

Writing Practice

*A Rhetoric of
the Writing Process*

Ben W. McClelland

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of the
Writing Process

BEN W. McCLELLAND

Rhode Island College

Longman 
New York & London

Writing Practice

Longman Inc., 1560 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036
Associated companies, branches, and representatives
throughout the world.

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Developmental Editor: Gordon T. R. Anderson
Editorial and Production Supervisor: Ferne Y. Kawahara
Interior Design: Antler & Baldwin
Manufacturing Supervisor: Marion Hess
Composition: Kingsport Press
Printing and Binding: Haddon Craftsmen

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

McClelland, Ben W., 1943-
Writing Practice

(Longman series in college composition and communication)
Includes index.

1. English language—Rhetoric. I. Title. II. Series.

PE1408.M3936 1984 808'.042 83-12000
ISBN 0-582-28362-0

Manufactured in the United States of America
Printing: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Year: 92 91 90 89 88 87 86 85 84

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book evolved from ideas which grew with writing. Many people contributed to that growth. William E. Coles, Jr. presented me with a teaching style that initiated a search for my own. Harvey Wiener enabled me to see the making of a book out of my teaching and started me on the way. Barbara Cambridge read an early draft of the first chapter and responded helpfully. William E. Smith, a close friend, served faithfully as well as a reader of drafts, making especially useful suggestions on sentence combining. Rosemary Herring read proof, bringing an experienced teacher's view to the text.

The Rhode Island College Faculty Research Fund awarded me grants in the early stages of writing. Rhode Island College granted me a sabbatical leave for the final months of composition.

Anonymous reviewers worked with me and the publisher over several months through successive drafts, providing expertise and common sense.

My colleagues Ellen Gardiner, Kathryn Kalinak, and John Roche had the energy (and courage) to try out an untried book in their classes.

Those at Longman Inc. who were associated with this project—Harvey Wiener, Tren Anderson, and Ferne Kawahara—brought humane care and professional concern to all of our dealings.

I owe all of these people—and I express it now—a deep debt of gratitude.

I also want to thank some who experienced the growth of this book with me daily: my students for what they have contributed directly to the text and for what they have taught me about the learning and teaching of writing; Ellen Gardiner for careful manuscript reading and thoughtful response; Arlene Robertson and Natalie DiRissio for professional typing services which

transformed my tedious script into typescript; and, especially, my wife Susan and my family for abiding with me (and frequently without me) through the two-year process during which this book grew.

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1

PRACTICING: Write Only on the Days You Eat

*A Single Good Performance Requires Days
of Regular Practice.*

Your English composition course differs in a significant way from most other college courses. In a typical course you read about a subject, listen to lectures, discuss ideas, study your reading and class notes, and demonstrate your understanding of the subject by completing tests and writing papers. Your English composition course differs because, in addition to having you study writing as a subject, it requires that you practice the activity of writing. In this way, taking a composition course is more like playing a varsity sport or taking a course in dance, music performance, or studio art. If you have taken such a dance, music, or art course or have played a varsity sport, you know that to do well you must develop the habit of practicing the activity daily.

You may also recall your teacher or coach urging, "Practice! Practice!" So don't be surprised if you find your composition teacher behaving more like a coach or a performance or studio teacher than a teacher of a subject-matter course, because a composition teacher asks students to keep in shape, practice, and perform writing acts. In fact, I have adapted this chapter's title

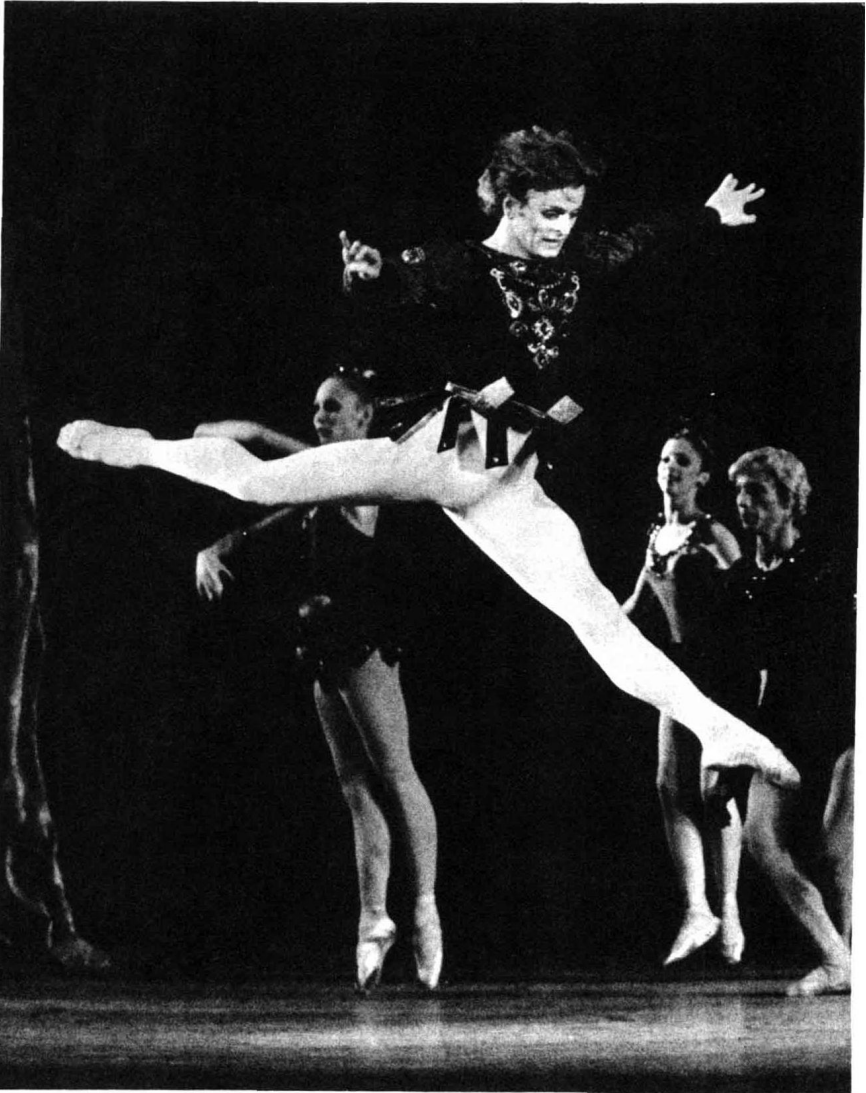
from a violin teacher's maxim. Much of Shinichi Suzuki's success with very young students lay in his ability to motivate them to practice daily.

When my first-grade son, Ben, began studying the violin, I demanded that he follow the rigorous practice schedule Mr. Suzuki required of his pupils. Ben excelled, practicing an hour a day, memorizing and performing this gavotte and that sonata. He learned to express ideas and feelings through music. Within a few months his teacher and I knew that Ben could become an accomplished young violinist, if only he would maintain the habit of practicing. My son's trial of will—to practice daily bowing exercises, rhythmic games, scales, and full pieces—has been going on for nine years. To be sure, he has had dark days; I recall when comic books, girlfriends, roller disco, and Fleetwood Mac beckoned him to sights and sounds more enticing than pulling a well-rosined bow over taut metal wires. But after a few months the sight of a soundless violin was more than he could bear: he resumed daily practice because he wanted to feel again the power of being a performing musician. He wanted to express himself musically.

You may have had a similar experience as a youngster with music or dance lessons or with Little League sports. If so, you know that to perform an activity effectively and gracefully, you must practice it regularly. In order to use your body and mind to accomplish demanding actions, you must be physically and mentally in shape. Like artistic performers and athletes, writers must practice consistently to develop muscle tone and endurance so that fingers, hands, arms, eyes, and brains can function long and effectively at their peak.

Shortly, I will offer some writing exercises to help you begin developing habits of effective writers. But before doing so, I want to give you a few reasons for becoming a writer who practices. Have you ever marveled at Mikhail Baryshnikov leaping effortlessly and touching down light-as-a-feather? Anyone who has can see aesthetic beauty as well as physical prowess in these motions. Similarly, anyone seeing a Wyeth painting or hearing Itzak Perlman play the violin enjoys sensuous delight as well as intellectual stimulation. Daily practice is essential to the works these people perform. Yet one doesn't have to be an accomplished professional to move someone else by artistic performance. Even my son, who is not precocious, transports me with music.

Handing him the bow for his daily practice, I watch quietly as he adjusts the tension of its horsehair strands. He peers intently at the music sheet, a page of dots and circles, lines and spaces, all nonsense to me; shortly he begins, playing with ease, as if the violin and bow were natural appendages. He takes me musically to another time and place. In this special moment I am his child, not old enough to read the words from a storybook,



Photograph by Martha Swope

so he reads them for me, leading me to a world of warmth and light, of fear and brooding, of failure and triumph.

Just as athletes and artists, professional or amateur, move us with their performances, so writers move us with their words. Reading the written word can move us as powerfully as listening to music or watching dance. My students and I regularly move each other with our writing: We are persuaded to act, moved to laughter and tears, jostled to question our beliefs, or compelled to make rejoinders.

Many of my students, however, lack the desire to perform as athletes, musicians, and dancers do. So, why do they practice writing? For different reasons: many students simply want to learn how to express themselves more effectively in words; some of them want to write dramatic poems or amusing stories; others want to write better examinations or academic papers; and still others want to transmit clear instructions or logical reasoning in reports. The aim of the practicing writer, after all, is to gain control over language and to move others with words. Doing so, a writer may become a more effective problem solver and a more resourceful thinker as well as a more successful writer. To write effectively means practicing daily—or at least on the days you eat. Here is a plan of finger (and brain) exercises to help you become a practicing writer.

WRITING PRACTICE SCHEDULE

First, schedule a time for a writing workout each day. If you keep a daily schedule of your college class meetings, record on it your daily writing practice time. If you have no such class schedule, then make one for your writing regimen. How much time should you allot each day to writing? Many of you should attempt to work gradually up to an hour daily. Some of you may be able to warm up effectively with less practice; others of you will need more time, just as different athletes and artists vary the amounts of time for practicing to keep in shape.

Setting and adhering to a schedule of regular writing workouts is essential to your writing improvement. Through these daily practice sessions you get in and stay in shape to write more effectively. For example, you develop writing endurance, the ability to write for longer periods of time before tiring, mentally or physically. If you work rigorously through the exercises

below, you should begin to develop new patterns of thinking, new ways of seeing, and eventually new ways of expressing yourself. Furthermore, the writing you produce during workouts can serve as sources of ideas for the papers you will write for class.

Here are some exercises for your writing workouts. By practicing them regularly for the first month of the course, you will begin to feel the power of the practicing writer. Even though you may falter once or twice (everybody has a bad day now and then), you will return to the regimen because, even if seeing blank pages will not be more than you can bear, you will regain an interest in expressing yourself in written words.

EXERCISES

Exercise 1: Freewriting

Have you ever gotten writer's cramp when completing an essay exam or taking notes on a fast-moving lecture? Freewriting builds up your endurance for fast writing and for quick thinking. Select a topic and write continuously for a set period of time. Ten minutes is a reasonable period at first. (After a week or so increase the period gradually to 20 minutes.) Keep writing words across the page nonstop for the full period. If during the exercise you can think of no more to write on the topic, continue writing nonetheless. Simply recopy words, phrases, or sentences until your mind lights up with new ones again. At the end of the period, stop writing and count the number of words you produced. Your only purpose in this exercise is to write as many words on a topic as you can in a given period. (Note: After you have determined how many words you write per line on average, you may estimate the total number of words rather than counting every one.)

Are you looking for some topics for freewriting? Why not begin with an idea from this chapter: for example, the comparison of writing with playing sports and music; or how, as an athlete or a musician, you mustered up the discipline required to practice daily. Looking for more topics? Perhaps you and your classmates can draw up a list of possible topics to which you may refer from time to time.

Try this freewriting exercise every day for a month. Record

MONTH: _____

	S	M	T	W	T	F
DATE TIME WORDCOUNT						
DATE TIME WORDCOUNT						
DATE TIME WORDCOUNT						
DATE TIME WORDCOUNT						
DATE TIME WORDCOUNT						

Figure 1.1

on the chart above the length of exercise periods, word totals, name of the month, and the days' dates. Discuss with your classmates your experiences with this exercise.

Examples of Freewriting

Let's look at some examples of my students' freewriting exercises. Freewriting is a novel kind of writing assignment for students because it is free and unstructured. For that reason, students' first few attempts are very taxing and the initial results often are disappointing. For example, here's all that Pat could write during a tension-filled, 10-minute freewriting period in the first week of class when I suggested that students write about why they were in the class and what they wanted to get out of it:

I am taking this course cause I was told I have to improve my English. I thought I was going to get help learning how

to write, now the teacher tells me to write without giving any help. I'm stuck, he says not to stop writing, this is stupid. I can't think of anymore to say. I know he's going to look at me. What can I say? The sign on the wall says No Smoking. The teacher wrote his office number and telephone number on the board. Is he going to make us write like this everyday?

WORDCOUNT: 98

Beginning-of-the-course freewriting exercises often look like Pat's. It takes practice to develop the ability to think through an idea spontaneously and to write out that thinking. Before developing control over that ability, students often get very tense, feel stupid and on-the-spot, as Pat did. Many write little more than 75 words, and their writing rambles, containing few focused ideas.

It is surprising, therefore, to see how rapidly students begin to improve their ability to write more words and to create more connected and focused ideas during timed writing periods. The following are exercises written in the last month of classes. The freewriting periods were 15 minutes each. Among others, Matilda and Alison selected "If next week were my last week to live. . . ." Matilda's response reflects the two lines of thinking explored by all the students who chose this topic: whether to do things they had never dared to do or to maintain the same routine activities to the end.

IF NEXT WEEK IS MY VERY LAST WEEK OF LIFE

I wouldn't be sitting here right now. I'd be acting out all my wildly perverted fantasies! Singing atop restaurant tables, between the soup spoon and salad fork; riding naked upon horseback against the rolling waves on the beach; skiing down the white, ravenous alps. That's where I would be—doing things I had never done before.

Or maybe I'd be out in the quiet, peaceful country with my family, enjoying the sights and sounds of spring. Looking at things I'd seen a hundred times before, only now through different eyes—observing each patch of moss upon a growing tree, noticing each tiny wrinkle upon my mother's lovely face, enjoying my nephew's wild screaming for the first time—that's what I'd be doing, probably.

Or I might choose to just sit down with a good book and read. Read of the foreign, distant places where I've never been; read of the famous people I have never met; read of the wonders in outer space that I'll never see. I might just sit down and think of things I'll never do, experiences I'll never feel, children I'll never have.

Or would I do any of that? Most unlikely. I'd probably just live each day as I normally would, only this time more joyously.

WORDCOUNT: 201

Alison took the occasion to write something considerably more daring than she ever had.

UNTITLED

If next week were my last one on this complicated earth, I would be devastated. My goodness, it would mean giving up the things I enjoy most in life: decorating my bedroom; eating, rock 'n roll, and term paper deadlines. These may seem trivial to some, but how I enjoy them. What would life be like without three papers due on the same day? Could I actually survive without "pigging out"? Can I leave these luxuries behind?

Ending my life would not be easy. It means getting things ready; moreover, it means getting myself ready. The first thing I'd do is eat all my Easter candy. Who cares about being fat in heaven—everyone floats anyway. The second thing I'd do is pick out a real tacky outfit to wear at my wake. It would be something I wouldn't have the nerve to wear normally—maybe a hot pink tube top and some black leather pants. The third thing I'd engage in would be fulfilling my fantasies, sexual and otherwise (maybe even wear the tacky outfit for the sexual fantasies). Next, I'd make love to the man I'll leave behind, until I breathe my last breath. Finally, if next week were my last one alive, I'd set my lingering thoughts to music—creating a song sure to make you cry (just to reveal the seriousness and sensitivity I *really* possess).

WORDCOUNT: 222

This exercise gave Alison the idea for later writing a satire, poking fun at "proper thoughts and proper behavior for young ladies." In the next selection Edith discusses struggling with a certain kind of goal which should sound familiar to us pudgy folks.

MY GOAL FOR 1982

Every year I set some goal for myself, sometimes I attain that goal and sometimes I don't. This year I have set the goal to lose 20 pounds. Now, that doesn't sound too difficult does it? Well, let me tell you, it isn't as easy as it sounds.

In January I began my campaign to lose 20 pounds in 1982. I began going to exercise class four and sometimes five times a week. I was sure this would do something for me besides take up my time, which I must admit I have little of. It wasn't very successful. Three months of toil for approximately eight pounds which return in a month if I don't exercise.

In order to reach my goal I will have to diet. This is something I try to do on a regular basis but I find it hard to be consistent. I do really well for about a week or two and then I blow it all in two days.

I really want to lose this 20 pounds before I get any older. It seems that the older I get, the more difficult this twenty pounds will be to lose. I am also afraid that if I don't lose it now it will start creeping higher and higher until before I know it I'll be so fat that I won't be able to do anything.

So this year's goal is to lose 20 pounds. Presently I am trying to follow Weight Watchers diet and exercise regularly. It is a slow process but I think I can do it.

WORDCOUNT: 262

While it is quite long, Edith's exercise contains a lot of repetition. It demonstrates that even though she has been practicing for several weeks, impromptu writing stimulates just the beginning of her thinking on a topic; if she is stalled on one spot, she can simply "write out of it" without feeling panicked, tense, or stupid, as beginning students sometimes do.

In the following exercise Mura, a bright, 35-year-old, faces

squarely the writer's dilemma that plagued her and a number of her classmates during the course:

WHAT KEEPS ME FROM WRITING MY VERY BEST: OR PRIORITIES OF LIFE

Initially, a wave of enthusiasm engulfs my being, and I can't wait to set my earth-shattering thoughts onto paper. The ink flows unceasingly in an effort to keep pace with the plethora of ideas crying to be heard. During this first phase of writing I am absolutely positive no one has ever composed a more perfect sentence, paragraph, or paper. Completing the first impetus of the procedure, I set aside my masterpiece, to be proofread at a later date.

A few days later, the excitement completely gone from the project, I attempt to correct my mistakes and type out my scribbling. At this point my only hope is to be able to make as few typographical errors as possible and get the thing in on time. The first typed draft is normally such a mess it has to be typed again.

By now I have gone into "writer's shock" and no longer recognize the meaning of the words, but only if they are spelled correctly. As hours dwindle down to a precious few (sounds like a song) inertia sets in and mundane things take on grandiose importance. Such as cleaning the bathroom, matching socks, changing the litter-box, watering the plants or sweeping the back steps. It is at this time I should be examining sentence structure and paragraphs, but unconsciously I know that might mean a whole rewrite. By procrastinating it is possible to let the clock run out, thereby making it impossible to complete another draft.

On my last paper I played a dirty trick on myself. Because of the snowstorm we had an extra week to spend, but I had it prepared for last Tuesday. On Sunday night, I took a little peek. This was my undoing. The only solution to the horrible sentence structures was another draft. I am thankful spring is around the corner and the likelihood of another snow storm is minimal. I wouldn't want to make it a habit.

WORDCOUNT: 297