

TEN MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT COLLEGE WRITING

1. The instructor is my audience, the only person who will read my writing.

Writing in college requires you to be aware of many different audiences: your teachers, your classmates, the campus community as a whole. Scholarship is most exciting when it's shared, and you will often have the chance to share what you've discovered (through presentations, college publications, conferences, etc.). You must decide on a real or imagined audience with whom you'd share your ideas.

2. What I think doesn't matter.

You may have been told to remove the first-person pronoun "I" from most of your academic writing, whether in the context of a personal opinion, a description of personal experience, or just a phrase such as "I would argue." However, sometimes personal experience can add an emotional aspect to otherwise factual evidence you're presenting, and feeling free to use "I" from time to time can help you avoid some awkward sentence constructions ("*One knew that one had achieved one's purpose...*")

3. What I think is all that matters.

At the same time, you need to remember to take into account other people's opinions as you write and revise—from the voices of other writers to the voices of your instructor, mentor, or peers giving you feedback. An isolated personal opinion is not in itself a thesis worthy of exploring in writing.

4. I'm a good writer: I know grammar backward and forward.

It's great to have facility with grammar and punctuation. Still, you can write a paper that is stylistically flawless but that has no thesis statement, poor development, insufficient support, or other problems of thinking—and *thinking* is what your instructors want your writing to reflect.

5. I'm a bad writer: I can't keep all the grammar rules straight.

Readers expect certain conventions of grammar and punctuation in your writing so that they may clearly follow your ideas. However, it's not a crime or a sin not to have every last comma rule memorized, and although problems with punctuation or grammar might sometimes obscure your good ideas, these problems do not in the end trump these ideas. Your mentor, peers, Writing Center tutors, and your *Hacker's Pocket Guide* can all help you review and improve your sentence-level writing style.

6. The essay formats we practiced in AP English are the perfect templates for every essay I will write.

The five-paragraph essay format is a great model for an SAT writing exam and a lousy model for a 10-page research paper. Your college writing tasks will ask you to build on some of the good writing habits you have (formulating a thesis, structure, organization, and the like) while requiring you to learn new formats for various disciplines and writing purposes.

7. I need a firm thesis before I can begin writing or researching.

If you wait until you have an airtight thesis before you begin writing or planning, you will run out of time, energy, and interest. An argument may change as you read, think, and write about it, so don't be unproductively wedded to an initial thesis statement.



8. I need to find only sources that agree with me.

First, remember that the point of doing research is to inquire into the information that's available, not just to find sources whose arguments you can dutifully repeat as matching yours exactly. Ideally, as you do research, you'll find sources that challenge you to rethink your position subtly or substantially. Second, many writing tasks—such as argumentative essays or literature reviews—require you to look at a variety of positions and opinions on an issue; you ignore conflicting sources at your peril.

9. Quotations from sources are the ultimate authority on a subject and are thus self-explanatory.

Research papers are not meant to be a collection of quotations (or paraphrases) welded together; you use source material to amplify, reflect, and speak back to a meaningful thesis idea of your own creation. “Plunking” down quotation after quotation tells your reader nothing about the inquiry process you have gone through or why your paper on this topic is different from any other paper.

10. Writing papers is just like taking a test—I need to show that I can remember and repeat important information.

Though you may have taken numerous essay tests already in your school career, you should know that writing essays in college is a process of creating knowledge, not just mastering it. Rarely is a professor hoping to get twenty essays all on the same subject, repeating what the textbook has said or what has come up in class discussion. Instead, writing about a subject is a way for you to learn more, both through discovering what other sources reveal about the topic as well as discovering your own changing questions and positions. A well-written essay will show that you can synthesize the material you've learned in class, the information you can gather through academic research, and the ideas and answers you yourself formulate.

