Common Mistakes in Graduate Writing

It’s the little things that count
Ah, grammar. Get it right and no one notices. Get it wrong and everyone does. Here are a few common trouble spots

• Difference between “that” and “which”
• Difference between “affect” and “effect”
• Not using a comma after an introductory clause
• Common agreement errors:
  o Data (plural)
  o None, nobody (singular)
  o Measurements (15 centimeters of snow is vs 15 pots of blueberries are)
• Semicolon/colon errors

Style Watch

• Keep the GRE words to a minimum
• Keep your sentences short and to the point. Dense sentences don’t make you look smart; they make your reader feel stupid.
• Vary sentence structure.
• Avoid jargon. Make sure you’re writing in English not in science-or business-ese.
• Make sure your language flows between sentences and between paragraphs (transitions).

Meta

• It’s all about the audience. If your memo is going to a policy maker (as many Bren memos seem to do), make sure you’re writing in a language a policy maker will understand. By the same token, if you’re writing a memo to a biogeochemist, you probably don’t need to define “eutrophication.” Also: be sure to think about what he or she wants to get out of the document and focus the content around that point or points.
• Write more than one draft. The thing about clichés is, they’re usually true. Writing really is a process. And even professionals need to write a “shitty first draft” (as my friends and I like to call it) before they write a decent second one.
• Proofread, proofread, proofread. Put your paper through Spell Check. Then ask a pal to read your paper again. Don’t debase your masterpiece with one too many double periods and “their/there” mistakes.
• Craft your intro carefully—tell your reader the point of the paper close to the top.
• Write a conclusion. Don’t leave your reader hanging.
• Read your assignment carefully. Omitting an important element (for example, many of you didn’t address the limitations of the climate change paper in your writing assessment) can cost you.