checkers.)

**Definitions –** This issue is related to clarity, but has to do specifically with how you define the terms that you use. Make sure that it’s clear from your text how you define your key terms. If you’re writing about happiness, for example, don’t presuppose that your reader will know exactly what you mean by this term. It might be important for your argument that we know your definition from the outset, at other times it might be enough to just mention in passing what it is that you’re referring to. Sometimes it helps to imagine your reader as someone who is either a bit dense or someone who wants to question your argument in any way possible, looking to misunderstand you. (Defining one’s terms is standard in literary studies and people fight over the silliest things.)

**Fragment –** see ‘Sentence fragment’ below.

**Learner’s Dictionary befriendment** – if you’ve been asked to befriend your Learner’s Dictionary, then there are a lot of small mistakes relating to prepositions and collocations in your text. Make sure always to have your LD by your side when writing and to look up words as often as you can to make sure that you’re using them in the correct way. You can also use COCA to check on individual expressions and phrases. Using your LD to look up the word ‘befriendment’, for example, will teach you that there is actually no such word; I made it up. To ‘befriend’ someone means to become friends. I’m very good friends with my LD, and I miss it terribly now that I’ve let it live in Linköping for a while. The more you use your LD, the better your English will become.

**Non sequitur** – a non sequitur is a statement that doesn’t follow naturally after what came before. It might be a faulty conclusion but it might also be an abrupt turn of topics between sentences. Bridge your sentences, bridge your paragraphs – make sure everything is connected.

**Paragraph structure** – if you’ve been asked to work more on your paragraph structure, you need to pay more attention to what we talked about during our paragraph seminar: topic sentences, discussion, evidence, transition words, etc. Remember also that each paragraph should only discuss one thing. When you start a new topic, you should also start a new paragraph.

**Perhapsitis –** if your text suffers from ‘perhapsitis’, then you express too much uncertainty when trying to make a case for your argument. Avoid words like ‘maybe’, ‘perhaps’, or even ‘I think’, as they make you come across as uncertain (my own texts often suffer greatly from this debilitating disease). ‘Perhapsitis’ is a term coined by the poet Ezra Pound, who used it when editing T.S. Eliot’s famous poem *The Waste Land* (1922).

**Pronouns and referents** – a pronoun refers to a noun that’s been mentioned earlier in the text. If you have been asked to work more on pronouns and referents, it means that it’s not always clear to what earlier noun your pronouns refer, which might in turn make your argument and sentences more difficult to understand. This is an issue of clarity.

**Prune** – if you’ve been asked to prune a bit, then you should work on removing superfluous words and to shorten your text a bit so that it doesn’t exceed the length requirements *unnecessarily*. It’s OK to go slightly over if you have something to say. Sometimes, though, we can shorten our argument a bit without losing anything essential. Cut to the chase, in other words.

**Punctuation** – if you’ve been asked to work on your punctuation, there is either a problem with your use of the most common punctuation marks OR I couldn’t think of anything else for you to work on. In the former case, you need to pay attention to where you place your full stops and your commas. In the latter case, you haven’t necessarily made any mistakes, but in order to add a new level to your writing, try to learn a little bit more about punctuation. It’s usually a good idea to put commas after initial adverbials, for example, because it makes the text easier to read. See if you can get a correct semicolon and/or colon into your next essay, too. (If you don’t want to, that’s fine, too.)

**Repetition –** it’s good to repeat ourselves so that we really get our point across, but when we do so, there should be variation to our expressions. Try to think of synonyms and different ways to say the same thing. A good rule of thumb is to never use the same word twice in a sentence (ideally in a paragraph, but that might be too difficult to achieve). You can also try a transition phrase such as ‘In other words,…’. Just make sure that you’re not just repeating the same thing over and over because you don’t have anything else to add to it. If that is the case, visit **‘So what’** below.

**Run-on sentence –** a run-on sentence is when you put two main clauses together without a proper conjunction or punctuation, usually with just a comma (which is why this type of sentence is also referred to as a ‘comma splice’). Example: A run-on sentence adds a main clause to another main clause with just a comma in between, a comma is not strong enough to place between two main clauses. We can fix this by changing the comma to a ‘but’ or a semi-colon (=;).

**Sentence fragment** – a sentence fragment is a clause without a subject and/or a finite verb.

**Simplicity** – if you’ve been asked to work on simplicity, then that probably means that your language is a bit muddled. Perhaps you write long, complicated sentences that are ambiguous and hard to understand. Write shorter, more straightforward sentences to make what you say carry across more clearly.

**So what** – if you’ve been asked to think more about the ‘so what’, then you need to explain further *why* something that you bring up is important or what the consequences of that thing are. A good idea is to constantly ask of your own writing: so what? (Not in the text – only to yourself while you’re writing.) Don’t presume that your reader will draw the same conclusions that you do from a statement – follow your line of thought all the way to the end. This becomes especially important when you start quoting from the novel you’ve chosen. *Tell* us what you see in the quotes – how do you interpret them? A so-what:ting scenario can look a bit like this: My bike has been stolen. So what? Well, I can’t afford to buy a new one. So what? Well, now I can’t get to work. So what? I risk losing my job and won’t be able to support my family. Aha – there’s the so what! (Scenario borrowed from the movie *The Bicycle Thief*.)

**Speculation\* -** It is very tempting to say what we think characters in novels must feel or want, or what their motives must be in certain situations. But when we can’t back such analyses up with any concrete evidence from the text itself, such readings are *speculative* and don’t belong in academic literary essays or in university class-rooms. Take out all speculation from your essays and save it for a cup of coffee with a friend.

**Split infinitive** – when we place a word between the ‘to’-infinitve and the base form of a verb, we call that a split infinitive. The most famous example of a split infinitive comes from *Star Trek*: To boldly go where no man has gone before. While this would suggest that split infinitives are OK – which they are, in certain circumstances – they are largely frowned upon in academic writing. As with other things, a good rule of thumb is to follow the rules until you know enough to break them. Therefore: avoid splitting your infinitives, no matter what Kirk says.

**Style –** the question of style might be connected to colloquialisms (see above). Remember to keep a proper academic style in your texts. Avoid contractions and words that are too informal. Try to keep an objective tone and don’t get too personal. Avoid phrases such as ‘I think’ or ‘According to me’.

**Tense – fiction –** when you refer to something that happens in the novel that you’re writing about – use present tense. Avoid the progressive form.

**Three-part essay** – your essay should have an introduction (with a they say/I say), a body (where you make a case for your ‘I say’), and a conclusion (where you summarize your argument and go out with a bang – the latter part not necessary but highly recommended). If you’ve been asked to work on this issue, then you need to really work on the structure of your next essay, making sure that all three parts are there.

**Title –** your essay should ideally have a title that captures both its topic and your argument. It should also ‘sell’ your essay a bit, making a presumptive reader *want* to read it. With MLA style, all significant words should be capitalized. This Means That Your Title Should Look Kind of Like This. What words are insignificant, you ask? Prepositions, articles, and conjunctions.

**Transition words –** how do your sentences relate to one another? This needs to become clear. Consider each sentence that you write in relation to the one before and the one after.

**Verbs –** if you’ve been asked to work more on verbs, then there is a greater problem in your text than mere subject-verb agreement errors. Review the verb-chapter in the grammar book and try to figure out where you went wrong in your text. As you go on writing, stop to think in each sentence what tense or aspect you should use, and whether or not you can/should use a finite or a non-finite verb. Are you using the right modal auxiliary?

**Voice –** if you’ve been told to work more on your voice, it means that you should try to make your own voice the dominant one in the text. Let *your* argument lead the way, and don’t give more space than needed to anyone else. If you do so, only bring them in to bounce off them, as it were – use them to bring out your own argument in some way. (This will of course work differently in the next essay, where you don’t have to bring in any secondary sources unless you want to. There, you will instead have to work on making your argument and your voice stand out against the novel that you’re writing about. This means avoiding too much description and recapitulation of plot, letting your interpretation be the focus of the paper.) More ‘I Say’, in other words.

**Word choices** – if you’ve been asked to work on word choices, then that means you’ve used words that don’t always fit the context. When you’re not super-sure what a word means or how it should be used, look it up. Make sure to consider any examples in the dictionary that illustrate how they should be used in a sentence. You can also look them up on COCA (a corpus that we will talk about in class during seminar 5).