A SHORT GUIDE TO STYLE FOR PAPERS, REPORTS, AND THESES

David Rosenberg

(adapted from Jay Lund)

1) Write for Your Audience

- Discuss your topic in a way that is of interest to the reader.
- Use terms familiar to the reader.
- Make your arguments explicit and brief. Do not waste the reader's time; time is a scarce commodity. Do not assume the reader will read the entire paper.

2) Create a Train of Thought in the Reader's Mind

- Clear writing reflects clear thinking.
- Make the purpose and intended message of the paper prominent.
- Structure your discussion. Organize your ideas to reflect a clear train of thought.
- Use headings and subheadings to reinforce your train of thought.
- Provide the most detail on areas you think are most important. Place details of less important areas in an appendix. Excessive detail in the main body distracts the reader.
- Use tables and figures, as well as words, to create a train of thought. Tables and figures should summarize and focus evidence and thoughts. Present data only once (as text, a table, or a figure).
- Always include an abstract and conclusions to summarize the importance of your work.

3) Make the Reading Easy

- Use simple sentence structures with no excessive wording. For example, replace "We used a linear program in order to find a more productive allocation of resources," with "A linear program found a more productive resource allocation."
- Use the active tense. Replace "Water markets were facilitated by changes in enabling legislation," with "Changes in enabling legislation facilitated water marketing.
- Use simple words. Replace "Doses of Toxic A greater than 50 mg/l induced negative impacts on salmanoid species", with "MTBE doses greater than 50 mg/l harmed salmon."
- Avoid jargon. Jargon greatly narrows your audience. Reword terms like "Scenario 1" or "Class A" with descriptive labels like "Base Case" or "Water Conserving Households".
- Spell out acronyms on first use. i.e., American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE).
- Avoid footnotes or end notes; they distract the reader from your train of thought.
- Use literature citations. Citations provide a "paper-trail" of ideas and evidence to support your discussion and help the reader place your perspective in a larger context.
- Use parenthetical citations (Lund, 1990), rather than footnotes or numbers. They are more readable. List all references at the end of the work. See ASCE for details.
- Number pages.
- Double space all drafts. Double spacing is easier to read and leaves room to insert comments. Single space final versions.
- A good and mercifully brief style manual is Strunk and White, The Elements of Style.
- Solicit as many friendly experts and non-experts as possible to read your paper and provide feedback. Read every comment as a positive suggestion for something you could explain more clearly (and succinctly).

Purposes for Paper Parts David Rosenberg (adapted from Jay Lund)

Basic Rules for Writing
- ✓ Write for an intended audience.
- ✓ Write with an intended message.
- ✓ Create a train of thought in the readers mind.
- ✓ Clear writing reflects clear thinking.

What gets read in a paper?
When browsing journals, you have probably noticed which parts of each paper you read. As a rule of thumb, most readers scouring journals read: 90% of the Titles, 10-20% of the Abstracts, 2-5% of the Introductions and Conclusions, and 1-2% of the papers in their entirety. It is especially important for the title, abstract, introduction, and conclusions to be well written, as these will be read by the more numerous and impatient readers.

Abstract – the paper in a paragraph
Distill the paper into a single paragraph, no more than 1/2 page in length. Convey the main points and problem briefly, so that busy readers can find work of interest to them (for further reading) or quickly learn the main point without reading further. A well-written abstract helps a wider audience swiftly digest more literature and encourages those interested in your work to read further.

Introduction
The introduction generally serves four purposes:
1. Provide a general problem statement and orientation to the subject and its importance,
2. Review background and prior research; let the reader know in general terms what has been done with this problem before,
3. Overview the paper's specific focus and approach to the problem plus what the paper contributes that is new or useful, and
4. Foreshadow the structure of the paper: prepare the reader for what is to come.

Intermediate Sections
Structure intermediate sections to create a train of thought in the reader's mind. Each section or sub-section should establish one step in that train of thought.

Conclusions
Briefly summarize what has been learned from the work. Should not introduce any new material.

References
Use sufficient references to:
1. Allow a novice to get up to speed on your subject through additional reading,
2. Provide background on the problem and the work done on the problem by others,
3. Support strengths and weaknesses of points and methods you have identified or used, and
4. Avoid repeating extensive material that is already well established and available elsewhere.

See any ASCE journal for good examples of reference and citation style.

Appendices
Locate details in an appendix which are important for some readers, but would interrupt the continuity of the argument or development for most readers.