DIRECTIONS FOR PREPARING BETTER PAPERS
(Updated 28 August 2006)

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I grade papers both on clarity of writing and on content. When a paper is well written, little distinction needs to be drawn between these two. When the writing is poor (particularly when the writer has not followed the rules of grammar), content is difficult to extract. In other words, content and the way a piece is written are inextricably intertwined.

*I grade the content of a paper primarily on the basis of what has been written, not primarily on what I have to presume the author intended to convey.* Therefore, writers should pay close attention to the rules of grammar and to hints for strengthening writing.

The two authorities on which I rely are:
1. *The Chicago Manual of Style* (which has FAQs online at: [http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/cmosfaq/cmosfaq.html](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/cmosfaq/cmosfaq.html). Of course, this is only frequently asked questions, not all of the pertinent questions that might arise.

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**WRITING**

*Common errors*

Among the common writing errors I encounter are:

a. **Absence of agreement in number:** subjects/verbs and pronouns/antecedents that do not agree in number.

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b. **Antecedents unclear:** pronouns whose antecedents are unclear, because more than one preceding noun could serve as the antecedent.

c. **Introductory clauses that do not modify the subject of the sentence.**

   The sentence: "Although many people see the fields of archives and records management as distinct and parallel professions, they often are recognized as two phases in the continuum of a record's existence." is grammatically incorrect because the subject of the introductory clause--“people”—is not the antecedent of the subject of the sentence--"they."

d. **Comma separation:** a comma separating the subject from the verb.

e. **Use of contractions:** These are inappropriate in formal writing.

f. **Misuse of common words:**

   1. use of the words “another” and “other” without antecedents, and use of the word “also” as a conjunction without a clear indication of to what the thought following “also” relates. These words express a condition of being in addition to something. Always be certain that you have made clear the concepts to which they are additional.

   2. use of the word “different” as though it were not expressing comparison. The word expresses difference from something. When you use the word “different,” make certain that you have told the reader what it is different from.

   3. confusion in the use of the definite and indefinite articles. “The” is the definite article and normally requires an antecedent. “A” and “an” are indefinite articles and require no antecedent. “The town” means a specific community, while “a town” means any town.

g. **Paragraphs without a topic sentence:** The topic sentence identifies the subject of, and therefore focuses, a paragraph. Normally the topic sentence is the opening sentence of a paragraph. A paragraph without a topic sentence is merely a collection of sentences. A paragraph of two sentences rarely has a topic sentence and should be avoided.
Dull writing

1. **Repetition of structure and/or words:** A common cause of dull writing is use of the same sentence structure in several successive sentences or in several sentences in close proximity to each other. When you notice that several sentences begin in the same manner, using either the same convention, such as an introductory clause, or the exact same words, or when you notice that you are using the same word(s) for the subject and/or verb in more than two sentences in one paragraph or in more than three sentences on one page, you should rewrite some of the sentences to add variety, and thereby spice, to the presentation of your thoughts.

2. **Verbosity:** The second most common cause of dull writing is unnecessary verbosity. The more words and complex sentence structures that a reader must wade through to capture a writer’s thought, the more difficult the reader’s job becomes. Effective writers work to make the reader’s job easy, because a reader who is put off by the challenge of struggling through a piece of writing is less likely to receive the full benefit of the message the writer is striving to convey.

3. **Weak and inexpressive verbs:** The most common cause of dull writing, I find, is the use of bland, inexpressive verbs. Always strive to write with verbs that express action, color, emotion, and feeling.

   a. More specifically, much dull writing results from use of the **passive voice**, which is formed by: (1) constructing a sentence such that the object of the action is presented as the subject of the sentence and (2) constructing the verb of the sentence with a form of the verb “to be.” For example in “e” above, “they often are recognized . . .” is passive voice, because the object of the action--the fields--is made the subject of the sentence. Active voice would read: “people often recognize . . .” Similarly, passive voice is readily recognized by its use of a form of the verb “to be,” in this case “are recognized” (passive) instead of “recognize” (active).

   Another strategy for reducing dull writing is to use as sparingly as possible the verb constructions: “there is”; “there are”; and “it is.”

   b. Secondly, the impact of verbs often is diluted by placing adverbs between the root and auxiliary parts of the verb. “had eventually come…” for “eventually had come…”

Some hints for ways to achieve good writing and style

a. **Identify authorities:** On the first occasion that you mention any author or other authority in the text (as: “Author John Jones points out . . .”), give the individual’s full name and explain in a few words the reason why the cited individual(s) is an authority
(as: “long-time student of archives,” or “author of the basic text on the subject,” or something similar).

b. **Mince words**: Use as few words as possible to express your thoughts. Fewer words represent cleaner, clearer thinking, and thus communicate thoughts more crisply. Writing with a minimum of words is difficult. Writers achieve the goal of a minimum of words through editing and rewriting several times. This is one more reason to be attentive to your writing schedule (see below).

c. **Couch negative statements in positive terms**: Negative statements always have more impact when they are phrased as positive statements. “He has none,” for example, is a more direct and strong statement than: “He does not have any.” One reason that negative thoughts stated positively are stronger is because they need fewer words to accomplish their purpose. Another reason is that they take advantage of that part of the sentence that normally is the strongest--the end--for the most important thought, in this case “none.”

d. **Proof your work**: Attention to detail and preciseness are assets in writing. Sloppiness in your paper, therefore, measured by the distraction resulting from an excessive number of grammatical, typographical, and spelling errors, as well as by an untidy appearance, will be reflected in your grade. In other words, PROOF YOUR WORK before turning it in.

e. **Follow a writing schedule**: Draft your paper well before the due date, so as to give yourself the opportunity to read your work after you have put it aside for a period of time. Wording that seems clear and crisp at the moment that it is written often, on a later reading, fails to exhibit that clarity and crispness. Read and edit your work on successive days to improve the likelihood that your words and structures convey your thoughts.

f. **Associate headings and text**: If you use headings to initiate sections of your paper, be certain that at least one line of subsequent text follows the heading on the page. Do not allow a heading to appear at the bottom of a page and the text following that heading to begin on the top of the following page.

g. **Ensure that the paper has all three parts**: Every paper must contain the three parts of: (1) the introduction that tells the reader what the paper is about, (2) the body of the paper in which the author presents the material that is the substance of the paper, and (3) the conclusion/summation in which the author both reminds the reader of the principal points or findings of the paper and presents the conclusions, interpretations, or lessons to be drawn from the work.
STYLE FOR BIBLIOGRAPHY AND NOTES

Writers in a field are expected to follow the conventions of that field for presenting bibliographic information and citing sources in notes (footnotes or endnotes). The style manual employed in the archival community is the *Chicago Manual of Style* (University of Chicago Press). Examples of its use will be found in the pages of the *American Archivist*.

Essential to appropriate style is consistency, from one bibliographic entry and one citation to another, *in the order and punctuation* of the information in bibliographic entries and notes.

The following is a quick guide to appropriate style for both a bibliographic entry and form of citation.

*Bibliography*

The purpose of the bibliography is to provide information sufficient for a reader to identify and find an item should the reader wish to consult the work.

The bibliography must present:

a. For books: the author's full name, the full title of the work, and the basic publication data--place of publication, publisher, and date of publication.


b. For articles: the author's full name; in quotation marks, the full title of the article; in italics, the full title of the journal in which the article appears; the volume number; in parentheses, the date of the issue in which the article appears; and the inclusive page numbers of the article:


c. **Note** that the titles of books and of journals always are italicized. You can indicate italics either by using italics or by underlining.
Notes

The purpose of footnotes (placed at the bottom of the page) and endnotes (grouped in a section following the text) is to inform the reader of the source of information or the source of a direct quotation, and/or to give the reader information additional and parenthetical to that in the text. Citations in notes always contain both author and title. If the item has no title, as in the case of a web page, you must supply one, which you put in brackets to show that the wording is yours. In the humanities style, citations are not enclosed in parentheses and inserted into the text.

The rationale in the humanities fields for both the more informative style of note and keeping the note out of the text is to facilitate the reading of the narrative of the work. A train of thought should not be broken by requiring a reader to consult both a note and the bibliography simply to determine the source cited.

**NOTES THAT PRESENT THE AUTHOR'S LAST NAME WITHOUT A TITLE OR THE LAST NAME AND THE DATE OF PUBLICATION, OR THAT IDENTIFY A WORK BY A NUMBER ASSIGNED TO THAT WORK IN THE BIBLIOGRAPHY ARE UNACCEPTABLE IN THE HUMANITIES STYLE.**

An acceptable form for notes is:

1. in the first citation: author's full name, full title of the work, and page number(s) of the material cited, as in the examples below:
   b. John A. Jones, "Community Archives: A Report," *Southern Archival Messenger*, 4 (January, 1989), 4-5 [only when they are preceded by another number must page numbers be preceded by "p" or "pp"].

2. in second and subsequent citations: author's last name, short title, and page number(s), or, when the citation refers to the same work cited in the preceding note, use “Ibid.,” followed by new volume and page number(s), if appropriate. **DO NOT CITE ITEMS BY NUMBER FROM THE BIBLIOGRAPHY.**
   c. Ibid., 5. [Capitalize "ibid." when it is used at the beginning of a citation. Use the lower case "i" when the word is located within a citation.]

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FORMATTING AND PRESENTING PAPERS

Papers are to be printed in 12-point type, double-spaced, using the margin prescribed by the University of Texas Press of 1.25 inches on all four sides. This gives both a pleasing appearance in the balance between white space and text, and sufficient room for a reader to make comments.

Fasten the pages of your paper by stapling in the upper left-hand corner. Do not put your paper in a binder of any sort. These cost money you do not need to spend. You may lay the paper unsecured in a folder if you wish.

MARKING PAPERS

In commenting on papers, I will use standard editorial marks. Many dictionaries reproduce these marks in the prefatory matter. Among many web pages illustrating the marks, these are good ones: http://www.nyu.edu/classes/copyXediting/editmarks.html and http://bfa.sdsu.edu/editorial/copyediting.htm.

While you will see that some variation does occur in the usage of marks, by familiarizing yourself with those illustrated on these two web pages, you will be able to interpret markings on your paper easily.