FROM SPEAKING, THINKING, AND READING

Into Writing

LEWIS MEYERS

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To Ida and Milton Meyers

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

Into Writing is a book for inexperienced writers. It focuses on paragraph and short-essay writing, contains a section on grammar and usage, and offers a generous selection of readings. *Into Writing* differs from other composition textbooks, however, in that it recognizes, and helps students overcome, certain key obstacles to developing writing skills — obstacles that hitherto have either gone unrecognized or received scant attention. These obstacles, each of which is dealt with in a main section of the book, are created by speech interference with writing, by the difficulty of using language to express critical thinking in writing, and by the linked problems of comprehension and expression that students experience when progressing from reading to writing.

Part I, "From Talking to Writing," meets head-on the difficulties many students experience in moving from conversational speech to writing. *Into Writing* helps students realize how and why conventional writing differs from the way most of us speak. For instance, writers typically need to give their readers more information than speakers need to give their listeners. Readers can't ask writers to explain themselves more fully, and they can't rely on writers' gestures or facial expressions to aid them. The writer must learn to anticipate the reader's needs and to take special measures to meet them.

Part II, "Thinking and Writing," treats paragraph structure, essay organization, and selected rhetorical modes — illustration by example and reasoned argument. Separate chapters are devoted to the prewriting process and to revision techniques. Chapter 3 provides a group of essay assignments that can be used throughout Part II so that different aspects of the writing process can easily be applied to the same writing assignment. Thus the student can move from collecting information and planning the essay to actually writing it; or the student can go further, work on organizational strategies, employ a rhetorical mode, and revise as needed. My belief, here and elsewhere in *Into Writing*, is that students learn to organize thought effectively by discovering communicative needs in context — by responding to real situations and by applying to them a carefully planned sequence of writing skills.

Part III, "The Details of Writing," contains instruction in sentence structure, grammatical conventions, syntax, diction, spelling, and punctuation. Though designed for use as a reference tool, this section avoids reproducing the mechanical quality that characterizes most handbooks.

Instead, students are drawn naturally into clear explanations of grammar and usage, as illustrated by the chapter "Personal Pronouns," which is organized according to the individual personal pronouns rather than according to the more abstract concepts of reference, agreement, and case.

Part IV, "From Reading to Writing," consists of seventeen brief, guided reading selections and three longer ones. All of the readings are accompanied by imaginatively structured exercises and writing assignments. Each of the guided reading selections is presented in full and then presented again, this time interrupted by questions to which students are directed to write answers. These carefully constructed questions generate, in a step-by-step process, the makings of the essays that are the object of both the main writing assignment and the alternate assignments. The patient guidance afforded students by the interlinear questions makes possible the use of readings that are more challenging and thought-provoking than those found in many writing textbooks. The longer reading selections do not include interrupted texts; students are encouraged to form their own questions and answers, and thus these essays are particularly suitable for independent reading.

In an accompanying Instructor's Manual, I elaborate on practice exercises and writing assignments in the book and suggest classroom-tested approaches to presenting the material.

Besides those features discussed above, the following instructional elements in *Into Writing* will help students become effective writers:

The *Audience Checklist,* in Chapter 1, provides a list of questions that students can keep at hand and use to ensure that they have given their readers sufficient and precise information.

A *sample student paper,* in Part II, is shown in various stages of development to illustrate prewriting strategies; at the end of the discussion the final draft of the student paper is given in full.

An *inductive approach to paragraphing,* in which exercises precede explanation of such ideal states as paragraph unity, avoids mere exhortation and reliance on definition alone; students may produce the desired qualities of paragraph structure and then test their writing against approved principles.

Exercises throughout the book are numerous and imaginative; most of them involve writing, and many can be used for small-group work in the classroom.

A *discussion of reading methods,* including material on summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting, precedes the reading selections as a specific preparation for students who must write about what they read.

An *Appendix on Verbs* treats the verb system as a whole and is provided as a resource for students.

By dividing the book into four sections devoted to speech interference, essay writing, grammar and usage, and reading, I have attempted to allow for the utmost instructional flexibility. You may adopt the sequence of parts as presented or produce your own; you may concentrate on a single part of the book or move from one part to the other throughout the term. Cross-references in the text and suggestions in the Instructor's Manual will help you determine the way you want to present the material. *Into Writing* is a book intended for you — an active, involved teacher of composition, whose teaching decisions reflect a wide understanding of the field of writing and of the needs of students who are learning how to write. I hope the book will serve you well.

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I
FROM TALKING TO WRITING

Many students, soon after they cross the threshold of a writing classroom for the first time, make the same observation about their ability: "I never could write," they say apologetically. Or, if they do not utter these exact words, they use ones very much like them to explain their past difficulties in writing.

"I never could write." Often that is far too modest a statement. Many students entering college don't know their own intellectual strength. Others, if they mean for their statement to be a prediction, haven't yet discovered that strength. Usually, though, students who make such a claim find they can talk about a subject more easily than they can write about it. If only they were never pressed to do more than say out loud what they mean!

"*You* know what I mean," a student assures her teacher, who says that the third sentence of the second paragraph in her first essay does not make its point clearly enough. And in fact, when the teacher encourages her to explain her point, the student says exactly what she had in mind. Now she is clear, and now the teacher does know what she means. But what happens when the student sits down and tries again to write that sentence? Does she still have problems expressing her thoughts? Is the student back where she started from?

If you recognize yourself at all in this student — and you probably do to some extent — there are two important points for you to keep in mind. The first is that speech and writing are different ways of using language. Therefore, one way to do things exists for speaking, and another way applies to writing. The second point is that your own experience in using language probably has been largely through speech, and through conversational speech in particular.

The first section of this book gives you the opportunity to move in a conscious way from talking to writing.

1
The Reader Needs to Know

It's no wonder that many people who are used to talking rather than writing say, "You know what I mean." For when two people have a chat, each very often does know what the other means, at least by the end of their conversation. This understanding is due as much to facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and body language as it is to the actual words the people utter. Except when they talk on the telephone, people are physically close to each other when they converse; they can, if they wish, pick up clues to meaning from the other's slightest movements. But even when separated by miles of humming wire, they can repeat themselves if asked to do so, changing a word here or there when some obvious confusion about meaning arises. If necessary, the listener can always request more information, and the speaker can always volunteer a clearer explanation. And since speakers and listeners generally take turns in their conversational roles, they both have a good opportunity to judge the effectiveness of their own attempts to be understood or to understand.

HOW SPEECH DIFFERS FROM WRITING

Two people talking together often discuss something or someone they both already know a lot about. Frequently, the subject of their conversation is right in front of their eyes. Communication is easy, because the topic is already familiar or can actually be seen by both people.

Let us imagine a specific situation. The scene is an automobile showroom. Two friends who have decided to pool their savings and buy a car are examining a new model that excites their interest. By eavesdropping on part of what they have to say to each other, we can notice some of the differences between speech and writing.

"You see how they don't open? There's no button, nothing."

"Yeah, I see, only the front ones."

"What d'ya think about the dash?"

"It's O.K. But I think this thing could be in a better position. Remember what Eddie said about the time he. . . ."

"Hmm! He was paying too much attention to the scenery, that's why."