ABNEY'S PATENTED (well, not really) NOTES ON STYLE

There follow the basic criteria for stylistics from the scoring guide:

8–well-written, if not arresting, style
(can't really be faulted, but not memorable)
9–mix of simple and more complex structures, apt word choice
(reader wants to read on)
10–memorable structure and phrasing, felicitous word choice
(can't put it down; *felicitous* means *happy*, *lucky*, *fruitful*) .

Information Gleaned from Research:
The Roman consul and general Marius removed the land ownership prerequisite for military service.

Examples of How to Incorporate This Information into a Research Paper:

8–This reform was positive.
(to the point, but not arresting)
9–This reform proved beneficial to the poor.
(forceful and less vague: the reader asks, "How did it benefit the poor?")
10–These reforms particularly benefited the propertyless classes.
(better still: greater detail [which group among the vast poor of Rome] without needless flashiness. Notice how "benefited" sounds stronger than "proved beneficial.")

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE RESEARCH PAPERS

(Other teachers may have different lists.)

1. Steer clear of passive voice: tell who *did* what, not what *was done* by whom.

Active: Marius removed the land ownership requirement.
(Active voice focuses the reader's attention on the actors and causes in human history, which is normally where the writer wishes the reader's attention to be)
Passive: The land ownership requirement was removed.
(Passive voice diverts attention to the action in and of itself and away from the causes and agents of history. Passive constructions do have their place in research but to a limited degree only. I traditionally limit myself to an average of one passive sentence per typed page in a research paper. I find that too much passive puts the logical flow of the narrative at risk, a fatal mistake when one is attempting to advance a critical argument. In the sample sentence, for instance, passive voice has disconnected the occurrence from history: somehow it just happened, but no one seems to have done it.

One can sometimes recast passive sentences into active voice with a reflexive pronoun construction.)

Passive: Marius was betrayed by the very measures he had instituted.

becomes

Active: Marius found himself betrayed by the very measures he had instituted.

2. Use the indefinite pronoun *one* if your comment pertains to everyone in general, but no one in particular. Use the pronoun *I* if you are expressing a personal opinion.

One should not smoke in hospitals.

(Acceptable, because no one should smoke in a hospital.)

On the basis of the verbal evidence, *I* find Lord's position legitimate.

rather than

On the basis of the verbal evidence, *one* finds Lord's position legitimate.

(I attribute this misguided usage to many self-appointed intellectuals. *One* thinks chiefly of William F. Buckley, Jr. [or at least *I* do.] This misuse of *one* sounds pretentious and, worse, is inaccurate. Although the tone of a research paper necessarily differs from that of a personal essay or an informal letter to a friend, researchers should nonetheless have the courage to express their own voice. Among the several billion inhabitants of this planet, surely one of them somewhere would disagree with the legitimacy of Lord's position in the example above. To say "one" in such cases implies otherwise.)

3. Assume you have a sympathetic, interested, generally informed reader, neither idiotic nor expert on your topic.

(Teachers have widely differing views on this point. Mine follows. A research paper should include all the information necessary for the reader to follow its argument to a logical conclusion but no more. Some suggest that the writer of a research paper assume that the reader knows nothing whatever about the topic. I respond, "Why would I be wasting my time reading a paper on a subject that holds no meaning or interest for me?" Teachers have a certain familiarity with the broad outlines of their discipline. Space in a research paper is precious. Devote as much as possible to advancing the point. Inform the reader, but do not bury him under a barrage of irrelevant detail.)

4. Big words don't impress. You may sound pretentious, or you may misuse them.

(Researchers are not paid by the number of letters in their papers, nor do teachers grade them on the basis of their SAT verbal scores. By all means include in a research paper all the specialized jargon or terminology of the field when appropriate, but otherwise choose the

straightforward. Finding the right word is an art, an acquired skill. To insert large, obscure formulations into a paper without careful consideration is a capital offense. Research requires precision. Avoid both mindless repetition and running for the thesaurus with every new sentence.)

5. Learn to hear what you are writing. If you can't imagine yourself saying it out loud, even to that sympathetic, interested reader, then don't write it, either.

   (I see this guideline as an important corollary to the previous one. My final criterion for writing, be it word choice or punctuation, is how it sounds in my head. At its heart, language is still an oral-aural, not a written, phenomenon. If it sounds awkward, change it.)

6. Provide accurate citations. Enable the reader to clarify points or just to learn more.

   (The marshaling of information to support one's opinions is the hallmark of competent scholarship. Anything less does not qualify as research. The advancement of knowledge is a group effort. Give credit where credit is due. The works cited page in an article or the bibliography in a book invariably furthers my own quest for knowledge. Remember those public service ads for libraries on CBS a few years ago? Tell me where I can read more about it.)

7. Do not cite facts.

   (You needn't document evidence that Caesar was assassinated on Mar. 15, 44 BC; it's a historically accepted fact.)

8. Likewise, do not cite general knowledge.

   (The sympathetic, informed reader knows Horace was a Roman poet.)

9. Cite any opinions and all ideas you borrow.

   (It exceeds the limits of human wisdom to establish absolute truths. Do not state, "Horace is the greatest Roman poet." Tell who says so and why.)

10. No contractions in formal writing.

    (Contractions are not inherently uneducated or ungrammatical, but they set an informal tone in an academic paper.)

11. *AD* goes before the year, *BC* after.

    By tradition, Rome was founded in 753 *BC*.

    Most historians date the end of the Western Empire to *AD* 476.

(Not every date requires these tags, but most in classics do. I myself do not care for the trend in academic scholarship to replace *BC* [Before Christ] with *BCE* [Before the Common Era] and *AD* [*Anno Domini* 'in the year of the Lord'] with *CE* [Common Era] because I consider these coinages intellectually dishonest. Prevarication has no place in academia. No matter what we call it, we know why the Western dating system starts when it does.)

12. Otherwise, few abbreviations are acceptable in a research paper.

(Smith 39 *ff.*)
Ed. John Doe.

(Most of these abbreviations belong in parenthetical documentation or the works cited list only. Above all, avoid *etc.* in the body of your paper. Not only is it an abbreviation, it also leaves unanswered questions. "At various times his life, Caesar associated with Marius, Sulla, Cicero, Brutus, Pompey, Crassus, *etc.*" In the first place, it should be *et al.* when referring to people. In the second place, these other people are either worth mentioning by name, or do not allude to them at all. Tell the reader all that he needs to know, but do not leave him dangling.)

13. Use forms of *be* sparingly.

Horace *is* the greatest Roman poet. **(needlessly judgmental)**
Horace *seems* the greatest Roman poet in the judgment of many scholars.
Certain subsequent poets have felt that Horace *stands* at the pinnacle of Roman poetry.

(Look for creative synonyms: *stand*, *seem*, *appear*, *prove*, *lie*, *find oneself*.)

14. Choose *that* as the relative pronoun for indispensable information and *which,* in a clause set off by commas, for noncrucial additions. If the addition is not critical, consider deleting it.

The battle *that* sealed Pompey's fate occurred at Pharsalus in 48 BC .

(tells that this battle, rather than any other, cost Pompey everything)

Pharsalus, *which* is in Greece, was the site of Caesar's defeat of Pompey.

(simply adds a fact that, if omitted, would not detract seriously from the narrative flow)

Both examples contain too many words.

15. Cut every excess word.

(Brevity sharpens precision in research. If you enjoy language and literature, the written word can become a friend to you. Sometimes you must eliminate excess verbiage, no matter how much it hurts.

If some grand formulation does not add markedly to the overall purposes of your paper, it must go.)

Let's consider the guideline sentence:

Cut every excess word.

I would have gained nothing by restating it:

Cut each and every excess word.

In fact, *each and every* **has the ring of cliché. Make your point and move on.**

Likewise,

Caesar defeated Pompey at Pharsalus

improves tremendously upon

Pharsalus was the site of Caesar's defeat of Pompey.

16. Do not split infinitives.

Fuller finds it difficult not *to condemn* Caesar for his harsh measures.

rather than

Fuller finds it difficult *to* not *condemn* Caesar for his harsh measures.

17. Watch for unclear pronouns.

This was a disappointment.

(What was?)

He said that to him.

(Who said what to whom?)

(In particular, the pronoun *they* **has a nasty habit of popping up in the middle of a paragraph without warning and with no clue to the reader whom you mean. Research should convey a pleasant, but not conversational, tone.)**

18. Never make these substitutions:

while **for** *although*

Although Jefferson sympathized with Adams's point, he still persisted.

rather than

While Jefferson sympathized with Adams's point, he still persisted.

but

Adams stormed out of Washington *while* Jefferson's inauguration was taking place. **(better still:** *during Jefferson's inauguration.***)**

(*Although* **sets up a sort of contrast between two ideas.** *While* **is appropriate for actions that occur simultaneously.)**

like **for** *as (if/though)*

Johnson thought *as* Lincoln did on the issue of Reconstruction.

rather than

Johnson thought *like* Lincoln did on the issue of Reconstruction.

but

Nero was nothing *like* his predecessor Claudius.

(Both *as* and *like* establish comparisons, but in different grammatical contexts. *As* introduces all clauses, that is, subject-verb constructions. *Like* is a preposition that belongs with nouns and pronouns.)

As his reign progressed, Caligula acted more and more *as though* he were insane.

rather than

As his reign progressed, Caligula acted more and more *like* he were insane.

but

Caligula behaved *like* a capricious child.

(*As if/though* sets up in the clause that follows a hypothetical condition predicated on the clause that precedes it. *Like* asserts the similarity between two nouns or pronouns.)

(being/seeing) as (how) **for** *because*

(*Being as* and *seeing as how* are linguistic aberrations too grotesque for comment. *As* is useful in comparisons.)

Caesar was at least *as* popular *as* Pompey.

(*As* suggests the relative popularity of each.)

The river god Peneus transformed his daughter Daphne into the laurel tree just *as* Apollo was about to catch her.

(Here, *as* tells what each person was doing at that time, but emphasizes the comparison more than the simultaneity of the actions, for which English uses *while*. *As* also establishes function or purpose.)

Gildersleeve served *as* a soldier in the Confederate forces before writing his *Latin Grammar*.

(*As* reveals one of Gildersleeve's roles in life.)

Gildersleeve wrote his *Latin Grammar* both *as* a source of income and *as* a corrective to the errors he perceived in grammars written by Northerners.

(*As* offers an explanation why he wrote. *Because* is the clear choice over the potentially vague *as* and *since* for establishing causality. Note the different emphases in these examples.)

Because we worked together, this was the result.
As we worked together, something else was also going on.

Since we worked together, something else has subsequently happened.

a lot of **for** *much/many*

Archeologists found *much* evidence of Roman daily life in Pompeii.

rather than

Archeologists found *a lot of* evidence of Roman daily life in Pompeii.

(*A lot of* has too colloquial a tone for a research paper.)

19. The possessive pronoun for pronouns ending in —*one* or —*body* is *his*.

Nobody was able to contain *his* disappointment at the measure.

rather than

Nobody was able to contain *their* disappointment at the measure.

(Unless the noun or pronoun serving as a possessor is plural, do not use *their*.)

20. Beware the apostrophe.

(English does not forms noun plurals with the apostrophe. Certain abbreviations may form plurals by adding an apostrophe, but see the twelfth guideline on avoiding abbreviations.

Some writers find more problematic the rules for formation of the possessive. The possessive of the pronoun *it* is *its*. *It's* is a contraction for *it is* and should never appear in academic research; see guideline ten above for use of contractions. Moreover, all singular nouns form their possessive form by the addition of *'s*, even those that end with an *s*-sound. Classicists have traditionally asserted the right to ignore this rule, but it is inconsistent to write *Dickens's works*, but *Xerxes' deeds* in place of *Xerxes's deeds*. To avoid a construction admittedly awkward in sound and appearance—does anyone think that *the boss's secretary* looks attractive [the words, not necessarily the secretary] with the letter *s* four times in a row?—make a substitution: *the deeds of Xerxes*, *my employer's secretary*.

Another common error: the omission of an apostrophe when the passage involves two possessors. I once read this sign on a school locker, "Kathy and Mary's locker." In my head I kept envisioning Kathy and her friend, Mary's locker, walking or clunking around school together, going on double dates with boys or tool boxes, and getting into the sorts of mischief that plague teenagers whose best friends are storage cabinets. The wording *Kathy's and Mary's locker* would have spared me these thoughts. When Caesar and Pompey forged an alliance by Pompey's marriage to Caesar's daughter, it was *Caesar's and Pompey's alliance* or, if one prefers, *the alliance of Caesar and Pompey*. Generally, unless one is referring to a rock group, e.g., *the*

Captain and Tennille's biggest hit, **where the two people constitute a single entity, both nouns require an apostrophe. [By the way, it was "Love Will Keep Us Together," the number one song of 1975.])**

21. Write out all numbers that can be written in one or two words.

six legions
fifty-six days
three-fourths of the population
ten thousand years
but
The Gauls lost over *250,000* of their people.
(Dates and years constitute an obvious exception to this guideline.)

22. Enumerate consistently.

First, this paper will examine Caesar's reputation. *Second*, it will assess his historical impact on the modern world.
(The draft versions of one of my professor's articles used to careen madly back and forth between the adjectival and adverbial forms of the ordinal numbers: *first*, *secondly*, *third*, *fourthly* **with no consistency. Fortunately, he had me to point out this sloppy style to him. Even skilled writers will use** *on the other hand* **without first having used** *on the one hand*. **The theoretical human form—not to go spelunking in Plato's allegorical cave or anything deep like that—has two hands. Use both in ticking off contrasting points.)**

23. Know when to break a paragraph.
(I still find myself working at this one. I will finish drafting a page and realize to my horror that it contains a single unending paragraph. I am not a believer in transition sentences at all costs, no matter how artificial they may sound. Perhaps this aversion rests with my inability to craft them well enough. I do believe in ending with a bang, a sentence that makes the reader wish to find out what happens next, even if the sentence is not a formal transition. Sometimes the best transition is actually in the following paragraph. I offer a few examples and return thereafter with additional tips.)

previous ¶: The virtual annihilation of nations makes it hard to think about anything else.
following ¶: We need to recall, however, that the bloodshed in the epic does not occur in a vacuum.

previous ¶: Such a perspective seems uniquely suited to the epic as it has come down to us.
following ¶: Let us consider two brief examples of oral metonymy **[the "perspective" mentioned in the previous sentence]**, one ancient Greek, the other Middle High German.

(Please forgive this next example, but I went to graduate school, so once in a while, I like to let 'er rip.)

previous ¶: It is through recurrence across tradition that this metonymic depth, which can never be adequately verbalized (or textualized, for that matter), attaches to the bare, if esthetically pleasing, semantic surface and becomes generally known, as Schwartz writes, "to the poets and to the public" (68).
following ¶: In light of these points, it no longer seems sufficient to approach words and phrases in epic texts at a purely lexical level.

previous ¶: A reception in Brunhild's country is icy, indeed.
following ¶: In contrast, how pleasant it is to drop in on Rüdiger in Pöchlarn!

(**A transition may be as simple as a word or two to sum up or refocus the reader's attention:** *in sum*, *in short*, *therefore*, *accordingly*, *next*. **If all else fails and your paragraph is swelling to immense proportions, divide it in two. Begin the latter paragraph with** *additionally*, *further*, **or** *moreover*. **It may not offer the smoothest read of all time, but it will work.)**

24. Use the preposition *between* only with two singular or collective nouns. For three or more entities, use *among*.

The final battle *between* Caesar and Pompey was fought at Pharsalus.

(Yes, I know the sentence uses passive. The next one does, too.)

By early 1945, the last few battles were being waged *between* Nazi Germany and the Allied nations.

(The "Allied nations" mentioned in the previous example obviously consisted of more than two, but they are perceived [passive!] as a single entity engaged in combat with another single entity, i.e., Nazi Germany.)

The Axis proved a largely unsuccessful alliance *among* Germany, Italy, and Japan.

(This sentence depicts the nations cited as three distinctive entities.)

25. A single prepositional phrase at the beginning of a sentence does not normally require a comma to set it off from the rest of the sentence unless it violently disrupts the narrative flow.

In one day Caesar's army bridged the Saône.
After their second defeat the Helvetians surrendered to Caesar.
Throughout Rome were many temples to foreign divinities.

but

In contrast, most Romans accepted the results of Actium without protest.

(Personal taste plays a role here. I fall back on my fifth guideline. Do I hear the sentence as one smooth utterance or with an initial pause? I punctuate accordingly.)

26. Use commas to set off subject-verb clauses introduced by *and*, *(n)or*, or *but* (coordinating conjunctions), but not by *that* , *after*, or *because* (or other subordinating conjunctions).

Coordinating conjunction: Pliny the Elder sailed off toward the erupting Mt. Vesuvius, *but* his nephew did not accompany him.
Subordinating conjunction: Pliny the Younger concluded *that* his uncle had died of asphyxiation.
Subordinating conjunction: Pliny the Elder may have died *because* volcanic ash had clogged his windpipe.

27. A comma and the conjunction *and* should precede the last item in a series. To omit the comma implies a privileged relationship between the last two items.

We ate cereal, grapefruit, toast*, and* bacon and eggs.

(The term *bacon and eggs* holds a special place in English as a single unit in the mind. Notice that even here a comma followed by *and* does precede the last—collective—item. This rule would still apply to the following variant of the above example.)

We ate cold cereal and milk, juice and coffee, toast and jam*, and* bacon and eggs.

but

Before they departed, the Helvetians allied themselves with the Rauraci, the Tulingi, the Latobriges*, and* the Boii.

rather than

Before they departed, the Helvetians allied themselves with the Rauraci, the Tulingi, the Latobriges and the Boii.

(The second version might mislead by implying a particular connection between the Latobriges and the Boii where none existed.)

28. Use American standards for spelling and punctuation.

(Only the *New Yorker* and the theater crowd have yet to grasp the implications of the American Revolution for the English language. Two hundred fifty million native speakers can't be wrong.)

29. Analyze subject-verb agreement carefully.

(You speak English, so most of the time, this rule presents no difficulty. Everyone knows that *the cats is meowing* simply will not work. Occasionally, however, relying on the sound of the phrase does not suffice. People speak much more rapidly that they write. Upon close

reflection, some utterances simply do not hold up to the rules of standard grammar.)

One of the conspirators who *were* in the Senate that day was Brutus.

(antecedent of *who* is *conspirators*, a plural. Resist the temptation to write *was* just because of *one* or *who*. Look at the sentence as two independent clauses.)

The conspirators *were* in the Senate that day. One of them was Brutus.

but

One of the conspirators, who *was* a particularly trusted associate of Caesar, was allegedly his son.

(antecedent of *who* is *one*, a singular pronoun. Look at the item as two independent clauses to clarify the contrast.)

One of the conspirators *was* a particularly trusted associate of Caesar. One of the conspirators was allegedly his son.

(With a little effort, one can not only avoid most of these pitfalls, but also improve the quality of the writing.)

Among the conspirators in the Senate that day was Brutus.

The conspirator Brutus, a particularly trusted associate of Caesar, was allegedly his son.

30. *None* is generally singular, but sometimes plural.

Due to threats of violence against every council member's family, none of them *was* willing to speak out against the proposal.

(*None* is singular because it emphasizes *not any person individually*, in other words, it equals *nobody*.)

None of the veterans, now in their eighties and nineties, *were* able to attend the dedication ceremony of the World War I memorial.

(*None* is plural because it focuses on the *whole group collectively and negatively*, that is, it means *all of them . . . not*.)