Dr. Marx’s Special Formula
for improved grades on English papers

- Get a good idea; brainstorm with someone. Let your imagination run riot at first; then cull. Massage the idea into a trim and shapely thesis.

- Support and develop your thesis with specific references or short citations from the text. Consider the big picture, but look closely at small details.

- Proofread twice; spelling, grammar, punctuation and format count.

- Follow these ten commandments

  I. Eliminate excess verbiage; every word must tell.
  II. Read every sentence aloud. Make sure it makes sense and sounds like something you would say to another person.
  III. Avoid unnecessary adverbs like “basically,” especially intensifiers like “very” or “incredibly.”
  IV. Present plot summary only to support an interpretive assertion.
  V. Support controversial statements and define crucial terms.
  VI. Don’t belabor the obvious or repeat yourself, even in introductory and concluding paragraphs.
  VII. Always place periods and commas inside closing quotation marks.
  VIII. When writing about literature stay in the present tense.
  IX. Study the pages on documentation and plagiarism before using secondary sources.
  X. Dream up apt and snappy titles.

Be sure you understand and know what to do about every one of the instructor’s corrections. Use this key to interpret or, better yet, avoid them.

- **squiggle** Delete: read what’s left and notice how much better it is.
- **Paragraph sign** No paragraph or new paragraph
- **~** Reverse order of words
coh    Lacks coherence; insufficient connection between sentences or paragraphs
w.w./w.c.  Wrong word/word choice—use dictionary or thesaurus
d    Diction—inappropriate level of formality or informality
Frag./ s.f.  Sentence fragment—incomplete sentence. A complete sentence makes an assertion that can be contradicted, e.g. “She did.”
c.s.    Comma splice. Separate complete statements with period or semicolon.
tense    Inconsistent tense. Usually keep to present tense
Ref.    Reference error. Pronoun has missing or ambiguous antecedent
Agr.    Lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent or subject and verb
Awk.    Awkward phrasing. Read this aloud.
Sp.    Spelling error
Il    Faulty parallelism. Parallel sentence elements must have parallel structure.