

# Is Your Teen Ready for College Writing?

Revised edition

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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? You could well be if you are spending most of your time on creative writing.

Most college students will never be required to write anything except expository nonfiction. 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.

The chemistry department faculty doesn't care how Caitlin feels about isotopes nor does the business faculty care how Josh feels about supply and demand. College faculty want to see that students:

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

Most of the writing students will be required to do in college will be persuasive writing that uses the thesis-plus-support pattern, which can be taught and learned as a series of writing strategies.

Focusing just on required writing skills takes some of the hassle out of trying to teach unmotivated, struggling, and resistant writers. 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. Those students may even develop an interest in more imaginative writing after they see they can master the basics.

# Is Your Teen Ready for College Writing Mechanics?

Your teens may have done well on their SATs, but what counts in the college classroom is whether students routinely apply writing conventions in their own writing.

A [1986 study](#) of the most common errors in the writing of college students found 20 specific errors, other than spelling errors, accounted for over 90% of all the errors in college students' writing. A [similar study](#) was done in 2005-2006. Errors found among the 20 most frequent errors tabulated in both studies are these:

- Wrong word (#1 in 2005-06, #4 in 1986 when this category included homonyms)
- Missing comma after an introductory element (#2 in 2005-06, #1 in 1986)
- Vague pronoun reference (#4 in 2005-06, #2 in 1986)
- Spelling, including homonyms (5# in 2005-06. In 1986 spelling errors other than homonym errors were omitted from the top 20 list)
- Unnecessary comma (#7 in 2005-06, #17 in 1986)
- Missing comma with a nonrestrictive element (#11 in 2005-06, #5 in 1986)
- Unnecessary shift in verb tense (#12 in 2005-06, #10 in 1986)
- Missing comma in a compound sentence (#13 in 2005-06, #3 in 1986)
- Unnecessary or missing apostrophe, including its/it's (#14 in 2005-06; its/it's by itself was #20 in 1986)
- Fused (run-on) sentence (#15 in 2005-06, #17 in 1986)
- Comma splice (#16 in 2005-06, #8 in 1986)
- Lack of pronoun-antecedent agreement (#17 in 2005-06, #16 in 1986)
- Sentence fragment (#20 in 2005-06, #12 in 1986)

Grammar and punctuation errors found in 2005-06 that were not frequent in 1986 are:

- Unnecessary and missing capitalization (#8)
- Unnecessary or missing hyphen (#19)

All high school graduates should be able to recognize and correct these errors in their own writing whether they are heading off to college or not.

# Is Your Teen Ready for College Research?

College instructors expect students to develop informed opinions about important issues in their disciplines. To assess students' progress, instructors require students to write *source papers* (high schools call them *term papers* or *research papers*) in which students discuss issues raised by scholars in the discipline.

Most college libraries offer training to help students find evidence for source paper 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 preparing a source paper before they hit campus.

Specifically, students must know how to:

- Identify [writing topics](#) within the framework of a specific discipline or course.
- Develop a [thesis statement](#) that expresses an opinion on one of those topics.
- 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.

Students can learn these skills in middle school and use them throughout high school. The skills can be applied equally well to paragraphs and to 20-page research papers.

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

# Is Your Teen Ready to Use Sources in College Writing?

Most of a research paper must be the writer's own ideas. Long before they get to college, students should master the simple, standard procedure that allows them to use source material to support their ideas rather than using it in place of their ideas.

Regardless of the stylebook a college requires, instructors will expect students to follow this simple, three-step procedure for presenting evidence from a source:

## **1) Prepare readers to understand the evidence.**

Polite writers identify the person from whom they got their information before they present the source's information. Next, they explain why the source is qualified to speak on their topic. Finally, they tell readers what to look for in the evidence, supplying context for understanding the information. Many times writers can accomplish all these tasks in a single sentence.

## **2) Present a summary of the evidence.**

The rule of thumb for academic writing is that no more than a quarter of the paper can be borrowed ideas, and only a fraction of that content can be direct quotation. Academic writers are expected to summarize what sources say. Even paraphrase must be used sparingly.

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

Writers must explain how the source material is relevant to the topic sentence of its body paragraph and thus to the thesis of the paper. Writers must not leave readers to figure out the significance themselves.

By following this simple three-step procedure for presenting evidence, students can fulfill most of their obligation to present original material on their writing topic. Steps 1 and 2 may require only a sentence apiece. The explanation of the significance of the material, however, may easily be three to five times as long. Students can provide the rest of the required original content in their introductory and ending paragraphs.

# Is Your Teen Ready to Write Collaboratively in College?

High school graduates need to be able to write a document in collaboration with others. 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.**

Encourage teens to do their work and complete it on time without reminders or supervision. Students who do sloppy work, don't show up for team meetings, or don't turn assignments in 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. 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 progress any faster for all your teen's impatience.

## **3. Give young writers a real audience.**

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 interest who may lack the context for understanding even clearly presented material. The sooner you expose your students to readers who differ significantly from themselves, the easier it will be for them to write collaboratively with a team.

## **4. Give students peer collaboration opportunities.**

Students have to learn to accept suggestions and criticism if they are going to work collaboratively 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 teamwork stressful and encourage those who enjoy cooperative projects.

You may find the best way to implement these suggestions is by collaborating with others who are teaching collaborative writing skills.