

THE Writer's way

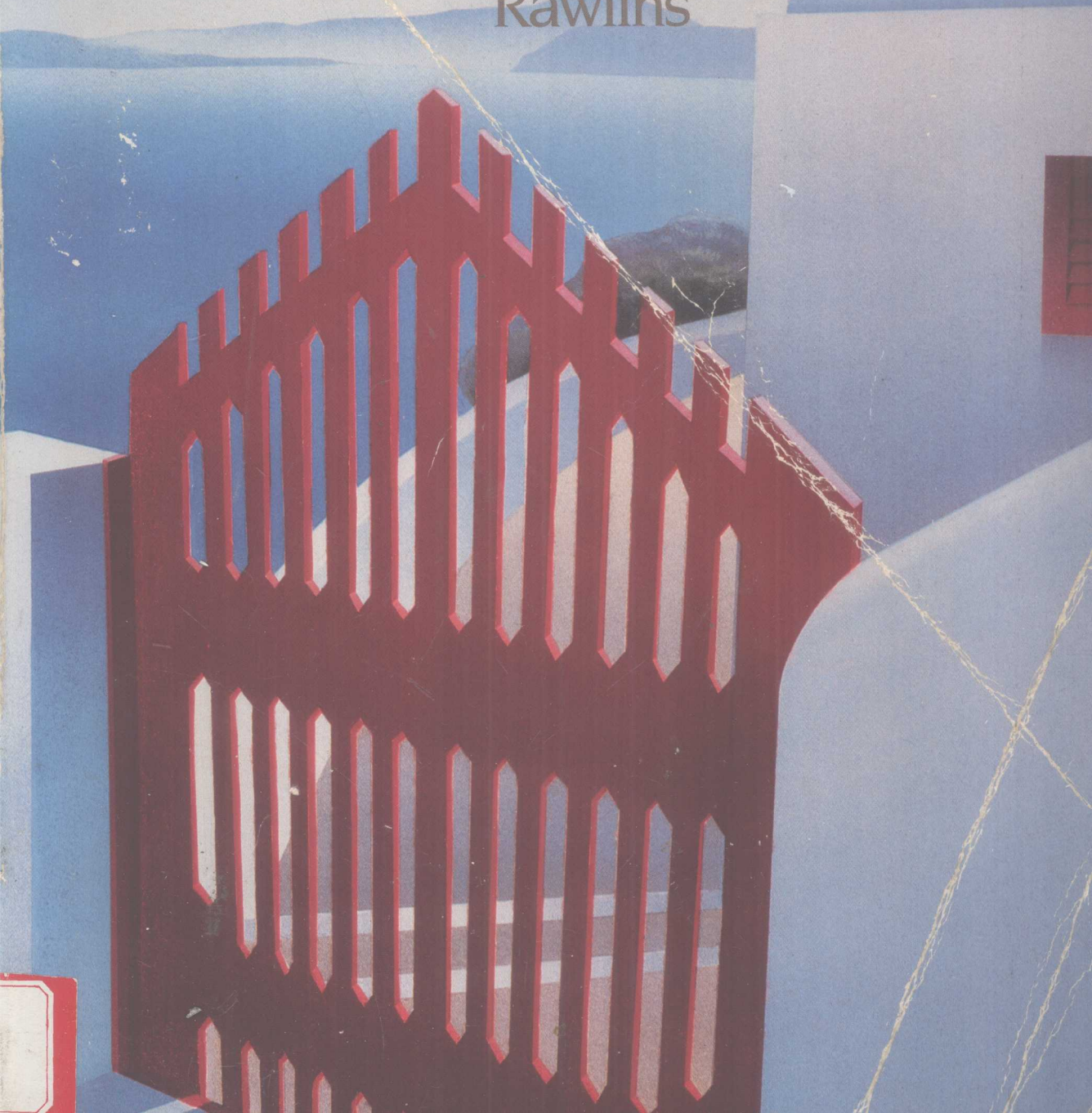
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THE WRITER'S WAY

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 86-81299

ISBN 0-395-35788-8

BCDEFGHIJ-H-8987

THE WRITER'S WAY

P R E F A C E



very week I go to a recital to listen to my daughter Molly and her fellow violin students play their current pieces. The students range from age four to fourteen or so. Some of them are just learning how to hold the instrument; others are playing adult concerti. But, however well they have mastered the mechanics of violin playing, most of them aren't really "making music"; they're just "playing the violin." Every day they practice, trying to perfect the way they hold their bows, their vibrato, and a thousand other mechanical components of the act they're trying to master. But even if they learn to do all these things perfectly, most of them succeed only in making perfectly mechanical, perfectly pointless notes. Other students know the difference and play to make music. Listeners know right away and listen to hear the music, not to judge the technique.

Too many writers write the same way that many violinists play their instruments: by following the rules and by going through the proper mechanical acts. We don't even have words to distinguish between writing as mechanical act and writing as meaningful act, so we have to make up our own; I call the first "making an essay" and the second "writing for real reasons." *The Writer's Way* exists to encourage writers to stop merely constructing essays and to start writing for real reasons.

If good writing is more than just formulating a thesis well or organizing well or titling well or punctuating well, what is it? The aim of *The Writer's Way* is to answer that question. The focus of the book is always on why writers write — what they try to accomplish — and how that sense of personal purpose answers all questions about how to write or what good writing does. Writing for a real writer's reasons I've called "writing the Writer's Way." *The Writer's Way* contains a detailed, step-by-step description of the writing process, from prewriting brainstorming to polishing the mechanics of a final draft, and it contains a good deal of description of the traditional surface features of good essays. Yet, throughout, it reminds the writer that good writing can't be accomplished just by trying to

the features of finished good writing or by trying to duplicate the sequential acts of a model writer at work.

This book is based on the linguistic principles known as the “whole language approach” or the “natural language approach.” Its best-known spokesmen are Frank Smith and Kenneth and Yetta Goodman. Its basic principle is that people learn best by doing the whole thing to be learned and doing it often, surrounded by examples of what it looks like and how it’s done, in a context where the thing to be learned offers immediate, demonstrable personal rewards: either aesthetic (“That feels good”) or utilitarian (“I can get things done with this”). The writer must write from the point of view that says, “I do this *as myself*” and “I do this *for me*.” Frank Smith calls this sense of personally motivated commitment to writing “joining the club of writers,” and he points out that all speakers learn to talk beginning from that attitude as a starting place. “The writer’s way” is merely my phrase for thinking of writing in those terms. *The Writer’s Way* talks in natural language and keeps asking the questions, “Why would *you*, the person you are, write this?” “What would you be trying to accomplish by it?” It treats all questions of technique as springing from and being answered by such questions of intention and effect. And since its premise is that writing is something real people do, all writing samples in the book, good and bad — even the sample sentences — are real writing that my real college students did, unless otherwise indicated.

How to Use This Book

Students reading *The Writer’s Way* should feel free to make it work for them in whatever way suits their needs, but I had something in mind when I laid it out, and I’ll tell you how I think it works best.

The book is divided into five major parts and an appendix. Part I is a broad introduction to the natural-language attitude toward learning to write. It’s intended to acquaint you with the way the book thinks before you undertake specific writing activities, and I encourage you to read it straight through before doing anything else.

Part II is a step-by-step walk-through of the writing process: first thoughts, drafting, organizing, rewriting, sharing the work with colleagues, and cosmetic editing. It’s a long section, but I encourage you to read it as a whole (certainly not at one sitting, but in one *thinking* if possible), because it all hangs together and everything explains everything else. Sharing the writing with colleagues (Chapter 9) is only another way of thinking about the issues of purpose, audience, and thesis that have been the subject of the six preceding chapters.

Part III discusses style, the art of saying things with clarity and power. It focuses on three vices — wordiness, vagueness, and pretentiousness —

and one virtue — vitality — and examines ways to avoid the first three and cultivate the fourth. These chapters can be read in any order at any time once a writer has said something on the page and is ready to think about ways to say it better.

Part IV discusses the particular decisions about audience, purpose, structure, and language that writers face when writing in specific modes: personal story-telling, writing about people, writing to inform, and argument. These chapters were designed to be used in the conventional composition class way: reading a chapter, perhaps discussing what's been read, perhaps practicing the arts mentioned there by doing the assignments, and then writing an essay of the chapter's type. The chapters in Part IV do not duplicate the process information of Part II, so a reader free from the constraints of a term calendar would want to read all of Part II before addressing Part IV. Since that usually is impossible in a course, I suggest you read the chapters in Part II and the chapters in Part IV concurrently: be talking about and writing narratives (Chapter 15) while talking about and experimenting with pre-writing and overcoming writer's block (Chapters 3 and 4), for instance.

Part V does for writing in college what Part IV does for the four essay modes: discusses the particular decisions about audience, purpose, structure, and language a writer faces when writing general academic assignments, term papers, and essay tests.

The Appendix discusses the special concerns of writers using word processors. It will be useful to people who are already using a word processor, but is of greater interest to those who aren't, because it is a plea to get one and a description of the good things one will do for your writing.

Acknowledgments

When Jimmy Cagney is still standing after being shot at the end of the movie *White Heat*, Pat O'Brien asks, "What's holding him up?" Over the years, a lot of people have held me up, and I would like to thank them. In the beginning Marie Borroff gave me the heart, and Louise Jensen and Frank Smith gave me the brains. Murray Markland, David Downes, Lynn Elliott, and Gil Prince all were willing to tell me over and over that the project was worth pursuing. Ginger Rush, Velda Swaim, and Mary Blair provided superb logistical support. Lois Bueler, Brooks Thorlaksson, and Steve Metzger read the first prototype of the book and gave invaluable nudges in helpful directions, plus a cautious "I think there's something of value in here." Brooks Thorlaksson's English 17 team provided the ambience, the bonhomie, and the zeal. Robert Connors of the University of New Hampshire, John Dick of the University of Texas at El Paso, C. R. Embry of Truckee Meadows Community College, Robert Noreen of California

State University at Northridge, Lucy Shultz of the University of Cincinnati, and Eric Walker of Florida State University provided me with valuable advice.

In a very real way, this book belongs to five years of students in writing classes and language education classes at California State University at Chico. They told me what helped their writing and what didn't. They read every page of the manuscript with care and insight and helped every paragraph with their suggestions. They did the writing that allowed me to make the case that good writing is just something ordinary people do. They even cheerfully supplied me with examples of writing in need of work. Most important, they said, "Yes, this book is needed. It helped me write. Keep on with it." (Actually, since they were in California, they said, "Go for it.") Among them I have space to name only Jim Kennedy, Cate Leming, Cliff Crabb, Andy Dungey, Anne Molony, Eunice Cunningham, Sue McFate, Karen Schultz, Jim Scribner, Tammy Claus, Darren Marshall, Rosie McGillivray, Paula Woods, Jean Hollister, and especially the gang from English 175 in the spring of 1983 — Jess Curtis, Vernon Andrews, Perry Croft, Karen Funk, Al Garcia, Lorelei Goodyear, Joseph Martin, and the others.

At the top of the debt list is my family, Judy, Molly, and Max, who periodically reminded me that a) nobody has to *make* anybody learn anything, b) we're all poets and novelists and essayists just like we're breathers and dreamers, and c) I was loved though mad. I hope the love you taught me shines from every page of this book.

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