

A little book on writing a paper at AUN:

**Words of Encouragement,
Warning, and Help**

**Cortland Smith
Steve Devitt**



AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY
OF NIGERIA

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Foreword: A Letter from the President

Dear AUN Community,

The authors of this ‘little book’ have asked me to commend it to you. I jumped at the chance.

AUN is Africa’s first development university. The tasks of development are many, and make no mistake, development is not easy.

Helping Nigeria, or any country, to greater prosperity, justice, health, freedom, sustainability, and peace is going to be a life-long task. It is a task that will require enormous courage. It will require boundless energy. It will demand all of your talent, and skill: we expect nothing less of AUN graduates. We expect you to make a better world than the one my generation will hand over to you.

One of the most important skills—probably the most important skill—that you will need, whether you are running a business, developing software, engaging in community development, medicine, law, education, politics or any other endeavor, is the ability to write English well.

This is so because at the heart of all human interaction is communication. If you cannot communicate clearly, and persuasively, then your good ideas will come to nothing. In the modern world, and in the future world, that communication will be in English.

This little book, if you read it, if you take it seriously, will help you master this difficult language. Read it. Use it. Learn from it. Go out and create a better world.

Good luck to you all,

Margee Ensign,
President
American University of Nigeria

Introduction

Looking back on our university years, it comes as a shock to remember how little guidance we were given on how to write a good university paper. Our professors must have believed that we arrived being good writers, knowing how to write formal papers complete with correct footnotes. They were wrong.

We don't want the same thing to happen to AUN students. You deserve better. So we wrote this little book to give you the help we were not given.

We will also address a particular problem now common all over the world: most entering university students don't write very well. Here are some examples by entering AUN students:

"Population is the key says by peter Nigeria is sixth world most populated country in the world."

"Education is one of the basic requirements of life. It has also become a very important need to achieve."

"Taking cigarettes with the knowledge of its harm to the body is a way of calling illness to one's health."

We probably agree with the sentiments expressed, assuming that we have correctly disentangled some of them from their unfortunate prose. Alas, the writing itself is a long way from acceptable university standards: we have not unfairly singled out the worst examples.

Learning how to write clear and acceptable English is "a very important need to achieve." Where to start? What is to be done?

We have written this little book because we hope it can help. Proper English must be taught by the faculty of AUN, learned and practiced by the students of AUN. We offer this book as a tool.

To AUN students: this book leads you through the process of writing a paper, and writing well. You can learn to write competent, readable, and well organized English while at AUN. That is the aim of this book. Please read it. Write. Use it. Write some more. Consult it. Keep it on your desk as you write a paper. You can master written English—others have done it here at AUN.

To AUN faculty: while this book is addressed to students, it should prove helpful to you as well. Most university faculty members have not been trained to teach English writing skills. (You already have your hands full teaching your discipline.) It can be daunting—we know. Discouraging. Perplexing. Yet everyone is going to have to pitch in, because AUN cannot allow students to leave the university incapable of writing proper English.

While this book speaks directly to students—in what we hope is an accessible and somewhat breezy and informal way—you can use it as a quick reference and teaching tool yourself. When you grade a paper and find an impossible sentence [as you surely will] you can just note, “See Little Book, run-on sentences.” When a student’s tenses run amok [as they assuredly will] just note, “LB: see ‘tenses.’” We hope to have written a useful aid that will make your life a little easier, and your students’ work more readable.

P.S. Remember, smoking is a way of calling illness to one’s health.

So let us begin.

The worst, Dear AUN Student, has happened.

You knew the day would have to come, but somehow you hoped that your luck would last. But no, your professor really has given you a writing assignment. You probably have the normal student response in such a situation: anger, dread, resentment, confusion, fear, and despair. We were once undergraduates ourselves, so we know.

Don’t panic. No gnashing of teeth. We are here to help.

The following little book has been designed to help American University of Nigeria students through the maze of *any* writing assignment. It is general enough so that it should be useful, whether you are writing a short story in creative writing, a technical paper in computer science, or a formal research paper in biology, business, or petroleum chemistry.

We will lead you through the process, from first thinking about your topic through to the final editing. On the way, we will visit things such as outlining, sentence structure, using your computer to properly format, writing good paragraphs, how to correct your spelling, avoiding common mistakes, and how to properly cite sources that you quote. If you let us, we will act as your guide all the way through, start to finish.

Some of this you will already know and be pretty good at. Some will be new. Use the manual in a way that you find most helpful. You may be tempted to skip the sections on grammar, sentence structure, and the like. This would be a bad mistake. Most English stylebooks start with these topics, because they are so important and fundamental. Almost all students who write English in the modern world arrive at university needing help in the basics. You are probably one of them.

You can use the book as a quick reference guide to solving your writing problems, such as sentence structure (this appears to be a huge problem at AUN, where ‘run-on’ sentences rule). You can review your grammar if you don’t know why your teacher is accusing you of a “sentence fragment” or a “wrong tense” or a “missing article.”

For those who already write well, you may never have been faced with writing a university-level research paper before. There is the computer to be mastered, research and organization to be considered. *Turnitin*.

We advise you to read the whole book: we’ve kept it short, and we have tried to make it relatively painless. Then, when you run into specific problems, you will know where to quickly dive back in for help. Pay attention and your writing and grades will improve.

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Appendix I

You and your computer looking good

Chapter 1

On topics and brainstorming

It may be that your instructor will assign you a very precise topic. In that case, your only concern will be to stick to it. This is not always as easy as it sounds. One of the biggest problems many students face is picking a topic, and staying on it.

If you are instructed to choose your own topic, it is best to consult the teacher in the course, so that you don't get too far off track. Some research is generally required during the topic selection process, so that you have an idea of what material is readily available. You should remember that a good academic paper isn't just your ideas; it is a synthesis of what you learn and what you think.

Too often, students want to write about overly broad subjects. Be warned: huge topics, such as "Why is There War?" or "The History of Nigeria" or "The Ecology of Adamawa State" or "How to Start a Business," require huge research. Usually, they will not succeed. A huge topic simply will not fit into a 5, 10, or 20 page research paper. Wait until you are older. You can write a book then.

Your assignment may require research, or it may not. Most of what we will talk about will be useful in either case.

So, let us assume that you now have a general topic. Your teacher has said, "*Write a paper on some important political problem in Nigeria.*"

You will have to refine or modify this topic later as you think more about it, and further still when you start to do some research about it, but for now you have somewhere to start.

First, you must exercise some self-discipline and stick to the point: a political problem in Nigeria. This is easier said than done.

Often, students find themselves wandering off the path—they start with their topic, but that is not where they ultimately wind up.

In this example, perhaps they begin by thinking, “Hmmm. A political problem in Nigeria. Well, corruption is a big problem. Politicians are known to be corrupt. But then lots of people are corrupt all over the world. The Chinese are always having corruption scandals. Maybe that is because they have a one-party system. But then, there are corruption scandals in the US, too. If I Google ‘corruption’ I’ll bet Nigeria isn’t any more corrupt than South Africa. I read that in South Africa there is a lot of corruption in the ruling party, the ANC.” And so on. The student started in Nigeria, and before you know it, he was taking a world tour. This is not a good strategy.

The first rule must be: if it doesn’t speak directly about the topic (or at the very least, indirectly about the topic in an illuminating way) leave it out. It doesn’t matter how interesting you are sure everyone will find your astonishing and wonderful insights; if it isn’t helping you to get to where you want to go, leave it behind. Don’t show off. Don’t try to impress. Your job is to write about your topic as clearly as possible.

Put the topic at the top of your draft, and keep referring back to it. This is your destination. Go there. Detour at your peril.

Now what? Now we **brainstorm**.

You can do this more easily on a sheet of paper than on a computer screen, so get a pencil and paper. We can wait...

Now, all over the page, in no particular order (you aren’t making a list) write down everything you can think of about your topic, everything that comes to mind. It doesn’t matter if it sounds silly: if it pops into your head, write it down.

The whole point of this exercise is to be as free in your thinking as possible. Go wild!

Here is an example:

“Political Corruption in Nigeria”

What are the laws?

POLITICIANS TAKE BRIBES

Who does it
hurt?

widespread poverty

**Does anybody ever
go to jail?**

**what about
religion?**

The constitution?

Military corruption!

Who does the bribing?

What's worse,
national, state,
or local?

*My family isn't
corrupt*

Boko Haram

WHY AREN'T THEY PROSECUTED?

Do even Nigerians care?

**DO THE RICH HAVE TO
PAY BRIBES, TOO?**

Rigged elections

*Constitution says can't prosecute
In office—immunity*

Locals have to
pay bribes at
roadblocks

is it worse by region?

***Is giving a job to a relative corrupt?
Uncle Umar? He's no crook!***

What you will find is that you have written down many interesting, and sometimes crazy, things. Good work! You will also find that not all of them will fit into one paper, especially if it is a short paper, so now you have to organize and weed this garden. This will help you to **refine your topic**. Perhaps you should read some articles about corruption in Nigeria first, just to get some more ideas, and eliminate others.

The first thing you should do is draw lines around all of those things on your “brainstorm sheet” that you believe fit together in some way. Some terms might wind up in more than one cluster. That is OK. The result will look like a bunch of amoebas.

So, for example, you might cluster: *locals have to pay bribes at roadblocks; do Nigerians even care?; Politicians take bribes; Do the rich have to pay bribes?, and who does it hurt?* That might lead you to a paper about the impact of political corruption on the population.

Or you might draw a circle around: *Politicians take bribes; why aren't they prosecuted?; The Constitution; Does anybody ever go to jail?, and Constitution says can't prosecute in office*. Notice that one of your subjects was in two different groups: *Politicians take bribes*. You are just grouping all the things that seem to fit together best, and sometimes there is overlap. In this case, it looks as if you are heading towards a paper that deals with corruption, prosecution, and the constitution.

By the end of this process, your paper will be covered by strangely shaped animals full of ideas.

Now it is up to you to see which one—or ones—seems the most promising. Choose your animal. You can even choose more than one—but the more you choose, the more complex, and longer, the essay will probably have to be. Just one is probably going to be enough.

Let us suppose that you decide you want to find out about the Nigerian constitution and how that might play a role in whether crooks go to jail or not, and how it influences corruption. That means that many of the ideas produced by “brainstorming” are going to be left out.

There will probably be no place for *my family isn't corrupt*, or for *do Nigerians even care?* This is what happens. Writing is often about learning how to leave stuff out, even really interesting stuff. **Not everything belongs in your paper**, and you have to weed ruthlessly.

You now have a tentative topic, a refinement of what your teacher gave you. Later, you can refine it even more after you have done research on the topic and come up with a “thesis question” and a “thesis.” You will find that you need to add things, and drop things. That’s how the process works. For now, though, you have a pretty good general topic: “*The Nigerian Constitution and Corruption.*”

Perhaps you already knew that you wanted to write about the “immunity clause” in the Constitution right from the start. That’s fine. Perhaps you already know the question you want to ask and answer. That’s splendid. Then you are one step ahead of the game, and the following work will be easier. One cautionary note: a good academic paper not only demonstrates your own thinking, but your ability to gather information. Of course, that information has to be correctly cited, even if you put it in your own words. The idea of a good paper is a synthesis of both your research and your thinking. Above all, don’t just make things up.

Here we are just suggesting one of many possible pathways that your researching–writing journey might take. You can easily adapt it to your own needs.

For example, next we are going to suggest an outline. An outline, however, can be written, and rewritten, anywhere in this process to good effect.

Chapter 2

Organizing your many thoughts: outlines

Now, looking at the general topic –or the specific topic, if you are already that far along in your thinking– and at your “brainstorming paper”, pull out all the thoughts that you think relate in important ways to your topic, omitting all the rest. Write them down in a list. Now that you are thinking about your refined topic, new ideas will occur to you. Put them down, too.

Now you must begin to put these things in some order that makes sense to you.

Don’t panic. You are using a computer, not a quill and goatskin. If, later on, you change your mind and want to move things around, drop some things out and add new ideas as your paper develops; it will be easy to do. Writers move things around all the time, and sometimes very late in the process.

Some people like to use a very **formal outline** to help them organize their thoughts.

Using such an outline takes some practice and skill, but a formal outline can be very helpful, especially if you are writing a long and complex paper. It is a skill you should learn while you are at university. Such an outline looks like the following illustration, and can be formatted easily enough through your computer word processing system.

- I. Big topic
 - A. Sup topic
 - 1.) breakdown of sub topic
 - 2.) more breakdown
 - a.) some details
 - b.) more details
 - B. Second sub topic
 - 1.) breakdown of sub topic...etc.

Let's say you are going to write a short essay on the topic "Corruption and the Nigerian Constitution." You don't have to do a lot of research, yet, to get an idea of what you might talk about. So here might be a one very simple "Formal" outline.

The Corruption and the Nigerian Constitution

- I. The Problem
 - A. Corruption is rampant
 - 1. define corruption
- II. Politicians aren't punished
 - A. Why not prosecuted?
 - 1. bribery?
 - a.) evidence?
 - B. Is it Constitution?
 - 1. what does it say about immunity?
- III. Good example
 - A. A good case...etc.

One of the advantages of such an outline is that it shows you quite clearly where a piece of information ought to fit in your structure, and what you are going to need to find out. Already there are some red flags. How do you know that there is a great deal of corruption? Where's your proof? How will you even define what corruption is? Is your father giving your Uncle Umar a job building roads an act of corruption? How about sending some official a Christmas gift? What if that gift is a Mercedes?

Perhaps you begin to see how helpful this outline can be and how it can guide your research. It isn't just extra work—it is a useful tool.

For most purposes, however, you probably don't need anything as complicated as a formal outline. An **informal outline** will do.

All that involves is a rough road map to where you are going.

It could be something as simple as:

Introduction

First major point

Second major point

Third major point

Conclusion

Let's assume that a little time has passed, and you have now Googled your topic enough to have found some interesting materials, and you have some sense of what you will write about. It is a short paper, so you decide to focus on just one instance of corruption.

Let's further suppose that you found the court case of James Ibori, who was former governor of Delta State. He was brought before the Economic and Finance Crimes Commission on 170 charges, but let go. [Later, a British Court sentenced him to 13 years in prison for money laundering.] The question before the Nigerian court was whether he could be prosecuted or if he was protected by the "immunity clause" of the Nigerian Constitution.

So your outline might be:

Corruption and the Nigerian Constitution: The Ibori case

Introduction—The Immunity Clause and James Ibori

First point: the argument for the Immunity Clause.

Second point: the argument against the Immunity Clause

Conclusion: Your conclusion and why you came to it.

That's your outline. It is an outline because you still don't know much about your topic, and you will have to fill in all the gaps. Simple as it is, it is far better than just sitting down at your computer and starting to write whatever comes to mind. That rarely works well.

An outline, even one as informal as this one, helps you pinpoint what sort of information you will need to collect through your research and what you still need to learn. The more detailed the outline, the more helpful you will find it.

Even if you aren't writing a research paper, an outline does the same thing: It tells the reader what you will write about, lists the topics in order, and then concludes the paper. It helps to guide your thinking.

An outline also addresses that nasty problem we talked about earlier: sticking to your topic. With an outline, a side-trip taken to South Africa or to a scandal in Europe or China will stick out for the irrelevance that it is, and you can reel yourself back in before you leave Nigerian shores.

An outline is also useful in that it helps you weed. You are likely to discover all sorts of interesting, sometimes wonderful, things, as you read about your topic, almost irresistible little tidbits that you so want to include! Alas, you can't write about everything. You can't put it all in. You don't have the time, and you don't want to write an essay that wanders and confuses the reader.

If you stick to an outline (and since it belongs to you, you can always alter it as you go along) it should be pretty clear what sort of information should be included, what sort should be left out, and in what order it should appear in your paper.

Master this technique and writing anything here at AUN, and for the rest of your life, will be much easier and more fruitful. Your writing will be better organized and easier for the reader to follow.

Chapter 3

How to do research at AUN

Don't be frightened by the word research. It only means "find out," and it can take many forms.

If we asked you to find out where the students in your hostel are from, you could go around and ask all of them. Two from Kano, 1 from Lagos, 6 from Adamawa State, etc. Congratulations! You have just done research.

Every field of study, every discipline, is interested in different things, and therefore asks different questions, and in different ways.

Someone in a business course might want to know, "Why is one bank more successful than another bank?" Someone in a history course might want to know, "How did Nigeria get free from Great Britain?" An ecologist could ask, "What sorts of trees survive best in the Yola climate?" A university is all about asking questions, learning how to find the answers, and then reporting them.

Some research is done through scientific experiment in a laboratory. Some is done through questionnaires, or polling, or interviewing; some analyzes data—such as tax records or census figures or old documents—data that other people have already collected. Most undergraduates everywhere do most of their research through their library.

You have probably already had some training in how to use the AUN Library, but if you haven't used it much, you may have forgotten what to do. If you need help, go to a librarian and ask for it.

One of the key advantages of studying at AUN is access to the best e-library in Africa, and one of the leading e-libraries in the world. There are thousands of on-line resources that you can access. We would like to point out just two that will prove to be very valuable to you, as they will provide you with the information you need while helping you create an academic paper that is both acceptable and credible.

First we are going to take a closer look at only one of these: *Ebscore*, a database with 118,000 books, and more than 7,300 different academic journals.

Once you have entered the e-library with your number and password, you can go to academic search. You can designate that you only want to see books and full length journal articles. Before you do your search, you want to narrow the field just as you did while you were working on your topic. The topic “corruption” is too broad –there’s a lot of corruption in the world, and in print– so perhaps you think, “corruption in Nigeria.” That may still be too broad. So you might narrow it down even further to “political corruption in Nigeria.” Now you have a search that will show specific results that pertain to your topic. You will be surprised at how many things present themselves to you. You are on your way.

In addition to telling you what has been written, two wonderful things happen. First, when you get your list, on the left hand side of the screen, you will see a “citations” button. If you click on a particular article and then click on that, it will give you the option of saving all the bibliographic information in the citation style of your, or your instructor’s, choice. You can cut and paste that to a word document, and you have the citation for your bibliography. Then all you have to do is cut and paste so this bibliography is in alphabetical order (generally by author’s last name).

[We will get to “citation” and “bibliography” later. Both are required in formal papers, and this little trick is going to save you an enormous amount of time.]

After that, the database gives you the option of reading the article or saving it to your computer. Really, compared to going to old-fashioned card catalogs and then ordering books and journals to be brought to you, and then having to write down all the publication information, this is a modern miracle!

JSTOR has similar features and can also find both books and articles for you. Now all you have to do is skim them, deciding quickly which will be useful to your paper, which will be very important to you, and which can be discarded.

The diversity of information available is incredible – and you don't have to carry any books back from the library.

Think of research as a treasure hunt. You look everywhere for clues. If you are using one source, even if it doesn't give you what you are looking for, it may have a footnote or a link to some other information. Great. You found a clue. Maybe what you need is hidden there in this new article or book you never knew existed or were ignoring. Footnotes and bibliographies in your source materials are not annoyances: they are your allies, your friends, in this treasure hunt.

Here is the truth about research: probably nobody has written exactly what you are looking for. For example, they may have written about corruption and the constitution, but have they *proved* anything? So you are going to have to dig. The librarian can point to where digging is likely to pay off. Never be afraid to ask for help.

Good luck, and happy hunting.

Chapter 4

Coming up with a guiding question and thesis

Perhaps, right from the start, you knew just what you wanted to find out in this essay: you had a question, and you pretty well knew what the answer to that question would probably be. That's great. Now you can get on with it.

However, if you are assigned a paper such as the one we are pretending you will have to write, and you are still thrashing around for a good focus, let us introduce you to the idea of a *thesis*.

To review, what have you done so far? You have brainstormed to generate ideas. You have read some material about the subject and you narrowed down the focus of your initial assignment. You have given yourself a rough idea of what the paper will probably cover—Corruption and the Nigerian Constitution—and how the topic might be organized, in outline form. You have begun your investigation, your research. Because of what you have now learned through this research, you know a lot more about your topic than you did a week ago. You also see some dangers ahead, some things you probably *don't* want to discuss because they are too broad, or there doesn't look like there is much information available.

When you started, you hardly knew anything at all, not even enough to ask an interesting question. Now is the time to ask that question. But what question is your paper going to ask and answer?

Your paper needs a thesis.

That sounds frightening, but it isn't, really. A **“thesis question” is the question your paper is trying to answer; a thesis is your answer**, a conclusion you wish the reader to agree with when they come to the end of your paper. That sounds pretty simple; well, there is a little more to it.

You want your paper to be interesting. For an interesting paper, you need an interesting thesis, which means you have to ask an interesting question.

If you ask, “Does the Constitution mention anything specific about corruption?” well, that is not so interesting. Worse still, it isn’t enough to write a whole paper assignment about. So this would be a poor thesis question, and therefore a poor thesis. Nobody wants to read a boring paper, especially not your teacher. Try not to bore your teacher.

Here’s another suggestion for a thesis question: *Given political corruption, is the immunity clause in the Nigerian Constitution a good idea?* If you think that corruption is a serious problem, and you know that nobody can be prosecuted while in office, perhaps it is a bad idea. On the other hand, what’s to stop the unscrupulous from prosecuting people on false charges of corruption, just to get them out of office? So, it’s an interesting question and a quick search shows that there has been plenty written on the topic. Your research is going to be finding out the answer to your question. Thus your thesis might be –if you so choose– *“The immunity clause in the Nigerian constitution fosters corruption.”*

This is a thesis that you will have to discuss intelligently (drawing on scholarly research, not just your own ideas) and try to prove. It might be an interesting thesis both for you as the writer, and for the reader.

Or, of course, you could ask the same question and come up with a different thesis, such as, *“The immunity clause has not been proven to increase corruption in Nigeria.”* Or, how about, *“The immunity clause in the Nigerian constitution might protect criminals for a while, but it is worth the price in security against partisan political persecution.”* Do more reading, and see what seems the strongest position.

One of the advantages of your topic is that it is “researchable.” **Your thesis question needs to be researchable.**

It often happens that students are tempted to ask interesting questions that can only be speculative. There is no way to really research them. When you are given an assignment, it is important to remember this, and to avoid this trap. There is no point in asking a question where there is so little information that there is no hope of answering it in a convincing way.

You could have a thesis that said, “*God wants Nigeria to have this constitution and therefore it can’t be leading to corruption.*” We are not experts on God: perhaps this statement is even true. The problem is, it isn’t researchable—there is no way you could ever prove that it was true or false.

So what do you do next? Now you search –honestly and rigorously– for the information that will help you answer your question.

Sometimes when you ask a question, you get an unexpected and unwelcome answer. “No, the medical treatment didn’t work.” “No, the advertising campaign didn’t seem to increase sales.” “No, primary school children didn’t like the new textbook.” “No, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that the immunity clause fosters corruption.” If the evidence goes against your initial guess, then you change your thesis to say what the evidence suggests. You must never alter your evidence to try to prove your case. That is dishonest and unacceptable. If you did it in one of our classes, we would give you an “F.”

By the way, what we have suggested in this research agenda should not discourage you from reading and researching and outlining and writing all at the same time. We have broken these activities up and put them in one possible sequence just to show you how the process works. But in reality, you will be doing all of them, and we encourage you to start writing and revising early in the process, even as you continue your ‘treasure hunt’ for more information.

Of course, you can delay your writing until you think all of your research is completed. Many people do that. But if you start writing earlier, you will not be so rushed at the end, and the writing process itself will often point you to more research that you will need to do.

Chapter 5

Writing your first draft

When they start to write, most students think that they are now writing their final paper. But –as you will see– they are wrong.

They are now writing what is often called a “rough draft” or a “first draft.” **A first draft is a first attempt at writing a paper**, knowing that there is much work still to be done even after the draft has been written. We will lead you step by step through the process.

But first, we must digress. Now that you face a blank screen, now that actual writing has started, we must all face a bitter truth.

English is a very difficult language.

It is difficult to speak, and to read and write. It is difficult if you learned it as a small child at home in London or New York. It is even more difficult if it is your “second” language—not the language you spoke with your family at home, but something you had to learn at school in Kano, Abuja, or Lagos. It is difficult for everybody.

The spelling often doesn’t make any sense: “knight” is pronounced the same way as “night,” but “rough” is not pronounced at all like “through.” Sometimes English spelling is a nightmare.

English also has lots of rules, which people then go and break continually, especially when they write informally on the Internet.

It is important for you to remember for whom you are writing. In fact, nothing is *more* important when it comes to writing. **Always remember who your audience is.**

Writing a “tweet” to your best friend is entirely different from writing an email to your father. Writing to your father is not at all the same thing as writing a newspaper article. Newspaper articles are not “academic” articles, and are written very differently.

Writing at university, or writing professional books and papers at the university level, is the most formal English writing that there is. For this purpose, you should stick to all the rules. [This Manual, incidentally, is written in a style that is a bit less formal than ‘academic.’ The writers made this choice deliberately: the audience for the book is not other professional academics, but rather, non-professional AUN students who are looking for help. You are our audience.]

English is hard. We admit it. However, we can make it easier, and we can help you write it more correctly, and perhaps even with some style and panache. Academic writing does not have to be boring. Learning to write proper, well organized, and graceful English is one of the most important things you can, and should, achieve while you are at AUN.

Why? Why is it important to write well?

It is important to write well because when you leave university, you will have to write, no matter what profession you enter. If you write badly, people will think you don't know what you are talking about, that you are stupid, or that you are uneducated. Perhaps they will think all three! People will not understand you. Some university graduates have not gotten jobs, and have lost jobs, because their writing is bad. Some have not gotten promotions and raises because their writing is bad. To write well in the modern world is very important.

We once had a student –this is a true story– who returned to our US university a few years after graduating. He told us about his life:

Tom hadn't majored in business. Although he had never taken a single course in business, he got a job in a business after he graduated, worked hard, and started to rise in the company. He came back to tell us that he had just gotten a big promotion. He got it having successfully competed against other people in his company who had far more education in business –and with far more prestigious degrees– than he had.

He was elated. “I got the job!” he crowed. “Here I was competing with all these Harvard MBA's, and I beat them. I got the promotion.” We asked him how.

Well, it seems that everybody was asked to write a major report for the company, so they all did. But his was the only report that was well written, well organized, and convincing. “Just because I could write a decent report, they thought I was a genius!”

He was grateful that we had insisted that he learn how to write.

Here is a true sample of AUN student writing by an entering student:

I always walked with confidence wherever I go. I was not scared of anybody in school not even the big bullies. My body structure at that age was not huge but of tiny. I was good at fighting at fighting people and wasn't afraid of losing or winning and I hardly lose a fight. I was a talkative and that helped me a lot in dealing with people. I threatened anyone who dared to come near me with the intention of beating me with scary words.

If she doesn't improve her writing skills, her future will be bleak. She will not be coming back to AUN to crow about the promotion she just got.

Where can we start? Well, why don't you start? You tell us what all the problems in this little paragraph are. If you were talking with this student, what, specifically, would you tell her? Take your time. We'll wait... Jot down the notes here:

You should have caught that:

The tenses are distributed at random and the student doesn't know if she is in the present or the past; prepositions are misused; the writing was not proofread; there is a very confusing problem created by incorrect word order; she is wordy and uses pretentious words; there are two run-on sentences, and she seems unacquainted with the use of the comma.

Did you spot all that? If not, we think a review of Basic English would be helpful. We are sure it will help you to improve your own writing, and perhaps some day you will come back to Yola to brag of your success.

Chapter 6

Parts of Speech, revisited.

When you were a very small child, you started to talk. (Isn't it amazing to see such tiny humans chattering away? How do they do it? And in foreign languages, too.) Anyhow, surprisingly, you talked in complete sentences at a very young age. You picked up the rules of grammar all by yourself. You learned the parts of speech. Maybe it is time to review what you learned as a toddler.

You might have said something like: "*Umar and I walked slowly to the old market,*" not, "Omar market the walked I old slowly to."

Congratulations. Your sentence had a subject, a verb, and a complete thought, in the right order. It is perfect. This is better than any sentence in the student paragraph above. When you write your paper, remember this. Sentences are the building blocks of all writing. Good sentences are the basis of good writing.

1. Every sentence has a subject, a verb, and expresses a complete thought.

This means that a sentence has a noun or a pronoun (see below) that either does something, or has something done to it. In this case, there were two subjects, "Umar" (and) "I", and the action was "walked," which was the verb. If you had just said, "I walked" that would have been a complete sentence, too: there is a subject, a verb, and the thought is complete.

Here is another AUN student's writing:

Trades like sewing, art work and other things to do.

This is not a sentence. This is a sentence fragment.

It is a sentence fragment because there is no verb. According to the rule, if it doesn't have all three –subject, verb, and a complete thought– it is an incomplete sentence, or a "sentence fragment."

“Umar and I” is a sentence fragment, not a sentence. “To the old market” is a sentence fragment.

2. Don't write sentence fragments.

(When you become a better writer, you can bend rules sometimes, as we sometimes do in this book, but for now, obey them.)

In your little sentence –and you were only four years old at the time that you said it– you used: two nouns (one of them “a proper noun”), one pronoun, one verb, an adverb, a conjunction, a preposition, an adjective, and an article. You used every part of speech in the English language, and you used them correctly. Clearly, you were a brilliant child. Keep it up!

You can skip this section if you feel that you are already a wonderful writer, know all the basics, and could easily correct other student papers. Let's find out. Just to make sure, here is a little quiz.

Identify, in your “four-year-old you” sentence, the following parts of speech:

Verb: _____

Pronoun: _____

Proper noun: _____

Article: _____

Adverb: _____

Adjective: _____

Noun: _____

Conjunction: _____

Preposition: _____

(Use the following discussion to correct and grade this quiz.)

Can you define these parts of speech? Do you, in fact, know what you are talking about? Well, read on. It is important that you understand this. Why?

Knowing the parts of speech allows us to talk about improving your writing. It is basic vocabulary. You can't discuss football if you don't know what "goal" means. Therefore, you have to know what we mean if we say, for example, "You used the wrong preposition" (which people often do.)

3. A noun is a person, place, or thing.

In the sample sentence, there are two nouns: both "market" (a thing) and Umar (a person) are nouns. Sometimes nouns are abstract, too, like "loyalty" or "skill." Both "loyalty" and "skill" are things, and hence nouns.

A "**proper noun**" is a name of something, such as "Umar" or "Nigeria" or "AUN." These are formal names, and they are capitalized. You were already using formal nouns at age three.

4. A pronoun takes the place of a noun.

In your sentence, "I" was the pronoun: it took the place of your name. Other pronouns are: "we, you, he, she, his, it" and so on. They are very useful. Otherwise you would have to keep repeating the same name over and over again: "Umar left and Umar and Myriam walked slowly to Umar's house to say hello to Umar's mother." Whenever you use a pronoun, the reader must be able to identify what or who the pronoun stands for so you don't wind up with a sentence like: "Idris met Maryam and Aisha at college, and then married her." Married which one?

5. An article is a little word that precedes (introduces) a noun.

Many languages don't have articles, or have different ones. The French have four different words for "the" and you must use the right one. English is easier.

In English, the correct article makes a difference. "The market" is not the same thing as "a market." "The Market" refers to what is obviously a specific market, while "a market" could be any market. Changing an

article can change the meaning. The three common articles in English are “a,” “an,” and “the.”

6. An adjective modifies or describes a noun or pronoun.

What was the adjective in your sentence? “Old.” It told you something about the market (a noun); it described it.

7. A verb shows an action or state of being.

“Walked” was the verb here. That’s pretty simple. But what is a “state of being” verb?

Generally, in English, it is a form of the verb “to be.” So we could say that “Umar is young.” That is a complete sentence. Obviously “Umar” is the subject. In this case, however, he isn’t “doing” anything. He is “being” something. He is, in fact, “being” young. Therefore “is” is our “state of being verb” in this sentence. “Umar young,” does not have a verb: it is not a sentence.

8. An adverb modifies or describes what a verb is doing.

You can walk quickly, loudly, softly, often, happily, seldom, and so on. These are all adverbs, and they modify the verb “walk.” In your sentence, the adverb was “slowly.”

9. A Conjunction ties words and groups of words together.

The most common conjunctions are: “and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet.” “And” is pretty obvious. “And” linked me to Umar. The others work in similar ways. “Umar wanted to run, but [or “so” or “yet”] he couldn’t.” This ties together two clauses. Don’t worry: we’ll explain “clauses” later. You use them all the time, and you always have.

10. A Preposition links words by showing where, when, or direction.

In our case, Umar ran “to” the market, not “from” the market, or “around” the market, or “over” the market or “outside” the market. A preposition could also tell us when he did it, using words such as “before” or “until” or “since.” Prepositions are crucial, and using the wrong one in a sentence will confuse your reader. This often happens in student writing at AUN. These little words can cause endless trouble, so you will need to mind them. Never confuse your reader.

So there you have it. Whew! Oh! “Whew” is an **interjection**, as are “Yea!” “No!” “Oh!” and the like. It is our last part of speech. You should probably never use an interjection in a formal university paper. Save it for texting.

And with that, we have covered all the English parts of speech. Now we deal with putting them together in ways that are correct, make sense, and –with luck– have some flare.

Now we talk about how to write a good sentence.

Learn this, and you are way ahead of your competition.

Chapter 7

What a sentence is and isn't

Few can only be said with words from my experience in my Institution which had given me the opportunity to interact and relate with different people as it is obvious that the campus is not homogeneous but heterogeneous and as such my work has been charged with various responsibilities with regards to providing for every student on campus services which we have excellently delivered and has been our path for receiving several awards of excellence.

The foregoing is a piece of AUN student writing, slightly altered to protect the identity of the author.

Notice that it is all one sentence.

As a piece of English prose, it is dreadful. One of the reasons that it is so incoherent is that the author doesn't understand how to construct a good sentence.

Nobody is born knowing how to do this. He or she is not a stupid or wicked person. This student just needs some guidance. In this section you will learn how to not write sentences like the one above, a run-on "compound-complex" sentence that has crashed and burned, leaving only grammatical rubble behind.

First, please remember that we have already warned you about the dangers of "sentence fragments." For university writing, don't write sentence fragments. Your sentences must have a subject and a verb, and they must express complete thoughts. You can save sentence fragments for less formal writing (such as in this book, where we sometimes use them deliberately.)

You want to write good sentences. Good sentences are the bases of good papers. You would be surprised how few people can write them!

Good sentences don't all have to be "simple sentences," but simple sentences are fundamental, and a good place to start our discussion. The

student author above needs a lot of help in writing them. Perhaps you do, too.

1. A simple sentence

A “simple sentence” is one that has a subject, a verb, and is a complete thought.

You want to express a simple idea. “I walked slowly to the old market.” “I” is the subject. “Walked” is the verb. The idea is complete.

This simple idea might include two nouns, two subjects (called a *compound subject*, if you are curious), such as “Charity and I” or “the table and chair.” The point is, the subjects, whatever they are doing, they are doing it as a unit, one subject. So, while it is obvious that “I walked home” is a simple sentence, with one subject and one action, so is: “Charity and I will walk to the library.” It is a simple sentence because “Charity” plus “I” are treated as one unit. The same is true of: “The table and chair are in the other room.”

[“Charity walked home and I walked back,” or “The table is wooden but the chair is metal” would *not* be a simple sentences because they have two subjects doing two different things.]

A simple sentence can also have a *compound verb*, which means that the *actions* in the sentence happened together.

For example, we could write: “I ran and skipped home.” Running and skipping happened together, so it, too, is a simple sentence. “I skipped home and ate lunch,” is *not* a simple sentence because the two actions *aren’t* linked.

2. Compound Sentences

Not all sentences are “simple” sentences. There are also “compound” sentences and “complex” sentences, and even “compound-complex” sentences.

Since you write them all the time, you need to know how to write them correctly. Often, this is where students run in to problems. Caution: danger ahead.

A compound sentence is comprised of two or more independent sentences linked with conjunctions or punctuation. Each sentence could stand alone.

A group of words that could be a complete sentence but is, instead, just part of a bigger sentence, is called an **“independent clause.”** Here are some examples. Taken by themselves, they are sentences. Link them together and they are *independent clauses* in *compound sentences*.

Umar walked home.

I staggered back.

Ben studied hard.

Musa fetched the goat.

Clara wrote her paper.

Ibrahim kept silent.

Peace continued to chatter.

Umar walked home and I staggered back.

Ben studied hard but Musa fetched the goat.

Clara wrote her paper and Ibrahim kept silent yet Peace continued to chatter.

The various conjunctions (“and,” “but,” and “yet”) link the parts of these sentences together. All of them are compound sentences.

If you put many independent clauses together in a compound sentence, it can get quite complicated and lengthy. There is a danger here: it could run away with you.

“Peace continued to chatter and Ben studied hard, yet Ibrahim kept silent and Clara wrote her paper; Musa fetched the Goat and I staggered back.”

Please notice that you need to use conjunctions and sometimes punctuation to link these clauses. You can’t just staple them together as

in: “*Ben studied hard Musa fetched the goat.*” That would not be a proper sentence. It would be a run-on sentence, which we will discuss later.

Perhaps you can see how easy it would be to get in to trouble with compound sentences. You must always keep a leash on them. Often, it is better to cut them apart in to simple sentences.

3. A complex sentence

A complex sentence has an independent clause and at least one “dependent clause.”

For example, this sentence is “complex”: “*Umar walked home while I staggered back.*”

What? Isn’t this just a compound sentence? After all, two things are happening. There are two subjects –Umar and me– and there are two verbs–walked and staggered. Ah, but there are *not* two complete thoughts. There is only one (“Umar walked home”) plus something else. The ‘something else’ is a *dependent clause*.

What is a dependent clause? It is a clause with a subject and a verb, but a clause that doesn’t make complete sense all by itself. It could not be a sentence as it stands. It is a sentence fragment. It depends on the rest of the sentence. **A “dependent clause” needs an “independent” one to lean on, to depend on.**

“While I staggered back” is unfinished. You want to ask, “And what? What happened while you staggered back?” This clause doesn’t tell you. That’s why it is called a “dependent clause.”

While you could walk into a room and shout to friends, “Ibrahim kept silent” and it would make perfect sense, you couldn’t say, “While I staggered back.” Something is missing.

So, if you have a sentence with both kinds of clauses, independent and dependent, it is a complex sentence.

These, too, can easily run away from you. You must exercise some discipline. Even quite correct complex sentences can get confusing.

The student, who came from Lagos, often flying the day before class started, was, as one might expect, frequently –although apologetically– delayed.

Compound sentences can be very tricky and we advise caution when writing them.

4. Compound-complex sentences

You can complicate things still more by creating a compound–complex sentence. This is what the unfortunate author of our “Few can only be said...” sample sentence tried, so disastrously, to do. He failed.

Compound–complex sentences are a bit like wild horses. They are dangerous. If you don’t have a lot of experience even riding tame horses, a wild horse is a very bad idea. The same is true of writing a compound–complex sentence; unless you are very sure of what you are doing, you would do well to avoid them.

Here is a compound–complex sentence using the same clauses from above.

While Musa fetched the goat and Umar walked home, I staggered back to find that although Peace continued to chatter, Ibrahim kept silent as Ben studied hard and Clara wrote her paper.

Any compound–complex sentence has two or more independent clauses. This sample has 4. A compound sentence also has at least one dependent clause (this has 3.) This sentence required two commas, as well as various conjunctions and prepositions. Any student tempted to write such a sentence probably shouldn’t. It would be better to break it up.

Good sentences can be simple, compound, complex, or compound–complex. Many students seem to want to write very long and very complicated sentences, apparently on the theory that this is what

professors want. They are mistaken. It is a bad idea. Such sentences often break free of students and plunge over cliffs.

Consider this sentence:

She came to AUN; because her parents wanted her to attend an American style university even though she wanted to be near her boyfriend; who was going to go to school in Kano which if you don't know is in the far north of Nigeria far from Yola; which is a little Cooler probably but still pretty Hot we all know how Hot Yola can be, and Far from Kano especially; if you drive over the Poor roads, who wants to drive that far except maybe you could hire a driver but it would be bumpy no matter what, so you should Fly even if it costs a lot of Money; and your parents can give you some.

This is a very bad sentence, an awful sentence. It is called a “**run-on**” sentence. Do not write sentences like this. Here is your first defense against ever writing such a terrible sentence:

If your sentence goes on for more than two or three lines, break it up. Look for clauses with subjects and verbs, and turn them into complete sentences. Short sentences are fine.

While you are at it, stop throwing semicolons and capital letters around like so much confetti. *Every* semicolon used in this sample sentence is incorrect, and there are 7 capital letters that shouldn't be there either, while commas are in short supply. Did you spot all these mistakes?

Many AUN students seem strangely drawn to compound-complex sentences, but they are dangerous and difficult beasts—the Black Mambas of student writing. A long and complex sentence does not make you sound smarter. A complex sentence that is out of control and badly punctuated—such as the one above—is a writing horror. Such a sentence is like a car that has lost its breaks, and for the writer, just as dangerous. **Don't write run-on sentences.**

The modern style is to write shorter, simpler sentences. It is what the best writers tend to do now. It is not the only thing good writers do, of

course. Once you gain confidence, and are well grounded in grammar, tenses, and usage, you can write longer sentences with ease and style, thus enabling you to **vary the lengths of your sentences**. It keeps your writing lively. Mastering the simple sentence, however, is the first step. Then work your way up.

Wonderful Nigerian writers (and Nigeria has produced some of the finest writers in the modern English-speaking world) are often happy to write simple sentences. You should be, too. Simple sentences are easier to control. They don't run away with you. You say what you have to say and are finished, just as we are now finished talking about sentences. Go forth and write some good ones.

Next, we turn our attention to another very serious challenge: the proper and consistent use of tenses.

Chapter 8

Getting your tenses right

Does anybody know what time it is?

Tenses are about time: now, then, the future. How many times –tenses– are there in English? Take a guess. Chinese students studying English (there are more people learning English today in China, where it is taught from grade one on up, than live in England) are taught that there are 16 English tenses. If you ask a German English student, you may hear that there are 18. By some counts, there are 30. Experts don't agree with each other on this. In any case, there are a lot of tenses. This is a big problem for many students.

When you write verbs in English you have to locate your action in time.

Is it happening right now? Is it about to happen in the future? Did it happen once in the past, or repeatedly in the past? Did it start in the past and continues now? All these times, and so many more, are indicated by verb tenses, and you have to know “when” you are talking about when you write.

I am; I was; I will be; I have been; I had been; I would have been; I will have been...

It's pretty confusing.

Actually, you already know a lot of tenses, and how to use them. Seventy percent of English conversation happens in the “present progressive,” and therefore you are already using one of the fancy forms and didn't even know it.

“What are you doing?” “I'm reading this stupid Little Book.” *That's present progressive*. So is “I am going” and “It is raining” and “Abdul is leaving.”

So, what's the problem? Well, students know some tenses, but don't know most. When they write, they often don't seem to know "when" they are. This confuses the reader.

Of course, almost nobody knows the names of all the tenses, and, honestly, who needs to? You can have a full and happy life without knowing what the "future perfect progressive" is [which, by the way, is a sentence like this one: "He will have been working 6 hours."]

This isn't the time and place for us to teach you the other 28 tenses, even if we could remember the names of them all, which we can't. We can, however, give you a little help in this regard, a helpful hint or two based on the sorts of problems that crop up in AUN student writing.

First, you have to know what time it is. Students often don't. Consider the following AUN student sentence:

"I always walked with confidence wherever I go."

This student is time traveling. Students are often time travelers, wandering around in many times at once. This does not make for good writing. "Walked" is in the past. "Go" is in the present. Which is it to be? The reader becomes dizzy. A dizzy professor is not a happy professor. The solution is to find a time and stay there: either "I always walked with confidence wherever I went," or "I always walk with confidence wherever I go."

As another example, a student might write: *"He was going to the market and will have been late when she used to arrive just as he comes in."* What?

Let's try that one again.

"He went to the market and was late when she arrived just as he came in."
All one tense makes a difference, doesn't it?

Your first tense rule has to be: **Pay attention to what time you are in, and stay there.** If something happened in the past, stay in the past.

If something will happen, or might happen, in the future, stay there. You will not impress your reader by using fancy tenses where they don't belong.

"Abuja was created because leaders felt that Lagos was too crowded." Not, *"Abuja was created because leaders feel that Lagos will be too crowded."*

Yes, of course there *will* be sentences where times *will* change. But that will happen less often than you might imagine. If you *go* back over a sentence you *are* writing and find that you *have used* more than one tense, you *will* need to be quite certain that you *meant* to time travel, as we just *did* in this sentence.

Then you will have to wrestle with tenses, and you should seek help if you need it, perhaps at the Writing Center.

We firmly believe this: we learn to write by writing. Then we get feedback from people who know and write English well. Bit by bit, error by corrected error, we perfect our skills.

You will not learn all the correct tenses all at once. What will happen is that as your mistakes are pointed out, you get more confident about correcting them, and learning proper usage. This is how we learn.

Have a little courage. Keep writing, keep being willing to make mistakes and *have them pointed out*, and try not to make the same mistake again. This is how you first learned to talk, and it worked then. This is how you will learn to write formal English in a more correct and graceful way.

It will work as you learn 10, 20, or 30 English tenses –if there are indeed 30– even if, like us, you never know or care what they are all called.

Chapter 9

What is a paragraph and why?

You write in paragraphs. But why?

When you write, you are trying to communicate something, and to communicate it clearly and precisely. You want to do whatever you can to help your reader understand what is in your mind. That is why we use paragraphs.

A paragraph is just a grouping of sentences into coherent blocks.

When a reader sees a paragraph, she can say to herself, “OK, here is one idea; the next paragraph will be another idea.”

The trick to writing a good paragraph is usually found in the first sentence, the topic sentence. A topic sentence tells the reader what the writer will talk about in the paragraph. Then you do that –you write about that idea– and you don’t start the next idea until another paragraph. It is really pretty simple. If any sentence doesn’t help explain your topic sentence, it doesn’t belong in that paragraph, it belongs in a different one.

There are a few tricks writers use to keep their readers interested, keep them reading, and shaping paragraphs is one of them.

One obvious, but useful, trick is to vary the length of your paragraphs, making them short, medium, or long, and mixing them up on the page.

More work! Why would anyone bother to do this? It has to do with appealing to the eye, making the page of text, whether on a computer screen, or on a sheet of paper, more interesting, more attractive. This is why we also suggested that you vary the length of your sentences. You want to invite your reader to join you. It’s less boring.

Paragraphs also add intrinsic rhythm to writing. Long, descriptive paragraphs slow the reader down, while short paragraphs make the reader move faster through the words. Good paragraphs enhance your style.

What are some of the problems that students run into when they write paragraphs?

One is writing many paragraphs only one sentence long.

What is the problem with this?

Well, it looks funny, and disjointed.

It looks like “tweeting” or “texting.”

It doesn’t look serious.

It doesn’t look inviting.

It is like making somebody hop down a street, instead of walk.

Don’t do it.

The other problem students have, perhaps more commonly, is just the opposite. It is writing paragraphs that are just too long. Maybe there is no such thing as an ideal length for a paragraph, and it is certainly true that different people have different tastes. But it is also true that people are creatures of habit. Perhaps in the 19th century, before the age of television and computers, of texting and tweeting, people simply had more patience when they read, and a longer attention span. Now, however, we are used to getting our information in fairly short bursts. We read like sprinters, not like long distance runners. Not for us the prose of somebody like Marcel Proust, whose paragraphs could go on for pages. Rare today is the reader who wants to be confronted with huge blocks of print, endless strings of words and sentences. In fact, if you saw a book with only one paragraph page after page, you probably wouldn’t even read it, no matter how good it was. To modern eyes, it just looks like too much work. While it might not actually have more words than four or five separate paragraphs, it looks like more to the eye, and the eye and brain often rebel. As a matter of fact, even though this is not a terribly long paragraph, you yourself are probably thinking, enough! Get on with it. Get to the next paragraph. Remember this when you are writing. If, when you look at your page, you see a very big paragraph, look for ways to split it up.

Did you actually read the paragraph above?

So that’s it: vary the length of your paragraphs, have a topic sentence, and stick to the point.

Chapter 10

Common errors

Over the years, we have noticed that many students at AUN make similar errors. This is not strange.

In every country, the way people talk is not the same way that they write. Spoken language, everywhere, is less formal –and less correct– than written language. This is true in America, in India, in England and Rwanda and Brazil.

Many of the problems that students face in writing formal English come from the fact that what is OK to say is not OK to write –at least not to write in a formal academic setting. People say “cuz” at AUN, for example. But you can’t write “cuz” because there is no such recognized English word. You write “because.” You are not emailing or texting your friends. You are writing a university paper for a professor. By the way, in a university paper, “OK” is out as well.

The following chapter is designed to help you avoid some of the most common errors we see in AUN writing. You might make some of these errors, many of them, or none of them. Take a look at the list and see. If you spot one of your problems (even a problem you didn’t know you had) then fix it. We will show you how. Your papers will be better. Your grades will be higher.

THE USE OF CAPITAL LETTERS

Capital letters seem to cause confusion. You can’t just throw them around like so many kola nuts. Let’s clear this up.

Capital letters should appear in several defined contexts, and not otherwise. Of course, use a capital to start all sentences; everybody knows that. Capitals are also used for titles that come before a name, such as Mr., or Senator, or Prof.

A capital also starts quotes like this: “Within quotation marks, capitalize the first word unless the quote is only of a phrase or a partial sentence, in which case you should put... or... before the first word to indicate that it you aren’t quoting everything that was said.”

You should also capitalize all “proper nouns,” i.e. nouns that are formal names such as American University of Nigeria, or Yola, or Business Administration (when it is the name of a formal discipline), or Myriam.

You should **not** capitalize if the word isn’t a formal name. Thus, The American University of Nigeria is a university; Professor Osuagwu is a professor; President Ensign is a university president; in Economics 101 you study economics. Capital letters should not appear at random. They are not used to show that you think something is good, or important, or just because you like it.

“FATEFUL” NOT “FAITHFUL.”

If a teacher makes a correction in your word use, and you don’t understand why, look it up. Your computer can give you the answer in almost no time. Get used to using it that way. You should not make the same mistake twice.

For some reason, many AUN students write “faithful”, which means something like “loyal,” when they mean “fateful,” which means “portentous.” Don’t do this.

“THEIR” ISN’T “THERE”

This is a common mistake. You need to pay attention, whenever you write one of these two words, that you are writing the correct one. If you are writing quickly, it is easy to slip –everybody does. Your “grammar” tool on the computer will often catch the mistake for you, but you need to be alert.

ON THE USE OF “WHO”, NOT “THAT” OR “WHICH.”

People are not things. People are people. The proper pronoun to use when writing about them is “who”, not “that.” Thus: “The student *that* went to AUN” is incorrect; it should be, “the student *who* went to AUN.”

PITY THE POOR SEMICOLON

Semicolons are very overused in writing at AUN. They should appear rarely. Using a semicolon doesn't make you look smarter, especially if you misuse it. When the urge to use a semicolon hits you, try to resist.

A semicolon is like a very strong comma. It separates two independent clauses –remember them? For this purpose, you should ordinarily use a comma. You use a semicolon only when you want to show that the two ideas in the two clauses are so strong that they could very well be two distinct sentences; you have chosen to bind them together by a semicolon for reasons of style.

A semicolon is also used like a strong comma if you have a complicated list and you don't want commas all over the place like so many bugs on your paper or screen. Consider the following example. "He visited: Yola, Adamawa State; Abuja, Federal Capital Territory; Jos, Plateau State; Calabar, Cross River State, and Benin City, Edo State."

A semicolon is never used to introduce a quote or a list. Use a colon for that.

IN SPEAKING OF TIME, "BY" IS NOT "AT"

If you write, "He will arrive by noon," you are saying that he will arrive some time *before* noon, perhaps at noon at the very latest. If you mean to say that he will arrive precisely at noon, then you must use "at,": using "by" is both incorrect and misleading. This is a case where the proper preposition is vital.

Here is another example. If your teacher tells you that you can turn in a late paper "by next semester" she is saying that you have to get it to her before next semester begins. "By" and "at" do not mean the same thing. "By" means "prior to."

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

Many languages don't require articles. "A book" is simply "book." "The cafeteria" is just "cafeteria." Not so, English.

Nouns in English usually require articles: an indefinite article –"a" or "an"– tells you that no special, no particular, item is being talked about.

“Go to a classroom” means just any classroom. “Go to the classroom” means you have a particular one in mind. “Go to classroom” isn’t proper English at all and should never be written.

PREFER “WILL” TO “WOULD”

For reasons shrouded in mystery, many people at AUN say and write “would” when they should be saying and writing “will.” It is a tense problem.

If you want to indicate that something is going to happen in the future, use “will.” It denotes the future tense. “I will leave.” “They will certainly hate it.” “She will say no.”

“Would” implies conditionality. It implies the word “if” –either as part of the sentence, or left unspoken. Thus, “I would leave if only there were a car.” “They would certainly hate it if they knew.” “She would say no if we asked her.”

A good rule of thumb is this: when you want to write the word “would”, first ask yourself: “Is there any “if” involved?” If not, chances are you want the word “will” instead.

CLOSE YOUR PARENTHESES

There are four different ways to punctuate a parenthetical word or group of words in a sentence. In all four cases, the marks come in pairs. So (**I pause to tell you**) you probably wouldn’t leave out the second parenthetical mark in *this* sentence. Nor would you –**in all probability**– leave out the second dash. The same must be true, **it follows**, of the second comma in this sentence [**it really should go without saying.**] And now you have seen all four in action.

A very common error in writing is to leave out the second comma. Pay attention. **The second comma is as important as the second), –, and].**

The four also come in different strengths, from weakest to strongest. The weakest is the comma, then comes the dash, then the parenthesis, and finally the bracket. It all depends on how much of a break, a pause (like that one), in the sentence you want to make.

GENDER MATTERS

Many languages don't distinguish between male and female when using a pronoun. In effect, everybody becomes an "it." Other languages, such as French, give gender to everything –tables, chairs, books, computers. English falls in the middle.

When writing about people, English is very serious about gender. If talking about a man, you *must* use "he" and "his" and "him." A woman *requires* "she" and "hers" and "her." To get this wrong in English is a big error and makes you sound illiterate.

Objects, usually, just take "it" and "its."

THE PARTS OF YOUR SENTENCES OUGHT TO AGREE

If your subject is plural (for example, goats) then the verb has to be plural too—*run*. Under no circumstances should "the goats runs." Nor should "the goat run."

Remember "Taking cigarettes with the knowledge of its harm..."? One of the problems here is that the author didn't pay attention to agreement. "Cigarettes" is plural, "its" is singular; "...cigarettes with the knowledge of *their* harm..." is correct.

There is no easy cure for this problem (and it is a big one) except to remain alert: are you writing about one thing, or more than one thing. Decide. Then make everything else in the sentence –verbs and pronouns– match.

"VAST" AND "AWESOME" AND "BRILLIANT" USUALLY AREN'T

The universe is "vast." The Pacific Ocean is "vast." Both are also "awesome." Very little else is. Yes, occasionally one can say that someone's knowledge is "vast." But on the whole, this word is over-used at AUN, and "awesome" should be reserved for things that truly create "awe" in the observer. "Brilliant" is similarly over—and incorrectly used. What is fine when chatting to friends in the Cafeteria is not necessarily fine in an academic paper. When tempted to use any of these words, think again.

Chapter 11

Documenting your sources and avoiding plagiarism

Now we come to a very important topic. This could make or break your paper—or even fail you in the course.

You have done research, you are writing your draft. You are using this little book to remind you of how to write better. You are looking at the notes you have taken from your library and other research –the information and the direct quotes.

When you do research, it is expected that you will draw on the works of other people. This is fine. It is not cheating. It is research.

What *is* cheating is not telling your reader where you got the information, and –worse still– using someone else’s words and pretending that they are you own. This is worse than cheating. It is stealing. It is stealing someone else’s work. In a university this is one of the very worst sins you can commit. It is called “**plagiarism.**”

People have been expelled from university for plagiarism; professors have lost their jobs and careers for plagiarism. It is very serious.

The odd thing about “plagiarism” is that it is so unnecessary. It is unnecessary because all you have to do, if you want to use someone else’s information, or to quote what they have written, is to tell the reader that that is what you are doing.

How do we do this? We cite our sources. This chapter will tell you how.

First, you need to distinguish “direct” from “indirect” quoting.

Direct quoting is when you use the actual words of some author whose work you have consulted. It is perfectly fine, normal, and acceptable to do this. Go ahead.

But do so sparingly. Instructors do not want to receive a paper that is nothing but pages of long quotes. Learn to paraphrase and selectively use long quotes. Long quotes should be used in cases where the words are so well done you could not possibly hope to write them any better, or when you are dealing with a controversial subject and you want to make it perfectly clear that the opinion is that of the source –not yourself.

For example, if you want to cite this book for some other purpose, and you want to use our words, be our guest. But you must put our words into quotation marks with a “citation” to tell the reader that the words came from us, like this:

According to Smith and Devitt, “Direct quoting is when you use the actual words of some author whose work you have consulted.” (1)

Then, either right then and there, or in a footnote (that’s a note at the bottom of a page) or in an endnote (a note at the end of a chapter in a book, the book itself, or at the end of a paper or essay) you tell the reader that note (1) was from Smith and Devitt, A Little Book on Writing a Paper at AUN on page whatever, etc. Your information could come from a book, a journal or newspaper article, a website, and so on. **If you quote, no matter the source, use quotation marks and cite the source.**

There are different formats for doing this, citing a source –very formal rules– and different fields of study insist on different rules that you must follow. “Must follow” means “must follow.” You don’t get to make up your own rules.

Yes, it makes the world more complicated and difficult and it is silly. Why isn’t there just one way for everybody? Who knows? We are not in charge of the world; we’re just telling you how it is.

Find out from your teachers which style of citation they want you to use, and look that style up. You can use these links to the most commonly used systems:

APA: <https://lib.calpoly.edu/research/citations/apa.html>

MLA: <https://lib.calpoly.edu/research/citationa/mla.html>

Chicago: www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

It may be annoying but it is not all that difficult. Your computer will do much of the work for you, as you shall see.

You also need to use this system of citation if you draw information from a source but *don't* quote it word-for-word. This is called “**indirect quoting.**” If you find useful information you want to use, show where it came from. If you find a good idea, but would rather put it in your own words, cite that as well. For example, “Plagiarism has gotten both students and faculty members into a lot of trouble, according to Smith and Devitt. (2)”

You don't have to cite common knowledge, such as *Nigeria's constitution has changed over the years* or *Yola is home to the American University of Nigeria*. What you need to cite is information that is not common knowledge, or controversial, information that might cause your teacher to think: “Hmmm, I wonder where she read that? Did she just make that up?” [Hint: you never want your teacher to think you are just making stuff up. And while we're at it, remember: don't make things up.]

So you cite your source: tell your teacher where you found this information, and where he or she can find it, too. Problem solved. **Plagiarism is completely unnecessary, as well as wrong.**

Your teacher may want you to include a bibliography at the end of your paper, though many will not. **A bibliography is a list of all the sources you actually used—not just looked at—whether you quoted from them or not.** Each set of citation rules comes with its own rules for how to write a bibliography. Once again, this is an annoying but manageable problem.

Chapter 12

Proofreading your draft

OK. You have written your paper, including citations and, if required, a bibliography. It might be only a one or two page opinion paper, or it might be a 20-page term paper in your senior year, but it at last is written.

Done, right? No.

You have *not* written your final paper. You have written a draft. Consider it a good first attempt.

Now, we have several suggestions for you on how to improve this draft as you transform it into a polished paper which, we hope, will earn you an A and the love of your peers and countrymen. Well, an A, anyhow.

First, **all word processing programs have “tools” that allow you to check both your spelling and your grammar. Use them.** If you don't know how, ask. That goes for page formatting as well.

For some reason, students are often afraid to ask for help. Perhaps they think it will make them look stupid. The reverse is true. The entire purpose of a university is to learn what we do not yet know. That is what faculty research is. That is what student learning is. It is often said: “The only stupid question is the question you do not ask.” This is true, and so we repeat, **ask for the help you need.** This is what the faculty and staff are paid for.

There is no excuse for turning in a paper with a single word misspelled. **Always use spellcheck.** Of course, the computer may not be able to alert you to the fact that you have written “to” when you should have written “too” or even “two,” so stay alert. It is your grade at stake, and your computer doesn't really care about your grade.

Grammar is a bit trickier than spelling. The computer tool is very useful, to be sure. It is especially useful when it tells you why you might be in error –for example, when it explains when to use “which” and when to use “that.” However, the sad truth is that the computer is not always right. Bad computer! Like people, no computer program is perfect. So while it is very helpful, if the computer tells you to do something that you believe is incorrect –and it happens– don’t take its word for it: check elsewhere.

All done now? No, not yet.

Now we suggest that you **print out a copy of the paper and then go away.**

Give yourself enough time –a few hours at least, though though overnight would be better– to get some distance from it. We are willing to bet that when you come back to your paper with fresh eyes, you will see all sorts of errors (such as the repeat of “though” above) and things that could use improvement.

From long years of experience, trust us when we tell you that no matter what you have written, **there is always room for improvement. Always.**

Part of it is just the time away from the writing. Part of it is the fact that we often spot things on paper that we overlook on the computer. We don’t know why. Do both and you will be a double winner. Then make those changes.

Is there anything else you can do? Yes.

Have somebody whose judgment you trust read your draft and tell you what he or she think and make suggestions for change –though perhaps you had better check with your teacher to make sure that this is all right. (Some teachers will think this is a good idea; other teachers will tell you not to do it. In either case, follow their rules: it is their course and they give the grades.)

This whole revision process –revision really means to look at again– can go on as often as you have the time in which to do it, which is a good reason not to wait until the last minute to write your draft. **The earlier you get a first draft written, the more time for revision** and the better your end product will almost certainly be, and the higher your grade.

You now have in your hands a “final draft.”

Congratulations! You have completed –almost completed– your paper. There is one more step.

Chapter 13

A digression on Turnitin

AUN requires that you and your teacher use *Turnitin* for all written paper assignments.

TurnItIn is an anti-plagiarism program used extensively in Europe and the United States. When papers are submitted to *TurnItIn*, they are automatically filed and checked against all of the papers that have ever been filed with the program from all over the world since its inception more than a decade ago. The site also does a huge Internet search of all the words in submitted papers against hundreds of thousands –maybe millions– of Internet sets and data bases.

If you have copied and pasted lines from any source that *Turnitin* finds (journal articles, books, websites, newspapers, other students' papers, etc.) those lines will be highlighted in red in the version your instructors sees, and *Turnitin* will tell your professor just where you got it.

If you just cut and paste a big chunk of text, or even a few lines, and pretend that you wrote it –a few lines of text from anywhere on the Internet, essentially– your teacher will know it. He or she will not be happy unless you cite your source.

The site will also tell your teacher exactly how much of your total paper was plagiarized. It calculates percentages! 6%. 17%. 22%. 96%. In short, if you try to steal something and not give a proper citation, you will get caught. That is the whole purpose of *Turnitin*, and it works.

An all-too-common practice of beginning students is just to copy and paste and then note the author. This isn't good enough. You have to put quotes in quotation marks, and you have to follow the proper rules of citation when directly or indirectly quoting. This is non-negotiable. *Turnitin* plays by precise rules and so must you. This will tell *Turnitin* that you are giving credit where it is due, and not trying to cheat.

For instance, **a long quote, more than three lines, should be single-spaced (remember, your paper will be typed double spaced at AUN and at most universities) and the margins of both sides of the paper should be brought in, just like this paragraph.** This way, both *Turnitin* and your instructor know it is a direct quote and not stealing.

Before you submit a paper to *Turnitin*, you have to “join it” as a student. This is easy. You google *Turnitin* and go to its main website. It will ask you to join as a student, and all it asks for is an e-mail and a password.

In class, your instructor will give you the class number and password (so you must first join the site, then join the class). This costs students nothing, and once a member, your *Turnitin* membership will go with you from school to school if you go on to graduate study.

Instructors have to get the school’s password from the Assistant Deans. They give students the title that the assignment will be filed under, and the deadline for filing the paper’s “due-date.” Students may not file papers after the deadline, and this also shows up on the master sheet the instructor finds when he pulls up the assignment. The *Turnitin* Program will not accept papers after the deadline your instructor sets, and then he or she is obligated by AUN policy not to accept your paper.

Faculty members may also assign revision papers (so the writing in the first paper is not counted as plagiarism), can print papers from *Turnitin*, and can respond to the papers on the site itself. However, many instructors prefer you give copies both to *Turnitin* and a hard copy to directly to them. This is so they can write comments right on the paper. In either case, *Turnitin* will be required.

Chapter 14

On style

So far, our advice has been written so that you can more easily write competent, workmanlike papers. No matter what your current English skills are, if you take our suggestions seriously, if you continue to write and swallow your pride to get feedback, courageously facing constructive criticism [we know: nobody likes criticism, especially of his writing] and making the suggested changes, then you will write better, clearer, more grammatical English. That is our promise to you.

It is a big investment in your future, and in your future success in life.

Nobody is born a good writer. The more you write, and the more seriously you apply yourself to writing, the better writer you will become.

We're not stupid. We know that many students find every opportunity they can to avoid writing, and some even avoid courses that ask for papers. This is probably the most serious mistake you can make as a university student.

It is at university that you can practice.

It is at university that you can get feedback, not the sack.

It is at university that you can get help and advice and encouragement, not a tongue-lashing from your boss. Don't waste this opportunity to develop an essential skill.

Most people in Nigeria do not grow up speaking English, but English is the national language of Nigeria and it is the international language of choice. University students are learning English in China and Brazil, in Japan and Sweden and Argentina, places where English is not their national language. In the future, you will be competing against them.

As to writing with style, as opposed to writing correctly, here we enter far more subjective territory. Even your authors disagree with one another sometimes, one loathing the semicolon, the other being rather fond of it, for example. And don't get us started on the creative use of sentence fragments, or starting sentences with conjunctions, as this one just did.

However, there are some general observations that we can both agree on.

First, good writing is straightforward. It uses words as precisely as possible to convey meaning. You must never –let us repeat that– **never use a fancy word just to try to impress the reader with how smart you are. It never works.** This is a very serious problem among students. Of course there is a place for 50,000 Naira words, such as “erudite” and “equanimity,” but only if they are truly needed.

Good writing never uses a complicated sentence if a simple sentence will do the job as well. Writing to impress almost always backfires. It is like tying a bow on the head of a baboon.

Good writing is succinct. It never uses 7 words when 6 words will do the job. Five would be better still. Our motto is:

PRUNE YOUR PROSE

Here is an example, again from AUN student writing:

Laptops have programmes which make businesses have ease in their day to day running of their business.

Here's a little test. Re-write this sentence (which has 17 words) with the same information, but in the fewest words you can. How many words can you chop off? Two, three? Five? Ten? We can prune this wordy sentence down to just four words and still convey the same meaning.

Good writing is usually active, not passive. That is, write: “I am going to the market,” not “the market is being gone to by me.” OK, you're

right: nobody would write that. But you might write, “The papers were returned,” rather than “He returned the papers.” The second version is usually better, because it is more vigorous and direct. This is the difference between the “active voice” and the “passive voice.”

Good writing usually sounds good. Try this trick: **after you have written something, read it aloud.** Rare is the run-on sentence (a very big problem in student writing) than can survive being spoken aloud. If you run out of breath, the sentence is generally too long, unless you are a very good writer with much experience. Read what you have written aloud to somebody else. If it doesn’t make sense to them, it probably doesn’t make sense; if it sounds awkward to them, it probably is awkward. If it confuses them, it’s confusing.

Here is another trick that good writers use: **be brutal.** Sometimes a sentence can’t be fixed. Sometimes a paragraph can’t be fixed. If this is the case, it will save you time and heartache just to kill it and start over, rather than waste your time trying to salvage a mess.

Another way to improve your writing is to improve what you read. **To write well, read well.** Nigeria has produced some of the greatest writers of English in the modern world. Authors such as Achebe, Soyinka, Adichie, and Okri are read and admired wherever great modern writers are read.

Reading good authors, Nigerian and others, is almost magical in the way that reading good prose can impact your own style and ability.

If *writing* is crucial to developing English competency, *reading* great English writing is crucial developing ease and style. Among other things, it will help you build your vocabulary. You always need to know more English words: you can’t build a house if you don’t have the right building blocks.

Good writing, like bad writing, seems almost contagious. We unconsciously imitate. If you read nothing but ‘tweets’ and trash, your writing will come to sound like ‘tweets’ and trash. **Read that which is worthy of imitation.**

We close by giving you a gift for all of your hard work. It is a gift from us, and from one of Nigeria's gifts to the world, Ben Okri.

English style doesn't get any better:

"There was not one among us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigors of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see." (Okri, Ben. The Famished Road. New York: Anchor Books, 1993. Print. P.3)

Here is a very great Nigerian author writing in his language, your language. Read him and people like him; feel your own style grow in confidence and grace. Don't waste this time and opportunity at AUN. Become the writer you can be.

Chapter 15

Afterward on the Learning Center

AUN has a resource that is available to the entire AUN community: the Learning Center, located in the Library. Trained tutors are available to guide you through your paper, to help you find and correct mistakes, and to help make sure that your citations and bibliography are in order. Then can also help you master and tame an unruly computer. Unless you write as well as Adichie and Okri, it is the foolish AUN student indeed who never uses the Learning Center.

Appendix I

You and your computer looking good

Some teachers are actually people, and they react to how papers look. Your computer can work for you, making your papers look good.

First, pull up Microsoft Word. Depending on which version you have (and having Microsoft Word is pretty much a necessity in academic life) you will have menu options on top of the screen.

Put your name, number, class name, and date in the upper left hand margin of your paper. Then

- 1) Click on view, then click on ruler,
- 2) Set the ruler with a five space 'indent,'
- 3) Click on 'paragraph', and set the 'double space' bar, and then click the button that says, "don't put space between paragraphs."

You must also choose a font size. 12-14 is an appropriate size. Students sometimes think, wrongly, that if they use a bigger font, they can type fewer words, and a 5-page paper becomes, as if by magic, only 3 or 4 pages of copy.

Faculty members, who have already seen every trick, know this one. You will achieve nothing except your teacher's enmity and a poorer grade.

4) As to font style, choose the conventional. It is easier to read. **This, on the other hand, is not.** Nor is this. Nor this. And certainly not this. You don't want your **teacher** annoyed *with* **YOU** because of *your* font **choice**.

Times New Roman 12 point is the most common and accepted style. And don't justify your pages ("justify" means make your paper margin all straight, like the left hand margins of this book) unless specifically asked to. Justify left, ragged right is the easiest style of paper to read.

Now you are ready to write.

A nice looking paper will impress most teachers, and the computer can help you create a nice looking paper. Students should familiarize themselves with the functions of their word-processing program and rely on it to make sure their endeavors are academically acceptable.

Papers should be doubled spaced –not single, not triple– so the instructor can make notes concerning grammar, word selection, or underline important elements. The computer will also point out common spelling mistakes, but will not differentiate between words like "write" "right" and "rite."

[Be aware that different teachers *may* require different formatting. Some teachers will ask you to single space with a space between the paragraphs, but no indent. Some instructors will require and indent at the beginning of each paragraph.]

In research papers, the computer offers a bevy of goodies: students need only to access the pull down menu under "references," or "insert." The computer will help you place footnotes if they are required.

Your instructors should inform you of which citation style they want you to use. The common ones are MLA, APA, and Chicago. Google them to see examples.

The computer will actually help you format a bibliography and organize sources, as will the e-library, as we noted in the “Research” chapter.

Computers also facilitate editing, revision and restructuring. As the student is typing, the computer points out misspelled words by (a left click on the underlined word will generate spelling options.) In fact, with some simple words, the computer does “auto-correct,” and does the work of correcting your spelling for you. Good computer! Just make sure that the computer change is the one you want to make.

Using the “cut and paste” function, students can re-arrange their papers, moving words, or phrases, or sentences, or paragraphs, or even big sections around at will.

However, if students use this function to cut and paste essays or information from the Internet, and fail to notify the reader of this through a footnote and quotation marks, they will face severe penalties, have to talk to unhappy people in the administration, and bring shame to their families, their school, and their nation. We say once more, avoid plagiarism –also known as “cheating”– at all cost. It is serious and it is punished.

In the grammar check, simple rules will be pointed out to avoid sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and misplaced modifiers. The computer will suggest re-writing, but this it will not do for you.

If you are having trouble mastering these tricks on your computer, go to the Learning Center. They are sitting there waiting to help you.

Computers are great tools. Fifty years ago, students had to do all of the above with a typewriter, armed with scissors, paste, erasers that often tore holes through the paper and–yes, it is true–carbon paper. That is why all the people who went to a university back then have wrinkles. Today’s students can work less, have more spare time, be happier, and avoid wrinkles entirely.

Good luck with your writing assignment. Make us proud.



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