

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF STUDENT PAPERS



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The "Seven Deadly Sins" of Student Papers

As you may have noticed, the world is far from a perfect place. Depending on your theological slant, the reasons for this are varied. One thing most agree on however is that some of these imperfections found in the world constitute sins, and, in Christian theology, some of these sins are greater than are others. Therefore, you are admonished to avoid the "seven deadly sins."

The Seven Deadly Sins

In preparing and submitting papers, students (and professors, who in a real sense are still students) work in a far from perfect world. Data availability, time, access to resources, etc. are all equal "sins" that can hinder the "perfect" paper. I have compiled a list of the seven deadly sins of student papers. These are ones that you should pay particular attention to, as they are seen as under your control. The list is in no particular order of severity.

Grammar

This is the first deadly sin. Unfortunately, it is something that cannot be covered in this brief handout. However, most style manuals provide some good advice. If you know that you have grammatical problems, work with someone after you've written the first draft.

Punctuation

This is the second deadly sin. Again, this is beyond this handout; however, style manuals also offer some good advice on this topic. For example, when using a comma to separate items in a series, you use the comma before the "and" in front of the last item in the series—omitting this is a common error made by many students and professors. (Recent style manuals may make this optional; I do not.)

There are a couple of punctuation errors that I find in many student papers that I would

prefer not to find in yours. First, when you are using a typewriter—or word processor—you must use two hyphens to make a dash (or insert the symbol from your word processing package).

Second, an ellipsis mark consists of three spaced periods: "The Seventh Army . . . moved to occupy the conquered territory." When you omit the end of a quoted sentence, you must use four periods: "The new moon offered little light. . . . He was forced to get on his hands and knees to explore the opening."

Appearance

First impressions are important. A properly done cover sheet, margins that conform to a manual of style, proper notation, good quality paper, clean type with a good ribbon (or similar results from a printer)—all these and several other items are an important part of the finished product. The first impression the reader gets of the paper is not from the content, but from the appearance.

Documentation and Use of Sources

Accurate and adequate documentation is critical to a paper. Plagiarism, which fits under this heading, is perhaps the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. We'll go over proper documentation and citation below. Part of documentation is making certain that you use appropriate sources. As pointed out by Scott and Garrison (2006, 80), you should not use encyclopedias as sources; you may "consult one for an overview of a topic," but "move on to other sources." *Wikipedia* is a source I find increasingly cited by students. Don't cite it! It isn't even at the level of a true encyclopedia, such as *Encyclopedia Britannica*; its entries are essentially web blogs, and anyone who wishes may submit—or change—entries.

You should use reputable journals and books for sources. Many papers in public administration may also benefit from government documents. Newspapers and newsmagazines

may be used for current events, etc., but should not provide a large portion of your sources.

Use of Figures and Tables

This is really not the problem—the problem is the lack of use of figures and tables. While figures and tables should not be over-used, the judicious placement of a table or a figure can greatly strengthen any presentation.

Summaries

Properly ending a paper seems to cause students great problems. Keep in mind the old military adage—you first tell people what you are going to do, then you do it, then you tell them what you've done. In writing a summary, you should go back over your paper and make sure you mention every relevant part. There is a great deal of similarity between a summary at the end of the paper, and an executive summary.

Appendices

These are rarely found in student papers, not because they don't belong there, but because students ignore them. This is another subject we'll discuss below.

Organizing and Writing the Paper

A paper makes a statement about its author before a word is read. You should want that statement to be favorable. You should always type your paper (or use word processing) on good quality paper. A paper is composed of a number of parts—introduction, body, conclusion, etc.—and you should indicate those parts through proper utilization of headings and subheadings. Some specific points to keep in mind are presented below.

The Sin of Plagiarism

As indicated earlier, this is the deadliest sin of all. All material taken from any source—books, monographs, articles, newspapers, other student papers, class lectures, etc.—**must** be

properly cited, and all sources identified. Plagiarism is prohibited, and may result in a failing grade for the assignment or for the course and in an extreme case suspension or dismissal from the program.

APSA Style

You should use the manual of style required or preferred by your instructor. The MPA Program and most instructors in political science use the APSA style. Under this style, remember the following rules:

1. Use footnotes only for information that supplements your discussion, but that cannot be readily incorporated into the text. These are indicated by raised Arabic numerals, and are presented on a separate sheet entitled: "Endnotes."
2. Cite within the body of the text using parenthetical citation style. You must cite the source of your information--you cannot simply take someone else's work and present it as your own. Linking a series of long, extensive quotes or paraphrases together, however, does not constitute research—that is more of a *Reader's Digest* summary. While there is no hard-and-fast rule concerning the amount of citation that should be done, the author was once advised (in freshman English, taken in the dark, distant past) that a good rule of thumb is to have approximately three citations per page.

Appendixes

An appendix, or appendixes, may be useful for some papers. As pointed out in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, (1994, 20) "[a]n appendix. . . is helpful if the detailed description of certain material is distracting in, or inappropriate to, the body of the paper." Student papers may benefit from one or both of the appendixes discussed below.

1. Reference Material. It is a good idea to include relevant portions of a document if you are citing material from a source that may not be readily available. Examples of such documents include labor contracts and in-house publications.
2. Questionnaires. Always include a copy of any questionnaire used to obtain data discussed in the paper unless the questionnaire is reproduced in total within the body of the paper.

Summary

As I stated earlier, the world is far from a perfect place. It follows that this is far from a perfect document. Following the suggestions contained within this document cannot guarantee a student a good grade on a paper; however, as a wise sage once stated: "It couldn't hurt" Avoiding these seven deadly sins will improve the chances that your paper is evaluated on the merits of its research and analysis, not on its appearance and mechanical errors. Nor should a student see this list of sins as inclusive. A student writing a paper should use anything that will help him or her improve the quality of the paper.

Reference

- American Psychological Association. 1994. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 4th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Scott, Gregory M. and Stephen M. Garrison. 2006. *The Political Science Student Writer's Manual*. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.