

THE TEN WRITING COMMANDMENTS



What NOT to do when writing a formal essay

1. THOU SHALT NOT start your essay with a question, quote, or definition.

*Start off with a clear statement or maybe a story or illustration to provide context. You're trying to lead your reader toward a conclusion. **Questions** don't accomplish this goal. While **quotes** sometimes work well to begin speeches, it doesn't work as well in writing, where your purpose is to draw attention to your argument rather than to yourself. **Definitions** are just lame.*

2. THOU SHALT NOT use large fonts, spacing, or margins to try to add length.

***YOUR TEACHER IS NOT STUPID.** Anyone who grades essays regularly can see Courier or any other non-standard font a mile away. The same applies to overly large spacing and margins. It does not help your cause if the person grading your essay feels as if you've insulted them right off the bat.*

*Essays should use a **STANDARD 11-12 point font** (Times New Roman), double spacing, and one inch margins.*

3. THOU SHALT NOT try to write a suspense novel.

This isn't Harry Potter. Be very clear with your reader from the very beginning exactly what point you plan on making. A clear thesis that includes a preview of points should always appear in the first paragraph. Avoid any kind of vague language that leaves your reader in the dark.

4. THOU SHALT NOT just tell a story.

You should not look at your essay as telling one big story; rather, you should look at your essay as a collection of shorter stories that come together to prove a point. In a thesis-driven essay, short stories [evidence] should be passengers along for the ride, being used to serve your purpose of proving a point. The story is a means to an end - not the end in itself.

5. THOU SHALT NOT quote a full sentence by itself without any context.

Any quoted material should be properly introduced and worked into a larger sentence.

Instead of: "Keep quotes brief" (Richey).

Try: Mr. Richey always advises his students to "keep quotes brief" (Richey).

6. THOU SHALT NOT use a pronoun without an antecedent.

You should only use a pronoun if you have already made a direct reference to the noun previously in the sentence or paragraph. A reader should never have to think “What is ‘it’?” or “Who is ‘she’?”

7. THOU SHALT NOT “talk to” the reader.

Avoid the use of 2nd person (“You”), as you should never address the reader directly in formal writing.

8. THOU SHALT NOT use contradictory language.

It’s okay to be somewhat ambivalent, but complete ambivalence muddles an essay. Your essay needs to say something and in order to do that, you have to take a side - even if you do so grudgingly. Phrases like, “there are many pros and cons,” or, “it was really good but it was also really bad,” don’t really contribute to your goal of writing a thesis-driven essay. Using language like, “the pros outweighed the cons,” or, “it did more harm than good,” will do more to help you make your point.

9. THOU SHALT NOT begin or end paragraphs with quoted or paraphrased evidence.

*Evidence should appear in the **middle** of a paragraph - not the beginning or the end. A paragraph should start with a **topic sentence**, after which you present your evidence. Your paragraph should conclude with **analysis** of the evidence.*

I encourage the **PEA** or “**Support Sandwich**” method:

State your **POINT** → Present **EVIDENCE** → **ANALYSIS** of the Evidence

The evidence is sandwiched between your topic sentence and analysis.

10. THOU SHALT NOT give the reader your opinion.

*While there are some forms of writing where your opinion may be appropriate, it is extremely rare that this is ever appropriate in academic writing. You should be defending your **thesis** (short for hypothesis - an educated guess) presenting **conclusions** that are based on research and backed by evidence. This is not something like, “I like strawberry ice cream.” For the purposes of your paper, **your conclusions should be stated as facts.***

Language to avoid: “I believe...” “I think...” “In my opinion...”

^ This language communicates uncertainty and does not project a sense of confidence in your thesis.