

Writing Papers—Common Pitfalls and Some Tips for Avoiding Them

The following outline reflects common concerns with student papers at Perkins, along with what I hope are practical suggestions for dealing with them.

- 1) **Problem** = Insufficient investment of time. Haste makes waste and it also makes for poor papers.
Solution = Give yourself ample time to
 - a. craft a thesis and formulate an outline
 - b. write clearly and cohesively
 - c. cite sources properly, eliminating any chance of inadvertent plagiarism
 - d. employ dictionaries, encyclopedias, and style manuals whenever you are in doubt
 - e. consult with a librarian or other friendly human resource
 - f. revise, rewrite, and proofread
 - g. bribe a friend to proofread yet again

- 2) **Problem** = Poor organization. **Solution** = Make every unit of the paper do the job you need it to. Create an outline to map out what you want to say and where you want to say it. Stop frequently and ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish
 - a. At the sentence level. Is this sentence clear? Does it contain a subject, verb, and object? Is the verb active or passive? Is there any unnecessary, extraneous, convoluted, or redundant verbiage?
 - b. At the paragraph level. Do the sentences in this paragraph relate to one another and to the paragraph's topic sentence?
 - c. At the paper level. Do the paragraphs hang together to address the paper's thesis? Is there a thesis statement? Are there sufficient supporting examples? Adequate analysis? Is there a conclusion that reflects and reiterates the thesis statement?

- 3) **Problem** = Inappropriate writing style. Professors at Perkins will assign a variety of projects that call for different kinds of writing, including reflection papers, spiritual journals, summaries, sermons, and scholarly/analytical essays. **Solution** = In all cases, student should
 - a. Be clear on their professor's expectations for each assignment. If in doubt, ask.
 - b. Make every effort to employ correct spelling and proper grammar.
 - c. Avoid colloquialisms, slang, and abbreviations derived from text messaging. Some examples include: not the brightest bulb in the box, bent out of shape, get a life, creep, glitch, klutz, BTW, LOL, OMG.
 - d. Keep it simple. Fancy words and complicated sentences cannot divert a reader's attention from weak mechanics.

- 4) **Problem** = Unusual formatting. Using an idiosyncratic format for papers can distract professors and (sometimes) make them cranky. **Solution** = In the absence of any guidance, go with a standardized format that includes
 - a. One-inch margins

- b. Twelve-point type in a readable font, such as Times New Roman, Ariel, or Century
- c. Black ink for text (reserving color for tables and charts)
- d. A cover sheet that includes your name, your class name, class number, and professor, the date, and the paper's title. No binders.

5) **Problem** = when and where to use footnotes. **Solution** = Use footnotes any time you quote the work of another, any time you paraphrase the work of another, and any time you state a fact that is not generally known. Other things to keep in mind:

- a. Insert footnotes at the end of clauses or sentences.
- b. A single note can include more than one reference. Simply separate each reference with a semicolon.
- c. Try to avoid big block quotes. Select the pithiest part of the section to quote and paraphrase the rest.
- d. When using *Chicago Manual of Style*, the format for citations in footnotes varies slightly from the format for citations in the bibliography. See *CMS*, 15th ed., p. 597 (Ref. Z 253 .U69 2003) for examples.
- e. When in doubt about when or whether to footnote, seek guidance.

6) **Problem** = Inability to write a book review. **Solution** = Some components to consider for this kind of assignment are

- a. Giving the book's citation in your professor's chosen scholarly style, and use this style for writing your review
- b. Giving a **brief** summary of the book's content and state its thesis. What were the author's goals in writing the book? Why did the author undertake this project? And what are author's credentials?
- c. Asking questions and doing some analysis:
 - i. What are the book's strength's and weaknesses? For example, did you notice particular flaws in the argument? The writing style? Did the author accomplish what he/she set out to do? Were the mechanics (editing, proofreading, index) in order?
 - ii. What about the book struck you particularly? Select the points you think are important and explore them.
 - iii. Where does this work fit into the context of its subject? How does it relate to other books you know? Has it broken new ground? Is it a rehash of old material? In what ways?
 - iv. Did this author use the best available sources, from within the field and from other, complimentary, disciplines? Is there a good balance of primary and secondary sources?
- e. Maintaining an objective and civil tone throughout. Remember that you too will have a book reviewed one day.

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