

Student Writing in Progress

Seven Ways High School Prepares You for Failure

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Framing the Paper

Kelsey Diaz wrote this letter in her English Composition 1101 course at the University of Central Florida in fall 2009. Her assignment was to explain what she'd learned in the course to other students who would take it next. Her class did not use a final portfolio; instead, she wrote this as a final reflection on her learning for the course. Diaz's work gives you a chance to think about audience, tone, message, and the choices writers can make to speak their minds while also engaging their readers. We think more drafting would have refined this message significantly—but we also think the message is well worth considering.

Diaz 1

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Seven Ways High School Prepares You for Failure

Welcome to the new mythical world of higher education: Lecture upon lecture, crazy parties, intense study sessions, and social dramas that put your virtual Facebook arguments to shame. I know you're excited; I was too, but before you start planning your Greek life, remember you're here to learn. And not only are you here to learn, but you are blissfully unaware of a major disadvantage that affects all incoming freshman: Most of what they taught you in high school English was a lie!

Shocking, yes. Now, before you begin to doubt me, know this: I've been there, and I've done that. I went to high school. Every day in senior English was blissfully easy: reviewing the 5 paragraph essay, learning about

Diaz 2

literature in the Victorian age, doing a "picture essay." Senior English was fun. I was an eager freshman in English composition, waiting for the next challenge. Boy, did I get one! I had to learn a new way of writing.

As kind and caring or harsh and cruel as your high school teacher may have been, there's no way that they could have prepared you for college, especially with all of the "standardized test" bullshit. Now, I'm not saying that you didn't learn anything in your English class; you probably learned a lot! All I'm saying is that the writing you did in high school and the writing you will do in college are two totally different things.

The 5-Paragraph Essay

Ever since the No Child Left Behind act, it seems that teachers aren't teaching the same material. I can't remember a time when the teacher didn't start a lesson with "Now, you'll need this for the FCAT. . . ." The problem is that apart from standardized tests, you will never write another 5-paragraph essay again.

How often do you read any serious writing that has an introduction with a thesis, 3 body paragraphs, and a conclusion that restates the thesis? If you were writing a letter to your grandmother asking for her famous homemade cookies, you wouldn't use a 5-paragraph essay. Don't do it in college. Your professor will most likely laugh at you.

Write Objectively

Remember all of those assignments when you weren't allowed to use "I," "we," or "us"? It turns out that not only can you break this rule, but you may never write "objectively" again! (Once you learn the technique.) Think of it this way: No two writers write alike. After all, we are all just individual,

Florida high school students must pass the "FCAT," Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test, in order to graduate. FCAT is a response to the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, intended to improve pre-college educational standards. A common criticism of NCLB is that teachers are forced to "teach to the test," but the tests don't really measure what students (need to) know.

Do you recognize the 5-paragraph essay format that Diaz describes? How do your thoughts about it compare to Diaz's?

Who does Diaz seem to be writing to? Are you part of that audience? If so, do you think she understands you well?

Diaz 3

Diaz sometimes writes in all-or-nothing terms. Here, she seems to completely dismiss the value of objectivity in writing. Do you think Diaz has considered her audience carefully enough in this letter?

unique people. Everyone has their own way of saying what they need to say, and it's okay to just say it how you need to say it.

You Have to Cite a Resource for Every Single Part of Your Paper

In high school, the teachers wanted to know if you can think hard enough to gather sources with similarities and use them to back up a statement, usually not chosen by you. The standard procedure for papers was to make up a (usually obvious) point, turn it into a thesis, google your topic for "resources," copy and paste quotes, and finish with your own "original" sentences, tying everything together so it wasn't just one big block of quotation marks.

In college, you're the one trying to prove something, not your sources. Not nearly as many are used, and they are used for actual research and learning, not restatement. Of course, different papers will use different numbers of sources, but you're analyzing the meaning of the source, not regurgitating quotes.

Turn in a Rough Draft and Your Final Draft

Honestly, how many of you in high school actually revise your papers? Typing up a version of scribbled notes and putting it through a spell check doesn't count. You will need to learn to write lots of drafts. You will have to completely restart a paper even though you think you're almost done. Chances are, after all editing and revising is finished, you'll likely have less than a quarter of content from your first draft, if any at all.

Editing is a whole new beast in college; you're not just looking for typos. You're looking for audience, style, restated information, off-topic content, and most importantly, ideas. If you ever get stuck, just start writing;

Ideally, Diaz would have talked about sources in terms of kinds of writing. For instance, can you give some examples of how scholarly writers use sources differently from the way Diaz describes high school writing?

Diaz 4

chances are you'll be throwing most of it out in a revision anyway. As a rule: the more drafts, the better the paper.

Your Resources Are Right and True

In high school, you've probably learned how to determine a "good" resource from a "bad" one. They taught you at least one thing right; at least for the most part. Remember that all writing, even if it's from a professional, even if it's by a researcher who has been studying a subject for years on end, is by writers who are still just people. They all have their own way of writing, and more importantly, they all have their own reason for writing.

You must learn to *analyze* the content of your source, not just read it. Who wrote it? Why? What are they trying to accomplish? What are their intentions for the reader? Is the writer biased? Do two different sources disagree? Why? Remember that you are the one writing the paper, so you are the one in control; you are the one that has to prove what you've learned.

Use One Book Source and Three Internet Articles

Here's a fun one. You might actually get the chance to interview a professional. More than likely, you'll be required to interview one sometime in your college career. Don't goof off, though it can be very easy to do so.

Research your topic, your interviewee, everything you possibly can. There may be special words or "lingo" that you just don't understand. Learn about the profession's, organization's, or group's goals and background information; it can give you ideas for introductory questions. And for the sake of all that is good, don't try to write everything down!

What do you think of Diaz's certainty here? Have you seen evidence so far for what she's saying?

How would you characterize Diaz's attitude toward high school teaching about writing? Does she give sufficient reasons for her attitude?

Can you tell why it's so important to Diaz that academic writers are "still just people"?

Diaz here explicitly addresses a concept that much of her critique has circled around: control. Can you read each of the "myths" Diaz explores in this letter as a different element of control by or over a writer?

Diaz seems to be saying that, when you're interviewing, you need to conduct a conversation instead of asking rote questions and writing down answers. Did this come through for you? If not, how could she revise?

This is the second time Diaz has used the term "lies." Do you think Diaz is justified in using the term? Is her use of it appropriate for her audience and purpose?

What does the first sentence of her last paragraph do to Diaz's ethos?

You're going to want to ask open-ended questions, with lots of follow-ups in order to get the maximum amount of useful information in your interview.

You're on Your Own in College

Simply lies. Most likely, you'll be in a class with plenty of students who are just as confused as you are. It takes a while to learn a whole new writing style, and your professor is there to teach you; not to be an evil sadistic torturer who gives nothing but F's. Your professor knows you are a freshman, and that you are treading new waters. If you ever need help, just ask!

If you're like me—lazy, tired, and not willing to read bulleted points with long paragraphs—just remember one thing: You are not alone. Learning a whole new way of writing may seem a daunting task, but you're not the first freshman ever, you're not the only one to do it, and there will always be someone to help you when you need it. And just to make sure you get the point, I'll "restate the thesis" like you're used to: Write in your own words. You're the writer writing, not your sources, so just grab a pencil and have at it!