

Dr. J's A-H List of Hints and Reminders for Good Writers

I keep a list of common errors that kept popping up while reading student papers. What follows is by no means exhaustive, but keep the following in mind. (I have another handout of “19 Rules” in Blackboard. I include more detail about most—if not all—the items on this list.)

- A. **Page Numbers:** Include page numbers on your essay: the upper right hand corner is a good spot.
- B. **Titles:** Titles of long works (e.g. books or drama) are underlined or italicized and titles of short works are put in quotation marks (e.g. essay titles, individual poem or short story titles)
- C. **Long Quotations:** Indent quotations over 4 typed lines
- D. **Introduce & Flesh Out Quotations:** Introduce all quotations. Then, say something after the quotation: flesh it out. Explain it for your reader. You should flesh out quotations from theorists and from literary criticism just as you would from your primary text.
- E. **In-Text Cues/Avoiding Plagiarism:** Use in-text cues to clarify what ideas are yours and what ideas you are paraphrasing from an author. For example:

DRAFT A: In the last class, Dr. J said, “There will be no postmodern fuckery in my classroom.” The definition of “postmodern fuckery” is currently under debate among several literary critics (22). Some feel the term is hackneyed and others stop just short of calling it obscene. Clearly the term, though, is underused in the scholarship.

REVISED DRAFT: In the last class, Dr. J said, “There will be no postmodern fuckery in my classroom.” According to Ima Scholar, the definition of “postmodern fuckery” is currently under debate among several literary critics (22). Scholar explains that some feel the term is hackneyed and others stop just short of calling it obscene. Building from Scholar’s work, I argue the term is underused in the scholarship.

- F. **MLA citation goofs:** When in doubt, look it up in the MLA handbook! For example, dictionary definitions and works from anthologies have specific citations. HINT: If you are using Harraway’s essay from the Geyh, Leebron, Levy anthology, you do not use Geyh, et al in the parenthetical citation. Too bad they don’t have a blooper show for MLA, huh?!?
- G. **Topic Sentence Quotes:** A quotation from someone else does not make a good topic sentence. Why? Who does it feature? Your critical voice or someone else’s voice? Exactly.

H. **Vague Language:** “This is very interesting” or “Ima Scholar makes a key argument” or “Several important, interesting things happen in this story” all represent vague, imprecise language. They are shorthand for short thinking. You want your language to demonstrate sharper, clearer analysis.

“This is very interesting” REVISED = “This passage marks the story’s turning point.”

“Ima Scholar makes a key argument” REVISED = “Ima Scholar contributes a postmodern feminist argument to a text hitherto dominated by psychoanalytic readings.”

“Several important, interesting things happen in this story” REVISED = “Three key events support my argument about how violence now pervades every niche of postmodern American culture: the dog fight, the cat fight, and, most importantly, the fish fight.”