

Dr. Wicker's Surefire System
For Writing
Effective Academic Essays

1. **Make good use of your writing-as-thinking process.** Write in sections instead of writing straight through from beginning to end; you don't have to get everything perfect from the start.
 - **Invention** -- Use research, discussion, journaling, brainstorming, doodling and/or other stupid invention tricks to get ideas down on paper
 - **Arrangement** -- Use mind-mapping, clustering or outlining to group, prioritize and connect your ideas into sections and subsections. Don't be afraid to play around with your ideas; try connecting them in different ways and see where that leads you.
 - **Re-vision** -- Turn your draft paper into something others can understand, leading your reader through your paper by using the beginnings of paragraphs and sections to make clear your point and how it connects back to what I've just read. It's often best to write introductions last, once you know what you're actually introducing.

2. **Think of your paper as an argument.** Take charge! Tell me your interpretation of things.
 - Articulate your argument in a **thesis statement**, usually toward the end of the first paragraph or introductory section.
 - Structure the rest of your paper -- each section and paragraph -- to **explain and support that argument** through various sub-arguments and points. Nothing should be in your paper that doesn't clearly contribute to your argument.

3. **Make this argument analytical**, not merely descriptive or narrative. While it may concern itself with *who, what, when & where*, its chief concerns are *how, why, what does this mean* and *what is at issue?*
 - The point of an academic paper is not so much to tell me a bunch of facts or ideas as it is to tell me their **meaning** (significance, value, purpose).
 - Usually this involves articulating the particular **context(s)** in which you find your subject meaningful (i.e. personal, social, theological, historical, scientific, economic, psychological, moral, etc....)
 - And then articulating the nature and significance of its **relationship(s)** to other facts, ideas, things, events, people, etc. within those contexts. How and why do those relationships function? What are the values, assumptions, consequences, constraints, tensions, causes, effects, modifications, etc. by which they are influenced or informed?

4. **Continually focus, orient and contextualize your reader.** Never give me a piece of information without first making clear exactly how I should use that fact within your ongoing argument. (That way, I will know what to do with it *as* I read it, and not afterward.)
 - **Use the beginning of a section or paragraph** to explain its place and purpose in your argument, usually by briefly articulating its relationship to the previous section or paragraph.
 - Tell me a story! Use signpost words and phrases (“However,” “For example,” “Therefore,” “First,” “Finally,” “Despite this new...” etc.) to describe important **progressions, connections and turns** in the logical structure of your argument, especially at the beginnings of sections or paragraphs.
 - Use the **beginning of each sentence** to orient your reader and establish a general topic, typically by referring to (but not fully repeating) an idea, issue or language from the previous sentence (“old information”); then use the **end of your sentence** for the details or point (“new information”) you wish your reader to emphasize.
 - Quotes cannot do your talking for you! Never give a quotation (or any other piece of information, for that matter) without first **introducing** it and making clear its significance within your own argument; afterwards, you may also need to analyze it in more depth.

Common Essay Issues

1. **Your thesis should be absolutely clear.** If I as a reader can't easily identify your thesis sentence(s), or if the thesis comes too late in the paper, then the paper isn't working. Don't forget: a thesis is **not** a topic, a question or a method of approach. A thesis articulates an argument about the meaning of your topic of analysis – and is thus the *result* of your method, the *answer* to your question.
2. **Your paper needs focus and coherence.**
 - **Avoid vagueness, lack of focus.** Do more than make general observations (even insightful ones) about a topic. All parts of the paper must work together toward one clear end.
 - **Connect.** Your paper should bring everything together into one clear, focused, organized argument that leads me on a particular path through your analysis, without going off on tangents. The relationships between all parts should always be clear.
3. **Push the analysis a bit more.** You don't have to be brilliantly original in your analysis. But it is the nature of analysis to go beyond mere description: to look beneath pat, obvious surface meanings at the deeper contexts, relationships and tensions which enable them.
 - For example, don't always take what people (whether authorities or the narrators of fictional stories) in a primary source say at face value, but instead explore those words in terms of their larger implications within the overall text.
 - In general, see things in terms of dynamic systems of meaning – not as isolated items.

Dr. Wicker's Tips
for
Graduate-Level Academic Writing

1. **Use standard, formal grammar.** Avoid jargon, slang and other colloquialisms – except in those contexts where such language represents the clearest, most accurate way of expressing a thought.
2. **Normally, use present tense.** Unless you want to emphasize the historic nature of a text (“Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* in the mid 1880s, forty years after his own boyhood in Missouri”), use present tense when referring to what is said or done within the text.
 - Heraclitus **warns** that you cannot step into the same river twice.
 - Twain **writes** with passion and humor. In one very short paragraph, he **satirizes**...

However, past tense is still useful for differentiating earlier moments in a text from later ones:

- While he initially **drifted** – literally – into his decision to help Jim escape, Huck eventually **comes** to a moment of clarity and decision.
3. **Use first person when appropriate.** Good academic writers (esp. in the humanities) use first person (“I don’t intend...,” “my point is...”) voice in their papers to lead readers through their arguments.
 4. **Eliminate needless words.** Less is more: any word which isn’t absolutely necessary for proving your argument, for making your analysis clear, should be deleted.
 - “Throughout the **entire** novel...” “Readers can **definitely** understand Frankenstein’s perspective.” “Every human being **essentially** wants to be loved and appreciated...” “Victor Frankenstein, the protagonist in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, is an **extremely** complicated **literary** character.” “*Frankenstein* is an interesting **piece of work** that **to a great extent** addresses social issues **prevalent in the society** such as...”
 - **Refer to “this passage” or “these words”** – avoid unnecessarily distanced language such as “the above quote” or “the aforementioned quote.”
 - **Transition words** are great: I highly recommend them -- **but only** if they are truly and precisely doing work for your argument. There is no need for *every* sentence to begin “Thus,” “Therefore,” “Accordingly,” “As such,” “Additionally,” “Moreover,” etc.... Save those words for important turns and connections in your argument, typically found at the beginnings of paragraphs (but sometimes within paragraphs as well).

5. **Construct your sentences around clear and specific subject-verb relationships.**

- **Center your sentences on strong, simple verbs.** Express the central, crucial action of each sentence or clause in a strong, specific, active verb:
 - Every season, the creators of *Adventure Time* **produce** great works of video art.
 - In this passage, Frankenstein **demonstrates** his sensitive and humane side, which emerges as the book progresses.

By contrast, *don't* obscure or confuse this action by trying to do the same work through passive voice, nominalizations, gerunds or other vague verb forms, or by stringing prepositional phrases (e.g., *with, of, at, on, for, by, in*):

- *Passive*: Great video art by the creators of *Adventure Time* **is produced** every season.
- *Nominalization*: Every season, great video art **production occurs** by the creators of *Adventure Time*.
- *Gerund*: The passage above **is** Frankenstein **demonstrating** his sensitive and humane side that emerges as the book progresses.
- **Make clear the agent of that action, typically as the subject in a subject-verb clause.** Keep that agent and action as near to each other as possible, and as close to the front of the sentence as possible:
 - The **characters Finn and Jake engage** with moral, psychological and cultural issues concerning our relationship to death and time that resonate with the viewers of the show.
- **Manage clauses.** Make sure that all clauses and phrases in a sentence agree and that their relationship to the main clause is as clear and simple as possible. Use commas to mark the boundary between the main clause and any subordinate or non-restrictive relative clauses.

Common Grammar Issues

“However” run-ons. The word “however” is not used for internal connections within a sentence; it instead articulates a connection between a sentence and the previous sentence. Therefore, it typically shows up at the beginning of a sentence. Avoid using “however” in the middle of a sentence, where it can cause an ungrammatical run-on: “The government did not fall, however, the rebels gained a city.” You can instead:

- Use a different connector: “*While* the government did not fall, the rebels gained a city.” “*Although* the government did not fall, the rebels gained a city.”
- Use a period or semi-colon to split into two effective sentences, and move “however” to the front: “The government did not fall. However, the rebels gained a city.” “The government did not fall; however, the rebels gained a city.”

Disagreement in number. Don't use plural “they” or “their” for an individual of unknown gender (“Each professor brought their favorite novel”). You can instead:

- Alternate genders per example (either “his favorite” or “her favorite”),
- Make everything plural (“The professors brought their favorite novels”), or
- Use a singular pronoun (such as “one”) or number-neutral term (“a favorite”).

Unclear pronouns and other references (e.g. “it,” “this,” “there is...”).

- During the speech, the narrative ownership switches from Walton to the Creature. With **this**, **it’s** a showing of the importance of the Creature’s constant fight to create a noble image.
- As is evident throughout *Frankenstein*, and warned against forcefully in this passage, **there** is no consideration given to the centrality and importance of family.

Dangling modifiers. Every phrase needs a clear and logical antecedent – a specific word in the sentence that it modifies. Readers look for that antecedent in the next noun that shows up after a participle or other modifying phrase:

- While walking home, a tree nearly fell on me.
- Leading to this passage, Frankenstein has recently been rescued by Captain Walton.

Lack of parallel structure.

- Each item in a series should take the same grammatical form. This example unhappily mixes noun phrases, simple nouns, gerunds and verbs:
 - The ISO 14000 standards address a wide range of environmental practices that include environmental management systems, auditing, performance evaluation, training, objectives and targets, creates corrective action systems, assessment, product standards and provides for continuous improvement.
- Either all the items in series share a single verb, or each item has its own unique verb. In this example, the first two items share the verb “used,” but the last item has a different verb:
 - The project had to be shut down because it used inordinate amounts of time, money and violated several government regulations.

Quotation grammar errors. Fit all quotations into the grammar of your prose, or fit your prose to the grammar of the quotation, or keep them separate. Do not intertwine grammars promiscuously to the point where the reader has no firm grammatical basis of understanding:

- *It is clear that Shelley meant to show the progression from the Beautiful and Sublime, “Yet my heart overflowed with kindness, and the love of virtue. I had begun life with benevolent intentions, and thirsted for the moment when I should put them in practice” to the unfortunate conclusion that he “...had committed deeds of mischief...”*

Common Punctuation Issues

- **Quotations**
 - Place all periods and commas **inside** quotation marks (unless a parenthetical citation intervenes). (This is standard American practice; British practice differs.)
 - Use **double** quotation marks (except for quotes within other quotations). (This is standard American practice; British practice differs.)

- **Commas**

- Use commas to separate the items in a list; the “Oxford” comma before the “and” is optional so long as you are consistent in your usage.
- Otherwise, the main job of commas is to indicate the boundary between the main clause and another clause or phrase:
 - Without her, he was nothing.
 - The world will have to respond quickly, because that is the only way to prevent genocide.

Don't put a *single* comma between a verb and its subject (or its object): the whole point of comma usage is to identify clauses – not to break them apart. However, you can use **two** commas to insert a modifying “parenthetical” phrase or clause between a subject and verb:

- Henry, reeling from the Locopops-induced brain freeze, fell victim to the evil Doctor Rotcod.

- **Colon/Semi-Colon Confusion**

- Use a colon (:) to introduce a list of complex items. Use semi-colons (;) to separate them.
- This is the main function of a colon: to introduce a word, a phrase or a clause. By contrast, a semi-colon subtly juxtaposes two clauses in one sentence; it is rarely used appropriately. If you use a semi-colon, there must be a full, independent clause with its own verb on *both* sides of the mark (without any conjunction signaling a subordinate clause).

- **Hyphen/Dash Confusion.** Hit the hyphen (-) key twice to make a dash (--). Dashes are vague marks which act like super-commas or colons. Hyphens separate syllables (“break-ing”) or join two words together (“wishy-washy”). Words that normally don't take a hyphen may do so when combined to form a specific adjectival phrase. Compare:

- “She struggled as a single parent.” vs. “He came from a single-parent household.”
- “He dove over the counter when he heard the sirens.” vs. “She can get by with over-the-counter medicines unless she gets worse.”

- **Titles.** Italicize the titles of long forms (e.g. journals, books, films and television series). Save quotation marks for the titles of short forms (e.g. essays, stories, poems, songs and episodes). Capitalize all but the most trivial words in titles or headings.

- **Capitalization.** Don't capitalize words (e.g., “history,” “eighteenth century,” “presidential”) other than proper nouns, unless used in a title or heading.

- **Reference to Language.** All words that you refer to (rather than use) words should be in quotation marks (or italicized): Did you know that “cook” is Latin in origin?

- **Numbers.** Spell out numbers ten (some say twelve or twenty) and below, as well as round numbers such as “seventy,” “one thousand,” etc. (unless you are dealing with math, money or statistics).