

THE PRACTICE OF WRITING

SECOND EDITION



ROBERT SCHOLES

NANCY R. COMLEY

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Brown University

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Queens College, CUNY

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The Practice of Writing

SECOND EDITION

TO OUR STUDENTS,
who have taught us so much

Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

ROBERT FROST

Give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth.

OSCAR WILDE

First question: who is speaking? Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives from it his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true? What is the status of the individuals who—alone—have the right, sanctioned by law or tradition, juridically defined or spontaneously accepted, to proffer such a discourse?

MICHEL FOUCAULT

In our society, and probably in all others, capacity to bring off an activity as one wants to—ordinarily defined as the possession of skills—is very often developed through a kind of utilitarian make-believe. The purpose of this practicing is to give the neophyte experience in performing under conditions in which (it is felt) no actual engagement with the world is allowed, events having been “decoupled” from their usual embedment in consequentiality. Presumably muffing or failure can occur both economically and instructively. What one has here are dry runs, trial sessions, run-throughs—in short, “practicings.”

ERVING GOFFMAN

A man knowing little or nothing of medical science could not be a good surgeon, but excellence at surgery is not the same thing as knowledge of medical science; nor is it a simple product of it. The surgeon must indeed have learned from instruction, or by his own inductions and observations, a great number of truths; but he must also have learned by practice a great number of aptitudes. Even where efficient practice is the deliberate application of considered prescriptions, the intelligence involved in putting the prescriptions into practice is not identical with that involved in intellectually grasping the prescriptions. There is no contradiction, or even paradox, in describing someone as bad at practising what he is good at preaching. There have been thoughtful and original literary critics who have formulated admirable canons of prose style in execrable prose. There have been others who have employed brilliant English in the expression of the silliest theories of what constitutes good writing.

GILBERT RYLE

Practice, practice. Put your hope in that.

W. S. MERWIN

PREFACE

The way to write better is to write more—but not alone, not aimlessly, not without guidance and encouragement. This text is designed to facilitate the tasks of those engaged in learning and teaching about writing. It has been composed by two teachers who are themselves committed to writing as both a field of study and an occupation.

Our philosophy of composition is implicit in the epigraphs we have chosen for our book. As Frost says about all deeds, writing must be work *and* play, both serious *and* joyful, if it is to be done well. Any text in writing, then, must preserve the joy of composition for those who use it, even while providing the work that needs to be done.

We also believe, with Wilde, in the usefulness of masks. Nowhere in all their work are students so vulnerable as in their writing classes. Nowhere do they feel their personalities, their very selves, so open to criticism of a very painful sort. If the style is the person, to criticize the style is to wound the individual behind it. Many of our assignments are designed to free students from the burden of self by offering them personae, voices, and roles already chosen for their suitability to a given form of writing. The true self of a writer must be given space to grow in and should be protected while growing.

There is a public dimension to writing, as well. As Michel Foucault reminds us, certain forms of writing accompany certain social, economic, and political roles. In a society that encourages self-development and economic mobility, the skills of language—and foremost among them, writing—are the major path to advancement, whether personal, professional, or social. The language games and writing exercises presented here must be undertaken with the awareness that each individual's ability to develop and function socially will depend partly on the compositional skills of that individual. Our play at writing is for "mortal stakes" indeed.

Yet it is still play—what Goffman calls "utilitarian make-believe." In writing classes students are "neophytes" engaged in "dry runs, trial sessions . . . 'practicings'." As Gilbert Ryle

points out, we learn some things by instruction, but the actual doing of anything must be learned by practice. For that reason we have provided models for analysis and discussion, short exercises for the classroom, and a range of longer assignments for homework papers. We take our motto from W. S. Merwin: "Practice, practice. Put your hope in that."

In preparing this second edition, we consulted a hundred teachers who had used the first edition, to see what they had used and what they had omitted, what had worked well and what had been less successful. We accepted their advice and cut ruthlessly all but the most effective material from the first edition before starting to compose the second. We also made a number of changes to produce a stronger and more useful text.

We increased the number of readings, so that virtually every writing assignment is based on a text that is to be used either as a model or as a point of departure for the student's own writing. We took steps throughout the book to draw attention to the process of writing and to show how certain forms of writing are related to particular aspects of the writing process: the form of reflection to revision, for instance. We also reflected on our own writing and, as a result, revised our first two chapters to make them into a single more readable chapter—and to devote more attention to the writing process.

The most important changes to the chapters on the various forms of writing are as follows. We have greatly strengthened the chapter on argumentation at every point: a longer introduction, some excellent new readings, and more varied writing assignments. We have also rearranged the chapters on topic-oriented forms in order to put argumentation directly before analysis and synthesis. In the analysis chapter we have emphasized the analysis of texts, and to the synthesis chapter we have added extensive new materials for synthetic projects.

Because of their success in the first edition, we have added further material based on advertising, art, photography, and literature, as well as the more expository and argumentative kinds of writing. These readings are intended to provide interesting texts for class discussions as well as to function as bases for written assignments. (There is, in fact, enough reading material here so that a separate collection of readings is unnecessary.) We have frequently provided questions to help organize class discussions of the readings. In the questions we have tried

to treat the readings as a writing instructor (as opposed to a literature instructor) must; that is, to emphasize *how* the text has been composed rather than *what* it means. You will find here variety, interest, and a clear progression from the more personal and subjective to the more impersonal and objective forms of writing.

In our preface to the first edition, we thanked those who field-tested the book and who, along with our reviewers, gave us the invaluable advice and criticism that helped to shape *The Practice of Writing*. We would like to thank them again and to add to that group all those instructors who used *Practice* and sent us their comments and suggestions for the second edition: Susan McDermott (Junior College of Albany); Ann Parrish, Dennis Radford (Atlantic Union College); Pamela Hardman (Baldwin-Wallace College); Janice Broder (Brandeis University); Frederick Lang (Brooklyn College, CUNY); Rosemary Hake (California State University—Los Angeles); Clark Mayo (California State University—San Bernardino); William Seibenschuh (Case Western Reserve University); Ann K. Jordan (Clermont College); Michele Barale, Lynn L. Merrill, Gloria Rittenhouse (University of Colorado—Boulder); John Bethune, R. T. Farrell, Michael Grillo, Judith May, Beth Schwartz (Cornell University); Ann Amsler, Susan Jenkins, Ian Johns, George Miller (University of Delaware); Jonathan Cross (Emerson College); John Leavey, Gregory Ulmer (University of Florida); Walter Blue (Hamline University); Earl P. Murphy (Harris-Stowe State College); Roger Ferrand (Hobart and William Smith College); Gary Williams (University of Idaho—Moscow); Diane M. Calhoun-French, Alice A. Cleveland (Jefferson Community College); Irving Warner (Kodiak Community College); Susan L. Blake (Lafayette College); E. A. James (Lehigh University); Joyce Freundlich (Livingston College); Gwen Snodgrass, Julie Sosnin (University of Louisville); Catherine Blair (Lycoming College); Joseph Popson (Macon Junior College); Patricia Burnes, Alison Gooding, Paul M. Puccio (University of Maine—Orono); John McKernan (Marshall University); Robert E. Hosmer, Jr. (University of Massachusetts); John G. Parks (Miami University); A. C. Goodson (Michigan State University); Edward Cooper (Mira Costa College); Leslie Jean Campbell, Michael P. Dean, Natalie Schroeder, Ronald A. Schroeder (University of Mississippi); Sharon Kelly (University

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R.S./N.R.C.

A NOTE ON THE USE OF THIS TEXT

This book is devoted to the *practice* of writing. It presents more opportunities for writing—“practices,” as we call them—than anything else. The book also contains numerous “readings.” This is so because we believe that, just as talking is based on listening, and drawing is based on looking, writing is based on reading. The readings in this book are not meant to be put upon pedestals and admired, however admirable they may be. They are there to be worked with and responded to—in writing. They are there to be transformed, imitated, analyzed, argued with, and incorporated into new writing by the students who use this book.

Actually, there is more material here than anyone could possibly use in a single quarter or semester. The reason for this abundance is to provide instructors with options, choices, flexibility. After the first chapter, which is introductory, the writing opportunities move from the personal to the more impersonal and academic. The weight of the book, however, falls upon the more academic or scholastic kinds of writings, the forms and processes required for college courses. Thus, the last four chapters move from classification and argument to the kinds of analytic and synthetic writing required in research papers.

Obviously, we think that work in all the forms of writing is useful, or we would not have included them all in the book. But we understand also that there are many reasons why an instructor may wish to touch only lightly on the materials in Parts Two and Three, in order to concentrate heavily on Part Four. The book is designed to allow for this emphasis. There is, in fact, more material in every part than would be needed if all the parts were emphasized equally. The instructor will find that this text will support any emphasis that he or she chooses to make,

though we have anticipated an emphasis on argument, analysis, and synthesis, providing the greatest depth in those chapters.

Within each chapter we present a particular form of writing, beginning with the most basic kinds of practice and moving toward more extended and demanding assignments. Using the chapter introduction, the first reading/practice set, and one further set will allow an instructor to treat a particular chapter without lingering over it for too long; there is enough variety so that the second assignment can be chosen to suit the interests and capabilities of a given class.

Although we think the order in which we present the forms of writing in this book makes sense, we have tried not to be dogmatic. The forms of writing may in fact be covered in any order, so long as the arrangement leads to synthesis at the end. In the chapter on synthesis, we have provided sufficient material so that library research is not necessary, but many of the suggested assignments there can be expanded and enriched by library work if the instructor desires it.

It is our conviction that writing is a form of thought and that thinking is a pleasurable activity. Have fun.

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