Mythbusters: Writing Center Edition

By Sarah Nimmo

Making the transition from high school to college is especially challenging for first-year students. Many of us learned certain “writing rules” and strategies in high school that simply don’t translate to the college level. I’m about to debunk some of these writing myths and help you master writing college papers in no time.

Myth 1: Organize your paper based on the five-paragraph essay structure.

Busted: The five-paragraph essay is possibly the biggest myth regarding essay writing. It sounds easy, formulaic: one paragraph for an introduction and a thesis with three main points, one paragraph for each of those three main points, and one paragraph for a conclusion.

Your professors are going to expect a little more sophistication now that you’re in college, and you will make life harder if you try to mold your paper just to fit this structure. Once you free yourself from the five-paragraph chains, you will be amazed by the new possibilities. Write a two-sentence thesis statement to make a more complex claim if needed. Use four points and a counterpoint instead of limiting yourself to three. It can be difficult to explore new organizational techniques, especially if the five-paragraph essay has become your go-to essay structure, but it will help you in the long run.

Myth 2: Never use “I.”

Busted: Much like the five-paragraph essay, this “rule” usually causes more problems than it solves. Unless your paper is in the sciences or another field where using “I” is generally frowned upon, most professors will not dock you.

The Writing Challenge

By Taylor Roberts

You face the writing challenge with every paper. The challenge is about overcoming that voice in your head telling you that you’re not a good writer.

As a junior, I felt giddy at the prospect of taking a creative writing course that allowed me to step outside typical academic writing. However, I was less enthusiastic about my first grade.

I went through a series of emotions not unlike the five stages of grief: shock, denial, dread, embarrassment and finally a sense of humility. The experience was downright disheartening.

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One of my freshman-year professors taught me a rhyme to help with writing conclusions: “Don’t summarize, synthesize.” Tell your audience what all of this information actually means. What are the implications? Conclude by explaining why your interpretation is interesting, meaningful, or relevant.

**Myth 4:** Write the paper from beginning to end.

**Busted:** Busting this myth was one of the most relieving moments of my college career. The introduction is one of the most difficult parts of a paper to write because there is so much pressure on you to “draw in your reader.”

When you sit down to write your paper, you are not legally bound to begin with the introduction. I find it easier to begin with my thesis. Write your thesis at the top of the paper and continue on from there or if you don’t have a thesis yet, write out all of your ideas and identify the connections. It’s much easier to know where you’re going if you’ve been there before. Make the introduction the last paragraph you write, and you’ll find that your introductory paragraphs are much improved as a result.

**Disclaimer:** These suggestions, much like the myths they are based on, are subjective. Ultimately your professor determines what is or is not acceptable for a paper. Some may prefer that you have a certain number of points or a summary in your conclusion. If you are ever struggling or uncertain, ask your professor if there is a formatting preference.

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**The Writing Challenge**

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However, it also gave me and my classmates struggling with the same experience the opportunity to rise to a challenge—the writing challenge.

When accepting the writing challenge, it is important to remember to take a deep breath. A bad grade does not mean you are a bad writer. Contrary to popular belief, great writers are not born; they are made. The beauty of writing is that with more practice you have the potential to become a great writer. However, you have to want it. Sometimes in between late night study sessions, part-time jobs and hanging out with friends, we tend to forget about the writing challenge until it calls to us at 2 a.m. the night before our paper is due.

So how do you conquer the writing challenge? Here are a few tips I learned from my creative writing course that can be transferred to any writing intensive class:

- **Find your muse.** My muse is Pinterest because it gives me inspirational quotations that get my creative juices flowing. Some people use exercise or journaling to jump start their writing process.
- **Your outline doesn’t have to be neat and your first draft doesn’t have to be perfect.** Remember that writing is a craft. It is allowed to be messy.
- **Revise. Revise. Revise.** You’ll have to clean up the mess you’re going to make! Writing is a time-consuming process, and planning is necessary. You can’t crank out your best paper the night before.

Lastly, it is important to remember that the ultimate challenge is being a better writer.
Don’t Fear the Research

By Meredith Francis

It is easy to get overwhelmed by all of the writing that comes with college, especially when you hear the two most dreaded words in all of college writing: research paper.

Whether you are a freshman writing an eight-page argumentative essay for rhetoric, a sophomore or junior working on a 15-page history paper, or senior working on your thesis of 20 or more pages, the research paper is a daunting task. It is especially daunting when you are staring at a blank Word document, the cursor blinking mockingly, waiting for you to at least write your name on the page.

However, I have always found that research papers always seem a lot scarier than they actually are. Here are a few tips to help you manage those longer, more intimidating papers:

To begin, utilize Xavier’s resources. The library is a great place to start. The librarians are incredibly knowledgeable not only about the kinds of research we have available, but also about how to find the correct sources you will need. You can even make an appointment with a librarian for your project.

In order to manage all the research you gather, keep a running list. Write out your bibliography as you go along so you don’t have to rush to put it together at the end of the writing process. This is also helpful as you take notes and keep track of quotations that you will need for your paper.

Having trouble getting started? Try freewriting! Take a blank piece of paper and jot down as much as you can about what you think you want to say in your paper. Focus on getting your ideas down and don’t worry about making it sound academic or “well-written.”

Make an outline for yourself. Whether it is just a bulleted list of ideas or a detailed outline with fancy Roman numerals, outlines are helpful for when you sit down to write. An outline can help you make sure that your ideas flow logically and smoothly.

Don’t try to write your research paper all at once. Make a daily or weekly goal for yourself – a paragraph here, a page there. Your brain will get tired, so give it a rest every now and then. Give yourself plenty of time to work before the deadline.

Write with a buddy. Grab a friend, put on comfy clothes, and sit in the library with snacks and coffee. Make it as fun as possible! This is especially useful early in the writing process when there is still so much work to be done. Pick a Sunday afternoon to work for a few hours in the library.

If you work for more than five or six hours at a time, try the 50/10 rule. Work really hard for 50 minutes, and then give yourself a break for 10 minutes. Stretch, grab some fresh air, eat a snack, or get on Facebook to clear your mind. This little 10-minute reward will make you work extra-hard and stay focused.

When you get to the revision stage, try printing out your paper and reading it out loud. Sometimes we miss things when we read to ourselves off of a screen. When you read your paper aloud, you will probably find awkward wording or pesky typos that will just need a quick fix.

And remember: relax! You aren’t the first person to write a research paper. Tons of students have survived the process. Good luck and happy writing!

MacKenzie Breaks It Down

* Don’t be afraid to ask for help.
* Plan ahead.
* Make your bibliography a work in progress.
* Use the buddy system.
* Do something a little wacky; freewrite.
* Remember to breathe.
* Give your paper a skeleton.
* Sound it out, now.
* Relax!

By MacKenzie O’Kane
Surviving My Own Transition

By Colleen O'Connell

This semester, my first one as a graduate student and at Xavier’s Writing Center, has been impatiently anticipated for over a year. I’ve reread both the letter accepting me into my program and the email offering me a position as a graduate assistant in the Writing Center an embarrassing number of times. I spent countless nights awake thinking of how far away this life-change seemed. The days leading up to August 25th seemed endless. The first day of school was my academic Christmas; it was going to be magical.

That yearning and sense of mystique seem so naïve, now. I had completely forgotten just how difficult a large transition can be. Two months later, I still feel a little shell-shocked by the change but also a bit more comfortable in my new role. With midterms through and more than half the semester under our belt, I’m sure we're all feeling more comfortable.

If I’m being honest, I would not have made it to this point in the semester or this level of confidence without my peers in the Writing Center and in my program. I could not get by without a little help from my friends (or without butchering song lyrics, apparently). Using my peers at Xavier has helped me build a sense of community and accountability that are simply impossible to have alone. I know that I’m challenging myself to do better work than I would do in a vacuum and getting more out of my time here as a result.

In addition, working at the Writing Center and engaging with fellow students in all areas of the writing process with numerous techniques has broadened my own horizons and shed light on strategies I hadn’t used in my own writing in a long time. Simply put, working with students like you has made me a better writer. So, I recommend the Writing Center to you not as a token plug for my employer, but because experience tells me how peer assistance can help fellow students. Also, I’m selfish. Like all of the other tutors here, I genuinely like working with fellow students and seeing a wide variety of styles, voices, topics, and approaches—even for the same assignment.

Oh, and don’t forget to check out @XUWritingCenter on Twitter. You might just spot a #GnomeOfComposition sighting where you least expect it...