The Transition from High School to College Writing

The transition from high school writing to college writing can be daunting. First-year college students frequently struggle with this transition because college professors usually have different expectations regarding structure and argument than high school teachers. However, you need not be intimidated by this difference because that's all it is: a different approach to writing.

Audience

In college, professors comprise the most influential segment of your audience. Since they will be the ones who evaluate your paper, they are the ones you need to appeal to in your writing. If you are in a class where you will be reviewed by your peers, or where you will be required to post your writing on a webboard, the audience for your writing may be broader. However, you should also keep in mind that you are not only writing for an individual or group of readers, you are adding to a conversation within an academic field, and each field has its own conventions. Before you begin writing a paper, familiarize yourself with the disciplinary conventions for that particular class. Consult the guidelines in the assignment your professor has given you, or look over articles you have read for the class to familiarize yourself with the style used in the field. The Writing Resource Center also has resources available that provide an introduction to writing in the various disciplines. You may access these during our hours, without making an appointment.

Structure

In high school, you may have been taught to construct five-paragraph essays and other short forms of writing. College writing sometimes uses the five-paragraph essay as a starting point, but often pushes students to break out of the limits imposed by such a rigid structure. Some assignments simply cannot be responded to effectively with an introduction, three supporting paragraphs and a conclusion. If you feel comfortable with the five-paragraph format, use it to start out with, but be prepared to explore alternative strategies if and when necessary. For example, it may be useful to add subheadings to longer papers to break them up into smaller sections, but you should check with your professor first before using this strategy, as not all disciplines prefer this approach.

Argument

In high school, you may have learned to include a thesis statement in your papers, usually somewhere near the end of the first paragraph. Most college writing also depends on thesis statements, but they may look very different from the statements you are used to seeing and writing. A typical high school thesis statement might look like this: In this paper, I will discuss Abigail Williams' motive in *The Crucible*. A typical college thesis, on the other hand, might look more like this: In *The Crucible*, Abigail Williams denounces Elizabeth Proctor and other women from her village in an attempt to win John Proctor for herself. As you can see, the sample college thesis statement sets up a specific argument and takes a position on that argument. In addition, it gives the reader some warning regarding the kind of evidence to expect in the remainder of the paper. Readers will expect, at minimum, information about the relationship between Abigail and John, between Elizabeth and John, and between Abigail and Elizabeth.

Research

A research paper in high school might have involved collecting information from Yahoo! or Google and re-presenting that information in a book-report format: research for research's sake. College research papers are nearly always argument-based: you collect evidence in order to make a point, not just to prove that you found five sources. Moreover, college papers require a different level of source material. While the Internet can be a great research tool, college students need to

learn the difference between unreliable "free web" sources and more reliable "fee web" sources. Anything the library pays for through subscription service is generally an acceptable research source. Books and peer-reviewed journals are even better.

Format
Though it varies by professor, most college papers are typed and double-spaced, with one-inch margins all around. They are usually in 12-point font, either Times New Roman or Arial. Unless professors specifically ask for one, papers are usually submitted without a cover page; similarly, college papers rarely include plastic binders and other types of folders. Graphics (such as charts or illustrations) are sometimes permitted, but they should be professional looking and do not count as page space.

Some fundamental differences between a book report and a literature paper:
- A book report/book review typically has a pre-established form consisting of two segments: summary and opinion.
- A literature paper has a flexible structure.

- A book report asks what the book is about and why the reader should/should not read the book.
- A literature paper makes and defends an argument about a specific debatable topic within the text. A literature paper also provides evidence for its position.

- A book report gives an opinion—a flat statement of belief.
- A literature paper defends an argument/thesis statement. An argument typically has an architecture of "supports" to bolster a stated belief and also includes an explicit discussion of opposing arguments.

- In a book report, opinion can be rather explicit.
- In a literature paper, the writer's position on the argument should generally be more subtle.

If you find yourself struggling…
Don't be afraid to ask for help! Remember that writing is a *process*—one that will become more familiar to you as you gain experience. Student writing assistants in the New College Writing Resource Center are trained to assist you in any point of the writing process, from brainstorming to organizing. We can help make your transition a smooth one.

Information adapted from the Temple University Writing Resource Center (http://www.temple.edu/writingctr/student_resources/college_v_hs.htm) and The University of Texas at Austin Writing Center (http://uwc.fac.utexas.edu)