An Open Letter to Ninth Graders

Dear First-Year High School Students,

I am one of the co-editors of *What Is “College-Level” Writing?*—a 2006 collection of essays that focuses on the difference between high school writing and college-level writing. Because of my work on that book, I’ve spent a great deal of time in the last five years thinking about what students need to make the transition from high school to college.

Many studies and reports in recent years have argued that there’s an important “expectations gap” between the skills students are typically bringing to college and what college teachers like me think students should be bringing with them to college. This letter is an attempt to state those expectations clearly, at least from my perspective.

I offer you my advice and encouragement as you embark on your high school career because I think there’s a lot that you can do on your own to get ready for college. A good place to start is with some advice from Stephen Covey’s book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*: “Begin with the end in mind.” I am advising you to set clear and specific long-term goals for yourself and then work incrementally over a period of time to meet them. I would like to provide you here with a number of specific goals that you can work toward over the next four years.

Let’s begin with perhaps the most fundamental of all college-readiness skills—reading.

Reading

Reading comprehension, as measured by standardized tests like the SAT and the ACT, is certainly an essential college-level skill. Students in college are required to read an enormous amount of material across a formidable range of disciplines, and college students must be able to understand and engage with this material thoughtfully. Reading is a foundational skill that makes success possible in virtually all areas of your college education.

Strong reading comprehension skills, though, do not in themselves guarantee that you are ready for college. The best college students I’ve worked with over the years have had a number of other reading-related strengths in addition to strong comprehension skills, and I would like to briefly outline them for you here. Remember, you have four years to work on these.
Students who are ready for college like to read. If you don’t like to read, you are going to find college very difficult.

Students who are ready for college have read some good books as well as some important books while they were in high school. I’m not suggesting that you need to follow any particular or prescriptive reading list, like the one that literary critic E. D. Hirsch includes, for example, in Cultural Literacy. But a high school student who is ready for college should have some sense of our shared intellectual and cultural history, as well as at least some exposure to work outside the Western cultural tradition. A high school student who is ready for college should be able to recognize and respond in some thoughtful way to, say, a reference in a lecture to King Lear. Ideally, a student ready for college would have some visceral sense of what Lear feels like as a dramatic experience and as a point of reference in our common heritage. The same can be said about the book of Job, Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, Cervantes’s Don Quixote, Willa Cather’s My Antonia, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, and Richard Rodriguez’s Hunger of Memory, among others.

Students who are ready for college read for pleasure. Reading is not something that a student who is ready for college always associates with “work,” “discomfort,” “inconvenience,” or “pain.” Students who are ready for college enjoy reading. Being able to enjoy reading is often the result of a long engagement with books and the written word that cannot be replaced by “cramming” or taking special college preparatory classes. The students whom I have found to be most ready for college have loved books and loved to read. If you don’t love to read, you will probably be confused and frustrated while at college. Reading is perhaps the most paradigmatic activity of a liberal arts education. It is where learning begins at college. You have four years to learn to love to read.

Writing

Strong writing skills are, of course, essential to college success. As a longtime composition instructor, I know that there are many things that high school students can do to become strong writers.

First of all, you should expect any piece of serious writing to require considerable effort. Students who are ready for college routinely plan to produce multiple drafts of essays; expect to read and reread assigned texts; expect to think and rethink key ideas they are exploring in their essays; and routinely ask friends, family members, tutors, and professors for feedback about their work. High school students who are ready for college know that
good writing does not get produced without considerable effort, and they are willing to make that effort. Most of the time they do such work enthusiastically.

Students who are ready for college come to college interested in learning how to become better writers. Many of the most problematic students I’ve encountered in my teaching career come to college unable or unwilling to believe that they have anything left to learn as writers. (I’ve been writing seriously now for about thirty years, and I’m still actively looking for ways to become a better writer.) Students should come to college with the understanding that they have a great deal to gain from listening to their professors as they discuss and evaluate their written work. In fact, students who are ready for college understand that this is where much of the most important learning in college takes place.

A whole range of behavioral and attitudinal qualities are also essential to anyone who hopes to be a successful college-level writer. English professor Kathleen McCormick described these qualities memorably in an online exchange among contributors to What Is “College-Level” Writing? Commenting on an essay by Kim Nelson—a student whose contribution to the volume described the process of completing a college-level essay on J. R. R. Tolkien—McCormick wrote,

Let’s begin by listing many of the skills with which Kim entered college. I think they should be divided into two types: behavior skills and writing skills. Behavioral skills are not exclusive to college-level writing, but without them, it is hard to achieve anything, and they are skills that few of us articulate as explicitly as Kim does, so I think they deserve to be underscored:

- Work through “panic” and refuse to procrastinate.
- Pace yourself to work on assignments for an extended period of time.
- Find others to help you (parents, teachers, friends at dinner, tutors at the writing center).
- Recognize that a critique by a professor, while initially disheartening, is helpful.
- Initiate repeated visits to the professor.
- Value intellectual work and collaboration and validation more than the grade.
- Brainstorm in note form.
- “Bang out” an outline and critique it.
- Choose quotations.
- Develop a thesis.
- Transfer writing skills learned in high school to the college situation.
- Maintain sensitivity to language use.
- Reread texts you plan to write about; underline.
- Do library research.
- Listen to multiple levels of textual analysis.
- Rewrite and revise your thesis and writing.

Thinking

I would advise you to seek out classes and learning experiences that challenge you. Research is beginning to show us that the brain responds in very powerful and positive ways to cognitive challenges. Don’t limit yourself to subjects or activities that are familiar or easy.

Students who are ready for college bring with them a curiosity about ideas and an interest in encountering new ways of looking at the world. In fact, one of the reasons they come to college in the first place is to expand their minds, to encounter new ideas and perspectives, and to grow. High school students who are ready for college have genuine curiosity about the world and the people in it. Do you?

Listening

Listening is a vastly undervalued and underappreciated skill in our culture. Strong listening skills (and the patience and empathy that make listening possible) will be enormously valuable to you in all areas of your life, in college and beyond. Listening skills will certainly help you move toward a more open and welcoming engagement with the world and with others.

Strong listening skills also make possible healthy, positive, respectful human relationships. Much of college success depends on establishing strong working relationships with professors, college staff, and fellow students. Such relationships are built, of course, with strong listening skills. Students who are unable to listen are typically unable to learn, for all the obvious reasons.

Good listeners bring to any interaction with others a number of important qualities, including patience, empathy, personal generosity, emotional intelligence, and respect for others. Good listeners are also able to suspend an interest in themselves and focus instead in respectful ways on what others think and feel. Students who are ready for college have done some of the important personal work that makes this possible. Listening is a skill, like many others, that improves with practice, and one can become a better listener simply by endeavoring to be one.
“Grit”

“Grit” is another quality that is vitally important for college readiness. Researchers who use this term suggest that it includes self-discipline, perseverance, and passion. As psychologists Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman note in their recent essay “Self-Discipline Outdoes IQ in Predicting Academic Performance of Adolescents,” grit appears to be at least as important to academic success as IQ or “smarts.” In fact, all high school students should hear what Duckworth and Seligman have to say about self-discipline:

Underachievement among American youth is often blamed on inadequate teachers, boring textbooks, and large class sizes. We suggest another reason for students falling short of their intellectual potential: their failure to exercise self-discipline. . . . We believe that many of America’s children have trouble making choices that require them to sacrifice short-term pleasure for long-term gain, and that programs that build self-discipline may be the royal road to building academic achievement.

Any student is capable of bringing a quality of joyfulness to their work at college, and the same can be said for the qualities of self-discipline, perseverance, and passion. Without these qualities, students can only be considered ready to be bored, lost, angry, or confused at college.

Attitude Toward College

Drinking, socializing, and taking reckless advantage of “freedom” on campus lead many students to squander their time at college. I’ve seen many young men and women trapped in a protracted adolescence that often lasts well into their late teens, early twenties, and beyond. As teachers, we want students to have a youthful spirit (however old they may be), but we also want them to bring maturity to the college enterprise.

Some students, usually as a result of difficult life experience, arrive at college with such maturity. But many do not. In my experience, mature students are often able to engage with college in very productive ways. Those who do not bring such maturity, however, typically cannot. Such students often find themselves confused or angry or without any real direction.

You also need to understand that the chance to attend college is an opportunity of incalculable value. Because many students take this opportunity for granted, I recommend that community service be a required part of every high school student’s preparation for college. Community service is an excellent way for you to begin building a balanced and
mature perspective on life. Such a perspective will be invaluable to you when you attend college.

**Determining Readiness**

I have developed a checklist of the college-readiness skills described in this article. You can use this practical document to track your progress in high school and ensure that you are ready for college by the time you graduate. Visit [here](https://www.aaup.org/article/open-letter-ninth-graders#.WXdro-mQxPZ) to view and print the checklist. Remember: you have four years to develop the skills that you will need to succeed in college.

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An Open Letter to High School Students about Reading

Dear High School Students,

Greetings! A few years ago I wrote an open letter to ninth graders about college readiness, trying to provide beginning high school students with a college professor’s perspective on what being ready for college really means. As it turns out, “being ready” involves a lot more than taking a particular sequence of courses or achieving a certain GPA. My original letter received a very enthusiastic response from high school teachers and students. Some teachers even had their students write their own letters back to me in response to what I said. It was great getting feedback directly from high school students.

There were many areas of agreement expressed in the letters I have received from students over the years, but one rather consistent area of resistance was about reading. In my letter, I told students that if they wanted to be ready for college they needed to love reading, they needed to read for pleasure, and they needed to do a lot of reading overall. A number of the students I heard from did not like this advice one bit.

I have a few more things I’d now like to share with you about getting ready for college—and, believe it or not, they all involve reading.

In the years since I published that open letter, I have done a great deal of research on reading and learning, and I am in the process right now of coediting a scholarly book about reading, Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom (NCTE). As I mentioned in my first letter, I am the coeditor of two books about college readiness—What Is “College-Level” Writing? (2006) and What Is “College-Level” Writing? Volume 2 (2010)—so I’ve spent a great deal of time thinking about what high school students need if they want to be successful in college.

My research has confirmed that “deep” reading and reading for pleasure may be the most important things you can do to prepare for college.

One study that has shaped my thinking on this subject was conducted by Alice Sullivan and Matt Brown. Their research showed that reading for pleasure produces important benefits across a variety of academic disciplines (including math) and that “reading is actually linked to increased cognitive progress over time.” Obviously, these cognitive gains will help you regardless of your major or career aspirations. This study was based on data gathered from six thousand students in the United Kingdom. It may seem counterintuitive that reading can help you with math, but if we think of reading as an activity that by its
very nature—regardless of what you are reading—helps us develop more sophisticated
ways of understanding the world, then it makes good sense.

As the French novelist Marcel Proust noted, “It is through the contact with other minds
which constitutes reading that our minds are fashioned.” Exposure to new vocabulary, new
ideas and conceptual understandings, new ways of forging relationships between ourselves
and others and ourselves and the world, and new forms of reasoning help us do this.

Another important study that has helped shape my understanding of the importance of
reading to college readiness was conducted by French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and
Jean-Claude Passeron. These researchers found that the influence of language skills
developed through reading, conversation, and family life “never ceases to be felt” across an
individual’s life span. And the benefits go much deeper than vocabulary: “Language is not
simply an instrument of communication: it also provides, together with a richer or poorer
vocabulary, a more or less complex system of categories, so that the capacity to decipher
and manipulate complex structures, whether logical or aesthetic,” depends partly on the
complexity of the language a student possesses. Some of this is passed down like an
inheritance by one’s family, and some is gained through effort, application, and focused
attention to reading. Reading, then, can literally help determine the way we are able to
think.

As I mentioned in my first letter, science has begun to play an important role in our
understanding of learning, and some fascinating discoveries have been made in this regard
related to reading. We now know that the brain actually changes as a result of engaged,
effortful learning and that when we challenge ourselves to learn something new, the brain
forms new neural pathways. These new pathways make us smarter. As psychologist Carol
Dweck has noted, “More and more research is showing that our brains change constantly
with learning and experience and that this takes place throughout our lives.”

The discovery of the brain’s “neuroplasticity” has important implications for you as
students. New evidence suggests that intelligence and IQ are not fixed but rather can be
strengthened through effort and activity. In fact, researcher Maryanne Wolf has shown that
reading itself has had a profound impact in shaping human history and the development of
the human brain: “Reading is one of the single most remarkable inventions in history; the
ability to record history is one of its consequences. Our ancestors’ invention could come
about only because of the human brain’s extraordinary ability to make new connections
among its existing structures, a process made possible by the brain’s ability to be shaped by
experience. This plasticity at the heart of the brain’s design forms the basis for much of
who we are, and who we might become.” Wolf suggests there is great value in students
engaging in challenging reading activities—reading that is “time-demanding, probative, analytical, and creative.” This is important research for you to know about as you think about getting ready for college and establishing the kind of approach to your work that you will choose to take in high school.

There has also been a great deal of research recently on the difference between “deep learning” and “surface learning.” Much of this research focuses on how students engage with the texts they read for school. A key variable in this research is how students position themselves as readers in classrooms. Some ways of engaging with texts provide very powerful opportunities for growth, while others provide very limited opportunities. In one study, sociologists Judith C. Roberts and Keith A. Roberts found that many students see “reading” as simply forcing one’s eyes to “touch” each word on the assigned pages, and many students candidly admit that they do not even read assigned materials at all. Many students often read only to finish rather than to understand what they have read. Students may favor this kind of approach to learning because it requires minimal effort. Obviously, however, with minimal effort comes minimal rewards.

“Deep learning” and “deep reading” require a very different kind of engagement and investment from you, but they produce significant gains that can help develop college-level skills and dispositions. Instead of memorization, recall, and shallow engagement, “deep reading” requires reflection, curiosity, humility, sustained attention, a commitment to rereading, consideration of multiple possibilities, and what the education scholar Sheridan Blau has called “intellectual generosity.” These are characteristics highly valued in the workplace, and they can be of great service to you in all areas of your life. Why not start developing them now?

Reading researchers have also found that we read for all kinds of different reasons, and readers often have to adjust their reading strategies for different purposes and contexts. When we read for pleasure, we often read a text just once, and rather quickly, focusing on the enjoyment and the pleasure. When we read a complex text or sophisticated research, we may still focus on the enjoyment of encountering new ideas and challenging content, but we often have to change our approach and read more carefully, more slowly, and more deliberately. We also have to assume that we will likely need to reread key passages in order to understand them fully. I do this myself almost every day in my professional life as a scholar and teacher, even though I am a fairly skilled reader.

Strong readers expect to make situational adjustments in how they read, depending on context and purpose—and on what they are reading and why they are reading it. This
understanding can be a very useful component of your repertoire of college-level reading skills and strategies.

I also have to admit, in the interests of full disclosure, that we as teachers have probably helped create some of the aversion to reading that many students feel. Educator Kelly Gallagher has called this process “readicide”—“the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools.” Gallagher suggests that readicide is caused by educational practices that value the development of test-takers over the development of lifelong readers. I’m afraid that this statement may, alas, be true. It certainly helps explain the disturbing results of a large research study conducted by the American College Testing Program (ACT), which found that barely half of all high school graduates possess college-level reading skills.

Two recent reports about reading from the National Endowment for the Arts—Reading at Risk and To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence—confirm the disturbing scope and nature of this problem. You need to know about this research, because it can provide guidance—and motivation—for you as you prepare for college. So much of college is built around reading. You want to be going in as strong readers who enjoy reading and can handle the volume and complexity of college-level reading material.

So what am I recommending? I recommend that you start to find a way right now to enjoy reading and to make it an important part of your life. A great deal of research has been done on the importance of free choice in building engagement with reading, so choosing what you are interested in is a great way to start. You can read whatever books or articles you want. Of course, we all enjoy reading social media, but we’re not going to count that. Let’s focus, instead, on books and articles. This kind of reading requires sustained concentration that will help you develop a number of important cognitive skills, including the capacity to focus your attention for longer periods of time and the ability to monitor and direct your reading processes (metacognition). These skills will be vitally important to you in college and beyond.

I wish you the very best in your high school years and great success as you transfer to college and put these essential reading and thinking skills to work. If you’d like to discuss anything that I’ve said here, please feel free to write me a letter or send me an e-mail. I would enjoy hearing from you.

Patrick Sullivan is an English professor at Manchester Community College in Manchester, Connecticut. His most recent book is A New Writing Classroom: Listening, Motivation, and Habits of Mind.

https://www.aaup.org/article/open-letter-high-school-students-about-reading#.WXdnZemQxPY