

## *Common Mistakes to Avoid in Formal Writing*

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### Quoting

1. Periods (.) and commas (,) go before the closing quotation mark ("); other punctuation marks go after. (Things are done quite differently in Great Britain, so beware of blindly emulating the punctuation you see in books published in the U.K.)

E.g. At this point, "the sardine tin of terrible contents," as Sophia calls the bomb, went off.

E.g. At this point, "the sardine tin of terrible contents" — in short, the bomb — went off.

But, when citing from a text, you put the punctuation after your parenthetical **page reference**.

E.g. His last words were "the horror, the horror" (180). (see also Quoting, point 5)

2. Use a colon (:) to introduce a quotation that is grammatically independent from the clause you use to introduce the quotation.

3. Always cite page numbers from your source-text when you allude to or quote a specific passage.

4. Use illustrative quotations frequently; beware of generalizing without specific support from the text.

5. Use a block quotation (indented on the left, and *not enclosed in quotation marks*) for passages that would take up more than three or four lines of normal text. Please note that in block quotations, the punctuation mark goes **before** the page reference: e.g. "... the horror, the horror." (180)

6. For quotations within quotations, use double quotation marks first, then singles within them. In all other cases, use double quotation marks only. (see Quoting, point 8)

7. Use square brackets [ ] — *not* parentheses ( ) — to indicate where you have in any way altered the original text of a source.

8. Do not use quotation marks to add emphasis to, or apologize for, an unusual word or phrase. Either rephrase or, if you must, use italics: "In this passage we detect *middling* morality, when Anna — a good woman — commits a bad act."

9. Cite your sources with enough specificity that your granddaughter, when she reads your essay years after your death, will be able to track down in her local university library precisely the same books and articles you used for your paper.

### Punctuation

1. Do not join independent clauses with a comma; use a semicolon to unite them or a period to separate them.

2. Titles: short works (lyric poems, stories, articles) go into quotation marks; long works (novels, films, journals) go into italics.

3. A hyphen (-) binds words (usually an adjective and a noun) together: e.g. "one-horse town," "nineteenth-century Russia."

4. A dash (—) indicates a strong syntactical pause and is handy for parenthetical insertions: e.g. "I weep — though it's shameful — for my lost youth." If you can't find the dash in your word-processing software, use two hyphens in a row (--).

5. Italicizing is the typographical equivalent of underscoring (underlining). Don't mix them in the same essay.

6. Make sure that you *fully enclose* parenthetical words, phrases and clauses in commas (or dashes or parentheses).

Right: "This charge, if proven true, could be devastating."

Wrong: "This charge, if proven true could be devastating." Wrong: "This charge if proven true, could be devastating."

### Numbers

1. Spell out ordinal and cardinal numbers at least until twenty. Spell out big round numbers, too: *one hundred; two million*.

2. Write "the twentieth century," not "the 20th century," and hyphenate it if it's used as an adjective: "twentieth-century Russia"

3. Write "the 1920s," not "the 1920's" (no apostrophe).

## Formatting and spelling

1. Always give your essay a helpfully descriptive title (not in quotation marks), and *always* number the pages.
2. Always double-space your essays throughout and use a 12-point font, preferably Times Roman or Times New Roman.
3. Italicize foreign words: e.g. “Few *raznochintsy* became landowners and therefore they had no right to levy *barshchina*.”
4. Remember that spell-checking programs are of very limited value. You must still distinguish between *their* and *there*, *affect* and *effect*, *prophecy* and *prophesy*, *compliment* and *complement*, *allude* and *elude*, *penal* and *penile*, etc.

## Grammar

1. Introductory phrases must agree with the subject of the main clause. You don’t want to be known as the author of a sentence like “Salivating profusely, I watched my dog approach the soup bone.” This error is often called a *dangling modifier*.  
Right: “Reading Tolstoy, **we conclude** that he is a patrician observer of Russia’s moral landscape.”  
Wrong: “Reading Tolstoy, **it is clear** that he is a patrician observer of Russia’s moral landscape.”
2. Make sure verbs agree with subjects: e.g. “The concept of boundaries and borders **is** [not **are**] crucial to the novel.”
3. Observe so-called parallelism in your syntax.  
Wrong: “His reactions are similar to a moonstruck lover.”  
Right: “His reactions are similar to a moonstruck lover’s” (or “...similar to those of a moonstruck lover”).

## Miscellaneous matters of style, or Pet peeves of priggish pedants

Please, in formal writing, do not use

1. journalese, or talk-show language: “Turgenev takes the old father-and-son **scenario** and **puts a new spin on it**.”
2. the language of popular psychology, also known as psychobabble: “Chekhov’s heroes are all **in denial**, especially the **anal** Burkin. Burkin is **conflicted**, and he suffers from **low self-esteem**. He is certainly not a **role model**.”
3. worn-out words that no longer mean anything: e.g. *totally*, *incredible*, *wonderful*, *interesting*, etc.
4. clichés: “Anna **gets a wake-up call** in Chapter Two.” “Maxims are **par for the course** in Tolstoy’s fiction.”
5. mixed metaphors: “The fire of passion intoxicates Oblomov.” When using figurative language, be consistent.
6. multiple “rhetorical” questions. These tend to come in flocks; limit them to one (or none) per essay.
7. *get* as an auxiliary verb. For example, people can *grow* or *become* disappointed. Let us not write that they *get* disappointed.
8. split infinitives: “To needlessly split infinitives is sinful.” It’s not *wrong* to split an infinitive — many great writers do it — but it is objectionable to split the infinitive when a simple rearrangement of words could have gracefully avoided this.
9. distractingly big or foreign words (or phrases) more than once. For example, *raison d’être* is a once-per-essay phrase; *simulacrum* is a once-per-book word; *exophthalmic* is a once-per-career word (P. D. James take note!).
10. *however* as the first word of a sentence (or *however* as an erroneous substitute for *but*). Start the sentence with *nevertheless* or *nonetheless*, or place *however*, surrounded by commas (see Punctuation, point 6), a bit further along in the sentence.
11. contractions (*can’t*, *don’t*, etc.). That means you should avoid writing *it’s* in a formal essay. If you cannot resist, though, remember that *it’s* means “it is.” *Its* is a possessive pronoun, like *his* or *ours*.
12. abbreviations, except in notes (or parentheses at the most). Remember: “i.e.” means “that is”; “e.g.” means “for example.”
13. *evidence*, *reference* or *transition* as verbs! Use *evince* (or *demonstrate*, *show*, *prove*), *refer to* (or *indicate*, *mention*, *cite*) and *move* (or *change*, *make a transition*, *pass into*) instead.
14. the pop-sociological word *lifestyle*. Use *life* or *custom* or “way of life” or “manner of living” or “mode of existence” instead.
15. *individual* as a noun to mean *person*. If you are discussing *women*, *men*, *girls*, *boys*, or *people*, please call them that.
16. *behaviors*. This plural form is social-science jargon. Use *kinds/sorts/types of behavior*, *habits*, *idiosyncrasies*, *conduct*.