How It Differs From Writing in High School

One of the first things you'll discover as a college student is that writing in college is different from writing in high school. Certainly a lot of what your high school writing teachers taught you will be useful to you as you approach writing in college: you will want to write clearly, to have an interesting and arguable thesis, to construct paragraphs that are coherent and focused, and so on.

Still, many students enter college relying on writing strategies that served them well in high school but that won't serve them well here. Old formulae, such as the five-paragraph theme, aren't sophisticated or flexible enough to provide a sound structure for a college paper. And many of the old tricks - such as using elevated language or repeating yourself so that you might meet a ten-page requirement - will fail you now.

So how does a student make a successful transition from high school to college?

The first thing that you'll need to understand is that writing in college is for the most part a particular kind of writing, called "academic writing." While academic writing might be defined in many ways, there are three concepts that you need to understand before you write your first academic paper.

1. **Academic writing is writing done by scholars for other scholars.** Writing done by scholars for scholars? Doesn't that leave you out? Actually, it doesn't. Now that you are in college you are part of a community of scholars. As a college student, you will be engaged in activities that scholars have been engaged in for centuries: you will read about, think about, argue about, and write about great ideas. Of course, being a scholar requires that you read, think, argue, and write in certain ways. Your education will help you to understand the expectations, conventions, and requirements of scholarship. If you read on, so will this Web site.

2. **Academic writing is devoted to topics and questions that are of interest to the academic community.** When you write an academic paper, you must first try to find a topic or a question that is relevant and appropriate. But how do you know when a topic is relevant and appropriate? First of all, pay attention to what your professor is saying. She will certainly be giving you a context into which you can place your questions and observations. Second, understand that your paper should be of interest to other students and scholars. Remember that academic writing must be more than personal response. You must write something that your readers will find useful. In other words, you will want to write something that helps your reader to better understand your topic, or to see it in a new way.

3. This brings us to our final point: **Academic writing should present the reader with an informed argument.** To construct an informed argument, you must first try to sort out what you *know* about a subject from what you *think* about a subject. Or, to put it another way, you will want to consider what *is known* about a subject and then to determine what *you* think about it. If your paper fails to inform, or if it fails to argue, then it will fail to meet the expectations of the academic reader.