

# Surface Matters



A  
Writing Program  
Mini-Manual  
for Self-Editors  
at  
Randolph College

# Writing Lab

The Writing Lab, a responsive reader service for student, staff, and faculty writers, is located in Main 137, next to the Learning Resources Center. The Writing Lab staff (seven peer tutors and a faculty director) offers one-on-one response and support in 30- or 45-minute conferences for writers at all skill levels, on a walk-in, contract, faculty referral, or self-scheduled appointment basis. These services are free to all members of the Randolph College community. For more information, visit the Writing Lab web site at <http://www.randolphcollege.edu/writinglab>.

## Writing Lab Tutoring Schedule:

Sunday through Thursday evenings  
Monday through Friday afternoons

Make your own appointment electronically through the Portal: Portal > myLinks > Academics > Writing Lab Appointments. You may also meet with a tutor in the Writing Lab on a drop-in basis if one is free.

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## Credits

*Surface Matters* was composed by Associate Professor of English *Emerita* Mary Brewer Guthrow, who was Director of the Writing Program from 1986–2006. It was revised in 2007 by her successor, Assistant Professor of English Lynne Davis Spies.

# A Short Introduction to a Small Book

The most important element in good writing is content, having something to say and saying it well. Nevertheless, surface matters. At college and also in the workplace, the effectiveness of good content can be significantly diminished by flawed form or careless presentation. Over four years, a writing-intensive liberal arts curriculum provides abundant opportunities for honing writing skills. Within that larger context, this little book is designed to provide quick reference and some useful strategies for dealing with a number of common troublespots. It is not intended to be a replacement for the standard handbooks, and it does not address larger revision issues such as organization, coherence, or development. In the long, complex process of becoming a competent and confident writer, though, mastery of just these few conventions represents a giant step, one guaranteed to set you apart in contemporary American culture. Go for it!

affect or effect?	numbers
apostrophes	paragraphs
colon	parallel structure
comma? no comma?	passive voice
dash	quotations
definitely	receive
documentation	run-ons
ellipsis	semicolon
etc.	tense shifts
fragments	that/which/who?
its/it's	titles

# 1 affect or effect?

\*Strategy: Think “A for Action” (Action = Verb : Affect)

**Affect is the verb.**

How will changing the health care system *affect* students?

**Effect is the noun.**

What will be the *effect* of higher ticket prices?

**Exceptions (relatively rare):**

In the idiom “to effect a change,” meaning to bring about a change, *effect* is a verb; and in psychology, *affect* can be a noun, meaning a feeling or emotion.

# apostrophes<sup>2</sup>

(See also its/it's #11 below)

\*Strategy: Since we don't "hear" apostrophes in spoken English, they are easy to leave out in writing. If you have trouble remembering apostrophes, here is a crude but effective proofreading technique: stop at every word in your draft that ends with s and ask yourself, "Is this a possessive?" (Does the next word belong to this s-ending word?) If you do this faithfully, eventually you will learn to ask yourself as you write.

**For singular possessives, add 's to the singular form.**

the cat's fur (one cat)  
the mouse's tail  
Jane's roommate

**When a singular noun already ends in s, you still add 's for the possessive in most cases because you are adding a new syllable.**

Chris (one syllable)  
Chris's (two syllables) book  
Linus (two syllables)  
Linus's (three syllables) blanket

**When no new syllable is added in the possessive form of a singular word ending in s, just add an apostrophe.**

Massachusetts (four syllables)  
Massachusetts' (still four syllables) laws

**For plural possessives, add an apostrophe after the final s. For irregular plurals (not ending in s), add 's.**

the cats' fur (more than one cat)  
the mice's tails

# 3 colon:

Do not confuse it with the semicolon (#19 below).

\*Strategy: Think of a colon as a shorthand symbol for “and here it is” or “more specifically.”

**Use a colon between title and subtitle.**

*Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*

**Use a colon to introduce a list, an example, an explanation, or a long (indented) quotation,**

Many people attended the anniversary dinner: officers, donors, community leaders, journalists. [list]

She only wanted one thing: to become rich and famous. [phrase]

There was only one thing left to do: They would have to walk to the nearest gas station. [a second sentence]

**but not after “such as” (because the colon already means “such as”).**

# 4 comma? no comma?

Commas set things apart. If you are unsure about needing a comma, ask yourself, “What boundary am I marking here? What am I separating?” To understand “comma rules” you must be able to identify independent (main) and dependent (subordinate) clauses and to distinguish restrictive (identifying) from nonrestrictive (parenthetical) elements in your own sentences.

## **Use a comma**

### **to separate elements in a series,**

We cooked hot dogs, hamburgers, and chicken on the grill.

[Note: There is a comma before “and.”]

### **and to mark the end of the first independent clause in a compound sentence where two independent clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet),**

It rained hard, but they kept playing.

The counselors cooked the hamburgers, and the campers roasted marshmallows.

### **but not in a compound verb.**

We cooked hamburgers and roasted marshmallows.

[You don’t want to separate the subject from part of its verb.]

# 4 comma? no comma?

Commas help readers separate an introductory element from the element being introduced.

**Use a comma after introductory phrases,**

In almost every case, the study found a significant conflict of interest.

**but it's optional after very short introductory phrases.**

In 2007 Congress debated immigration reform.

**Use a comma after an introductory dependent clause,**

Because wholesale prices were rising, our costs were going up.

**but not before most dependent clauses (because the subordinating conjunction\* already signals “New clause coming”).**

Our costs were going up because wholesale prices were rising.

\*Some other common subordinating conjunctions are *when, since, unless, if, before, after, while, until, whether*.

Exception: When the independent clause is followed by a subordinate clause introduced by “although/even though,” a comma does sometimes set off the subordinate clause when it has a reflective, “afterthought” quality: I didn’t quit, although I thought about it.

# 4 comma? no comma?

**When a month/day/year date comes in the middle of a sentence, a comma *follows* the year.**

Edith Wharton was born on January 24, 1862, in New York.

**When a city and state come in the middle of a sentence, a comma *follows* the state.**

The College was founded in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1891 and opened in 1893.

**Use commas like a set of parentheses to set off parenthetical (nonrestrictive) phrases or clauses,**

In *The Woman Warrior*, a highly acclaimed autobiographical work, Maxine Hong Kingston writes about growing up in two cultures.

Professor Jones, who is conducting the workshop, is an expert on environmental law.

The soccer players, wearing Randolph College sweatshirts, were waiting for the van.

**but do not separate restrictive (essential, identifying) phrases or clauses from the word(s) they modify.**

The highly acclaimed autobiographical work *The Woman Warrior* was Maxine Hong Kingston's first book.

The woman who is conducting the workshop is an expert on environmental law.

The students wearing Randolph College sweatshirts were soccer players.

# 5 dash--

**For a dash, type *two* hyphens with no spaces before, after, or in between.**  
(Most computer programs will convert the two hyphens to a solid line.)

Dependable, supportive, resourceful—a good tutor must be all of these.

6  
definitely

is definitely not spelled like it sounds!

**Spell definite like the related words**

finite

*or*

infinite

# 7 documentation: APA

**APA-style documentation** is used most often in the social sciences. More particular information about this documentation style, which relies upon in-text parenthetical citations linked to bibliographic entries on a Reference page at the end of the paper, is available in most college writing handbooks and the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, available in the Writing Lab.

## **APA citation form looks like this:**

Heath (1983) found that children experiment with ritualized insults by the age of three.

[Note: When the source is named in the text itself, the name is followed immediately by the date of the source.]

*or*

A recent study of sexism in the classroom concludes, “Girls who know the answer are more likely to wait to be called on, while males are more apt to shout out” (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, p. 269).

[Note: APA cites page numbers only if there is a direct quotation. Also, APA uses “p.” before the page number and uses “&” for “and.”]

## **References (APA)**

Note that in APA style, proper names and the names of journals are capitalized; however, in the titles of books and articles, only the first word in the title or subtitle is capitalized. Initials are used for all first and middle names.

### **Book**

Heath, R. (1983). *Ritual and language*. New York: Macmillan.

### **Book with two authors**

Sadker, M., & Sadker, D. (1994). *Failing at fairness: How America's schools cheat girls*. New York: Scribner's.

**Journal article**

Rowe, D.C., Vazsony, A.J., & Flannery, D.J. (1994). No more than skin deep: Ethnic and racial similarity in developmental process. *Psychological Review*, *101*, 396–413.

**Work in an anthology**

Stearns, P.N. (1991). Fatherhood in historical perspective: The role of social change. In F.W. Bozett & S.M.H. Hanson (Eds.), *Fatherhood and families* (pp. 28–52). New York: Springer.

**Internet source**

VandenBos, G., Knapp, S., & Doe, J. (2001). Role of reference elements in the selection of resources by psychology undergraduates. *Journal of Bibliographic Research*, *5*, 117–123. Retrieved October 13, 2001, from <http://ibr.org/articles.html>.

# 7 documentation: CMS

**CMS documentation** is used most often in scholarly writing in history and art history. More particular information about this documentation style, which relies upon footnotes or endnotes linked to entries in a Bibliography at the end of the paper, can be found in most college writing handbooks and *The Chicago Manual of Style*, available in the Writing Lab.

## **CMS footnote or endnote form looks like this:**

One commentator has written that slavery was but one cause of the American Civil War: “Perhaps equally as important were the economic differences between an industrial North and an agricultural South.”<sup>1</sup>

If the note is the first to refer to a particular source, most instructors prefer full note form:

1. Maryann Chase, *The Causes of Disunion* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 248–249.

If two or more consecutive notes from the same source appear, use the following form for subsequent consecutive notes:

2. *Ibid.*, 299.

Subsequent references to sources that have already been cited (though not in the immediately preceding note) can be shortened to include the author’s last name, a shortened version of the title, and a page number:

5. Chase, *The Causes*, 352.

### **Bibliography (CMS)**

Note that CMS form allows “University” to be shortened to “Univ.”

### **Book**

Chase, Maryann. *The Causes of Disunion*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005.

### **Book with two or three authors**

Morrison, Shana, and William M. Johnson. *Looking for Lincoln*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001.

### **Journal article**

Laughon, Martin George. “Tribal Wars and the Shaping of the West,” *Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (2000): 126–143.

### **Work in an anthology**

Wordsworth, William. “Revolutions and Poetry.” In *Artistic Perspectives on the French Revolution*, edited by Linda Stuart, 11–32. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006.

### **Internet source**

Smithson, Shana. “More about German Holocaust Guilt,” *Historical Review* 32, no. 1 (2002). <http://www.journal.umassachusetts.edu/v32no1/05888/05888html>.

# 7 documentation: MLA

**MLA documentation** is used most often in English and many other humanities papers. More particular information about this documentation style, which relies upon in-text parenthetical citations linked to bibliographic entries on a Works Cited page at the end of the paper, is available in most college writing handbooks and the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, available in the Writing Lab.

## **MLA citation form looks like this:**

Ethnographic studies in the Carolina Piedmont have shown that children experiment with ritualized insults by the age of three (Heath 176).

[Note: no comma after the author's name, and no "p." before the page number.]

*or*

In her study of language development in two Carolina Piedmont communities, Shirley Brice Heath discusses ritualized insults (174–75).

[Note: When the source is already named in the text itself, only page numbers appear in the parentheses.]

## **Works Cited**

### **Book**

Chambers, S. Allen, Jr. *Lynchburg: An Architectural History*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1981.

### **Book with more than one edition**

Booth, Vernon. *Communicating in Science*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.

**Book with two authors**

Sadker, Myra, and David Sadker. *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls*. New York: Scribner's, 1994.

**Work in an anthology**

Wright, Richard. "How 'Bigger' Was Born." *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature*. Ed. Abraham Chapman. New York: Mentor-NAL, 1968. 538–63.

**Journal article**

Luttwak, Edward N. "Where Are the Great Powers? At Home with the Kids." *Foreign Affairs* 36.4 (1991): 23–28.

**Internet sources**

Abelson, Reed. "In Health Care, Cost Isn't Proof of High Quality." *New York Times* 14 June 2007. 18 June 2007 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/14/insure.html?hp>>.

Savage, Kerrie. "Attending the Interior Self: Fannie's 'Task' in *Mansfield Park*." *Persuasions On-Line* 27.1 (2006). 18 June 2007 <<http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol27no1/savage.htm>>.

# 8 ellipsis . . .

space period space period space period space

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, . . . a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Thomas Jefferson  
Declaration of Independence (1776)

**When you quote directly from a source, use an ellipsis to show where something has been left out.**

(The most recent edition of the *MLA Handbook* states that some instructors require square brackets be placed around an ellipsis that *you* insert to distinguish it from an ellipsis that may appear in the original text.)

**You do not need an ellipsis if words are omitted at the beginning of a quotation that is part of your own sentence.**

In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln said that our nation was “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

**If the omitted words will come at the end of your own sentence, use four periods, with no space before the first period.**

The Declaration of Independence begins, “When in the Course of human events. . . .”

**However, if a citation follows an ellipsis at the end of a sentence, the fourth period follows the citation, and there is a space before the first ellipsis point.**

The *Hodges' Harbrace Handbook* states, “Because language allows variety, you have many options to consider as you write . . .” (4).

# 9 etc.

from Latin “*et cetera*,” meaning “and the rest”

**Try not to use “etc.” in academic writing** (unless it is part of something you are quoting). Using “etc.” suggests that you really don’t know (or don’t want to bother writing out) whatever it is that “etc.” is intended to represent. Either say what else you have in mind, or just stop with what you had before you got to “etc.”

# 10 fragments

Think of a fragment as a piece of a sentence that has broken off from its main clause and then has been punctuated as if it were a new sentence.

\*Strategy: If you have trouble recognizing fragments in your own writing, try reading your draft out loud, one sentence at a time, but begin with the last sentence, then read the next-to-last sentence, and so on to the top. Without its main clause ahead of it, a fragment will sound incomplete.

A fragment is usually a kind of afterthought, a phrase or a dependent clause that elaborates on or explains something in the independent clause just ahead of it. There are two ways to fix fragments: reattach the fragment to the independent clause it modifies, or make the fragment into a new, complete sentence.

## **Fragments come in a variety of forms:**

**subordinate (or dependent) clauses, introduced by subordinating conjunctions (if, since, whenever, even though, unless, until, before, after, because, while, whether, although),**

There was widespread support for this proposal. Although some were critical of the funding mechanism.

**relative clauses (introduced by who or which),**

Radical changes came quickly once the law was passed. Which caused a kind of backlash.

**participial phrases (introduced by an -ing or -ed verb form),**

She was enthusiastic about the job. Getting to work every day at 7.

**or noun phrases (introduced by transitional phrases).**

There are a lot of problems with this system. For example, the unreadable manual.

## **Complete sentences would be these:**

There was widespread support for this proposal, although some were critical of the funding mechanism.

Radical changes came quickly once the law was passed, which caused a kind of backlash.

She was enthusiastic about the job, getting to work every day at 7.

There are a lot of problems with this system. For example, the manual is unreadable.

# its/it's

**its** = possessive pronoun that must be followed by a noun belonging to (possessed by) it.

**it's** = contraction (or contracted form) of it is

Mixing up these two words is one of the most common errors in written English. Because we so strongly associate apostrophes with possessives, it just seems logical that a possessive meaning “belonging to it” would have an apostrophe. Wrong!

**The possessive pronoun *its* has no apostrophe, just like all the other possessive pronouns: his, her, our, your, their.**

***It's* with an apostrophe**

always

always

*only*

means “it is”!

**It's** hard to say what **its** best feature is.

# 12 numbers

Unless your instructor or style sheet directs otherwise, write out numbers one through nine and use figures for 10 and up,

*but*

use figures for dates, percentages, decimals, and dollar amounts,

*and*

in a text with only a few numbers in it, you can use words for all the numbers that can be written in one or two words (one hundred years, two million dollars, but 101 volunteers);

*also*

always spell out a number when it is the first word in a sentence.

**Do not use “amount” or “a great deal” or “less” with nouns that name things that can be counted.**

**Instead, use “number” or “fewer.”**

A small amount of asphalt, *not* a small number of asphalt (asphalt is not countable)

A large number of highways (we can count highways), *not* a large amount of highways.

Less confusion, *not* fewer confusion (confusion is not countable)

Fewer people were confused (we can count people), *not* less people were confused.

# 13 paragraphs

In academic writing, a paragraph should have a single controlling idea and should develop that idea with supporting details, not simply restate the point in different words.

**Do you have a paragraph that is only two or three sentences long?**

It is probably not fully developed.

**Do you have a paragraph that is more than a page long?**

It probably needs to be condensed, pruned, or divided into two.

\*Strategy: Making a numbered list of your paragraphs, using a brief statement of the single controlling idea in each, is a good way to get an overview of a rough draft before revising it. Ask yourself: “Does each idea here lead logically to the next? Do I have transitions to help the reader see how paragraphs are related to each other and to the thesis, or to the question I am responding to? Am I repeating myself?”

# 14 parallel structure

**both . . . and**  
**not only . . . but also**  
**either . . . or**  
**neither . . . nor**

These two-part conjunctions, called correlatives, are frequently used in academic writing. What's tricky about them is that the same grammatical form (for example, two clauses, two nouns, two verbs, two prepositional phrases) must follow both parts of the conjunction.

**not parallel:**

Population growth not only [verb] threatens the developing nations but also [noun phrase] the rest of the world.

**parallel:**

Population growth threatens not only [noun phrase] the developing nations but also [noun phrase] the rest of the world.

**not parallel:**

Either [clause] we need to cut spending or [infinitive] to raise taxes.

**parallel:**

We need either [infinitive] to cut spending or [infinitive] to raise taxes.  
*or*

Either [clause] we need to cut spending, or [clause] we need to raise taxes.

# 15 passive voice

Scientific writing often stresses objectivity through use of passive voice in communication of experimental data, and there are some other appropriate uses of passive voice constructions. In general, though, consistent use of passive voice can produce a lifeless, wordy text.

**active (someone or something acts/does something)**

The kids ate the pizza.

The committee has discussed the problem.

**passive (someone or something has something done to it)**

The pizza was eaten by the kids.

The problem has been discussed by the committee.

\*Strategy: To change passive voice to active voice, ask yourself, “Who/What is doing the action here?” (Answer: the kids, the committee) Then, make the actor(s) the subject in the new sentence, keeping tense the same.

# 16 quotations

## Using direct quotations

Always quote selectively (having too many quotations can be counterproductive) and quote exactly (down to the last comma and capital letter). Always double-check quotations for accuracy; it is surprisingly difficult to copy something down without unintentionally changing it in some small way.

## Quotation marks

**Periods and commas always go inside the quotation marks (because American printers have decided it looks better that way).**

My sister whispered, "Let's have tea."

"Let's have tea," my sister whispered.

**Other punctuation marks (; ! ?) go inside the quotation marks if they are part of the quotation, outside if they are punctuation in your own sentence.**

Did my sister whisper "Let's have tea"?

My sister asked, "When will we have tea?"

# 17 receive

also perceive  
conceive  
conceit

**This old rhyme is still worth memorizing:**

I before E,  
Except after C  
Or when sounded like A,  
As in neighbor or weigh.

# 18 run-ons

**When two independent clauses are joined only**

**by a comma,**

The evidence is incomplete, more work needs to be done.

**by a transitional word or phrase,**

The evidence is incomplete therefore more work needs to be done.

**or by nothing at all,**

The evidence is incomplete more work needs to be done.

**the result is a run-on.**

**To repair a run-on, two independent clauses in the same sentence must be**

**joined by a coordinating conjunction (and but or for nor so yet) followed by a comma,**

The evidence is incomplete, and more work needs to be done.

**separated by a semicolon,**

The evidence is incomplete; more work needs to be done.

**or divided into two sentences.**

The evidence is incomplete. More work needs to be done.

# 19 semicolon;

Don't confuse it with the colon (#3 above).

\*Strategy: Think of a semicolon as a supercomma, strong enough to hold independent clauses apart.

## Use a semicolon

### in lists of elements that already contain commas,

The study included data from four cities: Houston, Texas; San Diego, California; Cleveland, Ohio; and Baltimore, Maryland.

### between independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction in a compound sentence,

The hours were terribly long; no one got much sleep.

### or between independent clauses in a compound sentence when the clauses are joined by a conjunctive adverb or a transitional phrase instead of by a coordinating conjunction.

No one got much sleep; however, it was a very valuable experience.

The company was owned by the employees; therefore, everyone was motivated to work hard.

### Do not use a semicolon between an independent clause and a dependent clause,

Everyone was motivated to work hard[;] because the company was owned by the employees. [delete ;]

### or between an independent clause and a phrase.

They spent two years in the Peace Corps[;] a very valuable experience. [replace ; with a comma or a dash]

# 20 tense shifts

**Use one tense consistently unless you have a reason for changing.**

\*Strategy: Underline all the verbs in your rough draft; then go back and check for consistency of tenses.

**Tenses can be troublesome in academic writing.** Follow the conventions for the discipline in which you are writing.

**Writers in literature and history discuss *texts* in present tense.**

Shakespeare uses figurative language in his sonnets.

This historian flawlessly argues her point about the Clinton administration.

**But they use past tense to refer to past *events*.**

Shakespeare was born in 1564.

The Clinton administration caused controversy with its health care plan.

**Writers in the sciences and social sciences often describe their *experiments* in past tense and their *results* in present tense.**

# that/which/who?

All three are *relative* pronouns; that is, they *relate* the clauses they introduce to a noun in another clause.

Two kinds of distinctions are involved here: one between references to persons and references to things and another between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses (see also the last part of #4 above).

**That** usually refers to things, most often in restrictive (identifying) clauses.  
The thing *that* made me change my mind was her enthusiasm.

**Which** always refers to things, most often in nonrestrictive (parenthetical) clauses.  
Her enthusiasm, *which* made me change my mind, was extraordinary.

**Who** refers to people, in either restrictive or nonrestrictive clauses.  
The person *who* has that information isn't here today. (restrictive)  
Ms. Smith, *who* has that information, isn't here today. (nonrestrictive)

# 22 titles

**Always double-check titles for spelling and capitalization.**

**Set titles apart in your text with the appropriate punctuation.**

**Do not punctuate the title of your own paper or the titles of legal documents or religious texts (such as books of the Bible).**

**Underline (or *italicize*) the names of**

books	films
journals	plays
magazines	paintings
newspapers	sculpture
tv or radio programs	long poems published alone ( <i>Paradise Lost</i> )

**Use “quotation marks” to punctuate titles of**

short stories	journal articles
essays	magazine articles
songs	newspaper articles (the headline is the title)
poems	book chapters

# Checklist for Academic Writers

1. Do I fully understand what I am being asked to do in this writing assignment? (If not, re-read the instructions, and/or talk to the instructor.)
2. Can readers see how I have organized my paper?
3. Does each paragraph develop a single point or idea, and are there transitions between paragraphs? Do I support my general statements with specific evidence?
4. Do I stay with one tense unless I have a reason for shifting tenses?
5. If I use quotations, do I quote exactly, word for word and comma for comma? If I paraphrase or summarize, do I still furnish citations?
6. Have I checked my spelling even after running a computer spell-check program? (Remember that such programs won't correct typos if they form actual words or distinguish among there/their/they're, for example.)
7. Have I read my paper aloud or has someone read it to me, to help me hear errors I haven't seen?

# Notes





# RANDOLPH COLLEGE

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