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10 April 2020: NB: This guide is for Ye Olde Harde Copye, and those who produce it as a means of written communication. I am assuming you, my dear reader, are bilingual, speaking the languages of Turning In A Paper And Getting It Back Online as well as Hard Copy paper submission. You used to hand papers to me. It was crazy—you’d *literally* *hand* them to me! And nobody worried about contagion. I miss that, frankly, but this isn’t about me.

When, inevitably, the generation of student writer arrives that does not understand “margins” please let me know you are here, and after I recover, I will greet you anew and rework the language of this guide.

***Marginal Comments: The Lexicon***

Upon receiving your papers, you may find in the margins some or all of the following marks. Some of these repeated errors increasingly cost your grade. If you have a question regarding any of my comments, do not hesitate to consult me.

 **PR:** proofread

 **c.s.** Comma splice: joining 2 sentences with a comma, rather than treating them grammatically by (1) employing a semicolon, (2) joining them with a conjunction, or (3) severing them with a period.

 **This is one of the most common errors, I will grade you down for it, if you still don't know what a comma splice is you haven't read this sentence closely enough so start over.**

**frag** Sentence *fra*gment. Do not begin a sentence with “But,” “And,” or “So.” Or "Or." That's a fragment.

**w.c.** Word choice is inappropriate. Look the word up in a dictionary.

**sp**  Mis*sp*elled word

**syn** *Syn*tax is awkward

**awk** *Awk*ward use of language or idea. You might see this a lot. It means it’s grammatic, but the idea is not clearly presented. Reword it. “*Syn”* (“syntax” [see above]) can mean you might be able to juggle the words around; “awk” means you’re at a more systemic lack of clarity. You might need to reword this part entirely. Don’t feel bad. We are all awk. The great writer Flaubert said writing was like combing your hair—the more you do it, the more it shines.

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**Delete**

**l.c**. Word should be lower-cased

**cap**. Word should be capitalized

**punc**. Error in *punc*tuation. Could be any number of punctuation marks, so look at the line I’ve indicated. *N.B. A comma blight has been sweeping our nation (sic), so I ask you to think about whether a clause is subordinate or not. See # 4 below.*

JB’s Incredibly Useful Crash Course

**Words and phrases not to use:**

truly

in real life

deeper meaning

at first glance/read

Don’t use “feels” unless you are talking about a masseuse. It’s often a cover for a vague thought. If you can’t produce concrete evidence for your claim, let it go.

Ditto “creates an image.” This is too vague and probably subjective: look back to the quote and specify what the connection is between the quotation and what you are claiming is its connotation. If you can’t state it clearly, it’s in your head and not in mine, so start again. For example “heart” can suggest love, a site of success or failure depending on how the cardiac surgeon did, or be connected to light or darkness. There is no inherent meaning in (or to) a heart. Or a rose. Or a color. Or, frankly, anything.

Nothing has “imagery.” Or everything does. This is not useful. Used on its own the word is too ambiguous. What is the image *of*? If you can’t say, move on. The connection has to be specific.

Don’t just quote something and move on. Say explicitly what *in* the quotation is important to your argument and why. You may think it’s clear because it’s clear to *you* at the minute—and that’s great. Yay. The rest of us are not you, though, so help us out.

When You’re Done With Your First Draft (Yes, Draft)

1. Look at your first and last paragraph. Are they related? If not, go back and fix stuff until they are related clearly.

2. Don’t end your paper with a generality, a truism, or a wise statement about the world, humanity, life, universe, etc. You don’t have to prove that a book is an accurate (or inaccurate) reflection of the universe. Actually, you can’t, so relax and enjoy the fact that it’s not your job to explain Life As We Know It and/or justify the existence of literature. I sometimes wonder if students actually *believe* what they write. It’s actually sad if you don’t—so **regard this as an invitation to think about what you actually believe you have proved.** Have the courage of your convictions and argue what you know to be the case.

3. Don’t use “the reader.” By “avoid its use” I mean “don’t use it in my class.” The reader is better than “I” but it’s often a cloak for “I.” Expunge subjectivity.

4. If you don’t know exactly what a word means, look it up in the *OED* ([Oxford English Dictionary) on the library web site](https://www-oed-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/).

5. Don’t put commas in front of your quotations just because it’s a quotation. Work out if it is grammatically called for.

6. Come to office hours and ask a question even if you think it’s basic. If you don’t understand me when I talk, tell me to say it again another way. I talk fast. Tell me to slow down.

 **Dialogue is vital, and that’s when the best conversations happen in education, and life—which hopefully are not mutually exclusive experiences. Questions are the basis of civilizations.**

7. Reread this document right before you turn in your paper. What happens after that is up to you.