writing for a specific purpose

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to jerry and mark

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

preface

This text grew out of the belief that the best writing done by students occurs when they have a sense of purpose. It has been our experience that too often students in composition classes have been asked to write on various topics simply for the sake of practicing their writing. In everyday life, people use the tool of writing most effectively when they have something specific to communicate. Furthermore, we believe that a writing text should meet the immediate goals of a student in an academic environment and his or her future needs as a professional in a particular field.

The text is based on the premise that writing involves several skills: knowledge of grammatical structures, knowledge of rhetorical patterns, an ability to analyze and organize information, and a sense of appropriateness. We believe that the function or purpose of the writing will generally determine the appropriate rhetorical and grammatical structures used.

This book will be most helpful for students in intermediate and advanced English-as-a-Second-Language classes who intend to use their English for academic work and careers. Because the writing tasks in the book deal with problems found in several academic fields and careers such as business, engineering, science, history, and diplomacy, it is appropriate for a wide range of students with different aspirations. The situations introduce students to the semitechnical vocabulary of various fields. Thus, students will also become acquainted with a wide range of vocabulary that will be useful in their academic work and career.

The theoretical basis for the text is set forth in D. A. Wilkins's book *Notional Syllabuses* (Oxford University Press, 1976). In this book, Wilkins argues that the designing of a syllabus should begin with an analysis of what a student must communicate in a second language; then situational and grammatical concerns can follow. For example, many writing contexts necessitate making recommendations (such as a

scientist recommending the thrust of future research, a corporate executive recommending the direction of future investments, or a student recommending a course of action in an academic paper). Clearly, an international student should be able to write a recommendation in a form that is both grammatically correct *and* appropriate to the situation. The purpose of this text is to provide students with a context for practicing the functions most commonly found in academic papers, such as classifying, analyzing, predicting, and substantiating.

It is our hope that through this text—which aims to provide a purpose for writing and to make writing assignments relevant to the academic and professional needs of the students—writing will become a meaningful process for the students. And if the process is meaningful, the students, we hope, will have the incentive to become successful writers of English.

acknowledgments

to the teacher

Each chapter in this book emphasizes a specific function used in writing, beginning with a brief description of the function and examples of how it might be used appropriately in certain situations. Following this introduction exercises entitled "Practice Using Terms" familiarize the students with rhetorical terms commonly associated with that function. A list of these rhetorical terms, "Expressions You Need to Know," follows each exercise.

The "Expressions You Need to Know" are purposely put after the "Practice Using Terms" so that students will draw on the expressions they already know before they are given a list. It should be pointed out to students that the expressions are only a guide and a limited list of terms, and they should be encouraged to think of other rhetorical terms for each chapter.

Next are a series of grammar/punctuation exercises relevant to the function of the chapter. For example, in chapter 4, where the student will analyze the process of a scientific experiment, the grammar exercise focuses on using the passive voice. In chapter 5, where the student will need to use quotations in substantiating an assertion, punctuating quotations is the focus of the punctuation exercise.

As this book is foremost a writing text, not all grammar points that may cause students difficulty are covered. Students should be referred to a grammar reference book or grammar text for supplementary work if grammar presents a continued problem.

After these preliminary exercises, several situations require the student to use a particular set of data. In most of the situations, the data are given or the student is instructed how to get the data (from survey-poll questions or source material). The student is given a writing voice ("You are an insurance agent for Penn Mutual Life . . . You are a chemist in a nutrition lab . . . You are a traffic officer . . .") and is asked to use the data in a particular manner, such as substantiating an assertion or making a prediction ("The Task").

The first situations in each chapter are typically the most controlled, as they provide all of the data as well as guidelines for how the data should be organized. The final situations in each chapter are less structured so that the student can gradually develop his or her own skill in organizing. In the same manner, each succeeding chapter requires the student to write progressively longer, more detailed responses to the situations. The text begins with assignments for short paragraphs and progresses toward longer compositions.

Each chapter has three to five writing situations. The teacher can assign certain situations to the whole class or allow students to select a situation most relevant to their writing and career needs. The teacher may want to discuss some of the situations with the students before they write, in order to familiarize them with new vocabulary and the organization of the paragraph or essay to be written.

There are purposely few model essays included in the text. After class discussion of the situation and the data, the students should be able to write the essay without the artificial reference provided by a model. We believe that having a minimal number of models will make the writing tasks more challenging and realistic.

Many chapters conclude with varied types of correction exercises using samples of student papers written in response to the situations in the chapter. The exercises have guidelines that ask students to correct errors they themselves will most likely make, or have made, in the course of writing the response to the situation. The correction exercises also deal with questions of appropriateness. Students are asked to provide alternate ways of writing phrases that are grammatically correct, but inappropriate for the situation. We have found that these exercises are most useful when done in small groups or in pairs of students, as a means of summarizing and reviewing the material of each chapter.

The final chapter deals with the research paper and intends to help the students use the functions they have practiced throughout the text to develop an academic paper. This chapter also contains information on the form for a research paper, such as the bibliography and footnotes.

An appendix following the final chapter includes standard forms for a business letter and memorandum, which students may refer to throughout their use of the text when the situation requires writing one of these forms. Also in the appendix is a section combining reading and writing, with instructions to students on how to identify the functions used in several reading passages. This section will be especially useful to those who teach reading as part of a writing course. The basic instructions accompanying each reading selection can be adapted to other reading passages the teacher wishes to use.

Though the text provides ample material for a one-semester course, the teacher may expand on the text's format and content by using grammar exercises from other texts or supplemental reading passages.

The possibilities for additional situations and tasks are endless. A current political situation might be the spark for a situation wherein the student is given the voice of some powerful political figure. Or a current issue in the school or in the community might provide another starting point for a writing task. The students themselves are creative sources of writing situations. Once they are familiar with the format of the book, the teacher might ask them to propose their own situations to fit a particular writing function. What the text provides is a framework for using the functions most commonly found in academic papers in a variety of rhetorical situations.

to
the student

INFORM   *When you write you have a purpose* in mind. Your intention may be to inform your friends of your safe arrival in the United States, to describe a science experiment, or to recommend a solution to a company problem. Thus, your writing is designed to serve a specific purpose, such as informing, describing, or recommending.

FOCUS   *The goal of this book is to* help you express these intentions in a way that is grammatically correct and appropriate.

EXEMPLIFY   *Let us suppose* that you wanted to find out what papers were necessary for you as an international student to get a part-time job. Your purpose would be to request this information. In order to do this, you would most likely write to an immigration officer. To be most effective your request should be expressed in a formal manner.

EXEMPLIFY   *For example,* rather than writing "Tell me how I can get a work permit," it would be more appropriate to write, "Could you please tell me how I can obtain a work permit?"

CONTRAST   *Unlike many other writing textbooks,* we will be concerned not only with whether the writing is grammatically correct, but also with whether it is appropriate.

AGREE   *We believe* that your best writing will occur when you have a clear idea of why you are writing (purpose) and to whom you are writing (situation).

AGREE   In addition, *we are convinced* that by keeping these ideas in
PREDICT   mind, *you will* become a more effective writer. Each lesson will provide
RECOMMEND   a variety of writing situations. *We suggest that* whichever one you select, you try to imagine that you are in that situation, writing for the specific purpose that is described.

Each lesson will also include exercises on grammar, punctuation, and expressions related to the situations in the lesson. At the end of each chapter, there are essays written by international students in response to the situations in the lesson. Your job will be to revise the essays so that they are grammatically correct and appropriate. By correcting other students' compositions, we hope that you will learn to recognize your own errors.

With this background information, let us look at what intentions were used in the introduction. We began by *generalizing* ("When you write you have . . .") about the process of writing and by *focusing* on the intent of this book ("The goal of this book is to . . .") and *exemplifying* the emphasis of the text ("Let us suppose . . ."). A more complete description of these materials was provided by *contrasting* them with other writing texts ("Unlike many other writing texts . . ."). We concluded by *affirming* the strength of this approach ("We believe . . ." "We are convinced . . ."), *predicting* the effect it will have on your writing ("You will become a more effective writer."), and *recommending* how the materials can best be used ("We suggest that . . ."). These functions can be found in all types of writing. The goal of the following exercises is to help you express them in ways that are appropriate for a particular situation.

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1
inform/
focus

Good writers often begin by giving the reader general background information about the topic, followed by a more narrow statement of the subject covered in the paper. These introductory functions may be called *informing* and *focusing*.

In writing a report about the marketability of a certain kind of potato chips, for example, a good writer might begin by giving some general information about national market trends of potato chips or snack foods. Then the writer would alert the reader to the specific subject matter of the report by *focusing* on a particular market of potato chips. Similarly, a report on the granite found in a certain region would begin with some general information about granite or about the geological history of the area, and then state the specific region and type of granite to be explained in the paper.

In completing the following exercises, use your imagination to find ways *to inform* the reader and *to focus* on the specific subject matter at hand. The list of expressions can be used as a reference. We encourage you to use alternate phrases with which you are already familiar.

inform

The purpose of including general background information in the introduction is to interest the reader in the topic of the paper. For example, if you were writing a report on bilingual education in the United States, you might use one of the following techniques to interest the reader in this topic, and to provide him or her with some general information:

1. Present a fact or figure indicating how widespread a problem or phenomenon is. For example:
   a. In 1978, 260,000 children in the United States attended bilingual education programs.

b. The bilingual education programs in the United States include over sixty different languages, ranging from Cambodian to Greek.

c. More than $600 million have been spent on bilingual education programs.

2. Report the opinion of an authority in the area being discussed. For example:

a. (An opinion opposing bilingual education.) According to Dr. J. T. Woodman, a political scientist who is studying bilingual programs in the United States, "Most bilingual education programs in the United States are nothing more than expensive programs which segregate children by their language background and provide no educational benefits."

b. (An opinion supporting bilingual education.) According to Jacques Lafaye, coordinator of a highly successful bilingual school in Maine, "Bilingual education programs are important in maintaining the ethnic diversity of America."

focus

The general background information prepares the reader for the specific *topic* of the paper and needs to be followed by a statement focusing on the particular *purpose* of the paper. In the example of bilingual education in the United States, one of the following *focus* statements might be used:

The purpose of this report is to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of bilingual education programs in the United States.

In this paper *I intend to* summarize the strengths and weaknesses of bilingual education programs in the United States.

practice in informing and focusing

EXERCISE 1–1

Imagine that you are writing a report on the international students at your university. The purpose of the report is to explore the major problems that these students face while studying in the United States. Answer the following questions.

Inform

1. How many international students are currently enrolled at your university?
2. What countries do they come from? (Ask the students in your class.)
3. What fields are they studying?
4. What do most of the students intend to do when they finish their education?