

Rose's Rules of Writing – the Top 36

1. Care about the paper you write. Imagine it in a book entitled *The Works of* [your name].
2. Papers should be double-spaced, white 8 1/2 x 11 inch paper, using 12-point font and one-inch margins.
3. Number your pages after the first page (at the top right-hand corner, along with your last name).
4. Give your paper a title that is informative, not cute. The name of the work you are dealing with is NOT the title of your paper. "Shakespeare's Use of Time in *Hamlet*" is a thoughtful and relevant title; "It Takes a Broken Egghead to Make a *Hamlet*" is cutesy and inappropriate; do NOT underline, italicize, or put in quotes your own title.
5. Italicize all full-length *films, plays, and books*. Italicize magazines and newspapers. "Short stories," "film shorts," "one-act plays," and "articles" go in quotation marks (" "). At risk of sounding redundant, Do NOT underline, italicize, or put in quotes your own title.
6. Establish the context of your paper in the first sentence: "The Clown in the last scene of *Antony and Cleopatra* brings only one asp to Cleopatra." NOT> "There's only one snake."
7. Give your paper a clear thesis sentence at the end of the first paragraph (the second if the paper is as long as 8 pages). **This rule is the one most important one.**
8. Do NOT use one or two sentences as a paragraph.
9. Each paragraph must stick to the subject introduced by the first sentence in that paragraph.
10. Do NOT misspell words. Misspelled words look dumb; do not look dumb. Use a dictionary or a literate friend to check your spelling. Be warned: spell-check will not catch all the mistakes that I will.
11. A possessive without an apostrophe is a misspelled word.
12. One exception to rule 11: "Its" is the possessive of "it." "It's" is the contraction for "it is." Since I do not allow contractions, you will never need to write "it's" on a paper.
13. Make the transition between your sentences and your paragraphs clear and logical. This task is the most difficult in writing, but out of difficulty we find invention.
14. Do not use the first or second person—I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, ours; you, your, yours—unless I say you may.
15. **Do not use the passive voice** ("Careless students are failed by Mr. Cohen"); **use the active voice** ("Mr. Cohen fails careless students"). Because the active voice is honest and clear, this rule is the most important rule of style; and, like it or not, style affects meaning. If you will take the time to master the voice of your verb, you will find yourself a better writer in all ways. I may be a bear on this one, but I'm a bear for your sake.
16. Do not begin sentences in any of the following ways: "There are/is..." "This is..." "It is..."
17. Do not use "this," "these," "that," "those," "which," or "it" unless the word has a clear and unmistakable antecedent nearby. Never begin a sentence with "this" unless you follow it immediately with a noun that re-identifies the idea to which you are referring.
18. Never publicly dangle a participle or misplace a modifier: write "Showing unmistakable signs of stupidity, the student did not persuade his professor" NOT "The student did not persuade his professor, showing unmistakable signs of stupidity."
19. NEVER write an incomplete sentence (participles—"ing" words—cannot stand as verbs).
20. DO NOT hedge. Words like "maybe," "perhaps," and "might" do not keep you from being wrong; they merely alert the reader to the fact that you are worried about it.

21. NEVER JUST SUMMARIZE OR PARAPHRASE. Remember that I have read it or seen it. I do not want to know **what** happened. I want to know **your ideas** about what happened.
22. Support your assertions and ideas with concrete examples or **brief** quotes from the essay, poem, play, or film you are discussing or with a **short** citation from some reliable authority.
23. NEVER use someone else's ideas (even in paraphrase) or words without giving proper credit.
 - When the quote is from the Bible, put the book, chapter, and verse in parenthesis after the quotation (Psalms 12.6).
 - When the quote is from Shakespeare, put the play (unless you've mentioned it), the act, scene, and line number in parenthesis after the quotation (*King Lear* 3.1.25).
 - When the quote or paraphrase is from someone else, put his or her last name and the page number of the quote in parentheses following the quotation (Cole 27) and list the book in good bibliographical form in a works cited list at the back of your paper.
24. On those rare occasions when you quote more than two lines of text, indent and single space the quotation and **leave off the quotation marks**. In American English, the final quotation mark always goes **after** the comma and the period and before the semi-colon and the colon [," / ." / "; / ":].
25. Know these three rules about commas:
 - Join independent clauses (clauses with a subject and a verb) either by using (1) a comma with a conjunction ("Readers have extraordinary sex lives, but non-readers tend toward impotence and frigidity.") or (2) a semicolon without a conjunction ("Readers have extraordinary sex lives; non-readers tend toward impotence and frigidity.").
 - Separate items in a series by using a comma after **every** item before the conjunction ("The professor was arbitrary, arrogant, and nasty.").
 - Never use a comma between the subject and the verb or between the verb and its object (except for interrupting clauses which use 2 commas). Remember that when a single subject has two verbs **no comma** is necessary before the "and" ("Shakespeare authored sonnets as an individual and wrote plays as a collaborator" is correct without a comma).
26. Bury words like "however," "furthermore," "moreover," "indeed," and so on (**conjunctive adverbs**) in the clause or sentence ("The students, however, failed."); do not put them at the beginning.
27. Write about works of art in the present tense, since Hamlet will be stabbing Polonius and the asp will be nibbling on Cleopatra's breast long after your grandchildren have forgotten your name.
28. Be consistent when you have two or more parallel structures in a sentence. **With adjectives**: "He was pompous and terrorized freshmen" is wrong. "He was pompous and fond of terrorizing freshmen" is right. **With prepositions**: "A student could count on his bad temper and arbitrariness" is wrong. "A student could count on his bad temper and on his arbitrariness" is right. **With correlatives**: "He graded not only for content but for style" is wrong. "He graded not only for content but also for style" is right.
29. **Avoid jargon** (say "library"; do not say "instructional media center"), **cliché** (say "the professor is a conservative grouch"; do not say "the professor is an old fogey"), **slang** (say "the teacher is foolish"; do not say "the teacher is a dork"), and **hyperbole** (say "this man has too high a regard for himself"; do not say "this man is the most arrogant bastard who ever lived").
30. Write "use" not "utilization" or "utilize." (To "utilize" means to use something for a purpose for which is was not intended.)
31. Lose the word "**very**" from your written vocabulary, avoid the word "**effective**," eschew the words "**transition**" and "**impact**" as verbs, and only use an exclamation mark after the happy face you scrawl on the bill you give to diners.

32. **Avoid rhetorical questions.** That approach is fine for Brutus at Caesar's funeral, but too manipulative for a good essay. If you have an answer, write it. If not, your job, not mine, is to find one.
33. Conclude your paper with a paragraph that explains the importance of your ideas to some larger understanding. Do not allow me to ask "so what?"
34. Proofread out loud and **also** find a good proof reader. Before writing your final copy, have an intelligent friend read your paper to you, and then fix the things you don't like.
35. Staple your paper at the top left-hand corner. An unstapled paper requires a 25¢ stapling fee.
36. Regardless of who loses your paper— it will probably be me—you're the one who will have to rewrite it or get an F. **So be safe: keep a copy of your final version.**

These rules are adapted from a compilation by Ralph Alan Cohen, co-founder of the American Shakespeare Center and Gonder Professor of Shakespeare and Performance at Mary Baldwin College.