

Several Rules for Writing Papers

1. Cut words wherever you can

Example: "In my opinion, Belinda Coote's book *The Trade Trap* seeks to provide a thorough and comprehensive framework for interpreting and understanding the global economic environment."

Where can you cut in this sentence?

2. Prefer active voice to passive voice

Passive voice: "Civilians were killed during the air-strikes over Iraq."

Active voice: "U.S. Air Force planes killed civilians while conducting air-strikes over Iraq."

3. Avoid cliches

Anytime you see a word or phrase that is trendy or frequently used, avoid using it in your own writing.

Examples: "Saddam Hussein is a horrible dictator, just like Hitler." "Slobodan Milosevic is a horrible dictator, just like Hitler." "Fidel Castro is a horrible dictator, just like Hitler," "North Korea's Kim Jong Il is a horrible dictator, just like Hitler."

More examples: "old hat," "stand should to shoulder with," "to give a green light," "kinder and gentler," "to avoid something like the plague," "cool as a cucumber," "stupid is as stupid does," "one in a million," "whatever."

Most of these sound hockey; all of them are overused. Try to use your own words to express ideas, rather than using cliché phrases that others have used.

4. Do not overstate

Words like "very," "catastrophic," "outstanding," "brilliant," "outrageous" should be used infrequently.

5. Be sparing with quotations

Too often students quote directly from sources to hide the fact that they do not really understand the source and are unable to explain what an author is saying. Rather than quoting a source directly, try to paraphrase as much as possible. Only use quotes if you have already made it clear to the reader that you understand the source you are quoting, and wish to use the author's own words because the original is especially well phrased or witty; or if there is some other reason to quote directly.

The basic rule: Only quote if there is a specific reason to quote. Otherwise, paraphrase another author.

6. Do not use sentence fragments

Every sentence must have a verb.

Example of a sentence fragment: "Every political party must have a guiding political ideology, in order to inform its actions in specific political struggles. Political ideologies like communism, fascism, democracy, or religious fundamentalism."

7. Do not use specialized vocabulary unless you understand it.

In the student essay we read in class on the Belinda Coote book, *The Trade Trap*, the student used the term "commodity" repeatedly. However, it was not clear that the student understood what this term means. The writer should have figured out what a "commodity" is, in the sense that it is used in *The Trade Trap*, and should have made it clear to the reader that he/she understood it.

Similarly, you should only use words and phrases like "feudalism," "terms of trade," or "social democracy" if you are sure you understand them. If you do not understand them, look them up in the dictionary and read more until you do understand them.

8. Use paragraphs correctly

A paragraph should express one complete point through a series of sentences. You should not introduce too many separate points in a single paragraph; develop each point separately in its own paragraph. The paragraphs should logically follow one another so that there is a progression of thought across the whole essay.

Taken as a whole, the essay should establish a clear theme (or argument) in the introduction; each paragraph should argue a particular point that sustains the overall thesis. By the end of the essay, the reader should be persuaded that the argument is valid.