

BIG RED FLAGS THAT GIVE AWAY A WEAK PAPER

This is a list of problems I usually come across when grading papers (and that lower your grade), along with some advice about how to solve them. Please read this before handing in your paper, so that you can write a better one and I can give you a good grade.

Relevance

- Talking about a topic that does not have anything to do with the paper question.
- Not reading the question(s) in the assignment, or only glancing at them. The questions have been chosen carefully to encourage discussion; if you don't address them you're not fulfilling the requirements of the assignment.
- Not talking about what your thesis statement announced, starting to talk about a topic and then drifting into something else.

Structure

- An introductory paragraph three or four lines long. You should get to your thesis statement by starting a discussion, and at least three or four *sentences* long.
- Absence of a thesis statement. You should be able to summarize what the core of what you're going to talk about is in a sentence or two.
- Absence of a conclusion—your final paragraph is not necessarily your conclusion. *Summarizing all the points or reinforcing what you announced in your thesis statement is a good way of putting the icing on the cake.*

Your paper should have an introduction, development and conclusion.

Discussion

- Not defining your terms. The theories we study have an application; they are tools that you must explain before going into an in-depth discussion. By defining your terms you are establishing that you understand them, and that you are applying them systematically to your work.
- Choosing two themes / subjects that are not related, which makes comparisons impossible. The comparison should be the core of your paper.
- Starting your paper with an “origins” reference (for instance, the dawn of man, the beginning of time, the birth of media, the beginning of a certain medium). Do you really need to go as far back as that? Is it relevant to your paper?
- Referring to “(our) society”, “(our) culture”, “people”, “human beings”, “mankind”, “everyone” / “everybody”. It sounds as if you're over-generalizing, making statements that are too broad to really make any meaningful points. Overstatements in general weaken your discussion.
- Absence of concrete examples that support or demonstrate your arguments. Don't write your whole discussion in abstract or vague terms. Theories are usually abstract, it's true, but they're also easier to understand and demonstrate if you bring them down to earth with examples.
- Lists of examples with no argumentation to explain them. Always account for your examples, a list of items does not prove a point.

- Not bringing counterexamples or counterarguments. Proving that you can poke your own discussion and provide evidence to reinforce it is proof that you've thought about the topic thoroughly, and results in a stronger paper.

Style

- Incomplete / run-on sentences; repeating the same word several times in one or two lines. *A very easy way to avoid these problems is reading your paper aloud.*
- Not using the appropriate vocabulary that we've been discussing in class. *We study the terminology of the field so that you can use it as a tool in your analyses.*
- "Tacking on" terms that we used in class without being sure of what they mean, or abusing buzzwords. Using incorrect terminology is worse than not using it at all.
- "Tacking on" citations as if to prove that you're applying the class readings, when the sentence or paragraph has nothing to do with the citation and is not something discussed in that specific work.
- Misspelling repeatedly, especially of terms that we see in class, or the names / titles that you're using in your discussion.
- Being too formal, or trying to use an ultra-formal style, which has nothing to do with the way you speak and you don't actually know how to use.
- Being too casual, writing as you write in a blog or a web forum. You are writing an academic paper; you have to use your own words, but being too casual usually entails being too fuzzy in your argumentations. Casual style also uses up more words.
- Swearing. It's not a good academic practice. It also denotes poor vocabulary.

References

- No references to external sources whatsoever, just what you consider "your opinion." Even opinion papers need references, and have to be structured and well reasoned.
- No references to the works you have been using, even if it's only the book / movie / clip / photo / game / other media artefact that you are writing a textual analysis on.
- Not being specific with your references. If you're discussing a game, give the proper title of the game (and what version you are playing). For example, there are many *Legend of Zelda* games spanning more than 20 years; instead of saying "this is like Zelda," mention the specific game you're thinking of.
- Submitting old papers, changing one thing here and there. It's easy to tell if you wrote the paper for another class.
- Re-hashing the arguments you read in a book as your main thesis topic. Trying to squeeze in the argument of a 20-page book into a 1500-word paper is not a good idea. Firstly, because you will not be able to produce the same type of discussion to support it; second, because there are many ways to see that you're copying the argument. This practice counts as plagiarism too.

Remember: failing to properly account for your sources may be considered plagiarism.

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