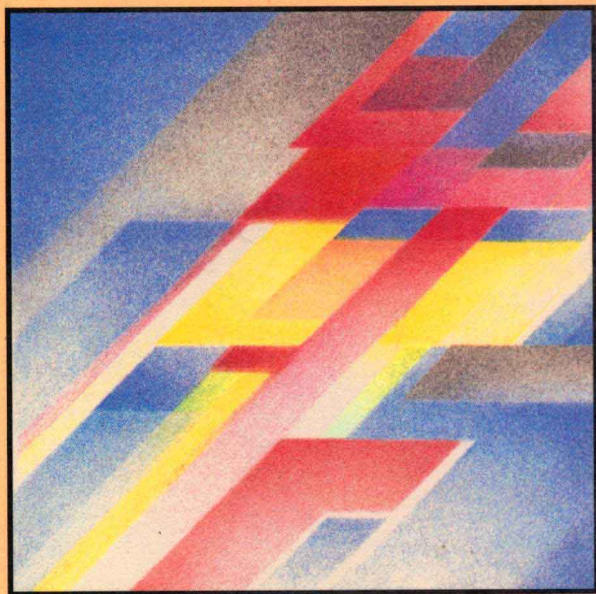


THE *Writer's*

HANDBOOK



JOHN McKERNAN

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THE WRITER'S HANDBOOK

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Preface to the Teacher



I have designed this handbook so that any instructor in English will be able to find in it all materials necessary to teach a one- or two-semester (or quarter) course in college composition. This mass of material is culled from what I have found most valuable in my twenty years of teaching freshman composition.

In designing the book, I especially wanted to include information and activities that stress the expressive, informative, and persuasive aims of writing that I believe composition courses should teach and encourage. Linked with this notion, almost as a subtext, is the idea that narrative is a powerful device capable of being used in all forms of writing from the simplest personal experience to the most complex forms of analysis and argument. Besides attending to the aims of writing, I wanted to provide a logical flow from personal writing to the more impersonal kinds of writing represented by assignments in argument, persuasion, definition, and research. To help solve the thinking problems engendered by these sorts of assignments, I have included numerous *Thinking Exercises* to challenge students, and I have included a chapter that develops a practical and writing-based approach to logic and clear thinking.

In presenting a sketch of grammar knowledge, I have classified many *terms*, but I have also attempted to identify

and illustrate grammatical *functions* within sentences. My goal was to emphasize how grammar creates meaning and to relate sentence elements to the process of writing. Chapter 20 discusses at length some of the perennial problems found in student writing, such as sentence fragments, subject-verb agreement errors, and so forth. You will find that this book emphasizes good grammar and correctness in spelling and punctuation not as ends in themselves, but as devices to ensure clear and concise communication. I hope that the format, tone, and arrangement of this book suggest to students that English teachers care primarily about communication of meaning and are distressed by errors because they mar meaning and block communication.

Although this text is a traditional handbook, certain distinctive features set it apart from other handbooks. Above all, it emphasizes student writing and the kinds of processes that students engage in as they create and carry out writing assignments on their own. This handbook includes comments on writing by students taken from a variety of different places: from essays on writing, from journals, from comments in conferences, from comments in classes, from comments written as a part of peer editing of papers, from comments scribbled in the margins of books, from notes passed in classes, and from notes given to teachers. I believe student comments on writing, when well done, are as astute as any professional's and should be encouraged in all possible forms.

The rhetoric section emphasizes the uniqueness, circularity, and repetitiveness of the different activities that comprise the total writing process. It doesn't simplify the process and tell students to just prewrite, write a first draft, and revise, nor does it offer any of the other linear strate-

gies for composition under the guise of process. It presents abundant material on how to generate good topics, good main ideas, plentiful and interesting support, effective organization, drafting strategies, and it offers all sorts of revising possibilities in a writing context in which it is obvious that these activities occur and recur until the final draft is written and proofread. I think students need them and deserve them. I want to encourage the habits of mind and heart whereby students slow down and read their own work carefully. I want a text that by precept and example expects students to *take themselves and their writing seriously*. Of special note is the section on proofreading as a part of the total writing process. Most students need to be taught effective proofreading strategies. This text includes this material in a separate section linked to, but following, the discussion of the other elements of effective writing.

Because the assignments involved in research writing create such problems for both teacher and student, I have fundamentally redesigned the traditional sections dealing with plagiarism, summary, paraphrase, quotation, library use, research techniques, and writing drafts. The précis (or summary) is developed in Chapter 11. The paraphrase is explained in Chapter 12. Rules for quotation are given extensive treatment in Chapter 22 on punctuation. The material on use of the library has been presented in the Glossary of Library Terms, Chapter 16. The complete methodology for a research paper is presented sequentially in a series of ten steps in Chapter 17. It has always struck me as a recipe for grief and as a model of ineffective instruction to ask the average freshman to—at one and the same time—learn to negotiate a college library; select a research topic; gather significant material; read extensively and evaluate masses of material; and quote, summarize,

and paraphrase correctly while writing a meaningful paper, accurately documenting it all. I do not recommend abandoning either the research paper or any of these activities; they are crucial to academic discourse. What I recommend, however, is that the process of research be broken down (for the sake of instruction) into its component parts. In some instances, global writing assignments are quite appropriate; however, one should assign the research paper as a whole, broken down into its respective parts; otherwise it will be a device for fostering mediocre writing. My experience has taught me that a pedagogy that breaks the standard research project down into its component parts leads to worthwhile and interesting writing.

Because careful revision plays such a fundamental role in improving student writing, extraordinary attention is paid throughout the entire text to revision as fundamental to effective writing: especially in terms of the whole paper (Section 2.9), in terms of paragraphing (Chapters 3–6), and in terms of revising sentences (Chapter 19).

To help students think about writing in a variety of different ways, most sections of the book include *Thinking Exercises* that have been designed to engage students' interest and stimulate their thinking about solutions to problems in writing and developing effective strategies in writing. Coupled with these forms of exercises are a large number of *Writing Assignments*, each of which presents different kinds of assignments that fulfill different aims: expressive, informative, or persuasive.

In addition to the handbook, a supplemental workbook is available with information and exercises designed both to develop the thinking skills necessary for composition and to develop fluency in sentences and paragraphs, mainly by means of sentence combining and language drill.

A comprehensive *Instructor's Manual* is also available that contains extensive help for the teacher in planning classroom activities and also in providing syllabi for a variety of composition courses that cover either one or two quarters or one or two semesters. A copy of the *Instructor's Manual* is available to teachers using this book by writing to the English Editor, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 111 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10003.

Acknowledgments

Every composition textbook owes many debts of gratitude to earlier authors. I want to thank the following authors and their books for the beneficial influence they have had on my teaching and on my writing this book: J. C. Dent, *Thought in English Prose*; Richard M. Weaver, *Rhetoric and Composition*; Donald Davidson, *American Composition and Rhetoric*; Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*; Donald Murray, *Write to Learn*; John Ostrom, *Writing Paragraphs*; Claude Faulkner, *Writing Good Sentences and Writing Good Prose*; Linda Flower, *Problem Solving Strategies for Writers*; Celia Millward, *Handbook for Writers*; and Frank D'Angelo, *Process and Thought in Composition*. I mention these, primarily, because in them I discovered ideas that are reflected in one way or another in my book and that can be immediately translated into classroom materials to engender effective student writing.

I am also grateful for the comments of Llewellyn McKernan and Ellery Sedgwick, who made crucial suggestions at an early but critical stage in the writing. In addition to their help, a larger debt of gratitude must go to those

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Preface to the Student

In one of the poems written by Robert Lowell, he tells about a rare book that his father used to prop up a lamp on a table. I hope this book will be a light for the student and not a prop for the table lamp. I believe that composition is one of the most important courses anyone can take because it both enlightens and empowers. Books about writing are rare books because they enable people to acquire skills that give them substantial power in the world. Any student who expresses clearly in words his or her thoughts and emotions so that readers take the writer seriously has real power.

I see this book being used in all classes in college where writing is important. I see it being used by beginning writers who are struggling to express their thoughts clearly and by advanced writers who are continuing the struggle to discover both what they want to say and how they want to say it. I cannot stress too strongly the value of effective instruction in this writing and thinking process. Those two strategies go together and nourish each other to bring about any effective act of communication. Writers think about what they want to write and the act of writing helps them to think more clearly.

This book studiously avoids complicated theories of rhetoric and grammar. My goal is not to have you learn a mass of grammatical and rhetorical terms you will never use again nor to develop highly analytical skills that are

divorced from the process of writing itself. My primary goal has been to present strategies and techniques that illuminate the steps in this process and that enable you to better control, manipulate, and express the material that presents itself to you when you sit down to write.

You will increase the value of this book for yourself if you discover the many ways you can employ it to help you develop as a writer. Five different uses come quickly to mind.

1. Use this book to discover the strategies of effective writers. There are some good rules for effective writing: (a) Have or find something to say. (b) Be clear. (c) Be honest. Say what you really mean. (d) Be interesting. (e) Write for a real reader. This book emphasizes the practical experience, critical comments, and valuable suggestions of other good writers, especially student writers. I include this material because it is interesting and to the point, and I believe that excellent advice about writing is to be found in the casual off-the-cuff comments of actual writers.
2. Use this book to help you understand some of the various kinds of writing assigned by your teachers in college. These different types include journal writing, personal essays, in-class essays, expository themes, persuasive papers, argumentative essays, definition papers, letters, and research papers. The book gives the characteristics of these forms, practical advice on how to write in these different forms, and plenty of examples of these different kinds of writing.
3. Use it when you are planning a writing assignment. Reread the sections in Chapter 2 and study the section dealing with the kind of writing you have been assigned.
4. Use it while revising. After you have written a rough

draft and put it aside for a while, you will have time to read pertinent sections in the book and think about the main point of your essay and whether or not your writing is effective for your intended audience. Because any writing assignment involves a series of steps that are often repeated in different ways and at different times, you will find that the book is divided into separate sections that focus on different concerns in revising. Important sections deal with assignments, topic selection, main idea, statement of purpose, organization, audience, drafting, and revision. Other sections that may help in revising are those dealing with word choice (Chapter 21), paragraphing (Chapters 3–6), and proofreading (Section 2.10).

5. Use it as a reference guide in matters relating to spelling, punctuation, grammar, diction, and usage. You will find that this handbook contains more information on these topics than any comparable textbook. Let me make one suggestion about editing your writing for correctness. Develop the habit of proofreading your writing *after* you have written it, not *while* you are writing it. You can become a more efficient and effective writer if you divide your writing and your correcting into two distinct activities.

Even though scholars claim that everyone who speaks and listens has a knowledge of grammar, students often worry about grammar and grammatical correctness. This is understandable, and although the relationship between grammatical knowledge and writing skill is difficult to understand completely, many student writers *feel* more comfortable writing their drafts when they believe they have a

good knowledge of grammar. If you feel that way, you might want to study thoroughly Parts 6–8 on your own.

All of the material in this book, important in itself, will become valuable to you if you make a commitment as a person and a writer to intellectual honesty, hard work, and clear thinking. These alone lead to good writing and can transform you into an educated person able to express powerfully your thoughts and feelings. I believe that there is nothing more worthwhile to a society than a tradition of effective, honest writing and innumerable good, honest writers. They alone can keep freedom and justice alive and make humane values triumphant.

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