1. Gerunds take possessives
2. Do not use exclamation marks—your paper is supposed to be neutral, formal, and analytic.
3. Apostrophes are only for contractions and possession—they do not show plural.
4. Never use “etc.” in your paper…it gives the reader the impression that there are more details to your argument, but you do not feel like listing them.
5. Dashes are two hypens--with no spaces between. In MS Word it will auto correct to an Em-dash —
6. Make sure you ask yourself if what you are writing answers the essay question or assignment—you are not allowed to answer an assignment you wish was assigned just because it is easier to do so. You have to ask yourself, “is what I am arguing an answer to the assignment?” If the answer is “kinda, sorta, maybe, or no” then you need to rethink your organization and content.
7. Never use the word “nowadays.”
8. Master the simple art of parallel structure in your writing.
9. If you use the phrase “not only” you must eventually follow it with “but also”
10. People get “who,” things get “that”
11. Do not split infinitives
12. Always make sure to carry over the preposition with parallel structure and infinitives: for example

Bad – “They have the right to vote and dance at prom.”

Good – “They have the right to vote and to dance at prom”

Good – “ I fight for truth, for justice, and for the American way”

1. Inanimate objects cannot own things. You do not say “the car’s radio”, you say “the radio of the car”
2. When using quotation marks, use two, not one-- “hello” – not ‘hello’: single quotes are for quotes in quotes-- “Billy was walking down the street and said, ‘hello.’”
3. Inanimate things cannot own other things. If it is not or was not ever alive, then do not make it own things (“the plot of the story,” not “the story’s plot”)
4. Multiple plural words have plural on the first word, not the last (“points of view” “brothers in law”)
5. The phrase is “ a couple of” – such as “in the last couple of songs, there is a good one” – do not leave the “of” out. You do it in speaking sometimes, but it is not correct.
6. When using research, direct quotes are the strongest form of evidence. Paraphrasing all of your researched evidence makes your paper look like you are “faking it”. Paraphrase long or major big ideas, but always use a little bit of quote to demonstrate that it is genuine research and not a glancing sloppy reference.
7. Never begin and end with a simple direct quote—the first and last words of an essay should always be your own. Even if you start with a quote, introduce it first, or explain it when you conclude with it.
8. When using a quote that is more than 4 complete lines in your paper, you must indent them and use MLA formatting for longer quotes. However, you should minimize this to no more than once (if at all) in shorter papers (4 pages or less).
9. When talking about the theme of a story, never just reduce it to one simple word. If the theme is “innocence,” the first question your reader asks is “well, what about innocence?” answer that and make it clear in the into. Simply going to a one-word theme is oversimplifying the issue, and stunts your argument.