

Writing Tips for Your Papers
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Part of the process of being a preservice teacher is learning to be a good writer. You will have to write observation and reflective papers (including your philosophy statement for the portfolio). We have compiled a series of suggestions and a few resources to help you improve your writing.

Writing Observation Papers

Writing observations is an art in and of itself. During the duration of your time as preservice teachers, you will have to write observations for the different classes you visit. Both the Classroom Management and Final Reflection Papers are just the first attempt at reporting what goes on in your classrooms. Here are some suggestions that can hopefully make your reports more thorough:

1. Observation papers have a very particular purpose: to find out what you have learned about a particular area of teaching, such as classroom management, lesson planning, space organization, etc. Make sure you cover each question in as much detail as you can within the page limitations. This is the only chance you may have to give the reader information about what goes on in the classroom, so detail becomes important.
2. We know you might not be able to see **everything** that happens in a classroom, due to your own time constraints. However, that should not be an excuse for not addressing any of the questions. In case you **really cannot** discuss one question because you cannot see that (e.g. you only observe in the morning, so you cannot see what your teacher does at the end of the day), make sure to explain that situation. Your observation should report both the **presence** and the **absence** of each item.
3. Although we expect it to be unlikely, there might be situations wherein the teacher provides you with a **negative** example of classroom management. In that case, be professional. Do not “throw your teacher under the bus.” They deserve all our respect since they were kind enough to provide us entry into their classrooms. Report the negative examples in detail (after all, we still need to hear about that), but avoid either offensive statements or overly critical comments.
4. Conversely, you might be very impressed with your teacher’s techniques. Do not let the awe blind you from the task at hand. If you wish to include praise for your teacher, do so either in the introductory or in the concluding paragraphs of your paper (or both). You are still supposed to report the happenings, not to write an ode to your cooperating teacher.

One thing about which we strongly ask you to exercise caution is **the interpretations you make out of your observations**. You are supposed to observe and report on what you saw, not start making conclusions about what your teacher does (this relates to numeral 3 above). Furthermore, you should be extremely careful about the conclusions you draw based on demographics. Sometimes papers might ask for demographics to have a better feel of what your classroom looks like. One thing is to say that the classroom lacks diversity if 15 out of 15 students are white. Another is for you to make conclusions about how students react to instruction or classroom management based on either their race or socio-economical status (it is very different if you are reporting based on comments from your cooperating teacher). Conclusions of the latter kind, especially if they border on **prejudice** should **never** make it to a

paper. You need to learn to be sensitive about diversity issues and the possible value judgments you make.

Also, regarding students, your cooperating teacher may sometimes confide information about students' backgrounds (e.g. specific disabilities, family issues, etc.) when explaining why he or she proceeds in certain way. Only if this information is strictly necessary to answer a specific question should it make it to the paper. If you are concerned about how to handle some sensitive information, we encourage you to meet with your instructor or his/her TA to discuss this matter before it makes it to the final draft.

Finally, **proofread your papers!** Your instructors may deduct points for grammar or spelling; in fact, it is not an uncommon practice to do so. Proofreading your papers actually saves time when grading and allows the instructors to actually focus on the contents of your paper.

If you have questions about the writing of other papers, you can look at the following files (Note: although these files are part of the Early Childhood cohort materials, these guidelines still apply to all cohorts):

Writing your philosophy statement:

http://edwebsfiles.ed.uiuc.edu/ci/oce/docs_08/EC_250_philosophy_guidelines.pdf

Writing reflective papers:

http://edwebsfiles.ed.uiuc.edu/ci/oce/docs_08/EC_250_response_paper_guidelines.pdf

Grammar Mistakes to Which We All Should Pay Attention

In my experience as a TA, I have noticed a series of common and frequent mistakes while writing the papers. There is a reason why instructors take time to correct grammar in all the papers: As teachers, you are expected (by parents, students, and employers alike) to use the English language properly, regardless of your students' ages and backgrounds or your subject area. Carelessness in the use of the language is unbecoming a teacher. That, in fact, may even raise questions about your skills as an instructor (you would be surprised to learn how many times spelling errors in cover letters or résumés can cost someone a good job).

Fortunately, some of these mistakes are easy to fix. Sometimes, they are more a matter of lack of attention when writing than they are actual lack of knowledge. This is a quick guide to help you tackle some of them as you are working on your written assignments.

1. Watch out for these homophones!

As you already know, homophones are words which are pronounced alike, yet spelled differently. This is always a source of confusion, especially because *spellcheckers do not recognize them as errors within a sentence*. Here are some of the most common ones I have found:

- *Affect vs. Effect*
 - Affect (to influence in a positive or negative manner): “Since the classes are always indoors, the weather doesn’t *affect* what happens in the classroom.”
 - Effect (the result of a particular cause): “The *effects* of the lack of management in the classroom are evident in how students react to the activities.”
- *Their vs. There vs. They’re*
 - Their (possessive pronoun): “Students take *their* lunch in the north cafeteria.”
 - There (adverb of location): “When you look at the teacher’s desk, you can see that she’s so tidy that she can see all the students’ work right *there* on top of it.”
 - They’re (contracted form of *they are*): “This teacher has very clear rules. The students know the rules and *they’re* aware of the consequences for breaking them.”
- *Principal vs. Principle*
 - Principal (individual in charge of the school): “Consequences to breaking the rules include calling the parents and being sent to the *principal’s* office during recess.”
 - Principle (rule or rationale for doing something): “The teacher emphasizes intrinsic rewards because he believes in the *principle* of doing things because they’re beneficial to you.”
- *Its vs. It’s*
 - Its (possessive pronoun): “Students love to read this book, but *its* condition is so deteriorated that I wonder how much they can really learn from it.”
 - It’s (contracted form of *it is*): “Then the students moved to the reading area. *It’s* on the left corner, surrounded by shelves and fully carpeted.”

2. Abbreviations

One common error I have noticed in terms of the use of abbreviations is that of *e.g.* versus *i.e.* The former means *for example*; the latter, *that is [to say]*. Here are two examples:

- As a future teacher, I think that looking at *some* elements of a teacher’s classroom management (e.g. behaviors, language, preventative management, etc.) is important because it provides one with examples of how to proceed when one has his/her own classroom. – Here we use *e.g.* because you are providing examples of the categories that are used (some is the key word here).
- This paper will explore the *four* key elements of classroom management (i.e. behavior, rewards and consequences, language, and preventative management) and the examples I was able to find after observing my teacher for ten hours. – Here we use *i.e.* because we are listing what the elements are (since we said there were four).

3. Parallel structure

This is another error I have told students to fix in several sentences. Parallel structure means that when you are separating items within a series, they should all be the same part of speech.

Examples:

Incorrect:

Students arrive at 7:00 am. Once they enter the room, they are supposed to *hang* their coats, *sharpen* their pencils, and *picking* up their assignments from the mailbox (You are mixing up simple forms and gerunds. The verb “Be supposed to” [which, by the way, is spelled with the “d” at the end] is to be followed by the simple form).

Correct:

Students arrive at 7:00 am. Once they enter the room, they are supposed to *hang* their coats, *sharpen* their pencils, and *pick* up their assignments from the mailbox.

Incorrect:

When students misbehave, they go *either* to detention *or* miss recess (When using paired conjunctions [i.e. *either...or*, *both...and*, and *not only...but also*], parallel structure rules apply).

Correct:

When students misbehave, they *either go* to detention *or miss* recess (Here you keep parallel structure since what follows both *either* and *or* are verbs).

4. Emphatic *do*

As the name indicates, the use of *do/does/did* within an affirmative sentence should only occur when emphasis is needed. Some sentences I have read do not need the extra emphasis. Let us review some examples:

Incorrect:

During all my observations, the teacher *does* always provide the class with handouts at the beginning of the class (In this example, the emphatic *do* is unnecessary because you are using *always*. It is clear, without the need for further emphasis, that this is a regular classroom practice.)

Correct:

During all my observations, I noticed that the teacher was very inconsistent with the use of the board. However, he *does* provide the class with handouts at the beginning of every class. (In this example, the use of emphatic *do* actually adds to the meaning. It stresses the contrast between the inconsistency of the board versus the regular practice of providing handouts).

Suggestion:

Before you place a do/does/did within an affirmative sentence, ask yourself, “Is the emphasis *really* necessary?”

These are just a few that are most recurrent. Please pay attention to these, as well as your use of *punctuation* (comma use is another recurrent error I have found). Finally, I offer some additional resources that you can rely on to improve your writing:

- The Writers’ Workshop: This is a wonderful resource here at the U of I (I have used it myself on a few occasions). There are two sections on their website I encourage you to check:
 - Writing Tips:
http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/writer_resources/writing_tips/writing_tips.htm
 - Grammar Handbook:
http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/writer_resources/grammar_handbook/grammar_handbook.htm
- Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University: This is another very useful resource, which I have used in the past as well. OWL has a number of suggestions about writing matters, such as editing and proofreading:
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/>