Writing Tips for Course Papers

1. Your paper should have a title, and give your name, the course and professor for whom you are writing, the date, and the number of the draft, if more than one.

2. Your paper should be typed, double spaced on one side of a sheet only, with reasonable margins. Number your pages.

3. Use either footnotes or endnotes to cite sources. In the text, raise your note numbers a half space above the line (a superscript in most writing programs). Often you can use only one note number per paragraph (¶). Simply group the several sources you use for each ¶ and list them in the order in which they were used, separated by semicolons. If you have a quotation, be sure to indicate where it comes from.

4. Think of paragraphs as the building blocks of your paper. Be sure each ¶ has a strong topic sentence and follows logically after the one before it. (You should be able to follow the sense of a paper by reading only topic sentences.) Make sure your ¶s are not overly long—never a full page. Shorter ¶s and more frequent topic sentences make the structure of your argument more apparent and lead the reader better.

5. Integrate quotations into your own sentences with an introduction such as:
   a. One Republican observed, “The tariff is not a cure but a cause of depressions.”
   b. For some Republicans, the tariff was “not a cure but a cause of depressions.”

6. When you use longer quotations, try interrupting them to keep them anchored to your own text. Quotations marks go outside the punctuation at the end of the sentence.

   "As our industrial plant becomes more and more productive,” one Republican observed, “the tariff doesn't support the economy. It causes depressions.”

7. When you leave out words within a quotation, use three dots (…), called ellipses, to indicate an omission. If the ellipsis comes at the end of a sentence, use a fourth dot (the period) to end the sentence. Do this only if the ellipsis comes within the quoted material, not at the beginning or the end of the quotation.

   Example: As one Republican observed, "the tariff . . . causes depressions.

8. Keep reading and rereading what you have written as you go along, making sure that the paper is moving ahead crisply and not wandering aimlessly. Keep the length of each section in bounds, in proportion to its importance. Work on transitions.

9. After you finish the first draft, EDIT. Do not turn in first draft. Read and reread, adding here, pruning there, rewriting to make sentences clearer and punchier, reworking and reordering ¶s. Make your conclusions as strong and provocative as they can be.

10. Avoid the following:
a. historical present: Example: President Lincoln *fears* the South will secede.

The past is past, so use the past tense. The main exception is for writing about works of literature, where one can legitimately say something like the following: “O’Keefe wants us to sympathize with the jilted heroine.”

b. passive voice: Example: “Criticisms of the policy were voiced by several senators.”

Say instead, “Several senators criticized the policy.” In passive voice, the action goes back on the subject. In active voice, your subject is a vigorous actor.

c. split infinitives: Example: “Before he was killed, President Kennedy intended to forcefully argue against further expansion of American presence in Vietnam.”

Say instead, “President Kennedy intended to argue forcefully . . . .

d. “like” when you mean “such as”: Example: “Assassinations like President Kennedy’s have changed the course of history.”

Unless you mean to exclude Kennedy’s death from your statement, say instead, “Assassinations such as President Kennedy’s have changed the course of history.”

e. “however,” except when you mean “in whatever manner.”

Example of correct use: “However Kennedy died, it was a loss to the nation.”

f. agreement errors: subject and verb

Example of incorrect use: “Only one of the men were arrested.”

Your subject and verb must agree in number—both singular or both plural. In the example, one could be fooled by the word “men,” which is not the subject of the sentence but the object of the preposition “of.”

g. agreement errors: nouns and possessive adjectives; pronouns and antecedents.

They must also agree in number, except when we are attempting to avoid sexist language by using “their” instead of a universal male “his,” (as in: “Everyone in the gang wore their white tee shirts.”)

h. dangling modifiers: as in “Turning the corner, the tree was full of birds.”

Trees don’t turn corners!

i. run-on sentences: use a semi-colon, or a comma and a conjunction, to join two independent clauses.