A Short Guide to ((Literary) Academic) Writing

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A quick note:
This is by no means an exhaustive guide to writing. There are many styles of and purposes for writing, and while different genres of writing share certain common elements, they have as many differing traits. In producing this guide, it is my hope to offer a few tips and reminders on the basics of academic writing. Even in academic writing, conventions will differ across disciplines. Therefore, do take everything with a small grain of salt; in writing, there is no substitute for discriminating judgement.
What is good writing?

Good writing should flow like spoken words do. When you write, you should write with purpose, clarity and conciseness, but most importantly, you should write with your own VOICE. That is why any good paper, when read out loud, will flow. When you write, you are expressing thoughts on paper the same way you would express thoughts orally; except on paper, you can afford to censor, refine and revisit your words time and time again.

In this sense, orators have a much more difficult job than writers do. Unlike writers, they cannot ask their audience to revisit what they said five minutes ago; the reader, meanwhile, should they find anything on paper unclear, can simply turn back the page and re-read previous content. When your paper flows like a speech, when readers are able to follow your train of thought with ease—without having to revisit previous paragraphs—that is when you know you are writing well.

Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start...

Every essay should and must start with an introduction. This is—after all—where the all-important first impressions are made. You don’t want the reader to put down your essay after the first two sentences.

In the introduction, you will not only provide the reader with the context for the topic you will be discussing in the remainder of your essay, you will also be providing the reader with your thesis. The thesis is essentially the point you will be making throughout your essay:

What are you trying to say about your topic?

Why should the reader care about what you are saying?
So what is a good introduction?

A good introduction should set your reader up so that they can follow the rest of your essay with ease. Introductions will differ by academic discipline, but most of the time, they contain a combination of the following elements:

- The titles of any works that you will be discussing—novels, poems and other primary sources—and their authors’ names
- The titles of secondary sources that form a main part of your argument, and their authors’ names
- Any other information that is not common knowledge, but is essential to the reader’s understanding of your essay—this is the context and may include historical or social background to the works being discussed
- Definitions of specific terms that you will be using, especially terms that you have created yourself—there is no point using them if the reader has no clue what you mean by them
- The thesis statement—what point are you trying to get across to your reader? And why is your particular point special
- A (very) brief roadmap—what ideas and pieces of evidence will you bring up over the course of your essay?

It is important to remember that the introduction is built on clarity, conciseness and specificity. The more precise you can be with the contextual information and thesis you give your reader, the less likely they will be confused, and the less work they will have to do trying to understand what you are saying (and as a writer you really don’t want your reader to do too much work!).

Also, be bold. Dive right into your topic with your opener. Don’t waffle. The more confident, interested and invested you sound in your opening paragraph, the more likely the reader is going to be interested in your writing. So go out of your comfort zone to create an opener that really captures your reader’s attention.
A good introduction might read something like this:

“Ever present in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* are the mythological forces and religious principles that inform and affect Jane Eyre’s decisions as she progresses through the novel. And yet the exact role the mythological and religious play in facilitating Jane’s development are ever-shifting; at certain points in the novel, it appears that religious forces guide Jane more strongly, while at other points in the novel, pagan influences play a more proactive role in encouraging Jane to move forward. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar sum up this complicated relationship between the mythological and religious: Jane’s life is simultaneously a pilgrimage and “a kind of mythical progress from one significantly named place to another” (342). The use of ‘pilgrimage’ would appear to imply a religious journey, yet Jane’s ‘mythical’ progress would appear to undermine the significance religion plays in Jane’s development. Does Jane’s development in the novel take the form of a religious pilgrimage or a mythological quest? As we further examine *Jane Eyre*, it will become apparent that Jane uses elements from both the mythological and religious to guide her own development; the fact that she does not depend exclusively on one or the other to guide her journey is the true marker of her development and progress throughout the novel.”

Note in the example above:

- Context is provided in the form of titles and authors of primary and secondary sources
- The opener is emphatic; even by itself, the opener is a claim
- The introduction sets the reader up for the final sentence of the paragraph, which is the thesis statement, in two ways:
  - The introduction identifies an issue in the work discussed that previous literature has not resolved—namely, what is the relationship between the religious and mythical in *Jane Eyre?* By identifying a previously unresolved issue, the writer has given us the rationale for and the importance of this essay
  - The introduction guides the reader into the thesis statement first by posing the thesis statement as an
explicit question in the penultimate sentence, then by using the thesis statement to answer this question. This provides both clarity and specificity to the thesis.

A weaker introduction may read like this:

“Present throughout Emile Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* is the theme of confinement; the setting often has an oppressing atmosphere, and Thérèse in particular, feels trapped and her desires suppressed at many points in the novel. However, the confinement that Thérèse feels at various points in the novel stems from different reasons, and is presented in various fashions throughout the novel. This can be seen from the confinement she feels at the beginning of the novel in her life before Laurent, and later the entrapment she feels when married to Laurent.”

While is this introduction does provide the necessary context needed for the rest of the essay in the form of the work discussed as well as a brief summary of relevant passages in the novel, there are still many ways in which it could be improved:

- Stylistically, there are weaknesses in the writing: it is unwieldy, caused by the excessive use of commas and buildup of one dependent clause on another.
- The introduction does not set the reader up for the thesis statement because the thesis statement is too broad; it does not attack the essay with sufficient specificity to warrant a specific introduction. In fact, it isn’t exactly clear which sentence is the thesis.
- Since the thesis is not specific and clear, the rest of the introduction resorts to paraphrasing and generalization.
- There is no strong impetus behind the thesis; rather, the thesis (if there is one) is just a summary of what is present in the novel: “the confinement that Therese feels at various points in the novel stems from different reasons...” The reader is not given a reason to care about or get excited about the topic being discussed.
More on the thesis statement

Needless to say, the thesis is the most important element of the introduction, and possibly the whole essay.

The thesis is more than just a paraphrasing of the main point of your essay; it should be an argument. Do not cheat your reader or yourself by creating a thesis that everyone can agree with because it is factually true. This is why the thesis in the above example fails. No one can disagree with the thesis, thus there no point in arguing this idea. The reader just thinks, “so what?” You want to show your reader, “Well, here’s why what I have to say is new and interesting, and why you should care about it.”

A not so good thesis statement:

“However, the confinement that Thérèse feels at various points in the novel stems from different reasons, and is presented in various fashions throughout the novel.”

Revising that statement to make it better:

“Although the stifling confinement Thérèse experiences throughout the novel may appear to have myriad sources, it is in reality just the result of her innate African temperament.”

This thesis is much stronger because it has an impetus or drive. It refutes a common conception of the novel, that Thérèse’s confinement is a result of many different factors, and proposes an idea that opposes this already accepted statement. The thesis disagrees with something, and readers can choose disagree with the thesis. This is what a good thesis statement is—readers must be able to argue against it. It is now up to the rest of the essay to overcome the reader’s possible oppositions to the thesis statement by developing evidence in a clear and logical way.

The opener

One last note on the opener: as mentioned previously, be direct, be assertive and challenge your reader by making a claim. Readers are much more likely to respond well to an opener such as:

“Dangerous, violent lunatic—upon first consideration, it is easy to reduce Bertha Mason in the novel Jane Eyre to this sweeping generalization.”
As opposed to this:

“Bertha Mason is an interesting character in the novel *Jane Eyre*, because she rebels against the norms of society.”

There is no claim that can be disagreed with and no specificity in the second opener (aren’t all good characters “interesting”?). As a result this opener is unengaging to the reader.

**Developing your argument**

**Relationships and flow**

A good argument is all about relationships. Relationships can take many forms. Two parties in a relationship may support each other, or they may oppose each other. In writing, relationships are your friend. If you make clear to the reader the relationships between the various sentences in a paragraph, the paragraph will flow.

This does not imply that all the sentences in the same paragraph must serve the same purpose—in fact, if they did, the paragraph will be utterly uninteresting, with no shifts in thought to keep the reader occupied. When developing a paragraph, bear in mind that you are inviting the reader into your stream of consciousness; the reader is following your train of thought as its focus shifts from one idea to the next. Allow twists and turns in thought to develop your paragraphs, but make sure that road signs such as transitions words (“however”, “although”, “furthermore”) let the reader know where those twists and turns are.

Good development in a paragraph may look something like this:

“We can now begin to view Bertha as a manifestation of the author’s radical impulses. Yet one aspect concerning Bertha seems to reinforce conservative ideas prevalent during the Victorian era. When Jane finally sees Bertha in broad daylight, she notes that Bertha is “a woman...with thick and dark hair” (326) and “blackened inflation of the lineaments” (327). Throughout *Jane Eyre*, Bronte often takes great care in noting the skin color of various characters. While Bronte describes the morally-principled Jane as “white” (18) or pale, she attributes dark skin to characters...
she deems morally inferior to Jane. For example, the cruel John Reed “[reviles Mrs. Reed] for her dark skin, similar to his own” (18) and Blanche Ingram is ironically as “dark as a Spaniard” (201). If Bronte attributes similarly dark complexion to Bertha, is she suggesting that Bertha’s actions are immoral (a conservative impulse) at the same time she uses Bertha to express the more radical impulses of the novel? The connection between darker complexion and inferiority signifies an ingrained racism—a conservative idea that Bronte does not challenge.”

What is good about this paragraph:

- In the second sentence, the writer uses “yet” to inform the reader of a shift in her train of thought—a possible counter-argument to an earlier point
- The writer uses evidence from the novel to support this counter-claim in the middle of the paragraph
- The last two sentences are organic and allow us to follow the flow of the writer’s thinking; the question in the penultimate sentence is posed in such a way that the reply in the final sentence builds up to the claim that has been threading the paragraph

HOWEVER, allowing the reader to see the flow of a writer’s thoughts does not end within the paragraph. The flow must be carried through into the next paragraph, creating a logical transition. Again, a good transition finds its strength in making the relationship between the two paragraphs clear. How are the two paragraphs linked in a way that is meaningful?

We can expand on our previous example of good development in a paragraph to examine what a good transition may look like. Below the final sentence of the paragraph above and the final sentence of the paragraph following it:

“The connection between darker complexion to inferiority is certainly demonstrative of an ingrained racism—a conservative idea that Bronte does not challenge.

Bronte also appears to be showing conservative impulses in the way she reduces Bertha—this supposedly immoral madwoman—to a non-thinking entity.”
This transition works because the relationship between the two paragraphs is clear. The use of the word “also” makes it clear that the second paragraph is supporting the same claim as the first paragraph, but using different reasoning and evidence. The reader can see that the second paragraph is relevant to the first because the writer makes the relationship between the two paragraphs clear.

Now that we have seen examples of good development and transition, here is a piece of writing that may require more work:

“This Victorian patriarchy consisted of the notion that women were socially (and legally) inferior to men. Jane is reluctant to marry Rochester, as she fears the loss of autonomy and respect that will come with her married status. Let us for now consider Bertha’s role in the overall structure of the novel. It is incredibly significant that Jane sees Bertha for the first time on the eve of her marriage, and then properly on the day of her marriage. In some ways, Bertha’s appearance on the day of Jane’s marriage allows Jane to escape the marriage when it is clear she and Rochester are not yet equals. Bronte also makes an important connection between the eve of the marriage and the scene in the Red Room by stating that Jane, upon seeing Bertha tear the wedding veil, “lost consciousness: for the second time in [her] life—only the second time” (327). By linking the tearing of the wedding veil—a symbol of revolt against marriage—with young Jane’s revolt in the Red Room, Bronte makes Bertha a statement against Victorian conventions which necessitated that women be subordinates in their marriages.

Additionally, the novel also makes various references to those who have been disenfranchised and enslaved by English colonialism, and compares these people to Jane.”

What needs fixing (and this is certainly not an exhaustive list):

- The transition is sudden, and the reader is not prepared for it in any way. The use of “additionally” implies that the second paragraph will in some way reinforce or expand on the claims made in the first paragraph, but the writer shifts to a completely new topic, throwing the reader...
off the writer’s train of thought. The second paragraph is not the relevant to the first
• The relationship between the second and third sentences is not clear, again due to a transition that the writer has not set up. “Let us for now...” shifts the focus of the paragraph suddenly without priming the reader for the shift. It is lazy and does not bother to invite the reader into the writer’s logic and train of thought

Analysis and evidence

It would be impossible to provide an exhaustive description of what makes for good analysis. Many times, what constitutes a good analysis is circumstantial. Different styles of writing and different academic disciplines will demand different ways of analyzing thought. In literature, writers will most often be asked to examine both a series of primary and secondary sources. This examination should form the bulk of the essay—by analyzing your sources, you provide evidence to support your thesis.

While paraphrasing or summary is important to provide the reader with context, good analysis must always move beyond mere summary. Analysis is specific. Analysis involves asking why an author has chosen to use a particular word, tone, image, narrative technique etc.... Analysis is explaining the effect a particular literary device creates and how that influences the reader’s interpretation of events or characters in a literary work.

When dealing with the analysis of primary sources, quotations and specific references are your friends. This is not to say that quotations or references should be used with abandon. Many writers treat quotes in particularly without careful consideration. Here are the most important ideas to take into consideration with dealing with quotations:

• They should not do your work for you. If you are summarizing or paraphrasing, quotes are not helpful. It is not useful to quote that Rochester and Jane “went up to London” (Bronte, 520). The quote does not bring any
new baggage with it; it does not provoke a claim

- Use quotations sparingly and deliberately. Unless you wish to point out something special about an entire paragraph, do not quote an entire paragraph. Doing so diminishes the power of your quotation. Instead, find the specific word or phrase that forms the crux of your argument and quote only that

- Always prepare the reader for your quotes. A sign post, such as “for example” or “such as” followed by the quotation means that the reader can see your train of thought much clearly

- Consider the relevance of your quote or reference: does it support your claim fully?

Evidence from secondary sources should be dealt with in a similar way. They should be chosen selectively as not to dilute the power of the quotation or reference. They must have a purpose. However, there are additional considerations to take into account when using secondary sources:

- The writer does NOT need to agree with everything presented in a secondary source. While evidence from a primary source is used mainly to support the writer’s claim or thesis, you as the writer are completely at liberty to disagree with, support or undermine a claim made in a secondary source. As such, it is imperative that you make this relationship clear. How are you

A quick tangent:
Many systems of citation are used; the MLA, APA and Chicago styles are most common. Citation formats can be easily referenced in libraries or online. Often times, there is particular confusion on how to cite an article from a book. An example of a correct bibliographic entry (in the MLA style) for an article is provided:

using this secondary source? To support your own argument or to provide an example of a viewpoint you will argue against?

- Secondary sources represent the exchange of ideas by scholars. Always set up quotations or references to secondary sources by introducing the scholar who made the claim or citing correctly. Do not “dump” quotations out of the blue into your essay simply for the sake of quoting.

Here is an example of concise, specific and purposeful analysis and two instances of secondary source integration:

“Even more crucially, Jane appears to make the most progress in gaining her independence during a few key moments in the novel when Bronte brings pagan influences to the forefront. For example, when Jane summons the conviction to leave Rochester, she is not guided by strong Christian dictates but instead guided by a pagan moon-mother (Bronte, 367-368). The importance that a pagan symbol—the moon—plays in facilitating Jane’s development of her independence and self-respect appear to indicate that mythological influences play a greater role in driving Jane’s progress than religious influences. In fact, it seems that religious forces slow down Jane’s progress throughout the novel. The religiously zealous St. John attempts to use Christianity to coerce Jane into marrying him, removing her of her independence. Some critics even go as far as to make an association between Christianity and anti-feminism, claiming, as Macpherson does, that Jane’s experience at Moor House is “the story of a daughter’s subordination to a patriarch of a father with a religious whip in his hands” (59).”

“All these readings, however, are based on the assumption that Jane Eyre actually develops and makes progress throughout the novel. Critics like Wood have challenged this assumption, stating that Jane in fact does not progress at all, but that the novel is a repetitive motif of “escape and return” (Wood, 95).”

What is successful about these two paragraphs?

- The purpose of the secondary sources is explicit, and each secondary source is given sufficient introduction before it is used. The reader can easily see the flow
between the analysis of the essay and the secondary sources: in the first paragraph, the secondary source is used to reinforce a claim whereas the second paragraph uses a secondary source to provide evidence for a counter-argument.

- References to the novel are exact and concise; the writer simply states that Jane is guided by “a pagan moon-mother”. In this case, a reference is sufficient and a quote would be superfluous, as the writer is analyzing the content rather than language of a specific moment. Quoting the moment where Jane is guided by the moon would be an empty quotation; the quotation would serve no other purpose than retelling the novel.

- The writer comments on the example she uses in the context of the overall novel; she specifically examines the effect of incorporating a “pagan moon-mother”—pagan influences rather than Christian dictates encourage Jane’s growth.

Here, the writer’s attempts at analysis are not as successful:

“However, this is too facile an argument for other readings of *Jane Eyre*; Lamonaca states that is would be a mistake to interpret religion and feminism as such, as Macpherson (and Gilbert and Gubar) ignore St. John’s “virtual apotheosis” (245) at the end of the novel. Over the years, the ending of *Jane Eyre* has indeed caused much debate and discussion. However, by paralleling St. John accepting his religious calling with Jane’s decision marriage to Rochester, Bronte also depicts Jane’s decision to marriage Rochester as her own divine calling (246). *Jane Eyre* thus becomes feminist in this sense because Jane’s calling to marry Rochester is now as valid as St. John’s calling to work in India as a missionary. More importantly, it is Jane herself who defines her own religious calling, not men like St. John or Rochester who attempt to exert their authority over Jane in the name of God. As such, the role of religion in this reading could be said to be empowering; Christianity and feminist thinking need not be mutually exclusive.”
Why doesn’t this paragraph work as well?

- Although it is evident that the secondary source has been used to support a point, the introduction of the secondary source appears to be rather sudden. Lamonaca’s name is thrown into the paragraph without any prior priming and the quotation is dumped. It does not do any work other than tell the reader in fancy jargon what Lamonaca has said. The writer does not appropriate the secondary source to support a claim or thesis.
- While the writer does provide an analysis of a specific moment of the novel, explaining its implications for the entire novel, some of the later claims toward the end of the paragraph are not supported sufficiently with evidence in the form of quotations or specific references.

**Style**

As mentioned previously, good writing is a result of good VOICE. Each writer has a particular rhythm of writing, just as each human being has a particular rhythm of speaking. Often times, we can easily identify a work by Dickens, Flaubert or Woolf because of the particular idiosyncrasies or habits we know each writer has. Academic writing is no different.

Personally, I choose to interpret voice in a slightly more literal sense. While writing, I always endeavour to imagine that I am transcribing a speech. As a result, I am aware that my writing voice has a certain oral quality to it, almost as if I am conversing with an audience. I am not afraid to use colons, brackets or dashes to indicate pauses that might occur if I were reading my essay out loud. I do not spell out everything I am going to write about, because I do not tell people what I am going to talk about. I do not forcefully argue a point while writing, because I do not forcefully argue when speaking; I gently yet firmly steer the
reader/audience through my train of thinking (I find questions help me with this). And I do this because I find that in conversing with a reader, the reader has much less difficulty following my flow of thoughts. The reader does less work, and my writing becomes more lucid.

I think this paragraph will give an idea of what I am talking about:

“Bronte also appears to be showing conservative impulses in the way she reduces Bertha—this supposedly immoral madwoman—to a non-thinking entity. Bertha is described in various ways with animal imagery: she has a “quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane” and she “bellow[s]” (338) at those who have come to visit her. This conservatism is contradictory to the radical impulses previously examined; yet before we conclude prematurely that Bertha is simply a vessel for conservative impulses, we should note another striking similarity between the two scenes being considered. Of particular interest is the way young Jane and Bertha are characterized. The young Jane, like Bertha, is also described with animal imagery: at one point during her struggle she utters a “wild, involuntary cry” (21). What is Bronte insinuating when she invites us to identify Bertha with the young Jane?”

At the same time, because I try to take a gentler, more conversational approach to my writing, I tend to shy away from being emphatic. As a result, filler phrases or hesitant-sounding verbs crop up through my writing:

“What is even more significant to note if we choose to support the view that Jane’s journey throughout the novel is a mythological quest rather than a religious pilgrimage is that Jane appears to make the most progress in gaining her independence at a few crucial moments in the novel when pagan influences are brought to the forefront.”

“In the context of the ending—which (as most endings do) summarizes the progress that our protagonist has made over the course of the novel—it is not implausible to view Jane’s progress throughout the novel as a religious rather than mythological pilgrimage.”

Weak verbs such as “appears” and waffling phrases such as “it is not implausible to view” or “what is even more significant to note” appear with a fair
degree of frequency in my writing because I do not want my tone to be overly forceful. However, they also hinder me from creating energetic, active sentences. This is a stylistic habit that I would like to break without sacrificing my own writer’s voice.

Revisions of the previous sentences could go something like this:

“Jane’s development throughout the novel bears an even stronger resemblance to a mythological quest when we consider that she makes the most progress to achieving her independence at moments when Bronte emphasizes pagan influences and beliefs.”

“In the context of the ending—which (as most endings do) summarizes the progress that the protagonist has made over the course of the novel—the reader is tempted even further to view Jane’s progress as a religious rather than mythological pilgrimage.”

Grammar and language

It would be impossible and frankly exhausting to provide a list of all the possible grammatical mistakes one could make while writing. The list below is only a representative sample of the most common grammatical and linguistic mistakes writers tend to make.

Passive voice constructions

Often times, writers should avoid passive voice constructions, where the noun performing the verb becomes the object instead of the subject. They take the energy and impetus out of sentences, and are often more unwieldy than active voice sentences. In addition, passive voice constructions do not always make clear who is performing the action.

For example:

“It is said that Jane Eyre is an unconventional Victorian woman.” (Who says?)
However, there are specific places where writers may choose to deliberately use the passive voice. When emphasizing a character's inaction or passivity, the passive voice may be more suitable than the active voice.

For example:

“The young Jane is shunned by her family during the early parts of her life.”

In this sentence, it is not Jane performing the shunning; she receives the effect of the shunning. Since the writer wants to keep the focus of the sentence on Jane and not on her family, the passive voice (where the noun receiving the verb is the subject) is completely appropriate.

But for the most part, passive voice constructions should be avoided. Below are examples of passive sentences turned into active ones:

“Jane appears to make the most progress in gaining her independence at a few crucial moments in the novel when Bronte brings pagan influences to the forefront.”

“Bertha is quite literally from a colonized country, described by Bronte as the daughter of “a Creole” from Spanish Town, Jamaica (335).”

Becomes:

“Bertha is quite literally from a colonized country. Bronte describes her as the daughter of “a Creole” from Spanish Town, Jamaica (335).”

“Various references to the theme of death are also made in the opening of Thérèse Raquin.”

Becomes:

“Zola makes various references to death and mortality in the opening of Thérèse Raquin.”
Verbs

Verbs can make or break a sentence. Verbs drive a sentence forward by giving it an action, and a well-chosen verb can make a sentence much more concise. The successful use of verbs in a sentence rests primarily on the specificity and strength of the verb chosen.

If a verb chosen does not convey the exact nuance of what you are trying to say, it will not do your sentence or your ideas justice. For example, “limit” and “undermine”, while both conveying the idea of weakening something, have different specific meanings. One cannot be substituted for the other.

If a verb chosen is weak and generic, it will also not do your ideas justice. Verbs such as “appears”, “seems” or even—on occasion—“is”, weaken your sentence because they do not have enough force or confidence behind them.

Look at these examples below, and see how the verb changes everything:

“This conservatism is contradictory to the radical impulses previously examined.”

And:

“This conservatism contradicts previously examined radical impulses.”

“Bronte makes this connection between the two females stronger when she brings us into their minds.”

Into:

“Bronte reinforces the connection between the two females when she brings us into their minds.”

“The connection between darker complexion to inferiority is certainly demonstrative of an ingrained racism—a conservative idea that Bronte does not challenge.”

Into:

“The connection between darker complexion to inferiority indicates an ingrained racism—a conservative pulse Bronte does not challenge.”
“In fact, it would even appear that religious forces slow down Jane’s progress throughout the novel.”

And:

“In fact, religious forces actually hinder Jane’s progress throughout the novel.”

“We see Maupassant first break these stereotypes when he brings out Madame Loisel’s flaws.”

Into:

“Maupassant first breaks these stereotypes when he exposes Madame Loisel’s flaws.”

Nominalizations

Nominalizations also hinder writers from using strong verbs. In a nominalization, a verb is turned into a noun; often, this occurs when a writer uses “of” in conjunction with another verb.

For example:

“Zola also makes much use of color in his description of the Passage du Pont-Neuf.”

In the example above, “makes” and “of” conspire together to turn “use” into a noun. More often than not, nominalizations are clunky, and dilute the immediacy of the main action of the sentence. In general, nominalizations are easy to excise from sentences:

“Zola uses color abundantly in his description of the Passage du Pont-Neuf.”

Conciseness

Often (but not always), the fewer words a writer can use, the less likely her readers will be confused. In using fewer words, the writer gets to her main idea more quickly, and removes dependent clauses or empty phrases that may clutter the sentence and weaken the force of her ideas.

There is no single way to achieve conciseness. However, conciseness often depends on the following elements of sentences: verb specificity, nominalizations, long phrases that can be replaced with a verb, the passive voice and the inappropriate use of prepositions. In short, verbs are crucial to achieving conciseness.
Here are some examples of how sentences can be made more concise:

“It could be said that Emma and Homais are counterparts, and share similar attitudes.”

Removing the empty phrase “it could be said”:

“Emma and Homais are counterparts and share similar attitudes.”

“An element of farce is also present in the play, when Gayev makes a grandiose speech in honor of a century-old bookcase.”

Removing the superfluous phrase “an element of”:

“Gayev’s grandiose speech made in honor of a century-old bookcase highlights the farce in the play.”

“Of particular interest is the way young Jane and Bertha are characterized.”

Changing the passive voice into active voice:

“Bertha and childhood Jane’s characterizations are especially significant.”

“The first impression the reader gets of Charles Bovary is that of a meek, awkward schoolboy who is immediately made fun of because of his ridiculous hat.”

Removing “of” and strengthening the verb “gets”:

“From the outset, Flaubert characterizes Charles Bovary as a meek, awkward schoolboy whose ridiculous hat immediately becomes the subject of mockery.”

“Perhaps the most prominent way in which Okara shows the narrator’s nostalgia for his childhood is through the allusion in the title ‘Once Upon a Time’.”

Removing the empty phrase “perhaps the most prominent way” and replacing the preposition “through” with a verb:
“In particular, Okara uses allusion in the title ‘Once Upon a Time’ to showcase the narrator’s nostalgia for his childhood.

The ambiguous “this”

Good writing is all about clarity. This statement has been made many times already, but it bears repeating. Clarity means that the reader does not become frustrated trying to piece together the incoherent parts of a writer’s argument. Much of clarity has to do with making clear, logical connections between ideas.

The ambiguous “this” is one of the most common impediments to clarity. The ambiguous “this” is often present at the beginning of sentences, and ostensibly refers to an idea in the previous sentence, trying to make a connection between the two sentences. But what the “this” refers to is unclear.

For example:

“Mrs. Glegg arrives wearing her old clothing and assumes an air of moral superiority by reproaching Mrs. Tulliver for attempting to look attractive: “Mrs. Tulliver had shed tears several times at sister Glegg’s unkindness on the subject of these unmatronly curls” (Eliot, 58). This shows the reader Mrs. Glegg’s hypocrisy.”

Since it is not immediately clear what “this” is referring to, the reader has a difficult time making the connection between the quotation and the conclusion that the writer attempts to reach in the second sentence. Replacing “this” with a more specific sentence, or inserting an additional phrase elaborating on what “this” is eliminates any ambiguity:

“Mrs. Glegg arrives wearing her old clothing and assumes an air of moral superiority by reproaching Mrs. Tulliver for attempting to look attractive: “Mrs. Tulliver had shed tears several times at sister Glegg’s unkindness on the subject of these unmatronly curls” (Eliot, 58). This apparent humility on the part of Mrs. Glegg barely masks the pettiness from which it derives.”

Another example:

“In the penultimate stanza, the narrative persona comments that he “saw a building with a thousand floors, /A thousand windows and a thousand
doors;/Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.” This exaggerates the abundance of the resources available, and by doing this, emphasizes the irony of how the Jews still weren’t being helped despite the huge amount of resources available.”

By changing the “this”, the writer makes the sentence much clearer:

“In the penultimate stanza, the narrative persona comments that he “saw a building with a thousand floors,/A thousand windows and a thousand doors;/Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.” The hyperbole in these lines highlights the sheer abundance of the resources available, emphasizing the irony of how the Jews still were turned away despite the huge amount of resources available.”

The semicolon

Of all the punctuation marks that exist, the semicolon probably causes the most confusion. Semicolons can be used in many different situations: to separate long items in a list, to break up a complex sentence, or to bring together two clauses.

With the exception of listing, semicolon usage follows this general rule:

*Clauses separated by a semicolon must be able to stand on their own.*

In other words, semicolons are used to bring independent clauses together.

This is an inappropriate use of the semicolon:

“There is no indication of impulsive emotion on Jane’s part when she sees Bertha; as seen when Jane returns to her room, telling the reader: “but now, I thought” (340).”

The second and third clauses of the sentence are dependent on the first, so a semicolon should not be used. Here is where a semicolon is appropriate:

“There is no indication of impulsive emotion on Jane’s part when she sees Bertha; after Jane returns to her room, she merely tells the reader: “but now, I thought” (340).”
A few fun reminders...
Now that I have gone through some of the (key) components that make for good writing, allow me to indulge some reflection on my own writing.

A sentence that I like:

“Although Gilbert and Gubar acknowledge the significance religion plays in facilitating Jane's intellectual and emotional maturation in the novel, they appear to interpret *Jane Eyre* as primarily a woman's mythological quest and secondarily a religious pilgrimage.”

I like this sentence primarily for three reasons:

- Firstly, I think the verbs chosen in this sentence are specific and drive to the point quickly; “facilitating” in particular I like because it serves the purpose of indicating that Jane is only reliant on religion to a certain extent
- The shift in train of thought in the sentence is handled efficiently, without fuss, through the simple use of “although”
- The secondary source is integrated in a way that supports my claim in the paragraph; I am claiming at this point that *Jane Eyre* appears to mimic a fairy tale, and appropriate Gilbert and Gubar's argument for my own purposes

A sentence that I don't really like:

“In addition to colors being described as dirty palettes of color as opposed to clear, specific colors, the opening of *Thérèse Raquin* also includes other references to disease and contamination.”

The parts of this sentence which so painfully scream for improvement include:

- The logic in the sentence just doesn’t work: the opening of *Thérèse Raquin* is not being described as dirty palettes of color—the setting in the opening is
- The passive voice: the locution “being described as” is clunky and does not convey action or immediacy in the sentence
• The transition between the first and second halves of the sentence: while not clunky in any way, I see a fundamental lapse in the analysis. The use of “in addition” would imply that “disease and contamination” somehow augment the effect of the “dirty palettes” of color, but that relationship is not very strong here.

**Words of wisdom from Prof. Rodensky:**

Verbs are the lifeblood of a sentence. They give the sentence energy, direction and purpose. The more specific you can be with the verb, the less waffling around you will have to do in the sentence. And the sooner the verb describing the main subject makes an appearance in a sentence, the more immediacy a sentence will have.

**Words of wisdom from Trimble’s *Writing with Style:***

“[The writer’s] natural tendency...is to think primarily of himself—hence to write primarily for himself. Here, in a nutshell, lies the ultimate reason for most bad writing” (Trimble, 3).

Personally, good writing has always meant writing where the reader has to do as little work as possible. The writer personally guides the reader through his sequence of thoughts as opposed to leaving the reader to grope around throughout the essay.

**I’m sitting down to write my first paper as a sophomore, and I’m going to remember that** good writing is good re-writing. I think many writers except great writing to come out of them at the first draft. In reality, writing is a sequence of edits, re-edits and more edits. By re-writing you learn to recognize and break personal writing habits that may make your writing unclear. Re-writing gives you the perspective and distance needed to notice old mistakes and tendencies—one of the most challenging parts of writing.

“Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.”

~Mark Twain