“What one skill, above all others, do you expect graduates of Masters of Urban Planning programs to possess?”

“We need planners who can really WRITE!”

- Professional planner, UPC Symposium panelist, 2011
“Whether preparing staff reports, planning studies or other communications, a planner must be able to efficiently convey key information.” (American Planning Association)

“Planning Skills: An Examination of Supply and Local Government Demand” (Greenlee, et al., 2014)

Authors surveyed 298 practicing planners:
- 98% rated writing skills as "somewhat" or “very important” for entry-level planners.
- 100% thought writing was “somewhat” or “very important” for advanced planners.
Good writing begins with considering your intended audience(s).
For whom might we write during our planning careers?

- Neighborhood residents
- Elected/appointed officials
- Attorneys
- Scientists
- Engineers
- Funders and supporters
- Allies and adversaries
- Activists
- “NIMBY” opposition
- Anti-regulation opposition
- People of varying educational backgrounds
- People from different cultures than yours
- People for whom English is a 2nd/3rd language
- People who do not know what “planning” is
- Professors
- Peers and colleagues
- Professional journal editors
Tip 1: Recognize that we ALL wrestle with writing clearly.
Tip 2: Step outside of yourself from time to time

Pretend you’re reading for the first time (print out? read out loud?) and ask yourself:

• Have I laid out a clear structure? (“sign posting”!)
• Have I unfolded a clear story? (“through line”!)
• Have I respected my readers’ time by GUIDING them through the story? (“sign posting”!)
• Is my writing clear and concise?
• Have I proofread to locate and fix all distracting grammar, spelling and syntax errors?
• Has my “298 buddy” and/or professional editor taken a look?
Tip 3: Arm yourself with resources and inspiration
Review of key points on formatting citations

By Asha W. Agrawal

Asha’s 4 basic principles for formatting citations
1. Make it easy for readers to find your source (provide complete information)
2. Keep the entries as brief as possible
3. Be consistent
4. Be persnickety. (Example: “Every error is an error of substance, a betrayal of ignorance and incompetence, the academic equivalent of the double dribble.”)

A Turkman Tip
For basic types of sources, start by consulting the templates shown in Figure 16.1, pages 146-148 (8th edition).

Notes on common errors to avoid

Bibliography entry:

Formatting details to note:
• The comma after “Jennifer.”
• The “title-style” capitalization of the article and journal titles.
• Formatting of the volume and issue number.
• Do NOT include information on the database within which you found the article. This URL isn’t needed for journals, since they have a steady-state identity outside a database.
• The period at the end of the entry.
• The hanging indent. (MS Word can format these indents automatically.)

Proofreading Tricks

By Asha W. Agrawal

1. Before you proofread, take a break for at least a few hours (and preferably a day).
2. Use your word processor’s spell-checker.
3. View your document in a different format – e.g., print it out if you normally read on the screen, enlarge the image on the computer screen, or change to a different font.
4. Read your work aloud. You will hear errors you don’t see when reading in your head.
5. When feasible, use MS Word’s “Find” feature to check for errors you know you make regularly. For example, if you often forget to put a period before a closing quote mark ("."), then search for the mistake you tend to make (".).
6. Ask a friend or colleague to proofread for you.

Revising Written Work

By Asha W. Agrawal

1. Core idea or thesis for the document you are writing (report, memo, email, etc.): In one sentence, what is my core idea? (And is that sentence in my document?)
2. Review the individual core idea to make it more accurate, more precise, easier to understand, or more persuasive?
3. Can I divine the document to my core idea easier for readers to identify and remember? (i.e., is it following differently, more explicitly labeling my core idea as such, introducing the core idea earlier in the paper, or repeating the core idea more times)
4. Argument/evidence (questions to ask about each major claim or statement you make): Have I adequately explained this claim?
5. Would different evidence, examples, or arguments better support this claim?
6. Organization of the entire document: Can I recognize the material to make my document cleaner and easier to read?
7. At the beginning of each section, do I highlight the key points in the material to follow? (i.e., provide an “internal preview” of the main ideas in the section)
8. Paragraphs (questions to ask of each paragraph): What is the core idea of this paragraph?
9. Can I revamp this paragraph to make it core idea clearer and more to make the progression of information more logical? (Hint: You almost always want to write the core idea in the first sentence of the paragraph)
10. Sentences (questions to ask about each sentence): Does this sentence have a precise meaning to communicate?
11. Can I rewrite this sentence using simpler language or grammar?
12. Can I rewrite this sentence using more vivid or more precise language?
The field of planning will offer you many fulfilling career opportunities. One advantage is that there are jobs in the government, nonprofit, and public sectors, so you can choose the employer type that best suits your preferences. In addition, planners report high job satisfaction because they believe that their work contributes positively to improving local communities.

If you become a planner, you can find jobs in the government, nonprofit, and public sectors. Planning is a field that offers fulfilling career opportunities. In addition, planners report high job satisfaction because they believe that their work contributes positively to improving local communities.
Planners are trained to synthesize information, but too much information can obscure the main points. Ask yourself:

- Can material be moved to a table or chart?
- Can material be moved to an appendix?
Tip 6: Minimize jargon and remove unneeded words

The project will provide a golf course facility.
The project will provide a golf course.

The “Open Space” designation includes marshland areas, bayland corridors, and waterfront recreational facilities.
The Open Space designation includes marshes, bay lands, and waterfront recreation.

The project could potentially be expected to increase the rate and volume of drainage runoff.
The project may increase the rate and volume of runoff.

Source: “Planning in Plain English, N. Macris
Tip 7: Favor “active voice” and minimize “passive voice”

**Active Voice:** The subject performs the action denoted by the verb.
Example: Rick will mail the letter.
Why Active? The subject (Rick) is mailing (verb). Sounds direct and confident.

**Passive Voice:** The subject receives the action, making it passive.
Example: The letter is going to be mailed by Rick.
Why Passive? The letter (subject) is being acted upon (mailed). Less direct.

Passive voice sentences add words and can require the reader to work harder to understand the intended meaning.

Passive voice isn’t necessarily “bad” – but most writing by urban planners should use active voice.

Passive Voice “Clues”:
- some form of the verb “to be” (e.g. am, is, are, were, been…)
- main verb ends in –en or –ed
Your turn! Which one is “passive”? Which one is “active”?

Example 1:
City staff finds that traffic noise may increase if the County approves this project and the developer builds it as proposed.

Example 2:
It is the determination of City staff that there is a possibility of associated increases in traffic noise if this project is approved and constructed.

Problems with the passive example?
- Sounds bureaucratic
- Sounds dull
- It’s unclear – who is going to approve?
- It’s unclear – who will construct?

Why is the active example better?
- Much clearer!
- Shorter and livelier
- More specific about who carries out the action
Tip 8: Always introduce a list

Good example of introducing a list:
Planning documents use lists in many ways. Examples include:
• Objectives, goals, and policies in a plan
• Conditions of approval for a development project
• Requirements for an application submittal
• Recommendations for a planning commission action

Use parallel construction in lists:
• Goal 1: Protect wetlands from urban development.
• Goal 2: Preserve prime agricultural lands.

Bad example: non-parallel construction:
• Goal 1: Protect wetlands from urban development.
• Goal 2: Prime agricultural lands shall be preserved.
Tip 9: Report and Interpret Numbers

Report #s to provide the raw data for the readers to ask/answer other questions

Interpret #s to help the readers understand what the numbers actually mean!

Why not just report?:
- Because readers need a context in which to understand what the numbers mean. Is a given number big or small? Are things stable or changing? Does a particular value exceed an important cutoff?
- Remember: You have chosen to report the number for a reason. Tell your reader what that reason is!

Why not just interpret?:
- Because the readers should have access to the raw numbers upon which your calculations and conclusions are based.
- Example: Suppose you read that the prevalence of childhood asthma is 40% higher in minority communities in Los Angeles County compared to White communities, but the asthma rates are not given for either minority or White communities. How meaningful is that difference? What’s the baseline? (1.4 vs. 4 in 1,000? 400 vs. 560?)
Example!

• “In a national study of teenage boys, time spent playing video games shows a statistically significant inverse association with time spent reading.”

• “For every hour a boy played a video game, he read just two minutes less than a boy who didn’t play video games.”

• “Notably, nongaming boys didn’t read much at all either, spending only eight minutes a day with a book.”

• Translation: The lower reading time for gaming versus non-gaming boys was statistically significant but very small.

• Important Point: Besides reporting the effect size, it is also important to compare it to the baseline level of reading for boys.
In-Class Exercise

• “Hilary Clinton received 65,844,954 votes to Donald Trump’s 62,979,879 votes.”

• “In the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Hilary Clinton won the popular vote over Donald Trump.”

• “In the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Hilary Clinton won the popular vote by more than 2.8 million votes, with 48.2% of the vote to Donald Trump’s 46.1%.”

Number of Votes Obtained in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

- Donald Trump: 62,979,879 votes (46%)
- Hilary Clinton: 65,844,954 votes (48%)
- Others: 7,804,213 votes (6%)

[Diagram showing the distribution of votes]
• “In the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Hilary Clinton won the popular vote by more than 2.8 million votes, with 48.2% of the vote to Donald Trump’s 46.1%. Clinton received 232 electoral votes to Trump’s 306.”

• “In the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Hilary Clinton won the popular vote by more than 2.8 million votes, with 48.2% of the vote to Donald Trump’s 46.1%. Trump won the electoral vote by garnering more than the 270 minimum needed to win the election.”
Plagiarism is the use of someone else's language, images, data, or ideas without proper attribution.

It is a very serious offense in the university and in your professional work.

In essence, plagiarism is both theft and lying: you have stolen someone else's ideas, and then lied by implying that they are your own.

TIPS:
1. Read examples in the course syllabus.
2. Cite your sources – text and graphics – for anything that is not your own.
3. Put someone else’s writing – even a little – in quotation marks.
4. It's always okay to ask your advisor!
5. Submit your work to TurnItIn for a thorough check.
Tip 11: Ask for Help and Advice

Sometimes you are “too close” to your own work. (See tip #2)

We all benefit from an extra pair of fresh eyes (or two pairs, or three).

A buddy can help with writer’s block, wording, clarity, and edits that you will miss yourself.
TIPS:
1. Relax – we all wrestle with writing clearly.
2. See your writing through “fresh eyes.”
3. Gather writing guides and inspirational writing.
4. Focus on clear paragraph development: one main point per paragraph.
5. Simplify your writing where possible. Table? Appendix?
6. Minimize jargon, remove unneeded words.
7. Favor “active voice” in your writing – direct, clear, and confident.
8. Introduce lists and use parallel construction.
9. Report and interpret numbers
10. Plagiarism – don’t go there; always okay to ask your advisor.
11. Ask for help and advice.