

*The*  
**Act of Writing**

CANADIAN ESSAYS FOR COMPOSITION



**Ronald Conrad**

*The*  
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CANADIAN ESSAYS FOR COMPOSITION  
THIRD EDITION

Ronald Conrad  
Ryerson Polytechnical Institute

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## To the Student

Reading and writing are two sides of the same coin. If you read one book a year like the average Canadian, you will never really learn to write. But perhaps 80 or 90 percent of those who read habitually will become much better writers than those who don't, and because of this will succeed more easily in school and career -- not to mention leading a fuller life because of what they have learned while reading.

All this is why you are using *The Act of Writing*. If you meet the challenges that a book like this poses, you can do a lot for yourself. Among these challenges:

- Read the essays with attention, and maybe reread them, to understand their topic and the techniques the author has used to present it.
- React to the argument, thinking critically, agreeing or disagreeing. And in discussion tell your classmates and teacher why. Be forceful: if you have reasoned well, your opinion is as good as anyone else's.



- Write a strong response to the topic or choice of topics suggested by your teacher. Using the essays you have studied as models, organize clearly, argue well, and polish your own language to the most powerful level you can achieve.
- To do this, reject those writing practices of the past that are inefficient or even harmful; exert yourself to learn and use the “process” approach explained and encouraged throughout this book. It may be based on today’s research, but it is how most good writers have always written.
- Finally, *read more*. See the biographical introductions, which tell what else our authors have written. See the “Further Reading” suggested after each essay. And when a particular author or subject strikes your interest, choose the books you will read now, or over the holidays, or next summer. Improve your writing and enlarge your world by reading now and for the rest of your life.

R. C.

## To the Teacher

We are gratified by the enthusiasm of teachers and students for *The Act of Writing* since its publication in 1983, but we have also listened to your requests for change — both in your verbal comments and in your opinions quantified by our recent user survey. The present edition delivers all your most often requested changes, while carefully preserving the qualities you liked in the first place.

The request most often voiced was for a unit on argumentation and persuasion. You now have it: our new Chapter 9 is the centerpiece of this edition, a “superchapter” offering a substantial introduction as well as eight model essays carefully selected to demonstrate a range of approaches to argumentative and persuasive writing. To make room for this major chapter without inflating the size and cost of the book, we have shortened four other chapters and dropped a fifth, the relatively little used “Extended Definition.” Yet we have maintained the key chapters “Cause and Effect” and “Comparison and Contrast” at a full complement of six essays each, and have beefed them up with some fine new selections by authors like David Suzuki, Mordecai Richler, Mavor Moore, Russell

Baker, and Margaret Laurence. (We are printing Laurence's classic essay "Where the World Began," requested in the survey.)

Another frequent request was to apply more fully the introductory instruction on process in writing. We have done so. There are now 48 individual "Process in Writing" assignments throughout the book, one in response to the subject and/or approach of each selection. And at the end of every chapter, immediately after the list of 25 to 30 essay topics, is a sequence entitled "Process in Writing: Guidelines": a series of optional steps individualizing the process approach for the method of organization explored in that chapter. (By the way, every one of the 245 end-of-chapter essay topics is new, to provide you with fresh reading matter in your students' essays.)

Other requests were for more women authors, more essays on the media, and more essays on the environment. You now have them. And in general, you have easier access to more essays demonstrating each pattern of organization: systematic cross-references after each chapter introduction now identify those essays in other chapters that most strongly use the central approach of the unit your class is studying. For example, Chapter 3, "Description," reprints four essays but refers you to six more elsewhere in the book, for a total of ten selections that make strong use of description.

Another kind of cross-referencing is offered in a new feature: "Further Reading," just after each essay, suggests several book titles in a variety of genres, relating to the author and/or topic just studied — in order to encourage wide reading and facilitate independent study.

Finally, new selections are central to any edition. We have chosen ours for their impact, variety, style, polish, and clarity of organization. We hope they will stimulate debate in your classroom, and we hope that as models they will encourage critical thinking, clear organization, and careful revision in the writing of your students.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

*The Act of Writing*, Third Edition, offers flexibility and encourages individualization. The combination of four to eight essays per chapter with several more identified in cross-references will yield more selections per unit than you are likely to use. Thus you can individualize, choosing those that best suit the needs and interests of your particular class. This book also offers a range of difficulty, from essays that are easily accessible to almost all students to essays that are frankly challenging. (Note: The "Table of Contents and Difficulty Ranking" of your instructor's manual ranks all selections by level of difficulty, so that if you are new to this book you can more easily plan a syllabus to fit the needs of your class.) The

numerous discussion topics after each selection offer you and your students a choice of theme and emphasis in classroom debate. And finally, the "Process in Writing" topic after each essay, the many end-of-chapter topics, and the optional process "Guidelines" tailored for each chapter give a wide latitude of choice for the individual teacher, the individual class, the individual student.

Note also the two tables of contents. The first lists all selections in their chapters arranged by *form of organization* (you can choose from six essays, for example, that all demonstrate organization through comparison and contrast). The second table of contents lists all essays by general *subject*, to help you choose selections of interest to your particular students.

An introductory essay, "The Act of Writing," starts the book off by putting to rest a number of widespread misconceptions about writing that plague students in the classroom, then attempts to describe what it is that an essayist actually does. It emphasizes the individuality of the writer, the importance of motivation, the role of intuition as well as logic, and a balance of spontaneity and revision in the process of writing.

The essays are all by Canadians or by persons with Canadian experience, but the scope ranges widely: some are about Canada, some are about other countries, and most are concerned with such universal themes as childhood, aging, work, technology, sport, and war. The use of Canadian essays is not a statement of nationalism. In fact, it is an attempt to bring to Canada the kind of anthology that is taken for granted in other countries: a collection of works that are mostly universal in theme but that, naturally, draw a good part of their content from the country in which the book will be used.

As we have seen, the essays are arranged in chapters that each demonstrate a fundamental and useful pattern of organization. "Narration" starts the book off, because no approach is easier or more motivating for a first assignment than writing a story, in chronological order, about oneself. "Example" and "Description" follow, because *these* methods of development are used to some degree in almost all writing. "Cause and Effect" and the following chapter, "Comparison and Contrast," are at the centre of the essayist's organizational repertoire. "Analogy" and "Classification" follow "Comparison and Contrast," for they are both varieties of comparison. "Process Analysis," an approach used widely across the curriculum, follows. After all these *forms*, our new chapter, "Argumentation and Persuasion," explores more fully the writer's most common and basic *purpose*, to make a point. It explores the dualities of deduction and induction, and of argumentation and persuasion, then illustrates their application with the eight model essays.

Every selection is prefaced with an introduction to the author, designed

to interest the student and encourage further reading in the author's works. And each selection is followed by pedagogical material entitled "Further Reading," "Structure," "Style," "Ideas for Discussion and Writing," and in Chapter 9 "Argumentation and Persuasion." Note that in this material different questions serve different purposes. Some are directive, calling attention to major features of the essay. Some are technical, for example focussing on a specific point of language that illustrates a technique. And still others are exploratory, encouraging open-ended response. The instructor's manual offers answers to those questions that are not open-ended and suggests responses to some that are. Read the manual's introduction: it gives more suggestions for using *The Act of Writing*. For each essay, the manual also lists vocabulary that may need attention.

Each of the nine chapters begins with a discussion of how and why to use the form at hand, and ends with a selection of 25 to 30 essay topics which complement that form. These topics have been chosen with care, to tap some of the students' deepest concerns and channel them into motivation for writing. The reason for this attention to topics is that no one problem is more destructive to the performance of both student and teacher than dull or superficial subject matter. How can writing be important if its content is not? And how can a teacher enjoy or even tolerate marking without an interest in *what* the students are saying? A further "Process in Writing" topic occurs after each essay. If class members have had a good discussion about the selection, their motivation and writing performance may be greatest if they explore these topics, which draw upon both the subject and the underlying form of the essay that precedes them. And at the end of each chapter occur the optional process guidelines mentioned earlier, individualized for the specific pattern of development in that unit.

Finally, a glossary at the end defines literary terms often used in the discussion questions; when one of these terms is a key part of a passage, it appears in SMALL CAPITALS.

The instructor's manual has been revised for this edition, and will be sent gratis upon request.

I would like to thank all those who, in one way or another, helped with this project: students and colleagues who reacted to essays; teachers who gave of their time to answer our survey; John Cook, who advised on choice of selections; and Dan Bratton, who critiqued the introduction to our new chapter. Thanks also to Jocelyne and Michel Leclerc for their research in Quebec, to Mary Stevens, Win McGlone, Allan Weiss, and Karen Kitagawa, and to Norma Christensen for her detective skills in tracking down permissions. Doris Anderson, Judy Stoffman, and translator Philip Stratford took the time to update their selections, and George Gabori,

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R. C.



## Introduction: The Act of Writing

Writing is one of the most widely misunderstood of human activities. It is odd that after all the years we have spent in school, after all the hours we have spent reading other people's writing and producing our own, most of us cannot say what really happens when we write. We can describe other complicated tasks — driving a car, baking bread, building a radio, or programming a computer. But to most people the act of writing is a mystery. Not that we don't have theories, either those told us in school or those we have arrived at ourselves. But many of these theories are misconceptions that actually hinder our efforts to write. Let's look at some of them.

*MISCONCEPTION: Writing is like following a blueprint: I figure it all out in advance and then just fill in the details.* Of course an outline, used sensibly, will help. But some of us were taught in school that our best thinking goes into a logical and detailed outline — and that the writing itself is secondary. Thus we are reduced to carpenters or plumbers of the written word, who merely saw, cut, and fit the pieces in place once the master plan has been

established. The problem with this reassuringly logical approach is that it views writing as a science, not as the art that all our practical experience tells us it is. How many of us have given up on a required outline, done our thinking mostly as we wrote the essay itself, then produced an outline by seeing what we just wrote? Or how many of us have painfully constructed a detailed outline in advance, only to find while writing the essay that our real message does not fit the plan?

Writing is exploring! We know the direction in which we will go and the main landmarks we hope to pass, but not every twist and turn of the path. What a dull trip it would be if we did! Let's leave room for discovery, because some of our best ideas occur in the act of writing. Quebec poet St.-Denys Garneau went so far as to say, "I cannot think except when writing." Many teachers now reflect the fact of writing as discovery by calling a first draft the *discovery draft*.

But while avoiding the rigor mortis of overplanning, let's not go to the opposite extreme, like Stephen Leacock's famous horseman who "rode madly off in all directions." We do work best with an outline, five or ten or fifteen lines that define the main point and how we intend to support it. But our outline should be a brief one — a compass on a journey, not a blueprint for a construction project.

*MISCONCEPTION: If I don't hit it right the first time, I've failed.* It's not hard to see where this idea came from: in school we write so many essays and tests within the limits of one class period that writing in a hurry begins to seem normal. But merely completing such an assignment is difficult; seriously revising it is even more difficult. Few people can "hit it right the first time." Professional writers know this; most of them take longer to write than we do. They tinker with words and sentences, they cross out and replace sections, they go through two or three or even five or ten drafts — and sometimes they throw the whole thing out and start over. These writers know by experience that writing is not a hit-or-miss affair with only one try allowed, but a *process*. They know that revision can yield astonishing results.

*MISCONCEPTION: When I write, I am speaking on paper.* If you have heard yourself speaking on tape, you were no doubt surprised at the number of filler words you used. "Uh," "um," "well," and "hmmm" serve to fill in the gaps between your thoughts but hardly help to carry the message. And if you listened closely, you may have been surprised at the number of incomplete statements — fragments that by themselves made little or no sense. Fillers and fragments are tolerated in speech because, after all, we



are making up our message on the spot. There is no chance to plan, revise, edit, or proofread.

But in writing there is, and this fact increases the expectations of your reader far beyond those of your listener. Language in written form can be planned. It is complete. It is precise and concise. It uses standard words. It is punctuated. It follows all the rules. In short, it is a product of the time that its written form allows you to give it, not a spur-of-the-moment, hope-for-the-best effort like the speech that comes so easily from your mouth.

*MISCONCEPTION: The best words are the biggest words. Variations on this theme are If my writing looks scholarly it will impress the reader, and even If I make my essay so difficult that no one knows what I'm saying, everyone will believe me.* At the roots of these widespread ideas is a notion that writing is a kind of competition between writer and reader. A writer who is obscure enough will make the reader feel like a dummy and will thus win the game.

Avoiding the game altogether is difficult when so many leaders in business, education, and government play it. The first step toward open communication, though, is to think of your reader not as an opponent but as an ally. You are both working toward the same goal, which is the reader's clear understanding of your ideas. Another step is to admit that words small in size can be large in meaning. The best-loved writings in our language show a strong preference for short words. Writing made of them is more concise, more vivid, and usually more profound than writing made of the elephantine words that some of us ransack the dictionary for. When a long word conveys your meaning best — perhaps like “elephantine” above — by all means use it. But often the writer, like the architect, finds that *less is more*.

*MISCONCEPTION: I don't like to write.* For some unfortunate people this statement is true. But for most who say it, the truth is really “I don't like to *begin* writing.” Who does? Staring at that blank page is like staring from a diving board at the cold water below. But a swimmer and a writer both work up their courage to plunge in, and soon they both experience a new sensation: they don't want to come out. Teachers whose students write journals in class see the process at work every day. As class begins, the writers are filled with stress: they chew their pens and frown as they stare at the page to be filled. But a few minutes later they are scribbling furiously away, recording in an almost trance-like state their latest experiences, feelings, and insights. And when the teacher asks them to stop, in order to begin the next activity, they are annoyed: they sigh and