



Making the Transition from High School to College Writing

The transition from writing for high school to writing for college classes can be difficult for the best writers. Regardless of your abilities, you may be overwhelmed by the freedom to choose topics for papers, the variety of class assignments, and the vast number of resources at the university. However daunting it may seem, the transition from writing for high school to writing for college will be easier if you take a few minutes to think about who your new audience is and what their expectations of you are.

Who is Your Audience?

Professors, instructors, and teaching assistants comprise the most influential segment of your audience. Since they will be the ones who ultimately determine your grades, they are the ones you need to appeal to in your writing. If you are in a class where your work will be reviewed by your peers, or where you will be required to post your writing on the Web, the audience for your writing may be broader. Your professor may even tell you explicitly who your audience is by asking you to "write a letter to an advertising executive" or "write as if you were going to submit this essay to a sociology journal." Be sure to heed these cues and adapt your writing style accordingly.

It may also help you to realize that you are not only writing for an individual or group of readers, you are adding to a disciplinary conversation, and each disciplinary conversation has its own conventions. This means that you may have to adapt your style, voice, tone, and form of documentation to the discipline for which you are writing. For example, if you are writing a business memo, you may adopt an informal tone that is not appropriate for a history paper. If you are writing a biology lab report, you may want to write in the passive voice, but if you are writing an English paper, you want your verbs to be active. Before you begin writing a paper, familiarize yourself with the disciplinary conventions. Often your professors will provide guidelines for you to follow, but if these guidelines are not sufficient, you might think about modeling your writing on articles that you have read for class. Alternatively, you might consult texts like *Writing for the Humanities* or *Writing for the Natural Sciences*, which you can find in the UWC library. And, of course, you may always consult your instructor or visit the UWC at any point in the writing process.

You may also want to imagine that your audience is a very diverse group of men and women who may or may not share your religious beliefs, political commitments, or assumptions about race, class, or gender. Since the last thing that you want to do in an essay is offend your audience, take care not to assume anything about your reader. For example, do not assume that your reader is male (even if your professor is). Always use gender-neutral language: "humankind" instead of "mankind," "police officer" instead of "policeman." You will build your ethos as a writer if you present yourself as conscientious and inclusive.

What Are Their Expectations?

Your assignment sheet will often provide the clearest articulation of your professor's expectations. So, before you begin writing, you need to be sure that you read and understand the assignment. In addition to providing you with a topic and suggesting a structure, assignment sheets often explicitly outline your instructor's criteria for evaluating your essay

Making the Transition

Once you understand the expectations of your professor, the demands of the assignment, and the conventions, you are ready to begin the writing process. But here are some general rules to follow while you write:

Engage in some form of pre-writing before you begin. Often, it helps to work through your argument before you begin writing. Talk to your professors, a consultant at the Undergraduate Writing Center, or even a friend. You may also find that free-writing (just writing your thoughts as they come to you), also helps you get started. Additionally, outlines will keep you focused while you write, and flow charts enable you to see how the parts of your argument fit together.

Research. Because you have fabulous resources available to you at the university, you want to draw from a wide variety of sources in your research. Explore the materials available in the libraries and over the Internet, but be careful. Always evaluate your sources. Personal web pages, for example, may not be the best sources for accurate historical information, but they can provide useful data for assessing public interests. Be sure that your sources are reliable and suitable for your paper.

Always cite your sources. If you refer to a source to help you write your essay, you must employ attributive tags and proper citations. If you fail to cite all the ideas that are not your own, you risk committing plagiarism, an offense punishable by expulsion. See the university's policy on plagiarism or ask a UWC consultant before you begin writing.

Write multiple drafts. The myth of the Romantic poet who is struck by inspiration and fires off a masterpiece is just that—a myth. Good writing requires time and considerable work. Don't be surprised if you write three or four drafts for each of your papers.

More is not better. As a conscientious writer, you don't want to waste your reader's time. State your points as clearly and concisely as possible, and avoid needless repetition.

Proofread. You will not inspire confidence in your audience if you have three typos on your title page. Read over your essay for careless errors and spell-check before you print your final copy.

Always get a second opinion. Make sure that you always have someone else look at your papers. Although you may understand the argument you are trying to make, you need to be sure that you have communicated that argument to your reader. A second reader, even if it is just a friend or a roommate, can tell you if you have conveyed your points effectively.

If you find yourself struggling, seek help. Remember that writing is a process, one that will become more familiar to you as you gain experience. At the UWC we are trained to assist you in any point of the writing process, from brainstorming to organizing and editing. We can help you make your transition a smooth one.