MOST IMPORTANT: this research paper is intended to be your ideas and your arguments backed up with a modest amount of research from outside sources. Be careful not to let your research overwhelm and drown out your own voice and your careful analysis of your primary texts (whatever texts you chose to write about). That said, it is also crucial that you acknowledge each and every idea you get from someone else with correct citations. Using more than two or three words in a row from someone else’s work REQUIRES that you put the material in quotes and give the author credit.

SOME COMMON PROBLEMS IN RESEARCH PAPERS

All of the following examples are drawn from actual student response papers. The assignment required students to summarize and critically respond to an article about Hawthorne’s Scarlet Letter by Frederick C. Crews called “The Ruined Wall.”

1. Dropped Quotes. A quotation cannot be a sentence on its own – it must be properly introduced.

example:
[Dimmesdale’s] sudden energy leads him to write a grand sermon. “Nothing less than the descent of the Holy Ghost will be held sufficient to account for such a performance” (Crews 147).
better:
[Dimmesdale’s] sudden energy leads him to write a grand sermon. As Crews writes: “Nothing less than the descent…”
even better:
[Dimmesdale’s] sudden energy leads him to write a grand sermon. As Crews explains, his final performance is so extraordinary, it makes the reader wonder if God himself is intervening: “Nothing less than the descent…”

2. Quotes that try to speak for themselves. Sometimes instead of actually summarizing and explaining an idea themselves, students use quotations with dense, complicated language and assume the meaning of the quote speaks for itself.

two examples:
Crews, relating back to the metaphor, implies that Hawthorne “condensed two ideas that are intimately related. Dimmesdale’s moral enemy is the forbidden impulse, while his psychological enemy is guilt” (138).

The “other avenue” refers to “the means his libido chooses, given the fact of repression, to gratify itself surreptitiously” (139).

For both these writers, it’s not entirely clear if they themselves understand the passages they’ve quoted.
Crews, relating back to the metaphor, argues that Dimmesdale actually has two enemies, not one – the sexual drive and the guilt which accompanies this impulse. As Crews explains it, Hawthorne “condensed two ideas that are intimately related. Dimmesdale’s moral enemy is the forbidden impulse, while his psychological enemy is guilt” (138).

The “other avenue,” according to Crews, is the way his sexual desire will find a way to gratify itself secretly, through fasting and scourging himself, for example (139).

3. Make sure to carefully distinguish between your own ideas and those of the critic you’re summarizing.

Example:
The author proved that not only was he suffering a physical consequence of the sin, but that in fact he wanted to suffer. This inescapable guilt he felt was something he deserved. His awareness of sin was higher than a normal man’s, only because of his connection to God.

This writer begins well, by using the phrase “the author proved.” But the sentences that follow don’t explicitly say whose ideas are being described.

Better:
The author proved that not only was he suffering a physical consequence of the sin, but that in fact he wanted to suffer. Crews goes on to suggest that the inescapable guilt Dimmesdale felt was something he deserved and that his awareness of sin was higher than a normal man’s, only because of his connection to God.