Guidelines for Good Writing
Dr. Austin Caswell
Professor Emeritus
Indiana University

1. Don’t use big words when little ones will prove efficacious.

2. The passive voice is avoided.

3. Don’t be wordy; omit needless words.

4. Remember that all words have specific meanings. To make sure you use them correctly, look up definitions or choose words you are sure of.

5. Avoid clichés like the plague.

6. Italicize all foreign terms but don’t use them just because they look classy; you won’t impress anyone and it just makes your writing look affected. Use words like Tonklangfarbenmelodie and fin de siècle only if no English expression will do.

7. Don’t forget the necessary diacriticals (ç, ë, ñ, ö, û, etc.).

8. It is wise to not split an infinitive.

9. Read your work aloud—it will reveal things that you will otherwise miss.

10. Don’t be cute—it turns people off because it is usually based on private jokes.

11. Write the first draft off the top of your head—messily, with Turabian and the dictionary far away—and then clean things up on the second go-round; with a word processor this is easy to do.

12. Make sure that footnotes and bibliography are perfect factually and stylistically; people use them and get mad when they’re sloppy.

13. Always have others (at least two) read your work: one who knows a little about your subject and one who knows a lot.

14. Don’t assume.

15. Use the current accepted spelling of names (Strawinsky is wrong and so is Schönberg).

16. Impressive length and snazzy looks are nothing—clear prose and logical argument are everything.

17. There are two kinds of footnotes: (1) source citations and (2) descriptive commentary; use the descriptive kind to tighten up your prose by getting long explanations out of the way.

18. The more you read the better you’ll write.

19. Let your writing sit and come back to it; especially if you’re stuck.
20. Don’t be secretive; bounce your ideas off your friends.

21. Use accepted name-forms; no one has ever heard of John Sousa.

22. The more you use professional jargon, the fewer people will understand you.

23. Borrow ideas and methods from other disciplines.

24. Colloquialisms have a limited life-span and an unlimited power to alienate, dude.

25. Syntax is when what you’re saying aren’t the way they should be that the rules say so they get confused. It’s better if it’s better.

26. Are you using a contraction because it’s clearer or because it sounds comfy?

27. “Its” is possessive (“its beginning is very loud”)—“it’s” is a contraction of “it is” (“it’s beginning in a minute”). English makes no sense at all.

28. Always assiduously avoid alliteration.

29. If you don’t work from an outline at first, try making an outline of your first draft—it will show you what you have done.

30. As wrong as it may look, "Phillip Glass's" is preferred over "Phillip Glass'."

31. Germans capitalize everything except periods and commas, calling them "Substantives."

32. Don’t be afraid to use punctuation, but, make sure, to, get it right.

33. Learn the proper use of : and ; -- they are not the same.

34. Don’t just give information, say something about it.

35. If every sentence is the same length, style, voice, and form you will sound like a machine. What if a musical composition were written that way?

36. "At this juncture my methodological prognosis does not allow me to hypothesize an unassailable resultant." (Translation: "I don’t know.")

37. "The method that works" is better than "the method which works."

38. One to ten -- 11 to 1,000,000,000,000.

39. Every writer should make sure their singulars and plurals agree.

40. If your umpteenth draft looks like your first one, something's the matter. Don’t worry if some of your best ideas get thrown out; you can always use them in another paper.