THE RANDOM HOUSE HANDBOOK

Frederick Crews

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To the instructor

Composition texts tend to fall into two categories, which might be called the Big Book and the Little Book. The Big Book impersonally sets forth the rules of "good English" and persuasive writing, and it usually includes information about such various matters as linguistics, logic, etymology, poetics, business letters, and the art of passing an exam. The Little Book speaks intimately to the student as a person who needs some assistance in composing essays. Necessarily, however, its advice is fragmentary; a reader can't turn to the index with any expectation of finding a reference to the specific problem that's troubling him.

The Random House Handbook attempts to combine the virtues of both texts without sharing their drawbacks. Like the Little Book, it is a personal statement from one essayist to others; its emphasis falls, not on unbending laws of correctness, but on a writer's options and on the difference between mechanical and lively prose. Yet it is also a reference work, dealing in great detail with the questions that affect young writers *as* writers. Instead of touching on every subject connected with "English," I have tried to give students an extensive guide to current opinion about diction, syntax, punctuation, and idiomatic expressions.

The *Handbook* deals with standard English, not as the best of all dialects, but simply as the one that most educated people expect to find when they read an essay. My attitude is pragmatic: I want students to use the language creatively without alienating their readers. Much of my advice, especially in the 795-entry Index of Usage, rests not only on personal taste but on a comparative study of recent authorities. The book to which I am most indebted is Roy H. Copperud's *American Usage: The Consensus*, a work which recognizes that normal contemporary practice should overrule scholars' whims.

The order of my chapters is intended to minimize the mere avoidance of errors while highlighting a writer's opportunities and responsibilities. In fact, however, the chapters can be assigned in any sequence that fits an instructor's plans. Since some teachers leave their students free to use a handbook on their own, I have explained some of the book's uses below. Further information about the individual chapters, along with a key to the Exercises, can be found in a manual which is available gratis to instructors.

To the student

This is a book for would-be essayists, most of whom find themselves members of an unloved course known as Freshman English. The inside word about Freshman English is that it's entirely concerned

with error-hunting, that it penalizes originality, and that the key to success in it is to humor the instructor in his pet peeves. Although these rumors are generally false, they die hard, for they comfortably lay the blame for bad prose on the reader instead of the writer. The trouble is that they also help to bring about such prose. Believing that "English" demands a hypocritical kind of essay, some students never allow themselves to meet the real challenge of being a writer.

We all know what a writer is: it is someone who uses written words to reach out toward other people, trying to communicate part of his experience and also perhaps to win agreement to some idea that matters to him. The fact that he happens to be enrolled in a course may affect his task in numerous ways, but if this fact becomes the main consideration, he ceases to be a writer and is merely a survivor or a casualty of Freshman English. In order to help prevent such a result, I call attention to the essayist's freedom to be himself. To a large extent this is a book about a writer's necessary struggle to find his own voice by resisting clichés, half-truths, and prefabricated patterns of organization.

Yet a writer may also have to observe certain norms in order to gain a hearing for his ideas. Even though some of "the rules" shift from one decade to the next, at any given point they are taken seriously by nearly all educated readers. I have tried, not to dictate a purist attitude toward language, but to indicate the phrases and constructions that would be likely to cause trouble for you. You may have good stylistic reasons for writing colloquially, but at least you ought to know when you're doing so.

Because a student is asked almost overnight to become an essayist, my book starts by considering what essays are, how they are organized, and what the essayist's relation to his reader ought to be. Someone who has at least a rough competence in forming grammatical sentences can profitably read the first six chapters in order. Other readers may want to begin with later chapters that treat usage and mechanics. Those who aren't sure of the meaning of grammatical terms should turn directly to Chapter Seven, and then go to the chapters covering the problems they want to work on first.

For advice and encouragement I am grateful to Elizabeth Crews, James B. Smith, Richard Ohmann, George McMichael, Richard Larson, and, above all, June Smith of Random House, who has edited my book with enthusiasm, self-sacrifice, and extraordinary keenness of judgment.

Frederick Crews
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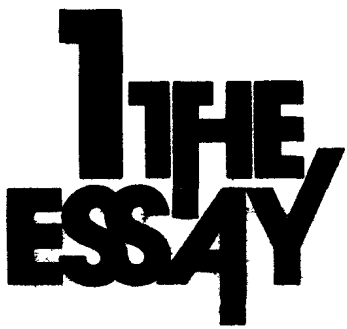
A
WRITER'S
WORK



YOU AND YOUR READER

If you're like most students entering a composition course, you arrive with a mixture of hope and apprehension. The hope is that the course will help you to put your thoughts into written words with greater precision and effect. The apprehension is that nothing of the sort will happen and that you'll have to go through a painful, humiliating ordeal. Essays, you know, will be required of you on short notice. Will you be able to write them at all? Looking ahead, perhaps you experience a feeling that assails every writer from time to time—the suspicion that words may fail you. (And if words fail you, the teacher will fail you, too.)

It may seem odd at first that "putting your thoughts into words" should be so challenging. Since childhood, after all, you've been speaking intelligible English. When you converse about things that matter to you, the right words often come to your lips without forethought. Again, in writing letters to friends you scribble away with

confidence that you'll be understood. But in writing essays you find yourself at a disadvantage. You know that your prose is expected to make contact with a reader's feelings and carry him along with a developing idea of your own, but you don't have a clear idea of who this reader is. Instead of exchanging views with someone who can see your face, interpret your gestures, and tell you when a certain point needs explanation or support, you have to assume a nonexistent relationship and keep on writing. It's almost like composing love letters "to whom it may concern" and mailing them off to "Occupant" or "Boxholder."

This is the normal situation of every essay-writer, but it is temporarily altered in a composition course. There you do get to know your reader, the instructor, in a certain limited way, and you can gradually develop some ease as you become familiar with his judgments. Unlike the mythical "general reader," this one will tell you what he likes and dislikes in your work; he'll even keep reading and commenting when he's bored. Nowhere else are you likely to get the systematic, prolonged encouragement and criticism he will offer. Thus the composition course poses a unique opportunity: if the teacher's opinions are sound and if you take them in the right spirit, you can spend these weeks discovering what other readers, the anonymous ones, would think about your writing, and you can strengthen the habits that make for a good reception.

But the course holds a risk as well as an opportunity. The risk comes directly from that first anxiety about having nothing to say. You'll quickly learn that there *are* ways of getting words onto paper even when you're confused, and if you're not careful you may begin writing mechanically. Instead of exploring your mind and trying to communicate what you believe, you may begin serving up ingredients you think the instructor wants to see. An essay, you tell yourself, has to have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion—and you forget that it's supposed to be interesting. You allot one prominent topic sentence to every paragraph, but the paragraphs, instead of moving forward, just stand there like abandoned temples to the god of the essay. Your prose acquires unity, coherence, emphasis—and acid indigestion. You've simply stopped trying to say what you mean.

The irony about "giving the teacher what he wants" is that this isn't what he wants at all. No teacher I've ever met has preferred an imitation essay to the real thing. Teachers often dwell on technical aspects of the essay because these are important and discussible, but what they want above all is that you be yourself in prose. And if you look at the classic essayists, the ones who are held up for your admiration in the course, you'll find that they haven't followed any routine formula. Some of them, in fact, seem to be outrageously indifferent to paragraph unity, logical transitions, and so forth.

What each of them has instead is his own strong voice that makes us want to listen and believe.

There is no simple way to acquire your voice as an essayist. It's largely a matter of critical rewriting, of refusing to be satisfied with the clichés and awkward phrases that crowd your mind when you're facing a blank page. A composition course and a handbook can show you the general difference between prose that convinces and prose that doesn't, but only you know what is clamoring for expression in your mind. The essential thing is to keep pressing toward clarity, trying to meet the reader's expectations while remaining in touch with your feelings.

WHAT AN ESSAY DOES

The kinds of writing you will do in other courses—exams, reports, term papers, perhaps a senior thesis—all resemble the essay in some respects and call upon the same techniques of persuasion. But the essay is a looser form than any of these; it lends itself to a special combination of personal opinion and reasoning, of intimacy and objectivity.

An *essay* can be defined as a *fairly brief piece of nonfiction that tries to make a point in an interesting way:*

1. *It's fairly brief.* Some of the classic essays by Montaigne and Bacon occupy only a few paragraphs, but essays generally fall between about three and twenty typed pages. Under that minimum, the development of thought that typifies an essay would be difficult to manage. Above the maximum, people might be tempted to read the essay in installments like a book. A good essay makes an unbroken experience.

2. *It's nonfiction.* The essayist tries to tell the truth; if he describes a scene or tells a story, we presume that he's doing his best to capture reality.

3. *It tries to make a point . . .* An essay characteristically tells or explains something, or expresses an attitude toward something, or supports or criticizes something—an opinion, a person, an institution, a movement. A poem or a novel may also do these things, but it does them incidentally. An essay is directly *about* something called its *topic* (see p. 21), and its usual aim is to win sympathy or agreement to the point or *thesis* (see p. 22) it is maintaining.

4. *. . . in an interesting way.* When you write an answer to an "essay question" on an exam, you don't pause to wonder if the reader actually *wants* to pursue your answer to the end; you know you'll succeed if you concisely and coherently satisfy the terms of