Jessica Rett,
rett@ucla.edu

Writing advice for graduate students in formal linguistics
(may be biased towards projects in formal semantics)

Rules for writing a term paper (works for journal articles as well)

1. **Know your audience**.
It's not me! It's a fellow grad student who hasn't taken the course/who doesn't work in the field. Spend some time setting up the discussion -- what's important and why? -- and make sure to introduce relevant formalism. Provide a description of every constant, and an English gloss or example of every complex formula.

2. **Be very deliberate with your words.**
If you want to coin a new term, it's not sufficient to put quotes around it in a perspicuous context. If your argument draws on key terms, define them. If your argument requires the introduction of novel terms, it's especially crucial that you define them too. Be mindful of the differences between syntactic and semantic categories; between the object language and the formal language (and between "being a predicate" and "denoting a property"); and, always, between evidence and proof.

Avoid demonstratives. "This account" in a section in which you're comparing your analysis with several others, or "this fact" in a section in which you're introducing facts, are effectively semantically vacuous. Avoid PRO, the referent of which will likely be more unclear to your reader than it is to you.

3. **Recognize the difference between empirical generalizations and theoretical claims.**
If a colleague's paper accounts for Phenomenon P with Theory T, be cautious about conflating P with T. P could be a mischaracterization of the data without T being false; T could be false while P is a brilliant observation; P and T could both be great, just not well suited to each other.

When discovering and identifying your own empirical generalizations, use theory-neutral terms to describe them. (Eg. Call them "numbers," not "numeral quantifiers," especially if you're to go on to argue that they're not quantifiers!)

4. **Back up every empirical observation.**
(SDT: "Show Don't Tell")
Is it a well-known empirical observation? Good, it should be easy to find citations. Is it little-known? All the more important to find citations. If it's your observation -- no matter how small -- give us all the data we need to be convinced of your point. Positive data, negative data, look at your point critically so your reader doesn't have to do the work for you.

But! Just because you have citations doesn't mean you shouldn't also provide the data. If the empirical observation is crucial to your main point, you should give your reader the data so (s)he can resolve his/her doubts before transferring them onto your account.

5. **Be as charitable as possible to your theoretical adversary.**
(No "pot shots".)
Know the difference between data a colleague's theory can't handle and data it just wasn't designed to handle. If you can alter the theory in a reasonable way to handle your data, do so. There may very well be problems elsewhere.

6. **Pursue an idea as far as possible.**
Don't have an exact theory to advance, just a suggestion? That's fine (well, for term papers). Say as much as you can about it. What are the ramifications of your suggestion on related phenomena? What are the ramifications of your suggestion on relevant theories? What sorts of components would a theory have to include to address your observations or concerns?

The sentence "And so Theory X can account for Data Y." should never end a discussion; it should be followed by a precise description of how X accounts for Y (no matter how obvious it seems to you).

7. **Give us a break!**
Make your sentences and your paragraphs relatively short. Just as each section should correspond to a topic, each sub-section should correspond to a sub-topic, and each paragraph to a different statement required to support the argument advanced in the sub-section. The smaller your paragraphs, the easier it will be for your reader to separate these various supporting statements and ideas.

Think of your reader as breathing a breath of comprehension and relief every time they successfully interpret a sentence. The longer and more convoluted your sentences, the more deprived your reader will be of clarity and oxygen.

8. **Structure**
There are lots of ways to structure a paper. Usually, boring is better. Here's a boring way to write a paper.

1. Introduction
1.1 Why the topic is theoretically interesting; summary of your proposal
1.2 What's been said about the topic in the past (you should present terminology here)
1.3 (Optional: describe the structure of the paper. I don't know anyone who reads these but they're harmless, I guess.)

2. Empirical overview
2.1 Old data
2.2 New data

2.3 Review of why new data present a challenge to extant theories

3. Analysis
3.1 Things your theory presupposes
3.2 Theory's mechanics
3.3 Application of the theory: some examples, a discussion of every sort of data in Section 2.

4. Discussion
4.1 Situating your proposal in terms of what we already know/think about related things
4.2 Possible consequence/extension 1 of theory
4.3 Possible consequence/extension 2 of theory
4.n Possible consequence/extension n of theory

5. Conclusion (a more comprehensive summary, maybe some open questions)

Rules for writing an abstract

1. **Timing**.
When should you write an abstract?
-A MONTH BEFORE it is due.
-AFTER you have written a relatively involved draft of the paper. This means that you've already puzzled through the analysis, its corresponding formalism, and identified its strengths and weaknesses.
-AFTER you have discussed both the paper and the conference with your advisor. If you're my student, I want to see two versions of the abstract before you submit it.

2. **Know your audience.**
You should think of your reviewer as someone who's published on the topic: someone you've cited or someone who's been cited by someone you've cited. You will not need an overview of the topic at large, but it's always a good idea to summarize those aspects of it that are directly relevant to your paper.

3. **50/50**
Your abstract should convey information of two sorts: set-up and solution. Remember: your abstract is being judged on the solution you've come up with for a particular problem, so you want to spend as much time describing it as possible. A reviewer may not reject your abstract if there's a gap in your set-up; a reviewer will almost certainly reject your abstract if there's a gap in the presentation of your analysis.

The set-up (1 page):
-Paragraph 1: Introduce the topic; quickly explain why it's interesting; summarize what you have to offer.
-Paragraphs 2 & 3: Describe the relevant data and what others have said about it

-Paragraphs 4 & 5: Describe the problem you have with what others have said (this may involve more data)

The solution (1 page):
-Paragraph 1: Describe the change in perspective that is your analysis informally.
-Paragraphs 2 & 3: Present the formal details of your analysis
-Paragraphs 4 & 5: Explicitly address how your analysis accounts for the data on the previous page

4. **Responsible formatting**
Abstracts that have large fonts or wide margins almost never go into enough detail; abstracts with small fonts or creative spacing are almost always too convoluted and inefficient. Stick with a 10- or 12-point font and normal margins, and set apart examples just as you would in a paper.

Abstracts shouldn't have footnotes. If a point is only worthy of a footnote, then it's not important enough to be in an abstract.

5. **Citations**
"When in doubt, cite" is a great rule of thumb for papers. But thorough citing isn't a good use of your space in an abstract. For each citation-worthy point you make, pick one key reference -- the earliest for empirical observations, maybe the most recent or comprehensive for theories -- and make heavy use of "a.o.".

<u>Rules for writing a grant proposal</u>

1. **Know your audience.**
Your reviewer will likely not be a linguist. (This differs by grant… ask around!) This means you should spend some time situating your project in your field and subfield. I usually use the following template:

The goal of theoretical linguistics is to [Goal 1].
Within this field, the goal of [subfield] is to [Goal 2].
Within semantics, the goal of [sub-subfield, e.g. event semantics] is to [Goal 3].
In this project, I address Goal 3 by looking at [Phenomenon].
In particular, I will attempt to answer the question: [Main Question].

2. **Questions and sub-questions.**
Because this is a research *proposal*, you will not be expected to know answers. But you **do** need to know, at this point, which questions to ask and how to go about looking for answers. You've already introduced your Main Question in the first paragraph. Spend the rest of your discussion of your project by splitting the Main Question into Subquestions.

For each sub-question:
-Present the question
-Explain the question
-Describe what you already know about the question (optional)
-Detail what you plan to do to answer the question

3. **Sell yourself.**
Your CV will speak for itself, no need to reproduce it in whimsical list format here. You have two goals in terms of how to sell yourself to your reviewers:

A. Explain what is it about your phenomenon that makes it particularly suited to address Goal 3. (Make them think, "OMG, we HAVE to have research on this topic!")
B. Explain what is it about you that makes you particularly well suited to conduct this project. (Make them think, "OMG, we HAVE to have Jessica researching this topic!")

Answers to A will look like: Armenian is unique across the world's languages in that it _____; exclamatives are unique relative to other speech acts because they _____.

Answers to B will look like: I have a ridiculous amount of experience learning and researching Armenian; my advisor has done pilot studies on the acquisition of gapping; my university is close to a population of native Thai speakers.

4. **Include a timeline.**
If your reviewer isn't a linguist, (s)he might have a hard time accepting that it will take you a year to ruminate on modal subordination. Don't leave it up to them to wonder whether or not the project will or should take you the full year; *tell* them *why* it will. Break down the project into sub-projects (these might very well correspond to your sub-questions) and, for each one, estimate how long it will take and explain why. This might require explaining to your reviewer what semantic fieldwork entails, or the challenges of collecting and looking through 100+ old grammars for an example with the word *totally* in it.

You can include your timeline in a separate section at the end of your proposal, but you might also choose to add it in as you go through the description of your research. The latter is a particularly natural method if your sub-projects line up with your sub-questions.

Just as important as a responsible timeline is the impression of flexibility. All of your reviewers will have experienced disappointments in their research in the past: that initial non-replicable experiment, the horrifying realization that what you thought was a case marker really might be a topic marker instead. Be up front about what's speculation and what's not. And if your project appears to hinge on a particular hard-to-predict result -- the approval of your travel visa to China, say -- include a paragraph outlining a reasonable Plan B.

5. **Broader impacts.**
Many grant-granting institutions -- not just NSF -- require that you additionally tout how your research will help diversify the scientific community. Don't panic! There are several different ways to be diverse.

A. If you yourself contribute diversity: a minority within your field or subfield; a first-generation college graduate or higher-ed student; a theoretical linguist who doesn't believe in UG; etc.
B. If you are serving an underrepresented community: your project involves outreach into a local community; you're working to document or preserve an endangered language; etc.
C. If you are diversifying the subject matter in your field: you're the first theoretical linguist to examine Tezoatlán; you're the first to notice a connection between Uto-Aztecan and Semitic languages; you're the first to pay attention to creaking; etc.
D. If you are diversifying the way linguists approach a topic: you're cooperating with philosophers, you're borrowing technology or techniques from biologists who study animal communication; etc. These interdisciplinary approaches are sometimes specifically required by the grant-granting institution.
E. This isn't an exhaustive list… you're entitled to diversify how we think of diversity!

6. **Get as much help as possible.**
START EARLY. Nope, even earlier.

If your audience is a non-linguist, this is a perfect time to abuse your non-linguist friends and family. Can they understand your research project? If not, back to the drawing board!

A lot of the large grants are terrifying. NSF's website, FastLane, is a bitch to navigate. But the good news is that at least one of your peers or professors has dealt with it before. Ask them for advice! If you find yourself needing to take a break from writing or researching, do a FastLane practice run.

A lot of the large grants have Program Officers -- including ones who specialize in linguistics -- whose job it is to help you submit the sort of proposal they'd like to fund. Take advantage of them, but be respectful and gracious.