The kind of writing you do for college classes (formal academic writing) may not be the kind of writing you are used to doing. Your college instructors expect you to know and follow certain rules, or conventions, about writing college papers. The following information will help you become familiar with the conventions (expectations) of formal academic writing.

**Audience & Purpose:**
College writing is directed towards a college-level reading audience. *(You are not writing only for your instructor.)* Your purpose for writing depends upon the assignment. Sometimes you may be writing to inform the reader, other times to persuade the reader, etc. Know your purpose before you begin writing.

**Tone:** Tone is the writer’s attitude towards the subject and is created through structure, style, and word choice. In academic writing, you should use a formal tone, maintaining a formal distance between yourself as the writer and your reader and not sounding too personal. The following guidelines will help you achieve this formal tone.

**Avoid Using:**
- I, me, you, we, us, our, your (Some assignments may require first person—“I”. Check with your instructor if you have any questions.)
- Contractions (ex.—instead of “don’t” use “do not”)
- Slang / informal language / clichés / colloquialisms
  
  Examples:
  - Don’t use: kids, guy, u, thru
  - Use: children, man, you, through

- “It is” and “there are” constructions (utilize more specific word choices) (Ex. Instead of “It is difficult” use “The class is difficult.” “Class” is a more specific word choice than “it.”)

**Use:**
- Present tense, especially when writing about literature & film
- Active voice (see The Writing Center handout on “Active & Passive Voice”)
- Abbreviations / acronyms only after writing out the entire name first (Ex. The American Heart Association (AHA) is a non-profit organization.)
- Active / vivid verbs (e.g., replace “says” with “remarks,” “replies,” “claims,” “states,” etc.)
- Parenthetical in-text citations when using information from reference sources (see The Writing Center handout on “MLA Format: How to Cite Research Sources”)

**Essay Format and Style:** Academic writing calls for an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.
Introduction:
- Usually one paragraph, it introduces the subject of the essay and includes a clear thesis.
- Often, the thesis statement is located at the end of the introduction.
- The thesis statement should clearly indicate what the entire paper is about.

Body:
- The body paragraphs explain the thesis ideas in detail, using examples such as quotations or references to sources and explanations of how these examples support the point.
- Topic sentences at the beginnings of the body paragraphs help to organize the essay. The topic sentence will state the main point of the individual paragraph.
- Use quotation marks and/or parenthetical in-text citations appropriately to cite sources.

Conclusion: This paragraph reiterates the thesis idea and brings the essay to a meaningful close.
(See The Writing Center handout “Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences” for more information)

MLA Format Quick Reference:
- 1 inch margin on all sides (top, bottom, left, and right margins)
- 12 point font (including header and page number)
- Double-space the entire paper (including identification information, works cited, and quotations)
- Header should include your last name and page number (ex. Doe 3) (see below)
- Identification information – name, teacher’s name, class, date (double-spaced!) (see below)
- Date format (day month year – e.g. 7 July 2006)
- Title (center aligned—Do not use any punctuation, such as quotation marks or underlining, for your own title. Do not bold your title or put in extra lines between the title and the text.)
- Indent paragraphs ½ inch
- Works Cited page – title center aligned (ex. Works Cited, not Works Cited Page), items alphabetized by authors’ last names, use hanging indent for citations

Below is an example of the positioning of the header, the identification information, and the title: