

The Transition from High School to University

To meet the expectations of university writing, you will need to unlearn rules you may have learned in high school. Those rules may have helped you to plan and write your essays by providing a ready-made structure you could fit your ideas into. But continuing to rely on these rules will limit your freedom to develop more sophisticated arguments and a more mature style.

Here are some important differences between high school rules and university expectations:

HIGH SCHOOL RULES

UNIVERSITY EXPECTATIONS

Essay Structure	
Essays consist of three main points.	There is no predetermined number of points that your essay must include.
Essays have a five-paragraph structure: an introduction, your three main points, and a conclusion.	Essays have as many paragraphs as needed. You should choose a structure for your essay that serves your ideas and your argument.

Paragraphs	
Paragraphs are as long or as short as needed to meet the five-paragraph requirement and the page limit.	Paragraphs are usually between one-third and two-thirds of a page and vary in length according to the needs of the paragraph.
Each paragraph must begin with a topic sentence that explicitly echoes the thesis statement.	Paragraphs will be clearer and more coherent if they begin with a topic sentence that sums up the main point of the paragraph.
Paragraphs generally end with a conclusion that reiterates the point contained in the topic sentence.	Your paragraphs should end whenever you have provided enough evidence and analysis to support the point in your topic sentence; repeating that point would be redundant.
Alternatively, paragraphs may end with a transitional sentence that anticipates the next paragraph.	Provide a transition only when it helps the reader follow your train of thought. But your paragraphs will be more coherent if you place the transition at the start of the next paragraph.

Thesis Statement	
Essays must include a thesis statement.	Not every essay needs a thesis statement.
The opening paragraph must end in a thesis statement.	The opening paragraph often ends in a thesis statement, but a thesis can also occur elsewhere.
The thesis statement must be supported by three main points.	The thesis statement does not have to be supported by any specific number of points.
A thesis statement must be one sentence in length.	A thesis statement can be two or three sentences long, or even longer if the argument is complex.

Introduction and Conclusion	
The introduction should begin with a broad and general statement and eventually be narrowed down.	The introduction should raise the essay topic or question as soon as possible in specific and concrete terms.
The conclusion should provide a summary of the main points of the paper.	The conclusion should do more than merely summarize what you have already done in the paper.

Argument	
You may add narration and description to remind the reader of events or particulars.	You may incorporate narrative or plot elements into your argument as long as you analyze them in sufficient depth.
Argumentative essays can be based on personal experience or opinion.	Argumentative essays should be supported by evidence from your sources. In some disciplines, your professor may invite you to supplement your argument with an account of your personal experience.
Your essay should not acknowledge opposing viewpoints because they will weaken your argument.	An essay that addresses counter-arguments becomes stronger and more persuasive by acknowledging the complexity of the material.

Presentation	
Students may receive credit for visual effects.	Professors are concerned with your ideas and your writing and expect you to submit your essays in a plain format with no fancy fonts, colours, title pages, and binders.

Here are the overall differences between the two institutions in philosophy and approach:

HIGH SCHOOL ...

UNIVERSITY ...

Provides formulas.	Discourages formulas.
Offers you a ready-made structure to work with.	Provides freedom for you to come up with your own way of structuring your argument.
Teaches just one model for an essay that you then apply in all of your courses.	Offers discipline-specific guidelines for approaching written work.
Encourages repetition.	Discourages repetition.
Provides rules.	Encourages critical thinking.
Rewards you for demonstrating your knowledge of the material.	Rewards you for engaging in analysis.