

writing
to the
point:
six basic
steps



WILLIAM J. KERRIGAN

SECOND EDITION

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Fullerton College



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to the instructor

The first edition of this book presented a method of teaching composition that, over a period of twenty years, had proved successful with thousands of students in community colleges and universities—a method that starts from scratch and teaches the indispensable basics, step by step, in language that students really understand.

In the second edition, I can add only that the claims of effectiveness made in the first edition have been enthusiastically confirmed. The number of students helped by this method—in *all* their studies, so they continue to report—has increased to tens of thousands as whole English departments, consisting of instructors with widely differing backgrounds, temperaments, and tastes, have made this textbook their choice.

My response to their acceptance has been encouragement but not satisfaction. Kindly criticism from students and instructors who used the book has helped me amend the first edition—yet I have been able to leave intact the basic qualities that have made this book both palatable to students and sure-fire in its results. Thus users will find it the same book they have grown to depend on for the course materials they want to teach, yet at the same time enlarged and improved with considerably more and better examples, further explanations, and elimination of passages that have proved unhelpful to students.

The method is one that I developed in response to the real needs of most students—who aren't going to be literary artists but certainly

should learn how to write competently, both for the courses they take in college and for their life work as employees, employers, and professional people. My teaching has been based not on theory but on experience. What I've found is that most students don't want advice on how to improve their themes; they want to know how to write a theme, starting from scratch. So I begin with the very first step, and when they can all do that—as they all can—I take them to Step 2 and then to Step 3, and on to the point where finally all of them are writing competently.

I have also found that students, even the brightest ones, often don't understand that a theme must have a clear point, and that the whole business of the theme is to support that point in a logical way. It does no good just to say this to students; they must be taught to write themes this way—which is exactly what this book teaches.

This isn't a reference book for students to consult while the instructor is left to create the course; the book itself is the course, and it supplies the principles, explanations, examples, assignments, and even the answers to students' objections. I've taught foreign languages, and found doing it very easy because the course was right in front of me in the book. I believe a good English textbook, as many foreign-language textbooks do, should take students methodically from lesson to lesson, each lesson furnished with everything necessary for the students' mastery of its new concepts.

Because I could find no book that did this for English composition, I wrote this one. In doing so, I transcribed the oral instruction I'd been giving my classes for years. As a result, the book addresses the student easily, familiarly, and directly: it is a conversation with the student. For my object is not to sound professional; it is to teach.

At the same time, the course in this book is highly structured, and it teaches highly structured writing—which is just what students want and certainly need. Far from restricting students, the tight structure soon frees them to say what they really want to say. Their themes become as individual as their handwriting. And students endowed with gifts of expression find at last a form in which they can put those gifts to meaningful use.

In fact, what still is the most pleasing result is that, on completing the course, students are enthusiastic about their own writing and the good, solid sense it makes when they reread it.

WILLIAM J. KERRIGAN

contents

to the instructor	v
 step 1	
Write a short, simple declarative sentence that makes one statement.	2
 step 2	
Write three sentences about the sentence in Step 1.	10
 step 3	
Write four or five sentences about each of the three sentences in Step 2.	30
 step 4	
Make the material in the four or five sentences in Step 3 as specific and concrete as possible. Go into detail. Give examples.	38
 correcting the paper	62
 a breathing space	74
 step 4 again	100

step 5	In the first sentence of the second paragraph and of every paragraph following, insert a clear reference to the idea of the preceding paragraph.	114
step 5	new insights	122
step 1	a useful review	128
step 6	Make sure every sentence in your theme is connected with, and makes a clear reference to, the preceding sentence.	134
step 6	further insights	142
step 6	an analysis	154
	“The Method of Scientific Investigation” by T. H. Huxley	156
	contrast	170
	the argumentative theme	180
	expression	190
	index	211

SECOND EDITION

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six basic steps

step

Though Step 1 is simple, it will call for some effort. (Where there's no effort there's no learning.) But before we begin with Step 1, I'd like to say something helpful about the method in this book. It is a method, a step-by-step method, and that is what makes this book different from others that you may have used. The book itself, as you'll see at once, talks directly and familiarly with you, instead of formally to your instructor; so it is not so much a book as a conversation.

Now what I want to say is that the method taught in this book has proved useful to everyone from grade school students to graduate students in English. (As a matter of fact, one excellent writer, the head of a college English department, told me gratefully that he had learned some things of value from it.) But what you'll really like to hear is that out of the thousands of high school and college students who have studied this method, not one has failed to learn to use it. And after learning it, not one has failed to write themes that, as he himself could see, were quite acceptable—the kind of theme that he had never dreamed he could write.

I suspect that what lies behind this method is my experience with swimming. Efforts to teach me to swim, beginning back in my grade school days, had time after time proved utter failures. In crowded municipal pools, in small private pools, and in the swimming holes in rural creeks, my friends told me to do this and do that, gave me one piece of advice and then another, held me up as I waved my arms and

one

legs, put water wings on me, demonstrated for me again and again. No use. I couldn't learn to swim a stroke or to keep myself up in the water for one second.

But one day when I was in my twenties and was paddling my hands in the water in the shallow end of a pool—while other people swam—a friend of mine got out of the water and said, “Walk out there ten or fifteen feet and turn and face me on the deck of the pool here. O.K. Now raise your hands above your head, take a deep breath and hold it, close your eyes if you want to, and just lie face down in the water. You absolutely can't sink. Then, when you're out of breath, stand up again.”

I followed his directions and to my surprise I didn't sink.

“Now,” he said, “when you lie down again in the water, just kick your feet up and down and you'll come right to me at the edge of the pool.”

I did as he told me. When my hands met the side of the pool and I stood up again, I realized that after years of vain effort, I had—in less than five minutes—learned how to swim. It was the simplest kind of swimming to be sure; and I need not take you through the steps that followed, in which I moved my arms, lifted my head to breathe, and developed various strokes. Let me say only that today I have an acceptable swimming technique.

When it came to teaching theme writing, then, I imagine I realized

that for a method that was going to work for all students, good, fair, and indifferent, what was necessary was a set of simple instructions that any and every student could follow, that would lead—like “lie face down in the water”—to automatic success. The foolproof method that I developed is fully contained in this book. But before turning to that method, I have a few more helpful words to say. First, remember that it guarantees that you will write acceptable themes. And that is because it is automatic: it relies on itself, not on any skill of yours; it does not depend on your having good ideas, a good vocabulary, or good expression. For that reason, it cannot guarantee that the themes you produce will be literature. (To produce literature you would ordinarily need to have done a lot of reading and writing, besides, of course, having been born with unusual gifts.)

But after all, what call will there ever be for you to write literature? In your government class, in your psychology class, in your anthropology class, if your instructor requires you to write a paper, what he will want is a decent, clear, orderly, detailed explanation of something, not a beautiful personal essay. Similarly, in later life, when you have to write a report for your employer or employees, for your customers, or for your colleagues, the people you write for will not expect a masterpiece. But they will want a clear explanation of something that they need to understand. To teach you to do that kind of writing is the modest but useful purpose of this book.

Some of you may write literature later on and if so will find this book a good foundation for it. Meanwhile, if we are all to achieve the modest goal of this book, you will have to do some work—though I must keep assuring you that it will be work you, whoever you are, can do. As I have told you, the fundamental secret of swimming was revealed to me by my friend in a flash. But I did not then become a decent swimmer without hours of practice in the pool. We learn to swim by—and only by—swimming; we learn to skate by skating; and you—as you don’t recall but I’m sure believe—learned to walk by walking. It should not surprise you, then, that we learn to write by writing.

So first of all, you’ll have to apply your mind to the instructions that go with each step in this method. You can understand the instructions; they’re not as hard as the rules of football, basketball, pinochle, driving a car, or making your own clothes. And you can follow a football game, play cards, drive, or make your own clothes, can’t you? But you probably won’t understand the instructions without some effort—they’re not as simple as “touch your right ear.”

Believe me when I tell you, however, that what you *don’t* understand in this book you won’t need in order to write an acceptable

theme. You'll get the main ideas, all right. Sometimes you'll go along, maybe even for several pages, saying, "This stuff is too deep for me. I don't know what it's in here for anyway." Right! That material is here because some students will find it helpful for the kind of theme they write. But it needn't worry you.

So if you're occasionally baffled by something as you study the six steps, be patient and do not become discouraged. I can see how your first puzzlement may come, for example, in the first chapter, where I compare a certain sentence to a magnet. You may say, "I don't think I really see the point. And especially I don't see whether I'm supposed to be learning something here or not." Go right on and don't worry. The magnet—or whatever else you don't understand—isn't important.

At the same time, don't be timid. If you don't understand something, give it at least a second try before going on to the next thing. Then, of course, you may think your friends won't like it if you do too well. So? Are your friends going to give you your final grade for this class—the grade that will appear on your permanent record? More important, have those friends got a good job all ready for you—a job that they're going to give you when you graduate, as a reward for doing what *they* like? The truth of the matter is that you have nothing to lose—and a lot to gain—by striking out on your own, as a man or woman bent on success, and striving for understanding of what you're taught. (Chances are your friends may have the good sense to follow your lead.)

Besides understanding as much as you can, you'll have to write themes to show yourself you can apply the rules—and to get practice, of course. Actually, a dozen practice themes of two or three hundred words should be enough to make you a decent writer.

"But," you object (and this will be only the first of your objections), "that's just the point: I can't write a theme." Have no fear. Just follow the instructions, simple step by simple step, and you'll automatically be writing a theme before long. "Just take a deep breath and lie face down in the water."

Finally, I'll make a bargain with you. I can't give you clear directions and at the same time answer all your objections. But I promise to answer your objections later on, when the answers won't get in the way of something else; and I'll also give you the reasons behind each step.

Let's look at one specific objection, though, and a partial answer to it. Particularly if you feel and have been told that you already write well, the method that follows may at first strike you as cramping your style by (a) keeping you from saying what you want to say and (b) forcing you to do very meager, bare, thin, mechanical writing. But you can be sure as you go on that if you're patient, you will find that the

very opposite is true. The method we are about to begin will allow you to employ all your talents in a fuller way than you have ever been able to employ them before. Just take a deep breath and lie face down in the water.

I'd like to tell you something now, before we begin Step 1, and ask you to remember it throughout this book. Will you? It is this: the method you are about to follow is not something new. It is simply a description of the *basic* things all writers do today and did yesterday and hundreds of years before that. And I want you to keep in mind that they do them and did them not because they're the right way to do things according to some English teacher, but because they're the main way, the necessary way, of helping *readers* to follow what a writer is saying and to get a clear picture of it.

step one

Write a sentence.

"Well, nothing could be simpler than that," you say. All right, but be sure that it's a *sentence*, because everything depends on that. The following, for example, are *not* sentences: "Why grandpa pretended to be dead"; "My summer on a cattle ranch"; "Working in a gold mine"; "Why we should study anthropology." No, a sentence makes a definite statement—without any *why's* or *where's* or *if's* to depend on. It tells us that somebody (or something) *is* something—or *was* something, or *does* something, or *did* something.

Somebody	{ is or was	something.
Something	{ does or did	

For instance, "The child is crying"—can you see that somebody is *doing* something in that set of words? That's what makes it a sentence. The following are sentences. In each, point out to yourself the person or thing that is, was, does, or did something, and the word or words that say that this somebody or something is, was, does, or did something.

Solar power has been used by the telephone company for over twenty years.

I learned self-reliance on my job.
Knowledge is power.
College is different from high school.
Good government requires a balance of tendencies.
Henry Ford was an innovator.
My mother is a resourceful woman.
Orderliness makes work easier.
Colors affect mood.

If you still have trouble recognizing a sentence, and being sure you're writing one yourself, don't cheat yourself by thinking you can just go on to the next paragraph and come back to this problem later. The ability to recognize a sentence is absolutely necessary in this course, because anything *but* a sentence will no more work as Step 1 than water will work as gasoline in your car, or a piece of string as a spring in a clock.

But to grasp what I mean by Step 1 you have to know that the *statement you write for Step 1 is not a title, or heading, or introduction of some kind*. Sometimes when students write their statement for Step 1, they write a sentence, all right, but show that they think of it as a title by writing it with capital letters—for instance: Coal Is Again Being Used by American Industry. No! The sentence in Step 1 is not a title or heading, nor is it an introduction. Don't let me leave you with any such idea. It's going to be a sentence in your theme—a definite, complete statement of a fact or of an idea. In fact, it is a brief statement, in miniature, of your whole theme.

So, write a sentence.

SEVEN RULES

Any sentence? No, you're to create a sentence that fits the following seven rules. These rules may at first seem somewhat bewildering rather than simple—and I've promised you simplicity. But learn them now, because they'll make a great deal of sense later on, and learning them now will aid simplicity by saving you a great deal of trouble soon.

1. Create a sentence that you can then say much more about.
2. In deciding on your sentence, concentrate not on the person or thing that is or does something, but on what he, she, or it is or *does*, because, as you'll find out, *that's* what you're going to have to say much more about.
3. Pick a sentence that will pin you down to saying something

definite. "Aunt Minnie is wonderful" allows you to follow with almost anything about Aunt Minnie; it doesn't pin you down to anything in particular. But "Uncle Ben is a miser" pins you down to a certain definite class of things you're going to have to say about Uncle Ben. Now notice: after you've said about Aunt Minnie that she's wonderful, you're left thinking up how you're going to go on to say that she's wonderful; but when you've said that Uncle Ben is a miser, a statement that pins you down, you know at once what you're going to have to say; you find that it's already in your head; and what follows practically writes itself.

4. As a beginner, you must make your sentence for Step 1 short, simple in form, and undetailed—like the examples of sentences given earlier in this lesson. For if you don't, you'll be in trouble when you reach Step 2.

5. Your sentence is to be a statement (called a declarative sentence), not a question or a command. Thus, neither "Why is cigarette-smoking always harmful?" nor "Practice writing at least one paragraph a day" will work as Step 1.

6. As a beginner, be sure your sentence for Step 1 makes only one statement, not two or more. That is, don't try to use a sentence like "Drinking is dangerous and expensive." That's two statements, really: one, that drinking is dangerous; the other, that it's expensive. So, say that it's dangerous or say that it's expensive, but don't say both. Many students tend to violate this rule.

7. As I'll repeat when I discuss Step 2, don't use for Step 1 any sentence that is *description* or *narration*, or that introduces a *process*. Description is how something *looks*. So don't write, "Mt. Hood looks different on different days," or "Main Street doesn't look the same any more." Narration is *what happened* or *what somebody did*. So don't write, "I was almost killed on my motorcycle," or "By age thirty-five my uncle built up a chain of shoe stores." Process is *how to make* or *do something* or *how something works* or *is constructed*. So don't write any of the following kinds of sentences: "Knitting a shawl is easy." "Use your knees right to ski well." "A diesel engine works without spark plugs." "A coral reef is built up of the solidified skeletons of small sea animals." There's nothing wrong with all those sentences in their place, obviously; but they're absolutely not the kind of thing we're working on in this book.

You may have to experiment with several sentences until you've got one that follows those seven rules. Don't imitate; don't just change "Uncle Ben is a miser" to "Aunt Mildred is a spendthrift." Create something of your own, out of your own interests, knowledge, and experience.

step one

**Write a short, simple declarative sentence
that makes one statement.**

ASSIGNMENT

Do Step 1 as your first assignment, and the writing part of this lesson is done. Do it right now, and put it in your notebook for future consideration.

Next, since the written work for this lesson is so short and easy, you can spend some time rereading what you've read so far. The first thing to make sure you've gotten out of what you've read is that, just as by following my friend's simple directions I couldn't *not* swim, you, by following my directions, can't *not* write an acceptable theme. You're bound to succeed. Or, if you already write well and think that this work is too simple for you, just be patient and consider the following story.

When I was a young child, an older cousin of mine presented me with a simple bar of iron and told me that I could do lots of tricks with it. I was quite skeptical about the powers of an old piece of iron! But in a few minutes I learned that that short, simple iron bar had a magic property I had never heard of and would never have dreamed of. It was magnetized! And I certainly could perform with it tricks I had never imagined possible. Well, in somewhat the same way, the short, simple sentence of Step 1, though seemingly almost powerless, has certain wonderful qualities that, once you've begun to suspect they're there, you could spend years exploring.

All the first half of this chapter, which I've asked you to reread, is actually a preface. But if I had called it a preface, you probably wouldn't have read it; so I smuggled it into this first lesson because I think that knowing you're going to succeed—can't *not* succeed—is the biggest extra help this book can give you. The second thing you should get out of this chapter is all I've said about Step 1 itself. Go over that part thoughtfully, because every word will prove helpful. Reread this whole lesson carefully—now or later—before going on to the next one.

step

I've divided this chapter into sections, each of which can be treated as a single lesson, because the chapter seems to me too long to be digested as a single meal. There is no writing assignment until the very end; but you can do reading assignments by rereading each section carefully, doing your best (which is good enough for me) to make sure that you are following what I'm saying. Of course, you may be interested in following it, too, but remember that it wasn't intended to entertain you, but to teach you something that you're going to need to know.

Your instructor or a friend will come in handy here if you have questions or objections. But I'll anticipate one possible objection from readers who already have had some successful experience in writing: remember that Step 2 is only Step 2; in it we do not begin the theme proper or even get into the first paragraph of the theme itself.

A NEW KIND OF THINKING

You gathered from the last chapter that I found that swimming was not impossible for me. As you might suppose, I also found out that accepting the challenge of what I had never done before was exciting. Step 2 will ask you to do a kind of thinking you've probably never done before. (Steps 4 and 6 will ask you for still other new kinds of thinking.) But it is a kind of thinking, I've discovered, that with a little effort