



ROBERT A. SCHWEGLER

**PATTERNS IN
ACTION**



PATTERNS IN ACTION

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SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.
美國亞洲基金會敬贈

LITTLE, BROWN and COMPANY

Boston Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Schwegler, Robert A.
Patterns in action.

Includes index.

1. College readers. 2. English language—Rhetoric.

I. Title.

PE1417.S366 1985

808'.0427

84-25054

ISBN 0-316-77577-0



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Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 84-25054

ISBN 0-316-77577-0

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Published simultaneously in Canada
by Little, Brown & Company (Canada) Limited
Printed in the United States of America

Acknowledgments

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PREFACE

Successful writers know how to make good use of their skills and knowledge. They know how to draw on experiences, facts, and ideas and can blend them to create an essay whose content is worth sharing with readers. They are able to employ a variety of forms of written expression, using different sentence, paragraph, and essay patterns as ways of sharing information, arguments, and feelings. They shape and revise their writing to take into account the demands of the subject, the purpose for which they are writing, and the expectations and attitudes of their audience.

Above all, successful writers have mastered the skills of exploring a subject and organizing, drafting, and revising an essay—skills we often refer to collectively as “the writing process.” It makes sense to talk of writing as a process because the act of writing calls for using these skills not individually but in combination. In probing a subject to discover ideas for an essay, a writer may recognize ways to arrange the finished product. Or in revising, the writer may decide to go beyond changes in wording and style to alter the purpose of the essay or to add new information and ideas. Thus much writing instruction today is properly directed at acquainting students with the elements and interrelationships of the writing process, often by observing a piece of writing in various stages of development or by describing the practices characteristic of experienced writers.

Yet though we speak of the writing process, we might with even more justification refer to it as “the writing/reading process” because reading plays an essential role in all the stages of writing. It is through reading that developing and experienced writers alike gather

material for their writing and build a repertoire of stylistic and rhetorical patterns to draw on as they compose. Reading gives writers a chance to understand their audience's needs and expectations because it allows them to see what kinds of expression have succeeded (or failed) when addressed to similar audiences. And reading teaches us how to explore our own experience and the world around us by sharing the questions, arguments, and ideas that other people have used as guides.

The essays, discussions, questions, and activities in *Patterns in Action* are all directed toward helping developing writers make reading a useful and indispensable part of their writing. The essays provide models of effective writing and subjects for lively discussion; they also suggest perspectives that can provide a fresh view of experience. The discussion that opens each chapter shows how various patterns of expression can be used to promote thinking and to aid communication. The questions and activities following the selection encourage students to respond with ideas and feelings that might in turn be developed into essays, and they also direct attention to strategies of style and structure that students can use in their own work. The opening chapter ("Reading and Writing") and Chapter 11 ("Writers on Writing") speak directly of the many connections between reading and writing and suggest how the skills of critical reading stressed elsewhere in the text can help students organize and revise what they have to say. (The structure of this text is discussed in detail at the end of Chapter 1—"How This Book Is Arranged," pp. 13–15.)

The text throughout emphasizes the aims of writing (to express feelings, to inform and explain, to persuade, to re-create experience) as well as the forms. In addition, it is built around discussion of ideal rhetorical patterns, such as comparison and classification. The text recognizes that in real writing—in action—these forms are shaped by audience and occasions and that good writing mixes the patterns in many different ways. The instructor's manual for this text, written with the aid of Judith Stanford and with a bibliography on reading and writing by Chris Anson, explores some of the many interactions of form and purpose and suggests a variety of activities to explore these relationships.

For their help in preparing this book I would like to thank Carolyn Potts of Little, Brown who nurtured and guided it; Virginia Pye and Elizabeth Schaaf (also of Little, Brown) who made sure that

ideas turned into chapters, and Adrienne Weiss and Carolyn Woznick, who helped in the final stage. Most of all, I would like to thank Nancy Newman Schwegler, who is responsible for whatever good the text contains but none of its miscues. Sylvan Barnet, Harvey Wiener, and Judith Stanford provided help and counsel throughout the project. Chris Anson, Sam Watson, Pat Murray, Marie Secor, Janice Neuleib, and Susan Pratt helped me in many ways with their comments on the readings and on the design of the content, and William Kelly read large portions of the manuscript and acted as a sounding board. Three students provided papers for this text: Greg Glovach, Margi Ganucci (Chapter 9), and Heather Kaye. Finally, I am greatly indebted to Sylvan Barnet and Mike Rose for sharing their experiences as writers and their advice as teachers through the essays they prepared for Chapter 11.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Reading and Writing

“To learn to write you need to read both widely and well.” This often-repeated advice springs from the reasonable assumption that the work of accomplished writers can introduce us to ways of improving our own writing. Published essays—finished products—cannot, of course, tell us much about what goes on during the act of writing. They cannot show us the false starts, the mistakes, and the frequent revisions that are an inevitable part of the efforts of even the best writers. Nor do they reveal the ways writers discover interesting ideas or decide which of two or three possible methods will best convey these ideas to readers. However, published essays can do some equally important things. As models for effective writing, they help us set goals for our own essays. They suggest ideas, strategies, and styles of writing that we can draw on in our work. Finally, they help us become aware of the ways an essay affects its audience, readers like ourselves.

Not all reading contributes equally to the development of writing skills, however. To read essays or books only for the facts they present is of little benefit to writing because such reading calls for no attention to the ideas behind the facts or to the ways that both information and ideas are shared with readers.

For your writing to benefit, you must read with a critical eye—that is, with an awareness both of what an author is saying and how it is being said. Critical reading operates at three levels, each of which can make a different contribution to your writing. At one level it involves reading for meaning—going beyond the facts presented

in an essay to identify the ideas that link them. By examining an essay carefully to make sure you understand its generalizations and arguments as well as the evidence that supports them, and by responding to its conclusions with opinions of your own, you can develop insights and ideas worth sharing through your own writing.

At a second level, critical reading means being aware of the strategies a writer uses to introduce and organize an essay, to support an argument, and to structure paragraphs. It means paying attention to the ways a writer uses words to emphasize ideas, to create tone and convey attitudes, or to communicate emotions and paint vivid pictures. Writing strategies can be as broad as the patterns used to organize entire essays or sections of essays, like those illustrated in the chapters of this text (including comparison, description, analysis, and narration), and they can be as limited as the brief examples used to support a generalization. Stylistic strategies—the words an author chooses and the way they are combined in sentences—may involve the creation of images that allow a reader to visualize a scene or share the author’s feelings, or they may involve variations in sentence structure to achieve clarity and emphasis.

To help understand reading for strategy and style, you might try this brief experiment. Write a set of directions for something you can do well, such as baking a soufflé, waterskiing on one ski, or playing handball. Assume that your audience does not share your level of expertise. As you write, notice the many decisions you make: “Should I abbreviate *teaspoons*?” “Will I have to explain what kind of shoes to wear when playing handball, or tell people where to find a handball court?” “How can I begin talking about waterskiing?” After you have finished, look at similar directions in a cookbook, a pamphlet on the rules for handball, or a book about water sports. As you read, see how many details you notice that you did not notice when you read similar things in the past. You may find yourself remarking, “That’s a good way to get people interested in waterskiing!” “Yes, I thought writing out *teaspoons* was a waste of space, but I didn’t know whether to put a period after the abbreviation.” “I had trouble explaining that complicated way of hitting the ball; the way this writer does it is really clear.” As you read, you will be collecting strategies to use the next time in your own writing.

At a third level, critical reading calls for an awareness of how well a work meets the needs of an audience. It means developing the ability to judge how most readers would respond to an essay,

knowing whether they would be convinced by the author's arguments and supporting evidence, knowing when they would require more information and explanation, and recognizing when the writer has presented more detail than most readers will need. It also means judging the merit of an author's ideas (Are her arguments for gun control sensible? Are they workable? Has she taken account of the major objections to gun control?) and of the way the ideas are presented (Is her analysis of the problem of rapidly rising health care costs easy to follow? Does she identify the major causes? Is her outlook made clear in a thesis statement?). Finally, it means being able to judge the appropriateness of the strategies an author has chosen (Is cause-and-effect the best pattern for talking about this subject? Would the author be able to shed more light on it by comparing it with similar predicaments our society faced fifty years ago?).

To interpret and evaluate as you read and to recognize the strategies a piece of writing employs, you must draw on your experiences and values and also on what you have learned about forms of expression through many different kinds of reading, both fiction and nonfiction. Just as your outlook and the awareness of writing strategies you bring to an essay will differ from those of other readers, so you can expect your responses to differ, too, both in important and unimportant ways. To someone who has always lived in a city, for example, an informative article on beekeeping may seem interesting and authoritative. A beekeeper, however, may respond in irritation because the article's information may be inaccurate or its advice potentially harmful either to the novice beekeeper or the bees themselves. Your response to an essay may also change from the first time you read it to the second or third.

Variety in response is, of course, one of the pleasures of rereading and of talking with others about an essay or story. Some kinds of writing, mostly stories and novels, but nonfiction essays and books as well, even seem to encourage differing interpretations and to invite controversy. In most essays, though, the writer tries to limit the range of responses in order to make sure the meaning is clear to most members of the audience. One of the most effective ways a writer can do this is by employing forms of expression—such as the patterns illustrated in this text—whose meaning and purpose should be clear to most readers. Yet critical reading is never simply a matter of recognizing such patterns and extracting the meaning from an essay.

It is an active response to what an essay says (and how it says it), an activity as creative and challenging in its own way as is the writing of an essay.

PATTERNS IN ACTION

This text emphasizes the role patterns of thought and expression play in both reading and writing. The basic patterns of thought are ways our minds can explore a subject, looking at it from different perspectives and isolating different aspects. The patterns include narration, description, example, comparison, process, cause-effect, definition, division, and classification.¹ Perhaps the easiest way to understand the patterns is to regard them as questions one might ask about a subject. In thinking about a computer, for example, you might view it as a process, asking “What happens inside a computer between the time I ask it to perform a complicated mathematical operation and the time the answer is printed out on the screen?” or “How do the chips that make up computers actually operate?” You might look at it as a cause or an effect, asking “What major changes in business and industry are computers likely to cause in the next decade?” or “What technological discoveries made small, high-speed, low-cost computers possible?”

In the following list, each pattern of thought is accompanied by questions of the type it enables us to ask about a subject. As you prepare to write, you may wish to use these or similar questions to probe a topic and to develop ideas or interpretations. Notice, too, that the questions for each pattern of thought will encourage you to take a different perspective on the topic.

Narration

- What happened?
- To whom did it happen?
- When? Where?

Description

- What are the physical features?
- How is it organized in space?

1. The patterns of argument, discussed in Chapter 10, are combinations of these basic patterns.

Example

What are some reasonable illustrations?

What are some representative examples or instances?

Comparison

Is it similar to other things?

Is it different from other things?

Process

How does it work?

How can it be done?

Cause-Effect

Why did it happen?

What is likely to happen in the future?

Definition

To what class of things does it belong?

What features characterize it and set it off from other things?

Division

What are the parts?

How are they related to each other and to the whole?

Classification

Into what categories does it fall?

What are the characteristics of each category?

The basic ways of thinking about a subject correspond, in turn, to writing strategies, to patterns of development that can be used to organize whole essays or paragraphs and other sections of an essay. For example, in asking what steps a computer follows to estimate a company's future sales and profits or to predict population growth in a region, you have already begun to divide its operation into a series of logical stages that make the whole process easier to understand. This arrangement would help readers understand the process too, and you would probably choose to use it in organizing a written explanation, perhaps following a general outline like this:

Step 1 (description and discussion)

Step 2 (description and discussion)

Steps 3, 4, 5, etc. (description and discussion)

Likewise, in sharing your speculations about the causes (or effects) of a recent fad in clothes or entertainment, you might choose to arrange and develop your conclusions in a pattern similar to that

you followed arriving at them, beginning by isolating the probable causes then moving on to discuss the possible effects as in this outline:

- Cause 1 (description and discussion)
- Causes 2, 3, 4, etc. (description and discussion)
- Effect 1 (description and discussion)
- Effects 2, 3, 4, etc. (description and discussion)

(The relationship between ways of thinking and ways of developing and arranging an essay is explored in depth in Chapters 2–10 of this book.)

These basic patterns of thought and expression can be used for a variety of purposes in writing: to inform or explain, to argue, to explore or speculate, to express feelings, or to amuse and entertain. The specific purposes they serve will depend on both the subject and the point an author is trying to make. A writer might, for instance, use comparison as a pattern of development in arguing that a new highway is a better solution for traffic congestion in a particular city than is a new mass transit system. Another writer might explore the effects of each solution and conclude that neither will do much to relieve the current problem. A third might use classification to explain the solutions that have been adopted in other cities. A fourth might use narration or description to express the feelings of a commuter caught in a traffic jam.

Sometimes, moreover, the patterns appear in a more precise form as adaptations to the needs of the occasion. When addressing the causes of a problem or the possible solutions, for example, cause-and-effect often takes the form of a problem analysis or a problem-solution essay. Process turns up frequently as a set of directions; comparison appears in evaluations as a way of deciding which of two or more options (products or courses of action, for instance) is preferable.

These more specific patterns represent ways our culture has chosen to respond to specific subjects and situations and to communicate about them. Once you have been alerted to these “patterns in action,” you will find it relatively easy to identify them in your reading and to recognize writing situations that call for them because you have probably encountered and used them many times before—