Academic Style: Common Writing Mistakes

Fewer vs. Less:

Writers tend to overuse (and incorrectly use) the word "less" when often they should be using the word "fewer" instead.

1. We use "**less**" when we are referring to a whole group of multiple things by using a **single, but collective noun** like a swarm, an audience, or even time in general. See the examples below:
   - ✓ There is <u>less time</u> for this assignment than usual.
   - ✓ There was <u>less water</u> used in the experiment than anticipated.
   - ✓ <u>Less detail</u> is required in the abstract.
   - ✓ The disease impacts <u>less than 3%</u> of people.
   - ✓ We need <u>less discussion</u> and more action.

2. We use "**fewer**" to refer to multiple people, places, or things, i.e. when we are referring to a **plural noun**. See the examples below:
   - ✓ There were <u>fewer people</u> injured today, compared to yesterday.
   - ✓ He completed the race in <u>fewer seconds</u> (or <u>less time</u>) than his PB.
   - ✓ <u>Fewer issues</u> are as important as inflation right now.
   - ✓ The student covered <u>fewer topics</u> in the second part of their essay.
   - ✓ <u>Fewer chemicals</u> were used in the production of this fertiliser.
   - ✓ There are <u>fewer rhinos</u> in Angola than there were 40 years ago.

Noun Strings:

Writers sometimes write a string of nouns in front of the central subject of the sentence, which reads like "jargon" and can confuse the reader. Remember, you can situate such information elsewhere in the sentence, and it is often best to use the subject at the beginning of the sentence. See the examples below:

- ✗ **AWKWARD**: Business performance monitoring <u>procedures</u> can help to prevent financial difficulties.
- ✓ **CLEAR**: <u>Procedures</u> that monitor business performance can help to prevent financial difficulties.

- ✗ **AWKWARD**: Special education safety awareness <u>projects</u> are essential for good practice in the industry.
- ✓ **CLEAR**: <u>Projects</u> that promote safety and awareness in relation to special education are essential for good practice in the industry.

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Which vs. That:

Writers tend to overuse the word "which" when often they could be using the word "that" instead.

1. We use "**that**" as a conjunction when the information we are providing is grammatically essential to complete the sentence (*note: "that" can also be used as a pronoun). "That" does not need to be preceded by a punctuation mark like a comma. See the example below:
   - ✓ Smith (2020) suggests that the drug may be used to treat anxiety disorders.

2. We use "**which**" when the information we are providing is not grammatically essential to complete the sentence. "Which" often needs to be preceded by a punctuation mark like a comma. See the example below:
   - ✓ The drug, which is used to treat anxiety disorders, is a potent anxiolytic of the benzodiazepine class.

Because vs. Since:

Writers tend to overuse the word "since" when often they should be using the word "because" instead.

1. We usually use "**since**" when we are referring to the passage of time:
   - ✓ Berlin has been united <u>since</u> the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

2. We use "**because**" to explain cause or a reason for a particular outcome:
   - ✓ Kaufman's political stability variable is imperfect metric <u>because</u> it is based on perceptions of likelihood.

✗ **CONFUSING**: We were able to gain deeper insight into teenage drug use <u>since</u> Smith published a detailed report on it.
> i.e., Have we gained insight *during the time since* Smith published, or *because* he published?.

✓ **CLEAR**: We were able to gain deeper insight into teenage drug use <u>because</u> Smith published a detailed report on it.

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Unclear Pronouns:

A pronoun is a word that refers to an unnamed someone or something, e.g. *I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *this*, *that*, etc. Writers sometimes overuse pronouns when they should restate the subject of the sentence instead. See the examples below:

- ✗ **UNCLEAR**: When Joyce and Proust first met, <u>he</u> mostly talked about duchesses. (*Who did?*)
- ✓ **CLEAR**: When Joyce and Proust first met, <u>Proust</u> mostly talked about duchesses.

- ✗ **UNCLEAR**: After putting the last object on the tray, he poured water on <u>it</u>. (*On the object or on the tray?*).
- ✓ **CLEAR**: After putting the last object on the tray, he poured water on <u>the tray</u>.

- ✗ **UNCLEAR**: Kennedy was admired for his views and criticised for his affairs; <u>this</u> is evidenced in newspapers from this time. (*What is evidenced – the fact that he is admired or criticised?*)
- ✓ **CLEAR**: Kennedy was admired for his views and criticised for his affairs; <u>this admiration</u> is evidenced in newspapers from this time; <u>this criticism</u> is evidenced in newspapers; both <u>this admiration and criticism</u> is evidenced in newspapers.

Comma Splice:

A comma splice is the incorrect use of a comma to join two independent clauses (two simple sentences) in one sentence. Comma splices can be avoided by using either a conjunction or a new sentence. See the examples below:

- ✗ **INCORRECT**: Immovable artifacts in archaeological studies are called <u>features, non-artifactual</u> evidence that has cultural significance is called an ecofact.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: Immovable artifacts in archaeological studies are called features, <u>and</u> non-artifactual evidence that has cultural significance is called an ecofact.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: Immovable artifacts in archaeological studies are called <u>features. Non-artifactual</u> evidence that has cultural significance is called an ecofact.

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Run-On Sentences:

Run-on sentences occur when a sentence "gets ahead of itself", and the author uses two or more independent clauses without appropriately using a conjunction or a new sentence. The meaning of the sentence gets lost, and reading becomes a difficult and confusing task. As with comma splices, this can be avoided by using either a conjunction or a new sentence. See the examples below:

- ✗ **INCORRECT**: The poem portrayed the theme of madness it focused on asylums of the nineteenth century.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: The poem portrayed the theme of madness, and it focused on asylums of the nineteenth century.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: The poem portrayed the theme of madness. It focused on asylums of the nineteenth century.

Mere Description or Exposition:

Academic writing requires more than just description or exposition; it also requires analysis. See the table below:

	Definition + Function	Example
Description	A detailed and informative account of an observed object or phenomenon.	*The planet named Earth is the third planet from its sun.*
Exposition (Explanation)	A detailed account of the causality of a phenomenon made valid by statements that carry the strength of natural law.	*Earth is exactly the correct distance from its sun to sustain life for the human inhabitants.*
Analysis (Argumentation)	A proposed resolution for a dilemma, a problem, or an inquiry, which uses a series of statements intended to prove validity (of premise) and which is based on evidence. In academia, the resolution is primarily, but not exclusively, contingent on establishing significance.	*The perception of time for the inhabitants of Earth is specific to the planetary orbit of the sun only, proving that the human construct of time is anthropocentric and assuming that construct applies to any other part of the universe is erroneous and hubristic.*

Noun-Verb Agreement:

A noun is the subject of your sentence (a person, place, or thing) that performs the verb (the action of the sentence). The noun number must match the verb number, i.e. both should be single, or both should be plural. This is called noun-verb agreement.

E.g. When we use 1 noun/subject and 1 verb related to it:
- ✓ **EXAMPLE**: The <u>researcher</u> <u>utilises</u> the data to good effect.
- ✓ In this sentence, the "researcher" is the noun and "utilises" is the verb.
- ✓ The noun is single, so the verb is also single.

E.g. When we use 2 or more nouns/subjects and 1 verb related to both of them:
- ✗ **INCORRECT**: Sternberg's three-tier theory of intelligence and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence <u>is</u> different.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: Sternberg's three-tier theory of intelligence and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence <u>are</u> different.

E.g. When we use 1 noun/subject and 2 or more verbs related to it:
- ✗ **INCORRECT**: A thesis <u>directs</u> the reader and <u>inform</u> the reader of the scope of the student's research.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: A thesis <u>directs</u> the reader and <u>informs</u> the reader of the scope of the research.

E.g. When we "interrupt" the noun/subject with other words:
- ✗ **INCORRECT**: <u>Each</u> of the participants <u>were</u> examined carefully.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: <u>Each</u> of the participants <u>was</u> examined carefully.

- ✗ **INCORRECT**: <u>Neither</u> of the nurses <u>discuss</u> the hypothesis fully.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: <u>Neither</u> of the nurses <u>discusses</u> the hypothesis fully.

- ✗ **INCORRECT**: The <u>proceeds</u> from the fundraiser <u>contributes</u> to research.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: The <u>proceeds</u> from the fundraiser <u>contribute</u> to research.

- ✗ **INCORRECT**: The <u>percentage</u> of employees who feel undervalued <u>are</u> increasing each year.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: The <u>percentage</u> of employees who feel undervalued <u>is</u> increasing each year.

E.g. When we begin a sentence with "There is/are" and the verb must agree with the subject that follows:
- ✗ **INCORRECT**: There <u>is</u> few <u>reasons</u> to believe this conclusion.
- ✓ **CORRECT**: There <u>are</u> few <u>reasons</u> to believe this conclusion.

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Empty Phrases:

Writers often use figurative phrases that are somewhat meaningless. This should be avoided in academic writing because we want to achieve clarity and precision. See the examples below of empty phrases that can be avoided:

- ✗ In today's world/ Throughout history/ In this day and age…. (**vague**).
- ✗ It must be noted that…. (**redundant**).
- ✗ Shines light on… (**What light? Provide the insight instead of gesturing**).
- ✗ One could argue… (**Then why are they not making the argument?**).
- ✗ Nowadays… (**Vague and informal**) .
- ✗ The idea of/that… (**State the thing itself, rather than the idea of it**).
- ✗ The notion of/that… (**See above**).

The UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems provides a helpful table here: https://www.ucd.ie/nmhs/t4media/snmhs_student_guide_for_effective_academic_writing_.pdf. (Amended table below):

Avoid using:	Instead, consider using:
Unfortunately, interestingly…	Significantly…
This was an interesting report because…	This report is noteworthy because…
Weiss (1973) would define loneliness as…	Weiss (1973) defines loneliness as…
The author will examine anxiety and depression.	This essay examines anxiety and depression.
The research looked at diabetes rates in Ireland.	The research analysed diabetes rates in Ireland.
In my opinion, youths are being radicalised by social media. I believe/ think that youths are being radicalised by social media. The author believes youths are being radicalised by social media. The author would argue youths are being radicalised by social media.	Youths are being radicalised by social media.
Patients suffering from anxiety… The chronically anxious…	Patients experiencing anxiety… People with chronic anxiety…
In recent/ ancient times… As society progressed…	Since the late 1990s… For two-hundred years…