# Instructor Notes

Because both your academic courses and your potential future as an analyst involve some written assignments, I’d like to offer a few tips and suggestions for you. This is not designed to replace the more formal guides and assistance, but simply to provide some of my observations based on written assignments I’ve seen from a lot of students and from some analysts who worked for me.

There are two reasons I put a lot of emphasis on this. The first is the academic side: the better your skills, the better your grades will be. The second reason is broader than this. Many of you probably have seen things like written reports or Power Point briefings where there were egregious errors in spelling or grammar. It is very easy for these errors to completely overshadow the point trying to be made. Improving written skills can provide a lot of payoffs beyond pure academics.

Having said all that, here are some informal suggestions and tips that I would offer:

1. Spelling

Spell Check in Word decidedly is your friend, and you should always use it for your papers. The one issue with Spell Check is that it does not do well with homonyms (words pronounced the same, but spelled differently and with different meanings). Unfortunately, there are a plethora of homonyms that can cause you problems. Based on stacks of student papers that I’ve reviewed (which seemingly would fill a library by now), here are some of the more problematic words:

a. ‘Borders’ versus ‘boarders’. For some reason, this has been one of the most common errors I’ve found. ‘Borders’ are boundaries; ‘boarders’ are people who board ships (as in the pirate movies, “Prepare to repel boarders”) or people who live in rooming houses.

b. ‘Principal’ versus ‘principle’. ‘Principal’ means ‘main’ or ‘primary’; ‘principle’ means ‘belief’ or ‘general truth.’

c. ‘Tenet’ versus ‘tenant’. ‘Tenet’ is ‘general truth’ and ‘tenant’ is a ‘dweller.’

d. ‘Shear’ versus ‘sheer’. ‘Shear’ is to cut something; ‘sheer’ (as usually used in papers) is ‘utter’ or ‘total.’

e. ‘Lead’ versus ‘led’. Simply, the past tense of ‘to lead’ is ‘led.’

f. ‘Affect’ versus ‘effect’. Normally, ‘affect’ is the verb, and ‘effect’ is the noun. [I say normally, because ‘effect’ as a verb has gathered some use as meaning ‘to cause to become effective’, but it’s best to avoid this use.]

g. ‘Populace’ versus ‘populous’. ‘Populace’ are the people living in a country or area (a noun), while ‘populous’ is an adjective meaning thickly settled.

h. ‘Sight’ versus ‘site’ versus ‘cite’. ‘Sight’ involves vision; ‘site’, location, and ‘cite’ to quote.

2. Sentence fragments

A lot of papers have problems with sentence fragments. If you use fragments, Spell Checker normally will indicate these (the infamous wavy green line of death), but not always. At times, in fact, Spell Checker will flag a sentence as a fragment when it is in fact a complete sentence; the only fix for this is to tell yourself that you know better than Bill Gates. To avoid fragments, just make sure that you have a subject and a verb in the sentence. One of the more common reasons for having fragments is starting a phrase with a preposition. Always double check these.

3. Apostrophes

These seem to be an issue for a lot of students. They’re particularly a problem when dealing with plural nouns. Although not perfect, in most cases the best approach is simply to use the plural (as long as it ends with an ‘s’) and then just to put an apostrophe mark at the end of the word (with no additional ‘s’). If the plural doesn’t end in an ‘s’ (such as ‘children’), add an apostrophe s.

4. The killer: Its and it’s

This almost always is a problem, in large part because the rule doesn’t always make a lot of sense. In short, ‘it’s’ is used only for ‘it is’ and the possessive form of ‘it’ is ‘its’. A fairly easy way of avoiding problems is to always spell out ‘it is.’ If you do this, you’ll never have to use an apostrophe.

5. The use of ‘you’

For academic papers, this rule is simple: never use ‘you.’ Some students like using a sentence construction such as “if you look at the facts, you will see….”. For academic papers, this is akin to nails on a chalkboard. Likewise, except in very rare circumstances, avoid using ‘I’.

6. Capitalization

Some students seem to want to over-capitalize. Within a sentence, only proper nouns should be capitalized.

7. ‘Criterion’ versus ‘criteria’

This also is a fairly common problem. ‘Criterion’ is singular and uses ‘is’, and ‘criteria’ is plural and uses ‘are.’

8. Commas

I won’t go into details, but a very common issue is for students to use excessive commas in sentences. Please watch your writing for this problem; only use commas to set off independent clauses in sentences and to separate sequences or lists.

9. Abbreviations

The first time you use a term that will be abbreviated, you should spell it out, followed by the abbreviation in parentheses, such as International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). From there, you can use only the abbreviation.

These tips certainly don’t cover everything, but I hope that they make the process a bit less painful for you.