

# ON WRITING IN COLLEGE

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To the Colgate University Class of 2020

We're living in a period of "literacy revolution."<sup>iii</sup> Digital forms and discourses are in states of rapid change, and young people come of age in a world where they are as interested in making texts as they are in reading them. The ways that new technologies position users to produce rather than solely consume texts have primed *you*—as new students at Colgate—to become writers, both in the more conventional sense of "writing" and in the larger sense of "writing": of making a lasting object, mark, or impression. Writing is an art, a *techné*, which Aristotle describes as "a reasoned habit of mind in making something."<sup>iv</sup> As you enter this new academic space, it is important to understand that at Colgate, we engage in reasoned habits of mind in order to create an environment that embraces intellectual inquiry and engagement as activities that contribute to human flourishing.

This "intellectual inquiry and engagement" necessarily occurs through discourse, or language, because the questions that professors address are often problems without static solutions or answers—and yet they are some of the most important questions facing us today: How might we prevent disease, develop new technologies, mediate conflict, teach children, address injustices, protect the natural world, study the mind, understand cultures, interpret history, grow economies, distribute resources? The list goes on, and for each question that scholars ask, *communication* is key because it is one of our central means of contributing to knowledge. Because disciplinary knowledge changes, evolves, and deepens over time, scholars share continuously developing ideas about our *best possible* answers—not merely our opinions, but our *reasoned ideas* and *research findings*, supported with evidence we have gathered from observation, experimentation, and analysis. To share these best possible answers and the ways we have reached them, we write, and write, and write. All of us—scientists, humanists, social scientists, and scholars of all walks—write so that we may share our insights, in our multifarious voices and from our different perspectives, to further the conversations in our fields and contribute our understandings to the world.

As your professors invite you to study their individual subjects, they will introduce you to existing knowledge and offer you multiple lenses through which to view that knowledge. We hope you will discover exciting connections between and across different disciplines. Over the course of four years, as you immerse yourself more fully in your own chosen fields, those initial invitations will deepen: you will be expected to join in the work of addressing problems and contributing understandings. The work will be challenging. Yet, we know that you are up for it, and that you will be changed by it. Whether or not you choose to continue scholarship as a long-term career, your classes and the hundreds of pages you will write over the next four years will help you develop critical habits of mind to serve you well in any vocation: you will learn to identify and analyze problems, ask skilled questions, conduct research, synthesize sources and findings, and share new understandings and solutions in clear and effective ways.

Indeed, writing in college is not just to show your professor that you have learned new material. It is, much more importantly, a way to most fully *engage* the material, find connections between old and new ideas, and uncover complexities and implications that you may have missed on a first encounter. It will be important to remember that the goal in college writing is almost never to repeat the "right" answer or merely recite

expert opinions or perspectives, but to enter the “conversation” surrounding a topic.<sup>iii</sup> To do so, you must listen, read, think, record, and experiment carefully, and then *make a contribution* in the form of a report, an argument, a critique, a synthesis—or any number of other forms. As you write papers, working to articulate your ideas and share your reasoning or findings, your ideas will become clarified and developed in important ways.

So, what will college professors expect of your writing? This is a hard question, with a complex answer. Because writing is a mode of learning, writing will be different depending on what you are studying. As you move from class to class and discipline to discipline, you will use different methodologies, rely on different kinds of evidence, and need to write in sometimes very different forms. You may need to “code-switch” or shift “registers,” which means you will write in different styles or in slightly different “voices,” depending on your purpose, your audience or discourse community, your topic, and the genre you are composing.<sup>iv</sup>

However, although there are no universal *specific* expectations, you should always attend consciously to five aspects of writing—purpose, content, structure, style, and presentation—and read each assignment prompt carefully to determine expectations for each of these aspects. **Purpose** describes the goal of your text: a prompt may ask you to articulate and support an argument, summarize literature surrounding a topic, report the findings of an empirical study, consider one text (or writer or theory or object) in light of another, or make any number of other contributions. **Content** describes the material you explain and explore to carry out your purpose: empirical findings, observations, textual analysis, etc. **Structure** describes forms you use to make your writing coherent, cohesive, and logical: paragraphs, sections, headings, thesis statements, framing questions, transitions, repetition of key concepts, etc. Many will refer to structure as “format,” and disciplinary formats vary widely. **Style** describes *how* you say what you say: level of formality (in diction, syntax, and punctuation), conventional or unconventional grammar, citations format (MLA, APA, CMS, etc.), and so forth. **Presentation** describes how the writing looks on the page (font, spacing, etc.), submission procedures, and other important specified requirements for an individual professor’s assignment.<sup>v</sup>

As well, you will often be expected to use sources in your writing, and professors may sometimes talk about using sources in language that sounds unfamiliar to you. New college writers often assume that the sole or primary purpose of using sources is simply to support an argument. The truth is, however, that most professors expect you to do much more than this. When professors ask you to “draw from your readings” or “put sources in conversation with each other,” they are asking you not just to *summarize* what scholars have said, but to *analyze* what you’ve read by articulating connections between others’ ideas, theories, and observations. We often call readings and theories “lenses” because they “focus” our looking in a way that can help clarify, extend, and influence our understanding of a topic. A good way to think of source-based writing is that **textual quotations and data never speak for themselves**. You make sources “speak” by analyzing them, questioning their definitions of key terms, explaining their relevance to your argument, examining their reasoning, considering how their data or other evidence was collected, applying their reasoning to new questions, and articulating the ways in which they echo or diverge from other thinkers or experts on the topic.<sup>vi</sup>

If this all sounds a bit complex or daunting, don’t worry. Recognize that it is natural to feel nervous about the expectations of college thinking, reading, and writing, and you can be guaranteed that if you sometimes feel unprepared, you are not alone—and you will not be left alone. Colgate students often feel as though everyone around them is smarter than they are, and that no one else is experiencing any kind of struggle. This is simply not true. Ask any upper-class students—or professors for that matter—if they have had

moments of doubt or struggle or feeling alone, and you will understand how natural it is to go through these processes. So, expect to go through some difficulties. Expect to be challenged—personally and intellectually. Embrace those challenges; it is often the case that when you are struggling the most or are most confused, you are also learning the most. Reflect on and affirm all the ways in which you had already learned so many new skills and knowledge before you came here, and conceptualize this time now as a time of building upon and expanding that knowledge and those understandings. Know that in four years, you will look back on the fact that you successfully composed hundreds of pages of academic writing. You will realize that for capable students like you, one of the best ways that you will have learned to write more *successfully* will have been to simply write *more*.

Finally, many of us will face the challenge of writing in a language or register that is different from our native languages or our familiar ways of speaking. It is important for those of us who are second (or third or fourth) language learners to realize that we are likely still in an acquisition process. Some of us may have grown up speaking and writing English at school, but speaking another language at home. Some of us are fluent in writing and speaking other languages and are gaining greater fluency in English while studying here in the U.S. Others of us will be gaining fluency in other languages as we study at Colgate and abroad. For all students—not just those with more complex linguistic backgrounds—it will be important to become familiar with the values and expectations of writing and speaking in different academic contexts. In terms of adapting to values and expectations here at Colgate, remember that certain ways of thinking and writing may seem entirely natural to people who have been immersed in U.S. culture or who have certain educational backgrounds, but these can seem entirely at odds and even wrong to others.

Transitioning to any new context takes patience, time, and very explicit recognition and articulation of values, conventions, and expectations. Take advantage of the many resources you will have to support your writing and research over these next four years—your professors, your classmates, the Case-Geyer Library faculty, consultants in the Writing and Speaking Center, and the many, many staff members and administrators at Colgate who are dedicated to helping you succeed. We are excited to witness and support the learning processes you will each go through—and we look forward to the many exchanges that will occur because of the thinking and writing you will do.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Lunsford, Andrea. Interview. “Profs Speak! – Professor Lunsford on the Literacy Revolution, Poetry, and the Return of the Voice.” *Cellar Door*. Stanford University English Undergraduate Blog. 1 January 2010. Web. 23 May 2014.

<http://www.stanford.edu/group/cellardoor/cgi-bin/home/2010/01/profs-speak-professor-andrea-lunsford/>

<sup>ii</sup> Aristotle. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Trans. George A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. 320n. Print.

<sup>iii</sup> The use of the metaphor of “conversation” to describe scholarly exchanges is now commonplace in the academy. We draw from the conversational metaphor established by Kenneth Burke, who describes the “unending conversation” as “a heated discussion” between others that we enter at a particular point in time; however, as he notes, this “discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before.” To enter the conversation, Burke advises: “You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you.” Ultimately, the conversation will continue on and on, long after you—and all of the others—will have left. From: Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. 3rd ed. 1941. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973. 110-111. Print.

<sup>iv</sup> The term “code-switch” was coined by Hans Vogt in 1954, but adapted widely by scholars across different fields. Chad Nilep discusses the many uses of this term in his review essay “‘Code Switching’ in Sociocultural Linguistics,” *Colorado Research in Linguistics* [online], 19(1), 1-22. Nilep parses his longer review with a brief definition that describes our use of this term: “When a change in linguistic form (language alternation) signals a change in context (contextualization) the practice may be described as code switching. It is therefore possible to use code switching without switching “language” per se, for example by switching registers.” From: Nilep, Chad. “Code Switching and Language Alternation.” *Society for Linguistic Anthropology*. 4 February 2010. Web. 29 May 2014.

<http://linguisticanthropology.org/blog/2010/02/04/code-switching-and-language-alternation/>

<sup>v</sup> These five aspects guide the approaches of Colgate’s Writing and Speaking consultants as they work with students to develop their writing. These are adapted from: Hjortshoj, Keith. *The Transition to College Writing*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001. Print. One insight worth sharing here from Hjortshoj, a professor at Cornell University, is that there is a reason students often feel underprepared for the work of college writing: “The basic reason is quite simple, and it is a cause for celebration as well as concern. *Even the best high schools cannot fully prepare you to be a college student, because in some very fundamental ways a college or a university is a different kind of learning environment in which you must become a different kind of student*” (3; italics in original). To help you transition to this “very different kind of learning environment,” we recommend his book as one that directly addresses you, as students, as you make the transition from high school to college writing.

<sup>vi</sup> A very useful textbook on making the transition from high school to college writing, particularly in terms of the analytical work that is required across the disciplines, is David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen’s *Writing Analytically*. 6th ed. Boston: Thomson Learning, 2011. Print. This text discusses the work of “joining a conversation” and “making sources speak” in detail. A number of faculty across the disciplines have found it useful in their own teaching of first year writing, and we recommend it to you as students as well.