Chapter 8: Writing for Classes

Figure 8.1

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Where Are You Now?

Assess your present knowledge and attitudes.

	Yes	Unsure	No
1. I enjoy writing and am a confident and productive writer.			
2. I know what my instructors expect in student writing.			
3. I understand the feedback I get from instructors and accept their criticism.			
4. I am comfortable sharing my writing with peers.			
5. I begin working on papers early and always revise my first full draft before turning in the paper.			
6. I have a consistent approach to the writing process that works well for me.			
7. I understand what plagiarism is and always cite online and print sources as required.			
8. I seek out help whenever needed as I work on paper assignments.			
9. I try to write all my college papers as if they were written for my composition instructor.			

Where Do You Want to Go?

Think about how you answered the questions above. Be honest with yourself. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your level of confidence and your attitude about writing?

Not very strong									Very strong
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

In the following list, circle the three areas you see as most important to your improvement as a writer:

- Using time effectively
- Using sources effectively and appropriately
- Understanding instructors' expectations
- Citing sources in the proper form
- Being productive with brainstorming and other prewriting activities
- Sharing my work in drafts and accepting feedback
- Organizing ideas clearly and transitioning between ideas
- Understanding the difference between proofreading and revision
- Developing ideas fully
- Drafting and redrafting in response to criticism
- Using correct sentence mechanics (grammar, punctuation, etc.)
- Using Web sites, reference books, and campus resources
- Developing an academic "voice"

Think about the three things you chose: Why did you choose them? Have you had certain kinds of writing difficulties in the past? Consider what you hope to learn here.

_____

_____

_____

How to Get There

Here's what we'll work on in this chapter:

- Understanding why writing is vital to your success in college
- Learning how writing in college differs from writing in high school
- Understanding how a writing class differs (and doesn't differ) from other classes with assigned writing
- Knowing what instructors in college expect of you as a writer
- Knowing what different types of assignments are most common in college
- Using the writing process to achieve your best work
- Identifying common errors and become a better editor of your own work
- Responding to an instructor's feedback on your work in progress and on your final paper
- Using sources appropriately and avoiding plagiarism
- Writing an in-class essay, for an online course, and in group writing projects

The Importance of Writing

Writing is one of the key skills all successful students must acquire. You might think your main job in a history class is to learn facts about events. So you read your textbook and take notes on important dates, names, causes, and so on. But however important these details are to your instructor, they don't mean much if you can't explain them in writing. Even if you remember the facts well and believe you understand their meaning completely, if you can't express your understanding by communicating it—in college that almost always means in writing—then as far as others may know, you don't have an understanding at all. In a way, then, learning history is learning to write about history. Think about it. Great historians don't just know facts and ideas. Great historians use their writing skills to share their facts and ideas effectively with others.

History is just one example. Consider a lab course—a class that's as much hands-on as any in college. At some point, you'll be asked to write a step-by-step report on an experiment you have run. The quality of your lab work will not show if you cannot describe that work and state your findings well in writing. Even though many instructors in courses other than English classes may not comment directly on your writing, their judgment of your understanding will still be mostly based on what you write. This means that in all your courses, not just your English courses, instructors expect good writing.

In college courses, writing is how ideas are exchanged, from scholars to students and from students back to scholars. While the grade in some courses may be based mostly on class participation, oral reports, or multiple-

choice exams, writing is by far the single most important form of instruction and assessment. Instructors expect you to learn by writing, and they will grade you on the basis of your writing.

If you find that a scary thought, take heart! By paying attention to your writing and learning and practicing basic skills, even those who never thought of themselves as good writers can succeed in college writing. As with other college skills, getting off to a good start is mostly a matter of being motivated and developing a confident attitude that you can do it.

As a form of communication, writing is different from oral communication in several ways. Instructors expect writing to be well thought out and organized and to explain ideas fully. In oral communication, the listener can ask for clarification, but in written work, everything must be clear within the writing itself. Guidelines for oral presentations are provided in Chapter 7 “Interacting with Instructors and Classes”.

Note: Most college students take a writing course their first year, often in the first term. Even if you are not required to take such a class, it’s a good idea for all students to learn more about college writing. This short chapter cannot cover even a small amount of what you will learn in a full writing course. Our goal here is to introduce some important writing principles, if you’re not yet familiar with them, or to remind you of things you may have already learned in a writing course. As with all advice, always pay the most attention to what your instructor says—the terms of a specific assignment may overrule a tip given here!

8.1 What's Different about College Writing?

Learning Objectives

1. Define "academic writing."
2. Identify key differences between writing in college and writing in high school or on the job.
3. Identify different types of papers that are commonly assigned.
4. Describe what instructors expect from student writing.

Academic writing refers to writing produced in a college environment. Often this is writing that responds to other writing—to the ideas or controversies that you'll read about. While this definition sounds simple, academic writing may be very different from other types of writing you have done in the past. Often college students begin to understand what academic writing really means only after they receive negative feedback on their work. To become a strong writer in college, you need to achieve a clear sense of two things:

1. The academic environment
2. The kinds of writing you'll be doing in that environment

Differences between High School and College Writing

Students who struggle with writing in college often conclude that their high school teachers were too easy or that their college instructors are too hard. In most cases, neither explanation is fully accurate or fair. A student having difficulty with college writing usually just hasn't yet made the transition from high school writing to college writing. That shouldn't be surprising, for many beginning college students do not even know that there is a transition to be made.

In high school, most students think of writing as the subject of English classes. Few teachers in other courses give much feedback on student writing; many do not even assign writing. This says more about high school than about the quality of teachers or about writing itself. High school teachers typically teach five courses a day and often more than 150 students. Those students often have a very wide range of backgrounds and skill levels.

Thus many high school English instructors focus on specific, limited goals. For example, they may teach the "five paragraph essay" as the right way to organize a paper because they want to give every student some idea of an essay's basic structure. They may give assignments on stories and poems because their own college background involved literature and literary analysis. In classes other than English, many high school teachers must focus on an established body of information and may judge students using tests that measure only how much of this information they acquire. Often writing itself is not directly addressed in such classes.

This does not mean that students don't learn a great deal in high school, but it's easy to see why some students think that writing is important only in English classes. Many students also believe an academic essay must be five paragraphs long or that "school writing" is usually literary analysis.

Think about how college differs from high school. In many colleges, the instructors teach fewer classes and have fewer students. In addition, while college students have highly diverse backgrounds, the skills of college students are less variable than in an average high school class. In addition, college instructors are specialists in the fields they teach, as you recall from Chapter 7 "Interacting with Instructors and Classes". College instructors may design their courses in unique ways, and they may teach about specialized subjects. For all of these reasons, college instructors are much more likely than high school teachers to

- assign writing,
- respond in detail to student writing,
- ask questions that cannot be dealt with easily in a fixed form like a five-paragraph essay.

Your transition to college writing could be even more dramatic. The kind of writing you have done in the past may not translate at all into the kind of writing required in college. For example, you may at first struggle with having to write about very different kinds of topics, using different approaches. You may have learned only one kind of writing **genre** (a kind of approach or organization) and now find you need to master other types of writing as well.

What Kinds of Papers Are Commonly Assigned in College Classes?

Think about the topic "gender roles"—referring to expectations about differences in how men and women act. You might study gender roles in an anthropology class, a film class, or a psychology class. The topic itself may overlap from one class to another, but you would not write about this subject in the same way in these different classes. For example, in an anthropology class, you might be asked to describe how men and women of a particular culture divide important duties. In a film class, you may be asked to analyze how a scene portrays gender roles enacted by the film's characters. In a psychology course, you might be asked to summarize the results of an experiment involving gender roles or compare and contrast the findings of two related research projects.

It would be simplistic to say that there are three, or four, or ten, or any number of types of academic writing that have unique characteristics, shapes, and styles. Every assignment in every course is unique in some ways, so don't think of writing as a fixed form you need to learn. On the other hand, there are certain writing *approaches* that do involve different kinds of writing. An approach is the way you go about meeting the writing goals for the assignment. The approach is usually signaled by the words instructors use in their assignments.

When you first get a writing assignment, pay attention first to keywords for how to approach the writing. These will also suggest how you may structure and develop your paper. Look for terms like these in the assignment:

- **Summarize.** To restate in your own words the main point or points of another's work.
- **Define.** To describe, explore, or characterize a keyword, idea, or phenomenon.

- **Classify.** To group individual items by their shared characteristics, separate from other groups of items.
- **Compare/contrast.** To explore significant likenesses and differences between two or more subjects.
- **Analyze.** To break something, a phenomenon, or an idea into its parts and explain how those parts fit or work together.
- **Argue.** To state a claim and support it with reasons and evidence.
- **Synthesize.** To pull together varied pieces or ideas from two or more sources.

Note how this list is similar to the words used in examination questions that involve writing. (See Table 6.1 "Words to Watch for in Essay Questions" in Chapter 6 "Preparing for and Taking Tests", Section 6.4 "The Secrets of the Q and A's".) This overlap is not a coincidence—essay exams are an abbreviated form of academic writing such as a class paper.

Sometimes the keywords listed don't actually appear in the written assignment, but they are usually implied by the questions given in the assignment. "What," "why," and "how" are common question words that require a certain kind of response. Look back at the keywords listed and think about which approaches relate to "what," "why," and "how" questions.

- "What" questions usually prompt the writing of summaries, definitions, classifications, and sometimes compare-and-contrast essays. For example, "**What** does Jones see as the main elements of Huey Long's populist appeal?" or "**What** happened when you heated the chemical solution?"
- "Why" and "how" questions typically prompt analysis, argument, and synthesis essays. For example, "**Why** did Huey Long's brand of populism gain force so quickly?" or "**Why** did the solution respond the way it did to heat?"

Successful academic writing starts with recognizing what the instructor is requesting, or what you are required to do. So pay close attention to the assignment. Sometimes the essential information about an assignment is conveyed through class discussions, however, so be sure to listen for the keywords that will help you understand what the instructor expects. If you feel the assignment does not give you a sense of direction, seek clarification. Ask questions that will lead to helpful answers. For example, here's a short and very vague assignment:

Discuss the perspectives on religion of Rousseau, Bentham, and Marx. Papers should be four to five pages in length.

Faced with an assignment like this, you could ask about the **scope (or focus)** of the assignment:

- Which of the assigned readings should I concentrate on?
- Should I read other works by these authors that haven't been assigned in class?
- Should I do research to see what scholars think about the way these philosophers view religion?
- Do you want me to pay equal attention to each of the three philosophers?

You can also ask about the approach the instructor would like you to take. You can use the keywords the instructor may not have used in the assignment:

- Should I just *summarize* the positions of these three thinkers, or should I *compare and contrast* their views?
- Do you want me to *argue* a specific point about the way these philosophers approach religion?
- Would it be OK if I *classified* the ways these philosophers think about religion?

Never just complain about a vague assignment. It is fine to ask questions like these. Such questions will likely engage your instructor in a productive discussion with you.

Key Takeaways

- Writing is crucial to college success because it is the single most important means of evaluation.
- Writing in college is not limited to the kinds of assignments commonly required in high school English classes.
- Writers in college must pay close attention to the terms of an assignment.
- If an assignment is not clear, seek clarification from the instructor.

Checkpoint Exercises

1. What kind(s) of writing have you practiced most in your recent past?

   _____

   _____

2. Name two things that make academic writing in college different from writing in high school.

   _____

   _____

3. Explain how the word "what" asks for a different kind of paper than the word "why."

   _____

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   _____

   _____

8.2 How Can I Become a Better Writer?

Learning Objectives

1. Describe how a writing class can help you succeed in other courses.
2. Define what instructors expect of a college student's writing.
3. Explain why learning to write is an ongoing task.
4. Understand writing as a process.
5. Develop productive prewriting and revision strategies.
6. Distinguish between revision and editing.
7. Access and use available resources.
8. Understand how to integrate research in your writing.
9. Define plagiarism.

Students are usually required to take at least one writing course in their first year of college. That course is often crucial for your success in college. But a writing course can help you only if you recognize how it connects to your other work in college. If you approach your writing course merely as another hoop you need to jump through, you may miss out on the main message: writing is vital to your academic success at every step toward your degree.

What Do Instructors Really Want?

Some instructors may say they have no particular expectations for student papers. This is partly true. College instructors do not usually have one right answer in mind or one right approach to take when they assign a paper topic. They expect you to engage in critical thinking and decide for yourself what you are saying and how to say it. But in other ways college instructors do have expectations, and it is important to understand them. Some expectations involve mastering the material or demonstrating critical thinking. Other expectations involve specific writing skills. Most college instructors expect certain characteristics in student writing. Here are general principles you should follow when writing essays or student "papers." (Some may not be appropriate for specific formats such as lab reports.)

Title the paper to identify your topic. This may sound obvious, but it needs to be said. Some students think of a paper as an exercise and write something like "Assignment 2: History 101" on the title page. Such a title gives no idea about how you are approaching the assignment or your topic. Your title should prepare your reader for what your paper is about or what you will argue. (With essays, always consider your reader as an educated adult interested in your topic. An essay is not a letter written to your instructor.) Compare the following:

Incorrect: Assignment 2: History 101

Correct: Why the New World Was Not "New"

It is obvious which of these two titles begins to prepare your reader for the paper itself. Similarly, don't make your title the same as the title of a work you are writing about. Instead, be sure your title signals an aspect of the work you are focusing on:

Incorrect: *Catcher in the Rye*

Correct: Family Relationships in *Catcher in the Rye*

Address the terms of the assignment. Again, pay particular attention to words in the assignment that signal a preferred approach. If the instructor asks you to "argue" a point, be sure to make a statement that actually expresses *your idea* about the topic. Then follow that statement with your reasons and evidence in support of the statement. Look for any signals that will help you focus or limit your approach. Since no paper can cover *everything* about a complex topic, what is it that your instructor wants you to cover?

Finally, pay attention to the little things. For example, if the assignment specifies "5 to 6 pages in length," write a five- to six-page paper. Don't try to stretch a short paper longer by enlarging the font (12 points is standard) or making your margins bigger than the normal one inch (or as specified by the instructor). If the assignment is due at the beginning of class on Monday, have it ready then or before. Do not assume you can negotiate a revised due date.

In your introduction, define your topic and establish your approach or sense of purpose. Think of your introduction as an extension of your title. Instructors (like all readers) appreciate feeling oriented by a clear opening. They appreciate knowing that you have a purpose for your topic—that you have a reason for writing the paper. If they feel they've just been dropped into the middle of a paper, they may miss important ideas. They may not make connections you want them to make.

Build from a thesis or a clearly stated sense of purpose. Many college assignments require you to make some form of an argument. To do that, you generally start with a statement that needs to be supported and build from there. Your thesis is that statement; it is a guiding assertion for the paper. Be clear in your own mind of the difference between your topic and your thesis. The topic is what your paper is about; the thesis is what *you argue about* the topic. Some assignments do not require an explicit argument and thesis, but even then you should make clear at the beginning your main emphasis, your purpose, or your most important idea.

Develop ideas patiently. You might, like many students, worry about boring your reader with too much detail or information. But college instructors will not be bored by carefully explained ideas, well-selected examples, and relevant details. College instructors, after all, are professionally devoted to their subjects. If your sociology instructor asks you to write about youth crime in rural areas, you can be sure he or she is interested in that subject.

In some respects, how you *develop* your paper is the most crucial part of the assignment. You'll win the day with detailed explanations and well-presented evidence—not big generalizations. For example, anyone can write something broad (and bland) like "The constitutional separation of church and state is a good thing for America"—but what do *you* really *mean* by that? Specifically? Are you talking about banning "Christmas trees" from government property—or calling them "holiday trees" instead? Are you arguing for eliminating the tax-free status of religious organizations? Are you saying that American laws should never be based on moral values? The

more you really dig into your topic—the more time you spend thinking about the specifics of what you really want to argue and developing specific examples and reasons for your argument—the more *developed* your paper will be. It will also be much more interesting to your instructor as the reader. Remember, those grand generalizations we all like to make ("America is the land of the free") actually don't mean much at all until we develop the idea in specifics. (Free to do what? No laws? No restrictions like speed limits? Freedom not to pay any taxes? Free food for all? What do you really mean when you say American is the land of the "free"?)

Integrate—do not just "plug in"—quotations, graphs, and illustrations. As you outline or sketch out your material, you will think things like "this quotation can go here" or "I can put that graph there." Remember that a quotation, graph, or illustration does not make a point for you. *You* make the point first and then use such material to help back it up. Using a quotation, a graph, or an illustration involves more than simply sticking it into the paper. Always lead into such material. Make sure the reader understands why you are using it and how it fits in at that place in your presentation.

Build clear transitions at the beginning of every paragraph to link from one idea to another. A good paper is more than a list of good ideas. It should also show how the ideas fit together. As you write the first sentence of any paragraph, have a clear sense of what the prior paragraph was about. Think of the first sentence in any paragraph as a kind of bridge for the reader from what came before.

Document your sources appropriately. If your paper involves research of any kind, indicate clearly the use you make of outside sources. If you have used those sources well, there is no reason to hide them. Careful research and the thoughtful application of the ideas and evidence of others is part of what college instructors value. (We address specifics about documentation later on.)

Carefully edit your paper. College instructors assume you will take the time to edit and proofread your essay. A misspelled word or an incomplete sentence may signal a lack of concern on your part. It may not seem fair to make a harsh judgment about your seriousness based on little errors, but in all writing, impressions count. Since it is often hard to find small errors in our own writing, always print out a draft well before you need to turn it in. Ask a classmate or a friend to review it and mark any word or sentence that seems "off" in any way. Although you should certainly use a spell-checker, don't assume it can catch everything. A spell-checker cannot tell if you have the *right* word. For example, these words are commonly misused or mixed up:

- there, their, they're
- its, it's
- effect, affect
- complement, compliment

Your spell-checker can't help with these. You also can't trust what a "grammar checker" (like the one built into the Microsoft Word spell-checker) tells you—computers are still a long way from being able to fix your writing for you!

Turn in a clean hard copy. Some instructors accept or even prefer digital papers, but do not assume this. Most instructors want a paper copy and most definitely do *not* want to do the printing themselves. Present your paper in a professional (and unfussy) way, using a staple or paper clip on the left top to hold the pages together (unless the

instructor specifies otherwise). Never bring your paper to class and ask the instructor, “Do you have a stapler?” Similarly, do not put your paper in a plastic binder unless the instructor asks you to.

The Writing Process

Writing instructors distinguish between **process** and **product**. The expectations described here all involve the “product” you turn in on the due date. Although you should keep in mind what your product will look like, writing is more involved with how you get to that goal. “Process” concerns how you work to actually write a paper. What do you actually do to get started? How do you organize your ideas? Why do you make changes along the way as you write? Thinking of writing as a process is important because writing is actually a complex activity. Even professional writers rarely sit down at a keyboard and write out an article beginning to end without stopping along the way to revise portions they have drafted, to move ideas around, or to revise their opening and thesis. Professionals and students alike often say they only realized what they wanted to say *after* they started to write. This is why many instructors see writing as a way to learn. Many writing instructors ask you to submit a draft for review before submitting a final paper. To roughly paraphrase a famous poem, you learn by doing what you have to do.

How Can I Make the Process Work for Me?

No single set of steps automatically works best for everyone when writing a paper, but writers have found a number of steps helpful. Your job is to try out ways that your instructor suggests and discover what works for you. As you’ll see in the following list, the process starts before you write a word. Generally there are three stages in the writing process:

1. Preparing before drafting (thinking, brainstorming, planning, reading, researching, outlining, sketching, etc.)—sometimes called “prewriting” (although you are usually still writing *something* at this stage, even if only jotting notes)
2. Writing the draft
3. Revising and editing

Involved in these three stages are a number of separate tasks—and that’s where you need to figure out what works best for you.

Because writing is hard, procrastination is easy. Don’t let yourself put off the task. Use the time management strategies described in Chapter 2 “Staying Motivated, Organized, and On Track”. One good approach is to schedule shorter time periods over a series of days—rather than trying to sit down for one long period to accomplish a lot. (Even professional writers can write only so much at a time.) Try the following strategies to get started:

- **Discuss what you read, see, and hear.** Talking with others about your ideas is a good way to begin to achieve clarity. Listening to others helps you understand what points need special attention. Discussion

also helps writers realize that their own ideas are often best presented in relation to the ideas of others.

- **Use e-mail to carry on discussions in writing.** An e-mail exchange with a classmate or your instructor might be the first step toward putting words on a page.
- **Brainstorm.** Jot down your thoughts as they come to mind. Just write away, not worrying at first about how those ideas fit together. (This is often called "free writing.") Once you've written a number of notes or short blocks of sentences, pause and read them over. Take note of anything that stands out as particularly important to you. Also consider how parts of your scattered notes might eventually fit together or how they might end up in a sequence in the paper you'll get to later on.
- **Keep a journal in which you respond to your assigned readings.** Set aside twenty minutes or so three times a week to summarize important texts. Go beyond just summarizing: talk back about what you have been reading or apply the reading to your own experience. See Chapter 5 "Reading to Learn" for more tips on taking notes about your readings.
- **Ask and respond in writing to "what," "why," and "how" questions**. Good questions prompt productive writing sessions. Again, "what" questions will lead to descriptions or summaries; "why" and "how" questions will lead you to analyses and explanations. Construct your own "what," "why," and "how" questions and then start answering them.
- **In your notes, respond directly to what others have written or said about a topic you are interested in.** Most academic writing engages the ideas of others. Academic writing carries on a conversation among people interested in the field. By thinking of how your ideas relate to those of others, you can clarify your sense of purpose and sometimes even discover a way to write your introduction.

All of these steps and actions so far are "prewriting" actions. Again, almost no one just sits down and starts writing a paper at the beginning—at least not a successful paper! These prewriting steps help you get going in the right direction. Once you are ready to start drafting your essay, keep moving forward in these ways:

- **Write a short statement of intent or outline your paper before your first draft.** Such a road map can be very useful, but don't assume you'll always be able to stick with your first plan. Once you start writing, you may discover a need for changes in the substance or order of things in your essay. Such discoveries don't mean you made "mistakes" in the outline. They simply mean you are involved in a process that cannot be completely scripted in advance.
- **Write down on a card or a separate sheet of paper what you see as your paper's main point or thesis.** As you draft your essay, look back at that thesis statement. Are you staying on track? Or are you discovering that you need to change your main point or thesis? From time to time, check the development of your ideas against what you started out saying you would do. Revise as needed and move forward.
- **Reverse outline your paper.** Outlining is usually a beginning point, a road map for the task ahead. But many writers find that outlining what they have already written in a draft helps them see more clearly how their ideas fit or do not fit together. Outlining in this way can reveal trouble spots that are harder to see in a full draft. Once you see those trouble spots, effective **revision** becomes possible.
- **Don't obsess over detail when writing the draft.** Remember, you have time for revising and editing

later on. Now is the time to test out the plan you've made and see how your ideas develop. The last things in the world you want to worry about now are the little things like grammar and punctuation—spend your time developing your material, knowing you can fix the details later.

- **Read your draft aloud.** Hearing your own writing often helps you see it more plainly. A gap or an inconsistency in an argument that you simply do not see in a silent reading becomes evident when you give voice to the text. You may also catch sentence-level mistakes by reading your paper aloud.

What's the Difference between Revising and Editing?

Some students think of a draft as something that they need only "correct" after writing. They assume their first effort to do the assignment resulted in something that needs only surface attention. This is a big mistake. A good writer does not write fast. Good writers know that the task is complicated enough to demand some patience. "Revision" rather than "correction" suggests *seeing again* in a new light generated by all the thought that went into the first draft. Revising a draft usually involves significant changes including the following:

- Making organizational changes like the reordering of paragraphs (don't forget that new transitions will be needed when you move paragraphs)
- Clarifying the thesis or adjustments between the thesis and supporting points that follow
- Cutting material that is unnecessary or irrelevant
- Adding new points to strengthen or clarify the presentation

Editing and proofreading are the last steps following revision. Correcting a sentence early on may not be the best use of your time since you may cut the sentence entirely. Editing and proofreading are focused, late-stage activities for style and correctness. They are important final parts of the writing process, but they should not be confused with revision itself. Editing and proofreading a draft involve these steps:

- Careful spell-checking. This includes checking the spelling of names.
- Attention to sentence-level issues. Be especially attentive to sentence boundaries, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, and pronoun referents. You can also attend at this stage to matters of style.

Remember to get started on a writing assignment early so that you complete the first draft well before the due date, allowing you needed time for genuine revision and careful editing.

What If I Need Help with Writing?

Writing is hard work. Most colleges provide resources that can help you from the early stages of an assignment through to the completion of an essay. Your first resource may be a writing class. Most students are encouraged or required to enroll in a writing class in their first term, and it's a good idea for everyone. Use everything you learn there about drafting and revising in all your courses.

Tutoring services. Most colleges have a tutoring service that focuses primarily on student writing. Look up and visit your tutoring center early in the term to learn what service is offered. Specifically check on the following:

1. Do you have to register in advance for help? If so, is there a registration deadline?
2. Are appointments required or encouraged, or can you just drop in?
3. Are regular standing appointments with the same tutor encouraged?
4. Are a limited number of sessions allowed per term?
5. Are small group workshops offered in addition to individual appointments?
6. Are specialists available for help with students who have learned English as a second language?

Three points about writing tutors are crucial:

1. Writing tutors are there for all student writers—not just for weak or inexperienced writers. Writing in college is *supposed* to be a challenge. Some students make writing even harder by thinking that good writers work in isolation. But writing is a social act. A good paper should engage others.
2. Tutors are not there for you to "correct" sentence-level problems or polish your finished draft. They will help you identify and understand sentence-level problems so that you can achieve greater control over your writing. But their more important goals often are to address larger concerns like the paper's organization, the fullness of its development, and the clarity of its argument. So don't make your first appointment the day before a paper is due, because you may need more time to revise after discussing the paper with a tutor.
3. Tutors cannot help you if you do not do your part. Tutors respond only to what you say and write; they cannot enable you to magically jump past the thinking an assignment requires. So do some thinking about the assignment before your meeting and be sure to bring relevant materials with you. For example, bring the paper assignment. You might also bring the course syllabus and perhaps even the required textbook. Most importantly, bring any writing you've done in response to the assignment (an outline, a thesis statement, a draft, an introductory paragraph). If you want to get help from a tutor, you need to give the tutor something to work with.

Teaching assistants and instructors. In a large class, you may have both a course instructor and a teaching assistant (TA). Seek help from either or both as you draft your essay. Some instructors offer only limited help. They may not, for example, have time to respond to a complete draft of your essay. But even a brief response to a drafted introduction or to a question can be tremendously valuable. Remember that most TAs and instructors want to help you learn. View them along with tutors as part of a team that works with you to achieve academic success. Remember the tips you learned in Chapter 7 "Interacting with Instructors and Classes" for interacting well with your instructors.

Writing Web sites and writing handbooks. Many writing Web sites and handbooks can help you along every step of the way, especially in the late stages of your work. You'll find lessons on style as well as information about language conventions and "correctness." Not only should you use the handbook your composition instructor assigns in a writing class, but you should not sell that book back at the end of the term. You will need it again for future writing. For more help, become familiar with a good Web site for student writers. There are many, but one

we recommend is maintained by the Dartmouth College Writing Center at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/index.html.

Plagiarism—and How to Avoid It

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of material from a source. At the most obvious level, plagiarism involves using someone else's words and ideas as if they were your own. There's not much to say about copying another person's work: it's cheating, pure and simple. But plagiarism is not always so simple. Notice that our definition of plagiarism involves "words and ideas." Let's break that down a little further.

Words. Copying the words of another is clearly wrong. If you use another's words, those words must be in quotation marks, and you must tell your reader where those words came from. But it is not enough to make a few surface changes in wording. You can't just change some words and call the material yours; close, extended paraphrase is not acceptable. For example, compare the two passages that follow. The first comes from *Murder Most Foul*, a book by Karen Halttunen on changing ideas about murder in nineteenth-century America; the second is a close paraphrase of the same passage:

> The new murder narratives were overwhelmingly secular works, written by a diverse array of printers, hack writers, sentimental poets, lawyers, and even murderers themselves, who were displacing the clergy as the dominant interpreters of the crime.

> The murder stories that were developing were almost always secular works that were written by many different sorts of people. Printers, hack writers, poets, attorneys, and sometimes even the criminals themselves were writing murder stories. They were the new interpreters of the crime, replacing religious leaders who had held that role before.

It is easy to see that the writer of the second version has closely followed the ideas and even echoed some words of the original. This is a serious form of plagiarism. Even if this writer were to acknowledge the author, there would still be a problem. To simply cite the source at the end would not excuse using so much of the original source.

Ideas. Ideas are also a form of intellectual property. Consider this third version of the previous passage:

> At one time, religious leaders shaped the way the public thought about murder. But in nineteenth-century America, this changed. Society's attitudes were influenced more and more by secular writers.

This version summarizes the original. That is, it states the main idea in compressed form in language that does not come from the original. But it could still be seen as plagiarism if the source is not cited. This example probably makes you wonder if you can write anything without citing a source. To help you sort out what ideas need to be cited and what not, think about these principles:

Common knowledge. There is no need to cite **common knowledge**. Common knowledge does not mean knowledge everyone has. It means knowledge that everyone can easily access. For example, most people do not

know the date of George Washington's death, but everyone can easily find that information. If the information or idea can be found in multiple sources and the information or idea remains constant from source to source, it can be considered common knowledge. This is one reason so much research is usually done for college writing—the more sources you read, the more easily you can sort out what is common knowledge: if you see an uncited idea in multiple sources, then you can feel secure that idea is common knowledge.

Distinct contributions. One does need to cite ideas that are **distinct contributions**. A distinct contribution need not be a discovery from the work of one person. It need only be an insight that is not commonly expressed (not found in multiple sources) and not universally agreed upon.

Disputable figures. Always remember that numbers are only as good as the sources they come from. If you use numbers like attendance figures, unemployment rates, or demographic profiles—or any statistics at all—always cite your source of those numbers. If your instructor does not know the source you used, you will not get much credit for the information you have collected.

Everything said previously about using sources applies to all forms of sources. Some students mistakenly believe that material from the Web, for example, need not be cited. Or that an idea from an instructor's lecture is automatically common property. You must evaluate all sources in the same way and cite them as necessary.

Forms of Citation

You should generally check with your instructors about their preferred form of citation when you write papers for courses. No one standard is used in all academic papers. You can learn about the three major forms or styles used in most any college writing handbook and on many Web sites for college writers:

- The Modern Language Association (MLA) system of citation is widely used but is most commonly adopted in humanities courses, particularly literature courses.
- The American Psychological Association (APA) system of citation is most common in the social sciences.
- The Chicago Manual of Style is widely used but perhaps most commonly in history courses.

Many college departments have their own style guides, which may be based on one of the above. Your instructor should refer you to his or her preferred guide, but be sure to ask if you have not been given explicit direction.

Checklists for Revision and Editing

When you revise…

	Check the assignment: does your paper do what it's supposed to do?
	Check the title: does it clearly identify the overall topic or position?
	Check the introduction: does it set the stage and establish the purpose?
	Check each paragraph in the body: does each begin with a transition from the preceding?
	Check organization: does it make sense why each topic precedes or follows another?
	Check development: is each topic fully explained, detailed, supported, and exemplified?
	Check the conclusion: does it restate the thesis and pull key ideas together?

When you edit…

	Read the paper aloud, listening for flow and natural word style.
	Check for any lapses into slang, colloquialisms, or nonstandard English phrasing.
	Check sentence-level mechanics: grammar and punctuation (pay special attention to past writing problems).
	When everything seems done, run the spell-checker again and do a final proofread.
	Check physical layout and mechanics against instructor's expectations: Title page? Font and margins? End notes?

Key Takeaways

- A writing course is central to all students' success in many of their future courses.
- Writing is a process that involves a number of steps; the product will not be good if one does not allow time for the process.
- Seek feedback from classmates, tutors, and instructors during the writing process.
- Revision is not the same thing as editing.
- Many resources are available to college writers.
- Words and ideas from sources must be documented in a form recommended by the instructor.

Checkpoint Exercise

1. For each of the following statements, circle T for true or F for false:

T	F	Intellectual freedom means that college instructors have no specific expectations for student writing.
T	F	Since your instructor knows what you are writing about, you do not need to worry about titling your paper.
T	F	The writing process begins when you start writing the first paragraph of a paper.
T	F	If you discover at some point in the writing process that you have to make significant organizational changes or even change your thesis, then you must have misunderstood the assignment.
T	F	Copying directly from another's text is the only serious form of plagiarism.
T	F	The Internet is a free zone of information; Web sources need not be cited.
T	F	All college instructors expect citations to be made in exactly the same way.

8.3 Other Kinds of Writing in College Classes

Learning Objective

Understand the special demands of specific writing situations, including the following:

- Writing in-class essays
- Writing with others in a group project
- Writing in an online class

Everything about college writing so far in this chapter applies in most college writing assignments. Some particular situations, however, deserve special attention. These include writing in-class essays, group writing projects, and writing in an online course.

Writing In-Class Essays

You might well think the whole writing process goes out the window when you have to write an in-class essay. After all, you don't have much time to spend on the essay. You certainly don't have time for an extensive revision of a complete draft. You also don't have the opportunity to seek feedback at any stage along the way. Nonetheless, the best writers of in-class essays bring as much of the writing process as they can into an essay exam situation. Follow these guidelines:

- Prepare for writing in class by making writing a regular part of your study routine. Students who write down their responses to readings throughout a term have a huge advantage over students who think they can study by just reading the material closely. Writing is a way to build better writing, as well as a great way to study and think about the course material. Don't wait until the exam period to start writing about things you have been studying throughout the term.
- Read the exam prompt or assignment very carefully before you begin to respond. Note keywords in the exam prompt. For example, if the exam assignment asks for an argument, be sure to structure your essay as an argument. Also look for ways the instructor has limited the scope of your response. Focus on what is highlighted in the exam question itself. See Chapter 6 "Preparing for and Taking Tests" for more tips for exam writing.
- Jot notes and sketch out a list of key points you want to cover before you jump into writing. If you have time, you might even draft an opening paragraph on a piece of scratch paper before committing yourself to a particular response. Too often, students begin writing before they have thought about the whole task before them. When that happens, you might find that you can't develop your ideas as fully or as coherently as you need to. Students who take the time to plan actually write longer in-class

essays than those who begin writing their answers right after they have read the assignment. Take as much as a fourth of the total exam period to plan.

- Use a consistent approach for in-class exams. Students who begin in-class exams with a plan that they have used successfully in the past are better able to control the pressure of the in-class exam. Students who feel they need to discover a new approach for each exam are far more likely to panic and freeze.
- Keep track of the time. Some instructors signal the passing of time during the exam period, but do not count on that help. While you shouldn't compulsively check the time every minute or two, look at your watch now and then.
- Save a few minutes at the end of the session for quick review of what you've written and for making small changes you note as necessary.

A special issue in in-class exams concerns handwriting. Some instructors now allow students to write in-class exams on laptops, but the old-fashioned blue book is still the standard in many classes. For students used to writing on a keyboard, this can be a problem. Be sure you don't let poor handwriting hurt you. Your instructor will have many exams to read. Be courteous. Write as clearly as you can.

Group Writing Projects

College instructors sometimes assign group writing projects. The terms of these assignments vary greatly. Sometimes the instructor specifies roles for each member of the group, but often it's part of the group's tasks to define everyone's role. Follow these guidelines:

- Get off to an early start and meet regularly through the process.
- Sort out your roles as soon as you can. You might divide the work in sections and then meet to pull those sections together. But you might also think more in terms of the specific strengths and interests each of you bring to the project. For example, if one group member is an experienced researcher, that person might gather and annotate materials for the assignment. You might also assign tasks that relate to the stages of the writing process. For example, one person for one meeting might construct a series of questions or a list of points to be addressed, to start a discussion about possible directions for the first draft. Another student might take a first pass at shaping the group's ideas in a rough draft. And so on. Remember that whatever you do, you cannot likely keep each person's work separate from the work of others. There will be and probably should be significant overlap if you are to eventually pull together a successful project.
- Be a good citizen. This is the most important point of all. If you are assigned a group project, you should want to be an active part of the group's work. Never try to ride on the skills of others or let others do more than their fair share. Don't let any lack of confidence you may feel as a writer keep you from doing your share. One of the great things about a group project is that you can learn from others. Another great thing is that you will learn more about your own strengths that others value.
- Complete a draft early so that you can collectively review, revise, and finally edit together.
- See the section on group presentations in Chapter 7 "Interacting with Instructors and Classes", Section

7.4 "Public Speaking and Class Presentations" for additional tips.

Writing in Online Courses

Online instruction is becoming more and more common. All the principles discussed in this chapter apply also in online writing—and many aspects are even more important in an online course. In most online courses, almost everything depends on written communication. Discussion is generally written rather than spoken. Questions and clarifications take shape in writing. Feedback on assignments is given in writing. To succeed in online writing, apply the same writing process as fully and thoughtfully as with an essay or paper for any course.

Key Takeaways

- Even in in-class essays, using an abbreviated writing process approach helps produce more successful writing.
- Group writing projects require careful coordination of roles and cooperative stages but can greatly help students learn how to improve their writing.
- Writing for an online course puts your writing skills to the ultimate test, when almost everything your instructor knows about your learning must be demonstrated through your writing.

Checkpoint Exercises

1. List three ways in which a process approach can help you write an in-class essay.

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Describe what you see as a strength you could bring to a group writing project.

   _____

   _____

3. Explain ways in which writing in an online course emphasizes the social dimension of writing.

   _____

   _____

8.4 Chapter Activities

Chapter Takeaways

- Successful writers in all contexts think of writing as
    - a process,
    - a means to learn,
    - a social act.
- Paying close attention to the terms of the assignment is essential for understanding the writing approach the instructor expects and for shaping the essay.
- Using the writing process maximizes the mental processes involved in thinking and writing. Take the time to explore prewriting strategies before drafting an essay in order to discover your ideas and how best to shape and communicate them.
- Avoid the temptation, after writing a draft, to consider the essay "done." Revision is almost always needed, involving more significant changes than just quick corrections and editing.
- Virtually all college writing builds on the ideas of others; this is a significant part of the educational experience. In your writing, be sure you always make it clear in your phrasing and use of citations which ideas are your own or common knowledge and which come from other sources.
- College writing extends throughout the curriculum, from your first writing class through to your last term, including writing in class on examinations, group projects, and online courses. Through all this great variety of writing, however, the main principles of effective writing remain consistent. Work to develop your college writing skills at this early stage, and you will be well served throughout your education and into your career thereafter.

Chapter Review

1. Complete this sentence:

   The main reason I am in college right now is

   _____

2. Look for abstract or general words in what you just wrote. (For example, if you wrote, "I want a better job," the key general word is "better." If you wrote, "I need a good education for my future," the general words are "good" and "education." Circle the general word(s) in what *you* wrote.

3. Write a sentence that gives your personal definition of your general words. (For example, if you wrote "I want a better job," what makes a job *better* to you personally?)

   _____

   _____

4. Now look at the *why* of what you've written. *Why* did you define your reason for being in college in the way that you did? Why this reason and not other reasons? Think about this for a minute, and then jot down a statement about why this is important to you.

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. Now look at the *what* involved in your reasoning. *What specifically* do you expect as a result of being in college? What are you gaining? Try to come up with at least three or four *specific examples* related to your reasoning so far.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

6. Imagine you are assigned to write an essay for this prompt: "Argue for a particular benefit of a college education." Look back at what you've written so far—is it headed in this direction? Write down a tentative thesis statement for such an essay.

   _____

   _____

7. Look back at what you wrote for questions 5 and 6 to see if you have the beginning of a list of topics you might discuss in an assigned essay like this. Test out a possible outline by jotting down a few key phrases in the order in which you might discuss your ideas in the essay.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

8. Think about what you have just been doing in the previous questions. If you took this exercise seriously and wrote out your responses, you might actually be ready to begin writing such an essay—at least as prepared as you might be for an in-class exam essay. You have just gone through the first step of the writing process although very quickly. If you spent a few minutes thinking about your ideas, clarifying your reasons and thinking of developing your thesis through examples and explanations, you are in a better and stronger position to begin writing than if you'd started immediately with the prompt. Your essay will be much more successful.

Outside the Book

1. Use this exercise for the next paper you write in any of your college classes. Your goal is not merely to write a great paper in that class but to learn what writing process techniques work best for you. Plan to begin just as soon as you are given the assignment. Try to use each and every one of these strategies (review them in the chapter), even if some things

seem repetitious. Your goal is to find out which techniques work best for you to stimulate the most thought and lead to the best writing.

- Read the assignment and make sure you understand exactly what is expected.
- Sit down with a piece of paper and jot some notes as you brainstorm about your topic.
- Talk with another student in the class about what you're thinking about your topic and what you might say about it.
- Write a journal entry, written strictly to yourself, about what you think you might do in your paper.
- Write down some questions to yourself about what your paper will be covering. Start your questions with "why," "how," and "what."
- Send a classmate an e-mail in which you describe one of the points you'll make in your essay, asking them for their opinion about it.
- When your classmate responds to your e-mail, think about what they say and prepare a written response in your notes.
- Write a statement of purpose for the paper and a brief outline listing key points.
- Show your outline to your instructor or TA and ask if you're on the right track for the assignment. (You can ask other questions, too, if you have them, but try this step even if you feel confident and have no questions at all. You might be surprised by their response.)
- Write a fuller outline—and then go ahead and draft the paper.

2. Return to this exercise after receiving the paper back from your instructor. If you feel the paper was successful, think back to the techniques you used and circle steps above that you felt were particularly helpful and contributed to your success. If you are dissatisfied with the paper, it's time to be honest with yourself about what happened. When unhappy about their grade on a paper, most students admit they didn't spend as much time on it as they should have. Look back at the list above (and other writing strategies earlier in this chapter): what *should* you have done more fully or more carefully to make sure your paper got off to a good start?

Make an Action List

Past Writing

My worst writing habits have been the following:

_____

_____

To overcome these bad habits in college, I will take these steps:

_____

_____

Sentence-Level Mechanics

I generally make the following specific errors (things my past teachers have marked):

_____

_____

I can learn to correct errors like these when proofreading and editing by

_____

_____

Writing Process

I generally rush through the following stage: (circle one)

- Prewriting
- Drafting
- Revising/proofreading

I will spend this much time on this stage in my next college paper:

_____

_____

I will use these strategies to ensure that I successfully move through this stage:

_____

_____

Seeking Help

I am most likely to need help in these areas of writing:

_____

_____

I will use these resources if I need help in these areas in my next course paper:

_____

_____