

Avoiding Common Writing Mistakes

Time Management: Improve the quality of your paper by starting early! Avoid waiting until the last possible moment to write. Instead, leave sufficient time for thinking about the material, writing, reorganizing, revising, proofreading, and editing. Do not turn in a (rough) first draft!

Organization: To effectively communicate your argument and ideas, you need a well-organized, coherent paper. Making a detailed outline and having a “mission” for the paper *before* you begin to write will facilitate this process. Once you start writing, be sure that every paragraph has a clear purpose (and thesis sentence) and advances your overall argument. Provide good transitions and “signposts” between paragraphs or sections. Subject headings also can help the reader follow the progression of your arguments in longer papers.

Even for shorter papers, an introduction and conclusion are helpful. In the Intro, provide a “roadmap.” For instance, “In this paper, I argue X. I then illustrate this argument by looking at the case of Y. I conclude by discussing Z.” At the end of the paper, briefly state what you have accomplished therein.

Argumentation: Critical thinking and good writing entail taking alternative points of view into account. Rather than overstate your case, briefly address any potential objections to your own argument, counter-arguments, or alternative interpretations of reality. Doing so will demonstrate that you have analyzed the issues from a variety of perspectives.

Stylistic Issues: Try to use the active voice instead of the passive voice. Avoid extensive quotations unless they are crucial to your paper. It is usually preferable to paraphrase or to use a shorter quotation. Be sure to explain (or comment on) the quotation rather than letting it “speak for itself.” Be diligent about using footnotes, parenthetical citations, and other forms of citation in a consistent manner (see the link to the style sheet for details).

Check a recent map or other reference materials if you think a country name has recently changed (e.g., Burma, Democratic Republic of Congo, etc.).

Spell Check: When run spell check, understand that this merely indicates whether a certain word is in the dictionary. While helpful, it is not the last step in doing a paper. In other words, it does **not** obviate the need for proofreading. Errors which appear frequently (perhaps because of spell check, since the reader assumes it has detected every error) include: “insure” instead of “ensure” (both are in the dictionary), “of” instead of “if” (or vice versa), “not” in place of “now,” etc.

One Final Tip: Back up your computer files frequently!

For additional “best practices” and advice on writing, see the most recent editions of the following texts:

Kate Turabian, *A Student's Guide to Writing College Papers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

William Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*. New York: Macmillan.