

The Transition to College Writing

SECOND EDITION

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Orientation

That burning day when I got ready to leave New York and start out on my journey to college! I felt like Columbus starting out for the other end of the earth. I felt like the pilgrim fathers who had left their homeland and all their kin behind them and trailed out in search of the New World.

—Anzia Yezierska

To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.

—Henri Bergson

Are You Prepared for College?

It isn't difficult to understand why Anzia Yezierska experienced a "New World" when she entered Columbia University in 1904. At that time, when high school was still very high on the educational ladder, going to college was a rare opportunity, especially for a young woman born in a Russian Jewish ghetto in Poland and raised in a tenement on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In 1910, only 2.7 percent of Americans over the age of twenty-five had completed college, most of them from wealthy families in the eastern states, and the average American had completed only eight years of school. Because only about 4 percent of high school graduates continued their education, there were fewer than 1,000 colleges and universities in the United States, with an average enrollment of only 250 undergraduates. To be one of those students was a great privilege, set apart from the ordinary lives of working Americans. "All the young people I had ever seen were shut up in factories," Yezierska recalled in her autobiographical novel *The Bread Givers*. "But here were young girls and young men enjoying life, free from the worry for a living."

More remarkable, considering the dramatic changes over the past century, is the fact that most undergraduates still experience college as a new world, both exciting and confusing, filled with unexpected opportunities and challenges. If you are entering college this year, you represent the majority, about 63 percent, of high school graduates nationwide. Each fall more than 3 million high school graduates begin their studies at more than 4,000 American colleges and universities, with an average enrollment of 3,900 students. Nearly 17 million students are currently enrolled in undergraduate or graduate programs in the United States. What was once a rare privilege has become a statistical norm and, for many careers, a necessity.

With the expansion of college enrollments, high schools, in coordination with testing services and college admissions offices, have raised the priority of preparing their students for this transition. In high school, many of you have taken honors or advanced placement courses designed to prepare you for undergraduate studies. You have taken batteries of standardized tests, perhaps two or three times, possibly with the help of coaching services. Parents, friends, teachers, and guidance counselors may have helped you to identify the schools that correspond with your interests, credentials, and financial resources. Published guides to colleges, catalogues and brochures, detailed Web sites, and campus visits provide additional views of undergraduate life at particular schools. Each year, millions of high school seniors and graduates enter a complex matchmaking system with college admissions officers, who review applications filled with detailed aptitude and achievement scores, Advanced Placement (AP) scores, high school transcripts, class ranks, lists of honors and activities, personal essays, and letters of recommendation.

For the purpose of orchestrating admission to college, this matchmaking system works remarkably well. In its survey of students who entered four-year colleges in the fall of 2004, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* found that more than 90 percent were attending their first or second choice of schools. From this limited perspective, we might imagine that going to college has become an ordinary, predictable experience, effectively regulated by educators at both ends of a transition that has become straight and smooth.

But research and experience tell a different story. For a great variety of reasons, 35 percent of first-year students discontinue their studies, at least temporarily, by the beginning of the sophomore year; according to current projections, only 54 percent will graduate within the next six

years. And college teachers still complain, as they have for more than a century, that their students are unprepared for the kinds of writing, reading, thinking, and learning required in undergraduate studies.

Students who are entering college obviously run into a variety of obstacles they did not anticipate, and high school credentials, furthermore, cannot reliably predict a student's performance in college, especially in the first year. Students with weak high school backgrounds often do extremely well; those with superb credentials sometimes have the most difficulty adjusting to undergraduate studies. For reasons we will explore throughout this book, even the most thorough preparations for college differ from the real experiences and challenges of *being* a college student. As a consequence, strategies for success in high school and in college admissions are not reliable prescriptions for success in undergraduate courses.

Examples of two of my students will illustrate some of the unpredictable factors that determine whether individuals will adapt quickly or slowly, successfully or unsuccessfully, to the new challenges of college work.

Eduardo and Marie

In their first semester of college, Eduardo and Marie were both enrolled in a writing seminar I taught. Admitted to college as a "disadvantaged minority" student, Eduardo was raised in a dangerous, impoverished urban neighborhood and attended a public high school that sent a low percentage of its students to college. His mother, a single parent, had little formal education and spoke to her children in Spanish, her native language, and Eduardo's verbal test scores were somewhat low. Marie, by contrast, came from a wealthy suburban family and attended an exclusive private high school, designed to prepare students for admission to competitive colleges and universities. There, she had performed well in Advanced Placement courses, and her test scores were high, especially in math and science.

At the end of that first semester, Eduardo had adapted to college studies with apparent ease and obvious success. Without any of the typical signs of exhaustion or stress, he had achieved a perfect 4.0 (A) average for the term. Marie, however, had struggled to complete the term with a C average, even though she devoted enormous amounts of time to her courses. After studying all night, trying to memorize the course material, she failed her first examination of the semester,

in physics. Concluding that she needed to work harder, she became increasingly tired and distressed.

Due in part to her struggles in her other courses, in response to assignments in my writing class, Marie relied on simple formulas she had learned in high school (formulas I'll discuss further in Chapter 6). And although the resulting essays were orderly and correct, they often missed the point of the assignment and shed little light on the subject. Eduardo spent less time on his papers, I suspect, yet his work was always thoughtful and interesting to read in ways that captured the specific and changing purposes of my assignments.

I should note that the ends of these stories are both happy. Because the first year of college is a period of transition and adjustment, the unpredictable factors that influence student performance in that year extend to the following years as well. In later semesters, Marie gradually figured out how to complete her work more effectively, and when she graduated and entered a master's program in engineering, she was an excellent student. Eduardo continued to refine his learning skills and graduated with a nearly perfect record in economics. In the beginning, however, their strategies for adapting to college work were dramatically different, in ways that all students may find instructive.

Because Eduardo's transition to college was extraordinarily smooth and effective, I asked him to explain how he got all of his work done so efficiently, with such reliable success. His answer suggested a remarkable combination of alertness and flexibility, along with a strong sense of opportunity and enjoyment in learning. "I think that every course, every assignment, is a different little puzzle I have to solve," he explained. "What do I need to do here? When do I need to do it, and how long will it take? What does this teacher expect from me?"

Although he certainly made good use of the knowledge and skills he brought with him to college, Eduardo didn't confuse his classes in college with those in high school, even when they were in the same subject. Nor did he confuse his college classes and assignments with one another. Although he could observe real similarities and connections that gradually made learning increasingly efficient, he never assumed that *reading, writing, studying, or being a good student* had the same meanings in different courses or assignments. When writing a paper for me, he could figure out what *I* wanted him to do, partly because he didn't confuse my expectations with those of his high school English teachers or his current sociology or economics teachers. Then he figured out how much time he could reasonably spend on this

assignment, considering his other responsibilities, and he scheduled that time accordingly.

During Marie's first semester, her approach to college work seemed to run on a kind of automatic pilot, set by a few basic assumptions she had brought to college, such as "*Work hard and you will do well*" or "*Learning is remembering what teachers and textbooks say*."

Following such premises, if you work hard but *don't* do well, the only recourse is to work harder to do better. Although Eduardo always considered the advantages of working *differently*, or even *less*, Marie could only imagine working *more*. In turn, *studying*, for Marie, primarily meant *reading*, and the main goal of reading was *memorization*. While this generic approach to learning had worked well enough in most of her high school classes, especially in math and science, it did not work reliably in college, for reasons we will explore further in this book. Her physics course, for example, had quickly covered too much information for her to remember, and the exam questions required "understanding" or "application" of the main concepts. This also required *thinking*. Filled with a jumble of information from a sleepless night of cramming for a different kind of examination, her brain could not think about the questions at all. Although Marie was a capable writer, she approached writing assignments with similar inflexibility, allowing formulas that had worked in the past to override her attention to the specific demands of writing in the present.

Eduardo and Marie seemed to be equally bright, capable students, and I can't explain the different approaches with which they began their college studies. I don't know, for example, how Eduardo developed such acutely adaptive skills, beyond the fact that he had to contend with many unpredictable, potentially hazardous situations at home and at school.

But I do know that Marie had to develop—and was able to develop—the same kinds of skills to succeed in college. And for reasons I will explain, all successful college students must develop these flexible strategies for writing and learning in changing environments.

Mythical Colleges, Mythical High Schools

Why are these adjustments necessary? What prevents students like Marie from recognizing that college work requires new learning strategies? And why do college teachers often fail to explain the particular ways in which entering students need to adapt to their expectations?

Here I'll answer these questions in very general terms, with the help of simple diagrams, and in the following section I'll explain the basic differences between high school and college that make new approaches to learning essential.

The fact that college represents a turning point in students' lives shouldn't surprise anyone. Colleges and universities advertise the new experiences and opportunities they offer to students as main attractions, and few of you would either expect or want this experience to be a direct, routine continuation of high school. Higher education has always offered people the opportunity to reinvent themselves and find new directions for their lives among diverse options that weren't open to them in the past. Beyond this turning point, much of the knowledge and skill you previously acquired will remain useful, but the credentials that brought you to this point will suddenly become irrelevant. When college admissions officers close your application folder and put it in the ACCEPTANCE pile, I doubt that anyone will ever look at your high school record again. Previous triumphs, struggles, and failures are in this sense erased, and what you do from now on is all that matters.

Freshman orientation and advising programs introduce new students to unfamiliar social, administrative, and practical features of campus life. As a rule, entering students receive lots of help in meeting one another, settling into dorms or other housing, registering for classes, learning about campus organizations, and coping with other bewildering details of living in a new place.

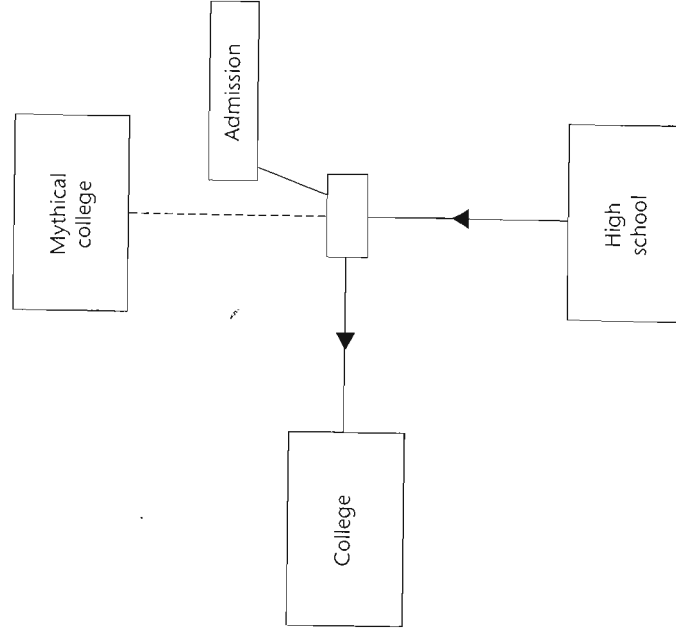
Orientations to intellectual life and to new ways of learning are more difficult to provide, and the need for change in these areas is easier to ignore. One reason is that increasingly standardized systems that lead to college admissions create illusions of academic continuity between high school and college. Although living in a new social and physical environment may be disorienting in every other way, the measured skills that got students into a particular school seem to represent a solid bridge and clear path to further success. Lacking obvious alternatives, students will tend to stay on this path as long as they can. And when it leads them into trouble, they may conclude, as Marie did, that college work simply requires *more effort*, not *different kinds of effort*, for different purposes.

Failing to recognize that admission to college is a dramatic turning point in learning, as in other aspects of their lives, undergraduates often approach their studies as though they were attending a mythical

college or university: the kind of school for which they are already prepared to succeed, without substantial changes. Students like Marie therefore seem unprepared for college because they imagine that they *are* prepared. The diagram shown below illustrates this straight path that students often try to follow, along with the dramatic turn they must take to contend with the realities of undergraduate studies successfully.

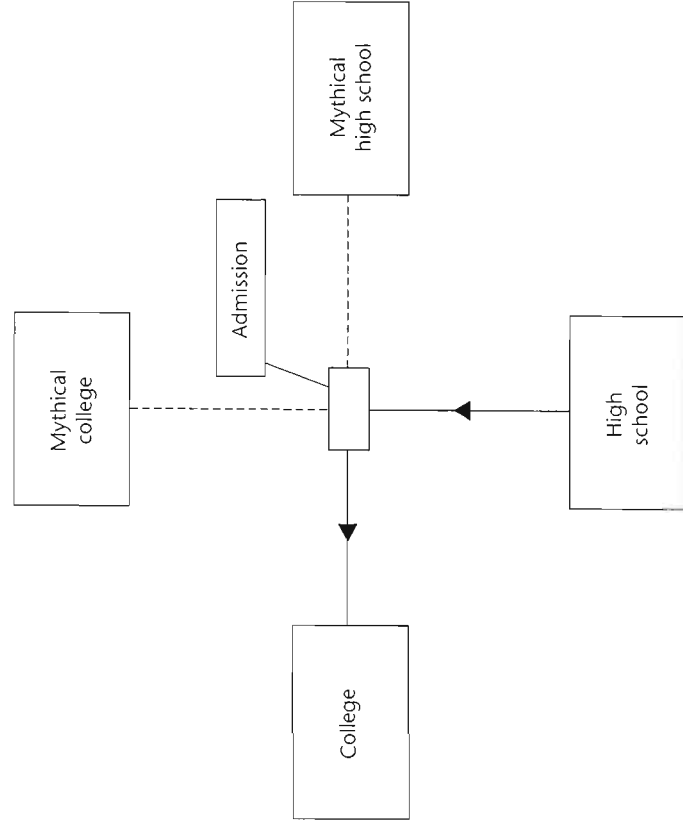
In the next section I'll explain why high school teachers cannot reliably predict the expectations that students will actually encounter when they make this turn into specific courses and fields of study at particular schools. But these expectations would not remain mysterious if all college teachers clearly explained the changes they expected students to make in writing papers, reading assigned texts, taking notes, participating in discussions, or studying for exams. Why do individual teachers fail to make their expectations clear to students?

To varying degrees, professors do provide instructions and guidance for completing assignments and other work for their courses. They specify the lengths and usually the forms of assigned papers or



the questions they want students to consider while writing or reading. They also describe the forms of impending examinations and may offer hints about coverage and strategies for studying. But these guidelines rarely include explanations of the particular ways you should write papers, read assigned texts, or learn about the subject; and they are even less likely to describe the ways in which you must adapt to this work, in moving from high school to college or from one college class to another. To illustrate why the real expectations of college teachers remain bewildering, therefore, we must add another vector to our diagram shown below.

You probably wouldn't conclude on your own that the failure of college teachers to explain what they expect results from ignorance. As teachers in their own areas of expertise, professors may seem omniscient. If their standards are difficult to understand and more difficult to meet, the most obvious explanation is that they know so much more than you do. In their roles as teachers, however, there is one important area they know very little about: the academic backgrounds, skills, and learning strategies that you bring to college and to their particular courses.



From the perspectives of college teachers, the real high schools you attended also lie beyond a corner they can't see around, in environments they can't reliably imagine. And much in the way that entering students envision a mythical learning environment as the logical extension of their preparations for college, professors often imagine mythical high schools as the logical extensions of everything students should have learned in preparation for college work. "Don't they teach that in high school?" they often ask.

Because they think these mythical high schools should be responsible for teaching students the kinds of writing, reading, logical reasoning, critical thinking, and other skills required in undergraduate classes, college teachers will tend to assume that you are already familiar with these expectations or that you will make the necessary adjustments on your own. And because most of these teachers know very little about high school instruction, even in their own fields, they could not clearly describe necessary changes in your approaches to learning even if they felt responsible for doing so.

Illusions of continuity between high school and college therefore persist on both sides of the admissions process, in the minds of college students and of college teachers. For the purpose of negotiating the real *discontinuities* between these environments, however, you hold the clear advantage. Unlike your college teachers, you know what you actually learned in high school, along with the writing, reading, and learning strategies you bring to college work. At this turning point, you can see in both directions and, with a clear eye and open mind, observe the differences.

Some Basic Differences between High School and College

I've argued that even the best high schools can fully prepare you only for *admission* to college. High school teachers can't accurately predict your college experience, and college teachers can't reliably imagine your high school background because high schools, colleges, and the transitions between any two of them are actually quite diverse.

High schools vary greatly in size—from fewer than a hundred students in some rural and private schools to urban and suburban districts with enrollments of several thousand. But variations in higher education are even more extreme. Among the 4,236 colleges and universities in the United States, about 450, more than 10 percent, enroll fewer

than 200 students. At the opposite end of the scale, 166 universities are at least 100 times larger, enrolling 20,000 to 50,000 students at a single campus. As a consequence, some of you might go to colleges that are smaller than your high schools, whereas others enroll in universities that are larger than the towns in which you were raised. About 80 percent of you will attend colleges in your home states, and some of you will travel only a few miles from your homes, where you might continue to live. Others will cross the entire continent or arrive from other countries, moving from large cities to small towns or from rural areas to urban centers. College tuition varies radically as well, and so do standards for admission, curricula, housing, physical and social environments, and patterns of diversity in the student body.

The many differences among colleges and universities were no doubt important factors in your choice of schools. They also determine the particular adjustments you have to make as individuals, entering college with different backgrounds. Across these variations, however, some basic, categorical differences exist between high school and college, to which most of you must adapt. These factors represent foundations for particular kinds of writing, reading, and learning that will be discussed in later chapters.

College courses are not direct continuations of high school instruction. As I noted, standardized tests create illusions of uniformity and continuity, partly because many of the high school courses billed as preparation for college studies actually prepare students to pass the standardized exams that are essential for college admissions. In some basic subjects, these classes do provide excellent foundations for introductory college courses. A good high school calculus or precalculus class will be a great asset to you in your first year of college mathematics and science. The same will be true for good high school courses in chemistry, biology, physics, and computer science. The periodic table, the principles of genetics, and the laws of motion aren't likely to change between your senior year of high school and the first year of college. Nor are the dates of important historical events, or the structures and vocabularies of English, French, or Spanish.

Even in these basic subjects, however, methods of instruction and evaluation will vary considerably. Freshman courses in English literature, psychology, American history, or philosophy will not necessarily cover the material you studied in high school versions of these courses, nor will they proceed with the same assumptions about what is important and true.

In addition, many of the subjects you study in college do not exist in the high school curriculum. The average university encompasses about fifty academic departments and interdisciplinary programs, each with its own faculty, roster of courses, prerequisites, and requirements for undergraduate majors. At the freshman level in the social sciences, for example, introductory courses often represent branches of study within these departments: microeconomics, international politics, cultural anthropology, social psychology, or the sociology of religion.

While high school teachers are usually generalists, college teachers are specialists. Your college professors will not directly coordinate their courses with high school instruction because most of them know very little about the high school curriculum. Professors who teach introductory courses in their departments are specialists in certain types of research. They are not just biologists but are particular types of molecular biologists, neurobiologists, or geneticists; they are not just historians but are specialists on particular periods and features of English, American, Brazilian, or West African history. These teachers view introductory courses not as extensions of high school but as points of departure into advanced studies.

Principles of "academic freedom" encourage variation in college teaching. "Academic freedom" means that within broad guidelines for fairness and responsibility, individual college professors are free to decide what and how they should teach. College courses are rarely governed by the kinds of state and local mandates that standardize secondary education, and most college professors are not required to pass through formal teacher training and certification. As a consequence, two professors in the same political science department, for example, may teach an introduction to political theory with very different course designs, texts, assignments, and examinations. One might emphasize factual knowledge, through formal lectures and short-answer exams. The other might emphasize critical thinking and lead discussion-based classes, assigning position papers and a research project in place of exams.

This variation is most dramatic in the first year. In your first year or two, most of your courses will satisfy degree requirements that are designed to ensure broad exposure to the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. In a single day, therefore, you might travel from a large lecture course in chemistry to a writing class that is taught as a seminar

or workshop, and then to a small lecture course in cognitive psychology that includes student participation and to a biology lab where you work on experiments with a partner. Your friends, meanwhile, are probably taking other courses of diverse sizes and designs in other departments—in anthropology, education, philosophy, astronomy, nutrition, or calculus. The following semester you will take different courses, some of them in other departments, with teachers who have their own unpredictable ideas about what and how you should learn. At large schools, especially, individual professors will have little or no idea what you are doing (or how much you have to do) in other courses.

College work requires new kinds of motivation and self-discipline. In their first year, most of my students face the necessity of finding new reasons for getting their work done and new ways of making productive use of their time among many potential distractions. When they were in high school, their parents, teachers, and school officials often made sure they were attending classes, completing assignments, and meeting requirements from one day or week to the next. In high school, they also worked hard for the purpose of getting into college.

In college, most of those structured expectations vanish. On any particular day you will be free to skip class, postpone work on assignments, and spend your time in many other tempting ways. Because colleges give students much greater freedom and responsibility, they can easily fall behind in their work, sometimes even to the point of failing classes, without any intervention from their teachers. Problems with time management and motivation account for a large proportion of the students who leave college in their first year, including some who were very successful in high school. For this reason, the most successful college students deliberately reconsider their motivations and make thoughtful decisions about the use of their time.

Take Charge of Your Own Transition to College, as Active Learners

Many students seem to drift through the first year of college, and sometimes through later years as well, letting immediate circumstances structure their time and priorities from one hour or day to the next. In some cases, frequent distractions divert their attention from work they

need to be doing. As deadlines loom, the resulting scramble to complete readings, papers, and other assignments greatly reduces effectiveness, engagement, and pleasure in their academic work. At best, these students drift into a more or less functional routine of attending classes and completing assignments, without evaluating their motives and methods. Without considering why they are doing this work, beyond a vague sense of obligation or a fear of bad grades, they attend college as though it were an advanced version of high school: another level of compulsory education. The real, transformative opportunities of college are thus diminished, if not altogether lost.

Successful college students find internal motivations and discipline to replace the external factors that may have kept them focused in high school. These students tell me that they do not want to disappoint themselves or waste opportunities, and that they take pride in learning to be both independent and responsible—to achieve their own goals. They insist that they are not working just to meet course requirements and get high grades, which they view as a *result* of their motivations, not as motivations in themselves. *In other words, students who get the most out of college usually take the most active responsibility for determining what, how, and why they should learn.*

The great importance of active learning became clearer to me a few years ago when I interviewed a group of seniors chosen to participate in a fellowship program for the most promising biology majors. I hoped to identify the approaches to college studies that contributed to their success, and I was asking these questions on behalf of capable students at lower levels, such as Marie, who were running into trouble in their courses, even when they worked very hard. In our discussion, I was surprised to learn that in their first year most of these students had elected to take the “autotutorial” course in introductory biology, rather than the conventional lecture/laboratory courses designed for science majors. “Why did you choose that course?” I asked. “It’s just the best way to learn,” one of them said. “In reality, all of our courses are autotutorial.” Others smiled and nodded in agreement, but I wasn’t sure what he meant. “If you think you can understand the material just by putting in your time, listening to lectures, and doing the assigned readings,” he explained, “you won’t do very well. If you really want to understand the subject, you always have to get interested in it for your own reasons, and teach yourself.” Another student added, “And teach each other.”

These students explained that they usually studied together, in pairs or small groups, and educational research supports their belief that, for the purpose of learning, “two heads are better than one.” Here are some other active learning strategies these students had chosen:

- Whenever possible, they chose smaller classes in which they could develop and communicate their understanding in writing, discussion, and presentations. They preferred these learning environments to impersonal lecture courses with formal examinations.
- They avoided procrastination, completing readings and starting assigned papers early, so they could participate in class discussions and ask questions about points of confusion.
- For the same purposes, they often talked with teachers after class and during office hours.
- They had taken the initiative to find positions as research assistants to teachers in their fields, or in laboratories, libraries, or other facilities related to their majors.
- They had initiated or joined student organizations in their areas of interest—for example, undergraduate research and study groups, student curriculum committees in their departments, or advocacy groups on particular issues.

In comparison with more passive approaches to learning in college, such active strategies do not necessarily require more time, but they do require thoughtful, deliberate time management. You cannot participate effectively in class discussions or do well in interactive classes, for example, if you haven’t found time to complete readings and think about discussion topics in advance. And you can’t get help with papers and other assigned projects if you start them the night before they are due.

And well-managed time is something you must deliberately *find*, or create, in your schedule. It won’t just be there when you need it. If you are taking a reasonable number of credits, your academic work shouldn’t require overwhelming amounts of time each week. On average, college students spend about four hours in class each day and another three hours on out-of-class study and assignments—less, if anything, than a full-time job. But this time is not so neatly blocked into work hours. With complex academic schedules, irregular workloads throughout the term, many extracurricular events, membership in campus organizations, constant opportunities for social activity, and

often part-time jobs and athletic practices all competing for their time and attention, college students tend to lead hectic, fragmented lives. Scheduling all of this activity effectively is a complicated task that, in itself, requires constant attention.

- For this reason, one of your first purchases in college should be a good “academic planner,” or “daybook,” with enough space for each day to list everything you need to do. An electronic notebook that you can always carry with you will serve the same purpose. At the beginning of each term, enter all of your regular class times and (from the syllabi for your courses) all of the scheduled times for exams, due dates for papers, and other assigned work, along with work hours (if you have a part-time job) and other regular responsibilities. This will give you a sense for the blocks of time available for studying and working on course assignments.
- Revise this schedule on a daily basis, entering new and altered commitments. When papers and other projects are assigned well in advance, note when you should *begin* to work on these projects, not just when they are due.
- With these responsibilities in mind, plan your week in advance, scheduling blocks of time for writing, reading, and other work out of class. Avoid postponing all of your writing and study time until late in the evening, when you are sleepy and exhausted. Nocturnal writing habits account for a lot of the unfocused and unfinished writing that students turn in.

In a book about writing, I offer this general advice about time management because the quality of your written work will depend heavily on the time and attention you can devote to it in a typically complex and busy schedule.

GUIDELINES

- Because college remains a transformative experience, high schools can fully prepare students only for *admission* to college, not for the challenges of *being* a college student.
- Because the expectations of college teachers may vary unpredictably, meeting these challenges requires both alertness and flexibility. In

the first year, especially, view every assignment in every course as a puzzle you must solve.

- In each of these contexts, ask yourself what it means, exactly, for you to *read, write, study, or be a good student*.
- These flexible adjustments are necessary because colleges differ from high schools in some fundamental ways (pp. 9–12).
- For all of the preceding reasons, the most successful students take active responsibility for their own learning and for the thoughtful management of their time.

2

Language and Learning

The foundation for a successful undergraduate experience is proficiency in the written and the spoken word. Students need language to grasp and express effectively feelings and ideas. To succeed in college, undergraduates should be able to write and speak with clarity, and to read and listen with comprehension. Language and thought are inextricably connected, and as undergraduates develop their linguistic skills, they hone the quality of their thinking and become intellectually and socially empowered.

—Ernest Boyer, *The Undergraduate Experience in America*

The Vital Connections between Language and Learning

To examine the complex and changing roles of writing in higher education, we should begin with a broad view of writing among other, related uses of language. On the basis of prior experience, you may associate writing skills with the production of assigned essays, primarily in subjects such as English or history. Among all uses of written language, however, formal papers or reports will represent only a fraction of the writing you do in college, and these diverse forms of writing are linked with other uses of language that are just as crucial to learning.

In every type of course, in every department, language is the primary medium of teaching and learning. Some classes also rely on other media: visual representations (such as pictures, diagrams, and films), demonstrations, hands-on activities (such as lab experiments), or mathematics. But about 90 percent of instruction in college is verbal, and