Style Guide for Dr. LeVan's Assignments
(revised April 2011)

Research papers and other written assignments require careful attention to writing style, format, and use of sources. This guide lists some useful resources and is meant to help you avoid common errors. It also clarifies my expectations.

Writing style
Correct grammar and spelling help elucidate your ideas and arguments. Weaknesses in these areas often make for weak papers.

- Check for common homonym errors. Make that you have used *its* and *it's*; *their, there* and *they're*, and other homonyms correctly. *It's* always means it is. *Its* is the possessive pronoun.
- Use spell check carefully. It often will suggest changes that are not in fact correct, such as "apple" for the proper name "Appel."
- Vary your word choice and use active verbs as much as possible. Forms of the verb "to be" and the passive voice are less descriptive and they do not make a strong impact on the reader.
- Avoid unnecessary repetition. In addition, avoid unnecessary repetition.
- Maintain a formal style. This is extremely important. One sentence paragraphs, pop culture references, Webster's dictionary definitions and frequent use of first-person are too casual and rarely strengthen your argument.
- Proofread your paper, even if you are in a rush to meet the deadline.

After you have a first draft, edit with these goals in mind:
(1) Headings are acceptable and often useful, but do not let them become substitutes for smooth transitions between paragraphs
(2) Find the right tone and be consistent with your verb tenses
(3) Aim to persuade rather than please the reader
(4) If the assignment prompt asks for a thesis, make sure you have one
(5) Your introduction should provide a "road map" for the rest of the paper. But avoid merely listing the authors or ideas you plan to discuss. For example, do not simply "I will discuss authors *x, y,* and *z.*" Instead, succinctly summarize the ideas of *x* and *y,* and describe how *z* challenges them.
(6) Do not rush the conclusion. Summarize your key findings, elaborate on the more important implications, note any shortcomings with your data, and outline some creative possibilities for future research.

Format
- Follow the formatting instructions pertaining to font size, margins, and length. It is easy for me to tell if you have re-sized the font or altered margins to fit a page limit. I prefer 12 point font with one inch margins. If I have asked for a hardcopy, then double-sided pages are strongly preferred.
- Clean up formatting errors such as irregular spacing, misplaced punctuation (i.e., a comma where there should be a period) and citation formatting errors.
- If the paper is a big one, such as an SRP for SIS, make sure the different academic components such as the literature review are clearly identifiable.

Citations

- Adopt a citation style and stick to it. When citing published journal articles from library databases you should treat the citation as if you have the print version. In these cases, <u>it is not necessary to list the name of the database</u>, the URL, or the date you accessed the article, as recommended by some citation style guides.
  - If the article or source is only published on the web, then you should cite the URL and the date of access. Examples would include articles from online magazines or organizational websites. These resources are less permanent than journal articles, and additional information is necessary.
- When citing information, make sure you integrate this information in your paper in a way that clearly supports your point *and* blends in with the rest of your writing. <u>For my papers, informal in-text citations such as the examples here are acceptable</u>. But you still need to prepare a full bibliography or works cited page.
  - Example of good integration: Although politicians from this party often claim that they do not take bribes, the NGO Citizens Against Bribery recently announced that it has discovered "significant evidence" of corruption in the party (Jones 2007, 47).
  - Example of poor integration: Politicians from this party often claim that they do not take bribes, although "Citizens Against Bribery found significant evidence" of corruption in the party (Jones 2007, 47).
- <u>Do not let the quotation "speak for itself</u>." During editing, ask yourself whether any further explanation is necessary and double check to make sure that the quotation actually supports the paragraph's main idea.
- I prefer footnotes rather than end notes. Use them sparingly. I will not count them against your overall page length.
- Avoid unnecessarily long quotes, especially in a short paper.

Sources

Your choice of sources is indicative of how seriously you took the assignment. A list of scanty or inappropriate sources typically results in a bad paper.

- Rely on primarily academic sources such as books and peer-reviewed journal articles. If your topic is current, you may use newspapers and online sources but you still may need to situate that information within scholarly material.
- Examine online-only sources for bias. For example, while the United Nations and the World Bank are generally considered reliable, examine other sites more closely. If an organization's web site states that its mission is "to prove that X is the best economic policy," it may be a less credible source for facts about X. You can still use statements from the organization as long as you present them as opinions ("The Smith Foundation believes that…").
- Check the domain name in the URL of websites you visit. Examples of domain names are "american.edu" and "amazon.com." The domain name indicates the nature of the site and therefore can give you clues to the suitability of the site for a research paper. Commercial, or ".com" sites are more likely to present one-sided information, but ".org" or ".edu" (nonprofits and educational institutions, respectively) do not necessarily guarantee objectivity either. Proceed with caution when using web-based information.

- Cite Wikipedia very sparingly. There is nothing wrong with using Wikipedia to give you a quick overview of an unfamiliar topic or to point you to other sources. But you should never rely on it heavily and it will never impress anyone.

Some Useful Resources

I encourage you to purchase either *A Manual for Writers* by Kate Turabian or *The Chicago Manual of Style*. For a concise guide to grammar, consult *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White. You will use these resources more often and you will become a better writer if you actually own them.

Citation software: I strongly encourage graduate students to obtain citation software such as EndNote. It operates like a database and greatly simplifies the task of preparing a bibliography. The AU library regularly offers training for EndNote, and you can download it through the Office of Information Technology website.

AU Library Citation Guide: http://subjectguides.library.american.edu/citation. This guide provides examples of several major citation styles. I am not picky as long as you are consistent. Most AU students seem to use MLA; personally I prefer APSA.

AU Writing Center:
http://www.american.edu/cas/writing/.
The writing center can help you evaluate and improve your writing. It also offers special assistance for international students. If you receive a comment on your paper encouraging you to visit the writing center, do not be embarrassed. After you graduate, it is much harder to get access to such help so take advantage of it now!

> Learn the simplest things. For you
> whose time has come
> it is never too late!
> Learn your A B C's, it is not enough,
> but learn them! Do not let it discourage you,
> begin! You must know everything!
> You must take over the leadership!
>
> From *Praise of Learning*
> By Bertolt Brecht

AU Academic Support Center: http://www.american.edu/ocl/asc/. The ASC offers a variety of academic services, including writing instruction designed for international and ESL (English as a Second Language) students.

Additional tips if English is not your first language:
- Rule #1: If you grew up speaking another language at home, or if you are in Washington on a study abroad program, do not be embarrassed about asking for help. Come to my office hours!
- I tend to grade the grammar in your first paper gently – but only if you first let me know that you are struggling with writing in English. (See Rule #1.)
- I will not read your paper in advance of the due date. But under most circumstances, I am happy to arrange for one of my graduate student research assistants to proofread your paper. Just make sure that you make an appointment with him or her well before the paper's due date.