



Center for Writing and Speaking

E NO. 13 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

Transitioning to College Writing

While many enter college intensely prepared for the workload and style of writing that college requires of them, plenty of students feel less prepared and disoriented by the idea of college writing. Particularly for first year students, this transition can be a challenge that is both frustrating and rewarding. Regardless of your background and how you feel about writing, here are tips to help ease the transition into college writing. Above all, keep one thing on your mind as you make the plunge—nothing else matters except how you improve from this point on.

Note Taking and Class Participation

Taking good notes and participating in class are the building blocks to good college writing. They prepare you to approach writing papers and generate material for you to draw on in your writing. Here are a few guidelines for note taking and active class participation.

- *Do all of your assigned reading before the class period.* You might have had classes in high school where you could skip or just skim the reading and still be fine. This thinking will become detrimental once you hit higher level classes!
- *Find the method of class participation that works best for you.* Many professors build ways for quiet types to participate—some have the class turn in discussion questions every period, some allow for weekly reflective writing, and some require course journals that are periodically graded throughout the semester. If you feel uncomfortable talking in class, put a great deal of effort into these reflective practices. If your professor is not offering any of these ways to participate, either try asking them to reconsider, or come to class prepared with a question or two about the reading that you can participate with in the discussion.
- *Try a few different note taking styles.* Believe it or not, there are many different note taking styles developed by professors and students to aid organization of material. Some popular types include the Cornell note taking method, visual graphing of information, or outlining the structure of the lecture or discussion. Search around on the internet or talk to Academic Advising in order to find the one that's right for you.
- *Review your notes with a friend from class.* As Keith Hjortshoj reveals in *The Transition to College Writing*, students catch only about 35% of the important information revealed in a class lecture (27). Sharing what you learned with a classmate can help you fill in each other's gaps.

Moving Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay

Many students enter college extremely skilled in writing one type of essay—the five-paragraph or “keyhole” essay that consists of an introduction, three paragraphs with points that support the main idea, and a conclusion that restates the introduction. While this is a good initial structure, moving away from this model of writing can help you grow as a writer.

- *Consider your audience.* American students are often trained to write a five-paragraph essay in preparation for standardized testing—a blank audience who knows nothing about who you are and grades your writing based on a concrete rubric. In college, your professors get to know you in class, are interested in your ideas, and want you to grow. You can take risks in your writing, and you should adopt a voice that speaks to your professor and classmates rather than a grading robot.

AGNES SCOTT



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Transitioning to College Writing, Continued

- *Rather than sticking exclusively to this structure, consider the elements that make all types of writing clear, concise, and elegant.* As the five-paragraph essay suggests, essays should have a discernible beginning, middle, and end. Rather than a stick-straight structure that constantly refers back to a roadmap presented with the introduction, allow your essays to grow and flow, with starting and stopping.
- *Your writing should center on a clear and concrete argument.* Readers are expecting you to develop an argument that is articulated in a thesis statement, supported both in your introduction and through the paragraphs in your essay, and wrapped up in your conclusion. Your argument should be sound, based in evidence, and readers are expecting you to address opposition to your argument as well throughout your paper.

The Interchangeable Stages of Writing

In American high schools, students are often taught to believe that writing is a linear process. This is simply untrue—in the writing of this handout, for instance, the writer went through several drafts, asked for the input from fellow tutors and from Dr. Cozzens, and tinkered with the text for a long time. It is a good idea to have a frame with which to approach writing, but consider the listed steps below to be switchable rather than a linear process. These steps are explored in [The Transition to College Writing](#) by Keith Hjortshoj.

- *Planning.* Planning what and how you will write is an essential step, one that writers often start with first but can integrate into the writing process at any point. Exercises like brainstorming and mapping can help generate ideas and provide direction for your writing. Gathering research, taking notes, and rereading sources texts are also great ways to start planning your essay. Once you have gathered material, try to create an outline that gives a rundown of your argument.
- *Composing.* This is the actual act of writing, where you are writing new material for your essay.
- *Revising.* Revising is different from editing. Instead of a cursory polish of grammar and spelling mistakes, revising gives you the chance to really see what's working in your paper and what isn't. Some people revise extensively as they write, presenting a mostly intact draft when they are finished. Others go through several drafts, cutting and pasting paragraphs, ideas, and sources constantly as they write.
- *Editing.* This stage is where you pick apart the grammar issues, double-check that your spell check didn't make any mistakes, and clean up any other surface-level things. Reading out your essay loud or asking someone else to do it is a good way of catching small mistakes.

What now?

As you start writing your first paper, take a deep breath and find something about the text or subject you're exploring that excites, confuses, or angers you. Try out many different types of writing styles as you get more comfortable with academic writing. Talk to your professor, and send them a draft ahead of time if you can. When the due date comes, make sure you titled your document as required and release your first college paper into the world!

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