Guide to Becoming 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 shift has to do with motivation and control: college students must be self-motivated and active learners responsible for their own attendance, performance, and development. Most colleges have writing centers and other forms of academic support available, but students often 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. This guide includes links to other resources available on Temple University's Student Success Center website. If you are a current Temple student, you should also consider visiting the Writing Center to discuss any questions you might have. A trained tutor will help you with *your* individual writing needs—at any step of the writing process from brainstorming to revision, for any writing project large or small, for any type of class (or even if it's not for class), whether you're a first year student or at the final stage of your PhD.

Realize that you are *not* a "terrible writer," nor is there such a thing as a "perfect writer."
Every day, Writing Center tutors encounter students who apologize for being "terrible writers." But here's the truth: good writing is the result of a difficult process, and oftentimes "terrible" writing is part of that process. You may imagine that your favorite author writes beautiful, grammatical, perfect sentiments every time she sets pen to paper, but it takes a lot of effort to appear effortless. A published text may appear flawless, but long before it made it to press, that writing likely underwent multiple revisions by the author and was probably shaped by several peer reviewers, editors, and publishers. Even award-winning, professional writers struggle with writer's block, clunky sentences, redundancy, clichés, irrelevant tangents, lapses in grammar, being unable to think of the right word, sloppy organization, rejection, and feeling hopelessly inadequate. Just as runners do not win marathons until they have spent months training, just as standup comedians finetune their jokes in front of dozens of small audiences before ever hitting the bigtime, and just as impresarios do not sit at pianos for the first time and instantly know how to convert the keys into harmonious music, good writers improve their skills by reading, practicing, reflecting on their craft, using the resources available to them, seeking and being open to feedback, and revising. Abandoning the pretense of perfection is the first step toward improving your writing.

Understand that *all* departments have courses that require college students to write.
Writing is not merely special behavior reserved for English class, and even in English classes, writing does not always involve analyzing literature. Whether you're a business major writing SWOT analyses, an engineering major writing lab reports, or a physical therapy major writing patient progress reports, you will be expected to grow as a proficient writer within your field while pursuing your degree. Likewise, as you complete your general education, elective, and major requirements, you should know that what counts as evidence in one discipline may not matter much in another. In addition, different disciplines value different qualities of writing. For example, while the writing done in a philosophy class might favor thorough, nuanced examination of an idea, the writing for a business class might favor short, concise points. While a chemistry lab report

might insist on measurable, definitive facts and clear explanations of reproducible procedures, an argument paper in an English class might prefer that an issue be comprehensively considered from multiple, competing points of view. A movie review for that same English class, however, might value a persuasive, engaging tone above all else. And while ambiguity, mystery, and creativity can be great in a short story, such qualities could be scorned by the professor of a history course. Two writing assignments that are common across many disciplines are the annotated bibliography and the literature review. The best way to learn what kind of writing is valued in a particular field is to read successful writing from that field. Most course instructors will assign as required reading examples of what they deem successful writing.

Write fluently and understand *your* writing process.
College instructors often expect students to produce at least 1-2 pages in answer to an in-class essay question and 1-3 pages as homework in response to an assigned text. Term papers may be 5-15 pages or more, and few professors are fooled by "fluff." The best way to ensure you will have something to say to fill all those pages is through a combination of timely advanced preparation, thorough research, and full engagement with the course materials. You should also understand the full writing process and experiment with how *you* can most comfortably and successfully complete each step of it. Most writers usually find a thesis and organization only *after* they have done a significant part of the writing; experienced writers seldom start with a thesis and outline and then proceed to fill in the blanks. Likewise, if you are writing a research paper, it is very unlikely you will know what to say until *after* you have done most of the research. The purpose of a college research paper is to *build upon* what experts have already said about your subject, and you cannot do that if you have not yet listened to what they have said.

Recognize and employ audience, purpose, and genre.
Writing is done for many different audiences, for a variety of purposes, and in a wide range of genres or forms. There is a rhetorical difference between a text message to your crush, an email to your professor requesting a due date extension, a research paper analyzing the effects of gentrification, and a restaurant review posted online. Attention to audience, purpose, and genre will give you a sense of what tone, data, and vocabulary are appropriate in a writing situation.

Argue from an interpretation of data and an analysis of texts.
In science or social studies, you will need to 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, you will need to be able to identify a research problem, formulate a thesis, and articulate a thesis statement based on critical thinking about the components, themes, meaning, influence, or context of a text. A "text" in college might include a novel, a painting, an historical style of clothing, the body of tweets associated with a hashtag, a politician's body language in a televised debate, or the architecture of a Gothic cathedral, to give a few examples. 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.

Evaluate sources by how reputable they are.

For many writing assignments, you will need to conduct research. A quick web search may suffice for some papers, but many research papers will require you to use the library's academic databases to find scholarly, peer-reviewed sources. These sources, which come from academic journals or books, are different from other types of sources like websites, newspaper articles, or encyclopedia entries. A scholarly source is written by someone with expertise in the field (a "scholar"), has been checked for accuracy by other experts ("peer-reviewed"), and generally gives a more in-depth, comprehensive, and thoughtful examination of the subject than a newspaper article or encyclopedia entry usually would. Such sources are often longer, denser, and more challenging than the texts we typically encounter in daily life, yet it is essential to comprehend these sources in order to faithfully summarize and refer to them in our own writing. Regardless of what kind of source you are using, a researcher must always judge a source's value and trustworthiness by examining its credentials, comparing it to similar sources, and thinking critically about its information and claims.

Develop an effective research strategy.

A successful college writer needs to be able to develop effective research strategies, which includes recalibrating a search string whenever the initial search terms yield results that are too few, too many, or too off-topic. The research process is the first major step in writing a research paper, and you should allot ample time to locating and reviewing appropriate sources. Nevertheless, you should also develop strategies for assessing, narrowing down, and prioritizing what could be a potentially massive field of preexisting scholarship in order to avoid being overwhelmed. If the opposite is your problem—if you are having trouble finding enough sources about your topic—realize that the sources you include in your essay do not need to be about your precise topic in order to be relevant to your argument. For instance, if you are analyzing representations of race in a recently released horror movie, you may not find any scholarly articles about *that specific movie's* treatment of race; however, you may still be able to find useful ideas in articles that are about representations of race in the horror genre or in movies *in general*, even if those articles make no reference to the specific film you will be discussing. You should also keep in mind that research is not simply "the first step" of writing a research paper; as you complete your paper and your ideas grow and morph, you will likely need to conduct more research to confirm, support, and supplement these evolving ideas. Librarians are happy to assist with your research needs.

Take citation seriously.

What constitutes plagiarism is rarely discussed in class, yet a single instance of plagiarism in a writing assignment, even if it occurs accidentally or does not resemble a "classic case" of plagiarism, can have serious repercussions. It is essential to know when to cite sources and to learn how to do so according to your discipline's style guide. Citing your sources does not make your writing appear unoriginal; quite the contrary, citing, incorporating, and synthesizing other scholars makes your original writing appear comprehensive, authoritative, and knowledgeable.

Have a reasonable command of Standard English as it is written and know how to address patterns of error.

Knowledge of grammatical terminology isn't necessary, but you should be able to [find the 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. [Modifier errors](#) also frequently interfere with sentence clarity. You should allot time in your writing process not only to [proofread for errors and omissions](#) prior to submitting your work but also to substantially [revise papers for sense, organization, and development](#) prior to proofreading. Your editing process should also include attention to [clarity](#) and [flow](#). Additionally, college professors often expect [formal "Standard English" usage](#) in papers, even though it is generally accepted these days that dialect variations in English are legitimate, rule-bound forms of speech. Students should learn to identify common dialect interferences such as subject-verb agreement (e.g. "she go to the store" rather than "she goes"), transcribed constructions used primarily in speech (e.g. "I should of known" rather than "should have"), and vernacular vocabulary or slang (e.g. "y'all," "jawn," or "def"). Good writing involves much, much more than being grammatically correct, and many professors value qualities such as clarity, thoughtfulness, and originality over grammatical and mechanical flawlessness; nevertheless, many readers do notice and judge such mistakes, and your professor may penalize them.