1. State your thesis in the first paragraph of the paper, ideally at the very end. Writers usually arrive at the clearest formulation of the thesis after writing the paper, so you may be tempted to place the thesis in the conclusion. Resist the temptation and STEAL your thesis from the end (or between the lines, or wherever it lurks). Using the most specific language possible, polish and qualify the thesis to begin your argument. A good thesis will name specific strategies instead of saying authors “use diction, tone, and syntax.” Ex.: Truth’s speech uses elevated diction, a respectful tone, and complicated syntax . . . .

2. Name the texts and authors in the first paragraph; use the full names. Later you may use the last names of authors and abbreviations you introduce for the texts (e.g., “D.o.I.”).

3. Each paragraph should advance the argument. Add a sentence that connects with the thesis if the paragraph does not explicitly address that organizing idea.

4. Focus paragraphs on one main point each. In general, follow the “Goldilocks” principle: not too small (less than three sentences) and not too large (longer than half a page). To deserve a paragraph of its own, an idea probably needs a topic sentence to introduce it, a second sentence to explain or elaborate it, and a third sentence offering an example. Alternatively, an idea might need several sentences of explanation or several examples. Some of you should combine short paragraphs even if you need to find and state their common ground. Others should spare readers the “boa constrictor” experience of confronting a page-long paragraph. Divide it into two (+) main ideas (topic sentences).

5. INTRODUCE quotations and state explicitly their relevance to your argument. Use introductory tags that identify the author (and perhaps the text) and highlight the reason you quote. Often you will use a comma before a quotation, but a colon might also work. Ex.: Sojourner Truth repeats a question to emphasize her status: “Ain’t I a woman?”

Avoid quoting several sentences in a row if it means you leave them for the reader to interpret. Refer to at least one phrase in each sentence you quote to state its significance.

6. Strong conclusions pull the major points together and consider their implications or largest applications. If you have “stolen” your thesis from the conclusion (see 1 above), you need to fill the hole it leaves. Merely repeating the thesis gains more points than stopping without a conclusion; a strong paper ends with a new idea or application, such as a statement of contemporary relevance, a new characterization of the rhetorical strategies and audiences, or a synthesis of the points you discuss.

7. PROOFREAD, ideally by reading out loud. For most people, the combination of eye and ear catches more errors than eye alone. Finishing before the deadline gives you a chance to sit back with relief and make sure you have inserted your final, most nuanced thoughts. Asking another person (or Consultant at the Writing Center) to read your paper gives you a fresh eye.