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# CONFRONTING COLLEGE WRITING MYTHS

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## INTRODUCTION

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I learned a lot about writing in high school: how to write a thesis, consider an audience, integrate quotes into a sentence, and choose a topic that really matters to me. These all serve me well in college. However, there are a few “rules” of writing I learned in high school that it’s definitely time to break! It’s not that they’re never right, it’s just that they aren’t really “rules” anymore; they’re just things to consider. To save you the time and agony of having to decide if your high school English teacher is still right, here are the top 5 “rules” of writing it might be better to break.

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### MYTH #1: ALWAYS USE THE 5 PARAGRAPH ESSAY MODEL

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Reality: Most likely, your papers are going to be longer than 3 pages. This means that each of the 5 paragraphs would be over a page long and would have to encompass multiple ideas and topic sentences. It’s okay (and much better) to break up those long ideas into multiple paragraphs. If you have 4 topic sentences to prove your thesis, write at least 4 paragraphs. The 5 paragraph model is good to keep in mind, however, so that you are choosing an adequate number of supporting ideas to prove your thesis, and so that you don’t forget standard paper essentials like a conclusion. You also won’t always be writing typical essays; if I wrote this blog post in 5 paragraph style, it definitely wouldn’t work. Bottom line: don’t be afraid to break this rule if it isn’t going to work for your paper, and break it as little or as much as is necessary.

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### MYTH #2: NEVER USE “I”

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Reality: Sometimes you are allowed to use “I” in a paper and directly tell the reader what you, the writer, are thinking and arguing. For a literary analysis, still usually stay clear of “I,” but for other types of papers— philosophy papers or informal responses, for example— the “I” is okay! From experience, I can attest to the fact that my philosophy papers became much stronger once I started putting myself into them (rather than using the very common “one could argue...” that was so popular in high school). A great rule of thumb: if it makes more sense to put yourself into the paper directly because you are writing from your own point of view and using your own experiences to form an argument, use “I.” If you still aren’t sure, feel free to check with your professor.

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### MYTH #3: YOUR PAPER SHOULD BE A REFLECTION OF EXACTLY THE POINT

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Reality: It's important to consider what your professor has said— after all he is an expert in the subject you're studying— but in almost all papers your professor is looking for you to do some original thinking on the subject. Taking things that were discussed in class into account as you formulate your argument is key, but make sure you are writing about something that's interesting for you. That will make the writing process more fun for you, and the reading/grading process more fun for your professor! More importantly, your papers should prove that you've learned something in your courses and have spent time thinking about the information and have found new, interesting ways to think about it.

### MYTH #4: USING A THESAURUS IS THE BEST WAY TO “SPICE UP” YOUR PAPER

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Reality: Definitely use a thesaurus. I am a fan of big vocabularies and interesting phrases. However, make sure you only use words that you actually know and understand. If you find a word in the thesaurus that you love, look it up before you sprinkle it into your paper. Otherwise you could end up with a lot of words that almost work, but don't quite because they have slightly different meanings than the words you originally used. Then it's really obvious that you used a thesaurus and the big vocabulary isn't quite as impressive anymore. For example, if you try to change the word “want” in the sentence “I want to learn something new every day” simply by typing the word “want” into a computerized thesaurus, you might end up with an “infatuation” with learning something new every day, or even a “hankering” to do so, neither of which conveys the same meaning as the original word.

### MYTH #5: THE CONCLUSION SHOULD JUST SUMMARIZE

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Reality: You should definitely summarize your paper a bit in the conclusion, but you shouldn't go through your entire argument again. Rather, you can touch on the key points and remind the reader of your thesis. You should also make sure that you give the reader something to take away that applies your idea in a slightly larger context or re-emphasizes the importance of your argument. Don't bring in something entirely new and out-of-the-blue, but there needs to be something that the reader can think about after finishing the paper. I like to explain that the introduction brings the reader into the paper, the body proves the argument, and the conclusion brings the reader back out of the paper into the real world with a way to remember/apply what was said in the paper.

This list could go on, but I hope it provides you with some important things to bear in mind as you get started on your next paper.

