

## ***What Is College-Ready Writing & Why Does It Matter?***

A Resource for Teachers  
by William Bryant, PhD

### **Introduction + Why Writing Matters So Much**

I used to be the Director of Writing Assessments at ACT, the company that produces the ACT college admissions exam. I was the guy in charge of coming up with prompts and scoring student essays for the ACT Writing Test.

What I observed in my nearly ten years at ACT was that not very many students were capable writers. Though the ACT test-takers were in the process of preparing for college, they were far from ready to write at the college level.

This would turn out to be a huge problem for most of them.

Research shows that only about **27 percent** of high school seniors are ready for college writing. Because they're unprepared, about **half of all students entering college** must take remedial coursework that doesn't count towards their degree. In fact, each year students and their families in the US spend over **\$1.5 billion** on remediation.

What's more, students who take remedial coursework are **far less likely to complete their degrees**. Too many borrow money to attend college, find out that they're not academically prepared, pay for courses that don't count, get discouraged, and finally drop out, with a load of debt and no degree.

### **Writing is a Key Foundational Skill**

Study after study shows that writing is THE academic skill **most linked to college success**; when students lack writing competence as they enter college, they start out with a crippling disadvantage. Writing is also one of the top skills employers seek, yet one they report most often missing in their new-hires. Thus, the reading, thinking, and communication skills entailed in competent writing have a direct impact on students' ability to achieve their education and career goals.

### ***Transferable skills***

Colleges and employers value good writing skills in part because they recognize that people who write well possess an array of high-level competencies that apply across many varieties of subject matter and types of projects.

It's easy for students to regard composing an academic essay as an isolated exercise that will have little value to them outside of school. Instead, they should understand it as an **occasion for developing and demonstrating a constellation of highly valued skills and habits of mind that apply no matter their college major or chosen career.**

What do these transferable skills look like? In composing a successful extended, source-based academic essay, students:

- Demonstrate that they understand a complex task and their purpose for working on it;
- Recognize the needs and expectations of people who will receive and evaluate their work;
- Generate productive ideas that are well suited to a given task, audience, and purpose;
- Demonstrate that they can successfully scope and plan a complex intellectual project;
- Find relevant, credible source materials, analyze them, and make discerning use of them in their own work;
- Identify and define a specific, relevant problem residing within a broad domain of information and debate;
- Formulate a coherent response to a defined problem, based on their analysis of a range of information and perspectives;
- Stake out a persuasive position on a debatable issue, and effectively support it with an argument grounded in evidence and logical reasoning;
- Organize a collection of materials, information, and ideas into a coherent presentation;
- Communicate complex ideas clearly and effectively;
- Skillfully revise their work in response to feedback from others and their own self-critique;
- Produce a polished final product.

An extended, research-supported academic essay provides an unmistakable demonstration of the author's knowledge, the quality of their thinking, their capacity for executing a complex intellectual task, and their skill at communicating clearly and effectively.

No wonder so many schools and employers want to see writing samples from their applicants.

### ***Agency***

This collection of valuable, transferable skills is only part of why students should appreciate the importance of becoming competent writers. Even more essential to their development—and potentially even more motivating—is the agency they will acquire.

By *agency*, I mean students' capacity for power and impact in the world. Effective writing is a means for advancing their own interests and objectives throughout life.

For their voices to be heard and taken seriously on issues that matter to them—whether in personal encounters, in school, in work situations, or in public discourse—students must learn how to think critically and communicate effectively. Composing extended academic essays provides opportunities to build these empowering skills.

How do students acquire agency through writing?

Extended, source-based academic writing projects provide students with occasions for discovering what they're interested in, and with strategies for learning about and thinking through the topics and questions that matter to them. They learn how to find relevant information and perspectives, how to evaluate the quality of the ideas and information they encounter, and how to analyze the validity of sources and arguments.

In the process of composing, students discover their own thinking, weigh their ideas against those of others, and arrive at their own defensible positions. They learn to express themselves with precision, to fortify their positions against counterarguments, and to present their ideas in ways that are persuasive and compelling to others.

Writing in college is **not about worksheets and pre-formulated questions**. Rather, students will be asked to compose research-based multiple-page essays in which they discover and explore topics and issues that they care about.

They'll have responsibility for the content and structure of their work. They'll be expected to exercise good judgment about what to include in an essay and how to effectively organize and present it, according to the nature and needs of their project.

## **What College-Ready Writing Is & What It Is Not**

### **College-Ready Writing**

A primary goal of writing instruction early in college is to prepare students for writing in their discipline later on. General principles of academic writing that are transferable across disciplines, therefore, are important to master in introductory courses.

This kind of writing generally requires students to compose multiple-page essays that engage with other sources.

The essay types most commonly required in college are persuasive and informational; comparatively little narrative or creative writing is assigned.

In *What Is "College-Level Writing,"* Patrick Sullivan writes that the central goal of college writing instruction is to "introduce students to an ongoing conversation that is multilayered and complex. . . [and] ask them . . . to engage the issues and ideas in that conversation thoughtfully."

Student essays, accordingly, should demonstrate:

- A willingness to evaluate ideas and issues carefully;
- Some skill at analysis and higher-level thinking;
- The ability to shape and organize material effectively;
- The ability to integrate some of the material from the readings skillfully;
- The ability to follow standard rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling.<sup>1</sup>

Essays typical of college-level work call upon a full set of research, critical thinking, and composition skills. A persuasive essay provides the greatest opportunity to emphasize *argumentation*, a skill central to the focused kinds of thinking and writing students are likely to be asked to do throughout their academic and work lives. Almost half of writing assignments in composition courses are based on argumentation.

In addition, a persuasive, research-based essay provides an opportunity to critically engage with texts and to develop critical thinking skills through analysis and reasoning. The importance of critical thinking is stressed throughout college.

William Condon and Diane Kelly-Riley identify with some precision the form critical thinking takes in college-level writing:

- Identification of a problem or issue;
- Establishment of a clear perspective on the issue;
- Recognition of alternative perspectives;
- Location of the issue within an appropriate context(s);
- Identification and evaluation of evidence;
- Recognition of fundamental assumptions implicit or stated by the representation of an issue;
- Assessment of implications and potential conclusions.<sup>2</sup>

A research-supported, persuasive essay—with its focus on defining a debatable issue, examining multiple perspectives, and taking and supporting a position—provides an opportunity to demonstrate critical thinking in each of these areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Sullivan & Timberg, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Condon & Kelly-Riley, 2004.

## High-School Writing

The research on how writing is taught in middle and high school shows that **most students do not get the kind of writing experience they need to be prepared for college**. In high school and earlier, the majority of students spend most of their time responding to short-answer worksheets and writing according to formulas. They aren't taught how to compose research-based, multi-page essays that demonstrate critical thinking.

In their analysis of a national survey of high school writing instruction, one group of researchers reported that "the writing activities [high school students] were assigned most frequently by teachers involved little analysis and interpretation," and that "a sizeable proportion of the participating teachers seldom assigned activities that clearly involved writing multiple paragraphs."<sup>3</sup>

Another study of high school classrooms showed that "many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length."<sup>4</sup> A study titled *A Snapshot of Writing Instruction in Middle Schools and High School* found that ". . . the actual writing that goes on in typical classrooms across the United States remains dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information, whether copying directly from a teacher's presentation, completing worksheets and chapter summaries, replicating highly formulaic essay structures keyed to the high-stakes tests they will be taking, or writing the particular information the teacher is seeking."<sup>5</sup>

Yet another group of researchers conducted a national survey of instructional practices in middle school classrooms. They likewise found that students spent insufficient time writing, that little time was spent on writing instruction, and that assignments "mostly involved writing without composing."<sup>6</sup>

Writing without composing was also a primary finding in a report on middle school classroom writing instruction from The Education Trust.<sup>7</sup> According to their report, assignments most often asked students to take notes or provide short answers to text-based questions. Only **nine percent of assignments**, the report states, "asked students to . . . do the heavier lift of composing original text to express their own thinking and analysis in multiple paragraphs, much less multiple pages." The researchers found that in most of the assignments they reviewed, "composing a coherent piece of extended writing was simply not a goal."<sup>8</sup>

An abundance of research thus shows that there is a big gap between high school and college writing. Most students' writing experience prior to college is not rigorous enough to prepare them for

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<sup>3</sup> Kihara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009, p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> Applebee & Langer, 2006, p. ii.

<sup>5</sup> Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Graham, et al, 2014

<sup>7</sup> Santelises & Dabrowski, 2015

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

the demands of college-level academic work. They are not getting enough experience at authentic academic composition and the interpretive reading, analysis, argumentation, and other higher order skills that go with it.

This lack of rigorous writing experience is a major disadvantage to students entering college, since, as one study found, **“the academic intensity of the student’s high school curriculum still counts more than anything else in pre-collegiate history in providing momentum toward completing a bachelor’s degree.”**<sup>9</sup>

COLLEGE-READY WRITING GAP		
High School		College
Primarily short responses and worksheets; “writing without composing.”	<p><b>College-Ready Writing Essentials™</b></p>  <p><b>Creating A Bridge</b></p>	Multiple-page source-based compositions: reports, essays, position papers, critical reviews, etc.
Formulaic structures, such as the 5-paragraph essay and 11-sentence paragraph.		Structure determined by student author according to the needs of their project. Formulas are avoided.
Students write to standardized topics and prompts.		Students discover topics and explore issues that they care about.
Students’ cultural identity, background, and experience are off-limits in academic writing.		Students’ identity, background, experience are important resources that they bring to their academic writing.
Evidence-supported persuasive essays are not emphasized.		Evidence-supported persuasive essays are the primary type of writing required.
The primary purpose of writing is to demonstrate language skills.		The primary purpose of writing is to demonstrate critical thinking skills.
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### Competencies Needed For Successful College Writing

A lot of research has been conducted on the qualities and abilities students must develop in order to succeed in college. This research points not only to academic knowledge and skills, but also to certain personal and social behaviors, such as a willingness to work hard and to cooperate with others.

Further, research shows that successful college students also possess self-awareness: they know their own academic strengths and weaknesses, what motivates them, what their goals are. They also are aware of the social and cultural environment around them; for example, they recognize the values and assumptions that underlie their school community and the society in which it operates.

<sup>9</sup> Adelman, 2006. Also see Attewell & Domina, 2008; Long, Conger, & Iatarola, 2012

## Knowledge and Skills

The knowledge and skills needed for college-ready writing can be grouped into four categories:

**Writing Processes:** Knowing how to plan, draft, revise, and finalize an academic essay;

**Rhetorical Knowledge:** Understanding the writing task, purposes for writing, and audiences; knowing how to use language and reasoning in ways that are valued and persuasive within college academics;

**Critical Thinking:** The ability to insightfully analyze and evaluate ideas, arguments, and perspectives from other sources, and to contribute one's own well-reasoned ideas, arguments, and perspectives;

**Knowledge of Conventions:** Understanding that there are guidelines and expectations for how academic work should be presented; knowing how to produce an essay that exhibits correct grammar, language mechanics, and formatting, as well as effective organization, appropriate tone and style, and careful attention to accurately presenting and citing the work of others.

## Behaviors

### **Personal Behaviors**

Much success in school—and in life, for that matter—depends on what students personally bring to the work they do.

- Are they persistent, even when frustrated?
- Are they motivated to do their best?
- Do they complete assignments and meet deadlines?
- Do they take responsibility for their own performance?

These personal qualities—*persistence, motivation, conscientiousness, responsibility*—are essential to college-ready writing, as well as to students' overall academic success.

### **Social Behaviors**

In college, students are expected to participate in classroom discussions, work collaboratively in groups, engage with instructors, review and comment on the work of peers, and respond to the feedback they receive from others. In every case, developing good academic social skills will be essential to success.

Taking responsibility for their own performance, getting themselves intellectually engaged in their work, learning all they can about a topic that interests them, revising and reworking their writing—all of these are examples of successful academic behaviors.

## **Awareness**

### ***Self Awareness***

Successful students have the ability to reflect on their own thinking and behavior. They understand how they learn best and what motivates them. They set goals for themselves and are willing to honestly evaluate their own performance so that they can improve.

Good instruction provides opportunities to develop skills of self-awareness that can help students not only improve their writing, but also understand and advance their own goals and interests.

### ***Social Awareness***

Successful students also recognize the social and cultural contexts around them. They seek to understand their relationship to the institutions and systems that shape their experience. As students pursue an education, it is important for them to recognize that they are situated within a particular school, a particular academic discipline, a particular community of people who have a tradition of thinking and communicating in particular ways.

In other words, students are always in relationship with the culture, people, and institutions around them; and in those relationships their personal background, experiences, identity, and values matter. The same is true outside of school—in the workplace, and in civic life. Learning to see and understand those relationships is a necessary part of getting an education.

Students should understand that good writing skills—which entail good reading and thinking skills as well—will be valuable to them in their academic pursuits, in their careers, and in their personal and civic lives.

## **Conclusion**

The skills needed for successful academic writing are acquired through **direct instruction and practice**. Students who do not have an opportunity to begin learning and practicing such skills prior to leaving high school consequently are unprepared for college-level work after graduation.

Our mission, therefore, is to bridge the gap between high school and college writing, by helping more students gain experience with authentic academic composition prior to beginning their college careers.

*College-Ready Writing Essentials* is a flexible, ready-to-use, online resource based on extensive research, aimed directly at helping students get the kind of writing experience and exposure to writing concepts that they need to be successful as they begin their college careers. *CRWE* guides students through the complex process of composing a research-supported persuasive essay.

Why this task? Why a research-supported persuasive essay?

- It's the kind of essay students will be asked frequently to write in college, in a variety of different courses—English, History, Political Science, Communications, Social Science, Business, Culture Studies, and others.
- They'll be asked to write this kind of essay because it is an essential type of intellectual work that trains them to think and communicate like an educated person.
- It is an effective way to demonstrate that they have learned about an issue in depth, are thoughtful about it, and can convey their knowledge and ideas clearly and effectively.
- Persuasive, evidence-based arguments lie at the heart of academic work. Writing this kind of essay trains students to formulate their own arguments, critique the arguments of others, and communicate with clarity and power.

As they produce their essay, they will practice some key skills necessary for success in college. They will:

- Demonstrate that they understand what is being asked of them;
- Successfully scope and plan a complex, authentic academic project;
- Find credible source materials, read them perceptively, and make effective use of them in their own work;
- Define a relevant issue and formulate a coherent position on it;
- Construct an argument that makes their position persuasive;
- Demonstrate their knowledge, the quality of their thinking, and the quality of their judgment;
- Communicate effectively in writing;
- Revise their work in response to feedback;
- Produce a finished academic product that they can be proud of.

*College-Ready Writing Essentials* is designed with the challenges of classroom composition instruction in mind. It provides the level of writing experience that will best equip students for college success, aligning task and instruction with college-level practices and concepts.

(See *CRWE* brochure following Works Cited on next page for full details & demo access.)

For additional information—or to get started with *CRWE* via Canvas in your own classroom—please contact me at [hello@better-rhetor.com](mailto:hello@better-rhetor.com).

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