

What Does it Take to Become an Effective Writer in College

The learning environment of college is strikingly different from that of most high schools, and the shift into this new academic culture can be disorienting, even to the best students. In every subject, the biggest single shift has to do with motivation and control: college students must be self-motivated and active learners responsible for their own attendance, performance, and learning. Most colleges have writing centers and other forms of academic support available, but students must seek out that help rather than wait for a teacher to show them the way.

With that overarching consideration in mind, the following is a list of abilities related to writing and reading that make for success in college courses. Remember that college students are often expected to write in ALL of their subjects; writing is not merely special behavior reserved for English class.

Write fluently and understand the process.

Students should have enough familiarity and comfort with the writing process that they can produce at least 1-2 pages in answer to an in-class essay question and 2-3 pages at home in response to an assigned text. Their high school experience should include informal writing such as journals, brainstorming, and impromptu essays as well as formal papers which have gone through multiple drafts and peer reviews. Students should know that most writers usually find a thesis and organization by writing; experienced writers seldom start with a thesis and outline and then proceed to fill in the blanks.

Recognize and employ audience, purpose, and genre.

Students should understand from experience that writing is done for many different audiences, for a variety of purposes, and in a wide range of genres or forms. They should, for example, be able to summarize the argument of a newspaper editorial, report on an event they witnessed, critique the action of a public figure, argue for some action to be taken in their school or neighborhood, and analyze the theme of a short story. They should see the rhetorical difference between writing a letter to a friend and an application essay to a college admissions committee. Experience in creative writing, science lab reporting, and the written application of math concepts to real world situations are also excellent preparation for the breadth of writing they will encounter in college. What counts as evidence in one discipline may not matter much in another; attention to audience, purpose, and genre gives students a sense of what material, data, and vocabulary are appropriate in which situation.

Argue from an interpretation of data and an analysis of texts.

In science or social studies, students should be able to organize an expository essay according to a debatable assertion that draws on a reasoned interpretation of observations, measurements, graphs, and charts. In humanities and the arts, students should be able to develop a thesis based on critical thinking about the elements, components, or themes of

a text (A “text” in college might included a novel, a painting, or a costume). The thesis or main assertion should grow out of a problem posed by the analysis or interpretation; a position is more than an opinion and should be firmly rooted in data, text, or an already existing debate on an issue. The strict “5-paragraph theme,” taught so frequently in high schools, is too rigid to prepare students adequately for the range of papers they will have to write in college, but students should be familiar with the general structure of introduction/body/conclusion for an expository paper or an essay exam question.

Search for and evaluate research material in various forms, cite sources, and understand why bibliographic references are important.

Students should be comfortable with book and web versions of indexes of popular journals and newspapers. They should understand what academic journals are and under what circumstances these journals are necessary for research. Students have an advantage in college if they are comfortable with email, web searches, and website construction. However, many web-savvy students don’t know that a quick web search does not exhaust the possible sources of information and analysis; many don’t even understand that they must judge the value and trustworthiness of any source. Beginning college students should at least recognize that all sources aren’t created equal, especially on the web. In addition, plagiarism is a major problem in colleges today; students in high school should begin to learn how to cite sources responsibly and understand why using someone else’s ideas as one’s own is a very serious crime in the academic world.

Have a reasonable command of Standard English as it is written and know how to address patterns of error. Be able to find the subject and verb in a sentence.

Students should be prepared not only to revise papers for sense and development, but to proofread and edit for errors and omissions. Spelling counts in college – even in the most informal settings – but not everybody in college is a great speller. Students who are not confident spellers should know how to use a computer spell-check and know the limits of the spell-checker’s ability to catch mistakes. College professors expect Standard English usage in papers, even though it is generally accepted these days that dialect variations in English are legitimate forms of speech in home and many public situations. Students should be able to catch in proofreading common dialect interferences such as subject/verb agreement (“*she go* to the store”) or transcribed constructions used primarily in speech (“I *should of* known”). An extensive knowledge of grammatical terminology isn’t necessary, but students should at least know how to find a subject and verb in a sentence. Professors complain most about sentence boundary problems – run-ons or fragments – and these can be corrected if writers analyze their sentences for subject/verb structure.