Study Tips: Writing

Topic sentences, dangling modifiers, MLA documentation, faulty parallelism, thesis statements... English composition classes require command of confusing terminology and mastery of one of the most important skills for college success—writing. For the student whose high school English instruction was less than exceptional, composition classes can prove a real headache. Here are some tips for succeeding in this essential subject.

“But I’m a Lousy Writer...”

Many students enter college thinking that their writing ability is fixed, that regardless of effort, they will never be outstanding writers. This type of attitude is self-defeating. While it is true that some students come to college with a better ear for the language than others, all students can improve their skills measurably with a little effort.

Composition, like math and science, has basic rules that every writer needs to know. Through study and practice, you can learn the basics of grammar, essay structure and documentation—knowledge that will translate into higher scores on composition papers and exams.

The Four Essentials of Composition

Your composition course may seem less daunting if you think about it in terms of these four main areas of coverage:

1. The Sentence: The sentence is the building block of all compositions, so the road to success starts here. Your English composition instructor will require you to avoid run-ons and fragments, use the active voice, write in an engaging and clear voice and vary your sentence structures.

2. The Paragraph: The ideas that make up an essay are developed in paragraphs. A successful paragraph has a clear topic sentence supported by compelling evidence. It makes a focused point that helps advance the essay’s central argument.

3. Essay Structure: The ideas in an essay need to follow one another smoothly and logically from beginning to end. A well-crafted essay defines its purpose in the introductory paragraph, introduces several supporting points in the body and concludes in a way that leaves the reader thinking about the paper’s implications.

4. Documentation: Chances are your composition course has a research component, and you’ll need to know how to document sources using MLA, Chicago or APA style. Failure to learn proper documentation can prove fatal in college—a plagiarized paper can easily result in an “F” in the course or even expulsion from school.

Composition Recourses Available on the Web

The more writing examples you work through, the better. Try these sites to supplement your classroom instruction:

- The Online Writing Lab at Purdue
- The Online Writing Lab at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock
- William Strunk’s classic text on English composition, The Elements of Style
Grammar and English Usage Exams

Many composition courses will have exams that focus on the foundations of writing: punctuation, grammar and style. Studying this type of material isn’t all that different from studying for an organic chemistry exam: You need to know some terminology, and you need to know what can be put together with what.

There are few short-cuts for learning grammar, punctuation and style rules. You’ll need to memorize a lot of terminology so that you can distinguish pronoun agreement errors from pronoun reference errors, squinting modifiers from dangling modifiers. You’ll need to know when to use a colon and when to use a semi-colon. Is a sentence passive voice or active voice? First person or third person? Should you use there, their or they’re? Then or than, affect or effect? And yes, you’ll need to learn those pages of comma rules in your writing handbook.

The best approach to learning all these important rules is to practice regularly. Work through all the examples in your writing handbook. Make up flashcards and quiz yourself frequently. Also, visit the sites in the sidebar for additional writing resources and self-tests.

Essay Exams

The essay exam is a very different beast from a grammar exam. You will, of course, need to demonstrate mastery of proper grammar and punctuation, but chances are your professor is most interested in seeing how well you can craft an essay.

The most effective preparation for an essay exam is to write lots of practice essays. Time yourself so that you are writing under exam conditions. Also, try studying with a classmate so that you can exchange and critique each other’s essays. The following checklist can help you assess your performance:

- Does the essay have a clear thesis or argument?
- Does each paragraph have a sharp focus defined in a topic sentence?
- Have you used specific details to support each of your main points?
- Is the essay organized logically? Does each idea build off of what came before, and does each paragraph help prove the validity of the thesis?
- Does each sentence flow smoothly from one to the next? Are the transitions between paragraphs effective?
- Is the style engaging? Have you varied the sentence structure? Do you use figurative language to help illustrate some of your points?
- Is your tone and voice appropriate for the essay prompt? (formal/informal, first person/third person)
- Is the essay free of serious errors of grammar and punctuation?

Most students find that they can craft a timed essay most effectively if they devote a couple of minutes to outlining their ideas first. Figure out what each paragraph is going to cover before you begin writing. It is both time consuming and frustrating if you have to cross out half your exam because you got off in the wrong direction.
Ten Tips for Success In English Composition

1. **Never miss class.** Whether your class takes the form of lecture, discussion, peer review or in-class writing, you’ll be learning important skills and getting a sense of what aspects of English composition your professor most values.

2. **Keep up with the reading.** If you have to cram all the rules of grammar the night before an exam, you’ve set yourself up for disaster.

3. **Work the problems.** When learning grammar and style, you should work through all the problems in class handouts, web resources and your writing handbook. This practice will be essential when exam time rolls around.

4. **Review regularly.** Make up a set of flashcards with terms on one side (comma splice, metaphor, topic sentence, dangling modifier, etc.) and examples on the other. Quiz yourself frequently so that the vocabulary of English composition becomes part of your long-term memory.

5. **Seek help.** Ask an expert if you’re confused by any aspect of writing. Take advantage of your professor’s office hours, tutors and your school’s writing center. We’re often blind to our own writing mistakes—a second set of eyes can be invaluable.

6. **Write frequently.** The best writers write all the time. The more you write, the easier writing will become. Try creating a blog or journal to keep yourself in the habit of writing daily.

7. **Work with classmates.** Study doesn’t need to be a solitary activity. Form a study group with a few classmates—you’ll retain information better by talking through the problems with others.

8. **Read frequently.** Reading and writing go hand-in-hand. The more you read, the more you’ll train your ear to recognize effective and engaging prose.

9. **Know what’s being tested.** No two instructors teach composition in quite the same way. Is the exam short answer or essay format? Is your professor more interested in grammar or the development of your ideas? Can you use your handbook during the exam? Does your professor require you to learn all the terminology, or just to recognize the existence of an error?

10. **Rest your mind.** You’ll write best when you’ve eaten well and had a good night’s sleep. Even with take-home essays, you’ll find that you can write more in an hour when your mind is sharp than in four hours when you’re in an exhausted stupor.

Overcoming a Writer’s Block

Whether you’re writing an essay exam or a take-home paper, writer’s block can quickly lead to panic and poor performance. Luckily, a few tricks can help you get the words flowing again.

First, **get rid of the idea of inspiration.** Even professional writers rarely feel inspired when they write. Instead, you need to view writing for what it is: hard work. As the saying goes, “if you wait for inspiration, you’re not a writer, but a waiter.”

A few tips to help you get your ideas down on the page:

**Brainstorm.** Once you have a topic, create a list of everything that comes to mind related to the topic. Then, figure out which ideas are worth salvaging.

**Free write.** Just write down whatever comes to mind. Don’t worry about whether the ideas are good or bad, and don’t try to edit what you write.

**If you’re at a computer, turn off the screen and start typing.** Sure, you can’t see what you’re writing, but you also can’t backtrack and fuss over what you’ve written. You’ll probably delete most of this writing, but it will help you get the ideas flowing.