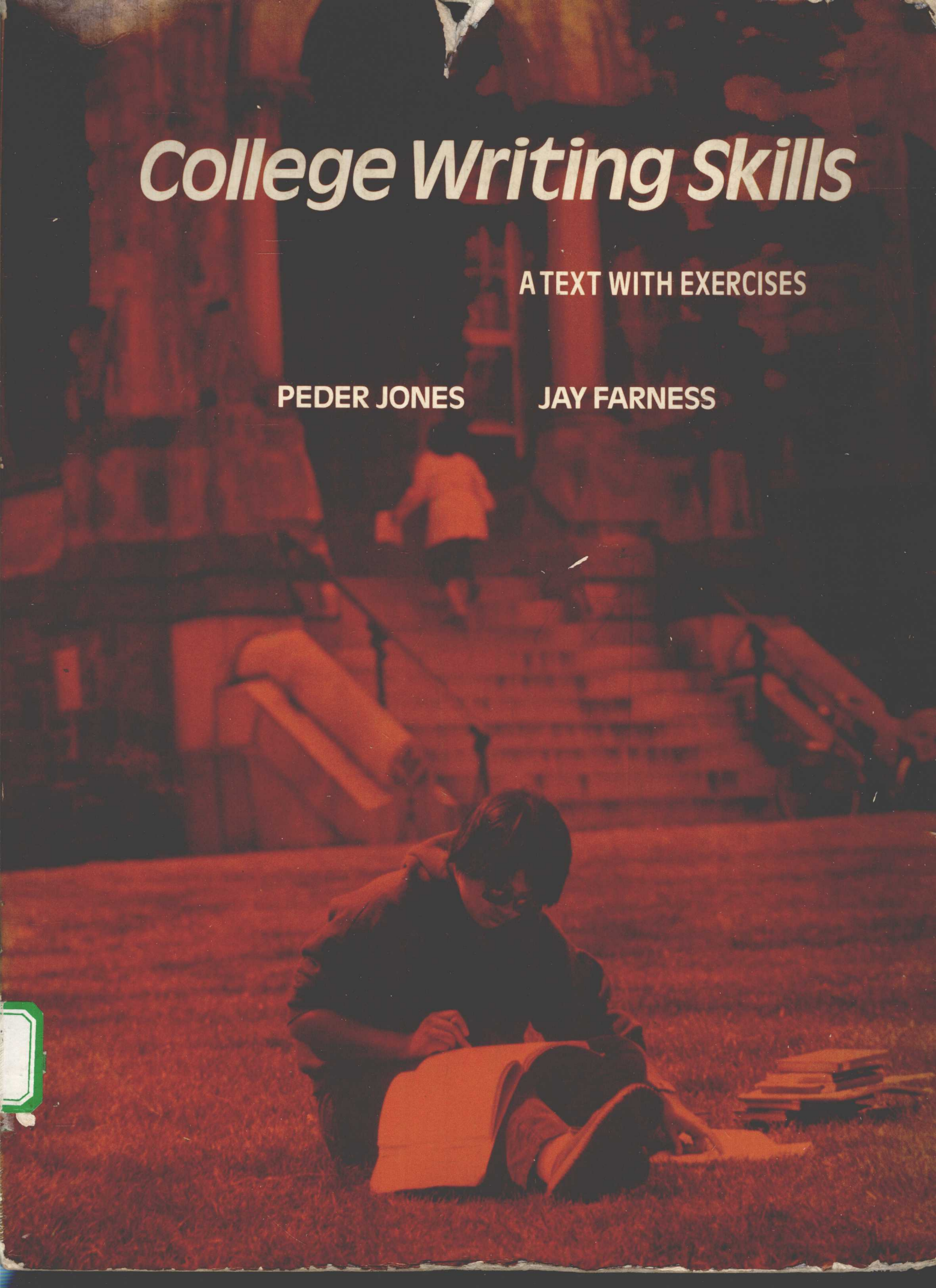
College Writing Skills

A TEXT WITH EXERCISES

PEDER JONES JAY FARNESS



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Preface

College Writing Skills teaches, through precept and practice, those skills essential to success in college writing. A glance at the table of contents will show that we construct a framework of rhetoric—work in paragraph and essay—around disciplined study of sentences and words. In this way the book combines the most important features of current and traditional approaches to college English. Our overall aim, however, is to present a limited number of skills and techniques which, when mastered, will enable the beginning college writer to compose clear and effective sentences, paragraphs, and brief essays.

The book emphasizes practice: it emphasizes student writing rather than students reading about writing. Accordingly, we have provided more than 450 sets of exercises and an additional 102 optional workshop activities, all of which require the student's active participation. These exercises embody our belief that practice—practice in forming ideas, practice in getting ideas out of one's head and onto paper, practice in finding the most effective way to say something, practice in avoiding or correcting errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage—is crucial to developing one's writing skills.

Equally important, of course, is an understanding of the basic terms and concepts that all successful writers employ. This book presents those principles in simple and concise form, gives examples of applications, and then offers exercises in which students develop facility with structures and concepts. The variety of lessons and exercises helps students work through conscious acts of writing toward the assurance and spontaneity that mark most students' mastery of spoken English.

Students begin work in the book by studying, developing, and writing paragraphs, and the book, throughout its sentence, word, and essay sections, returns to and reinforces paragraph writing skills. This emphasis on paragraph writing reflects the widely held view that the paragraph is a composition in miniature. Moreover, experience has shown us that the paragraph is the most accessible unit of language for classroom discussion and study and that paragraph writing can cultivate rhetorical sense even in students busy with work on sentence or word difficulties.

For the sake of consistency and practicality, our approach and terminology are essentially traditional. We must nevertheless acknowledge numerous debts to recent work in language study and rhetoric, including strategies developed in the teaching of English as a second language. Such new ideas and techniques are reflected, for instance, in this book's development

of sentence skills through use of grammar frames, in its emphasis on *doing* writing, in its strengthening of reading and thinking skills as the by-product of the teaching of writing, in its use of familiar situations and relevant subject matter—whole language—as lesson content.

Finally, we are happy to express our gratitude to colleagues and friends for their professionalism, their help, and their good wishes. In particular, we thank Bryan Short, Sharon Crowley, and a superb composition faculty at Northern Arizona University for its exemplary dedication to a great public work. We also thank Jayne de Lawter, Anne Hilles, Mark Messer, Keith Muscutt, Adrian Sanford, Barry Sherman, and especially Paul Mann.

P. J.
J. F.

Contents

UNIT ONE

Writing Paragraphs

Putting Your Thoughts to Work

A. HARNESSING THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING

Language is so complex and the human being's capacity for language is so immense that scientists are continually awed by the ordinary speech—your speech—that they must interpret. Nature and culture seem to have adapted human beings for nothing so well as for language use. By age four, when our physical and mechanical movement is still imperfect, we have already mastered the grammar and many of the codes of our native language.

True, a child's vocabulary is limited like its world, and the child will continue to study the tricky and uncertain corners of grammar throughout the school years and beyond. But even a four-year-old composes sentences and thus shows a very impressive mental and verbal skill. For the sake of illustration, suppose only one simple sentence pattern (the four-year-old actually knows several): adjective-noun-verb-adverb ("Big balls bounce high"). And suppose a child's vocabulary is limited to fifty adjectives, fifty nouns, fifty verbs, and fifty adverbs (the average child's vocabulary is actually far larger and more complex). We then face this many possible utterances from this child:

$$50 \times 50 \times 50 \times 50 = 6{,}250{,}000$$

This imaginary child controls and can produce millions of possible, meaningful utterances even before starting kindergarten!

Most of your sentences are longer and more complex, involving many more word choices than this simple example. Actually you have *billions* of possible sentences at your disposal when you speak or write. Linguists—scientists of language—assert that you regularly combine and utter sentences never before spoken in the history of the universe. Your amazing linguistic skill makes this inventiveness routine.

Scientists face the enormous challenge of understanding and explaining the language talents of human beings. But the rest of us have only to use and develop these talents, which indeed are among nature's greatest gifts to our species.

The vast majority of college students have the motivation, ambition, and good sense to invest in and work at their strongest talents, including their impressive linguistic talents. Even students who may not have sufficiently worked up their writing skills are fluent speakers, able thinkers, skeptical listeners, and sensible readers; they are sophisticated users of a complex instrument they have spent a lifetime mastering.

So what happens when the typical student comes face to face with a writing task? The

typical student lets loose his or her verbal and mental skills, but not always in the most effective direction. Strange to say, many college students—many people, really—use (and waste) their finest verbal and rhetorical powers persuading themselves that they cannot possibly do an assignment, that they have nothing to say, that the assignment is totally unjust.

EX 1–1 For fun, test the truth of this observation by jotting down on a separate sheet of paper answers to the question "Why can't I write an essay?" Let your experience, your memory, and your imagination help you come up with as many answers as you can.

These familiar roadblocks may have appeared in some form on your list: *I don't know what to write; I can't discipline myself to sit down and write; I'm a terrible speller, and I never know where to put commas.* You probably included some personal favorites as well.

EX 1–2 Now, as you perhaps expected, this game can be made harder and more productive with a slight change in the question: "Why *can* I write an essay?" Once again, jot down as many answers as possible.

If this question stymies you more than the first, go back to your answers to the first question (EX 1–1). By turning those answers around, you may find that your weaknesses are also, or are really, strengths. Suppose one of your answers was "I don't know spelling." If you reflect for a minute, you will probably see that you *know* much more spelling than you *don't know*. If you misspell ten words in a 500-word composition, haven't you also correctly spelled 490 words? In what other activity do you bat so close to 1.000? This reasoning may seem a little silly, but it's not nearly so silly as your telling yourself, after so many years of practice, that you don't know English well enough to write a successful paper. See if you can't apply such positive thinking to the other answers you wrote to the first question and thereby use them to answer the second question (EX 1–2).

There is a trick in this procedure. *If* you *can't* answer the first question, *then* there's no reason you cannot write essays. But *if* you *can* answer the first question, *then* you are already well on the way to composing an essay: an essay *on* the first question, on the difficulties of essay writing.

EX 1–3 On another sheet of paper, write an essay of 150–200 words on either of the following topics:

Why I Can't Write an Essay
Why I Can Write an Essay

B. PLAYING GAMES BEFORE WRITING SERIOUSLY

Finding ideas and writing about them often involve the use of such schemes to bypass our mental blocks and detour around memory lapses. Each of us knows so much; yet we often leave our brains idling in neutral, claiming we do not know enough to write. After a while we believe our alibis. To get moving, we must trick, tease, or cajole stored information out of our minds. We seem to do this best in action, not in thought. We don't do all the thinking *before* we start writing. We think *in* language or writing; thought comes *with* writing. We are better language users than we are pure thinkers. So when in doubt, write. After all, when you use language, you use your best, your most practiced and developed, human skills.

This view of language and writing has led many teachers and students to an appreciation of "freewriting"—writing nonstop off the top of one's head, sheer writing—as a way of stimulating expression. Freewriting—on almost any subject—can help remind you that English is as fundamentally yours as the air you breathe, that language is your medium to use and benefit from, as water is to a fish.

EX 1–4 Try some freewriting on another sheet of paper. Pretend you are a fish swimming in a river of language. Write—nonstop—what you see and feel in there.

You can channel freewriting by using some playful procedures to help you tease or trick ideas out of a temporarily closed or lazy brain. Then later, by reading or studying what you have written, you can follow cues or leads for further writing.

EX 1–5 Play this descriptive game. Write a sentence or two about what you are experiencing at this moment through each of your senses. Make each statement as vivid and precise as you can.

1. *Hearing* _____
2. *Touching* _____
3. *Smelling* _____
4. *Tasting* _____
5. *Seeing* _____

Taking messages from the senses and converting them to precise statements on paper is not just the province of poets. Chemists, anthropologists, theater critics, and political analysts, among others, must also be able to express their sensory impressions in writing.

EX 1–6 On a separate sheet of paper, list two college courses that you plan to take later this year or next year. Next to each course name, write two or three sentences telling which sense or senses you will have to employ in the course work and in what ways you will use them.

You may have noted, for example, that vision is important in most types of research. The ability to see what is there and to describe it accurately in writing is a valuable skill.

EX 1–7 This freewriting game requires a partner. Look at your partner carefully. Describe your partner's costume (clothes, jewelry, hairstyle—all the elements of appearance that a person can, within limits, alter at will). Proceed with this description from bottom to top, one sentence per item; do this on another sheet of paper.

C. SCRIBBLING INSIGHTS AND INSULTS: JOURNAL WRITING

Many people believe journal writing to be the best of all freewriting activities. If you have never kept a journal, now may be a good time to try one; the joys, surprises, crises, and occasional absurdities of college life make for great journal entries. If you have unsuccessfully tried to keep a journal, perhaps you were trying to create the wrong kind of journal for your personality. A daily entry—a diary—is not necessary (though it is a good idea to date each entry you do make). In fact, most journals are really scrapbooks of freewriting: sometimes spontaneous scribblings, sometimes expressive writing according to various procedures. Don't the names of the journal-writing games listed below tickle your fancy just a little bit?

- imaginary dialogue
- outrageous comparison
- fake love letters
- if I could make myself invisible . . .
- New Year's resolutions
- the world's greatest party
- the world's worst party
- your thrilling moments in sports or theater or dance
- the Insult Hall of Fame

If one of these ideas seems like something you could write an interesting paragraph about, why not give it a try? (This is not an assignment—just an invitation.)

A freewriting premise can help you explore fact as well as fancy. Here is a page of a writer's journal that on this particular day turns out to read very much like the classic "diary" entry.

> Question: What is the most memorable thing that happened to you yesterday? When you close your eyes, what particular vision of yesterday do you see in your mind's eye?
>
> My father and I played golf in the rain yesterday. Actually the rain varied between big, pelting drops and a fine, annoying, wind-driven mist. The mist was light enough so that my father could turn to me and say, "See? It's letting up." *That's* what I see in my memory. I didn't want to play in such weather, but golf is my father's passion, and I hadn't seen him in more than a year. He had counted on this outing. Besides, if he wasn't going to chicken out,

neither was I. So we both got very wet. But later, when the sun finally came out, everything dried out but my shoes. His were rubber; mine were leather. Today, my shoes are still wet, but that's another story.

EX 1-8 Write quick answers to these questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What do you like about the journal entry above? What particular features of it would you praise if the writer came around looking for a little encouragement?
2. What parts of this experience can you relate to? What could most people sympathize with?
3. What would you be interested in hearing more about from this writer? How might he expand this paragraph? What could he follow it up with?

Here is another paragraph about a memorable event, but this one is not so effective as the first. The question remains: What is the most memorable thing that happened to you yesterday? When you close your eyes, what particular vision of yesterday do you see in your mind's eye?

Yesterday I went grocery shopping, and I was so clumsy wheeling a cart through the store that I knew I was in for a bad day. After I paid, as I left the store with my arms full of groceries, a kid came running into me and I dropped them.

EX 1-9 Imagine that this experience has happened to you and that these words are your words. How might you revise this paragraph to improve its effectiveness? Where might you enliven it by adding important or interesting information? On another sheet of paper, rewrite the paragraph to make it more memorable.

Now look over your paragraph again. Have you made the experience easier *to see* in your mind's eye? Have you, unlike the original writer, *shown* as well as *told*? For instance, how exactly were you *clumsy* in the store? How exactly did the kid come running into you? How exactly did the groceries drop, and where did the dozen eggs end up? How exactly did you feel? How did the kid seem to feel? Use your imagination! Go back and make the changes that will bring this incident to life.

EX 1-10 Now try writing your own show-and-tell paragraph. The question remains: What is the most memorable thing that happened to you yesterday? When you close your eyes, what particular vision of yesterday do you see in your mind's eye? Write your paragraph on another sheet of paper.

EX 1-11 Many well-written descriptions say something—in or between the lines—about human behavior or human nature. Such stories have "morals." Write the "moral" (theory, rule of life, or principle) that each paragraph seems to illustrate. One sentence should be enough for each.

1. the paragraph about the golf game
2. your paragraph about the grocery accident
3. your paragraph about yesterday's incident