

TIPS ON WRITING A PAPER

Read carefully. Make sure you understand what you are reading as you go. If you don't know a word, look it up. If you find yourself skimming, slow down. Ask yourself what the author is saying; if you can't give a summary as you go, go back and read it again. Take notes on the reading, and also jot down your own ideas as they occur to you.

Write thoughtfully and convincingly. An essay is an attempt to convince the reader to adopt your interpretation of certain pieces of evidence. To be convincing, you must draw quotations from the sources which you then analyze and connect in a logical manner. Essays are made up of paragraphs, which are made up of sentences, which are made up of words. Each of these elements must have internal integrity, and a logical connection to similar elements around it. By this I mean that words should be used carefully and precisely, should agree in number and gender, and should fit together properly. Sentences should build upon one another and refer to one another; and paragraphs should show a clear and logical connection to one another.

PRECISION IN WORDS

USE VERBS!!! The English language has more verbs than any other, and most of us fail to use them to advantage. Avoid verb phrases:

NOT She has a conflict with, or she goes against

BUT She opposes

WRITE IN THE ACTIVE VOICE

Have the subject of your sentence be the person who does the action, not the person who receives it

NOT She was hit by the ball.

BUT He hit her with the ball, or the ball hit her.

Make sure words fit together

NOT winning new boundaries

BUT winning new territories, OR extending its boundaries

Carry out a friendship (forge a friendship, carry out an obligation)

Achieve an idea (achieve a goal, conceive of, realize an idea)

Use common sense to check metaphors, allusions; often trying to visualize an image reveals unexpected comedic results.

This is just the tip of the iceberg; the real meat is underneath.

It's time for us to take off our shirts, roll up our sleeves, and get to work (!)

Be aware of the implications & connotations of words

NOT England endured great change

BUT England underwent great change, UNLESS you specifically mean that hardship and suffering accompanied that change.

HOMOPHONES: traps for the unaware!

English, being the quirky language that it is, contains many words that sound alike but mean different things. Some of the more common duo and trios appear below. Make sure that you have used the correct one, because even spellcheck won't catch these for you!

there (place) -- **their** (belonging to them) -- **they're** (they are -- as a contraction, not acceptable in formal writing)

its (belonging to it) -- **it's** (it is -- see note for they're)

Notice that **its** does NOT follow the usual rules for possession -- NO apostrophe! (I told you English was quirky.)

whose (possessive) -- **who's** (who is -- see note for they're)

thrown -- throne

doe -- dough

two -- to -- too

one -- won

so -- sew

knot -- not

no -- know

do -- due

blew -- blue

ode -- owed

by -- buy

err -- air

ring -- wring

would -- wood

seems -- seams

site -- sight -- cite

rite -- right -- write

Many others exist; make sure the word that sounds right means what you want it to mean. Any doubts -- dictionary time!

AVOID CLICHES, VAGUE WORDS AND PHRASES

Below is a partial list of words that are either unnecessary, or too often used as a substitute for the precisely right word

Meaningful relationship

role model

this paper

it must be emphasized that

the fact that

the reason why ("the reason" will do)

etc.

an example of this is

involves, includes

most uses of "there/that/this is" due to

somewhat, apparently, it seems (be brave - take a stand!)

throughout the ages

views, concepts, feelings

surely, clearly

for the purpose of

the following, the above

the question of, the issue of

this statement shows that

very

Be careful with "must have" and "prove" - these are strong words, and you must (and I do mean must!) make a compelling case to use them.

SENTENCES

Write in **complete sentences**. A complete sentence has a subject, a verb, and often an object of the verb. It gives a sense of conclusion and containment. "She ran" is a complete sentence. "While she ran" is not, because the reader asks what else was happening at the same time.

Use as few words as possible to make your point (this allows you to make more points).

NOT One point that Petrarch makes is that

BUT Petrarch argues that

NOT He is a man who follows

BUT He follows

Makes sure the parts of your sentences **agree** with each other

NOT Each in their own way BUT Each in his own way
(Each is singular, their is plural - no agreement). Someone, everyone, anyone, anybody, nobody, no one, either, neither and every are all **singular**. Each takes the same form of the verb as the subject it, and each takes a singular possessive (its, his, hers -- never their).

Be sure your verb agrees with the true subject of the sentence:

NOT Questioning of values are a threat

BUT Questioning values threatens

(Questioning is the subject, not values; it is singular, so the verb cannot be plural. Instead of "is a threat," technically correct, I substituted the more forceful verb, "threatens.")

Parallelism and Balance

A quick and easy way to smooth out awkward sentences, as well as to ensure that two or more phrases within a sentence really make the same point.

NOT It is the Fates who have spun Oedipus's destiny, and Job is caught in the middle of a conflict between his god and Satan.

BUT Oedipus tries to escape the destiny the Fates have decreed for him, while Job struggles to accept the capriciousness of his beloved god.

NOT Just as Job's belief in God sustains him, so Oedipus's pride is the basis of the king's life.

BUT Job's belief in God sustains him, as Oedipus's pride does him.

Punctuation

Punctuation helps to show the relationship between different words of phrases in a sentence -- NOT the length of a pause.

The comma (,) separates items in a list, phrases in apposition (John, the owner) or phrases within the same sentence (While running, she tripped).

Semicolons (;) can connect two closely related ideas, and are a great help in avoiding run-ons.

The cat was not a bad cat; she was just not a great cat.

Colons (:) can introduce a list of long phrases, or mean the same as "namely."

Only one thing stood between him and his beloved: the Grand Canyon.

By convention, one space follows a comma or semicolon, two a period or colon.

Apostrophes - these are not snowflakes, to be scattered at random over a page. Apostrophes are used in contractions (to be avoided in formal writing), or to show **possession**. Dan's book = book of Dan. Apostrophes have nothing to do with plurals, unless you are showing that an object belongs to more than one person.

The king's book - a book belonging to one king

The kings' book - a book belonging to two or more kings

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ONE SENTENCE AND THE NEXT. Are you building on the same idea? Use moreover, in addition, therefore. Are you opposing one idea to another? Use on the one/other hand, however, though. Try to show the reader which way you are going - whether you are showing contradictions in a work, or building on one central theme (readers do appreciate it so!).

Relate each quotation to its context in your paper - don't just plop it down on the page.

Bruni said, "Petrarch taught us the way in which to learn."

Said and stated are perfectly acceptable introductions, as is argued (if such is the case). Stressed or emphasized are not; Bruni may emphasize something in his writing, but he did not when introducing a quotation.

A QUOTATION MUST REPEAT EXACTLY WHAT SOMEONE SAID OR WROTE!

Whatever is between quotation marks must appear in your paper just as it does in the original. This means you must write your sentence so that the quotation fits into it grammatically.

PARAGRAPHS

Many of the points on sentences hold true for paragraphs as well. Show how one paragraph relates to the one preceding or following. Relate the different sentences within a paragraph to one another. **USE TOPIC SENTENCES!!!** Your first sentence should contain the essence of the sentences that follow. It is the main point of the paragraph, expanded and clarified by the sentences that follow it.

Two paragraphs are especially important: your introduction and your conclusion. I recommend writing the introduction last, because then you've written the paper and know what you're introducing. Your conclusion should not merely repeat your introduction, but should go beyond it, now that you've made your arguments and supported the statements you made in your introduction.

PROOFREAD!!!

Especially in this computer age, typos, misspelling, incorrect or inaccurate quotations reveal a lack of care that readers (including me!) will hold against you.