

Is Your Teen Ready for College Writing?

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Is Your Teen Ready for the Writing Style Colleges Demand?

Are you wasting time teaching your teens writing styles they will never need to use?

The persuasive essay format, which most of us learned as the five-paragraph essay, may well be the only writing style a student will use in college or on the job. Unless they major in English, students will not need to

- Write about their personal feelings.
- Write personal narratives.
- Write any imaginative work, such as stories or poems.

Most college instructors are not interested in students' feelings, only in their thinking. The chemistry department faculty doesn't care how Caitlin feels about isotopes. The business faculty does not care how Joshua feels about supply and demand. The faculty want to see whether Caitlin and Joshua understand those terms well enough to use them in discussing and solving problems in their discipline.

Specifically, college faculty want to see that

- Students have read and understood the literature of the discipline.
- Students can use the terms, concepts, thought processes, and procedures of the discipline they are studying.
- Students are developing opinions about the discipline they are studying.
- Students can articulate reasons for those opinions.
- Students have evidence from reputable sources to support those opinions.

Almost every writing skill students must know for college work can be mastered by ordinary youngsters without an ounce of talent or interest in writing. Focusing just on *required* writing skills takes some of the hassle out of trying to teach unmotivated, struggling, and resistant writers. Those students may even develop an interest in creative writing after they see they can master the basics.

Students who have interest, motivation, or talent are not stuck writing five-paragraph essays all their lives. Writing competently is a foundation, not a millstone.

Make sure your students have a solid foundation; then turn them loose. You cannot do any harm by sticking to the basics, and you may do a great deal of good.

Is Your Teen Ready for College Writing Mechanics?

Your teens drilled on college grammar, did worksheets to identify common grammar mistakes, practiced SAT questions to correct common grammar errors. Your students have grammar for college writing down cold, right?

Possibly.

Standardized “bubble tests” don’t test whether students can apply writing conventions like correct spelling and grammar in their own writing. What counts in the classroom is the students’ own writing.

In 1992, Connors and Lunsford studied the most common errors in the writing of college students. The researchers found 20 specific errors accounted for over 91.5% of all the errors in college students’ writing. Here, in descending order of frequency, is their list:

1. Missing comma after introductory element
2. Vague pronoun reference
3. Missing comma in compound sentence
4. Wrong word, especially a wrong homonym
5. Missing comma(s) with nonessential (nonrestrictive) element
6. Wrong/missing verb ending
7. Wrong/missing preposition
8. Comma splice
9. Missing/misplaced possessive apostrophe
10. Unnecessary shift in verb tense
11. Unnecessary shift in pronoun
12. Sentence fragment
13. Wrong tense or verb form
14. Lack of subject-verb agreement
15. Missing comma in a series
16. Lack of agreement of pronoun with antecedent
17. Unnecessary comma(s) with restrictive element
18. Fused (run-together) sentences
19. Misplaced or dangling modifier
20. It’s/its confusion

Nothing on the list should be above the ability of a sixth grader, should it?

Besides Connors and Lunsford’s list, some colleges also provide a list of homonyms they want students to be able to spell. Most are words of five or fewer letters, such as:

your, you’re	for, four, fore	whose, who’s
then, than	bear, bare	there, their, they’re
to, too, two	for, four, fore	lose, loose

If you can teach your students so thoroughly that they rarely let an error from one of these two lists slip into their writing, you will have equipped them for the writing mechanics required in most college and workplace situations.

See <http://www.you-can-teach-writing.com/writing-mechanics.html> for more on this topic.

Is Your Teen Ready for College Research?

Almost all college writing requires students to support an opinion with evidence. College instructors expect students to develop informed opinions about important issues in their disciplines. To assess student progress, they require students to write *source papers* that draw on other people's reasoning.

Instructors may require students to use a combination of published sources (like books and databases) and unpublished sources, such as the student's own experience or an interview the student conducted, as evidence for their opinions.

Most college libraries offer training to help students use the library's resources to find published evidence for assignments. However, it's not the librarian's job to find Caitlin a topic for her sociology paper or tell Josh how to limit his biology topic to manageable size. Students are expected to know how to do those things before they get to college.

If you want to see your teens succeed in college, make sure they have mastered the process of planning a persuasive paper before they hit campus.

Specifically, they need to know how to

- Develop a thesis statement that expresses an opinion on a topic.
- Write supporting points that are reasons for believing the thesis to be true.
- Systematically identify evidence they already have for each supporting point.
- Identify key words to use in searching for evidence they do not already have.
- Summarize the main idea of a chapter, article, or other long work in a sentence.
- Record enough information so they can easily find the source again.

These are skills students can learn in middle school and practice all through high school. They are equally appropriate for "paragraph essays" and for 10-page research papers.

Competence in these six college writing skills will enable students to make good use of the more detailed training their colleges can provide.

Is Your Teen Ready to Use Sources in College Writing?

Students are rarely expected to write a source paper until the high school research paper. As they learn about citations, cover pages and other details, one essential topic often is overlooked: appropriate use of source materials. Yet even middle school students can master this essential college writing skill in the course of writing persuasive essays.

Using sources appropriately means following a simple three-step strategy for each piece of evidence.

1) Prepare readers to understand the evidence

In speaking we say, “My mother says,” “the weatherman said,” or “my boss told me yesterday” before we present that person’s ideas. In academic writing, writers also identify their source before they use the source’s information.

Next, writers identify the source’s credentials for speaking on the writer’s topic. The head of the Mayo Clinic may not be as well qualified to speak about bunion pain as Aunt Irene who has bunions. Finally, they tell readers what to look for in the evidence, supplying context that the evidence may not provide.

Writers need not make a big production of preparing the reader for the evidence. Many times they introduce the source, the source’s credentials, and set expectations all in one sentence. Sometimes they can give the evidence in that same sentence.

2) Present a summary of the evidence.

College writers are expected to summarize what sources say. College instructors frown on students’ use of quotation; paraphrase must be used sparingly.

Readers assume that all the ideas borrowed from a source are between the source’s name and the end of that sentence. Writers have to be very careful to leave no doubt about which ideas are theirs and which ones are someone else’s. Savvy writers present all the source’s information in one block, even if that information runs several sentences. Then they make their comments on that material.

3) Explain the relevance of the evidence to the thesis.

More often than not, writers must explain how the source material is relevant to the topic sentence of its body paragraph. An example will show what I mean.

Let’s suppose Josh uses this information in an essay: *WFYI meteorologist David Dope predicts Central New York will have unusually snowy winters for the next 10 years.* Josh could be writing about global climate change, the town’s highway department budget, or why his dad should buy him a snowmobile. Unless he explains how the information is relevant to his case, readers may not see the connection.

The five-paragraph essay format calls for three pieces of evidence in each of the three body paragraphs. It won’t take too many essays before even slow students have the process down pat and are ready to handle the source papers required in college writing.

For more about developing paragraphs, see
<http://www.you-can-teach-writing.com/paragraph-writing.html>

Is Your Teen Ready to Write Collaboratively in College?

High school graduates, whether bound for college or a job, need to be able to work in teams. In academic and office settings, many team projects involve writing a document.

Collaborative writing can be daunting to anyone, but it can be especially hard on those students who aren't prepared for the emotional challenges of working in teams.

Here are four ways to help teens prepare for the challenges of collaborative writing.

1. Teach youngsters to take responsibility.

Students who procrastinate, do sloppy work, or do not turn in assignments on time hurt themselves and everyone on the team. Teams work best when every member is willing to do his or her share and a little bit more.

2. Teach youngsters to be patient.

A team member who is used to taking an assignment and running with it can be perceived as dictatorial by more laid-back folks.

It takes time for a group of people to become a team. If your youngsters are hard driving, "type A" personalities, teach them to distract themselves with other work while their teammates blunder around trying to decide how to start the project. The team will not form any faster for all their impatience.

3. Give young writers a real audience.

If high schoolers' readers are usually friends and relatives who can guess what the writer intended to say no matter how badly the writing is botched. A college audience, by contrast, is more likely to include people of dissimilar background and interests.

The sooner you expose students to readers who differ from themselves, the easier it will be for them to write collaboratively with a team.

4. Give students peer review opportunities.

Students have to learn to accept suggestions and criticism if they are going to work on a team. They also have to learn how to say unpleasant things in kind and constructive ways. Repeated practice will help those who find peer reviews stressful and encourage those who enjoy them.

None of these recommendations is particularly difficult, but each requires some effort. You may find the best way to implement them is to join with other parents.

Can you think of a better way to show your students the value of collaboration?