

# *Sponsored Programs Guidance “Cradle to Grave”*



**DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE  
RESEARCH & EXTENSION**

*University of Arkansas System*

## **Writing to Keep Funders Happy**

*“Why do writers write? Because it isn’t there.”—Thomas Berger*

### 1. Quotation Marks/Parentheses

- a. Except in rare cases, periods and commas are always placed inside quotation marks.
- b. Question marks, exclamation points, semi-colons, and colons are placed outside quotation marks unless they are part of the actual quotation.
- c. Do not use quotation marks around titles or trite expressions. In fact, don’t use trite expressions, and you won’t have to worry about it.
- d. Be sure to open AND close all quotations (The same goes for parentheses. (I meant to do that).
- e. When using parentheses, be sure to utilize brackets if the parentheses are already within a parenthetical phrase.

*“A blank piece of paper is God’s way of telling us how hard it is to be God.”—Sidney Shelton*

### 2. Sentences

- a. All sentences must have a subject and a verb; otherwise, they are fragments, not sentences.
- b. Avoid run-on sentences. Commas and semi-colons have their place, but excessive use is not a sign of the writer’s intelligence. Pretend that each comma costs a dime. Semi-colons cost 50¢. Cash only.
- c. Avoid overuse of short choppy sentences. Combine sentences with those 10¢ commas to vary length within a paragraph.
- d. Comma splices are the devil’s gift to humanity and the quickest way to prove you don’t know how to write. When joining two complete sentences, ALWAYS use a transition or connecting word (“and,”

“but,” “however,” etc... and don’t forget the appropriate punctuation).

- e. Every word in a sentence should count. Get rid of unnecessary words. For instance, “that” is usually a waste of four letters you could put to better use elsewhere. When you see “that,” burn it. Likewise, “which,” “that,” and “who” are often misused and lead to punctuation errors. In some cases, particularly long sentences with dependent clauses, “that” may be necessary. But, if your writing is littered with “thats,” you probably have too many dependent clauses in the first place.
- f. Also, in regard to “that,” know when to use “that” and when to use “which.” “That” is used when the meaning of the sentence is dependent on the phrase following the word: “I went to a store that sells dry ice.” “Which” is used when the phrase following the word is incidental and does not change the meaning of the sentence: “I went to a store to buy dry ice, which I use in my cooler.” Chances are, if a comma is necessary before the word, “which” is appropriate. If not, “that” is likely correct usage.

*“It is my ambition to say in ten sentences  
what others say in a whole book.”—Friedrich Nietzsche*

- g. Use parallel construction when listing items in a series. Example: “When writing a grant, one needs to think about grammar, to think about spelling, and to think about jargon.” Using the word “to” in one item in the series requires you to use “to” in all other items.
- h. Starting a sentence with “so,” or using “so” in place of therefore in a sentence is not considered bad writing. So, go ahead, but just don’t overdo it.
- i. “There are” and “There is” are weak ways to start a sentence. Be more specific and use a stronger verb.

*“Writing is so difficult that writers, having had their  
hell on earth, will escape punishment hereafter.”—Jessamy West*

### 3. Apostrophes

- a. Be sure to place apostrophes in the proper location (before the “s” for singular nouns and after for plural nouns).

- b. “It’s” is only used as an acronym for “It is.” “Its” is the possessive of “It.” (no apostrophe). (Sorry, but there’s not easier way to write it). Possessive “Its” never splits.
- c. Like it or not, the possessive of “Arkansas” is “Arkansas’s.” Yep, I hate it too, but Arkansas’s Legislature decided to spend time on this last session and made that extra “s” a state law. A fellow in Washington, Arkansas, lobbied for it, and though I can find several style manuals saying the little “s” is wrong, my argument did not prevail. I cringe every time I write it. It just ain’t natural.

*“I was working on the proof of one of my poems this morning and took out a comma. In the afternoon, I put it back.”—Oscar Wilde*

#### 4. Punctuation

- a. Sentences have beginnings, middles, and endings. Always use punctuation.

*“There’s not much to be said about the period except that most writers don’t reach it fast enough.”—William Zissner*

- b. If listing items in bullet order, either punctuate at the end of each item or do not. Do not mix.
- c. Semi-colons are expensive (50¢), and they don’t make a writer look smarter. Use them only when necessary.
- d. Dashes and colons are more effective than commas, but they are even more expensive than semi-colons. Only use when you are attempting to place emphasis on what follows.

*“If you take the hyphen seriously, you will surely go mad.”—John Benbow*

- e. When listing items in a series, either use a comma before “and” or do not. Don’t confuse the reader by shifting style.

*“There is no such thing as writer’s block. That was invented in California by people who couldn’t write.”—Terry Pratchett*

#### 5. Words

- a. “Irregardless” is not a word (that’s why it has that little red line underneath it).
- b. Don’t tell your reader you will “try and” do something. You will “try to” do it.

- c. Avoid the noun form of verbs. Example: “The implementation of the policy by the committee was a surprise.” = “The committee implemented a surprising policy.”
- d. Avoid starting sentences with the word “It” and “There,” especially when followed by a noun. “It is the grant recipient who tracks funding” versus “The grant recipient tracks funding.”
- e. Use participles (-ing) in place of forms of the “be” verb.
- f. When using a form of “to be” in the subjunctive (something that is not true), always use “were” instead of “was.” (“If he were here...”)
- g. Spell out acronyms the first time they are used and place the acronym in parentheses immediately afterward.
- h. Don't assume all of the reviewers will know or understand commonly used abbreviations, terms or processes in your field. Many RFAs address a variety of fields and there may not be many members on the review committee from your specific discipline.

*“One of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary looking for long words because you're a little ashamed of your short ones.”—Stephen King*

## 6. Tense

- a. Use consistent tense. Do not shift tense unless the reference to time frame changes: “We won't go now, but we will later” is an example of proper tense shifting.
- b. In general, when writing about events use past tense. When writing about facts or ideas, use present tense.

*“The work never matches the dream of perfection the artist has to start with.”—William Faulkner*

## 7. Style

- a. When writing a grant proposal, you are usually writing to an unknown audience. Be formal; avoid jargon, slang, and idiomatic expressions; and do not write conversationally. That semi-colon just cost me 50¢; I'll avoid using any more. Dang! (Is that slang?)
- b. Shorter, simpler words are almost always better.
- c. White space is a necessity! Break your thoughts into paragraphs.

*“When you write, try to leave out all the parts readers skip.”—Elmore Leonard*

- d. Use nouns and verbs rather than adverbs and adjectives. But, if an adjective can be used in place of a phrase, err on the side of fewer words. “My colleague who is inexperienced...” = “My inexperienced colleague...”

*“As to the adjective, when in doubt strike it out.”—Mark Twain*

- e. Always avoid useless adjectives. Many mean nothing and just take up space.

*“Substitute ‘damn’ every time you’re inclined to write “very”; your editor will delete it, and the writing will be just as it should be.”—Mark Twain*

- f. Do not use the same word repeatedly within a sentence or paragraph. If necessary, use synonyms.

*“Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.”—Mark Twain*

- g. When sequencing events in narrative form, work from old to new. Don’t jump around, and don’t start with what “is” until you’ve explained what “was.”
- h. When one word will do, avoid using two. “The reason for” = “because.” “Is able to” = “can.”

*“The most valuable of all talents is never using two words when one will do.”—Thomas Jefferson*  
(I wrote the tip before I found the quote. Great minds think alike)

- i. Keep words simple, but use more complicated words if they help shorten sentences. “I showed John the ropes of the job” = “I mentored John.” (Note: “I was John’s mentor” is also correct, but it uses passive voice).
- j. Underlining and italics are commonly accepted ways to emphasize words in academic writing. For grant writing, bold typeface is preferred.
- k. Don’t use confusing language. Doing so makes the reader think you are trying to hide something.

*“What we really needed were a few more*

*English majors to write the instructions.*”—Michael Collins, astronaut

- l. Avoid sexist language. In the hands of certain reviewers, it is a death knell. Be especially careful when using pronouns. But, sexist language works both ways. Don't use “her” just to prove that you are not sexist. It doesn't work.
- m. Be consistent in your level of headings. Don't number the first set and use letters in the next unless that is the manner it is done in the RFP.

*“Resist the temptation to use dazzling style to conceal weakness of substance.”*—Stanley Schmidt

## 8. Passive Voice

- a. Even though passive voice is more widely accepted in scientific writing than other forms, avoid it at all costs. There is nothing more boring than reading a passive sentence, and it requires more words: “The dog was walked by John” versus “John walked the dog.”
- b. The subject of your sentence should perform the action of the verb rather than be acted upon. If a subject is acted upon, you likely have written a passive sentence.
- c. Passive voice leads to dangling modifiers, another grammatical error that will attract an editor's wrath. (Note: I did not write “the wrath of an editor.”)
- d. Lots of the tips included on this sheet will help avoid passive voice.

*“Nighttime is really the best time to work. All the ideas are there to be yours because everyone is asleep.”*—Catherine O'Hara

## 9. Paragraphs

- a. Try to limit paragraphs to a single thought, idea, or subject.
- b. A contrasting thought should be the beginning of a new paragraph.
- c. Don't abruptly change thoughts. Use transitions or transitional phrases.
- d. Use short paragraphs for short proposals and longer paragraphs for longer proposals.
- e. Whenever possible, avoid one-sentence paragraphs. Develop your thoughts!

*“Say all you have to say in the fewest words possible or your reader will be sure to skip them; and in the plainest possible words or he will certainly misunderstand them.”*—John Ruskin

## 10. Modifiers

- a. Don't dangle modifiers. Make sure your sentences complete thoughts that provide all necessary information. For instance: "Without repeating the experiment, the results cannot be accepted." *Who needs to repeat the experiment? Who cannot accept the results?* Better: "In order to convince his professor to accept the results, the post-grad student must repeat the experiment."

*"Old English teachers never die.  
They just misplace their modifiers."*—Kris Rutherford

## 11. Capital Letters

- a. Seasons are not capitalized unless used in a title or heading.
- b. "State" is only capitalized when used as a specific reference.  
Example: "The State of Arkansas."
- c. Directions are only capitalized when referring to a specific portion of the country, not when used as compass directions.
- d. Titles are capitalized when they come before a name, not after.  
Example: "Judge David Thompson" versus "David Thompson, the judge,..."

*"An editor should have a pimp for a brother  
so he'd have someone to look up to."*—Gene Fowler

## 12. Numbers and Dates

- a. When referring to a decade, there is no apostrophe before the "s."  
Example: "1980s."
- b. When a date is made of two or more parts, use a comma to separate them if consecutive parts are words or consecutive parts are numbers. If numbers and words are mixed, do not use a comma. Correct: July 15, 2011. Incorrect: July 15 2011. Correct: July 2011. Incorrect: July, 2011.
- c. When referring to rule 12(b), a comma follows the second item unless at the end of a sentence or list. Correct: "July 4, 1776, was hot." Incorrect: "July 4, 1776 was hot."
- d. Spell out single digit whole numbers. Use numerals for numbers greater than nine.
- e. Be consistent when using numbers within a sentence. "There a four students in this class but forty in the other." OR "There are 4 students in this class but 40 in the other."

- f. If a sentence has multiple categories of numbers, maintain consistency between categories. “There are four students in this class but forty in the other, while the first has 6 pencils and the second 50.” Believe it or not, this is correct grammar.
- g. Spell out simple fractions, and use hyphens (“one-fourth”).
- h. Use numerals for mixed fractions (4 1/8) unless the first word in a sentence (Four and one-eighth).
- i. Never use a numeral at the beginning of a sentence.
- j. When dealing with large numbers, use the simplest method, but be consistent (“3 million” and “3,000,000” are both correct).
- k. Always put a zero in front of a decimal unless the first numeral in the decimal is a zero (“0.24” and “.02” are both correct).

*“There is no idea so brilliant or original that  
A sufficiently-untalented writer can’t screw it up.”—Raymond Feist*

### 13. General

- a. Revise. Then revise. Then revise again.

*“There is no great writing, only great rewriting.”—Justice Brandeis*

- b. When you are done revising, revise at least one more time.

*“The wastepaper basket is the writer’s best friend.”—Isaac Bashevis  
Singer*

- c. Accept constructive criticism.

*“There is no mistaking the dismay on the face of  
a writer who has just heard that  
his brain-child is a deformed idiot.”—L. Sprague de Camp*

- d. Regardless of what is written on this tip sheet, if the RFP calls for something different, give them what they want.

*“No passion in the world is equal to  
the passion to alter someone else’s draft.”—H.G. Wells*