The Power of Writing

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Preface

Most people write for the same reason they balance their checkbooks, drive their cars, or read their newspapers. Writing allows them to control the circumstances of their lives. Unfortunately, many students enter a composition classroom believing that writing is a special talent possessed by a few gifted individuals. As long as they see writing as something that *other* people do, they cannot develop their own abilities to write. We wrote *The Power of Writing* to show students how *they* can use writing to get things done.

For this reason, *The Power of Writing* is written *to* students and *for* students. We address the student directly from the first page in order to communicate clearly that writing is something they can do. We want them to see the potential of writing for organizing experience, clarifying thinking, discovering new ideas, communicating information, arguing a debatable issue, investigating a problem — to explore the full range of uses for writing in their lives.

In writing this book, we have tried to concentrate on the essential elements of writing. These are not the old "basics": lectures on the qualities of good writing, for instance. Telling students what they should do when they write has little effect on their actual performance. Nobody learns to swim sitting on a beach towel. *The Power of Writing* immediately immerses the student in the activity of writing. Part I: Writing Strategies helps students to explore their ideas, develop a focus, and revise in light of purpose and audience. Part II: The Aims of Writing leads students through specific assignments in writing to discover, inform, analyze, persuade, and investigate. Part III: Editing provides students with essential information on mechanics and style. Even in this section, we engage the students in the process of editing rather than getting bogged down in hair-splitting discussions of grammatical terms.

We are under no delusion that this textbook, or any textbook, should be the focus of a composition course. At one time, administrators and even some compo-

sition teachers might have pointed to the textbook as the best explanation of what the composition course entailed. Most of us now point to our classrooms, our conferences with our students, and our students' papers as the best representation of what we can accomplish in such a course.

Given a focus on student–teacher interaction as the foundation of the composition course, what part should a textbook play in the development of student writing? As a minimum, a textbook shouldn't get in the way. When students have invested large sums of money in an oversized text, their teacher feels almost compelled to spend time explaining the book, diverting attention from the students' own work. Because *The Power of Writing* was written to be read by students, we have avoided unnecessary jargon and theoretical justification for our approaches. Although our book is based on sound rhetorical theory — for instance, emphasizing a process approach to writing and encouraging collaborative activity — we do not feel that students in an introductory writing course should spend time figuring out the difference between topics and *topoi* or comparing Aristotle's views on argument to those of Stephen Toulmin. Many books aim to train new composition teachers. We don't believe a student textbook should serve that purpose.

We have strived, then, to make *The Power of Writing* a textbook that works for the teacher. Students get the necessary background information they need from the textbook so that class time focuses on working with the students' own writing. If students are struggling with a particular problem, the instructor can refer them to a section of the text that will provide helpful information in a clear, easy-to-understand format. The book's many activities will help the class as a whole explore new ideas and consider new approaches. The tone of the book is encouraging to students, especially those who often ignore independent reading assignments.

The Power of Writing . . .

- Empowers student writers

    Students learn how to use writing to improve their personal, professional, and academic lives. Writing is not treated as an end in itself but as a means of achieving individual and social goals.

- Recognizes student diversity

    American higher education has become increasingly open to students of different ages, cultures, educational backgrounds, and career goals. *The Power of Writing* emphasizes the importance of cultural background and heritage and the role that communication plays in developing mutual understanding and respect.

- Encourages collaborative activity

    Composition scholars have become increasingly aware of the social nature of all writing. *The Power of Writing* encourages group brainstorming, peer

review, and other collaborative writing activities. Many of the activities take place in Discovery Groups set up to explore alternative approaches and to examine issues critically instead of merely to give pat answers.

- Acknowledges professional writing concerns

    The Power of Writing will appeal to those students who have an interest in professional writing situations. For instance, students are often asked to write for situations they could encounter on the job. Sections on conducting field research and preparing graphics recognize the need for these skills in many practical writing situations.

- Appeals to reluctant writers

    The friendly tone of the text and the use of illustrations and examples are appealing to the student who may be unprepared for college-level reading or who lacks motivation. High-interest reading selections are used throughout. The visually interesting format encourages independent reading of the textbook.

- Provides information on writing with a computer

    Students are encouraged to see the computer as more than a fancy type-writer. As well as considering word processing applications, "Byte-Size Bulletins" provide information on modems, printers, electronic mail, databases, style programs, and many other subjects of interest. Instead of being relegated to an appendix, word processing information is placed in the context where it is most needed. We discuss databases in a chapter that considers library research and explain spell checkers in a chapter on editing. Since the emphasis is on the potential uses of computers, even students who do not use a word processor will find the information timely and relevant.

- Is informed by composition theory and research

    Although *The Power of Writing* is not laden with rhetorical jargon, it does rely on the results of composition research for its approach to student writing. For instance, the emphasis on collaboration in writing is based on recent studies showing the importance of collaboration to students' intellectual development. Writing assignments are also sequenced, beginning with short writing-to-discover activities and leading progressively to the more challenging tasks of writing to persuade and to investigate. Wherever possible, the editing activities are designed to represent writing in context rather than to focus on individual sentences. Rather than simply treating language as a static object, the "Language Notes," which instructors may find useful as "mini-lessons," engage the class in becoming conscious of their own language customs and habits. Critical thinking is encouraged throughout the text. The text itself becomes open to question in the "Critical Moments" section at the end of each chapter. In other words, the text is student centered, process oriented, and collaboratively based.

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