

Making the Transition from High School to College Writing

Making the transition from high school writing to college writing can be intimidating. The freedom to choose your own topic, long and complicated assignments, and the pressure to perform well can overwhelm even experienced writers. The following guidelines for writing your paper may help make this transition easier.

Audience – Professors, instructors, and teaching assistants typically are your immediate audience. They determine your grade, so make sure your paper appeals to them by following the style and citation formats your professor prefers. And if you don't know what these are, ask. It's helpful to imagine that your paper's job is to make your audience an expert on the topic. This will make your writing much clearer and easier to follow.

Choosing a Topic – You'll likely write better about an aspect of the course that interests you rather than one you find dull. Make this aspect your topic. Gauge your topic so that it's not too broad or too narrow for the length and scope of your paper.

Thesis – Your thesis, arguably the most important part of your paper, is a statement (not a question) that makes a specific argument about your topic. To formulate a thesis, ask yourself what you want to accomplish with your paper. Try to sum up your argument in one sentence, although it's okay to have more than one sentence for complicated topics. You need to know exactly what you're trying to argue before writing your paper, or else you may wind up with five pages that don't relate to or argue your thesis.

Brainstorming/Prewriting – Always engage in some sort of prewriting or brainstorming before you begin your paper – for example, talk to your professor about your ideas, make lists of points you want to address, or freewrite on your chosen topic. Often, making an outline helps keep your paper focused, and making a flow chart lets you see how your argument fits together.

Research/Citations – Take full advantage of UT's excellent research resources. Books, scholarly journals, articles, and more are available to you. Also, librarians are available to help you at the hours listed on the UT library website, www.lib.utexas.edu. Always make sure your sources are reliable, and cite everything you use to prevent plagiarizing.

Drafting – Don't try to write the final product in one draft. Good writing takes time and work. Concentrate first on designing your thesis and organizing your argument, then use further drafts to concentrate on writing well. Take time off after writing your first draft and come back to it when your mind is refreshed.

Organization – Good organization is all-important to a well-written paper. Without it, your ideas will be an unintelligible jumble. Try figuring out the most logical flow of your ideas, and use that as the backbone of your paper.

Revising – Once you’ve made your argument and pounded out a first draft, it’s time to revise. Ask the following questions when revising: Does your argument flow? Do your sentences and paragraphs fit together? Is your writing clear? Make sure to incorporate any instructor comments. You may end up with three or four drafts as you revise your paper – this is fine.

Tightening Your Writing – Contrary to popular belief, long, complicated, and pretentious sentences often indicate bad writing. They often say very little and impair clarity. Keep it simple and clear, or you risk confusing your audience. Also, be very direct about what you mean – don’t assume your audience will simply pick up on something.

Final Steps – Now is a good time to get a second opinion on your paper. This is extremely important, as someone else may see flaws in your paper that you might have missed. The Error! Contact not defined. is a great resource, although you can also ask a parent or friend to comment on your paper. Also, reading your paper aloud is a great way to tell how your writing sounds to your reader. If you can’t understand something you read aloud, fix it. Lastly, check for grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors. They are surefire ways to lose credibility. Don’t rely on spell check or grammar check; they often won’t pick up on errors.

Remember:

- Your professors and TAs are there to help you. Talk to them.
- College papers expect you to make a contribution to the academic discourse on the subject. They are opportunities to be creative and original.
- As writers themselves, professors can recognize papers full of fluff.
- The Undergraduate Writing Center can help you with any step of the writing process.

Further Resources:

- Students Helping Students. Tackling the College Paper : Tips on Getting It Done-and Getting the A. New York: Penguin, 2005.