

MY MOST COMMON COMMENTS ON DRAFTS (please don't make me repeat them on yours)

I've included below a list of the most common suggestions and comments that I typically give on draft work projects from Practicum students. To save effort and put our collective efforts to best use, please don't make these common mistakes and pitfalls. It will free both of us to focus on making your work substantively much better rather than slogging through a horde of grammar imps.

That said, remember to cheerfully toss aside any rule that gets in the way of a clear and persuasive sentence.

Don't use the passive voice. It is enormously frustrating to read when a sentence is written with repeated uses of "is," "be," "are" and other passive verbs so that it is virtually impossible to identify who is taking the action. Just say it! Identify your subject with muscular verbs. This one bad habit eats up the vast majority of my editing time, frankly, so please don't – DON'T – do it.

Assume your reader is smart, engaged – but ignorant of the topic at hand. Otherwise, they wouldn't take time to read your incisive work. Be sure to define any abstruse term when you first use it, spell out your acronyms and technical abbreviations on their initial use, and include a distilled statement of the argument's foundational principle before launching into the theoretical stratosphere.

Give me a relatively polished draft. I understand that your work, by definition, remains an on-going effort and hasn't crossed the finish line. Nonetheless, it doesn't help either of us if you give me an early draft that precludes any cogent comments on careful text that you're willing to stand by. I've seen many associates hurt themselves by giving their supervising partners a "rough draft" that clearly assumes that the reviewing partner will finish the associate's work – which the partner rarely, if ever, appreciates.

Structure is your friend. Environmental law often mandates long, complex and befuddling chains of logic. Help your reader by liberally using paragraph breaks, section headings, and sign-posts (e.g., underlining or italicizing topic sentences). While your audience wants you to respect their intelligence, they'll always appreciate a helping hand.

Style guidebooks are fun. No, really. I'll place some handy references in the library on reserve for your use, but I highly recommend:

[*The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*](#) by Steven Pinker (now in paperback, and well worth it);

[*Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*](#) by John Trimble; and

[*Academic Legal Writing*](#) by Eugene Volokh.

The grand classic – *The Elements of Style* by Strunk & White – is generally available both in paperback and online as a .pdf, but its advice has grown a bit dated.