

GUIDELINES FOR TERM PAPERS

Term papers are a necessary evil of college life. They exist to give the student an opportunity to practice writing the types of reports that will be required by employers. The student should make every effort to do a respectable job on any term paper, if for no other reason than the skills acquired will be useful in later life. (Those who cannot write will need to master other job skills, like flipping burgers and cleaning toilets.) What is common, unfortunately, is the poor quality of most student writing. While there is certainly room for the creative expression of ideas, many students have not yet mastered the basics of written English. Sometimes it is impossible to determine what a student is trying to say simply because the writing is so poor.

At the upper division level of college coursework, there is absolutely no excuse for poor writing. It makes no difference where you come from or what you have done; these rudimentary communications skills should have been mastered before reaching this level of study. It is expected that you can write correctly, and part of your grade on term papers will be determined by your writing ability. In short, you will write correctly, or your grade will suffer.

No attempt is being made to dictate the fine points of writing. Feel free to express yourself in any appropriate manner. But while there are many acceptable styles of written communication, there are some major errors that are never allowable. These are the types of errors that will count against your grade. Listed below are the cardinal sins and major errors that will be counted against you on your term papers. Read this list well and understand it. If you do not understand something, ask your instructor for clarification.

**This is the one and only warning you will get,
and if you ignore it you will suffer the consequences.**

* * * * *

THE CARDINAL SINS

Plagiarism - Plagiarism is not allowed under any circumstances or in any form. Should you plagiarize and be caught at it, you will suffer severe consequences. Plagiarism is not confined to copying exactly from another source. It is not sufficient to change merely a word or two in a sentence. For the purposes of this class, if you have a string of six words lifted directly from

an uncited source you are guilty of plagiarism. If you are incapable of writing creatively, you must at least learn to paraphrase. Quotations must be properly punctuated and referenced, in an appropriate style.

Late Papers - Papers are due on time. You have plenty of warning, and no excuses will be accepted. And just so you get the message...

**NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED!
NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED!
NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED!**

MAJOR ERRORS

Misspelling - This includes improper hyphenation and the use of archaic forms of words. It is best to have a good dictionary by your side at all times. If you use a word processor with a spelling checker, you will still have to check your work. For example, the computer will recognize "to", "too", and "two" as proper spellings no matter where they appear in the text. If you use a grammar checker, you still will have to be careful; even grammar checkers can make mistakes and miss errors. The writer bears the final responsibility for spelling.

Typographical Errors - These are regarded as misspellings. Check your work carefully.

Contractions and Abbreviations - Contractions do not belong in formal reports like the ones you will be writing. Do not use contractions unless they are part of a direct quote. Any abbreviation must be properly defined on its first usage.

Run-on Sentences - If you are going to use a compound sentence structure, the independent clauses must be separated by proper punctuation and a coordinating conjunction, if required.

Sentence Fragments - Sentences require both a subject and verb. Some forms of creative writing might relax this requirement, but this is not creative writing; this is report writing. You will tend to make this error if you use a lot of compound sentences. A careless writer will make the second independent clause a sentence fragment.

Paragraphs That Run an Entire Page - Keep paragraphs reasonably short. A paragraph is meant to convey one thought. A typical paragraph will be three to six sentences long. This means that there will be between two and four paragraphs on a page. Be careful of overly long sentences.

Single Sentence Paragraphs - A paragraph that is one sentence long tries to do too much in one sentence. This type of paragraph is often a very long run-on sentence. A sentence conveys or explains a single idea. Long sentences are often more readable when broken into smaller pieces.

Mismatched Subjects and Verbs - This refers to structures like "They is..." and "She are...". This type of error is offensive to the eye and the ear. You are most likely to make this kind of error if you are writing a complex sentence with a number of subordinate clauses. For example, "The director of one of the country's largest corporations that specializes in the manufacture of consumer specialty goods is..." has a singular subject ("director") and requires a singular verb ("is" instead of "are") even though "...goods is..." looks and sounds funny. Complex sentences can get you into trouble, so be careful. You need to use them to give your writing a little life, but they are dangerous to the careless writer.

Incorrect or Unclear Antecedents - When you use a pronoun, it refers to another noun somewhere else in the text. This relationship must be unambiguous and correctly stated. Consider the following sentences:

"Bankers, state and local government officials, and members of the general public are all working together in an effort to prevent the possible failure of a number of savings and loan institutions from damaging the financial infrastructure of this nation. They feel that some of their current work may actually hasten these failures."

Exactly who is the "they" and "their" in the second sentence? The relationship is not at all clear. This makes it impossible to tell who is doing what to whom. This type of error can be avoided by using pronouns sparingly. Every time you use a "he", "she", "it", or "they" you must be sure that there is absolutely no doubt to whom or what the pronoun refers. You should refer to a company or an organization as "it". Do not start a paragraph with a sentence whose

subject is a pronoun. Do not use any first person pronouns ("I", "we", "me", "us", "our") or second person pronouns ("you", "your").

Exhibits - Exhibits must be introduced in order. Any documentation that supports your written argument must be logical and sequential. If you find that your exhibits are not in the same order as they are introduced, fix the order. No exhibits may be introduced in the final section of the paper where recommendations are made. All exhibits must support the previous discussion, and the recommendation section must stand by itself. Be sure to mention any assumptions that are relevant to the exhibits either in the text, on the exhibit, or in both locations.

Repetitive or Weak Structures - Some writers seem to start every sentence the same way. That is one sure way to put the reader to sleep. Many people tend to start sentences with "Although..." or "Also,..." or some other indirect form. This is a very weak style and makes for dull reading. Try to start sentences (especially those that begin paragraphs) with subjects. Under this error type, the following specific items will count as errors.

Beginning a sentence with an adverb followed by a comma is forbidden, such as "Recently, ...". This error includes forms like "However, ..." and "Therefore, ...".

Use of the word "also" is absolutely forbidden. "Also" is a very fine four letter word, but students tend to abuse it horribly. You will not use it at all.

Inappropriate Phraseology - This is a catchall for poor wording. There are some phrases that are never appropriate in report writing. For example, no person or company is ever "looking to" do anything. Do not use rhetorical questions; they insult the intelligence of the reader and waste space. The only question marks in a formal report (if any) should be in direct quotations. Under this error type, the following items will count as errors.

Use of ordinal adverbs is forbidden. This means words like "firstly", "secondly", , and "lastly" are proscribed. These words sound just plain dumb, so do not use them.

Use of any form of the verb "to look" is forbidden.

Use of any form of the word “current” is forbidden, unless you are writing about the flow of water or electric current. This means that “currently” is proscribed.

Use of the word “obvious” is forbidden. The truth of the matter is that nothing is ever obvious. There is always something that you do not know. When you start describing things as obvious, you are guilty of hubris. You will not do that in your writing.

The words “basically”, “essentially”, and their synonyms are banned. By using these words you are telling your reader that s/he is too dumb to understand your reasoning. Never insult your reader.

The word “impact” is a noun, not a verb. Only overaged yuppies and careless tyros would use the word as a verb, and you will not do so.

A “number” of things can be counted, like the number of books on a shelf. An “amount” of things can be measured, like the amount of knowledge in those books. You do not have a “number of water in a glass” nor do you have an “amount of dollars in your wallet”. Be careful to use these words correctly.

Be careful of words and phrases that sound alike. When people lose their jobs, it is sometimes called a “layoff” (noun, one word). The managers who make the decision choose to “lay off”(verb, two words) the workers.

Should other forbidden phrases be noticed, you will be informed of them in class.

There are many fine points of writing that are open to interpretation. In these cases, you will receive the benefit of the doubt, but you could lose points if you become unreasonable. Be careful about the use of commas. It is easy to get carried away. As for bibliographies and footnotes, any reasonable format is acceptable. Margins and fonts must be reasonable, too. This typically means 1" margins all around. Use full justification of the text; a ratty looking right margin is distracting. The font should be either a standard serif (Times Roman) or sans serif (Arial) variety. Do not get cute with all those neat little fonts you find on the computer. Your intent is clarity of communication, not entertainment.

HINTS...HINTS...HINTS

At this point you might be considering either changing your major or slitting your wrists. Neither action is career enhancing, so accept the fact that you will have to work on your writing. Do not think that you can put a few scribbles down on a piece of paper and let some typist figure it out for you; that technique never works. Typists are very expensive, too. You will do a better job if you do it yourself.

Prepare an outline before writing your paper. By organizing your thoughts, the writing will be easier, and you will make fewer mistakes. The outline is neither required nor expected to be turned in with the paper. It is strictly for your benefit. If you think that you are good enough to write with the outline "in your head", you are very, very wrong.

When it is time to proofread your paper, you are advised to go into a room, close the door, and read the paper aloud. Many written sins become obvious when they are spoken aloud. At times you will be unable to understand what you wrote. It is much better for you (and your grade) if you find these mistakes before the teacher does.

Another variation of reading aloud is to read your paper to a friend or family member. If the listener cannot understand what you are trying to say in the paper, the paper is probably poorly written. Remember that you are writing for an audience that will only know what you present in the paper. If you intend to be understood, your writing must be clear and concise. There is one restriction to using this format. If you are writing a paper that is supposed to represent individual work, say as part of a take-home test, you may not use another member of that class as your audience.

Take a little time and care, and you can produce a good quality term paper. A good paper is the only way you will be able to get a good grade. A good paper is something you can be proud of, so make the effort to do a good job.

Take advantage of the English Department's Writing Center. It will make you a better writer, but you must be careful. You are held responsible for the rules presented in this set of Guidelines. If you should receive recommendations from someone in the Writing Center that are contrary to these Guidelines and you follow them, you could lose points on your paper.