Tips for Better Essays

1. Your essay should stand alone; don’t begin by quoting the prompt, or the topic you’re writing about. Also, your essay should not merely assert that something happens in the text; your principal task is to explain how it happens, and why it matters, or what is significant about it.

2. Introduce the piece you’re focusing on at the beginning of your essay by mentioning the author’s full name and the full title of the work. Note that book titles appear underlined or in italics; article or story titles appear in “quotation marks.” In all subsequent references, use only the author’s last name.

3. Please don’t rely on vast generalizations (“Since the beginning of time, all men have...”), especially not as an opening gambit. Such statements are generally insupportable, often counter-empirical, and indicate to your reader a suspect reliance on over-simplification. You want your reader to trust you as an intellect; moves like that do not build such trust.

4. Similarly, avoid over-reliance on formulas like “I believe,” or “I firmly believe that...”. Belief is an idea we hang onto in the face of contrary evidence, or in the absence of evidence at all. Develop your take as a form of persuasion based on observation.

5. Rather than evaluate the putative quality of the writing of a piece (“Two thumbs up!” “I hated this book because...”), focus instead on analyzing and interpreting it. Keep plot recaps to a minimum; treat your reader as informed, as someone who has already read the text. Your task is not to prove to the reader that you’ve read it; you should be showing your reader something he or she may not already know about that text and how it works.

6. Use quotations to support your argument or interpretation. If you use more than three exact words in a row, you must put them in quotation marks; if you use a word or phrase that is crucial to your argument (e.g., “Discipline”), you must put it in quotation marks the first time, and attribute it: “Herb Green uses the term ‘discipline’ to describe the system of behaviors and thoughts that authorize one’s ability to speak with authority.” Carefully copy any quotation you use exactly; please don’t signify carelessness by misspelling or misattributing published work (this goes for the author’s name and the title, too).

7. When you use a quotation or make an assertion that is someone else’s exact thought and language, you must cite your source. Do so not by putting it in the body of the sentence (Bad example: On page 32, towards the bottom of the page, Birdie says her mother’s “interests were literature, existentialism, and the Holocaust.”) but in parentheses after the clause or sentence containing the quote: (better example: Sandra’s “interests were literature, existentialism, and the Holocaust” (32). (SEE #8 for yet another revision to this sentence). PLEASE NOTE that the citation goes after the close quotation marks, and before the sentence punctuation. And remember that when you use a quotation, the sentence containing it still has to make grammatical sense.

8. The convention in literary analysis and interpretation is to write it in the present tense, as if it were happening right now; after all, it’s your analysis that counts, and you are doing it in the present. To revise the sentence above: In college, Sandra is mainly interested in “literature, existentialism, and the Holocaust” (32).

9. Some “texts” are novels, some memoirs, some essays, and some are even films. When you refer to a piece of writing or other cultural production, be sure that your labels for it (coming of age novel, speculative short story, critical memoir, etc.) adequately approximate what it is. Andrew Pham’s Catfish and Mandala, for example, is NOT a novel; it is a travelogue, a memoir, and a critical reflection on Vietnam and the US.
10. Always remember the basic rule: revise, revise, and revise again. Revision—a serious, deliberate, and thoughtful revision—can make the difference between so-so work and work that makes your professor brag about you. Give yourself time to do it: get a draft in, and let it set for a good day or so to get your head out of it. Then read it as you would someone else’s work: What is this writer trying to convey? What did they get really right on? What did they sort of miss? Try rewriting it, from scratch, without consulting the original, comparing the two versions afterwards. Since we often don’t have that kind of time, ask yourself which parts worked really well, which didn’t. Ask yourself whether a change of the order of information might make something clearer, or whether you’re off on a tangent that was good for you to think through, but less good for your reader to have to follow. Ask yourself whether you’ve left enough crumbs for your reader to follow, and whether your transitions make your prose move the way you want it to. Do this before you proofread, as a separate step entirely.

11. Proofread carefully. When you proofread, consider grammar, syntax, and word usage. Your language reflects your thought, and it should do so clearly and adequately. Similarly, use—but do not trust totally—spell-check. Make sure the word you use (its? it’s?) is the right one for the context. Also, keep an eye on mechanics like punctuation, tabs, margins, and paragraph breaks.

12. In your revising and proofreading, make sure you adequately translate your reactions into analytical language; don’t leave it in the form of a reading diary or notes: “When I was reading it, at first I thought that Roberta and Matt would get together, but then it turned out the novel wasn’t about that at all.” Turn this into something like: “While Cooley uses a romantic convention to set up her novel, the text transforms into a story about readers and the things they desire to read.” Use your notes and reactions to fashion your analysis, not to stand in awkwardly as a substitute for one.

13. You have a lot of leeway with font size and selection, margins, etc. Don’t abuse it. Use of a wacky font (Brush Script MT, 12 pt) may seem to you like a declaration of independence; to your reader it may signify that you spent more time on your font selection than on composing the essay. Fonts have different widths (among other things); a “monospace font” (like Courier) has the same width for each character (including spaces and punctuation), while a “variable space font” (like Times—this font—or Palatino) can squeeze more characters into a single line. If you are having trouble fitting into the space requirements (like you have three extra lines), try changing your font style (I went from Times 12 pt. to Times 11 pt. to get this document to fit onto 2 pages). But remember that you may also (indeed, usually) simply need either more development or more editing. Don’t try to force 7 pages of text into 9 point Times just to get it into five pages; similarly, if you use 14 point Courier with 2” margins to stretch it to 3 pages: it just looks suspicious. As a general guide, use 12 point Times or Palatino or Helvetica, 1” margins on the top and bottom, and 1” to 1 1/4” inch margins on each side.

14. Give your paper a title. If you can’t figure out a pithy way to describe what you’re doing here, it’s likely you have neither narrowed nor focused your work sufficiently.

15. Finally, remember to have fun. Choose to write about something that interests you, that grabs you. Find an angle on it that intrigues you. If the prompt just doesn’t reflect what you want to write about, talk to your instructor about it; there may be some way out of the impasse. That way, the level of your interest won’t flag, your commitment to the topic will be evident, and you will be able to exert more control over it. I can’t understress this last point: if you are totally bored with what you are writing about, that boredom will obscure your work like tulle fog. And worse: it makes it seem like you don’t have enough respect for your own thought not to waste it on something about which you care so little. And if you don’t care for and respect your own intellect, it makes it difficult for others to justify making the effort to do so.