

Ullman on writing

An advisor must make sure that their students can write clearly. There is little point training students to generate great ideas if they cannot communicate them. It is essential that the advisor reads very carefully and checks every sentence of a student's first attempts at writing. A common situation, and one that must be caught early, is writing that goes into a lot of detail on the easy parts, and gets fuzzy or overly terse when it comes to presenting the hard parts: the proof of a key theorem or the details of a complex algorithm, for example. So an advisor must judge what is hard and be sure that the writing does justice to those parts.

— Jeffrey D. Ullman

Ullman on ‘Non-referential this’

While it sounds pedantic at first, you get a huge increase in clarity by chasing the “nonreferential this” from students’ writing. Many students (and others) use “this” to refer to a whole concept rather than a noun. For example: “If you turn the sproggles left, it will jam, and the glorp will not be able to move. This is why we foo the bar.” Now the writer of this prose fully understands about sproggles and glorps, so they know whether we foo the bar because glorps do not move, or because the sproggles jammed. It is important for students to put themselves in the place of their readers, who may be a little shaky on how sproggles and glorps work, and need a more carefully written paragraph.

— Jeffrey D. Ullman