Best Writing Practices

1. Organize, organize, organize

    - keep syllabus, handouts, instructions, notes, and research in one binder
    - bring this binder with you to all classes, research sessions, tutorial sessions
    - calendar your research and writing time AS SOON AS you receive a writing assignment
    - plan to have a COMPLETE draft of major papers at least 1 week in advance of final due date; of minor papers at least 3 days in advance of final due date
    - keep all graded material in your binder for reference / future papers

2. Talk to your professor – regularly.

    - Connect either after class, during office hours, or via email or phone to verify that you genuinely understand the assignment and expectations on length and research parameters.
    - Make sure that you are able to explain the assignment IN YOUR OWN WORDS to a professor, tutor, or peer (if you can't, then that probably means you won't be able to write it).
    - Meet with your professor to go over your work plan, to ask research-based questions, and to look over draft(s) – if you do, then you'll be sure to catch problems or misinterpretations of the assignment early on. Plus your professor will know how hard you worked on the assignment.
    - If you have any questions about comments or grades after the fact, be your own advocate – seek out the professor and ask to discuss the matter, but make sure you're responsible about it (that means be prepared for honesty, and be gracious to the professor for spending the extra time with you). You'll probably learn something important that will help you to improve on your writing and research skills in the future.

3. Streamline your research so that it's quick and effective.

    - Pick a topic that actually interests you – it makes all the difference.
    - The clearer your topic / question, the more productive your research time.
    - Variety is the spice of life and the key to academic success – use many different types of sources (primary and secondary, books and journals, internet, television, film, radio [NPR], interviews, experience

Common Writing Traps

1. Good intentions squandered because of disorganization
    - "Where did I put those assignment instructions?"
    - "I forgot all the stuff I wanted to work on, but the paper's impossible anyway, so what's the point?"
    - "It's not that I procrastinate….I just work better when I'm under pressure!"
    - "Well, it's 9pm. I guess I better start that soc. paper due tomorrow. Thank goodness for the internet."
    - "I have absolutely no idea what grade I'm getting in in this course."

2. Not talking to your professor = recipe for disaster

    - "My professor's weird, mean, doesn't like me."
    - "I can't understand a word s/he's saying."
    - "S/he's never around when I can meet."
    - "I have absolutely no idea what I'm supposed to be doing on this assignment."
    - "I'm pretty sure that this is what I'm supposed to be doing."
    - "I have no idea if I'm doing this right. Oh well."
    - "I worked so hard on this, and then s/he tells me I didn't do the assignment right! It's so unfair!"
    - "I have no idea why I got a 1.0 on this paper."
    - "When I see him/her, I'm going to let him/her know exactly what I thought of this paper and course!"

3. The more time spent researching doesn't guarantee positive results.
    - "I don't know what to do. I'll just pick anything."
    - "I'm writing a five-page paper on the history of the universe."
    - "I have a 10-page bibliography of internet sites."
    - "Books? Do people still read books?"

- Set out research goals before you head to the library. Have a clear number of sources from each source type in mind before you begin.
- Look for sources that are clearly academic (a problem on the internet) but also comprehensible (a problem with some academic journals).
- Use the FSC library website, the library support staff, the EHP staff, etc. to minimize the "wandering" phenomenon.
- Do online research through the FSC library website FIRST. General, free search engines like google.com can sometimes make things more complicated.
- Record all bibliographic information fully at the time you do the research to make your footnotes / endnotes / bibliographies that much easier.

- "Wow. 1,458 matches. It's going to be a long night."
- "But the website said that the earth is flat."
- "I spent 10 hours in the library. How comes I still have no clue what I'm doing?"
- "But I DID use four sources: <u>People</u>, <u>Time</u>, <u>USA Today</u>, and my mom."
- "Where did I get this quote?"

4. Outline before and after you write.
- Creating a substantive outline before sitting down at the computer will actual save you time in the long-run and will improve the quality of your writing.
- Check the success of your organization / writing by outlining your final product and comparing it to your original plan (or at least reviewing it to make sure your paper is logical and cohesive).
- Utilize resources like the Inspiration program – several EHP staff can help you with it if you've never used Inspiration before.
- Keep in mind that there are many types of outlining – if you don't consider yourself a "linear thinker," that doesn't mean outlining isn't for you.

- "I'll just start typing and go back to edit later."
- "I have an outline in my head."

- "I'm finally done writing. Phew! Just enough time to print it and turn this baby in!"
- "I don't even care at this point. I just want it done."

Other things to keep in mind:

5. Make sure your paper / each paragraph incorporates the main ingredients of successful writing: thesis(es), supporting evidence, transition sentences, conclusion(s). SEE OUTLINING HANDOUT.

6. Write in short, clear sentences to avoid grammatical errors. SEE COMMON PROBLEMS WITH GRAMMAR HANDOUT.

7. Provide proper notation throughout your paper (footnotes, endnotes, or internal notes) – KNOW WHAT CONSTITUTES PLAGIARISM AND AVOID IT AT ALL COSTS. In college (and in life), it is absolutely the case that taking a zero is better than cheating. Most professors will try to work with students who are serious about succeeding; cheating may result in expulsion. Professors have a variety of new tools, such as anti-plagiarism software, to screen papers. One school, The University of Virginia, even retracted graduates' diplomas as many as five years after the fact when a professor ran old papers through anti-cheating software and found problems. We will be discussing academic honesty, citations, and plagiarism later in the seminar.

8. Utilize resources available to you. There are a variety of writing resources available to you, including the Writing Center (third floor of Hammond) and on-line resources through the FSC library's website. We will go over some of these with instructional library Sara Marks at the end of the month.

9. Learn through mistakes to grow as a thinker, writer, scholar, human being.

10. Enjoy the writing process.