

25 Tips on Writing

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When I was a professor, I once spent a week grading 68 undergraduate papers, each 8–10 pages long. In the process, I noticed enough trends that I decided to throw together a series of writing tips. The number came to 25. I was focused on academic writing, but most of the principles are universal. Write on!

1. Say less, mean more.
2. When citing research, choose interaction over quotation.
3. How should you use sources? You shouldn't. You should digest and interact with them.
4. Your thesis statement shouldn't tell me what you'll be talking about but what you'll be arguing for.
5. Master your prepositions.
6. Always and forever avoid sweeping generalizations, and never ever make extreme statements.
7. Don't write as though everyone agrees with you.
8. You can ruin a sentence with a misplaced, comma. But well-placed commas, well, those are rhythmic gold.
9. If you fail to anticipate my objections, I'll assume you're not talking to me.
10. Your best writing is your rewriting, and since you didn't rewrite anything...
11. Just remember that the author's rhetorical flourish is often the reader's eye roll.
12. Clarity is the only currency we've agreed upon. Discount it, and my attention will come at a discounted rate.
13. We don't want a pile of meat. We want a sandwich. So give us an introduction and an overview, a summary and a conclusion.
14. Proofreading hides its own proof.
15. When you don't proofread, I can tell, and it's annoying.
16. Why would I trust your research if I can't trust your grammar?
17. Most people in the world speak multiple languages. English speakers, let's at least master one.
18. Every sentence builds or erodes trust.
19. Tell me what you're going to say, say it, then tell me what you said.
20. There's something called structure. Learn to see it. There's something called flow. Learn to sense it.
21. Don't make me walk through the fog of your only draft while pointing out all the beautiful sights.
22. Don't start your sentences with “this.” This is why.
23. Don't parachute me into your topic; walk me into it with an introduction. I wasn't planning to skydive today.
24. Keep working at it. You're getting better with each sentence.
25. Now go say something beautiful beautifully.