Double Negatives

In formal writing, avoid using double negatives.

A “double negative” is when two negatives are used in a clause as a single negation.

I didn’t do nothing to him.
He never wrote no letters.

Instead, use only one negation for such sentences:

I didn’t do nothing to him. → I didn’t do anything to him.

OR

I didn’t do nothing to him. → I did nothing to him.

He never wrote no letters. → He never wrote any letters.

OR

He never wrote no letters. → He wrote no letters.

Also avoid using negatives with modifiers such as barely, scarcely, and hardly because these are considered negative already. This is acceptable in many forms of spoken English, but in written English it is inappropriate.

He doesn’t scarcely know a thing. → He scarcely knows a thing.
I can’t hardly breathe in here! → I can hardly breathe in here!

It is acceptable to use two negatives only if a positive is intended:

It is not unreasonable to assume that it will rain frequently this spring.
The dog was not unhappy with the prospect of receiving a piece of steak.

However, this should be used with care, as it can seem pretentious and wordy.

This handout is adapted from University of Alabama Writing Center Website. Only the format has been changed.