**Essay & Writing Conventions Handout**

Please note that intentional disregard of standard writing conventions will significantly affect your essay grade.

1. The English that we speak and the English that we write are two separate issues. Do not write the way you talk. **Avoid slang and overused expressions/clichés**
2. **Do not misspell words**. Spell check does not go beyond a fifth grade level, so you can’t expect it to catch words that are just used incorrectly or mixed-up.
3. **CAPITALIZE** proper nouns, titles of books, and article titles.
4. **Do not ask questions in your essay**. Yes, this means no questions at all! Statements establish that you are the authority on the topic, where questions don’t create an authoritative or confident tone.
5. **Do not use contractions** (don’t, can’t, won’t, etc.) unless they are in direct quotes. Contractions send the message that you are writing something informal, not a formal essay, and send the message to your reader that you are lazy.
6. Do not begin your Introduction with a direct quote or a question.
7. Do not drop quotes into your essay without a transition and a lead-in.
8. **Never use “a lot.”** How much is “a lot”? Everyone’s answer will vary, thus you need to be more specific in your description.
9. Avoid vague or weak words for description (good, bad, things, nice, really, big, small, etc.). Be more descriptive in order to establish tone and voice.
10. Never use absolutes (always, never, everybody, everywhere, etc.). You might include or exclude someone or something that shouldn’t be included in your analysis.
11. **Never use first person pronouns when writing a literary analysis essay** (I, me, my, mine, & myself) unless they appear in a direct quote.
12. **Never use second person when writing a literary analysis essay** (you, your, yourself, us, we, our, ourselves) unless they appear in a direct quote. Think about this: who are you including when you use second person? That’s right, you are including the reader, and the reader might not want to be included or the argument might not apply to the reader. Second person creates an assumption on the writer’s part.
13. Do not begin sentences with “This means that,” “This shows that,” “This displays that,” “The quote shows,” “I think,” “In my opinion,” “In this story,” or any variance of this type of phrasing. It’s unnecessary and sounds passive.
14. Refer to **fiction** (most literature) in the *present tense*. It never really happened, so how can it be in the past?
    1. NO: Harry Potter **was** a misguided young man.
    2. YES: Harry Potter **is** a misguided young man.
15. Refer to **nonfiction** in the *past tense.* Autobiographies and biographies are rooted in reality, thus they are believed to have happened.
    1. YES: America **fought** a war with England in the 18th Century.
    2. NO: America **fights** a war with England in the 18th Century.
16. In general, spell out numbers below 10 (double-digits).
17. Do not refer to the author by first name beyond the introduction, but do be sure to mention both the first and last name the first time the author is mentioned. After the introduction, just use the author’s last name.
18. Represent titles correctly:
    1. Book = underline the title or use italics (*Of Mice and Men* or Of Mice and Men) Generally speaking, use italics when typing, underline when writing by hand.
    2. Poem & Song Titles = quotation marks (“Richard Cory”)
    3. Short Story = quotation marks (“The Most Dangerous Game”)
    4. Play = underline the title or use italics (same as letter “a”)
19. “Big words” do not necessarily make you sound smarter. Actually, they often create quite the opposite. “Big words” have the potential to make the reader focus on the words rather than the intended message. You also risk sounding unnatural in your word choice, thus negatively affecting your tone and voice.
20. Cited information in your essay must have the appropriate MLA citation in parentheses after the closing quotation marks, followed by a period.
21. DO YOUR OWN WORK. Plagiarism (theft of someone’s ideas or intellectual property) is inexcusable. Cite your sources, use your own brain, and do not attempt to take credit for someone else’s work or ideas. Plagiarism will be dealt with according to the CVUSD and TOHS policy.