

OPINION | COMMENTARY

Is There a Doctor in the White House? Not if You Need an M.D

Jill Biden should think about dropping the honorific, which feels fraudulent, even comic.

By Joseph Epstein
Dec. 11, 2020 5:56 pm ET

You begin the piece as a letter but then abandon this rhetorical format. Be consistent.

Be sure to confirm facts before publishing. Even editorial pieces require use of facts.

When referencing the degree, rather than the person who holds the degree, the correct reference is "doctorate" or "doctor's degree".

Be consistent in your use of personal or indefinite pronouns.

My that must have been exhausting to teach for 30 years, nonstop! You taught "over a period of 30 years."

How does one "read" a person?

I believe you mean abbreviation, not initials.

Perhaps it would better to say "redundant" than pathetic as owning a vanity license plate is itself pathetic.

Avoid use of passive tense. It is bush league to write in a passive voice.

Apart from the awkward sentence structure, you also use a passive form of definition known as a "negative definition". Please be precise! The sciences would not accept such a negative definition. Philosophy might, if you are Hegelian, as might Theology, which would call this apophatic knowledge. But those fields are outside the sciences, are they not?

Using the words "bit," "small" and "unimportant" in the opening sentence make your argument sound weak. Strive for a more assertive approach such as "a tremendous piece of advice on what may seem like a pathetic matter."

If you persist in using your chosen opening, do try to avoid double negatives. It's not an unimportant thing to use correct grammar.

"Through" implies the dissertation awarded the degree. A dissertation is considered as partial fulfillment of a doctoral degree. For more on this, please see paragraph 4 of your piece.

Cite source.

Thank you for your service.

This sounds like a Title 9 violation. Unless Title 9 was not in effect during the above-referenced 30-year period. You might want to consult someone with an Ed.D. to make sure you are not indicting yourself.

Phi Beta Kappa does not admit "legacies" -- please see their minimum requirements at <https://www.pbk.org/Requirements>. If you do wish to earn such recognition based on your own merit, you may want to attend to Stipulation 5 of their requirements as I believe this would be a challenge for you without some life coaching: "In keeping with the Founders' interest in fostering not only academic excellence but also friendship and morality, invitation to Phi Beta Kappa should be extended only to persons of good moral character."

References to an undefined past is fine in fairy tales but precision is required in journalism.

Please cite sources or your interview with the referenced secretary. One assumes you conducted an interview with a real person since you use a personal pronoun.

Be precise. Op-Eds are not prose poems.

Personification is the tool of fiction writers, not journalists or editorial writers. Be cautious, as you want to be taken seriously, don't you?

Madame First Lady—Mrs. Biden—Jill—kiddo: a bit of advice on what may seem like a small but I think is a not unimportant matter. Any chance you might drop the "Dr." before your name? "Dr. Jill Biden" sounds and feels fraudulent, not to say a touch comic. Your degree is, I believe, an Ed.D., a doctor of education, earned at the University of Delaware through a dissertation with the unpromising title "Student Retention at the Community College Level: Meeting Students' Needs." A wise man once said that no one should call himself "Dr." unless he has delivered a child. Think about it, Dr. Jill, and forthwith drop the doc.

I taught at Northwestern University for 30 years without a doctorate or any advanced degree. I have only a B.A. in absentia from the University of Chicago—in absentia because I took my final examination on a pool table at Headquarters Company, Fort Hood, Texas, while serving in the peacetime Army in the late 1950s. I do have an honorary doctorate, though I have to report that the president of the school that awarded it was fired the year after I received it, not, I hope, for allowing my honorary doctorate. During my years as a university teacher I was sometimes addressed, usually on the phone, as "Dr. Epstein." On such occasions it was all I could do not to reply, "Read two chapters of Henry James and get into bed. I'll be right over."

I was also often addressed as Dr. during the years I was editor of the American Scholar, the quarterly magazine of Phi Beta Kappa. Let me quickly insert that I am also not a member of Phi Beta Kappa, except by marriage. Many of those who so addressed me, I noted, were scientists. I also received a fair amount of correspondence from people who appended the initials Ph.D. to their names atop their letterheads, and have twice seen PHD on vanity license plates, which struck me as pathetic. In contemporary universities, in the social sciences and humanities, calling oneself Dr. is thought bush league.

The Ph.D. may once have held prestige, but that has been diminished by the erosion of seriousness and the relaxation of standards in university education generally, at any rate outside the sciences. Getting a doctorate was then an arduous proceeding: One had to pass examinations in two foreign languages, one of them Greek or Latin, defend one's thesis, and take an oral examination on general knowledge in one's field. At Columbia University of an earlier day, a secretary sat outside the room where these examinations were administered, a pitcher of water and a glass on her desk. The water and glass were there for the candidates who fainted. A far cry, this, from the few doctoral examinations I sat in on during my teaching days, where candidates and teachers addressed one another by first names and the general atmosphere more resembled a kaffeeklatsch. Dr. Jill, I note you acquired your Ed.D. as recently as 15 years ago at age 55, or long after the terror had departed.

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The prestige of honorary doctorates has declined even further. Such degrees were once given exclusively to scholars, statesmen, artists and scientists. Then rich men entered the lists, usually in the hope that they would donate

How does one "enter" a list? Or do you mean that rich men did the work of data entry by typing the list into a computer?

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This piece is clearly "clickbait" to get liberal academics to purchase a subscription to WSJ. You may want to reconsider such hack work as you would not be able to list such a publication in your CV as a properly peer-reviewed piece.

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Dear Mr. Epstein:

While I appreciate your efforts to generate "clickbait" for the Wall Street Journal, I cannot give you a passing grade on this piece for the following reasons:

1. You do not provide a clear thesis statement. Therefore, it is challenging to understand of what, precisely, you are attempting to convince the reader. If you need guidance on how to write an effective thesis statement, you can Google "How to write a thesis statement" and choose from the more than 185,000,000 resulting links. Do confirm the quality of the website and its sources before using it, though! This brings me to my next point...
2. You do not provide any evidence for your claims. Teachers use the term "evidence-based writing" to describe the kind of writing required of non-fiction publications such as newspapers. In evidence-based writing you use outside sources to support your ideas. This gives your writing credibility and strengthens an argument (which you would need in order to use evidence-based writing -- see point #1, above). To learn more, you may want to contact an elementary school teacher or go to Khan Academy to learn more. Actually, definitely go to Khan Academy. Our country's teachers are busy these days, I hear...
3. You use passive voice throughout the piece. I know that it can be scary to assert your voice as a writer but if you want to be taken seriously, you need to learn how to avoid the use of passive tense. In fact, using passive voice can call into question the credibility of your claims by inadvertently exonerating you from any errors (e.g. "mistakes were made"). There is a nice piece on Grammarly.com that might be helpful. Just search "misuse of passive voice" in the Grammarly search bar and the piece will come up in your browser.
4. Your piece is incomplete. A paywall is not an acceptable excuse for submitting partial work. This is akin to students uploading the "wrong" research paper on BlackBoard moments before the deadline. I may only have a Ph.D., but even I know when to call bullshit.

I realize that you are intending to apply to graduate programs to earn a Ph.D. as a means to overcome your self loathing and sense of total inadequacy. Unfortunately, based on this writing sample, I cannot provide a recommendation letter for your applications. It would only contribute to how did you put it?... ah yes, "the erosion of seriousness and the relaxation of standards in university education".

Sincerely,
Amy Shore, Ph.D.

P.S.: This message also serves as a model for future correspondence. Note that one should use a formal mode of address when writing to individuals with whom they do not have a pre-existing and personal relationship. Additionally, always use the individual's proper title as a means to demonstrate respect. I'm sure you wouldn't want to offend a woman such as Dr. Jill Biden who has dedicated her life to education and public service, would you?