The “3 Cs”

The “3 Cs”—consistency, coherence, and context—are an easy way to keep in mind three of the most important characteristics of good writing. You’ll notice that they mostly boil down to common sense and using your head. This is the case with many—but not all—of the “rules of writing.”

**Consistency (Parallelism, “Making Things Match”)**

Changes in language signal your readers that something has changed, so don’t write differently if you don’t have something different to say or accomplish. In other words, don’t change your style unless or until it serves your purpose.

Be consistent in:

- Person—first (I, we), second (you), third (she, he, it, they)
- Number—singular or plural
- Tense—present, past, future, etc.
- Voice—active (almost always preferred, subject of sentence is the actor) or passive (subject of the sentence is passive, is acted upon)
- Tone—formal or informal, prescriptive or descriptive, etc.

Make the form of your writing serve its content and serve you.

**Coherence (Organization, Order, Transition, “Making Things Hang Together”)**

Make sure that your discussion has a logical order that is appropriate for your subject, audience, and purpose.

- Don’t settle for discussing things in the order they occur to you—that’s just the first step.
- Give “little things” like lists and series some kind of order, too.
- Use headings and subheadings to guide your readers and signal where your sections (and the ideas they express) stand in relation to each other.
Provide at least two subheaded sections when you divide a larger section, because the result of division logically must be more than a single unit. (If you can’t come up with a second subheading, it indicates that subheadings are, in that case, inappropriate and that you should consider rewriting your higher level heading, instead.)

Use transitional phrases and words to “spell out” the connection between one paragraph and the next, one sentence and the next. (Don’t assume that your readers will see those connections just because they’re obvious to you.)

Context (“Making Things Make Sense” to Your Readers)

- Use your introduction to tell your readers what they will be reading and why it’s important. In other words, give your readers a “reason to read.”
- Answer your readers’ “So what?” question. Just because the significance, implications, and/or consequences of your information are clear to you does not mean they are clear to your readers.
- Use your conclusion to remind your readers of the meaning or significance of what they’ve read.

Proofreading

It’s a good idea—a very good idea—to let as much time as possible pass between writing and proofreading. The more time that passes, the more likely you are to catch any omissions, inconsistencies, or errors. Another helpful hint is to read aloud what you have written, because your ears will often catch what your eyes miss.

You should proofread for two reasons: to check what you have written and to check how you have written it. Because these two kinds of proofreading check for different things and require different kinds of attention, you should proofread at least twice.

What You Have Written (Content)

- Read your text word for word, for what each word means and for how it affects meaning.
- Read, not for what you expect to see or what you meant to write, but for what you have actually put down on paper (or up on the screen).
- Make sure that the words you have down on paper both make sense together and say what you want them to say.
- Remember that even “little words” like prepositions, articles, and conjunctions can affect the meaning of what you have written.

How You Have Written (Form)

- Check for grammatical errors.
- Make sure that all your sentences are sentences and not fragments.
- Check your spelling. Use whatever “spell check” utility to which you have access, but remember that this won’t catch the kinds of typos and outright errors that, themselves, spell “real words.”
- Check for inconsistencies in: person, number, tense, voice, tone, etc.