

C/I 100F: WHO OR WHAT IS NORMAL AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?

MWF 10-10:50am, M 7-10pm; Hopkins 210

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Office Hours:	T 1:30-2:30; Th 3-4; W 7-8 (in library); or by appointment
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Course Description:

C/I is an unique course which serves to orient students to both academics and life at Austin College. The academic orientation will be through the exploration of what it means to be “normal.” “Normal” is a deceptively complex term. It has a simple definition according to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary: “usual or ordinary; not strange” and most of us would say we can identify what’s normal fairly easily. It turns out, however, “normal” is incredibly difficult to understand when it comes to human behavior. Philosophers, statisticians, physicians, psychologists, and many others have struggled to determine just what is “normal” for our species. While this may seem a trivial issue, the definition of normality impacts who is prescribed medication, who gets accommodations in school, governmental regulation, public health programming, legal cases, social acceptance, and many other areas. Throughout this course we will examine the many ways to approach the definition of “normal,” from empirical research to moral arguments to “knowing it when we see it.” We will use the controversy surrounding the release of the 5th edition of the *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (or DSM-5) in 2013 as a backdrop for this exploration of “normal.”

The orientation to life at Austin College will be conducted through several series of activities and assignments which will go on throughout the course. We will be visiting a variety of important offices on campus through our Campus Resources series so you’ll know what resources are available and how to make use of them. You will have campus participation assignments which will help push you out of your comfort zone and explore the variety of opportunities Austin College has to offer. I have also retained the services of four excellent C/Ls for this course, who will help shepherd you through this first semester. You will be placed in small groups under the care of one of the C/Ls, but you will get to know all of them throughout the semester. Another part of life at Austin College is adjusting to the academic expectations of the faculty. To this end, we will have a series of classes on Monday nights called Toolkit for Success, where we will cover research-based strategies for taking better notes, studying effectively for exams, and writing well-structured papers.

Since there are a variety of different areas we will explore this semester, the class sessions will incorporate a variety of formats. There will be traditional lecture, small- and large-group discussions of readings, field trips, student presentations, videos, writing workshops, and panels. Class sessions are designed to expand upon and enrich the content in the readings, not simply present the same information in an alternative format.

Course Goals:

All C/I courses at Austin College are designed to help students develop skills in:

- Critically analyzing and evaluating sources, interpreting evidence, and drawing logical conclusions
- Writing clearly and presenting thoughts in a coherent and persuasive fashion
- Listening critically, asking clear questions, and presenting thoughts effectively in discussions and presentations
- Effectively and efficiently using the resources available through Abell Library to conduct research and produce high quality projects
- Understanding and implementing the principles of academic integrity at Austin College in a sophisticated manner

This course has the following additional learning objectives:

- Develop proficiency with digital writing and curating a blog
- Explore topics from multiple theoretical and disciplinary perspectives
- Cultivate strong skills for academic success
- Familiarize yourself with campus resources
- Engage in campus activities

Required Materials:

Frances, A. (2013). *Saving normal: An insider's revolt against out-of-control psychiatric diagnosis, DSM-5, big pharma, and the medicalization of ordinary life*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

LeCroy, C. S., & Holschuh, J. (Eds.). (2012). *First person accounts of mental illness and recovery*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Paris, J., & Phillips, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Making the DSM-5: Concepts and controversies*. New York, NY: Springer.

Additional readings will be posted via Moodle.

Assignments:Exams (25% of final grade)

There will be 3 exams given throughout the semester, each worth 60 points. Exams will consist of multiple choice and short answer items, typically focusing on definitions of important terms, development of critical thinking skills, and application of course concepts to real life situations. Exam items will cover material from lecture, assigned readings, and in-class activities.

Writing Assignments (35% of final grade)Campus Participation Assignments (60 points)

Part of college success is engaging in the campus community. To that end you will be responsible for attending a variety of events across campus. After attending each event, you will write a short reflection paper (minimum of 2 pages, double-spaced) which summarizes the activity (no more than 1 page) and your reactions. You will write four papers over the course of the semester, each worth 15 points. For the purposes of this class, campus events are broken into the five categories listed below. You may only turn in one paper per category and you may not write about an event in which you were a performer.

- Athletics: Football, soccer, and volleyball are in season for roughly the entire semester. Basketball will start in November.
- Artistic: Theater productions, Improv Troupe performances, concerts, recitals, gallery showings.
- Academic: Faculty lectures, invited speakers
- Student Organization: Attend a regular meeting of one of the many student organizations on campus. The Opportunity Fair outside the WCC on the first day of school is a great place to find out about groups that might interest you.
- Community Service: Austin College sponsors loads of service events. We will visit the Service Station as part of our Campus Resources series, but I encourage you to find it sooner if you want to use this option.

“Am I Normal?” Paper (50 points)

In this autobiographical paper I want you to reflect on your life to this point. Would you say it has been normal or not? You will describe your own experiences in a number of domains and then explain if you consider it to be normal or not. If not, I want you to tell me what a normal experience would have been like. For example, if you grew up with 8 siblings and think this was abnormal, then what would be the normal amount of siblings? I also want you to reflect on what you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of your experiences. For example, having 8 siblings may have led you to develop good conflict management skills, but it might also have meant your older siblings established a reputation (e.g., class clown, star athlete) that made people judge you before you had a chance to show who you really were.

This is NOT a research paper. I want you to talk about your own subjective opinions about whether or not your life has been normal. If you do bring in outside information, however, you must include appropriate citations. You must cover the following six major areas listed below in your paper. I have included some examples of things to consider for each area.

- Physical – major milestones (e.g., walking, talking), health, growth compared to peers
- Social – friendships, romantic relationships
- Academics – grades, relationships with teachers, writing ability
- Family – size, composition, closeness, activities
- Hobbies – athletics, clubs, things you collect, leisure activities
- Work – jobs, community service
- Creativity – art, music, creative writing, dance, fashion design

Keep in mind that your C/L will be reading a draft of your paper and I will read your final product. The C/Ls and I will keep what you write strictly confidential, but you do not have to include anything you would be uncomfortable sharing. If you want to include the circumstances of your first sexual experience and whether or not you found it normal, that's fine with me, but I do not require or expect this level of disclosure.

Normality Paper (100 points)

This paper will tie together what you have learned over the course. Using the readings, lectures, discussions, and your personal reflections, you will create your definition of “normal” and defend why you think it is the best. You will then use this definition to discuss the pros and cons of the current DSM system, the definition of mental illness, and how these factors affect mental health practitioners, people with mental health problems, and the general public.

Presentations (25% of final grade)

Comparing “Normal” Presentation (50 points)

We will be talking about our perceptions of normal and numerous scholarly ways to define normal, but another critical piece of information is public perception of “normality.” To truly determine what the public thinks is normal would be a massive undertaking, so we will take a humbler attempt at gathering information to see what others think. Each student will interview four people using the questions below. You must interview two Austin College students (you cannot use other students in this class) and two people who are not college students (e.g., family members, friends, faculty). You will then work in groups of 3-4 to create a 10-minute PowerPoint presentation summarizing what you found, isolating themes and patterns in the responses, and making hypotheses about why results were similar or different.

You will ask your interviewees to describe a “normal” American, a “normal” Californian, a “normal” Texan, a “normal” Minnesotan, and a “normal” New Yorker. For each of these descriptions, ask your interviewee the following questions:

- What is his or her life like?
- What issues does he or she think are important?
- What does he or she do for fun?
- What are his or her personality traits?
- What are his or her living circumstances?
- What are his or her demographics (e.g., age, race, religion, income)?

Mental Health Diagnosis Presentation (100 points)

Since we will be using mental health as the central case study for this course, it is important that we become more familiar with the types of diagnoses contained within the DSM. The LeCroy and Holschuh text contains descriptions of mental health conditions written by people with the diagnoses, which will humanize the information and provide a range of experiences. Since the accounts are not written by mental health professionals, however, they may or may not be good representations of what the disorder typically looks like. Each chapter in the text has a short introduction that introduces the disorder(s) being discussed, but they are based on the previous edition of the DSM and are not particularly thorough. Your job will be to provide a more in-depth introduction to the disorder for your classmates. Working in small groups, you will create a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation to deliver to your classmates. These presentations will include the current DSM diagnostic criteria, prevalence rates, how the disorder is thought to develop, and treatment options.

Small Assignments (15%) of final grade

Throughout the semester there will be small assignments based on in-class activities. Most of these will be assigned and completed within the same class session, though some will contain a homework aspect. These assignments cannot be made up if you miss class (unless you have a documented excuse, such as travel for a college event or a medical professional told you not to attend class; see Attendance policy below).

How to Calculate Your Current Grade

This course uses a weighted grading system, so you cannot simply add up all your points and divide by the total points available. To calculate your overall grade, you need to take the percentage of points earned in each category, multiply the points by the weight of the category (the percentage of the final grade), and add up all the categories. For example, if you received

150 out of 180 points on the exams, you would multiple the percentage you received (0.833) by the weight of exams (0.25), and find you received 0.208 for your exams contribution. Repeat this process for each category to find your total grade. I will also supply a grade calculator for the course via an Excel spreadsheet.

Grading:

Grades will be assigned on a scale no more stringent than the following percentages:

Letter	%	Letter	%
A	> 93%	C	73%
A-	90%	C-	70%
B+	87%	D+	67%
B	83%	D	63%
B-	80%	D-	60%
C+	77%	F	< 60%

Tentative Course Schedule:

Date	Class Topic		Readings/Assignments
Pre-Semester Meetings			
8/21	F	Introductions & Class Overview	
8/24	M	College Success I	New York Times Reading
8/25	T	College Success II	
8/26	W	C/L Panel I	Scavenger Hunt Activity Due
Week 1			
8/28	F	What does it mean to be normal?	
Week 2			
8/31	M	Definitions of normal: Experiential	
	M	Toolkit for Success: Writing I	
9/2	W	Campus Resource: Adams Center	
9/4	F	Definitions of normal: Statistics	Am I Normal? Paper Due to C/Ls; Moore & Notz (2009)
Week 3			
9/7	M	Campus Resource: Academic Skills Center	
	M	Am I Normal? Paper Feedback Sessions	
9/9	W	Definitions of normal: Cultural	
9/11	F	Definitions of normal: Role of Heuristics	Am I Normal? Paper Due
Week 4			
9/14	M	Definitions of normal: Medical (AKA “Health”)	Boyd, 2000; Emson, 1987; Scully, 2004
	M	Toolkit for Success: Reading	
9/16	W	Definitions of normal: Mental health	Campus Participation Paper #1 Due; P&P 4, 7; F 1
9/18	F	Definitions of normal: Mental health	

Date	Class Topic			Readings/Assignments
Week 5				
9/21	M	Exam 1		
	M	Toolkit for Success: Studying		
9/23	W	History of the DSM I		P&P 1, 6; F 2
9/25	F	History of the DSM II		
Week 6				
9/28	M	Economics of the DSM		P&P 2; F 3
	M	Toolkit for Success: Group Work		
9/30	W	Diagnoses: Real or Not and Does it Matter?		P&P 5
10/2	F	Historical Diagnostic Fads		F 4
Week 7				
10/5	M	Present Diagnostic Fads		F 5
	M	Toolkit for Success: Presentations		
10/7	W	Future Diagnostic Fads		F 6
10/9	F			<i>No Class – Fall Break</i>
Week 8				
10/12	M	“Goldilocks” Approach to Diagnosis		Campus Participation Paper #2 Due: P&P 8; F 7
	M	JanTerm Registration Preparation		
10/14	W	Comparing Normal Presentations		
10/16	F	Comparing Normal Presentations		
Week 9				
10/19	M	Exam 2		
	M	Toolkit for Success: Writing II		
10/21	W	Campus Resource: Service Station		
10/23	F	Campus Resource: Career Services		
Week 10				
10/26	M	Finding Research Literature		
	M	Toolkit for Success: Communication		
10/28	W	Mental Disorders Overview		
10/30	F	C/L Panel II		
Week 11				
11/2	M	Mood Disorders		Campus Participation Paper #3 Due: L&H 2
	M	Spring Registration Preparation		
11/4	W	Anxiety Disorders I		L&H 3 (p. 105-141)
11/6	F	Anxiety Disorders II		L&H 3 (p. 142-174)
Week 12				
11/9	M	Trauma Disorders		L&H 3 (p. 175-196)
	M	TBA		
11/11	W	Dissociative Disorders		L&H 10
11/13	F	Schizophrenia		L&H 1 (p. 1-37)
Week 13	M	Personality Disorders		L&H 4

Date	Class Topic		Readings/Assignments
11/16	<i>M</i>	TBA	
11/18	<i>W</i>	Eating Disorders	L&H 6
11/20	<i>F</i>	Childhood Disorders	Normality Paper Due to C/Ls; L&H 13
Week 14			
11/24-29	<i>No Class – Thanksgiving Break</i>		
Week 15			
11/30	<i>M</i>	Surviving Finals Week	Campus Participation Paper #4 Due
12/2	<i>M</i>	Normality Paper Feedback Sessions	
	<i>W</i>	Navigating the Mental Health System	F 8
12/4	<i>F</i>	Course Summary & Wrap-up	Normality Paper Due
Final Exam Period – Exam 3 – Tuesday 12/8 – 12-2pm			

Comment on Course Content:

This course covers material related to mental illness and psychotherapy, which are sensitive topics. Some people in our class will have experience with therapy either personally or via loved ones. For this reason please remember to be sensitive to others when asking questions, making comments, etc., in class. I encourage everyone to voice their thoughts and be curious about the subject matter, but do so in a respectful manner. I would also ask those individuals who are currently dealing with mental illness to refrain from discussing your own symptomology or treatment in class. This not only protects your privacy, but also will not pressure other students to reveal aspects of themselves beyond their comfort level and will allow for the carefully constructed examples prepared for class to be used. If you want to discuss a specific situation, please make an appointment with me. It is likely I will not be able to make any definitive statements about someone else's mental health, but I will be happy to hear your concerns and make referrals to resources. If you have serious concerns about yourself or someone else, please talk to me or a mental health professional. Here is a list of several resources for mental health issues:

Austin College Counseling Services:

<http://www.austincollege.edu/campus-life/counseling-services/>

903-813-2247

Suicide Crisis Line

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)

Applied Psychological Group of Texoma

<http://www.apgtexoma.com/>

903-893-0298

Psychology Today's Therapist Finder

http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/prof_search.php

Technology

This course will be web-enhanced through the use of Moodle. Readings, lecture slides, some handouts, and links to other resources will be provided through this system. Unless otherwise specified, you will turn your assignments in via Moodle. You can access Moodle through the following link: <https://moodle.austincollege.edu/login/index.php>. Questions concerning content/postings should be directed to the instructor, while questions regarding access/technical issues should be directed to the Austin College IT Help Desk (903-813-2063; helpdesk@austincollege.edu). A PDF viewer is required to view the content posted to the Moodle site. Free Adobe software is available for download via <http://get.adobe.com/reader/>.

Policies:

Academic Integrity

Scholastic misconduct is broadly defined as any act that violates the rights of another student in academic work or that involves misrepresentation of your own work. Scholastic dishonesty includes (but is not limited to): cheating on assignments or examinations; plagiarizing, which means misrepresenting as your own work any part of work done by another; submitting the same paper, or substantially similar papers, to meet the requirements of more than one course without the approval and consent of all instructors concerned (including papers you have submitted in previous semesters); providing others with copies of your assignments; depriving another student of necessary course materials; or interfering with another student's work.

Plagiarism is a serious offense which will not be tolerated. Most of the time, however, plagiarism happens because students are rushing through assignments and do not leave themselves with sufficient time to properly attribute information taken from other sources. For this class you must cite your sources using APA style. If you plan to be a psychology major or minor, I encourage you to get used to APA style, as you will be using this throughout your coursework. Note that for either style, you need to include citations each time you use information from a source. It is incorrect to use information throughout a paragraph and only include a citation at the end. Also, if you use 5 or more consecutive words from a source, you must include quotation marks and include the page number (or paragraph number if you are using an online source) in your citation.

You will be required to submit an electronic copy of all major assignments which will be compared with the TurnItIn database. Penalties for scholastic misconduct in any portion of the academic work for a course shall be made at the discretion of the instructor and may range from point deductions on the assignment to failing the class. All academic misconduct (no matter how small) will be reported to the Academic Integrity Council, which may impose sanctions up to and including expulsion. Austin College's full academic integrity policy is available in the *Environment* (Austin College Student Handbook; the most recent edition is posted on Moodle) in the Student Conduct section. If you have any questions about whether something is plagiarism or not, please talk with me about it BEFORE you turn in an assignment.

Accommodations

Austin College seeks to provide reasonable accommodations for all individuals with disabilities and will comply with all applicable federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and guidelines. If you have a documented disability for which you would like accommodations, please inform me by the second week of class. It is your responsibility to remind me of your accommodations at least a week before I distribute each assignment or exam. To arrange for accommodations, you

will need to register as soon as possible at the Academic Skills Center with Laura Márquez, the Director of the Academic Skills Center, (903-813-2454, Suite 211 of the Wright Campus Center). For information on this process, go to <http://www.austincollege.edu/campus-life/academic-skills-center/>. This syllabus is available in alternative formats upon request.

Attendance

Attendance is required and critically important to your success in this class. Topics not covered in the textbook will be discussed in class and some exam questions will come directly from classroom learning activities. Students who miss more than three classes without documentation may be dropped from the course at the instructor's discretion. If you know you are going to miss class for a medical, religious, or Austin College sanctioned academic/athletic reason, let me know in advance and potential alternative assignments may be given at the discretion of the instructor. PowerPoint slides will be posted to the Moodle site, but will be outlines which require additional information from lectures or activities. If you miss class it is your responsibility to get notes from a classmate. Full lecture slides will not be distributed. If you must arrive late or leave early, please sit near the door and do so in the least disruptive manner possible.

Changes to the Syllabus

All aspects of this syllabus are subject to change at the discretion of the instructor. Students will be informed in writing of any changes to the syllabus.

Communication

Outside of class, I will communicate with you most frequently via your *Austin College email address*. **It is your responsibility to monitor this address and you are responsible for the information delivered to this address**. I highly recommend you check your email at least daily. I will also post messages to Moodle, so you are encouraged to check Moodle regularly. The best way to contact me is through email. I will always attempt to respond to email promptly, which means within 24 hours. **I typically do not check my email after 8pm**, so if you email me at night, do not expect a response until the next morning. I check Moodle daily and will respond to questions posted in the forum within 24 hours.

Extra Credit

Extra credit opportunities may be given at the discretion of the instructor, but cannot raise your overall grade by more than 2%. Possible examples of extra credit opportunities include attending and reflecting on events on campus or additional posts to your course blog. The amount of points received for attending events will vary by the time commitment (the points will be posted along with the information about the event). The length of the reflection paper required will also vary, but will be a minimum of 2 pages. The requirements for the reflection paper are as follows:

- Describe the event (e.g., where, when, why)
- Who was the target audience?
- What did you learn?
- How does this relate to something we have discussed in class or some other aspect of psychology?
- If you had been in charge of the event, what would you do plan next as a follow-up? How might the event coordinators continue to build momentum, conduct additional research, etc.?

Incompletes

An “incomplete” only may be given as a grade for the course when a student has a **passing grade the course** and has an unforeseen and uncontrollable event occur that prevents him or her from earning a significant number of points in the course. Thus, incompletes are rarely given and each situation will be considered on a case-by-case basis. To have an incomplete changed to a different grade all missing work must be completed by the end of the following term.

Late Work

Assignments are due at the beginning of class on the date listed in the syllabus. Assignments turned in after class but on the same day will be penalized 5%, with 10% additional penalty for every additional calendar day the assignment is late (thus if the assignment is due on Tuesday but turned in on Thursday the maximum score you could receive is 75%). No assignments will be accepted more than 7 days after the original due date. Extensions may be given at the discretion of the instructor, but **extensions will rarely be given during the 24 hours before an assignment is due.** It is your responsibility to budget your time so you are not working on assignments at the last minute. Specific arrangements must be made with the instructor as to how late work will be turned in (e.g., email vs. hard copy) or it will not be accepted.

Make-Up Exams

If circumstances prevent you from being in class on the day of an exam, please notify me as soon as you can (BEFORE the exam) in order to arrange to complete a make-up exam. Make-up exams will be scheduled prior to the exam date if possible. Please note **I will require documentation** (e.g., a doctor’s note) explaining your absence from class in nearly all cases. Make-up exams may be different than the original exam and **must be completed within 1 week of the original exam date.**

Role of Instructor

I will provide learning opportunities designed to provide students with information about psychology and foster critical thinking. Every effort will be made to accommodate different learning styles and students will be encouraged to provide feedback both formally and informally. I pledge to carefully consider constructive feedback about teaching methods and incorporate suggestions to the extent feasible. I am responsible for treating students in a respectful, professional manner and creating a classroom atmosphere where students treat each other as such. I will be accessible outside of class and encourages you to meet with me either during office hours or individual appointments to discuss concerns (e.g., about the class, workload, assignments, etc.), conflicts or problems that affect course performance, concepts which need further clarification, additional resources related to course material, or careers in psychology.

Role of Student

Students will come to class prepared to learn and open to new ideas. Assignments (including readings) will be completed before class begins and to the best of each student’s ability. Classroom discussions will be conducted in a respectful manner, where all opinions are valued regardless of whether you agree or disagree with the content. Students who cannot maintain respectful communication will be asked to leave the classroom. Students will take responsibility for their own learning throughout the class. Students will consult available resources (e.g., the syllabus, Moodle, email messages) before asking administrative questions.

Statement on Classroom Conduct

All students have the right to a civil, productive, and stimulating learning environment. In turn, instructors have a responsibility to nurture and maintain such an environment. Lively, even heated, discussion is not disruptive behavior. Both instructors and students have a fundamental obligation to respect the rights of each other and an equally fundamental obligation to respect the instructional setting as a place for civil, courteous behavior.

Statement on Diversity

We will all bring unique perspectives to this course and I hope those who feel comfortable will share insights and alternative interpretations throughout the semester. Cultural perspectives will be explicitly included in many of our discussions and will likely come up in many others. I welcome feedback on ways to increase the diversity of perspectives being provided in class and methods for creating a more inclusive atmosphere through my teaching.

Writing Tips

Your ability to write will greatly impact your grades in this course. I expect you to make strides in your writing in terms of mechanics, style, and ability to write concisely. Writing skills make up a substantial portion of your grade on written materials, so make sure to take this seriously.

Professionalism

- You will turn in most assignments for this class electronically via Moodle. When asked to turn in a hard copy, assignments must be printed in black ink on white paper. Pages must be clean (i.e., no coffee rings, dog drool, rips, etc.).
- Your name, the date, and the assignment title must be included on the first page.
- Pages must be numbered (if assignment is more than 1 page).
- If turning in a hard copy, all pages must be stapled together. I do not read anything that is not attached to the first page and your grade on the assignment will reflect this.
- Proofread your papers. Writing is about communicating to the reader so you need to make sure you are getting your point across. If you typically have issues with grammar and/or spelling, make sure you have your papers done early enough to have someone proof them for you. The Academic Skills Center has writing tutors available and I strongly encourage you to make use of them.

Use of Quotes

- Quotes should be included very infrequently. You should not use more than 2 quotes in any paper you write for me. Most of your papers will likely not contain any quotes. I want to see that you can paraphrase and explain what happened in your own words.
- If you do use quotes, you still have to explain what the authors are saying.
- Remember, if you use 5 or more consecutive words from another source, you must use quotation marks and include the page number (or paragraph number if it is an online source) in your citation.

Additional tips

- The goal of scientific writing is to be concise and precise. You will not get bonus points for inserting “fluff” into your papers. In fact, your grades will suffer if you are including a bunch of filler instead of substance.
- Avoid sexist language. Do not refer to people generally or groups of mixed genders as masculine. You do not have to write “his or her” every time either. You can switch

between he and she as long as they are approximately balanced throughout the paper as a whole. As a side note, many people identify outside the dichotomy of male and female, so genderless pronouns such as “ze/zir” or “zhe/hir” are likely to be more common in the future. There are a number of variations of these pronouns and there is no standard as of yet. In my classes these are acceptable and in fact encouraged, but you should check with other professors before using genderless pronouns.

- For longer papers (>3-4 pages) it is often helpful to include headings and subheadings to organize your writing.
- Never use the word “prove” in your writing. Research studies do NOT prove anything. Research can support, suggest, indicate, demonstrate, corroborate, show, etc.
- The writing assignments you do for me are considered formal writing. Therefore, there should not be any contractions (e.g., you’re, can’t, don’t) in your papers. The exception is when I ask you to write reflection papers. These are less formal and may include contractions.
- I am not impressed by your vocabulary. I am impressed by your ability to communicate clearly. Do not use big words if you do not know what they mean.
- Know your target audience. Avoid jargon unless you are sure the entire audience will know what it means. Unless specifically told otherwise you can assume the target audience is me.
- If you are critiquing a research article, you need to be able to articulate why the issue you are pointing out is important. Do not just say they needed a bigger sample. What would be gained by having a bigger sample? How does a small sample limit the ability to interpret the results?

Common Writing Mistakes

- The word “that” is the most overused word in the English language, and is often included in sentences unnecessarily. When you come to a sentence which includes “that” while proofreading your paper, read the sentence again without “that.” You will often find it still makes sense. If so, remove the unnecessary “that.” Here is a non-exhaustive list of words commonly followed by “that” which typically do not need to be: state, say, mention, believe, feel, think, agree, found, indicate, conclude, imply, and realize.
- Do not start a sentence with the word “however.” Not only is it a conjunction (just like “and,” “but,” etc.) but in this context the word does not mean what you intend it to mean. At the start of a sentence, “however” means “in whatever manner,” not “nevertheless.” This is true even when there is a comma after the “however.” This can always be fixed by simply moving the “however” a few words into the sentence or using “nevertheless” to start the sentence. For example, “However, the research does not support this idea” becomes “The research, however, does not support this idea.”
- Periods and commas always belong inside quotation marks. Do not put the period after the quotation mark.
- Be aware of the verb tense you are using. Students often shift tenses back and forth throughout papers, paragraphs, and even sentences. Some tense shifts are appropriate, but many times are due to sloppy editing. Make sure you are consistent and intentional with your tenses.
- Do not use “they” when you are referring to a single person. This is usually done in an effort to avoid choosing he versus she (see above).

- The word “pique” means interesting or stimulating. The word “peak” means comes to a point or summit. The word “peek” means a brief look. Attention is “piqued” not “peaked.”
- The word “feel” should only be used if you are describing an emotion or the sensation of touch. “Feel” should NOT be used to suggest intuition, judgment, agreement, or beliefs. These are examples of thoughts or cognitions. It is incorrect to write “I feel I deserve a better grade.” This is a judgment and should be stated “I think I deserve a better grade.”
- The software used to create presentations is “PowerPoint” not “power point.”
- The word “therefor” is used to describe an exchange, such as “I traded my sandwich and received a salad therefor.” The word “therefore” refers to a statement based on the preceding information, such as “I did not like the salad, therefore I regretted the trade.”