



Writing with Consistency

What is consistency?

In any technical or scientific document, we must ensure that we are staying consistent in terms of the overall look and design of our documents.

Writing (and by extension the discipline of rhetoric) involves making choices, and we may make whatever choices we desire—so long as we stay consistent with our choices so we do not confuse our reader. In other words, consistency helps to ground our reader in our writing.

Often, starting out with guidelines is useful, but we can always check for consistency issues as we revise.

Writers should remain consistent with the following:

- **Capitalization:** As a general rule, all proper nouns (i.e., specific people and places) should be capitalized, but in a technical document, if we make the choice to capitalize a word like University, then we need to stay with that choice throughout our entire document.
- **Spelling:** Skilled technical writers keep consistent spelling. Therefore, it would be strange to use both “color” and “colour” in the same document. We should choose.
- **Numbers:** Generally, we spell out numbers one to nine, but after the number 10, we can use the Arabic numerals.
- **Verbs:** We should make the decision to write in the present tense (which is more common in technical and academic writing) or the past tense. Thus, it would be strange to use both suggests and suggested in the same document. However, we can—and should—use only the past tense when we describe experiments we conducted in the past—in the same way that we describe historical events in the past. When we cite someone, we should use the present tense.
- **Font:** Make sure that your font is the same throughout the entire document.

If we use bulleted points in a document, we must use the same bullets throughout the document, and we should make a firm choice if each bulleted statement ends with a period or not.

Thus, all of the bulleted statements should end with a period, or they should all lack a period—there should be no going back and forth (note how the list above is consistent). If, however, our bulleted statements are incomplete sentences, we should consider not using a period.



Consistency Continued

Moreover, subheadings (a brief title given to a section of a document that often helps for organizational purposes) are great for organizing a report, proposal, a resume, or a CV, but we should always strive to make sure that all subheadings look alike. In other words, if I center and bold most of my subheadings, I would lapse into inconsistency if one or more of my subheadings were in italics instead of bolded.

However, if I want my subheadings in italics, I should make that a consistent choice throughout my document. Often, writers think that consistency looks boring (and they might want to liven material up with a random italicized subheading), but instead, consistency helps to guide our reader.