

MAXINE C. HAIRSTON

# SUCCESSFUL WRITING

THIRD EDITION



---

# SUCCESSFUL WRITING

---

Third Edition

MAXINE C. HAIRSTON

The University of Texas at Austin

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY  
New York      London

Copyright © 1992, 1986, 1981 by Maxine C. Hairston. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

The text of this book is composed in Sabon, with the display set in Avant Garde Gothic. Composition by New England Typographic Service. Manufacturing by Courier Westford.

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Hairston, Maxine.

Successful writing / Maxine C. Hairston.—3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. English language—Rhetoric. I. Title.

PE1408.H297 1992

808'.042—dc20

91-40992

ISBN 0-393-96204-0

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110

W. W. Norton & Company, Ltd., 10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

---

# Preface

---

This third edition of *Successful Writing* maintains the focus established in the earlier editions, that of giving practical, concise advice to student writers who have mastered the elements of usage and mechanics and can write readable prose. Now they are ready to learn more about the craft of writing: how to find their topics, develop ideas, write for different purposes to different kinds of readers, and how to revise, polish, and edit their writing into clear, forceful prose that will engage as well as inform their readers.

Such writers may be in second-semester or honors freshman courses or in sophomore or upper-division courses in or out of English departments. Whatever their classification or their major, most of them find they have to write more and more in all their courses, and they realize they will continue to write, both by themselves and collaboratively, after they leave college and become professionals. Many of them also want to become better writers just for the sheer fun of it. That may be the best motivation of all.

This third edition responds to all these needs with direct and accessible suggestions about generating and organizing material and an expanded chapter on revision that emphasizes revision as a creative, rewarding, and interactive process that is distinct from editing. To make the book conform more directly to actual writing practice, that chapter on revising now appears directly after the chapter on drafting a paper. Chapters focused on improving style follow the chapter on revision. The editing process is now handled in a separate chapter, new to this edition. In keeping with the field's focus on workshop pedagogy, this edition also puts new emphasis on writing as a social act and provides special guidelines for students working in groups as well as suggestions for many writing activities to be carried out in groups.

Chapter 1, "Writing in College," has been expanded to accommodate a larger, more-specific section on what professors expect of students who

write papers, and it includes a new, informative student paper on *film noir*. Chapter 2, “What is Good Writing?,” is now more focused on academic writing, bringing in new assignments and new examples. Chapter 3, “What Happens When People Write?,” expands on the theory that writers vary their writing processes according to the kind of writing they are doing and introduces new terms, *explanatory* and *exploratory*, to describe and clarify these approaches. The chapter also includes fresh material on using computer programs for generating material and for outlining.

Chapter 4, “What Is Your Writing Situation?,” has been extensively revised to put greater emphasis on audience awareness; it now includes succinct, carefully focused guidelines for analyzing audience, purpose, and persons. Chapter 5, “Drafting Your Paper,” remains essentially the same but offers fresh examples and new writing activities. Chapter 6, “Revising,” has been reorganized and tightened to give students realistic and workable suggestions about revising; it now includes specific advice to help students work on their revising in peer groups. The chapter provides two response sheets for giving students feedback on drafts, one for large-scale revision and one for small-scale revision. It also shows the development of a new student paper, “The Roots of Country Music,” through three drafts and includes comments on that development.

Chapter 7, “Holding Your Reader,” has an expanded section on writing strong leads; Chapter 9, “Crafting Paragraphs,” expands its coverage of beginning paragraphs and now gives more specific advice and guidelines for writing closing paragraphs. Chapter 10, “Editing,” is a new chapter, conceived as a reference for advanced students who need succinct advice on overcoming common stumbling blocks in usage and mechanics. It underscores the key role editing plays in appealing to readers and makes suggestions for improving the visual impact of a paper. It helps students set priorities about errors and documents this advice with results of a survey asking business and professional people what errors they find most offensive. *Successful Writing* is the only advanced-composition text with this pragmatic feature.

Chapters 11 and 12, “The Research Paper” and “Writing on the Job,” are essentially unchanged from the second edition. Chapter 11 is designed to help students whose research tasks may take them beyond traditional library sources; chapter 12 gives students advice they may need for some academic writing tasks and later on the job when they must write case studies, grant proposals, abstracts, and other kinds of working documents.

This edition, like the previous two, retains distinctive features that make it a particularly useful text for advanced writing courses:

- ♦ All student writing examples come from the papers of students in advanced courses.

- Writing activities and assignments are based on topics that range across the curriculum and stress the importance of audience and purpose in every writing situation.
- Special guidelines help students draft, revise, and evaluate their own papers; additional guidelines help them work with their peers and in collaborative writing situations.
- Several chapters include self-teaching prompts designed to make students careful critics of their own work.
- Advice about usage and writing conventions is pragmatic and sets priorities. It is based on an actual survey of how readers respond to lapses in usage and mechanics.

The underlying premises of this third edition of *Successful Writing* remain unchanged from previous editions:

1. Writing is a dynamic social process that can be taught and learned.
2. People grow as writers by learning to draft, revise, and polish their writing by working in a variety of situations for a variety of readers.
3. Learning to interact and work with other writers is an important part of every writer's development.

I believe in these principles as strongly now as I did ten years ago when the first edition of *Successful Writing* appeared.

MAXINE HAIRSTON

---

# Acknowledgments

---

I received encouragement, support, and valuable advice on this book from a number of colleagues and friends, but I want to express my special appreciation to Professor Michael Keene of the University of Tennessee. I owe him a great deal. I also wish to thank Mary Trachsel for her assistance in rewriting the chapter on research papers.

I also want to express my thanks to the following people who made useful and enlightening suggestions at all stages of manuscript preparation: Douglas Atkins (University of Kansas), Martha A. Bartter (The Ohio State University—Marion Campus), Mary Bly (University of California, Davis), Linda Cades (University of Maryland), Edward P. J. Corbett (The Ohio State University), Toby Fulwiler (University of Vermont), Richard Gebhart (Findlay College), William Harmon (University of North Carolina), E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (University of Virginia), Paula Johnson (University of Wyoming), Andrea Lunsford (The Ohio State University), Donald P. McNeilly (University of Maryland), Susan Miller (University of Utah), Amy Richards (Wayne State University), Robert Rudolf (University of Toledo), Joseph Trimmer (Ball State University), Steven J. Vander Weele (Calvin College), and John Walter (University of Texas) and John Webster (University of Washington).

---

# Contents

---

Preface

xiii

---

## 1 ♦ WRITING IN COLLEGE 1

---

Writing as a Way of Learning	1
Strategies for Writing Papers in College Courses	2
Analyzing Your Writing Situation	2
Guidelines for Limiting a Paper Topic	4
General Criteria for Academic Writing	5
Matters of Content	5
Matters of Form	6

---

## 2 ♦ WHAT IS GOOD WRITING? 11

---

Characteristics of Good Writing	11
The Problem of Models	12
Good Writing Has Substantial Content	14
Good Writing Is Clear	14
Good Writing Is Unified	15
Good Writing Is Economical	16
Good Writing Is Grammatically Acceptable	17
Those Final Touches	19
Vigor	19
Authentic Voice	19
Exercises	20
Suggested Writing Assignment	22



<b>3 ♦ WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PEOPLE WRITE?</b>	<b>25</b>
An Overview of the Writing Process	25
How Professionals Writers Work	25
Explanatory and Exploratory Writing	26
The Stages of Writing	30
Preparation	30
Stocking the Bank	31
Writing More about Less	32
Identifying Audience and Purpose	36
Discovering Ideas and Accessing Information	37
BRAINSTORMING	37
FREEWRITING	37
USING COMPUTER INVENTION PROGRAMS	39
ASKING THE JOURNALIST'S QUESTIONS	40
RESEARCHING YOUR TOPIC	40
CULTIVATING SERENDIPITY	41
Organizing Material	41
OUTLINING ON PAPER OR ON SCREEN	42
ROUGH OUTLINES OR LISTS	44
TITLES AND THESIS SENTENCES	44
Incubation	45
Allowing Idle Time	45
Two Important Cautions	46
Illumination and Execution	46
Creating a Writing Environment	46
Building Good Writing Habits	47
Overcoming Blocks	48
Finding Your Pace	50
Sprinters, Plodders, and Bleeders	50
Postponing Corrections	51
Maintaining the Creative Tension	52
Exercises	53
Suggested Writing Assignments	54
<b>4 ♦ WHAT IS YOUR WRITING SITUATION?</b>	<b>57</b>
Audience	57
Analyzing Your Audience	57
Guideline Questions about Audience	58
Purpose	60

Analyzing Your Purpose	60	
Guideline Questions about Purpose	61	
Persona		62
Presenting Yourself	62	
Controlling Your Persona	62	
Guideline Questions about Persona	63	
Message		64
Exercises		65
Suggested Writing Assignments		66

---

## 5 ◇ DRAFTING YOUR PAPER 69

---

Writer-Based and Reader-Based Prose		69
Some Suggestions about Openings		71
Illustrations	71	
Quotations	72	
Anecdotes	72	
Generative Sentences	73	
Common Patterns of Organization		73
Reasoning from Evidence	74	
Claims and Warrants	75	
BASIC TERMS AND PATTERNS	75	
STANDARD TOULMIN ARGUMENTS	76	
EXPANDED TOULMIN ARGUMENTS	76	
ADVANTAGES OF CLAIM/WARRANT ARGUMENTS	78	
Definition	80	
Cause and Effect	81	
Circumstantial Arguments	82	
Comparison	83	
ANALOGIES	83	
A FORTIORI REASONING	84	
Narration	84	
Process	85	
Combining Methods		85
Exercises		86
Suggested Writing Assignments		88

---

## 6 ◇ REVISING 91

---

The Revision Process		91
Different Kinds of Revising	91	

A Plan for Revising in Stages	93
Sample Student Essay	94
Revising the First Draft	96
Revising for Focus	97
Revising for Audience	97
Revising for Purpose	98
Revising for Proportion	98
Revising for Organization	99
A Sample Revised Draft	99
Revising the Second Draft	101
A Sample Final Draft	102
Analysis of Small-Scale Changes	104
Revising in Peer Groups	105
Guidelines for Working in Writing Groups	105
Responding to Drafts	108
Revising under Pressure	108
When to Stop Revising	109
<hr/>	
7 ♦ HOLDING YOUR READER	111
<hr/>	
Choosing a Good Title	111
Writing Strong Leads	113
What First Paragraphs Do	115
Different Kinds of Opening Paragraphs	115
STRAIGHTFORWARD ANNOUNCEMENTS	116
OPENING ANECDOTES OR NARRATIVES	116
QUESTIONS	117
Solving the Opening Paragraph Dilemma	118
Tightening Your Writing	118
Hooks and Nudges	119
Directional Signals	120
Repeating Words	121
Using Conjunctions at the Beginning of Sentences	122
Other Aids to the Reader	124
Frequent Closure within Sentences	124
Chunking to Avoid Reader Overload	125
Avoid Antagonizing Your Readers	127
Exercises	128
Suggested Writing Assignments	130

<b>8 ♦ WRITING CLEARLY</b>	<b>133</b>
Write Concretely and Specifically	133
Make Your Readers <i>See</i> Something	136
Downshift from the General to the Specific	138
Make Your Sentence Subjects Specific and Concrete	139
Use Agent/Action Sentence Patterns Often	140
Clarify Your Sentences by Adding People	141
Avoid Too Many Nominalizations	142
Choosing Verbs for Clarity	143
Use <i>To Be</i> Verbs Sparingly	143
Choose Economical Verbs	144
Use Passive Verbs Sparingly	145
Use Passive Verbs Well	146
Choosing Other Words for Clarity	147
Choose Adjectives and Adverbs Carefully	147
Add Metaphors for Clarity	148
Avoid Jargon, Gobbledygook, and Doublespeak	148
Eliminate Sexist Language	151
CHARACTERISTICS OF SEXIST LANGUAGE	151
REASONS TO ELIMINATE SEXIST LANGUAGE	152
WAYS TO ELIMINATE SEXIST LANGUAGE	154
Exercises	155
Suggested Writing Assignments	157
<b>9 ♦ CRAFTING PARAGRAPHS</b>	<b>159</b>
The Outside View of Paragraphing	159
Guidelines for Breaking Paragraphs	160
Avoiding One-Sentence Paragraphs	162
The Inside View of Paragraphing	164
Commitment/Response Paragraphs	164
Other Paragraph Patterns	167
INDUCTION OR REASONING FROM EVIDENCE	167
CLAIM AND WARRANT	167
DEFINITION	168
CAUSE AND EFFECT	168
COMPARISON	168
NARRATION	169
PROCESS	170

Opening and Closing Paragraphs	170
Crafting Opening Paragraphs	170
Wrestling with Closing Paragraphs	172
Exercises	174
Suggested Writing Assignments	176

---

## 10 ♦ EDITING 179

---

Check the Rhythm of Your Prose	180
Adjust Sentence Length and Variety	180
Adapt Word Choice	180
Reconsider the Body Language of Your Writing	181
DIVIDING	181
HIGHLIGHTING	182
FORECASTING	183
Check for Errors in Usage	183
Avoid Sentence Fragments	183
MINOR SENTENCES OR FORMAL FRAGMENTS	184
TRUE SENTENCE FRAGMENTS	185
Avoid Comma Splices	187
Avoid Fused or Run-On Sentences	187
Avoid Dangling Modifiers	188
Make Structures Parallel	188
Avoid Faulty Predication	189
Check for Spelling Errors	191
Proofread	193
Set Priorities about Errors	194
What Businesspeople Think about Grammar and Usage	194

---

## 11 ♦ WRITING RESEARCH PAPERS 199

---

Topic Selection	200
Formulating a Research Question	200
Identifying the Audience	201
Defining the Purpose	202
Research	204
Setting Up a Search Strategy	204
Collecting Data: Primary and Secondary Sources	204

Searching Outside the Library	205
Using the Library	206
PERIODICALS	207
NEWSPAPERS	208
GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS	208
BOOKS	209
COMPUTER SEARCHES	209
FOLLOWING UP ON BIBLIOGRAPHY ENTRIES	210
SERENDIPITY	211
Taking Notes	211
Writing	213
Choosing a Plan of Organization	213
Mastering the Conventions of Documentation	213
USES OF DOCUMENTATION	214
STYLES OF DOCUMENTATION	216
BIBLIOGRAPHIC ENTRIES	217
HELP WITH DOCUMENTATION	219
<hr/>	
<b>12 ♦ WRITING ON THE JOB</b>	<b>221</b>
<hr/>	
Grant Proposals	221
Purpose of the Proposal	222
Preliminary Planning	222
The Body of the Proposal	223
Making a Budget	224
Writing the Abstract and Title	225
Getting a Second Opinion	225
The Final Draft	226
Evaluation Criteria	226
Nontechnical Reports	226
Characteristics of Reports	227
The Audience for Reports	228
The Structure of Reports	229
Case Studies	231
Abstracts	233
The Uses of Abstracts	233
Promissory Abstracts	233
Summary Abstracts	234
Writing the Abstract	234
WRITING THE PROMISSORY ABSTRACT	235
WRITING THE SUMMARY ABSTRACT	236

xii CONTENTS

Length of Abstracts	237
Papers for Oral Presentation	237
Length of Papers	237
Structure for Oral Presentations	238
Oral Style	239
Exercises	240
Suggested Writing Assignments	241
Index	245

---

# 1 ♦ Writing in College

---

## WRITING AS A WAY OF LEARNING

If you are like most college students, writing papers is a way of life for you. In fact, the further along you get in your studies, the more papers you will probably have to write, not only in courses such as history, philosophy, and English but also in courses you had not thought of as writing courses, such as engineering and accounting and astronomy. That's not surprising because in recent years, more and more faculty in widely varied disciplines have come to believe that students benefit from writing in college courses in a number of ways. Here are some of those benefits:

- Writing helps us absorb and master new information. When we write about a topic we have to engage with it and become active learners, not simply sponges for information. Writing also forces us to organize our ideas more carefully and put them in explicit form. Thus we understand material better and retain it longer when we write about it.
- Writing helps us to discover what we know. Writing about a topic stimulates our thinking, and as we write we tap into our store of knowledge and remember relevant experiences and anecdotes. Writing also helps us generate new ideas because when we write we often make connections, see relationships, and draw parallels that would not have occurred to us if we hadn't started to write.
- Writing promotes critical thinking. When we write, we put our ideas into tangible form so we can distance ourselves from them and see them more objectively. When we write something down we are more apt to ask ourselves, "Is this worth saying? Will this idea stand up to scrutiny? Can I support this claim?" Writing also helps us to spell out



problems and see their parts so we can consider how we might go about solving them.

In short, writing is a powerful tool for learning, one that plays a crucial role in education and in your later career. It is also a highly satisfying craft to have at your command. It just feels good to know you can write clearly and effectively and that whatever writing task you face, you're equal to it. The purpose of this book is to help you develop the habits and strategies that will give you that sense of control and make you a confident and competent writer in any situation.

## STRATEGIES FOR WRITING PAPERS IN COLLEGE COURSES

Some kinds of college writing assignments are so highly specialized that you may need to take a course in scientific and technical writing in order to do them well, but in most courses in the liberal arts or social sciences, you will get off to a good start on your papers if you follow a few general guidelines for planning and roughing out a first draft. You will find initial guidelines in this chapter, and you can then consult other chapters in the book to learn more about developing and refining your paper.

### Analyzing Your Writing Situation

Before you start to write, take the time to think about your writing situation and to analyze what's involved. Begin by asking these questions about the three factors that control any writing situation.

- What is my purpose? What am I trying to accomplish? What is the main point I want to get across?
- Who are my readers? What assumptions should I make about my readers? What questions do they want me to answer?
- What limitations am I working under? What resources (information, library facilities, and so on) do I have to work with? How much time do I have to write? How long is the paper supposed to be?

It's a good idea to take time to jot down preliminary answers to these questions before you start to write even a rough draft. Writing down answers will serve two purposes.

First, it will help you to focus your paper and keep it under control by reminding yourself not to take on more than you can manage. For in-