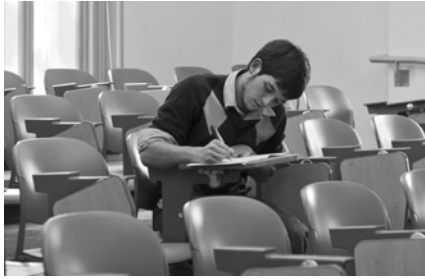


From High School to College Writing



Frequently, students who have always done well on writing assignments in high school find that they end up with very different grades in their college classes regardless of the effort they put in. Papers that might have earned an A in a high school class now end up getting a B- or C. This can seem frustrating, or unfair, or lead students to question either their own skill or the professor's standards.

While some of this might be chalked up to different standards for work, students often miss a fundamental step in writing for their college classes: analyzing the rhetorical purpose of the writing assignment. In other words, students often write *general* essays when they are being asked to perform a *specialized* task that has both a different purpose and different characteristics. No matter how good the essay, it won't get a good grade if that isn't what the student was asked to write.

Why so different?

This is not actually intended to be a cruel bait and switch. What it comes down to is that high school writing is generally more geared for the purposes of assessment. Your teachers want to make sure that you've learned what you are supposed to know. This is not to slight their teaching, but they do have a set curriculum and they want to prepare you to do well on standardized tests. The five paragraph essay works well for assessment of what you know and the grounds for that knowledge. This means that it can still be a good structure for some in-class essays or other exams.

However, much of college writing is concerned with you communicating your ideas, findings, or analysis to your reader. Instead of showing us that you understand and have thought about the material, these assignments ask you to write with a focus on your reader; you are communicating with your reader, trying to inform, persuade, or enlighten them. This means that the five paragraph essay often doesn't work for the specific tasks you need to perform. Some students have done specialized writing assignments in high school, but even those students encounter unfamiliar writing tasks in college.

What this translates to is having to spend some time **analyzing your assignment** itself to figure out three basic questions: *what is your purpose?*; *what materials or approaches do you need?*; and *who is your audience?* The answer to each of these questions will help you figure out what this specific assignment is asking you to do, what you need to do it, and what your tone and diction should be. All of these are important concerns not only for receiving a good grade, but for learning how to communicate your ideas to other people (an important skill for success in or out of academia). If you find you're having trouble answering any of these questions, ask your instructor, your classmates or a tutor for help. Encountering a new writing task can be confusing for anyone, sometimes particularly those who are skilled writers, and an assignment may not always clearly explain its genre.



Here are some examples of past writing assignments interpreted. You might read each one first and see how you would interpret it and then compare your interpretation with ours. Note that even though all three require you to use analysis, your rhetorical purpose is different for each, *requiring different modes of writing*.

Art History:

In this assignment you will compare and contrast two works of art. Your comparison should be based on a close analysis of each work according to the criteria provided in lecture and in additional information given to you in section and on the class web-site. Although you will be analyzing each work separately, your final essay should discuss the two works in relation to one another. This is a looking and thinking assignment. You are not expected to know or provide detailed historical information about these works. You are expected to study them carefully, analyze them, and discuss the differences and similarities in their compositions and expressions. However, you are welcome to suggest reasons for dramatic differences between works as long as you can demonstrate their validity (e.g. formal or textural differences due to different media, and so on).

Interpretation: The language here can trick people into thinking that this is the same kind of assignment as “compare and contrast” essays they wrote in high school. However, while high school compare and contrast essays often involve simply listing the similarities and differences, this assignment requires you to analyze the works in order to show us what it tells us to look at them together. You need to use specific criteria from class, section, and the web-site, so it’s important to make sure you have those in mind when brainstorming for your paper. Based on technical word choice in the prompt, we can presume that you are writing for an academic audience familiar with artistic terms. However, it’s still always a good idea to make sure that you clearly define or embed the terms you use.

English: Write an essay analyzing how *Zoot Suit* applies Bertolt Brecht’s concept, “Verfremdungseffekt” (or alienation effect). Discuss several narrative and dramatic devices that reflect the central idea of the concept, the distancing of audience in order to stimulate critical thinking and political action.

Interpretation: This assignment asks you to analyze the role of Brecht’s concept in the play *Zoot Suit* to demonstrate how this theory helps us understand what’s going on in the play. Be careful of the word “essay” here, as it can trick you into writing a generic essay that doesn’t clearly communicate your analysis or to persuade your readers of the relevance of Brecht’s concept to the play. One pitfall that writers can fall into here is simply listing some narrative and dramatic devices in the work. Just discuss devices that are relevant to your argument. While technical terms like “Verfremdungseffekt” can intimidate students, the end of the prompt helpfully defines the term. Clearly the instructor understands that this may be a difficult term to grapple with. Remember to focus your thesis on the role of this alienation effect in *Zoot Suit*, not in the broader world. Based on word choice in the prompt, we can assume that you are writing for an academic audience familiar with literary terms

Sociology: In his ethnography, *Changing Identities*, James Freeman discusses many of the problems experienced by Vietnamese-American immigrants in the years following the war in Vietnam. **In thinking about the question “What does it mean to be an American?” please answer the following:**

- 1) Describe the different waves of immigrants from Vietnam, and how they arrived in the United States. How did this provide different opportunities and constraints for different groups?
- 2) What are some of the contradictions and changes in identity formation that many Vietnamese-American families experiences living in the United States? Please discuss some aspects of resettlement; education; family structure; religion; and contemporary progress.
- 3) What are some of the current dilemmas for Vietnamese-American families today?

Interpretation: This assignment asks you to explain to your reader how the answers to these questions about Vietnamese-American immigrants reflect, speak to, and complicate their identity as Americans. Your paper needs to argue for some causal connections between events and their impacts as well as helping your reader form a better overall picture of Vietnamese-American experiences and their effect on individual and family identity. This kind of prompt can be confusing for students who try to answer the questions one by one without considering the overarching question that the prompt poses or how the answers can make a coherent essay. You’ll need to identify experiences, context and effects, to argue for what makes you think these are connected, and to work with *Changing Identities* to develop your ideas and analysis. The purpose of the essay suggests that you are writing for an educated but non-specialized audience.