

An impressionistic painting of a path or stream winding through a field of flowers. The colors are vibrant and blended, with a focus on reds, purples, blues, and greens. The style is painterly and textured.

# STEPS

TO WRITING WELL

WITH  
ADDITIONAL  
READINGS

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JEAN WYRICK

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# STEPS TO WRITING WELL

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WITH ADDITIONAL READINGS

**JEAN WYRICK**

*Colorado State University*



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# To the Teacher

*Steps to Writing Well* is written for teachers of composition who have had trouble finding a text that is accessible to their students. Too many texts on today's market, these teachers rightfully complain, are still unnecessarily complex, sophisticated, or massive for the majority of students. Written simply in an informal, straightforward style and addressed to the student, this text is designed to provide a clear step-by-step guide to writing a variety of 500-to-800 word essays. The combination of concise, practical advice, a number of student and professional samples, and a brief handbook should provide more than enough helpful information for students enrolled in a one-semester or one-quarter course without intimidating them with more material than they can possibly master.

The book is organized into four parts. Part One offers advice on "The Basics of the Short Essay"; Part Two discusses the "Modes and Strategies"; Part Three presents "A Concise Handbook"; Part Four contains "Additional Readings." The text begins with the essay "To the Student," which not only argues that students can learn to write better with practice and dedication but also gives them a number of practical reasons why they *should* learn to write better.

Part One, containing seven chapters, moves students sequentially through the process of writing the short essay. Chapter 1, on prewriting, stresses finding the proper attitude ("the desire to communicate") and presents over a half-dozen helpful suggestions for selecting and focusing a subject. In addition, a section on using the journal explains more than a dozen ways students may improve their skills by writing a variety of nonthreatening—and even enjoyable—assignments. The section on audience should help student writers identify their particular readers and communicate more effectively with them.

After finding a topic and identifying their audience, students are then ready for Chapter 2, devoted almost entirely to a discussion of the thesis statement. This chapter first explains the role of the "working thesis" in early drafts and then clearly outlines what a good thesis is and isn't by presenting a host of examples to illustrate the advice. Also included in this chapter is explanation of the "essay map," an organizational tool that can help students shape their essays and plan their body paragraphs.

Chapter 3 discusses in detail the requirements of good body paragraphs: topic sentences, unity, order and coherence, adequate development, use of specific detail, and logical sequence. Over forty paragraphs illustrate both strengths and weaknesses of student writing. These paragraphs are not complex literary or professional excerpts but rather well-designed, precise examples of the principles under examination, written on subjects students can understand and appreciate. Moreover, this chapter twice provides the opportunity for students to see how a topic may progress from a working thesis statement to an informal essay outline, which, in turn, helps produce well-developed paragraphs in the body of an essay. To complete the overview of the short essay, Chapter 4 explains, through a number of samples, how to write good introductions, conclusions, and titles.

Chapter 5, "Revising Your Writing," is one of the most important in this text. Because too many students still think of "revision" as merely proofreading their essays rather than as an essential recursive activity, this chapter is devoted to explaining the revision process and to stressing the necessity of revision in all good writing. These pages guide the students through the various stages of revision, carefully cautioning novice writers against trying to analyze and revise too many parts of their papers at once. The chapter also includes hints for overcoming writer's block, a checklist for essays, a special note for writers with word processors, and two student essays for revision practice.

Chapter 6, on effective sentences, emphasizes the importance of clarity, conciseness, and vividness, with nearly one hundred and fifty sample sentences illustrating the chapter's advice. Chapter 7, on word choice, presents practical suggestions for selecting accurate, appropriate words that are specific, memorable, and persuasive. This chapter also contains sections on avoiding sexist language and "bureaucratese."

Each chapter in Part One contains numerous samples and exercises. "Practicing What You've Learned" exercises follow each major section in each chapter so that both teacher and students may quickly discover if particular material needs additional attention. Moreover, by conquering small steps in the writing process, one at a time, the students should feel more confident and should learn more rapidly. Assignments, which also follow each major section in these chapters, suggest class activities and frequently emphasize "peer teaching," a useful method that asks students to prepare appropriate exercises for classmates and then to evaluate the results. Such assignments, operating under the premise that "you don't truly learn a subject until you teach it," provide engaging classroom activity for all the students and may also remove from the teacher some of the burden of creating exercises. In addition, throughout the chapters in Part One, activities called "Applying What You've Learned to *Your Writing*" follow the exercises and assignments. Each of these activities encourages students to "follow through" by incorporating into a current draft the skill they have just read about and practiced. By following a three-step procedure—reading the advice in the text, practicing the advice through the exercises, and then applying the advice directly to their own prose—students should improve their writing processes. Finally, each of the chapters in Part One concludes with a summary, designed to help students review the important points in the material under study.



Part Two concentrates on the four rhetorical modes: exposition, argumentation, description, and narration. Chapter 8 on exposition is divided into separate discussions of the expository strategies: example, process, comparison/contrast, definition, division and classification, and causal analysis. Each discussion in Chapter 8 and each of the chapters on argument, description, and narration follows a similar format by offering the students (a) a clear definition of the mode (or strategy), explained with familiar examples; (b) practical advice on developing each essay; (c) warnings against common problems; (d) suggested essay topics on subjects that appeal to students' interests and capabilities; (e) a sample student essay with marginal notes; (f) a professional essay followed by questions on content, structure, and style, and a vocabulary list; (g) a revision worksheet to guide student writers through their rough drafts. The advice on developing the essay and the section on common problems are both explained in easy-to-understand language accompanied by numerous examples. The ten student essays should encourage student writers by showing them that others in their situation can indeed compose organized, thoughtful essays. The student essays that appear here are not perfect, however; consequently, teachers may use them in class to generate suggestions for still more revision.

The ten professional essays presented in Part Two were selected to spur class discussion and to illustrate the rhetorical principles discussed in the text. While each of the modes and strategies are illustrated by a professional essay, Chapter 9, on argumentation, contains two professional essays so that students may see writers arguing different sides of a current controversy. This chapter also presents two advertisements that directly counter each other, again offering students an opportunity to compare and contrast argumentative approaches.

Chapter 12, "Writing the Research Paper," shows students how to use the library, take notes, and incorporate source material into their essays. Examples are provided to help students understand the difference between summary and paraphrase and between plagiarism in its various forms and proper documentation. The chapter contains information on the current MLA parenthetical documentation format and samples of the most often used bibliographic entries, as well as a "problem-solving" student essay that uses research material to support its points. It also includes discussion of the APA style of documentation and samples of the most frequently used entries.

Part Three contains a concise handbook with non-technical explanations and easy-to-understand examples showing how to correct the most common errors in grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. This part also includes nine sets of exercises over the grammar and punctuation rules. Instead of following each and every rule with five or ten simplistic sentences containing the error in question, this text offers a series of exercises systematically placed so that the students may practice applying several rules at one sitting, just as they must do when they write their own prose. A brief section on spelling hints may offer some limited relief to students who suffer from the malady of being poor spellers.

Part Four gives teachers the opportunity to choose among twenty-seven additional professional essays. These essays—some serious, some humorous, some familiar, some new—also illustrate the modes and strategies discussed in

Part Two and offer a variety of ideas, structures, and styles to consider. By assigning some of these readings, in addition to the ten in Part Two, teachers may show students different organizational patterns found within the same strategy. For example, students studying comparison/contrast may see several essays developed by the "block" method and others developed by the "point-by-point" method. Similarly, students writing process analysis papers may study both directional and informational models; students studying causal analysis may see some essays that primarily focus on the causes of something and others, on the effects; and so on. Studying the professional essays presented here should help novice writers as they make their own rhetorical choices.

One minor note: readers of this text may discover an occasional attempt at humor. The lighthearted tone of some samples and exercises is the result of the author's firm belief that while learning to write is serious business, solemn composition classrooms are not always the most beneficial environments for anxious beginning writers. The author takes full responsibility (and all of the blame) for the bad jokes and even worse puns.

Finally, an Instructor's Manual, which includes suggestions for teaching the text, answers to the exercises and Part Two's essay questions, and questions for the essays in Part Four, is available. For a free copy, write the English Editor; Holt, Rinehart and Winston Publishers; Suite 3700, 301 Commerce Street; Ft. Worth, TX, 76102.

While there are many methods of teaching composition, *Steps to Writing Well* tries to help inexperienced writers by offering a clearly defined sequential approach to writing the short essay. By presenting simple, practical advice directly to the students, this text is intended to make the demanding jobs of teaching and learning the basic principles of composition easier and more enjoyable for everyone.

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# To the Student

## FINDING THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

If you agree with one or more of the following statements, we have some serious myth-killing to do before you begin this book:

1. I'm no good in English—never have been, never will be.
2. Only people with natural talent for writing can succeed in composition class.
3. My composition teacher is a picky, comma-hunting liberal/conservative/hippie freak/old fogey/whatever, who will insist I write just like him or her.
4. I write for myself, not for anyone else, so I don't need this class or this book.
5. Composition classes are designed to put my creativity in a straitjacket.

The notion that good writers are born, not made, is a widespread myth that may make you feel defeated before you start. But the simple truth is that good writers *are* made—simply because *effective writing is a skill that can be learned*. Despite any feelings of insecurity you may have about composition, you should realize that you already know many of the basic rules of good writing; after all, you've been writing since you were six years old. What you need now is some practical advice on composition, some coaching to sharpen your skills, and a strong dose of determination to practice those skills until you can consistently produce the results you want. Talent, as the French writer Flaubert once said, is nothing more than long patience.

Think about learning to write well as you might consider your tennis game. No one is born a tennis star. You first learn the basic rules and movements and then go out on the court to practice. And practice. No one's tennis will improve if he or she stays off the court; similarly, you must write regularly



and receive feedback to improve your composition skills. Try to see your teacher not as Dr. Frankenstein determined to reproduce his or her style of writing in you, but rather as your coach, your loyal trainer, who wants you to do the very best you can. Like any good coach, your teacher will point out your strengths and weaknesses; she or he will often send you to this text for practical suggestions for improvement. And while there are no quick, magic solutions for learning to write well, the most important point to remember is this: with this text, your own common sense, and determination, *you can improve your writing.*

## WHY WRITE?

“OK,” you say, “so I can improve if I try—but why should I bother? Why should I write well? I’m not going to be a professional writer.”

In the first place, writing helps us explore our own thoughts and feelings. Writing forces us to articulate our ideas, to discover what we really think about an issue. For example, let’s suppose you’re faced with a difficult decision and that the arguments pro and con are jumbled in your head. You begin to write down all the pertinent facts and feelings, and, suddenly, you begin to see that you do, indeed, have stronger arguments for one side of the question than the other. Once you “see” what you are thinking, you may then scrutinize your opinions for any logical flaws or weaknesses and revise your argument accordingly. In other words, writing lays out our ideas for examination, analysis, and thoughtful reaction. Thus when we write, we (and the world at large) see who we are, and what we stand for, much more clearly. Moreover, writing can provide a record of our thoughts that we may study and evaluate in a way that conversation cannot. In short, writing well enables us to see and know ourselves—our feelings, ideas, and opinions—better.

On a more practical level, we need to write effectively to communicate with others. While a part of our writing is done solely for ourselves, the majority of it is created for others to share. In this world, it is almost impossible to claim that we write only for ourselves. We are constantly asked to put our feelings, ideas, and knowledge in writing for others to read. In four years of college, no matter what your major, you will repeatedly be required to write essays, tests, reports, and exercises (not to mention letters home). Later, you may need to write formal letters of application for jobs or graduate training. And on a job you may have to write numerous kinds of reports, proposals, analyses, and requisitions. To be successful in any field, you must make your correspondence with business associates and co-workers clearly understood; remember that enormous amounts of time, energy, and profit have been lost because of a single unclear office memo.

There’s still a third—more cynical—reason for studying writing techniques. Once you begin to improve your ability to use language, you will become more aware of the ways others write and speak. Through today’s mass media, we are continually bombarded with words from politicians, advertisers, scientists,

preachers, and teachers. We need to understand and evaluate what we are hearing, not only for our benefit but also for self-protection. Language is frequently manipulated to manipulate us. For example, years ago some government officials on trial preferred us to see Watergate as an “intelligence information gathering mission” rather than as simple breaking and entering, and today some politicians claim to merely “misspeak themselves” when caught in lies. Similarly, military officers and CIA members may discuss the “neutralization” of their enemies, possibly through the use of weapons with names such as “Peacekeeper,” designed to obscure their potential for our total destruction. (In 1988, the National Council of Teachers of English gave their Doublespeak Award to the U.S. officers who, after accidentally shooting down a plane of civilians, reported that the plane didn’t crash—rather, it had “uncontrolled contact with the ground.”) Advertisers frequently try to sell us “authentic art reproductions” that are, of course, fakes all the same; the television networks treat us to “encore presentations” that are the same old summer reruns. And “fenestration engineers” are still window cleaners; “environmental superintendents” are still janitors; “drain surgeons” are still plumbers.

By becoming better writers ourselves, we can learn to recognize and reject the irresponsible, cloudy, and dishonest language of others before we become victims of their exploitation.

## A GOOD PLACE TO START

If improving writing skills is not only possible but important, it is also something else: hard work. H. L. Mencken, American critic and writer, once remarked that “for every difficult and complex problem, there is an obvious solution that is simple, easy and wrong.” No composition text can promise easy formulas guaranteed to improve your writing overnight. Nor is writing always fun for anyone. But this text can make the learning process easier, less painful, and more enjoyable than you might anticipate. Written in plain, straightforward language addressed to you, the student, this book will suggest a variety of practical ways for you to organize and write clear, concise prose. Because each of your writing tasks will be different, this text cannot provide a single, simple blueprint that will apply in all instances. Later chapters, however, will discuss some of the most common methods of organizing essays, such as development by example, definition, classification, causal analysis, comparison/contrast, and argument. As you become more familiar with, and begin to master, these patterns of writing, you will find yourself increasingly able to assess, organize, and explain the thoughts you have about the people, events, and situations in your own life. And while it may be true that in learning to write well there is no free ride, this book, along with your own willingness to work and improve, can start you down the road with a good sense of direction.

J.W.

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