"We should care for [our students’] minds by being tough academically. Push them hard. Make them write grammatically and spell all their words correctly. I urged our new faculty members to push them beyond the point where it begins to hurt. It is only in that way that the students will really make progress and move to higher levels of intellectual accomplishment. Tough love is the only kind really worthy of an educator."

Fr. Vincent M. Cooke, SJ  
Academic Convocation  
President, Canisius College  
September 14, 1993

More Notes on Essay Expectations  
Moleski, SJ

1. Make up a system of abbreviations for the materials referenced in your paper. Huston Smith, *Religions of Man*, might be abbreviated as HS or RoM.

2. Refer to pages in a book by the abbreviation, a comma, and the page number: “Nature here is an expression of a single Lord of all being” (HS, 349).

3. For books of the Bible, give book, chapter, colon, verse(s): “Thus you shall be a sign to them, and they shall know that I am the LORD” (Ez 24:26). Where you are dealing with a single book of the bible, it is not necessary to name the book in the reference.

4. For references to the *Tao Te Ching*, follow the example of the introduction, and refer to chapters: "Stillness and tranquility set things in order in the universe" (Ch. 45).

5. I am very, very fussy about the correct punctuation of parenthetic references. Please note the following:

   A) Eliminate the period at the end of quoted material; the final punctuation for your sentence goes AFTER the closing parenthesis:

   WRONG: Islam teaches that "God is great." (HS, 324).

   RIGHT: Islam teaches that "God is great" (HS, 324).

   B) You must NOT eliminate question marks or exclamation points from quotations:

   By word and by deed, Buddha teaches "Here is the path . . . Tread it!" (HS, 144).

   "But what does the phrase itself mean: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior?" (HS, 426).

   C) Please notice also how to space before and after "quotation marks" and "(parentheses)." Use two spaces to separate sentences. "Poor editing means a poor grade!"

   Note Well: Get these things right, or you get C- at most on the first essay, D at most on the second essay, or F at most on the third essay.

6. Single space and indent long quotations, without using quotation marks and with the parenthetical reference floating after the concluding punctuation mark. A long quotation is more than one sentence, or a sentence that runs for more than three lines:

   The Greenlanders have no conscious program of education; nevertheless, anthropologists report that their children are universally obedient, good-natured, and ready to help. Recently Ruth Benedict found American Indians who remembered back to a time when social controls were internal: "... There was no law then . . . everybody did what was right." (HS, 227)

   Zero references = Zero for the paper!

7. The most important thing I look for in your essays is personal insight. I am looking for evidence that you have penetrated the meaning of the materials for yourself and have made connections between the readings and other features of your intellectual life.

   Your title is your first opportunity to exhibit your personal standpoint and to direct my attention to the central issue(s) in your essay.

   Do not simply repeat the assigned topic!

8. Your reactions to the reading are vitally important to the formation of your understanding of the texts. Pay attention to your feelings about the readings in order to determine what matters to you, but then use those responses to develop a formal commentary on the text.

   REACTION: This was a really hard book. I had to read it three times before I could make any sense out of it, and even then, I’m not sure I know what this person is talking about. I hate this book and I wish I’d never taken this course in the first place! This just isn’t what I expected at all.

   ESSAY: Although Puddefoot promises a discussion of both mathematics and theology in *Logic and Affirmation*, the two topics are not given equal time. Puddefoot’s approach is consistently philosophical and theological, only occasionally turning to mathematics as a source of analogies. It may be that this was the only course open to him, since it is easy to envisage a theology of mathematics while it is hard to imagine a mathematics of theology.
9. Do not give me a vague, "English Major" introduction and conclusion. I hate glittering generalities:

“There are many possible interpretations one could give of Surprised by Joy. Everyone who reads this book will come to his or her own conclusion about what Lewis meant by his title. No one can be completely certain that he or she has pinned down Lewis’ meaning exactly. In this life, no one is ever really certain about anything. I will do my best in this essay for Fr. Moleski’s course, “Freedom, Sin, and Grace” to explain what I got out of this book by C.S. Lewis.”

Get to the point! If you can write two good pages, then you can write two hundred; if you can’t write two good pages, I don’t want to read any more of your writing.

10. Handwritten papers are only marginally acceptable. They will therefore receive, at most, a marginally acceptable rating (C). If I cannot determine how well you are spacing and punctuating, they will automatically fall under the penalty for poor grammar (C-, D, or F) because all illegible submissions are always wrong.

Some Frequently Asked Questions and Their Answers

Student: Why are you so demanding about such small details?
Teacher: My best teachers were demanding with me. Paying attention to details is evidence of your ability to criticize your own work and to consider it from more than one point of view. Your performance on these essays is also a measure of how well you listen to instructions and carry them out, even when it involves attention to worrisome details. If you have these skills, then I am willing to recommend you to graduate schools and employers by giving you a high grade; if you lack these skills, I indicate my reservations about your capacities by giving you a low grade.

Student: But don’t our ideas matter more than correct punctuation?
Teacher: Not in a formal essay. The purpose of formal writing is to combine form and content in a beautiful whole. I think it is very wrong to say “Either we have great ideas or a finely-edited essay,” as if having both were an impossible ideal. I have no trouble ignoring your misspellings and grammatical inconsistencies in your reaction papers; in your essays, however, I want to see evidence that you know how to evaluate your own writing in terms of commonly accepted standards of spelling, grammar and punctuation.

Student: But none of our other teachers care about this stuff!
Teacher: That is an indictment of your other teachers, not of me. I am an expert on 2-page essays—I have read over 5000 of them in my teaching career (1976-78, 1988 to the present). My expectations about grammar come from the study of English (B.A., summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, Boston College, 1973), Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Spanish, German and Russian; I have also done some programming in ASM, BASIC, Pascal and C, so I know how intolerant computers are of small errors in grammar and syntax.

Here at Canisius, I served on the Structures Committee, the Educational Policy Committee, the Core Curriculum Committee, and the Faculty Senate for a total of five years. I know that many other faculty members are concerned about the quality of student writing. The College wants every faculty member to make an effort to improve the writing skills of our students. The quotation at the top of the first page of these notes shows that the President wants us to hold you to high standards.

Student: Why such a severe penalty? It just doesn’t seem fair!
Teacher: I’ve learned from experience that students don’t pay much attention to “good advice.” If I do not attach serious consequences to violation of these standards, students do not pay attention to them. When I do uphold these standards, some students get upset. I see that as the price I pay for upholding the standards of scholarship.

Student: But these are such trivial details!
Teacher: Yes, they are. Because they are trivial, they are easy to get right, every time. If you learn these lessons now, you will not need to learn them later.

When I grade your papers, I ask myself whether I would like my favorite teachers or other members of my Department to see this essay and whether I would like you to represent me in the business world. I feel ashamed when I see that my students cannot proofread their essays for trivial mistakes. Ultimately, that is why I give low grades to such papers.

I do not make idle threats. I do not think that sincere and well-intentioned incompetence should be rewarded as highly as a competent performance. Edit your papers well or suffer the consequences.