

# 13

## Timm's Tips for College Writing Success

Nathan Timm

---

A junior at Florida State University when he composed this essay, Nathan Timm was studying writing and was an active member of the university track team.

---

Every college student has to write. Some love it, others dread it. Welcome to college. Deal with it. If students want to be able to succeed in college, they must learn to write well in almost every subject. Writing has become just as much a part of college as late-night pizza delivery. Still, students always seem to be complaining about writing papers, even English majors, including avid writers who are trying to write successfully outside of class. Writers can get so entangled in their assignments that they think of each assignment as torture instead of a challenge. Any method found to alleviate this frustration can be a sanity-saver. To help, I came up with eight helpful hints for writing successfully in and out of class in college.

### **1. Set Measurable Goals**

If I didn't set goals for my writing, I would lose my hair by age twenty-one. Put your goals in writing. Keep them simple. Write them in your journal. Tape them to your mirror above your sink. I have Post-it Notes all across my room. I set goals to get my writing done ahead of time because then I can spend the remaining extra time concentrating on feedback, comments, and revision.

Setting goals will allow you to make time for your writing. I set a goal for this year to spend an hour writing a day with at least twenty minutes on my personal writing. When I meet this goal my writing improves, but when I don't it suffers.

## 2. Allow Time

College students vary in their ability to manage time. Some students attempt to balance school, work, and sports all in one day. On the other hand, I've seen college students seem to spend their entire Saturday afternoon sitting on the porch drinking the day away. Writing takes time. It's not like some subjects where you can never open a book and hope to pass. English classes consume time because essays can't be written with the help of Cliffs Notes. I spend over half my homework time doing writing assignments. I have to make time. I set up appointments to write.

## 3. Have Fun With It

Whether you're an English major or not, you still are required to write. It might be journals, papers, e-mails, or even letters. Writing isn't fun for everyone, but if you hope to be successful having fun needs to become a major component of your writing. Maybe it's the end result, which puts a gleaming smile on your face or produces a sigh of relief. Or you find joy in the process which you go through in order to get to the product of your writing. I heard a quote once that I try to follow, especially with my writing endeavors. "I never worked a day in my life. It was all fun."

When I'm reading a paper on the bus to the trials, my teammates from the cross country team say:

"Nathan. You're writing another paper. That's gotta suck."

"No, not really," I usually respond.

I would rather be writing than studying for other classes. I don't find much enjoyment in reading the same text over and over to get a decent grade on a midterm. I enjoy English classes. In order to get writing done, students need to make the paper fun. Write more in different areas. Make it a challenge. Don't ever think of writing as a bore. I think everyone wants to improve their writing in some shape or form, but often they don't have the discipline.

In his book, *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow discusses the idea of forming a writing group. Sharing with others is one way to make writing more fun because I'll be the first to admit that writing for school all the time can get draining.

## 4. In Your Free Time—Write

I can't tell you how many papers I've written or found ideas to if I write while watching television. I'll just be relaxing in front of the television while eating

dinner. Then something on the television will trigger an idea for an idea. Then I pick up a pen and my journal and start writing. Every part of life can dictate your writing life. That's why I make a conscious effort to write for myself sometimes. Whether it's a motivating quote I came upon or just a piece of advice for that day, I write it down. I sometimes just write a story, chronologically going through my day.

If you're living a boring life, your writing will probably reveal that. Equally, too much partying can cause your writing to suffer. You're probably going to have a hard time feeling up to writing when you're out later, but then again if you're a late-night person, maybe writing late at night would be your specialty. Make it a point to sit down and write before and after you go out—maybe you'll find out something new about your writing abilities. Maybe you will find new motivation to write before you go out. Find your best writing window. Capitalize on your strengths. You could feel so relaxed after you get home that you'll write freely. This will help you reach your writing potential, and also prove relaxing. Plus, you'll learn that you can do two things you enjoy doing at exactly the same time, useful for a time-pressed college student.

## **5. Write With Music**

You'll never know if this will work for you if you don't try it. You'll be amazed at the writing you'll get by having music in the background. You'll find it easy to write along to the beat of the music. The different moods in the music will change the pace and break up the mood in your writing. You'll be more likely to write with a varied sense of style going to the beat of the music. The longer, slower songs will help you think more deeply and relax while constructing your piece.

Faster paced music will help you to type faster and get into a stronger rhythm while you write. Some writers feel they must write in silence, but I disagree; you have the best of both worlds while writing with music. I prefer to let my Aimster play list go and dictate the song selection because if I were selecting I would get distracted from the writing task. The focus still needs to be on writing and letting music become a helper, but not a distraction.

## **6. A Procrastination Solution**

A trick I started using my freshman year in college helped me eliminate the majority of my procrastinating habits. If you're a procrastinator, give yourself an hour to complete your assignment, but do it a week in advance. Most procrastinators would never think of trying this mind-boggling idea, but under the proper conditions it can work successfully. Imagine your assignment is due in an hour and work furiously with adrenaline pumping. You can be excited about the writing and overloaded with motivation because the time is so short. You'll discover what you can do when you have only moments to spare, and then find

yourself a week ahead. An extra week to edit and get feedback from friends or the teachers means you won't be stressed about writing.

This is the best secret of my writing process. Work ahead and you'll be amazed how well you can write, using each minute and experiencing a new-found joy of writing under the time constraints, but with less actual pressure. Leaving you time to edit. I think the biggest struggle of college writers is editing; it's either they don't have enough time or they just feel their writing doesn't need to be edited. Using procrastination creatively allows you to find time to (learn how) to edit.

## **7. Try Working With a Partner**

So many students are good writers, but you'll never really know unless you ask them. Others can help you with your paper, but you have to ask. Let them read it. Edit it. Let them break down their reading of your paper and tell you what they got out of it and what they still want from the paper. You'll be amazed at how two people interpret the same section of an essay when they read it together at the same time. So find a friend in your class and work together. Go out for coffee. Go watch a movie together after you've completed your work. This way, writing will become social instead of being such an individual activity.

## **8. Take Breaks**

I know we've all seen tired and exhausted students literally falling asleep in front of the computer. They drink five cans of Mountain Dew to surge them through the last two pages of a paper. They have so much caffeine in their system that they can't even sit still. When this happens, I say: "I need a break. I'll be back in a second." I call this proactive relaxing. I work first then I take breaks. After a certain amount of time, the mind is going to wander and lose focus on the goal ahead.

After a long semester of writing papers for class and your own personal work, plan a week-long break from writing. Time to relax. Maybe even try to read more. No writing allowed. Then after that week get back to writing. You'll be more motivated than before. You finished a tough semester and deserved a break, but now it's time to see the results of the hard work.

After your week-long break challenge yourself to complete something new, maybe a poem, an essay, or a short story. Make it a goal to show it to someone.

Most of these ideas may seem odd and unfamiliar and I doubt all of them will help you personally with your writing. But, if even one idea helps you become a more effective writer then I feel that I've succeeded in sharing my processes with you. I battle the same things that every college student does with writing, but some of my own ideas and suggestions from writers I read

have helped me get through the rough times of writing. I think if you give some of these techniques a try you might become quite surprised at the new look you'll find in your writing. Then, writing will be the first assignment you'll finish, instead of the last.

---

## Sharing Ideas

- Read Nathan's essay in light of Susan Wyche's essay in Part I. Do these writers agree on the habits of college writers? What other writing habits have you observed among your friends?
- Consider Nathan's advice in light of Donald McAndrew's and Kevin Davis' chapters (Part III) about how college resituates and shapes students in relationship to their methods of study and in relationship to their family members. Do you feel Nathan's tips are influenced by the sorts of changes he knows college students are experiencing in their new lifestyles? Explain and explore.
- Nathan Timm modeled his essay on Donald Murray's essay in Part II. Choose an essayist in this collection and compose an imitation, parody, or spin-off of his or her work. Or, more specifically, focus on chapters where authors offer tips and advice, then offer your own advice and illustrate with quotes from one of your own papers (how to invent; how to get the writing done; how to revise; your tips for surviving as a college writer; how to write with voice; how to understand, undertake, and successfully complete a variety of writing assignments; and so on).
- If you write with music, discuss what music, what it means to your composing process, and why. Take one of your papers and annotate the margins, telling how listening to music while composing affected that draft. Make your "best composing" playlist. Do you invent to the same music you revise to? Why or why not? If you're one of those who needs silence, not music (or TV!) for writing, argue against music (or TV) as a writing aid.
- Tell some tales of working with a writing partner. What helped you be productive? What kept you from doing your best work together? Consider on-line collaboration (if you've done some)—how has that worked for you so far? What skills do you have to learn to help others write? How does Nathan's advice connect to Donald McAndrew's observations about college writing classrooms?
- Plan an optimal writing calendar for your next paper. Look at the syllabus, consider the assignment (using Dan Melzer's chapter in Part IV to help you do this), and write out a time line that would let you do your very best work. Now, troubleshoot: add complications to that schedule (what might

draw you away from your work and how can you avoid interruptions and distractions?). Even if such detailed planning is unlike your normal practices, try to follow this schedule and see if it makes a difference in the quality of your final writing product for this paper, the unit, or the term.

- Read Amanda McCorquodale's and Scott Arkin's process narratives (Part I and Part V). To what extent do they seem already to be following Nathan Timm's advice? To what extent do you follow it yourself? Add three more tips to his essay based on your own writing habits.
-