Common Obstacles in Student Writing

Repetition:
Essentially repeating the same idea over and over in the same paragraph or throughout the paper.
Solution: State things clearly and boldly; then you don’t have to repeat.
Have lots of good ideas/content; then you don’t have to BS.

Choppy sentences:
Paper reads roughly; sentences are short and un-interesting
Solution: Vary sentence style and structure; try longer sentences that combine ideas. Choose every word and sentence carefully. Better a paper be carefully written and on the short side than long, rambling, and not so good.

Unsteady opinions:
Lots of “I think…” / “I believe…” / “It seems like…” / “probably” / “maybe” / “might”
Solution: Say it like it’s a fact, and then back it up with good details. You don’t need to qualify every statement by saying it’s your opinion or that it seems to be that way. You name is on the paper; we know it’s your opinion.

Switching between verb tenses:
Writer goes back and forth between past and present tense. Writer seems unsure of when the events are taking place. This will always confuse the reader.
Solution: Stick with the appropriate verb tense(s).

Pronoun misuse:
Saying “You” and “I/me” or “We/us.”
Solution: Don’t use 1st and 2nd person in formal writing. Stick to third person. If the paper is more informal and references to self are allowed, be continuous and don’t shift over to the second-person “you.”

Being too general or too specific:
Solution: Ask yourself, What is the big picture/issue behind all these details? What are the details for this big issue? Use quotes from text and examples. Find the big meaning that ties the details together.

Dry writing:
Solution: Use details, details, details. Imagery, similes, metaphors, new and interesting ways of looking at things or describing things. Lots of color and life. Put us there with your descriptions.

Rambling:
Paper doesn’t stick to main point, or we’re never sure exactly what that main point is.
Solution: Use an outline or a writing plan. Work from that “skeleton,” and fill your writing in as you go. But don’t start writing without knowing in what direction you want to take the reader. By the time you reach the conclusion of your paper, you should have brought the reader on a full-circle journey from start to finish, leading us along with good transitions.

Contractions:
Many instructors will insist that you don’t use any contractions whatsoever in your paper. This mostly depends on how formal the paper is. Sometimes it sounds just too awkward to not use contractions, but that should be determined by the instructor and/or the formality of that particular essay.
Bad sample paragraph:

The author speaks his mind. She really tells it like it is. She isn’t shy about telling what her life is really like. Then she talks about the past. Her past sounds like it was pretty rough. She wasn’t treated well as a child. I think her parents neglected her a lot. They might have even hit her. I think she knew that she really got screwed up by this. It seems like she is unhappy in life, but then she said her son makes her laugh. If she could say that he made her laugh, then her life wasn’t so bad. But I still think she thinks her life is a little bad because her growing-up wasn’t so good. She didn’t have a happy childhood, and I think that affects you down the road. You would be pretty screwed up if you have some of that stuff done to you too. We don’t know how bad things are for people. Then you can take a look at a poem like this and see what she says about life. It’s an interesting poem.

How to fix it - Student Writing Activity (Sometimes we have to start from scratch)

The speaker in the poem is very candid about her view on life. She doesn’t shy away from talking about the harsh truths of life, including her own difficult childhood. Mistreated verbally and even physically as a child, she grew up to be an adult with emotional and psychological issues. Though she is affected negatively by her past, she can appreciate the beautiful moments in life, such as when the silly antics of her son make her laugh (quote/example from poem). Despite this happiness, her life is still veiled by the dark shadow of her past. A person’s childhood shapes his or her future, and the speaker of the poem cannot escape the horrors of her young life. She opens the reader’s eyes about the realities of her life so that others can see her pain and, perhaps, come to terms with their own.