# Great Writing

## *A Reader for Writers*

Harvey S. Wiener · Nora Eisenberg

Third Edition

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# *About the Authors*

Harvey S. Wiener is Vice President at Marymount Manhattan College. He has written many books on reading and writing for college students and their teachers, including *The Writing Room* (Oxford, 1981). He has served as chair of the Teaching of Writing Division of the Modern Language Association and as a member of the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Dr. Wiener was founding president of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Brooklyn College, he holds a Ph.D. in Renaissance literature from Fordham University. Dr. Wiener has won grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, and the Exxon Education Foundation.

Nora Eisenberg is a professor of English at LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York, where she has taught courses in composition, creative writing, and literature. She is the director of the City University Faculty Publication Program and founder of the CUNY Write Safe, an online resouce for students and teachers. Dr. Eisenberg holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University and has taught at Brooklyn College, Stanford University, and Georgetown University. She has published numerous articles on Virginia Woolf and is the coauthor with Harvey Wiener of many books on writing. Dr. Eisenberg is also a fiction writer; her short stories have appeared in such journals as the *Voice Literary Supplement* and *Partisan Review*. Her novel, *The War at Home*, will be published by Leapfrog Press in 2002.

# *Preface*

We believe in a number of important principles about learning to write, and these principles inform this book and establish its content, approach, and format.

We believe first in the primacy of text and in the enduring authority, intelligence, and joy in great writing. When aspiring writers read great writing carefully and attentively, they come close to producing exceptional writing themselves. Aiming for contemporaneity, too many anthologies for writers avoid great writing; they may offer readable, serviceable samples, but they rarely show our language at its very best or address the great intellectual issues of our civilization. To use readings as guides for writing—as exercises in form, as explorations of style, as laboratories for the growth of ideas in words and sentences—students must read the very best our culture has to offer. Shakespeare, Swift, Woolf, Cather, Plato, Hawthorne, Orwell, Mill, Poe, Emerson, Brontë, White, Hughes, Didion, Keats, Joyce, Thoreau, great writers of our civilization, help provide the models that teach the writer's craft.

With a title like *Great Writing* we know that we are going out on a limb, and we want to admit at the outset that our selections unabashedly proclaim our own subjective judgments, tastes, and prejudices. An experienced reader could grumble about our exclusions or could question some of the pieces or authors we chose to include. Still, we strove to make selections that many educated readers would identify as important writing by great figures. You will recognize most of the authors and many of the selections. Our goal was always to choose the most clearly written, the most elegantly and intelligently reasoned, the most sensitive and thought-provoking pieces that suited the rhetorical strategies we believe best organize a course of study. We aimed for ethnic, geographical, and sexual diversity among our authors, and we tried to balance long pieces with short ones, humorous pieces with serious ones, and intense pieces with relaxed ones. We chose excerpts as rarely as possible yet could not always avoid them when we drew from novels, long works of fiction, or long essays. Where excerpts appear, we have explained the context so that what precedes or follows the selection is always clear. Of course, our wish is that students will like so much of what they read here that they will choose to read or reread on their own the full-length works—all of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Brönte's *Wuthering Heights*, and Thoreau's *Walden*, to name a few.

We also believe that poets, dramatists, novelists, and short story writers have as much to teach about writing essays as do nonfiction writers. Certainly in regard to description, narration, imagery, style, tone, characterization, symbol, point of view, satire, irony, dialogue, diction, coherence, allusion, and analogy—basic terms that readers and writers use to talk about their efforts—our collection of poems, short stories, and scenes from novels and plays can speak to beginning writers and can teach them. To exclude poetry, fiction,

and dramatic literature from a reader is to risk a loss of exposure to great minds at a critical point in a student's growth.

More than offering great ideas and brilliant style, poets, fiction writers, and playwrights grapple with the same kinds of rhetorical principles that many people have too long insisted are the purview of essayists alone. Surely Marvell in "To His Coy Mistress" worked through the familiar conventions of argument and persuasion that face any writer who chooses to take a position and to win supporters. Certainly Carson McCullers in "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." faced the same need for clarity and personalized meaning, the same confusions of denotation and connotation, the same impulse to establish new lexical validity that any writer faces in attempting an important definition. This is not to say, of course, that we are challenging the rightful place of the expository essay in a program for developing writers; rather, we aim to complement that place by establishing for it a larger context that includes great writing in any genre. In fact, you will find many outstanding essays in this book.

Exploring the writer's craft through a consideration of rhetorical patterns is a useful way to study writing. We have chosen to organize this book by means of traditional rhetorical categories: description, narration, exemplification, process analysis, comparison and contrast, classification, causal analysis, definition, and argumentation and persuasion. Our choice of selections demonstrates our conviction that elements of writing in all genres rely on these categories. Every chapter contains poetry, fiction, essays, and occasionally drama—all within familiar rhetorical contexts. We're not offering these examples as pure or absolute models of their type, however. Sometimes the rhetorical strategy is a dominant mode in the selection and is easy to recognize. At other times the strategy may be more subtle. A single paragraph or two, even a couple of sentences, may demonstrate some particularly striking application of a rhetorical principle. Sometimes more than one strategy—say, description and narration, causality and process, or definition, illustration, and argumentation—may work hand in hand.

The value in practicing rhetorical patterns is that they point the way to a range of available options for writers. We agree with many critics of rhetorically organized readers—it's the rare writer who chooses a rhetorical strategy and then sets out to fill it with ideas. No one says, "Today I'm going to write a classification essay." Ideas always come first for writers, and as these ideas develop, writers pay attention to audience, purpose, language, style, and all the varied, complex factors that help make an essay successful. Still, as ideas develop, writers cannot help but benefit from knowing rhetorical options and using them creatively and intelligently. Thus, if a writer wanted to develop an essay about the Civil War, a knowledge of cause-and-effect strategies would help him or her present clearly a sense of why the war began; a knowledge of descriptive strategies would help breathe life into a Union hospital scene; a knowledge of comparison and contrast strategies would help in a consideration of the relative strengths of the North and the South. The writer would not have to exclude one strategy for the other: Powerful writing often relies on a number of different

rhetorical patterns within a single essay. Again, the key is choices. Learning to write within rhetorical contexts expands a writer's choices and, no matter what the assignment, improves dramatically the possible approaches to writing.

We have made significant revisions for this new addition, adding outstanding pieces of great writing to an already noteworthy collection. Drawing from a wide range of cultures and ethnic backgrounds, we continue to offer challenging essays, stories, poems, and plays. Susan Sontag, Jane Smiley, Adam Gopnik, Andrew Sullivan, Annie Dillard, Ian Frazier—these and other renowned writers are just a few of the new voices in the chorus of talent in *Great Writing.* Also new to this edition are samples of student writing. Before the end of each chapter's introduction, we show how one student responded to the rhetorical strategy. Marginal annotations highlight essential elements in the student's draft.

"Summing Up" sections at the end of each chapter's introduction provide useful reviews of the major ideas explored in the chapter. In crystallizing the main points, "Summing Up" will help guide students' thoughtful reading and writing throughout the book. The section at the end of each chapter called "Crossover" taps students' critical thinking skills by asking them to consider linkages among selections that raise similar issues, themes, and ideas.

We want to thank our friends and colleagues who encouraged us to develop this text and who read proposals and early drafts. Don McQuade and Bob Atwan listened to early versions of our thoughts. John Wright saw the goals of our project immediately and gave us the support and energy we needed to carry it through. Elizabeth McMahan (Illinois State University), Lee Jacobus (University of Connecticut), and Gratia Murphey (Youngstown State University) did a thorough, thoughtful job of critiquing an early manuscript. Steven Nardi provided invaluable help in the revision of the manuscript. His sharp intelligence and grace make him a joy to work with. Lisa Moore at McGraw-Hill guided *Great Writing* to, and through, production with affection, respect, and care. To all the people who helped us along, including our families, we are deeply in debt.

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