You may find that the writing you’re asked to do at Southwestern is different from some of the academic writing you’ve done in the past. In this handout, we’ll cover **four things to know about college writing**, an overview of some common assignments you may encounter, and a few **tips for writing an excellent thesis**. Of course, given the range of courses and professors at Southwestern, none of this information will apply 100% of the time. However, we hope the following tips will help provide you with some general guidelines for approaching college writing.

### FOUR THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT COLLEGE WRITING

1. **College writing is about creating knowledge, not displaying it.** Although you’ve probably written research papers and personal essays for your courses in high school, it’s likely that much of the academic writing you’ve done so far has been served as a way for teachers to check your knowledge against their own. Put simply: in high school, you write to show that you know things. College writing is different. While you certainly still want to display your knowledge, the goal is for you to say something new about a topic, to provide analysis or an account of original research. Your professors won’t be reading to confirm what they already know; they’ll want your essays to teach them something new about both the information you’ve learned in your research and how you see that information coming together to form a new idea.

2. **College writing is significant.** This is not to say that the writing you’ve done in the past isn’t important. But college writing is different because it often makes a case for its own importance in the writing itself. One common question that you’ll be expected to answer in your writing is “so what?” What does your paper contribute to the current understanding of a topic or problem? Why are your findings significant? In many courses, you’ll open your paper with a literature review, a summary of the arguments and research already available about your topic. Then you’ll explain how your writing serves to answer an important, unaddressed question, how it refines what’s come before, or how it addresses a shortcoming or error in previous scholarship.

3. **College writing resists formulas.** The five-paragraph essay is a useful tool for learning how arguments fit together. However, it’s not a one-size-fits-all solution. In many of your courses, you’ll be asked to look beyond formulaic organizations to choose the structure that best communicates your idea.

4. **College writing is discipline-specific.** This is something you’ve probably already encountered – your high school Biology teacher wouldn’t approve a lab report that began like a personal essay, and your English teacher probably wouldn’t want a research paper that includes a “Results” section. As you write at the college level, you’ll find that each subject, or discipline, has different conventions that dictate how you organize, approach, and cite your writing. The papers you write for your History class will be different from those you write for Philosophy, which will be different still from those you write for Biology and for Business.
COMMON ASSIGNMENTS YOU MAY ENCOUNTER

Each assignment is different, so it’s very important that you rely on your prompt and your professor’s instructions as you write. However, there are some common types of assignments that you may encounter – the descriptions below are intended to give you a sense of what each of these assignments generally asks you to do.

1. Summary – This is an assignment with which you’re probably familiar. Summaries ask you to conduct research by reading primary or secondary sources and providing your reader with a clear, concise, and accurate account of the important arguments or information in those sources. Depending on the discipline, summaries may contain quotations from the original source. All summaries are heavily cited to indicate where in the source the information is located. Although assignments may vary, summaries typically do not include your opinion – they provide readers with an unbiased account of the information or arguments in a text.

2. Analysis – An analysis frequently builds on a summary. It may include more than one source, and explains both the important information/arguments & how the author(s) present(s) that information or those arguments. The line between analysis and critique can sometimes blur, but straight analysis tends to look for connections within and between texts instead of including your opinion about a topic or text.

3. Critique – Critiques build on analyses & summaries. After you know what’s being said & how, you can assess the strengths or weaknesses of the texts you’re critiquing. Critiques frequently do ask you to step in and evaluate the information or arguments you’re responding to. Even so, you’ll want to be sure that you provide evidence from the text to back up any claims you make about its strengths or weaknesses.

4. Proposal – You might write a proposal for a business plan, a biochemistry experiment, or an English paper. Obviously, each of these documents will look quite different from the others. Typically, however, proposals are shorter documents (less than two pages) that include a review of the significant information available about a topic, a tentative argument that you’ll expand on later, and a case for why that argument is important.

5. Abstract – An abstract is a summary of your own work. Like a proposal, it is typically a brief document (less than one page). And like proposals, abstracts vary across disciplines. They generally include an account of the important argument, the way that argument is supported (experiment results, primary text research, accounts of fieldwork), and a case for the significance of the work.

6. Literature Review – Literature reviews combine the skills you use in summary, analysis, and critique. Focused on one topic, literature reviews put other peoples’ writings into conversation with each other. Summarizing & analyzing for literature reviews is different from straight summary or analysis because your concern is not the text you’re studying, but instead the topic that text is about. Therefore, you may choose to emphasize things that the author does not, or to neglect to engage some important points if they do not apply to your topic.
7. **Annotated Bibliography** – You may be asked to complete an annotated bibliography as a part of your research before you begin working on a longer paper. Annotated bibliographies are lists of useful sources with summaries of the information contained in those sources. Depending on your assignment, these summaries may be focused on one topic (as in a lit. review) or on an accurate representation of the ideas/information/arguments in the original text (as in straight summary). The number and length of annotations varies with the assignment, but typically each annotation falls somewhere between one paragraph and one page.

**TIPS FOR AN EXCELLENT THESIS**

While you’ll do many different types of writing at Southwestern, you will certainly have to write at a number of essays in which you propose and support an original argument. The following questions may help you to consider whether your thesis will be appropriate to the type of paper you’re writing.

**1. Does your thesis statement fit the SCOPE of your paper?** It’s tempting to start “Since the dawn of time,” but the history of everything everywhere is a bit outside the scope of a 2- (or even a 200-page) paper. Think about limiting your scope to something more manageable. Try: “In the first paragraph...” or “In the second half of Martin Luther’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech...” or “In the conversation between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy the first night that Jane is sick...”

**2. How ARGUABLE is your thesis statement?** A good thesis statement is the peg on which your entire paper hangs. If your sentence is not arguable, you will not be able to make a solid claim and your research (evidence) will not effectively convince the reader of the strength of your argument. This sentence is not very arguable: “Dogs and cats are common pets.” It’s based on a broad truth that’s so universal it’s not much of an argument—everyone agrees it’s true (and a little boring). This would be better: “Though small dogs and cats might seem to make more sense for apartment dwellers, large dogs are actually great pets for people living in tight spaces.” Then you have to spend time convincing your reader that your counterintuitive argument is correct—with research and clearly organized writing.

**3. Is your thesis statement SPECIFIC?** Limiting the scope of your paper to a manageable size is the first step; having a specific thesis statement that makes a unique argument keeps you from getting caught up in big, vague ideas. Sometimes it seems like a big idea is a better argument since you can say almost anything, but it can like the Bog of Eternal Stench from The Labyrinth: you get really stuck and when you do, your paper stinks. Better to be specific about what you’re trying to say rather than throwing everything and the kitchen sink into your paper. Do that work first with your thesis sentence.

**4. Does your thesis statement make SENSE both as a sentence and for your paper?** This might seem obvious, but your thesis statement needs to be a sentence that is easily understood—by you and the reader—so don’t use words you don’t know and write clearly. It also needs to reflect what happens in your paper. Sometimes you come up with a thesis and then, when you’ve written your paper, you realize it needs to be adjusted. Write it during your pre-writing or outlining stage, go back and check on it while you’re writing your paper, then revise it again at the end. Make sure your thesis reflects what your paper is actually about. Read it out loud to yourself or to a friend to make sure it makes grammatical sense or that it sounds polished.
5. Is your thesis statement INTERESTING? On the surface, this might seem like the most subjective of these tips, but it’s important to have an interesting idea from which your write your paper. If you’re bored, chances are your reader will be as well. Find an argument that seems to say something new—either with new research or with a new approach. Even if you’re talking about something that here’s been scholarly debate about for years, you might be just the bright young scholar who comes up with a new argument about the Wife of Bath’s teeth that changes the scope of the discussion. Or at least gives you enough to say for a short paper.

Remember, writing a good thesis statement is an important step in writing a good essay. Keep it SASSI!

SOURCES & FURTHER RESOURCES

The DEWC website has a collection of student resources for writing including information on different types of assignments, citation styles, writing for different disciplines, and links to research support.

www.southwestern.edu/offices/writing

For more tips on writing at the college level:
http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/high_school_v_college.htm has great tips on interpreting professor’s assignments.

http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/general/transition-to-university has a helpful chart on the difference between high school & college writing.

http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/college-writing/ offers suggestions for breaking out of the five-paragraph essay.

http://catalog.flatworldknowledge.com/bookhub/reader/12?e=lochhaas-ch08_s01 has more information on the differences between high school & college writing.