

Top Twenty Writing Skills for Graduating High School Seniors: Getting Ready for College Writing

Top suggestions for critical thinking and habits of mind:

1. College-bound students should know how to move beyond summary to higher-order cognitive skills, particularly analysis, and they should have the opportunity to practice these skills in their reading, writing, and thinking. Many students erroneously assume that the words “analyze” and “summarize” mean the same thing; however, college writing requires both critical thinking and persuasive ability, skills that require much more than simple summary. AP students who “test out” of freshmen composition are especially likely, according to college faculty, to struggle in their second writing courses, since these students don’t get the chance to acquire the appropriate rhetorical skills necessary for success in argumentation or technical writing.
2. College-bound students should be willing and able to express a position, to defend that position with logic and evidence (that is, NOT with a statement like “I feel that what Anderson said was hurtful and wrong”), and to not abdicate that position in the conclusion of the work (“In the end, it’s up to everyone to make up their own mind”). They should be able to support general statements with details that are concrete, specific, accurate, and relevant. Moreover, college-bound students should be able to come up with their own argumentative theses rather than needing constant and explicit instructions on what to write about.
3. College-bound students should know how to complete course reading and to read rhetorically.
4. College-bound students should understand that an “A” in a high school class is not the same as an “A” in a college class. The high school “A” indicates preparedness for college writing, not mastery of college writing skills. High school teachers can help prepare students to acquire new skill sets (such as from shifting from writing literary criticism to writing exposition and persuasion, and shifting from an emphasis on self-discovery to one on analysis and correctness, for example) and to be flexible and open to higher standards and new writing strategies.
5. College-bound students should be aware that literary criticism is not the only way to think, read, and write critically. Every campus discipline has its own discourse conventions, and all disciplines require adherence to those conventions as a prerequisite for effective communication.
6. College-bound students should have some exposure to conducting research beyond “Google” and “Wikipedia,” including (in-person) visits to the (bricks-and-mortar) library to learn how to locate books, journals, and other appropriate sources. Basic research skills beyond casual web surfing will not only aid students in their writing but will also help them develop a sense of cultural context and a base of knowledge (for example, a sense of national and international geography, history, and politics) from which to write. Students would also benefit from a developmentally appropriate look at how to evaluate the credibility of source material.
7. College-bound students should understand that writing elements have rhetorical purposes—for example, that the function of the conclusion is not to restate the thesis—and they should have a sense of how stylistic choices can enhance or detract from the effectiveness of their writing.
8. College-bound students need regular and guided access to texts beyond their literature textbooks: magazines, journals, newspapers, essays, articles, and book-length nonfiction texts.
9. College-bound students need to know that “student skills” are a vital part of college success: arriving promptly, completing assigned reading, following the course syllabus, submitting work on time, following assignment directions, and contributing to the classroom conversation.

Top suggestions for form and format:

10. College-bound students should have rhetorical skills that go beyond the five-paragraph and Jane Shaffer essays, whose templates prevent students from successfully mastering the complex writing assignments they must complete in college, and whose constraints require that the textual content fit the form rather than the other way around.
11. College-bound students should be prepared to place a thesis in a variety of appropriate locations in an academic work, including places other than the end of the first paragraph.
12. College-bound students should practice writing strategies that permit them to see how and why those strategies work: Why place the thesis in one place as opposed to another? How does the organization of the work help make its points? Which strategies will best draw in an open-minded reader who disagrees with the text's position? And ultimately, what is the point of having spent this time thinking, writing, and polishing the text (that is, the big "So what?").
13. College-bound students should not commonly write to a minimum length requirement. Assigning five pages on Topic X encourages students to work toward the length requirement first and foremost, whereas assignments whose topics demand a certain length will encourage critical thinking and clear writing about the topic.
14. College-bound students should be able to move beyond timed-writing strategies and should practice writing strategies aimed at process, revision, and polish, as well as strategies aimed at producing good-quality academic or professional writing under deadline.

Top suggestions for expression and correctness:

15. College-bound students should have acquired basic written grammar skills. For example, many students have internalized erroneous "rules" like "Never open a sentence with 'although'" because they haven't been taught how to open with an introductory clause, and many students' only comma "rule" is "Put a comma where you want the reader to take a breath." Learning to write in Edited American English (EAE) is a lengthy process that of course continues throughout students' university careers; however, they ought to have a sense of at least the grammar and punctuation topics covered in their high school materials. (Support and professional development to assist teachers, many of whom have not been adequately prepared and supported to teach EAE, would be extremely helpful.) Also, students should arrive with basic editing skills beyond running the spell and grammar check.
16. Similarly, college-bound students should recognize the difference between formal and informal language and diction, including when to use each. Students should also have the chance to try different types of voice and tone. In addition, students should have some practice using the word "I" in their writing, a sense of when the first-person pronoun is appropriate or inappropriate, and a sense of how (and how not) to use the self as evidence in an academic essay.
17. College-bound students should have basic skills at integrating quoted materials: how to use signal phrases, how to establish the ethos of the source being quoted, how to avoid dropped quotations, and how to interpret quoted material without repeating.
18. College-bound students should have competence in writing with a consistent point of view rather than shifting from third- to second- to first-person statements without rhetorical awareness ("When one comes to a four-year college, you know that it's going to be hard, and sure enough, I got homesick"). Students should also be able to manage a consistent verb tense, as well as appropriate voice, mood, and agreement.
19. College-bound students should know the basics of how to use transitions, including where to locate transitional statements.
20. College-bound students should have access to effective vocabulary development that goes beyond learning words in isolation. They should know that vocabulary is best learned in context (that is, through reading rather than from reviewing notecards or writing vocabulary sentences) and that the ACT and SAT words they practice are not generally the high-utility that they will encounter in their college reading or use in their college writing.