

## UNDERSTANDING COLLEGE WRITING (PODCAST 33 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone! This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to explain what constitutes college writing—that is, what college writing is, what it’s not, and how it may be different from the kind of writing you’ve done in the past.

First off, let’s face it: Any kind of writing to be done well requires time and patience. That’s a given. When students transition from high school writing to college writing, there are often bumps along the way, largely due to expectations. This is not to suggest that high school teachers don’t have expectations, for they do, but it is to say that in college the expectations are different.

For one, professors expect that student writers understand the basics of grammar, usage, and mechanics, and that they know how to write paragraphs and short essays. Professors expect students to know about and use the writing process, and they expect students to be conscientious in what they produce (content is proofread and edited, for example). Without a doubt, the highest expectation professors have of student writing in college is that it demonstrates a more “sophisticated” level of thinking than what is expected in high school. Indeed, in college the kind of writing that you will be producing, for the most part, will be what’s commonly called academic writing. Don’t let that terminology worry you too much because chances are that you have experience with academic writing even if you didn’t realize what you were producing was, in fact, academic writing.

So how do you know what exactly academic writing is? Great question. For starters, **academic writing has more formal requirements**. In general, you should keep contractions out of your writing, and it’s best to avoid first person plural (we, us, our) and second person (you, your, yourself) pronouns in your writing. (You might want to check out my podcast devoted exclusively to the problems of using second person.) First person singular (I) should be limited to situations when you are marshaling in critical personal experience evidence, but even then you should use such content sparingly. Some professors will pitch fits if a first-person pronouns rears its head in an academic essay, so keep your professor’s predilections in mind in this regard.

Academic writing also **does not allow for such informal use of language** as colloquialisms, hyperbole, idiomatic expressions, or clichés. Put another way, don’t use slang, don’t exaggerate, don’t use dialect, and don’t use expressions people have used over and over and over again. Strive for fresh, direct phrasing. You’re probably thinking: That’s a lot of “don’ts”—and I guess to some extent that’s true. However, what’s also true is that when one writes, one has to keep the audience and purpose in mind, so it shouldn’t come as a great surprise that college writing is more formal writing and thus there are things you should not do in such writing that would be fine in an email to a friend. Make sense?

The point here is that academic writing uses a writing style appropriate for college writing



assignments. This is not to say that academic writing should be wooden, or worse, boring sounding, for this is not the case at all, but this is to say that academic writing has certain characteristics that one needs to keep in mind when writing. So, based on what I've said so far, it's safe to say that one characteristic of academic writing is that it is more formal.

Another characteristic of **academic writing is that it is usually written for an academic audience.** That is to say that regardless of what the essay discusses, it has to be of some importance to others—it offers some kind of opinion or insight relevant to a wider community of readers. In this regard, you're not writing for yourself or just for your professor; you are writing for others who might find value in the insights you offer in your paper. For example, an academic essay wouldn't focus on how your next-door-neighbor is the devil incarnate and discuss all of the awful, terrible, and low-down things he does to make your life miserable, but your essay might discuss the lack of human decency so common today and use your next-door-neighbor as a case-in-point example to illustrate your contention. Following me? To loosely paraphrase William Carlos Williams, so much depends on the treatment of the subject. In this regard, the writer's job is to move beyond the parameters of what might be considered a personal essay and to offer a discussion of the topic that has broader appeal—that is, others would be interested and would recognize the value of the discussion.

Another characteristic of **academic writing** is that it **uses evidence (often from outside sources—** that is, content from research) to support the assertions the paper makes. The evidence includes facts, statistics, examples, testimony, and the like. Simply put, evidence is what you use to support what you have to say about a subject. Of course the evidence alone won't make the writer's case, for the writer needs to do something with that evidence—look at it closely, examine it, comment on it in terms of its relevance to the point of the paragraph as well as to the larger point of the essay as established in the thesis. In other words, it's up to you to offer interpretation and insight of the evidence you use as it relates to the point you are trying to make.

Many writers mistakenly think that just the presence—the sheer inclusion—of evidence will help the writer make his or her case, but this is not so at all. The skill to cultivate here is learning how to use the evidence in a way that makes your point all the more compelling to readers. Maybe an example will help. Listen to the two following passages and think about which one is more effective in developing its point.

Example 1: Another reason elderly drivers should be re-tested every few years is to make sure their mental faculties are sound. [Quote] "A decline in cognitive ability has been linked to a greater crash risk in older drivers (Sayers, 2012, p. 39). [End quote] The results of a study by Boyle (2012) proves this belief: [Quote] "Poor decision-making affects the ability to operate a motor vehicle safely and elderly drivers' cognitive decline makes them increasingly unsafe on the roadways" (p. 55). [End quote]

Example 2: Another reason elderly drivers should be re-tested every few years is to make sure their mental faculties are sound. It's common knowledge that as people age their reflexes slow down. It's also true that for some, as they age, their ability to remember details and quickly form responses also slows down. With this in mind, it's interesting to note that the Harvard Medical Review reported that [Quote] "A decline in cognitive ability has been linked to a greater crash risk in older drivers" (Sayers, 2012, p. 39). [End quote] The link between declining cognitive functioning and the risk of car accidents



should not come as a surprise, as anyone with an aging relative knows that advancing age often impacts a person's ability to process information and react to situations. This is just the nature of being old. However, whether or not elderly people who drive get into car accidents is not as important as the inherent risk of getting into a car accident—and the Harvard Medical Review report makes it clear that there is a greater risk of accidents with elderly drivers.

I suspect the difference between the two examples is clear enough, but let me expound just a bit. The first example simply made a statement—Another reason elderly drivers should be re-tested every few years is to make sure their mental faculties are sound—and then followed it directly with a quote and then another quote. The basic idea of the paragraph wasn't even established effectively and the writer segued into a stand-alone quote and then another. There was no commentary offered for either quote, so it was up to readers to make any kind of connection between the quotes and the point the writer may be trying to convey. In short, the execution is poor to fair.

In the second example, the sense of purpose is much clearer on the page. The writer establishes the point—the idea that elderly drivers should be re-tested every few years to make sure their mental faculties are sound—and then offers some elaboration on that idea before transitioning to the use of evidence. The writer works in a quote with sufficient context and then follows the evidence with commentary so that it is clear how the evidence relates to the point the writer is trying to make. And the writing is sustained—that is, the point is fully developed for an audience.

Perhaps **the most challenging aspect of academic writing is that you often have to write about topics that are unfamiliar to you.** In this regard, you may find yourself faced with having to write about or respond to or make sense of ideas in your text book, scholarly journals, essays, or some other source. Put another way, your ability to write well is related to your ability to read well. In fact, writing is undeniably connected to one's ability to read and to think about that reading. Academic writing requires the writer to read challenging texts, think about those texts, and then write about or use those texts in some way.

For those of you new to college-level writing (or for those of you who've been out of practice for some time), the key takeaway from this podcast should be an understanding of the basic expectations when writing for an academic purpose. Much of the information offered is pragmatic, and if you keep the basic characteristics of academic writing in mind, you will be in a good position to practice this kind of writing and with practice and effort improve upon your ability over time. Like anything new, it takes a little while to get the hang of things, so be patient and learn as you gain experience.

Thanks for listening, everyone. Happy writing!

