Some General and Technical Writing Suggestions

General:

Affect is a verb, effect is a noun. One way to remember this is that “affect” starts with an ‘a’ for “action”. Examples: the effects were clear, the independent variable affects the dependent variable, there was an experimenter effect, the experimenter affected the outcome of the study through subtle reinforcing behaviors.¹

That is almost always used instead of which. Example: The handout that described common grammar errors... Which should be used much more sparingly and only used as a restatement that does not change the basic meaning of the sentence (non-restrictive). Example: The latest study, which has been widely publicized, is a rigorous test of the hypotheses.

However should be used in the middle or the end of a sentence rather than at the beginning. Example: Instead of “However, the participants were not debriefed,” it is better to say “The participants, however, were not debriefed” or, perhaps better, “The participants were not debriefed, however,” depending on which makes the most sense at the time and interrupts the flow of the sentence least.

Since should only be used when referring to time passing (e.g., …since the early days before science), and because should be used otherwise (e.g., I try to improve my writing, because I do not want to sound foolish).

While should be used when referring to something happening at the same time (e.g., while the participants were filling out the questionnaire, the experimenter smoked a cigarette), and whereas, but, or and should be used otherwise (e.g., He spoke eloquently, whereas she sounded unprepared).

Technical:

When reporting results or study procedures, past tense is used. Example: “a t-test indicated that the two groups were significantly different.” Nearly all of your write-ups in class will use past tense.

Never use the variable names when you report results from your analyses (or in the Method section at all). Always use a conceptual term. For example, if the variable name in SPSS is called “RESID” and represents a question about type of living arrangement, use “type of residence” or a similar conceptual term rather than “RESID” in your report.

Spell out number values under 10 if they do not represent precise measurements (e.g., “eight participants” vs. “score of 10.5”) or appear at the beginning of a sentence (“Eighty-four participants responded.”). Use figures if the value is over 10 (e.g., 450 participants), uses decimals (e.g., “9.5”), precedes a measurement scale (e.g., “5 cm”), or if the number modifies another number (e.g., “ten 7-point scale items”).

Use because or because of rather than due to.

The word data is plural, not singular. Examples: Data were collected; Data were analyzed. Data set is singular, however. Example: The data set was large.

¹ Affect is sometimes used as a noun by psychologists as a synonym for emotion. And one can always try to use effect as a verb as in trying to “effect change,” but this usage always hurts my ears.
Think about using more formal language:

not so good                               better
so,                                       therefore, thus, consequently,
wrong                                      incorrect
right                                      correct
can’t                                      cannot (i.e., avoid all contractions)
you                                        one, participants, researchers, theorists
ran analyses/analyses were run            conducted tests, computed values, tested hypotheses
big                                        large
really big                                 very large

Think about being as concise as possible:

not so good                               better
the fact of the matter is                  it is true that, clearly, apparently, in fact, evidently
due to the fact that                      because

Think about being more precise:

not so good                               better
They were friendly.                        The participants were friendly.
It is the best measure available.          The Hoffner scale is the best measure available.

(if you find yourself starting a sentence with “it” or “they” or “those,” you are probably not being specific enough for the reader).

Use scientific logic in describing results:

not so good                               better
the theory was proven                      the hypothesis was supported, hypothesis was confirmed, the findings were consistent with the hypothesis

Other recommended sources:

