

Some guidelines for writing papers
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1. You must seriously consider serious objections to your argument. For example, if you are criticizing an author, you must construct and respond to a strong defense of the author, and if you are defending, you must construct and respond to a strong criticism. Attacking straw men is bad, and a complete lack of attention to possible counterarguments is worse. If you cannot imagine serious counterarguments to your thesis, then your thesis is probably trivial (or your imagination is too constrained). *Do not underestimate the importance of this. A paper that considers no counterarguments or only very weak ones is not a persuasive or successful paper.*
2. Meeting #2 requires taking a clear position on the question you are addressing. "This paper will explore the issues related to" is not a thesis (and, obviously, doesn't allow for any interesting counterargument).
3. Logic counts.
4. Spelling counts. Running a spell-check is the beginning, not the end, of finding spelling errors.
5. Grammar and correct usage count. Using the grammar-check in Microsoft Word is not recommended as a method of finding grammatical errors. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, and Shertzer's *The Elements of Grammar* are much more reliable guides. If you own none of these, you should invest in one or more as soon as possible.
6. Style counts, but see #7.
7. Most of what they taught you in high school composition (if your high school had such a course) remains true. Outlining before you start writing is useful. A thesis paragraph at the beginning of the paper, thesis statements at the beginnings of many paragraphs, and periodic signposts about what has been proven so far and what remains to be proven, help keep a paper clear. It is true that overdoing this kind of thing can make essays seem mechanical and unlovely; but it is better to err on the side of a clear unloveliness than to err on the side of stylish confusion. As with grammatical rules, you should know the rules of composition and be able to use them easily before you decide that their violation is warranted in this or that case for stylistic reasons. So, for example, one sometimes has good reason to use the passive voice. Unless one understands the problems with the passive voice, however, one can't distinguish the rare appropriate uses from the many sloppy ones.
8. A metaphor is not an argument. A list is not an argument. Even an analogy, by itself, is not an argument.
9. One argument can refute, undermine, or override another. Refutation: "This is wrong. The evidence otherwise, the causality runs the other way, there is no logical link here..." Undermining: "This may be correct, but look where else it gets us in the long term, or what other consequences the argument has that proponents didn't notice, or what obviously ridiculous cases the argument actually has to cover on its own terms, or..." Overriding: "This may be correct, but this other issue is more important, because it is more urgent, because there is some logical or moral ranking of principles, because justice is more important than utility..." If your argument overrides another, you normally have to give reasons why x is more important than y, not simply assert it.
10. Beware of introductions and conclusions, especially in short papers. A lengthy introduction discussing how important a question is and how many great thinkers have thought about it for how many centuries is a waste of space, and space is your most precious resource. Cut to the chase; offer your thesis and outline your argument. Conclusions should not include surprises; they should clearly state the conclusions that have already unfolded through the course of the argument. Unsupported speculations about other related questions, or unargued-for controversial claims about the wider significance of what you have established, can only weaken the force of the arguments you *have* made.

11. Statements like "I think X," "I believe X," and (worst of all) "I feel X" are autobiographical. They tell the reader something about you; they tell the reader nothing about claim X. Sometimes—rarely—there is a call for such constructions, but don't use them when you really mean to be arguing in support of X.

This is a list of some common mistakes, but is by no means complete. Buy and use a style guide such as Fowler's or Strunk & White for more complete guidance. Examples and explanations are short and sometimes incomplete; when they conflict with fuller accounts in a style guide or dictionary, rely on the latter.

Observe the distinctions between or among the following.

farther/ further (*farther* for actual physical distance, but "Nothing could be further from my thoughts.")

may/ might (When speaking about a present or future action, *might* expresses some doubt, while *may* is agnostic about likelihood. When speaking about past actions, only *might have* is correct for counterfactuals, things that could have happened but didn't. "If Japan had won the battle of Midway, it might have won the war.")

may/ can (*can* refers to possibility, *may* to permission)

its/ it's (*its* means *belongs to it*; *it's* is short for *it is*)

tolerance/ toleration (Usually *tolerance* is a personal attitude, *toleration* a policy, as in state toleration of religion)

discreet/ discrete (*discrete* means noncontinuous or individuated, not subtle or quiet or private.)

which/ that (*which* for clauses that aren't necessary to identify the object, usually set off by commas; *that* for clauses that are necessary to specify the one being talked about.)

who/ whom/ that (Avoid *that* when the antecedent is a person. *Who* is to *whom* as *we* is to *us*.)

affect/ effect (A affects B; A effected a change in B; C is the cause, D is the effect; a prisoner turns over personal effects; he affects a cane, pocket watch, and bowtie in order to appear eccentric.)

imply/ infer (The author implies, the data imply; the reader or the researcher infers.)

disinterested/ uninterested (*disinterested* means impartial; someone doesn't care is *uninterested*.)

hopefully/ I hope that (*hopefully* does not mean what you almost certainly think it means. "He looked up his grade hopefully," not "Hopefully, it won't rain today.")

lay/ lie (*lay* is a transitive verb; it requires an object. I lay the book down; I went to lie down on the bed.)

less/ fewer (*fewer* for discrete objects you can count, *less* for general amount. Less reading, but fewer pages of reading. We need less labor; we need fewer workers.)

sensuous/ sensual (Anything appealing to the senses, such as a painting or a piece of food, can be sensuous. Most of us most of the time don't find food sensual.)

populace/ populous (*Populace* is a noun; the population, the people. *Populous* is an adjective.)

tenant/ tenet (Unrelated. A *tenant* inhabits a house or a piece of land. A *tenet* is a belief or a principle. A philosopher, or anyone else, who held his or her tenants firmly might be guilty of assault.)

between/among (*between* for two people or objects, *among* for three or more.)

everyday/ every day (When you mean "routine" or "normal," it's *everyday*.)

principle/ principal (*Principle* is the noun that means a rule, a norm, a goal. *Principal* is the adjective meaning primary, or the noun that refers to a primary actor, the first officer of a school, the director of an agent.)

precedent/ president (*According to the precedent set in Clinton vs. Jones, a President may be sued while in office.*)

dissent/ descent (*Hobbes worries that too much dissent might begin a society's descent into civil war.*)

lose/ loose (To *lose* something is to release it from some kind of restraint, to let it go. *Loose* as a verb isn't an everyday construction; it can always be replaced by *release* or *let loose*. If the sentence doesn't work with such a replacement, then you mean *lose*, the opposite of *gain* or *find*. I *lose* my freedom, my glasses, or my job; I have the most to *lose*.)

comma/ semi-colon/ colon (Semi-colons separate full independent clauses in the same sentence, or items in a list that contain commas within them. A colon precedes a list, or separates two independent clauses in the same sentence when the second is a restatement or an amplification of the first. Commas set off most phrases and dependent clauses, and separate the items in a list except when the items themselves contain commas.)

the phrase is "all intents and purposes," and not, e.g., "all extensive purposes."

Pay careful attention to: subjunctive verbs, noun-pronoun agreement, subject-verb agreement

Be careful to avoid:

dangling participles ("Being unready to face the day, coffee helped." It wasn't the coffee that was unready.)

prepositions after transitive verbs ("He advocated for the position that...")

incorrect prepositions ("different than;" in American English it's "different from." In British English "different to" seems sometimes to be acceptable, but I do not understand when.)

switching verb tenses mid-thought ("Aristotle argues x; further, he said y.")

I am not a stickler about dangling prepositions provided that they don't create a lack of clarity,¹ and there is no rule in English against split infinitives (though, again, be careful about clarity).

Some notes concerning plagiarism

It is your responsibility to know, to understand, and to follow the rules concerning citations and plagiarism. Plagiarism *will* result both in failing the entire course and in appropriate disciplinary action. Turning in someone else's work as your own is simply not allowed. Neither is it allowed to turn in work for which you have already received a grade and credit in another class, unless you have the permission of *both* professors. While you are encouraged to discuss your papers with other students, the writing must be your own.

I monitor the web sites that provide term papers, both those that allow you to download them for free and those that charge you for them. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that plagiarism is on the rise because students who otherwise wouldn't cheat find it so temptingly *easy* at three o'clock in the morning to download a paper. Resist that temptation.

A footnote or parenthetical citation should be provided for every use of someone else's words, as well as for your paraphrases of someone else's ideas. You have a bit of leeway in writing about a single book that everyone in your audience has read; you don't need to prove with quotations and citations everything you say about the major themes of the book. (I know that you're not trying to steal authorship of "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" or the idea that the state of nature is a state of war.) You should, however, err on the side of caution.

¹ "That is the sort of nonsense up with which I will not put"—attributed to Winston Churchill, but Churchill had a surer mastery of the language than most of us do.