Writer

to Writer

Arthur W. Biddle

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Arthur W. Biddle

University of Vermont

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WRITER TO WRITER

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Preface

THE AIM OF THE PREFACE IS TO ESTABLISH THE PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF YOUR BOOK

The McGraw-Hill Author's Book

TO THE STUDENT

Describing this book in a few words figures as one of the most challenging writing assignments I've been given in a long time—and I've been handed some tough ones. From the beginning, two principles have guided me. The first is suggested by the title, Writer to Writer. This book was written from one writer (me) to another writer (you). Like you, I struggle with getting started and with meeting deadlines, with finding just the right word and with that paragraph that simply won't come together. You know, the world is not made up of WRITERS (like Shakespeare, Dickens, Hemingway) and writers (like you and me). Instead, we are each somewhere on a spectrum of skill and experience. At one end of that spectrum, the kindergartner struggles to form the letter A, while at the other end the most accomplished stylists and master storytellers gnash their teeth and swear at their typewriters. Yet we are all engaged in the same activity. Where you are on the spectrum now matters less than where you find yourself at the end of this course. Along the way you'll produce a lot of solid writing and even occasional passages of brilliance. It's true—I've seen it happen just about every time. With determination and a good writing teacher, you can learn to write confidently and well. The purpose of this book is to give you the knowledge and the practice to achieve that end



You'll progress further faster if you work on your writing one stage at a time. This second principle, called "writing as process," focuses first on discovering what you know and what you need to say, then on getting it into the most appropriate form for your purpose and audience. Each chapter's topics are arranged to help you move through the process from the germ of an idea to the finished piece.

These principles, like the advice and the writing assignments that follow, have been tested with hundreds of students for more than 10 years. They work for students in first-year English and for upperclass students in more advanced courses. They'll work for you.

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

The instructor will find Writer to Writer a text that most students enjoy reading, perhaps because the approach is pragmatic, not dogmatic. Just as there are many ways of teaching a writing course, so there are many ways of composing an essay, many processes. At each stage the student-writer is shown several methods and techniques and encouraged to experiment to find which is most helpful. Topics and assignments are carefully sequenced to allow each student to develop expository skills. Other features of the book are:

Purposive writing that explains a process, analyzes a problem, makes a decision, convinces a skeptic, gets action.

Audience-directed writing that stresses the needs of the reader.

Writing assignments, of which there are more than eighty to provide flexibility for classes of differing experience.

Handbook elements, only the most necessary, presented at the point of need: outlining in a prewriting chapter; paragraph generation, sentence structure, and punctuation in revising chapter; documentation in research chapter.

Style explained throughout in treatments of purpose, voice, audience, subject, revision.

Writer's protocol showing a writing process from choice of topic, listing of ideas and development of a plan through drafting and revising stages and accompanied by student writer's comments.

Writer to Writer offers a richness of resources that allows instructors to tailor the materials to their own classes and institutions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledging the assistance of others in the long process of writing this book is a pleasure. To my classes, past and present, my thanks for your patience and good sense. And for what you've taught me. Many of the writing samples in this book came out of those classes. I'm grateful to the authors for permission to use their work.

A number of friends and colleagues have also helped with this book. At the University of Vermont, Mary Jane Dickerson, Frieda Gardner, and Sidney Poger have been especially supportive. John Clarke, David Huddle, and Tony Magistrale have let me borrow ideas and writing activities. From neighboring St. Michael's College, Jennie Stoler has assisted with several chapters and cast the objective eye of the economist at several more. Writing teachers at other colleges and universities have read large parts of the manuscript and offered valued suggestions: John J. Clayton, The University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Edward Corbett, Ohio State University, John Ferré, University of Illinois-Urbana, Lynn Garrett, Louisiana State University, Thomas H. Miles, West Virginia University, Elaine M. Miller, Robert Perrin, Indiana State University, Maurice Scharton, Illinois State University, Richard M. Verrill, Boston University, Suzanne Wolkenfeld, William Woods, Wichita State University, and Ruth L. Wright, Auburn University. Through it all, I've been very fortunate to have a talented, longsuffering typist like Diann Varricchione to make even my worst prose look elegant.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my debt to two men whose examples as writing teachers have influenced my work. Indeed, the humanity and wisdom of Ken Macrorie and Donald Murray have enriched our entire profession.

Arthur W. Biddle

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Stage I The Writer Prepares

WRITING IS EASY ALL YOU DO IS STARE AT A BLANK SHEET OF PAPER UNTIL DROPS OF BLOOD FORM ON YOUR FOREHEAD

-Gene Fowler

Maybe writing has never come easily to you. It doesn't to most of us. And if we don't sweat blood, well, we do suffer a lot, especially at the beginning of a piece of work

The first section of this book will help you get started. Step by step you'll discover how to tap the ideas and knowledge you already have, then how to increase and organize that knowledge. In Chapter 1 you'll try some stretching exercises for loosening up and building confidence. In Chapter 2 you'll learn proven ways of finding subjects to write about—subjects that interest you as well as your readers. You'll also see how to organize your material. Your work in Chapter 3 will teach you how to identify your audience and how to clarify your purpose.

My purpose in these chapters is to assist you through the first stage of the writing process. Good writer or shaky one, no matter what your ability at the beginning of this course, take heart. This section and the rest of the book that follows will give you the confidence and many of the skills to meet the challenges that lie ahead

Chapter One You and the writing process

This book is about writing. It's probably not the sort of book you would hunt down in a bookstore and willingly lay out 10 or 12 dollars for. I understand that. If at the end of the course you still feel the same way, we, this book of mine and I, will have failed. And that would bother me. You see, the idea behind this book is that one of the two or three most important intellectual skills that you can learn in college is to write effectively. I teach writing because I know that people can learn to write—and I can see every day how important that is to them.

Let me tell you a story. Some time ago I read a paper by a student in the modern American novel course I teach. As a reader, the student seemed to have a good insight into the book he was discussing. But, as a writer, he just couldn't put it across. He wasn't making the connections clear between his ideas. Although the evidence he had selected from the novel was potentially good, he didn't know how to use it. He couldn't show cause and effect relationships—"because of this, therefore that." When he came in for a conference, he was concerned not so much because the paper had gotten a poor grade but because he knew that the comments I had written on his paper were true, true not only of this essay but of most of what he had written in college. I tried to describe to him what I saw: a fairly bright college student who had grown intellectually in the last couple of years (he is a junior) but whose writing ability had not developed much at all. Here were the perceptions and insights of a college junior handcuffed to the writing skills of a tenth or eleventh grader. Ken shook his head glumly in agreement. I wish I could tell you that the story had a happy ending, but I can't. It isn't over yet. I do have the feeling, though, that next semester Ken will take the writing course I suggested to him. Then, perhaps, I can add, "And he lived happily ever after."

The point of the story is that writing well matters. Writing well matters not only in this course—just one of forty or so you'll take in your 4 years of

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college—but also in the control that ability gives you over ideas and situations, in the confidence that skill gives you to confront new experiences, and in the power that proficiency gives you to develop and shape your ideas. This control, this confidence, this power can be yours if you want and if you work at it.

SO DON'T BELIEVE ME

Last year I took an adult education course in yoga and meditation. Not knowing much about these subjects or the cultures that gave birth to them, I was curious yet a bit skeptical. But the instructor had the perfect defense against any doubts that I or other students might harbor. Whenever he introduced a new concept or made a claim that a particular kind of exercise would relieve tension, for example, he would add, "I don't expect you to believe me. Just try it, test this exercise, and see if it works for you." He had discovered the only way of teaching his subject to people trained to be suspicious. He didn't demand acceptance of an alien culture or faith in his wisdom as a teacher. Instead, he invited his students to apply the American principle of pragmatism: Does it work? Then let's use it! Judging by this standard, I found much of what he taught us to be true or valid or workable.

Many students complain that writing is not their strength. They never expect to feel comfortable about writing. Perhaps you have heard it said that you can't teach anyone to write. Not true. You can learn to write effective prose—prose that informs and persuades with clarity and grace—and feel confident about your ability to compose whenever the need is there. I know you can because I've seen students master the intellectual and technical skills necessary to that end semester after semester. Never have I had a student who worked faithfully on his writing fail. In fact, I offer my students a "money-back guarantee," and only half in jest. I tell them what my yoga teacher told us and what I now tell you: "I don't expect you to believe me. Just try it and see if it works for you."

Approach the suggestions made in this book with the attitude of the experimenter. Please don't accept them on blind faith just because you see them in print. Many falsehoods, half-truths, and just plain silly ideas are to be found in books. The funny thing is that they look so respectable when they are set in type. Readers need to learn that and to exercise independent judgment about what they read. So don't believe any idea or suggestion you find in these pages. Test it. Apply it to your own writing. Then decide if it is true. No teacher should ask for more—or hope for less.

APPLY YOURSELF 1. "Why Johnny Can't Write." They began about 10 years ago—the complaints that Johnny can't write. Parents held emergency meet-

ings and demanded action from the schools. Employers complained that job seekers couldn't even fill out application forms. Newsweek ran a cover story revealing just how serious and widespread the problem was becoming. Letters to the editor poured into newspaper offices. An entire nation, it seems, was concerned that its future voters and leaders wouldn't be able to string a dozen words together in a coherent sentence.

You've probably heard and read some discussion of this problem. List the causes that you're familiar with and tell whether, in your experience and observation, they hold true. Then describe your own situation and needs. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer? What do you hope to learn from this course?

THE WRITING PROCESS

Back when I took freshman composition, the routine in the course went something like this: The instructor would assign a 500-word theme, due in a week. We might have to define democracy or argue against capital punishment. While we were agonizing over that outside of class, in class we would deal with some matters of language, perhaps discuss kinds of propaganda or examine magazine ads for effective techniques of persuasion, maybe do an exercise with adverb clauses. When the theme was due, we turned it in. A week later it came back with several errors marked, usually a word or two of encouragement, and a letter grade. The end.

During the years since then, writing teachers have learned a good deal about the nature of the writing process. As a result, most freshman comp classes aren't like the one I had many years ago. What we writing teachers have learned is what I want to pass on to you, first in condensed form in this chapter and then in very practical ways throughout this book.

The most effective way to learn to write is to go at it as a process. You will probably have to learn a number of processes this semester. In your political science course, for instance, you may study the way a president is elected: petition drives, state primaries, party conventions, national elections, electoral college. In zoology the process might be the developmental stages of a butterfly: egg, larva, pupa, adult. Like these, writing is a process. The stages are prewriting, drafting, revising. We teach writing this way because people seem to make the greatest improvement when they learn it this way and because most writers compose this way.

PREWRITING

The word "prewriting" has come to stand for all the preparations the writer makes before beginning to draft or write. This stage includes, but is not