

GUIDE TO WRITING ESSAYS AND TERM PAPERS IN AMERICAN STUDIES

WRITING THE ESSAY OR TERM PAPER:

- Provide a title indicative of your theme.
- Know your argument before you begin to write.
- In your opening paragraph provide your reader with the background necessary to introduce that reader to your subject, its history, and its significance.
- Include your thesis statement (your argument) in your opening paragraph.
- Provide definitions of all terms critical to your argument so that the reader knows exactly what you mean by key expressions.
- Explain any words or references that may be unfamiliar to your reader. An essay should be intelligible to a lay reader.
- Provide specific, detailed evidence to buttress your argument and sub-arguments.
- Document all information that is not general knowledge, all statistics that are not general knowledge, all instances of direct quotation, and all paraphrases with footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical citations and a complete bibliography or citation list that includes all publications data. See Acknowledging Sources: <http://amerstudies.rutgers.edu/documents/AcknowledgingSources.pdf> for the Rutgers American Studies Department's guide to proper citation.
- Provide transition sentences linking each paragraph thematically to the one that precedes it.
- Make sure that your final paragraph is a genuine conclusion, that it summarizes your argument in a more sophisticated and nuanced form than when you introduced it in your opening paragraph.

AVOIDING COMMON ERRORS:

- Avoid use of contractions in formal prose, e.g. "He's the one" instead of "He is the one."
- Do not confuse "it's" and "its." "It's" is an abbreviation for "It is." "Its" is a possessive, e.g. "its location."
- Do not confuse "there" and "their." "There" refers to location whereas "their" is a possessive, e.g. "their home."
- Make sure that your pronouns and possessives agree in number and gender with the last preceding noun or pronoun to avoid improper use of referents. For example, if the first sentence reads: "The slaves were beaten by their masters," you cannot follow that sentence with another that reads: "They were beaten viciously." because the "They" in the second sentence grammatically would have to refer to the masters rather than to the slaves since the masters would be the last prior referent.
- Avoid dangling modifiers. A modifying phrase refers to the closest noun or pronoun.

Incorrect: "Seeing the error of her ways, it still was impossible for her to quit smoking." The modifying phrase is "Seeing the error of her ways," but "it" is inanimate and cannot see.

Correct: "Seeing the error of her ways, she, nevertheless, found it impossible to quit smoking."