The Writer's Craft

A Process Reader

SECOND EDITION

Sheena Gillespie Robert Singleton Robert Becker

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SECOND EDITION

Sheena Gillespie *Robert Singleton* *Robert Becker*

Queensborough Community College
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To Linda, a creative teacher and cherished friend.
To Ruth, Ann, Clifford, and Claude.
To Zina and Ariela.

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Preface

It is often only in the process of writing that I really discover what it is I am trying to write about.

—*David Updike*

I think of my first draft as a beautiful piece of marble. That is what is given . . . . But the hard work—how I earn the gift—is what I make out of it.

—*Julia Alvarez*

I looked at the actual, rough drafts of the poet Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass, and I saw that it was filled with the same false starts, the same cross-outs, and the same write-ins that covered my own writing.

—*Patrick Fenton*

These quotations capture the major themes of *The Writer's Craft*: discovery, rewriting, technique. Writing is discovery; revision is necessary; the "how-to" of writing can and must be learned—through writing.

The Drafts

Because student writers should learn to revise their work effectively, we have sought to emphasize what most inexperienced writers overlook—that revising is not a touch-up or correction phase of writing but that it is an instrumental, inseparable part of the overall writing process. Revising is not simply recopying. And since students often believe that experienced writers create essays without any of the mess or fuss that they themselves experience, the necessity of revising is best demonstrated by showing that professional writers also create drafts of their work. We wrote to established contemporary writers requesting their participation in our project and were surprised and overjoyed by their response. The diversity of manuscripts we received confirms our belief in the importance of revision: Some drafts are almost illegible because of massive changes; others show signs of only scanty editing. Some are written and revised in longhand while others are mechanically

reproduced with handwritten changes. Some, obscured by coffee stains, reflect long hours of labor but are transformed three or four or six or ten versions later into fresh typewritten copy. Whatever the author's personal style, the message is clear—revision is indispensable. *The Writer's Craft* contains eighteen original photographic reproductions of draft essays by professional writers. For the first time, students can witness in a textbook in-depth revising as it occurs from draft to finished product.

By examining the drafts, students will learn three essential concepts about writing and revising. First, they will no longer feel that professional authors are a breed apart, that their talents enable them to write flawlessly and without using processes common to all writers. Second, students will see the diversity of approaches to revising, a diversity that reinforces the personal nature of writing but which establishes beyond any doubt that revising—no matter *how* it is done—must be done. Third, by learning the vocabulary and techniques of revising, students will be able to understand and apply revision to their own writing.

To help students and instructors use the drafts in this book we have developed special supporting materials. Each draft is preceded by an introduction that explains both how the authors applied that phase of the writing process to their work and then how they revised that work. Questions and commentary comparing draft and published versions focus on how and why specific revisions were made. Screened pages insure easy access to the drafts; use of a second color helps readers work back and forth between drafts and published essays.

Arrangement and Organization

How does the organization of *The Writer's Craft* help students to improve the quality of their finished essays? The first five chapters discuss ways to generate ideas and to improve the writer's rhetorical stance by examining relationships among purpose, meaning, audience, and tone. Chapter 6 presents the special problems of beginning and ending an essay. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 present traditional—modal— ways to develop the body of an essay. Chapter 10 relates diction and sentence variety to the processes of revising and polishing. The ten chapters are thus organized as one would approach a writing project, beginning by choosing a topic and ending with editing. Throughout the text, students are reminded of the necessary interplay of creating/inventing, composing, and revising—a strategy that helps them to view themselves as writers in control of their writing.

In this edition, we have expanded the strategies for revision in Chapter 2, and draft paragraphs from professional writers illustrate the revision strategies. Chapter 3 has been revised radically to give new emphasis to the drafting process in establishing meaning. Chapter 10 has been reworked and highlights the relationship of diction and sentence variety to the process of editing and proofreading. These discussions help students distinguish these processes from the larger revision strategies discussed in earlier chapters.

Essays and Headnotes

The text presents fifty-five classic and contemporary essays and journal entries chosen for their appeal to a college audience, their lively and varied styles, and their ability to illustrate an aspect of the writing process. Each author is introduced with a headnote, twenty-four of which contain original statements on prewriting or revision from such contributors as Edward Hoagland, Richard Selzer, Joyce Maynard, Pete Hamill, and Susan Allen Toth.

The second edition contains twenty-six new selections by classic and contemporary authors highlighting topics of interest to students, including Letty Cottin Pogrebin on TV, Anna Quindlen on working out, Garrison Keillor on baseball, Christopher Hallowell on an AIDS victim, Jack Newfield on Stallone vs. Springsteen, and Jim Fusilli on rock music critics.

Apparatus

Within each chapter, introductions and questions direct students' attention to how the professional writers have used revision and other techniques to improve their writing. Each draft has its own introduction and questions. Each additional essay is followed by sets of questions on content and process. Each chapter has a set of warm-up exercises that grow out of the chapter's readings and phase of the writing process and provide continued practice in freewriting, brainstorming, journal-keeping, observing, and interviewing. Each chapter ends with a set of writing/revising topics that incorporate the subjects, process, and revision strategies demonstrated in the professional drafts. A glossary of rhetorical terms is also included at the end of the text.

In this edition, the warm-up exercises and writing/revising topics are more closely correlated with chapter readings. Also, the process questions that follow each essay are more recursive, catching up and reinforcing craft discussions from earlier chapters as well as providing exercises on the current chapter.

Guidelines

Guidelines at the end of each chapter provide "hands on," step-by-step instructions for students to follow when writing on their own. Arranged to summarize the phase of the process highlighted in the chapter, the guidelines are easy to read and apply.

Instructor's Manual

In addition to answering questions accompanying the drafts and essays, the Instructor's Manual contains additional suggestions for using the drafts and original quotes from authors, additional questions and writing topics, as well as a rhetorical and

thematic table of contents. It also includes more quotes on the writing process from the authors of the draft selections. Our ideas and suggestions in the manual have grown out of "road testing" this book in our classes.

Acknowledgments

The second edition of *The Writer's Craft*, like the first, would not have been possible without the enthusiasm, cooperation, and contributions of professional writers who were willing not only to submit drafts but also to share their prewriting and revision strategies. We are most grateful to Julia Alvarez, Russell Baker, Richard B. Elsberry, Patrick Fenton, Linda Bird Francke, Jim Fusilli, Marshall Glickman, Pete Hamill, Edward Hoagland, Rachel L. Jones, Joyce Maynard, Elizabeth McGrath, Jack Newfield, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Anna Quindlen, Richard Rodriguez, Sydney H. Schanberg, Richard Selzer, Brent Staples, Peter Steinhart, Susan Allen Toth, David Updike, Hana Wehle, and the late E. B. White.

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Generating Ideas: Freewriting, Brainstorming, Journal-Keeping

As with any other craft, writing takes time and practice to master. As with any other craft, the practitioner must become familiar with the methods and tools of the trade. The tools that writers use are words and ideas, and you have already been using an abundant supply of these for many years. Yet in mastering the craft of writing, all writers need to use these tools *in certain ways* that assure effective communication with readers. Understanding the *process* of writing will help you to become more skilled in the craft.

Getting started is usually the trickiest part of writing. At one time or another, when faced with having to write something, you might have experienced these feelings:

- a suspicion that you have nothing of interest to say
- a belief that nothing you write will be good enough
- a fear of making mistakes

Any one of these conditions is enough to trigger writer's block. Obviously, blocked writers would welcome a successful formula for getting started, but even those who generally do not experience writer's block may benefit from a way to get started that will make them more comfortable with writing and better able to generate ideas.

Freewriting is one way of getting started. In his essay in this chapter Peter Elbow defines *freewriting* as the undelayed, uncensored writing down of whatever occurs to you about a subject. Without calling his method by that name, poet William Stafford instead describes his way of getting started as a kind of "fishing." In his essay in this chapter, he describes how he takes a pen and paper in hand and waits to catch some idea or impression which then serves as a starting point for other ideas. Whether they

wait (like Stafford) or write continuously (like Elbow), many experienced writers and other beginning writers have found it valuable to get something on paper—a thought, a feeling, or an impression—whenever they must fulfill a writing assignment.

Another technique that you might find helpful in getting started is *brainstorming*. Brainstorming is a *listing* of specific ideas. It is like freewriting in that it usually is done rapidly for a specified amount of time as a means of gathering thoughts about a subject, but whereas freewriting uses phrases and sentences, brainstorming records only isolated words in an effort to focus more specifically on the subject. Brainstorming is a machine-gun approach; freewriting meanders like a bird on a summer's day. When you write in list form you should not be tempted to criticize or correct the mechanics—new ideas, images, parts and subparts of the subject get all your attention. One item leads to another, and when your time is up, you can read over your list and eliminate or rearrange your ideas.

Keeping a journal provides another way of getting started. People have been recording their daily thoughts and activities in diaries, journals, and notebooks since writing first began. Journals are kept by the old and the young, by professionals and amateurs, by the famous and the forgotten. The diarists and journal writers in this chapter pay tribute to the diary or journal for serving them in several ways: helping them mature, storing their ideas for writing, recording their thoughts for posterity. Whereas a diary is usually a record of daily thoughts and actions, the journal may take off on meditative flights far from the day's occupations. It may mix the record of the day's activities with older memories, speculations, original or not-so-original thoughts. It can be like a letter to yourself which the world will probably never see, but which you can later mine for ideas for the essays you will be writing in your English composition course.

What does journal-writing consist of? Thoughts, feelings, experiences, and reactions to reading are often the subject matter of journals. The format is as varied as the content: short notes, stories, essays, drawings, poems, book and movie reviews, letters, quotations, songs—everything that interests or intrigues. Basically, your journal is *you*. It will express your interests, likes and dislikes, your ambitions, desires, and fears. What is written and how it is written are your own private concerns.

Most journal-keepers write intensely personal matter for their eyes alone. Anne Frank could have had no idea at all of the millions of people who would read, in many languages, the diary she kept during her days of hiding from the Nazis. On the other hand, some writers keep journals that they intend to publish. Some of the entries in this chapter are by writers like Bob Greene who wanted their journals to be read by others.

As you can see, there are many strategies for generating ideas for writing. While freewriting and brainstorming are effective techniques for rapidly gathering ideas for a short term, keeping a journal allows a writer to harness thoughts for future or long-term use. Whichever methods you find most suitable—and you will probably find yourself using all of the techniques discussed—should help you to get started whenever you write. Once you are able to solve the problem of getting started, you may even begin to enjoy writing down your ideas, and writing itself will become more natural to you.

Getting Started by Freewriting

In the following essays, Peter Elbow and William Stafford describe their strategies for getting started. Read these essays carefully and think about how freewriting could help you generate ideas or overcome the problem of writer's block.

Peter Elbow

Peter Elbow (b. 1935) is director of the writing program at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He achieved national attention with his book *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), which included "Freewriting." His latest book is *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (1986). In *Writing with Power* (1981), Elbow describes the benefits of freewriting:

> Freewriting is the best way to learn—in practice, not just in theory—to separate the producing process from the revising process. Freewriting exercises are push-ups in withholding judgment as you produce so that afterwards you can judge better.

Freewriting

1 The most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises regularly. At least three times a week. They are sometimes called "automatic writing," "babbling," or "jabbering" exercises. The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, "I can't think of it." Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it's fine to write "I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say" as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you *never* stop.

2 What happens to a freewriting exercise is important. It must be a piece of writing which, even if someone reads it, doesn't send any ripples back to you. It is like writing something and putting it in a bottle in the sea. . . . Freewritings help you by providing no feedback at all. When I assign one, I invite the writer to let me read it. But also tell him to keep it if he prefers. I read it quickly and make no comments at all and I do not speak with him about it. The main thing is that a freewriting must never be evaluated in any way; in fact there must be no discussion or comment at all.

3 Here is an example of a fairly coherent exercise (sometimes they are very incoherent, which is fine):

> I think I'll write what's on my mind, but the only thing on my mind right now is what to write for ten minutes. I've never done this before and I'm not

prepared in any way—the sky is cloudy today, how's that? now I'm afraid I won't be able to think of what to write when I get to the end of the sentence—well, here I am at the end of the sentence—here I am again, again, again, again, at least I'm still writing—Now I ask is there some reason to be happy that I'm still writing—ah yes! Here comes the question again—What am I getting out of this? What point is there in it? It's almost obscene to always ask it but I seem to question everything that way and I was gonna say something else pertaining to that but I got so busy writing down the first part that I forgot what I was leading into. This is kind of fun oh don't stop writing—cars and trucks speeding by somewhere out the window, pens clittering across peoples' papers. The sky is still cloudy—is it symbolic that I should be mentioning it? Huh? I dunno. Maybe I should try colors, blue, red, dirty words—wait a minute—no can't do that, orange, yellow, arm tired, green pink violet magenta lavender red brown black green—now that I can't think of any more colors—just about done—relief? maybe.

4 Freewriting may seem crazy but actually it makes simple sense. Think of the difference between speaking and writing. Writing has the advantage of permitting more editing. But that's its downfall too. Almost everybody interposes a massive and complicated series of editings between the time words start to be born into consciousness and when they finally come off the end of the pencil or typewriter onto the page. This is partly because schooling makes us obsessed with the "mistakes" we make in writing. Many people are constantly thinking about spelling and grammar as they try to write. I am always thinking about the awkwardness, wordiness, and general mushiness of my natural verbal product as I try to write down words.

5 But it's not just "mistakes" or "bad writing" we edit as we write. We also edit unacceptable thoughts and feelings, as we do in speaking. In writing there is more time to do it so the editing is heavier: when speaking, there's someone right there waiting for a reply and he'll get bored or think we're crazy if we don't come out with *something*. Most of the time in speaking, we settle for the catch-as-catch-can way in which the words tumble out. In writing, however, there's a chance to try to get them right. But the opportunity to get them right is a terrible burden: you can work for two hours trying to get a paragraph "right" and discover it's not right at all. And then give up.

6 Editing, *in itself*, is not the problem. Editing is usually necessary if we want to end up with something satisfactory. The problem is that editing goes on *at the same time* as producing. The editor is, as it were, constantly looking over the shoulder of the producer and constantly fiddling with what he's doing while he's in the middle of trying to do it. No wonder the producer gets nervous, jumpy, inhibited, and finally can't be coherent. It's an unnecessary burden to try to think of words and also worry at the same time whether they're the right words.

7 The main thing about freewriting is that it is *nonediting*. It is an exercise in bringing together the process of producing words and putting them down on the page. Practiced regularly, it undoes the ingrained habit of editing at the same time