
KEY TO GRADING NUMBERS:

- (1) *Weak Argument*
- (2) *Vague Writing*
- (3) *Lack of Examples/Evidence*
- (4) *Excessive Quotation*
- (5) *Failure to Introduce a Quotation*
- (6) *Insufficient or Inaccurate Citations to your Sources.*
- (7) *Sloppy Editing*
- (8) *Incomplete Sentence*
- (9) *Excessive Use of the Verb "To Be" (is, was, were, would be)*
- (10) *Passive Voice*
- (11) *Present Tense*
- (12) *Long and abstract sentence subjects*
- (13) *Intruding a clause between your subject and your verb*
- (14) *Long, Rambling Sentence*
- (15) *Weak Topic Sentence for a Paragraph*
- (16) *Confusing Organization*
- (17) *Repetition*
- (18) *Factual errors*
- (19) *Weasel words*
- (20) *Warm-up sentences*
- (21) *Lack of dates for events, quotes*

A. INTRODUCTION

This guide explains how we will grade your papers and how you can improve your writing.

We emphasize improving your writing because an ability to communicate in writing is a rare and valuable skill that will enhance your success in almost any career.

To make a strong case you must present and explain historical evidence: relevant information and examples from the past. Please do not confuse evidence with metaphors and analogies to contemporary events or with your own personal experiences and opinions.

No one can produce a satisfactory paper in a first draft. After writing a rough draft, you need to revise it to polish your sentences, paragraphs, organization, argument, and evidence. If you write and submit only a first draft, you can expect a failing grade.

PROBLEMS

[Please note that the numbers before each item will be the key for comments on your papers. In other words, if you find a **#1** written on your paper in the margin, it means that you have a weak argument.]

(1) *Weak Argument*

Solution: Your paragraph or paper must present an **argument** clearly and concisely stated in your opening paragraph. **The first sentence in your first paragraph should state your argument.** The rest of that opening paragraph should explain your argument. The rest of your paper should present evidence in support of that argument. An argument is more than a descriptive statement; it must offer an explanation about causation.

An argument answers a **why** question rather than simply a **what** question. In other words, a good argument tries to explain the **cause** of some event or some pattern of thought or behavior in the past.

Example: To write that "The American Revolutionary War began in April 1775 at Lexington" is an accurate descriptive statement, but it is not much of an argument. It does not explain the cause of an action.

More pointed and promising is the following: "Undisciplined American militiamen commenced the American Revolutionary War by firing at British soldiers at Lexington in April of 1775."

Of course, you would have to present persuasive evidence that American militiamen had fired first.

A good argument focuses on a single, primary cause and does **not** provide a list of multiple causes.

Example: Which of these offers the better argument?

- (1) The British expansion into the Ohio Valley caused the Seven Years War to begin in 1754.
- (2) Cultural, social, economic, and political reasons caused the Seven Years War.

Clearly the first is more focused and more specific.

(2) *Vague Writing*

Solution: Explain your ideas in careful detail. History is a discipline for organizing details of events, settings, and people into coherent explanations for change over time. History writing requires careful attention to the specifics of time and place. For all of your examples identify their location in place and time. Vagueness is the bane of history writing.

Example: *Vague:* The settlers were not nice to the Indians.
 Specific: After the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the settlers crossed the Appalachian Mountains to seize Indian land in the Ohio Valley. This invasion destroyed the habitat for the wild animals that sustained the Indian way of life.

Vague: “There was a reason that George Washington cut down the cherry tree.”

Specific: “Seeking relief from the scurvy that cost him his teeth, George Washington cut down the cherry tree and ate the cherries.”

(3) *Lack of Examples/Evidence*

Solution: After making an important statement, you should *immediately* provide an example or a piece of evidence. If you just keep piling on assertions, you will fail to persuade your reader.

(4) *Excessive Quotation*

Solution: Short, relevant quotes can be invaluable to illustrating your points but you should avoid the excessive use of quotation. Some students write papers where most of the words are not their own but quotations from their reading. Only use quotations to illustrate points that you have just expressed in your own words. Avoid long quotations. A single-sentence quotation is usually more effective. Only use a quotation which vividly and precisely illustrates your point. Be careful to introduce each quotation by identifying the author and the context.

(5) *Failure to Introduce a Quotation*

Solution: You should **always** introduce a quotation by identifying the author of the words. Ideally, you will also specify a date for the quotation.

Example: Poor: “I just love to stand up in boats.”

 Better: “In 1776, while crossing the Delaware River, George Washington yelled, AI

just love to stand up in boats.”

(6) *Insufficient or Inaccurate Citations to your Sources*

Solution: Footnote your quotes and your use of information or ideas derived from any other writer. Too many students mistakenly believe that they only need to provide citations for quotations.

Always locate your footnote number at the **end** of a sentence, never in the middle.

Your citation to a source should provide the name for the author of the document; the title for the document; and the author and title of the reader; and the specific page or pages.

Examples:

A document:

Richard Hakluyt, “A Discourse Concerning Western Planting,” in Foner, ed., Voices of Freedom, 25.

A book:

Alan Brinkley, The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People, I (to 1877) (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008), 127.

NOTE: Do **not** use pp. or pg. in front of page numbers. They are unnecessary and distracting.

A lecture:

Alan Taylor, History 17A Lecture, Mar. 5, 2014.

NOTE: You should rely **primarily** on the documents for your evidence. You should only draw on lectures to provide some context.

(7) *Sloppy Editing*

Solution: Proofread your paper before you submit it. Correct your typographical, spelling, and punctuation errors. Refer to your dictionary when in doubt. If you are sloppy, you will receive a very poor grade.

(8) *Incomplete Sentence*

Solution: Every sentence must have a subject (in front of the verb); a verb (in the middle); and a direct object (following the verb). Note the following sentence

"Parson Weems wrote fables."

"Parson Weems" is the subject; "wrote" is the verb; and "fables" is the direct object. Often students write sentence fragments, generally by omitting a verb.

(9) *Excessive Use of the Verb "To Be" (is, was, were, would be)*

Solution: Of all the inert verbs in the English language, "to be" conveys the least meaning. Too often students use this one verb over and over in sentence after sentence. This makes for very tedious reading. "To be" also traps writers into clunky and wordy convolutions that cloud your meaning. Instead of "to be," you should use action verbs, which means all other verbs. A very few examples: wrote, spoke, ran, fought, led, argued, insisted, resembled ... Sometimes "to be" is (as here) the only appropriate verb. But **most of your sentences** should employ an action verb (such as "employ").

(10) *Passive Voice*

Solution: Here we have the very worst form of "to be:" combined with a past participle. You need to weed the passive voice from your writing. By reversing the more natural order of agent-action-goal, passive sentences cripple the clear flow of information.

Examples:

"The cherry tree **was cut** down by George Washington."

In most cases such passive sentences can be corrected readily to construct an active statement where the subject becomes a person (or persons) performing the action. Often this simply involves reversing the direct object ("George Washington") and the subject ("The cherry tree") of the passive sentence:

"George Washington **cut** down the cherry tree."

Passives mask responsibility for an action. For example:

"The letter **was written** in a dull style."

Who wrote the letter in that dull style? Far better to employ an action verb after the human subject:

"Thomas Jefferson **wrote** the letter in a dull style."

(11) *Present Tense*

Solution: When writing about an event that occurred in the past, use the past tense. This seems simple, but many students never stray from the present tense.

Examples: Present Tense: "Washington chops down cherry trees."
Past Tense: "Washington chopped down cherry trees."

Some students shift from past to present and back to past tense within the same paragraph (or even within the same sentence) while describing the same people and events set at the same moment in the past. For example:

"Washington has wooden teeth. He used them to eat with. Washington never gums his food. He avoided apples, but he loves cherries."

No. Stick with the past tense throughout.

(12) *Long and abstract sentence subjects*

Solution: In addition to a verb in the middle, every sentence needs a subject at the start. Clear writing favors concise subjects (such as Clear writing - only two words - at the start of this sentence). If your subject involves more than 3 words, you probably need something shorter. In most sentences your subject should be an agent of action. This usually means a human being or a human group.

Example: Abstract: "The passion for cherry soda of George Washington was the reason that he chopped down the cherry tree."

Concise: "George Washington chopped down the cherry tree because he loved cherry soda."

(13) *Intruding a clause between your subject and your verb*

Solution: A sentence works best when the subject leads directly into the verb ("George Washington chopped..."). Subordinate clauses work best either at the start of the sentence, to modify the verb, or at the end, to modify the direct object.

Examples: Intruding Clause: "The farmer, *angry over the death of his favorite cherry tree*, chased George Washington."

Better: "*Angry over the death of his favorite cherry tree*, the farmer chased George Washington."

NOTE: The improved version places **no** words between the subject (“the farmer”) and the verb (“chased”).

(14) *Rambling Sentences*

Solution: Avoid long, complex, convoluted, multi-clausal sentences. Many students mistakenly believe that good writing requires long sentences with multiple clauses. In fact, such long and complex sentences confuse and bore your readers.

As a rule, express only one idea per sentence. Use a sequence of sentences to develop the subtleties of your idea - instead of stuffing the whole lot into one overburdened sentence. When proofreading, if you encounter a long, overly complex sentence, devise a way to break it into two or three shorter statements. Avoid sentences that ramble on for more than 3 lines.

To achieve clarity eliminate unnecessary words - especially in the core of a sentence: the combination of subject-verb-object.

Example: The most beautiful and effective sentence in American literature is the immortal:

"Jane chased Spot."

Why? Because it has a human subject (Jane) engaged in an action (chased) involving a direct object (Spot) and because there are no extraneous words in between the three. (By the way, “Spot” is a dog).

Try to keep the core of your sentence clean by adding your qualifications and clarifications as phrases attached to the front or the rear of that core. For example:

"Angry over the soiled carpet and armed with a sawed-off shotgun, Jane chased Spot, a mangy dog with a bladder-control problem." is far better than "Jane, angry over the soiled carpet, chased, while armed with a sawed-off shotgun a mangy dog with a bladder control problem, Spot."

(15) *No Topic Sentence for a Paragraph*

Solution: Every paragraph should have one dominant idea expressed in a single "topic sentence" that controls the remaining sentences in that paragraph. A topic sentence works best as the first sentence in the paragraph. It conveys to the reader what the paragraph is about. The rest of the sentences should clarify or demonstrate that one key idea. If a subsequent sentence in the paragraph is unrelated to the topic sentence, it does not belong and should be removed.

(16) *Confusing Organization*

Solution: Be careful about the sequence of your paragraphs. If you pulled out all the other sentences in your paragraphs, leaving only the topic sentences, they should make a natural and coherent chain of ideas that could serve as a synopsis of your entire paper. If they do not, you need to reorder your paragraphs and/or improve the clarity and cogency of your topic sentences. Please make and follow an outline.

In history, chronology matters. Avoid jumping back and forth in time. It works best to discuss early events and developments **before** discussing later ones. For example, it works better to discuss the American Revolution **before** writing about the later War with Mexico.

(17) *Repetition*

Solution: Make a point clearly **once**. Avoid repeating the same idea over and over again in varying words.

(18) *Factual errors*

Solution: Check your facts, dates, and spellings of names carefully. History writing requires accuracy.

(19) *Weasel words*

Solution: Some students seek safety in such “weasel words” as “maybe” or “perhaps” or “might have been.” Such qualifiers render your writing almost without meaning. Avoid history in the key of “maybe.” Instead, make an argument for what “probably” happened. To do so, you will need to present evidence.

(20) *Warm-up sentences*

Problem: Students often prove slow to get to the point, preferring to begin papers with global formulas such as “Ever since the dawn of time...” or “Ever since Columbus discovered America. . . .”

Solution: Get to your own point immediately and stick to the topic of your paper throughout.

(21) *Lack of dates for events, quotes*

Solution: When you mention an event or introduce a quotation, specify the year. This provides the reader with a sense of place in time.

THE SIMPLE SECRET

Economy of Language: Good writing explains clearly. Simple, short sentences facilitate clarity. Please note my use of short, direct sentences. Throughout this writing guide, most of my sentences occupy only one or two lines. I build my points through a series of concise sentences. Several brief sentences work better than one long, rambling sentence with multiple clauses. Please also note that I use action verbs (like “use”) instead of “to be” in most of my sentences. I also use very concise subjects, usually human (like “I” in this sentence). And I avoid placing any words between my subject and my verb. Sometimes you have to break these rules, but you should strive for a clear and concise style in **most** of your sentences. You can achieve this if in **most** of your sentences you do the following 3 things:

- (1) Use a human subject
- (2) Use an action verb
- (3) Intrude no words between your subject and your verb

SUGGESTIONS

- (1) Before you start your rough draft, prepare a scratch sheet (or two or three) of ideas that you want to express. At this point do not be concerned with their order. Just write your ideas down as fast as they come to you. This is the point in the process to be creative and disorganized.
- (2) Then go over the scratch sheet(s) to choose which ideas are important, which are useful but subordinate, and which are unimportant or incompatible (and therefore should be discarded). Look for connections between your points and figure out the best possible sequence.
- (3) Draw up an outline, a skeleton of the order in which you will present your ideas and your evidence and examples drawn from your reading.
- (4) Prepare a rough draft.
- (5) Carefully proofread that rough draft, correcting and improving **every** sentence.

If you get bogged down, consult your teaching assistant. Bring along your scratch-sheet and your paper outline.

- (6) After your T.A. returns your graded paper, please consult with her/him in office ours about how to revise and expand for the next installment. Come to your meeting prepared: bring your first paper with you and demonstrate that you understand the criticisms. We are always prepared to

explain comments and to help you to improve; but we do not renegotiate grades.

HOW TO WRITE A FAILING PAPER

"I don't know nothing about this history stuff." - John McNamara, Boston Red Sox Manager (who was fired shortly thereafter in just punishment for his ignorance of history).

(A) Submit the paper in illegible long-hand, single-spaced, written in red ink on both sides of blue paper. Save your staples; avoid page numbers; and shuffle your pages randomly. History papers are not easy to write, so why should they be easy to read?

(B) Misspell at least one word per sentence to see if your teaching assistant owns a dictionary. Take peculiar pains to vary the spelling of any name: "Wasshington", "Wachington".

(C) Devise complicated constructions that mask your meaning. Why write "The cat is on the mat" when you could instead write "The predicative nexus of exemplification was instantiated by being-on and the beings that were the cat and the mat"?

(D) Discard punctuation. By simply dropping all commas you can multiply the possible interpretations of your sentences.

(E) Begin and end paragraphs anywhere you please. Why not just make your paper one long paragraph? Then you would only have to write one theme sentence. Or you could make every sentence a separate paragraph to avoid having to present any supporting examples or evidence.

(F) Why bother with any evidence? Why even read any of the books or documents? After all, history is just a matter of opinion and all opinions are equal. So why waste your time? Never consider any possible objections to your position. Simply assert.

(G) Avoid making an argument. It is so unpleasant. Besides, you can make do by filling the paper up with a statement of your feelings. Be as vague as possible. Don't forget to mention that your conclusion is too obvious to require any evidence. What happened to you the last time you went to San Francisco or what your roommate said the other day will help you fill in any remaining space. You can never go wrong by making analogies to current events.

(H) Avoid any direct statement. Qualify everything so that you cannot possibly be wrong. Use "perhaps" and "maybe" in every sentence. For example: "Perhaps it may be slightly astounding that the cherry tree possibly died from the ax blow that may have been delivered by Washington."

(I) When in doubt, repeat yourself. The more times you say the same idea in slightly different ways, the more likely you are to fill up your paper with minimal effort.

(J) Use as many irrelevant quotations as possible, but never footnote them. You may want to forget to use quotation marks.

(K) Never proofread or edit. Why spoil the spontaneity of the moment?