

P E R S P E C T I V E S O N

# ACADEMIC WRITING



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# PERSPECTIVES ON ACADEMIC WRITING

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## PREFACE

Educators have long realized that writing is important, not just for conveying information but also for clarifying thought and exploring ideas. For these reasons, writing has become an integral part of every discipline within the academy, from the humanities to the social sciences to the sciences. We believe that one important role of the first-year writing course is to show beginning college students how various disciplines produce and use writing. Accordingly, our central aim in *Perspectives on Academic Writing* is to reflect our commitment to writing across the disciplines in all aspects of our discussion. For instance, when we discuss report writing, we give examples of various kinds of assignments students might receive—whether in chemistry, journalism, or marketing. In describing how to write reports, we provide explanations and examples relevant to a number of different disciplines. In this way, we hope to sensitize our student-readers to the many contexts in which they will write during and after their college careers and to equip them with the skills necessary to assess each rhetorical situation and to select appropriate strategies to produce effective writing.

In order to inform ourselves and our readers about the different kinds of writing actually being required within different disciplines, we collected over a hundred different assignments from disciplines as diverse as sociology, psychology, environmental studies, marketing, elementary education, sports management, chemistry, computer science, and ethnic studies, to name a few. These assignments, coupled with conversations with our colleagues in other academic departments, have strongly influenced the instruction, the writing assignments, and the readings in the text.

*Perspectives on Academic Writing* has been designed for use by first-year students in courses focused on academic and research writing. It is divided into three parts. Part I discusses the writing process and the nature of collaboration. Part II, the core of the text, consists of eight chapters on the skills and kinds of writing students will be required to use throughout their college careers. Chapters 3 through 8 focus on writing personal histories, observing, reporting, critiquing, evaluating, and synthesizing. Chapters 9 and 10 guide students through the research process with library and nonlibrary sources. Part III consists of three collaborative research projects equally suitable for a small group or for an entire class. The projects are designed to give groups great latitude in devising and producing their work and to afford students the opportunity to write in a variety of academic formats.

One distinctive feature of *Perspectives on Academic Writing* is that many of the readings within the chapters are taken from scholarly journals of the sort students will work with as they progress through their studies. In selecting these readings, we chose pieces that demonstrate disciplinary perspectives and approaches but are, at the same time, accessible and interesting. The pages of *Perspectives on Academic*

*Writing* include discussions of how McDonald's won the hamburger wars, reviews of controversial films, and a report of a search for the identity of an unknown growth discovered in a pickle jar.

Because a central component of writing across the disciplines over the past several decades has been attention not just to writing but to language experiences across the curriculum, we have incorporated the pedagogy of collaboration—which we know permeates many disciplines and professions—throughout the text. *Perspectives on Academic Writing* provides not only carefully sequenced writing assignments that reflect the kinds of writing commonly assigned across the disciplines, but also special guidance on how to collaborate and how to organize and reorganize the social relations in which learning will occur.

We believe that *Perspectives on Academic Writing* is unique in accomplishing the following:

- Providing practice with a variety of academic writing assignments sequenced from easy to complex. These activities will help first-year students master the academic writing skills that they will need throughout college and beyond.
- Empowering students to become analytical, perceptive readers. Each of the disciplinary readings in *Perspectives on Academic Writing* is accompanied by questions requiring the kind of critical thinking that leads to sustained critical responses.
- Motivating students by providing them with a peer audience for their writing and ideas. According to current theory in composition and rhetoric, students learn more quickly and write more effectively when they are given audiences other than their teachers. This theory is fundamental to the approach of *Perspectives on Academic Writing*, which provides students with an audience of their peers each time they are asked to write.
- Helping students work together to become active researchers. *Perspectives on Academic Writing* does not merely instruct students to do research but provides a research process and teaches them how to investigate primary as well as secondary sources.
- Including activities of interest to nontraditional learners as well as to traditional learners. These activities have proved accessible to a wide range of first-year college writers.
- Providing students with reading and writing activities that introduce current rhetorical theory at a level of understanding appropriate for first-year students.
- Teaching students to become successful collaborators. *Perspectives on Academic Writing* shows students how to collaborate in each assigned discussion and planning activity. In addition, the text teaches students to reach collective judgments in all phases of the writing process—invention/prewriting; drafting/revision; final editing/publishing. This, in turn, encourages students to take their ideas seriously and to modify them or revise them in the light of others' ideas. Students also learn to recognize and tolerate differ-

ences and, ideally, to see the value systems or sets of beliefs that underlie these differences.

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## CHAPTER 1

# HOW WRITERS WRITE

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### WHAT WRITERS DO WHEN THEY WRITE

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It is no exaggeration to say that there are as many different writing habits as there are writers. Each writer possesses a unique collection of rituals and practices. Some writers spend days or weeks thinking about and discussing a topic and, then, in response to a feeling of readiness, write a first draft alone in one sitting; others set aside a regular block of time each day for writing and hold conversations on a regular basis to develop and refine their ideas. Some writers do most of the thinking about what they're going to write in their heads; others reveal these thoughts and strategies on paper. While some writers compose a first draft on paper, others write everything on a computer.

Knowing what you do when you write is important in order to improve your efficiency and make writing more productive and satisfying. After giving a general discussion of the important processes in which all writers engage, this chapter will provide a series of descriptions and exercises that should help you discover your writing behavior.

### Invention

Much has been written about how people discover what to write about and what to write. *Invention*, or the processes by which writers generate information and ideas, is a crucial component of any journey toward a completed text, whether that text be single-authored or cowritten.

Many writers have no idea about what they do when they invent, particularly if whatever they do produces the desired effect. These writers use unconscious strategies, alone or in concert with others, to come up with ideas and information, to plumb their memories, jog their minds, and make connections, and to create relationships. Other writers have an array of invention techniques and procedures that they self-consciously employ by themselves or with others, sometimes in a particular order, depending on the circumstances. Many of these techniques have been simplified and taught to apprentice writers. For the most part, beginning writers are encouraged to devote plenty of conscious time to the inventing process because

research studies show that fluent, competent writers seem to spend more time inventing than inexperienced ones do. Also, experienced writers are sufficiently flexible to engage in invention activities whenever necessary throughout the writing process—not just at the beginning before they start drafting.

In general, *invention* techniques fall into one of two categories. Some primarily generate information and ideas; others generate and arrange them. Here is a common invention technique that *generates* information:

*On a separate sheet of paper or sitting at your computer, write for two minutes anything that comes to your mind in response to this sentence, “When I begin writing, I \_\_\_\_\_.” Begin immediately and do not stop writing for two minutes. If you can’t think of anything to write, then write (and keep on writing) “I can’t think of anything to write.”*

This easy-to-use and effective technique is known as timed *freewriting*. Usually timed freewriting sessions last from five to ten minutes. Writers who frequently employ freewriting may alternate timed sessions with untimed ones, which last for as long as a writer wants, and they can produce many pages of text. Try freewriting whenever you want to generate ideas quickly or to explore or probe a topic—especially if you don’t have others with whom you can converse.

To give you an example of an invention technique that *generates* and *arranges* ideas and information, here is a simple version of an invention strategy that you will learn more about in a subsequent chapter:

*“When I begin writing, I \_\_\_\_\_.”*

*Answer the following questions (1–3) in response to the previous sentence. You may freewrite your answers if you wish, but try to spend a couple of minutes on each question:*

1. *Where do you usually begin writing? Describe one place where you often begin writing. If you don’t have such a place, then imagine an ideal place to begin writing, and describe it.*
2. *When do you begin writing? What time of day (in the morning? late at night?) do you prefer to begin writing? Why is that time preferable?*
3. *Whom do you think of when you begin writing? The teacher who gave you the assignment? Your audience? Yourself? Your ninth grade history teacher? Your mother? Do you always think of the same person—yourself, for example—or does it depend on the assignment, the state of your mind, and so forth? Explain.*

As you can see from your brief experience with these invention procedures, some are simple and require little effort; others are more complex and invite the user to create relationships among and categories within the ideas and information that they generate. In contrast to freewriting, the second exercise you performed didn’t

just assist you in bringing forth information about writing; it divided that information into three categories related to *where* you write, *when* you write, and *whom* you think of when you write. Many writers prefer to begin with a simple invention technique, such as freewriting, to discover ideas and to jog their memories. Then they follow this initial invention with a more elaborate procedure that sorts or “clusters” information.

One invention tool that lends itself readily to either simple or complex inventing strategies is the computer. Even with the most simple word processor, writers can easily freewrite or generate lists. Computers also enable writers to manipulate the writing that they produce. Chunks of text can easily be moved or reproduced and inserted in more than one part of a freewriting. Likewise, lists can be moved, combined and recombined, keyed in different fonts, and so on. Any of these strategies can enable writers to reconceptualize, expand on, or discover connections among their ideas. Besides the functions that a word processor provides, software designed to assist with various stages of the writing process is increasingly becoming available. Such software can help writers invent by offering them specific questions to answer about their topic.

Now that colleges and universities are making the Internet more accessible to their students, this powerful resource can also be a valuable stimulus to invention. Many writers find that a powerful way to stimulate their thought process is to read or converse with others on matters related to their topic. The Internet is a vast network that reaches every corner of the globe. It offers users a relatively simple way to access a variety of documents on a multitude of topics or to converse with people who share particular interests or possess specific expertise.

## Planning

It is difficult to separate components of the writing process from one another because they often occur simultaneously or recur throughout the act of writing. However, some useful distinctions can be made. *Planning* is the name given to those activities that shape the material (generated by invention) into an organizing principle or thesis. This principle or thesis then determines an appropriate structure. Unlike invention, planning cannot be easily accomplished through the use of one or more standard methods or procedures, so it is a challenge for writers, especially inexperienced ones.

Fortunately, even though there are no absolutely dependable methods for helping a writer discover a thesis, writing texts and teachers do offer some helpful techniques to accomplish this task. Some recommend the use of powerful invention procedures that arrange the generated information into complex groupings or patterns that reveal hidden or subtle relationships; such relationships can suggest interesting and provocative organizing principles. Other people maintain that a rigorous process of generating data, focusing on a small portion of that data, and then repeating the process by generating and then focusing again—especially if this process is informed by feedback from teachers or peers—can help a writer determine a thesis.

Once a writer has come up with a provisional thesis, the most commonly offered method of planning is a simplified variation of the outline. Although most writers do not produce a formal outline (with roman numerals and capital and small letters and so forth), many sketch a tentative structure to guide their drafting of an essay after they've decided on an organizing principle or thesis. Such an organizational plan might consist of several blocks of notes, each block describing a part of the essay; a series of summaries of what should go in the introduction, the first paragraph, the second, the third, and so forth; or a set of objectives that direct the writer to "talk about" certain items in a particular order.

In arriving at a workable outline or organizational plan, a writer can use the computer to good effect. A word processor enables writers to reorder sections of their plans, to easily add and delete details and ideas, or to save several alternate plans that can be compared, modified, or combined. Currently, there is also hypertext software designed to help writers create various organizational plans by allowing them to create links between topics and subtopics. And of course, many widely available software packages for word processing enable writers to craft formal outlines.

Although some writers can visualize the structure of a text before they begin to draft it, others must discover the form that their writing will take by writing. These writers usually do not benefit from an initial outline or organizational plan. This is not to say that writers who must discover their forms by writing can never benefit from an outline, however. Writers who discover form after they have begun drafting often outline a first or an early draft; such outlines are useful because they frequently suggest theses or organizational plans that can be helpful in crafting subsequent revisions.

For writers who discover form while drafting, the computer can also be extremely helpful. It can enable such writers to rearrange their drafts and highlight and draw out key lines from which they can create topic outlines. A computer can even allow a writer to rearrange portions of text, produce several alternate drafts, and create outlines comprising the first (or first several) lines of each paragraph. These outlines can then be compared, modified, and combined. Regardless of their planning strategies for shorter papers, however, most writers prepare detailed outlines before they begin drafting when they produce long papers that synthesize information from a variety of sources.

## Drafting

*Drafting* is the designation commonly given to the act of writing a text; it can—but doesn't always—follow inventing and planning activities such as freewriting or outlining. That is, some writers do a lot of inventing and sketch out detailed plans before they actually begin drafting. For these writers *drafting* means the writing they do when they make a first attempt to construct a text after they have completed any initial inventing or planning. Other writers, however, produce their best work when they begin writing a paper immediately—without any preliminaries. Such writers do not do any conscious inventing or planning. Later in their writing process, as they work on subsequent drafts, these writers may use freewriting or

other inventing strategies, as needed. They discover an organizational structure as their texts become more finished.

When a person begins writing immediately, it is hard to characterize that process as either drafting or inventing—since it is probably both. Moreover, although it is widely believed that drafting usually takes place after some invention and planning has occurred, invention paragraphs that resemble drafts are common enough to have been given a name: *discovery* (or *zero*) *drafts*. Because *discovery drafts* are special, experienced writers treat them differently from more conventional drafts that are composed following substantial inventing or planning sessions.

Once again, no matter how a writer drafts, the word processor is an important tool. Even those writers who absolutely must compose a first draft on paper often transfer that draft to the word processor so that they can more easily make revisions and edit their texts. However, many writers do their initial drafting with a word processor. Such a means of drafting offers several advantages. Drafting on a computer enables writers to write fast enough to keep pace with their thoughts—no matter how quickly these occur. It simplifies the processes of deleting, adding, or reordering words, sentences, or larger pieces of text, so these operations don't interfere with drafting. Moreover, for those who have done freewriting or other inventing on a computer, moving from inventing to drafting is easier.

### Revising and Rewriting

As we said earlier, it is not unheard of for writers to produce an almost-finished draft the first time they sit down to write. This does not mean, however, that such writers have done no revising; it simply means that the revising occurred in their minds and could not be observed. *Revising*, therefore, refers to any and all of the activities, performed alone or in concert with other people, that a writer does to transform successive versions of text into a finished product. Some writing teachers like to point out that the word *revision* consists of the prefix *re-* and the root *vision*, meaning to “see again.” This is a helpful way to think of the term because the most productive revisions often may transform whole concepts and structures within an emerging text. Also, if you think of revision as “re-vision,” you won't confuse it with editing, the practice of removing blemishes (such as awkward sentences or misspelled words) from a text.

In contrast to revising, which can be mental or physical, *rewriting* is strictly a physical, observable process. That is, it is possible to see just what a writer does while rewriting. Also, if a writer uses a pen, pencil, or typewriter to draft, the physical traces of textual changes—such as crossed-out and added words or arrows indicating changes in ordering—can be examined. However, for those who use a computer to write, the line between drafting and revising and rewriting is often blurred. Word processing makes the act of changing even large portions of text so simple that writers routinely make significant alterations while producing initial drafts. Word processors can also make it more difficult to observe rewriting because each alteration, no matter its scope, creates a “new” text. When a paragraph (or word) is omitted, for example, all traces of it are erased; the deleted paragraph (or

word) doesn't remain on the screen with an X drawn through it. On the other hand, if a writer uses a word processor to write and revise, it is easy to print out, and thus save, progressive drafts of a text.

You probably throw away all of your early drafts after you hand in a finished copy to your teacher, but the next few times you compose a paper, you might save drafts so that you can look over your rewriting and determine the kinds of changes you make, especially if these changes are in response to comments or criticisms you have received from others. In the interim, to get an idea of what you do when you rewrite, you might think of the last time you had to compose an essay, and try to recall the kinds of revisions you made on your paper (or on the screen of your word processor). Did you omit unnecessary words or phrases; move things around to make the ordering of the sentences in a passage less confusing; or add some necessary detail or information that you had omitted? There are four kinds of changes you and other writers make when rewriting: adding, subtracting, substituting, and rearranging. Usually rewriting means making one or more of these kinds of changes right on the paper or screen. However, if a draft is a discovery (or zero) draft, which as you recall is similar to inventing, rewriting could involve starting all over with a blank page or an empty screen.

## Editing

*Editing* is the act of polishing a piece of writing so that it is error-free. Most often, writers correct errors based on their own knowledge of grammar. They also may turn to reference aids such as grammar handbooks or on-line handbooks to help them identify and correct errors. Although editing is usually performed at the end of the process of producing a text, many writers correct misspelled words, fix grammatical and punctuation problems, or rewrite awkward sentences while they are drafting. We even know writers who try to correct spelling errors while they are freewriting! However, no matter how little or how much editing they might have done while constructing a text, meticulous writers do a careful editing of a final draft by reading it several times to ensure that they have eradicated every word- and sentence-level mistake.

Because editing is usually less intellectually demanding than inventing, planning, drafting, and revising, beginning writers sometimes don't give it the attention it deserves. This is a serious mistake. The quality of editing often determines the overall look and feel of a piece of writing. A sloppily edited paper can give the impression that the writer is lazy or careless. Copious editing errors can also annoy or irritate readers. Fortunately, however, writers tend to commit their own inventory of "bloopers," which they can learn to anticipate—and eliminate. An important step in becoming an effective editor, therefore, is to become sufficiently familiar with your writing so that you are aware of the types of errors you make. Skillful editing requires careful attention to your own special inventory of problems and to transcription errors that inevitably occur during the act of writing.

These days a variety of word processing aids such as spellchecks and grammar checks have become increasingly available. On occasion, we have been asked whether these have eliminated the need for careful editing. The answer is a resounding no.



Spellchecks often help writers detect misspelled words, but because they don't respond to the context in which words are used they can easily "overlook" errors. The same is true for grammar checks, which also cannot evaluate the context in which words and sentences appear. A spellcheck would find nothing odd about this sentence despite its peculiarity: "In the sprung, birds sing noisy because their building nests for there babes." Because all of the words within the sentence exist and can be spelled as they are, a spellcheck would find nothing amiss. Grammar and spellchecks, then, can be useful tools for the writer, but they are meant to enhance, *not* to replace, a careful job of editing.

## DISCOVERING YOUR OWN BEHAVIOR

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Do you play a musical instrument? Are you—or were you ever—a serious basketball player? Or perhaps you design and sew clothes. If you've already practiced one or more skills seriously, then you know that *how* you perform cannot be separated from *what* you perform. You have probably had to learn to observe and dissect your own behavior to rid yourself of ineffective habits and to build a repertoire of strategies that lead to success. Like any other skill, your writing will improve if you make an effort to examine and modify what you do. Here's a true story to illustrate how this might work:

*Kathy often put off working on a writing assignment, sometimes until the night before it was due because she "wrote best under pressure," yet she found that these last-minute sessions were extremely unpleasant. However, when keeping a log of what she did when writing an essay, Kathy discovered something curious: She could not write any part of her essay until the introduction was letter-perfect. After she finally got through the introduction, the rest of the paper "flowed." Kathy timed the process and found that it took her as long to do the introduction (typing and retyping it) as it did to do the rest of the essay.*

*When she shared the results of this discovery in class discussion, several of her classmates as well as her teacher suggested that next time she wrote an essay she should try to keep on writing beyond her initial introduction—no matter how flawed she thought it was. Then she could go back and fix her introduction after her draft was finished.*

*Kathy was determined to try this suggestion, so the next time she wrote she forced herself to continue drafting even though her introduction wasn't exactly the way she wanted it. To her delight, the rest of the essay flowed just as easily as it had when she had spent twice as long on the introduction, and it was easier to go back and revise the beginning of the essay after she had a completed draft. As the semester progressed, Kathy found that diminishing the stress of producing a perfect introduction at the beginning of her writing process lessened her fear of writing. Her diminished fear, in turn, helped her to stop procrastinating. By the end of the semester, Kathy concluded that giving herself more time to write produced better results than putting herself in a pressure cooker.*