



The Betty East Tutoring Center at Victoria College

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Common Mistakes

In the Tutoring Center we often see many students making similar mistakes in their papers. This handout provides a few examples of these mistakes, in hopes that students can better understand and correct these mistakes independently. If you need more information on any of these topics, the Tutoring Center offers full handouts on each subject.

MLA Format

The Tutoring Center does not recommend using any template (such as Microsoft Word MLA) to write your papers. These templates are often outdated and do not allow for easy editing.

Headings:

The heading does *not* go in the header section. The only thing that should appear in the header is your last name, a space, and the page number: Smith 1, Smith 2, etc. Your heading should appear *only* on the first page, in the upper left hand corner, and should look like this:

John Smith

Professor Johnson

EDUC 1300

1 January 2016

Note the order in which everything is listed. Also, note the format of the date. Always use the due date, not when you began working on the project.

Spacing:

Your paper should be double spaced. This means that a blank space is between each line of text (like in the example heading above). This does *not* mean that you hit the space bar twice between each word. Do not hit enter at the end of the line, let the computer do it automatically. You do not need to double space between sentences, either.

When you set Microsoft Word to format your document with double-spacing, too much space appears between paragraphs. To correct this, make sure you select “Remove Spacing After Paragraph” on the spacing menu.

Title

The title of your paper should be centered on the line below your heading and above the first line of your first paragraph. The title does not need to be underlined, italicized, in bold print, or inside quotation marks. Just center it.

Works Cited

Every research paper must have a Works Cited page. The page must come at the end of your paper and begin on its own page, not tagged on to the last page of your paper. The title for this sheet of paper must be formatted like the title of your paper. It will not cause your page numbers to start over. So, if your paper is four pages long, your Works Cited would appear on page five.

The Works Cited page lists every source of information, or reference, that you use from your research. These sources must be listed in alphabetical order. If the reference ends up being longer than one line, the next line(s) must have a hanging indent.

Thesis/Topic Sentences:

Students often forget the importance of thesis and topic sentences. These sentences help you stay on topic and help your reader follow the organizational structure of your paper.

Thesis Statements:

The thesis statement should appear once in your introductory paragraph as a preview to what your paper will be discussing. The statement should be reworded and appear again in your concluding paragraph to summarize what your paper was about.

Topic Sentences:

Every body paragraph of your paper should begin with a topic sentence. This sentence signals to the reader what this paragraph is going to be about. It also should tie in with your thesis statement and signal to the reader why this paragraph is important to understanding your topic.

Punctuation:

Punctuating your sentences improperly can lead to sentence fragments and run-on sentences.

Commas:

Commas should *not* be used where we would naturally pause for emphasis or to take a breath while speaking. Try reading your sentences with commas out loud. If the pause caused by the comma sounds awkward, the comma can most likely be removed.

Semicolons:

Many students mistakenly believe that the semicolon is the same thing as a comma. This is *not* correct. The only time a semicolon can replace a comma is when you are separating items in a long list. Otherwise, a semicolon is used to correct a run-on sentence by separating two complete thoughts contained in one sentence.

Addressing the Audience:

Academic papers should never address, or talk to, the audience in any way. There are a few ways students tend to do this:

Second Person:

Second person pronouns such as “you” should never be used in academic papers.

First Person:

First person pronouns must also be avoided. In some cases, pronouns such as “I” are okay. However, other first person pronouns, such as “we” and “us,” are not okay because they include the audience.

Rhetorical Questions:

Any time you ask a question in your paper, you are asking a rhetorical question. Your question is rhetorical because you are not going to get an answer from your audience. Because of this, any question you ask in your paper is addressing the audience and should be removed. The only time a question mark should appear in your paper is if you are quoting a source that is asking a question.

Word Choice

It is important to remember that when you are writing a paper for college, the paper will be read by educated people whom you do not know very well. Therefore, you should not use words and phrases that you would use in your day-to-day vocabulary.

Contractions:

A contraction is formed when two words are brought together in a shortened form and joined with an apostrophe. These words should always be spelled out in academic papers. For example, “don’t” should be “do not” and “won’t” should be “will not.”

Imagery:

Research papers are for facts and opinions. Visual imagery such as metaphors, similes, and overly descriptive terms should be put to the side. These are more appropriate to use in creative writing. For example, if your professor asks you to write about how a memory from your childhood has affected your adult life, some imagery would be acceptable. However, if your professor asks you to research crime rates in cities with strict gun-control laws and to write a paper persuading your audience of your opinion on gun-control, no descriptive imagery is necessary or relevant.

Slang

Sometimes students are so focused on getting their thoughts down on paper that they forget that, while some word spellings have been altered for texting and social media purposes, their official spellings have not changed. For example, the word “through” cannot be spelled as “thru.”

Additionally, word choice can be a factor in academic papers. Strive to sound formal and educated. For example, no academic paper should describe a topic as “cool.” Words such as “innovative” and “interesting” are much more appropriate.

Further, abbreviations, no matter how common they are or how many people know what they mean, are never okay. Leave LOL, BRB, OK, and TTYL in your text messages.