

CIS/CSE 400 – PROGRESS REPORT EDITING

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In reading your CIS400 progress reports I found that the same errors were appearing in many submissions. As an alternative to plentiful critical feedback, I will use this document to list these common problems and how they may be fixed.

This is not intended to replace the fine-grained editing like I performed on your proposals. Groups whose reports adhere to this document may arrange a meeting with me (Andrew) where we can discuss your organization, phrasing, word choice, etc. on a more individualized basis. Some reports are ready for a fine edit now. Others require lots of work. I am willing to help groups at their convenience, but please do not wait until the days right before the final paper is due. Also consider the fact it may be nice to get errors straightened out before you continue writing in the same (potentially) erroneous style.

AUDIENCE & TONE

- Write your documents assuming the audience is composed of other CIS400 students. In other words, assume a basic computer science knowledge, but define terms that are field-specific. Do not swamp the user with minute details when high-level intuition may be preferable.
- Realize there is a difference between personal details and technical ones. An algorithm that takes 1000's of lines to implement is a very different kind of challenge than “all my professors gave me lots of homework.” The reader does not care about your personal journey; talk to a broader audience than just Insup and myself.
- Your tone should be professional and formal. This is especially true of the 'abstract', 'related work' and 'technical detail' sections. Default to conventions found in academic journals.
- We're looking for an objective technical paper, not a sales pitch. Defend your approach, but also discuss its shortcomings. Don't think your grade is completely correlated with your 'success.'

PRONOUN USAGE

- First person singular pronouns like “I” and “me” should be avoided entirely. Ask yourself, is this something anyone else can do? If so, you do not need a first person pronoun at all. Rather than “I searched for...”, try using “A search revealed...”
- There are cases where the first person is required, for example, when an opinion is being expressed or a proprietary system is being discussed. First person plural pronouns should be used, even if your group has just one person. Example: “Our framework exhibits...”
- The second person pronoun “you” is unprofessional. Replace statements like “you should look at the appendix for details...” with “readers should look...” or “one should look...”

VERB TENSE

- The present tense is preferred *whenever possible*. The past tense can, and often should, be eliminated. Using future-tense verbs to describe what is yet to be done is acceptable.
- Everyone seems eager to recycle content from their proposals. This is fine, but please change the verb tense appropriately.

ORGANIZATION

- Most reports go directly from the abstract to “Related Work.” An abstract is not considered 'part' of a report; it is meant to stand alone. Why not make section 1 an “introduction” where you ease into the topic, describe the problem, and give reader's an idea what is going on before you bombard them with the (often very technical) work of others.
- Long blocks of text are not fun to read or write. Why not use subheadings to increase organization and break up the monotony? They might even make your report longer!
- Your paper isn't about the “journey”, its about the “destination.” Do not describe your development as a chronology. Present the final (or in this case, current) product. Rather than “we did A which did not work, then B which was inefficient, and next arrived at final product C” your approach should be “This is C. C improves upon the efficiency of B by [foo]. Alternate implementation A is inappropriate because [bar].”

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

- Do not be afraid to write short and terse sentences. Use of flowery, long, preposition-phrase filled sentences only complicate the (presumably complex) technical detail you are presenting.
- Did I mention terseness is a good thing? Try this exercise: (1) Take a sentence (2) Remove every word that does not significantly alter meaning (3) Use the new sentence. (4) Repeat

BIBLIOGRAPHY & CITATIONS

- Bibliographies were supposed to be *annotated*. No idea what this means? Next time read the project specification a little more closely!
- More resources. Seriously? 3 resources for a 7-10 page paper? Trust me, your idea is not that novel. Do yourself a favor and find more related work – or cite more.

OTHER STUFF

- Examples, examples, examples. There is no better way to explain a complicated process than by demonstration. They are often graphical in nature, which means pretty pictures take up space, instead of those boring words that take so long to write!