

WRITING ABOUT POETRY, AND ABOUT LITERATURE IN GENERAL: DO'S AND DONT'S

Note: The Appendix to Perrine's *Literature: Structure, Sound and Sense* provides thirty-eight invaluable pages of solid advice; by following closely the suggestions and guidelines in Perrine, you will rarely go wrong. Indeed, I can hardly imagine how you might punctuate Frost's poem as follows if you had read this Appendix: *The Road Not Taken* or The Road Not Taken. If you had read this section, you would know to place titles of short poems in quotations, as follows: "The Road Not Taken." Simply put, students hoping for grades of "A" and "B" in AP English will quickly familiarize themselves with Perrine's Appendix. Further, they will attend closely to class discussion and, when we explore the difference between active and passive voice, for example, they will wisely elect to write about literature in AP English using active voice, present-tense verbs (again, if they aim at earning an "A" or a "B" in the course).

In short, during your year in AP English, you should aim at achieving an increasingly mature, increasingly effective, increasingly sophisticated writing style. Notice what the great writers do; appreciate fine writing from your classmates; delight in nice phrases or sweet words wherever you see or hear them. Proceed both via affirmation and negation: DO some fine things, and DONT DO some well-known weak things. The following list of random "Do's and Don'ts" is a starter:

1. Integrate all quotations into the syntax of your sentence.
No: The words of the first two stanzas evoke an animal presence: "rank, disheveled bed" . . . "lay and snored."
Yes: The grandmother is first seen as an animal presence, who "lay and snored" in a "rank, disheveled bed."
2. Nouns do not modify nouns.
No: the poem version, the elm incident
Yes: the stanzaic version, or the poem; the incident of the elms
3. The first reference in a paragraph to a person, place, or thing, has to be a noun. After that you can use a pronoun ("she") or a pronominal modifier ("her voice"). Even if you've talked about "the grandmother"

in paragraph #1, you can't begin paragraph #2 simply saying "she." in other words.

4. Avoid changes in pronominal reference. The following example also shows a too-quick repetition of the same word, "experience."
No: The emotions that human beings experience are experienced in the following manner: first, one denies that one is about to die; next the dying person tries to bargain for life, and when that fails, depression sets in.
Yes: When someone is dying, first he denies the fact, next he tries to bargain for life, and when that fails, he becomes depressed.
(this is also a fine example of parallelism; it also leads to the subject of #5 below.)
5. Be aware of gender bias in your writing! How would you complete the following sentence: "When someone is dying, first _____ denies the fact." ("he," "she," "s/he," "one," "they")
How about this sentence: "Everyone should complete _____ paper."
("their," "his," "her," "his/her," "her/his")
6. Quote from your text accurately, and spell as the author spells.
7. Don't wander from tense to tense:
No: She maintains herself as the English matriarch, declaring she was tired and rolling her head away. Yes: "declaring she is tired"
8. Write about literature (and art) in the present tense.
No: Hamlet urged Horatio to watch Claudius.
Yes: Hamlet urges Horatio to watch Claudius.
9. Write in the active voice.
No: Polonius is referred to by Hamlet as "a rat."
Yes: Hamlet refers to Polonius as "a rat."
10. "Quote" is a verb. The noun form is "quotation." We don't say "a quote" or "in this quote" except colloquially.
11. Don't split infinitives unless you can't see any other way out. "To more clearly define" can just as well be written "to define more clearly."
12. Provide useful titles for your papers.
No: Hamlet, or *Hamlet*
Yes: Garden Imagery in Hamlet

14. A paragraph has a topic sentence and supporting sentences. The topic sentence should not be lost in a mess of other sentences. Rather, it should be clearly evident in a conspicuous position--either at the beginning, at the ending, or at a rhetorical climax.

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13. A sentence is not a paragraph.

15. Employ formal diction in your papers. Therefore, avoid contractions (No: aren't Yes: are not)

16. Avoid first names (Mr) and second names (Mrs) in formal writing.