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Linguistics 1

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Guidelines for writing essays

1. Write coherently. Your essay should transition logically from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph, bookended by (i) an introduction that summarizes the general purpose of the essay and the underlying ideas behind your analysis and (ii) a conclusion that emphasizes the specific major arguments and achievements of your analysis.

2. Write concisely. Don't fall into the trap of believing that "big" words or complex sentence structure make your essay look more impressive. Writing that gets to the point quickly and clearly is often much more effective than long rambling passages filled with unnecessarily pretentious vocabulary and convoluted syntax.

3. Write clearly. Avoid ambiguous words or phrases, be explicit about the details of the data and of your analysis, and carefully explain anything that is new, non-obvious, or multi-faceted.

4. Write sufficiently. Develop your analysis in full detail and discuss all relevant issues. If there is something that you can't figure out, say so explicitly, and describe why you think you can't figure it out. Being up-front about the limitations of your analysis is better than completely ignoring crucial facts.

5. Write appropriately. Always follow the writing conventions of the specific field and medium you are writing for. In this course, there are a few standard conventions you should follow for writing a linguistics essay:

- Mark all ungrammatical data with a preceding *, as in (1), and leave all grammatical data unmarked, as in (2). An intermediate level of grammaticality can be indicated with a preceding question mark, as in (3):

  (1) *This an ungrammatical sentence.
  (2) This is a grammatical sentence.
  (3) ?It's not hard to think a questionably grammatical sentence of English up.

- Place example sentences in list form, near the point in the prose where they are first cited, logically grouped and set apart from the prose by whitespace. Every example sentence (as well as every diagram or other significant item distinct from the prose) should be numbered consecutively in order of appearance

  (4) This is an example sentence.
  (5) So is this.

  You can optionally use numbers plus letters or primes to number related examples:

(6) a. Word order is important.
   b. *Important is order word.
(7) Agreement matters, too.
(7′) *Agreement matter, too.

Within the main text, cite examples by number. If you are referring to a consecutive range of examples, use an en-dash between the numbers. For example, you could refer to sentences (1)–(3), or equivalently (1–3). For non-consecutive sets of examples, use commas between the numbers. So if you want to refer to the ungrammatical sentences seen so far, you could write (1), (6b), and (7′), or equivalently (1, 6b, 7′). If the example you are referring to also has a letter, note that the letter should be included within the parentheses.

- Italicize words or parts of words when they are mentioned in the main text as linguistic objects:

(8) The word *dog* is a noun.
(9) The default plural marker in English is *-s*.

- Use single quotes for the meanings of words, as in (10). Use double quotes for so-called "scare" quotes (as in guideline 2 above) and when quoting language that is not mentioned as an abstract linguistic object, but rather, is being used concretely (said, written, etc.), as in (11):

(11) The word *dog* is also a verb that means 'bother; pester'.
(12) I wrote "dog" on the chalkboard.

6. Type or write legibly. For essay questions you'll presumably want to type; but for non-essay homework assignments you may prefer to do them by hand. If so, write neatly and legibly. When you're typing, then when we're doing phonetics and phonology you may want to include phonetic symbols, and when we're doing morphology and syntax you may want to include tree diagrams. It's acceptable to print out your paper and write these in by hand after the fact, though you may find it more productive to learn how to include them directly; phonetic symbols are all available as Unicode characters that can be inserted into documents, and a quick, simple tool for drawing tree diagrams can be found at *http://ironcreek.net/phpsyntaxtree/*.

7. Write (and revise) repeatedly. You will almost always need to write more than one draft of your essay to get your analysis to flow properly. Your goal is to present and defend your analysis, not to provide a step-by-step autobiography of how you decided on your analysis. The steps you follow in solving a problem do not necessarily correspond to the steps you should follow when presenting your solution. It's very easy to tell the difference between an unedited first draft and a polished essay that has undergone multiple drafts, so take the time to revise your essay, because you will be graded on how polished it is, both in content and in form. Similarly, check your spelling, and stick to a grammatical style appropriate for formal writing; but be sure your instinctive authorial voice is not compromised by blind adherence to arcane and unnatural prescriptive rules.