**Hints on Writing**

Below, I have noted some of the common mistakes I have found in students’ writing samples. The article reviews are formative assignments and I expect you to get better with each draft. Remember, these are all technical, formal papers that are admittedly a little stilted. I understand you do not usually talk like this, but make a conscience attempt to humor me in this regard. Here are some problems I have noticed (in no particular order). I expect you to read over the list, and make sure you avoid these problems in the next round of writing.

1. Do not abbreviate in technical writing (TN, Tenn, USA, etc are all words that need to be spelled out). There are exceptions like NATO, or ADHD after they have been identified after the first use, but avoid beginning a sentence with an abbreviation.
2. The APA style is weird. Please read the APA handout and look at your various texts and journal articles for practical examples. We will make slight alterations from time to time in the format, but know the standard. Pay close attention to the 8 fundamental APA rules in the APA handout.
3. Do not change tense in the paper. Right now, it is all future tense. In the final version, it will be PAST TENSE.
4. Write everything in the 3rd person. Refer to yourself as “the writer,” “the researcher,” “the investigator,” etc., do not use I, me, our, you, etc. Watch the implied “you” (the second person).
5. Do not use contractions in technical writing. “Doesn’t,” “can’t,” “he’ll,” etc. are all unacceptable.
6. Be parsimonious in your use of words, and please choose the right word (usually the shorter the better). As Mark Twain (1892) once observed, “the difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightening and lightening bug” (p. 92). Cut as much “fat” out as you can. Remember Eudora Welty’s great line, “…in order to be a good writer, you must learn to kill your children” (Welty, 1998, p.45). The words and phrases you use were born in your brain. However, some of those “children” should not see the light of day.
7. Do not be redundant, e.g., the author of this article…in the opinion of the writer of this article… etc. Use the researcher’s name(s) to make a point. Don’t include the title of the article or book.
8. When you quote directly, you need to use quotation marks and cite page numbers e.g., “Earth’s crammed with heaven and every bush afire with God, but only he who sees takes off his shoes” (Browning, 1878, p. 32). When you quote more than 3 lines or 40 words in succession, you will need to block it off **without** quotation marks and **provide the page numbers**. Here is an example. Cushner (2003) discusses some potential problems that may be ethnically coded. He suggested,

…most European-American children (who end up being the majority of the teachers in schools) are taught to look a person of authority directly in the eye…an African-American or Latino child being reprimanded…may look away from the gaze of the teacher thereby demonstrating respect. The teacher, expecting eye contact as a sign of respect, interprets the behavior as disrespectful (p. 97).

1. Make sure you divide your work into clearly marked sections (Summary; Reaction; etc.).
2. Please identify your opinions clearly. Often it is hard for me to discern where your ideas/reactions begin and the author’s end or vice versa.
3. Try to stay away from questions in the text (What will happen to the American school system?). Make your case with *statements* that are clearly supported (e.g., this writer believes that American schools are on sound footing). Most often, questions are statements we too are afraid to make. So make statements and defend them. But watch it…for every conclusion, you will need some support.
4. Know and appreciate both sides of an argument. If you are arguing for compulsory attendance at school, at least acknowledge and or cite the opposing view. Your argument will be strengthened and you will “sound” more informed.
5. Watch the quantifying descriptors that will paint you into a corner (i.e., all, every time, none, always, etc.)
6. Learn to be more conservative in your interpretation of the findings and in your judgments of others’ work. Be liberal in your use of “wiggle words” (i.e., it appears that…it seems… the evidence points toward…research suggests…the data indicate…in the opinion of this writer…it seems reasonable to conclude…).
7. Don’t jump to conclusions.
8. Watch the abstract phrase “Research proves…” Remember, you are to be skeptical of other’s findings, but maintain humility regarding your own.
9. Make sure that the reader knows whose ideas are being discussed. If they are yours, say so. If they are built on others’ notions, give them credit with a citation.
10. Don’t preach. Tone it down! This is the Joe Friday version of technical writing, “…just the facts, ‘Mam.” Let the information speak for itself. To paraphrase *Fox*, “You report…we decide.”
11. Include stats (how much, how many, etc.) when you are making your case. It will make it much stronger. This is especially true in the Review of Literature section.
12. Find studies that report data and cite them (liberally) in your review.
13. The parenthesis is part of the sentence. Consequently, punctuations will follow the parentheses (Riggins, 2003).
14. Don’t use titles (Dr. Mr. Ms., etc) or first names for authors in formal papers. This is APA’s attempt to be gender blind.
15. Pay close attention to subject verb agreement (student….they; teachers….he/she; researcher…they, etc.) in your papers—I do.
16. Use topic sentences to separate paragraphs. Remember, a paragraph has one (count ‘em, 1) central thought. By doing this, you make it easier to move around in your document if you decide to cut and paste later.
17. Proof read your stuff before you submit it. Preferably get someone else to help. A fresh set of eyes is valuable and will save both of us a little grief.

Thanks,

Gary L. Riggins

**Hints on Writing…Problem Statements**

The problem statement is perhaps the single most important part of your paper. Get it right and it will drive the rest of the study. This powerful short, simple, and direct paragraph (or two) has an established format that includes three essential parts: 1. A connection to the professional literature that identifies the theoretical area or thread of evidence that you will correct, deepen, or extend. 2. Based on this information and perhaps your own observations, you will clearly identify a problem to solve, question(s) to answer, or a issue to address. 3. The last part of this puzzle is a brief but clear statement that describes what you plan to do or how you intend to address the problem, question, or issue you have raised. A good problem statement is brief. Most of the introductory information has been thoughtfully laid out in the preceding background section.

A problem statement could look something like this:

**Lennon and McCartney (2003) have found that only 21% of elementary teachers consider individual learning strategies in their overall instructional planning. Starr (2001) has cited teachers’ lack of familiarity with innovative methods as a fundamental reason that most are reluctant to try “creative” methods. Consequently, the problem this paper will address is the apparent lack of use of individualized instructional strategies by elementary classroom teachers. Toward that end, this researcher will develop a series of fundamental brain-based individual learning strategies that may be incorporated into the elementary science curriculum. These teacher-friendly strategies will be synthesized from at least three sources; the appropriate professional literature, informal interviews with practicing professional educators, and this writer’s limited personal experience.**

**Issues and Common Problems**:

**Connect the dots**: Some problems dangle in space with little or no support in the professional literature. Your work needs to be connected with existing research indicating how your project will either extend, correct, or deepen the established theory. In the event you cannot find exact studies that relate to your idea, cite studies or data close to the problem/issue/question that you wish to isolate and interpolate (a Kierkegaardian leap of faith).

**Identify the problem**: Some begin with the second part of the problem statement, i.e., what you intend to do about it. Make sure that your problem statement is grounded in research (see “connect the dots”) and has the essential parts described above: 1. the connection to the theoretical evidence; 2. A problem, question, or issue to resolve; and 3. A Clear concept of what you are intending to do about it.

**Don’t jump to conclusions:** Make sure your problem statement is unbiased. Many are too premature on the decision—too quick on the trigger. Wait until the evidence is in before you make a decision. Consequently, do not state your problem in a manner that includes the answer. Like for instance, “This research will gather information to support legalized gambling in the state of Tennessee.” It would be better stated, “The researcher will review the impact of state lotteries on education, and evaluate the role of gaming in the state of Tennessee.”