The 6 Bs to Better Writing, or “How Do I Get the Most Mileage from My Essays?”

“What can I do now?”
There have been students who for various reasons believed coming into English Composition that they were good writers, only to discover when they got their papers back, that their writing wasn't as proficient as they thought. They begin to wonder, "What can I do now?" Over the years, I've formulated 6 B's that will not only help you improve the quality of your work, as well as the overall approach to your writing, but they will also contribute to a more satisfying college experience as well.

Be Interested
Don't moan and grumble when you're given a new topic to write about, but show some interest. When it comes to writing, attitude is definitely important. I've seen many students miss the “nugget” from an assignment, but others get it. Why? Because usually those who miss it go into the assignment with a negative attitude (so hint-hint: “keep it positive”).

In addition, believe it or not, we do not know everything there is about every topic. There are many different areas that still contain mysteries and unanswered questions that many theorists, scientists, etc., are still trying to unravel and solve. For example, we still do not know what holds the atom together, nor do we know how writing happens within the brain. As a result, you should approach each new writing scenario as an interested explorer, much like Indiana Jones. So with each new assignment, you should see yourself as the one who is finally going to unravel the mystery of this topic that has troubled and perplexed the minds of audiences throughout the ages. If you view each writing assignment in this way, then how can you not be interested in what you’re writing about?

Be Creative
Don't take the usual approach to your topic. Allow your creativity to find a “different path.” For example, I had an English Composition 1 student who was going to do her research paper on whether-or-not Count Dracula was a historical figure. However, halfway through her research, she came across a chat mom for people who lived their lives as vampires. Taking advantage of the opportunity, she managed to interview several individuals who were involved in vampirism as a modern day lifestyle. Using this new information, she allowed her creativity and new discovery to help her reformulate her paper into one about vampires – past and present, and the myths and realities that surround their lives.

Another student was doing a paper on ADD/ADHD. Her son had been diagnosed with it several years ago, but she said that she hadn't witnessed any improvement from the medications that he had been on. So as a result, she decided to research the topic. Through her reading, she discovered that the year before there was a large influx of students diagnosed with ADD and ADHD, physicians had taken sleep deprivation off of the checklist of things to look for when diagnosing children. She also discovered that the symptoms for sleep deprivation and ADD/ADHD were very similar. To add further evidence to what she now speculated, she went to her child’s doctor’s office, informed him of what her research had uncovered, and asked if she could leave some surveys for people to fill out. Her child’s doctor was intrigued by her findings and gave her permission to do so. After
collecting and reading through the surveys, she discovered that many of the children who were being treated for ADD/ADHD were, in fact, having problems with sleep deprivation.

Creativity will not only help you put together connections that may have been overlooked and not thought about, but sometimes, it can direct you to sources you would usually not consider in writing a paper. For example, I had a student who was coming back to school after being in the work force for many years, and he wanted to do his paper on Islamic terrorism and what happened on September 11, 2001. While doing his research, he came up with the idea of going to the local mosque and interviewing some of the people there regarding their beliefs, religious practices, and their own views of what these terrorists had done. He was nervous about doing this since he was not Islamic and did not know what to expect. However, he discovered many things about Islam he was not aware of, as well as developed a new appreciation for a faith that was totally different from his own.

Writing does not have to be about you bending over a bunch of books and writing a “dry” paper. Allow yourself to consider other possibilities, other avenues of information, than those that exist within the boundaries of two covers. There’s a whole world out there full of people, organizations, businesses, etc. So don’t just “follow the crowd” in your approach to a topic, but use your creativity and “make your own path.” Brainstorm ideas on various sources that you can draw from in order to come up with information, perspectives, personal experiences, insights, etc., that will provide you with the basis you need to formulate your own, unique approach to the topic or issue.

Be Organized

Don’t just “throw” your words and ideas together. Remember that this paper is to be a focused presentation of your perspective on some topic or issue; it is not to be a “literary tossed salad.” As a result, keep your focus on your thesis statement throughout the paper. Don’t just state it and then move on to other things. Instead, every idea and sentence in the paper should in some way develop and elaborate upon that one central focus.

This is why outlines are so important. They keep you focused and organized. For example, let’s take a look at the following portion of an outline:

Thesis Statement:

OSHA penalties are tough; however, the regulations and penalties must be enforced and improved in order to be effective.

I. Regulations create a safer workplace.
   A. They make sure safety programs are in place.
   B. They make sure equipment is maintained.
   C. They require employees to receive medical training in case of emergencies.

In this portion, we can see that there is a direct relationship between the thesis statement and the first point. In addition, the supporting points further develop and elaborate upon the main idea. By using an outline, you are able to formulate not only a focused and “to the point” argument, but you are also able to work on various strategies to effectively develop your ideas within the piece.

In addition to organizing the overall layout and structure of your paper, you also need to arrange your sentences in a way that’s best going to present and emphasize your ideas to the reader. For example, don’t put quotes or questions in the topic sentences of the body paragraphs – instead, use that position to the best of your advantage by placing your reasons there for your thesis statement. Then, use the rest of the paragraph to back up and support, develop, and elaborate upon whatever reason you’ve stated in the topic sentence.

Be Specific

Don’t use general, vague terms. Be as specific and concise as possible when writing. For example, consider the amount of detail the following female student used in relating an incident that she remembered:

From my childhood, I still remember one incident when a hand struck across my face. “How dare you!” my mother yelled. I don’t remember what I had done to deserve this particular reaction, but somewhere inside, I knew that I deserved it. I clenched onto my burning cheeks with trembling hands and ran out of the room, as far away from her as my seven-year-old legs could take me.

I opened the door to my sky blue room and flung myself onto my bed covered with familiar friends – Winnie the Poo, Barbie, and Raggedy Ann. I drew Winnie the Poo close to me and allowed the tears and
upheaval of emotions to flood through my mind. I began wishing the most despicable things would happen to my mother. I wished that someone would hurt her the way she had hurt me, I wished that her ivory lilies that engulfed the lawn would cringe back into the earth, and then I wished that her rambling friends that noise our home would never come to comfort my mother whenever she felt hurt or alone.

After awhile, the heat of anger subsided. This is the only incident that I remember where my mother left the marks of her five fingers upon my face. Time has discolored the redness, but the debris from that particular event has etched itself only my mind.

If the student had merely written the following, it would not have had the same effect:

Once when I was a child, my mom slapped me, and I got angry. I ran to my bedroom and cried, wishing that all kinds of bad things would happen to her.

By opening this portion of her life up to the reader and describing it with such depth and emotion, the reader is drawn into her experience and can easily visualize the incident and the feeling that she is trying to share with the reader.

Many students (you may feel this way as well) veer away from including such detailed examples from their own life because they are afraid of what others might think of them. This fear is destructive to the writing process because it not only prevents them from sharing experiences and observations that could add real depth to their writing, but it also prevents them from learning the lesson that every good writer knows — that intimacy with one’s readers can only be developed when one pours one’s life out onto the page.

Be Committed

Don’t give up just because things get a little tough. Perhaps you (like many students) have the mistaken idea that if one is a good writer that things come easily and smoothly. Therefore, when you sit down to write on a particular topic and things don’t come quickly, or when you can’t immediately even come up with a perspective on the topic, you change topics looking for that “easy experience.” The problem here is not that you’ve chosen a “difficult topic” but your expectations are wrong.

Writing is not an “easy process” for anyone — professional writer or student. It’s a process filled full of frustrations, anxiety, “dead moments,” as well as ecstatic moments when ideas and words intermingle and burn as a single flame. In Sophy Burnham’s book, For Writers Only, she gives the following quotes from professional writers on the difficulty of writing:

You don’t know what it is to stay a whole day with your head in your hands trying to squeeze your unfortunate brain so as to find a word. Ah! I know the agonies of style — Gustave Flaubert (122).

The first four months of writing the book, my mental image is scratching with my hands through granite. My other image is pushing a train up the mountain, and it’s icy, and I’m in bare feet — Mary Higgins Clark (32).

I have often rewritten — often several times — every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers — Vladimir Nabokov (130).

If we had to say what writing is, we would have to define it essentially as an act of courage — Cynthia Ozick (18).

If even professional writers find writing to be a difficult process, then why write? I think the best response for that question comes from a quote from Tennessee Williams:

There is no pleasure in the world like writing well and going fast. It’s like nothing else. It’s like a love affair, it goes on and on, and doesn’t end in marriage. It’s all courtship. (6)

Be Professional

Don’t hand in work that looks like the dog just slept on it. It’s important that at each step of the process that you approach your writing as a professional. This involves the following:
(1) Professional Commitment.

Professionalism just doesn’t happen, nor is it just a one-time decision. Rather with each new situation and/or writing assignment, you must make the decision on whether or not you are going to approach it in a professional manner. I’ve had many students who did not make that decision, and it showed in their mannerisms and performance.

(2) Professional Quality.

This continual decision directly affects the quality of your work. Quality means more than just the absence of error. It means to perform your assignment in a prompt, courteous manner, putting your best effort into all your work. For example, it would mean not waiting until the day before an assignment is due to begin working on it. But once you’ve learned how long you have to work on the assignment, budget your time effectively, so that you can put your best effort into each stage of the writing process, whether that’s the brainstorming activity, outline, first draft, subsequent drafts, and/or the final draft.

(3) Professional Appearance.

Finally, this commitment affects even the appearance of your work. For example, prior to being a full-time instructor, I spent several years in positions where I was responsible for hiring employees. There were a number of times people with an unprofessional mindset would come in to apply for a job. I could see it not only in their mannerisms, but also when they turned in their application, and it was crumbled, torn, or repeatedly folded and stuck inside their pockets. Oftentimes, these applications were placed in my “Not in This Lifetime” pile.

This same unprofessional attitude and behavior is often seen in students, both in their mannerisms in the classroom and in the condition of their assignments when they turn them in. However, there was one student who really impressed me with his professional manner. He had been in the work force for many years and due to changes in the company, he found himself back in college needing retraining. On one of his essays, he had a real difficult time with it. But instead of giving up, he kept at it, and late at night, he told me, it all came together for him. He was so proud of his paper and the quality of his work (which was a step higher than what he had done thus far) that he went out and put a nice back on the paper, and had it spiraled-bound with a plastic cover. It looked like a business report that a CEO of a large corporation would expect to receive. To say the least, I was impressed! His professionalism came through, not only in how he carried himself and interacted with others, but also in how he approached and handed in his assignment when it came due.

Now I am not saying that students should go out and spiral-bound their work (Although if you did, it would probably shock most of your instructors!). What I am saying is that you need to approach your college experience and your assignments with a professional attitude by completing them in a prompt, courteous manner and always striving to do your best.

Although you’ve probably learned that writing according to collegiate standards is not an easy process, it is a standard that you can meet in your writing, and by practicing these 6 B’s, you can improve not only your writing but your overall college experience as well. ***