



Read to Write

A Writing
Process Reader

DONALD M. MURRAY

Donald M. Murray

Read
to Write

A Writing Process

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(continued on page 595)



Read
to Write



“Exposure to the writing process, through Don Murray’s work . . . has been the single most important element of my education as a writer. By teaching the lesson that writing is not magic, but a rational process that can be identified and repeated successfully, no matter what the writing task, Murray has made better writers out of me and many of my colleagues. . . . Writers are hungry for real-life examples. In our writing seminars conducted by Murray, the most successful sessions have often revolved around actual pieces of writing. *Read to Write*, I believe, will satisfy the writing student’s passion for vivid illustrations of the writer at work and, thanks to Murray’s incisive comments, will also reveal to them the process that can help them achieve personal writing success.”

Christopher Scanlan
Providence Journal-Bulletin

for
Minnie Mae
who shares both reading
and writing with me



To the Student



Take this book seriously, but not too seriously. None of the writing in this book—no matter how famous the author—is as important as your own evolving drafts. Read this book as a writer who is playing the same game as publishing writers play, because you are. They face a similar terror of the blank page: Will I have anything to say? How will I say it? Will anyone understand? Will anyone care? I started this paragraph asking myself those morning questions, and so do all the other authors in this book.

We begin in emptiness, fear, and need. You may not have felt the need yet, but if you become a writer it will be because you have to write. It will be your way of hanging on, of trying to figure out, of making. But even if you do not become a “writer” you will write memos to the boss, reports for the commanding officer, lab notes, grant requests, political statements, legal briefs, case histories. You do not know what you’ll be called upon to write, but if you do you’ll face the problems of discovering, ordering and sharing meaning solved by the writers printed here.

Watch Writers Writing and Reading

Writing is a private activity and few of us ever see the writer practicing, the writer trying to get ready to write, the writer doing the writing that doesn’t work, which is so often necessary to produce writing

that does work. In my text, *Write To Learn*, I took the student backstage and showed all the false starts and ineffective drafts that led to a piece of my own writing. In this book you will meet other writers at work, see some of their early drafts, and hear what they have to say about how they discover what they have to say and how to say it.

These case histories reveal a technical writer at work on a manual for a computer company, a journalist searching for the grave of a World War II casualty in France, a literary scholar examining our culture, a science writer explaining the process (and some of the hazards) of having test tube babies, and a poet finding a poem. These men and women are candid and professional. By reading what they have to say about their work—and by seeing the work itself—you will be able to understand that you and a published writer are indeed playing in the same game.

In selections from Flannery O'Connor, George Orwell, Joan Didion, Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff you will hear writers talking directly about the writing process and you will be able to see if they practice what they preach. The introductions to selections by such authors as John McPhee, James Baldwin, Richard Selzer, William Zinsser, Toni Morrison, Raymond Carver, Theodore Roethke, John Updike, E. B. White, and others include statements they have made about the writing process. The introductions to each of the principal chapters also include the voices of writers sharing their craft with you.

Read with a Writer

In those case histories you will discover how some published writers read their own work to make their drafts more effective. Throughout the book you will read comments that reveal how this writer reads other writers. The fan in the stands often sees a different game than the player on the field. Neither view is right or wrong, but if you want to play the game the player's vision will be especially instructive. My comments will show you what one writer sees in the text. I go through one article—"Up in the Old Hotel" by Joseph Mitchell—in detail, and then comment on all the other articles when I read something I find significant as a writer.

Do not copy my way of reading, but find your own. What you need to read as a writer will change as you grow in experience and

as you face new writing tasks. The lesson to learn is that you can receive instruction from published writers who have faced the problems you face—and solved them in their own way.

The Writing Process at Work

The book is organized according to the model of the writing process developed in *Write To Learn: Collect, Focus, Order, Draft, and Clarify*. Many of us believe that writing can best be learned if we look at the process that begins before the blank page and ends with a final, edited draft. Of course, the process is not absolute. It changes according to the personality of the writer, the writer's experience, and the writing task, but it is still a helpful way to look at the logical, not magical, craft of making meaning with language. The selections in the book, as you will see, cannot really be contained in a single category; in fact, most demonstrate solutions to the problems encountered at each stage of the writing process, but they do show you the way in which a variety of writers move through a single step in the process of writing.

The Writers and Their Writing

The writers have been chosen from different backgrounds so that you may find writers who have experience both similar to and different from yours. We all need writers who help us see and understand our own world and other writers who help us see and understand worlds beyond our experience.

Most of the selections are nonfiction, writing built from information that can be documented in the real world, because that is the kind of writing most of you will do in school and beyond. There are examples of autobiography because most of us start by writing about ourselves and then may move on to achieve a greater distance from experience. Fiction and poetry are included because poets and fiction writers are the writers who usually move far ahead of the pack, teaching other writers what can be done that has not been done before. They are the explorers of form and language and inspire our own explorations.

The selections in this book come off my own bookshelves. Whenever I pull them down and open their pages they remind me of the possibilities of writing. They teach me how to write, and I want

to share them with you as you learn to write. Those of us who are writers never stop learning. And if you become a writer you'll be blessed with a life of learning.

Help with YOUR Writing Problems

As a writer, you will share the experience of these authors as they solve the problems that you face on your own page. These are effective writers because they have solved those problems well and created texts which speak individually and clearly to readers.

To help you as you write, there is a special index at the back of the book: "Writing Problems Solved." When you are stuck, you can diagnose your problem—perhaps with the help of classmates or your teacher—and then use the index to see how other writers have dealt with a similar difficulty. Don't just imitate their solutions. Figure out what they are doing and why, so that you can create your own solutions, the ones that will fit the demands of your text, your meaning, your audience, and your own voice.

After each selection there are questions to consider that may help you appreciate the text and build a bridge to your own writing. There are also activities that you can do as a class or on your own. I hope that both questions and activities will spark your own questions and activities. They will usually be better than mine because they will grow out of your own experience and your own needs at that moment in your development as a writer.

Reading with Writing

These examples of effective writing should not be seen as examples of good or bad writing. There is no clear line between good and bad in writing. There is not correct writing as opposed to incorrect writing, right writing as opposed to wrong writing. There is little in writing that is right or wrong. I have paired the selections to demonstrate that there are different ways to approach similar writing tasks. Read E. B. White and Jean Shepherd, for example, to see the different ways two writers approach a similar subject. We should delight in the diversity possible in our craft.

Writers are grateful that there are so few absolutes. Writing is always an exploration, an adventure. Everything is possible, though everything is not achieved. Writers talk of writing that works and writing that doesn't work. Writing that works fulfills the writer's pur-

pose and communicates to readers. The examples in this book work for me. I appreciate them as a writer and as a reader. They may not work for you. That is fine. Read them, listen to them, listen to what others—myself, your teacher, your classmates—have to say about them, and make up your own mind based on your own writing and reading experience.

Listen to the writers in this book as they talk to you about how they wrote their pieces. They have special knowledge of the history of their text as you do about the history of your text. This is not final knowledge. Take them seriously too, but not too seriously. They should not be heard as authorities, but as fellow writers, and you should compare their writing histories to the histories of your own drafts.

These examples are not machine-shop models that you can use to stamp out precise imitations. I have purposely paired selections to give you an idea of the differences there can be between writers who face similar subjects or similar technical challenges. I hope that you will compare these published writings to your own drafts and those of your classmates. This text is written by a practicing writer for practicing writers. It is designed to help you write and to help you read with a maker's point of view. I hope that you will be surprised by what some of us say as we write and read but I hope you will be surprised most of all by the reading appearing on your own page.

Write as you read and you will discover that you have joined a community of men and women who have found that they can play with language in such a way that it makes meaning of their world, and that the meaning can be shared by readers of their place and beyond, of their time and afterward. By writing and reading we learn and share, and through that sharing we escape ignorance and isolation so that we can continue a lifetime of learning.



To the Instructor



With this text, you will be able to take your students into the writer's workroom and make the connection between the problems your students face in their own drafts and the problems that accomplished, published writers have solved in their drafts. When I first taught Freshman English I had to follow a syllabus that forced the students to read prose models that the students—and I—could not relate to the problems they faced in their own writing. This reader attempts to make that connection.

Reading as a Writer

The first two chapters introduce the students to the reading skills they can use to learn from the writing of others and the skills they can apply to the reading of their own drafts in process. The writer has to be able to perform a sophisticated form of reading, which teaches the writer not only what is on the page but also what needs to be on the page. The reading role in writing is rarely discussed, but it is an essential part of the writing process and this text will document many of the ways reading relates to writing and writing relates to reading.

Documenting the Writing Process

Selections are organized according to the model of the writing process—collect, focus, order, draft, clarify—used in my companion composition text, *Write To Learn*. This reader, however, is designed to be used independently as well as with *Write To Learn*. The text is built on the belief that the writer passes through a logical, teachable process as a vague idea evolves into a finished, readable text.

Case Studies of Published Writers

Each section begins with the case study of a writer—a science writer, a literary scholar, a journalist, a technical writer, a poet—at work reading and writing. These case studies show professionals facing a diversity of writing tasks. Notes and early drafts can be examined by the student and compared to the final, publishable version. The writers also speak directly to the student in essays on writing that reveal their own methods of making meaning with language. For those who use *Write To Learn*, the case studies in this text extend and reinforce the extensive case study of my own writing as I developed a piece about my grandmother. Students who have my example in front of them can compare my methods to those of writers producing in a variety of genres.

There is also a detailed case history of one writer reading as a writer. I analyze one of my favorite pieces of writing—Joseph Mitchell’s “Up in the Old Hotel”—to show students how one writer reads to write. Students and instructors should be able to compare my reading to theirs, not to see what is right or wrong but to see how different writers read so that they will receive the learning they need to reinforce and improve what they are doing in their own work.

Each selection introduces the student to the writer in a way that will allow the student to identify with the author. The introduction to William Zinsser’s piece, for example, includes a letter he wrote me years ago—writer to writer—saying what he learned in writing that article for *The New Yorker*.

Reading While Writing; Writing While Reading

In each of the selections I point out places where the writer has done something that can teach a beginning writer a strategy, an attitude,

a technique that the student may apply on the student's own page. This connection between texts that have been written by a writer and texts that are being written by a student is reinforced by a special index at the back of the book, entitled "Writing Problems Solved." When the student faces a particular problem—how to write an effective beginning, how to give the reader documentation, how to write a definition, how to put a narrative in context and reveal its significance, how to structure an argument—the student can turn to this index and be referred to pages in the text.

Rhetoric in Context

I have chosen to demonstrate the rhetorical strategies students need to know within an effective text. Too often the models of rhetorical techniques are isolated from any context. But good writing is always in context, and the student can better understand the rhetorical example if the student is able to see how it works within a piece of effective writing.

The selections are personal. These are not all my masters by a long shot, but they are writers to whom I have been apprenticed for an hour, a year, or a professional lifetime. Other writers and teachers will have their own masters, but this is a reader constructed from the books on one writer's shelf. In this way I can demonstrate how one writer reads and I may be able to show, therefore, the importance of reading to a writer.

The selections emphasize nonfiction forms because most students will work in that genre. There are nine poems and four short stories in the book and a special introduction to both poetry and narrative to stimulate a discussion of how those genres relate to nonfiction. Thirteen of the selections are autobiographical because students are not yet experts on academic or professional disciplines; they can attempt to understand their own experiences through writing. The discussion of these texts will help the students make connections to their own lives and also show them how to apply the lessons learned through personal narrative to other writing tasks.

The nonfiction selections have been chosen to interest students who come to composition from other disciplines across the curriculum. They include examples of science, history, technical, nature, medical, journalistic, and biographical writing as well as literary criticism.

Making the Reading Connection to Writing

The selections have been paired so that the students can see two writers attacking a similar subject or facing similar writing problems. I hope that the pairings will be combined with examples of the students' own writing and will provoke instructive class discussions. I also hope the pairings will document the fact that there is no one way to write, that each writer brings individual experiences, personal points of view, particular skills, and an identifiable human voice to the task.

Every selection is followed by discussion questions and activities designed to spark profitable class sessions, to relate the selections to each other as well as to the writing process and to the student's own writing.

As I mentioned in the preface to the student, the reader will be most valuable to those who are writing their own texts while reading these texts. The selections, and all the other material in this book, is designed to be useful to the reader who is writing. The writers in the classroom should discover, through this text, that they are part of the larger writing community beyond the classroom.

The text can be used in many ways. It can be a supplement to my own process-oriented composition text—*Write To Learn*—or other composition texts. The introductions to the stages in the writing process allow it to be used as a writing text. In any case, it can—and should—be read contrapuntally to the student's own writing. They should, at their writing desks and in class, compare their solutions to their writing problems to the solutions demonstrated in the text.

Above all, the writers collected here reveal the importance of writing and the satisfactions this profound form of play brings to both writer and reader.

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Contents

| | | |
|-----------------|--|----------------|
| Preface: | To the Student | vii |
| | To the Instructor | xi |
| 1 | Reading as a Reader | 1 |
| 2 | Reading as a Writer | 18 |
| 3 | Information <u>Collected</u> | 36 |
| | <i>Case Study: A Journalist Writes and Reads</i> | 43 |
| | Christopher Scanlan, <i>Traveler's Log</i> | 45, Drafts 46, |
| | "The Young Who Died Delivered Us" | 56, and |
| | "Learning To Read Writing" | 62 |
| | Robert A. Caro, "The Sad Irons" | 72 |
| | Joseph Mitchell, "Up in the Old Hotel" | 83 |
| | William Least Heat Moon, "Nameless" | 112 |
| | John McPhee, "Oranges" | 124 |
| | Thomas Whiteside, "Tomatoes" | 133 |
| | Amiri Baraka, "School" | 143 |
| | Ken Dryden, from "The Game" | 153 |