Common Writing Problems

In a survey of Solent university teaching staff, we came up with this list of common things that tutors find wrong with student writing:

Overall

- No clear introduction
- Poor structure with little or no signposting (linking words or phrases)
- Generally too descriptive, often with little or no analysis or reference to theory
- Writing in the first person or slipping in and out of third and first person willy-nilly.
- Poor referencing (everything is treated as a summary, with no page numbers for specific points) – see also at paragraph level, below.

Paragraph level

- Weak or non-existent topic sentences
- Paragraphs are often very short with little development of the main idea, no supporting evidence or relevant examples.
- Poor transition between paragraphs (links and signposts again!)
- Only placing a single reference at the end of the paragraph - even when it is obvious that more than one source has been used.

Sentence level

- Incomplete sentences
- Incorrect word order.

Grammar

Difficulties with:

- Subject/verb agreement (they was, etc.)
- As above with collective nouns (the government were)
- Use of passive voice

Misuse of the apostrophe

- Using contractions (not good practice in academic writing)
- Using the apostrophe to create plurals (incorrect)
- Omitting or misplacing the apostrophe for possession (the student's work)
- Using "it's" instead of "its" for possessive

Misuse of the comma

- Missing comma after an introductory element
- Missing comma in a series
- Missing comma with a non-restrictive element (independent clause)

Stylistic errors

- Not using single quotes and double quotes correctly (single for quotation, double for quotes inside a quote)
- Using quotation marks with block quotes (incorrect, quotes of three or more lines should be indented with no quotation marks)
- Not understanding the difference between a reference list and a bibliography
- Not knowing the difference between an acronym and an abbreviation and how and when to use them

Southampton
SOLENT
University