Tips for Writing Formally

**Point of View** (you will see this abbreviated as p.o.v. when I comment on your writing)

* Never use 1st or 2nd person p.o.v. in a formal essay.
  + 1st person: I, we, me, etc.
  + 2nd person: you
  + It detracts from the formality of the writing.
  + It is a copout that permits the writer to avoid using better phrasing.
  + It’s a little self-centered to use 1st person, don’t you think? The paper isn’t about you, so you shouldn’t be in it! ☺
  + The reader probably doesn’t want to be in the essay, either, since the essay isn’t about him/her, so 2nd person is unnecessary, too.
* Why you should never use “I think” or “I believe” or “in my opinion” and all that nonsense:
  + Still self-centered!
  + Still detracts from the formality of the essay
  + It’s redundant: if you are the one writing the essay, the reader is probably clued in to the fact that it’s your opinion.
  + It weakens your authority. It’s as if you are qualifying your statement, confessing that you might not know what you’re talking about. Don’t do that! You should be the expert on your topic, and you should write with authority.

**Verb Tense**

* You must maintain a consistent verb tense throughout an essay—don’t switch from present to past and then back again. (You will see VT in the margins when I catch this in your writing.)
* That said, when we write about literature, we write in the present tense: In Coelho’s novel *The Alchemist*, Santiago embarks on a journey that will yield not only a treasure but self-knowledge and the fulfillment of his destiny. He begins as a lowly shepherd who knows he wants more from his existence, and he ends with an understanding of his personal legend.

**Keep going—there’s more!**

**Contractions and Poor Word Choices**

* We do not use contractions in formal writing. Why? Contractions detract from a formal voice, and they denote lazy writing.
* Some words are just not ok: “thing,” “stuff,” “a lot,” and ANY form of slang/colloquialism.
* Some words are unnecessary: “very.”
  + “Very” is another copout. It keeps the writer from looking for a better word if s/he can just stick “very” in front of basic vocabulary choices.
  + “Very” is sometimes redundant. If the writer is using the word “irate,” for example, is “very” necessary in front of it? Isn’t “irate” the “very” of angry?
* Other words are unnecessary or overused: “definitely”
  + What is the purpose of this, really?

**Titles**

* The title of a novel goes in italics, as in *The Alchemist* or *The Merchant of Venice* or *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*.
* The title of an epic (super long) poem goes in italics, as in *The Iliad* or *Beowulf*.
* The title of a short story goes in quotation marks, as in “The Dream” or “A Most Dangerous Game.”
* The title of a short poem goes in quotation marks, as in “Sara Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out.” (That’s a Shel Silverstein poem, fyi.)

**Genre**

* A novel is a novel, not a story: In Coelho’s novel, The Alchemist…
* A story is a story, not a poem: In the short story “The Dream,” the merchant…
* An essay is an essay, not a poem: In Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance,” he proposes…
* A poem is a poem, not a story: In Shakespeare’s poem about old age…
* Get the picture? Call a text what it is. These words represent specific genres, so they are not interchangeable.