

Tips: How to Write Better

America's colleges and universities have a wide variety of writing requirements, and every instructor develops techniques to help students improve. But in surveying writing programs and teachers across the country, NEWSWEEK ON CAMPUS found that the basic advice they give students is surprisingly uniform. Here, distilled from the experts, are seven tips for better writing:



■ **Organize before you start.** Writing is, at base, an exercise in thinking. The very act of setting down thoughts in words forces the writer to examine the real meaning of those words and the logic—or lack of it—that leads from one thought to another. It requires careful decisions on which information is unimportant to the task at hand and which is critical. And it demands attention to the most effective order in which to present the critical information. The clear message is that writing is much easier if you have first outlined just exactly what it is you want to say. An outline is not set in concrete: even the best writers revise their plans as they go along. But simply throwing a jumble of thoughts onto paper or a computer screen without prior consideration produces just a jumble of thoughts in a new medium—not good writing.

■ **Simplify.** As you write, beware of high-falutin word choice and pretentious phrasing. Always try for the simplest, clearest, most lucid way of expressing what you want to say. Beware, too, of jargon. It is a common misconception among students that adopting the specialized idiom of a particular discipline sounds more knowledgeable or important, and therefore makes their writing “better.” This is not true. In fact, a student who can wrestle a complex idea into felicitous new phrasing demonstrates that he or she has mastered the idea *behind* the jargon.

■ **Revise and rewrite.** Professors say this is where college students most often fall short: once they see their words written or typed out, they think the job is done. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Start a writing assignment far enough ahead so that you will have time to do it again—and again, if necessary. Read closely for meaning. Are the words you have chosen the best

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Read—as much as you can. Teachers of writing almost unanimously emphasize that reading and writing are inextricably linked. “I don’t think you can write any better than you can read,” says University of Texas English Prof. John Trimble, who adds that even many bright students are not very sophisticated readers. If you are already a reader, make it a point occasionally to sample books you wouldn’t ordinarily try. Someone steeped in 20th-century pulp fiction, for instance, can get surprising enjoyment—and learn a great deal about the rich variety of the English language—from the works of 19th-century novelists. If you are not a regular reader, try to get into the habit. At the very least, set aside some regular time to read something that is not required by your studies.



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