Most Common Problems in Grinnell Student Essays

I. Common errors:

A. grammatical errors - comma splice, apostrophe use, subject/verb agreement (singular/plural), pronoun antecedent (including "which" and "it"), sentence fragment

B. homophones - lie/lay, its/it's, affect/effect, to/too, there/their

II. Problems with essay focus:

A. scope of topic overly broad (attempts to make sense of "the nature of democracy" or "the role of women in the world" or "the evils of technology" in a 4-page essay)

B. statement about topic too vague or general (two elements “are very different yet share some similarities;” a poem "effectively uses poetic techniques to portray the poet's view of x") where it should connect several elements in a specific and substantive relationship

C. central idea merely a list of otherwise unconnected “things I noticed about this topic"

D. lack of counter-thesis: central idea self-evident or irrefutable, making the essay a dull and empty exercise

E. cannot formulate central idea as one complete, grammatical sentence, or thesis (reasons: really two ideas, or lacks an active verb to clarify relation among elements)

III. Weak argument:

A. paragraphs strung together in random order using a series of “and” transitions, such as "another," "in addition," "also" (this problem often linked to II-C above)

B. absence of, or undeveloped, counter-thesis (which may be envisioned as a skeptical reader, a counter-argument, or an alternative position) leads to lack of tension/rigor

IV. Other opportunities for improvement:

A. delete grandiose or vapid "warm up" sentences at beginning of essay--where does the
essay really begin?

B. connect choppy, repetitive sentences into more complex and varied long sentences (subordinate clauses, parallelism)

C. use conclusion not to re-state thesis or to introduce new supporting evidence, but to give topic a final twist or leave readers with one last implication/image

D. replace ubiquitous "to be" verbs (particularly sentences that start with "there are’ or "it is") and passive constructions with precise, vivid, and dynamic verbs

E. make diction consistent and effective by testing levels of diction (pompous? formal? conversational? cutesy? slangy?) against expectations of an academic audience