

Second Edition

*Process,  
Form, and  
Substance*

*A Rhetoric for Advanced Writers*

Richard M. Coe

# Process, Form, and Substance

A Rhetoric for Advanced

Writers

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To  
Samuel P. Coe  
my first and most important writing teacher  
Kenneth Burke,  
the great North American rhetorical theorist  
and all the writing students  
with whom I have learned  
whatever I know about teaching writing

# To the Instructor

**T**HIS book is for students who already read and write well enough to survive at college or university, for good student writers who are trying to get better. Although I have been careful to keep the text readable, this is not a simplified presentation.

Minimally, *Process, Form, and Substance* is addressed to student writers who have college-level reading abilities and can already write 500-word essays well enough to get good grades in a college writing course. Though they still may make some sentence-level errors, they know most of the so-called “basics” and write clear, correct sentences and coherent paragraphs most of the time (at least when they are in control of the subject matter).

There is no shortage of textbooks, written at a tenth grade reading level, that explain the basics of the writing process and help students produce the quality of writing required at college or university. Because it assumes student writers who start with some degree of competence, *Process, Form, and Substance* can move from straightforward to more sophisticated processes, forms and writing techniques. It can cover material ordinary textbooks never reach.

While it is certainly possible to make generalizations about writing, each writer is an individual. Not all writers write the same way, and a strategy that is effective for some writers—or readers—may not work for others. I doubt if anyone will want to master all the heuristics and other techniques for getting started that are discussed in Chapter 2. But rather than imposing my own preferences, I leave it to individual instructors and students to make their own selections, to choose the ones that work for them. At any event, it is probably more important for students to grasp the concept of heuristics—and the possibility of inventing their own heuristics to serve their own special purposes—than to master any one standard heuristic.

The aim is for students to come to understand their own writing processes—and how to intervene in their own processes in order to improve the quality of both process and product. They should acquire techniques for dealing with process problems (e.g., procrastination). And they should come to understand how a weakness in their written product can be eliminated by changing the part of their writing process which produces it.

It is useful for student writers to understand writing as both a creative and a communicative process, as both psychological and social. To become sophisticated writers, prepared for the kinds of writing they will likely face beyond college, they should learn to deal with complex writing tasks and contexts (e.g., writing for multiple or hostile audiences). They should learn

to write for widely divergent purposes, audiences and occasions. They should not only master academic discourse, but also learn to analyze the conventions of other discourses, to understand those conventions as applications of basic rhetorical principles.

**Form and Process.** Over the past twenty-five years, traditional formalist approaches to teaching composition have gradually been giving way to process approaches for the development of writing abilities. Because those who raised the banner of process did so in opposition to the inadequacies of traditional formal approaches, an unfortunate dichotomy was created. But any effective writing course should help students with their writing processes; and, one way or another, any effective writing course must help students deal with conventions and other formal structures.

*Process, Form, and Substance* is very much a process textbook, firmly committed to the assumption that the best way to improve someone's writing is to improve the process that produces it. Chapters 1 through 5 take a pure process approach. Even such topics as paragraphing, titles, openings, transitions, endings, and conventions are discussed not formally, but in terms of how they facilitate the reading process—hence in Chapter 4, where writing is discussed in specific relation to readers.

But there is no need to throw out the baby with the bathwater: writing is a *form*-ing process. If we understand form in relation to function and process, if we understand formal structures as they function in social and individual creative and communicative processes, there is no need to adopt an either/or, which-side-are-you-on mentality. We can understand standard rhetorical structures as prepared ways of responding, as a social memory of effective strategies for responding to certain types of writing tasks and situations. The formal structure of a particular piece of writing is in this sense like a fossil memory of the strategic process used to produce that text. And standard structures represent the time-tested social processes of a discourse community.

Chapters 6 through 9 of this book, therefore, discuss in both formal and rhetorical terms the basic structures that underlie most thinking and writing. These chapters cover the traditional modes of discourse (narration, description, explanation, and persuasion) and the traditional patterns of development (comparison/contrast, classification and division, definition, analogy, exemplification, process analysis, causal explanation, and logical progression). Most of this material will be familiar, but with a difference that matters, a difference that allows it to be integrated into a process approach. Rhetorical structures are treated not only as patterns for arranging material, but also as modes of inquiry, strategies for discovering and developing material. Thus the section on process analysis in Chapter 8 can help students develop more sophisticated insights when they are analyzing their own writing processes in Chapter 1.

In Chapter 10, the process and formal approaches come together. Instead of teaching particular special types of writing—there are, after all, so many,

and the world is changing too quickly to allow us to predict accurately which our students will need five or ten years hence—this chapter is built around a heuristic for analyzing and teaching oneself any genre of writing. Much of the chapter is devoted to academic discourse (including the research paper) because that is the immediate concern of most student writers. But the conventional formal features of academic discourse are explained in terms of their social functions, in terms of how they serve the purposes of the academic discourse community. In addition to developing a deeper understanding of academic discourse, students learn to analyze the conventional structures of any discourse community as manifestations of that community's social and rhetorical processes.

In short, the core of this book is Chapters 2 through 5, which help students master that intertwined set of creative, cognitive, communicative, social languaging processes we call writing. Chapter 1 can help focus students' attention to take best individual advantage of the other chapters. Chapters 6 through 9 present tried and proven strategies for achieving basic writing purposes. Chapter 10 not only explains academic writing, it also offers students a strategy for teaching themselves whatever types of writing they may want or need to master.

There are, of course, many ways to use any textbook. When I teach from this book, I take students through the first half more or less in order, starting with either Chapter 1 or Chapter 2. I refer them to particular sections of Chapters 6–10 that are relevant to particular writing tasks. If they are analyzing their own writing processes in Chapter 1, I have them read the section on process analysis in Chapter 8. When they are learning to analyze audiences and deal with readability in Chapter 4, I have them read Chapter 9 and write persuasions (and because it is the appropriate heuristic for inventing arguments, I also review Aristotle's *topoi*, Chapter 2, pages 89–96). Because my belief is that, in the end, a successful teacher helps students get to where they do not need a teacher any more, I usually end my advanced course with Chapter 10, which teaches them how to teach themselves new genres.

Many writing textbooks and teachers organize according to the classical pattern, teaching invention, arrangement and style in that order. *Process, Form, and Substance* adapts easily to such an approach if one simply teaches the basic patterns of arrangement, Chapters 6–8, in conjunction with Chapter 3 (and keeps Chapter 9 paired with Chapter 4).

Alternatively, in a course based on patterns of development, one could work from Chapter 6 through to the end, referring to sections of the first five chapters as the processes they discuss become relevant to particular writing problems. Or one could use Chapter 1 to define goals and then move to whatever parts of the book are most relevant to those goals. Or one could start with Chapter 10, use it as a basis for investigating the particular types of writing, and then move to the parts of the book that are most relevant to producing those types of writing.

## ***Tradition and the Individual Talent***

*Process, Form, and Substance* is based on the most recent research and theory. It deals with writing as a learning process, as a cognitive process of thinking and feeling, as a communicative process, as a social process that takes place in discourse communities. Because it makes no sense to ignore centuries of accumulated insight, however, *Process, Form, and Substance* is also based on two venerable, intertwined traditions: humanism and rhetoric. Though the emphasis is practical, I believe it matters that students understand this book is just not one person's opinion, but also a distillation of a 2500-year tradition informed by contemporary research.

**Epigraphs.** For that reason, every chapter and section begins with epigraphs that represent both traditional and "state of the art" knowledge about writing. These epigraphs are, no doubt, the most difficult reading in the book. I tell students not to worry if, when they start to read a chapter, they cannot understand the epigraphs. But after we have finished with that chapter, I often go back to one of the epigraphs and ask students to explain how it relates to what they have learned; this serves both as a stimulation and as kind of test of how well the chapter has been understood.

**Cross-references.** This book contains significant new material as well as traditional material that may be unfamiliar. Since most readers will not be reading the entire book from beginning to end, they may run into concepts or terms that are unfamiliar even though explained elsewhere in the book. Consequently, I have included many cross-references, as well as an index. But students should not feel compelled to check every cross-reference. If they understand the particular passage, they will generally do better to ignore the cross-reference and get on with their reading.

**Instructor's Manual.** Both to guide students and instructors who might want to learn more about some particular concept or technique and, as with the epigraphs, to make some intellectual antecedents explicit, the first edition of this book contained a feature unusual in composition textbooks: suggestions for additional reading. For the second edition, these suggestions have been expanded and moved to an instructor's manual. In addition to references to textbooks that have especially useful treatments of particular topics and to key readings in both Classical and New Rhetoric, these suggestions now include a bit of background reading specifically for instructors. More important, for instructors new to a rhetorical process approach, the instructor's manual makes explicit underlying principles and framing assumptions. And, of course, it provides pedagogical materials and suggestions.



## ***Entitlement***

Those who used the first edition of this book will notice the title has been revised to include the word *process*. It is somewhat unusual, though hardly unprecedented, to change a title while producing a new edition. But this book was always about writing as a *process* that *forms substance*, always based on Aristotle's assertion that substance is created when matter is formed. Without the word *process*, the title was inaccurate. In both editions, Part I is pure process approach, Part II an attempt to find a place within process for a reconceived, rhetorical presentation of the strategies and insights embodied in traditional forms. One of the major themes of this book is that words matter because, by titling, they create emphasis, influence perceptions and interpretations. Thus it seems especially important to provide an accurate title.

## ***Acknowledgments***

I have been influenced by certain superior textbooks. In alphabetical order, the most significant are Ann Berthoff's *Forming/Thinking/Writing*, Edward Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* and *Writing With Power*, Ken Macrorie's *Telling Writing*, Martin and Ohmann's *The Logic and Rhetoric of Exposition*, Joseph Williams' *Style: 10 Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, and Young, Becker, and Pike's *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*. These titles represent a wide span of approaches, and not all have not been "best sellers." But they are intelligent, innovative, and have been influential.

I also wish to thank the following people for reviewing the text in manuscript: Janet H. Carr (Northeastern University), Kevin Dungey (University of Maryland), John Hagman (Western Kentucky University), George E. Kennedy (Washington State University), Edward Klein (University of Notre Dame), Mary E. McGann (Rhode Island College), Jeannette P. Morgan (University of Houston), James E. Porter (Purdue University), Duane H. Roen (University of Arizona), Mike Rose (University of California, Los Angeles), Hephzibah Roskelly (University of Massachusetts, Boston), Kathy Shaw (Modesto Junior College), Laurel Sutton (Oral Roberts University) and Richard Young (Carnegie-Mellon University). Many of them made very useful, supportive, and insightful suggestions. I also wish to thank Phil Miller, Nancy Perry, Frank Hubert, and Ann Knitel of Prentice-Hall for their faith, support, flexibility, and cheerful attention to the kinds of detail that matter.

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### Student Writing

This book could not have been written without the gracious permission of many students to use their writing as examples. Virtually without exception, these students can now write much better than the examples indicate, but they have allowed their earlier writing to be reproduced here so that other students might learn more easily. Reviews of the first edition of this textbook concurred that the student writing is among its greatest strengths; certainly it is this writing that concretizes the principles and processes *Process, Form, and Substance* attempts to teach. So I here acknowledge them, first and last.

RICK COE

# To the Student

**I**F you are using this book, you are probably already a pretty good writer. Not as good as you would like to be, not as good as you can be, but better than average. To grow as a writer, you must concentrate on overcoming your weaknesses, on learning what you do not yet know. But it is also important to keep firmly in mind that you do write better than the average person, probably also better than you yourself wrote not very long ago. This textbook is based on the most up-to-date theory and research, and also on a venerable 2500-year tradition of rhetoric and humanism. With its help, you will soon write both more successfully and more confidently than you already do.

**A Process Approach.** The most effective way to improve your writing is to improve the process by which you produce it. Your written products can become more satisfying and successful. And the process itself can become more fruitful and fulfilling.

If you were trying to help a friend with her tennis serve, you would not just tell her to read the relevant passage in the official rule book, take her to Wimbledon to show her how the pros serve, and then repeat over and over again, “No, no! Don’t hit the ball into the net.” Knowing the rules is useful, and watching the pros can be inspirational. But it would be more important to do a detailed analysis of how your friend actually serves. Perhaps you would videotape her serving and look at the video in slow motion. You would contrast that video with analyses of how expert tennis players serve. You would locate the cause of the problem—perhaps she is reaching too high—and suggest how she should change her process. You would give her exercises designed to adjust her reach and develop an effective serve. You would have her practice serving in real or simulated game situations. And during all this you would be careful to give encouragement as well as criticism. In short, to help her produce a better serve, you would work on improving the process that produces her serve.

If such a “process approach” makes sense for developing relatively simple physical abilities like serving a tennis ball, it makes even more sense for developing writing abilities. If you want to improve your writing, you want help with your writing process. It is not enough just to learn the conventions of good form, to examine models of expert writing, to write and have the results criticized. You need to look at the process that produces the written product, to pay attention to how successful writers produce effective writing.

By shifting your attention to writing as process, a process approach can develop your writing abilities more quickly—and without damaging your self-confidence.

Taken together, the first five chapters of this book constitute a comprehensive process approach to the development of writing abilities. These chapters discuss writing as a learning process, writing as a creative process, writing as a thinking process, writing as a communicative process, writing as a languaging process. For writing is not so much *a* process as a set of intertwined processes.

Because a process approach means paying attention to writing processes and how they can be improved to get better results, Chapter 1 focuses on the learning process. This chapter can help you examine your own writing process, define your strengths and weaknesses, and set specific goals. Thus it can help you make better use of the rest of the text.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on writing as a creative process. Any creative process has two contradictory aspects: (1) encouraging inspiration, generating material and strategies; (2) finding focus, creating structure, and revising. Chapter 2 discusses creativity, getting started, and generating material. Chapter 3 focuses on the critical processes of organizing and revising, transforming what has been generated into well-structured, coherent writing. Chapter 3 also includes a discussion of collaborative writing and editing. Between them, these two chapters can help you guide your creative writing process.

Because writing is a communicative as well as a creative process, Chapter 4 focuses on writing for readers. It emphasizes the techniques by which writers make their writing coherent and accessible to readers. This chapter can help you produce readable prose. Then, in order to help you develop your style, Chapter 5 focuses on persona, voice, diction, and sentence structure.

**A Forming Process.** Writing is a forming process. As you write, you shape your understandings; and you give them shapes your readers can grasp. There comes a point in the creative process when it is useful for writers to understand the structure of a contrast, definition, process analysis or causal explanation, to know the standard form for a term paper, research report, leaflet, business proposal, or whatever. Many standard structures represent tried and true strategies for achieving particular communicative goals.

Chapters 6–8 present the basic patterns of development that are also basic patterns of thought, important in most kinds of writing. These chapters also deal with issues like objectivity and problems like how to represent complex subjects without oversimplifying. Chapter 9 focuses on persuasive writing. Chapter 10 explains how to analyze any particular type of writing in order to learn it, and then illustrates that analytic process by applying it to academic discourse (especially term papers). After working through Chapter 10, you will have a much better understanding of the types of writing required at colleges and universities; you should also understand how you can teach yourself whatever type of writing you may want or need to do in the coming years.

*Process, Form, and Substance* begins with a focus on you and your learning process. It looks at writing as a creative process, a communicative process, a language process. It approaches writing as process, as structure, as strategy and finally as social process. Thus it ends with a focus on the communities of discourse, created by writing, within which writing works. None of these perspectives is the whole story; each can help you grow as writer. Each can help you see how to write more confidently and successfully, can help you make your writing more satisfying and fulfilling.

### The Physical Process

A “bad back” or “stiff neck” is an occupational hazard for writers—more easily prevented than treated—and easily avoided by paying a little attention to the physical process of writing. Writing is often intense, and when our minds are intense most of us also tense our muscles. Writing is also sedentary, usually performed while sitting, and the human body is not well evolved for sitting hunched over a table, desk, or keyboard. A few simple precautions can save you a lot of pain and “down time.”

1. Sit on a chair that helps you support your back and neck properly. The chair should be low enough so that your feet reach the floor easily; and you should be able to swing your knees easily out from under the table or desk. The ideal chair has a firm cushioned seat, slopes forward slightly, and swivels easily. (*Note:* kneeling chairs are designed to accomplish the same objective, albeit by a different strategy.)
2. Sit with the bottom of your spine pushed against the back of the chair, your feet flat on the floor or a short stool (not dangling). Check the relationship between your arms and the writing surface or keyboard. Your arms should reach straight from the elbows to the paper or keyboard, so a good writing table, desk, or keyboard is usually a few inches lower than your kitchen table.
3. Check also the relationship between your head and whatever you have to look at while writing—be that books, note cards, pieces of paper, or a computer screen. Your neck will be happier if you do not spend too much time looking too far down, up, or to the side. Computer screens should be at eye level. Papers or books you type from for extended periods should not lie flat on the table.
4. Take a break at least once an hour. Stand up, move around, shrug, and stretch.

RICK COE

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# Process





