

CREATING COMPOSITIONS

Harvey S. Wiener

Creating Compositions

Third Edition

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TO THE MEMORY OF DON MARION WOLFE
whose ideas take on new power with each generation
of young writers

AND TO MY STUDENTS
who illustrate with every theme they write the
eternal freshness of those ideas

Creating Compositions

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PREFACE

The third edition of *Creating Compositions* continues to affirm that if you live by feeling and looking and hearing and responding, then you can write. The individual's life is the most important source for writing; your experiences—the countless moments of pleasure and sorrow and surprise that fill each day—make the best compositions. After you learn, through this book, to recreate your experiences in written words, then you can move easily into the world of abstract ideas where details other than those based upon experience are often needed to support a written assignment. Moving gradually into the formal college "essay," the text examines first the well-developed paragraph. As in previous editions, each chapter of the book explores a topic whose meaning your own life can dramatize: moments with friends, a room or a street alive in your memory, the role in your life of the liberated woman, to name a few. Most chapters urge class discussions about the quality of your own experience so that well before actual writing begins, you can share ideas and can listen to other people's thoughts about a topic.

I have made important changes in this third edition. Each chapter now contains instruction in *prewriting* (steps to take in discovering and fleshing out a topic) and in *sentence expanding, combining, or embedding* (techniques for improving style and clarity of expression). Many chapters have new themes and offer challenging topics for discussion and for writing. Most of the exercises are new. There are many new student compositions that appear along with several of the successful student themes from the last edition. Selections in The Professionals Speak sections have been updated, and the Reaching Higher sections have been expanded in most cases. Part III, the Minibook, offers several new sections and a variety of different activities.

But the basic format of *Creating Compositions* remains the same. In each chapter, vocabulary exercises present words helpful for the writing assignment at hand, words you might want to use in your own composition. These words are clearly and easily presented, and you will have the chance to figure out definitions without always having to look first in a dictionary. Further, correct definitions appear for your convenience in Appendix A.

A section in each chapter called Building Composition Skills explains different techniques in the construction of paragraphs and essays. You will also learn about and practice with the different kinds of details required to support a topic idea—from details alive with sense experience to details built upon statistics and quotations from reliable sources.

The section called Solving Problems in Writing looks at typical problems in written communication: the run-on error, the sentence fragment, problems with subject and verb agreement, punctuation skills, and a number of others. In all the explanations the stress is upon clear presentation. Charts and clearly marked model sentences illustrate principles by example more often than by rule and without the often confusing language of grammar. And the exercises often require that you apply each skill in the language of your own sentences. You probably will not need to do all the exercises and

you can probably leave out those activities which deal with skills that you and your instructor agree you already know. Perforated pages make it possible for your instructor to collect the work you do directly in the book.

In each chapter a section called *Writing the Paragraph* offers specific goals for the writing exercise. Before you have to write your own composition, you will read some examples of what other students wrote in response to the same assignment. The questions that appear after these student models suggest directions for your own writing, so does the checklist of goals that remind you of the specific skills you are trying to build. Suggested topics will give you additional ideas for your own themes.

The section *The Professionals Speak* gives you writing samples to illustrate how professionals deal with the same kinds of materials you treat in your writing. And to provide a special challenge either through review or through more practice in composition, there is at the end of each chapter a section called *Reaching Higher* for students who want to advance further their skills in writing. Part III at the end of the text contains *A Minibook of Special Skills* that presents briefly several important areas of communication for successful college work, including how to write a business letter, how to prepare footnotes and bibliographies, how to take notes and write a summary, and several other skills.

As in the past, I have a number of debts to friends and colleagues without whose support and encouragement *Creating Compositions* could not have progressed. From Don Marion Wolfe comes the whole philosophy of sensory language and the need for exploring individual moments in order to write with meaning. His too are the ideas for using model paragraphs as the heart of any composition program and for using activities in language that require students to call upon their own resources in communication. To Don Wolfe my gratitude is limitless. His death in April, 1976, robs all of us who knew him of a brilliant teacher and a warm, faithful friend. To my wife Barbara Koster Wiener go thanks for her patience during the preparation of the materials and for her skills as a teacher of reading, which made her assistance invaluable. Don Linder and Jeffrey Kaplan assisted me ably in producing the manuscript. To my colleagues at La Guardia Community College who used *Creating Compositions* and who made valuable suggestions for improvement I am deeply indebted, as I am to those colleagues in colleges across the country who wrote to me with new ideas. Robert Esch at the University of Texas at El Paso read the manuscript with more care and attention than any writer dare hope for. I thank him and Barbara Clouse, Youngstown State University, and Tom Miles, West Virginia University, who offered their advice on the third edition. Finally, it is to the students in my composition courses who proved each term anew the infinite resources of their own lives and their ability to commit those vital elements into words—it is to them I owe special thanks.

Harvey S. Wiener

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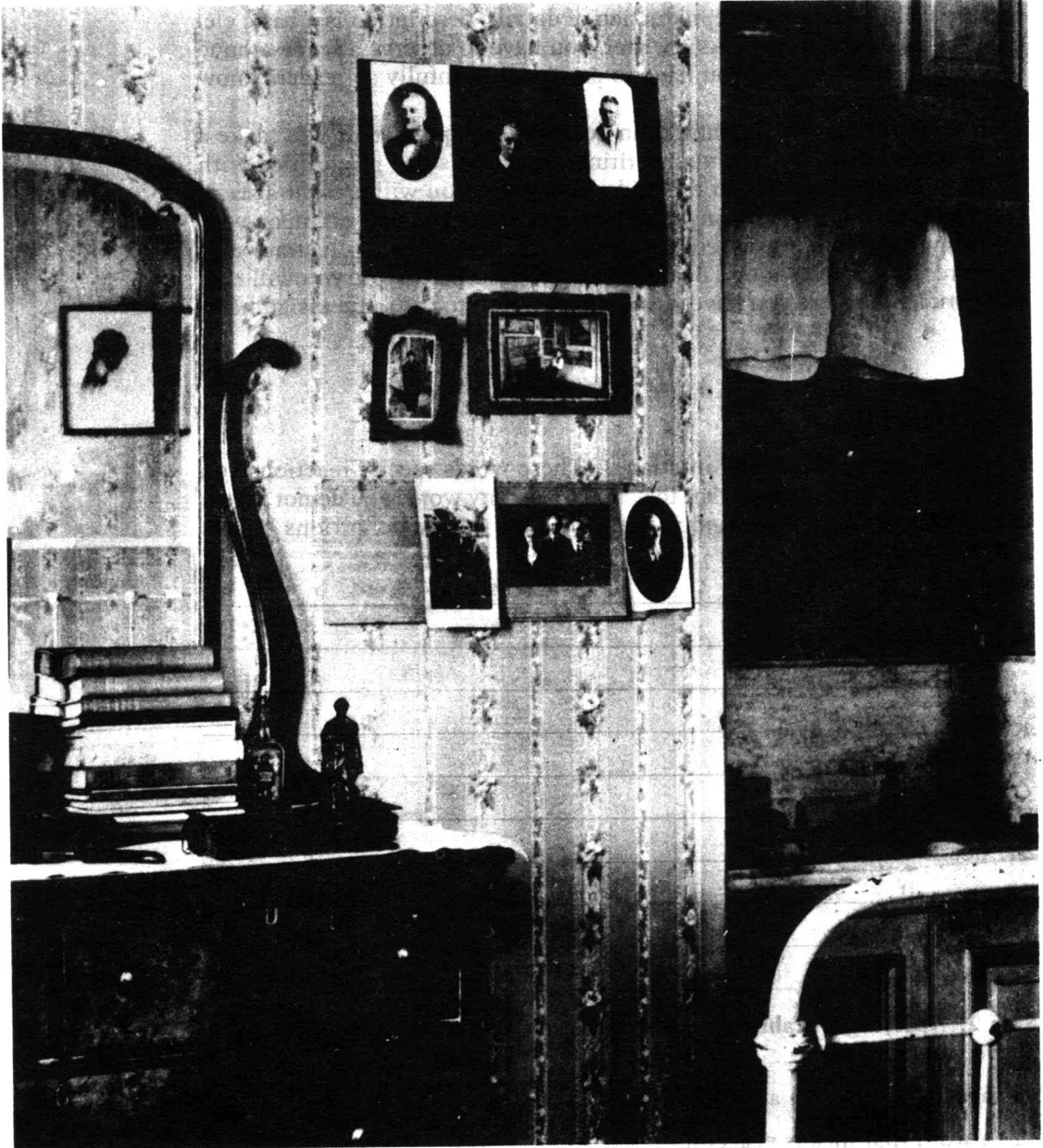
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part I

PARAGRAPHS

chapter 1

ROOMS THAT LINGER, ROOMS
THAT BREATHE: WRITING DESCRIPTION



INTRODUCTION TO DESCRIPTION

A kitchen in a warm apartment, a hospital room that smells of alcohol and ether, an attic in a lonely house—each of us knows some indoor place that has fixed itself clearly in our minds. To reproduce such a place in words is to describe for others the details that make it come alive. Because many writing tasks demand the reproduction of details, description is a basic element in the writer's craft. As a writer, you have to observe a scene around you with great care; and you have to present it faithfully so readers know exactly what you see.

This first paragraph assignment in description requires that you make a room come to life through your writing. Selecting some place filled with colors, noises, and people in the midst of actions, you will present a scene which is clear and vivid for any reader to appreciate. You will call upon your sense impressions of sound, color, smell, touch, and action to illustrate your major reaction to this room. Before you write your paragraph, you will read what students before you have written in response to the same assignment.

VOCABULARY

Step 1. Words to Describe Situations. These words specify reactions you may have to the room you want to describe. For any words you do not know, check a dictionary or Appendix A of this book. Write definitions on the blank lines below.

1. boisterous _____
2. amiable _____
3. regal _____
4. malevolent _____
5. dismal _____
6. hushed _____
7. hectic _____
8. tranquil _____
9. cluttered _____
10. effervescent _____

Step 2. Applying Vocabulary. After you are sure of the meanings of the above words, write:

1. a word to describe a friendly place _____
2. a word that means peaceful _____

3. a word to describe rough noisiness _____
4. a word to indicate deep silence _____
5. a word to describe a gloomy place _____
6. a word that means stately and royal _____
7. a word that means showing bad will _____
8. a word that would describe a lively, bubbling place _____
9. a word to describe a place of great excitement _____
10. a word to show things heaped in a disorderly way _____

Step 3. Words that Name Sounds. For the writer of description, words that indicate sounds are very important. For each word in italics below write a definition that explains the word accurately. Use a dictionary when you need one; check Appendix A for more help.

Example:

1. He *guffawed* at the jokes, his whole body shaking with delight.

laughed in a loud burst

2. The official tried to speak over the *clamor* of the students.

3. She spoke so low that her words were *inaudible*.

4. His uncle's deep, loud voice *bellowed* with laughter.

5. Wild applause *resonated* throughout the theater.

BUILDING COMPOSITION SKILLS

Sensory Language

Step 1. Listening Well. Listen a moment to the sound of the room in which you are now sitting. Write three sentences that tell sounds you hear. Use a color in each sentence.

*Examples: I hear the clamor of rush-hour traffic beyond the blue shutters.
Pink gum cracks as Paul blows a bubble at his seat.*

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Step 2. Action and Color. Look around. Write three sentences that show some action in the room. Use a specific color in each sentence.

*Examples: In front of me Marina munches on yellow corn chips.
A green fly circles lazily above the window sill.*

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Step 3. What You Feel. Touch your desk, your shirt or sweater, your pen, or your wristwatch. Move around and touch the walls, the doors, the windows, and other objects in your room. Write a sentence that includes a word to show what you feel. Use a color or a sound as well.

*Examples: My forehead is hot and sweaty.
I hear the squeak of my chair as I touch its smooth wooden sides.*

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

The practices above demonstrate an important technique in writing: *concrete sensory detail*. *Concrete* means specific, solid; *sensory* means relating to any of the senses. The highly specific pictures that result are called *images*. Notice in the two columns below how the images in Column I are general and have little sensory appeal, while those in Column II are concrete because they appeal strongly to the senses.

I

II

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| 1. the door | <i>a brown door with peeling paint and a broken glass</i> |
| 2. a chair | <i>a mahogany rocking chair that clacks and groans</i> |
| 3. the window | _____ |
| 4. an old book | _____ |
| 5. the chalkboard | _____ |

Step 4. Concrete Details. In the blank spaces under Column II, write concrete sensory details for the general pictures in Column I.

Step 5. Naming Specifically. One way to create pictures is to use the exact word you want rather than a general term that needs too many descriptive words to make the picture specific. Readers prefer the word *elm* or *oak* to *tree* because they get an added identification for the object through the exactness of the name.

For each general term in Column I, write in Column II three different *specific* terms to replace it.

I

II

Example:

- | | |
|-----------|------------------------------------|
| 1. tool | <i>hammer, pliers, screwdriver</i> |
| 2. car | _____ |
| 3. book | _____ |
| 4. animal | _____ |
| 5. food | _____ |
| 6. drink | _____ |

Topic Sentences

The key to a good paragraph is its topic sentence. For your purposes at this point, the topic sentence should always come as the first sentence of the paragraph.

Look at these three sentences and try to judge which you think most effective as the opening topic sentence in a paragraph:

1. It all happened last night.
2. My room is on the second floor of our house.
3. My room is the messiest room on the second floor of our house.

If you selected 3, you rejected 1 and 2 for good reason. Sentence 1, though typical of many papers by beginning writers, lacks a clear statement of topic. What is the *it*? What small element of suspense the writer tries to achieve

is usually lost in a drift away from the topic. Not having stated it clearly at the beginning, the writer easily loses control. Besides, the "It all happened. . . ." opening is so familiar and overused by now that it pays to avoid it.

Sentences 2 and 3 are superior because they both state the topic immediately: it's clear to readers that they will be reading descriptions of rooms. Sentence 2, however, is merely a statement of fact. It gives the writer too little control over the topic. What details can be included? What details can be left out? Sentence 3, on the other hand, by introducing the word *messiest*, states the writer's opinion about the room and gives a means for determining which details to use in the description. Any image not contributing to the overall effect of *messiness* would be omitted.

The most effective topic sentences are those that state both the topic and the writer's opinion of or attitude toward that topic. The box below highlights the qualities of strong topic sentences.

A TOPIC SENTENCE REMINDER

Good Topic Sentences:

1. Introduce the topic immediately.
2. Limit the topic.
3. Give an opinion or an attitude or a reaction or an impression that the writer has about the topic.

Why:

So your reader knows what you will write about.
So you know what you will write about.

Hint: Do not surprise your readers. Tell them immediately what you want to write about.

So you will not have too much to write about.
So you will have enough to write about.
So you will focus on only one major feature or point.

You get readers interested in the topic: they will want to find out why you feel the way you do about your subject.

You can introduce a key word that will help you relate all your supporting ideas to one dominant impression.

Here are two more topic sentences, which are successful because they introduce a limited topic clearly *and* give the writer's opinion about that topic. Each is explained for you.

1. Everyone in my writing class this Monday morning looks restless and uncomfortable.
2. Last Friday night I realized the bitterness that exists in my husband's character.

Topic: people in the writing class Monday morning

Opinion: restlessness

Topic: my husband last Friday night

Opinion: bitterness

The writer of sentence 1 above would need to show in the sentences that follow it just why everyone appears to be restless.