

Why Do Students Need To Master the Art of Writing?

The ability to write a well-organized and well-developed essay is crucial for the future success of all students. Essays are an important feature of many standardized exams such as the College Board's SAT and Advanced Placement tests. Essays are also an integral part of the college application process. Once they are in college, students often discover that the midterms and finals for their humanities and social science classes are usually essay exams. When they graduate from college and start working, students will still need the ability to write well. From crafting résumés and cover letters to writing memos and reports, many white-collar professional careers will require students to constantly apply all the writing skills and knowledge that they have acquired over a lifetime of learning.

How Can Students Improve Their Writing?

Formal essay writing does not come easily or naturally to many students. The informal modes of expression commonly used by students today do not prepare them for the structure and clarity that is prized in the style of writing that is considered appropriate for educational and professional purposes. Their use of street slang as well as technological forums like instant-messaging, text-messaging, and e-mail, create shortcuts that are not grammatically correct and which discourage the use of a higher-level and more varied vocabulary. To improve their formal writing skills, students must learn to clearly enunciate the primary objective (thesis) of their essays. In the body paragraphs of their essays, they must support and develop their primary objective (thesis) with sufficient and appropriate arguments. In order to be considered valid or effective, these arguments themselves must be supported with convincing evidence and analysis. The goal of writing is to communicate ideas and information clearly to the reader. The goal of an essay is to persuade the reader of a certain perspective or conclusion. Through insightful reflection, thoughtful editing, and constant practice, over time all students can improve their writing skills and will be able to craft better essays.

The first truth that students must accept before they can improve their essay writing is to understand that the introduction cannot be a meaningless formality. Students often believe that simply restating the task or question qualifies as an appropriate thesis and is sufficient for the introduction to their essay. It is not. An authentic introduction will include appropriate background information so that the writer's thesis can be understood within a proper context. Moreover, the thesis itself must be a direct and understandable response to the question or task set before the writer. An advanced, comprehensive thesis will go beyond merely stating a position or answer and explain why it is the correct answer or how it is the better position. An introduction that does not have these two elements is fundamentally flawed and undermines the effectiveness of the overall essay. Without context and thesis, the rest of the essay is adrift and serves no clear purpose.

The second truth that students must accept is that the structure and coherence of their body paragraphs greatly determine the overall credibility and effectiveness of their essay. Simply put, careless wording and inappropriate logic will diminish the reader's faith in the writer's ability and undermine the arguments and reasoning put forth by the writer. An essay is like a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece plays an important role in the whole. The writer must take great care to ensure that each piece fits properly into place and preserves the whole. The role of the body paragraphs is to support the thesis. In order to be taken seriously and support the thesis

effectively, the ideas or arguments expressed in the body paragraphs need to be supported by appropriate evidence and analysis. This is the forum through which the writer's intellect and knowledge is displayed. The more evidence that can be presented in support of ideas and arguments, the more knowledgeable the writer appears to be. The more persuasive the analysis seems, the more formidable the writer's intellect appears to be. As an expression of concepts and viewpoints, the essay relies solely on the use of the written language. Each word and every phrase can become endowed with great meaning and complexity or hidden meaning and subtlety. The great writers are the ones who judiciously choose their words and phrases with care and attention to detail. Accomplished writing is never the result of accident. It is the finished product that arises out of careful planning and many revisions.

The third truth that students must accept before they can improve their essay writing is to understand that the conclusion cannot be a cursory summary of the main ideas expressed in their body paragraphs. For too many students, the conclusion is often a vapid afterthought. Because it is at the end of their essay, they believe that it is not important or at least not as important as the rest of their essay. In this, they are mistaken. If the purpose of the introduction is to put forth a thesis within its proper context and the purpose of body paragraphs is to prove the thesis with supporting arguments based on evidence and reasoning, then the purpose of a legitimate and genuine conclusion in an essay is to explain how those supporting arguments put forth in the body paragraphs have successfully proven the thesis. This goes beyond merely restating the thesis or repeating the main ideas of the body paragraphs. It requires a true synthesis of all the ideas, evidence, and analyses presented in the body paragraphs to demonstrate why the thesis from the introduction is the correct answer to a question or how it is the better response to a given task. It is the hardest part of the essay. Most students never write a real conclusion to their essay. Part of the reason why is because they may not have been taught how to do so. Another reason why is because some of their teachers allow them to get away with merely restating the thesis or summarizing the main ideas of the body paragraphs.

The fourth truth that students must embrace in order to improve their writing is the realization that formal writing is a serious craft. As with any craft requiring skills that we are not born with, proficiency and eventually mastery comes to those who practice the craft the most. While some students may excel more rapidly or easily because of their innate ability or greater maturity, ultimately it is first-hand experience that determines how well or how badly one writes. As with any activity that requires the acquisition of certain skills and knowledge in order to succeed, students must be willing to approach the art and craft of writing with the same self-discipline and determination to excel that they would give to any of their other favored pursuits such as playing a musical instrument, dancing without making a fool of themselves, or becoming a good player at their game of choice whether it be athletic or electronic.

In the end, all students have within their power the ability to improve their formal writing skills. What is required on their part is a willingness to take writing seriously and put into their writing the necessary effort and forethought to be understood more clearly. The hardest truth for many students to face and bear is that the process of improving their formal writing skills is a long and arduous journey that will never end. No matter how good they think they are at writing, there will always be room for improvement or polishing. The most frustrating part of this truth is that, at any given moment, students think their writing is either fine or as good as it gets but adults (such as their teachers) think it's not. The secret to successful writing is not to become fixated on one's flaws and shortcomings as a writer. Instead, the secret is to remember that it is a constant journey of self-discovery and links each and every one of us to each other.