

Why Do Good High School Students Struggle with College Level Writing?

They need to transition from seeing college writing assignments as different than high school homework.

1. **“Why are you writing? Because I have a paper due tomorrow.”** In college, students are expected to write because they have something to say on the topic, something worth communicating. First year students do not understand that most of the challenge of college-level writing is finding their own position on a topic or text. We expect this level of engagement in college writing. In high school, students were either given topics or graded more on form and summary of content than on evidence and argument.
2. **Authorship or “voice” becomes a problem.** Unsuccessful college writers feel as if their writing has nothing to do with them; writing makes them feel depleted and exhausted. Because they often do not feel “expert” enough to write, they avoid the task altogether.
3. **First-year students have little to no understanding of the time commitments necessary for various stages or parts of the writing process.** In high school, they were used to teachers breaking writing projects down into discrete steps or tasks (e.g. outline, thesis statement, research evidence, rough draft, etc.) to be completed as homework and commented on often at each step. In college, they need to learn to backwards plan from a paper due date and develop their own accountability for the developmental stages of a paper. In addition, they tend to vastly underestimate how long it will take to reread texts, organize notes or evidence, and rewrite sentences for clarity to meet all of the expectations at the college level. Combine this with the time management problems faced by incoming students in general and it isn’t difficult to understand why so much first-year writing seems hasty and chaotic.
4. **They are being held accountable for their ideas for the first time.** In many high schools, students get away with vague language, unclear references, poorly chosen evidence, etc. because their high school teachers did not expect the same precision and clarity as what is expected at the college level. Students are not used to each idea, sentence, and word choice being taken so seriously by the teacher-reader. This comes as a shock at first, but then develops into a respect that can be motivating. Because they have been held accountable more for form than substance, they underestimate the amount of time they need to spend understanding complex texts to prepare to write.
5. **They move through writing tasks linearly.** When you ask a first-year student how a writing project is going, he/she will say, “I am almost done.” How do you know? “Because I have three of the five pages done.” A more experienced writer knows that filling pages does not necessarily mean that a writing project is almost done. A more experienced writer will say something like, “I have an outline, my references, thesis statement, so now I just need to sit down to write.” They understand that having their ideas in

order is a sign of completion of the hardest part of the writing task. They also know these ideas and this structure will change as they write. First-year writers hold on to their pages and words and outlines for dear life. Getting them to rethink, revise, or start a fresh draft is almost impossible. Being done is getting words on the page. They have an overwhelming desire to be finished, as if writing is a race. Success = completion.

6. **Fluency is a real issue for first-year writers.** Sentences come more easily when you are writing regularly and have confidence build from past experiences. One can face the blank page or the blinking cursor by reaching for confidence from past writing experiences (I have done this before; I can do this again). First-year writers do not have this, so they avoid beginning papers. They struggle to put words on the page because they are either editing as they write or they are simply lost as to what language, tone, or vocabulary to use. We often get their first drafts with clumsy language and incomplete thoughts because they put off the actual writing into the middle of the night because their fears about writing are much greater at this level. Some think they have to sound incredibly sophisticated so they reach for language that is awkward; others know they are writing junk and do it anyway just to feel the sense of completion.
7. **First-year writers tend to write as they speak because they have a linear view of the writing process.** They begin and then they end much as if they are having a conversation with an invisible person. They disregard the need for internal structure—such as topic sentences, transitions, logical order of ideas, definitions attached to the words they are defining, etc. They just spill what they know, indenting where they might take a breath in a conversation. The reader is invisible to them and the belief that they are writing for a reader doesn't make much sense. They are writing to show what they know; they are not writing a product to be read or interpreted. As a result, most papers read like badly structured responses to blue book exam questions.
8. **They apply the same simple writing process to all papers—whether it is a reaction/response paper or an analytic paper on a text.** A first-year student's view of a successful writing process:
 1. Figure out what you want to say (with or without an outline)
 2. Write the paper
 3. Fix it up.
 4. Turn it in.