

GUIDE TO GOOD WRITING

When writing your essays, keep the following in mind:

1. Yes, writing "counts."
2. Every essay must have an introduction and conclusion. The purpose of introductions and conclusions is to tell the reader what to expect and to sum up, respectively.
3. Remember: you are making an argument. State your main argument in the introduction, then follow through. Every paragraph, every sentence, every example should advance your argument.
4. Answer the question and only the question. Do not "pad" your essay with unnecessary facts and descriptions. (A "padded" essay commonly contains the tell-tale sentence, "To understand _____, it is first necessary to begin with..." as in, "To understand the impact of the First World War on the Middle East, it is first necessary to begin with a description of Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina.")
5. Do not quote secondary sources unless the source of your quotation writes as well as Shakespeare. (None of the authors I've assigned this quarter, with possibly one exception, does.) Students only quote secondary sources when they are too lazy to put the material in their own words, when they don't understand the material, or when they want to pad their essays.
6. The first or second sentence of every paragraph should be a topic sentence--that is, a sentence that identifies the subject of your paragraph. Each paragraph should contain nothing but that which the topic sentence says it will.
7. Every paragraph should contain one and only one idea--the idea presented in the topic sentence. This idea might, however, include several examples: There are several reasons why... (this is your topic sentence).
First,....Second,....Third,....
8. Write simple, declarative sentences. They are more powerful. You won't confuse your reader. You won't confuse yourself. If you have any doubts about how well simple, declarative sentences can propel even weak ideas, read Hemingway.
9. As a general rule, history is written in the simple past ("Washington crossed the Delaware in 1776..."), not in the continuous past ("Washington was crossing the Delaware in 1776...") and never in the present (So, Washington crosses the Delaware in 1776...). There are, of course, exceptions: "Washington was reading a book when he crossed the Delaware."
10. On the other hand, scientific truths--even wrong ones--are always in the present tense: "Contrary to common belief, Columbus believed that the world is flat."
11. Avoid passive voice. It tells me that you are not sure who the agent of an action is. Thus: "John read the book," not "The book was read (by John)."
12. Master the rules of capitalization. A title is capitalized only when it is unmodified and followed by a name: King Igor, the king, the Russian king Igor; the Ottoman Empire, the empire.
13. Use both your lecture notes and readings. Lectures do not have to be cited, but material from readings do. If you have any questions about citations, buy a copy of Kate L. Turabian's A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations (shame on you if you don't already have one), or, if you are a graduate student or plan to continue in graduate school, The Chicago Manual of Style, or an equivalent.

14. Plagiarism: PASSING OFF SOMEONE ELSE'S WORK AS YOUR OWN IS PLAGIARISM. That someone can be a fellow student, a professor, or an author. Words that are not your own must be placed within quotation marks and footnoted; ideas that are not your own must also be footnoted (one exception: the lectures for this class). Changing a few words in a passage copied from a book is plagiarism. Footnoting a passage that is quoted but not placed in quotation marks or attributed in some other way to its source is plagiarism. While I encourage students to study together and (God forbid) discuss the class and the essays/exams among themselves, the moment pen touches paper discussion ends and plagiarism begins. One special reminder: I am a professional historian. I make my living reading and comparing texts. Do not think you can get away with it. I'm better at this than you are, and the expression "living hell" does not begin to describe what your life will be like when I catch you.

15. Essays and exams must be handed in on time. You will be penalized if your essay is late.

16. "Impact" is not a verb (unless you are a dentist or a proctologist). "Due to" should never be used instead of "because of." "Though" should never be used instead of "although." The word is "abolition," not "abolishment." Never use "as" to mean "inasmuch as" (which is not much of an improvement, inasmuch as it is pretentious). And the adjectival form of "empire" is not "empirical."

17. Their, there, they're. Two, to, too. Than, then.

18. Apostrophes should only be used in two cases: to indicate possession and to form a contraction (i.e., can't). Because you will never use contractions in formal writing, this rule should be easy to remember. Under no circumstances should you use apostrophes when you are simply making a word plural. P.S. Learn the difference between "its" and "it's."

19. If you must refer to yourself, use "I," never "we" (unless you are the queen of England, have multiple personalities, lice, or all three). On second thought, don't refer to yourself.

20. Don't be chatty. Your reader is not your pal--he/she is your judge. As with so many other things in life, "cute" is annoying.

21. Avoid slang or any expression that would upset or have to be explained to your father.

22. Avoid anachronisms: The Muslim Empires were not multi-ethnic (ethnicity had not yet been invented), nor did the caliphs believe in "diversity."

23. Inanimate objects do not "see" or "witness," as in "the nineteenth century witnessed...."

24. Special note to graduate students:

- a. When you use the expression "such-and-such is informed by..." you are telling me that 1) there is a relationship between two mentioned items and 2) you don't know what that relationship is. The same with "such-and-such is imbricated with"--only worse.
- b. Elide does not mean "to combine"; it means "to leave out." The word you are looking for is "conflate."
- c. You better know what you are saying if you use the expression "articulates with."
- d. Finally, post-modern punctuation (parentheses around letters, etc.) and puns are no longer ironic; they're cliché. Remember: post-modernism was invented by Frenchmen who think that Jerry Lewis is funny.

25. Spell-check. It's the least you can do.

26. The university provides help in writing for those who want it. Do not hesitate to make use of this service.