

Unit 3: Writing Techniques

Lesson 1 College Writing

In this lesson you'll discover ways college writing is similar to but also different from most of your high school writing. In college writing, you're expected to reveal the quality of your thinking as well as your command of the English language and your awareness of organizational structures and rhetorical strategies.

Often high school writing is open-ended. Your teacher may simply ask you to write a descriptive essay about a place that's important to you. At times college writing may be even more open-ended than that. You may need to choose your own topic from several very general options. On the other hand, college writing may be more specific. You may have to write a precise analysis of a specific published work. Therefore, you need to be prepared to do both wide-open and extremely focused writing.

A list of the key terms can be found below:

- **Argument:** a persuasive essay that uses logic and evidence to support an opinion
- **Audience:** the intended readers to whom the author is writing
- **Colloquialism:** a phrase or expression used in informal speech and writing, but not in formal writing
- **Evidence:** a specific detail, such as a fact or expert opinion, that supports a reason
- **Syntax:** the structure of word order in a sentence
- **Thesis statement:** the sentence that states the main idea of an essay
- **Tone:** the attitude of the writer toward the topic or subject

What do you think about when you're reading a newspaper article? Many people think only about the facts in the story. But do you ever think about what you're *thinking* as you read a newspaper article? Or about your intellectual and emotional responses to the words on the page? Part of being a good writer is learning the art of metacognition, which is thinking about thinking. It's one of the most important skills in writing at a college level. And once you get the hang of it, you can apply it to all your reading and writing. The key to being a good college writer is to *think actively about the thinking* that goes into your writing. But *what* should you think about your writing? For one thing, think about the *goal* of the particular piece of writing you're working on. Everything you write should serve that goal. Ask yourself of everything you write: does this serve my goal for this piece of writing?

The writer of a newspaper article wants to convey facts. Writers of novels want to tell an entertaining or compelling story. Writers of television commercials want to sell a product. College students want to demonstrate their knowledge of the topic they've been asked to discuss. Each of these writing situations has a specific, definable goal. When we read, we need an "inner critic" that examines how others are using language to achieve their goals. When we write we need an "inner critic" that determines how we can best use language to achieve our goals. When you watch a television commercial, part of you watches and absorbs the information being presented. But another part of you, your "inner critic," knows that the people who wrote the commercial have the goal of selling you that product. This "inner critic" monitors your reaction to the commercial and comments on the commercial's quality. In developing your skills at metacognition, learn to ask questions of your inner critic. When you decide a commercial is pretty good or a newspaper article or essay was well written, ask your inner critics, why was it so good? What did the writer do that affected me in the way it did? What was the writer's goal? How did the writer achieve it? This kind of thinking takes practice, but once you get used to it, you'll find that you're more aware of the way language works around you. You'll be a stronger, more active reader. And when you turn that awareness to your own writing, you'll be on your way to becoming a college—level writer.

Two elements of writing are especially useful to approach in a metacognitive way: structure and style. Let's look at structure first. One of the main ways college writing differs from other kinds of writing is that it's almost always *argumentative*. That doesn't mean you start a fight; it means you state an opinion and support it. One goal of college writing is to demonstrate your knowledge of a given topic to your professors. Most professors won't require you to give them a long list of all the things you know about a certain topic. Instead, they often ask you to produce an *argument* in which you integrate your own ideas about a topic with your knowledge from the lectures, discussions, and readings. For example, a political science professor may ask you: "Now that we've discussed the concept of representative democracy, write an essay that applies this concept to a social or political institution of your choice." The word *argument* isn't used in this question, but you'll notice that the question asks you to *evaluate*, and evaluation requires a kind of argument. In almost every instance in which you're asked to write an academic essay, you'll be expected to produce an argument. In a writing assignment, it's a good idea to keep an eye out for words like

evaluate, assess, apply, claim, and respond. These words ask you to produce an argument of one kind or another. Keying in on these words and what they're asking you to do can help you decide how to focus your argument. To do this, you'll need to think about all the things you know about the topic at hand, in this case, the concept of representative democracy. Then you'll need to find a current political institution, preferably one with which you're very familiar, and develop an argument that discusses how these concepts apply to your topic. Next you'll need to work out a thesis. Remember a thesis is a concise statement of your argument. You can think of a thesis as having two parts, which serve two different functions. The topic section identifies the topic of your argument. In this case, it would identify the social or political institution you're going to discuss. The comment section makes a point about that topic. In this case, it would be a statement of how your topic relates to the concepts of representative democracy. Your thesis should also be an arguable statement. That means it says something that isn't obvious to your audience. For example, the statement "The Roman Empire under Julius Caesar was not a representative democracy" isn't a very good thesis, because it's just states a known fact. You can think of your thesis as the controlling idea of your essay. It controls the way you say things. The thesis provides you with a goal in writing. Once you've stated that goal, you can use your inner critic to decide which way to express a certain idea or to order your ideas to achieve that goal. Just as your inner critic can tell you whether a television commercial is doing a good job of selling you a product, it can tell you whether your essay is doing a good job of selling your argument to your audience. "I've been the president of the student council for a year now, and I really believe it follows Jeffersonian standards of government." In many contexts this might be an acceptable thesis, but in college it wouldn't be. For one thing, it doesn't directly reference representative government. Another problem is that in college you have to use evidence that has an academic authority. This usually means that you use some of the readings from your class to support your argument. Your experience in the student council may help support your claims, but you probably don't need to mention it in the thesis statement. A college version of this thesis might look like this: *School student councils are an example of representative democracy not only because they give the students a voice in the management of the high school, but also because they follow Jeffersonian criteria in doing so.* This thesis is better because it's more focused than the first, and it indicates that the paper will rely on specific facts dealt with in a political science class for its support. It also sets the reader up for what's coming: a discussion of Jefferson's ideas on how representation and decision-making work in a representative democracy, and how the operations of the student council fit those ideas. The best way to sell your argument to your audience is to give them lots of evidence. In college writing, the kinds of evidence you can use are much more limited than in many other kinds of writing. Generally personal opinion isn't considered acceptable evidence in college writing. So you'll probably want to follow your thesis about student council and Jefferson's criteria about representative democracies by explaining Jefferson's criteria and showing how the student council meets each one. How to structure your evidence is another challenge. Some arguments may begin with the least important evidence and lead up to larger, more important ideas. Others may begin with the strongest evidence and follow up with less important evidence. There's no one "right way" to structure

an argument. That's why it's so important to use your inner critic to evaluate the effectiveness of the structure of your argument. As you work out a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, even a group of paragraphs, ask yourself, "Is this the most effective way to achieve my goal, to sell my idea?" If it isn't, ask yourself, "Why not?" The answer will provide you with hints for coming up with a more effective organization. When structuring an argument for a piece of college writing, you might want to use one of the most common argumentative structures: the deductive argument. Deductive arguments move from general statements to specific statements. One classic example of a deductive argument is: All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal. This kind of argument is one of the oldest and most reliable forms of logical structure. For our political science paper, a deductive argument might take the following form: According to Jeffersonian criteria, representative democracies have three traits: people vote for someone to represent them in a legislature, the legislator casts votes on issues, and the legislator can later be voted in or out of office by the people. The student council has three traits: students vote for someone to represent them in a legislature, the legislator casts votes on issues, and the legislator can later be voted in or out of office by the students. Therefore, the student council meets Jeffersonian criteria as a representative democracy. Now you have to decide the most effective way of presenting your evidence. For example, should you include the actual text of the student council charter? Should you include a citation from Jefferson in which he makes the statement you attribute to him? Maybe now's the time to discuss your experience with the student council? And if you do decide to include these things, where would be the best place to put them? These are difficult questions, but remember, the answer to these questions should also be the answer to the question "How can I best achieve my goal for this essay?"

The thesis of your paper, the ideas you use as evidence, and the order in which you present your ideas make up the structure, or form, of your essay. Another way to use your inner critic to find the most effective way to present your ideas is to consider the style of your essay. When we talk about style, we're talking not about *what* you say, but about *how* you say it. Think about the similarities and differences in these three statements:

The current methods of decision—making in Bosnian politics bear little resemblance to democracy as it was described by Thomas Jeffersonian.

Millions of men, women, and children in Bosnia would greatly benefit from having a voice in their own government.

The time is now to end the suffering in Bosnia and to implement institutions of representative democracy in that impoverished, war—torn country.

Each of these statements says essentially the same thing: political institutions in Bosnia don't fit the concepts of representative democracy. But the way they say it differs greatly. The first is formal and emotionally detached. The second is still formal, but hints at an appeal to emotional factors. The third promises an argument that will be passionate as well as informative. Each of these statements could make an effective thesis in our hypothetical political science essay. But because they differ in style, the kinds of evidence they're likely to use will probably vary. There's no one right style for an essay. Use one you think will be most

effective in achieving your goal. When deciding on a style for a particular piece of writing, you think of the task as *finding* a tone. We use different tones, or voices, for different occasions. For example, we talk differently with our friends than we do with our parents. Think of your tone as the *personality* your readers hear when they read your essay. In determining the appropriate tone for your purposes, consider the *distance* between you and your reader. If you're well acquainted with your audience, for example, you may feel comfortable using a less formal tone. If you are writing to an academic audience, such as your political science professor, it's usually better to use a more formal tone. In general, however, the best guideline is: if you have any doubts about which tone to adopt, go with a *moderate* tone. You can use emotional language, or even humor when appropriate, but if you have any question about appropriateness, err on the side of caution. One of the worst mistakes a writer can make is to be too informal, or *colloquial*, at the wrong time. This can undermine your credibility as a writer and cause your audience to not take your ideas seriously. Two important elements of tone are diction and syntax. Diction refers to the specific words you select to express your idea. For example, consider these three sentences:

1. Last night we massacred the Bluejays!

Last night we defeated the Bluejays.

Last night our team celebrated a substantial victory over the Bluejays.

The difference in the sentences is diction, or word choice. The first sentence is informal, the second formal, and the third even more formal. Looking at your use of formal and informal diction is one of the most common ways to evaluate your own writing. Informal diction often relies on slang and other colloquial forms of expression. In general, it's best to use informal diction sparingly in college writing and only when you're absolutely sure it's appropriate. The other important tonal element to evaluate is syntax. Syntax refers to the grammatical structure of your writing. Just as with diction, we can distinguish between formal and informal syntax. Informal syntax tends to resemble spoken language. Listen to these three sentences:

1. Vern's a tall fellow, six feet, maybe six two.

Vern is a tall fellow. He's six feet, maybe six two.

Vern is a tall fellow. He's six feet tall; he might even be six two.

Notice how the tone grows more formal as the sentence structure changes. The first is grammatically incorrect, but would be appropriate in a conversation among friends. The second is still not perfect, but does not split the two separate ideas into two sentences. Finally, the third presents the ideas in grammatically accurate dependent and independent clauses. With syntax, even more than diction, it's important to err on the side of caution when determining the level of formality to use. Your credibility as a writer will suffer if your audience finds a grammatical error in your writing, even if you meant it as a device for setting an informal tone. And loss of credibility makes it less likely that you'll achieve your goal in that piece of writing.

College writing can seem like a mystery to high school students. However, the differences between high school writing and college writing are fairly clear, and competent high school writers can expand their skills and master the art of college-level essay writing.

To understand the differences between high school and college writing, study the chart below. It compares the expectations for six major elements of essay writing: the Assignment, the Thesis, the Body of the Paper, the Conclusion, Editing and Revising, and Formatting.

1. The Assignment

In High School

In College

1.1 The *teacher* is interested in *teaching* you writing techniques, finding out what you know, and measuring how you present it. The process of writing, the content of what you write, the method in which you write your content, and the experience you have while writing your essay are all equally important

College/University differs from high school in that *you* are expected to *learn*. This is quite different from *being taught*.

The professor is only interested in what you know about a specific topic shown through your expert essay writing. The content of your essay must communicate as a stand-alone document. Especially at "major" institutions, your essay may be one of 500 or more being evaluated. If you really want to do well, make sure your paper says what you want it to.

1.2 The content of what you write in high school is often general information. Theses tend to be broad, supporting details can be of any type, and conclusions can just rephrase the introduction.

The content of college writing is more specific. Your ideas should be distilled, with a succinct thesis statement. Your supporting details should be crystal clear and illuminate both the idea and the opinion of your thesis. Your concluding statements should convey resolution and a sense of completeness to your reader.

1.3 High school writing assignments often budget classroom time to discuss the assignment and pick relevant topics. Often the teacher has an element of control or guidance in topic selection.

For college writing a student must carefully analyze the assignment to ensure the paper topic they've selected on their own meets the specific requirements of the assignment. If in doubt, go ask the professor well before the paper is due! The student is in full control of the thesis selection. Professors will often provide suggestions, rather than become involved in assisting you in writing your essay. One approach to selecting your subject is to ponder, "What is the professor looking for as the ideal essay for this assignment? What would he or she write? How can I write to this ideal?"

2. The Thesis

In High School

In College

2.1 The paper has a topic and sometimes an opinion about the topic. Topic specificity can vary from general to very specific.

The paper begins with an effective thesis that is uniquely your slant on the topic. It must be a manageable (not too broad, not too specific) concept, and you must be specific and clear in your thesis.

3. The Body of the Paper

In High School

In College

3.1 In high school writing, it's usually acceptable for the body of the essay to be unfocused; excessive wordiness ("padding," "fluff," or "filler") is tolerated.

Clear examples or data that strongly substantiates your argument must support the presentation of concepts and arguments accurately and appropriately. Add only those details that support your argument. Linear thinking that keeps to the thesis is crucial.

3.2 The five-paragraph essay (intro, body, conclusion) is the governing organizational framework a teacher looks for.

A pattern of organization must be apparent. It must defend and support the thesis statement. There are many organizational schemes that work here: deductive or inductive logical order, question and answer format, explanation and analysis format. Process, narrative, descriptive, comparative, cause and effect, problem and solution, classification and the classic argument paper are all acceptable ways to organize a college essay.

3.3 Your adolescent "voice" is acceptable. The use of "I" in bringing across your point can be tolerable to a point.

Confidence in yourself and your knowledge of your subject must be projected through your writing. This can be accomplished by eliminating the use of "I" to communicate your point. Instead, use an omniscient expert perspective. "Don't apologize or rationalize your thesis or the information that supports your thesis. This will weaken your credibility as an expert. Write boldly and assertively, even if you're faking it about a subject!

3.4 Tone can be conversational or casual in many cases. The formality of your writing tone can range from relaxed and exactly how you speak to semi-formal academic language.

Your tone in college writing should be refined and should speak directly to your specific audience—a college professor who is usually an expert in whatever you're writing about. You should speak as an equal in a tone that's articulate, adult, confident, consistent, and controlled. Colloquial language, massive use of contractions, slang, and sentence fragments should all be avoided. The level of formality in your tone should reflect the formality your instructor presents in class. If it's a loose course with lots of humor, your writing can be modified to an easy, humorous approach to your subject (while maintaining expertise); if the instructor is stiff and runs a tight ship, make sure your writing reflects this level of formality. If you must err in tone, err on the side of formality, rather than submitting a paper that sounds like teenage writing. You want to sound like an academic, speaking to another academic.

3.5 Supporting details may come from anywhere: from the author, from undefined sources, from vaguely referenced sources. Often a teacher will be teaching citations only when the unit is a formal research paper, otherwise there isn't enough time in the day to teach, practice, implement, and assess the correct usage of quoting source material.

The supporting details and illustrating examples you present in your paper must clearly support your thesis. It must be clear whose thoughts and ideas you're presenting. Accurately make reference or cite experts whose material you use. It's completely acceptable to support your ideas with other people's thoughts and research. Expert quotes lend reliability to your thoughts. Do **not** try to pass off material that isn't your own as something you've just dreamed up. Your honesty will be at issue. Plagiarism is an offence that could cost you your college career. Cite and cite correctly! If you're unsure of which format of citation to use, ask your professors what they prefer. A reference to the quoted author within the paragraph sometimes is all that's necessary. A formal list of works cited may be the preferred style. If the assignment doesn't specify, ask. Again, you're trying to show your expertise in your subject. It's assumed that you're already an expert in writing formal essays.

3.6 Vague and obscure sources are acceptable in high school writing, as is a body of an essay that has no concrete details, just opinion or a continuation of the thesis.

Use only valid source material. Quote from the experts in the field. Use quality periodicals, journals, and text to support your thesis. You're proving in your paper that you know how to become an expert on a subject. You don't have to be an expert before you write the paper. This is a very important point to remember for maintaining your sanity. It's also related to choosing your topic carefully. Don't choose a topic that requires too much self-education. You'll quickly run out of time to write your paper if you must spend too much time in the library gathering information. Finding correct supporting details is also closely related to analyzing your assignment. Make sure you understand your assignment before you spend a week in the stacks of your graduate library learning about some idiosyncratic subject that doesn't meet your professor's assignment. Sometimes it's all right there in your head, but most of the time you'll need to gather information from other sources.

3.7 Paragraphing is important, but the seamless shift from detail to following detail isn't necessarily a skill expected in high school writing.

Transitions between paragraphs are very important: They show that you're a competent and able writer. They help the flow between introductory thesis paragraph and supporting detail and example paragraphs. They make the links between all your supporting details. And they show the reader when you're finished with details and when you're tying up all the loose ends in the conclusion. They prove that you're a master of your subject in addition to a very capable writer whose skill of making seamless transitions stands apart from those who merely write down information in an essay.

3.8 Diction in high school writing is still a "work in progress." Students are rapidly developing their vocabulary through direct lessons and through all the experiences in their life. A person's written vocabulary is more extensive than their spoken vocabulary, but often in high school writing a teacher will accept essays using the language the student speaks rather than a more formal vocabulary.

Diction is the skill of word selection. Your job as a college writer is to use the vocabulary of a scholar. Vary your diction to eliminate repetition. Use active verbs and colorful modifiers. A thesaurus is generally available in your word processing software—use it!! Don't overuse big words though, especially when simple terms explain your ideas clearly.

3.9 Syntax and sentence fluency are the skills of a developed and refined writer. High school writers are often very weak in this area. In addition, the focus of an assignment in high school is often not directed at syntax. Of greater concern are organization, mechanics of language, and content.

Syntax can also be described as sentence fluency. It's a valuable tool in writing that creates rhythm and adds additional meaning to your thoughts. Sentence fluency and accurate syntax usage are very subtle and useful tools in essay writing. The way you present words often develops underlying meaning and strengthens your point. Break out of overuse of only one way of presenting ideas. Using only complex sentence structure or stark, bare sentence format can bog your writing down with style problems. Vary the subject-predicate order. Mix things up! Use both complex sentences with interesting punctuation, and short staccato presentation of information. Work on syntax!!

4. Conclusions

In High School

In College

4.1 An adequate conclusion for a high school essay restates the thesis statement, refers to the main points in the body of the essay, and eases the reader out of the essay.

Conclusion is the frosting on the cake. Your conclusion should make reference to all the major points in your paper presented in both the thesis and in supporting evidence. Your conclusion should leave the reader (your professor) with the feeling that you've completely covered all that needs to be said. You may also use the conclusion to tie your subject to your own life, life in general, or to the reader's beliefs or philosophies. Take care not to assume too much about your reader. It would be a mistake to offend your instructor by making conclusions directed at them in a way that draws conclusions about them as a person or professional. Draw conclusions about your subject, and then if appropriate, connect your subject to the course or your professor's ideas or ideals. Do this only if they are apparent; don't make connections or ties to anything controversial unless you're sure this is a slant that you and your professor both share.

5. Editing and Revisions

In High School

In College

5.1 A high school student knows to check for mechanical errors and will make a brief attempt at surveying the content and checking for accuracy in details and citations. Are there an introduction, three supporting paragraphs in the body, and a conclusion (five-paragraph essay format)? Often your teacher will schedule peer editing or writing group lessons to help the editing process along. The teacher often has a checklist of what must be evaluated and guides his or her students toward an acceptable draft of their essays through prompt, direct instruction for editing and revising.

This is a solo effort; there will be no class time given for editing and revising. Check your organization of your essay—is it logical and apparent? Check your content—is it accurate? Check your thesis and supporting details—are they clearly connected? Do you need to go back and revise the thesis to dovetail exactly with what the body of your essay says? Have you correctly cited quotes and specific facts? Be sure that your mechanics of language are perfect. Spell check, grammar check, and email your best friend or sister and have them read your work for errors. One good way to edit for mechanical errors is to read through your writing backwards. Start at the end of the paper and move from right to left, from bottom to top until you reach the beginning of your essay. Errors of the mechanical kind, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and diction sometimes jump off the page this way. Have you paragraphed correctly? Does each new thought begin a new paragraph? All of the basics of proper English should be checked before you submit your essay. And finally reread the assignment: has your essay clearly met the parameters of the assignment?

6. Formatting

In High School

6.1

Many variations in formatting seem to be acceptable in high school. Creative font selection, big or little type, non-standard spacing and margins, and colorful or absent title pages all seem to work. Papers are almost always submitted in class, as a paper document.

In College

The formatting of the essay can and does matter. Make sure you use the standards: font size (12 point), an acceptable font (Times New Roman, for example), correct spacing (single space with in paragraphs and double space between paragraphs), standard column widths, standard top and bottom margins, correct indentations and tabbing for long quotes, the proper use of bulleted lists, a stark title page with only the necessary information, and your last name and page number placed in a consistent location on every page. Use the default format settings in MS Word if you're unsure of proper standards. Your works cited page should have the title centered, the first line of every entry extended left, and the following lines indented. Entries in a works cited list should be alphabetized by the author's last name or by the first word of the entry if the work is anonymous. A blank page at the end of the essay should be provided for comments from your professor. Never submit a handwritten essay. Find out if the professors want the document in a certain program (MS Word is the standard), if they want a copy on disk, or if they want a copy sent by email.

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Lesson 1 Assessment(s)

- Complete 3.01 Discussion: *What Is College Writing?*
- Complete 3.01 Quiz: *College Writing*
- Complete 3.01 Discussion: *Writing Lab: Peer Review*