

Writing Tips for the Term Paper

Writing is a critical skill, so your essay should reflect your best effort with respect to spelling, punctuation, etc. In particular, I'd like you to pay attention to the following common **grammatical errors by students:**

- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence. Don't just dive in.
- It's = it is, its = possessive.
- 1970s (the decade) vs. 1970's (possessive of 1970)
- Avoid passive voice: instead of "the Albanians were attacked by the Serbians," say "the Serbians attacked the Albanians."
- Always put punctuation inside the quotations, as in the sentence above.
- "Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I cannot put" (correct usage by Winston Churchill)—as opposed to "ending a sentence with a preposition is something I cannot put up with" (typical incorrect usage).
- Cut unnecessary words: "drought has a major impact on the kit fox as it leads to reduced seed production" can be simplified to "drought reduces production of seeds that the kit fox eats."
- Avoid overstatement, e.g., "The fact is that London has a completely different culture than New York."
- Use "such as" instead of "like."
- That vs. which
 - Rule 1: whenever possible, use that instead of which
 - Rule 2: use which mainly if there's a comma before the clause (e.g., the Port of Los Angeles, which handles 17% of the country's cargo, is highly congested.)
- There vs. their.
- Too vs. to vs. two.
- "Should have studied," not "should of studied."
- Don't start sentences with numbers: "11 million square feet of office space was added..."
- Who vs. whom (subject vs. object, e.g., who did that? vs. to whom am I speaking?)
- E.g. (for example) vs. i.e. (that is)
- Avoid run-on sentences.
- Turn your grammar and spell checkers on. Pay attention to their suggestions, but don't blindly accept all of their suggestions.
- Use hyphens for two-word adjectival phrases. For instance, think about the difference in meaning between "the high-flying soccer fans were out of control" and "the high flying soccer fans were out of control." The former refers to fans that are really excited, while the latter refers to airborne fans on drugs. Other examples: more-developed countries, light-rail planners, three-inch-long worms. Note also that hyphenating is not necessary with adverbs before adjectives, such as closely related.
- Avoid indefinite references such as them, their, it, they, this, and that, unless you are sure what they refer to is obvious to the reader. For instance, it is not obvious to whom "they" and "them" refer in the following: The Kosovar Albanians hate the Serbians because they discriminate against them.
- Avoid first person and sex-stereotyped pronouns. Present your research in an unbiased and unemotional way, but make it interesting to read with examples and background
- Avoid repetition.

- Delete all unnecessary words, phrases, sentences.
- Use parallel construction. For instance, if I had written "You should always use parallel construction when you write," it would not have been parallel with items a-e.
- Mr. Grammar says: "Put punctuation inside the quotation marks, like this."
- Use single quotation marks mainly for quotes within a quote. Otherwise use the double quotation marks for all other purposes.

A couple of other pointers for the term paper:

- Place the graphics within the text or at the end, but whatever you do, label all graphics as Figure X, and refer in the text to Figure X (where X is a number, in order of appearance).
- Include all necessary components of graphics: legends, scale, north arrow, date, title, etc. on map, and legend, title, and axis labels on graphs. Maps do not have to be fancy GIS productions, but should be neat and legible. Content counts most.
- Include page numbers.
- Stapling is fine. Fancy covers are not necessary.
- Proofread carefully and make sure your sentences say what you mean, or you will end up on my blooper list.