

Writing
from
Experience

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WRITING FROM EXPERIENCE

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Preface

Writing from Experience is a writing workbook for adults at the high intermediate or low advanced level of English as a second or a foreign language. With some modification, however, it can also be used by low intermediate or more advanced students.

This workbook is the result of ten years of classroom testing, both in the United States and abroad. During this time I have constantly modified my approach to make the text more useful in the classroom. I have also benefited greatly from the suggestions made by other teachers at New York University and Brigham Young University who have tried out the materials.

Writing from Experience has great flexibility of use. It may be the only text in a writing class, or it may be a supplementary text in a grammar class or a class for combined language skills. Because of the great amount of controlled practice in the text, it may also be used in a writing workshop or in a tutorial program staffed by teaching assistants.

The great variety of language practice in *Writing from Experience*—speaking, writing, listening, grammatical structure—represents a careful integration of the language skills and is designed to maintain student interest. Each unit begins with a discussion-writing stage and ends with a listening-writing stage.

Built into the writing practice is a systematic provision for correction, with materials and procedures that enable the students to make their own

corrections. In addition, an accompanying text, *Writer's Companion*, gives students help with many of their writing problems. The two books together provide a total package for composition writing which relieves the teacher of having to spend time explaining particular usages and gives students the maximum opportunities for self-help.

Because *Writing from Experience* is intended for students who are still struggling with problems on the sentence level, the workbook does not require them to explore a composition subject in depth. The topics involve mainly rhetorical patterns that are relatively easy to handle, such as description and explanation. The text contains ten units, each dealing with one particular subject. The topics in these units become progressively more comprehensive, and the level of difficulty increases.

UNIQUE FEATURES OF CONTROL

1. RHETORICAL CONTROL (of the organization and development of compositions)

Rhetorical control comes essentially from an outline given for each composition. This outline guides the two stages that are preliminary to the writing of the composition. The first stage provides for a discussion of each item in the outline. The second stage, introduced in Unit 4 after students have gotten used to working from an outline, requires the completion of an organizational worksheet based on the outline. This worksheet, which offers students the opportunity to make preliminary notes, serves as the basis for the final draft of the composition.

Constant use of such outlines makes students aware of the need for an organic structure to their compositions—a structure which the rhetorical rules of English require, but which may differ from the writing conventions of other languages.

The repeated use of outlines also gives students an awareness of paragraph development within the context of the composition, so they get a better feeling for writing effective paragraphs than if they wrote them in isolation.

2. GRAMMATICAL CONTROL (of the structures needed to write about a particular subject)

The text sets up the preliminary discussion stage in such a way that the teacher can help the students with any of the grammatical structures needed to discuss the subject of the composition. In addition, the text provides many reinforcement exercises for oral and written practice in these structures.

3. SEMANTIC CONTROL (of the vocabulary needed to write about a particular subject)

The discussion stage also offers an opportunity for the teacher to supply needed vocabulary. Furthermore, vocabulary related to the subject is found throughout the exercises.

In addition, many units give students the opportunity to enlarge the vocabulary needed for different functions, such as describing (geography and scenic views, personal characteristics), giving instructions (including recipes), writing letters, writing a newspaper announcement, filling out applications.

4. COMMUNICATIVE CONTROL (of the subject matter)

Each unit consists of a concrete topic that lends itself readily to discussion—such as holidays, superstitions, courtship and marriage customs. Thus students can talk and write about subjects that come from their own knowledge and experience. What they want to say is merely channeled through an outline. Each unit helps the students expand their thinking on the subject and increases the range of vocabulary needed to discuss the subject.

The discussion of the subject matter in each unit provides the opportunity for cross-cultural exchanges between student and student as well as between students and teacher.

ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITS

Each unit is divided into four sections:

1. Discussion and Composition
2. Reinforcement Practice
3. Extra Speaking and Writing Practice
4. Listening-Writing Practice

DISCUSSION AND COMPOSITION

While each unit is about the subject in general, most of the compositions are specifically geared to the student's own country.¹

This section is set up in two parts.

¹ Obviously, for students of English as a second language who do not remember much about their native country, these compositions can be about the English-speaking country in which they are presently living.

1. DISCUSSION: Preliminary outline for the composition (prewriting stage)

The guidance for this stage is presented in two columns. The left column is the outline. The right column suggests guidance that the teacher can give as the students discuss the items on the outline. This guidance includes ideas, grammar and usage, vocabulary, as well as elements of composition building.

This outline-discussion format facilitates the integration of all the levels of writing—sentence, paragraph, and full composition—in one process.

2. COMPOSITION (to be done before or after the reinforcement practice)

A. ORGANIZING THE COMPOSITION

From Unit 4 on, each unit includes an organizational worksheet, which is based on the discussion outline and which requires students to set up the structural framework of their compositions.

The worksheet requires students to indicate the contents of their introductions and conclusions, to write many of the opening sentences of paragraphs, and to list supporting details in each paragraph. Textual notes for each point on the outline guide the students in the use of their paragraphs. Thus, much of the guidance in rhetorical control that was first given orally during the discussion is noted at the appropriate place on the worksheet.

B. WRITING THE COMPOSITION

In this stage, instructions are given for writing the composition based on the notes made on the organizational worksheet. Also, instructions for the composition's format—title, paper, margins, spacing—are repeated in each unit as a reminder of the form that is to be followed.

C. CORRECTING OR REWRITING THE COMPOSITION

The text sets up a procedure for students to correct their own compositions and to learn from their corrections. A chart of correction symbols for both the teacher and the students is given in the back of the book. This system of symbols is modeled after the one commonly used in freshman composition texts. However, the number of symbols has deliberately been limited so that they will be easy for the teacher to use and for the student to follow.

Each unit also includes a correction page which students should use to write down corrections of mistakes they have made in their compositions. This requirement provides a convenient way for students to actively correct their errors and serves as a constant reminder to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

REINFORCEMENT PRACTICE

This section includes a variety of oral and written drills on structure and vocabulary, many of which are on the sentence level. The choice of grammatical structures has been determined by the need to communicate about a particular subject matter.² For this reason, the structures are not graded for degree of difficulty, nor do they cover all problems of grammatical usage. However, an effort has been made to include as many of the basic structures as possible, as a kind of review (and in some cases, an expansion) of structures students have previously learned. An effort has also been made to keep the explanations short and clear, with a minimum of grammatical terminology but with abundant examples.

The contents of the drills are all related to the subject matter of the unit. The vocabulary represents a mixture of formal and conversational styles appropriate for writing. Like the grammatical structures, the vocabulary is not graded.

Among the types of exercises are two of special note that appear in each of the units. One is on word forms. This type has been included because even advanced students continue to have difficulties with the use of the proper part-of-speech suffixes. The other contains strings of lexical items that must be made into full sentences. This exercise serves both as a review of sentence structures already practiced in the unit and as further practice in using the appropriate verb forms and structure words such as articles and prepositions.

EXTRA SPEAKING AND WRITING PRACTICE

The exercises in this section provide a variety of language activities that lead to speaking and writing practice, or both. Many of them can be done in pairs or in larger groups. These exercises may begin with oral work based on visual material such as a map, a chart, a diagram, or an airline ticket. Other oral practice, often leading to writing, may take the form of dialogs, role playing, or interviews.

LISTENING-WRITING PRACTICE

Each unit has two selections for dictation and two for dicto-comps (dictations-compositions), all based on the subject matter of the unit. Dicto-comps are somewhat longer selections than dictations; students write summaries from the dicto-comps that their teachers read to them.

² Examples of such structures are: in Biography: prepositions of time; in Instructions: passive for a process, conditions for precautions; in Telling Stories: direct and indirect speech.

In some units the Extra Speaking and Writing Practice section or the Listening-Writing Practice section includes partial or full written models for the composition. These sections may also include contextualized practice with the grammatical structures from the reinforcement exercises.

END MATERIAL

1. Partial answers to all the reinforcement drills in each unit. These answers are particularly useful for students who are doing any of the exercises on their own.
2. Chart of symbols for correction of compositions.
3. Index of exercises in the units.
4. A general index of all usage and writing practices.

TEACHER'S MANUAL

This manual contains specific suggestions for handling the work in each of the units. The manual also includes complete answers for all the exercises in each unit. In addition, there are two forms of a usage test that can be administered before and after the practice work with the text, not only to determine student progress, but also to pinpoint areas of student weakness.

ACCOMPANYING TEXT

Writer's Companion is a small, compact text designed to complement this volume. Its purpose is to take care of individual writing problems, especially on the sentence level, so that the teacher does not need to engage in endless explanations of usages that have not been mastered by particular students.

Writer's Companion consists of two parts:

1. An Index of Usage and Rhetoric. This is the main section of the book, arranged in the same alphabetical order as the correction chart in this book. Thus students can easily find information when they are writing compositions or making corrections. Some entries in the Index are mainly for correction of errors, such as dangling constructions and fragments. Other entries give more detailed information, such as the entries under verbs, spelling, punctuation.

Entries for rhetoric include introductions, conclusions, paragraphing, and transitions.

2. A Grammar Review and Practice section, consisting of a brief overview of basic grammar. This section is intended for those students whose lack of knowledge of English grammar interferes with their understanding of the rules of usage. This part of the text includes some exercises (with answers) which can be done as class work or assigned individually.

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To the Student

The method of writing compositions that you are going to **follow** in this book may be quite different from the way you have been taught **before**. In this book you will write compositions that are controlled by an outline. The use of such an outline will enable you to construct well-developed compositions. In order for you to concentrate on these techniques of composition building, you will be asked to write only about subjects that you know from your own experience.

Units 1 through 3 will help you get accustomed to following an outline. Beginning with Unit 4, you will be writing compositions that have three basic parts: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Such an organization may not be required in all types of writing, but it is the one most commonly used for formal papers and reports of the kind you might need for academic work. The introduction prepares the reader for what you are going to concentrate on, the body contains the main points that you are going to make, and the conclusion rounds out in some satisfying way what you have just said.

The following sections give a brief explanation of the use of introductions and conclusions, as well as of other elements of composition building. The examples are taken from Unit 7, **Superstitious Beliefs**.

1. INTRODUCTIONS

An introduction often makes general statements that lead into the specific subject (or the body) of your composition. There are a number of ways of making such general statements. One way that is suggested in this book is to give a definition of the broad term which you will treat in a narrower sense in the composition. For example, in the composition on "Superstitious Beliefs in (name of your country)," you will be asked to begin the composition with a general definition of superstition. The text suggests that such a definition might include references to the fact that superstition:

- is an unreasonable belief that supernatural forces can cause good or bad things to happen
- results from ignorance and fear of the unknown
- often involves magic and witchcraft
- may have a religious origin

2. TRANSITIONAL LEAD-INS

A transitional lead-in helps you move from the general comments of the introduction to the body of your composition. This transition indicates how you are going to narrow down the general statements in your introduction to the specific subject of your composition. Also, the transition may actually mention the main points on your outline so that the reader can anticipate the way you are organizing your composition. For example, a transitional lead-in suggested for the composition on "Superstitious Beliefs in (name of your country)" is: "Superstitions are often attached to numbers, animals and birds, and things." This transition tells the reader that you are going to organize your composition about superstitions under the headings of:

- I. Superstitions about numbers
- II. Superstitions about animals and birds
- III. Superstitions about things

3. PARAGRAPHING

The outline is very important in guiding you in the construction of your paragraphs. Each item on the outline is generally developed in a separate paragraph. The opening sentence of each paragraph (often called a *topic sentence*) includes a reference to the point on the outline. For example, the open-

ing sentence of point I, Superstitions about numbers, might be: "There are several superstitions about numbers in my country."

The sentences that follow this opening sentence should be only about the topic from the outline—in this example, superstitions about numbers. Also, the sentences that follow the opening sentence of a paragraph should be connected properly. Suggested connectives that might link sentences after the opening sentence of the paragraph about numbers are:

For example, we have *one* about number 13.

OR

The most common *one* concerns number 13.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion gives the composition a sense of completion by opening up from the main part of the composition to more general comments about the subject. Thus, the composition begins and ends with general statements about the subject.

For the conclusion of the composition on superstitions, the book suggests that general statements might refer to:

- the kind of people who still believe in these superstitions
- your own belief

A conclusion need not be long, and it can sometimes be omitted if the main part of the composition ends on an important point or if a story merely comes to an end.

The general statements of introductions and conclusions given in this book are only suggestions. You might want to use your own ideas instead. However, introductions and conclusions should be kept short so that you can concentrate on the main part of your composition, which comes from the other points on the outline.

This kind of tight control through the use of an outline with an introduction and a conclusion may seem artificial to you, and in fact this control is not always so strict as in this book. However, it is useful for you to practice such a control at first so that you may have the rules for composition building firmly in mind. Remember that your reader expects some guidance to the main points on your outline. Your awareness of these principles of writing is important not only for writing but for reading textbooks. In the introduction and conclusion of the entire book, and often in each chapter, the writer of a text will guide the reader to the main ideas. Also, the writer will frequently use headings to draw attention to the main points from the outline.

Procedures for the Teacher

The teacher's manual that accompanies *Writing from Experience* gives specific suggestions for teaching each of the units in the book. However, since the outline-discussion approach for teaching composition is basically different from other approaches, and since the success of this approach is partly dependent on the procedures for guiding the composition, it is especially important for the teacher to have some general guidelines here.

First, a word about when the compositions should be written. Although each unit begins with the discussion and composition section, the decision of whether students should write the composition before or after the reinforcement exercises is up to the teacher. However, regardless of when the composition is to be written, it is highly desirable to begin the work of the unit with the discussion of the composition. There are several reasons for doing so.

First, this discussion requires students right from the start to face many of the semantic, structural, and rhetorical problems involved in writing about a particular subject. The oral guidance given by the teacher for points on the outline helps students to begin to overcome these problems. This guidance not only forestalls the possible number of mistakes in student compositions, but it helps students retain longer those structural and lexical items that they struggled for in the discussion and that they will also need when they write about the subject.

Furthermore, after students talk about the composition topic, they often

realize that their mastery of some of the structures they have already studied is not as secure as they had thought. They are therefore more receptive to doing the reinforcement exercises and can gain more from them.

Another advantage of beginning with the discussion stage is that the cross-cultural exchange that is involved puts students at ease right from the start. Communicating freely and meaningfully with each other creates a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in which the students and the teacher can learn from each other.

PROCEDURES FOR THE DISCUSSION STAGE

Because of the importance of the discussion stage for the work to be done in each unit, specific steps are suggested below for handling this stage. These suggestions are based on the use of the outline page(s) at the beginning of the Discussion and Composition section.

First, write on the blackboard the title and the outline given in the left column. (Some subpoints can be omitted from the outline at first and then added as the discussion proceeds.) Students' books should be closed, in order to allow them to get the most benefit out of the oral work.

For the steps that are to follow, use the information from the right-hand column to help students with the content and expression of the composition. Include elements of the rhetorical development if the composition is to be written immediately after the discussion. Elicit as much of this information as possible from the students.

1. Call on individual students to give a full sentence for each point on the outline.
2. As a student makes a mistake or searches for a word, get the correct information from the class and place it on the board. Have students copy this information in their notebooks.
3. Continue calling on students until they give enough sentences for each point on the outline to enable you to place all the needed structures and vocabulary on the board. Encourage student exchange of information. In some units the discussion column has information on American culture that can be shared with the students.
4. If much student interaction has been generated during the class discussion, you might form student groups to continue discussing the points on the outline with each other.
5. From Unit 4 on, when introductions and conclusions are added to the composition, see how much of the suggested contents for these paragraphs you can get from the students themselves before you give the information from the

discussion column (and of course additional suggestions of your own.)¹ You might also ask the class for alternate transitions and opening sentences of paragraphs.

PROCEDURES FOR THE WRITING STAGE

If some time has elapsed between the preliminary discussion and the writing of the composition, it would be desirable to repeat the discussion based on the outline, especially for the handling of the introduction, conclusion, and transitions. Stress the use of opening sentences of paragraphs in order to start building an awareness of topic sentences.

Have the students fill out the organizational worksheet, which requires them to stay within the structural framework set up by the outline. Suggest that they check against the discussion outline for additional help.

For the first few compositions it is advisable to have students fill out the worksheet in class. Once this is done, the composition can be written, or at least started, in class, or it can be assigned for homework. The compositions in Units 8 through 10, which are rather long, may be broken into two parts, both for the discussion and the composition. The two parts however should hold together as one composition.

It is very important to point out the need for students to revise their compositions several times so that what they hand in is the best they can do. Students can catch many of their mistakes if they take the time to look over their papers carefully.

PROCEDURES FOR THE CORRECTION STAGE

In going over the compositions, mark mistakes with the symbols from the correction chart so that students can correct their papers themselves.

An error may be marked by underlining it and placing the correction symbol directly above it, or better still, in the margin. Students should be asked to insert the correction neatly above the error, preferably in pen for a typewritten composition, or in pencil or a different color ink for a handwritten composition. If there are many errors, it would be best to have students rewrite the composition.

If you feel that this symbol system is too complicated for your students, you might at first select only the starred symbols, which cover the more basic problems in English, and then gradually introduce the other correction sym-

¹The suggested contents of introductions and conclusions are especially important for the weaker or less reflective students. Such students will follow the suggestions rather closely, while the others will be able to express their own ideas more freely.

bols. Also, in some cases you might find it advisable to use some subsymbols—for example, V (tense), P (run-on).

Obviously, you might also add other terms that call for corrections, such as *not clear*, *unnecessary*, the omission symbol Λ , or the question mark for illegible writing or an incomprehensible point. Such notations have been omitted from the chart because they do not require explanation in the Index of *Writer's Companion*.

Once students have been made sufficiently aware of a particular usage, mistakes in this usage might be merely underlined or circled instead of being labeled.

After the compositions are returned, it is important to have your students list their corrections on the correction page. However, this notation should not be done before you have checked their corrections. For the first set of compositions, you might want to show students how to use the correction chart.

Encourage students to review their lists of corrections as often as possible so that they will avoid making the same mistakes again.

Also encourage your students to make use of *Writer's Companion*. Since the Index to Usage and Rhetoric in the *Companion* contains detailed information about the same items that are in the correction chart, students can get additional help in making their own corrections.

PROCEDURES FOR THE REINFORCEMENT PRACTICE

Although some of the Reinforcement Practice is specifically designated in the text as group work, actually almost all of the exercises can be done in groups. Division of students into pairs provides the most individual practice, but for some activities, larger groups might get the benefit of greater cross-cultural exchange.

Whether students are to do the exercises in class or at home, the explanations should be gone over first, and answers for the first few sentences should be made available to make sure that the students understand what is required in each exercise.

If students are having trouble with the exercises on word forms, it would be helpful for them to study the first two units in the Grammar Review and Practice section of *Writer's Companion*. They may need to do some of the exercises in these chapters in order to get an idea of the signals that indicate the need for a particular part-of-speech form.

Because the general index lists the usage practices, and because answers to the usage exercises are also given in the back of the book, the whole class or individual students can be assigned special exercises to do at home (even if such exercises are not in the particular unit being studied). In a workshop or tutorial the answers allow students to go at their own pace. If these exercises are not sufficient, assignments might be given from my *Modern English: Exer-*