

TURN YOUR INTERNAL VOLUME UP!

Writing and Study Skills



I know one of your biggest fears: writing. Writing long essays; writing complex essays; researching; and sounding good to your professors. I know that fear can keep you sitting still, staring at that blank white page as the cursor blinks and blinks and blinks... You're afraid you won't sound "academic" enough. You're afraid your ideas aren't "smart" enough. You're afraid you just don't get it. Right?

Wrong.

You do get it. You just need to learn to listen to yourself, to listen to your own ideas. It's easy to zone out your internal voices...but, if you slow down, stay quiet (while that cursor blinks on the screen in front of you), you'll hear your thoughts and you'll notice that they make good points, that you should listen more often. Your opinion on a given topic—say, American pop culture, for example—is as interesting as mine, or as your classmate's, or as a Ph.D. candidate in Cultural Studies and you need to trust that.

Don't get me wrong; writing in college is different than writing in high school. In high school, essays tended to have a pretty formulaic structure: the five-paragraph essay where the "I" was unacceptable and the thesis statement could look something like this: "Video games are dangerous for young children because [POINT A] + [POINT B] + [POINT C]." Then, the first paragraph dealt with [POINT A], the second one with [POINT B] and the third one with [POINT C]. While that was probably a helpful way of approaching an essay in high school, what it failed to recognize was that your ideas are more complicated and compelling than three simple points.

So, yes, college writing is going to be different and you will be learning new approaches to writing essays, but don't let that scare you. The most important characteristic about yourself, a trait you should always recall and tap into, is your inherent curiosity.



CURIOSITY

If you stay quiet and listen to your ideas as they float around in your mind, you'll hear yourself asking many questions. When you listen to your professor lecture, notice the moment when you stop jotting down notes and hear yourself say "oh, wow, I didn't know that", or "I wonder why", or "that's confusing." When you're reading an article, or a book, or a poem, pay attention to the minute when you feel yourself getting frustrated by the author's point, or confused, or intrigued. Take notes in the margins: insert a question mark, or an "I disagree" or a "Why?" or a "How?"

We are all naturally curious to find out more information about a topic we're interested in. That internal two-year-old still lives in us all: "But, why is the sky blue?" "But, why doesn't the sun go to sleep at night?" "But...WHY, WHY, WHY...? Embrace that; it'll get you places.

NOTHING IS PERFECT IN ITS FIRST RENDITION

When your eyes are shifting back and forth from the blank computer screen to the assignment prompt, I urge you to start typing. Don't let writer's block take over. Knock the wall down. Start with one word. Imagine yourself sitting at a piano. Hit one key. You'll hear the note. It'll echo for a second and then call for another note to complete it. Maybe the notes don't sound right together, but at least you're making noise. Writing involves the same process. You have to start somewhere, even if you have no real idea where. Start typing all the random thoughts that come to you about the essay topic. Maybe you just want to start by writing about your confusion.

I'm so confused about this assignment. I don't know what I think of American Idol. I've always thought it was just entertaining, and never thought much about it. I do know that a lot of people get really obsessed with it though. I wonder why.

In the above example, you'll notice that the question "why" came up. That's your inherent curiosity coming out. Spend time with it; consider the possibilities. Write them down.

You'll have a first draft before you know it. It will probably only make sense to you, but that's OK. You've played the piano, even if you never thought you could. Now, you need to start figuring out which notes sound good, or which ideas are the most interesting to salvage.

Writing is a recursive process, which means it goes on and on and will never feel completely finished. If you trust your own ideas about a topic, you'll realize that you'll



always have more ideas, more to say, more to revise. Writing takes time because it's an integral part of thinking. None of us think very logically, so naturally, when you first start tackling an essay, your thoughts aren't going to be extremely logical, unless the topic is something you've been thinking about for a while. So just start writing something. Anything. Soon enough, you'll write your way into your central idea, your thesis statement. The light at the end of the tunnel.

JOINING A CONVERSATION; TRUSTING YOUR CONTRIBUTION

Once you reach your main point—a version of your thesis statement—highlight, cut, and paste it at the beginning of the first draft. Now, go through the draft and pick out the sub-points that will reinforce the thesis statement. You've finally designed an outline that will help you write the second draft. You know what your main points are; now you need to support them with evidence and then analysis of the evidence.

Even though the word research can be intimidating, try to view it as rewarding instead. There is so much information out there, especially with the Internet at our fingertips, that it can understandably become overwhelming. But tune into your natural curiosity, turn up the volume, and start sifting through your sources. Figure out what others are saying about your given topic. Ask a librarian to help you find reliable and credible sources that will reinforce your thesis. Not all information that you find on the web will be reliable, so you want to make sure you evaluate each site: Who is the author of the source? When it was last updated? Does it include a bibliography or is it just someone's subjective opinion? Once you've located trustworthy sources, read them carefully, paying close attention to your reactions. Underline, circle, and highlight the points that you find interesting or helpful for your own research.

Think of the research you've done as a conversation you've been eavesdropping on. What do you want to contribute to the conversation? How can you respectfully and smoothly insert your own opinions and ideas? You could acknowledge the good points that have been made—always making sure you state who made them—and then build upon them. If you disagree with one of the speakers, you should tell them that you do, but you should always tell them why you disagree. Otherwise, they'll ignore you because you won't have any concrete explanation.

Think of this second draft as a conversation with others, not a solo performance. Your ideas are growing now; they're becoming clearer and more complex because they are engaging with others. It's no longer your internal voices playing tug-o-war, but now other writers are sharing their internal voices. It's becoming louder, but more interesting



IMAGINE AN AUDIENCE

Your ideas are on stage now. There are other actors involved. They are conversing with you. But, you're not alone. In front of you is an audience watching, listening, questioning. You want to give them a good show. You want them to stand up and clap at the end. Even if they didn't particular agree with your points, you want them to respect you. So, you are careful with how you present yourself. You don't want to speak in code. You want the audience to understand you easily, without too much effort.

Who is in the audience? Is it your classmates? Your professor? What are their values, beliefs, and opinions? You need to be sensitive about what you're saying in your essay so that nobody is offended and nobody is left confused. The audience of your essays depends on the type of essay you're writing, what your professor has said about audience, and what class you're writing for. So, when you're revising your first draft, keep your audience in mind and be aware of what gaps you need to fill for them.

It's common to view writing as a test to show what you've learned. Try to revise the way you see it though. Ultimately, writing is an avenue where you can explore, question and engage with what you're learning. See it as a process of discovery, not as a barometer of knowledge. If you stay true to your own opinions, you will actually appreciate the process of writing because it is a way for us to grow and develop as thinkers. So, don't hold back because you're afraid you don't have anything "good" enough to say. We all do; we just have to write our way into it.

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