Writing Style Guidelines

Basic Issues

- Use titles and sections to guide the reader.
- Spell check (there should not be any obvious spelling errors).
- **Expunge virtually all use of the passive voice**. Use of the passive voice confuses readers because it does not tell the reader "who" did the action.
- Use precise words as the subject of sentences. "This is an unclear sentence" is a good example of a bad practice. The pronoun "this" is an ambiguous reference as the subject of a sentence, forcing the reader to infer what the author might have meant.
- Grammar check. Use "which" and "that" properly.
- Use bullets where appropriate (a series of arguments or summaries is often easier to read in bullet format).
- Maintain consistent format of lists.
- Eliminate "noise words." Read your text carefully. Remove words and phrases that do not convey information that relates to your point. For example, "it should be noted that the insertion" can be said more simply "the insertion..."
- Use correct punctuation of Latin abbreviations: "e.g.," (not "eg") and "i.e.," (not "ie").

Flow/Content Issues

- Make sure the reader knows what questions/issues the paper (or a particular section) addresses.
- State, up front, the scope, purpose, and assumptions of the paper and each section to prepare the reader for what is coming and give her/him an idea why s/he should read the paper.
- Preview your arguments, findings, conclusions and the structure of the paper and follow through with the structure.
- Use figures.
- Label figures. Use extended captions to explain the content of figures in the text and point out the message that you want the reader to understand. The caption, possibly referring to annotations on the figure itself, should, (1) identify the important features of the figure, and (2) explain why they are important. Make sure that the figure has an important message; delete any figure that does not.
- Do not introduce new issues in the conclusion section; if the issue is important, address it in the main body of the paper; if it is marginally important, state it in an appropriate place; if it is not important, remove it.
- Avoid generic sentences like "further steps must be implemented to avoid risks" or "any project contains certain risk factors." Such sentences are always true and do not add anything. Instead, make them specific to the focus of your paper, i.e., say what steps should be taken, who should avoid which risks, what risk factors are present.
- Present future work only in a section on future work, never in a section on current work.
- Reference all quotes and information taken from a book, an article, an interview, etc.