

# How To Write a College Essay

## Essay Writing Tips



Hi, I am Gene Grzywacz author of [The Brute Force Study Guide](#). I hope you find this writing guide useful. It is broken up into 5 parts. The first part is How to Write a University Level English Essay, this section focuses on literature essays but most of the information is applicable to all your college writing. The following section is Secrets of Writing a Research Paper Fast. The next two sections cover common mistakes made with APA and MLA formats. Finally, a section on common grammar errors.

I want to give a special thanks to Mr. Harris of [Rapid Research Papers](#) for his input and help with putting this project together.

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How to Write a University Level English Essay:

## **Avoiding the Pitfalls of High School Level Writing**

High school literature essays and university or college literature essays have very different requirements, yet a lot of students do not know how to make the transition from writing at a high school level to a university level. If you are a high school English student, or a college English student, this article is meant especially for you. It will help you make that transition by recognizing some of the common problems found in your essays and how to remedy them.

### Introductions

Gone are the days when in high school you could start off a literature essay by praising how good the book or poem seemed to you. Something like this is very common: “This book by Judith Guest is a fabulous piece of literature that anyone will enjoy reading.” That was fine for high school level, but this is the big time now. Professors do not want to hear how good the book is; they already know. Get to the “meat of the matter” as quickly as possible. You have a stance, you have outside sources and internal sources from the book or poem to support your stance, and you must communicate your intention clearly from the introductory paragraph. Nothing should be vague here.

Here is a good example for a short essay. The essay question is to analyze William Butler Yeats's "The Secret Rose". The poem deals heavily with rose imagery and rose symbolism, and a concept of eras being reborn. It is a poem so full of mythology that if you are not familiar with the references, it will pose a problem. In an essay like this with such a general question to just "analyze", you must decide beforehand what, out of all the many things you could look at, will be interesting to focus on. Let us say that we have chosen to focus on three prevailing themes: time, love, and apocalypse. Let us also say that you have decided upon your course of action. You will bring about a discussion of those three themes by dissecting the Irish mythological references that are made. Mention your intentions from the beginning, with no unnecessary statements meant to make the paragraph only appear longer. Below is a suitable introductory paragraph:

Upon first glance, W.B. Yeats's "The Secret Rose" will be confusing to readers who are not familiar with the many references made to Celtic folklore and Irish mythology. While being dedicated to Maud Gonne, and focusing on the theme of time and apocalypse as it takes the reader through different eras, it is a hymn to the Rosicrucian symbol of the rose that is considered an emblem of love and a symbol of divine enlightenment. By providing a basic understanding of Irish myth and Yeats's involvement in the Order of the Golden Dawn, it will help build a better understanding of the poem, thereby allowing an analysis that will transcend static

considerations of legend, and rather facilitate an analysis of “The Secret Rose” as a poem about love, time, and apocalypse.

The blue section immediately introduces your focus. You will tackle the mythology, instead of possible other main focuses like the significance of Maud Gonne, Yeats’s female infatuation, to the poem. As you can see from this, we did not waste time saying how great Yeats is, or even when the poem was written.

The green section was able to mention the content of the poem and the content of what your chosen focus will be.

The red section is the thesis statement, best placed at the end of your introductory paragraph. It explains your procedure. By explaining the mythological references, you will bring about the three themes you want to focus on.

Note for essays analyzing poems: Because poems can have multiple interpretations, it is best to state concisely in your paragraph what you think the poem is generally about so the professor knows where your viewpoint stems from.

## 2) The thesis statement

In high school, you may have been able to get away with writing a vague, badly written thesis, but university

professors will not tolerate this. There is a basic and convenient formula that you may use when creating a thesis statement.

By doing **X** (general) through **Y** (all the specific methods like imagery, style, etc., that you will mention paragraph by paragraph), the author/I arrive(s) at **MY STANCE**.

**X + Y = YOUR OWN JUDGEMENT OR VIEW**

Example: When Mark Twain highlights the importance of nature (X) through the imagery of water and the symbolism of the Huck Finn's raft (Y), he reveals his displeasure with the hypocritical, modernizing society (WHAT YOUR STANCE throughout the essay will be.)

What are you accomplishing with such a formula? You have a stance, so you must communicate *what* the author does to give you reason to create your own stance. There are of course variants to this formula, but in the thesis you should always establish two things: Your point of view and what about the author or work you will use to defend your point of view.

3) Supporting paragraphs.

Whenever you make a supporting **point** in your supporting paragraphs, it must always contribute some way to your thesis statement and **stance**. A **point** is usually found in the first or second sentence of a supporting paragraph. Only more experienced writers may play around with this rule and place their supporting point a little further down in the supporting paragraph.

For this portion of this help guide, some of the content from the ‘Syn Lee’ essay entitled “Pride and Pursuit: The Unglamorous Side of Freedom Through the Eyes of Mark Twain and Edith Wharton” will be used. The essay deals with two books, *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* and *The House of Mirth*. The introductory paragraph for this essay is as follows:

\***blue**= what focus is

\***green**=content of focus (the two novels protagonists)

\***red**= thesis

A primary principle of freedom as defined by American philosophy is the uninhibited ability to define one’s own needs necessary for the maintenance and fulfillment of one’s personal life. Related to this is the ability and freedom to accept the consequences, positive or negative, that may result from the pursuit and attainment of these needs. One of the elements that defines American fiction is the portrayal of a protagonist, often with special insight into the hypocrisies and dangers of society, enacting this very principle of

defining need. For the young adventurous Huck Finn, he chooses a natural environment that is unrestrained by the “manners” and conditions of American middle-class society. On the other end of the spectrum, there is Lily Bart, an aspiring socialite of New York who chooses wealth and social acceptance in a culture of meaningless materialism. Both of these characters sacrifice to attain their defined needs, but it is the pursuit of esteemed social rewards that ultimately is shown to be the more unrewarding. When comparing Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* to Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, what is gradually revealed is that the desire to conform, transform, and live by society’s rules ultimately leads to dissatisfaction, demoralization, and demise.

If you wanted to make the first supporting point that the kindness of Lily Bart in a *House of Mirth* ultimately leads to her demise, below is a basic formula of what would be contained in the first supporting paragraph and any subsequent supporting paragraphs.

Set-off Sentence(s): Kindness is typically a virtue, but in the upper class society that Lily Bart lives in, it is a liability for her individuality.

**Point:** Primarily because Lily Bart’s kindness keeps her from bribing Mrs. Dorset with love letters to Selden, she is left penniless, and this ultimately leads to her downfall.

## Evidence: Examples, Quotes, Outside sources

After you have given your supporting point and given your evidence to support it, you need to drive home for your reader *how this is related* to your thesis and **stance**, and *how valuable* this supporting **point** is to them. You need to always link back to your thesis statement, *during* long supporting paragraphs, and at the *end* of one before you go into another paragraph with a new **point**. Failing to link back to your thesis will sometimes make readers forget what position you have taken. It will weaken your argument. A *connecting sentence* or two must be placed in the paragraph so the reader never loses sight of your thesis. Avoid static connecting sentences such as: “This is why it relates to the thesis statement”, or in this specific example’s case, “This point certainly proves why demise is only inevitable in an environment like New York City.”

As for the end of the paragraph, this is the time to drive home your **point**. In the case of the essay we are referring to for this portion of the article, something like the following would be suitable for ending the supporting paragraph: “Therefore, because X and Y examples given have shown how the organized New York elite societies are portrayed by Wharton as hypocritical and very flawed, it is evident that the achievement of happiness in a world full of immorality will only lead to the demise of the individual.

Tip: When reminding readers of your thesis over and over again in your essay, it is always helpful to change wording a little so that it does not get redundant or sound repetitive. Use synonyms. You can consider a different phrase that does not jeopardize what you intended initially to communicate.

#### 4) Never tell the story or its events

For an essay set by a professor, not a review, you must remember one thing: he or she has read the book. Your professor does not want you to relay what happened. Your professor wants to know *why* what happened is important to the purpose of your paper. Look at these two sentences about Huckleberry Finn:

Wrong: Huck Finn decides to sail the Mississippi, leave his aunts behind, and it is certainly an adventure for him.

The teacher certainly knows all of this, so why are you telling it again? Do not waste time with meaningless sentences that do not work towards your **stance** and **points**. It is better to combine the *obvious* with an explanation of the *significance of the obvious*.

Good: One good consequence of Huck's choice to make nature his home is his development of a morality and spirituality that are arguably more wholesome and upright

than what are demonstrated by practicing Christians on the land.

The *obvious* here is the known fact by all readers and your professor that Finn chose to go to nature and leave behind his aunts.

The *significance of the obvious* is that he developed a morality and spirituality that are arguably more wholesome and upright than what are demonstrated by practicing Christians on the land.

You have mentioned a fact of the story because of its significance to your paper that is trying to prove that normalized society will lead to a person's demise. It is essentially saying that only in nature, not on Christian land, was he able to develop a sense of morality that even the adults around him did not have.

#### 4) Source usage

What if you have too little to say in an essay and can only rely on sources? This is why, from early on, you should create your own stance based on your own ideas. Some prefer to consult outside sources only after they have built their own view. If you will be doing an essay on a novel, locate adequate examples from the book itself to create your stance. Afterwards, find sources to defend and even refute

what impression you already have. The point of finding sources that refute your thinking is to give you a broader perspective, or give you the opportunity in your essay to challenge that author's opposing viewpoint. This will make your essay much more intriguing if you can argue your point against another's more effectively. Do not fall into the trap of not having a real stance, finding someone else's own, and then plagiarizing.

But what if you have too much to say and do not want to use outside sources to interfere? You must use established sources. No university essay is complete or acceptable without it. In high school, it was acceptable to use sources like Sparknotes and Bookrags, but university requires more professional and advanced sources, such as journals, newspaper articles, encyclopaedia's, books, and other creditable sources of that nature. Do not be stubborn in this regard. Remember that other authors have insight that can improve upon your own. Just be sure to give them the credit when it is recognized.

### Example of including an agreeing source

If you believe that Tom Sawyer is racist because of how he played tricks on Jim the slave, find another source that may agree, allowing you to include the source but still keep your own point:

*“Tom Sawyer shows some sign of racist tendencies, and Dr. Talks A Lot, a professor of English has agreed with such a sentiment, saying in her article that, ‘Tom Sawyer is sadly a product of his environment, and therefore, he carries some racist tendencies’”(3).*

As you have just seen, you have included the source, and your point is not jeopardized. It has even been expanded upon.

### Example of including a disagreeing source

You can mention someone else’s point and then show contrary information that may even strengthen your point if you can argue effectively against it. You could use the same doctor’s words.

*“Although Dr. Talks A Lot states that Tom is a product of his environment, Tom’s rebellious nature and his rejection of societal norms would suggest that he would have been able to also thwart having others’ racist views impressed upon him. Examples to support this are . . .”*

Professors will be impressed by your ability to incorporate opposing viewpoints and effectively argue against them.

## 5) Conclusions

In high school, students often only briefly summarize what they have spoken about in their essay. This can be boring and extremely redundant. Highlight and re-emphasize the main convincing points you made during your essay. You can also create new meaning for your information. This does not mean giving new information. You can create a new picture by simply suggesting *what else is important or profound* about what you have presented. This is also the time to mention something else you wanted to say in your essay but had no place to slip it in. Now is the time to do that if you desire, to drive home your points and prove without a shadow of a doubt that your stance is justified and has been properly represented. It is the time to show that refuting sources mentioned in your paper or elsewhere can not measure up to what you have proven. If you avoid mindless summarizing and remember that the conclusion is your last chance to collect all your main points neatly and leave the reader fully believing you have presented a good argument, you will be fine.

If you follow these rules, you may very well find yourself with a better quality essay to hand into that professor of yours. Other things to consider when writing an essay are to be meticulous with your grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Common mistakes are subject-verb agreement, being inconsistent with European or American spelling, misuse of semi-colons and commas, and sticking to M.L.A. or the Chicago style. It is helpful to have another person read over

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your essay, and it is wise to read over and proofread your essay when you have a clear, refreshed head. This will help to avoid overlooking common mistakes or points not properly supported. Good luck with your college essay!

**Rapid Research Papers Mr. Harris will teach you in a step by step manner how to write your essay in the fastest manner possible. This will improve your writing and your grades.**

## Secrets of Writing a Research Paper Fast

### INTRODUCTION

If you are like most students you have too many classes, too much work, and not enough time in which to do it. Unfortunately, schools do not teach students many tips, tricks, or methods for writing papers quickly. In fact, they prefer you don't do it quickly. The emphasis for the school and for professors is on thoroughness. This means being very methodical in the research, and thorough with the paper composition and structure. While this may, in theory, help the student achieve a better education, sadly, the opposite usually occurs. Instead, many students are de-motivated and drawn towards plagiarism.

### Secret #1 Topic Selection

Topic selection is vitally important to the overall speed at which you ultimately compose your entire paper. Unknown to most students, topic selection has a huge impact on the total time it takes to write any college paper.

The best topic (all else being equal) is the one that is easiest and fastest to write a paper about. The right topic must provide plenty of research materials. Remember, when you conduct research, not all search results, or resources, carry the same weight. You could have two very similar topics, but the quality of the materials on which to draw could be significantly different. If you make the wrong choice, you

may find yourself struggling with what to write, halfway through your paper. If you can't find quality resources, you may have to start over again, or change your thesis statement (so you have more to write about). It is important to spend extra time at the beginning of the process researching, planning, and validating your topic.

Yes, your paper writing project may start off slightly slower than students who dive right in without proper planning. But, soon you will be on-track and producing more material than the person who suddenly runs out of things to say, data to draw upon, or sources to quote.

What about the typical advice to write about something you enjoy?

This is something many schools emphasize but, for speed-writing, that advice is wrong. It doesn't matter how much you enjoy a topic. If there aren't sufficient resources that can provide data to support your thesis statement, then liking the subject won't help one bit. Now, if you have identified two great topics, all other things being equal, then yes, enjoying your topic MAY help. I say MAY because you might find yourself over-researching or over-writing the paper, because you get wrapped up in the subject. There's nothing wrong with enjoying your subject, but it can take you off the course of finishing your paper.

## Secret #2 Efficient Research

Perform extremely efficient library research. It is called a research paper, after all. Researching your subject efficiently and effectively is the single most important factor in your overall writing time. The more efficiently you perform research, the more solid resources you'll find, fast. The more resources you have to draw from, the easier it will be to write your paper.

**Your paper quality (and grade) will improve in proportion to the amount of quality material you have, to draw upon, in support of your thesis.**

Knowing how to research efficiently will yield more (and better quality) source materials so you have plenty to write about. Or, it will allow you to finish your paper even faster, if you are just concerned with speed, not quality. You'll have many more options than if you continue to search inefficiently.

If you read Secret #1, you know how important proper topic selection is for finding good research sources and materials. Assuming you have chosen a great topic, before you begin writing, you have to compile all the relevant source data and resources (the material your research yielded). Therefore, it's important to learn how to scan your research results to quickly find the choice tidbits of information. If you try to read the source material word for word, you will take far too long to complete your paper. But once you know the "down and dirty" tricks for extracting the most useful information

(including the critical quotes you can cite) then you are well on your way to completing your paper quickly.

It is also very important to organize your resources efficiently. All of us have had the experience of getting to the paper writing stage, only to find that we didn't capture information we were looking at earlier in the day. Either we didn't bring the book home from the library, didn't take proper notes on it, and/or failed to photocopy the materials. It is important to develop an efficient system to:

- [capture your findings](#)
- [sort through them for relevance](#)
- [extract the key data](#)
- [save them for later reference](#)

If you do this, you are “halfway home”, and your paper will practically write itself! Learn how to search and document efficiently! There is an entire section in [Rapid Research Papers -- Write It FAST!](#) showing you exactly what you need to do to get efficient at researching your paper.

### [Secret #3 Know when to write an outline, or skip it.](#)

Outlines can help you immensely, or be a complete waste of your time, depending on your circumstances. The trick is to identify and understand which situation you are in. This is another area where “traditional” wisdom is dead wrong. High schools and universities ALWAYS teach you to write an outline. It is considered a critical step in planning a research paper or term paper.

Outlines are like road maps, they show you where you are going. On one hand, having a road map seems critical. On the other hand, how many times do you get into your vehicle without first consulting a road map? Did you need it? Probably not; it depends on the length of the trip, and the complexity of the route.

We've all had the experience of taking a road map on a trip, using it, and finding ourselves completely confused. It happens all the time, with road trips, and with writing research papers for school. Sometimes highly detailed outlines look great! But then you find yourself having a very difficult time making your paper resemble the outline. The harder you try, the more discouraged you get. This phenomenon is very common. So understanding when to create an outline, and when to skip it, is a key skill to have. Master this skill, and watch your overall paper writing time drop significantly!

#### **Secret #4 Proofread and edit your paper fast and efficiently.**

Proofreading your paper is a critical step if you want to get a decent grade on your paper. When you proof your paper, which is a cyclical process, you invariably end up making edits. Hopefully you did a good job writing, so your edits are few, and minor. But when you do make edits, you then have to re-proofread your paper. This can be time consuming. But having a solid step-by-step process for proofreading efficiently can be a huge help.

The more papers you write, the better you get at proofreading. However, if you do your own proofing and

editing, you are limited by your own knowledge and grasp of the English language, and by your ability to spot and correct your own errors. Your work and final writing quality is difficult to improve because you usually aren't aware of your own writing weaknesses. However, there are techniques you can employ quickly to break out of your own "editing rut".

One trick you can easily do to find a huge number of flaws in your paper is to read your paper out loud to yourself.

You will find that you stumble on certain parts where the language "just doesn't flow" properly. Your ears can hear mistakes that your eyes wouldn't notice, so make sure you read your paper aloud, with pen in hand.

Remember, not all "errors" are created equal. For instance, an MLA or APA formatting error is much more critical than a misplaced comma. So it is important to understand the relative weight or importance of errors. If you have plenty of time, simply correct all errors, spelling, formatting, grammatical, etc. But when your time is limited, you need to learn how to pick the "heaviest fruit". These are the problems that, if left uncorrected, will dramatically impact your grade.

It is also important to learn to how to quickly pick the "low-hanging fruit" – meaning the errors or problems that are correctable in the least amount of time.

**Secret #5** Use an existing template according to the assigned paper style, so you don't have to waste time with document

### formatting of margins, line spacing, etc.

I can't tell you how many students attempt to reinvent the wheel by starting a paper from scratch, setting up the formatting (usually incorrectly). This is a huge waste of your time and talents. Templates were created as a convenience, so use them!

I could cite many reasons of how and why manual formatting of documents wastes valuable time. I could also share some horror stories with you of how students received failing grades because of subtle (but important) mistakes with the margins and citing format of the reference materials. But I won't. It should be obvious that to do a good job, and to do it fast, you should take advantage of shortcuts everywhere you can. Using pre-existing templates is one of the best examples of a shortcut known to modern students.

### Secret #6 Magic Pen

This tip may sound trivial to many of you, but it's a secret that very few people know or use, that works like MAGIC to help motivate you to write your paper... and motivation is a big part of the battle. Are you ready for this ultra simple magic bullet? Here it goes: Seek out, buy, and use an ink pen that you absolutely love. An ultra cool, stylish pen, one that's just the right length and thickness for your hand, one that is a joy to hold, and behold! Find the perfect tip size just for you, that releases the ink so well, it flows like hot syrup over buttered pancakes!

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With a great pen like that, you will want to actually hold it, and use it. It may cost more, but it's worth it! Get it engraved, it will make it that much cooler. It should be a pen, so cool, that your friends get jealous. Holding a pen like that in your hand makes you feel contemporary, powerful, smart, and organized, all in one shot. I know, it sounds corny, but try it and see. You'll become a believer!

\*Note, this does NOT mean you should write your paper by hand. You definitely should be using a laptop (if your budget allows), so you can take it wherever you do research. Writing by hand is much too slow, and re-organizing your writing or thoughts is too difficult. But, there are times when you need to scribble notes in margins quickly, and during the proofing and editing processes, having a great pen will help motivate you.

## Common MLA Mistakes

**[StyleEase Software](#) - Tools For Academic Writers. StyleEase Software For Writing Academic Papers, Theses, And Dissertations In Apa, Mla, Chicago/Turabian, And Seminary Styles. StyleEase Automates Everything From The Title Page To The Bibliography, And Makes It Easy To Focus On Content!**

### **1. Don't Space the White Space...**

Place 1.0 inch margins on the top, bottom, left, and right sides of your paper. Your page headers will go inside the top margin, in the right-hand corner, .5 inches from the top. The first line of each paragraph should be indented 1/2 an inch from the left-hand margin (which would technically be 1.5 inches from the very left edge of your paper).

### **2. Don't Be Too Sexy...**

Don't identify the gender of researchers, authors, or any male or female you write about. Use only nonsexist or ambiguous language. For example, you may write, Albert Einstein but, you may not write Mr. Albert Einstein. Also, after providing a person's full name, any further mention of them should use their last name only e.g., Einstein.

### **3. Don't Forget to Flush and more...**

Don't forget to flush (align) your paper to the left. Do NOT justify your paper. Remember to *double space* the lines of text. But, *single space* between letters, at the end of a sentence. In MS WORD under *Tools, Options*, on the *View* tab, you can click the "Spaces" box to visually see your spacing and make corrections. Don't hyphenate a word or words unless they are found hyphenated in the dictionary. Don't include a title page, unless your professor specifically requires one. Print one-sided, on white, 8.5 x 11 inch paper.

### **4. Don't Mistreat Your Caps...**

MLA style has specific rules about capitalization in titles. Each word in a title IS capitalized unless it falls into one of the following categories: DON'T capitalize articles (e.g., a, an, the), prepositions (e.g., about, against, but, between, by, in, of, to, up), coordinating conjunctions (e.g., and, or, but, for, so, yet, nor), and the infinitive (to), (e.g., How to Write a Research Paper Fast). Don't confuse these rules with APA style. Don't forget to capitalize the first word after a colon (:).

### **5. Don't Get Tense About Verb Tenses**

Don't have a verb tense malfunction. Review your own verb tenses. When discussing research conducted in the past, use past tense. When discussing present theories, use the present tense. And, when forecasting future trends, use future tense.

## **6. Don't Neglect Your In-Text Citations**

MLA in-text citations are more simplified than other documentation styles. A typical in-text citation gives the author's last name and the page the information was formulated from, e.g. (Einstein 123). In-text citing is further simplified when the author's name is mentioned within the text, only the page number is needed within the parenthesis (123). Also, don't forget to punctuate *after* the citation, not before.

## **7. Don't Be Narcissistic - Get Over Yourself...**

Stop referring to yourself in the first person (I, me, we, etc.) in your papers. Even if that means writing in a passive voice. We KNOW it's you.

## Common APA Mistakes

**[StyleEase Software](#) - Tools For Academic Writers. StyleEase Software For Writing Academic Papers, Theses, And Dissertations In Apa, Mla, Chicago/Turabian, And Seminary Styles. StyleEase Automates Everything From The Title Page To The Bibliography, And Makes It Easy To Focus On Content!**

### **1.Spacing the White Space**

Place 1.0 inch margins on the top, bottom, left, and right sides of your paper. Your page headers will go inside the top margin.

### **2.Over-Sexed Papers (Leave Out The Sex)**

Don't identify the gender of researchers or authors, use only nonsexist or ambiguous language.

### **3.Forgetting to Flush and more...**

Don't forget to flush (align) your paper to the Left. Do not justify your paper. Remember to double space the lines of text. But, single space at the end of a sentence. In WORD under Tools, Options, on the View tab, you can click the "Spaces" box to visually see your spacing and make

corrections. Don't hyphenate words at the end of a line (you may have to turn this function off in your writing program).

#### **4.Mistreating Your Caps (in Titles)**

Contrary to what you've been taught before about titles...in APA style, ONLY use capital letters for the first word of a title, for the first word that comes after a colon, and for proper nouns.

#### **5.Being Narcissistic - Get Over Yourself**

Stop referring to yourself in the first person (I, me, we, etc.) in your papers. Even if that means writing in a passive voice. We KNOW it's you

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#### **6.Tense Malfunctions - Tense about verb tenses.**

Don't have a verb tense malfunction. Review your own verb tenses. When discussing research conducted in the past, use past tense. When discussing present theories, use the present tense. And, when forecasting future trends, use future tense.

#### **7.In-Text Citation Neglect**

When using a *direct quotation* (another author's *exact words*) DON'T neglect to include the page number (or paragraph

number if it's referencing a website). Use direct quotes sparingly in APA style. When using another author's *idea(s)*, cite with their last name and the year it was publicized. And, remember to punctuate *after* the citation, not before.

## Grammar Errors to Avoid

[Grammar Instruction](#) Do you have trouble with your grammar? Are you embarrassed by your writing? If so Confident Grammar program is for you.

No one's immune to making mistakes, but with a little effort anyone can make improvements, even in some of the most difficult areas of everyday English grammar. It takes some time and study, but the effort to understand how subjects and verbs relate or how nouns and pronouns go together may be well worth it in the end, contributing to overall personal success in life. With that in mind, here are four grammatical mistakes difficult to avoid for the average person.

### Subject-Verb Agreement

When the subject and verb of a sentence do not agree in number, a major grammatical error is introduced into writing or speaking.

Subjects and verbs must match up singular to singular or plural to plural: a boy runs and boys run, not a boy run or boys runs.

The most common subject-verb (S-V) agreement error is probably simply leaving off the -s ending on present tense verbs (third person singular), or leaving off the -s ending of

plural subjects (nouns). Remember the one-s rule: in the above examples, a boy runs and boys run, the -s only occurs once.

### **Pronoun-Noun Agreement**

Pronouns and the nouns they refer to, called antecedents, should agree in number, which means pronouns and related nouns must match up in a singular to singular or plural to plural relationship.

The most common mistake in pronoun-antecedent agreement is made in the context of a sentence that refers to people in general or a person in a generic sense. The writer or speaker usually has a single, abstract person in mind but uses a plural personal pronoun to later refer to that generic person.

The easiest solution to the problem of mismatching nouns and pronouns is to change the reference to an abstract person in the singular to people in the plural: not A person can always change their ways but A person can always change his or her ways. Or, better yet, simplify the whole process by changing both the noun and pronoun to plural: People can always change their ways.

### **Possession and the Use of the Apostrophe**

One of the most persistent grammatical mistakes in writing involves the concept of possession and misplacing its corresponding punctuation, the apostrophe.

For example, if a student writer refers to the car belonging to that student's parent or parents, the correct way to use the apostrophe to show possession depends on whether the student is referring to one parent or two: my mother's car or

my father's car is the singular form, marked by an apostrophe before the s; however, my parents' car is the plural possessive form, which is indicated by placing the apostrophe after the s and lets the reader know that there are two parents sharing the same car.

In the case of a single parent, then, the corresponding correct singular form (in the generic sense) would be: my parent's car.

## Quotations

Quotations come in two basic kinds: direct and indirect (paraphrase).

Use double quotation marks ("...") around direct quotes only and single quotation marks ('...') only for a quote within a quote ("...!'...'"). Paraphrases, or indirect quotes, do not include quotation marks of either kind.

Direct quotations often are incorrectly written because they are missing one or more of the three main parts. Direct quotes generally should include an introduction, punctuation (followed by a capital letter, or the word that followed by a lower-case letter), and the quote starting with double quotation marks:

Alfred Tennyson writes, "After many a summer dies the swan." or

Alfred Tennyson writes that "after many a summer dies the swan."

Periods and commas go inside the end quotation marks, and semi-colons (;) and colons (:) go outside.

## Final Words

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