

The CURIOUS WRITER

BRUCE BALLENGER

SECOND EDITION



THE CURIOUS WRITER

SECOND EDITION

Bruce Ballenger

Boise State University

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章



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Electronic Page Makeup: Integra Software Services, Pvt. Ltd.
Cover Design Manager: John Callahan
Cover Image: Copyright © 2006 by Pearl Publishing Co. All rights reserved.
Photo Research: Chrissy McIntyre
Manufacturing Buyer: Roy Pickering, Jr.
Printer and Binder: R. R. Donnelley and Sons Company—Crawfordsville
Cover Printer: Coral Graphics, Inc.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ballenger, Bruce P.

The curious writer/Bruce Ballenger. —2nd ed.

p.cm.

ISBN 0-205-53146-6

1. English language—Rhetoric—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Interdisciplinary approach in education—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 3. Academic writing—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Title.

PE1408.B37 2007a

808'.0427—dc22

2006102757

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Please visit our website at <http://www.ablongman.com>

Full (Hardcover) Edition

13-Digit ISBN: 978-0-205-53146-2

10-Digit ISBN: 0-205-53146-6

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10—DOC—10 09 08 07

PREFACE

A few years ago, the Carnegie Foundation asked a group of leading scholars, teachers, and intellectuals to investigate the current state of undergraduate education at America's research universities. The Boyer Commission report was unequivocal about the problems: "The experience of most undergraduates at most research universities is that of receiving what is served out to them. In one course after another they listen, transcribe, absorb, and repeat, essentially as undergraduates have done for centuries." The investigators called for a "new model" of undergraduate education that would "turn the prevailing undergraduate culture of receivers into a culture of inquirers, a culture in which faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates share an adventure of discovery. . . ." In particular, they added, "The first year of university experience needs to provide new stimulation for intellectual growth and a firm grounding in inquiry-based learning."

The "adventure of discovery" is what many of us love about writing. Our students often enter our composition classrooms with little experience using language as a tool of learning. Then we help them understand that writing can be a means for finding out what they didn't know they knew, and that the process of revision can lead to a fresh way of seeing things; pretty soon even some resistant writers welcome the invitation to sit down and write. They've discovered that they can write to learn.

Most of us *already* teach inquiry, although not all may realize it. For instance, our writing classes invite students to be active participants in making knowledge in the classroom through peer review workshops. When we ask students to fastwrite or brainstorm we encourage them to suspend judgment and openly explore their feelings or ideas. And when we ask students to see a draft as a first look at a topic, and revision as a means of discovering what they may not have noticed, we teach a process that makes discovery its purpose. Indeed, most composition classrooms create a "culture of inquirers" rather than passive recipients of what their teachers know.

That's why the Boyer Commission's call for an inquiry-based freshman year resonated with me and so many others. Initially, I saw its relevance to one of the most common writing assignments in the composition course—the research paper—and this led me to write my book *The Curious Researcher*. But an inquiry-based approach can and should permeate every assignment in the entire sequence of freshman writing courses. I also thought that although much of what we already do involves inquiry-based learning, we should explicitly make the spirit of inquiry—its practices, methods, and purposes—the focus of the writing course, generating ideas that students can apply not only in our classrooms but in their work in other disciplines.

INQUIRY IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Historically, composition teachers have struggled to decide what besides reading and writing skills students could export to their other classes and, later, into their lives. Often we vaguely refer to “critical-thinking” skills. *The Curious Writer* offers a comprehensive approach for teaching *inquiry*. This idea also may seem vague until you consider the following.

First, think about what is required to create a culture of inquirers in the composition course. How do we create the learning environment that will foster such a culture? I believe there are at least five key features of an inquiry-based classroom on nearly any subject.

1. *Create an atmosphere of mutual inquiry.* Students are used to seeing their teachers as experts who know everything that students need to learn. But in an inquiry-based classroom instructors are learners, too. They ask questions not because they already know the answers but because there might be answers they haven’t considered.
2. *Emphasize questions before answers.* The idea that student writers begin with an inflexible thesis or a firm position on a topic *before* they engage in the process of writing and thinking is anathema to inquiry-based learning. Questions, not preconceived answers, lead to new discoveries.
3. *Encourage a willingness to suspend judgment.* Student culture at most schools works against this. Papers get written at the last minute, multiple deadlines in multiple classes compete for students’ time, and multiple-choice tests or lecture courses imply that there is one true answer and the teacher knows it. To suspend judgment demands that we trust the process that will lead us to new insights. This requires both faith in the process and the time to engage in it. The composition course, with its emphasis on process, is uniquely suited to nurture such faith.
4. *Introduce a strategy of inquiry.* It’s not enough to simply announce that we’re teaching an inquiry-based class. We have to introduce students to the *strategy of inquiry* we’ll be using. In the sciences, the experimental method provides a foundation for investigations. What guidance will we give our students in the composition course? *The Curious Writer* features a strategy that is genuinely multidisciplinary, borrowing from science, social science, and the humanities.
5. *Present inquiry in a rhetorical context.* An essay, a research project, an experiment, any kind of investigation is always pursued with particular purposes and audiences in mind. In an inquiry-based class, the *situation* in which the inquiry project is taking place is always considered.

You’ll find all of these elements of inquiry-based learning integrated in *The Curious Writer*. For example, each assignment in Part Two, “Inquiry Projects,” leads students toward writing subjects that offer the most potential for learning. Rather than write about what they already know, students are always

encouraged to choose a topic because they want to find out more about it. In addition, the discussion questions that follow the student and professional essays are crafted to do more than simply test their comprehension of the piece or reduce it to a single theme. In many cases, questions are open ended and can lead students in many directions as they analyze a reading. *The Curious Writer* maintains a voice and persona throughout the book that suggests that I am working along with the students as a writer and a thinker, which is exactly the experience of mutual inquiry I try to create in my classes. Finally, *The Curious Writer* is organized around a strategy of inquiry that is present in every assignment and nearly every exercise. Introduced in Part One, “The Spirit of Inquiry,” I call on the model often in every subsequent chapter. The inquiry strategy is the thematic core of the book.

THE INQUIRY STRATEGY OF *THE CURIOUS WRITER*

A strategy of inquiry is simply a process of discovery. In the sciences, this process is systematic and often quite formal. The model I use in this book borrows from science in some ways through its insistence on continually looking closely at the “data” (sensory details, facts, evidence, textual passages, and so on) and using it to shape or test the writer’s ideas about a subject. But the heart of the model is the alternating movement between two modes of thinking—creative and critical—in a dialectical process. One way of describing this is shifting back and forth between suspending judgment and making judgments (see Figure A).

To help students see how questions can help them see their writing subjects in new ways, I offer four categories of questions—those that explore, explain, evaluate, and reflect—and return to these frequently, particularly in the early stages of the inquiry process. These will be most evident in the follow-up questions to the many readings throughout *The Curious Writer*. A strategy of inquiry is useful only if it makes sense to students; I’ve tried very hard, particularly in the first section of the book, to make the model comprehensible.

OTHER FEATURES

Because the inquiry-based approach is central to *The Curious Writer*, it’s crucial for students to work through the first three chapters in Part One, “The Spirit of Inquiry.” Part Two—the largest—focuses on “inquiry projects.” The range of assignments in this part should satisfy the needs of most composition instructors. If your university is lucky enough to have a two-semester sequence, *The Curious Writer* includes assignments suitable for both courses, including personal, argument, and research essays. Also included is the ethnographic essay, a form that engages students in field research; *The Curious Writer* is the first major text to include ethnography.

The book’s focus on genres of writing also makes it appealing for advanced composition courses. For example, assignments such as the profile, review, and

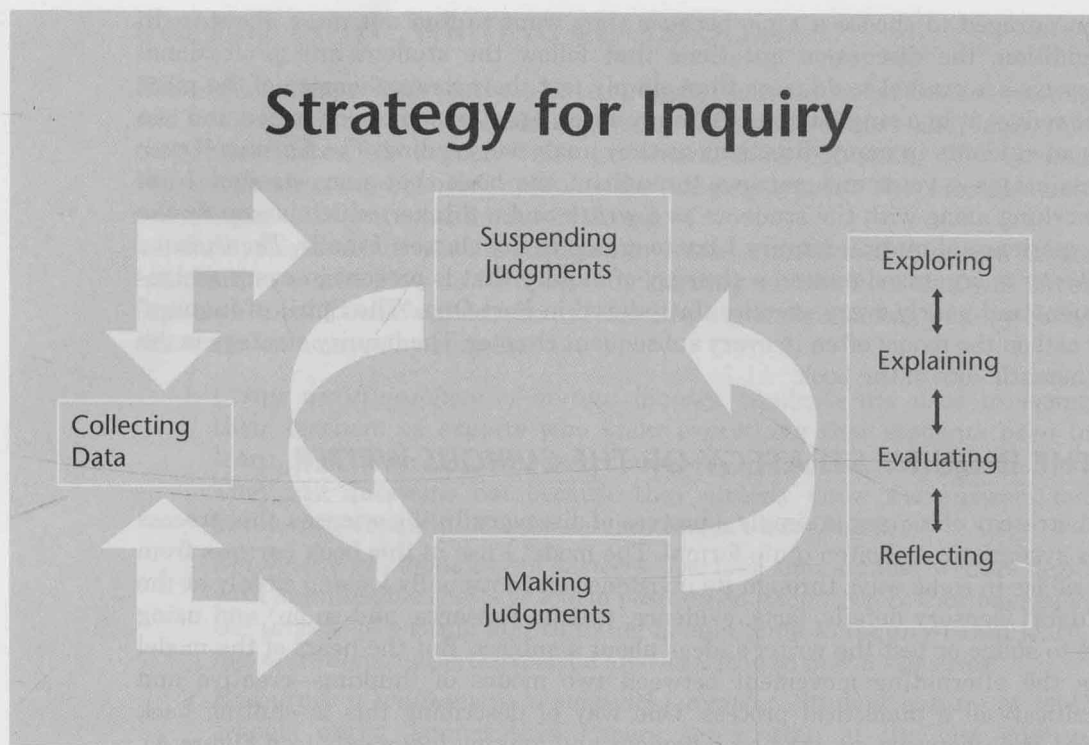


FIGURE A In nearly every assignment in *The Curious Writer*, students will use this strategy of inquiry.

proposal help students see how to apply what they've learned to distinct rhetorical situations and help them to understand how those situations shape the genres.

In recent years, I've become interested in reading strategies, a topic that I never mentioned as a novice teacher. There was simply so much to say about the writing process that I didn't think reading was a topic that should get much airtime. Yet as in writing, students bring many prior beliefs and assumptions about reading into our classrooms, and because reading is always an important part of teaching writing, I've come around to talking more about it. *The Curious Writer* reflects this. Chapter 2, "Reading as Inquiry," is devoted to the topic. The best thing about this is that the inquiry model I promote for writing applies just as easily to reading. I've also expanded the discussion to reading images. This emphasis on visual rhetoric echoes the latest developments in composition in response to the growth of the Web and the growing visual literacy of our students.

Finally, the approach of *The Curious Writer* grows in part from my own scholarship on research writing, particularly the criticism that research is too often isolated in the writing course. Students understandably get the idea that research is reserved only for the research paper if they're asked to do it only when they're assigned a research project. This book makes research a part of

every assignment, from the personal essay to the proposal, emphasizing that it is a useful source of information, not a separate genre.

This is the third textbook I've written with the "curious" moniker. Because all are inquiry-based, the word is a natural choice. And although I'm very interested in encouraging my students to be curious researchers, readers, and writers, I also hope to remind my colleagues who use the books that we should be curious, too. We should model for our students our own passion for inquiring into the world. We should also celebrate what we can learn from our students, and not just about writing, or the many topics they might choose to write about. I'm curious every time I walk into the writing classroom what my students will teach me about myself. That's a lifetime inquiry project for all of us, as teachers and as people.

NEW TO THE SECOND EDITION

I have made a number of changes to the second edition in an effort to refine the book further. These changes, many made at the request of the book's users and reviewers, include the addition of twenty-seven new readings (twenty-two professional and five student); new material on visual analysis in Chapter 2; a clarified and streamlined discussion of the four ways of inquiring in Chapter 3; expanded treatment of revision in each of the inquiry project chapters in Part Two; new material on the literacy narrative in Chapter 4; expanded treatment of formal argument techniques in Chapter 8; upgraded research models in Chapter 11; and new and improved versions of the *Seeing the Form*, *Writing with Computers*, and *Inquiring into the Details* features throughout the book.

APPROACHES TO TEACHING WITH THE BOOK

The Instructor's Manual, written by my colleague Michelle Payne, will give you detailed suggestions about ways to teach *The Curious Writer*. Here are a few additional suggestions drawn with a much broader stroke.

I organized the book to span, if necessary, a two-semester composition course, though it can easily be adapted to one semester. Typically, in a two-semester sequence the first course focuses on writing process, exposition, critical analysis, writing to learn, and so on. The second semester often focuses on argument and research. A single-semester composition course tries to combine them all. Fortunately, *The Curious Writer* is extremely flexible, with ample material to keep students busy for one or two semesters.

Sequence

Whether you use this book for one course or two, it's wise to introduce *The Curious Writer* to students by first working through Part One, "The Spirit of Inquiry," because this section lays the foundation for all that follows. The many

exercises in these chapters will help students experience firsthand what we mean by inquiry. Part Two, “Inquiry Projects,” is the heart of the book. I’ve organized chapters in an order that roughly follows typical composition courses, beginning with genres that draw heavily on students’ personal experiences and observations and then moving them outward toward other sources of information and encounters with other people’s experiences and ideas. In a one-semester course, for example, you might begin with the personal essay, and then move to the profile, followed by the review, and then the argument or research essay. This builds nicely by challenging students to work with more sources of information and leads to a more sophisticated understanding of persuasion and rhetoric. A two-semester course has the luxury of more assignments, of course, allowing you to potentially use most of the Inquiry Projects in Part Two.

Certain assignments clump together. For example, while arguably all writing is persuasive, the following genres are most explicitly so: proposal, review, argument, critical essay, and often the research essay. A course that focuses on argument might emphasize these assignments. A research-oriented course might exploit the wealth of material with a strong emphasis on outside sources, including the proposal, review, argument, research essay, and ethnography. A single-semester composition course that attempts coverage of critical thinking and writing as well as research and argument might move from personal essay to profile, and then cover persuasion through the review or critical essay, move on to the argument, and finish with the ethnographic and research essays.

Integrating the Research and Revision Sections

An unusual feature of the book is its treatment of research skills and revision. Research is an element of every assignment but it receives special attention in Part Three, “Inquiring Deeper,” in which students are introduced not only to the research essay but to research strategies and skills. Hopefully, you will find that this section, particularly Chapter 12, “Research Techniques,” is immediately relevant because students will be encouraged to consider research angles in every assignment they tackle. Consider assigning this chapter early in your course, particularly the sections on developing a working and focused knowledge of a subject.

Similarly, revision is an element of every assignment. That’s hardly a novel idea, but what is unusual is that *The Curious Writer* devotes an entire section of the book—Part Four, “Re-inquiring”—to revision. Like the section on research, the chapters on revision are relevant to students from their very first assignment. The first half of Chapter 14, “Revision Strategies,” is a useful introduction to what it means to revise, and you might assign this material early on in your course. The chapter also features specific revision strategies that your students will use in every assignment.

Chapter 15, “The Writer’s Workshop,” can also be assigned at any time and in sections. Consider having your students read the first half of that chapter—an introduction to peer review—before the first class workshops. The second half of the chapter focuses on “Methods of Responding,” specific workshop formats that are most helpful for drafts at different stages in the writing process. Ask students who are responsible for presenting their work to read about the method of response they’ll use in their workshop as preparation for it.

Using the Exercises

Learning follows experience, and the exercises in *The Curious Writer* are intended to help students make sense of the ideas in the text. I often plan the exercises as an in-class activity, and then assign the relevant reading to follow up that experience. Sometimes the discussion following these in-class exercises is so rich that some of the assigned reading becomes unnecessary. The students get it without having to hear it again from the author. More often, though, the reading helps students deepen their understanding of what they’ve done and how they can apply it to their own work.

However, assigning all of the exercises isn’t necessary. Don’t mistake their abundance in the book as an indication that you must march your students in lockstep through every activity or they won’t learn what they need to. *The Curious Writer* is more flexible than that. Use the exercises and activities that seem to emphasize key points that *you* think are important. Skip those you don’t have time for or that don’t seem necessary. If you’re like me, you also have a few rabbits of your own in your hat, exercises and activities that may work better with the text than the ones I suggest.

FOR INSTRUCTORS

The following resources are free to qualified adopters of Longman English textbooks.

The Instructor’s Resource Manual

ISBN 0-205-52077-4

This manual includes several sample syllabi, as well as a helpful introduction that will offer general teaching strategies and ideas for teaching writing as a form of inquiry. It also gives a detailed overview of each chapter and its goals, ideas for discussion starters, handouts and overheads, and a large number of additional writing activities that teachers can use in their classrooms to supplement the textbook.

E-book of *The Curious Writer*, Second Edition

An E-book of *The Curious Writer*, Second Edition is now available within MyCompLab, Longman’s premier online composition resource. In MyCompLab,

students and teachers will find the best multimedia resources for writing, research, and grammar in one easy-to-use site. Added to this, the E-book of *The Curious Writer* includes hyperlinks to relevant MyCompLab tutorials, quizzes, and instruction, providing an engaging multimedia learning experience for students. Also in the E-book, students will find unique, book-specific materials that supplement the text, including downloadable worksheets, writing activities, additional visual analysis exercises, and more. Tour the site at www.mycomplab.com.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe the success of the first edition of *The Curious Writer* to many people, particularly my Development Editor, Adam Beroud, whose savvy judgment, sharp eye, and imaginative thinking influenced me every step of the way. He's been similarly helpful with this second edition. None of the *Curious* books would be possible if the Senior Vice President and Publisher of Longman, Joe Opiela, weren't a force behind them.

I've also been fortunate to have the help of other bright and generous people, particularly my colleague and friend Michelle Payne, with whom I coauthored an inquiry book. Michelle developed the Instructor's Manual for this book and wrote the appendixes. I'm a lucky author to have a partner in these projects with such arich understanding of what I'm trying to do, and what I might do better.

In addition to Michelle, I've benefited from the insights of other colleagues as well, including Devan Cook, Brock Dethier, Bonnie Sunstein, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, Mike Mattison, Karen Uehling, Gail Shuck, Lad Tobin, and many others in the field whose work informed my understanding of how writers get better.

My students always contribute to my work. Several whose own exemplary writing is featured here include Julia Arrendondo, Jon Butterfield, Gordon Seirup, Kersti Harter, Margaret Parker, Lana Kuchta, Amy Garrett-Brown, Julie Bird, Kelly Sundberg, Gina Sinisi, and Christy Claymore.

Reviewers of books like these can be crucial to their development. I was lucky enough to have some excellent reviewers for the second edition, including the following: Melissa Batai, Triton College; Jennifer Black, McLennan Community College; Mark Browning, Johnson County Community College; Jo Ann Buck, Guilford Technical Community College; Jason DePolo, North Carolina A&T State University; John Christopher Ervin, University of South Dakota; Greg Giberson, Salisbury University; Nels P. Highberg, University of Hartford; William Klein, University of Missouri–St. Louis; Mary C. Leahy, College of DuPage; Lynn Lewis, University of Oklahoma; Steve Luebke, University of Wisconsin–River Falls; Michael Lueker, Our Lady of the Lake University; Jacqueline L. McGrath, College of DuPage; Betty Porter, Indiana Wesleyan University; Kristie Rowe, Wright State University; Kathleen J. Ryan, University of Montana; and Heath Scott, Thomas Nelson Community College.

Finally, I want to thank my daughters, Rebecca and Julia, who allow themselves to be characters in all of my books. They are both actors, and like good theater people, they are more than willing to play their parts in these texts, no matter what role I assign. I'm especially grateful to Karen, my wife, who has endured multiple editions of these books and their hold on my attention, which has often come at her expense. She's the beacon I follow through this blizzard of words, always guiding me home.

BRIEF CONTENTS

Preface xxxvii
Acknowledgments xlv

Part One **THE SPIRIT OF INQUIRY 1**

Chapter 1

Writing as Inquiry 3

Motives for Writing 4
Beliefs About Writing 4
Writing Situations and Rhetorical Choices 10
Habits of Mind 12
Writing as a Process 18

Chapter 2

Reading as Inquiry 33

Motives for Reading 34
Beliefs About Reading 34
Reading Situations and Rhetorical Choices 36
Reading as a Process 39
"Reading" the Visual 54

Chapter 3

Ways of Inquiring 69

Opening Questions for Inquiry 70
Exploration 71
Explanation 72
Evaluation 73
Reflection 74
Practicing Inquiry 75
Symphonic Inquiry 86

Part Two

INQUIRY PROJECTS 89

Chapter 4

Writing a Personal Essay 91

Writing About Experience 91

Motives for Writing a Personal Essay 92

The Personal Essay and Academic Writing 93

Features of the Form 94

The Writing Process 109

Chapter 5

Writing a Profile 133

Writing About People 133

Motives for Writing a Profile 134

The Profile and Academic Writing 135

Features of the Form 135

The Writing Process 152

Chapter 6

Writing a Review 177

Writing That Evaluates 177

Motives for Writing a Review 178

The Review and Academic Writing 179

Features of the Form 179

The Writing Process 195

Chapter 7

Writing a Proposal 219

Writing About Problems and Solutions 219

Motives for Writing a Proposal 222

The Proposal and Academic Writing 223

Features of the Form 223

The Writing Process 243

Chapter 8

Writing an Argument 267

Writing to Persuade People 267

Motives for Writing an Argument	273
The Argument and Academic Writing	274
Features of the Form	275
The Writing Process	286

Chapter 9

Writing a Critical Essay	315
Writing About Literature	315
Motives for Writing a Critical Essay	316
The Critical Essay and Academic Writing	317
Features of the Form	318
The Writing Process	349

Chapter 10

Writing an Ethnographic Essay	371
Writing About Culture	371
Motives for Writing Ethnography	372
Ethnography and Academic Writing	372
Features of the Form	373
The Writing Process	389

Part Three

INQUIRING DEEPER 427

Chapter 11

Writing a Research Essay	429
Writing with Research	429
Research Essays Versus Research Papers	430
Motives for Writing a Research Essay	431
The Research Essay and Academic Writing	431
Features of the Form	432
The Writing Process	452

Chapter 12

Research Techniques	491
Methods of Collecting	491
Research in the Electronic Age	492

Developing Working Knowledge	500
Evaluating Library Sources	509
Evaluating Web Sources	510
Developing Focused Knowledge	512
Interviews	521
Surveys	524

Chapter 13

Using and Citing Sources 531

Controlling Information	531
Using Sources	532
Citing Sources	538
MLA Documentation Guidelines	542
APA Documentation Guidelines	575

Part Four

RE-INQUIRING 595

Chapter 14

Revision Strategies 597

Re-seeing Your Topic	597
Divorcing the Draft	598
Strategies for Divorcing the Draft	599
Photography as a Metaphor for Revision	601
Five Categories of Revision	602
Problems of Purpose	604
Problems with Meaning	609
Problems with Information	616
Problems with Structure	620
Problems of Clarity and Style	626

Chapter 15

The Writer's Workshop 637

Making the Most of Peer Review	637
Models for Writing Workshops	640
The Writer's Responsibilities	642

The Reader's Responsibilities	644
What Can Go Wrong and What to Do About It	644
Methods of Responding	647

APPENDIX A The Writing Portfolio A-1

APPENDIX B The Literature Review B-1

APPENDIX C The Annotated Bibliography C-1

APPENDIX D The Essay Exam D-1

HANDBOOK H-1

Credits CR-1

Index I-1