

The List: B's Top Twenty Countdown

Below is a list of the most common problems I see in papers. Some are grammatical, some are MLA formatting, and some are conceptual. The list is in no order of importance.

1. Watch out for pronoun reference: people - they; a person - one, he, or she.
2. Avoid informal language unless you are sure that it is appropriate for the audience or occasion.
3. Always put a comma after an introductory phrase: In..., As..., When..., By..., If..., then. (This is especially important for "if, then" statements: Don't let the reader get lost in the sentence.)
4. Avoid rhetorical questions. One or two well placed rhetorical questions might be appropriate if you are absolutely sure your audience will fill in the answer that you assume they will. Otherwise, always answer any questions that you pose in a paper, preferably in close proximity to the question. In any event, definitely don't over use them.
5. Always cite page numbers (even for paraphrases): "blah blah blah" (67). Period at the end!
6. Avoid citing a dictionary unless it is crucial for a distinction you are trying to make. It is better to put forth your own definition that fits your situation and argue for its use.
7. Always use first names the first time you mention an author. Stanley Milgram, Walter Stace, etc. Afterwards, it is appropriate to use just the last name. Always make sure the audience is set up to know who is speaking or being spoken about.
8. Always set up quotes: Socrates says, . . . According to Socrates, . . . For Socrates, . . . etc. Again, make sure the reader knows who is speaking/being quoted.
9. Be sure to get the semi-colon before and comma after "however" and "therefore" when you use it in the middle of a sentence (. . . ; however, . . . ; therefore, . . .). Sometimes the semicolon is not needed, but many times it is. Watch out for the run-on/comma splice.
10. Avoid using "I think," "I feel," or "I believe": The problem isn't the "I" (which is often entirely appropriate to use). The problem is that many writers apparently feel that using one of those phrases gets them out of having to support the claim that follows. When you catch yourself using one of those phrases, go back, cut out the phrase, and then look to see if you have adequately supported the claim you are making.
11. Remember: put articles "in quotes" and books *in italics* (or underlined).
12. For the Works Cited, follow MLA format exactly!!!
13. Use "which" when there is a comma before it, in other words when it is a separate phrase. Use "that" when there is no comma.

14. In quotes, . . . has spaces in between; you really only need them in the middle, not the beginning or end of a quote. If you are leaving out words within the sentence, use three periods. If you are leaving out sentences between sentences, use four periods (one of which is the period of the previous sentence).

15. Avoid using the term "proves" unless you have a *tightly* sealed argument. Use "shows" instead. Remember: always ask yourself if you need to qualify your claims.

16. Avoid prefab 1, 2, 3 constructions in your thesis sentences (either explicitly via numbers or implicitly by providing a list of points). Determine the single idea that links these 3 or 4 things together and work that into the thesis. You can still use the same three (or more) supporting points, but make sure that the connection to the thesis is logical and spelled out for the reader, rather than relying on enumeration as a crutch for logic and clarity.

17. Avoid the commonplaces "in today's society" and "throughout history"—be specific; state who or what in this society, or what specific time period.

18. Remember: "people who," not "people that."

19. Use 'single' quotes inside "double" quotes.

20. No quotation marks on a block quote.