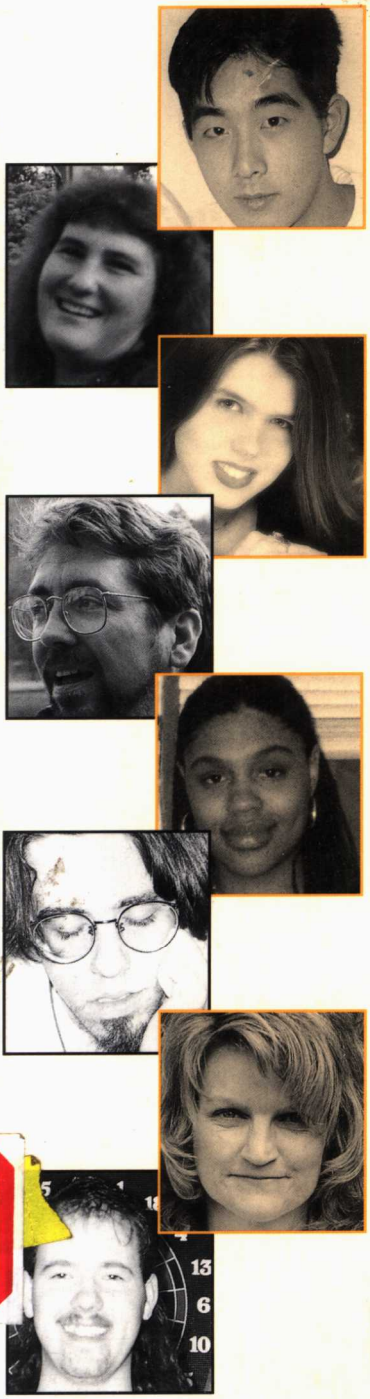

# FREE FALLING

## and other student essays

Third Edition

EDITED BY

PAUL SLADKY

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THIRD EDITION

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PAUL SLADKY
*AUGUSTA COLLEGE*

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# PREFACE

As you read this book, I expect that you may be surprised in many ways. I certainly have been, not at the fact that student writers can write so well, but that they ask so much of themselves *as writers.* I am amazed by how these essays push beyond the regions of the easy and the obvious, how they so clearly exceed the formulaic. We have been publishing student writers at Augusta College for several years now, yet I still find myself renewed each time a student discovers how powerful the act of writing is. "Real" writers know: if you give yourself up to it, writing will lead you to wholly unexpected and quite amazing places. Our literary tradition—which these essays now declare themselves a part of—has always sought to thrust readers into hitherto-before-unnoticed aspects of our world. Let me call it the *region of surprise* where writers dwell, where readers hope to tread, and, I believe, where the essays in this volume transport us.

I've taken great pleasure in reading and rereading the two hundred or so essays submitted by student writers from campuses around the country. One of the purposes of *Free Falling* is to celebrate good student writing, not just because it's *student writing,* but because it's *good writing.* The question "what constitutes *good* writing?" is, of course, legitimately and eternally arguable. As you read these essays, I invite you to ponder it. You will undoubtedly find the presence and absence of evidence to support your own conclusion. You will favor certain essays and even love a few, as I certainly do. I invite you, however, to challenge them all. In fact, I encourage you to challenge each one specifically by putting your own work up against it and finding a way to say, "Hey, mine can be as good as that." From there, it is simply a matter

of following through and writing yours so it is as good as that, or better, as the student writers selected for this volume have taken it upon themselves to do. The thirty-four essays published here certainly aren't the last word on these topics. They seem more like the first words, in fact, the precursors of the *most important* words, those yet to be written, those that *you* are going to speak and write.

In its essence, *Free Falling* has three primary purposes: *to celebrate* student writing, *to provoke discussion* about what makes writing good, and *to inspire* your own writing by motivating you to jump the nest and see where, as a writer, you might land. Whatever else it accomplishes, the book dramatically raises the curtain for this packed house to gaze upon the power and the glory of student writers finding their way into the region of surprise. That, in my opinion, is an accomplishment well worth celebrating. I hope it contributes a spark to the fires of your imagination.

There are many people I would like to thank, but, first and foremost, I thank the student writers who occupy the desks and labor in the vineyards of first-year English, seeking transformations in this world that begin in what is oftentimes the most difficult place, the transformations within oneself. I also sincerely thank the composition teachers who stand behind those students and who labor with equal commitment to those transformations. Many thanks go to the instructors whose students' work was selected from the hundreds of submissions for inclusion in this third edition: Karla Brown, Hawkeye Community College; Nancy Ethridge, Boise State University; Arthur Henne, Pennsylvania State University, York Campus; Kathleen Jernquist, Brown University; Anthony Kellman, Augusta College; Oswald Mayers, College of Saint Benedict; Marsh Rutter, Southwestern College; and Nancy Sutherland, Augusta College.

My thanks go to the following instructors for their insightful reviews of the second edition: Rita Bova, Columbus State Community College; JoAnn Buck, Guilford Technical Community College; Grace Bailey Burneko, Augusta College; Daniel Clark, Northern Kentucky University; Susan Faulkner, Cedar Valley College; Keith Groff, Holy Family College; Mitzi Harris, Western Wyoming Community College; Ronald J. Heckelman, University of Houston—Downtown; William Hofelt, Juniata College; Michael Hricik, Westmoreland County Community College; Bridget Kilgore-Prugh, Pennsylvania State University, York Campus; Catharine B. Kloss, University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown; Barbara E. L'Eplattenier, Purdue University; Perry Lueders, Southwest State University; Karen Madigan, Western Wyoming Com-

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My thanks to everyone involved with *Choice Voice* at Augusta College, both students who submitted work and teachers who encouraged it, as well as Charles Cooper, Rise Axelrod, Lillie Butler-Johnson, Grace Bailey Burneko, Peggy Cheney, and Karin Sisk, all for invaluable support. And finally, a most special debt of gratitude belongs to Nancy Sutherland and Susan Cottenden, who each offered a terrific haven for ideas and are especially blessed with a sensitivity to student writers and their writing.

Paul Sladky

# CONTENTS

*CHAPTER 1*

# WHY WE NEED TO PUBLISH STUDENT WRITERS

## TO STUDENTS

How should we read a book of essays written by students in composition courses? Does the fact that the writers are students like yourself change the way we read, or ought to read, the essays? Is their work any different from the published "professional" work we normally find in anthologies like this?

Judging from the essays in this volume, I think it's safe to say that the writers here take their purposes every bit as seriously as the pros. I'm struck again and again by how committed and energetic their writing is. Not the least bit sheepish, they are out to seize their readers and provoke response. The tone is not, "Gee, would you *like to* read my work?" and the feel isn't that of "ritual texts" being written for a class assignment and an audience of one. Rather, these are words that clearly belong to writers who believe in what they say, writers who are writing for an audience they know is real.

But the question still remains: How should we read the book?

My students would say, "You should read it with a pencil in your hand, and your ears tuned to the voice speaking on the page." Repeatedly, they tell me how much they learn from reading work published by their peers. Student essays excite them. Such essays suggest possibilities and quietly invite them as student writers to take new perspectives on their own writing, to consider ideas they otherwise wouldn't have considered.

Perhaps the best strategy, then, is simply to read this book as a writer would, absorbing the meaning of each essay and, at the same time, using it to clarify your own ideas and purposes. Study the essays to stim-

ulate your writerly inventions and expand your sense of style and form. Let the essays launch you in new directions, inspiring you with things to write about and ways to write about them. Let them validate ideas you've considered but, for one reason or another, have never written about. Get excited when you find yourself thinking, "Shoot. If a peer of mine can write this thing of hers like *that*, then I can sure enough write that thing of mine like *this*."

I could go on justifying ways to read the essays here. But it would sound too much like a directive that contradicts the essential spirit of the book. The way to read the essays is simply to read them, for no ulterior reason at all. Just read and see what happens. Discover what you enjoy, love, disagree with, even dislike about the style and substance of individual essays. You will find favorites, for sure, and you won't love every single piece, as no reader ever does. Nevertheless, I hope you are enriched for having experienced this student writing and its implicit celebration of authenticity and voice.

At Augusta College, we publish the work of English 101 students in *Choice Voice* magazine, a quarterly publication of the composition program. When students' work appears in *Choice Voice*, the effect on them as writers is quite remarkable. Self-concepts change; confidence grows; motivation inspires; and the quality of written products markedly improves. Somehow, writing for a real audience has that effect.

This, then, raises the most important question: What about *your* writing? Have you thought about publishing it? About letting someone other than your teacher read your work? I don't mean have you fantasized *being* Toni Morrison or Ernest Hemingway. Rather, have you ever worked hard on a piece of writing and thought it turned out to be pretty good, even *really* good, and wondered if others would be moved by it, like you have been, to think or feel more deeply?

If you haven't, let me extend an invitation. Since I want to encourage you to think about writing for publication, I invite you to send your writing to St. Martin's Press to be considered for the next edition of *Free Falling*. You'll find a submission form in the back of this book to send along with your essay. You might, in fact, make this your goal. Trust me, writing for publication helps establish a much clearer focus, purpose, and sense of audience. You begin to think: What would readers of *Free Falling* want or need to know?

Remember that the essays you're about to read started out exactly that way—in a composition class as *very* rough drafts. Also remember that a writer's destiny is never sealed. Ernest Hemingway, before he became "Ernest Hemingway," was a student who needed to write to learn

to write. There is no other way. Writers and thinkers are *made* by "applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair," as the saying goes. So, let me invite you to pull up a chair. And don't be afraid to send us what you've got.

## A Rationale and Pragmatics for Instructors

### The Rationale

The question implied in the title of this chapter, "Why We Need to Publish Student Writers," is answered by the experiences of the many instructors whose students' work is included in this anthology: Publication contributes to any model of composition because it supplements and extends, rather than displaces, curricular objectives, whatever those objectives might be. Publication is a proposal for what to *do* with texts once they're written. Thus, the pedagogical options for getting those texts written are not at issue.

In the classroom, the *effects* of writing for publication are quite specific. Writing for publication establishes a genuine purpose for student writers by establishing a genuine audience to write for. Consequently, the outcomes are tangible: publication motivates students to write, creates a strong sense of self-validation for students as writers, and contributes importantly to the improved quality of their written texts. This introductory chapter outlines what I perceive to be the variables in writing for publication that contribute most significantly to these outcomes.

Audience is probably the place to start, since recent composition theory begins with the assumption that writing is a negotiable form of social action. Ruth Mitchell and Mary Taylor, for instance, propose an audience-response model of writing that postulates that "all writing is directed towards an audience and is to be regarded as the written medium of transaction" (250). Following this definition, the success of a text is measured essentially by its *effect on* readers rather than by conformity to formal standards, a position with a theoretical taproot that touches Aristotle.

Yet, in spite of such theoretical arguments for rhetorically situated models of composing, we can only measure their practical success by asking the following questions: Where are the readers postulated by these models? Where is the audience whose response is so crucial?

Who, in effect, are our students writing for? The answers to these questions, unfortunately, come up a bit thin. Although the idea that writers engage in negotiated transaction with readers is theoretically, and even practically, alive in the universe of discourse *outside* the composition classroom, *inside* it, our students know in their bones that genuine, negotiated transaction with readers is, for the most part, purely fiction.

One of the most stubborn problems for classroom teachers remains that of authenticating audience. Short of asking students to write letters to congressional representatives or local newspaper editors, the question persists: How do we create for our students genuine audiences situated in genuine rhetorical situations?

The study that James Britton and his colleagues published in 1975 reveals that student writers, in general, write for an uncomfortably narrow range of functions and audiences in the school setting. In the schools he analyzed, Britton's data showed that 48 percent of the time the relationship between writer and audience was "pupil to examiner"; 39 percent of the time it was "learner to teacher"; and 1.8 percent of the time it was "writer to readers" (130). Only *1.8 percent* of the time were students writing to communicate in genuinely negotiable ways with an unknown audience. Since it isn't difficult to generalize these figures to our college classrooms, neither should it be surprising that Britton's call in 1975 was to expand the audience our student writers write for. Perhaps more disappointing is the fact that twenty years have passed and students frequently still do what Britton calls a "dummy run," producing writing in school settings for a narrow and purely instructional purpose and limited audience.

My purpose here is to suggest that writing for publication is an effective way to establish discourse contexts that move the concept of audience from theory to praxis by creating *genuine audiences* for student writers. At Augusta College, one of the most notable aspects of our writing-for-publication program in first-year English has been the extremely positive response from students. They are continually surprised at the writing they produce and the composing processes they engage to produce it. One writer said to me, "I never thought revising something seventeen times was possible until I wanted to get it published," a comment that might be interpreted to mean that only when this student felt he was getting something *from* the exchange was he willing to contribute something *to* the process.

We might also link this student's comment to the rationale for publishing student writers. It clearly reflects a *motivation*—would a

writer write seventeen drafts without being motivated?—as well as the writer's sense of *validation.* You can easily imagine a professional writer making such a statement, but can you imagine a student who, more typically, might think three drafts is cruel and unusual punishment? I think not. A student talking about *seventeen* drafts signifies the unacknowledged shift in status from pupil to writer. The remaining outcome—the improved quality of the texts produced—isn't directly recoverable from this student's utterance, but the inference is fairly substantiated; after seventeen drafts, the writing is *bound to* get better.

Writing for publication helps students accommodate written text to audiences, learn that writing must affect a reader, gain information about how readers respond, and understand how writing is evaluated. In our writing-for-publication program at Augusta College, we've observed that published student discourse reflects increasingly solid academic competence. Our students write and publish thoughtful, serious essays in forms accepted by the broader academic discourse community, the one they seek to join. In this regard, publication appears to remain a function of the classroom discourse that subsumes it. In other words, if the published writing is any indication, students *do* learn something of what we teach, and, given the opportunity to enter a genuinely social discourse, they also learn a great deal more.

Writing for publication creates a model that incorporates both social purposes and textual purposes, what have come to be the more or less competing pedagogical models today. If we examine their battle cries, we could say that "make it real" articulates a social purpose while "make it good (or flawless)" articulates a textual purpose. What's interesting is that writing for publication supports *both* social and textual purposes and simplifies the model by synthesizing the two without compromising either one. If an instructor's approach focuses on the social and contextual dimensions of writing, then writing for publication creates a smooth transition to the textual dimension. Likewise, if the approach focuses on the textual dimension of writing, then writing for publication introduces the social context in a tangibly authentic way that recent research has increasingly directed our attention to. In the process-oriented publishing classroom, neither text nor context is neglected. Once students establish authentic communicative purposes, then revising, polishing, and eliminating surface glitches become natural and motivated concerns. The rationale behind writing for publication is ultimately grounded in the effect that publication has on the writers themselves, what we might summarize as effects of motivation, validation, and textual quality.

## The Pragmatics

We might start talking about the pragmatic aspects of publishing student writers by first defining what it means to publish. Rather than considering publication strictly in its formal dimensions—formatting end-product texts to disseminate to an anonymous audience—we might approach a definition from a more basic consideration of publication in its social or *contextual* dimensions, that is, in terms of the relations that hold between readers and texts, and between writers and texts.

From a reader's perspective, the most prominent feature of published text is its status as finished or completed text; a published text is a text the reader, if not the writer, deems no longer "in process." We read published texts by and large for meaning, approaching them first and foremost (albeit unconsciously) as meaningful objects from which we will derive some kind of information or understanding. We read to *experience* the text—listen to its voice, enter its textual space, respond to its meaning. Given this crucial distinction between reading to understand and reading to correct, we might consider as a form of publication any arrangement that enables readers publicly or privately to experience a text rather than seek to improve or "correct" it.

Thus, our definition: *publication* is any public display of completed text that is no longer deemed *in process*. Who does this "deeming" is, of course, another important question that has a fully historical dimension, as anyone who has ever received a rejection letter from an editor can attest. The deeming process that declares a piece of writing worthy and complete is actually quite complex and, although it falls within the domain of relations between writers and texts, much of it lies beyond my purpose here.

Since conditions in the classroom differ, thankfully, from those faced by writers in the publishing industry, the "deeming" process I'm referring to is considerably broader than simple acceptance or rejection of a manuscript. In the classroom, the deeming process can be shared by writer and editor, whoever plays the latter role. I say *whoever* since it needn't necessarily be the instructor, or should I say, entirely the instructor. Responses by peer readers as well as by the instructor can contribute to texts in process and to a writer's decision and final declaration that a piece has achieved its purpose and is now "finished."

From my own perspective, one of the deeper problems in writing instruction today involves the extent to which we force students to bring writing projects to premature closure. Although the time constraints we must work with are quite legitimate from a management

standpoint, their effect is arbitrarily to constrain writers in ways that not only deaden their sense of ownership but also the very processes through which they nurture and develop ideas. The use of writing portfolios is one solution that dovetails nicely with writing for publication.

Aside from the consideration of the relations among readers, writers, and texts, the pragmatic question, in a nutshell, is this: How can we transmit our students' finished products to readers other than the instructor and/or their collaborative peer group? Imagination is the only thing that limits our answers. Some of the possibilities are well known and effective, even in a classroom filled with college students, including: reading student work aloud in class; creating classroom anthologies through desktop publishing; establishing departmental magazines that publish student essays on a quarterly or semester basis; and, one of the most exciting, developing an address or datafile on the campus computer network where student work can be published electronically.

Concerning electronic publishing, the possibilities for exceeding the limitations of print are, of course, endless. At Augusta College, we simply established an academic datafile on the campus network, called it *Choice Voice,* and filled it with past and present issues of our *Choice Voice* magazine. More far-reaching avenues include establishing a home page on the World Wide Web or developing thematically focused web sites where students can contribute discourse on particular questions or issues. As you can imagine, the Internet provides a highly authentic and expanding audience in a rhetorically rich field, all of which is waiting to be developed and explored by composition teachers and their students.

To give you a clearer sense of how writing for publication can be approached in first-year composition courses, it might perhaps be useful to offer a case history of our experience with writing for publication at Augusta College. It certainly isn't a new idea to create a campus-based publication that is devoted exclusively to student writing (a publication that is separate, by the way, from the college literary magazine). Such publications have cropped up on campuses across the country and succeed because they effectively tap a large, eager, and willing readership: the hundreds of students who enroll in composition classes each semester. What is new in our approach, however, is the idea of a peer-edited publication, as we have made *Choice Voice.* Instead of burdening faculty with the task of reading and judging submissions, we've created a student editorial board that reads and selects essays for publication. The board is composed entirely of students enrolled in first-year Eng-