

## UNIT 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO COLLEGE WRITING

In all likelihood, college-level writing will be different from other forms of writing students might have done in the past. This is because academic writing (as opposed to personal writing or creative writing) consists of writing that exists for a school-like or college-based setting. While many students have written essays for classes in the past, they might have been given a wide range of latitude in their assignments. Essays that are written for college classes and for professional contexts typically shift the focus away from the student and onto the students' readers.

### ACADEMIC WRITING

Unlike personal writing, academic writing is **not about you**. Instead, it is about answering a particular assignment, in a particular situation, for a particular reader. For the most part, academic writing exists for a readership that is *different* from the writer. Because academic writing exists for an audience, the expectations and requirements of that audience tends to dictate the form and scope of an academic essay.

#### Overview:

Most importantly, academic writing tends to be about what the student can prove, or what the student has learned from outside sources, and not about what the student *feels*. Sometimes this proof will take the form of taking a handful of 'given' or axiomatic facts and assembling them logically into a written work that resembles a 'proof' from geometry. Other times, very little will be given, and it will be the responsibility of the student to establish not just the argument but the conditions of the argument.

One of the first things that a college-level writer should consider is what goals an instructor might have had for assigning an essay. At the same time, the student writer should consider what might be learned from completing the assignment. Because most college-level essays are not intended to be read by a large population of people, these assignments tend to be given for the sake of the assignment itself.

#### Application:

In some ways, academic writing is a kind of 'training' or 'practice.' It often involves practicing skills taught during class, and it also involves applying the content of the class in a new context. Even if the student does not feel the essay 'does anything,' it is uncommon for essays in an academic setting to be 'busywork.' When a tennis player practices forehands (even though there is no 'game' going on) or a weightlifter lifts in order to condition muscles (as opposed to, say, helping a friend to move into a new apartment), it's not busywork. The application of the skills and the development of the physical tools are, ultimately, the point. Academic writing, like many college assignments, is about the development of mental tools.

In other words, a term paper in a college class is a great way for an instructor to make sure that the student has learned, at least temporarily, enough about the subject to write the term paper. The instructor wants students to show that they have thought about the subject and understood it, so a short paragraph that simply repeats a point the instructor made in class lecture is unlikely to fulfill the instructor's goals. Be careful to look at any assignment and to understand its context (i.e. the teacher who assigns the paper, the class the paper is assigned in, and the stated goals of that class).

#### What to Avoid:

Try not to make the writing personal. Maybe you will have a teacher who encourages you to introduce more of yourself into an essay, but it is usually safer to begin from a more neutral and more balanced perspective. Academic writing asks for things like **evidence** and **proof**, and students who rely too heavily on personal opinion run the risk of writing for themselves, instead of for their readers. Most of the time, the writing assignment is about the process (i.e. the thought that goes into writing) and not the product (i.e. the five-page thing you turn in the next day).

## WRITING FOR OTHERS

Probably more than at any other point in history, writing has become a personal activity. Social media encourages us to express our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. We write about personal experiences, and we are accountable only in the general sense that others might (or might not) care about what we have written. However, [academic writing](#) is not about us; it is about our readers. We are accountable to those who receive our messages, and this requires a change in mindset.

### Overview:

Typically, a piece of writing can be thought of as existing for the sake of the writer (like a personal journal or a grocery list) or for the sake of a reader (like a set of instructions or an exam essay). Knowing who will read the essay lets a writer know what can and cannot be assumed about a subject. For example, a recipe for cookies probably does not need to educate readers on what a cookie *is*, and probably does not even need to include a review on how to turn on an oven. It *might* need an explanation of certain terms (like ‘creaming’). It *probably* will need a list of ingredients.

Good writers keep in mind at all times who will be reading their work and how those readers will be using the work. In the above example, the person writing the cookie recipe can be pretty sure that the reader will be making cookies, but will probably be a little less certain about what the future baker’s personal tastes are going to be (or where the baker might live). This might result in additional directions about how to substitute chocolate candies for chocolate chips or how to adjust for baking at a higher altitude.

### Application:

A college-level essay usually has multiple readers, but the ultimate reality is that there is one reader that matters more than others—the person grading the essay. What this means is that a student writer needs to consider what reasons the instructor might have had for assigning the essay. These reasons might not be stated aloud. Maybe the assigned “goal” of the essay is to “teach your readers about the meaning of marriage in *Twelfth Night*,” but as far as a student is concerned, the “goal” of the essay is to get a decent grade. Remember, though that as far as the instructor is concerned, the “goal” of the essay is to make sure that each student has at least some practice with [analysis](#). In other words, the way for a student to get that “decent grade” is to show the instructor the skill that is being asked for—in this case, analysis.

In this case, there are three goals, and they work together. The teacher gets the student to practice analysis (goal one) by assigning a paper on *Twelfth Night*. The student writes about *Twelfth Night* (goal two) as a way of motivating the teacher to assign a high grade (goal three).

### What to Avoid:

Do not write the essay for the wrong readers. Writing an essay that a parent, a significant other, or a roommate likes is not the same thing as writing an essay that meets an instructor’s expectations. Most importantly, do not write the essay in a vacuum. Make sure that you do not assume that just because one of your instructors in high school always let you get away with poor use of punctuation because “it’s the ideas that count” does not mean that your new instructor (or, in the future, your employer) will agree.

## BEING DISCONNECTED

Even two people with most things in common (imagine, say, siblings—who share parents, schools, neighbors, culture, etc.) sometimes have breakdowns in communication. People with the best of intentions often struggle to understand one another. When Person A talks to Person B, sometimes differences in how words are defined, how facts are viewed, and how issues are weighed can lead to disagreement. Because academic writing is for others, overcoming the ‘disconnect’ is the responsibility of the writer.

### Overview:

Being disconnected happens when the person trying to communicate fails to do so because something else (another idea, another person, or even just time or culture) gets in the way. Sometimes, it’s a matter of definition. If I refer to a specific professional athlete as a “great” player, what is my threshold for great? Do I mean the player is better than average? Better than the person playing the same position for my team? One of the best alive? One of the best all-time? All could be ‘great.’

Sometimes, being disconnected comes about because the writer makes an assumption about how facts are viewed. Imagine that the writer finds an authoritative statement from a world leader that says “X is very, very bad” as a way of trying to convince the reader to stop doing it. The reader might agree that X said exactly that; however, the reader voted *against* X and really dislikes X’s opinions.

Finally, writer and reader alike might largely agree on definitions and viewpoint, but they disagree on what is of the greatest importance. Perhaps they might agree that the household budget needs to be cut, and they agree that the best place to start is with the luxuries they have in their budget. However, one person considers the cable bill to be a luxury and the other thinks that it’s time to switch to generic soft drinks, instead of Pepsi or Coke (or, perhaps, it’s time to cut soft drinks completely).

### Application:

In college-level writing, it’s essential that the student writer establish a connection with potential readers (see [Writing for Others](#)). One of the best ways to do this is to spend some time thinking like the reader. If the student has an argument, he or she should wonder what reasons people might have for disagreeing with that argument. Moreover, all students should spend some time thinking about the assumptions that they make.

Many cases of being disconnected come not from deliberate moves, but rather from what the writer doesn’t think about. Student writers will frequently find it useful to clarify how key terms will be used during an essay. Likewise, they might find it useful to explain what they *will not* be addressing. For example, an argument about tuition in college is likely to be emotionally taxing enough, so a student might explain that while debates about student loan programs are valid, they will not be the focus of the current essay.

### What to Avoid:

The most important for student writers to avoid is the assumption. Student writers will frequently make the mistake of assuming that something they believe is either true or at least widely accepted by most people. Almost as important is for the student writer not to fall into the trap of thinking “I explained everything fine, so it’s the reader’s fault if he or she doesn’t understand my point. Not my problem.” Because academic writing exists for the reader, the burden is on the writer. Failing to connect with your audience *is* your problem.

## TYPES OF ASSIGNMENTS

As was mentioned before, very little college writing is initiated by students. Instead, a typical piece of college writing is a response to an instructor's assignment. The vast majority of these assignments are information-based (the instructor wants the student to report information), with both analysis and argumentation filling secondary rolls. Understanding the ways these goals interact is important for college writers.

### Overview:

In the past, students might have encountered general categories of writing like *informative*, *persuasive*, or *narrative*. Other times, students might have encountered the *five paragraph theme*. What's important to remember about these categories is that they are not exclusive, and that the goals often overlap. Imagine a tiger—is it a striped animal, a furred animal, or a clawed animal? It is difficult to inform readers without *persuading* them that the information is correct, and it is really difficult to create a narrative that contains no information.

Types and categories are only useful when they help us, and they are spectacularly not useful when we assume that the mental boxes we used to sort things a few years ago are the same categories that apply now.

### Application:

When writing, student writers need to let the assignment and the content dictate their organizational pattern. Many times, an idea that would fit into a 5-paragraph essay format for a high school class will, in fact, require vastly greater development in college; suddenly, there are more than five paragraphs. Likewise, while the *student* might prefer it if all assignments fit nicely into modes that have been learned in the past, the most common mode found in a college essay is the *challenging paper*. Instructors often deliberately construct assignments that combine paper types and that ask for the student to do new things.

The teacher is not being difficult for the sake of being difficult (well, probably not, anyway). However, remember the purpose of college writing—the teacher is trying to use the writing assignment as a way of getting at some other, probably more important—skill or issue. In other words, the point of the assignment is to [learn something](#). An assignment that exists only on one level is likely to let the student fall back into 'auto pilot' mode and stop learning.

### What to Avoid:

Do not assume that papers exist in separate boxes. The truth of the matter is that most college papers are going to consist of multiple "modes" or "formats" at the same time. More importantly, the rules that work for one teacher might not work for another. Because the two top goals should be to learn and to do well on the assignment, a student writer needs to look at what the teacher is asking for. If it fits a pattern that the student has already learned, that's fine. Otherwise, students need to be able to adapt.