



Reading & Writing Skills

Quick—what are the two most important skills to be successful in college? If you said reading and writing skills, you are correct. (Of course, you probably knew that by reading the title of this guide.) Below are some general tips to help you improve your skills. Also, use the resources available at your college (e.g., library, tutoring, learning labs, faculty, and/or academic advisors) for assistance with specific reading/writing concerns.

10 Reading Tips:

1. Be prepared to read much more than you did in high school and to allot yourself more time to do it.
2. Do your reading assignments before the material is discussed in class and review them as soon after class as possible.
3. With each new textbook assignment, make an effort to integrate the material with your previous readings and class discussions.
4. Read actively and use textbook headings as the basis for taking quick outline notes for later test preparation.
5. Write notes in the margins of the textbook, use a highlighting pen, or use “sticky notes” to identify important points to remember.
6. Read flexibly, adjusting your speed and intensity for the difficulty of the material and your ability to comprehend.
7. Read critically to sort out the main ideas from minor details, and to distinguish facts from opinions.
8. Test your understanding of textbook material by frequently asking yourself questions as you read, and answering them with the main points of the reading expressed in your own words.
9. Develop ways of going beyond the text to clarify uncertainties or to get more information about a topic of particular interest.
10. Study visual aids (charts, graphs, etc.) along with the text and use them to increase your understanding of the topics covered.

10 Writing Tips:

1. Begin writing before you're ready to write a draft. Even students who know the importance of revising still sometimes wait to write until they have the text planned out in their heads.
2. Jot down notes about what interests you and what concerns you have. Write while you're doing the reading and initial research
3. Let yourself write about your beginning ideas without trying to make it sound like an introduction or a real paper.
4. Get feedback on work in progress. Ask professors or teaching assistants to give feedback on drafts or on an initial thesis/introduction; they can give you the most guided suggestions about how to succeed on an assignment.
5. A thesis should not be confused with a *topic*, which represents only the subject area of an essay. Inexperienced writers often make claims that represent superficial interpretations of the relevant evidence. Good writers, by contrast, devise *arguable* claims—ideas that an intelligent person, looking at the same evidence, might disagree with. One effective way to ensure that your thesis is arguable is to address the counterargument briefly in your essay.
6. Add analysis and reflection to your sources. If it's worth quoting, it's worth discussing. Never assume that your evidence can speak for itself—if it can, why would anyone read your essay rather than just go to the original source?
7. Support your general statements with specific examples, evidence, and/or quotations. It adds credibility and shows you have applied thoughtful analysis.
8. Write to express your ideas, not to impress your professor with your extensive vocabulary. Be sure you are stating your ideas clearly.
9. Set your essay aside for at least an hour or two before going back to revise it. This allows you to approach it with “fresh eyes” and clarity.
10. Look for examples of good writing and use them as a template for writing your ideas. Note that this is not the same as plagiarism, which is taking someone else's ideas or words and repeating them as your own.