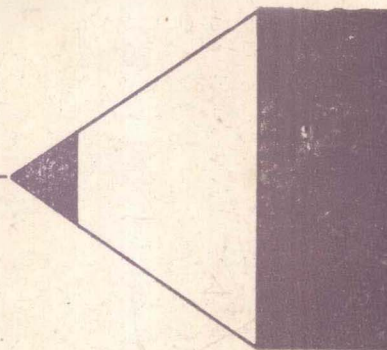


# Writing

*a guide for  
students*



*Michael  
Newby*

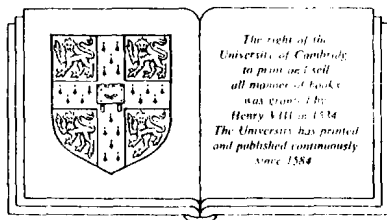
# WRITING

## A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

by  
**Michael Newby**

with

**Janet Brennan  
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Nicholas Potter  
Peter Williams**



**CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS**

Cambridge  
New York · Port Chester  
Melbourne · Sydney

*Our thanks to Phil Aubrey  
and to students and colleagues  
at the  
West Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education,  
Swansea*

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1989

First published 1989

Printed in Great Britain at The Bath Press, Avon

British Library cataloguing in publication data  
Newby, Michael

Writing : a guide for students.

1. Schools. Students. Writing skills

I. Title II. Brennan, Janet

808'.042

Library of Congress cataloging-in-publication data

Newby, Michael.

Writing : a guide for students/by Michael Newby with  
Janet Brennan . . . [et al.].

1. English language -- Rhetoric. 2. English language --  
Grammar -- 1950- I. Title.

PE1408.N426 1989

808'.042 - dc20

ISBN 0 521 37930 x

# LAURIE TAYLOR

Professor Lapping! Might I have a word?

Ah, Abdul. Keeping well? Settling in nicely? Jolly good. Must dash.

Abdou, Professor Lapping. Abdou.

Ah yes. Well, Abdou, what seems to be the trouble? Good heavens, is that the time?

It's my essay, Professor Lapping. I'm afraid I do not understand all your comments.

Cultural differences, Abdou. A grey old world without them.

I do not understand, for example, the meaning of this 'Sp'.

*Spelling*, Abdou.

Spelling?

That's it. Glance across the line and you'll see I've underlined the misspelt word so you can go and look it up and get it right next time. Simple as that.

I see. And then *here*, and *here*, and *here*, you have writtten something which looks like 'Pu'.

*Punctuation*, Abdou. *Punctuation*. Some basic fault or other. Could be almost anything: need for a comma, incorrect use of a colon, faulty apostrophes. Try reading

your work out loud to yourself. That often gives a clue. Now, I really must dash.

I see. And then I do not understand all these other signs – the upside down 'v's.

Quite straightforward. They mean something or other has been missed out – a word, an idea, a reference. Whatever.

Ah. And then there are these question marks. All by themselves.

They mean that I'm not too clear about what you're saying – that it is, *literally, questionable*. Now . . .

And then I do not quite make sense of your other comments. On this page you say 'Are you sure?', over here you say 'Really?' and 'Does this follow?', and here on the last page 'Can this be true?'

~~Should have thought they spoke for themselves~~, Abdou. Good heavens, is that the time.

Professor Lapping, perhaps I am taking a little longer to settle down than some other overseas students, but I do wonder if your marking might ever be a little more – well – helpful?

'Helpful', Abdou?

Well, instead of saying over and over again that my things were wrong – could you ever spare a moment to tell me what would be *right*?

Good God, Abdou! Whatever next? Spoonfeeding?

Laurie Taylor

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# Introduction

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This book is for people who have to write as part of their college course. If you are one of them, you will be asked by your lecturers to complete written assignments, many of which will be graded and will count towards your final assessment. What's more, you will probably have to take written examinations at the end of your course, and maybe along the way as well. It is obviously very important that, no matter how well you understand your subject, you don't let the way you write damage your chances of success when it should be doing just the opposite. Many students can find writing in college a daunting prospect, and yet have nowhere to turn for help. If you are one of them, this book has been written for you.

Other students come to college as 'good writers' already. If you think that you write well (and have, perhaps, been complimented on your writing by teachers and others) the book may still be useful to you. This is because you will almost certainly find the kinds of writing required of you in college set you new challenges, requiring you to meet different and more testing standards than anything you met in school.

Increasingly, students come to college not from school but from the adult world of work and family. Perhaps you are one of them. If so, you will probably have to learn all over again what it feels like to be a student, and writing in an educational setting is something you won't have done for some years. For you, too, this book should help you get back into the frame of mind you'll need for writing in college.

Few college lecturers see it as their job to give writing

lessons. Not unreasonably, some say that all that should have been sorted out at school. Others can see that there are special problems associated with writing in college which schools can hardly be expected to have taught. Nonetheless, they have little time to help their students solve them. Their work, after all, is to teach the subject and to respond to what their students write for them primarily from the point of view of facts, ideas, processes and relationships; not the writing itself. They may comment on the writing. They may tell students that they should improve their writing. They may even suggest the areas in which improvements could be made. However, they will leave it to the students themselves to see to those improvements. If this happens to you, then this book will be a place from which to make a start.

There's another important reason why it will repay you to give careful attention to your writing while at college. Writing is a way of slowing down and making more clear the process of thinking itself. Good writing is a means to good thinking. If your writing is not of the quality you would like it to achieve, it will mean that your thinking cannot find the precision and clarity of expression which it deserves. This is the most important reason of all for learning to write as well as you can. As it happens, it is also a major reason why writing is required of so many students in so many different subjects when they come to college: it is to help them think better.

One thing may surprise you: that although the bulk of this book is about writing, it also contains sections on reading, talking and listening. If so, remember that this is a book about writing in college – and college is a place where people listen, talk and read as well as write. Indeed, most of the writing you will do in college will arise out of those other ways of using language, or will lead back into them. How else will you find the things you wish to write about than by reading, listening and talking?

Learning to write well is a process which begins for most people when they go to primary school – and continues throughout their lives. Even the most experienced writer will tell you that this process of learning never ends. However, it can be interrupted if you don't practise writing regularly, and it stands to reason that the more you write the more fluent you will grow. One of the many advantages of going to college is that it gives you the chance to write seriously and often.

Whatever else you have achieved by the end of your course, you should have become a better writer.

However, writing well is more than simply a matter of constant practice. It also needs conscious attention, and from two sources. One source will be that of your readers, whose responses can help you see with more clarity how your writing succeeds, as well as where its weaknesses may lie. The other source of attention must come from you. By looking calmly and honestly at your own writing, by attending to what your writing is expressing, you will find that it comes into ever-clearer focus. Once you see it more clearly, you can control it more surely. The image which may before have been a blur will take on a new sharpness. Some of the lenses you will need are in this book.

The book also asks you to consider your attitudes to writing. Attitudes matter as well as skills and experience. So read the next few pages and give yourself some encouragement and reassurance. . . .





# *Attitudes*

---

## **Writing is a normal human activity**

There is nothing to stop any normal person from learning to write well. Writing is like talking: a natural ability – once you have learned how to do it. It develops with use in the right environment. If you are ‘normal’ – that is, if there is nothing wrong with the parts of you which are needed for writing – then you can learn how to write better. Even if there really is something wrong (which is most unlikely), don’t give up hope: the chances are that you can still improve considerably.

## **Problems you almost certainly don’t have**

‘Something wrong’ means that you may have a condition which might be hindering you in your efforts to write properly: maybe trouble in the muscles controlling your hand or arm, or eyesight difficulties which make it hard for you to focus for long on the page, or perhaps neurological problems which get in the way of good writing because your brain finds it hard to translate the words in your head to the correct marks on the page. It is extremely unlikely that this is the case. However, if you are seriously worried that there may be something wrong, go and see your doctor, who can arrange for you to have tests to find out exactly what the problem might be.

## **Are you out of practice?**

Assuming nothing physical or neurological is preventing you from writing well, remember that another important reason why people don't write as well as they could is because they don't have much practice. Like any other ability, writing becomes easier the more you do it. If, for example, you have come to college after two years of studying 'A' levels (like Maths) which do not give many opportunities for writing, it may be difficult to sit down and write an essay with the same ease as people who have written them once a week for several years.

## **Do you like writing?**

Failure to write well can also create emotional problems and these can obscure a writer's abilities. Think how much of your writing is connected with study – writing which will be read by a lecturer and probably given a grade. This is an unrelaxed situation in which to write, especially if your previous offerings have been criticised for poor writing. The result could be a build-up of anxiety, growing to the point at which you come actually to dislike writing, feeling ill-at-ease each time you have to commit your ideas to paper.

## **Your ideas do matter**

If this is the case, then part of the solution will be for you to develop a more positive, less tense attitude to your writing in college. If your ideas are important to you, then they will probably communicate your sense of conviction to a reader, and certainly be far more interesting to read as well. So do not be ashamed of what you want to say through your writing. This will, in turn, help you to be more relaxed, more confident about writing, and this change of attitude could help you write better.

## **Your language is very complicated**

Human language – the medium in which you express your ideas – is a set of inter-related systems of tremendous com-

plexity: systems of sound, structure, meaning, style, etc. (Imagine the problems any other living creature would have in trying to read this page without a language system like yours.) Don't be hesitant, therefore, about your language. You may need to practise new skills to make your written language even more useful to you than it already is, but your language now is well-established, extremely complex and flexible from constant use. What may be needed now is for you to polish small areas of it, and develop some new ones which are particularly appropriate for the writing you have to do in college.

## Writing is complicated too

No-one is saying that good writing is easy. Complex behaviour seldom is. However, it is useful to remember the differences between writing *problems* and writing *difficulties*. The first you can do something about; the second are what make writing so interesting and satisfying (and sometimes infuriating) a part of life. Just as language is a set of inter-related systems, so writing is a complicated set of related skills, ones in which you have already become very proficient. This must be so if you remember how far you have come since you made the first shaky scribbles on a piece of paper in the infants' class. Whatever the problems you may now have, though they may be annoying and even worrying ones, they are insignificant in comparison to the problems you have already solved.

## You are not alone

Most people find writing difficult sometimes, even those who write for a living. Few professional writers could honestly say they never needed to check a spelling in the dictionary; disagreement exists among fluent writers about the exact use of commas; clever people can write tortured, laborious prose which lacks clarity and sends the reader to sleep; professionals can get 'writer's block', where the words and ideas just won't come. All these problems are additional to the in-built difficulties of writing itself, difficulties involving how best to launch an argument or present information, which way round the parts of a sentence need to be to make the strongest impact on the reader, which word to choose for maximum effect, what style to adopt, and so on.

## People can enjoy writing

Even for accomplished writers, writing can sometimes be difficult. However, it should wherever possible be a pleasure as well, particularly in the careful expression of your ideas in the kind of written assignments required of you as a student. Many people would argue that it is only by carefully writing it down that you can really decide what it is you think and know about the issues and ideas you are studying. The process of learning through writing can be exciting and rewarding – every bit as much as *talking* about the subjects you have chosen to study with other people who share the same interests.

## ‘Rules’

Don’t worry about occasional references in this book to ‘grammar’ or to ‘rules’. The fact is that, without them, making and receiving spoken or written language would be quite impossible. However, people don’t learn their language by first learning the rules and afterwards applying them. Instead, they hear it, start to copy it, sort out its rules and regularities, try it out for themselves, make useful mistakes, see how the world-out-there responds . . . and in this way, gradually, they acquire the language habit. Later on, they do the same with reading and writing. At first, these habits need only be of use in the home, the local community, the school. As the years go by, however, new habits must be picked up to meet more complex language demands. In college, you may need to acquire still more – and perhaps lose a few as well – to meet the sometimes specialised language requirements of your own course of study. Like most rules and conventions shared by members of a community, language rules are necessary to ensuring that messages can be clearly delivered, received and understood. But always remember: people learn habits, not rules. ‘Grammar’ does no more than describe the habits you already know – the rules which you share with all other users of your language.

## Writing is power

Writing is a way of preserving language in space and time. As human societies developed, those who could read and write

tended to hold most influence. Written language was the property of the privileged and powerful; the law-makers, the spiritual leaders, the thinkers and changers. It is still the case that, in some societies in the world, many people are illiterate and have little power in consequence. However, in advanced societies it has become increasingly important for all people to share in this power; to be able to make their language travel in space and to preserve it in time by being able to write it down.

In the context of education, you need to write above all to help you think, and to demonstrate that thinking to other people. Be it the scribbled notes you write in a lecture, the carefully-researched dissertation you prepare over several months of study, or all the other kinds of written language you will make during your college career, writing gives you more control over your own ideas and understanding. This control is power.

\*

The pages you have been reading were written on a word-processor and then changed several times, each time allowing the writer to correct mistakes, change words, sentences and even paragraphs until it seemed he would probably not be able to express the ideas any better. (You may disagree and think they could be expressed far more successfully than they have been.) The first version – called, technically, a first ‘draft’ – started from almost nothing: just an idea that a book to help people who have to write in college might be more useful if it started with *attitudes*, since people have to be in the right frame of mind before they can start trying to improve their skills. As the writing took shape, gradually a set of ideas came out onto the page and, after a while, seemed to come to a natural conclusion.

The next stage was to read them through to see if they made sense. Some of them did but others weren’t as clear as they should have been. The paragraph headed ‘Your ideas do matter’ was particularly difficult and it ended up almost completely re-written from its original form. At the same time, mistakes in spelling and punctuation were corrected and one or two changes in word-order were made to make the writing sound more natural.

The third stage was to try to make the general argument clearer by giving each paragraph a title. That might have been a mistake; originally, the introduction was a piece of continuous prose and it seemed to be taking shape quite nicely like that, but in the end the writer thought the sub-headings would help the reader get into the book more easily. He may have been wrong, and still isn't quite sure, but . . . decisions have to be made at some point or you will never stop tampering with your writing. Good advice can sometimes be: 'Now leave it alone!'

The last stage was to read it aloud. It didn't sound too bad, but there were still one or two points to polish, a word to change here, a phrase to alter there. There was another typing error which had been missed. Then it seemed to have reached the stage where there was no more to say, so the page you're reading now was started.

The writer considered whether 'the writer' and 'the reader' could have been better expressed as 'I' and 'you' but decided that, in the context of a book about writing, it was probably better to use the first two terms as another reminder to the reader of what the book was all about.

In ways like that, this page went through just the same process as the others.





