

Common Mistakes in Graduate Writing

It's the little things that count

Ah, grammar. Get it right and no one notices. Get it wrong and everyone does. Here are a few common trouble spots

- Difference between "that" and "which"
- Difference between "affect" and "effect"
- Not using a comma after an introductory clause
- Common agreement errors:
 - Data (plural)
 - None, nobody (singular)
 - Measurements (15 centimeters of snow is vs 15 pots of blueberries are)
- Semicolon/colon errors

Style Watch

- Keep the GRE words to a minimum
- Keep your sentences short and to the point. Dense sentences don't make you look smart; they make your reader feel stupid.
- Vary sentence structure.
- Avoid jargon. Make sure you're writing in English not in science- or business-ese.
- Make sure your language flows between sentences and between paragraphs (transitions).

Meta

- It's all about the audience. If your memo is going to a policy maker (as many Bren memos seem to do), make sure you're writing in a language a policy maker will understand. By the same token, if you're writing a memo to a biogeochemist, you probably don't need to define "eutrophication." Also: be sure to think about what he or she wants to get out of the document and focus the content around that point or points.
- Write more than one draft. The thing about clichés is, they're usually true. Writing really *is* a process. And even professionals need to write a "shitty first draft" (as my friends and I like to call it) before they write a decent second one.
- Proofread, proofread, proofread. Put your paper through Spell Check. Then ask a pal to read your paper again. Don't debase your masterpiece with one too many double periods and "their/there" mistakes.

- Craft your intro carefully—tell your reader the point of the paper close to the top.
- Write a conclusion. Don't leave your reader hanging.
- Read your assignment carefully. Omitting an important element (for example, many of you didn't address the limitations of the climate change paper in your writing assessment) can cost you.