In her book On Writing, Eudora Welty maintains: “To write honestly and with all our powers is the least we can do, and the most.” But writing well is difficult. People who write for a living sometimes struggle to get their thoughts on the page; even people who generally enjoy writing have days when they would rather do anything else. For people who do not like writing or do not think of themselves as good writers, writing assignments can be stressful or even intimidating. And, of course, you cannot get through college without having to write—sometimes a lot, and often at a higher level than you are used to. No magic formula will make writing quick and easy. However, you can use strategies and resources to manage writing assignments more easily. College will challenge you as a writer, but it is also a unique opportunity to grow.

**Writing to Think and Communicate**

One purpose of writing is to help you clarify and articulate your thoughts. Writing a list of points, both pro and con, on an issue of concern allows you to see which of your arguments are the strongest or reveals areas that need additional support. Putting ideas on paper helps you review and evaluate them, reconsider their validity, and perhaps generate new concepts. Writing your thoughts down may even help you grasp them for the first time. Another important—and practical—function of writing is to communicate ideas. For your college classes you are required to write essays, research papers, and essay responses on tests. If you apply to other colleges or universities, you will have to compose letters of application, respond to specific questions, or write an autobiographical sketch. When you enter your chosen career you may have to send emails and write reports, proposals, grants, or other work-related documents. You must correspond with clients, business associates, and co-workers. And on a personal level, you want to contact friends and relatives. You may even find yourself responding to a community or national issue by writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. Writing is an essential skill you must have in order to function in the twenty-first century, but like any skill, it is something that can be acquired and refined. Some people just naturally express themselves better than others, but everyone can learn the basic craft of writing.

**Overcoming Writer’s Block**

At some point, every writer experiences writer’s block: staring at a blank page or computer screen without being able to put down even a single line. Your mind is blank, and panic sets in because writer’s block usually happens when you are working against a
deadline such as in a timed writing assignment or for a paper that is due the next day. Even though there is nothing you can do to prevent writer’s block from happening, there are several techniques you can use to help you overcome its negative effects:

• **Don’t Procrastinate**: Give yourself as much time as possible to complete your assignment. Budget your time so you can write the assignment in sections and still have time to edit and revise. If you are in a timed writing situation, jot down ideas in a scratch outline and work from that.

• **Try Freewriting without Guilt**: Just start putting ideas down on paper. You don’t need to worry about whether or not you are making spelling and grammatical errors; you shouldn’t fret over organization. Keep in mind that you can always delete what you have written once your ideas begin to flow.

• **Follow Your Inspiration**: Begin by writing the section of the paper you feel best able to write. If you cannot start at the beginning, write the conclusion first, or begin writing the body of the paper. If you have an outline, you will already have the ideas and organization you need to write the body paragraphs.

• **Break the Writing Project into Parts**: Think of the paper as a series of short sections. Sometimes you can be overwhelmed by the prospect of writing a ten-page research paper, but if you break it up into manageable pieces, the assignment does not seem so daunting.

• **Review the Assignment**: Reread the instructions for the assignment to make sure you understand what you are expected to write. Look for keywords that you can research to give you insight into your topic. Often discussing the assignment with your professor can give you the clarity you need to begin writing.

• **Verbalize Your Ideas**: Discuss your ideas with a classmate, friend or family member. You can gain new insights and confidence by hearing what others have to say about your topic and sharing your misgivings with them.

• **Visualize a Friendly Audience**: Imagine you are writing the paper to a friend or someone you know well. Often the fear of rejection paralyzes your ability to start writing, so removing that obstacle should enable you to write without inhibition.

• **Take a Break**: Try working on another writing project or switch to a completely different activity. Often if you get bogged down on one subject, thinking about something else for a while might clear your brain so you can come back to the original project with a new perspective. And getting up from the computer usually unclogs any mental blocks: take a walk, wash the dishes, or play with the dog.

• **Change Locations**: Try moving to another area more conducive to your writing style. Some people write best in a noisy environment while others require a place with minimal distractions. Find what works best for you. Remember that writer’s block is only
temporary—relax and start writing.

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**Selecting an Appropriate Voice**

Whether you are writing an argumentative essay expressing your conviction that whale hunting should be abolished or a literary analysis of Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening*, your paper should express a distinct point of view. Your purpose should be to convince your audience that you have something worthwhile to say. Gaining their approval depends to a large degree on their perception of the writer: you need to present yourself as educated, rational, and well-informed. But in doing so, you need to be careful not to lose your own voice. You should never use a wordy, artificial style in an attempt to impress your readers; neither should you talk down to them or apologize for your writing.

**Choosing the Proper Pronoun Focus**

One important consideration in selecting the appropriate voice for your paper is to choose the proper pronoun focus, and this is dependent upon the nature of the assignment. In some instances, the first person (“I”) is acceptable: for example, if you are writing an autobiographical sketch for an application to a university, anything other than first person would sound odd. Likewise, if you are writing an extemporaneous essay that answers a question prompting a first person response, such as “Explain why you do or do not vote,” again, first person would be the obvious choice. Even within the development of an essay that takes a third person approach, if you use an example from your personal experience to illustrate a point, you can discuss that isolated example using the first person. Most of the same arguments apply to the use of the second person pronoun (“you”). This textbook, for instance, utilizes the second person because of the unique relationship between the student/reader and the instructor/writer. As discussed in The Use of I in Writing in this book’s section on “Persuasive Essays,” the appropriateness of the first-person pronoun in college writing is a topic of debate. But academic writing more often requires you to adopt a third-person focus, preferably in the plural form (“they”). Using third person enables you to avoid boring the reader by suggesting that the topic is of interest only to you; in other words, it broadens the audience appeal. Using third person in the plural form also allows you to avoid making pronoun agreement errors which might occur as the natural result of imitating spoken English which seems to favor the plural form instead of the more grammatically correct singular: for example, most people would say, “Everyone should have their book in class” instead of “Everyone should have his book in class,” even though the former is technically incorrect. In addition, using third person plural eliminates the problem of sexist language and prevents the awkward use of “his/her.” Consider the following examples for their use of pronoun focus imagining they appeared in an essay about the validity of using source materials from the Internet:
Weak Example: As I surfed the Internet, I found a lot of articles that I couldn’t trust because I didn’t see any authors’ names or sponsoring organizations.

Weak Example: As we surf the Internet, we frequently find articles we cannot trust because we do not find authors’ names or sponsoring organizations.

Weak Example: As one surfs the Internet, one frequently finds articles one cannot trust because one cannot find authors’ names or sponsoring organizations.

Stronger Example: Surfing the Internet for source information is unreliable because many articles do not indicate their authors or sponsoring organizations.

The first example is too limited—who cares what you found on the Internet? The second example generalizes the focus better than the first, but it, too, restricts the audience. Changing the pronoun to “one” is also problematic because it is repetitious and awkward. The final example is the best to use in an essay because it emphasizes the point in an all-inclusive manner, without being redundant or sounding artificial.

This material is adapted from the following open textbook:

Crowther, Kathryn; Curtright, Lauren; Gilbert, Nancy; Hall, Barbara; Ravita, Tracienne; and Swenson, Kirk, "Successful College Composition" (2016). English Open Textbooks. 8. https://oer.galileo.usg.edu/english-textbooks/8.

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