

1. Incorrect Verb Tense

As you write, you are speaking in either a present or past tense. Once you decide which tense to use, you have to stick with it throughout your whole paper.

2. Plot Summaries Instead of Analysis: Don't Tell Me, Show Me!

Although you might have to recount some parts of a plot to make your point, be careful your paper does not become a plot summary. Only state the relevant part from the plot, and then analyze that passage; **show me** how it supports your thesis!

3. Unclear/Broad Thesis Statement

Too often students do not narrow their thesis enough. Their thesis is broad, making their paper an unorganized mess. The more you narrow your topic, the easier it will be to write about.

4. Too Many Quotes: Using Quotes to Make Your Point

In an academic essay, cited material (quotes) should only take up 15% of your word count. Quotes support your point; they do not act as points themselves. When you rely too heavily on quotes, you lose your voice in your essay. In many cases, this leads to plagiarism, which has huge consequences on your academic career. Think of your main paragraphs as so: you make your point, you use a quote to support it, and then you explain how both relate to your thesis.

5. Not Backing Up Your Evidence

Like the above step hinted at, you have to explain why your research supports your thesis. If you do not back up your research, then your research is invalid and unsupportable.

6. Semi-colons!!!!

The most common punctuation error students make is mis-using semi-colons. Semi-colons separate clauses and phrases of equal emphasis and material. Generally, they are used to separate independent clauses, which are complete sentences. Some advice: if you can avoid using semi-colons, do so.

7. Not Following Instructors' Specifications

Conforming to the instructions given on your assignment outlines is important! In your assignment outlines, your instructors list which citation style to follow (APA, MLA, etc.), the margins, font, and size that you should use to type your essay. The outline will also instruct whether a title page is needed. This is an area where students lose many easy marks! Follow your assignment outlines to make sure the paper you are handing in meets your instructors' expectations.

8. Formal Language and Contractions

Since you are writing academic papers, you need to avoid using informal, conversational language or personal pronouns, such as I or you. You must spell out contractions unless they are used in a direct quote. For example, avoid *don't*, *wouldn't*, or *can't*, and use *do not*, *would not*, or *cannot*. Your tone should be professional versus conversational in your paper, and your language has to reflect that.

9. Dangling Participles

Dangling participles are participles [a nominal form of a verb, often in *-ing* form] that lack clear connections with the words they modify. In other words, in a dangling participle your subject and verb do not connect.

University of Albany example: *Turning the corner, the view was much changed.*

(the verb *turning* does not connect with the subject *view*)

Correct version: *Turning the corner, he discovered that the view was much changed.*

10. Spelling

Spelling is a place where students lose marks, and this is something that is easily avoidable. Use the spell-checker in your Microsoft Word, or check your spelling in an online dictionary. With all the technological programs out there, poor spelling is avoidable.

11. Mis-Titling Papers

The title for your paper should reflect what you talk about in your paper. It does not need to be creative or fancy. However, do not use the title of the work you are writing on as your title! For example, if your name is Jane Doe and you are writing on *Pride and Prejudice*, do not title your paper "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Doe. *Pride and Prejudice* was written by Jane Austen, not you.

12. NOT CITING!!!

Anytime you use information from an outside source, such as your class textbook, notes, or online research, you have to give credit to the author. Do NOT use someone else's information as your own; that is plagiarism, and it is a huge academic offence that can even result in expulsion from your program or school.

Need help improving your academic writing skills? Contact the Writing Specialist for support:

Online: <http://www.mhc.ab.ca/Services/AcademicSupport/WritingSupport>

or at the Student Success Centre located in the
Vera Bracken Library.