



Grammar and Style Notes

Dr Robert G. May | Department of English

Editors and markers often use **abbreviations** to indicate grammatical, stylistic, and formatting errors in student essays. Here is a list of some of the most common editing and marking abbreviations

Editing and Marking Abbreviations					
<i>abbrev</i>	abbreviation	<i>dem</i>	dem. pronoun	<i>qtn</i>	quotation
<i>agr</i>	agreement	<i>fmt</i>	format	<i>ref</i>	reference
<i>awk</i>	awkward	<i>integ</i>	integration	<i>sfrag</i>	sent. fragment
<i>colloq</i>	colloquialism	<i>ital</i>	italics	<i>sgnpst</i>	signposting
<i>conj</i>	conjunction	<i>p</i>	punctuation	<i>sp</i>	spelling
<i>cont</i>	contraction	<i>parenth</i>	parentheses	<i>spl inf</i>	split infinitive
<i>cptl</i>	capitalization	<i>poss</i>	possessive	<i>splice</i>	comma splice
<i>ctxt</i>	context	<i>pov</i>	point of view	<i>tense</i>	tense shift
<i>d</i>	diction	<i>prep</i>	preposition	<i>t/o</i>	throughout
<i>dbl spc</i>	double space	<i>psv</i>	passive voice	<i>undln</i>	underline

Some of these errors are more serious than others, and some grammarians and stylists no longer consider some of these problems to be errors (for example, split infinitives are no longer considered to be absolutely forbidden in most types of writing). However, by learning about and striving to avoid a wide variety of grammatical and stylistic errors, including the ones now deemed acceptable, writers will avoid alienating their readers and drawing undue attention to their grammatical and stylistic choices. Avoid the errors on the list above by consulting the information in this document.

Errors are colour-coded by category:

- errors in **green** are **grammatical errors** (i.e., violations or specific rules of English syntax and semantics)
- errors in **blue** are **stylistic errors** (i.e., violations of formal essay-writing conventions and expectations)
- errors in **red** are **formatting errors** (i.e., violations of MLA Style precepts)

■ Abbreviation

(abbrev)

Avoid using abbreviations in formal expository writing.

- ✗ William Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* in the late 16th century.
- ✓ William Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* in the late sixteenth century.

Alternatives to Abbreviations			
<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>use ...</i>	<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>use ...</i>
the 16 century	the sixteenth century	i.e.,	that is,
his/her	his or her	e.g.,	for example,
&	and	vs.	versus
WWII	the Second World War	tho	though
the UK	the United Kingdom	thru	through

■ Agreement

(agr)

The nouns, pronouns, and verbs in a sentence must agree in number. Avoid mixing singular and plural nouns, pronouns, and verbs.

- ✗ The dystopian society and environment Atwood depicts in *The Handmaid's Tale* is clearly fictional.
- ✓ The dystopian society and environment Atwood depicts in *The Handmaid's Tale* are clearly fictional.

■ Awkward

(awk)

Avoid awkward constructions and phraseologies in formal expository writing by proofreading thoroughly and revising carefully.

■ Colloquialism

(colloq)

Avoid colloquialisms, clichés, and slang expressions in formal expository writing.

- ✗ Richard's cruelty comes to him as easily as leaves to a tree.
- ✓ Richard's first instinct is for cruelty.

📁 Colloquialisms, Clichés, and Slang	
<i>colloquialism</i>	A relaxed word or expression that is common in everyday speech, but is too informal for expository writing
<i>cliché</i>	A trite or overused expression or phrase that has lost its effectiveness through overuse
<i>slang</i>	A word or expression that is very casual, informal, and sometimes even offensive

■ Conjunction

(conj)

Avoid beginning a sentence with a conjunction.

- ✗ But Atwood's dystopian society and environment seem eerily familiar.
- ✓ However, Atwood's dystopian society and environment seem eerily familiar.

📁 Conjunctions			
and	for	or	yet
but	nor	so	

■ Contraction

(cont)

Avoid contractions in formal expository writing.

- ✗ Richard doesn't even spare the life of his most trusted advisor.
- ✓ Richard does not even spare the life of his most trusted advisor.

📁 Alternatives to Contractions							
<i>Instead of ...</i>		<i>use ...</i>		<i>Instead of ...</i>		<i>use ...</i>	
	aren't	are not			won't	will not	
	can't	cannot		wouldn't	would not		
	couldn't	could not		he'll	he will		
	doesn't	does not		I'll	I will		
	hasn't	has not		they'll	they will		
	haven't	have not		she'll	she will		
	isn't	is not		we'll	we will		
	shouldn't	should not		you'll	you will		

■ Capitalization

(cptl)

Capitalize words appropriately in formal expository writing.

- ✗ *The handmaid's tale* is one of margaret atwood's earlier works of fiction.
- ✓ *The Handmaid's Tale* is one of Margaret Atwood's earlier works of fiction.

📁 Capitalization							
<i>Always capitalize ...</i>		<i>(example)</i>		<i>Always capitalize ...</i>		<i>(example)</i>	
	titles of works	<i>Hard Times</i>		religious works	the Bible, the Koran		
	proper nouns	Charles Dickens		movements	Modernism, Marxism		
	geographic locations	England, Scotland		honorifics	Prime Minister Trudeau		
	geographic citizens	English, Scottish		first word in a sent.	In <i>Ulysses</i> ...		
	names of languages	Scots Gaelic, Erse		days of the week	Sunday, Monday		
	names of religions	Judaism, Islam		months of the year	May, June		

■ Context

(ctxt)

Back up, defend, and illustrate ideas and assertions with appropriate contextualization from primary and/or secondary sources, in the form of direct and/or indirect quotations. Be sure to cite your sources appropriately according to MLA Style.

📖 For more information, see "Avoiding Plagiarism"

■ Diction

(d)

Use the correct word under the correct circumstances.

- ✗ In *The Romance of the Forest*, Ann Radcliffe portrays Adeline as an innocent and vulnerable young woman.
- ✓ In *The Romance of the Forest*, Ann Radcliffe depicts Adeline as an innocent and vulnerable young woman.

■ Double Space

(dbl spc)

Without exception, the entire text of formal expository writing must be double-spaced, including all headings, block quotations, and the list of Works Cited.

📖 For more information, see “**MLA Formatting Notes**”

■ Demonstrative Pronoun

(dem)

A demonstrative pronoun must always identify its associated noun.

- ✗ Richard shouts, “Off with his head!” (Shakespeare 3.4.76). This shows how Richard lacks patience.
- ✓ Richard shouts, “Off with his head!” (Shakespeare 3.4.76). This exclamation shows Richard’s lack of patience.

📁 Demonstrative Pronouns			
this	that	these	those

📖 For more information, see “**This, That, These, and Those**”

■ Format

(fmt)

Use correct MLA formatting in formal expository writing. Use parenthetical in-text citations to cite page numbers for prose, line numbers for poetry, and act/scene/line numbers for plays. Note that there is no comma or any other mark between the author’s surname and the number.

- ✗ *Richard III* begins, “Now is the winter of our discontent” (Shakespeare, p. 3)
- ✓ *Richard III* begins, “Now is the winter of our discontent” (Shakespeare 1.1.1)

📁 Citing Poetry, Prose, and Drama		
prose	“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” (Dickens 35)	page number
poetry	“I hear thy name spoken, / And share in its shame” (Byron 15-16)	line number
drama	“If music be the food of life, play on” (Shakespeare 1.1.1)	act/scene/line

📖 For more information, see “**Citing Prose, Poetry, and Drama**”

■ Integration

(integ)

Integrate direct quotations properly into the text of formal expository writing.

- ✗ Richard is unhappy at the beginning of the play. “Now is the winter of our discontent” (Shakespeare 1.1.1).
- ✓ Richard, who is unhappy at the beginning of the play, laments, “Now is the winter of our discontent (Shakespeare 1.1.1).

📖 For more information, see “**Integrating Quotations**”

Avoid the use of italics (as well as quotation marks) to show emphasis.

- ✗ In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the handmaids are subjected to *extreme* abuse.
- ✗ In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the handmaids are subjected to “extreme” abuse.
- ✗ In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the handmaids are subjected to ‘extreme’ abuse.
- ✓ In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the handmaids are subjected to extreme abuse.

Use italics to indicate titles of long works (novels, plays, epic poems, etc.); use quotation marks to indicate titles of short works (short stories, poems, essays, etc.)

- ✗ *The Dead* is the culminating short story in “Dubliners,” James Joyce’s only short-story collection.
- ✓ “The Dead” is the culminating short story in *Dubliners*, James Joyce’s only short-story collection.

Formatting Titles	
Italicize the titles of...	Place in quotation marks the titles of...
books <i>Hard Times</i>	articles “Feminism in <i>Jaws</i> ”
plays <i>Death of a Salesman</i>	essays “Blindness”
long poems <i>Paradise Lost</i>	stories “The Dead”
pamphlets <i>A Modest Proposal</i>	short poems “Ode on a Grecian Urn”
periodicals <i>The New York Times</i>	chapters “The Wanderer”
films <i>Citizen Kane</i>	

For more information, see “**Formatting Titles**”

■ Punctuation

Do not use ellipses at the beginning or the end of a quotation.

- ✗ “Now is the winter of our discontent . . .” says Richard (Shakespeare 1.1.1).
- ✓ “Now is the winter of our discontent,” says Richard (Shakespeare 1.1.1).

Place commas and periods inside quotation marks; place other punctuation outside quotation marks.

- ✗ “Talk’st thou to me of ‘ifs?’ Thou art a traitor”, exclaims Richard (Shakespeare 3.4.76).
- ✓ “Talk’st thou to me of ‘ifs’? Thou art a traitor,” exclaims Richard (Shakespeare 3.4.76).

Use the comma appropriately.

- ✗ Margaret Atwood’s first three novels are *The Edible Woman Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*.
- ✗ Margaret Atwood’s first three novels are *The Edible Woman, Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*.
- ✓ Margaret Atwood’s first three novels are *The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle*.

For more information, see “**Comma Use**”

■ Parentheses

Avoid parentheses in formal expository writing to provide extra information. If the information is not important, omit it. If the information is important, integrate it without the use of parentheses.


- ✗ Hamlet (the Prince of Denmark) struggles throughout the play with an inability to act decisively.
- ✓ Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, struggles throughout the play with an inability to act decisively.
- ✓ Hamlet struggles throughout the play with an inability to act decisively.

■ Possessive

(poss)

Use apostrophes to indicate possession, not pluralization.

- ✗ Richard eventually kills his enemy's.
- ✓ Richard eventually kills his enemies.
- ✓ Richard quickly decides his enemies' fate.

 Possession		
<i>example noun</i>	<i>type of noun</i>	<i>possessive</i>
king	singular noun	king's
marquis	singular noun ending in -s	marquis's
mistress	singular noun ending in -ss	mistress'
Richard	singular proper noun	Richard's
Dickens	singular proper noun ending in -s	Dickens's
Weiss	singular proper noun ending in -ss	Weiss'
monarchs	plural noun ending in -s	monarchs'
Dickenses	plural proper noun	Dickenses'
men	plural noun not ending in -s	men's
Socrates	historical personage ending in -s	Socrates'

■ Point of View

(pov)

Avoid referring to "the reader" or "the audience" in formal expository writing.

- ✗ The settings Atwood establishes in *The Handmaid's Tale* strike the reader as anything but fictional.
- ✗ The settings Atwood establishes in *The Handmaid's Tale* strike the audience as anything but fictional.
- ✓ The settings Atwood establishes in *The Handmaid's Tale* seem to be anything but fictional.

■ Preposition

(prep)

Avoid ending a sentence with a preposition in formal expository writing.

- ✗ Richard's enemies do not know who they are dealing with.
- ✓ Richard's enemies do not know with whom they are dealing.

📁 Prepositions			
aboard	beneath	into	till
about	beside	like	to
above	between	near	toward
across	beyond	next to	under
after	by	of	underneath
against	down	off	unlike
along	during	on	until
among	except	out	up
around	for	out of	up to
as	from	over	upon
at	in	past	with
before	in front of	since	within
behind	inside	through	without
below	instead of	throughout	

■ Passive Voice

(psv)

Avoid the passive voice in formal expository writing; use the active voice instead.

- ✗ Queen Anne is not impressed by Richard's blandishments.
- ✓ Richard's blandishments do not impress Queen Anne.

📖 For more information, see **"The Passive Voice"**

■ Quotation

(qtn)

Place direct (word-for-word) quotations between quotation marks. Do not place indirect (paraphrased) quotations between quotation marks.

- ✗ Hamlet says, To be, or not to be (Shakespeare 3.1.55).
- ✓ Hamlet says, "To be, or not to be" (Shakespeare 3.1.55).
- ✓ "To be," Hamlet says, "or not to be" (Shakespeare 3.1.55).
- ✓ Hamlet begins to ponder his own mortality (Shakespeare 3.1.55).

📖 For more information, see **"Short vs Long Quotations"**

■ Reference

(ref)

Always provide a parenthetical in-text citation for all quotations, whether they are direct or indirect. Failure to do so may constitute plagiarism.

- ✗ Hamlet says, "To be, or not to be."
- ✓ Hamlet says, "To be, or not to be" (Shakespeare 3.1.55).

- ✗ Hamlet begins to ponder his own mortality.
- ✓ Hamlet begins to ponder his own mortality (Shakespeare 3.1.55).

■ Sentence Fragment

(sfrag)

Avoid sentence fragments in formal expository writing. All sentences must have a subject and a verb. If a sentence is missing either of these components, it is a sentence fragment.

- ✗ Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, “a woman must have money and a room of her own” (3).
- ✗ Written in *A Room of One's Own*, “a woman must have money and a room of her own” (3).
- ✓ Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own*, “a woman must have money and a room of her own” (3).

■ Signposting

(sgnpst)

Avoid signposting words and phrases in formal expository writing.

- ✗ This essay will prove that Swift's rhetorical method in *A Modest Proposal* is more persuasive than Woolf's rhetorical method in *A Room of One's Own*.
- ✗ Swift's rhetorical method in *A Modest Proposal* is more persuasive than Woolf's rhetorical method in *A Room of One's Own*.

Signposting
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A signposting word or phrase is one in which the writer tells the reader “out loud” what he or she intends to prove in an essay.• Examples of signposting words and phrases include “This essay will prove that ...” and “This quotation illustrates that ...”.• Signposting words and phrases contribute nothing to a piece of expository writing, and in fact they almost always detract from an essay's overall sophistication and rhetorical effectiveness.

■ Spelling

(sp)

Spelling errors detract considerably from an essay's overall persuasiveness and credibility. Writers avoid spelling errors by subjecting their work to a computer spell-check. Because computer spell-checks are not infallible, however, the most careful writers also subsequently proofread their work thoroughly.

When writing in Canada for a Canadian audience and under the auspices of a Canadian university, use Canadian spellings. It may be necessary to change your computer's spell-check settings from American spellings (usually the default) to Canadian spellings.

American Spelling vs Canadian Spelling			
American spelling	Canadian spelling	American spelling	Canadian spelling
acknowledgment	acknowledgement	fulfill	fulfil
canceled	cancelled	honor	honour
catalog	catalogue	labor	labour
center	centre	license (n)	licence
centered	centred	meter	metre
color	colour	program	programme

■ Split Infinitive

(spl inf)

Avoid splitting the infinitive in formal expository writing.

- ✗ Richard starts to cruelly slaughter his enemies.
- ✓ Richard starts to slaughter his enemies cruelly.
- ✓ Richard starts to slaughter his enemies.

🔗 For more information, see “The Split Infinitive”

■ Comma Splice

(splice)

Avoid comma splices (as well as run-on sentences) in formal expository writing. When two complete sentences are joined together with a comma, a comma splice is created. Correct comma splices by repunctuating the sentence.

- ✗ William Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in 1601, it was first performed in 1602.
- ✓ William Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in 1601. It was first performed in 1602.
- ✓ William Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in 1601, and it was first performed in 1602.

■ Tense Shift

(tense)

Use the present tense to refer to literary works and the past tense to refer to historical events in formal expository writing.

- ✗ The main character in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* was named Offred.
- ✓ The main character in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is named Offred.

- ✗ Margaret Atwood writes *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 1985.
- ✓ Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 1985.

■ Throughout

(t/o)

A marker or editor will sometimes indicate errors that recur throughout a student essay with the “throughout” abbreviation. For example, “psv t/o” indicates that the writer has used passive voice constructions throughout the essay.

■ Underline

(undln)

Avoid the use of underlining in formal expository writing.

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