

TIPS FOR WRITING
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Below is a list of things that you should either avoid or include in your writing. I see these problems and gaps regularly in student papers, and I want to bring these to your attention now, so that you can avoid them, rather than later, when I have to mark them in your papers. All of these do not apply to every student in this class, but everyone should find at least something useful to learn or apply from this list.

1. **Avoid passive voice:** “The archaeologist found the artifact” is active and usually better than “The artifact was found by the archaeologist.” Passive voice is not wrong, but it produces wordy and sometimes boring prose.
2. **Do your best to avoid “to be” verbs** since these make passive sentences, dull sentences, and often confusing “action.” Some uses are fine – don’t go overboard to avoid this verb – but do minimize it whenever possible. Proofread looking for “is”, “are”, “were”, etc., and try to reword those sentences to make them more active. For instance, sentences that have “there is/are” as the subject and verb tend to be poor sentences, so use them sparingly. When the “to be” conjugation restates the subject in the object or serves as a link between subject and adjective phrase, you usually cannot avoid it.
3. **Avoid confusing common words** such as “effect/affect,” “their/there,” “site/sight,” “accept/except,” “then/than,” etc.
4. **Beware of run-on sentences, incomplete sentences, or comma splices.** You cannot combine two independent clauses or sentences without proper punctuation (such as a semicolon) or a conjunction (such as “, and” or “, but”). Also, be sure not to have incomplete sentences – the most common mishap is for the sentence to not have a subject. For example, you should rarely have reason to begin a sentence with “which” or “that” unless those are followed by a noun.
5. **Avoid superlatives and inflated or grandiose adjectives.** Use “very” only sparingly, and don’t waste your reader’s time with words like “countless,” “innumerable,” or “infinite” or even “obviously,” “clearly,” or “certainly.”
6. **Know the subject of each sentence.** If plural (such as “they”), make sure that the verb is plural, too. In addition, if a pronoun, such as “she” or “it,” be sure your reader can figure out which person or thing the pronoun represents, what is called an “antecedent”.
7. **Make sure you know the difference between “its” and “it’s.”** Remember that “its” is a possessive, while “it’s” is an abbreviation (“contraction”) for “it is.”
8. **Do not use an apostrophe “s” (’s) unless you are making something possessive.** It hardly ever goes with making nouns plural except when pluralizing certain lower-case acronyms (e.g., “How many rbi’s did he have?”) or words-as-words (“She used fourteen *and*’s in the sentence”). For instance, do not write “1990’s”, and you are probably better off not putting it with numerals either (e.g., “1000s”).
9. **Do not decorate your sentences with commas, but do not forget to use them where appropriate.** Use commas where they help your reader understand the sentence, usually by breaking longer sentences into phrases, each group carrying out a distinct function. Commas often appear in pairs to mark the beginning and end of a phrase inserted into a sentence.
10. **Do not overcapitalize.** Reserve capital letters for proper nouns, and remember that most fields, such as anthropology or biology, are *not* capitalized unless part of a name, such as Department of Anthropology.
11. **Avoid making general statements that you do not support** with sources. You should attribute any summary statements to their sources with citations.

12. **Beware of colloquial and journalistic writing** if you are writing an academic paper. Do not write with catchy newspaper phrases or slang words unless you have good reason.
13. **Be consistent and correct when referring to articles or books** in your writing: Underline or italicize book and journal titles; place quotation marks around article titles. Do not vary from this format.
14. **Minimize parenthetical comments** *See back of sheet for additional information* . . . Hence, there is a good chance that you don't need to say it. Either pull these sentences and words out of parentheses and integrate them with the prose or dispense with them altogether except when you really need to use them.
15. **Do not overuse quotations.** I am interested in what YOU have to say. You should use other people's words and ideas to help craft your essay, but you should never string together quotations to fill paragraphs. You also should beware of trying to tie together or abbreviate quotations with excessive ellipses. Use these sparingly. You should only quote those things that are particularly well-worded, or peculiarly worded, or are worded in such a way that you want to emphasize them in your argument.
16. **Make sure that you have *verbatim* quotes.** Having otherwise is a mis-quote. If you need to leave something out, use ellipses (. . .) to indicate the missing words, but do not put these at the beginning or end of a quote. It is already obvious to the reader that what you quoted was not the only phrase or sentence in the entire work, meaning that words occurred before or after it in some capacity.
17. **Improve your skills with paraphrasing.** You will often need to summarize what others have put into print, and this involves paraphrasing much more often than direct quoting. Paraphrasing still requires a citation, sometimes with an actual page number, but you must find an adequate way to summarize that does not plagiarize. A good strategy involves reading a source closely to get the main ideas and then not consulting it again while you write, *in your words*, what that source conveyed.
18. **Try not to be repetitive.** I do not need to read three or four variations on a sentence. Going into more depth or summarizing previous arguments, as you would in a conclusion, or setting out the course of the paper, as you would in an introduction, are very different than simply rewording and repeating something that you have already said. Be concise and don't try to fill up a paper length requirement with repetition.
19. **Do not think of paragraphs as random clusters of sentences.** Paragraphs should be topically organized, typically such that the body of the paragraph relates directly the topic sentence that leads into it. These paragraphs need to flow logically from preceding ones to make a series of organized points.
20. **Spell-check and proofread!** I cannot emphasize these enough. One of the best ways to improve your editing skill is to read your sentences aloud. This can often highlight the fact that they may not be clear enough as is. You need to allow yourself at least as much time to edit as you do to write.
21. **Most importantly, do not plagiarize.** Plagiarism refers to the act of claiming someone else's work or idea as your own. It violates university policies on academic honesty and carries severe penalties. Therefore, I do not tolerate plagiarism of any kind, and I will report any violations. Avoid plagiarism by citing *all* of your sources, whether books, periodicals, web sites, and unpublished manuscripts. You cannot use someone else's ideas or words as your own, nor can you shuffle the words around to make them "yours." If you are unclear about what constitutes plagiarism or how to cite your sources appropriately, please consult with the instructor.