

General Guidelines for OWL Papers

These are general guidelines. I'd prefer you to follow them generally, but they are not set in stone.

- I. General essay guidelines.
 - a. Note: The following guidelines are for standard argumentative papers, which are the bulk of the papers we receive. However, it's important to read the information the student includes in the form and note the type of essay. Of course, if someone submits an explanatory or observational or narrative essay, they will need a different approach. Use your best judgment or contact me if you need advice on a paper. Many of these guidelines will still help a tutor with other types of essays as well.

1. Introduce yourself at the top of the paper. A sample could be:

Dear student,

My name is Laura and I'll be your tutor today. Please make sure you are in print preview mode so that you can see in-text comments. I have added in-text comments and more general comments at the end. Thanks! 😊

If you've worked with the student before, feel free to be more informal if you feel comfortable with it, such as:

Hi student,

This is Laura, and I'll be your tutor today. It's good to work with you again. Take a look at the in-text and end comments. Thanks! 😊

2. Skim through the entire paper quickly to get a general idea of what the student is arguing and how he or she is proving or attempting to prove the argument.
3. Look at the introduction—is there a hook (hooks are not always needed, but are often taught and required at lower levels), and is it effective? Is there proper background information introducing the topic? Most importantly, pay careful attention to the thesis. If there is a problem with the thesis, there will almost always be problems with the body of the essay due to that. Make sure that the thesis is a logical enthymeme. The thesis should contain two parts—the claim and the “why” of the claim. If the prompt is included with the student's submission, double check to make sure that their thesis answers that prompt.
4. Pay attention to the topic sentences. Do they clearly relate to the thesis? Are there enough transitions? Are there informal topic sentences that often do not work, such as a rhetorical question as a topic sentence? (This is debatable. Sometimes

rhetorical questions can work as topic sentences, but many times they end up sounding a bit clunky, so I usually urge students not to use them).

5. How are the student's examples? If outside sources are required, do they use them enough? Do they cite them correctly? If the example is not in quotes, are they paraphrasing it enough? Does it sound like their own words, or does it sound like someone else's? Plagiarism is one of the most difficult problems to confront in an essay, and unfortunately one of the most common. Try not to accuse them of plagiarism outright if you suspect the student of "borrowing" another's words. Try to phrase it more politely, such as:

I've noticed the tone of your essay has changed here. Did you find this information at another source? If so, please cite it and either put it in quotes or consider paraphrasing it more.

Many of our students are from other cultures where plagiarism is not frowned upon and is at times considered a form of flattery. Many students do not plagiarize intentionally; they are just unsure of the procedures.

6. One of the major pitfalls of student essays lies in the analysis. Some students will not have any at all, and just use a multitude of examples and believe that their point is proved. Others will sometimes provide too much analysis or go off on tangents that move away from their thesis. If you see a student veering off-course on their essay, gently try to steer them back.
7. Look at the paragraphs more generally. Are the points getting stronger as the essay goes on? Is the strongest just before the conclusion? Are there any paragraphs you think should possibly be moved around so that the ideas flow from one another in a smoother way? Feel free to recommend bigger structural changes to the essay.
8. The conclusion is an integral part to the essay, but many times the conclusions are weaker than the introduction, most likely because the student ran out of time or became frustrated and gave up. Make sure that the thesis is restated, along with several key points that were present in the essay. Lastly, the student should try to link the thesis to a bigger picture, such as society or the world as a whole. As one of my past teachers said, when one writes a conclusion that person is closing the door on their topic, but still opening a window on another topic.
9. Add general comments at the end. Identify trends you have seen throughout the essay but did not point out in great detail in the body of the essay due to time constraints. Offer any additional advice you think would help the student. Mention both strong and weak areas in their essay. As a tutor, we usually tend to focus on what needs work, but pointing out what works can be just as, if not more encouraging to the student. I usually end with something general, such as:

So those are my suggestions for your next draft. If you need any extra assistance, feel free to resubmit your next draft to the OWL, come see us in person at the SCAA, or see your professor during office hours. Thanks!

10. Send the essay back to the student, along with the editing marks handout.

II. The issue of grammar and minor errors.

I know it's absolutely painful sometimes to see an error in a paper and pass it by, but oftentimes that is what needs to be done in an essay to have it finished within the time constraints. It's also painstaking to point out every comma splice, dangling modifier, and verb tense in an essay. Therefore, here at the OWL we must glide over many nitpicky errors.

That is not to say, however, that we need ignore grammar completely. Grammar is often what a student needs help on, especially for many of our international students. Grammar is not taught often in high school or in college. Even English majors at CSUEB only need one grammar class to graduate. Professors, like the tutors, also do not have time to point out every grammar mistake in an essay, which leaves many students utterly clueless how to improve their grammar.

For the OWL tutors, I propose that we neither completely ignore grammar, nor do we edit their papers for them. I have attached an editing marks handout. We can use these shorthand marks to point out various common grammatical errors we see, such as verb tense or word choice errors. We also do not need to point out every one. Depending on the length of the essay, I sometimes merely point out grammatical errors for the first few pages, and then leave it up to the student. Use your best judgment in determining how much help in grammar and punctuation each student needs.

III. Common phrases for OWL papers.

These are common phrases I constantly use in the many OWL papers I have graded since we opened last year. I decided to share them, as I have them on hand. I frequently copy and paste them into the essay to save time and prevent myself from getting carpal tunnel at a young age. Feel free to use variations:

Make sure you format your essay correctly with a heading and a title, according to your professor's instructions.

Avoid overusing the 2nd person in academic writing

Avoid overusing the 1st person in academic writing

Avoid contractions in academic writing

If basically the only thing the person entered in the form was that they wanted help with grammar, I usually include:

You mentioned in the OWL e-mail that you wanted the tutor to mainly work on grammar. I want to stress that the OWL is not an editing service. We do point out overarching themes in grammatical mistakes, such as word form and verb tense errors, but here at the OWL we try to focus more on global issues. Please keep that in mind for the future. If you wish to improve your grammar, I recommend reading books for fun. The classics, Science fiction, fantasy, romance novels, mysteries—seriously, whatever you want. If you read a lot, the grammar will become second nature to you, and it's more enjoyable than studying a grammar handbook (although that is useful as well).

If the form is basically blank:

Online tutoring is difficult, because you're not here for me to ask questions to. In the future, please put as much information about the assignment into the OWL form as possible because that'll make it easier for me to help you.

If the paper really should be looked at in person, rather than online:

For this essay, I would recommend coming in to see us at the SCAA in person, or talking to your professor during office hours. Online tutoring is useful, but if you have questions, it's easier to talk to a tutor in person; likewise, if we'd like to ask you something (like all the questions I asked you in the essay), it's easier if you're there to answer them right away, so that we can then look at ways to improve your essay. So again, I'd strongly recommend working on another draft and then seeing us on the second floor of the library.

If you have any common phrases you think should be included in this list, feel free to e-mail them to me and I will include them.