Writing a Literature Paper:
Guidelines, Suggestions, Strategies

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http://www.umd.umich.edu/~cali/hum/eng/jonamith/writing.html
Editing

Once the paper is in a shape you're happy with, then it's time to edit seriously. Editing can be tedious, so it's best to leave time to do it separately. And it's often easier to make several editing passes through a paper, looking for different things each time. For example, I usually make one editing pass devoted to style and grammar. I listen to the sound of my prose, and I pay special attention to the grammatical errors I tend to make most frequently. Then I do an editing pass devoted to formatting and punctuation. Are all my citations properly formatted? Are all my commas correct? Then, I run my spellchecker. If your word processor has a spellchecker, and most do, you must get in the habit of using it. If it doesn't, you need to read through the paper with a dictionary in hand, checking every word about which you're not absolutely certain.

Proofreading

Alas, even if you have a spellchecker, your job is not done. You must still proofread the paper. This is necessary for several reasons: a spellchecker can't tell if you've used "there" when you mean "their," won't notice if you've omitted or duplicated or transposed a word, doesn't check for formatting, etc. You'll find it much easier if you print out a hard copy of the paper to do this. If at all possible, it also helps to have someone else edit and proofread your paper--another reader is apt to spot things you have missed or passed over.
The Title

Student writers tend to slap a title on their papers just before selecting the "print" command. This is a very bad move. Titles are vital—they are the reader's first encounter with the paper, and they are the first opportunity to communicate the paper's topic and possibly even provide a sense of its argument. Think for a moment about how important titles are in the things you read, how often you have made a decision to read or not read something based solely on its title. Professors have to read your paper even if your title is dreadful, but a bad title makes a bad first impression and leads us to expect a bad paper.

There are three kinds of titles you must avoid. One is to use as your title the title of the work you're writing about. A paper on *Hamlet* cannot itself be titled "Hamlet" or "Shakespeare's *Hamlet*". Sorry, but Shakespeare got there first—you'll have to exercise your brain a bit and develop something of your own. More to the point, neither "Hamlet" nor "Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" gives the reader any clue as to what aspect of *Hamlet* the paper is going to discuss. So in developing your own title you'll also want at least to indicate a more specific topic—say, "Fathers and Sons in *Hamlet*".

The second is a title like "An Analysis (or Discussion or Interpretation or Investigation, etc.) of *Hamlet*". It goes without saying that your paper on *Hamlet* will analyze (or discuss or interpret or investigate, etc.) the play. What doesn't go without saying is, again, the specific aspect of the play you're going to analyze.

The third kind of title to avoid is the creative title that means something to you but not to the reader. Your first responsibility in writing a title for an academic paper is to make clear what the paper's topic is. This usually requires naming the author(s) and/or the work(s). If you can also be creative and clever, that's wonderful, but if you're creative and clever without being clear then the reader is not going to appreciate your creativity and cleverness. Not long ago, for example, I received a paper with the title, "She Loves Him, She Loves Him Not." Clever, but how would a reader ever know that this was a paper about the relationship between Dido and Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*?

So, how do you develop a good title? For starters, most writers think about titles and are on the lookout for them while they're working on the paper—they don't put it off to the end. Taking some time to brainstorm about the title and to generate a list of different possibilities is also a good strategy. Begin by making sure your title contains the author/work and your topic—"Fathers and Sons in *Hamlet*" may not be exciting, but it gives the reader an idea of what will follow. A popular technique is to use as a title a phrase from the work that is related to your topic or that appears in a key passage, and then to provide a subtitle that indicates more straightforwardly the author/work and topic. For example: "A Little More Than Kin": Fathers and Sons in *Hamlet*. (Note the quotation marks around the phrase from the play, and the colon separating title and subtitle.) The Virgil paper mentioned above could also have been improved in this way: "She Loves Him, She Loves Him Not: Dido's Changing Love for Aeneas in *The Aeneid*."
The Introduction and the Thesis

No, it's not just you--introductions are hard to write. But that's partly because you're probably making the mistake of trying to write them first, whereas they should be among the last parts of the paper to be revised. The reason for this is simple: the introduction introduces the paper, but how do you introduce something until you've written or revised that something and hence know what it is you're going to say?

Like the title, the introduction can either draw the reader in or turn the reader off. And the surest way to turn the reader off is to begin with a general, sweeping, trite opening--something that you mean to sound profound but instead comes across as obvious or silly. Student writers tend to do this because they've been taught the "inverted cone" model of the introductory paragraph: start with a general statement and then work your way to more and more specific statements until you finally articulate your thesis statement in the final sentence. Well, there's a good bit of value in this model, but it's only one model for an introduction, and it doesn't require an opening sentence of such breadth as to sound like the inauguration of a multi-volume philosophical dissertation. I call this the "since the beginning of time" opening, because the sentence usually says something like, "Throughout history, fathers and sons have had complicated relationships." Now, honestly, does that make you want to read further? If you use the inverted cone, avoid such banalities and get to your topic more quickly: "Shakespeare's Hamlet contains numerous father-son relationships, most of which involve conflict."

But there are other ways to open a paper. It's possible to begin with a question that the paper will answer. Or with a quotation ("A little more than kin, and less than kind." Hamlet's first words immediately draw attention to the nature of his relationship with his step-father, Claudius."). Or with a brief example or anecdote that can be used to launch your topic ("Having only recently seen off Laertes with his blessing and with advice about the virtues of honesty, Polonius hires one of his son's friends to spread false rumors about Laertes' behavior that he might "by indirections find directions out" (3.2.72). Such deception, however, is common to the father-son relationships in Hamlet."). Experiment with different kinds of openings as a way of liberating yourself from the restrictions of the inverted cone. Just be sure that you don't take too long in getting to the point, and the shorter the paper, the less you can justify keeping the reader waiting.

The other main task of the introduction is of course to present the paper's thesis. A thesis doesn't have to come in any particular spot in the introduction, and it doesn't have to be a single sentence (student writers often tie themselves into knots trying to write a thesis sentence when in fact their argument is sufficiently complex to require more than one sentence to articulate it). But every paper needs a thesis, and it needs to appear somewhere in the introduction, and it needs to be stated with enough clarity and economy that the reader knows that this is what the paper will argue.

When student writers offer a weak thesis, it's usually because they confuse the topic (the paper's subject) with the thesis (the paper's argument about the subject). This tends to manifest itself in one of two ways. The first is a statement that's not really a thesis at all because it's purely descriptive, something with which no one could possibly disagree: "Hamlet contains many father-son relationships." This simply re-states the paper's topic. Always examine your thesis and ask yourself, "Is this a statement with which someone could reasonably disagree? Is this something for which I have to provide evidence to convince my reader?" Obviously, no one familiar with Hamlet would dispute that the play contains many father-son relationships, and such a statement could be "proved" with a one-sentence list. The other way this weakness manifests itself is in a sentence like, "By examining the various father-son relationships in Hamlet, we can determine Shakespeare's views about them." This may look like a thesis, but it's really not--it's really just another wordy way of saying that the paper's topic is father-son relationships in Hamlet. To be a thesis, it must say what Shakespeare's views are, what the examination of the play's father-son relationships reveals. For example, "Father-son relationships in Hamlet are characterized by rivalry and deception as fathers and sons compete against each other for political and sexual power." Or, "Despite the contrasts constantly drawn between Hamlet's father and the play's other fathers, the relationship between Hamlet and his father is also one of rivalry, conflict, and deception."

Notice that it's not necessary to announce your thesis with such expressions as "This paper will argue" or "In this paper I will show that." Just state the argument--it goes without saying that you're the one making it, and that you're making it in this paper.

A good thesis has three main characteristics. First, it must be non-trivial, something that must be proven--a thesis, not a topic. Second, it must be clearly expressed, so that the reader knows what it is. Third, it must be fairly specific. Students tend to make their thesis statements too general, usually out of the fear that if they're too specific the reader won't have to read the paper. Not true. The reader reads the paper to see if the thesis is successfully and adequately proven--to see the evidence, in other words. The thesis provides the reader with a map of the body of the paper, so it should be a fairly thorough reflection of the argument and its major components. If the paper on father-son relationships in Hamlet is really going to contrast the Claudius-Hamlet-Hamlet's father triad with the Norway-Fortinbras-Old Fortinbras triad, then the thesis should indicate this.

Part of the difficulty students face in writing a thesis and developing an argument is their allegiance, consciously or unconsciously, to the model of the "five-paragraph theme" learned in high school. Like the "inverted cone" model for the introduction (which is itself usually taught as part of the five-paragraph theme), the five-paragraph theme model has both virtues and limitations. It provides the basic outline of what an essay should contain: an introduction with a thesis statement, a series of body paragraphs devoted to illustrating and supporting the thesis, and a conclusion that reiterates the main points and the thesis. But especially when followed slavishly or mechanically, this model can be too simplistic and too stifling. As usually

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taught, the five-paragraph theme makes a single point with three different examples or three equally important sub-headings (hence the three body paragraphs). In college-level writing (and in most real-world situations, for that matter), however, you will be making arguments that are more complex and more subtle. A paper will contain, within its overarching argument, a number of points, some of greater and some of lesser importance, and in a variety of different logical relationships. A paper whose thesis is that, despite appearances, the relationship between Hamlet and his father is characterized by the same negative qualities as the play’s other father-son relationships, for example, will require first setting out the qualities of the other father-son relationships, and then the ways in which the two Hamlets seem to contrast with this, before the main section of the paper on their negative qualities can even be launched. So, in other words, consider what it is you want to prove and what you must do to get there, and make the thesis and the paper itself reflect that rather than trying to force your argument into the very simple and restricted form of the five-paragraph theme.
The Body Paragraphs

Having provided the reader with the map of the paper, you then must make sure that the body of the paper follows the map. If something is in the thesis, it better be in the body, and vice versa. Your task in the body of the paper is to lead the reader through the argument, step by step. This requires special attention to three features: paragraph unity, paragraph transitions, and paragraph coherence or "flow." There's a fourth feature—paragraph development—that's concerned with evidence and will be treated separately in the next section.

Each paragraph should make a single, main point. That point may be fairly complex, but it represents what the paragraph demonstrates and proves. The expression of that main point that is usually made in a sentence called the topic sentence, which is to the paragraph what the thesis is to the paper. A paragraph that sticks to a single, main point is said to have unity. Disunified paragraphs shift topics—often multiple times.

Now, like the expression "thesis statement," "topic sentence" can be a bit misleading. Often, a topic sentence is more than one sentence (most commonly, a general topic sentence is followed by a more precise and specific one). Sometimes, a topic sentence is implied rather than stated directly—good writers are skillful at this. And a topic sentence can come anywhere in a paragraph.

But you'd be surprised how often student writers either fail to state or even imply a topic sentence, or "drift" their way through a paragraph, arriving at their real point only at the very end of the paragraph. This is inevitable in a draft, but it's a major weakness in a finished paper. That's because it's pretty frustrating for the reader, who is reading through the paragraph unsure of what she's supposed to be getting out of it, what point is being made, what she's supposed to be looking for. Since your goal is to convince the reader of the truth of your argument, such readerly uncertainty is something you want to avoid at all costs.

So, work at writing an explicit topic sentence for every paragraph and locating it near the beginning of the paragraph. In revision especially, ask yourself, "What is the point I want to make in this paragraph? What is it, exactly, I'm trying to say?" As you get better at this you'll find that you become more adept at communicating your main idea less directly but no less clearly, but when you're just starting out, the discipline of being explicit early in the paragraph will improve the clarity of your papers. I've never heard a professor complain about a student paper with topic sentences that were too clear.

Whether or not the opening sentence of a paragraph is the topic sentence, the first sentence or two of a paragraph needs to establish a transition from the previous paragraph. In other words, how is the main point of the new paragraph related to the main point of the paragraph that precedes it? Remember, you're leading the reader through an argument, so you want the reader to be clear about how the new paragraph is related. Often this is a matter simply of a word or a phrase in the first sentence—"however," "another," "this," "despite," "on the other hand," etc. If you're working at making that first sentence your topic sentence, then it should be easy to also work at making it a clear transition from the previous paragraph.

Most abrupt or sudden paragraph transitions in student writing are the result of using the chronology of the work's plot or structure as a transitional device: "In the second act, Hamlet decides to trap Claudius using the play-within-the-play." There are times when such a transition is appropriate, but generally it's a bad idea—for the simple reason that you're writing an argument, not a plot summary. While you may very well choose to move through the work you're discussing in a chronological fashion, it is still your argument that should drive the transitions: "Although Hamlet presents himself as an obedient son, he refuses to accept his father's ghost's claim that he was murdered by Claudius, instead determining to 'catch' the king."

Having made it clear early in the paragraph what the main point is and how that point fits into the larger argument, you still have a paragraph to write. How you move from sentence to sentence--paragraph coherence or "flow"--now becomes crucial. When we say that writing "flows" well, what we really mean is that the writer carries us from sentence to sentence in a way that is clear both grammatically and in terms of the ideas involved. Student writers tend to fall into what I call the "machine gun" style of writing: each sentence fires a new but self-contained bullet of information, and while the relationship among them may be clear to the writer, it's not made clear to the reader. This in turn creates choppy prose. For example: "Hamlet's father's ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered him. He also tells Hamlet to avenge the murder. Hamlet agrees, but he decides to test Claudius. He tests him by staging the play within the play. This play enacts a similar murder. The ghost also tells Hamlet to leave his mother alone even though she was involved in Claudius's scheme. Hamlet confronts her after the play. The ghost reappears to chastise him when he does so."

Notice that this is not only rough and difficult to follow, but that the ideas, the arguments, get lost--the reader is forced to read the writer's mind to determine what the point is. By combining sentences and employing the same sort of transitional devices used between paragraphs, however, it can be revised to flow: "Hamlet is in fact not a dutiful son, for he disobeys his father's ghost's instructions in two ways. The ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered him and that Hamlet should avenge the murder. Although Hamlet agrees, he then decides he must test the truth of the ghost's claim. The play-within-the-play, which depicts a similar murder, is a clever device with which to 'catch the conscience' (2.2.613) of Claudius, but Hamlet's staging of it is nonetheless an act of disobedience. Hamlet disobeys even more directly the ghost's other command: that he not confront or punish his mother for her role in the plot. Visiting her after the play-within-the-play, he responds to her chastisement of him by chastising her. He becomes so angry that his father's ghost reappears, reminding him of his oath and of his 'blunted purpose' (3.4.126)."

http://www.umd.umich.edu/ce/tahun/eng/psmath/paragraphs.html
Handling Evidence: Paragraph Development and the Use of Quotations

Arguments obviously require evidence to support them. What, though, counts as evidence in a paper about literature? Literary critics bring different kinds of evidence to support their positions: biographical information about the author, historical information, evidence from the author's other writings (both literary and nonliterary), comments by other literary critics, and examples and quotations from the work itself. Different kinds of papers require different kinds of evidence, but all papers about literature require evidence from the text. The language of the work is the data, if you will, that, whatever other kinds of evidence you may offer, must be present. When we talk about paragraph development, what we really mean is this: is the main point of a paragraph spelled out clearly and thoroughly, and is it supported with good textual evidence?

How do you know when to use a quotation and what quotation to use? Well, it depends on your argument. Sometimes it's sufficient to paraphrase from the work, especially if the specific language of a passage doesn't add much to the general example. That's true to a considerable extent of the "Hamlet's disobedience" example above: since the point is that Hamlet disobeys his father, simply pointing out the ways he does so supports the point. But even here, specific textual language showing that the play presents Hamlet's actions as disobedient would be better. (And, indeed, it does: Hamlet assumes the Ghost has come to "chide" his "tardy son" for not obeying his "dread command" (3.4.121, 123).) In other words, choose to support those statements that are most centrally related to your argument, and then select quotations that do so most directly. Student writers frequently make bad decisions about quotations: they support points that aren't central to their argument, or they select quotations that don't support the point they claim to be supporting. Notice in the "Hamlet's disobedience" example that the phrase "catch the conscience" doesn't really serve a purpose in a paragraph whose point is Hamlet's disobedience. The "blunted purpose" phrase, on the other hand, does speak at least somewhat to this. What are needed instead are quotations that speak directly to Hamlet's disobedience.

And how many quotations and examples are required to prove a point? Again, it depends. A general claim about fathers and sons in Hamlet will require examples from several different father-son pairs. A claim that something is true throughout the play will require examples from different points in the play. In other words, you must examine your own claims critically, asking yourself, "How much and what kind of evidence do I need to provide to convince my reader that this point is true?" And you must develop a feel for which points are most crucial to the argument and which might be most surprising, for it is these that will require more evidence. Whereas a single example or quotation might suffice to establish a minor point, a central point is apt to require several.

Once you've selected a quotation to use, you then have to decide how much of it to use. Student writers often provide quotations that are too long--much of the language quoted is not directly related to the point being made, and as a result the language that is related gets lost. So look closely at your quotation. What part or parts of it are most essential, speak most directly to your point? Limit the quotation to just that part or parts, using your own prose to present information necessary for the reader to understand the quotation. Generally speaking, long quotations--those that must be indented and set off from the text--should be used sparingly.

When you're finally ready to incorporate a quotation into your paper, you have three responsibilities. First, you must be sure that the reader has adequate context for the quotation, that the reader knows where the quotation is coming from, who is speaking, what is happening at that point, etc. This is essential because you want the reader focused on what the quotation is saying and how it relates to your point. If the reader is trying to determine who is speaking and the context from which the quotation is taken, she won't be aware of the more specific details, which are the reason you're using the quotation in the first place. Second, you must fuse or integrate the quotation smoothly into the paper. That is, the entire sentence--your prose plus the quotation--must create a complete, grammatically and syntactically correct sentence. Third, and most crucially, you must explicate or explain the quotation. That is, you must make explicit what the quotation shows, how it supports or illustrates your point. While this may be obvious to you, you cannot assume that it's obvious to your reader, and you don't want your reader guessing or groping. The need to explicate is especially great after a long quotation. So don't just drop a quotation on the reader and immediately dash off to the next point.

Providing adequate context for a quotation requires that you put yourself in the reader's shoes. Quotations should not be dropped like bombs on the unsuspecting reader: they need to be introduced. Except in very special situations, a quotation should never sit by itself as its own sentence. The reason for this is obvious: the reader hits the quotation marks and immediately wonders who is speaking, which means she's not paying attention to the content of the quotation. And introducing a quotation by telling the reader that it appears in Act 4 or in lines 56-58 or in chapter 7 isn't of much help: the key is the context, not chronology. The location of the quotation goes in the parenthetical reference that follows it, not in the body of the text. On the other hand, don't provide more context than the reader needs to understand the quotation and its relevance to your point--unnecessary context will simply distract the reader. Watch out for pronouns and words like "this" and "that" in the quotation--be sure the reader knows who or what is being referred to. And avoid such wordy non-introductions as "An example of this is evident when" or "A confirmation of this occurs at the point where" or "Hamlet shows this when he says." Such phrases say nothing. They usually indicate that the quotation should have been integrated with the preceding sentence.

When it comes to integrating quotations into your prose, there are several different techniques you can employ. Any of them, if overdone or endlessly repeated, will become monotonous, so you should work at providing some variety. The simplest technique is to use "so-and-so says (or some other verb) that" or "as so-and-so says":

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When Claudius finally addresses Hamlet as his son, Hamlet notes that Claudius is "A little more than kin and less than kind!" (1.2.69).

Please note that quotations are not the same as dialogue in a work of fiction and hence are generally not treated as such. The following example is less appropriate:

When Claudius finally addresses Hamlet as his son, Hamlet says, "A little more than kin and less than kind!" (1.2.69).

But this example—the kind students writers tend to use—is just plain bad, because it's choppy and repetitive and provides no inkling of the point being made:

Claudius finally addresses Hamlet as his son. Hamlet responds, "A little more than kin and less than kind!" (1.2.69).

This simple technique is especially useful when you're quoting from an outside source. In such cases we usually provide the full name of the source on first reference (after that the last name is sufficient) and some sort of identification (depending, of course, on whether and how much the audience is apt to know about the person):

In What Happens in Hamlet, Dover Wilson notes that "the Ghost does not enlighten Hamlet on the question of the Queen's complicity" in the murder (47).

Frank Kermode, in his introduction to the Riverside edition of the play, calls Hamlet "an extremely theatrical play" (1139).

However, as the feminist critic Lynda Booze notes, "the plays must seem startlingly ahistorical in focusing on what would seem to have been the least valued relationship of all: that between father and daughter" (250).

The second technique is to introduce the quotation with a colon. In this situation, what precedes and follows the colon must be a complete sentence:

When Hamlet is finally left alone, he considers suicide: "O that this too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew! / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!" (1.2.135-38).

Frank Kermode notes in his introduction to the Riverside edition of the play that Hamlet constantly draws attention to its own theatricality: "Hamlet does not pretend the stage is the little world. It reminds us that all this is occurring in a theatre, with the Ghost in the 'cellarage' and the stage peopled by actors" (1139).

Long quotations should almost always be introduced with a colon.

A third technique is to use an ellipsis to omit words that would otherwise make the integration of the prose awkward. As long as you do not change the meaning of the passage, such omissions are perfectly acceptable. (Ellipses can also be used to reduce a long quotation so that the most important parts are emphasized.) Use three dots separated by spaces ( . . . ) to indicate that part of a sentence has been omitted, four ( . . . . ) to indicate that a full sentence or more has been omitted:

Hamlet complains of "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world! / . . . 'Tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed" (1.2.139-42).

Hamlet feels he must corroborate the Ghost's charge that Claudius is a murderer: "The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil; and the devil hath power / T' assume a pleasing shape . . . I'll have grounds / More relative than this" (2.2.606-08, 611-12).

(Note in this last example that the parenthetical reference lists only those lines that are actually quoted; the ones omitted with the ellipsis are not listed in the parenthetical reference.)

A fourth technique is to break up the quotation into its most important pieces and weave these into your prose. This is similar to the use of ellipses, but it's usually employed when a quotation would contain several ellipses and/or only a few scattered words from a passage need to be emphasized:

Repulsed by his mother's sudden marriage, Hamlet complains that the world is "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable," "an unweeded garden" full of "things rank and gross" (1.2.139, 141-42).

Hamlet justifies his determination to corroborate the Ghost's charge by noting that the Ghost may in fact be "a devil" exploiting Hamlet's "weakness and "melancholy" in an effort to "damn" him (2.2.607, 609, 611).

A few special features to note: 1) When poetry (including dramatic poetry) is incorporated into your prose, you must indicate the ends of the lines of poetry with slash marks (/), and if the first letter of each line is capitalized, so should they be in your paper. Do not use slash marks if the poetry is part of a long quotation set off from the text, and do not use them with prose. 2) Quotations within a quotation are indicated with single quotation marks ( '). 3) Poetry is always referenced by line number(s). If the poetry is part of a long work divided into sections, and if each section re-starts line numbers at 1, then the sections are noted as well. Hence the reader knows that the quotation above is taken from Act 2, scene 2 of Hamlet. But many long poems—Milton's Paradise Lost, Pope's Rape of the Lock, Wordsworth's The Prelude, etc.—are also divided into sections. Thus a
passage from the fourth book of *The Prelude* would be referenced in this way: "quotation" (4.138-42). 4) It is valid to add or change something in a quotation for clarification or for making the quotation fuse smoothly. You may, for example, replace a pronoun with the noun to which it refers or change a verb tense. The change must not, however, alter the meaning of the passage, and it must be indicated by enclosing any added or altered material in square brackets ([ ]): Claudius attributes Ophelia’s madness to the “deep grief . . . spring[ing] / All from her father’s [Polonius’s] death” (4.5.76-77).

Finally, a few words on what are variously called long or block or indented quotations. If a quotation is more than four typed lines (your lines on your paper, not lines in the book you're quoting from) of prose or three lines of poetry, it should be set off from the main text. Start a new line for the quotation, indent all lines of the quotation ten spaces but run them all the way to the right margin (something I can’t make my web authoring software do for the examples below), double space, and do not use quotation marks. For example:

In “The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare,” Lynda Boothe argues not only that father-daughter relationships are common in Shakespeare’s plays, but also that they follow a common pattern:

> While father and son appear slightly more often in the canon, figuring in twenty-three plays, father and daughter appear in twenty-one dramas and in one narrative poem. As different as these father-daughter plays are, they have one thing in common: almost without exception the relationships they depict depend on significant underlying substructures of ritual. . . . And the particular ritual model on which Shakespeare most frequently drew for the father-daughter relationship was the marriage ceremony. (250)

If the indented quotation is poetry, copy as precisely as possible the line breaks, indentations, spacing, and capitalization of the original. For example:

Hamlet’s opening soliloquy establishes that he has already contemplated suicide:

> O that this too solid flesh would melt,  
> Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!  
> Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!  
> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
> Seem to me all the uses of this world! (1.2.135-40)

If the indented quotation is from a play and contains dialogue, the names of the speakers and any stage directions should be included. For example:

Hamlet’s first exchange with Claudius and Gertrude indicates that the young prince is hostile towards, and argumentative with, his step-father:

> KING: But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—  
> HAMLET: [Aside] A little more than kin, and less than kind!  
> KING: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?  
> HAMLET: Not so, my lord. I am too much i’ the sun.  
> QUEEN: Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,  
> And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark. (1.2.67-73)

If an indented quotation contains a quotation within it, use double quotation marks (because in this instance the outer quotation has none).

Explicating the quotation is most important of all. It is crucial that you explain the significance of the quotation to your point. Don’t assume that the reader sees what you do—spell it out. But, don’t use a sledgehammer: sentences that begin with phrases like “What Shakespeare is saying here is that” or “Shakespeare is trying to point out that” or “This example shows that” can usually start after the “that.” Just state the point. And don’t be afraid to draw the attention of the reader to key words or phrases by repeating them as part of the explication. This is especially helpful after a long quotation, for it emphasizes the language that you most want the reader to notice.
The Conclusion

The conclusion is also a difficult paragraph to write. Here, too, the specter of the five-paragraph theme looms large, usually leading students to mechanically restate the paper’s main points, often in the opposite order from the introduction’s "inverted cone" and sometimes with almost the identical wording. Well, a conclusion’s primary function is to summarize concisely a paper’s major points, but it shouldn’t do so mechanically, and at its best it should take the paper’s main idea a step further. This can be tricky, because of course the conclusion should not introduce new material, but it should look beyond the paper’s narrow bounds and extend its insights. It often helps to think of where, were the analysis to continue, it might go next, or of what implications the argument might have for other related aspects of the work. A paper on father-son relationships in Hamlet might, for example, raise the issue of the play’s father-daughter relationships as equally strained, or a paper focusing on Hamlet’s relationship with his two fathers might point to the fact that parallels exist in the play’s other father-son pairs and triads.

A few things to avoid in a conclusion are the following: 1) Don’t use such phrases as “in conclusion” or “to sum up,” especially at the beginning of the paragraph. The reader sees the blank space and knows this is the end. 2) Don’t try to be profound. As in the opening of the paper, you’ll end up sounding silly or pretentious, and you’re apt to make some sort of sweeping claim that the paper can’t possibly have proven: “Hamlet’s relationship with his father, like all real life father-son relationships, is characterized by suspicion, deceit, and disobedience.” 3) Don’t undermine your own argument. Student writers have a curious propensity for reaching the end of a paper and saying something to the effect that this is merely their opinion, that the work could be interpreted differently, etc. This is incredibly frustrating for the reader, who has basically just been told that her time has been wasted, that you really don’t have any confidence in the truth of what you’ve just been saying.
Style

Your style will develop and improve the more you write. But in my experience the stylistic weaknesses of student writers tend to fall into several general areas, all of which can be strengthened if attention is paid to them.

Verbs. The quickest way to improve your writing is by paying attention to verbs. English is a language rich in verbs, so the use of vague verbs or long verb phrases is unnecessary. Simply converting "takes a look at" to "examines," "talks about in detail" to "analyzes," "sneaks out of" to "escapes," etc. will make a difference in your prose. Weak action verbs (such as do, get, have, go, make, say, etc.) can often be replaced by stronger ones ("has," for example, can be replaced by words like "displays," "exemplifies," "demonstrates," etc.). Weak action verbs paired with an adverb can usually be treated similarly ("talk heatedly" becomes "argue," "go slowly" becomes "shuffle" or "dawdle," "beat badly" becomes "annihilate," etc.), as can those paired with a noun ("make an argument" becomes "argue," "give an explanation" becomes "explain," etc.). And as much as possible, make sure your verbs are in the active voice: "He threw the ball" (active voice) rather than "The ball was thrown by him" (passive voice). As you can see, passive voice is wordier and less direct.

Sentence variety. Make sure there's some variety in the length and types of your sentences. Work at occasionally opening a sentence with something other than the subject. Student writers often tend to write strings of short, simple sentences. This makes the paper choppy and makes the ideas sound simpliceminded. If choppy sentences are a problem, combine some of them into longer and more complex sentences.

Wordiness. Make your prose clear and direct—remove all unnecessary words. Say "because" rather than "due to the fact that," "is" rather than "is seen to be," "would be" instead of "would prove to be," etc. Watch out for redundancies. One of the most common in student writing is "the reason is because"—"because" means "the reason." My favorite came from a student who wrote, "the teacher stood up in front of the class and lectured." "Lectured," however, means "stood up in front of the class." When you're editing your paper, ask yourself if each sentence could be simplified.

Grammar

College professors maintain the annoying belief that native speakers of the English language should have, after twelve plus years of education, a basic mastery of English grammar. If you do not own a grammar handbook you should get one, and you should use it. Grammar matters not because it's an arcane and impossibly-complex system of rules designed for the torment of students, but because it facilitates the communication of what you have to say. Grammar and content, in fact, are almost always related: when the prose isn’t clear, neither are the ideas.

When grammatical errors are marked on your papers, it is your responsibility to understand the problems and correct them. Consult a handbook, and if that doesn't help, please ask—either me or a tutor in the Writing Center or someone else.

I use the standard correction symbols found in any grammar handbook. The ones I use most frequently are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>awk = awkward prose</th>
<th>dm = dangling modifier</th>
<th>frag = sentence fragment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sp = spelling error</td>
<td>agr = agreement error</td>
<td>fs = fused sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wc = word choice</td>
<td>ref = unclear pronoun reference</td>
<td>cs = comma splice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ww = wrong word</td>
<td>trans = weak transition</td>
<td>? = new paragraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>// = faulty parallelism</td>
<td></td>
<td>check mark = good work, well said, nice point</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Format

Here's an ugly little truth: readers form opinions about your intelligence and effort on the basis of how your papers appear. A sloppy paper sends the message that you don't care about your work and haven't put much into it. For the same reason that you wouldn't appear for a job interview looking like a slob, you don't want a sloppy paper sending the wrong signals. The fact is, appearances do matter, and books get judged by their covers all the time.

Computers can make formatting easier, but they can also—as we all know—create difficulties as well. You need to learn how to use your word processing program—how to insert page numbers, set the margins, create a title page, etc. etc. Most have help features that enable you to get answers to questions without leaving the program or dragging out a manual. So take the time to familiarize yourself with your program's menu options and icons—it will pay off in the long run.

Title page. There are different ways of doing this; some professors care which model you use and some don’t. I prefer a separate title page. The title should be centered about one-third of the way down the page. It should not be underlined or in all capitals, but it should be capitalized appropriately, and titles of works should be underlined or in quotation marks as appropriate. (You’d be amazed how often student writers make errors in their titles—not just formatting errors, but grammatical ones. Now, that makes for a really great first impression.) About halfway down the page, still centered, should appear “by” (without the quotation marks) on one line, your name on the next. Near the bottom margin, still centered, should appear on separate lines the instructor’s name, the course name and number, and the date. (For a visual example of this and other formatting issues, see pp. 368-74 of The College Writer’s Reference.)

First page. Repeat the title on the first line of the first page, then start the body of the paper on the next line.

Margins. All margins—top, bottom, left, right—should be one inch. That’s one inch. Do not shrink the margins as a way of expanding the paper. Professors didn’t just fall off the old academic turnip truck—we read zillions of papers, so we know a wide margin when we see one. The right margin should be ragged, not justified (like on this document).

Page Numbers. Every page (excluding the title page) should have a page number. Technically, it should be in the upper-right-hand corner, a half inch from the top of the page, with your last name preceding it.

Staple your pages together. Always.

Spacing. The paper should be double spaced throughout, including block quotations.

Paragraph indentations. Indent each paragraph five spaces. Do not skip lines or half-lines between paragraphs.

Parenthetical references. Quotations must be followed by a parenthetical reference. If the quotation is integrated into your prose, the proper format is:

"quotation" (346).

Please note that no period or comma appears inside the quotation marks, that there is a space between the closing quotation mark and the parenthesis, that no words or abbreviations are used for page or line or act or scene, and that a period follows the parenthesis. (An author’s name or title is necessary only if you are using a source other than the class text or if you’re referring to several works and it’s not clear from the context which one is being quoted.) If and only if the quotation ends with a question mark or an exclamation point is it appropriate to include that end punctuation:


Format for indented quotations. Indented quotations begin on a new line, but do not skip a line. They should be indented ten spaces from the left margin (which is twice the distance of a paragraph indentation) but should run all the way to the right margin. Quotation marks are not used with an indented quotation. With indented quotations, the parenthetical reference appears after the closing punctuation:

quotation. (346)

There are numerous examples in this document of properly formatted quotations.