PSC1900: Research Seminar

418 Tolentine Hall
PSC1900-003: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:00-11:15am

Professor: Mark Lawrence Schrad, Ph.D.
E-mail: mark.schrad@villanova.edu
Office: 256 St. Augustine Center
Office Hours: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 11:30am–2:30pm, and almost any other time by appointment

Introduction and Objectives

Don't be fooled by the unassuming title—this is a course that is geared toward helping you to succeed in every other course that you take in college. It is about figuring-out ways to succeed by understanding our potential and our limitations. It is about making better decisions, finding better evidence, and making better arguments—both in the classroom, and in life. It is about how to tell fact from fiction, quality from crap, and persuasive from non-persuasive when it comes to what you read, watch or hear. In the realm of politics, it is about differentiating between well-reasoned insights versus off-the-cuff opinions, reliable information versus bogus polls, and neutral versus politically biased analysis.

In more concrete terms, we will explore the fundamentals of research and writing, that will culminate in a research paper on a topic of your choosing. Along the way, we will grapple with how to identify, evaluate, structure, develop and produce quality research, both in political science and the social sciences more generally. The social sciences are at heart an attempt to move beyond mere “hunches” or “intuitions,” and solidify them with the stuff of science: logic and rigor. Yet there is more to good research and good argumentation than dry rationalism, so by the conclusion, we hope to find some common ground between rationality and intuition that makes for arguments and understandings that are insightful and compelling.

Course Requirements

Student performance in the class will be evaluated based upon the following criteria, each of which will be tabulated according to the standard 100-point scale.

The grade breakdown is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation and Assignments</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm Assignment</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Paper</td>
<td>45%</td>
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Grading Scale:

- 96.9—93%: A
- 92.9—90%: A-
- 89.9—87%: B+
- 86.9—83%: B
- 82.9—80%: B-
- 79.9—77%: C+
- Below 60%: F

Class Participation and Assignments: 35%

Seminar classes such as this one are only successful to the degree that everyone not only attends class regularly, but also participates in the discussions—asking insightful questions, sharing opinions, and investigating topics from a wide variety of perspectives. What’s more, throughout the semester, there will be a number of in-class work assignments. For these reasons, class attendance and participation is mandatory, and (including the assignments throughout the course of the semester) constitute a rather sizable proportion of your overall course grade.

Now, I understand that you have a life outside of this classroom, and that you may occasionally be unable to attend class—whether because of a family emergency, an internship interview, or because you spent the night before drinking and playing Halo 4 until the crack of dawn. It happens. Therefore, you may miss one class section over the course of the semester—no questions asked. After that, however, further ab-
sences will have a significant and detrimental effect on your participation grade. *Missing a class does not exempt you from the assignment due on that day!*

Just showing up to class will not ensure that you receive a satisfactory class participation grade. You will be expected to come to class having read all of the assigned readings for that session, and had time to think critically about them. Ensuring that everyone is familiar with the arguments put forth in the various readings is the minimum condition for developing an effective class discussion. Good participation entails being an active participant (shocking, I know) in class by asking questions, making thought-provoking arguments, and generally engaging the discussion. I would strongly suggest everyone write down at least two questions that you have about either the readings or the general classroom topics before you come to class, which will not only help you to think critically about the materials, but provide an impetus for discussion, even for the reluctant speaker. If you spend the entire class session on Facebook, surfing the web, or looking down at your crotch as you text your friends on your phone--don’t expect a passing participation grade. Class attendance and participation count for 35% of your final course grade, which includes performance on the classroom assignments.

**Midterm Assignment (20%)**

Before moving on to the substantive work on your research paper, which will be the capstone of this course, I feel it necessary to ensure that we have mastered the relevant background concepts. Therefore, about the time of the mid-semester break, there will be a midterm assignment that will count for 20% of the final course grade. The precise deadline of this assignment will depend greatly upon the progress made in the course; but will be announced in class along with the form of the assignment.

**Research Paper (45%)**

The capstone to this class will be the individual research project of **16-20 pages**, which will be due during the final exam period. Ideally, this project will allow you to explore in some depth a causal question of some political importance. Simple historical overviews or general investigations will not suffice: such papers should be driven by a good “how” or “why” question, as we will discuss in class.

To ensure that the research develops in a timely fashion, I have instituted a number of (ungraded) benchmarks for the project throughout the semester, including an in-class presentation of your research question, a pecha-kucha presentation, and in-class peer reviews.

To both deter and detect the plagiarism that is inconsistent with your purpose as a student, I will ask that all research papers be submitted electronically by the final exam period (**Wednesday, December 19, 8:30-11:00am**) through the SafeAssign program, which is located under the “Course Content” tab on the course Blackboard site: [https://elearning.villanova.edu/webct](https://elearning.villanova.edu/webct).

**Class Policies:**

**Grading**

All assignments will be graded on a 100-point scale which can be used to translate your number grade into a letter grade. At the end of the semester, your final grade will be calculated by adding-up the grades on each assignment in proportion to the weights assigned to them above.

**Grade Entitlement**

A recent UC Irvine study found that 1/3 of all students surveyed expected a course grade of “B” just for attending lectures, while 40 percent expected a “B” simply for completing the required readings. Moreover 2/3 of all students surveyed claimed that explaining to a professor that they “worked hard,” it should be factored into the calculation of a grade. This trend increasingly mistakes effort for quality of work. I strive to objectively assess the quality of assignments in this class against a uniform standard, nothing more. Course grades should not be thought to be a reflection of either the amount of effort exerted or some sort of evaluation of the personal worth of the student.

**Late Assignments**

Written assignments turned-in after the due date and time indicated will be penalized one full letter grade (ten points) for each full day that it is late. Therefore, an otherwise “100” quality paper turned-in one day late would become at best a “90” two days late would become at best an “80,” and so forth, all the way...
down to zero. Since all of the deadlines are clearly articulated here in the syllabus at the beginning of the semester, and should come as no surprise later on, extensions on assignments will not be given. This is based on the same premise as the policy on extra credit (see below).

Questions on Grading

Invariably throughout the semester, students have questions about the grade they received on a particular assignment that goes beyond the given comments on the paper or exam. If you feel that you did not deserve the grade you received on a given assignment, I am certainly open to discussing the matter. However, we will insist upon the following:

1) **A 24-hour “cooling off” period.** Please do not approach me with questions about “why did I receive this grade” within 24-hours of having your assignment returned to you. This will allow you time to re-read the comments, and understand whatever shortcomings may be in question.

2) **Come to office hours.** I will not discuss individual grades during, before or after class. Questions about grades will only be considered in face-to-face discussions during office hours. In the end, it is exceedingly rare that a grade will be altered—but if you can persuade me that the evaluation was in error, I am generally not opposed to re-evaluating the grade, though I do, of course, reserve the right to evaluate the score upward or downward as the re-evaluation warrants it.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

Cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, assisting dishonesty and other breaches of the University Policy on Academic Integrity, as outlined in the Enchiridion (http://www.villanova.edu/vpaa/office/studentservices/policies/integrity/), are serious business. Not only are such activities contrary to your entire purpose in attending college and official university policy, but are also a personal affront to me as an instructor and competent human being. So, consider this your **prior warning:** if blatant breaches of academic integrity are discovered, I will prosecute them to the fullest extent.

Fortunately, when it comes to plagiarism, the Villanova Writing Center has a handy guide to effective citation and how to avoid plagiarism (http://www.villanova.edu/artsci/vcle/writingcenter/guide/citing.htm), I suggest looking it over. If you have additional citation, formatting, or any other questions throughout the semester, please feel free to discuss them with me so that we might clarify any ambiguities and prevent ethical problems before they develop.

The Penalties for Infractions of Academic Integrity are steep, and you should be aware of them: at a minimum, you will flunk the assignment or test, and likely, the entire class. Moreover, an official report of the transgression will be made to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the Board of Academic Integrity, and you will be required to complete a program on academic ethics. If a student is twice found responsible for such transgressions of academic integrity, the Dean may expel or suspend you from the University. So, long story short: don’t waste my time, don’t waste your time—just don’t do it. Again, please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have on this issue so that they can be easily resolved before the assignments are completed!

Extra Credit?

**No.** Let me clarify that: if there comes a situation where extra credit would be appropriate, it will be offered on an equal-opportunity basis to all students. However, individual extra-credit opportunities distort the baseline of evaluating every student by the same standard (as do requests for extensions). This is to say, please do not approach us at the end of the semester asking for some extra-credit opportunity to make-up for a poor performance on an earlier assignment. While you might think that such a request conveys a notion of additional dedication to achievement in the course, in reality, the message received is quite different: such requests are based on two implicit assumptions: 1) that the student in question wishes to be held to a different (lower) standard than the rest of the class, and 2) that the professor is willing to bend the rules and sacrifice objective standards of evaluation. As a result, I tend to find such requests to be rather off-putting, even though that was surely not the student’s intent, which is subsequently why I feel compelled to spell-out the justifications for this policy here in the syllabus.
Online Lectures and Materials?

No. Let me clarify that: lecture notes or slides will not be posted online, so please do not ask for them to be. Similarly, review sheets are not used in this class. It is not my duty to provide notes to you: I cannot do the learning for you. I suggest that you exchange your e-mail and contact information with the people seated next to you (or other friends in the class) to obtain notes if you happen to miss lecture on a given day. This interpersonal contact may stimulate the development of study groups, and has generally been the way courses have been conducted since time immemorial.

Why not? Here are my reasons, in order of ascending importance: 1) Technical issues: the huge file size precludes uploading. 2) Legal issues: effectively “publishing” lectures online violates the “fair use” doctrine of intellectual property rights protections, by which we may utilize many of the copyright-protected images and other lecture materials. 3) Negative effects on attendance and grades: pedagogical studies have shown that online materials, notes, and review sheets lead not only to dramatic drops in attendance, but also grades. Students tend to become overly-reliant on the printed word, which is often just a stepping-off point for a more important discussion (which in turn is missed if all you focus on is the content written on the power-point slides). These studies demonstrate that students become passive observers rather than active participants in learning, leading to worse correspondingly worse grades. 4) Finally, there is the more existential aspect: if the entire learning experience boils-down to an instructor writing outlines and students reading them, what is the point? What is my raison-d'être at this university: professor, or outline-writer? For that matter, what is yours: student, or outline-consumer? To that end, why not just get an online degree? The answer to all of these questions is in the mix: the traditional dynamic of classroom lectures, discussions, and the exchange between instructors and students that is the hallmark of the university learning experience, which prepares you to become a well-rounded and competent individual, and ultimately prepares you for life outside of academia, where very little is scripted in advance, and available on-demand.

All of these elements are damaged, rather than helped, by posting lectures, notes, slides, and other review materials online. I heartily suggest that, in lieu of such aids, that you take responsibility for your own education. Come to class. Ask questions, either in class, online or during office hours. That’s what they’re there for. Create your own study groups. It is my responsibility to teach, it is your responsibility to learn; and while I will do our best to help you in that endeavor, you likewise have an important role to play.

Living in the Computer Age

Computers are great. Ever more, computers are an integral part of the learning experience. Much of the readings are available online, you’ll probably do a great deal of research online, and write a paper or two on your computer. But as we all know, networks and computers are not always reliable—computers crash, networks fail, printers jam and run out of ink—these are the realities, and we must all confront them. Experience has shown that computers disproportionately tend to crash the night before an exam or assignment is due. As a competent adult, it is up to you to take responsibility and plan ahead for such eventualities. Back-up your files to the web or an external drive. As an excuse for not being able to access online materials or being able to complete an assignment on time, “my computer crashed” will garner little sympathy.

Respect

A key aspect of maintaining an interesting and energetic classroom environment is to ensure that all participants in discussions feel free to express their ideas and opinions without fear of scoffs or condescension. To that end, it is incumbent upon everyone to treat everyone—and their ideas—with respect, especially when another student’s perceptions may not align with your own. Of course when speaking of politically charged topics disagreements will surely arise, yet please be aware of and show respect for others’ ideas and feelings. If at any time you feel offended, please try to raise your concerns in a constructive, level-headed manner—either in class, online, or in office hours—to amicably resolve the situation. Many times, interpersonal conflicts are rooted in simple misunderstandings, other times they reflect serious issues that need to be resolved before continuing.

Accessibility

Generally speaking, I am a fairly easy person to get in contact with. I encourage you to e-mail me with questions, clarifications, and concerns as they appear throughout the semester, and I especially encourage you to come speak with me face-to-face during my office hours, or by appointment: nothing beats old fashioned interpersonal interaction.
Readings

There are no required books to purchase for this course, as all readings will be placed online through the course website on Blackboard: [https://elearning.villanova.edu/webct](https://elearning.villanova.edu/webct). The schedule of readings will probably be altered as the semester progresses, based on our interests and needs. Any changes to the readings, schedule, or assignments will be announced in class.

Course Website

This syllabus, along with relevant class announcements, review materials, reading assignments, and other information will be available on the Blackboard course site: [https://elearning.villanova.edu/webct](https://elearning.villanova.edu/webct).

Course Outline: Readings & Assignments

Part I: Introduction and the Basics of Argumentation

Week 1: What Are We Doing Here?  What is Political Science? What is Research in Political Science?

Tuesday, August 28 and Thursday, August 30


Week 2: Humility is Knowledge: The 10,000-Hour Rule

Tuesday, September 4 and Thursday, September 6


❍ Watch: Dan Ariely, TED Talk, “Are We in Control of Our Own Decisions?” (2008) ([http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_ariely_asks_are_we_in_control_of_our_own_decisions.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_ariely_asks_are_we_in_control_of_our_own_decisions.html))

Week 3: Causal Thinking

Tuesday, September 11 and Thursday, September 13


Assignment I: Map-Out Griffin’s Version of 9/11 (Wednesday, February 1)
Part II: Starting Research—From Facts Into Evidence

Week 4: Finding a Research Topic and Reliability

Tuesday, September 18 and Thursday, September 20

Reliability (for Monday, February 6):


Assignment II: Fact-Check Griffin, pp. 3-12. (Monday, February 6)

Week 5: Problems With Documents and Numbers

Tuesday, September 25


❍ 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 1-45. [Only read sections relevant to UA flight #93, ~8 pages.]

Assignment III: Griffin vs. the 9/11 Commission

Thursday, September 27

**Ethnographic Evidence and Numerical Evidence**


❍ Latynina, Yulia, “Plain Stupidity Caused the Krasnodar Floods,” *Moscow Times*, July 18, 2012.


Week 6: Quantitative Evidence and Literature Reviews

Tuesday, October 2 and Thursday October 4


Assignment IV: Prepare Literature Review
Part III: Basic Inference—From Evidence to Valid Reasons

Week 7: Validity—Linking Evidence and Numbers to Reasons
Tuesday, October 9 and Thursday, October 11


Assignment V: Identify Causal Fallacies in Chapter on Flight Interception

Week 8: No class—mid-semester break!
Tuesday, October 16 and Thursday, October 18

Week 9: Thesis Validity
Tuesday, October 23 and Thursday, October 25


Assignment VI: Evaluate Griffin’s Complicity Theory

Week 10: Plausibility Error
Tuesday, October 30 and Thursday, November 1

Part IV: Finding the Source of Inference Problems

Week 11: Narrative Fallacy and Peer Review
Tuesday, November 6 and Thursday, November 8

Week 12: Pecha-Kucha Presentations
Tuesday, November 13 and Thursday, November 15

Week 13: Research Design
Tuesday, November 20 (Thanksgiving Break)

Week 14: In-Class Peer Review of Papers. Reading Topic: Tricks of the Trade in Writing
Tuesday, November 27 and Thursday, November 29
Recommended, but not Required:

Week 15: Inference Errors and Overconfidence
Tuesday, December 4 and Thursday, December 6

Week 16: Reflections and Conclusions
Tuesday, December 11 and Thursday, December 13

Final Exam Period: Wednesday, December 19, 8:30--11:00am.
General Writing Guidelines

Every assignment you will have in the social sciences will have its own specific details, but all of them share the same important criteria. A well-written paper will:

- have an identifiable and well-stated thesis;
- employ persuasive reasoning;
- use evidence in an appropriate manner;
- be clearly organized;
- be edited for grammar and spelling;
- follow formatting rules;
- be turned in on time.

These are the criteria we will use to evaluate your writing—all of which are important, including the last one. A late paper will be marked down ten points—the equivalent of one letter grade—for each day (including weekends) that it is late, all the way down to zero. Please plan ahead to avoid crunch-time situations and computer meltdowns.

Editing and Grammar: An important part of writing an authoritative paper is to make sure that it is not riddled with punctuation errors and sloppy grammar. A reader will frequently feel that the writer has little to say if (s)he cannot compose a simple, grammatically correct sentence. This will not be the primary focus of this class, however. Instead of grammar or punctuation, our focus will be on writing and re-thinking your arguments, and presenting them in a coherent manner. We will examine the structure, flow, and logic of your argumentation, with the ultimate goal being to make you a more effective and persuasive writer!

Tips for Writing in Political Science

(Sections borrowed from Dr. Maurits van der Veen and Dr. Markus Crepaz)

This outline presents general guidelines for writing a political science paper. They may seem overly long and, at times, repetitive. Nevertheless, it is probably worthwhile to read through them at least once before you begin writing your research paper and then again as you are finishing up, to make sure you have not overlooked anything. Above all, keep in mind throughout the entire process that you are making an argument: your goal is to produce persuasive writing. The final two sections contain pointers on style and grammar you may want to keep in mind as you write.

What is the purpose of a paper?

You want your paper to be persuasive. In order to persuade, the paper must contain an argument that is your own. In addition, it should adduce evidence to support that argument from primary or secondary sources, from historical or contemporary events, from thought experiments, etc. Your goal is to persuade readers. This means readers should never be tempted to stop reading! Three things that can make your audience stop reading, but that are under your control are content, structure, and style.

Your paper’s content should be made clear to readers from the outset. The paper’s title should give an indication of the general topic and—if appropriate—of your thesis. The first sentence should draw the reader in: make sure it runs well and is not too long! The reader should know what your argument is by the end of the first few paragraphs, and roughly how you intend to prove it one or two paragraphs later. At this point, if readers are still reading, you can assume that they are at least basically interested.

For the rest of the paper, make sure you do not lose your audience. Make both structure and style as easy to follow as you can. Your argument should proceed smoothly from one paragraph to the next, and it ought to be internally consistent (unlike some of the material we will read this semester!). Sentences should make sense and not run on. We will criticize spelling, grammatical errors, or inconsistent use of tense, as it is important to realize that all of these are barriers to understanding your argument. (Unless such problems are egregious, however, they are unlikely to affect your grade.) Each time the reader has to pause or go back to make sure he or she has read a word or a sentence correctly, you provide a small temptation to stop reading. In addition, you make it harder to follow your argument. Nothing should come between your reader and your argument; least of all eminently preventable problems such as spelling errors.
At the end of your paper, you should restate your argument and the main points you have made—do not assume the reader has remembered everything exactly. You want to leave readers with an impression that reflects the whole paper, not just the last part of your argument.

One Way to Proceed in Writing a Paper

Choose a paper topic (if not already provided for you). Pick a topic that interests you, and about which you would like to learn more. A lack of interest in your topic means that the research will be less rewarding and that you will be less likely to do much of it. Moreover, if you do not find your topic interesting, you are unlikely to make it interesting to your readers—in other words, your paper is less likely to be successful at persuading anyone.

Decide what you want to argue, preferably without referring directly to the source material.

Write an outline of the paper, listing the important points to be made in the different paragraphs, still without referring directly to the material, although you may want to note which author, passage, etc. you think you will want to refer to.

Write an introductory paragraph, closing with your thesis. The exact contents of this paragraph may need to be changed at the end, but it is important to have a thesis in your mind as you write.

Write a first draft of your conclusion. This will give you an idea of what you need to work towards as you write. The conclusion should restate your thesis and the most important point(s) from the body of the paper. It is not the place to introduce new ideas for the first time!

Do the actual writing (see below).

Rewrite your conclusion, making sure you do not claim to have argued, shown, or suggested something unless you have indeed done so in the preceding pages.

Rewrite your introductory paragraph, making sure your thesis statement matches the conclusion and the argument throughout the paper.

Write a brief road-map paragraph, to follow the introduction, which gives the reader an idea of how you are going to persuade her. This is where you would indicate which authors or subjects you are going to discuss (and in what context), for example.

Proofread, spell-check, and read your paper aloud to make sure it sounds right.

How to Make and Support an Argument

If you are going to be commenting on books, articles, etc., do not assume the reader knows or can guess what you are talking about. Give a brief paraphrase or synopsis of the main argument of the passage or work you are discussing.

The burden is upon you to make sure the reader does not suspect you misrepresent an author to the latter’s disadvantage. This is where quotations may come in handy. Use them sparingly, however. If you fall for the temptation to string quotations together, you will not be making any argument of your own. As a rule, try to avoid quoting passages longer than 3 lines, unless you feel doing so is crucial to supporting your argument.

The burden is also upon you to make sure you do not represent the writing and ideas of others as your own, even accidentally! When you make a claim, make it clear whether this is your argument or that of one of the authors. When you cite or paraphrase an author, make sure it is followed by a correct citation (do not cite an random page in a book—we tend to double-check these things). Not giving credit for sentences, ideas, or facts that are not common knowledge is tantamount to plagiarism, and will be treated seriously! To avoid inadvertently quoting an author from your notes, always try to use your own language—just changing 1 or 2 words in a sentence is not enough!

Whether you agree or disagree with an author, make it clear which is the case, and explain why! Do not just assume that this will be obvious to the reader.

Think through the implications of your argument. Think of the logical extreme implied by your argument, and see if you agree with yourself. If not, you may want to qualify your claims.

Similarly, make it a point to write down the two strongest objections to your argument. Do not content yourself merely with thinking through them—write them down. This will make it more difficult accidentally to overlook an aspect of an objection you cannot handle satisfactorily.

Make sure your argument is coherent. Do not jump from one topic to the next randomly. Make the connection between different parts of your argument clear. If you find it impossible to proceed smoothly from one paragraph to the next, you need to re-examine your argument!
On a related note, make sure there is a sense of progression to the argument. The reader must be drawn from one paragraph to the next and be able to follow along with your argument in a natural manner. For example, do not make your main point first, and then pad with some marginally related smaller issues. Your audience will lose interest before you get to the end.

Finally, recognize the limitations of your argument. In particular, realize that it is incredibly difficult to “prove” anything definitively in the social sciences (it is much easier to disprove hypotheses), especially when it comes to a simple term paper. Therefore, conclusions like: “I have proven that globalization is bad,” or “I have proven that IMF policies do more harm than good,” seem a bit pompous—as though the writer is congratulating him/herself on discovering some iron-clad law and is only waiting for a Nobel Prize committee to reward this magnificent contribution. More often, overstated conclusions often simply confirm the opinions of the writer, and may be easily “disproved” by someone addressing the same issue from another angle. A more tempered conclusion like “I have demonstrated that globalization can have bad consequences,” or “my results suggest that IMF policies do more harm than good,” is less likely to raise the ire of the reader, especially one who may not be fully inclined to agree with your assessment.

Handy Checklist as You Finish

Does the paper have a short introductory section ending with a clear statement of the argument?

Does the paper have a short concluding section that restates the argument and pulls everything together?

Have you thought about how authors you criticize (or ignore) might respond to your argument?

Are any of the paragraphs longer than 2/3 of a page? If so, check whether the paragraph makes more than one point, and consider rewriting it or splitting it into two parts.

Have you not toyed with margins and font size to a noticeable degree? If your paper is considerably longer than the assigned length, you may be trying to tackle too much at once—simplify your main argument and cut out paragraphs that do not add to it. If your paper is considerably shorter, you may be approaching the issue too simplistically. (Have you really considered item 2 above? Most authors we read are/were intelligent people, and cannot just be waved off in a single paragraph).

Have you either a) read the paper out loud or b) given it to a friend to look at? Try to catch typos, confusing language, and holes in your argument before handing it in.

Have you spell-checked and proofread again after you made your final, small changes?

Some Issues of Style

As noted above, you must indicate the source (in some standard citation format) of every quotation. Directly quoting a lot is not a good idea, but leaving off quotation marks to reduce the apparent amount of quotation is considerably worse (and opens you up to charges of plagiarism).

Avoid sentences that run longer than 3 lines, where possible. They slow down the reader unnecessarily, and the longer the sentence, the greater the risk that it becomes badly structured.

Look up any word of whose meaning you are not entirely sure. Even a slight shade of difference between a word’s meaning and the one you intend can color or distort your argument.

Be careful with your use of this, these, etc. Is it clear what these words are referring to (usually the subject or object of the previous sentence)? If there is any ambiguity, try to rewrite your sentence so you can eliminate the issue.

Common errors to check for: cite vs. site vs. sight, its vs. it’s, principle vs. principal, imminent vs. immanent, accept vs. except, affect vs. effect, etc. An excellent and detailed listing of general errors in English can be found at: http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/. There is no excuse for committing such common errors at this point in your academic careers.
Local Grammatical Concerns

The list of grammar points that follows is borrowed at least in part from New York Times columnist (and former Nixon speechwriter) William Safire. It circulates widely in writing departments, for good reason.

- Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
- Never use no double negatives.
- Use the semicolon properly, always where it is appropriate; and never where it is not.
- Reserve the apostrophe for its proper use and omit it where its not needed.
- Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
- No sentence fragments.
- Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.
- Avoid commas, that are not necessary.
- If you reread your work, you will find on rereading that a great deal of repetition can be avoided by rereading and editing.
- A writer must not shift your point of view.
- Do not overuse exclamation points!!!
- And do not start a sentence with a conjunction.
- Place pronouns as closely as possible, especially in long sentences, as of ten or more words, to their antecedents.
- Hyphenate only between syllables and avoid un-necessary hyphens.
- Write all adverbial forms correct.
- Don't use contractions.
- Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided.
- It is incumbent on us to avoid archaism.
- If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.
- Steer clear of incorrect verb forms that have snuck into the language.
- Take the bull by the hand and avoid mixed metaphors.
- Avoid modernisms that sound flaky.
- Avoid barbarisms: they impact too forcefully.
- Never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
- Everyone should be careful to use singular pronouns with singular nouns in their writing.
- If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times: avoid hyperbole.
- Also, avoid awkward or affected alliteration.
- Do not string a large number of prepositional phrases together unless you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death.
- Always pick on the correct idiom.
- “Avoid overuse of ‘quotation “marks.””
- Never use more words than are necessary in order to get your point across: be concise.
- Always chek you’re spilling.
- Always be avoided by the passive voice.
- Every sentence a verb.
- Do not give other professors or I a paper with improper use of personal pronouns. Them and me do not like that.
- Be sure to affect the proper effect on your reader.
- Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague: seek viable alternatives.