

1. **Read the assignment carefully.** You don't want to get a poor grade because you did not sufficiently answer the question.
2. **Never underestimate the power of a good outline.** Outlines help you organize and structure your ideas. In the long run, an outline will save you time when you write your essay and will help you remain focused.
3. **Pay particular attention to your introduction and thesis statement.** The thesis statement is the core of your argument. If your reader doesn't know what your thesis statement is, he or she will have a difficult time following your argument and understanding your essay.
4. **Read aloud every sentence that you write.** If you find the sentence difficult to read, or if you would be embarrassed to be caught speaking such a sentence to another human being, rewrite the sentence immediately.
5. **Your readers are as intelligent and as well-informed as you are;** they have already read the works about which you are writing, and do not need you to describe them, or to tell them when and where the author lived, or even that he was an author. Please do not try to convince them of the beauty, truth, greatness, or profound significance of the texts you are discussing. A vacuous opening sentence is inexcusable. Instead, papers should begin with a vivid, direct, complex, precise assertion, from which the rest of the essay flows inexorably. The best papers often are written by people who write their opening sentence AFTER they have finished the rest of the essay. An opening sentence should not contain an assertion of a universal truth; be wary of "always" and "in every society."
6. **A paragraph rarely consists of one sentence and always starts with a clear, focused topic sentence.** Most paragraphs contain at least three sentences. On the other hand, paragraphs longer than one page are not likely to be paragraphs. The first sentence of your paragraph, your topic sentence, should give the reader a good, clear idea of what the paragraph is about. Remember that topic sentences are there to help your reader understand where you are going.
7. **Make sure you move from paragraph to paragraph logically.** The weakest writers often fail to provide a transition from the end of one paragraph to the beginning of the next.
8. **"Truth is in detail."** Only assertions supported by specific, significant detail are acceptable. Make no generalizations that cannot be supported by referring to specific passages, phrases, words, in the text you are discussing. A paragraph should not consist entirely of unsupported assertions.
9. **A high proportion of sentences containing subordinate clauses** (not to be confused with run-on sentences) usually characterizes a thoughtful, interesting paper. Try beginning a sentence with "although" or "since" or "in spite of" (see No. 26).
10. **Each outright grammatical error** (case, concord, tense) lowers the reader's willingness to read further, as does each split infinitive and misplaced modifier, or the use of a transitive verb intransitively or vice-versa. If you want more help with grammar, please talk to me or visit the writing center.

11. **Commas, semi-colons, and periods function not as random decoration**, but to reduce the amount of energy a reader must expend to understand what you are trying to say. The proper use of semi-colons can be effective. No semi-colon should be followed by a sentence fragment.
12. **Avoid starting sentences with “This”**; since “this” and “these” are often used ambiguously, use them sparingly, and with extreme caution.
13. **Avoid starting sentences with “And” or “But.”** You do not want to write sentence fragments.
14. **Italicize the titles of books**; place the titles of chapters, articles, poems, and smaller works between quotation marks. List the books you have used at the end of the paper and refer to them in the body of the paper. Always cite your sources.
15. **Make sure you follow format guidelines.** Pay attention to what the assignment tells you. Are your margins correct? Has the professor asked for double-spacing? Have you numbered your pages if asked to do so?
16. **Proofread with care**; a paper should not have more typographical errors than pages. Normal human beings are unable to proofread their own papers. Make every effort to induce a friend or passerby to proofread for you. Abandon all hope that your inability to spell is an essential part of your personal charm. Sign up to meet with me; remember, my job is reading your paper.
17. **If you borrow other people’s words and ideas, give them credit**; otherwise you are plagiarizing. Cite your sources both when paraphrasing and using quotations.

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