

Writing Tips: A Dozen Common Errors and How to Avoid Them

1. *Avoid Repetition.* Look over your paragraph; if you are repeating the same word over and over, either consult a Thesaurus for better options, or restructure a sentence or two.
2. *Format titles correctly.* Titles of long words, like books, take italics (*Hamlet*); titles of shorter works, like articles or poems or short stories, take quotation marks (“Daddy”).
3. *Write in active, rather than passive, voice.*
4. *Avoid beginning sentences with prepositional phrases.* “In this story, a lot of stuff happens” (bad). “A lot of stuff happens in this story” (good). But, what’s the point in writing “a lot of stuff happens”?
5. *Write about literature using present tense.* “Hamlet was conflicted when he saw Claudius praying” (bad). “Hamlet sees Claudius praying and is conflicted about killing him” (good).
6. *Don’t summarize; instead, analyze.* Assume your reader is familiar with the subject work and doesn’t need you to retell the story. Give a minimum of background information, just enough to contextualize the focus of your analysis.
7. *Incorporate quoted material into your sentences, rather than referring to full quotations as if they are disembodied spirits.* Don’t write: “‘John is acting like such a poop face today.’ This quote shows that Jane, down deep, doesn’t really respect her husband.” Instead, try this: “Jane’s casual reference to her husband as “poop face” suggests a subconscious disrespect for his authority” (Gilman).
8. *Use parenthetical citations correctly, per MLA guidelines.* (Last name page number). Example: (Faulkner 301). Note that there is no comma in between. If there is no author, use key words from the title. If you are stating a fact, you do not need a citation. If it looks funny, it might be wrong—check the MLA Guide!
9. *Don’t use double periods when citing.* Wrong: “...I saw John fall in the garden today and get poop on his face.” (Gilman). Right: “...poop on his face” (Gilman). Periods go outside the citation, and you only need one.
10. *Don’t begin sentences with pronouns,* which (haha) will often create a fragment, or a non-specific reference. The word “This” at the start of a sentence has been known to send Mr. Nigro into a conniption fit.
11. *Remember that pronouns refer to the immediately preceding proper noun.* Wrong: “Hamlet hates Claudius because he is crazy.” The pronoun “he” defaults to Claudius by rule, but this isn’t what you mean, is it?
12. *Make sure your nouns/pronouns and subjects/verbs agree in number (singular/plural) and case.* Wrong: “A person who falls in the garden is at risk of getting poop on their face.” Right: “A person who falls...his face” (singular); “People who fall...their faces” (plural).

Use this little one-page guide as a checklist when proofreading. And, proofread out loud. Trust me, your ear will notice the stuff that is wrong before your eyes will. There’s more, of course, but these are the things I tend to mark when grading student papers. By fixing these common errors, you can become a much better writer right now!