COLLEGE WRITING

A Personal Approach to Academic Writing

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Preface

I have written *College Writing* in the belief that learning to write well in college is not all that mysterious. College writers need to understand how their academic community works and why. They need to learn a few forms, conventions, and guidelines. And they need to practice writing for a variety of purposes to different audiences.

College Writing provides brief discussions of specific college writing assignments, including formal and informal essays, examinations, reports, and journals. In addition, it describes general strategies for revision, editing, research, and problem solving. I believe that certain kinds of students will find this book especially useful:

1. Students who enjoy writing, who already write well, but could always use a few more strategies.
2. Those who have never before enjoyed writing, but for whom this book may come as a pleasant surprise.
3. Those planning to major in the liberal arts, who would enjoy an introduction to the variety of writing possible in a college community.
4. Those *not* majoring in the liberal arts, who will find in this book a useful guide for writing well in any field of study.

I also believe that certain kinds of writing instructors will find this book especially useful:

1. Instructors who enjoy teaching writing and do it well, but might like their students to read a series of short essays on writing in a college setting.

2. Those who plan to spend most classroom time with their students' own writing; who believe that writers gain most by reading and commenting on each other's writing.
3. Those who believe writing to learn is as important as learning to write and that both can be pleasant and provocative activities.
4. Those who view research as a lively investigative activity; who believe that researching means learning to observe and interview as well as visit card catalogues and compile bibliographies.

In other words, *College Writing* is written to students and instructors who believe that writing is central to the whole academic enterprise, that it is at once a tough and wonderful business, and that it can be both learned and taught. It is also written to students and instructors who do not believe these things but think they might be worth considering.

Toby Fulwiler

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Toby Fulwiler

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Part I

WRITING TO LEARN

Chapter 1

WRITING IN THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

Professional writers write most confidently when they understand their subject, know their purpose, and can successfully predict their readers' response. The same holds for student writers, of course. But to become adept at college writing you will need to understand, above all, the nature and purpose of the academic community in which you write and the nature and expectations of your academic audience. Each new course you take will teach you a little more about this community in which you now dwell. This book is written to introduce you to some of the general expectations and practices typical of college communities—essential knowledge for writing successfully in college. If you learn your way around generally at first, you will be well prepared to move around more specifically later on, as you major in and master particular areas of study.

Knowing your way around the academic community will simplify and clarify your writing tasks, but in no way will *guarantee* speedy and successful results. In fact, there are no guarantees for any writers—even those with experience. Each time you put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, the whole mystifying process of composing begins anew. If you are an experienced writer, you already know this and accept the difficulty and unpredictability as part of the process.

If you have not had much writing experience, you may believe that everyone else finds writing easier than you do. This is seldom so. Writing—especially academic writing—is difficult for even the most experienced writers; but they may have more confidence that, in the end, it will turn out all right, more knowledge of the tasks before

them, and probably more strategies to help them accomplish those tasks.

PURPOSE

To write well, you need to know *why* you are writing in the first place. What is it you want to say about what? Sometimes that has been decided for you, as when a teacher makes a specific writing assignment or when an editor commissions a particular piece for a magazine. At other times the act of writing might be your idea completely, as when you decide to do an extra credit project or to keep a personal journal. However, regardless of the initial motivation behind a piece of writing, once committed to it, you must do two things: figure out your own particular approach to the subject, and write from knowledge about it—which may mean searching carefully through your memory, reading more, or simply constructing an argument in the most logical way possible.

I take as a given that you can't write well about something you don't understand. You can, of course, raise good questions and pose problems related to what is new or confusing to you, but beyond that there is little you can compose except BS—and we all know the value of that. The first part of this book explains how writing can actually lead you to more complete knowledge about something, which will enable you later to write to someone else with some authority. Most meaningful knowledge in a school setting is gained through some exploration in language and is subsequently expressed in writing.

To create an effective piece of writing you should know about accepted ways of thinking about your subject and conventional forms of handling and expressing your knowledge of it. What you particularly need to know are the expectations and assumptions of the community in which your assignment is taking place.

THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

If you are reading this book while enrolled in college, you are already a member of an academic community. What, you may ask, is the big deal? I'm in school, I'm studying, taking tests, writing papers, and getting grades—as I've done since first grade. What's the difference? Well, this time there may be a difference that could influence everything you write. Let's look at the nature of a college academic community.

College and university communities were established to study something called the truth. Each discipline pursues, investigates, and teaches some small part of it: the sciences investigate what is true in

the natural world, the social sciences the social world, the humanities the individual world, the arts the aesthetic world, and so on. Of course, truth is seldom packaged in tight disciplinary units, so understanding something fully often requires the crossing of disciplinary lines. The most extreme case may be the study of literature, in which to understand what is true about a single novel by Charles Dickens or Virginia Woolf you may need to know some history, philosophy, psychology, physics, anthropology, economics, or politics. In some cases, new hybrid disciplines have been created at the juncture where one pursuit of truth meets another—for example, biochemistry, psycholinguistics, and social anthropology.

To establish truth about the physical world, scientists have developed a particular way of asking questions and looking for answers which is called "the scientific method." Finding out biological or chemical truth may require similar methods but different tools. Those who investigate the social world—sociologists, economists, political scientists, psychologists, geographers, and anthropologists—have, in many instances, adopted the scientist's methodologies. They often find, of course, that the social world is even harder to pin down for examination than even the most distant star or complex microorganism.

To establish truth in the so-called humanistic world, humanists—philosophers, literary scholars, and historians—have developed a potpourri of investigative methods, ranging from the scientific to the imaginative and intuitive. In contrast, practitioners of the arts—musicians, composers, poets, novelists, playwrights, directors, actors, painters, sculptors, and dancers—do their best to escape classification of any kind. Neat disciplinary categories become increasingly messy when you realize that historians study social behavior but are usually called humanists, and that psychologists, who study individual behavior, are usually called social scientists, as are the geographers who study the physical space of the earth.

Furthermore, the professional schools of business, law, education, agriculture, health, natural resources, and engineering have put together their own specialized programs to train people to do certain highly specialized work in the larger community. As part of the process of training, these schools require at least an introductory-level knowledge of the different disciplines.

Despite these differences, many fields of study make assumptions about teaching, learning, and knowledge that have more in common than not—which is why we can even talk about the academic community as an entity. In fact, if you look at the modes of establishing truth in disciplines as different as history and physics, you may be more surprised by the assumptions on which they agree

than those on which they differ. For example, both historians and physicists depend heavily on close observation for the accumulation of facts on which to make generalizations, which they then try to disprove. Biologists and English teachers, too, may have more in common than meets the casual eye.

THE GROUND RULES

Certain beliefs operate as glue to hold together the otherwise disparate community of teachers and students that compose the academic community: you cannot write successful college-level papers without understanding these things.

Belief

As both student and writer, it helps to remember that establishing belief is the job of (1) the entire university community, (2) each general field of study within the university, and (3) each individual student writer in each particular course in that community. There is a necessary relationship among these three elements which is relevant to every single act of communication or expression you do while a member of this community. You want those who read your laboratory reports, term papers, and essay tests to believe that what you say is essentially *true*. Your job as a college writer is to persuade your readers that what you say is true, which introduces another element.

Persuasion

Every serious act of writing is essentially an exercise in persuasion: if you describe an experiment, you want your description to *persuade* your chemistry teacher that this is what actually happened; if you analyze the major causes of the Civil War, you want to convince your history teacher that, yes, these were the causes; if you evaluate the merits of a Robert Frost poem, you want your English teacher to believe your evaluation. While this may seem obvious, you must remember that persuasion is also the goal of most advertisements and political propaganda, but something rather important sets persuasion in the academic world apart from persuasion in the world of profit and politics: the use of evidence.

Evidence

How writers create belief is largely a matter of how they marshal their *evidence* to support what they say. In the first place, there must *be*

evidence to back up any assertions; otherwise, they are unsupported or weak generalizations. In the academic world, there is often a premium on evidence derived from books—preferably numerous books, each written by an expert with credentials that can be checked. Depending on your discipline, of course, other sources of evidence might be observation, experimentation, statistics, interviews, or personal experience—each documented in some verifiable way.

Documentation

To make an assertion as convincing as possible in the academic community, you should always provide your audience with a complete account of where you got your information, ideas, or evidence (more on this in Chapters 13–17); hence, the importance of footnotes, endnotes, references, bibliographies, and literature searches. Essentially, your readers want to know *who* said *what*, *where*, and *when*. When you provide this information, readers believe that your student ideas are buttressed by expert ideas and are more likely to believe them. In college writing you ignore documentation at your peril.

Subjectivity

In many disciplines, your personal opinion may not be worth very much; in some it will be. In the more interpretive disciplines, such as history, philosophy, and literature, you will generally find more room for *personal interpretation* than in the more quantitative disciplines, such as chemistry, physics, and mathematics. (The social sciences fall somewhere in between.) To be safe, whenever you make an academic assertion in any discipline, use the best evidence you can find and document it. But in all disciplines, your own reasoned, and necessarily subjective, judgment will at some times be necessary; if it is, just be sure to state it as such ("In my opinion. . . ." or, "It seems to me. . . .") and give the best reasons you can.

Objectivity

In the academic community, the way in which you search for truth is supposed to be *impartial* and *objective*, with some very clear exceptions within the humanities and fine arts. For many disciplines, however, when you perform experiments and do research, you attempt to remove yourself from the situation as much as possible and attempt to demonstrate that the results of your work are objectively,

not subjectively, true; that is, that the results you are reporting are not a figment of your imagination and personal bias and that anybody else doing this work would find the same results. In science, the best experiments are replicable (repeatable) by other scientists; the social sciences generally try to follow suit. This point is important to you as a writer because it means that it's advisable, whenever possible, to mention how you got your results (by objective methods, of course). In some cases, it's even preferable to use a deliberately objective tone (passive constructions, no first-person pronouns) and quantitative detail (statistics, graphs) in your writing, if you want to persuade members of these more or less objective communities to believe you.

Relativity

Students of even the most objective scientific disciplines make absolute statements at their peril. In the twentieth century, especially since Einstein, *relativity* has been the watchword: there is no such thing as certainty in the physical universe, and that concept has filtered, in one way or another, into every field of study. We now believe that there is more than one possible explanation, more than one possible interpretation, more than one version of nearly everything that happens. How does this apply to your writing? Quite simply, every statement you make within the academic community will be subject to question, objection, interpretation, and cross-examination; the farther you progress in your studies, the more likely it is that your ideas will be challenged. As a result, when you make academic assertions, pay attention to the qualifying words (perhaps, maybe, possibly, actually) and tentative phrases ("Have you considered. . . ?" "It is likely. . . ." "In my judgment. . . ." and "In all probability. . . ."). These phrases signify that you recognize the tentative nature of the "truth." So, though you *try* to be objective in your work or writing, you also need to acknowledge that it is ultimately impossible.

Balance

My last observation about the academic community is related to the notions of objectivity and relativity. Because there are multiple interpretations for so much that happens in the natural and social worlds—multiple versions of right and wrong, good and bad, correct and incorrect—it becomes useful for writers to represent these possibilities in their discourse through assertions that give *fair* (honest, nonemotional) treatment even to positions with which the writer disagrees. Important here are balance phrases ("On one hand/on the

other hand. . . ." "However, . . .") and the recognition of multiple causes ("in the first place/in the second place," "in addition," "also," "finally"). When you use these phrases in your spoken and written language, they suggest that you know the rules of the academic community.

Unfortunately, the foregoing generalizations are just that, generalizations that we don't have time to explore fully. In fact, the only thorough elaboration takes place semester by semester as you are progressively initiated into membership in the world of college or university studies. But no discussion of writing formal academic papers is useful unless you understand generally the nature and context of your academic audience. Every suggestion in this book is predicated on your understanding of this community and its ground rules and expectations. Once understood and agreed to, the many seemingly arbitrary assignments you will receive may begin to make better sense to you, and, in turn, your handling of them as a writer will make better sense to your teachers.

HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

This book examines three roles that writing plays in the academic community: a mode of thought, a mode of communication, and a mode of research. Chapters 1 through 5 explore the role of writing as a tool for developing your critical thinking skills. Chapters 6 through 12 describe the forms of writing in which students (and faculty) most often report their thoughts. Chapters 13 through 17 examine the role of research in substantiating these thoughts. Finally, Chapter 18 asks you to examine your own voice.

SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNAL WRITING

1. How would you classify yourself as a writer, experienced or inexperienced or somewhere in between? What about writing do you already know? What else do you want to know?
2. Describe the differences you already perceive between your high school and college learning environments. Explain in what ways you are treated differently by your professors than you were by your high school teachers. Are your reading or writing assignments noticeably different? How so?
3. Which of this chapter's so-called ground rules (for example, that your job as a writer is to create belief) are new to you? On which ones could you elaborate further, with examples from your own experience? Can you add other rules to this list?