

1) The writer's thesis states something obvious to readers

Example: "There is a great deal of debate over whether global warming is caused by humans or not."

Why this is a problem: A thesis such as this also goes nowhere because it isn't actually proving anything to the reader. A thesis needs to be arguable and should answer the question, "where does this writer stand on the debate?"

Solution: Write a thesis that is arguable. In other words, create a thesis that someone would dispute. For example, one could rewrite the thesis above into a better one by writing, "Global warming has, in all likelihood, been greatly accelerated by human production of carbon dioxide in Earth's atmosphere."

2) Quotations standing alone as sentences.

Why This Is a Problem: When you let a quotation stand alone as a sentence, the reader has no idea who said it or wrote it. It is also unclear how it fits in with the idea previous to the quotation or following it.

Solution: At the very least, have an attributive phrase attached to the quotation. For example: "The narrator describes Ethan's frustration in writing a farewell note to Zeena: 'His pen paused on the word....'"

3) Using too many words and phrases such as "possibly," "seems," "apparently," "could be," and "might be" when to state the writer's opinions.

Why This Is a Problem: These words are all fine to use in their appropriate place. However, when a reader encounters an essay full of these words, he or she begins to lose confidence in the writer.

Solution: When editing, take these words out if they appear to make you look less confident. For example: change "In this passage the road seems to represent a different path in life" to "In this passage the road represents a different path in life." It might not, indeed, represent this "path" – but you want to sound confident when you are arguing that it does.

4) Problem: Using the words "we," "I," and "us" in a formal, critical essay.

Why This Is a Problem: Many instructors allow personal pronouns in student writing, and they are certainly okay for writing personal memoirs or comparisons to fictional characters. In general, however, when you add personal pronouns to your writing and state an opinion such as "I think this character is depicted as a racist," you take away any possibility of argument. Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, and so your reader whom you are trying to convince could never argue, in response, "You do not think this character is a racist." In contrast, when you write, "This character is depicted as a racist," your implied reader can argue, "No, this character is not depicted as a racist." In formal essays you will sound more impersonal, objective, and persuasive if you offer a third-person judgment rather than a first-person opinion.

Solution: Use "the reader" for "we," and keep "I" out of it. Use "one" in place of "you."

5) Problem: Not enough textual evidence to support the writer's ideas.

Why This Is a Problem: Readers are simply not convinced by your writing alone. If you are trying to convince a jury that someone should be convicted for murder, you wouldn't be very persuasive if you simply said, "This person is guilty." The jury would want to have good evidence that the person is guilty.

Solution: Use relevant quotations and examples from the text. You should have at least one piece of evidence to support each topic sentence or point in your paper.

6) Problem: A conclusion that either begins, "In conclusion" or simply restates all the points you just made in your paper.

Why This Is a Problem: Beginning a conclusion with "In conclusion" is simply too clichéd. And when you spend a paragraph telling about the points you just wrote about in the paragraphs before the conclusion, you insult the reader's intelligence because it implies that he or she needs things to be repeated in order for him or her to understand them.

Solution: Use your conclusion to push your ideas to their furthest limits, what I call "x + 1." Avoid bringing up a completely new idea that you can't support, but do think about the deepest or widest implications of what you proved in your paper. This is the moment to really impress your reader and leave him or her with a positive impression.