



The UNIVERSITY of
WEST ALABAMA

Words Do Matter: Writing at the University Level

Text messages and IMs are a great way to stay in touch with friends and classmates, but those forms of communication don't exactly require academic rigor.

As you prepare to move into increasingly demanding courses, one of the most important things you can do to improve your chances of success – in school as well as in business – is to express yourself well. These few simple guidelines can help take your writing to the next level:

- **Choose your verbs carefully.** Verbs convey action, so don't rely on lazy, weak verbs like "is" or "have." Choose verbs that move, like – well, like "choose" – to write more precisely and avoid repetition.
- **Engage your reader with active verbs, not passive.** Passive voice (e.g., The glass was broken by John.) is not only difficult to read, it can also be awkward and unclear. "John broke the glass." – the active version of that sentence – says what it means and reflects real-life speech much more adequately. If you're uncertain of which voice you're using, try reading the sentence aloud; if it sounds weird, it's likely passive.
- **Proofread carefully for spelling and punctuation errors** – Know the rules and make sure you follow them. In fact, ask your professor for his or her preferred style guide (Strunk & White, Chicago Style, AP Style), then go buy a copy. Some rules of grammar are a matter of preference – like the Oxford or serial comma – so it's best to select the most common option.
- **Use a mixture of simple and complex sentences to add texture to your work.** Too many simple sentences can feel elementary, but a paragraph of complex sentences can feel like it's working too hard. Find a good balance for easy reading.
- **Smooth out your paragraphs with transitional words and phrases.** "Therefore," "In other words," "However" ... these are all simple ways to link ideas and avoid creating choppy paragraphs. But, don't use the same ones over and over again. Be creative!

Most of all, find a writing voice that fits your subject, your own personality, and your professor's expectations. To deepen your understanding of solid writing, you can even use on-campus resources! Many of the English M.A. students offer tutoring services, so be sure to seek one out and take advantage!