

Inessential Graphics on Athena*

`/final/location/when/i/find/out/what/it/is/iGraphics.dvi`

(Revision: Alpha)

BLEED ON ME

The Student Information Processing Board

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Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Ethics and Other Unmentionables	3
3	Why Athena	3
4	Your Habits and Your Health	4
5	Creating and Editing Prose	5
6	Formatting the Text	5
7	Backups and Revision Control	5

1 Introduction

At MIT you will have to write lab reports, essays, problem sets, monographs, letters, theses, zephyrs, Web pages, Live Journal entries, Slashdot comments, and who knows what more. Even if you're the type who managed to get through high school mostly by writing equations, here you will need to put words together here and there, and the habits you develop to that end will benefit you or shackle you for life.

The purpose of the document is to provide general guidance on best practices for any and all writing projects you will have to carry out as a student here at MIT, and specific guidance on the resources available to you on Athena for this purpose. We'll cover best practices for backing up files, for maintaining revision control, collaborating with other authors, keeping your writing projects from killing your wrists, and more.

2 Ethics and Other Unmentionables

Let's get one thing out of the way, right away.

Remember all the jokes about things that would have a mark placed on your Permanent School Record? Now that you're at MIT, it's for real. So don't plagiarize. Ever. It's wrong, and it can get you in more trouble than it could ever be worth. In the muck at the bottom of Boston Harbor, there are cement shoes stamped with the brand **plagiarist**. The students who wore these shoes are the lucky ones. They don't have to bear any more shame. The lobsters that ate the students wind up in the traps sooner or later. So think about this next time you're at Legal Sea Foods. And never take anyone else's writing without proper attribution.

MIT, as well many of your fellow students and the world at large, place great importance on proper ethics for all written work. The departments where you study have written policies on academic honesty, what constitutes violations of it, and what is done to those caught committing such violations. The Writing Center¹ has a few brief words to say about it, as well as some pointers on giving proper citations for work on which you rely. The humanities classes in which you enroll will give more verbose expositions on what plagiarism is and what happens to those caught engaging in it. A grade of F is usually just the beginning.

¹<http://web.mit.edu/writing/Special/plagiarism.html>

3 Why Athena

Many students prefer to use their own computers for their writing efforts, rather than Athena, and for good reason. To use an SAT analogy, Athena is to your dorm room as the bus is to your car. You can't eat in the Athena cluster, play music on the speakers, or have as much privacy. Luckily, you can have it both ways, and more on that in a bit, but first, let's list some of the things Athena offers you for your writings. Computers crash. Hard drives go bad. Operating systems overwrite files. Laptops get stolen. They get damaged in falls. They get stolen and damaged in falls. But they are inanimate objects that can be replaced for money. Your writings cannot. Redredging old work from memory is difficult and disheartening. On the other hand, your Athena files are backed up competently.

Of course, having it both ways is the best option. Your prose should be stored everywhere that's appropriate, from Athena, to your research group's computers, to your own computer, to your parents' computer, and a couple CD ROMs. It cannot hurt. In the Backups section are instructions on how to synchronize several copies of a document around the Internet, and how to burn CD-ROMs with your entire Athena quota. At one dollar a disk, it's a worthwhile endeavor.

Other things Athena can do for you is provide an easy setup for collaborating with your fellow students, using the Andrew File System. Everything else can be done on your computer just as easily, but we'll go through what Athena offers anyway.

4 Your Habits and Your Health

4.1 Repetitive Strain Injuries

Thanks to modern technology, every student has a chance today to experience the torment that Beethoven felt as he lost his hearing. Pithy comments notwithstanding, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS) is no joke. It's still called a syndrome because there remains some controversy on what does or does not cause it, and what can be done about it. But what is not controversial is that CTS can destroy your career. So do not mess with it. MIT Medical provides advice and counseling on how to deal with it if it happens to you, but there are some rules you should follow every time you go to a keyboard. First, do the reading on the early symptoms of CTS. Don't let the numbness that is the first sign slip past your guard. Learn the proper posture for typing, and stick to it. (This is another reason for using Athena: being in

public will make you less likely to slouch in front of the computer).

Take breaks as currently mandated. If you need assistance, use the `xwrts` command in the `outland` locker to remind you, or to lock the workstation if necessary. And if you feel it coming on, take more breaks. Go to the Med Center. Full blown CTS can wreck your student career. Don't tempt fate.

4.2 How Not to Get Hosed

Few things inspire as much procrastination as a writing assignment. Few things are more difficult to complete at the last moment as a writing assignment. Therefore, a good start for good study habits is writing. When you can write without frequent fidgeting, without moving aside to every distraction, then you can tackle your other tasks with even greater ease.

Despite your every inclination, start every writing assignment on the day you are assigned it. If other schoolwork prevents you from doing so, that is okay, but Slashdot and chatrooms are not other schoolwork, nor is the Dance Dance Revolution machine. Decide on a time when you start the assignment, and the time you will leave it for the next session. Keep those two times in mind and stick to them.

Start the task with the assignment itself in front of you, as well as the books and other materials you will use for it. On the computer, you should have your editing program of choice on the screen, (more on that later), browser windows that show the online materials you will be using, and *nothing else* – no games, no superfluous web pages, no email browser. Nothing. Just your work.

Take breaks to drink. Take breaks to freshen up. Take breaks to keep from getting wrist trouble. Take breaks to stretch your legs. Besides that, do nothing but write, until the clock says “stop.” In the beginning, you will have difficulty lasting more than a half hour at such a task. Writing can be a mentally exhausting task. But soon you'll be able to stretch your efforts. When you're able to do two four-hour sessions in a day, you are ready to take on the world.

After your session, see how far you've gone into completing your assignment. Now estimate how much more of this you need to do to complete the assignment by the deadline. Now you know how much of your afternoons is spoken for until then. From then until the moment of truth, set your writing hours and stick to them.

- 4.3 Writing Competently
- 5 Creating and Editing Prose
- 6 Formatting the Text
- 7 Backups and Revision Control