WRITING

INVITATION AND RESPONSE

VINCENT RYAN RUGGIERO

PATRICIA MORGAN

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Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers
Fort Worth Philadelphia San Diego New York Orlando Austin San Antonio
Toronto Montreal London Sydney Tokyo

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Address for Editorial Correspondence:
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 301 Commerce Street, Suite 3700, Fort Worth, TX 76102.

Address for Orders:
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 6277 Sea Harbor Drive, Orlando, FL 32887
1-800-782-4479, or 1-800-433-0001 (in Florida)

Acknowledgements are on pages 000–000 which constitute a continuation of the copyright page.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 92-70919

ISBN: 0-03-023089-6

Printed in the United States of America

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 1 039 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

TO THE STUDENT

Have you ever asked an instructor, "What do I do next?" and been given specific instructions that didn't work? Have you ever been told rather vaguely, "Well, that depends"? If either response has left you frustrated and still wondering what to do, you will appreciate the structure of this book. The answers to your questions will not be specific instructions that force you to work the way someone else expects. Neither will they be so vague that you still don't know what to do next. Instead, you will be given a framework in which to write, a framework that is flexible enough to lead you to your own best working habits, yet orderly enough to give direction to your work.

A basic metaphor of this book is that writing is a response to an invitation. The process of writing is actually a fluid, varied series of activities that is directed by you and your own answers to key questions. Ask yourself, "Do I want to write this down?" If the invitation is a class assignment, the answer, of course, is "yes." But realistically, you know that there are other times when you think of writing—a letter, a journal entry—and decide to answer the invitation with a "no."

When your answer is no, you go no further in the writing process; when it is yes, you gather material and ask yourself another question: "Do I have enough material to draft?" If not, you continue to gather material; if you do, you go on to draft your response. Further questions will help you decide if your draft is complete, organized, and logical; you will also decide if your draft is polished and ready for an audience. In each case, a no answer sends you back for further work—work that *you* have identified as necessary.

This pattern of asking **yourself** key questions about your writing is repeated throughout this text. This pattern teaches you the questions, not the answers. After all, the answers will change as you work. Sometimes the yes answers will come quickly and easily; sometimes, you will have to repeat activities that help you gather, organize, or revise material. Learning to ask the right questions is essential to providing productive answers; learning to answer the questions for yourself will make you independent of your instructor and confident of your own abilities.

Some chapters describe the kinds of invitations you might receive and the kinds of responses that are expected. Other chapters talk specifically about activities that shape your written response, activities that help you to explore a topic, gather material, organize a draft, recognize an audience, and polish your work. Much of the book is designed as a reference work—if you need help collecting material, turn to Chapter 6; if you need help using dialogue, turn to Chapter 13; if you need information about documentation of essay exams or literary analysis, there are specific chapters to answer your questions. In the classroom, your instructor will choose the material for study; outside of the classroom, you should find the catalogue in Part 3 useful for quick reference whenever you must respond in writing.

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

As writing instructors, we often wonder how to reach our students, both the competent writers who need to be challenged and the fearful writers who need to be reassured. They look to us for direction, and we respond by telling them to write. Often we begin by offering analogies to the writing process, comparisons to familiar, harmless processes that our students do not fear.

One of the simplest diagrams of writing is a pattern of invitation and response. Something prompts us; we respond by writing. The world is full of such invitations—to vent our anger, to evaluate a performance, to explain our actions, to express our gratitude. Many times we simply ignore them.

Yet there are other times when the invitation cannot be refused. Perhaps the prompt is so compelling that we must put our thoughts on paper; perhaps the invitation comes from an instructor or a supervisor and cannot be ignored. Voluntary or involuntary, our writing can be described as a response to an invitation.

However, this simple model of invitation and response will not suffice for the writing classroom. We want our students to see the activites that flow from that invitation to the written response, so we search for models of the writing process, a search that often ends in frustration.

Realistically, as writers, we know that "the" writing process is actually a collection of processes as varied as the writers and the contexts in which they write. Balanced against this knowledge are the needs of student writers who ask repeatedly, "How do I start?" "What do I do next?" Their questions urge us to present writing as an orderly process, moving inevitably from step to step toward a finished product, even though we know that a step-by-step model is only a partial reflection of the ways in which we write.

Our presentation of "writing process" is further complicated because, just as surely as we know that writing is *not* a series of neat steps, we also know that it *can* be exactly that. For every image we have of writing as a random collection of inspired, awkward, creative leaps, there is a memory of writing that actually flowed quickly and smoothly toward a finished product.

The challenge, then, is developing a model that allows for tremendous variation, for times when writing moves from prompt to paper with virtually no hesitation, and for others when we struggle with content, organization, and even with audience. In addition, it should be a model to which our students can relate, one that intrigues them as well as informs them.

One such model can be borrowed from a field that is an integral part of the late-twentieth century—computer science. Computer science is actually one of the most logical places to find a model of the writing process. Computers are giant mechanical brains, and computer scientists spend

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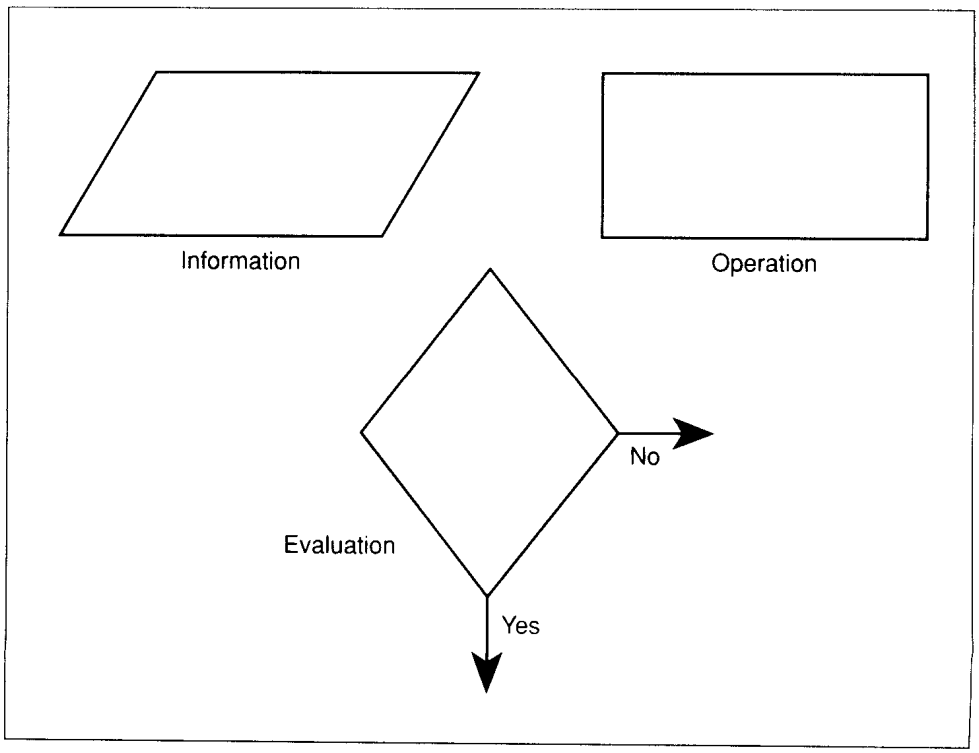
their days teaching these machines to think. A good bit of programming work is a representation of problem-solving, and in the efforts to capture the **thinking** process on paper, we can find a model to help us capture the **writing** process. More than one rhetorician has seen writing as "thinking on paper"; what more logical connection could exist than the one between teaching machines to problem-solve and teaching students to write?

We needn't study computer languages to borrow from the field. Programmers often begin with a **flow chart.** The flow chart illustrates the sequence of activities that lead from problem to solution. Three elements make up the chart: information (or input), operations, and evaluations (see Diagram A). Information is fed into the model. Operations are performed using that information; then an evaluation is performed to decide whether the operations are complete. In the simplest analogy to writing, a writer collects information, performs operations on it (selects, organizes, edits), then evaluates the work to decide if it is complete.

Is such a model a simple, step-by-step representation of the writing process? It can be. For those times when writing flows easily, the chart moves quickly through the operations and the evaluations, showing a straight flow from invitation or prompt to written response (see Diagram B on page viii).

Diagram A



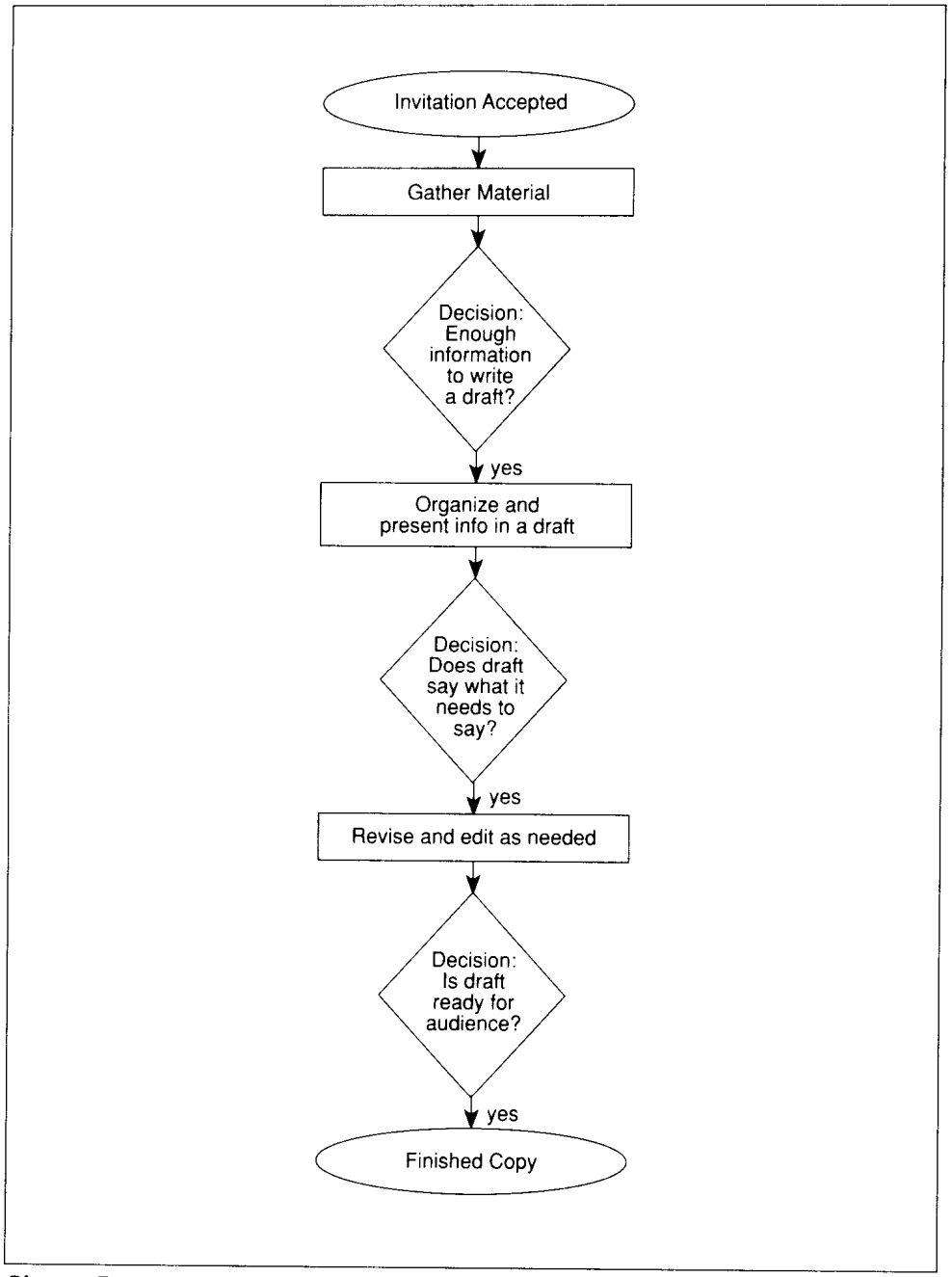


Diagram B When All the Answers Are Yes

On the other hand, a computer flow chart also allows tremendous variation. For example, the evaluation forces the writer to make a decision: Is my work at this point complete? If the answer is yes, the writer can move quickly to the next phase of the process. However, when the answer is no, the writer is sent back to work on specific areas (see Diagram C).

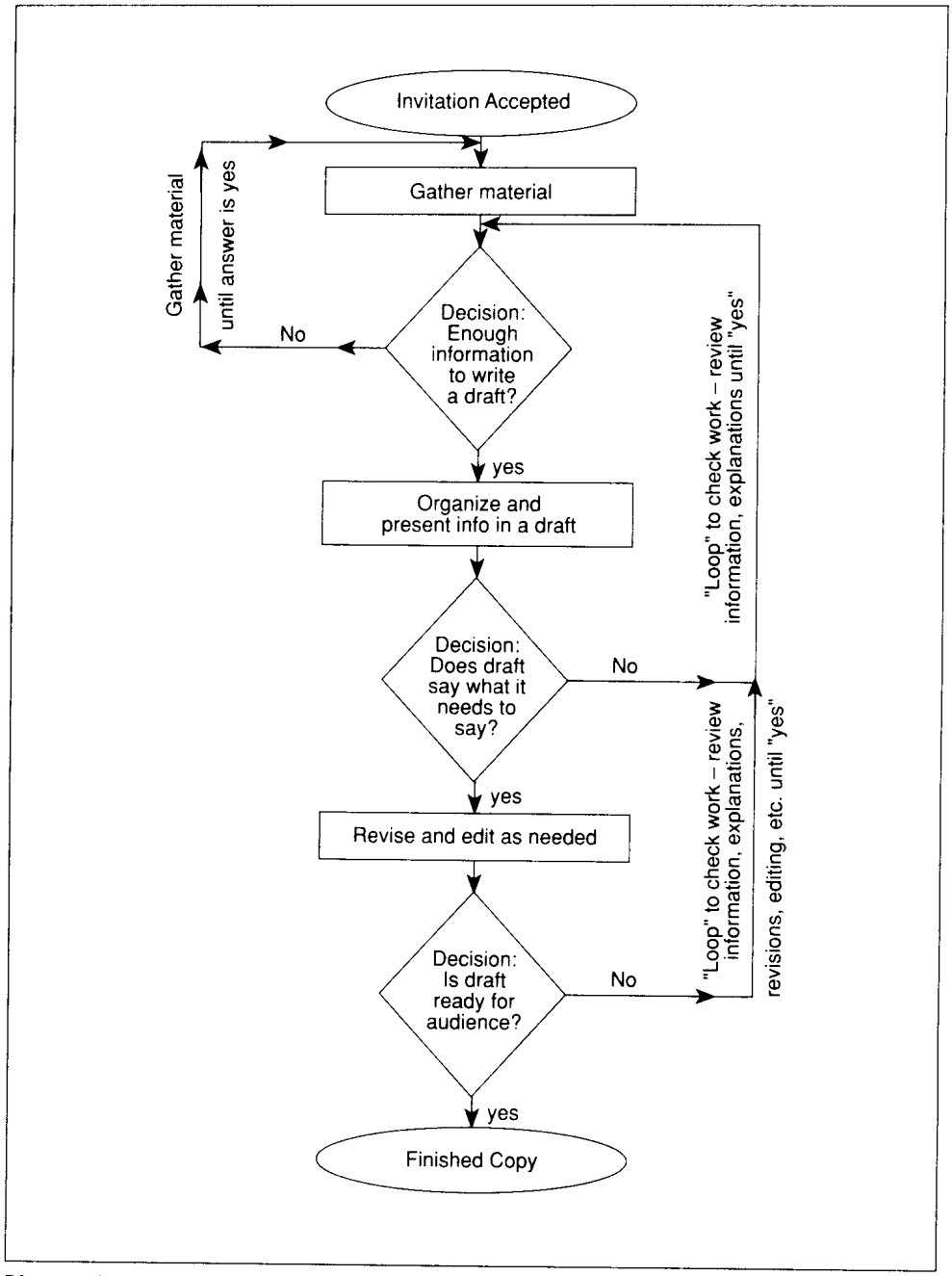


Diagram C Working from No to Yes

To diagram writing on a computer flow chart, we must first identify the decisions that we expect student writers to make as they work. This text describes the initial decision to write and three decisions made during the process itself. Each decision either sends the writer back to do more work or directs the writer to another area.

To begin this process, the writer first decides to accept the invitation to write and begins to gather material. As the writer works, the next decision to be made is, Do I have enough material to start a draft? A no answer sends the writer back to explore the topic further; a yes sends the writer on to draft. The third decision is, Does my draft say what it needs to say, clearly and completely? A no answer sends the writer back—to find more material if necessary, to look again at organization, at logic, at presentation—a yes sends the writer on to revise and edit. Finally, the writer asks, Is this draft ready for its audience? A no sends the writer back to work; a yes sends the draft on to its readers.

Not only is the flow chart model flexible enough to accurately represent variations in the writing process, it also empowers student writers. Instead of receiving specific directions from an instructor, students are encouraged to ask and answer questions that evaluate their own writing.

These questions can be taught; they recur in any writing context. Specific questions encourage students to review their work in progress continuously, and their own evaluations (directed by the questions) tell them what needs to be done next.

Is such a model too complicated for our students? For the most part, students are intrigued by it. They know something of computers and see the parallels, or they know nothing about computers yet see the logic. Certainly the model is more complicated than neat steps or patterns of circles. Yet writing is both more complex than simple models allow and less complex than elaborate constructs would have us believe. A process modelled on a computer flow chart allows for infinite variation—the kind of variation inevitable in the writing process.

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