

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

ESSAY WRITING TIPS

Question: What are some of the most common mistakes you have seen in student essays?

Answer: Over a period of several years teaching college courses, I have found a few common mistakes in essay writing, usually falling into structural or grammatical issues. These are very easy to overcome, but awareness is the key! Below I have divided these issues into structural and grammatical topics, and provided some easy-to-follow examples to help fix the resulting problems.

Detail: Some common **structural issues** are:

1. **Be objective and avoid first person:** You are writing an objective paper based on facts. You should argue a position, but make the argument fit the facts, not the opposite. Always be objective. To help with this goal, be careful with the sources you choose. People can post anything on the internet, but that does not mean it is correct. Verify, and use peer reviewed material (the library has aides for this topic). Finally, when you use the pronoun I, you are taking away from the legitimate objectivity of your scholarship – don't sell yourself short!
2. **Organization:** Always remember, every good essay has an introduction (give the reader a short preview of your writing, such as the question to be answered or the event to be considered), the supportive body (this is the material that will support your conclusion), and the conclusion (give your final interpretation and how the body of the paper supported this interpretation).
3. **Sources:** Also, be certain to check your sources as being acceptable with our professor. Remember, Wikipedia is not a source to list under resources. The same applies to Ask.com and similar sites. It is fine to start at these for an overview, but find articles that are reviewed in academic journals or journalistic articles when looking for facts and interpretations of an event.

Some common **grammatical issues** are:

1. **Write in the affirmative:** Do not write: "We cannot claim to have been the most successful in Vietnam," but rather: "Vietnam proved to be a disaster for American foreign policy." Say what you mean, mean what you say.
2. **Avoid passive voice:** Instead of: "Washington was a great president." try: "Washington is still revered as a great president today."

3. **Subject-verb agreement:** The subject and verb of a sentence must be in agreement in number (singular vs. plural). Do not write: “The two best things about college was pizza and parties.”, but rather: “The two best things about college were pizza and parties.”
4. **Then/than:** Then is (usually) a time designation: “Back then, we had it made.” Than is comparative: “I’d much rather be here with you than there with them.”
5. **There/their/they’re:** There refers to a place: “There is a place where I can go.” Their is possessive: “Their hairstyles are really cool.” They’re is a contraction: “They’re on their way to the movies.”
6. **Your/You’re:** Your is possessive: “You forgot your coat.”. You’re is a contraction for you are: “You’re right about that.”
7. **To/too:** To is a preposition : “She turned to us as she spoke.”; or an adverb : “They ran to and fro.” Too is an adverb meaning also: “Yes, me too.”; or sufficiently or extremely: “You’re just too much!”
8. **Its/It’s:** Its is possessive: “The dog wagged its tail.” It’s is a contraction for it is: “Thank goodness it’s Friday!”

NOTE: You may be asked to write a reflective paper from your perspective. Personally, I am not a fan of these, but if you are asked to do so, follow the instructions of the assignment and use I to designate your opinion. Otherwise, avoid the first person like the plague!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Purdue Online Writing Lab is a very good resource for essay help and information:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

If you need a quick proofread of your paper, try:

<https://www.grammarly.com>

For help with formatting your footnotes, endnotes, and bibliography, see:

<http://www.citationmachine.net/>