

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.”
