

# Common Writing Mistakes and Questions

## *Common Writing Mistakes:*

- Writers often mix up affect and effect.

The simple way to remember the difference is that affect is the action (verb) and effect is an outcome (noun).

For example:

*The change in weather affected everyone's mood.*

*vs.*

*The effect of the new weather was a change in everyone's mood.*

- Writers sometimes use improper pronouns.

Your pronoun (he/his, she/hers, it/its) must match its antecedent. If you discuss individual behavior and want to be gender neutral, “their” is not the appropriate pronoun.

*A voter may refuse to admit their biases.*

*Vs.*

*A voter may refuse to admit his/her biases.*

If you dislike using his/her, then try to change your sentence to avoid the need for a singular pronoun that refers to a person. Your pronouns must agree in terms of number (singular/plural) and gender (his/her). Deferring to one gender or the other can be risky based on your choice and your audience. Its is also not an option as its only refers to non-human nouns.

Another common mistake is using pronouns to refer to other pronouns. Always be sure that the antecedent to the pronoun is clear so that the professor/TA is not confused.

*After Congress completed action on this legislation, they moved to that debate.*

*vs.*

*After Congress completed action on this legislation, they moved to debate health care OR*

*After Congress completed action on banking regulations, they moved to that issue.*

- Students often mix up it's and its.

It's = It is

Its = the possessive form

There is no simple way to remember the difference other than to memorize it.

- Students often shorten “Political Science” into “Poly-Sci.”

“Poly-Sci” is not short hand for “Political Science.” Poli-Sci = Political Science. You should avoid using informal short hand in formal writing.

- Writers will often use passive rather than active voice.

Writers sometimes use passive voice either by habit, accident, or to avoid making too strong of a statement. However, in most social science writing, the writer is trying to explain a theory, and the relationship between various events or phenomena. This means it is very important to make sure that the reader understands the relationships that the writer is

describing. Passive voice obscures the actor and instead makes events seem disconnected from the participants.

*The bombs were dropped on the Chinese embassy by accident.*

*Vs.*

*The American military accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy.*

While this may seem like a trivial distinction, passive voice is one of the primary complaints made by professors and TAs about student writing. Writing in active voice insures that your writing is clear and direct. While there may be times when you want to obscure the subject or the subject is not clear and you want to communicate that, most of the time you will want to write in active voice.

### ***Writing Questions:***

*When can I use the word "I" in a paper? Some TAs tell me to use it and some TAs hate it when I use it, what should I do?*

An instructor's opinion on the use of the word "I" in an essay is going to depend on what the thesis statements in the academic literature that he reads all the time look like. In some fields, such as International Relations, it is extremely common to use the word "I" in a thesis statement, but in other fields it is not common. Instructors who ask you to use "I" in your thesis statement usually do so for two reasons. One, the instructor is from a field where the use of "I" in the thesis is common. Two, the instructor is concerned that students will turn in papers without a thesis and she is hoping that making students mark the thesis with the word "I" will help them include one. The best policy is to ask your TA how he/she feels about the use of the word. In the case that the instructor indicates that he would like you to use the word "I" don't overuse it. "I" should only occur in your thesis statement, and perhaps in your conclusion. Do not use it more than twice.

*Well if I can use "I" in a paper, can I use "me" or "you"?*

The short answer is no.

The not much longer answer is, While you can use "I" in some disciplines, you still cannot use "me," "my," or "you" in formal essays. However, you can use the words "I," "one," "they," and "we."