

Introduction

An essay is a specialized and formal kind of writing. This guide is meant to help you with writing them. It's a brief, easily read inventory of common mistakes made by students in the past that might help students in the present.

If essays aren't clearly written, it's difficult to understand what's being stated in them. Proper spelling, good grammar, and complete sentences are minimum requirements.

The use of spelling and grammar checks on the computer and reference to *The Bedford Handbook* will help you. It also might be helpful for you to read your paper aloud in order to verify its style and content. Such an "audio-check" can be an important supplement to a visual scan.

General Guidelines

Please read assignments carefully – a frequent problem is that students will only answer half a question, focusing on the first part, which is only 50% of a grade.

Students often are tempted to become informal in their essays. Resist this urge. For example, refer to someone by their last name, not by their first name - unless there's a reason for doing so - and don't use slang expressions.

Importance of Sources

Writing academic papers is not like writing an editorial for a journalism class or a short story for a creative writing class. Other people have to be able to find the facts that you found and to see how you arrived at your conclusions. There also are differences in the writing style for different academic subjects. In the Sciences, an ability to duplicate results is often to confirm a theory. In the Arts & Humanities, understanding an argument is often where a debate begins. Opinions are fine, just state that they are your ideas. Other folks' ideas and materials must be cited. That is why footnotes and citations are important, so the reader knows the source of your information. Also, the strongest papers are those that use a variety of sources rather than relying almost entirely on one or two items.

Format of the Paper

There are three fundamental parts of an academic paper:

1. An introductory paragraph that states what your paper will discuss – its central themes.
2. A discussion of the issues and inclusion of sufficient examples to back up your statements. This discussion must refer back to the introductory paragraph and its stated themes.
3. A concluding paragraph that sums up your discussion and relates back to the previous paragraphs and their themes.

If a paper lacks any of these three parts, it is incomplete.

Avoid Generalizations & Specializations

Don't generalize. For example, don't imply that everyone thought a certain way in Europe all the time. If a reader could find the example, say, of an obscure 18th century Protestant sect in Lithuania that might not support your claim, it would invalidate your entire generalization. You can, however, qualify your statements to make them work: "Many people thought this way at times in Europe."

Be sure to specify what you are discussing. Avoid vague references. If you use "it," "them," "they," or other pronouns, be very sure that it is clear to a reader about what it is to which you are referring.

Pay attention to nuances of the article "the" in your writing. If you say "the American culture" or "the Black society," you are implying there is only one kind of this experience. It would be better to generalize your statement by writing simply "American culture" or "Black society."

Avoid simplification, trivialization, and judgmental statements that you don't have space to back up. It's sometimes better not to state something that is secondary to your main argument than to gloss it over with a two-sentence summary. If you open a can of worms, you usually need two cans in which to repack the little critters! Stick to your main arguments.

Format

1. All papers must be typed.
2. Double space & include 2 cm / 1 inch margins.
3. No binders (one staple in the upper left corner).
4. Include a cover page. This does not count towards the length of the assignment - if it is a five-page assignment, the cover page is not considered page number one. The cover page should include the title of the essay topic, the date, the class, etc.

5. Use slash marks (/) to indicate line breaks for poetry quoted, if the poetry is not indented.

Common Errors

English has many words and grammatical structures that are easily confused. Common ones include the following:

1. Distinguish between:
 - its and it's
 - there, they're and their
 - where and were
2. Spell out all but complex numbers like 164 or 182 - twelve, not 12. Exception: When using several numbers together, be consistent and either spell out all of them or use figures for all of them.
3. Try not to end phrases or sentences with a preposition. Reword them to avoid this kind of structure.
4. Pay attention to your tenses. Don't let your verbs erratically jump around from tense to tense.
5. Don't use contractions in formal essays – use "is not" or "they are" instead of "isn't" or "they're" - unless you are quoting someone.
6. Capitalize proper nouns or titles only when they are being used as such. For example, capitalize "U.S. Postal Service," but not "the postal service."

Sentence & Paragraph Length

Avoid long, rambling sentences. They tend to muddy the argument and lead to confused writing. It's good to vary sentence length, but when you're writing a long sentence, be sure all of its parts fit together clearly and logically.

Make paragraphs longer than one or two sentences. If you find yourself with short paragraphs, try merging a couple of the paragraphs with good transitional sentences and a topical sentence or develop the short paragraph with additional relevant information and details.

Good transitions need to be used between paragraphs, too. If you need to get from a thought about tofu to one about pushups, you might have to write transition sentences to move the reader from thinking about diet to exercise.

References

All quotes or paraphrasing of material that you use in a paper must be properly cited. If you use material from outside course readings, then a copy has to be submitted along with your paper. Always cite by author and make the citation style consistent throughout your paper.

There are several styles of references, depending on the discipline for which you are writing. The style is up to you and your instructor. There are, however, two general ways to coordinate citations and bibliographies:

1. If you use just citations, the first citation for an author must be complete. For example,

Roberta **JAMES**, *Environmental Change and the Settlement of Maine*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern Maine, 1998.

Then, in subsequent references, you would just cite it as, (James, pp. 88-92).

2. If you use a short citation in the text, then you must use a complete reference in a bibliography at the back of the paper. For example,

Text - (James, pp. 88-92).

Bibliography - James, Roberta. *Environmental Change and the Settlement of Maine*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern Maine, 1998.

If an author has more than one work cited in your essay, you need to put the title in the citation. Likewise, if there are references in your paper to works by authors with the same last name, you need to put their first names in the citation, in order to be able to tell them apart.

The bibliography must be alphabetically arranged by the authors' last names. If the origin of a citation is not known, then list it as "Unidentified author," "Unidentified cartographer," etc. - then alphabetically list under "U" in the bibliography.

A common error is that students will cite someone quoted in a text, attributing it to the author of the overall text. If, for example, Ms. James quotes Dr. Harold Smith and you want to refer to that quote, then you need to cite it as,

Complete citation:

Harold **SMITH**, in Roberta James, *Environmental Change and the Settlement of Maine*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern Maine, 1998, p. 10.

Short citation & complete bibliography:

Text - (Smith, p. 10).

Bibliography - Smith, Harold. In Roberta James, *Environmental Change and the Settlement of Maine*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern Maine, 1998, p. 10.

Do not lump readings from a collection together under one bibliographic reference. When you cite a chapter, essay, poem, or other selection from an anthology, you must cite the author of that piece - not just the collection's editor. For example,

Complete citation:

Langston **HUGHES**, "Air Raid over Harlem," in Paul Lauter (editor), *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Volume II, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002, pp. 1334-1337.

Short citation & complete bibliography:

Text - (Hughes, p. 1334-1337).

Bibliography - Hughes, Langston. "Air Raid over Harlem." In Paul Lauter (editor), *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Volume II, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002, pp. 1334-1337.

Be very careful to quote, paraphrase, and cite materials precisely. Remember, if a reader cannot rely on the information provided, then the writer has failed.

Conclusion

This writing guide is meant to be a work in progress. Please make any suggestions to improve it to the authors. And good luck!



An L-A Guide to Style:

Brief Suggestions for Good Writing

by
Barry Rodrigue
& Bob Schaible,
with Luisa Scott

Arts & Humanities
Program