

# Ten Tips for College Writing

## 1. Have a Purpose

For effective college-level communication, you always need to identify a purpose for what you are writing (completing an assignment is NOT a purpose). Once you identify your purpose (e.g., explaining the importance of an issue, teaching a procedure, proposing a solution to a problem), you can create a thesis statement that makes a point and clarifies your purpose.

## 2. Use Evidence

College-level writing is most effective when you support your claims with evidence. Most often, this will be research, but evidence can also come from personal stories (but use them sparingly) or cultural examples. For instance, if you make the claim that “Most people these days prefer texting to talking on the phone,” you’ll want to use research and examples to support that claim. In this case, you’d probably want to combine some statistics from studies as well as examples of how we see this happening in everyday life.

## 3. Value Clarity

You want to be very clear in your arguments to make sure that your reader understands your points. There are several ways to ensure clarity: offer examples, simplify your sentence structure, and be deliberate in your word choice (see the next point).

## 4. Value Precision

Many students (especially those new to college writing) try to select the “biggest” or “most intellectual” word from the thesaurus. Often, though, these words mean something slightly different than what the writer intended. Choose the most precise word for what you’re trying to say. Also, use the language that the discipline uses. For instance, if you are writing a psychology paper, you’ll use *infants* (rather than *babies*) and *adolescents* (rather than *teenagers*).

Another way to ensure precision (and clarity) is to always include a noun after *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those*.

## 5. Value Concision

Along with choosing “big” words, many students also opt for a lot of words to make a point. This approach often creates problems with sentence structure and clarity (and can be quite annoying for the reader). Always opt for concision. If you’re trying to meet a word count or a page length, make sure that you’ve fully developed your points with evidence and examples.

## 6. Avoid Unnecessary Qualifiers

What’s the difference between “sad” and “very sad”? Or meaning something and “honestly” meaning something? Using adverbs like *really*, *very*, *truly*, and *honestly* to emphasize a point usually falls flat. If there is a big enough difference between the meanings, try to find a stronger (more precise) word to convey that meaning. For instance, instead of “very sad” you might try “grief-stricken” or “devastated,” which are much more descriptive.

## 7. Use Personal Pronouns Sparingly (if at all)

Sometimes it's acceptable to use personal pronouns in writing, but those instances are few and far between and you'll want to learn how to use them effectively.

*I, me, my, and mine:* Many disciplines frown on using first person at all. In a literary or rhetorical analysis, for instance, there is no need to refer to yourself because you are examining a text. If you are writing about primary research in the sciences (a study you conduct), however, it can be appropriate to refer to “my hypothesis” or “my research.”

*We, us, and ours:* Use these only when you're trying to identify yourself as part of the audience that you're writing for. If you use these pronouns, you **MUST** define the group (e.g., “We as ECU students” or “Our responsibility as Americans”).

*You and yours:* Be especially careful with the use of “you”—use it only when you want to speak directly to the individual members of your audience. This handout, for example, could have used the term *students* throughout rather than *you*, but the decision was deliberate to speak to you as an individual writer of college papers. To use *you*, you must know that the information will apply to all members of your audience. If the information won't apply, then substitute *you* with a more specific noun that identifies the audience (e.g., *students, parents, administrators, educators, etc.*).

## 8. Avoid Passive Voice

Passive voice weakens the authority of your writing, so you should strive for active sentences as much as possible.

Active structure: situates the person or entity completing the action at the beginning of the sentence

*Johnny threw the ball.*

Passive structure: loses the person or entity completing the action

*The ball was thrown (by Johnny).*

You can determine if you have a passive structure by looking for or adding a “by\_\_\_\_\_” phrase to the sentence as shown in the example above (←or to this sentence).

## 9. Revise and Edit

Very few writers create an effective piece of writing on the first draft. In fact, most “good” writing goes through several revisions (content and structure) and editing (grammar and word choice) sessions. Seek out feedback and work with consultants in the Noel Studio to help you learn how to revise and edit effectively.

## 10. Be Confident in Your Writing

One of the most important aspects of college-level writing is to write with an authoritative tone—you should sound like an authority on your topic. Eliminate hesitant or unsure phrases from your writing, including *In my opinion, I think, I feel, and I believe.*