

Writing tips and suggestions from Queensborough Community College

Ask for help

If there's a pattern of error in your writing but you're not sure how to fix it on your own (e.g., run-on sentences, sentence fragments, past participles, subject-verb agreement), make an appointment at the Writing Center (Library, 1st floor) so you can learn the skills that will make all of your writing more effective. They can also help you with brainstorming or organization of your thoughts if that's a roadblock for you.

Find the thread

Make sure your essay is coherent. Your responses inspired by the different sections of a prompt should clearly relate to each other and tell a connected story.

Avoid generalizations

Watch out for sentences about "people" or generalizations about the world: do they support the central idea of exploring yourself and your experience? (Hint: probably not.) Remove them and see what holes remain or what space you've freed up for specific examples, answering implicit questions, or following a line of thought more thoroughly.

Editing techniques

- Read your essay two sentences at a time (e.g., first sentence and second sentence of a paragraph; second sentence and third sentence of a paragraph)—do these two sentences repeat each other? Remove the weaker one.
- Your best editor is an imaginary, insatiable three-year-old who says "How do you know" or "Why does that matter" after every single sentence. Does the narrative you're telling pass the "three-year-old test"? If not, then there's still more critical thinking to be done in order to fully flesh out your ideas (and make them toddler-proof!).
- Give yourself enough time to come up with weak ideas, mess up, and start over. No one writes a good essay the night before. Really. Begin this essay **today** so you have time to revisit your work with fresh eyes multiple times over the course of the week.
- Write the middle (body paragraphs) of your essay first, then the conclusion, and then the introduction. The introduction is the hardest place to start, because you have to know where the essay is going to write a good one!
- Talk about your ideas for this essay with other people. Just saying things out loud or trying to explain them to another person gets you through that tough first draft phase in which the right words just won't come out.
- Watch out for redundancy (saying the same thing with slightly different words, like I just did). Pick the most effective way to say something and move on!
- Read your essay out loud. You'll catch grammatical errors and notice awkward wording very quickly by doing this.
- Let someone else read (but not write!) your essay—a significant other, a family member, a friend. Sometimes just knowing that someone you care about will read it can motivate you to write more effectively.

- Oftentimes when we write drafts, we arrive at a great idea later in the essay that would be far more effective if we said it at the beginning of the paragraph or earlier in the essay. Try switching the order of your sentences or your paragraphs and see what happens to the flow of your work.
- Refer to the rubric to “grade” yourself—does your essay meet all the requirements?

Additional suggestions based on first drafts of past student blog posts

- Title: Not just the title of the song you’re writing about. Create a title that implies, teases, or promotes an idea from your SBP.
- Definition vs. analysis. Read every sentence in your SBP and ask yourself if it’s about *this* particular piece or if it’s about *all music generally*. If you’re defining what a vocabulary word means, you’re not analyzing the music you hear.
- Return to the assigned textbook passages about the musical features you’ve chosen to analyze. All of the assigned reading provides examples of the ways in which you can describe each musical feature. A common trap for people describing melody, for example, is to instead describe dynamics, style of playing (texture), and accompaniment instead of contour, range, and intervals.
- Return to the lecture on pop song form (nearly all of you are writing about a piece that follows this structure).
- Connect the details you analyze in the music to your background information and broader context. Show how the outside information you know about the artist affects how you think about the work’s musical details (don’t fall into the trivia trap!). Show how the work’s musical details lead you to think about broader issues. Everything you say in your SBP should reinforce other details in the post and do so explicitly.
- Unless an artist is your personal friend (you know them in real life), refer to them by their last name.