Twenty-Five Rules for Writing Academic Papers

The following rules are suggestions based on faculty experience with writing and with grading student papers. Many of the rules correlate to specific guidance found in the APA Manual and the remainder tend to follow sound advice found in all writing manuals.

1. Write about authors using verbs in the past tense.

Correct: Giroux (1985) argued that teachers should help transform society.
Incorrect: Giroux (1985) argues that teachers should help transform society.

2. Cite authors using only their last name.

Correct: Giroux wrote several important works about the roles of teachers in society.
Incorrect: Henry Giroux wrote several important works about the roles of teachers in society.

3. Write in the active not the passive voice. Passive voice frequently uses is, be, to, or was.

Correct: Giroux (1985) argued that all teachers should help transform society.
Incorrect: That teachers should help transform society was something that Giroux (1985) argued for.

4. There are four acceptable citation methods, depending on how you are using the idea.

Correct: Giroux (1985) argued that teachers should help transform society.
Correct: Giroux (1985) argued that teachers should act “as transformative intellectuals” (p. 376).
Correct: Teachers should help transform society (Giroux, 1985).
Correct: Teachers should act “as transformative intellectuals” (Giroux, 1985, p. 376).

5. If you cite a single author or source across multiple consecutive sentences, you only need to cite them once.

6. Refer to previously identified historical persons by their last name only. Do not call them by their first name or add “Mr.” or “Ms.”

Correct: Joe McCarthy, senator from Wisconsin, created turmoil during the 1950s. McCarthy was a Republican.
Incorrect: Joe McCarthy, senator from Wisconsin, created turmoil during the 1950s. Joe was a Republican.

7. Proper nouns name specific people, places, and things. They are always capitalized. Capitalize titles when they precede proper nouns but not when they follow or appear alone.

Correct: King Louis XIV built the royal chateau of Versailles. The king constructed the grandest royal palace in Europe.
Incorrect: King Louis XIV built the royal chateau of Versailles. The King constructed the grandest Royal Palace in Europe.

8. Don’t use don’t or any other contractions in formal writing.

Correct: Brown v. Board of Education did not succeed in fully desegregating schools.
Incorrect: Brown v. Board of Education didn’t succeed in fully desegregating schools.
Correct: It is important to remember the strengths and weaknesses of technology in the classroom.
Incorrect: It is important to remember the strengths and weaknesses of technology in the classroom.

9. Use apostrophes to indicate possession.

Correct: A teacher’s responsibility is to her students.
Incorrect: A teachers responsibility is to her students.

10. Do not use an apostrophe to indicate the possessive with it.

Correct: Those responsible for the Treaty of Versailles did not foresee its role in the rise of Nazism.
Incorrect: Those responsible for the Treaty of Versailles did not foresee it’s role in the rise of Nazism.

11. Do not use apostrophes to pluralize nouns.

Correct: The soldiers in World War I fought primarily in trenches.
Incorrect: The soldiers’ in World War I fought primarily in trenches.

12. Use 1-inch margins at the top, bottom, left, and right.

13. Use 12-pt font such as Times New Roman.


15. Do not write paragraphs consisting of only one or two sentences.

16. Do not write paragraphs that are a page or more in length.

17. Do not use unclear pronoun references.

Correct: Voltaire and Rousseau were often in disagreement about the character of Geneva. Voltaire, for instance, was a supporter of the establishment of a theater.
Incorrect: Voltaire and Rousseau were often in disagreement about the character of Geneva. He, for instance, was a supporter of the establishment of a theater.
18. Do not use “amount” when you mean “number.” Hint: if you can substitute the word “number” for the word “amount,” then do so.

Correct: A large number of soldiers died at the Battle of Gettysburg.
Incorrect: A large amount of soldiers died at the Battle of Gettysburg.

19. Introductory clauses or phrases are always followed by a comma.

Correct: In determining a policy for Ireland, Gladstone was faced with the problem of winning a majority in the Parliament.
Incorrect: In determining a policy for Ireland Gladstone was faced with the problem of winning a majority in the Parliament.

20. Two independent clauses [which can be identified because each clause contains a subject and a verb] joined by a short conjunction [and, but, or, yet, so] are always separated by a comma.

Correct: Germany emerged from the Franco-Prussian war as a strong empire, but France did not.
Incorrect: Germany emerged from the Franco-Prussian war as a strong empire but France did not. (Subjects italicized, verbs underlined)

21. Two verbs with the same subject are never separated by commas.

Correct: Germany emerged from the Franco-Prussian war as a strong empire and became the dominant state in Europe.
Incorrect: Germany emerged from the Franco-Prussian war as a strong empire, and became the dominant state in Europe. (Subjects italicized, verbs underlined)

22. Two independent clauses joined by a long conjunction [however, therefore, etc.] are always separated by a semicolon before the conjunction and a comma after it.

Correct: Germany emerged from the Franco-Prussian war as a strong empire; however, France suffered a considerable loss of prestige.
Incorrect: Germany emerged from the Franco-Prussian war as a strong empire however France suffered a considerable loss of prestige. (Subjects italicized, verbs underlined)

23. Do not write long, convoluted or repetitious sentences. Break them up into shorter, simpler sentences.

Correct: The Industrial Revolution was characterized by the invention of new types of machinery. This machinery, combined with its placement in large factories, had much to do with the character of work for the laboring classes in Europe. The factory workers were forced to work on these machines for up to sixteen hours per day.
Incorrect: The Industrial Revolution was characterized by the invention of new types of machinery, which workers had to stand before for sixteen hours per day, and these machines were always located in large factories, thus having an effect on the lives of the
working class whose work was not pleasant due to the machines the people worked on for such long hours in the large, hot, unpleasant factories of the Industrial Revolution.

24. Avoid overgeneralizations such as “In this time,” “Always,” “Never,” and “The people . . .”

Correct: Many white southerners continued to support the Jim Crow system following World War II.
Incorrect: Southerners continued to support the Jim Crow system following World War II.

25. Don’t make inanimate objects “think” or “feel” or “believe.”

Correct: In this article, Giroux argued that teachers should help transform society.
Incorrect: The article stated that teachers should help transform society.
Correct: Many elementary educators value the role of experience in a child’s education.
Incorrect: Education values the role of experience.

Source: Margerison’s Writing Tips (adapted by Brennan, Marshall, Pope, and Ford)