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# Top 20 Writing Flaws



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## Introduction

The primary goal of this work is to help college and university students improve their essay writing. The book is organized into 20 small chapters. In each chapter, a problem frequently found in undergraduate essays is introduced and explained with examples for elucidation; this is followed by a proposed solution and practical tips on how to avoid the flaw in future essays. Finally, exercises are given to help students eliminate that problem from their writing.

The sections will be arranged in a chronological numerical order, beginning with *one* and ending with *twenty*. This is not to suggest that the problems discussed in the higher-numbered sections occur less frequently or are less problematic, but there is a general movement towards less serious errors; so the movement is from errors that by themselves can deprive a paper of a passing grade to other errors that are not so fatal.

*Top twenty Writing Flaws* is not meant to replace other essay-writing handbooks, but to complement them. It does not cover every conceivable grammatical, stylistic or aesthetic error that might appear in an essay, nor does it make such an attempt. Instead, it chooses twenty common problems that occur in student essays and provides an overview of each of these problems by looking at practical examples.

The importance of the book lies in giving students practical examples on how to avoid writing flaws. From my experience in teaching at the undergraduate level, I find that one of the common complaints of first year composition students is that they are judged so critically on the mechanics of their writing, but that they do not feel that they have been properly taught how to avoid these types of errors. However, a course in essay writing assumes that the student has a command, and not simply a basic understanding, of grammar. Thus we arrive at an im-

passe; the professor's desire to teach writing at the essay level is waged against the student's desire to improve his or her writing at the sentence and paragraph levels. This book attempts to bridge these two agendas by first showing how sentence and paragraph-level errors directly impact the grades they receive on their papers, and secondly, by giving students tips and exercises to help them improve their writing on all levels.

What distinguishes this book from other ones on writing is that it presents the flaws in a compact and easy-to-follow format, as it is hoped that students will not be intimidated about having to read lengthy sections of grammar and stylistic prose in order to understand some of the difficulties they are having with writing. Although there are many books and handbooks that deal with improving the writing of college and university students, the approach and language used in these books are sometimes too complicated for students to understand and are often without practical exercises. *Top Twenty Writing Flaws* is different because of its accessibility to students who might get bogged down by complex grammatical prose and who want an easy and quick checklist to their most common writing flaws. Limiting the flaws to only 20 narrows down and thus puts better focus on eliminating these writing problems, and it also provides enough space for exercises and application.

Because the work presents the flaws in a compact and easy-to-follow format with a clear presentation of the problem and suggestions to eliminate it, it is hoped that **all** undergraduate students (regardless of specialization) will use the book in helping them produce efficient essays and research papers.

There are many ways the book could be used: First, students studying independently or with a tutor will find clear guidance in the easy and straightforward explanations, directions and examples to develop their writing skills in general. Secondly, the book could be used as a primary or core text in undergraduate writing courses and workshops, especially basic writing courses that are usually considered as prerequisites for higher courses. Finally, the book could be used as a supplement or a secondary text in basic and advanced writing courses as well as literature

courses where the professor wants students to have a fast checklist of the most common writing flaws.





## Chapter one

### Plagiarism

#### 1. Defining the Flaw

Plagiarism is a form of academic dishonesty in which a student takes either the words or the ideas of another writer without acknowledging where these words or ideas come from. Of the twenty writing flaws listed in this book, this one is the most fatal because it is a dishonest act and entails penalties not only in the academic environments but in all professions, as well as in copyright law.

Plagiarism is considered a kind of theft or a serious academic fraud, and so the consequences of plagiarism are serious. If the student plagiarizes an essay, the appropriate Dean is notified and the student receives a failing grade in the course with the notation “Academic Dishonesty” permanently marked on his or her transcript record. In some colleges and universities, this act is so looked down upon that the student can risk being dismissed from college or university. In either case, there is a permanent record of the student’s plagiarism. Students should also be aware that professors know about the essays purchased from paper mills or from on-line databases and are familiar with these web-sites, so they have no problem in tracking down plagiarized essays.

*You will be committing plagiarism in the following cases:*

1. When you take a phrase, sentence or a whole passage from another writer without using the proper quotation marks.

2. When you **summarize** a passage from a writer's work without acknowledging the borrowing.
3. When you **paraphrase** a passage from a writer's work without acknowledging the borrowing.
4. When you try to slant or distort the words of the author or scholar you are using in a summary or paraphrase.
5. When you purchase a paper or a research paper online from a term-paper mill and submit it as your own.
6. When another student or a person you know or you are related to writes the research paper for you or helps you in the organization, the ideas or the language, and you do not acknowledge that in your paper.

## 2. Eliminating the Flaw

*The following tips help you avoid plagiarism when writing an essay or a research paper:*

1. If you decide to use a quotation from someone else's work, always remember to use the punctuation marks specified for that purpose i.e., quotation marks. You should clearly indicate the boundaries of the quote i.e., where the quote starts and where it ends.
2. If you decide to paraphrase a source, you must still acknowledge that source by using parenthetical citation at the end of each paraphrase. **Paraphrasing** is a writing skill in which you rephrase previously published information in different words without changing the original meaning. When you write a paraphrase, you state the author's thoughts in your own words. A paraphrase is usually as long as the original text in order to communicate its full meaning.
3. If you decide to summarize a source, you have to acknowledge the source by using parenthetical citations at the end of each summary. A **summary** is similar to a paraphrase except that a summary is shorter. When you summarize, you compress large amounts of information into fewest possible sen-

tences. In order to do that, you include only the main points and main supporting points, leaving out the details. In fact, the summary is shorter than a paraphrase because many of the details have been omitted.

4. When you paraphrase or summarize from a source, you have to remember to fully digest the author's ideas and interpretations and restate them in your own words. You cannot lie about what another critic has said to suit the objectives of your paper. Of course, you have to select evidence that clarifies and strengthens your own ideas, but you have to make sure that the source you are using actually adds strength and depth into your analysis. Borrowing from others should be functional in making your arguments more effective, and by no means should be used as a kind of filler when you have nothing else to add.
5. When you write an essay or a research paper, you are required to build your own work and consult the work of other professional scholars on the topic. Therefore, when reading the essay, the professor expects to hear *your* voice and to be convinced that *you* are both the thinker and the writer of the essay. Submitting a paper you bought from internet is not only a serious theft, but it is an unethical act which will have negative consequences on your academic life.
6. You should always credit anyone who helps you develop an idea, conduct a survey, or help in the organization of the essay. Remember, you will be committing an academic fraud if you submit another student's work as yours, or even if you submit the same paper for two or more courses without permission.

Let us look at some practical exams of plagiarism.

### **Example one**

#### *Original Source*

Like Conrad's Africa, Forester's India is a locale frequently described as inapprehensible and too large. Once, when Ronny and Adela are together early in the novel, they watch

a bird disappear into a tree, yet they cannot identify it since, as Forester adds for their benefit and ours, “nothing in India is identifiable, the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else”. The crux of the novel is therefore the sustained encounter between the English colonials ... and India.

(Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London 1994, p. 234)

### *Plagiarism*

Edward Said makes an analogy between Conrad’s Africa and Forester’s India. **Like Conrad’s Africa**, Forester’s India in *A Passage to India* **is inapprehensible and too large**. One can conclude, therefore, that **the crux of the book is the sustained encounter between the English colonizers and the colonized India** (Said 234).

The above example from the student’s written work is a clear case of plagiarism. Although the student acknowledges Said for the information by referencing him at the beginning of the paragraph and by including the in-text citation between brackets, which includes the page from which the passage is taken and the last name of the author, he/she did not put the borrowed language between quotation marks, but copied, mostly word-for-word from the original source material. Furthermore, the paragraph ends with the student’s attributing the conclusion to himself/herself when, in reality, it is Said’s conclusion.

### *Correct incorporation of quotation*

In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said makes an analogy between Conrad’s Africa and Forester’s India to show how both settings are very difficult to penetrate and to be fully comprehended. In Forester’s *A Passage to India*, India is depicted as strange, unidentifiable, and too elusive to be pinned down. Said, therefore, concludes

“that the crux of the novel is the sustained encounter between the English colonials ...and India” (Said 234).

The above correct version has quotation marks to indicate the phrases that were copied from the original document. Most of the passage was reworded by the student, and so the phrases that were copied verbatim are now nonexistent. The student also revised the paraphrase by acknowledging that the conclusion reached in the last paragraph is the writer’s and not his or hers.

### Example two

#### *Original Source*

Technology has significantly transformed education at several major turning points in our history. In the broadest sense, the first technology was the primitive modes of communication used by prehistoric people before the development of spoken language. Mime, gestures, grunts, and drawing of figures in the sand with a stick were methods used to communicate – yes, even to educate. Even without speech, these prehistoric people were able to teach their young how to catch animals for food, what animals to avoid, which vegetation was good to eat and which was poisonous.

(Frick, Theodore *Restructuring Education through Technology*, IND Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington 1994, p.10)

#### *Plagiarism*

Technology has greatly changed education at many points in history. **The first technology was the primitive modes of communication used by prehistoric people before the development of spoken language; like mime, gestures, grunts and drawing of figures in the sand with a stick.** It is clear that those prehistoric people

were able to communicate many things even without speech.

The above passage, in content, structure and diction, is taken wholesale from the original source without acknowledging it. The student shows no attempt to rewrite large parts of the paragraph; in fact, many phrases are left as they are in the original. Inserting even short phrases from the source into a new sentence still requires placing quotations around the borrowed words and citing the author. If even one phrase is good enough to borrow, it must be properly set off by quotation marks.

### *Correct incorporation of quotation*

In examining technology, we have to remember that computers are not the first technology people have had to deal with. Frick believes that "...the first technology was the primitive modes of communication used by prehistoric people before the development of spoken language". He further provides examples of these modes of communication such as "mime, gesture, grunts, and drawing of figures in the sand with a stick". Frick concludes that prehistoric people could communicate many essential elements for their survival, even without speech (Frick 10).

In the above example, quotation marks were added to indicate that the phrases were copied from the original document. The student has also revised the paraphrase by acknowledging that the conclusion reached in the last sentence is Frick's. Notice how the key idea, the choice and order of the examples and even the basic structure of the original sentences are all taken from the source, and so it is necessary to place a citation at the end of this paragraph to acknowledge that the content is not original. If a writer paraphrases the source's sentences and borrows the main idea and examples from a source with an

acknowledgment at the end of the paragraph, no plagiarism is committed.

### 3. Practice

*Read the following essay topic:*

Leaders, activists and politicians are important orators who use language in a special way to convince their listeners of their arguments and attempt to achieve their objectives. They use pathos, ethos and logos to make their arguments stronger. Ethos refers to an appeal to the audience by establishing authenticity and trustworthiness as a speaker. Pathos is the appeal to the audience's emotions. Logos includes the support of hard facts, statistics, and logical argumentation. Write an essay about the different rhetorical strategies that orators use to enforce their arguments to a listening public. You should incorporate into your discussion the following three examples of powerful speeches by famous women activists and leaders.

1. The first Speech is by Sojourner Truth entitled "Ain't I a Woman?"

*Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) was arguably the most famous of the 19th Century Black women orators. Born into slavery in New York and freed in 1827 under the state's gradual emancipation law, she dedicated her life to abolition and equal rights for women and men. Scholars agree that the speech was given at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, on May 29, 1851. After that, there is much debate about what she said and how she said it. The version that is most quoted and which is produced here was originally recorded in Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al. The History of Woman Suffrage (1881–87). The speeches were modernized by Miriam Schneir in Feminism: The essential Historical Writings (1972).*

*As one of the most effective female orators of her time, Sojourner Truth spoke for oppressed people with humor and courage, and in her speech, she emerges as a spontaneous speaker who has the vitality of a great blues singer showing strong refutation of those who spoke before her and a rebuttal of implied arguments made by previous speakers; mainly the inferiority of women to men. Although the language used in the speech is informal and improvised, Truth is able to make it nonetheless effective through the use of rhetorical questions, like "Ain't I a woman" which functions as a refrain and which Truth uses as a weapon to subdue her opposition. Truth refuses to accept women's subordinate and inferior role to men; she runs the table on them through a clever use of the very examples they cite, reversing the emphasis and drawing an opposite conclusion.*

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man — when I could get it — and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? ("Intellect," someone whispers.) That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or Negro's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn't a woman! Where



did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from?  
From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they are asking to do it, the men better let them.

(Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, Norton, New York 1996, p.370)

2. The second Speech is by Elizabeth Cady Stanton entitled “Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions”.

*Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) is an American women’s rights activist, a feminist, an editor, and a writer who was born on November 12, 1815, in Johnstown, New York. In 1840, Stanton married a reformer Henry Stanton (omitting “obey” from the marriage oath). When Stanton and her husband attended the World’s Anti–Slavery Convention in London in 1840 on their honeymoon, she joined other women like Lucretia Mott in objecting to the exclusion of women delegates from the assembly. This urged them to plan a women’s rights convention that was to take place on July 19, 1848, at Seneca Falls, New York. At this meeting, the attendees drew up its “Declaration of Sentiments” and took the lead in proposing that women be granted the right to vote. A total of three hundred people attended the convention including forty men to discuss the rights of women in America.*

*Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of the major contributors to the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions. She is credited with making the Declaration almost identical to the Declaration of Independence, which was a very effective approach to getting the women’s declarations heard. The document shows her brilliance, eloquence and insight in emulating the same structure and language used in the Declaration of Independence arguing that men have mistreated women and denied them of their “inalienable” rights, establishing thus “an absolute tyranny” over*

*them; a tyranny analogous to that which England has established over the American colonies. The effect that this document had was so powerful that it allowed for what was later known as the Women's Suffrage Movement.*

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they were accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct

object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners.

Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master—the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.

He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes, and in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given, as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women — the law, in all cases, going upon a false supposition of the supremacy of man, — and giving all power into his hands.

After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single, and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be profitable to it.

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.

He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.

He allows her in Church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church.

He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.

He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for a sphere of action, when that belongs to conscience and to her God.

He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

Now, in view of this entire disfranchisement one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation — in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, — and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which long to them as citizens of the United States.

In entering upon the great work before us, we anticipate no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule; but we shall use every instrumentality within our power to effect our object. We shall employ agents, circulate tracts, petition the State and National legislatures, and endeavor to enlist the pulpit and the press in our behalf. We hope this Convention will be followed by a series of Conventions embracing every part of the country.

(Diyanni, Robert. *One Hundred Great Essays*, Longman, New York 2002, p. 640)

3. The third Speech is by Queen Elizabeth entitled “Speech to the Troops at Tilbury”.

*Elizabeth I (1533–1603) was Queen of England from 17 November 1558 until her death. Sometimes called the Virgin*

*Queen, the Faerie Queen or Good Queen Bess, Elizabeth was the sixth and last monarch of the Tudor dynasty. Elizabeth is acknowledged by historians as a charismatic performer and a dogged survivor, in an age when government was ramshackle and limited, and when monarchs in neighboring countries faced internal problems that jeopardized their thrones. Her period is noted for the flowering of intellectual and artistic achievement.*

*In the following speech, Queen Elizabeth addresses her land forces that had assembled at Tilbury in Essex in anticipation of the landing of the Spanish Armada, a fleet of warships sent by Philip II to invade England. In fact, the Armada was defeated at sea, and so never reached England, but Elizabeth's courage in personally leading the troops was not diminished. The rhetorical effectiveness of her speech is due in part to her repeated assurances of her love for her people, her willingness to put her life in jeopardy, her well-balanced and carefully crafted parallel sentences and phrases; but most importantly, her willingness "to live or die" there and to lay down both her "honor and blood even in the dust".*

My loving people,

We have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety, to take heed how we commit our selves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery; but I assure you I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear, I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good-will of my subjects; and therefore I am come amongst you, as you see, at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live and die amongst you all; to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and my people, my honour and my blood, even in the dust. I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will

take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field. I know already, for your forwardness you have deserved rewards and crowns; and We do assure you in the word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you. In the mean time, my lieutenant general shall be in my stead, than whom never prince commanded a more noble or worthy subject; not doubting but by your obedience to my general, by your concord in the camp, and your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory over those enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people.

(Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, Norton, New York 1996, p. 29)