

Tips for Succeeding in English 134

In the spring of 2008, Deborah Wilhelm, a composition instructor, invited English Department faculty at Cal Poly to create a list of writing preparedness suggestions for college-bound high school students. About twenty faculty members from an assortment of specializations (British literature, American literature, composition, drama, poetry, technical writing, and linguistics) responded to the invitation. Interestingly, four of those who responded also indicated that they taught high school before teaching at Cal Poly.

Faculty members indicated that they don't expect high school seniors to have mastered college-level skills; rather, their responses focused on the pieces that are missing from the skill set that incoming freshmen possess when enrolling in college-level composition courses. Gaining these missing pieces, according to faculty, will help students appropriately position themselves to acquire the new skills that their college courses demand.

The most frequent suggestions focused on the following areas:

- Critical thinking, particularly analytical abilities
- Form that goes beyond formulas
- Expression: correct and effective use of language

While you likely acquired some of these skills in high school level English courses, English 134 instructors will expect you to quickly build from those basic skills and be prepared to compose essays that are much more complex and sophisticated.

English 134 students should be prepared to:

1. Compose essays that go beyond summary and instead focus on higher-order cognitive skills, particularly analysis. Many students assume the words “analyze” and “summarize” mean the same thing; however, college writing requires critical thinking and persuasive ability, skills that require much more than simple summary.
2. Compose essays that articulate a position that is supported with logic and evidence. Students should be able to support general statements with details that are concrete, specific, accurate, and relevant. Moreover, English 134 students should be able to come up with their own argumentative theses rather than needing constant and explicit instructions on what to write about.
3. Learn to read rhetorically. In other words, student writers need to account for the relationship between their audience, their subject, and themselves as writers each time they compose.
4. Approach grading in English 134 with the understanding that an “A” in a high school class is not the same as an “A” in a college class. The high school “A” indicates preparedness for college writing, not mastery of college writing skills.
5. Recognize that every intellectual discipline has its own discourse conventions, and all disciplines require adherence to those conventions as a prerequisite for effective communication.

6. Conduct research beyond *Google* and *Wikipedia*, including (in-person) visits to the (bricks-and-mortar) library to learn how to locate books, journals, and other appropriate sources. Basic research skills beyond casual web surfing will not only aid English 134 students in their writing, but will also help them develop a sense of cultural context and a base of knowledge for the subject matters about which they write.
7. Understand that writing elements have rhetorical purposes—for example, that the function of the conclusion is not to restate the thesis—and have a sense of how stylistic choices can enhance or detract from the effectiveness of their writing.
8. Understand being successful in a course requires arriving promptly, completing assigned reading, following the course syllabus, submitting work on time, following assignment directions, and contributing to the classroom conversation.
9. Develop rhetorical skills that go beyond formulas—such as the five-paragraph and Jane Schaffer essays—whose templates may prevent students from successfully mastering the complex writing assignments they must complete in college, and whose constraints require that the textual content fit the form rather than the other way around.
10. Determine the appropriate location for a thesis statement, including places other than the end of the first paragraph.
11. Take responsibility for the choices they make as writers. In other words, students write purposefully and deliberately.
12. Move beyond timed-writing strategies and instead practice writing strategies aimed at process, revision, and polish, as well as strategies aimed at producing quality academic or professional writing under deadline.
13. Demonstrate basic written grammar skills. Students should also arrive with basic editing skills beyond running a spell and grammar check on their word processing program.
14. Recognize the difference between formal and informal language and diction, including when to use each (e.g.: a sense of when the first person pronoun is appropriate or inappropriate, and a sense of how (and how not) to use the self as evidence in an academic essay).
15. Demonstrate basic skills at integrating quoted materials: how to use signal phrases, how to establish the *ethos* of the source being quoted, how to avoid dropped quotations, and how to interpret quoted material without repeating (e.g., “This means that . . .”).
16. Exhibit basic competency in writing with a consistent point of view rather than shifting from third- to second- to first-person statements without rhetorical awareness. Students should also be able to manage a consistent verb tense, as well as appropriate voice, mood, and agreement.
17. Transition between ideas, paragraphs, and sentences.
18. Develop vocabulary that best conveys their intended meaning. Students should know that vocabulary is best learned through reading rather than from reviewing note cards or writing vocabulary sentences.