

Parent Guidelines: How to Check Student's Essay, 12/31/15

WV parents:

As I've said many times before, your involvement in the class work and homework of your students is crucial to their success. One of the areas where you can be particularly helpful is the editing of their essays. You may feel inadequate for this task, but there are actually quite a few things you can check to improve your student's work. You do NOT have to be familiar with the contents of the essay or work being analyzed, although, of course, that would help. What you can do is use the following guide to check your child's essay; if it passes these tests you have eliminated many problems (and points-off). It is possible to pass all these tests and still have other problems in the essay; however, these checks should help you to eliminate many of the more common problems. I have tried to order these checks by difficulty, beginning with the easiest items first.

1. The essay must be double-spaced (except for header and block quotes).
2. Header is at the top right of the first page and has the following format:

Stanley Student
Year 1, Haltom City
September 23, 2010

Of course, insure the name, year, location, and date reflect your student's class.

3. Header must be separated from title by a blank line.
4. Title must be centered
5. Almost all words in the title must be capitalized (except for insignificant words like "and" or "in").
6. First paragraph must be separated from title by a blank line.
7. Most essays (especially year 1) have a set number of paragraphs, usually 5. These paragraphs are:
 - a. Introduction paragraph,
 - b. 3 (or more) body paragraphs,
 - c. Concluding paragraphInsure that the essay has exactly that number of paragraphs.
8. Each paragraph should be at least 8 lines long, and may not exceed one page.
9. Although 6-line paragraphs are sometimes acceptable, in almost all cases the student will not be enough content to get the highest grades. Be sure he covers the required content for each paragraph. It's usually better to have at least 8 lines.

10. The introductory paragraph should be the first one, and should not have any quotes in it. It should tell what the whole essay is about. It should present the problem to solve.
11. The concluding paragraph should be the last one, and should not have any quotes in it, nor should it introduce any new material. It should sum up the whole essay, restate problem addressed in introduction, and then present solution. Add a memorable clincher for best grade.
12. Do not start or end any paragraph with a quote. Quotes should appear in the middle of paragraphs.
13. Each paragraph must be separated from the other paragraphs. There are two ways to do this:
 - a. Add an extra blank line between paragraphs.
 - b. Indent the first line of a paragraph about 1 inch (or 5-10 spaces, whatever makes one inch).This must remain consistent throughout the essay. If you do "a", do it for all paragraphs; if you do "b", do it for all paragraphs. Do not do both (extra line between and indenting first line).
14. Only third-person pronouns are allowed (except in quotes). This means the student is NEVER allowed to use these words (except in quotes): I, me, we, us, my, mine, our, ours, you, your, and yours. It is a simple matter of scanning the essay and insuring that these words never appear (except in quotes).
15. No questions are allowed (except in quotes). Even if the student is writing an essay that answers, "What is the nature of God?", he must reword the question as a statement. For example, "The nature of God is...". Simply scan the essay and point out to your student any questions. They must be changed into statements.
16. No contractions are allowed (except in quotes). For example, "don't", "isn't", etc. Scan the essay for these items and point them out to your student for revision.
17. Each body-paragraph (inner paragraphs not including first and last) must have at least two (only one for Starting Points students) quotes. While there are rare times when it can have more, this is unusual; they should never have less. Insure each inner paragraph has the correct number of quotes.
18. If a quote is three lines or less, it must be an "inline" quote. That is, the quote must be part of the paragraph, and set off with quote marks. For example, "this is an inline quote" (and this is where the citation goes).
19. If a quote is more than three lines it must be blocked. "Blocked" means that the quote is separated from the paragraph by a blank line before and after, there are NO quote marks, the quote is indented on the left side, and the quote is single-spaced. Here is an example within a paragraph:

The reason the Greeks sacrificed was to bribe the gods. Neither this sacrifice nor any of the others in the *Aeneid*

helped to identify Octavian as a son of god. The Hebrew sacrifices to God showed a much higher purpose:

...they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it. Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. (Exodus 12:7-13 NKJV)

This sacrifice was substitutionary, offering the life of an animal for a person. Even more importantly, the lamb represented Christ in his substitution for the death of mankind.

20. All quotes must be followed by a citation in parenthesis to identify where the quote came from. In the above quote the citation is: (Exodus 12:7-13 NKJV). Different works require different citation formats. A Homer citation looks like this: (Homer *Iliad* 9.138-139). Use the earlier email that contains the file "guidelines.citation.pdf" to insure all quotes are properly cited.
21. Each quote must be written down exactly as it appears in the book. Check the quote against the book to make sure they match.
22. The essay should never refer to itself. Look for and instruct your student to remove phrases such as: "This essay will...", "This paragraph will...", "this paper will..."
23. The essay should never refer to the reader. Look for and remove "the reader...", "the audience", etc.
24. Microsoft Word can check for many errors, but the easiest to check for are spelling errors. They are usually marked with a wavy red line under the misspelled word. Load your student's essay in Microsoft Word, look for the red underlines, and have him/her correct those words.
25. There are some words that are vague and should normally not be used in an essay, for example: "things" and "seem". Check your child's essay for these words; challenge him to use something more specific. For example:
 - Bad: Odysseus had many things to give him a strong advantage over his adversaries.
 - Good: Odysseus' intelligence, strength, and coolness under pressure give him a strong advantage over his adversaries.
26. Each paragraph must "make sense". Read each paragraph and see if you understand the main point your student is trying to make. If his/her point is confusing to you, then anyone else reading it will probably feel the same way. Have your student rewrite until it makes sense to you.
27. Not only each paragraph, but also each sentence must "make sense". To help insure this is the case, try reading the sentences in reverse order (last sentence first). This is a good way to check each sentence (rather than a whole group of sentences) to make sure each one is understandable. If any sentence is confusing, have your student rewrite it.

I believe all the above checks are within the ability of most parents. Please use these checks to help improve your student's essays. They are not everything that it takes to write a good essay, but they are a good start. If you feel more adventurous, here are some more things you can do:

More advanced checks:

28. Print out the grammarGuidelines.pdf file from the earlier email and check each requirement there against your student's essay.
29. If you are unsure about certain grammar in your student's essay, check out the web site: <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar>. Most of things you will need are under the box titled "Word & Sentence Level".
30. If you set up Microsoft Word correctly, it can catch many errors. It is not perfect, so there are times it whines about something it thinks is a problem, but really is not. However, it can be very helpful. If you would like, I can help you set up Microsoft Word to catch the maximum number of errors. Call or email me and I will show you how to do it.

I may think of more things that parents can do to help their students, so I might from time to time send out an updated version of this email.

If any of you parents have found some things that you do to be very helpful to your students, please email them back to me; I might be able to share them with other parents.