

## Essay Writing Key

The following nine categories represent problems I encounter repeatedly in student essays. You will find numbers in the margins of your essay which refer to the numbers of the categories. In most cases, they concern conventional use of punctuation and formatting in the writing of literary criticism. If you are an English major, you must make it a priority to master these conventions. In a few cases, there is a degree of flexibility in conventional usage; you will see some published works (particularly older ones) which violate the guidelines I give here. Wherever possible, I have attempted to recommend to you the best and most up-to-date practices.

### 1. How to Punctuate the Word *However*

*However* is a conjunctive adverb implying contrast with something that precedes it:

This is true. However, that is not.  
This is true. That, however, is not.

The word *however* is always followed by a comma. It is preceded by a comma if and only if it interrupts the normal word order (as in the second sentence above).

Many students write sentences like this:

This is true, however, that is not.

This sentence is not punctuated correctly. 'This is true' and 'that is not' are independent clauses; that is, they can form sentences on their own. Two independent clauses must be separated by a period or a semi-colon when connected with *however*. So the sentence above should be revised in one of two ways:

This is true. However, that is not.  
This is true; however, is not.

### 2. How to Format Titles

Titles should **never** be underlined in an essay produced on a modern word processor, which can produce italics. The MLA Style Guide stubbornly continued to recommend underlining long after it had become obsolete. As of 2009, the MLA Style Guide no longer recommends underlining. So, even if you've been taught to underline titles in the past, it's time to move with the times.

The following types of titles are placed in italics:

- Longer poems (generally narrative ones, those that tell a story)
- Literature in prose
- Book titles
- Journal titles

The following types of titles are placed in quotation marks:

- Shorter (generally lyric) poems
- Titles of journal articles

### 3. How to Cite Poetry

Cite poems by line numbers; never use page numbers unless the edition you are using does not provide line numbers.

### 4. What Words Should I Capitalize?

As few as a possible. Words at the beginnings of sentences, in personal names, and most words in titles are always capitalized. As a general rule, nothing else should be. There are a few conventional exceptions, such as 'the Middle Ages'. A good rule of thumb is never to capitalize anything unless you are willing to bet your life that it should be capitalized (a tongue in cheek way of saying, "Be *very* conservative with your capitals).

The word "romance" generally should not be capitalized—especially when referring to the medieval literary genre—unless it is part of a title or quotation. In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries there was an intellectual and artistic movement called Romanticism. This should be capitalized.

### 5. Commas and Capital Letters in Quotations

Compare the following sentences:

Curry believes that Chaucer intended the pun.  
Curry believes that Chaucer "intended the pun" (Curry 27).

The first does not contain a quotation; the second does. However, the two sentences are grammatically the same. You should try very very very hard to integrate quotations with the grammar of your own sentence in this way. Follow these rules:

1. Integrate the grammar of the quotation with your own grammar.
2. Do not capitalize the first letter of the quotation.
3. Do not introduce the quotation with a comma unless you need it for the grammar of your own sentence.

Rules 2 and 3 have one exception. In some cases, the quotation is preceded by an introductory word or phrase like 'says', 'states', 'observes', etc. In this case, there should be a capital letter and a comma:

Evaluating the evidence, Curry says, "Chaucer intended the pun" (Curry 27).

## 6. How to Quote Poetry

Short quotes (less than four lines) should be integrated with the grammar of your own sentence (see number 5 above). When you are quoting more than one line, the line breaks should be separated by slashes:

At the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer describes how the “shoures soote / The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote” (lines 1-2).

If the quotation contains quotation marks, change them to single quotation marks.

Quotations of more than four lines should be set off from the main text of your essay by indentation (it should not be centred). For example:

The *Canterbury Tales* begins as follows:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures sote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
Whan Zephyrus eke with his swete breethe  
Inspired hath in every holte and heethe...  
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages. (lines 1-6, 12)

Important things to note. First, quotation marks are not used in indented quotations (unless they contain dialogue). To use both quotation marks and indentation to indicate that the text is a quotation would be redundant. Second, you should try to end your quotation at a place that looks (grammatically) like the end of a sentence. Even if the quote does not end in a period in the original, you should change the final punctuation to a period.

## 7. Be Careful of Historical (Over-)Generalisations

When interpreting literature written in the past, it is very tempting to base your arguments on statements about historical conditions at the time the literature was written. However, you should avoid basing your arguments on statements that are too general or reductive. Remember that society at all points in history is complex, and conditions are not uniform. General or reductive statements are also the ones that tend to reflect your modern biases and your ignorance of the past. So you should learn to recognize them and be suspicious of them. Wherever possible, back up your knowledge of the past with statements from reputable historians so that you are certain you (a) understand the historical phenomenon you are discussing and (b) aren't mis-representing it.

## 8. How to Format Foreign Words and Technical Terms

Foreign words should be placed in italics. For instance, the three estates are (in Latin) the *bellatores*, the *oratores*, and the *laboratores*. Old or Middle English which are used as technical terms should be treated similarly, e.g. in the fourteenth century, writers were very concerned with *gentillesse*.

In quotations, foreign words should not be placed in italics, but in quotation marks. The exception is if they are foreign words within the quotation: e.g. "Whan that he wolde han my *bele chose*" (quotation in Middle English, but the last two words of the quotation in French).

## 9. How to Format Parenthetical Citations

I hate parenthetical citations. Footnotes are so much more professional. But the MLA Style Guide still recommends them, for whatever reason. Here are some things students typically get wrong:

Burrow calls it "a fool's errand (Burrow, 27)".  
Burrow calls it "a fool's errand." (Burrow, 27)  
Burrow calls it "a fool's errand"(Burrow, 27).

The first sentence implies that Burrow said, "Burrow, 27," which he did not. The parenthetical citation should go outside the quotation marks. The second sentence does not end with a final punctuation mark. The period should be moved to after the parenthetical citation. If the quotation ends in a question mark or exclamation mark, it should be retained and a period added after the parenthetical citation. Any other punctuation should be removed at the end of the quotation. The third sentence is missing a space between the final quotation mark and the first parenthesis.

If the quotation contains quotation marks, change them to single quotation marks.