

PSY 282: PSYCHOTHERAPY & ASSESSMENT

MW 3-4:20; Hopkins 310

Instructor:

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T 9-10, 3-4; Th 10-11, 2-3; or by appointment

Course Description:

This course will guide students through the clinical responsibilities of mental health practitioners. Students interested in counseling/clinical psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy, school counseling, or educational psychology would benefit from the content and skills learned in this class. The major focus of this course will be on the varied models (e.g., humanistic, psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral) and modalities (e.g., individual, group, couples) of psychotherapy. The secondary focus will be the clinical assessment methods clinicians use to diagnose, treat, and track outcomes in their clients (e.g., MMPI, projective tests, Beck Depression Inventory). Students will compose a treatment plan, critically assess the strengths and limitations of various therapies, and obtain valuable insight into the primary roles of applied work in mental health.

The format of this course is lecture/discussion. Most class sessions will include a lecture component along with discussions, activities, and/or demonstrations. Class sessions are designed to expand upon and enrich the content in the textbook, not simply present the same information in an alternative format. The course is designed to help students reach the following learning objectives:

- Understand the history of clinical psychology and the typical job activities of clinical psychologists.
- Articulate the research findings related to the efficacy of psychotherapy.
- Explore people's perceptions of psychotherapy.
- Conceptualize mental health issues from a variety of major theoretical orientations and incorporate the conceptualization into a treatment plan.
- Experience techniques from several major theoretical orientations.
- Gain familiarity with common psychological assessments and how to interpret them.

Required Materials:

Pomerantz, A. M. (2013). *Clinical psychology: Science, practice, and culture – DSM 5 Update* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

- You may purchase either the textbook or the electronic version, whichever you prefer.

Additional readings will be posted via Moodle.

Assignments:*Exams (225 points)*

There will be 3 exams given throughout the semester, each worth 75 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.

Perceptions of Therapy Paper (50 points)

This assignment will explore beliefs about psychotherapy. You will interview 3 people and reflect on your own answers to a series of questions about awareness and stereotypes of therapy. Try to find people of heterogeneous backgrounds to get a range of potential perspectives (e.g., friends, family, students, professors, coaches). At least one of the people you interview cannot be a student. It is important you protect the confidentiality of those you talk to, so do NOT report the names or any identifying information about the interviewees. You do, however, need to give general information about the interviewees. For example, saying you interviewed a male sophomore who is majoring in business is not identifying information. Saying you interviewed your roommate is giving identifying information. Saying you interviewed a woman in her 40s who works in the medical field is not identifying, but saying it is your Aunt Shelly is.

Assignment Details:

- Conduct three interviews about perspectives on psychotherapy.
- The list of questions below is a suggestion only. You can ask whatever you like as long as it's respectful and informative. **Do NOT ask people directly about their own mental health issues or the mental health issues of their family.** If interviewees choose to volunteer that information it's fine, but respect their right to privacy. You can come up with your own questions in addition to the ones listed below.
- You can choose the questions but ask the same set of questions to each person.
- Summarize the results of your interviews and include **your own opinions on the questions you asked** (so you will have a total of 4 viewpoints represented in your paper). Make sure you reflect on responses throughout the paper (not just at the end in the summary).
- Compare and contrast the different viewpoints. You need to compare responses at the question level (i.e., what did people say for Question 2?), the interviewee level (e.g., how did the pattern of responses of Interviewee 2 and 3 compare?), and come up with hypotheses as to why you observed what you did (e.g., educational, religious, demographic factors).
- This should be organized and written as a paper, with a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. You may organize the body of your paper by either topic/question or by interviewee, whichever works best for you is fine with me so long as the organizational style you choose is clear and consistent.
- Your paper must be no less than 5 and no more than 8 pages long. Use 12 pt., Times New Roman font, 1 inch margins, and 1 inch margins. You are not required to use outside sources, but if you do make sure to cite them properly.

Question Ideas

- What do you know about psychotherapy?
- What do you think of the profession of psychology?
- How effective do you think psychotherapy is in general?
- What qualities do you think a good therapist would have?
- Why do you think some people are hesitant to use psychotherapy?
- What alternatives are there to psychotherapy if someone is struggling emotionally?
- What do you think about the use of medications to treat mental illness?
- How long do you think people generally stay in therapy?
- Is mental illness curable?
- Do you think health insurance should cover psychotherapy?

Treatment Plan (50 points)

For this assignment you will play the role of a consulting psychologist assisting a colleague with a treatment plan. You will be given an intake report with all the pertinent background information and conceptualize the client's problems from two of the theoretical orientations we discuss in class. You will then write a treatment plan where you discuss what techniques you would use based on one of your conceptualizations. More details will be provided along with the case study.

Assessment Report (50 points)

For this assignment you will be given a case study with results from several psychological assessments and have to combine the findings into a single report. This will involve interpreting the results of each instrument individually as well as integrating the various findings into a comprehensive narrative. You will also provide treatment recommendations and a general diagnosis. Use of specific diagnostic criteria from the DSM is not required for this assignment, but we will talk about how to identify a symptom cluster. More details will be provided along with the case study.

Reflection Papers (45 points)

As we discuss the major theoretical orientations of psychotherapy, we will have a chance to practice some of the techniques on ourselves to see how useful they can be. This will include a more formal exercise for three of the biggest theoretical approaches: psychodynamic, behavioral, and cognitive. After discussing each approach in class, you will experiment with a technique for approximately a week and write a short reflection on how you felt doing it, the strengths and limitations of the technique, and what other techniques from that orientation you would add to complement what you did. Reflections will be in the form of a paper at least 3 pages long (double-spaced, 12 pt., Times New Roman). Keep in mind this is not therapy and you should select appropriately challenging explorations. For example, if you are extremely scared of snakes, you should not attempt to systematically desensitize yourself to the point of being able to handle a live snake over the span of a week. If you have any questions or concerns about what to select for any of these exercises, please talk to me as soon as possible.

Psychodynamic: For this project you will have the option of either keeping a dream log or doing a series of free association exercises. If you select to keep a dream log, you must record in detail at least one dream for 5 consecutive nights. The most effective way to do this is to keep a notebook by your bed and write down your dream as soon as you wake up. You will interpret the dreams with a focus on recurring themes, remembering to discuss both the manifest and latent content. If you choose the free association option, you will be given a series of words every day for 6 days and you will write a short paragraph in response to each word. You will look for recurring themes in your writing and make interpretations. You must turn in your dream log/free association responses along with your reflection paper.

Behavioral: For this project you will identify a behavior you want to change (either increase or decrease) and select a reinforcement schedule to use. Track the frequency of the behavior without trying to modify it for 2 days (this is most simply done by keeping a piece of paper or index card in your pocket or using your phone), then conduct a functional analysis where you hypothesize what situations/behaviors/emotions/etc. seem to be promoting/preventing the target behavior. Based on what you hypothesize in your

functional analysis, create a plan to use either reinforcement or punishment appropriately to change the target behavior. Institute the behavioral modification plan for the next 4 days, continuing to track the frequency the entire time so you can discuss how well the intervention worked in your reflection paper.

Cognitive: For this project you will identify a cognitive distortion you want to work on in your own life from the list provided in class. For 2 days you will simply count the number of times you observe yourself having a distorted thought (this is most simply done by keeping a piece of paper or index card in your pocket or using your phone). For the next 3 days you will use one of the thought journaling method we will discuss in class to challenge the distortion. On the 6th day, you will count the number of times you observe one of those distorted thoughts. Make sure to discuss the effectiveness of the intervention in your paper.

Final Presentation (80 points)

During the final exam period, you will give oral presentations in groups of three. The presentations will be based on additional topics related to clinical psychology. Your presentation must include PowerPoint slides and provide your classmates with an overview of the area of practice/issue. The presentation will be 15 minutes long. The topics available for selection are: Couples/family therapy; Geropsychology; Neuropsychological assessment; Forensic assessment; Child clinical psychology; Clinical outcomes assessment; Prescription privileges; and Telepsychology.

Total Points:

Exams	225
Interview Paper	50
Assessment Report	50
Treatment Plan	50
Psychodynamic Reflection	15
Behavioral Reflection	15
Cognitive Reflection	15
<u>Final Presentation</u>	<u>80</u>
Total	500

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
Week 1			
8/29	M	What is Clinical Psychology?	Chpt. 1
8/31	W	Evolution of Clinical Psychology	Chpt. 2
Week 2			
9/5	M	Psychodynamic Therapy I	Chpt. 12
9/7	W	Psychodynamic Therapy II	
Week 3			
9/12	M	Behavioral Therapy I	Chpt. 14; Perspectives of Therapy Paper due
9/14	W	Behavioral Therapy II	
Week 4			
9/19	M	Cognitive Therapy I	Chpt. 15
9/21	W	Cognitive Therapy II	Psychodynamic Reflection due
Week 5			
9/26	M	Existential Therapy	Sharf, 2012
9/28	W	Exam 1	
Week 6			
10/3	M	Humanistic Therapy I	Chpt. 13; Behavioral Reflection due
10/5	W	Humanistic Therapy II	
Week 7			
10/10	M	Dialectical Behavior Therapy	Chapman, 2006; Rizvi et al., 2013
10/12	W	Process Group Therapy	Cognitive Reflection Due Chpt. 16
Week 8			
10/17	M	Does Psychotherapy Work?	Chpt. 11;
10/19	W	The Dodo Bird & Common Factors	Asay & Lambert, 1999
Week 9			
10/24	M	Exam 2	
10/26	W	Intelligence Testing	Chpt. 9
Week 10			
10/31	M	Learning Disabilities & ADHD	Treatment Plan Due
11/2	W	Subjective Personality Assessment	Chpt. 10
Week 11			
11/7	M	Objective Personality Assessment	
11/9	W	Assessment Report Writing	
Week 12			
11/14	M	Assessment Case Study	
11/16	W	Cultural Competence	Chpt. 4
Week 13			
11/22-27		No Class – Thanksgiving Break	
Week 14			
11/28	M	Ethical Practice	Chpt. 5; Assessment Report Due
11/30	W	Exam 3	
12/9	F	Final Presentation (3-5pm)	

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)

Child & Family Guidance Center

<https://www.cfgcenter.org/>
903-893-7768

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 you 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 Ramsey, 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, so make sure to get contact information from a few classmates. 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.

Dropping the Class

All drops must take place by the 10th week of class. If you drop the class before October 14th, no record of the course will show up on your transcript. Dropping between October 15th and November 4th will result in a "W" on your transcript. You may not drop the course after November 4th. The exception is medical withdrawals. If you have a medical situation which prevents you from completing the semester, you need to talk to Tim Millerick in Student Affairs about this process, as this is done through his office and I have no role in those decisions.

Extra Credit

Extra credit opportunities may be given at the discretion of the instructor. Possible examples of extra credit opportunities include: participation in psychological research, attendance at events, or further research into a topic of interest. The maximum amount of extra credit possible for this class is 7.5 points (~1.5% of your final grade).

- Students can earn extra credit points by participating in research authorized by the psychology department. These research opportunities are current studies being conducted by your peers and/or the psychology faculty, and are opportunities to contribute to the knowledge of the field as well as your classmates' education. Participation is a serious commitment that requires honest and thoughtful responses. If you give false, misleading, or thoughtless (i.e., choosing "4" on every item on the scale) data, it not only compromises the work of your peers and faculty but can potentially cripple research that took months or years to set up. The researchers can see how much time it took you to complete the study (even the online surveys) and have to throw out data that is clearly carelessly entered. If you do not have enough time to complete the research appropriately (as described in the informed consent statement), do it at another time.

All students will be added to the email list to receive notifications of research opportunities for extra credit. If you do not want to receive these emails, you will be given the opportunity to opt out. For every 30 minutes of research participation, students will receive 1 point of extra credit. **MAKE SURE to keep a list of the studies you participate in** so you can be sure you have received all your extra credit slips. At a minimum, write down the name of the study, date of participation, and contact information for the researcher. If you write a 2 page (double-spaced, 12 pt., Times New Roman) reflection paper about your experience participating in the study, you will earn 1 additional point.

- Research Participation Response Paper Requirements:
 - Describe the study you participated in as well as you can. In other words, what were you asked to do?
 - Describe how you felt during the study. Was it fun? Uncomfortable? Confusing? Surprising?
 - Tie the research to something we discussed in class or is discussed in your readings. If you're not sure what the research was investigating, say so but try to guess what it was about.
 - How would you improve the study? Evaluate the research design to the extent possible (i.e., you may not know the reliability of the instruments being used but you can say you thought the questions were worded poorly).
- Additional extra credit assignments may arise during the semester as opportunities to attend campus or community events become available. The amount of points received for attending such events will vary by the time commitment (the points will be posted along with the information about the event). The length of the response paper required will also vary, but will be a minimum of 2 pages.
 - Event Attendance Response Paper Requirements:
 - 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.?
- Students can also write a 4 page paper on an approved psychology topic for 2 points of extra credit. These papers must be proposed no later than 11/4 and turned in no later than 11/18.

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%). Assignments will typically not 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.

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. On the rare occasions where I ask for 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.) and stapled together. I do not read anything that is not attached to the first page and your grade on the assignment will reflect this.
- 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).
- 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. These tutors will not proofread your paper for you, but can help you learn proper writing mechanics. For example, if I give you feedback about improper use of commas, you can make an appointment to discuss the rules for using commas.

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. This is both an APA style issue and a pedagogical issue. 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.

APA Style tips

- The *Publication Manual* has more in it than just how to cite sources!
- 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. If you are discussing a person who prefers the pronoun “they” in your paper, respect that person’s wishes and use “they/their.” In this case, you need to include a statement in the paper that “their” is the preferred pronoun of this individual so I do not take points off.

- For longer papers (>3-4 pages) it is often helpful to include headings and subheadings to organize your writing.

Additional tips

- Never, ever 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 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.” Be especially wary of using the phrase “I feel like...” as very rarely is followed by an emotion.
- 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.”
- When you are referring to people, use the word “who” instead of the word “that.” For example, “the students who took this class last semester” instead of “the students that took this class last semester.”
- The word “everyday” means commonplace or usual. If you mean to say something happens each day, use the phrase “every day.”
- If you are a leader, you lead people. The past tense of this verb is “led.” For example, I led the meeting yesterday. The homophone “lead” is a type of metal. For example, I led the meeting yesterday about removing the lead paint from the building.