Writing

When some students are asked to choose between a ten page research paper and a root canal, the latter choice seems like a better idea. I realize it is a bit unfair to compare an essay to dental work. Still, the fact remains that there are those of you who do not like to write. Actually, hatred is probably a better term here. Some students hate to write. Okay, so we will accept this as a given. Now, we need to find out why.

I’ve always been curious that, in the age of text messages, tweets, and Facebook updates, many students still want to argue that they hate to write. However, they spend the majority of their day doing just that. Granted, the writing is in short bursts and restricted to certain character lengths, but it is writing nonetheless. If this applies to you, it’s impossible to say that you hate writing. This is an unfair generalization of the term. I think what you mean to say is that you hate research writing. That’s better. Wait…no, it’s not.

In college, your instructors will always expect a certain level of academic quality in your writing. After all, you cannot take a college level writing class until you have demonstrated your ability to handle it. (If you aren’t there yet, please do not be discouraged. It’s always best to build on your skills first before trying them out.) While high school English courses assigned you one to two page book reports, college professors will ask you for anywhere from four to ten pages of in-depth, analytical work. Now, I understand that this doesn’t sound that appealing to many of you. But, rest assured that you can do it! If you possess confidence in your abilities, no matter their level, you can achieve anything.

So, my goal for this section is to teach you that writing (like so many other things) is a process. You should never expect it to be perfect the first time. There are always multiple issues that can be addressed and revised. That is, if you give yourself enough time to do so. In order to prepare for college level writing and have more confidence in your abilities, here are some suggestions:
Know your deadlines! If your instructor expects an essay from you, they will usually list the deadlines for this assignment in your syllabus. This is where time management is so important. You should do more than simply mark the deadline in your calendar. You need to also allow time to draft your work, visit the library, speak with someone in the writing center, and much more. For example, if your paper is due on December 4, you should space out this project throughout the semester in order to alleviate any stress. As much as you think you work better the night before a deadline, this is so untrue. You work faster, not better.

Choose a topic early. Some instructors will actually give you a topic for your essay, which is a nice perk. However, there will be a time when you are asked to write about a very broad topic. So, you should develop a “research question” early. This will help guide your project and give you a clearer path to completion. For example, let’s say that you are asked to write about something related to popular culture. This alone is such a huge subject, and it would be impossible to discuss everything related to this topic in just five or six pages. First, define “popular culture,” which for many of us means items that we consider entertainment, like movies and video games. Next, determine your own interests. If you are a gamer, then make your paper something about video games. Now, to narrow this even further, think about a certain genre of games. Let’s pick educational games for this example. This is a good place for our research question. “How do educational video games help with child development?” What do you think of this? Would writing a paper about this topic be more manageable? This could work! Not only do I have a paper topic, but I am interested to find out more.

Start your research/reading. As much as we want to believe it sometimes, we don’t know everything. If this paper is going to discuss how video games help children, we need to find out more. The writer cannot simply talk about my kid brother and his experience with games. Unless your instructor directs you to write a personal narrative, your paper needs to go way beyond this experience. Plan to spend some time in the TCC library. Spend at least a day search for articles and books in our databases. Then, when you find material
relevant to your project, read…read…read. Build up your knowledge so you are ready to discuss these findings in the essay. After all, the final paper is essentially a conversation you will have with your instructor and fellow students.

- **Develop a bibliography.** Chances are, you will find lots of great material for your paper. The challenge at this point is to keep everything organized so it is ready when you need it. Too many students find awesome material to use in the paper only to lose it later in the semester. Your bibliography will contain three parts: (1) an appropriate citation (this will be a part of your “works cited” page – please check with your instructor on the exact format of this citation); (2) a brief summary of the source; (3) a brief note about how you will use this material in your final paper. Once you have a bibliography complete, you will have not only your “works cited” page complete, but also ideas about how you would use all of the research in your own essay.

- **Start drafting!** (Do you notice how I did not say ‘write the paper’?) You need to set aside some time way ahead of the deadline to start a rough (and I mean rough) draft of your essay. This will not be polished in any way; this is your opportunity to move all of your thoughts and ideas to the page. By this point, you will have lots of things to say about your topic, and it can be difficult to keep that information in your brain along with the math equations and historical facts you need for other classes. Move those thoughts to the page, and you will always have a permanent record.

- **Ask for help!** Even if you feel your writing is excellent, give yourself time to either talk with your instructor or someone in the writing center about your project. Every instructor has stories about students who lost points for small spelling and grammar mistakes that could easily be remedied. Don’t let this be you! Since you are still drafting the paper, ask someone to take a look at it if only to confirm that you are on the right track. Of course, you could wait until the night before the paper is due and take your chances. But, if you are serious about success, you won’t wait.

- **Submit your final, polished essay.** If you have allotted yourself enough time (thanks to proper time management skills), you should have an opportunity to work through
all of those minor writing issues and submit a paper worthy of that high grade you hope to earn. Be proud of your achievement! Research writing (and essay writing in general) can be difficult. But, you did it!

To conclude, there are and will always continue to be students who do not like to write essays. I get it. However, I would argue that the reason they do not like them is due to poor time management skills and lack of a clear path. You now have both of these things. And, while I will never be able to make you like research writing, I can make it better for you. Now, do you still want that root canal?