



Thesis Handbook

The Westminster School at Oak Mountain

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Introduction

Great writers have different approaches to practicing their craft. Ernest Hemingway is reported to have planned his writing schedule aloud with several six-toed cats he had helped to genetically engineer. Wendell Berry, a favorite of many in the classical school movement, still writes everything by hand and then passes the draft to his wife who proofreads and edits as she types it on an old-style typewriter. Cormac McCarthy, one of the great living American authors, rises at 6:00 A.M. and writes "through the morning, every morning, seven days a week. I find the sun has a forlorn truth before noon."* But while there are many approaches to good writing, common practices and strategies seem to show up time and again. And it is these practices that this course is meant to instill. So while the following handbook may seem constrictive and stifling at times, it is meant to serve you well in the long-term. Eventually, you may find your own way of constructing a persuasive argument; but even so, you will in all likelihood continue to use the principles you first practiced while composing your junior or senior thesis at Westminster.

So trust the process. In the end, you will have established habits and instincts for writing persuasive nonfiction that could very well stay with you for the rest of your writing life.

Procedural Notes

- Please submit all papers for Mr. Wortman (thegradedepression@gmail.com) and Mr. Tew (dtew@westminsterknights.org) by email as PDF attachments only. Turn in hard copies of papers to Mr. Ritch unless otherwise specified by him.
- All assignments must be typed and turned in electronically unless specified by the teacher. (Handwritten assignments will not be accepted.)
- All late assignments will be penalized. Late papers will be penalized 11% per day. Do not miss deadlines! *Please note that any technical difficulties must be brought to your teacher's attention at least 24 hours **prior** to the assignment's due date or it will be counted as late and penalized accordingly.*
- Do not procrastinate! Studies show that students who plan and execute produce better papers than those who start too late in the process.

* (the parisreview.org)

DEADLINES FOR JUNIOR THESIS

Item Due	Due Date
Topic Submission	August 24
Submission of Sources/Bibliography	August 31
ANI Chart / Thesis Statement	September 8
Division and Argument	September 29
Statement of Facts	October 6
Refutation	October 13
Peer Review- Introduction/Conclusion	October 17
Rough Draft Due	October 20
FINAL DRAFT DUE!	November 10
Presentation Plan Due/ Slides	November 14 (Tuesday)
Presentations Begin!	November 28

DEADLINES FOR SENIOR THESIS

Item Due	Due Date
Initial Topic Submission	August 24
Submission of Sources	September 7
Annotated Bibliography (four sources minimum)	September 14
ANI Chart/ Thesis Statement	September 28
Division and Argument	October 27
Statement of Facts	November 10
Refutation	November 17
Peer Review- Introduction and Conclusion	November 28 (Tuesday)
Rough Draft Due	December 1
FINAL DRAFT DUE!	January 12
Presentation Plan Due/ Slides	February 13
Presentations Begin!	February 26

Basic Requirements

1. Use classical organization. (Introduction, Statement of Facts, Division, Argument, Refutation, Conclusion)
2. Manifest superior style.
 - a. Write clearly, using active verbs; vocabulary you know; and simple, straightforward sentence construction.
 - b. Write in a formal style. Avoid contractions, email-like diction, casual rhetorical questions, and the like.
 - c. Write good, basic paragraphs with good transitions, clear topic sentences, consistent focus, strong evidence, sophisticated analysis, and conclusive endings.
3. Interact with sources.
 - a. Interact with sources a minimum of 2-3 times per page.
 - b. Quotes are preferred, but paraphrases can suffice if the author is identified in the text of the paragraph. Avoid overusing long (especially block) quotes.
 - c. Quotes must be explained/ analyzed.
4. Follow formatting requirements according to current MLA standards.
 - a. Title Page
 - b. Page numbers
 - c. 1 inch margins
 - d. 12 pt Times New Roman
 - e. Works Cited page
 - f. Section Headings (Juniors only)
5. Adhere to conventions for usage and mechanics.
 - a. Spelling
 - b. Punctuation
 - c. Grammar
 - d. Style
6. Meet minimum and maximum page count (not including works cited or title page).
 - a. Juniors - minimum 6, maximum 8 pages
 - b. Seniors – minimum 10, maximum 14 pages

(See a more specific break down on pg. 16)*
7. Meet minimum research expectations
 - a. Juniors - 4 to 5 regularly cited sources, at least 2 books and 2 periodicals
 - b. Seniors - 6 to 8 regularly cited sources, at least 2 books and 4 periodicals

The Canons of Rhetoric: Invention

Classical orators organized the task of speech-making into five basic canons: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and oral delivery. We will focus on two of these: invention and, later in the handbook, arrangement.

Invention, or *inventio*, is a means by which arguments are discovered. This is the beginning of the process as a student contemplates various broad subjects. There are two concepts within invention that need to be explained further- *topoi* (topic) and *stasis*.

A topic of invention is simply a kind of argument. Aristotle divided all topics of rhetoric into common and judicial. The former could be used in any circumstance; the latter were better limited to legal proceedings. Of the six common topics, we will focus on four that are particularly useful in establishing and defending a thesis.

1. **Definition**

An argument from definition uses the essential qualities of a thing as the basis for drawing conclusions about it. For example, pro-life conservatives may argue that because a fetus is a living person, it is endowed with basic human rights.

2. **Causation**

An argument from causation can focus on either side of the cause/effect relationship. For example, it could be maintained that because reading requires sustained concentration, and exposure to computer screens has been shown to inhibit the ability of young people to concentrate, therefore computer use harms rather than helps reading programs in impoverished schools. The argument is attempting to prove that computers are a cause of declining literacy rates.

3. **Semblance**

Jesus used this method of argument all the time. Whenever he begins, "The kingdom of heaven is like. . ." he is employing an argument from semblance. In a contemporary context, many advocates of gun control point to the UK, where private ownership of guns has been banned since 1997. Their argument would hinge on their ability to demonstrate that the two nations were similar enough to warrant the comparison.

4. **Testimony**

Argument from testimony depends entirely on the perceived authority of the witness. In a debate between Christians about a narrow point of theology, the Bible will obviously suffice as the highest court of appeal. However, outside this context, and with broader subject matter, the nature of authoritative testimony requires more attention. Arguments based on testimony need to demonstrate that the source of the testimony is reliable and authoritative

*Yet another way of categorizing arguments is to consider their status or stasis—that is, the kinds of issues they address. This categorization system is called stasis theory. In ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, rhetoricians defined a series of questions by which to examine legal cases. The questions would be posed in sequence, because each depended on the question(s) preceding it. Together, the questions helped determine the point of contention in an argument, the place where disputants could focus their energy, and hence what kind of an argument to make. A modern version of those questions might look like the following:

Did something happen?
What is its nature?
What is its quality?
What actions should be taken?

Here's how these questions might be used to explore a "crime."

Did Something Happen?

Yes. A young man kissed a young woman against her will. The act was witnessed by a teacher and friends and acquaintances of both parties. The facts suggest clearly that something happened. If you were going to write an argument about this event, this first stasis question proves not very helpful, since there's no debate about whether the act occurred. If the event were debatable, however, you could develop an argument of fact.

What Is Its Nature?

The act might be construed as "sexual harassment," defined as the imposition of unwanted or unsolicited sexual attention or activity on a person. The young man kissed the young woman on the lips. Kissing people who aren't relatives on the lips is generally considered a sexual activity. The young woman did not want to be kissed and complained to her teacher. The young man's act meets the definition of "sexual harassment." Careful analysis of this stasis question could lead to an argument of definition.

What Is Its Quality?

Both the young man and young woman involved in the action are six years old. They were playing in a schoolyard. The boy didn't realize that kissing girls against their will was a violation of school policy; school sexual harassment policies had not in the past been enforced against first-graders. Most people don't regard six-year-olds as sexually culpable. Moreover, the girl wants to play with the boy again and apparently doesn't resent his action. Were you to decide on this focus, you would be developing an argument of evaluation.

What Actions Should Be Taken?

The case has raised a ruckus among parents, the general public, and some feminists and antifeminists. The consensus seems to be that the school overreacted in seeking to brand the boy a sexual harasser. Yet it is important that the issue of sexual harassment not be dismissed as trivial. Consequently, the boy should be warned not to kiss girls against their will. The teachers should be warned not to make federal cases out of schoolyard spats. And with this stasis question as your focus, you would be developing a proposal argument.

As you can see, each of the stasis questions explores different aspects of a problem and uses different evidence or techniques to reach conclusions. You can use stasis theory to help you explore the aspects of any topic you are considering. In addition, studying the results of your exploration of the stasis questions can help you determine the major point you want to make and thus identify the type of argument that will be most effective.

*Content/wording gathered from The Everyday Writer @ bcs.bedfordstmartins.com

Research

Evaluating research can prove difficult for young writers. The advent of the internet has even further complicated this already challenging process. *However, it is the responsibility of the writer to use only sources that are credible and authoritative.* This requirement is not arbitrary or merely pedantic. Using substandard sources actually undermines your persuasive force by undermining your credibility. Better sources make for more persuasive writing.

There are a variety of materials you might find helpful in the research process. However, not all useful sources will end up in the reference list. An encyclopedia entry, for example, is a great place to get background information. It may also contain a bibliography, which could be a gold mine of useful material. The encyclopedia would not, however, count as a reference. Here are some practical guidelines for determining the usefulness of a source.

1. General knowledge. Good for background knowledge and basic entry into a topic. Also helpful in leading to other more detailed sources.
2. Clinical research. Very difficult to read. The more recent, the better.
3. Monographs - Fancy word for books on a single topic. Excellent source of narrowly targeted data and argumentation. Everyone should try to find at least one of these.
4. Articles - These can come in collections (or anthologies) or in periodicals. They are usually narrow in focus, but not overly deep.
 - A. Popular - The most basic treatment of a subject.
 - B. Journal - More in depth, usually for a scholarly audience.
 - C. Reviews - Very valuable. Gives not only one author's critique of a book, but also usually summarizes the main point of the book under consideration. Like finding two sources in one!

What about blogs, interviews, documentaries, and other non-print sources?
I like these. They are creative and often suggest real involvement in the topic. However, only print sources will count toward the minimum source requirement.

* Remember that all sourcing/citations in the paper as well as the works cited need to be written according to the guidelines of the Modern Language Association (MLA). You can find help at the Purdue Online Writing Lab (The OWL at Purdue) or the MLA website (www.mla.org). There are no excuses for errors in this area. You can also get help from Mr. Wortman. Also, please remember the minimum source requirements for juniors is four and for seniors is six- see page six for more specifics.

Plagiarism

Any and all instances of plagiarism will be taken very seriously. Any and all forms of plagiarism constitute grounds for failure of the thesis. Listed below are explanations of the most common kinds of plagiarism. These are taken from the Harvard Writing Center's website, which includes more helpful discussion of these instances along with illustrative examples. Please visit the site listed below if you have further questions.

Verbatim plagiarism

If you copy language word for word from another source and use that language in your paper, you are plagiarizing verbatim. Even if you write down your own ideas in your own words and place them around text that you've drawn directly from a source, you must give credit to the author of the source material, either by placing the source material in quotation marks and providing a clear citation, or by paraphrasing the source material and providing a clear citation.

Mosaic plagiarism

If you copy bits and pieces from a source (or several sources), changing a few words here and there without either adequately paraphrasing or quoting directly, the result is mosaic plagiarism. Even if you don't intend to copy the source, you may end up committing this type of plagiarism as a result of careless note-taking and confusion over where your source's ideas end and your own ideas begin. You may think that you've paraphrased sufficiently, or quoted relevant passages, but if you haven't taken careful notes along the way, or if you've cut and pasted from your sources, you can lose track of the boundaries between your own ideas and those of your sources. It's not enough to have good intentions and to cite some of the material you use. You are responsible for making clear distinctions between your ideas and the ideas of the scholars who have informed your work. If you keep track of the ideas that come from your sources and have a clear understanding of how your own ideas differ from those ideas, and you follow the correct citation style, you will avoid mosaic plagiarism.

Inadequate paraphrase

When you paraphrase, your task is to distill the source's ideas in your own words. It's not enough to change a few words here and there and leave the rest; instead, you must completely restate the ideas in the passage in your own words. If your own language is too close to the original, then you are plagiarizing, even if you do provide a citation.

In order to make sure that you are using your own words, it's a good idea to put away the source material while you write your paraphrase of it. This way, you will force yourself to distill the point you think the author is making and articulate it in a new way. Once you have done this, you should look back at the original and make sure that you have not used the same words or sentence structure. If you do want to use some of the author's words for emphasis or clarity, you must put those words in quotation marks and provide a citation.

Uncited paraphrase

When you use your own language to describe someone else's idea, that idea still belongs to the author of the original material. Therefore, it's not enough to paraphrase the source material responsibly; you also need to cite the source, even if you have changed the wording significantly. As with quoting, when you paraphrase you are offering your reader a glimpse of someone else's work on your chosen topic, and you should also provide enough information for your reader to trace that work back to its original form. The rule of thumb here is simple: Whenever you use ideas that you did not think up yourself, you need to give credit to the source in which you found them, whether you quote directly from that material or provide a responsible paraphrase.

Uncited quotation

When you put source material in quotation marks in your essay, you are telling your reader that you have drawn that material from somewhere else. But it's not enough to indicate that the material in quotation marks is not the product of your own thinking or experimentation: You must also credit the author of that material and provide a trail for your reader to follow back to the original document. This way, your reader will know who did the original work and will also be able to go back and consult that work if he or she is interested in learning more about the topic. Citations should always go directly after quotations.

Original website: <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>

Preliminary Assignments

Topic Proposal

Choosing a topic is arguably the most important and sometimes the most maddening part of the thesis project. Unfortunately, a number of well-intentioned thesis projects in the past have suffered from a poorly chosen topic. Consequently, the topic proposal assignment was instituted to make sure that each student has a reliable starting point.

The topic proposal should be a substantial document that answers the following questions in the first person in a well-written paragraph:

1. What are you studying? Be specific here. The answer to this question should take the form of complex statement demonstrating the beginnings of deep knowledge of a broad subject.
2. Why are you studying it? What question are you trying to answer? You don't need to have an answer to the question, just a good sense that the answer is out there for you to find in the sources.

Annotated Bibliography (for seniors)

You must also show that you have research material that makes these questions promising. You are required to have **four** resources (at least two books and two published articles) to prove this written up in the annotated bibliography. For each resource, list it in MLA bibliographic style and give a brief description of the content of the source, why the information is important, and how it is going to be used in the paper (including in what section the information will appear). According to Cornell University, "The purpose of the annotation is to inform the reader of the relevance, accuracy, and quality of the sources cited."* This is not just a summary of the information. There is more about MLA in the Research Section on page 11.

* <http://guides.library.cornell.edu/annotatedbibliography>

Draft of Argument

By this time you should have a working thesis. Your argument is still malleable, but the thesis needs to be well-established. This is not meant to be a finished product, but you should have a relatively firm line of reasoning at this point. This draft also needs to contain numerous quotations. Part of the argument should be summaries of what others have argued. These summaries should function as support for your thesis. However, you should also have a voice in the argument. It is a balance.

Summary of requirements:

- Begin by writing your thesis statement at the top of the draft. Skip a line before beginning your actual argument.
- Your argument should be the length of the estimated final, so at the very least you should have at least **two** good pages for the junior thesis and **four** for the senior thesis on the rough drafts. The specs for the final draft are laid out in detail on pg. 16.
- Because you will be quoting and interacting with sources (often!), you should include a properly formatted bibliography. This will not contribute to the final page count.

Draft of Statement of Facts

Now that you have a solid start on the argument, you should already have most, if not all, of the information necessary for writing the Statement of Facts. This section is most effective if done in the form of a story (think Narrative). Stories inform as well as engage the reader. A crucial feature of this section is the Stasis. From the get-go you should be preparing the reader for the Stasis. This does not mean you must rush right into laying out your research question. But you must consider with each paragraph whether you are preparing the reader to fully understand the question you will be addressing. History, definition, clarification, simplification -- all these are important and helpful for getting your reader up to speed. But in the end, you need at least one solid, well-developed paragraph explaining precisely what research question you are going to address in the argument and why. Do not neglect to include evidence of your research in the statement of facts. Every summary and explanation can be strengthened through the use of quoted material.

Summary of requirements:

- A full length statement of facts, so somewhere between **2-3 pages** (approx.).
- For this draft only (do not do this on the final), you should label the Stasis paragraph(s). This is meant to force you to mentally recognize this section and double check yourself to make sure it is solid.
- Because you will be quoting and interacting with sources (often!), you should include a properly formatted bibliography (MLA). This will not contribute to the final page count.

Draft of Refutation

With the Statement of Facts and Proof written, you can now address the "other side" of the argument. You may address key points in the counterargument, objections to your position, issues of conclusion, etc. Just as you did in your Proof, the Refutation requires specific evidence from cited sources as well as analysis of that evidence. This is the "turn against" portion of the Refutation. Then you return to your argument, and you explain why the point is weak or illogical, why the thinking is misguided, or why the conclusion is the wrong one. This is the "turn back."

Summary of requirements:

- The Refutation should be at least one full page for the juniors and at least two full pages for the seniors.
- At least one point of Refutation must be addressed for juniors and at least two different points of Refutation for the seniors. Each point should have its own evidence and analysis.

Introductions and Conclusions (overview, first and last impressions, no clear "right way"-- but are things to avoid, some things better than others...)

The Canons of Rhetoric: Arrangement

For this course we are going to channel the spirit of the great Greek and Roman orators. Our approach will be taken largely from the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* (“Rhetoric from the Beginning”), a Latin rhetoric handbook written by an unknown author in the first century BC. We choose this approach because it has stood the test of time. Even today, many if not most public speeches follow some form of the outline laid out in this ancient guide.

The author of *Ad Herennium* divided an ordinary argumentative speech (or thesis for our purposes) into six different parts. Each part had its own purpose. The overall purpose, however, was to persuade an audience of the speaker’s primary thesis. Below is a brief outline explaining the nature of each section as well as some advice for composing each.

I. Introduction

Purpose: To connect with the audience and to introduce the topic
Advice: Do not overdo it. Introduce your topic and emphasize relevance. Give your reader a sense that your topic is important. However, you should avoid exaggerating the importance of your topic or using trite or stale strategies to get your audience’s attention. Be creative, but respect the intelligence of your audience. Note: Do not use fictional narrative to captivate.

II. Statement of Facts

Purpose: To provide background and to clearly establish the stasis
Advice: Maintain an objective tone here. You should not yet be arguing your point. Choose subject matter in the statement of facts that will help your reader understand your argument. History, definition, clarification, and (this is important) simplification are all important features of the statement of facts. However, most important of all is the stasis. Everything else should lead the reader to the central issue that your argument will address.

III. Division

Purpose: To state the issue you are addressing and your thesis. It should also include a brief outline of the main points of argument.
Advice: Keep it brief, but make sure you establish a very clear outline for the rest of your thesis. It is acceptable to use the first person pronoun in this section.

IV. Argument

Purpose: To provide a logically driven case in support of the main thesis
Advice: See the list below.

1. Know your basic argument. Every argument is made of premises and a conclusion. In most cases it is the premises which a write will spend most of his time defending.

2. Use quotations and other source interactions, but do not assume that a quotation or paraphrase is enough. Testimony from a well-known or highly credentialed author can be persuasive, but it is not enough. Most quotations and paraphrased references should be part of an argument, where you are either using the words of other in your own line of thinking or summarizing and evaluating that work.
3. Avoid repetition. Do not continue rehashing the same argument over and over again. Instead, develop each argument thoroughly and completely.
4. Avoid irresponsible reasoning. Fallacious and hasty argumentation will set most readers against you.

V. Refutation

Purpose: To answer the strongest objections to the thesis

Advice: Do not skimp here. This section of the thesis should be substantial. Do not treat it as an optional add-on. Dealing fairly and skillfully with your opposition may do more in the end to persuade your audience than your initial argument.

Also avoid the straw man fallacy. Set up plausible objections and give them a thorough explanation. It is best to actually quote a source if possible.

VI. Conclusion

Purpose: To summarize, connect, point forward

Advice: Mere summary will hurt more than help your efforts here. That said, a conclusion without some summary will also seem lacking. Remind the reader what you have said, but go beyond that to calling for action, emphasizing the urgency, importance, or relevance of your topic. It may be a good strategy to recall elements of the introduction (picking up a story, restating statistics, etc.) to give the paper a well-rounded feel.

Summary of Requirements (Juniors):

- Label every section.
- Approximate lengths/section:
 - Intro (1/2 pg)
 - SOF (1 1/2 - 2 pgs)
 - Argument (2 1/2 - 3 pgs)
 - Refutation (1-2 pgs)
 - Conclusion (1/2 pg)

Summary of Requirements (Seniors):

- Labels are optional.
- Approximate lengths/section:
 - Intro (1 pg)
 - SOF (2-3 pgs)
 - Argument (4-6 pgs)
 - Refutation (2 pgs)
 - Conclusion (1-2 pgs)

The Modes of Persuasion

Pathos (Appeal to Emotion)

Your paper will begin appropriately enough with an introduction. The point of the introduction is to captivate your audience. You need not accomplish this in the first sentence, but if you have not gotten their attention by the first page, you probably do not stand much of a chance of getting it in the Statement of Facts. The primary means of capturing audience's attention is to convince them that your argument is important to them, that they have some interest in what you are going to say. You can accomplish this most readily through pathos.

Pathos is an appeal to emotion via values and beliefs. By tapping a person's values and beliefs, you engage their emotions. When their emotions are engaged, they are more likely to listen to lengthy and sometimes technical Statement of Facts and Argument sections. There are numerous ways to engage a person's emotions through their values and beliefs, but one of the surest is through storytelling. A good story that arouses sympathy, provokes outrage, or inspires virtue can go a long way to connecting you with your audience. Other means include carefully chosen facts intended to awaken your audience to the seriousness of the issue you intend to address. You can even start your paper way out in left field with a vivid description, moving citation, or the like, and then finding your way to the topic. One final thing to consider is using personal experience. Doing so will strengthen your ethos or credibility as well as creating pathos.

Ethos (Appeal to Personal Credibility)

After the Introduction you will proceed to the Statement of Facts. Here you are going to show that you have done your homework. This will create a measure of trust between you and the reader, and this is called ethos.

Ethos is simply the degree of credibility or trust you elicit from the audience. Ethos can be established in a number of ways. First, you can show yourself to be knowledgeable in the subject matter of your topic. Essentially, you want to communicate that you are something of an expert in your chosen topic. While you educate your audience on the basic background of your topic, they will subtly pick up on how comfortably you discuss and analyze procedures, mechanisms, structures, people, historical periods, wars, weaponry, etc. So whether you are clarifying what you mean by the term freedom or describing the election of Abraham Lincoln, you are all the time showing that you are worthy to speak on the topic.

A second way to establish ethos is to interact with outside sources, both those that oppose and those that support your viewpoint. Summarizing the viewpoints or research done by others demonstrates that you have surveyed the field and know what people have already said about your topic. Summarizing the viewpoints of those you disagree with goes even further. It shows that you are fair-minded and unbiased, balanced and reasonable. People will listen to someone with these qualities even if they dislike what is being said. Overall, the more you can show that you have read a lot of important works in your field of research, the better your audience will trust you to add your own two cents to the discussion.

A third and final way to establish ethos is to demonstrate firsthand involvement or experience with the realities you are addressing in your topic. If someone in your family was killed in battle or you have seen firsthand the devastation of Katrina, you stand a better chance of getting the respect of your audience.

Logos (Appeal to Reason)

The final mode of persuasion is probably the best known: logos or logical reasoning. There are a number of ways to argue, but they all take the form of establishing premises that lead to a conclusion. Thus there are really only two primary dangers in logical reasoning: unsubstantiated premises and logical fallacies.

The first danger is very common among young writers who make assertions without any evidence to substantiate them. Some points, to be sure, are widely known and can be asserted without any supporting evidence. For example, you do not need evidence to assert that George Washington was the first president of the United States. Other assertions, though, may seem obvious to you, but in fact will need some serious support in order to serve as a premise for further argumentation. For example, not everyone agrees that modern industry is depleting the ozone or that the book of Genesis is incompatible with evolutionary biology. For every point you make, be sure that every assertion you make is either widely known and believed to be true or backed by evidence.

The second danger in logos-based persuasion is logical fallacies. You run two risks here: either your audience does not catch you, and you have been dishonest; or your audience does catch you, and you look like a buffoon. You should be familiar with the most common informal fallacies so that you can keep watch on your own arguments as well as those of others.

Usage Concepts

The following concepts correspond to the some of the more common errors in grammar, punctuation, mechanics, and style.

Punctuation

The Big One- the comma

1. Series comma – We will use the Oxford comma, which is the comma before the conjunction in a series of three or more element (e.g. I purchased eggs, bread, and milk.)

2. Interrupter or introductory comma – Anytime an expression constitutes an interruption in sentence flow, it should be set off by commas. This includes 1) long intro phrases, 2) all intro clauses, 3) parenthetical expressions, 4) some concluding expressions, especially if they contrast what came before (e.g. I have always found that young students dislike writing, except when I assign creative fiction.).

3. Comma before conjunction – Compound sentences joined by a conjunction also require a comma before the conjunction.

4. Comma splice – Do not join two independent clauses with only a comma. Use the semicolon if they have a close logical relationship; otherwise, separate into two sentences. Another option is to use the semicolon and a conjunctive adverb like *however, thus, nevertheless, or therefore* -- all of which should be followed by a comma.

Other punctuation marks

Apostrophe – Place it before the ‘s’ with singular possessives, after on plural possessives that end in s (e.g. the student’s report card, the students’ report cards). Add an apostrophe and an s to make the possessive form of a plural word that does not end in s (e.g. the children's desks).

Colon – Use before lists and to introduce some quotes. Either way, it should always follow an independent clause (e.g. Campers should bring the following items: pocket knife, flashlight, and sleeping bag. Homer begins his epic with an address to the gods: “Rage: Sing, Goddess, Achilles’ rage, Black and murderous. . .”).

Hyphen - Use to form compound numbers (e.g. twenty-three) and compound adjectives that come *before* a noun (e.g. a well-known actor).

Grammar

Agreement – This can include errors in subject-verb or pronoun-antecedent agreement.

Sentence fragment – A sentence is a complete thought- an independent clause. An independent clause must contain a subject and predicate and should not begin with a subordinating conjunction like *because*, *when*, *if*, or *after*.

Pronouns - You should not use a pronoun unless you have first established the antecedent. Then, make sure the pronoun agrees in number and gender (if necessary).

Homonyms - Please be sure that you are using the correct word given the context (your/you're, there/their/they're, to/two/too).

Mechanics

Italics – MLA style requires italics for books, magazines, films, epics, albums, and works of art. Short essays, chapter titles, articles, songs, short stories, and poems should be in quotes.

Quotation error – This could be a double/single quote error, incorrect intro punctuation (colon v. comma), or simply a failure to use quotation marks at all.

Number error – All numbers should be spelled out unless they greater than ninety-nine or are part of serial designation (e.g. One, five, seventeen, 103, Biology 101, 37% of participants).

Style

Sentence-level:

Awkward expression – You will see this when you have used words or phrases in a nonstandard way. There may be no problems grammatically or with punctuation.

Sentence structure – You will see this mark if your sentence really doesn't make sense as it is written, even if I can see what you meant to say.

Parallelism – Whenever you have parallel ideas (comparison, series, or other pairing), you should balance them with parallel grammatical construction (e.g. The way we think is significantly affected by the way we live.)

Wordy – Always prefer the shorter sentence. Do your best to make every sentence no longer than it needs to be. You may depart from this principle later, but it is a good place to start.

Passive verb – The passive often lacks the clarity and force of the active, but can be used to link ideas and create a smoother flow from sentence to sentence, thus improving the coherence of a paragraph. If you see this mark, your use of the passive has not been effective.

Slang – Do not use unless quoting.

Poor word choice – Use the dictionary to look up words you do not completely understand. It takes time to get to the point where you not only to understand the meaning of a word as you read it but can also use it properly in a sentence.

Incomplete construction – The sentence is jumbled or lacking connection and really makes no sense as it is written. Often inserting a single word will fix this, but sometimes it requires substantial rearrangement of ideas.

Unclear antecedent – Pronouns should be close enough to their antecedents so that there is no question what they refer to.

Paragraph-level:

Wrong/ inconsistent verb tense – Within any given paragraph, you should maintain the same verb tense. In some cases you may also have used to the wrong mood (i.e. should have, would have , could have).

Development – This generally deals with addressing how and why your information works together and/or helps to prove the argument. Development involves analysis/ explanation of the points and evidence provided- getting "beneath the surface."

Coherence – Coherence is the quality of a paragraph that allows for smooth reading from start to finish, without bumps or odd breaks in the flow. There are several ways to enhance the coherence of your paragraph: 1) begin sentences with old information then proceed to new, 2) repeat key topical words, and 3) use transitional words.

Unity - Unity means that the supporting sentences develop the topic or argument that is established in the topic sentence. Supporting sentences do not drift away from the established topic. There is nothing tangential. There should be a quality of oneness to the entire paragraph.