

THE OXFORD

THE ESSENTIAL RESOURCE—FROM THE
FIRST NAME IN REFERENCE

Essential Guide to Writing

- Step-by-step approach for organizing, shaping, and completing your work
 - Rules of style and technique
- Appendix on punctuation and grammar
- Examples of expert prose from the masters

Thomas S. Kane

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**Essential Guide
to Writing**

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BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M4V 3B2, Canada

(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr. Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

THE OXFORD ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO WRITING

A Berkley Book / published by arrangement with Oxford University Press, Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY

Berkley edition / July 2000

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Some examples and the Punctuation section were previously published in *The Oxford Guide to Writing: A Rhetoric and Handbook for College Students*.

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For information, address: Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

ISBN: 0-425-17640-1

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375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7

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Acknowledgments

This book is based on *The Oxford Guide to Writing: A Rhetoric and Handbook for College Students*, and thanks are due once more to those who contributed to that book: my friend and colleague Leonard J. Peters; Professors Miriam Baker of Dowling College, David Hamilton of the University of Iowa, Robert Lyons and Sandra Schor of Queens College of the City University of New York, and Joseph Trimmer of Ball State University, all of whom read the manuscript and contributed perceptive comments; Ms. Cheryl Kupper, who copyedited that text with great thoroughness and care; and John W. Wright, my editor at the Oxford University Press.

For the present edition I am again grateful to Professor Leonard J. Peters and to John W. Wright. In addition I wish to thank William P. Sisler and Joan Bossert, my editors at Oxford University Press, who encouraged, criticized, and improved, as good editors do.

Kittery Point, Maine
December 1987

T.S.K.

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The New Oxford Guide
to Writing

Introduction

Two broad assumptions underlie this book: (1) that writing is a rational activity, and (2) that it is a valuable activity.

To say that writing is rational means nothing more than that it is an exercise of mind requiring the mastery of techniques anyone can learn. Obviously, there are limits: one cannot learn to write like Shakespeare or Charles Dickens. You can't become a genius by reading a book.

But you don't have to be a genius to write clear, effective English. You just have to understand what writing involves and to know how to handle words and sentences and paragraphs. *That* you can learn. If you do, you can communicate what you want to communicate in words other people can understand. This book will help by showing you what good writers do.

The second assumption is that writing is worth learning. It is of immediate practical benefit in almost any job or career. Certainly there are many jobs in which you can get along without being able to write clearly. If you know how to write, however, you will get along faster and farther.

There is another, more profound value to writing. We create ourselves by words. Before we are businesspeople or lawyers or engineers or teachers, we are human beings. Our

growth as human beings depends on our capacity to understand and to use language. Writing is a way of growing. No one would argue that being able to write will make you morally better. But it will make you more complex and more interesting—in a word, more human.

Subject, Reader, and Kinds of Writing

Choosing a Subject

Often, of course, you are not free to choose at all. You must compose a report for a business meeting or write on an assigned topic for an English class. The problem then becomes not *what* to write about but how to attack it, a question we'll discuss in Chapters 5 and 6.

When you can select a subject for yourself, it ought to interest you, and interest others as well, at least potentially. It should be within the range of your experience and skill, though it is best if it stretches you. It ought to be neither so vast that no one person can encompass it nor so narrow and trivial that no one cares.

Don't be afraid to express your own opinions and feelings. You are a vital part of the subject. No matter what the topic, you are really writing about how *you* understand it, how *you* feel about it. Good writing has personality. Readers enjoy sensing a mind at work, hearing a clear voice, responding to an unusual sensibility. If you have chosen a topic that is of general concern, and if genuine feeling and intelligence come through, you will be interesting. Interest lies not so much in a topic as in what a writer has made of it.

About Readers

You don't want to repel readers. This doesn't mean you have to flatter them or avoid saying something they may disagree with. It does mean you must respect them. Don't take their interest for granted or suppose that it is the readers' job to follow you. It's your job to guide them, to make their task as easy as the subject allows.

Ask yourself questions about your readers: What can I expect them to know and not know? What do they believe and value? How do I want to affect them by what I say? What attitudes and claims will meet with their approval? What will offend them? What objections may they have to my ideas, and how can I anticipate and counter those objections?

Readers may be annoyed if you overestimate their knowledge. Tossing off unusual words may seem a put-down, a way of saying, "I know more than you." On the other hand, laboring the obvious also implies a low opinion of readers: don't tell them what a wheel is; they know. It isn't easy to gauge your readers' level of knowledge or to sense their beliefs and values. Sensitivity to readers comes only with experience, and then imperfectly. Tact and respect, however, go a long way. Readers have egos too.

Kinds of Writing

The various effects a writer may wish to have on his or her readers—to inform, to persuade, to entertain—result in different kinds of prose. The most common is prose that informs, which, depending on what it is about, is called exposition, description, or narration.

Exposition explains. How things work—an internal combustion engine. Ideas—a theory of economics. Facts of everyday life—how many people get divorced. History—why Custer attacked at the Little Big Horn. Controversial issues laden with feelings—abortion, politics, religion. But whatever

its subject, exposition reveals what a particular mind thinks or knows or believes. Exposition is constructed logically. It organizes around cause/effect, true/false, less/more, positive/negative, general/particular, assertion/denial. Its movement is signaled by connectives like *therefore*, *however*, *and so*, *besides*, *but*, *not only*, *more important*, *in fact*, *for example*.

Description deals with perceptions—most commonly visual perceptions. Its central problem is to arrange what we see into a significant pattern. Unlike the logic of exposition, the pattern is spatial: above/below, before/behind, right/left, and so on.

The subject of *narration* is a series of related events—a story. Its problem is twofold: to arrange the events in a sequence of time and to reveal their significance.

Persuasion seeks to alter how readers think or believe. It is usually about controversial topics and often appeals to reason in the form of *argument*, offering evidence or logical proof. Another form of persuasion is *satire*, which ridicules folly or evil, sometimes subtly, sometimes crudely and coarsely. Finally, persuasion may be in the form of *eloquence*, appealing to ideals and noble sentiments.

Writing that is primarily *entertaining* includes fiction, personal essays, sketches. Such prose will receive less attention here. It is certainly important, but it is more remote from everyday needs than exposition or persuasion.

For Practice

- ▷ List ten or twelve topics you might develop into a short essay. Think of topics that deal not so much with things, places, or how-to-do projects as with your opinions and beliefs. Pick subjects that interest you and are within your experience, yet challenging. Be specific: don't simply write "my job" but something like "what I like most (or hate most) about my job."
- ▷ Selecting one of the topics on your list, compose a paragraph about the readers for whom you might develop it. Consider how

you wish to affect those readers, what you want them to understand and feel. Think about their general knowledge, values, attitudes, biases; whether they are your age or older or younger, come from a similar or a different background; and how you would like them to regard you.

Strategy and Style

Purpose, the end you're aiming at, determines strategy and style. Strategy involves choice—selecting particular aspects of a topic to develop, deciding how to organize them, choosing this word rather than that, constructing various types of sentences, building paragraphs. Style is the result of strategy, the language that makes the strategy work.

Think of purpose, strategy, and style in terms of increasing abstractness. Style is immediate and obvious. It exists in the writing itself; it is the sum of the actual words, sentences, paragraphs. Strategy is more abstract, felt beneath the words as the immediate ends they serve. Purpose is even deeper, supporting strategy and involving not only what you write about but how you affect readers.

A brief example will clarify these overlapping concepts. It was written by a college student in a fifteen-minute classroom exercise. The several topics from which the students could choose were stated broadly—"marriage," "parents," "teachers," and so on—so that each writer had to think about restricting and organizing his or her composition. This student chose "marriage":

Why get married? Or if you are modern, why live together? Answer: Insecurity. "Man needs woman; woman needs man." However, this

cliché fails to explain need. How do you need someone of the opposite sex? Sexually is an insufficient explanation. Other animals do not stay with a mate for more than one season; some not even that long. Companionship, although a better answer, is also an incomplete explanation. We all have several friends. Why make one friend so significant that he at least partially excludes the others? Because we want to "join our lives." But this desire for joining is far from "romantic"—it is selfish. We want someone to share our lives in order that we do not have to endure hardships alone.

The writer's purpose is not so much to tell us of what she thinks about marriage as to convince us that what she thinks is true. Her purpose, then, is persuasive, and it leads to particular strategies both of organization and of sentence style. Her organization is a refinement of a conventional question/answer strategy: a basic question ("Why get married?"); an initial, inadequate answer ("Insecurity"); a more precise question ("How do we need someone?"); a partial answer ("sex"); then a second partial answer ("companionship"); a final, more precise question ("Why make one friend so significant?"); and a concluding answer ("so that we do not have to endure hardships alone").

The persuasive purpose is also reflected in the writer's strategy of short emphatic sentences. They are convincing, and they establish an appropriate informal relationship with readers.

Finally, the student's purpose determines her strategy in approaching the subject and in presenting herself. About the topic, the writer is serious without becoming pompous. As for herself, she adopts an impersonal point of view, avoiding such expressions as "I think" or "it seems to me." On another occasion they might suggest a pleasing modesty; here they would weaken the force of her argument.

These strategies are effectively realized in the style: in the clear rhetorical questions, each immediately followed by a straightforward answer; and in the short uncomplicated sentences, echoing speech. (There are even two sentences that are grammatically incomplete—"Answer: Insecurity" and "Be-

cause we want to 'join our lives.' ") At the same time the sentences are sufficiently varied to achieve a strategy fundamental to all good prose—to get and hold the reader's attention.

Remember several things about strategy. First, it is many-sided. Any piece of prose displays not one but numerous strategies—of organization, of sentence structure, of word choice, of point of view, of tone. In effective writing these reinforce one another.

Second, no absolute one-to-one correspondence exists between strategy and purpose. A specific strategy may be adapted to various purposes. The question/answer mode of organizing, for example, is not confined to persuasion: it is often used in informative writing. Furthermore, a particular purpose may be served by different strategies. In our example the student's organization was not the only one possible. Another writer might have organized using a "list" strategy:

People get married for a variety of reasons. First . . . Second . . .
Third . . . Finally . . .

Still another might have used a personal point of view, or taken a less serious approach, or assumed a more formal relationship with the reader.

Style

In its broadest sense "style" is the total of all the choices a writer makes concerning words and their arrangements. In this sense style may be good or bad—good if the choices are appropriate to the writer's purpose, bad if they are not. More narrowly, "style" has a positive, approving sense, as when we say that someone has "style" or praise a writer for his or her "style." More narrowly yet, the word may also designate a particular way of writing, unique to a person or characteristic of a group or profession: "Hemingway's style," "an academic style."