Common Student Errors in Writing

**A Punctuation:**

1. Parentheses are to be used to set off translations and citations and sometimes dates. They are not to be used in place of commas.

2. Dashes are to be used and only very rarely to mark emphasis. They are only used in pairs, and must enclose information that clarifies the main point of the sentence. They are not to be used as commas.

3. There is never a need to use semicolons. If you do not know the proper use of semicolons, do not use them. They are not to be used in place of commas.

**B. Other basic elements of grammar:**

1. Contractions are not acceptable in formal work.

2. It is not acceptable to use split infinitives.

3. Run-on sentences are not acceptable. Each sentence must have one point.

4. The word “however” is adversative. This means that a statement or clause that uses the word “however” must reflect a contrary view to the clause, sentence, or paragraph preceding it. The word “however” is not a synonym for “and”.

5. The word “though” should not be used, unless absolutely required for stylistic purposes. In almost every case, the word “though” should be replaced by “although.”

6. Sentences should not begin with the word “with”. The following sentence is an example of very bad style. “With this being done, Fred went to work.” The sentence should read instead: After he had finished this, Fred went to work.

7. It is very bad style to use the formula “of + noun” in place of an adjective. For example, it is proper to write, “Fred is a strong man.” It is improper to write, “Fred is a man of strength.”

8. The use of the present active participle, “being” is almost never appropriate. For example, it is improper to write “being a good swimmer, Janet won the race.” This should be written either as “as a good swimmer, Janet won the race,” or “since she was a good swimmer, Janet won the race.”

9. Sentences should never end in a preposition.

10. Demonstrative pronouns, “this, these, that, those,” should always refer clearly to an antecedent. In those cases where the antecedent is not clear, students should not use demonstrative, or any other pronouns. They should use nouns, which can be persons, places, or things.

11. Sentences should not begin with the word “and” or with the word “also”.

12. Students should not use colloquialisms or slang in their sentences.

13. Possession should always be demonstrated by the use of an apostrophe.

14. Apostrophes should not be used except to demonstrate possession.

15. Book titles should always be underlined or put into italics.

16. Students should avoid using the passive voice, except when the use of the passive voice serves a specific stylistic function.

17. It is important to use the correct terms when writing papers. If students do not know the meaning of the words used in the readings, they should learn them. Students should not use terms whose meaning they do not know.

18. It is almost never appropriate to use the phrase “to be” in a paper.

19. Students should distinguish between adjectival and adverbial forms of the terms they use. For example, “economic” is an adjective while “economically” is an adverb. Students should know when to use adjectives and when to use adverbs.

20. Subjects and verbs must agree in number. Plural nouns require plural verbs, and singular nouns require singular verbs. Collective nouns, such as “America” use singular verbs.

21. The word “their” is not a singular possessive form. The only words that can be used to show possession in the singular are “his,” “hers,” and “its”.

22. Students should not use the following expression: “from the text it shows us.” Instead, students should write, “the text shows us.”

23. Students should not use the following expression: “By reading the passage by XYZ, the Black Death affected everyday life in Florence.” Students should write: “The passage by XYZ makes clear that the Black Death affected everyday life in Florence.”

**C. Errors in quotation and citation**:

1. Students should only take direct quotations from secondary sources when engaged in a historiographical survey whose purpose is to compare the views of historians. It is never acceptable to quote secondary sources for the purpose of continuing one's narrative, or to fill space. Students should always paraphrase secondary literature.

2. It is never acceptable to insert a quotation into a paper without imbedding it within a sentence.

3. Quotations must make sense within the body of the sentence.

4. When citing a text, students should either use footnotes, or parenthetical citiations, e. g. (p. 42). Students should not write, for example, “on page 24 the author wrote xyz.”

**D. Errors in Organization**:

1. Each sentence requires one and only one main idea. A sentence without a main idea is a sentence fragment. A sentence with more than one main idea is a run-on sentence.

2. Each paragraph must have one main idea. Each student, when asked, should be able to point to the topic sentence of each paragraph and explain how each sentence in that paragraph pertains to the topic sentence.

3. Each student must connect the paragraphs of his or her paper with smooth transitions. The words "now' and "since," to name two, are not smooth transitions.

4. Each paper requires one and only one thesis. Each paragraph in the paper must be written to help demonstrate the validity of that thesis.

5. In writing a sentence, it is important that the subject should precede the direct object. The following sentence demonstrates very bad style: “The fighting the author shows us in the book is much like fighting in the past books we have read.” In this case, the direct object, “the fighting” precedes the subject, “the author.” This sentence should be written in the following manner: In this book, the author shows us fighting that is similar to the types of fighting we have seen in other books.”

6. When discussing an author’s argument, or material in a text, it is always necessary to provide context. For example, when discussing a battle, it is always necessary to state when and where the battle took place. The expression, “on page 24 the author discusses the battle of Hastings,” does not provide context.

7. As a corollary to the previous sentence, students should not write, “in chapter 6, the author discusses the battle of Hastings,” except when writing a book review. In the latter case, it can be appropriate to note the chapter in which the author discusses particular events or concepts.

# E. Conceptual Errors

1. Sources are **NOT** the works of modern scholars. The works of modern scholars are based on sources. Modern scholars use sources. Sources are information from the period studied by scholars.

2. Scholars **do not** use other scholars. Scholars agree with and disagree with the arguments, interpretations, views, and thoughts of other scholars. Scholars rely on the work of other scholars.

3. The thesis of a paper is its argument. The following sentence is invalid: “The thesis of this book is to show xyz.” A thesis is something. The thesis cannot show something. The author may argue a point. In this case, the author attempts to demonstrate xyz.