



Are you ready to Write?

As a college freshman, you will find that you are expected to do more writing, and more sophisticated writing, than you did in high school. In your first semester of college, you will probably be asked to do many types of writing, from short personal essays to long research papers, original arguments, science lab reports, data analysis, and of course, exams.

You will need to write in a variety of genres, and to adapt your writing style to different disciplines, ranging from literature to the hard sciences to the social sciences. Whatever college you choose, one thing is certain: you will be writing all the time.

There are many positive steps you can take now, before college, to prepare yourself for the writing challenges that await you. Start your own small collection of writing guides and handbooks, and keep them on or near your desk, and use them! If you don't already own the classic *The Elements of Style*, by Strunk and White, it's worth buying. Your first-year college writing teacher will probably ask you to buy a handbook that the English Department or Writing Program at your college has formally adopted.

Get used to having someone you like and trust read through your paper before you turn it in. In college, you may be asked to participate in peer editing sessions in your freshman composition class. This gives you a chance to see whether your writing is clear and accessible to someone other than yourself. Right now, you may have a friend, a parent, or a sibling who can be your "first reader," helping you not only with spelling and punctuation, but also the content and substance. Does your essay have a clear thesis? Is the paper well organized? Does your reader have questions that you need to address in a revision? Having a writing coach or first reader helps address these problems for you, and allows you to see your writing from your reader's perspective.

In college, you will have many demands on your time—extensive reading requirements in courses, long labs in science, and daily assignments—not to mention the siren call of extracurricular activities. Instill in yourself now the habit of writing a first draft of your assignment several days before it's due. This will allow time for your first reader to give you constructive feedback on problems and errors in your paper. It also allows you to have some time away from your paper, so you can approach it with a fresh eye when you sit down to revise. Above all, start now to avoid that pitfall of many a college freshman—writing the paper at the computer, the night before it is due.

When you register for your first college semester, include a composition or writing course. This will help you get off to a good start, reviewing the rules for writing a well-organized, fluent paper. Writing classes tend to be smaller than introductory lecture classes in other subjects, so you can count on receiving more one-on-one help from your

writing instructor. Even if your first college writing class is geared toward a particular discipline, such as English literature, composing papers throughout the semester will get you in good writing shape, since many of the skills you'll acquire or polish up, will be transferable to other disciplines that also require you to write.

Most colleges have writing centers or writing labs, where students who need help with a particular assignment can drop in to work with peer writing tutors or trained writing center staff. Many colleges also offer a writing tutor program, which enables students whose writing skills are not up to par to work with the same tutor over the semester or the entire school year. This is especially helpful if you experience "writer's block" or if you have been diagnosed with any learning disabilities that affect your ability to organize material.

Remember that knowing what kind of paper or report to write is your responsibility. If the assignment your professor hands out is not clear, visit her or him during office hours within a day after you get the assignment, and review it, making sure you are clear on what substantive matters must be covered, what reading or outside sources you may or must be familiar with before you write, how long the paper must be and whether the paper should be done on a computer, or whether you may write it by hand.

Try to think of writing as a skill that you need to practice constantly. In college, don't forget your social writing skills. Use e-mail and old fashioned snail-mail alike to stay in touch with your family and your old friends. Begin to think of yourself as a writer, even if your writing consists exclusively of notes home and college papers and reports. Learn to enjoy writing. In most college classes, writing is the way your professors evaluate your grasp of course material, and your ability to synthesize it. After college, your writing will often precede you in the world of business and professional interviews, meetings, and correspondence. If you begin now by working on the basics of organizing your thoughts, outlining them, coming up with a clear thesis, and finding supporting evidence for your thesis, you'll be on your way to mastering one of college's—and life's—greatest challenges.