

**TIPS & REMINDERS FOR ALL WRITERS**  
**OR**  
**PLEASE DON'T PUSH MY GRAMMAR BUTTONS**

You might have an excellent thesis and outstanding argumentation . . .  
but if the reader cannot get past your writing, she will not appreciate your brilliant insights!

**1. Problems with agreement**

You may be tempted to use “they” as a gender-neutral term, but it’s grammatically incorrect. Use “he or she,” “s/he” or just plain “he” instead.

No: If anyone knew about iconographic writing, they would not say that Precolumbian civilizations lacked a writing system.

Yes: If anyone knew about iconographic writing, *he* would not say that Precolumbian civilizations lacked a writing system.

**2. Passive verbs**

Active verbs are more interesting and just sound better. Identify who or what is doing the action.

No: Similar words were used by Juan de Oñate and Christopher Columbus to describe the Indians.

Yes: *Juan de Oñate and Christopher Columbus used* similar words to describe the Indians.

**3. Ending with prepositions**

It sounds fine when you use it in speech, but constitutes bad grammar in essays.

No: The Mexica had tremendous respect for nature, which they dedicated numerous gods to.

Yes: The Mexica had tremendous respect for nature, *to which* they dedicated numerous gods.

**4. Informal language**

Our lectures may sometimes feel relaxed, but your essay is where you showcase your scholarly voice. Do not use the second person; contractions; and “And” at the beginning of a sentence.

No: And you might argue that “Indian” isn’t necessarily a negative term.

Yes: *On a similar note, some students* might argue that “Indian” *is not* necessarily a negative term.

**5. Starting a sentence with “This” or “It is”**

Unclear referents confuse readers. Make sure they know what “this” or “it” really is.

No: Mexica believed in a god named Quetzalcoatl. This means that they may have predicted the arrival of Cortés.

Yes: Mexica believed in a god named Quetzalcoatl. *Because he is described as “white” and bearded,* some people suggest that the Mexica may have predicted the arrival of Cortés.

## 6. Rhetorical questions

Your job is to ask questions of the *text*, not of the reader. If you raise a question, then answer it. If you cannot provide an answer, then rewrite the question as a statement. Compared to questions, assertions have far greater impact.

No: In the Precolumbian game of “soccer,” winners were sometimes sacrificed to the gods. So why would anyone want to win?

Yes: In the Precolumbian game of “soccer,” winners were sometimes sacrificed to the gods. *As a result, it may be challenging for us to imagine wanting to win such a “prize.”*

## 7. “We Are the World” introductions

While it is important to help the reader warm up to your topic, do not begin with a first sentence so broad as to be meaningless, or so sweeping that you cannot prove it. If your paper begins at the dawn of time/man/the world, you are over-generalizing!

No: Throughout time, women around the world have had a role in history.

Yes: Women played many roles in Mexica society, but foremost among them was the job of temple-keeper.

## 8. “Seems” and “Appears”

Your paper is a place where you are forwarding a strong argument. Words like “seems” and “appears” weaken the impact of your statement. Take a stand: either something is or isn’t, but don’t be wishy-washy about what you’re saying.

No: The idea of the Fifth Sun seems to have given Mexica a sense of doom.

Yes: The idea of the Fifth Sun *gave* the Mexica a sense of doom.

## 9. Not spending enough quality time with your quotes

You have to think of your paper as valuable real estate: The more physical space you devote to a quote from the text, the more you need to make that passage work for you. Don’t assume that its meaning is obvious to the reader. While you should not feel pressured to point out every single significant thing going on in the passage, you should take the time to highlight why it supports and illuminates your point. If it’s worth quoting at length, then spend time explaining why it’s so special.

## GENERAL GRAMMATICAL REFERENCE

- **Always refer to the author and text in the present tense.**  
*Out of Many* compares European and Indian interaction in New Spain and New France.  
Keen describes Aztec society in greater detail than he does the Maya.
- **There is a difference between a hyphen (-) and a dash (—).**  
While some codices are richly-detailed—such as the elaborate Borbonicus Codex—others are written in a simpler style.
- **Semicolons:** A semicolon can join two related thoughts that could stand alone as sentences (both have a subject and a verb).  
*For the Mexica, history served both political and sacred purposes; it not only confirmed their right to rule, but also promoted their cyclical vision of life.*  
  
It also acts as a comma for lengthy clauses.  
*Pre-Columbian diet consisted of staples such as maize, chile, calabasa and beans; some poultry, like ducks and turkeys; and small game, in the form of pigs and deer.*
- **Colons:** A colon can join two thoughts, the second of which elaborates on the first.  
*Middle Eastern traders played a critical role in Europe: It was from them that Europeans learned accounting and bookkeeping.*
- **Commas:** Put a comma anywhere you would pause if you were to read your writing out loud.  
*Indians across the Americas suffered not only cultural devastation, due to forced separation from their families, but also ecological devastation and genocide, as tens of millions of people died within fifty years of European contact.*
- **Introducing a quote:** Be sure not to simply thrust your quote into the paragraph—prepare your reader for it! Proper citation is also an important safeguard against plagiarism.  
  
You can attribute it directly to the author:  
*Menchaca boldly declares, “I use the first-person voice, because this is also my history, a positioned history” (10).*  
  
You can also incorporate it your own wording in the sentence:  
*Menchaca describes Lake Texcoco as a parcel of land “infested with snakes and insects” (35).*
- **Ellipses:** Only use ellipses [ . . . ] when you have eliminated words from the middle of a quote.  
*Keen explains that Olmec civilization featured “ceremonial centers, monumental stone carving and sculpture . . . hieroglyphic writing, and probably a calendrical system” (11).*
- **Brackets:** Use brackets when you have altered (usually to clarify) the original wording.  
*“Legitimately or not, [Aztec] rulers all claimed the honor of Toltec descent,” Keen writes (13).*