Some guidelines for writing papers- *Jacob T. Levy, 2022.*[1]

1. You must seriously consider serious objections to your argument. For example, if you are criticizing an author, you must construct and respond to a strong defense of the author, and if you are defending, you must construct and respond to a strong criticism. Attacking straw men is bad, and a complete lack of attention to possible counterarguments is worse. If you cannot imagine serious counterarguments to your thesis, then your thesis is probably trivial (or your imagination is too constrained). ***Do not underestimate the importance of this. A paper that considers no counterarguments or only very brief and weak ones is not a persuasive or successful paper. In my classes, such a paper will typically end up with a C-range grade or worse.***

2. Meeting #1 requires taking a clear position on the question you are addressing. "This paper will explore the issues related to" is not a thesis (and, obviously, doesn't allow for any interesting counterargument).

3. Most of what they taught you in secondary school composition (if your school had such a course) remains true.[2] Outlining before you start writing is useful. A thesis paragraph at the beginning of the paper, thesis statements at the beginnings of many paragraphs, and periodic signposts about what has been proven so far and what remains to be proven, help keep a paper clear. It is true that overdoing this kind of thing can make essays seem mechanical and unlovely; but it is better to err on the side of a clear unloveliness than to err on the side of stylish confusion. As with grammatical rules, you should know the rules of composition and be able to use them easily before you decide that their violation is warranted in this or that case for stylistic reasons. So, for example, one sometimes has good reason to use the passive voice. Unless one understands the problems with the passive voice, however, one can't distinguish the rare appropriate uses from the many sloppy ones.

4. Logic counts.

5. Spelling counts. Running a spell-check is the beginning, not the end, of finding spelling errors.

6. Grammar and correct usage count. Using the grammar-check in Microsoft Word is *not* recommended as a method of finding grammatical errors. Fowler's *Modern English Usage,* Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style,* and Shertzer's *The Elements of Grammar* are much more reliable guides. If you own none of these, you should invest in one or more as soon as possible. (I recommend Fowler.)

7. Style counts, but see #3.

8. A metaphor is not an argument. A list is not an argument. Even an analogy, by itself, is not an argument.

9. One argument can rebut, refute, undermine, or override another. Refute or rebut (these are nearly synonyms): "This is wrong. The evidence is otherwise, the causality runs the other way, there is no logical link here..." Undermine: "This may be correct, but look where else it gets us in the long term, or what other consequences the argument has that proponents didn't notice, or what obviously ridiculous cases the argument actually has to cover on its own terms, or..." Override:

---

[1] I grant permission to anyone who wishes to circulate these guidelines or use them in their own teaching, but ask to be acknowledged as their author.

[2] **Exception**. If you went to a French secondary school, you may have learned an essay format that goes: *thèse, contrethèse, synthèse*. **Do not use this format.** In that format, the *synthèse* ends up as the insufficiently-defended thesis. You are free to have a moderate thesis, but if so, **that is the thesis of your paper.** That moderate thesis should be laid out at the **beginning** and should be defended by subjecting it to testing by objections.

"This may be correct, but this other issue is more important, because it is more urgent, because there is some logical or moral ranking of principles, because justice is more important than utility..." If your argument overrides another, you normally have to give reasons why x is more important than y, not simply assert it.

All of these are *success* terms. If I say "Hobbes refuted Aristotle," I'm not just saying that Hobbes contradicted Aristotle, or said some opposite things. I'm saying that Hobbes' argument succeeds. If I say "the defendant rebutted the accusation," I'm not just saying the defendant *denied* the accusation. I'm saying that the defendant provided successful arguments or evidence, such as physical proof of not having been at the relevant place. You can say "Hobbes *tries to* refute Aristotle." But note that with "dispute" or "contradict" or "deny," you don't have to say "try," because those aren't success words. I contradict you just by saying "no it isn't" to everything you say. But I haven't succeeded in *refuting* you.

10. Beware of introductions and conclusions, especially in short papers. A lengthy introduction discussing how important a question is and how many great thinkers have thought about it for how many centuries is a waste of space, and space is your most precious resource. Cut to the chase; offer your thesis and outline your argument. Conclusions should not include surprises; they should clearly state the conclusions that have already unfolded through the course of the argument. Unsupported speculations about other related questions, or unargued-for controversial claims about the wider significance of what you have established, can only weaken the force of the arguments you *have* made.

11. Statements such as "I think X," "I believe X," and (worst of all) "I feel X" are autobiographical. They tell the reader something about you; they tell the reader nothing about claim X. Sometimes— rarely— there is a call for such constructions, but don't use them when you really mean to be arguing in support of X. These certainly cannot be theses, which you can tell because the only possible objections would come from a mind-reader or psychologist showing that you *don't* think, believe, or feel X.

12. Beware of what the old T.V. show "Yes, Minister" jokingly referred to as *irregular verbs:* "I give confidential security briefings. You leak. He has been charged under section 2a of the Official Secrets Act" or "I have an independent mind, you are eccentric, he is around the twist." Compare Hobbes: "There be other names of government in the histories and books of policy; as tyranny and oligarchy; but they are not the names of other forms of government, but of the same forms misliked. For they that are discontented under monarchy call it tyranny; and they that are displeased with aristocracy call it oligarchy: so also, they which find themselves grieved under a democracy call it anarchy…"

Irregularities you might commit: "I believe in freedom, you believe in license, he believes in anarchy." "I belong to a denomination, you belong to a sect, he belongs to a cult." "I have principles; you have an ideology; he is a fanatic." "I believe in appropriate regulation; you are an authoritarian; he is a fascist." "I am a philosopher; you are a casuist; he is a sophist." "I am a patriot; you are a nationalist; he is a xenophobe." In each case there are legitimate distinctions to be drawn; but there is also a temptation to score rhetorical points by simply renaming the phenomenon depending on whether it is liked or misliked. If you draw these distinctions, you should be able to defend them. It is not an argument simply to give what you like a nice name and what you don't like a rude one.

13. I wish this went without saying, but: no emoticons, no internet or chat-based shorthand, and no vulgarity. Vulgar words may of course be quoted in appropriate contexts, such as a paper about censorship. The rule against them does not apply to religious words used in their strict sense, e.g. *damn* and *hell* (and, of relevance to students from Quebec, *tabernacle* and *chalice.)*

This is a list of some common mistakes, but is by no means complete. Examples and explanations are short and sometimes incomplete; when they conflict with fuller accounts in a style guide or dictionary, rely on the latter.

You will be held fully responsible for errors on these points. Using "disinterested" for "uninterested" **will** have an effect on your grade.

Some of these are subtle points but many are not, and they are important not only for this class but also for your ability to come across as a literate and competent user of English. Writing "would of" instead of "would have," or mixing up "its" and "it's" or "loose" and "lose," is sloppy and leaves an unprofessional, childish impression.

Observe the following distinctions.

CATEGORY 1: RULES. Violations of these are simply mistakes. Even in casual writing, you should maintain these distinctions; otherwise, you're just using the wrong word.

disinterested/ uninterested. *disinterested* means impartial; someone who doesn't care is *uninterested*.

its/ it's *its* means *belongs to it; it's* is short for *it is*

affect/ effect A affects B; A effected a change in B; C is the cause, D is the effect; a prisoner turns over personal effects; he affects a cane, pocket watch, and bowtie in order to appear eccentric. Unless you're quite sure of this distinction, stick to using *affect* as a verb and *effect* as a noun.

imply/ infer The author implies, the data imply; the reader or the researcher infers.

refute/ deny/ disagree *refute* requires logical success; it is a disproof of the other position, not a mere assertion that it is wrong. Monty Python's Argument Clinic ("This isn't an argument." "Yes it is!" "No it isn't, it's just contradictions!" "No it isn't!") offers only denials, not refutations. When you say that A *refutes* B, you must be prepared to show why and how A's *denials* of or *disagreements* with B's view are successful.

lay/ lie *lay* is a transitive verb; it requires an object. I lay the book down; I went to lie down on the bed. The Christian prayer goes "Now I lay *me* down to sleep," not "now I lay down to sleep;" "me" (or in normal speech "myself") is the object, and is necessary.

less/ fewer *fewer* for discrete objects you can count, *less* for general amount. Less reading, but fewer pages of reading. We need less labor; we need fewer workers.

of/ have would *have*, should *have*, could *have*, must *have*; not would of, could of, should of, must of

populace/ populous *Populace* is a noun; the population, the people. *Populous* is an adjective.

discreet/ discrete *discrete* means noncontinuous or individuated, not subtle or quiet or private.

everyday/ every day When you mean "routine" or "normal," it's *everyday,* one word. "Every day on the island, the characters on *Lost* experience something unknown to the everyday world."

principle/ principal *Principle* is the noun that means a rule, a norm, a goal. *Principal* is the adjective meaning primary, or the noun that refers to a primary actor, the first officer of our university, or the director of an agent.

precedent/ president *According to the precedent set in* Clinton vs. Jones, *a President may be sued while in office.*

dissent/ descent *Hobbes worries that too much* dissent *might begin a society's* descent *into civil war.*

ensure/ insure Ordinarily one *insures against* a bad outcome, e.g. by buying insurance. One aims to *ensure* (that is, bring about or guarantee) a good outcome. Hobbes does not try to *insure* peace.

lose/ loose To *loose* something is to release it from some kind of restraint, to let it go. *Loose* as a verb isn't an everyday construction; it can always be replaced by *release* or *let loose.* If the sentence doesn't work with such a replacement, then you mean *lose,* the opposite of *gain* or *find.* I *lose* my freedom, my glasses, or my job; I have the most to *lose.*

ambiguous/ ambivalent *Ambiguous* refers to a problem of interpretation; I don't know what a text means because it's *ambiguous* on an important point. *Ambivalent* is the attitude of being divided between two options. It may be that a text is *ambiguous* on a question because the author was *ambivalent* about the correct answer; or it may just be that the author expressed himself or herself unclearly. Your facial expression might be *ambiguous;* I, as an observer, don't know how to interpret it; that might be because your inner state of mind is *ambivalent,* or might be because you're very good at concealing what are actually very strong thoughts and feelings on your part.

tenant/ tenet Unrelated. A *tenant* inhabits a house or a piece of land. A *tenet* is a belief or a principle. A philosopher, or any other landlord, who held his or her *tenants* firmly would be guilty of assault.

imminent/ immanent/ eminent *Eminent* means well-known, distinguished. *Imminent* means soon. *Immanent* is a specialized word meaning *inherent* or *internal*; if you're not absolutely sure that it's the one you mean, it's probably not. Its most common use for our purposes is in the phrase *immanent critique,* a critique that takes place within the boundaries or assumptions of the existing argument. An immanent critique does not challenge the foundations of an argument, but tries to show that those foundations really lead to different conclusions.

which/ that *which* for clauses that aren't necessary to identify the object, usually set off by commas; *that* for clauses that are necessary to specify the one being talked about.

who/ whom/ that Avoid *that* when the antecedent is a person. *Who* is to *whom* as *I* is to *me.* To whom should I give the ball? Give the ball to me. Who wrote the paper?

may/ might When speaking about a present or future action, *might* expresses some doubt, while *may* is agnostic about likelihood. When speaking about past actions, only *might have* is correct for counterfactuals, things that could have happened but didn't. "If Japan had won the battle of Midway, it might have won the war."

may/ can *can* refers to possibility, *may* to permission

comma/ semi-colon/ colon Semi-colons separate full independent clauses in the same sentence, or items in a list that contain commas within them. A colon precedes a list, or separates two independent clauses in the same sentence when the second is a restatement or an amplification of

the first. Commas set off most phrases and dependent clauses, and separate the items in a list except when the items themselves contain commas.

To beg the question is **to assume the conclusion.** It is *not* merely "to invite the follow-up question" or "suggest the next question." "I win the argument because I'm right" begs the question; if we already knew that you were right, then who won the argument wouldn't be under dispute. *If you don't understand the difference between assuming the conclusion and inviting a follow-up question, you're probably misusing "to beg the question" and you should avoid the phrase.*

The phrase is "**all intents and purposes**," not "**all intensive purposes**."

Many **–ism** nouns for ideas and ideologies have **–ist** counterparts for the people who hold them or for their manifestations in the world, or as their adjectival forms: **communism/ communist, socialism/ socialist, monarchism/ monarchist, fascism/ fascist, capitalism/ capitalist, absolutism/ absolutist, anarchism/ anarchist, nationalism/ nationalist, multiculturalism/ multiculturalist, consequentialism/ consequentialist, syndicalism/ syndicalist, humanism/ humanist.** But this is not true for all **–ism** words: **liberalism/ liberal, conservativism/ conservative, libertarianism/ libertarian, Naziism/ Nazi, whiggism/ whig, republicanism/ republican, progressivism/ progressive, communitarianism/ communitarian, utilitarianism/ utilitarian, radicalism/ radical.** In general, if you drop **–ism** from the word and you're left with a complete word you could use to denote a person holding the beliefs *(liberal, conservative, progressive,* but not *social, capital, monarch, human),* then that's where you stop; don't add **–ist** onto that complete word. If you're not left with such a complete adjective, add **–ist** to get the adjective, or the noun of a person who holds the beliefs. **There's no such thing as a liberalist.**

Relatedly: many such words are sometimes capitalized and sometimes not. They are proper nouns and adjectives when they refer specifically to a political party, otherwise not (which means, in political theory papers, most often not). To be a Liberal is to be a member of a Liberal Party; to be a liberal is to hold liberal beliefs (these only sometimes overlap). Likewise for, *e.g.,* Communist and communist. *Nazi* is a special case; it is almost always a proper noun or adjective.

CATEGORY 2: CONTROVERSIAL RULES, OR STRONG GUIDELINES. In all these cases I think the distinction is worth making, and that the rule I describe is the right one. In formal writing you'll almost always be better off maintaining these distinctions. But in some cases ordinary usage has come to vary quite widely from the traditional rule; in others there's disagreement about whether there is such a rule; and in others the rule is maintained in formal writing but not in casual writing or in speech. I ask that you at least observe these distinctions in writing for this class, and urge you to observe them in other formal writing. In any case, I think you're better off at least *knowing* the traditional formal rule.

if/ whether *if* demands an implicit or explicit *then* in consequence. *Whether* takes an implicit or explicit *or not.* *If* your sentence or thought begins with "I wonder," *[implied "then"]* it should take "whether," not "if." I wonder *whether [implied "or not"]* there are any exceptions.

farther/ further (*farther* for actual physical distance, but "Nothing could be further from my thoughts."

tolerance/ toleration Usually *tolerance* is a personal attitude, *toleration* a policy, as in state toleration of religion; this is not as hard and fast a rule as the others on this list.

hopefully/ I hope that *hopefully* does not mean what you almost certainly think it means. "He looked up his grade hopefully," not "Hopefully, it won't rain today." Say "I hope that it won't rain today."

sensuous/ sensual Anything appealing to the senses, such as a painting or a piece of food, can be sensuous. *Sensual* is narrower, with a connotation that the appeal to the senses is sexual.

between/among *between* for two people or objects, *among* for three or more.

like/ such as *Like* creates a category that *excludes the example you're about to mention.* In this course we read books *like [but not including]* Rousseau's *Emile.* We read books *such as [and possibly including]* his *Social Contract.*

***Pay careful attention to**:*
subjunctive verbs, noun-pronoun agreement, subject-verb agreement, correct use of apostrophes, parallel constructions

Be careful to avoid:

dangling participles: "Being unready to face the day, coffee helped." It wasn't the coffee that was unready.

prepositions after transitive verbs: "He advocated for the position that…" One advocates a position, not *for* a position.

incorrect prepositions: "different from" is usually the best construction. "Different to" is acceptable in informal British English; "different than" is usually incorrect.

switching verb tenses mid-thought ("Aristotle argues x; further, he said y."). This is a frequent problem in papers in political theory that draw on past thinkers.

I am not a stickler about dangling prepositions provided that they don't create a lack of clarity.[3]

There is no rule in English against splitting an infinitive or beginning a sentence with a conjunction. In both cases, be attentive to clarity; and if you begin a sentence with a conjunction, be sure that it is a complete sentence and not a fragment.

When using a pronoun for a person whose gender is indeterminate, the traditional English rule is to use male pronouns—the so-called "generic 'he'". That is correct English and you won't be penalized for its use, but it is preferable to use "he or she" to the singular generic "they." Some writers choose to deliberately switch to a "generic 'she.'" This is also acceptable. Lacking a perfect solution to a thorny problem in English composition, I leave you to your own devices.

The overuse of parentheses is a stylistic problem, but not one I worry about too much. The misuse of parentheses is a more serious problem. If you've written a sentence with a parenthetical aside in the middle of it, you should be able to subtract the whole parenthetical aside and be left with a meaningful, coherent sentence. Among other things, that means that material in parentheses cannot be the sole antecedent for a subsequent pronoun or the sole subject for a subsequent verb; and the material in the parentheses does not affect the *number* of a subsequent pronoun or verb.

---

[3] "That is the sort of nonsense up with which I will not put"— attributed to Winston Churchill, commenting on the dangling preposition rule, but Churchill had a surer mastery of the language than most of us do.