

# SOME HELPFUL NOTES ON THESIS WRITING

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## General Note on “Style”

“Style” refers to such conventions as spelling, punctuation, abbreviations, titles, pagination, how to do format table of contents, references, notes, bibliographies, how to handle figures and tables, and a million other things that go into writing a professional document such as a report, proposal, manual, memo, brief, and so on.

These conventions are presented in *style guides*. Most areas of professional life are governed by a specific style guide (most students are familiar with the *MLA Manual of Style*, according to which they had to format their undergraduate papers, but for most of you it is now time to leave the MLA behind).

The two style guides most used in Homeland Security and US government work are

- *The Chicago Manual of Style* (one of the most venerable style guides, used by most social sciences, some sciences, and many US government agencies)
- *The U.S. Government Publishing Office Style Manual* (the style guide established by an act of Congress and used by most government agencies)

You may be familiar with other style guides, some of which are

- *The MLA Style Manual* (a style guide created by the Modern Language Association of America for writing in most Humanities disciplines – most students in their undergraduate writing classes are made to follow the “MLA,” but it is not used outside of the humanities, so you are unlikely to use it in your career in HSec)
- The American Psychological Association *APA Publication Manual* (this style guide is used in behavioral and some social sciences)
- *The Associated Press Style Handbook* (a style guide created by American journalists working for or connected with the Associated Press)
- The U.S. Government Printing Office *NASA Publication Manual* (the title explains it)
- The *Council of Biology Editors Style Manual* (style guide for scientific publications in life sciences)

The US Dept. of Homeland Security (DHS) uses mainly the *Chicago Manual of Style*, along with the *U.S. Government Publishing Office Style Manual*. There is also a *DHS House Style Guide* (you can google it), but it presents mostly conventions for layout of public documents, not conventions for writing, references, citations, figures, tables, and so on.

The US Army and Navy use the *Associated Press Style Handbook* (but both also have specific style guides for things like force-specific abbreviations, acronyms, terms, and so on; google U.S. Navy Style Guide and US Army Style Guide).

All of these guides are available online; I suggest you check them out, esp. the ones most likely to apply to your future professional work. **Always use the latest edition, since conventions may change between editions!**

To check out a list of these and other guides, check <https://digital.gov/resources/style-guides-by-government-agencies/>

## Helpful Notes on Some Conventions

The notes presented listed below apply to all professional literature and documentation, including reports, manuals, proposals, and others, not just to theses. They reflect general US conventions for professional writing (such conventions differ internationally). Many conventions also depend on the “style” you are using in your writing. And, you’ll see those conventions violated even in official documents. Nevertheless, as professionals you should be aware what the conventions are.

### Title

Titles in professional literature often have a two-part structure: *main title: subtitle*. The main title states the more general topic or area of concern to which the thesis/document applies; the subtitle states the specific purpose of the thesis/document. Some examples of double-titles:

Images in Wartime: British Visual Propaganda During World War One  
Meeting China’s Challenge: How to Strengthen US Cyber Security  
Sisters of Jihad: The Portrayal of Women in Islamic Extremist Magazines  
Militarizing Education: A Primer on Youth Education in Putin’s Russia.  
Symbolic Warfare: ISIL Visual Rhetoric in the Propaganda Film *Flames of War*.

Not all titles need to have this double structure, but the structure is very common in professional (and not only professional writing) and helps both writers and readers clarify the purpose of the document from the very first words. For busy professionals, clarity is job one.

### Table of Contents Do’s and Don’ts

Don’t list in the Table of Contents (TOC) items preceding the TOC (such as Dedication, Preface, and whatever else you have before the TOC). The TOC should list only items following it. Usually, pages with items preceding the TOC, as well as the TOC itself, are numbered with Roman numerals (*i, ii, iii, iv*), while page 1 starts with the “main text” (typically the Introduction; Preface usually belongs to the “preliminary matter” and its page is numbered with a Roman numeral). But, again, you often see those conventions violated as well, and it may be a good idea to consult the style guide in your specific area.

List Figures first, Tables after (as in the sample TOC on the following page)

# Contents

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You can also list figures and tables together in a *List of Illustrations* (the term “illustration” includes both figures and tables), especially if you do not have many figures and tables, as shown below.

## List of Illustrations

### Figures

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Figure 2. Percentages of students by race/ethnicity and Mathematics/Quantitative Reasoning placement I to IV, CSU entering first-year students 2018	9

### Tables

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Whichever way you do it, always list figures first. By the way, the term “figure” includes anything that is not a table, thus does not involve a grid and/or columns of data. Hence, the term “figure” includes photographs, sketches, drawings, graphs, and whatever. Notice also that figures and tables are numbered independently; thus, in one document you can have Figure 1 and Table 1, Figure 2 and Table 2, and so on (as in the example above). The indentations, spacing, punctuation and other aspects of the sample TOC above are not binding; you have many options here; the key is to make clear to the reader what’s coming, to make it readable at a glance. You may also check the style manual you are using for any specific guidelines.

## Captioning Figures and Tables

Another convention to note about figures and tables in a thesis (or any other professional document) is that the caption goes *below* the figure, while the caption of a table goes *above* the

table. The way I put it to my professional writing students is: *put titles under a figure but on a table* (think table-as-furniture, with stuff lying *on* it; that makes it easier to remember).

Here are two examples of figures with captions. Note how the source acknowledgement is included in the caption.

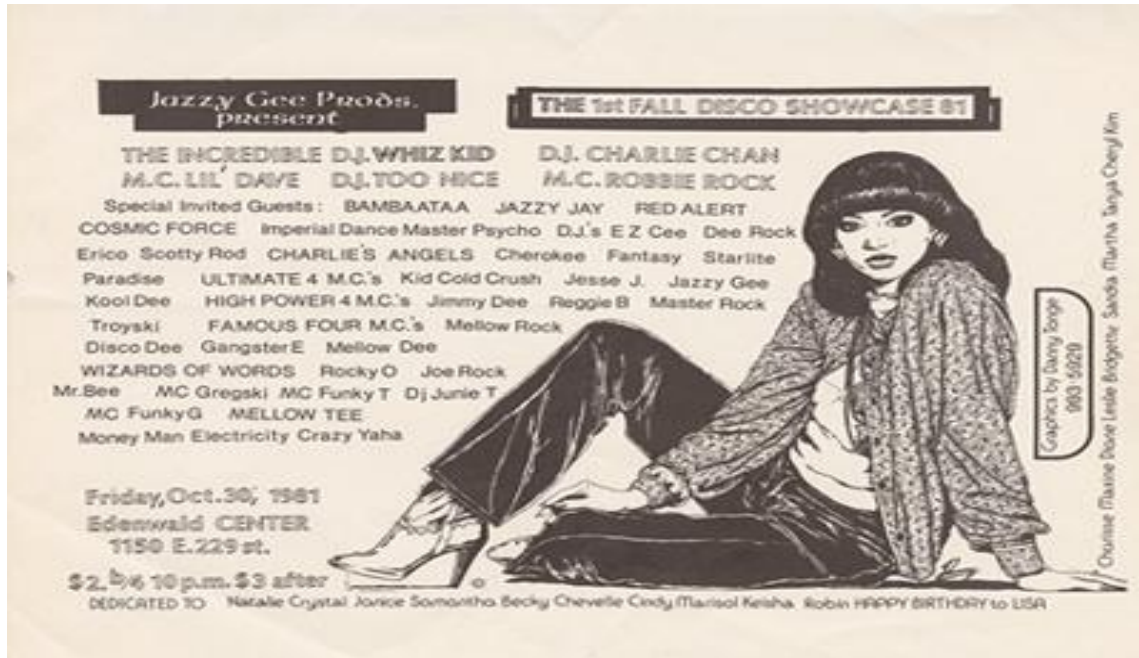


Figure 8. Example of an early hip-hop flyer. Danny Tonge, "Jazzy Gee Prods. Present" (advertisement), October 30, 1981, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University, Ithaca.

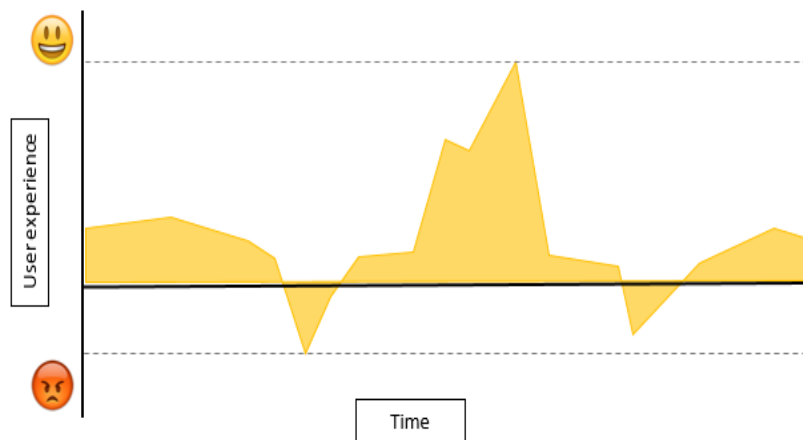


Figure 13.3. User experience charted over time, during the orientation period. Data from survey responses, listed in Appendix A.

Here are two examples of tables, with captions on top. Notice that in the case of tables, the source acknowledgement goes under the table, in parentheses.

**Table 1: Total clothing consumed in the United Kingdom for 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016**

Year	Clothing consumed (in tons)
2010	1,030,000
2012	950,000
2014	1,080,000
2016	1,130,000

*Source:* Data adapted from Waste and Resources Action Programme, *Valuing Our Clothes: The Cost of UK Fashion* (Banbury: WRAP, 2017), table 2, <http://www.wrap.org.uk/sustainable-textiles/valuing-our-clothes>.

**Table 2: Comparing survey methods**

Variable	Online	By mail	Telephone	Face to face
Cost	cheapest	cheap	moderate	costly
Speed	fast	moderate	fast	slow
Response rate	low/moderate	low/moderate	moderate	high
Open-ended questions	poor	poor	moderate	best
Possibility of interviewer bias	none	none	moderate	high

*Source:* Data adapted from Rahul Chakrabarti, "Principles of m-Health Survey Design," *Journal of Mobile Technology in Medicine* 1, no. 3 (2012): 3, <http://articles.journalmtm.com>.

### Paragraph Indents

We typically indent first lines of paragraphs (but not always; it simply helps the reader's eye navigate the document, especially while skimming fast), but we DO NOT INDENT the first paragraph that follows a title or a heading. Here is an example from a thesis:

#### ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the rhetorical dynamics of the political transformation in South Africa by focusing on one of its key moments – the award ceremony following South Africa's victory in the historic 1995 championship rugby match against New Zealand – as captured in an iconic

photograph by Ross Setford. The thesis applies the six axioms of visual iconicity proposed by Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites to validate the Setford image (referred to in the thesis as the *Rugby Moment*) as an important visual icon in the South African political transition as well as in post-apartheid political culture.

The thesis then more closely examines the image's rhetorical power by applying the key terms of Kenneth Burke's "dramatistic" Pentad (Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose) to analyze the performance – the political theater of the rugby match and the award ceremony – captured, focused, and sublimated by the image. It was this performance, and subsequently the image as its continuing trace in political culture, that contributed to the transformation of individual and collective identities that constituted the basis for the spiritual transformation (*metanoia*) that Philippe Joseph Salazar saw as the essential component of the democratic reconstitution of the South African nation.

Note that the first paragraph following the heading "Abstract" is not indented; all subsequent paragraphs are indented, up to the next heading, after which the first following paragraph again will not be indented.

However, very formal documents often do not indent paragraphs, but then they leave a double space between them for ease of reading (as I did in this guide not to confuse my text with the examples). The *Chicago Manual of Style*, however, calls for indents (except for paragraphs following headings) and no additional space between paragraphs.

### **Finally, Some Small Editorial Details**

*Avoid "off of," change it to just "off"* (thus, write "The coin rolled off the table," not "off of the table").

*Use vs. usage.* The word "use" refers to using something, like a shovel or a word. "Usage" is not a more formal way of saying "use" (many people think it is) but a completely different word that refers only to language conventions, as in "Standard English usage calls for using the word 'use' in the context of 'use a hammer to pound in a nail.'" In this example note also that in American English we place double quotes (") around a quotation, and single quotes (') around a quote within a quote (in many European countries it is the other way around). Note also that in the US periods and commas go inside quotation marks (as at the end of the example above). In Britain and some countries (esp. of the British Commonwealth) that also is the other way around (" rather than.").

*Amount vs. number.* "Amount" is a refers to so-called uncountable or mass nouns (such as "water" or "sand" or "concrete"); "number" refers to countable nouns (such as "people" or "buildings" or "airplanes"). Thus, we say "this calls for a large *amount* of water," or "this bridge took a huge *amount* of concrete to build," but we say "a great *number* of people showed up for the rally" (not "amount of people"). So, you can either drink a large *amount of beer*, or a large *number of bottles* of beer.

*Writing dates.* Write 1990s (not 1990's) – it is plural not possessive apostrophe.

*Like vs. such as.* “Like” refers to a likeness or similarity between things; “such as” precedes a representative example (or series of examples). Thus, when we say “There is no room in a democratic world for terrorists *such as* bin Laden,” we are offering bin Laden himself as an example of a terrorist for whom there is no room in a democratic world. When we say “People *like* bin Laden do not make good members of a democratic society” we are referring to qualities that people who do not make good members of a democratic society share with bin Laden, qualities *such as* (not “like”) fanaticism, inability to empathize, militancy, and others.

The confusion between “like” and “such as” is one of the most common errors you see everywhere, even in the media. My favorite example is the KPBS slogan “Programming made possible by viewers *like* you.” Technically, this means people who are like me: male, in their 60s, of European extraction, college professors. People who are not like me (that is, do not share the above characteristics) obviously do not contribute to KPBS. Moreover, *The Chicago Manual of Style* says this: *Like* means that what follows is intended as a frame of reference to indicate the group of things you're talking about, but is itself not included in the group. *Such as* means that what follows is an example (or a list of examples), of the things that are part of the group you're talking about. Thus, the KPBS slogan, by saying “people like you,” [note punctuation: comma inside quotation mark] actually excludes me from the list of people whose support makes KPBS programming possible, but includes other college professor males of European extraction in their 60s. If they said “people such as you,” they would be including me, along with all other people supporting KPBS, no matter their gender, age, and whatever. Go tell it to the good folks at KPBS (probably “like” sounds more folksy and most folks can't tell the difference anyway).

But, when we write professionally, for the government, and moreover in the context of national security and esp. analysis, we want to be professional and as accurate as possible (again, technically, if you say “terrorists like bin Laden” you are actually excluding ObL from your list of terrorists).