

DON'T DO THIS, DON'T DO THAT, AND DON'T DO THE OTHER THING!

This handout is a list of twenty-five writing crimes. They aren't grouped or sequenced in any sensible way. They're just items that sprang to mind when I sat down to think about common errors in student compositions. If you can avoid all of these errors, especially in critical-voice texts, you'll go a long way toward making a few English teachers deliriously happy.

1.

Don't use phrases such as these:

There are many examples of ...
Many ideas are developed about ...
... happens many times in the novel.

Unless you can cite more than, say, five examples of the "many" things you're referring to collectively, do not speak of the "many" things at all. And even if you *can* and *do* cite the five-plus examples, still avoid introducing them with this sort of clichéd phrasing. Don't say, for example, that "this work advances many ideas about the influence of an ideal on behaviour." Rather, state the actual ideas (or the one idea, if that's how many you have) that the work advances.

2.

Don't say, "throughout the novel," "in the play," "in the given selection," and so on.

The reader already understands that your references are to the work(s) or selection(s) you've identified in your introduction or that you've been assigned to comment on. Therefore, your use of such phrases is redundant.

3.

Don't use first-person pronouns (*I, me, my, mine, myself*) or second-person pronouns (*you, your, yours, yourself*) in critical responses. Such references convey an inappropriately casual tone and suggest a subjective approach to the text.

For example, don't say, **I think the beleaguered nurse, despite her anxieties, is a remarkably brave woman.**

Instead say, **The beleaguered nurse, despite her anxieties, is a remarkably brave woman.**

And don't say, **You can see that Cather uses rich imagery supported by extensive and subtle details.**

Instead say, **Cather uses rich imagery supported by extensive and subtle details.**

The exception to the no-first-person rule is the occasional use of *we*, *our*, and *us*, being first-person plural pronouns that refer not so much to humans generally as to readers of the text being discussed.

4.

Don't say "we as human beings," "we the readers," and so on. "We" is enough. The reader will not assume that "we" refers to non-humans or to those who haven't read the text being discussed.

5.

Don't begin a critical essay with a here's-what-this-essay's-about introduction. Rather, state your thesis.

For example, don't say, **In my essay I will show how the young soldier in Smith's narrative experiences an enormous shift in perspective that results in improved self-awareness.**

Instead say, **The young soldier in Smith's narrative experiences an enormous shift in perspective that results in improved self-awareness.**

And don't say, **This paper will discuss the elements of imagery and connotative language in the passage from Dickens' *David Copperfield* and show how they convey a sense of the ambivalence one feels in accepting a challenge.**

Say, rather, **The passage from Dickens' *David Copperfield* shows how imagery and connotative language convey a sense of the ambivalence one feels in accepting a challenge.**

6.

Don't use contractions or abbreviations in critical voice.

Don't say, for example, **He's isolated from the other workers in the accounting dept.**

Say instead, **He is isolated from the other workers in the accounting department.**

7.

Don't use past tense when referring to a text or to its author's efforts and effects. Speak consistently in present tense—of events and conditions in a work or of a writer's choices as though they are happening now rather than in the past.

For instance, don't say, **The inspector assumed that the victim was a male.**

Instead say, **The inspector assumes that the victim is a male.**

And don't say, **In that way Shakespeare was expressing all of humanity's condition through one character's experience.**

Say, **In this way Shakespeare expresses all of humanity's condition through one character's experience.**

Use past tense only if the event or condition to which you are referring is past tense for the character(s). For example, you could say this: **Recalling her childhood, Hagar observes that her greatest fear while walking in the graveyard was that she would soil her pretty dress.**

8.

Don't form incomplete comparisons. If you declare that something is less or more in quantity or degree, then you must say what it stands in relation to. Otherwise, don't express your statement in comparative terms.

For instance, don't say, **To reinforce Hagar's isolation and anxiety, Laurence gives more emphasis to images of fragmentation, haphazardness, and repugnance.** [*more emphasis than what?*]

Rather, say, **To reinforce Hagar's isolation and anxiety, Laurence emphasizes images of fragmentation, haphazardness, and repugnance.**

And don't say, **Kilodney gives a more detailed account of the man waiting for Halley's Comet.** [*more detailed than what?*]

Say, **Kilodney's account of the man waiting for Halley's Comet is more detailed than are his accounts of the other waiters in the story.**

9.

Don't use the phrase "since the beginning of time" or any variations on that motif. You weren't around at the beginning of time. Therefore any statement following that phrase—for example, "... societies have been at war," "... people have sought to know the meaning of life," "... the outsider has been in our midst"—will be unverifiable.

Indeed, don't make any statements for which you can't offer some kind of support.

10.

Don't use semi-colons (;) if you just don't "get" semi-colons. Semi-colons are used to separate independent clauses—parts of sentences that could stand alone as complete sentences. See the file "Grammar-Punctuation."

11.

Don't use commas haphazardly. As a general rule, use commas to set off words or phrases that could be deleted from a sentence without making the whole sentence incomplete. See the file "Grammar-Punctuation."

The following sentence is punctuated correctly:

Austen's style, so strongly lyrical and rhythmic, is decidedly poetic, even though her vehicle is prose.

The phrases "so strongly lyrical and rhythmic" and "even though her vehicle is prose" could be taken out, and the sentence would still be complete. Like so:

Austen's style is decidedly poetic.

Therefore the phrases, which are modifiers, are set off with commas.

12.

Don't misplace apostrophes. Apostrophes are ordinarily used to indicate **possession** (e.g. the *boy's dog*, *the boys' dogs*, *the boy's dog's bone*, etc) or **contraction** (e.g. *it is = it's*, *cannot = can't*, *would have = would've*, etc). The exception to the rule is in the case of the pronouns *it*, *their*, *her*, *your* and *our*; the possessive form in each case here is not indicated with an apostrophe (therefore: *its*, *theirs*, *hers*, *yours*, *ours*). **Don't ever use apostrophes to form plurals!**

If you're having trouble with these or other punctuation concepts, see the file "Grammar-Punctuation."

13.

Don't insert unassimilated quotations. These are clumsy and jar the rhythm of your text. Prefer the embedded phrase to the tacked-on or roughly inserted quotation.

For example, don't say, **The reader may feel like the captain does when he says this: "But I wondered how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly."**

Instead try, **Like the captain, the reader may "[wonder] how far [he shall] turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly."**

The following passages are derived from student essays on Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. In each case, note the awkwardness, even incomprehensibility, of the original passage, and then see how the revision clarifies and smoothes out the expression.

Original #1:

The two brothers, even after eighteen years of separation, cannot be differentiated. "Say, stand apart. I know not which is which."

Revised #1:

The two brothers, even after eighteen years of separation, cannot be differentiated. In frustration, the Duke insists that the twins "stand apart," for he "[knows] not which is which."

Original #2:

Luciana tries to show reason. "O, know he is the bridle of your will." Understandably angry, "There's none but asses will be bridled so . . . This servitude makes you to keep unwed."

Revised #2:

Luciana tries to show reason, saying to Adriana, "O, know he is the bridle of your will." Understandably angry, Adriana responds to Luciana's comment by saying, "there's none but asses will be bridled so," and says further that "this servitude makes [Luciana] to keep unwed."

Original #3:

The merchant protests Angelo's debt, which keeps him land-bound, "but that I am bound for Persia, and want guilders for my voyage."

Revised #3:

The merchant protests Angelo's debt, which keeps him land-bound, declaring that he is "bound for Persia, and [wants] guilders for [his] voyage."

14.

Don't set periods and commas outside quotation marks.

NOT "... with only sky and sea for spectators and judges".

INSTEAD "... with only sky and sea for spectators and judges."

NOT **Nor is he "grave beyond his years", so he tells jokes often.**

INSTEAD **Nor is he "grave beyond his years," so he tells jokes often.**

15.

Don't use the phrases "the reason why" and "the reason is because." Rather, use "the reason that" or "the reason is that."

16.

Don't be redundant.

Redundancy is to be avoided because redundancy is not good, and if you say the same thing unnecessarily more than once, you're just being redundant, and that's shocking and appalling, so be cautious about and wary of redundancy. Stamp out and abolish redundancy. Each and every use of redundancy must be eliminated and removed.

Jillions of redundancies can be noted. Here are a few:

Don't needlessly use the adjective *inner*. Phrases such as "inner spirit," "inner thoughts," and "inner fears" are redundant. Sufficient are "spirit," "thoughts," and "fears."

Don't use "thinks to himself." Who else would he be thinking to?

Don't bother with *personal* or *personally*. If you are referring to one's traits, behaviors, feelings, thoughts, or sensations, you needn't note that they are his or her *personal* traits, behaviors, thoughts, or sensations.

Don't pad a text with intensifiers. Adverbs such as "very," "extremely," "really," "highly," and so on are tapioca words—bland fillers that don't improve adjectives or other adverbs that already work well enough on their own.

Don't use the following redundancies.

absolutely essential
absolutely necessary
advance warning
affluent rich
always and forever
anonymous stranger
associate together
attach together
bad trouble
basic fundamentals

begin to proceed
boiling hot
cash money
cease and desist
circulated around
classic tradition
close proximity
closed fist
collaborate together with
combined together

complete monopoly
completely filled
component parts
continue on
crimson red
dark night
delete out
down under
each and every
elevate up

end result
enter into
evil villain
exactly the same
falling down
famous celebrities
fellow colleagues
empty blank
first of all
former graduate
free gift
full satisfaction
gather together
grand total
hopes and aspirations
hygienic cleaning
immortalized forever
individual person
jet plane
last will and testament
live audience
merge together
negative misfortune
new discovery
newborn baby
null and void
original founder
over and above
pair of twins
past experience
past tradition
previous history
print out
proposed plan
protective helmet
raise up
repeat again
revert back
rising above
safe sanctuary
sharp point
sink down
small speck
solitary hermit
specific example
square box
sufficient enough
swampy marsh
temper tantrum

terrible tragedy
tiny bit
true fact
turning around
under cover
unique individual
useless and unnecessary
wall murals
whether or not
young child
academic scholar
added bonus
advance scout
all-inclusive
ask a question
at this point in time
baby calf
bare naked
brief moment
burning hot
circle around
climb up
close scrutiny
cold frost
complete stop
completely unanimous
consensus of opinion
convicted felon
crystal clear
descend down
duplicate copy
empty hole
empty space
Ending outcome
essential necessity
exact replica
extreme hazard
false illusion
favorable approval
final farewell
first priority
foreign imports
former veteran
freezing cold
future plans
grateful thanks
growing greater
hanging down
honest truth

hot water heater
remembered back
ice cold
income coming in
initially from the beginning
raining outside
join together
killed dead
knowledgeable experts
little baby
live witness
mental thought
money-saving coupon
near vicinity
new and improved
new innovations
not one single person
oral conversation
other alternatives
passing fad
past history
postponed until later
previously recorded
prior history
protective armor
refer back
return back
round circle
safe haven
separate out
small child
spinning around
still remains
surrounded on all sides
tear apart
temporary reprieve
toys and playthings
tuna fish
two twins
unexpected surprise
unmarried bachelor
unsolved mysteries
usual custom
wear upon
widow woman
written down
young teenager

17a.

Don't use incorrect formats when writing titles of works. Titles of short works (poems, short stories, essays, articles, and so on) are indicated with quotation marks alone, not with underlining or italics too. Full-length works (novels, multiple-act plays, feature films, and television series) are indicated with italics only (in handwriting, the equivalent of italics is underlining).

Full-length works

Romeo and Juliet (full-length play)
To Kill a Mockingbird (novel)
The Odyssey (epic poem)
Star Wars (feature film)
The Simpsons (TV series)
The Collected Works of Hans Christian Anderson (anthology)
The Calgary Herald (newspaper)
Time (magazine)

Short works

"Trifles" (one-act play)
"Waiting for Halley's Comet" (short story)
"Ode on a Grecian Urn" (poem)
"The Big Snit" (short film)
"Homer Gets Fired" (episode from a TV series)
"The Little Mermaid" (single work from an anthology) But note that if you were using this title to refer to the Disney animated feature (a full-length work), you would show the title as *The Little Mermaid*.
"Economic Disaster Looms" (newspaper article)
"Big Stars at in Small Skies" (magazine article)

17b.

Don't title essays incorrectly. The title you give your essay should reflect the content of the essay. It is inappropriate, therefore, to title your essay with no more than the title of the work you are discussing. If, for example, you are discussing the characters of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, you would not title your essay *King Lear*. Rather, your title might be something like this:

Characterization in *King Lear*

or

Ignorance to Understanding in *King Lear*

or

The Importance of Seeing Better: Characters' Discoveries in *King Lear*

The title you give to a Critical/Analytical Response to Literary Texts assignment (i.e. the critical-response portion of Part A of the diploma exam) is appropriately derived from the assigned topic. For example:

Turning Points in *A Man for All Seasons*
Personal Resourcefulness in *The Stone Angel*
Dilemma in "Paul's Case"
Isolation in "The Wall"

A format note: Your title should appear in the same font and type size used in the text of your essay. As well, do not underline or italicize your full title. Look at the examples above and note that italic type or quotation marks are used only to indicate a title *within* your title. Finally, be sure to capitalize only the initial letters of important words. All other letters are in lower case.

18.

Don't use the incorrect construction "is when." Say instead "occurs when" or "happens when."

19.

Don't use the word *like* where you mean to indicate a supposed condition or an imagined situation. Instead use the phrase *as if* or *as though*.

For example, don't say, **It is like the stars above the young captain are not only alive but also focused on and judging him.**

Instead say, **It is as if the stars above the young captain are not only alive but also focused on and judging him.**

Or say, **It is as though the stars above the young captain are not only alive but are focused on and judging him.**

20.

Don't use the non-word *alot* when you mean the phrase *a lot*. Better yet, don't use the phrase at all. Prefer instead the words *much* or *many*.

Don't say, **His situation is alot like that of the struggling farmer.**

Instead say, **His situation is much like that of the struggling farmer.**

Don't say, **A lot of the images are associated with the effects of light and darkness.**

Instead say, **Many of the images are associated with the effects of light and darkness.** [Of this example, incidentally, look back to the first "don't" in this handout.]

21.

Don't use the verb *get* where a better verb can be used.

Don't say, **She gets a call from her husband.**

Instead say, **She receives a call from her husband.**

Don't say, **He gets angry with the assembled rebels.**

Instead say, **He grows angry with the assembled rebels.**

Don't say, **They get away from their pursuers.**

Instead say, **They elude their pursuers.**

22.

Don't misuse the phrase "in which." This phrase is used in constructions where the writer wishes to avoid ending a sentence with the preposition *in*. For example, one might say, "That is the car they rode in." Or one might say, "That is the car in which they rode." Strict grammarians will object to the former version, saying that to end a sentence with a preposition is incorrect. But it isn't so much incorrect as awkward. Some readers will say that the latter version sounds too formal. And indeed it may sound so in ordinary conversation, but in critical voice it is appropriate. Note also that ending the statement on the verb ("rode") gives the sentence a more forceful sound and sense than is heard in the sentence that ends in "in."

Are you familiar with Paul McCartney's song "Live and Let Die"? It includes the phrase "this ever-changing world **in which we live in.**" Now, isn't that just painful?

23.

Don't depend overmuch on spell-checkers. Spell-checkers often provide you with the right spellings of the wrong words. Proofread your composition carefully to be sure that you don't have the correct spelling of *aquatinted* when what you want is the word *acquainted*, or that you don't have *defiantly* when what you need is *definitely*.

Indeed, proofread every text carefully, especially (if circumstances allow) by reading aloud what you've written. Your ears will often catch errors that your eyes miss.

24.

Don't write incomplete sentences! Comma-spliced sentences, fused sentences, and sentence fragments are all incomplete. And all are inappropriate in critical-voice responses.

Look them up in "Grammar-Punctuation" or at any on-line writing-skills site, and learn how to **eliminate them from your writing!!!** ← **in boldface and with three exclamation points so you'll know that I really mean it**

25.

Don't write sentences with subject-verb disagreements or pronoun-antecedent disagreements!

Look this up in the file "Writing Skills. Subject-Verb Agreement." Otherwise, go to any on-line writing-skills site, and learn how to eliminate these problems from your writing.
