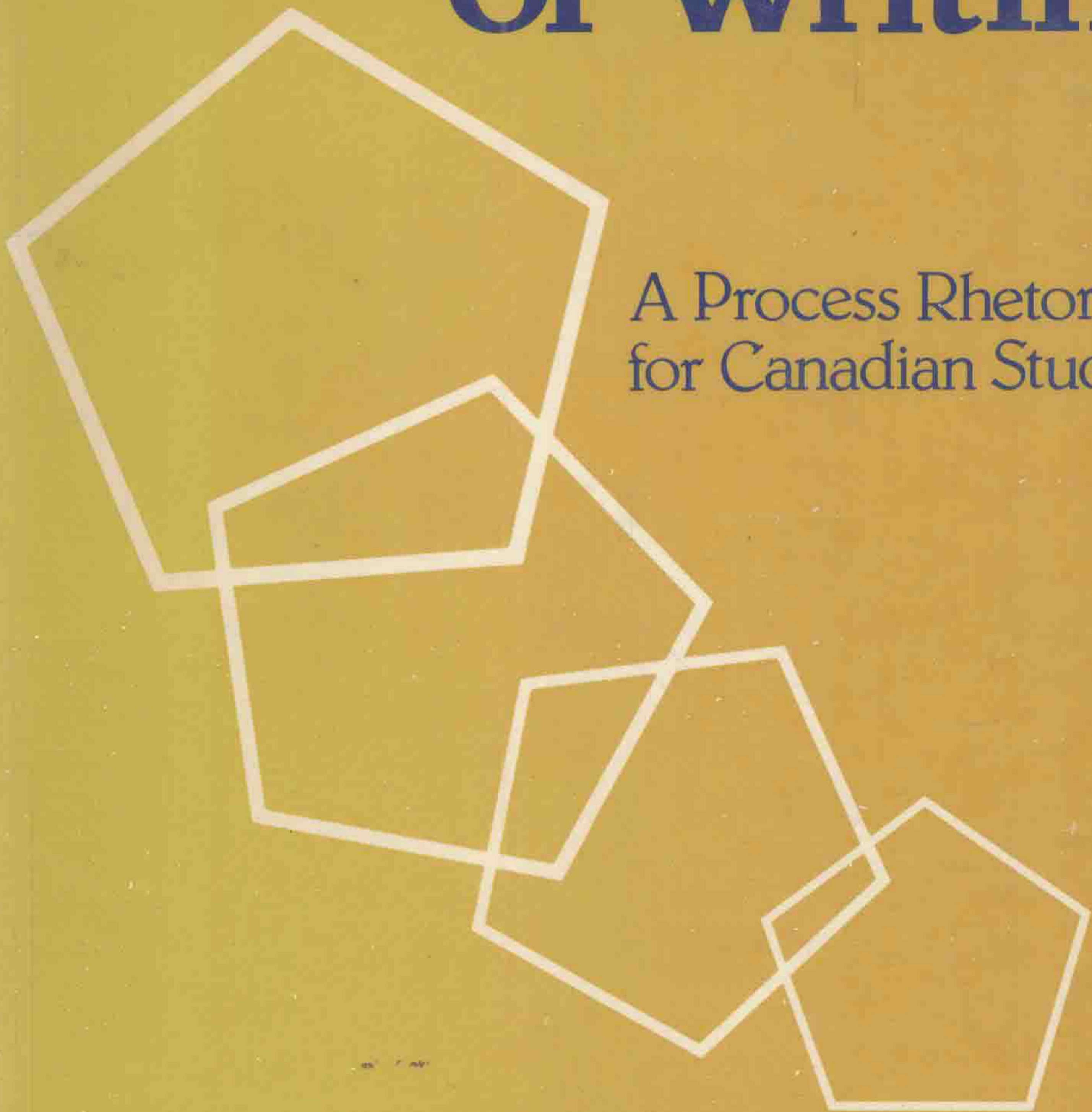


Elements of Writing

A Process Rhetoric
for Canadian Students



William E. Messenger
Peter A. Taylor

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William E. Messenger

University of British Columbia

Peter A. Taylor

University of British Columbia

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For Ann and Sue

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Preface

If you are like many people, you think of “writing” as something you find printed in a book. As a student, you probably also think of “writing” as a few pages of prose produced because a teacher asked you for it. It will have an introduction, some sort of middle, and a stiff “In conclusion.” And there may be no more to it. If you think of writing solely in this way—as a product—you may not be thinking fully enough about what you want to say and how best to say it; you will likely produce formulaic, mechanical, and therefore predictable essays, designed only to fulfill requirements and earn passing grades. Such an approach to writing, however, may be standing in the way of your getting the grades you really want. More important, it will have been depriving you of the pleasures of writing, which come from using language imaginatively and creatively. Changing the way you think about writing, and working to improve the way you write, will enable you to produce work that is less artificial and more individual, and that has purposes other than merely earning a safe grade. For these reasons we emphasize in this book that writing should also be viewed as a *process*, especially by those who are learning about it and developing their writing skills.

Yet obviously the process of writing is one that does culminate in a finished product—a letter, a book, a memo, a lampoon, an ad, a story, a report, a poem, an article, an essay—though this product is often simply the piece of writing as it exists when the process stops. Although the process could be almost never-ending, the exigencies of life—principally the lack of time—force most of us to stop it at some point; but students often let themselves arrive at that point far too soon.

It is true that for many writers, particularly for long-practised and skilled ones, the process of writing, the process that we outline in Chapter I and that governs the organization of this book, is not always one they follow consciously: much will have become automatic, or be determined by the circumstances surrounding a particular writing task. Nevertheless, as a student you will benefit from careful study of this process and practice in following it. And don’t think that becoming a more practised writer is the same as becoming a “safe” or formulaic one; on the contrary, you will become a freer, more individual writer. As you become increasingly familiar with the process, you will better understand not only its demands but also—and more important—the opportunities it offers you at each stage. And though the process will increasingly become almost second nature to you, you must begin by understanding it consciously. You can make intelligent choices among available alternatives only if you know what those alternatives are.

The twofold intent of this book is to introduce, or restore, some of the sense of pleasure in working with words, sentences, paragraphs, and whole essays, and at the same time to demonstrate that writing isn’t some mysterious sorcery but a craft that you can learn. This second aim, we hope, will also bring you the pleasures of accomplishment, of overcoming difficulties and embracing opportunities. Further, most of us who teach writing and language and literature enjoy

words enough to have some fun with them; we think students should as well. What you will find in this book, then, are practical suggestions for improving your writing, including some ways of having fun in the process.

Preliminaries

Before you begin a systematic study of this book, browse through it, see the kinds of things it contains. You might even want to read through some sections of it on your own, just for interest. And before you hand in any assignments, you should study Chapter XII (Preparing the Final Draft) and Chapter XIII (Proof-reading) so that you will know about manuscript conventions and how to check for such matters as spelling errors.

Using This Book

You can probably best study *Elements of Writing* from start to finish, following the order of the steps in the writing process. But since this process is recursive, often doubling back on itself, there is nothing sacred about that order; you will not violate it if you choose to start elsewhere than at the beginning and work back and forth as you see fit or as your needs direct. (Do read Chapter I first, however.) The chapters interrelate and overlap, like the parts of the writing process itself. But if nothing dictates a different approach, work through the chapters consecutively.

Because of the nature of the different steps they treat, the chapters vary in length and complexity. Chapters IV and XIV, for example, are the longest and most complex: you will want to spend much more time on them than on one as short as Chapter VI.

In addition to discussions and illustrations, each chapter contains several writing projects. These consist mainly of three kinds: exercises, explorations, and essays. With few exceptions, *exercises* call for short answers, a few words or sentences, or at most brief factual reports; *explorations* call for pieces of writing one or two paragraphs long; and *essays* call for extended pieces of writing. In addition, each of the first ten chapters includes a special exercise dealing with *idioms*, and the first twelve chapters all offer *sentence-combining* exercises as well.

Further, each chapter includes assignments that we call “Playing with Language.” Some of these amount to exercises, some to explorations, and some to essays, and they also vary a great deal in their degrees of playfulness; a few, for example, are simply letter or word games, whereas others could serve as topics for explorations or essays. But they all approach language and writing with some sense of play. They should not only prove enjoyable in themselves but also increase your pleasure in working with words and sharpen your sense of language and style.

We hope that most of the projects—particularly the exercises, explorations, and “Playing with Language”—are interesting enough to be tackled on their own, even if they haven’t been formally assigned. And many of them can lead to interesting discussions as well as to projects for writing.

Almost all the examples we provide are written by students, people like yourselves; you should feel at home with them, as you might not if confronted solely with pieces by seasoned professionals. Yet, as you will see, many of the student-written examples are excellent; their quality is not beyond your reach.

* * *

For advice and encouragement, we are grateful to many people—colleagues, friends, editors, and others. We are of course grateful for the experience we have gained from our many students over the years. And we extend our special thanks to those students who let us use pieces of their work: Mel-Lynda Andersen, Wendy Armstrong, Allen Bain, Effie Balomenos, Kathleen Bogas, R. J. Butler, Justin Campbell, Wendy Clifford, Elaine Del Medico, Mark Driediger, Yvette Hancock, Sue Inglis, Doug Jeffers, Kevin Kennedy, P. Rauri Lindsay, Susan Lowe, Robin Lowenstein, Sherry Lynn, Bruna Martinuzzi, Debbie Michels, Eithne Moore-Stevens, Mary Oud, Gerald Rowse, Trish Scott, Greg Skwarok, Daniel A. Small, Jim Sparks, George Sranko, Liz Wall, David Williams, Kathy Williams, Tim Wyman, Paul Yokoyama. For permission to quote published material, we are grateful to the following: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., for an excerpt from Peter Farb, *Word Play: What Happens When People Talk*, copyright 1973 by Peter Farb; Hugh MacLennan, for an excerpt from “By Their Foods...” from *Scotchman’s Return* (Macmillan, 1960); Collins Publishers, for an excerpt from Roderick Haig-Brown’s “Estuaries,” in *Fisherman’s Fall*; Grove Press, Inc., for an excerpt from Cecil J. Schneer, *Mind and Matter*, copyright ©1969 by Cecil J. Schneer.

Contents

Preface xi

Chapter I Introduction: The Elements of Writing and Process of Writing 1

The Rhetorical Context: The Occasion 1

Rhetorical Stance 5

The Steps in the Process of Writing 5

The Final Steps 9

STAGE ONE: PLANNING 21

Chapter II Steps 1, 2, and 3: Subject; Topic; Audience and Purpose 22

Step 1: Finding a Subject 23

Step 2: Narrowing a Subject to a Workable Topic 25

Step 3: Determining Audience and Purpose 27

Audience 28

Purpose 30

Questions to Aid in Focussing on Audience and Purpose 31

The Roles of Writer and Reader 32

Chapter III Step 4: Inventing, Generating Material 43

The Principle of Selection 44

Brainstorming 44

Inventing With Questions 45

The Reporter's Standard Questions 45

Inventing and Subject-Narrowing 48

Kinds of Subjects 51

Cross-fertilizing 52

Formulating a Thesis: The Thesis Question 56

Chapter IV Step 5: Organizing—Development, Arrangement, Thesis 62

Developing Your Ideas 62

Methods of Development 66

Example and Illustration 66

Definition 68

Classification and Division 72

Comparison and Contrast 75

Description 81

Narration	85
Process and Analysis	86
Cause and Effect	89
The Thesis Statement	92
Where to Place Your Thesis Statement	93
The Form of Thesis Statement	93
Plans and Outlines	94

Chapter V Composing an Argument 106

Argument and Your Audience	106
Induction and Deduction	107
Methods of Development	110
Example and Illustration	110
Definition and Classification	111
Comparison and Contrast	111
Description and Narration	111
Process Analysis	111
Cause and Effect	112
Basic Principles and Techniques of Argument	112
Techniques for Disposing of Opposition Arguments	117
The Structure of Argument	118
Planning an Argument	119
The Lighter Side	119
The Vocabulary of Argument	121

STAGE TWO: WRITING 131

Chapter VI Step 6: The First Draft 132

The Importance of Planning	133
A Planning Checklist	133
Getting Started	134
Keeping Going	135
Changing Course	136
Language and Style	136
The Mechanics of the First Draft	137

STAGE THREE: REVISING 145

Chapter VII Step 7: Revising 145

The Stages of Revising	147
Cooling-off Period	147
Early Screening	148

Sweep 1: Revising the Large Matters 149

Rhetorical Stance—Tone 151

Beginnings and Endings 157

Proportion 157

Beginnings 159

Endings 166

Chapter VIII Sweep 2: Revising Paragraphs 178

Kinds of Paragraphs 179

What is a Paragraph? 179

Paragraphing—Division into Paragraphs 179

Paragraph Length 180

The Parts of a Paragraph 183

The Topic Sentence 183

The Body 184

The Ending 184

Paragraph Unity 185

Paragraph Coherence 185

Unity and Coherence of the Whole Essay 191

Transitional Paragraphs, and Beginning and Ending Paragraphs 192

Transitional Paragraphs 192

Beginning and Ending Paragraphs 192

Rhythm in Paragraphs 193

Emphasis in Paragraphs 194

Chapter IX Sweep 3: Revising Sentences 205

Sentences: Parts and Kinds 205

Minor Sentences and Fragments 206

Clarity 208

Unity 208

Logic 208

Alignment 209

Coherence: Misplaced Modifiers, Dangling Modifiers, Weak or
Ambiguous Reference, Agreement, Shifts, Faulty Comparisons 210

Emphasis 216

Other Matters of Clarity 217

Economy: Avoiding Wordiness 219

Removing Deadwood 220

Reducing Clauses 220

Reducing Clutter: Prepositional Phrases 221

Combining Sentences to Reduce Wordiness 222

Vigour 223

Passive Voice 223

Verbs: The Hearts of Sentences	226
Negatives	227
Grace	228
Variety	228
Word Order	229
Rhythm	230
Sound	231
Figurative Language	232
Parallelism	233
Faulty Parallelism	235
Ramblers	236

Chapter X Sweep 4: Revising Words 245

Clarity: Choosing the Right Word	245
Wrong Word	245
Idiom	246
Denotation and Connotation	247
Usage	249
Economy (Avoiding Wordiness)	252
Vigour: Choosing Effective Words, Avoiding Weak Diction	254
Abstract and Concrete; General and Specific	254
Modifiers	258
Vague Words	259
Clichés, Trite Expressions	261
Grace	264
Tone	264
Slang	264
Coined Words	265
Variety	265
Avoiding Sexist Language	267
Jargon	268

Chapter XI Sweep 5: Revising Punctuation 283

End Punctuation Marks	285
Periods	285
Question Marks	285
Exclamation Points	285
Internal Punctuation Marks	286
Semicolons	286
Commas	287
Colons	289
Dashes	290
Strategies of Effective Punctuation: Making Choices	291
Joining Independent Clauses	292

Run-on Sentence	292
Comma Splice	293
Punctuating Openers of Sentences and Clauses	297
Connectors	297
Prepositional Phrases	298
Subordinate Clauses	298
Participial Phrases	299
Punctuating Series	300
Comma before “and”	300
Semicolons	300
Enclosing Interrupters	301
Short Interrupters	302
Nonrestrictive Clauses	302
Appositives	304
Unwanted Punctuation	307

STAGE FOUR: PRESENTING 313

Chapter XII Step 8: Preparing the Final Draft 314

Final Screening	314
Forms and Formats	316
Manuscript Conventions	317
Titles	321

Chapter XIII Step 9: Proofreading 330

Spelling	331
Chronic Misspellings	334
Correction Symbols for Common Errors	335

Chapter XIV The Library Research Paper 340

Steps 1 and 2: Finding a Subject and Narrowing It to a Topic	340
Step 3: Identifying Your Audience and Establishing Your Purpose	343
Audience	343
Purpose	343
Step 4: Inventing	344
Invention Questions	345
Search Strategy for External Sources	346
The Working Bibliography	352
Taking Notes	353
Step 5: Organizing, Planning Development	356
The Preliminary Outline	357
Step 6: Writing the First Draft	359
Integrating Quotations	359

Acknowledging Your Sources: Avoiding Plagiarism	360
Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Plagiarism	361
Step 7: Revising the Research Paper	363
The First Sweep: Revising Large Matters	364
The Second Sweep: Revising Paragraphs	365
The Third Sweep: Revising Sentences	367
The Fourth Sweep: Revising Diction	368
The Fifth Sweep: Revising Punctuation	371
Quotations Run Into Your Own Text	371
Using Square Brackets	372
Indicating Omissions in Quotations	372
Quotations Within Quotations	373
Block Quotations	374
Documenting Your Sources	374
The Mechanics of Documentation	374
The Note Method	374
The Name-Date Method	380
Bibliographies	383
Step 8: Preparing the Final Draft	383
Manuscript Conventions	384
The Final Outline	385
Step 9: Proofreading the Research Paper	386
Corrections and Interpolations	387
Checklist for Research Papers	387
Sample Library Research Paper	387

Chapter XV Samples of Writing 407

Glossary 423

Index 429

Sentence-Combining Exercises

1. Coordination 15
2. Subordination 39
3. Prepositional Phrases 58
4. Relative Clauses 100
5. Appositives 127
6. Noun Clauses 140
7. Participial Phrases 173
8. Infinitive Phrases 199
9. Gerund Phrases 240
10. Absolute Phrases 278
11. Colons and Dashes 310
12. Variety and Experiment 322

Idiom Exercises

1. 13
2. 39
3. 58
4. 100
5. 127
6. 140
7. 173
8. 199
9. 240
10. 278

*Writing for me is exclusively process.
It becomes a product when the book
is finished.* (Graeme Gibson)

CHAPTER I

Introduction: The Elements of Writing and the Process of Writing

Before you examine the writing process in detail, look at the whole rhetorical context in which it occurs. And don't be frightened by the word *rhetorical*: it simply means *having to do with the effective use of language*. Although the word *rhetoric* has acquired a negative secondary meaning—as in the phrase “mere rhetoric,” meaning fancy or inflated style with little or no substance—it primarily refers to the study of the elements and principles of effective writing—which is precisely what this book is about. The phrase “rhetorical context,” then, simply refers to the overall set of circumstances in which the elements of writing come together and interact to bring about a particular piece of writing.

*It is not enough to know what we
ought to say; we must also say it as
we ought.* (Aristotle)

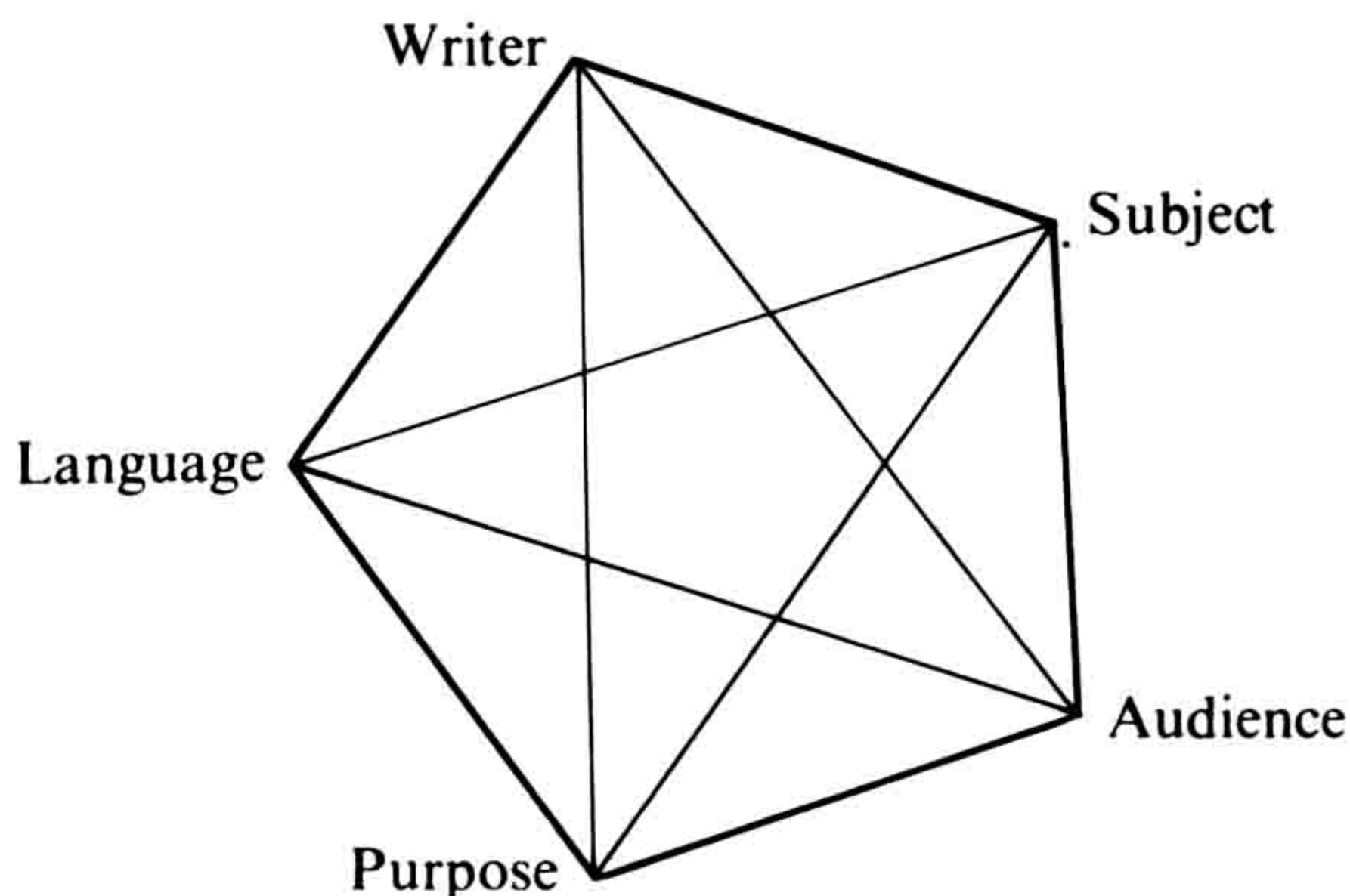
THE RHETORICAL CONTEXT: THE OCCASION

Any writing project has its origin in a specific context. You are writing on or for a specific occasion, which means that you are writing about a specific subject, to an identifiable reader or group of readers, with a specific purpose in mind, and using language that you have chosen for that occasion. For example, when you write a letter to apply for a job, you present yourself in a way that will give you the best chance of getting an interview with the prospective employer. You write to a reader whose objective is to hire the best applicant, and you try to select and order words in a way that will be most effective for the occasion. In the process, you think about yourself as *writer*, about yourself and your qualifications for the job

2 Elements of Writing

(*subject*), about the prospective employer (*audience, reader*), about your reason for writing the letter—namely to persuade your reader to grant you an interview (*purpose*), and about the words and style that will best get your message across (*language*). And you think about the relations between these elements.

The rhetorical context for any writing project can be diagrammed this way:



From this diagram you can see that the elements that make up the rhetorical context are all related to one another. Everything connects with everything else. Look at any writing project from each of the points of view: paying close attention to how the elements interact will help you make decisions about how best to proceed at every stage of the process.

Since the occasion of a given piece of writing is its rhetorical context—that is, the whole set of physical and mental circumstances that cause it to come into being—it follows that all the parts of that context will affect the way you compose that piece of writing. To return to our example: Any letter you write applying for a job is first of all occasioned by your need of or desire for that job. But the nature of the specific letter will also depend on your view of yourself in relation to the occasion (how desperately do I need the job?) and in relation to each of the other elements. It will also depend on your view of your subject in relation to the other elements. (How well can you do the job? What special skills or energy could you bring to it?) It will also depend on your awareness of your reader's needs and purposes (he wants to hire the best applicant—but how badly does he need to hire anyone at all?) and also on your view of your reader in relation to the other elements. And so on.

Even time and place can constitute part of the set of circumstances, the occasion, surrounding the writing of the letter and influencing its nature. If the school year is just ending, you may have a lot of competition for the job from other students; if the summer is coming to an end, you'll have less such competition. Either of these conditions could affect the way you write the letter. The kind and amount of your competition could also depend on such circumstances as the rate of unemployment in the region, or even on social and cultural conditions; for example a shortage of particularly skilled or educated people in your town would not only make your task easier but also give you a point to draw to your reader's attention.

Consider each element by itself and in relation to each of the other elements:

Writer You are the writer. On different occasions you will deal with different subjects, purposes, audiences, and linguistic demands, all affecting the way you present yourself and your ideas. In writing, as in conversation, you can't present all of yourself all the time. On some occasions, for example when presenting a lab report, your personality or your taste in music will not enter into it at all; on others, for example when writing a note to a close friend, you already share a good deal of personal experience with your reader and can feel free to express a wide range of your thoughts and feelings.

Here are some questions you can ask about yourself as the writer in different rhetorical contexts:

- Writer-Subject: What do I know, think, and feel about my subject?
Did I choose it, or has the occasion determined it for me?
- Writer-Audience: What do I know, think, and feel about my audience?
Did I choose it, or does the occasion determine it for me?
What role do I want my readers to play as they read what I am writing?
- Writer-Purpose: What is my overall or primary purpose?
Do I have any secondary purposes?
- Writer-Language: How can I develop an individual style on this occasion?

Subject Your subject, put simply, is what you are writing about. But the matter is seldom as simple as that, for different subjects make different demands on you as writer and on your readers; the subject can influence your purpose and your use of language. Further, some subjects are appropriate only for certain kinds of occasions.

Here are some questions to ask about your subject in different rhetorical contexts:

- Subject-Audience: Does my subject to any degree determine who my audience is?
Will my subject make any special intellectual or emotional demands on my audience?
- Subject-Purpose: To what extent does my subject determine or affect my purpose?
- Subject-Language: Does my subject require or discourage any particular linguistic or stylistic choices?
- Subject-Writer: What resources of knowledge and experience does this subject invite me to exploit?

Audience To write effectively, you need constantly to imagine yourself in the role of your readers, for the way you proceed is largely determined by what you perceive as their needs and expectations in relation to the other elements.

Here are some questions to ask about your audience in different rhetorical contexts:

- Audience-Purpose: For what purpose will my audience be reading what I write?
To what extent does my audience determine or affect my purpose?

4 *Elements of Writing*

- Audience-Language: What kind of language is my audience attuned to?
What style do they expect on this occasion?
- Audience-Writer: What does my audience know, think, or feel about me?
How can I acceptably establish myself as an individual in
the face of their expectations?
- Audience-Subject: What does my audience know, think, or feel about this
subject?
To what degree does my audience determine my subject?

Purpose In every piece of writing you have a purpose—sometimes more than one. For example, you may choose to write something in order to argue about some controversial issue, or to describe something beautiful that you saw, or to inform or explain or amuse. Think about the relation of your purpose to the other elements and about the effect purpose can have on those other elements.

Here are some questions to ask about your purpose in different rhetorical contexts:

- Purpose-Language: To what extent does my purpose determine or affect the
language and style I can use on this occasion?
- Purpose-Writer: How does my purpose affect the role I play as writer on
this occasion?
- Purpose-Subject: Does my purpose to any extent determine my subject?
- Purpose-Audience: Does my purpose to any extent determine who my
audience is?

Language An unabridged dictionary offers you about half a million words, but not even professional writers, university professors, or top business executives have vocabularies of more than about forty thousand words. The English language, however, is a good deal more than a long list of words: the resources of the language include what we mean by the word *style*, the ways those words can be put together to make statements and ask questions about the world and about the human experience of it, and to influence the way people think and act. Anything you or anyone else writes can use only a limited selection of those resources. How effective that selection is largely depends on how you see the other elements of the rhetorical context.

Here are some questions to begin asking about language and the ways you can use it in different rhetorical contexts:

- Language-Writer: What constraints does language put on me as a writer?
What opportunities does language offer me on this
occasion?
- Language-Subject: How will the language and tone I use affect the subject?
To what extent does language determine what I know or
can find out about the subject or what can be said
about it?
- Language-Audience: How best can I use language to affect the audience the
way I want to?
What terms, if any, will I have to define for this audience?
- Language-Purpose: What words will best serve my purpose?

These questions about the rhetorical context are not meant to be exhaustive, nor are they all equally important; you can generate still others by continuing to think about the relations between the elements as illustrated in the diagram.

Such questions are not altogether abstract. The kinds of interrelatedness they suggest can affect much of what we do and say. For example, we all know about the bore who can turn a pleasant social luncheon or dinner into an occasion for a formal lecture; he annoys because he misjudges the occasion: that is, he mistakes his audience, his role as speaker, the kind of subject that is appropriate, and the kind of language he should use. If you were to agree to give a talk to a group from your church, the nature of your prospective audience would influence not only your choice of subject but also the language you could use. If you're applying for a job as a child's nurse, you want your language to show sensitivity and lovingness. If you're applying for a job as a computer analyst, you want your language to show that you know the technical terms of the trade. If you attend a certain public lecture, it is probably because of the subject being discussed, and probably also because of the speaker's being an authority on that subject. The language of some northern peoples has dozens of words for snow; we have only one: that is, our language constrains how much we can know and how we can know it. If you keep these questions in mind as you go through the book or as you write, you will soon discover how useful they can be.

Rhetorical Stance

The position or point of view that you occupy in relation to all these interconnected elements determines your *rhetorical stance* on any given occasion. Your rhetorical stance in turn determines or affects nearly every feature of the style you use for a particular piece of writing. And all these elements of style, working together, constitute your *tone*, which is usually defined as your attitude toward your subject and your audience. But you can just as easily think of *tone* as the quality inherent in a piece of writing that determines how your reader will "hear" it, just as a listener hears your tone of voice when you speak. If your audience is to interpret your writing correctly, you need to be as clear as possible in your own mind about the rhetorical stance or posture you adopt toward them and toward your subject matter on a given occasion. You want to make sure that the attitude you imply is the one you want them to infer.

Your sense of rhetorical stance will naturally influence much of what you do during the planning and drafting stages, but you will usually not need to consider it in self-conscious detail until you begin revising. For that reason we discuss *rhetorical stance* more specifically in Chapter VII.

THE STEPS IN THE PROCESS OF WRITING

The process of writing consists of four major stages:

- Stage One: Planning
- Stage Two: Writing
- Stage Three: Revising
- Stage Four: Presenting