

Ten Suggestions for Scholarly Writing

1. Never write a word you don't understand; a sentence you can't explain; a name you don't know (or haven't investigated).
2. Before citing other writers' judgments or conclusions, determine whether those ideas actually merit repetition. Many do not.
3. Seek out the hidden axiom in every sentence you read or write. What assumption makes the sentence possible? Are you willing to defend the implied axiom? Or does it reveal prejudicial attitudes best discarded?
4. Avoid unnecessary generalizations. The only safe generalization is either one generated inevitably by a careful assembly of facts or one supported by a well-chosen footnote.
5. In scholarly prose, tone is of paramount importance. A colloquial word, a shabby metaphor, a phrase with connotations far removed from the subject at hand can have a braying effect that calls into question the writer's sensibilities.
6. Never write anything merely to display your intelligence. The only justification for scholarly writing is communication. Every aspect of your style must be geared to clarify, to make difficult things easier without falsification.
7. Avoid abstract concepts as much as possible: deal with the concrete. Strive to give your sentences animate or physical subjects and objects, instead of weak "—tion," "—ing," and "—ment" words.
8. Never use hit-and-run techniques: unexplained, casual praise or censure. Such things only intimidate or irritate the reader.
9. Anticipate strong criticism. Assume that you are writing to satisfy an incorrigible skeptic. Don't give him/her an opening to attack you or to conclude that you have ignorantly neglected important points of view.
10. Write so clearly that misinterpretation is inconceivable. If readers can misunderstand you, they will. Good writing is precise writing.