

**Engr 660: Software Engineering II**  
**10 September 1991**  
**(revised 2 September 1992)**

**A Few Suggestions Inspired by the First Critiques**

1. Include a complete reference to the paper—in the header, in a footnote, or in citation of the paper in the reference list. For each cited reference you should include authors, title (proper capitalization please), journal or book (normally in italics or underlined), volume and issue numbers, date, pages, etc.
2. Your first sentence should be strong, not wimpy. Remember that the reader forms his impression of your ideas and your writing from the first sentence or two.
3. Likewise, end your critique with a strong sentence. Remember that the impression left by the last sentence (or two) will likely determine what the reader remembers about your ideas.
4. In most circumstances, avoid use of first (e.g., “I” and “we”) and second person (e.g., “you”) pronouns. Use of “we” is sometimes acceptable if it is used to mean “the author and readers together.”
5. Don’t overstate your case and come across as arrogant (or ignorant). On the other hand, don’t waffle.
6. Although I want a critique of the paper rather than a summary, you do need to point out what the paper is about. One or two sentences should be enough to convey the paper’s central idea.
7. NEVER attack the authors personally! However, you are free to attack their ideas and presentation as long as you can make a good case for your position. References to other published material bolster your case.
8. Our critiques are opinion pieces. Do not lace your writing with phrases like “I think,” “I believe,” “in my opinion,” and “it seems.” (Sometimes, however, use of one of these is helpful in differentiating between what is your opinion and what is an established fact.)
9. For items that can be counted, use words such as “few”, “several”, or “many” rather than “some” or “much”. Although “some” is appropriate for denoting the arbitrary choice of an instance.
10. Remember that the word “data” is a plural noun.
11. Use “between” to describe relationships between TWO items; use “among” to describe the relationship among several items.
12. Use spelling checkers, but do not forget to proofread a document carefully yourself. Watch for problems like homonyms (e.g., “sheer” and “shear”) or correctly spelled, but unintended, words resulting from typographical errors.
13. If you know that a person has a doctoral degree, I suggest that you use the title “Dr.” rather than “Mr.”, “Miss”, “Mrs.” or “Ms.”—the latter may be written without the period since it is not an abbreviation. It is okay to omit a title, e.g., “Shaw” instead of “Dr. Shaw”. I suggest that you use “Ms.” for women rather than “Mrs.” or “Miss” unless you know the person prefers one of the latter titles.

14. Normally words like “chemical engineering” or “mathematics” should not be capitalized unless they are part of a name, e.g., “field of engineering” and “Department of Electrical Engineering.” Of course, you may sometimes want to capitalize such words for effect.
15. Use simple phrases when they work just as well as complex ones, e.g., write “begins” instead of “starts out at the beginning.”
16. Normally you should use words for single digit numbers appearing in sentences unless there are several other multi-digit numbers nearby.
17. Don’t put several long, difficult-to-parse sentences together. The average number of words per sentence should normally not exceed twenty. Vary your sentence length and structure.
18. Choose words carefully. Strive for precision. Strive for variety. Strive for conciseness. Keep the reader interested. Avoid jargon. Don’t try to impress the reader with your enormous vocabulary. Remember that dictionaries and thesauri are useful tools.
19. Well-placed commas assist the reader in parsing and understanding the sentences. Poorly placed commas have the opposite effect.
20. The antecedents of pronouns should always be clear—except for the expletive use of the pronoun “it” (e.g., as in “it is raining”).
21. Make most of your sentences active rather than passive. For example, write “Shaw defines engineering” rather than “engineering is defined by Shaw.”
22. Avoid content-free writing—sentences and paragraphs that use a profusion of flowery words and phrases to say nothing of significance. We sometimes apply the earthy acronym “BS” to such writing.