

WRITING TIPS AT A GLANCE

ALWAYS HAVE A THESIS STATEMENT

Develop a well-constructed thesis at the beginning of your paper that states the main idea you will convey. This sets the stage for readers, tells them exactly what to expect, and leads them into your researched material.

Hint: The main problem in essay writing is not stating the thesis upfront, in the introduction. Draft a thesis at the beginning of your writing that “hooks” the reader (i.e., captures their attention). A well-constructed thesis is supported by the research material and explains what to expect in the paper. It should be focused and honed—not vague—and summarize the overall theme of your paper. (Think like a magazine editor creating a gripping opening line.)

Sample Thesis: Marines must be prepared to face many new types of warfare in today’s modern battlespace.

Revised Thesis: From IEDs to terrorist insurgencies to unconventional urban warfare, Marines of the 21st century must—and will—be prepared for every new threat they confront.

ORGANIZING YOUR PAPER

Effectively organizing your essay to convey all of your key points (with the supporting material) is vital. If not, readers will get lost.

Hint: When you start writing, begin by drafting your introduction with thesis ideas. Also, as you do more research, take down notes and organize an outline to keep your ideas charted. As your outline grows and becomes more organized, begin to block similar information together into paragraphs. Then, after you’ve finished the outline and started the first draft, draft your conclusion, which summarizes your main points and thesis.

Standard Format for Organizing Outlines and Essays:

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| • Introduction: Paragraph (with thesis statement) |
| • Body: Multiple Paragraphs (with key points, supporting material, and research) |
| • Conclusion: Paragraph (with summary of research and restated thesis) |

ACTIVE & PASSIVE VOICE

Keep subjects and verbs together to avoid odd-sounding sentences. Also, use strong active voice verbs. Remember: Try to avoid the passive voice.

Hint: When editing and rewriting, look for sentences that begin with “There is,” “There are,” “There were,” “It was,” or “It is,” which usually indicate empty verb constructions. Also, look for passive voice constructions. Mark them on your draft, and then try rewriting and restructuring the sentences with better verbs.

Sample Empty Verb Constructions:

Example: There were many people sitting in the church.
Revised: Many people sat in the church.

Example: It is vital that children remain in their seats.
Revised: Children must remain in their seats.

Sample Passive Voice Constructions:

Example: The M4 was fired by the Marine.
Revised: The Marine fired the M4.

Example: The doors were secured by the guards.
Revised: The guards secured the doors.

PUNCTUATION (SMOOTHER SENTENCES)

Use conventional sentence structures. Avoid sentences that are awkward, wordy, or too long. Make sure modifying phrases and clauses do not add confusion, and that they are in the proper place.

Hint: Brush up on simple punctuation rules and usage (e.g., the comma, colon, dash, and semicolon). This will create a better understanding of how sentences are constructed at the base level. Any traditional high school grammar book will do. But for more in-depth coverage, refer to *A Writer’s Reference* by Diana Hacker, or consider *The Art of Styling Sentences* by Ann Longknife and K.D. Sullivan.

Basic Grammar Rules:

Comma:

- To separate two main clauses (sentences) joined by a coordinate conjunction: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. (Example: I was hot, but she was comfortable.)
- Introductory matter at the beginning of a sentence (e.g., a prepositional phrase, subordinate clause, or participle modifier). (Example: In the summer, we swim at the pool.)
- Items in a series (Example: He ate hamburgers, fries, and popcorn.); or coordinate adjectives (Example: The flag was red, white, and blue.)
- Parenthetical matter (Example: The lake, which was over 100 feet deep, looked cold and dark.); and nonessential words that describe (Example: Mr. Hess, my boss, invited me to dinner.)

Colon:

- A summary or list that follows a complete sentence (Example: The bag contained his items: shoes, shirts, and socks.)
- After the words “as follows” or “the following”

(NOTE: The colon does not follow the word “including.”)

Semicolon:

- Two sentences not joined by a coordinate conjunction (Example: It was dark; John used a flashlight.)
- Items in a series with internal punctuation (Example: We ate ham, turkey, and pastrami sandwiches; salad; and pie.)

Dash (aka em-dash):

- To interject a thought or additional information in a sentence (Example: The general—who is regarded as a brilliant leader—briefed his staff about the plans.)
- To set off a list or information that pertains to the sentence (Example: The world’s three tallest mountains—Everest, K2, and Kanchenjunga—are difficult to climb.)

(NOTE: This is formed by using two hyphens [--] in a row, without any spaces on either side. It is not a single hyphen [-]. Word processing programs sometimes will auto-format the two hyphens into a longer, single line/dash [—].)

NEEDLESS WORDS

To create more clarity, eliminate all needless words—which can make your reading unclear and hard to read. Also, use simple words instead of long, complex words (if it does not alter your meaning or point).

Hint: Limit using unnecessary adjectives and adverbs (look for words ending in -ly). Also, limit “hedge” words (aka intensifiers and qualifiers). This includes excess jargon and/or phrases.

Examples of Hedge Words:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• very• quite• perhaps• pretty• could• can• crucial• basic• major	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• might• may• usually• often• normally• most• seem• rather• too
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Examples of Excess Jargon Phrases:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• pretty much• a bit• sort of• in order to*• for that reason• it is imperative that• perfectly clear	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• in a sense• a little• kind of• of course• as a matter of fact• in that case• for the purpose of
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(* **NOTE:** Marines should use this phrase to indicate the “why” in a mission statement.)

MAKING IT EASIER TO READ

Use transitionary words at specific points in the paper for a better flow and an easier read. This usage helps guide readers through detailed content and makes your prose less choppy.

Hint: Transitionary words indicate rhetorical mood shifts within the text. This creates more understanding and guidance for readers, and allows writers to better emphasize their points.

Examples of Transitional Words:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• however• nevertheless• meanwhile• yet• furthermore• now• thus• moreover	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• later• today• then• besides• again• still• instead• conversely
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SPELL CHECK

Always use spell-check, for it is a useful tool. But it has limitations: It can't always detect proper usage and terminology.

Hint: For words that might be misused or misspelled, use the “Find” feature in your word processing program. This speeds up the tempo in locating potential mistakes. The “Find” feature can also be used to check acronyms and Service-specific terms for usage.

COMMONLY MISUSED WORDS

Here are some words to know (and be aware of) when using spell-check:

Confusing Look-Alikes and Sound-Alikes:

- **its/it's**

The car is in <i>its</i> garage.
<i>It's</i> an amazing view from the mountain.

- **their/there/they're**

<i>Their</i> luggage was misplaced at the airport.
I put the food over <i>there</i> by the table.
<i>They're</i> due for an appointment.

- **excess/access**

The cargo is in <i>excess</i> of the standard load.
They must be granted <i>access</i> to the base.

- **a lot/allot**

Those kids produced *a lot* of garbage.

He must *allot* him some of the money.

- **then/than**

I played soccer *then*.

She is taller *than* Sue.

- **accept/except**

We must *accept* all the applicants.

All the students passed the exam *except* Roger.

- **principle/principal**

That is the fundamental *principle* of this court.

He is the *principal* of the high school.

- **effect/affect**

The commercial had a negative *effect* on viewers. (noun form)

Only the commander can *affect* that change. (verb form, not commonly used)

The death *affected* everyone in the family. (most commonly used verb form of the two homophones)

- **your/you're**

Pick up *your* things.

You're still on the schedule.

- **may be/maybe**

John *may be* late to dinner.

Maybe the fire was started by accident.

- **too/to/two**

The ice is <i>too</i> thin for skating.
We went <i>to</i> the park.
We saw <i>two</i> cars speeding.

- **where/were/we're**

My wallet is not <i>where</i> I put it.
You <i>were</i> the one responsible for the mess.
<i>We're</i> scheduled to be at the movie by six.

- **know/knew/new**

Say only what you <i>know</i> to be true.
Tom <i>knew</i> what really happened.
Jim bought a <i>new</i> car.

- **capital/capitol**

Washington, D.C., is the <i>capital</i> of the United States.
We toured the U.S. <i>Capitol</i> when we visited Washington, D.C.

- **whose/who's**

<i>Whose</i> rifle is this?
<i>Who's</i> going to the party?

Other Words to Double-Check:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • form/from • the/them/he • discus/discuss • into/onto/in to • cannot/ can not • rise/raise • quiet/quit/quite • mine/mind • no/now/not 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • passed/past • thought/taught • use/used • threw/through/though • weather/whether • sit/set • buy/by • lose/loose • been/being
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AVOID REPETITIVENESS

Do not overstate your ideas or points. Trust your material, research, and writing, as well as your audience and readers.

Hint: During the revision process, pay special attention to excessive repetition of ideas—at the word, sentence, and paragraph level. A well-stated thesis, along with assertive introductory sentences in paragraphs, can help avoid this problem. (Don't hesitate to strike out a whole sentence if you've already made a strong statement on the topic.) Just as we limit sentences to one idea, limit paragraphs to one theme.

WRITE IN PHASES NOT ALL AT ONCE

Writing is a process and it takes time. Think about finishing papers in phases vice all at once.

Hint: Break your writing sessions into specific phases: drafting, rewriting, editing, and proofreading. This can alleviate anxiety, pressure, and “writer's block.” (Sometimes, one must simply stop working, and return to the writing later.)

PROOF/EDIT YOUR PAPER

When you approach the final draft stage, make sure all your material is arranged logically and your meanings are clear.

Hint: Read your paper out loud and listen for inflection and tone. Furthermore, you can read it out loud to an audience (e.g., family members, friends, or peers).

WRITING FEEDBACK IS GOOD

Don't be afraid of criticism, for all writers face it. Instead, look at feedback as a means to improve your overall paper through rewriting and revision. Professional writers concur that “writing is rewriting.” So rewrite, rewrite, rewrite.

Hint: Meet with professors, advisors, and other sources who can offer constructive criticism well before the due date of a paper. Take the feedback you can use for your paper. Don't wait until the last minute! Also, save and print after each writing session to ensure that when you come back to your writing you are working with your latest draft.

WRITING RESOURCES

Learn to use style guides and writing resources. Becoming familiar with their use will aid your writing, rewriting, and editing.

Hint: In addition to *A Writer's Reference* by Diana Hacker, also consider other guides: *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White; *On Writing* by William Zinsser; and *A*

Pocket Style Manual, also by Diana Hacker. Additionally, look into writing centers and writing groups in your area for extra resources.

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