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### Helpful Hints for Writing and Revising.<sup>1</sup>

#### Before You Write.

- 1) Read the paper topic and make sure it is clear. If not, ask the instructor to clarify.
- 2) Go back to the text the paper is meant to address. Reread it (or the pertinent sections) with the topic in mind. Mark or copy out quotes that seem potentially useful.
- 3) Develop an argument that you will state early on in the paper. This is a process (often best begun with some brainstorming or free writing). You need not have a polished argument when you begin your paper (often this will come as you work through the material), but you should have a general idea of an argument which can (and will!) be developed, reworked and polished as you write and revise.
- 4) Some form of **outlining** is always a good idea. It is always advisable to have at least a rough sketch of how you are going to proceed, i.e., how will you back up your argument, what is the best order for your paragraphs, etc.

#### How it Should Look.

- 1) On the top left corner of your assignment put your name, your instructors name, the class number and section and the date.
- 2) Center but do not underline your title (do not use a title page). Do not add a hard return between the date and the title or the title and the first line of the essay.
- 3) Identify the title and author of an essay the first time you use the essay as a source.
- 4) You may use endnotes or footnotes.
- 5) I prefer you not to hit "return" twice between paragraphs.
- 6) Remember a "**Works Cited**" page completed in accordance with MLA or Chicago style.
- 7) Please use a normal font and font size. I am computer literate and am wise to all the tricks that one might use to get those few extra lines.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally composed by Annette Van, Brown University, 1994.

- 8) Number your pages after the first with the page number in the top right corner. If you are really ambitious, add a header with your last name in front of the number, i.e., "Cohler 4."
- 9) Put all quotes in quotation marks. Make sure if you begin a quote that you end it. Make sure that what you have quoted is **exactly** the same as how it is written in the original. Quotations must also match up grammatically with the rest of the sentence. If a quotation is over three lines of text, indent it as a "block quote." (See sample research paper on the last page of this handout).
- 10) Spell all author names and essay titles correctly.
- 11) Please make sure you either retain a paper copy or a disk back-up copy of every piece of written work you hand in.

#### Things to Watch out For.

- 1) **Never ever** use the phrase "in today's society" (or variants thereof) in an essay.
- 2) Do not write America when what you really mean is the United States.
- 3) Please make sure that your title actually has something to do with the content of your essay. A good title tells us something about the essay (it can be clever and witty even) but do not choose a title simply because it is funny or sounds good.
- 4) Use contractions sparingly.
- 5) In general (with a few exceptions), use present tense when referring to the author of an essay even if they are dead. For example, "Rubin **writes** that . . ."
- 6) In general (with a few exceptions), use present tense when referring to action described within an essay or novel. For example, "when Janie **meets** Joe Starks . . ."
- 7) Use the past tense when referring to historical events that are over. For example, "Spanish colonists **forced** local native peoples to move to missions."
- 8) Double-check every pronoun to make sure that it refers to the person, object, thing that it should refer to. If there is ambiguity, i.e., two possible hes or shes, then clear it up.
- 9) Remember to address the essay to your audience in an appropriate manner. Your reader may not be familiar with the material.
- 10) Avoid unnecessary generalizations.
- 11) Never end your essay with a conclusion that is trite or simplistic. **Avoid clichés.** You should try to leave the reader with something to grapple with once they end the paper.
- 12) Make sure every sentence contains a verb.

- 13) Avoid unduly singing an author's praises. Writing an essay on someone else's work already implies it is of significance; approaching that work critically is a far more challenging task than simply bowing down to its greatness.
- 14) While using "I" in academic writing is becoming more acceptable, it should be used sparingly and with discretion. It is not necessary to point out the obvious, i.e., "I think," "I believe," "in my opinion."
- 15) Always use **non-sexist language**. It does **not** sound awkward and is the accepted form. Use "he or she," "s/he," etc. at your discretion.

### Arguing.

- 1) If no one would disagree with what you are stating, it is not an argument. Therefore, make sure that what you claim isn't simply self-evident. If this is the case, you might want to think about narrowing your focus.
- 2) Embrace **complexity** in your argument by avoiding oversimplifying problems. Not all problems can be solved in an easy manner, your paper will be much more sophisticated if you take this into account. Don't try to cure all of the world's ills in a short essay, it's more important for you to do a complex and thorough analysis.
- 3) As you write, keep the questions "**So What**" and "**Who Cares**" in the back of your mind so that you can avoid generalities or simple summaries.
- 4) Embrace **specificity**. There is a time for abstraction but you must avoid writing an essay that does not ground its arguments at all. Essays which begin "Throughout history, humankind has always..." instantly lose credibility. By citing specific cases, anecdotes, examples and quotes, you will give your essay substance. Plus, such detailing rhetorical devices are usually very effective in persuading your reader as to the existence and significance of your problem case.
- 5) **Logic, logic, logic**. Check your essay thoroughly in order to ensure the logic of your argument. For example, if you use "thus" or "therefore," make sure that the first segment of the equation really truly does entail the second part. In addition, look for moments in which the order of your argument seems a little off, i.e., outlines; outlines can help you by providing a skeleton to your argument.
- 6) Visualize your argument as a line that should flow relatively smoothly and uninterrupted. Make sure all of your arguments back up or refer back to, if only indirectly, to your thesis.

### Revision.

- 1) When you revise, keep the questions "**So What**" and "**Who Cares**" in the back of your mind. If you find that your essay can not respond satisfactorily to this question, change it accordingly.
- 2) If your introduction lays out what you will do in the rest of the essay, make sure that you do what you say you do, i.e., revise your introduction if you end up changing other parts of the essay.
- 3) If you can, have a friend, roommate, or writing tutor read your essay. Often a "disinterested" party can spot problems in logic and argumentation that an author cannot. Tell your reader what elements of the essay concern you the most, so that they can give you concrete advice. However, make sure that your friend, roommate, or writing tutor helps **you** to write and is not writing for you. This is plagiarism. If you work with a tutor, please indicate that in an endnote.

Editing.

- 3) Always read your essay out loud after you have written it to check for grammar and flow. If you find that something sounds awkward or off, it is, in all likelihood, in need of a rewrite. Even though an essay can be grammatically correct, it can still sound awkward--pay attention to style (such things do count).
- 4) **Spell check.**
- 5) Make a (computer or paper) back-up copy of your paper. You have worked too hard to lose it!