Help With: Common Writing Problems

Here are some of the most common problems I've encountered teaching composition. Many of them can be resolved by paying more attention to editing and proofreading.

Grammar Problems

1. Comma splices. Do not connect two full sentences with a comma.
   ☒ Nightclubs on campus would promote underage drinking, this would be a bad influence.
   This is not a sentence. Do not link two thoughts which can stand by themselves as two separate sentences with a comma. Use a semicolon, period, or conjunction:
   ☑ Nightclubs on campus would promote underage drinking, which would be a bad influence.

2. Errors with homonyms, words that sound alike but are spelled different. A spell-checker cannot tell *they're* from *their* or *there*.

3. Vague pronoun referents. ☒ The problem with illegal immigration and border walls is that they want to keep things the same way but we don't (Who are *they* and *we*?).

Structure Problems

1. Random paragraph division. Begin a paragraph with the main idea, expand it with examples, quotes, or arguments, and then end it. A paragraph is one self-contained unit of thought.

2. Biting off more than you can chew. Avoid thesis statements which are either too broad in scope to discuss in a short paper, or have too many sub-arguments.
   ☒ *Nightclubs on campus will result in the end of the university system* (Whoa, Nelly!).
   ☒ *Filesharing is bad because of a, b, c, d, e, f, and g.* That's too much to expect people to keep straight; simplify. People might also be confused into thinking *b* and *c* are subcategories of *a*.

3. Content not indicated in the introduction paragraph. Never "surprise" people in academic writing by adding additional ideas late in your paper that were never mentioned at the start.

Content Problems

1. Vague titles. "The Big Problem" doesn't exactly draw in the reader. Fight your impulse to write a title that keeps people in suspense, or to be catchy. You are not giving a name to a TV sitcom. Try to make your titles informative so that a reader or search engine can categorize it: "The US-Mexico Border Wall and Problems of Socioeconomic Inequality" isn't dramatic but it's specific.

2. Not having enough content. Using giant fonts, super-wide margins, and endless and irrelevant quotations to pad the paper fools nobody. The reader can clearly see that you haven't bothered to think out the issues carefully to write about it with any depth.

3. Assumed generalizations. ☒ Everyone is affected by globalization (Not everyone is affected). ☒ People have always argued about abortion (They have not. In some times and places it is a non-issue). Do not assume sweeping generalizations in your paper as it jeopardizes the credibility of the other arguments in your paper.