

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

*The Concise
Guide
to Writing*

RISE B. AXELROD
CHARLES R. COOPER

THE CONCISE GUIDE TO WRITING

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TO THE INSTRUCTOR

The *Concise Guide to Writing* aims to show students how writing works and how written texts are shaped by the writing situations from which they arise. Through five essay assignments, students experience four fundamentally different kinds of inquiry and composing: remembering events, observing people and places first hand, explaining learned information, and convincing readers to take seriously positions on issues or solutions to problems. Students see how these kinds of thinking and writing are important for them as college students, workers, and citizens. We also aim to show students that reading like a writer, planning essays systematically and revising thoughtfully, getting critical comments on writing, and reflecting on learning can improve their writing and their confidence as writers. *The Concise Guide* helps you to challenge students, to set high standards for them with each essay they attempt—and to provide the support they need to achieve more than they imagined they could.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The Concise Guide to Writing falls into three sections:

Chapter 1 explains how writing works and what it contributes to thinking and learning. It also introduces students to the writing activities in subsequent assignment chapters.

Chapters 2 through 6 present five different writing assignments: Remembering Events, Writing Profiles, Explaining Concepts, Arguing a Position, and Proposing Solutions. You may choose among these chapters and teach them in any sequence you wish, though they are sequenced here to move students from writing based on personal experience and observation to writing calling for synthesis of information and for argument.

Each assignment chapter follows the same organizational plan:

- several academic writing situations to show students where they may encounter this kind of writing in their other courses
- an activity for group inquiry that gets students practicing the kind of writing
- a summary of the purpose and audience and the features basic to writing of this kind
- a flexible guide to writing that escorts students through all the stages of the composing process

- a look at one writer at work, showing some aspect of the writing process for the student essay in a chapter

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 look at writers' strategies for reading and writing to discover and develop ideas, for cueing readers through orienting statements, paragraphing, cohesive devices, and transitions, and for revising their drafts.

NOTEWORTHY FEATURES

The Concise Guide to Writing has several features that distinguish it from other college rhetorics. Chief among these are the practical guides to writing, the integration of modes and aims, the integration of reading and writing, and the promotion of group discussion and inquiry.

Practical guides to writing. We do not merely talk about the composing process; rather, we offer practical, flexible guides that escort students through the entire process, from invention through revision and self-evaluation. Thus, this book is more than just a rhetoric that students will refer to occasionally. It is a guidebook that will help them to write. Commonsensical and easy to follow, these writing guides teach students to assess a rhetorical situation, identify the kinds of information they will need, ask probing questions and find answers, and organize their writing to achieve their purpose most effectively.

Systematic integration of reading and writing. Because we see a close relationship between the abilities to read critically and to write intelligently, *The Concise Guide to Writing* combines reading instruction with writing instruction. Each assignment chapter introduces one kind of writing, which students are led to consider both as readers and writers. Readings are followed by questions that make students aware of how they as readers respond and at the same time help them understand the decisions writers make. Students are then challenged to apply these insights to their own writing as they imagine their prospective readers, set goals, and write and revise their drafts.

Integration of modes and aims. This book treats the traditional modes of writing as writing strategies to be used to achieve particular purposes. Unlike many current rhetorics, ours does not distinguish writing by its modes but rather by its aims. Hence, we focus on narration, description, definition, or argument when they are relevant to students' success with one of the essay assignments.

Promotion of group discussion and inquiry. At the start of each of the assignment chapters is an exercise for group inquiry that invites students to try out some of the thinking and planning they'll be doing for the kind of writing covered in that chapter. Then, following each reading comes a question for discussion, designed to provoke thoughtful response about the

social and political dimensions of the reading. Finally, in the Guide to Writing is another exercise for group inquiry that gets students to discuss their work-in-progress with one another. All of these materials include questions and prompts to help students work productively together.

USING THIS TEXT WITH OTHER RESOURCES

The Concise Guide to Writing, with its five major essay assignments, provides all that might be required in a first-year composition course. It could usefully be supplemented, however, by a handbook of usage and style, a composition reader, or a variety of trade books. Instructors considering a rhetorically arranged reader would want to ensure that its readings and assignments align with those in *The Concise Guide*. One such reader is our own *Reading Critically, Writing Well*, third edition (St. Martin's Press). While both books are based on the same systematic approach to reading and writing, *The Concise Guide* offers more comprehensive support for composing than *Reading Critically*. Also available is *The Great American Bologna Festival* (St. Martin's Press), a collection of student essays written using our Guides to Writing. Instructors accustomed to assigning a thematic reader may find among its suggested writing assignments ones that match the *Concise Guide's* five assignments. An instructor considering trade books might choose an autobiography for students to read while working their way through our Remembering Events chapter, reportage to read with our Writing Profiles chapter, and books on current social problems to read with *Arguing a Position* and *Proposing Solutions*. Specific titles are listed in the **Instructor's Manual** that accompanies this text. The Instructor's Manual also contains teaching strategies, discussions of the readings, a chapter on general classroom techniques, and a selected bibliography in composition studies.

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Our debt grows year by year to those teachers and students who have used *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, on which this *Concise Guide* is based. They have encouraged and advised us.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Why is writing important? Does it always take a lot of time and hard work? Can computer word processing make it any easier? Is it necessarily solitary work? Is it possible to *learn* how to write well? Is good writing worth the effort? If you have just opened this book and are about to begin a writing course, you may be asking yourself questions like these. If so, read on. This book has some of the answers.

Writing Makes a Special Contribution to the Way People Think. When we write, we compose meanings. We put together facts and ideas and make something new, whether in a letter home, in a college essay, or in a report at work. When we write, we create an intricate web of meaning in which sentences have special relationships to each other. Some sentences are general and some specific; some expand a point and others qualify it; some define and others illustrate. These sentences, moreover, are concerned in a still larger set of relationships, with every sentence related in some way to every other. By controlling these complex relationships, we as writers can forge new meanings.

I think best with a pencil in my hand. —Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Writing Contributes Uniquely to the Way We Learn. When we take notes in class or as we read, writing enables us to sort out information and to highlight what is important. Taking notes helps us to remember what we are learning and yields a written record that we can review later for tests or essays. Outlining or summarizing new information provides an overview of the subject and also fosters close analysis of it. Annotating as we read with underlining and marginal comments involves us in conversation—even debate—with the author. Thus, writing helps us to learn more effectively and to think more critically.

And because we as writers are always composing new meanings, writing helps us to find and establish our own information and ideas. It allows us to bring together and connect new and old ideas. By enabling us to clarify and deepen our understanding of new concepts, writing helps us relate them to other ideas. Thus, writing tests, clarifies, and extends our understanding of the world.

I am never as clear about any matter as when I am just finished writing about it. —James van Allen

Writing Contributes to Personal Development. As we write we become more potent thinkers and active learners, and we come eventually to a better understanding of ourselves by recording, exploring, and telling about our personal experiences and our innermost thoughts.

Writing is a form of therapy. —Roald Dahl

Besides contributing to the way we think and learn, *writing helps us connect to others*, to communicate. The impulse to write can be as urgent as the need to converse with someone sitting across the table in a restaurant or to respond to a provocative comment in a classroom discussion. Sometimes we want readers to know what we know; we want to share something new. Sometimes we want to influence our readers' decisions, actions, or beliefs. We may even want to irritate or outrage readers. Or we may want to amuse or flatter them. Writing allows us to communicate in all of these ways.

I think writing is really a process of communication. —Shirley Anne Williams

Writing is a political instrument . . . a way to describe and control [your] circumstances. —James Baldwin

Good Writing Makes a Special Contribution to Success in College and on the Job. Students who write confidently and well learn more and earn better grades, for a student's writing is often the only basis an instructor has for an evaluation. Your first job may not require you to write, but later advancement often depends on skill in writing letters, memos, reports, and proposals. The United States is now an "information" society, one in which the ability to organize and synthesize information and to write intelligently and effectively is even more important than it was in the past. Writing may seem difficult, even threatening. Knowing *how* it works, however, can make writing less an obstacle, more an opportunity.

Learning to write well takes time and much effort, but it can be done.

—Margaret Mead

EXERCISE 1.1

Make a list of the uses you have made of writing *outside* school in the last four weeks. Then make a second list of the uses you have made of writing in school during the same period. Include everything from notes, lists, and letters to applications, essays, and poems. Include both writing you were required to do and writing you chose to do.

What can you conclude about the uses you make of writing? How does your writing outside school differ from your writing in school? Do you feel the same about all the writing you do? Which kind do you find most useful? Which do you most enjoy? Why? Summarize your conclusions.

HOW WRITING WORKS

What do we know about the process of writing? Research and published interviews with writers as well as our own experience as writers reveal a great deal about the process.

Perhaps the most important point to remember is this: writing is a skill that anyone can learn. Greatness as a writer may be a dream that only a few of us will pursue, but we can all learn to write well enough to handle any writing situation we encounter in college or on the job.

Many a writer spends time writing about the experience of writing. Sometimes we express our feelings about writing by comparing it with something else, often using simile and metaphor.

Writing is building sand castles. —A student

I work as a writer . . . on the principle of refining low-grade ore. —James Dickey

Writing is like jumping into a freezing lake and slowly coming to the surface.

—A student

The metaphors and similes writers typically use portray writing, not surprisingly, as a process—sometimes time-consuming, like refining ore; invigorating, like jumping into a lake; or simply fun, like building sand castles—but a process nevertheless. That writing is a process is the most important point you will learn in this course.

EXERCISE 1.2

How would you describe writing? Think of a metaphor (writing is _____) or a simile (writing is like _____) that best expresses your view of writing.

Not only is writing a process, but it is a process of discovery—one that makes discovery possible. Few writers begin with a complete understanding of their subject. They gather facts and ideas, start writing, and let the writing lead them to understanding. They will be making significant discoveries as they write.

Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery. —Henry Miller

I don't see writing as a communication of something already discovered, as "truths" already known. Rather, I see writing as a job of experiment. It's like any discovery job; you don't know what's going to happen until you try it.

—William Stafford

No matter that the process of writing can seem messy and meandering, writers learn to trust it. In fact, writers are likely to depend on the act of writing to lead them to new ideas and insights. Writing gives form to thought. When we write something down, we can examine it from one angle and then another, studying its many facets as we would a diamond. Many writers claim they write to discover what they think.

I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. —Joan Didion

How do I know what I think until I see what I say. —E. M. Forster

Once started, the process of writing continues even when writers are away from their desks. Always alert for ideas, they keep journals and notebooks ready for new thoughts and discoveries. Consciously or unconsciously, they continue to work at their writing.

I never quite know when I'm not writing. —James Thurber

Seasoned writers accept the fact that writing takes time and hard work.

I believe in miracles in every area of life *except* writing. Experience has shown me that there are no miracles in writing. The only thing that produces good writing is hard work. —Isaac Bashevis Singer

The hard work in writing comes in thinking things out. Writers may have promising ideas, but until they have written them down and tried to develop them, they cannot know if their ideas make sense and are worthwhile.

You have to work problems out for yourself on paper. Put the stuff down and read it — to see if it works. —Joyce Cary

The same thing applies to planning. Like the discovery of ideas, plans also need to be refined during the process of writing.

You are always going back and forth between the outline and the writing, bringing them closer together, or just throwing out the outline and making a new one. —Annie Dillard

Sometimes the hardest part of writing is getting started, just writing that first sentence. It may be reassuring to know what agony this first sentence sometimes causes even highly acclaimed writers.

I suffer always from fear of putting down that first line. It is amazing the terrors, the magics, the prayers, the straightening shyness that assails one. —John Steinbeck

Most writers know they will solve problems if they can just get started and keep on going. Consequently, they employ various strategies to keep the writing flowing, particularly during early drafting. Since almost all writers revise their first drafts, they need not worry about getting it right the first time. They know that agonizing indecision is unproductive.

There may be some reason to question the whole idea of fineness and care in writing. Maybe something can get into sloppy writing that would elude careful writing. I'm not terribly careful myself, actually. I write fairly rapidly if I get going. . . . In trying to treat words as chisel strokes, you run the risk of losing the quality of utterance, the rhythm of utterance, the happiness. —John Updike

Experienced writers know that strong writing does not always emerge in a first draft. They write, and they revise.

Occasionally you can hit it right the first time. More often, you don't.

—John Dos Passos

My first draft usually has only a few elements worth keeping. I have to find what those are and build from them and throw out what doesn't work. —Susan Sontag

Revising can be seen as an opportunity to gain an entirely new perspective on a topic. It can mean moving paragraphs around, rewriting whole sections, or adding substantial new material.

Writing *is* rewriting —Donald Murray

What makes me happy is rewriting. . . . It's like cleaning house, getting rid of all the junk, getting things in the right order, tightening things up. —Ellen Goodman

I have never thought of myself as a good writer. Anyone who wants reassurance of that should read one of my first drafts. But I'm one of the world's great revisers. —James Michener

I rewrote the ending of *A Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied. —Ernest Hemingway

Most writers actively seek critical comments from friends and colleagues. Playwrights, poets, and novelists attend writers' workshops, where their drafts can be read and critiqued by other writers. Researchers, engineers, and business executives almost always write collaboratively, in teams. Contrary to the familiar image of the solitary writer, alone at a lamp in a carrel, writing is very often a social activity.

For excellence, the presence of others is always required. —Hannah Arendt

Even professional writers sometimes find drafting frustrating. Most of them establish routines and rituals to make the process familiar and comfortable, setting a time and finding a quiet place to write away from interruptions.

I prefer to get up very early in the morning and work. —Katherine Anne Porter

The desk is in the room, near the bed, with a good light, [I write] midnight till dawn. . . . —Jack Kerouac

In spite of the time it takes, the inevitable delays, and the hard work, writing brings great personal fulfillment and pride. Many writers write in order to earn a living. They struggle, but they also celebrate, and they find great satisfaction in the process as well as the result of writing.

Well, it's a beautiful feeling, even if it's hard work. —Anne Sexton

There is much more to say about how writing works. Most important, writing is something you can master. You can learn about your own writing