**An Open Letter to Ninth Graders**

*Preparing our students, long before they become our students.*

Patrick Sullivan

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 selfdiscipline, 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/NR/rdonlyres/F83CC555-C601-4A7E-8854-7E847328E922/0/SullivanChecklist.pdf) to view and print the checklist. Remember: you have four years to develop the skills that you will need to succeed in college.

*Patrick Sullivan teaches English at Manchester Community College in Connecticut. He is the editor, with Howard Tinberg, of*  What Is “College-Level” Writing?