

General writing tips and instructions for Dr. Steinhart's classes

Three key words: Follow the directions

Nothing is more frustrating than giving instructions that are ignored. My tips and instructions are for your benefit to 1) improve your writing, 2) to acquaint you with conventional methods for scientific writing, and 3) assure that everybody is doing the same assignment and work. And being able to follow directions, heed advice, and respect others comments are an important part of any career.

Format:

- For all my assignments:
 - Use 1" margins (note that the default in Word is often 1.25")
 - Use 12 pt. times font
 - Use double spacing
 - Indent the first line of each paragraph with 5 spaces or one tab
 - Do not include a blank line between paragraphs
 - Headings and subheadings are useful (sometimes) and should be separated from the previous paragraph by one blank line.
- Title pages are not necessary, but do include a title and your name on every document
- Literature cited
 - Follow the format for Transactions of the American Fisheries Society, Guide for Authors (available on my web site)
 - You can use another format, but only if you check with me first
 - When citing in the text, remember to use "et al." when there are more than two authors (Smith, Robinson, and Stovall should be cited as Smith et al.). In the literature cited section, however, list all authors names (See TAFS format for examples)
 - References should be listed in alphabetical order (first) and by year if the same authors appear multiple times.

Common writing problems:

- Make sure to write to your audience
- They do not know what you are thinking - write out everything you are thinking
- Most of my assignments are scientific in nature – write appropriately
 - Do not use a conversational style
 - Do not tell cute stories (I know, science writing is dull)
 - Do support your statement with data!
- Topic sentences
 - Make sure to start every paragraph with a strong topic sentence that describes what the paragraph is about.
 - Make sure the rest follows the topic sentence and does not change subjects
- Avoid the overuse of pronouns ("it," "they," "them," "their," "its," etc.).
 - Wrong: "They have a long dorsal fin." – what does "they" refer to?
 - Right: "Bowfin have a long dorsal fin." – now we know what "they" is!

- Species names
 - Do not capitalize common names (unless it is something like Asian carp)
 - Always provide the scientific name after you first mention a common name
 - Italicize scientific names
 - Once you mention the genus, you can abbreviate the genus to just the first letter, if there are no other genera in your paper that start with the same letter (i.e., the after writing *Lepomis gibbosus*, you can just write *L. macrochirus*)

Citations and references:

- Make sure to cite the literature you have read – when in doubt, cite!
 - Citations provide credit for the work of others
 - Citations inform the reader to where they can find more information
 - Not citing is plagiarism
 - Citing does not allow you to copy – you must write the idea in your own words
- Suitable citations include:
 - Primary, peer-reviewed articles from journals
 - Agency reports
 - Scientific books
 - Peer-reviewed, scientific web sites (Wisfish.org, Fishbase.org)
 - Theses and dissertations
 - Personal communication
- Inappropriate citations include
 - Any web site not specifically mentioned above or checked with me
 - Popular books or magazines
 - Agency fact sheets/pamphlets
 - General textbooks (i.e., introductory texts in biology, physics, etc.)

Tables, figures, and statistics (if applicable):

- Tables
 - Are placed after the text and literature cited
 - Table captions are placed above the table
 - Write complete and descriptive captions (not “Table 1. This table shows...”)
 - Tables are numbered in the order they are referenced in the text. The first table mentioned is Table 1, etc.
 - In the text, DO NOT write “Table 1 shows the number of fish caught by year.” Instead write “Catches varied by year (Table 1).”
 - Do not include tables you do not refer to in the text
 - In general, figures are preferable to tables
 - Do not repeat data in tables and in figures (use figures if possible).
 - Small amounts of data should be included in the text, not a tiny table.
 - Do not copy and paste data from excel – make a table following this example:

Table 1. Total catch by fish species in Clear Lake, Wisconsin, during 1995-1997.

Year	Yellow perch	Walleye	Crappie	Brook trout
1995	123	123	123	123
1996	123	123	123	123
1997	123	123	123	123

- Figures
 - Are placed after the tables
 - Figure captions are placed below the figure
 - Figures do not need titles, that is what the caption is for
 - Make sure captions are complete – dates, location, and what the figure shows
 - Label all axes, with units
 - If you use error bars, make sure to identify what the error bars show (e.g., \pm SD)
 - Do not use color in figures
 - They are figures (Figure 1, Figure 2, etc.), not “graphs”
 - Figures are numbered in the order they are referenced in the text. The first figure mentioned is Figure 1, etc.
 - In the text, DO NOT write “Figure 1 shows that bass are big.” Instead write “Bass are big (Figure 1).”
 - Do not include figures that you do not refer to in the text

- Statistics
 - Make sure to report all statistical results
 - T-test results are presented like this ($t = 1.23, df = 123, p = 0.123$)
 - Chi-square results are presented like this ($\chi^2 = 1.23, df = 12, p = 0.123$)
 - For regression results, replace the x and y variables with the names of the variables, provide the r^2 coefficient