# Stylistic Heuristics

Here are some stylistic heuristics[1] that you should keep in mind while writing and proofreading.  As heuristics, they do not apply to every single case and are not hard-and-fast rules written in manuals of style, but applying them will generally help your paper.

1.  Most of the "rules" below follow from one basic idea.  You should assume that your reader is lazy.  Your reader cannot read your mind.  He or she is not going to remember what you said a long time ago unless you remind him or her.  A good writer never forces the reader to work unnecessarily.  A good writer never makes the reader go back and read something over again just to figure out what the writer is currently saying (unless the writer provides specific directions on where to look).  You want people to actually read your paper all the way through.  (The only reason you would write unclearly is if you think your ideas are really bad or really trivial and you want to obfuscate that fact so that people figure "if I can't understand it, it must be genius."  This plan is likely to backfire.)

2.  A sentence should be no longer than three lines (at 12 point font with standard margins) unless it contains a quote or formula.

3.  A paragraph should be no longer than a page (at 12 point font and 1.5 or 2 spacing).  A paragraph must have at least three sentences.

4.  Do not let your "this"s dangle.  For example, do not say: "This is why I hate writing papers."  Say, "This kind of garbage is the reason I hate writing papers."  If it is not clear what word you would put after "this" (or "that" or "these"), you need to rewrite the sentence because it won't be clear to the reader either.  If it is obvious what word you would put after "this," technically you can allow your "this" to dangle, but you might as well just fill in the missing word, in case the reader isn't as bright as you are (and he or she isn't—see rule 1).

5.  Each time you come across a pronoun (he, she, it) or a demonstrative or interrogative adjective (this, that or which, what, respectively), it should be extremely clear to what you are referring.  (See rules 4 and 1).

6.  Use grammatically correct gender neutral language (unless you're specifically writing a paper on the subject of how you think all this PC-crap is bogus).  You are trying to get a point across about the economics of countries.  You do not want your reader to get annoyed each time you use a pronoun.  You can use "he" when referring to a man, or even a group of people that has always been men (such as former presidents of the United States, but not presidents in general).  Some people try to always use "she" in place of "he".  That use is politically (and

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[1] Heuristics are sometimes referred to as rules-of-thumb, but many people take offense at the purported history behind this phrase.  Many people believe that the phrase "rule-of-thumb" comes from an old law that a man could beat his wife with a stick so long as the stick was no thicker than his thumb.

grammatically) correct, but as a woman, I find it distracting, especially when the person in question is not likely to be a woman.  To be politically correct and grammatically correct, I prefer the use of "he or she" ("him or her", "his or her") in formal papers when the verb is singular and "they" ("them", "their") only when the verb is plural.  (For lab reports and filling out forms, it is appropriate to use "(s)he" and "him/her").  Boats and countries can be properly referred to as either "she" or "it".

7.  Try not to have more than three "to be" verbs[2] on any page.  (This rule does NOT apply to lab reports).  This heuristic actually encompasses a bunch of more complicated stylistic rules.  For example:

   a.  (Passive voice): If you say, "France was bombed," you neglect to tell the reader who bombed France.  If you say, "France was bombed by Germany," your writing is not as tight as it would be if you wrote "Germany bombed France."  Additionally, unless you have a reason to emphasize that France was in a passive role, the former sentence is neither as powerful nor as interesting as the latter.

   b.  (Non-descriptive verb): "To be" verbs are not very descriptive.  (In other words, "to be" verbs sorely lack descriptive power).

   c.  (Dangling modifiers):  This error is a big no-no and can happen even without the use of a "to be" construction.  Ex:  To save time, the paper was written on a computer.  If you marked this sentence as "no error" on the grammar portion of the GRE you would lose points.  Why?  Because it is not clear who was saving time—the way it is written it sounds as if the paper is saving time rather than the person who wrote the paper.  (Correct: The hapless economics student wrote the paper on the computer in order to save time).

   d.  (Excess wordiness):  Sometimes you will use "to be" verbs instead of parenthetical clauses or simple adjectives.  Generally you will do so if you want your paper to be longer without actually adding any new substance.  Don't do it.  For example:  "Hitler was a Nazi.  He killed many Jewish people," becomes "Hitler, a Nazi, killed many Jewish people."  "The ribbon was red.  I put it in my hair," becomes "I put the red ribbon in my hair."

Because using a "to be" verb sometimes really is the best way to phrase a sentence, you should not completely purge them from your paper.  While going through the proofreading stage, you should do a search on each "to be" verb and ask yourself, "Is there a better way I could phrase this sentence?  Am I leaving anything out?"  Usually the "three 'to be' words per page" heuristic keeps your writing dynamic and tight without causing it to become stilted.

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[2] "To be" verbs include:  is, am, are, was, were, be, being, and been.

8. Elegant, easy to understand writing uses the notion of "parallelism." Parallelism means that if you start writing a list within a sentence one way, you keep the same format throughout the sentence.

   Example: She **plays** squash on Tuesday, **competes** in kendo on Sunday, and **works** on her homework every night. (NOT: She **plays** squash on Tuesday, **competes** in kendo on Sundays, and every night she **will do work** on her homework.—Also note that the days of the week are in parallel format in the first sentence but not the second.).

9. Really proper writers do not end sentences with a preposition. Personally, I think this heuristic is pretty silly (the history behind this rule is that in Latin people didn't end sentences with prepositions), but it does make your writing sound very formal.
   Example: Don't use words with which you are not familiar. vs. Don't use words you are not familiar with.

10. A neat final polishing trick is to make sure that the first sentence of every new paragraph in a section nicely matches up with the last sentence in the previous paragraph. This trick can be accomplished by using the same important word in both sentences or by directly referring to the previous paragraph and contrasting it with (or comparing it to) the current paragraph. The reason this procedure is tricky is because you still need to make the first sentence in each paragraph the topic sentence for the paragraph. This final polish makes your paper flow and keeps the reader reading without getting lost. Example:

    "…seem to work to some extent. S. Uyehara states that Japan was the last country in the world to abolish feudalism (Uyehara 2).
    "However, feudalism was decaying even before Perry brought over his ships (Allen 3, Lockwood 5, Griffis 292-293 etc.). After 1750, the Shogunate had constant financial…"