Checklist for Your Paper

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Substance
☐ Correctly present and charitably interpret the work of others.
☐ Use quotes and references to demonstrate familiarity with the material.
☐ Use your own examples or analogies to demonstrate understanding.

Format
☐ Title your paper.
☐ Divide your paper into sections if necessary.
☐ Indent long quotes and official statements of views or principles.
☐ Provide full references, either in footnotes or in a reference section.
☐ Make the print look good on the page: http://tinyurl.com/q7yy8bm

Spelling and Grammar
☐ Check your use of “their” and “there”.
☐ Check your use of “its” and “it’s”.
☐ Check your use of “lay” and “lie”.
☐ Check your use of “your” and “you’re”.
☐ Check your use of “to”, “too” and “two”.
☐ Check your use of “e.g.” and “i.e.”.
☐ Check your use of “affect” and “effect”.
☐ Check your use of “than” and “then”.
☐ Check your use of “I”, “me”, and “myself”.
☐ Check your use of apostrophes.
☐ Check your spelling of all proper names.
☐ Check your punctuation.

Style (General)
☐ Be clear.
☐ Be concise.
☐ Be specific.
☐ Attend to the sound: https://tinyurl.com/pws4jwe

Style (Specific)
☐ Replace nouns with verbs.
Example: “Frances provided a justification for her view.” Change to: “Frances justified her view.”

☐ Replace adjectives with adverbs.
Example: “Hud ate and it was quick.” Change to: “Hud ate quickly.”

☐ Avoid the passive voice.
Example: “The ball was hit by Neal.” Change to: “Neal hit the ball.”

☐ Avoid nested clauses.
Example: “The essay of Mill’s which is his most famous is On Liberty.” Change to: “Mill’s most famous essay is On Liberty.”

☐ Avoid verb-object interruption.
Example: “Now, such a theory excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, inveterate dislike.” Change to: “Now, such a theory excites inveterate dislike in many minds, even those which are most estimable in feeling and purpose.”

☐ Avoid subject-verb interruption.
Example: “Sellars, in an argument that influenced McDowell and Davidson among many others, claimed that foundationalism is false because it relies on the myth of the given.” Change to: “Sellars claimed that foundationalism is false because it relies on the myth of the given. This claim influenced McDowell, Davidson, and many others.”

☐ Get to the subject.
Example: “In England, from the peculiar circumstances of our political history, though the yoke of opinion is perhaps heavier, that of law is lighter, than in most other countries of Europe.” Change to: “The yoke of law in England is lighter than in most other European countries, though that of opinion may be heavier. This is due to the peculiar circumstances of our political history.”

☐ Keep the subject short.
Example: “The distinction between intuitions and concepts that Kant presents in the Transcendental Aesthetic is crucial to his arguments about the synthetic a priori.” Change to: “Kant distinguishes between intuitions and concepts in the Transcendental Aesthetic. This distinction is crucial to his arguments about the synthetic a priori.”

☐ Avoid subordinate “that” and “which” clauses.
Example: The availability of works in progress online has risen dramatically, which has led to a decline in journal reading. Change to: The availability of works in progress online has risen dramatically, and this rise has led to a decline in journal reading.

☐ Limit commas.
Example: “There is, in this, a confusion, with which, however, we need not deal.” Change to: “There is a confusion in this, but we need not deal with it.”

☐ Limit the use of technical terms, abbreviations, and formalism.
A Note on “They”/“Their”/“Them”

Some style guides include the following kind of recommendation:

- Avoid noun-pronoun disagreement.

  Example: “Suppose a dualist wants to defend their position.” Change to: “Suppose a dualist wants to defend his or her position.”

The problem with the original sentence is supposed to be that the noun phrase is singular (“The dualist”), while the corresponding pronoun is plural (“their”). The suggested fix is to use a singular pronoun instead (“his or her”).

But there are at least two problems with this suggestion. The first is that the resulting sentence doesn’t sound as good as the original. (Many people describe the “his or her” construction as “clunky”.) Second, and more importantly, this kind of construction wrongly suggests that every dualist is either male or female. More generally, the “his or her” construction suggests that the male/female distinction is binary. This suggestion is not only false, but disrespectful to those who are genderqueer (non-binary).

An alternative fix for the sentence would be to pluralize the noun phrase instead of singularizing the pronoun:

- Suppose some dualists want to defend their position.

This sentence is perfectly fine—grammatically, aesthetically, and in terms of respect—but it may not fit the author’s purposes. If the author wants to discuss a singular dualist, they will have to opt for one of the following instead:

- Suppose a dualist wants to defend her position.
- Suppose a dualist wants to defend his position.

But these options are also problematic. Most obviously, if we want to discuss the work of an actual dualist, and we don’t know that individual’s gender, then we won’t know which of these sentences (if either) is appropriate. More importantly, we know that uncritical uses of “he” and “she” are subject to implicit bias. For example, most of us are in the habit of referring to hypothetical CEOs as men and hypothetical nurses as women. These pronoun choices help to subtly reinforce the stereotypes that give rise to those choices in the first place.

So, my advice is to do one of two things. Either ignore the earlier recommendation and use the singular “they” (http://tinyurl.com/nsru2ay) or alternate back and forth between “he” and “she”. However, if you take the second option, just be aware of which pronoun you’re using. For example, don’t use “she” just because you’re talking about an elementary school teacher, and don’t use “he” just because you’re talking about a physicist. Better yet, make a conscientious decision to combat stereotypes by using gendered pronouns that go against audience expectations.