

Tips for Academic Writing

Common Grammatical Pitfalls

1. Avoid Over-used Phrases
 - a. “Cannot be understated/overstated”
 - b. “Throughout history”
 - c. “All of history”
 - d. “People have always”
2. Check your verb tenses!
 - a. If writing about the past, use past tense.
3. Novel vs. Book
 - a. A novel is a work of fiction. Academic books are not, so you should just call them books.
4. Passive Voice vs. Active Voice
 - a. Try using the “by zombies” test. If the phrase “by zombies” can fit into a sentence and the sentence still works, the sentence is passive.
 - i. Passive: The ball was hit [by zombies].
 - ii. Active: The boy hit the ball.
 - b. Sentences written in the passive voice can be vague about who is responsible for the action. See the examples below.
 - i. “Nuclear bombs were dropped.”
 - ii. “Poland was invaded in 1939.”
 - iii. “The people were massacred.”
5. Every sentence must have a noun and a verb.
6. Avoid run-on sentences.
7. Be yourself! While you should adhere to formal writing standards (i.e. no contractions, etc.), the best essays and papers are written in a clear and approachable style and avoid using overly-complicated language.
 - a. Long and unwieldy sentences are less effective than short, clear sentences. Write short (under 2.5 lines) sentences.
8. Beware of dangling participles. (When a participle does not have a clear subject.)
 - a. Example: “Working at the steel mill for twenty years, Joe’s ears were pretty much shot.” (Working does not have a clear subject).
9. Avoid “to be” verbs unless you’re using an adjective with them. Use strong, active verbs. You can find good lists of active verbs for writers online.
10. Avoid using the term “this” by itself.
 - a. Example: The statement “This is long” is not clear because the “this” is not specified. But, the statement “This document is long” works because it immediately specifies what “this” is.

11. Check commonly confused words

- a. gilded and gelded
- b. secession and succession
- c. then and than
- d. accept and except
- e. affect and effect
- f. elude and allude

12. Capitalization

- a. Proper nouns are capitalized. Others are not.
 - i. Examples: American Revolution, a revolution. President Washington, the president.

Getting Started with Writing:

1. If you know your topic but have writing anxiety and can't seem to get started, try recording yourself explaining your research/argument to a friend. Then transcribe to get words going on a page.
2. If you're stuck, try switching mediums: rather than staring at a computer screen, try sitting down with pen and paper.
3. Outline your paper before you begin, building outward starting with topic sentences. Get your major ideas down first before coming back to each point with your evidence to fill in the blanks.

Organizing your Essay:

1. Finding your thesis statement: your thesis statement does not have to change our entire line of thinking about X topic.
2. Your introduction should give your reader a roadmap of your paper.
3. Check your evidence in each paragraph against the topic sentence. A new idea needs a new paragraph for clarity.
4. A general rule is that a single paragraph should be no longer than one page (double spaced).
5. Once finished, compare your conclusion paragraph with your introduction paragraph. Often your conclusion is a much clearer distillation of your paper's actual ideas and argument, so you may want to use it as the introduction.
6. Your conclusion is not an afterthought or just a reworded version of your introduction. The conclusion is your opportunity to restate your argument, in your own voice, so that it remains in the mind of your reader.

Using Quotations

1. Start paragraphs in your own voice, not with a quotation. Answer the question “so what?” in your conclusion. (What do we know now? How does this change our understanding of X?)
2. Primary source quotes can be key evidence, but it’s better to paraphrase a secondary source rather than quote it.
3. Don’t simply place entire quotations in as freestanding sentences. Instead, quotations should have your words around them to introduce and frame them. Without any context around the quote, the reader is free to assume your meaning.
4. Don’t end a paragraph with someone else’s words. Always explain any quotation that you use, use the quotations as evidence to support your argument, and give yourself the last word.

General Tips for Evaluating Your Writing:

1. Create a personal style sheet to help yourself identify and correct common errors. Include things like misspelled words, grammar and punctuation problems, etc.
2. One key way that you can check to see if your paper makes logical sense is to copy just the topic sentences of your paper into a separate document. They should work like an outline and should all match up with your thesis paragraph.
3. Read your paper out loud! It’s much easier to catch mistakes of grammar, sentence structure, etc. if you hear the problem in your own voice. Alternatively, take advantage of the reading feature in software such as Microsoft Word and Adobe Reader and have the computer read it for you.
 - a. You can also try reading your paper backwards. (Read the last sentence, then second to last sentence, etc.). This is one of the fastest ways to see if you are missing a verb or making a large logical gap.
 - b. If you record yourself reading your paper, you can play it back to catch errors. (Note: this strategy works better for short papers).
4. Check for repetition.
5. Be sure that everything connects to your overall theme.
6. Try reverse outlining.
7. If possible, have someone else read through your paper. Often, our minds read what we intended to write, and we don’t notice problems with logic and consistency or even simple proofreading errors.
8. Proofread your work.
9. Take advantage of the writing center.