

WENDY BISHOP

*on writing:  
a process reader*



# *On Writing*

## *A Process Reader*

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*Wendy Bishop*  
Florida State University



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## Higher Education

### ON WRITING: A PROCESS READER

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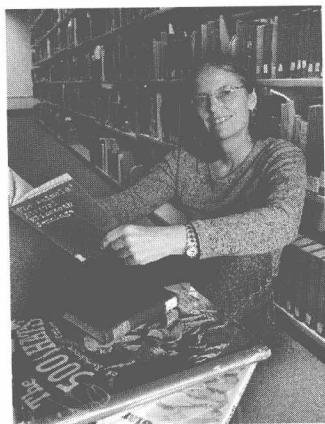
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*To my family—Dean, Morgan, & Tait;  
Jesse, Andrea, Amelia & Katie; Jeremy, Jen, Payton & Jacob;  
Eowyn, Julian, & Tyler; Dean & Andrea*

*I am so composed that nothing is real unless I write it.*

*—Virginia Woolf*

## *About the Author*



WENDY BISHOP, Kellogg W. Hunt Professor of English, teaches writing at Florida State University. She is the author or editor of a number of books in composition as well as several chapbooks of poetry. She lives in Tallahassee, Florida.

# Introductions

## To the Writing Student

How wonderful the struggle with language is.

—THEODORE ROETHKE, POET

You're in a writing class. You're assigned an anthology to read. It is this one, *On Writing: A Process Reader*. You may be wondering how you'll put this collection to use. While your teacher will assign certain chapters and particular readings and activities, I hope, too, that you'll explore and make use of this reader as you compose. Say you come home with an assignment. You go to the keyboard, but your hands aren't moving. At that moment, this reader has a place beside the computer. Open it to Chapter 3, "Considering Community and Audience"; or Chapter 4, "Writing to Find Your Topic: Inventing, Exploring, Discovering"; or Chapter 6, "Drafting, Responding, and Revising." Whenever you write, you can consult selections in this book for ideas about how to start—and continue—your work. And at the end of each chapter, you'll find a number of writing projects to help you launch yourself into your draft or improve a draft you've already begun.

Now it's another day. You look at the words glowing on the computer screen and think you'd rather do anything than continue. Writers whose work is shared in *On Writing: A Process Reader* understand that feeling. Do the housework and think about your writing. Go to a coffee shop, go for a run, write an e-mail to a friend, or do other things that allow you to place your writing on the meditative back burner (*Hint*: watching TV is rarely the best choice since it seems to put thought entirely off the stove). In any case, after a short break, return to *On Writing: A Process Reader* and read Gail Godwin's essay. It can give you ideas about what is stopping you and make suggestions for getting going again. Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz claims, "As the swimmer depends on water, so the writer depends on language," and poet and essayist Adrienne Rich explains that "Language is as real, as tangible, in our lives as streets, pipelines, telephone switchboards, microwaves, radioactivity, cloning laboratories, nuclear power

stations." Workers in words with two distinctly different professions, Szasz and Rich agree that language matters, and you'll find similar testimony when you turn to literacy narratives like those found in Chapter 2 of *On Writing: A Process Reader*. When a section of these narratives pulls you in, compare your own writing background to that author's background.

I encourage you to write back to the authors in this anthology, saving your responses in a journal entry. Better yet, consider how you might incorporate their experiences or advice into your own drafts. Writers regularly turn to other writers because sharing thoughts on processes and techniques can prime the pump. *On Writing: A Process Reader* provides such counsel in a fairly compact form. Instead of a shelf of books containing writers commenting on writing, you have this collection. It's an oasis, a reservoir, a cache, a compendium of insights and exercises. Enter as directed for your class, but be bold and join these conversations for yourself.

Thinking like and with writers inclines you to reconsider your own essay on local elections, or the history of the scientific method, or contemporary literature. For instance, you can use the index to help you find Kurt Vonnegut's essay that offers direct advice for your writing. You realize he's a writer you've heard about before, so you go to the Internet, as one end-of-chapter writing project suggests, and create your own, extended, author's biography for him from the many biographical resources you find there. Then you compose your own author's introduction. Or perhaps you decide to look up other works by Vonnegut using the on-line search engine at your library or consulting an on-line bookstore. By checking out or purchasing some of his other writings, or by borrowing a friend's copy of his books, you find ideas for your own writing life. Writers often undertake tangential yet text-related wanderings and wondering of this sort.

Still writing? Still waiting to write? Perhaps it will help to read all the poems on writing in this book and write your own poem. Perhaps you wish you were done with your draft so you look at the chapters on revising to see if you can safely say that's so, or, if you can't, to get some ideas for continuing and finishing. Perhaps you simply feel disengaged from your essay: it seems . . . the same. . . . That's when you should remember that I've provided some stylistic jump starts. Look at suggestions for undertaking a radical revision of your own essay draft (Chapter 6), and consider how each of the contributors to this reader writes with style and voice—aspects of texts that can be analyzed, imitated, and incorporated into your own style kit. While all the selections collected in *On Writing: A Process Reader* offer ideas for improving your writing, the style discussions and samples in Chapters 5 and 9 do so pointedly, providing a number of options to explore as you polish and prepare to present your paper.

Poet Derek Walcott reminds us that "the English language is nobody's special property. It is the property of the imagination: it is the property of the language itself," and essayist Bell Hooks explains, "Like desire, language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries." Writers rise to the challenge of language work. They strive to organize and make sense of their worlds using the words at their command. In each chapter of this reader, I've included drafts by



both undergraduate and graduate students who were enrolled in my writing courses and were meeting writing challenges similar to the ones you are meeting. Some of these classroom authors were required to take these courses, some elected to take them. Some had extensive writing experience, some very little. With several of their essays, I've included the writer's process narrative. These offer detailed composing stories and provide insights into writing decisions, the normally *hidden* work of writing. And, of course, I encourage you to keep similar composing notes of your own to tell your stories of writing.

In compiling this book, I assume you are in charge. You have needs as a writer. I know that writers have to hazard a draft and then all else comes to them. Remember, writing is not a  $1 + 1 = 2$  math problem or we'd all have arrived at the same solution by now. Sometimes you'll forget what you learned, sometimes you'll learn what you can't yet use. Some days you're hot and some cold, but the net progress is forward. I trust this collection of readings can support your forward movement, and that you'll make this collection yours: underline, highlight, doubt, believe, journal, draft. The goal here is to create your own best writing.

## **A Few Words on How Writing and Reading Work Together**

*Writers need readers. Writers are readers.* Let's examine these two claims by considering this student's scene of writing:

I live in a loud dorm, so I constantly have people running in and out of my room. I share my ideas with them and see how they react. If I see an interest in a certain part of the story, I go back to the computer and expand on it.

Like most authors, this writer is already immersed in a composing process. As you'll (re)learn in Chapter 1, writers engage in a complex, interactive cycle of idea generation, drafting (trying out those ideas), revision after response (gained when they reread their own texts or other readers review them), editing, and sharing. Writers and readers construct texts together: they need each other. The two activities create a dialogue, a conversation, a dance, a game, a compact, a contract.

The writer has aims and she enacts them in a text to the best of her abilities, and the reader responds to that text, bringing to bear on each rendering of text a complex history as a reader of other texts. In describing this interaction, teacher Jeanette Harris explains that each writer constructs his version of a *mental text*, which is the physical text—generally words on a page but also text on a Web page or visual and other media texts—and a reader creates her “mental text” from the physical text. Much can happen along the way: herein rests the oxymoronic “wonderful struggle” with language that poet Theodore Roethke mentions in the quote that opens this introduction.

Consider the reader you were of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the classic children's text, at age 10 (substitute *your* favorite children's book to make



this example work). Perhaps you enjoyed the outlandish cast of characters—the White Rabbit, the Caterpillar, and the Mad Hatter—or your reading was informed by your viewing of the Disney animated feature, or you were influenced in how you visualized each character by the original John Tenniel drawings that accompany the text. Perhaps all three influences shaped your initial and subsequent readings of this book. If a parent or sibling or baby-sitter read all or part of the book with you or aloud to you, you may have been informed, too, by any shared discussions of the book. You may have been asked in school to write a poem like “The Jabberwocky” or watched a scene from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* illustrated or parodied on a TV show. Then, you may have returned to the book privately, poured over the pictures, daydreamed across the text: imagined your family members as characters in that world or escaped to that world (and to the worlds of Lewis Carroll’s other books).

By the time you left the book, the TV screen, the computer game based on these or related characters and moved on to other texts, you had particular ideas of what the book was all about. Rereading *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in your children’s literature course in college will prove dramatically different, familiar yet strange. In that class, you may read the *Annotated Alice* by Martin Gardner, which offers historical information and asides about the life of the author Lewis Carroll, in real life Charles Dodson (1831–1898), an eccentric lecturer in mathematics at Oxford University whose stutter disappeared in the presence of the young girls whose company he preferred, and whose images he captured in photographs and in his imaginative writing. You will find the book less enchanting, perhaps, but more interesting as you realize the author was working at several levels: to entertain Alice Liddell, the original Alice, but also to find an outlet for Dodson’s witty and complicated language play, math puzzles, and commentary. You’ll marvel at the number of Web discussion groups on the Internet and find biographies and any number of informative (and silly) links and even full-text versions of Carroll’s classic.

One physical text written by Charles Dodson. A number of mental texts, including your own, changing over time. And, of course, your early reading and pleasure (or bemusement) with the book will inform your later readings, even as you gain new insight. Jeannette Harris claims, “By understanding the process by which writers and readers construct texts, you will become a better writer and reader.” I agree. But more exactly, how does that happen? If you don’t consider yourself much of a reader, how do you become more proficient at reading to aid your writing?

Think about a successful child who reads as outlined above. He picks (or is offered) texts that interest him and challenge him (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is not simple reading). He rereads, reads aloud, talks to others about his reading, imagines, rehearses, practices, draws pictures, writes back to the text. Later, in college, aiming to be a successful adult who reads, he studies, investigates the historical time period, gathers biographical data about Charles Dodson, studies Dodson’s photographs, forms his own, more complicated version of how and why *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was composed, and writes back to it

again, converses with the text in the form of a critical written response (which can still be admiring). All the activities I've mentioned are advocated by reading experts and writing experts. They are methods for situating yourself actively in the textual processes and usefully inform your reading, writing, and thinking. Let me in this case replace the term you've often heard—critical thinking—with some other useful terms: active thinking, reflective thinking, systematic thinking, engaged thinking (and, finally, reading and writing). Then, when you're ready for a further discussion on this subject, turn to Chapter 3, where Deborah Coxwell Teague offers you advice about reading and rereading in college by reviewing selective underlining, making marginal comments, and keeping a reading response journal or double-entry notebook.

To explore your own feeling about reading, consider the following strong statements generated by one first-year writing class. Circle those you believe in and place a check beside those you would challenge:

### **Strong Statements About Reading**

(Truths, Myths or . . . ?)

1. If it's in a book it's true.
2. Women are better readers than men.
3. Reading is a linear process.
4. Good writers have to read a lot.
5. Reading is a solitary activity.
6. The teacher's interpretation (reading) is always right.
7. English majors love to read.
8. Reading is to gain information.
9. Faster reading is better reading.
10. Reading is all about printed texts.
11. Always highlight key points in what you read.
12. It's the writer's fault if a reader can't understand.
13. Reading is exploration.
14. Reading is a learnable process.
15. Reading is a waste of time.
16. Reading is escape.
17. One is born to be a good reader.
18. There is no such thing as a nonreader.

Add two statements of your own or your peers.

19.

20.

During discussions, classroom authors offered the following advice to each other:

Eat something before you read, otherwise hunger preoccupies your thoughts. • Keep a pen and paper near to write down important things. • Take a short nap before you read. Or stop reading, nap, and wake up refreshed and ready to read. • Use your dictionary. Be comfortable but not too comfortable. • If highlighting is distracting, outline and read more than once. • Research the author. Make a schedule and stick to it. • Carry the book with you since you'll never know when you'll have some free time. • Don't be overly critical; go into reading with an open mind. • Clean your room before you read. • When reading something that is not interesting, sit up. • When reading a textbook, look at pictures, headings, extra comments, to get a full idea of what you will be reading before actually doing it. • Ask others for their input about the book you are reading.

Does this advice sound familiar? Useful? Problematic? In what ways? Now, transfer these observations about reading to writing. Which provide sound advice for you as you compose? For instance, isn't it important when rereading your own writing to use a dictionary, to be comfortable, to not be over critical, and sometimes even to clean your room so as not to be distracted or in order to focus your procrastination? In addition, consider two informal writings by classroom authors. What advice could you now offer them for connecting reading and writing processes?

For me, the process of reading factual texts is a struggle. I find my mind drifting off to another place. I feel as if it's being forced upon me and that I have no choice but to read it. The process of reading imaginative texts is much easier. It's not something you have to think about; it's something you enjoy. I can't really see it as a process, because it just flows much easier. I read student writing as something I could have written myself. So at first, I am very easy on it. I pick out only the good points. But then I get more critical with it and think of ways it could be different. Yet, as a whole, I like reading students' works because they are something I can closely relate to.

For me, factual material is like putting a stew together—if you read or skip over something, everything is messed up or will fall apart. For me, reading imaginative material is like a bird gliding over the ocean. For me, reading my own writing is like cleaning up my room. I have to make sure nothing is wrong and everything is in the right place.

This term, you'll add your own investigations to this developing conversation. You can do so by composing a literacy narrative (Chapter 2); by considering the role of audience (readers) for writers (Chapters 3 and 8); and by investigating the relationship of fact-based to imaginative-based texts or pleasure to academic

reading. You'll notice that in the course of this introduction I've begun to list all the chapters of this reader since nearly all the authors included make some mention of reading in relation to writing. As you join in, as you read your peers' work, I trust you'll keep in mind, too, the delight of shared texts:

"I read for pleasure and to find out things, learn about things and worlds, people I don't know and am curious about."

And that you'll continue on to become a similar sort of writer for the readers of your own work.

## To the Writing Teacher

All essays should be, not trials, but celebrations.

—THEODORE ROETHKE

It seems to me that practicing, professional, publishing writers do two things that the students in my writing classes often don't. First, professional writers write often and a lot even if "a lot" consists of rewriting the same opening paragraph 15 times. They spend hours on a task; they are committed. Writing is not a trial but a celebration of craft. Commitment is something we know student writers often don't have in similar quantities, but they don't have it for many different reasons. Some have never received positive responses to their writing, making it hard to return to a writing task. Some do not allow for (or have) many spaces in their lives that support productive drafting sessions. They may not yet see themselves as writers, so returning to writing is difficult. Second, professional writers are interested in writing as a subject; they live in that territory, they speak that language. They read professional journals and participate in live readings; they attend conferences and panel discussions. Their houses and offices are filled with texts, in many genres, not only in the genre they perform best in or write in most often. They love the trappings of and technologies of communication (pen, paper, notebooks, note cards, notebook computers, the Web). Writers are interested, too, in the wide world—culture and nature—the people and environments that they encounter, that they actively seek out.

Most writing classroom readers provide writing students with models: examples of good writing by good writers. Potentially, this type of collection will help an interested student become engaged in a craft conversation. The theory is, beginning writers read exciting work and in response produce excellent works of their own. This may happen sometimes, but not often enough; perhaps because a models-oriented anthology doesn't help classroom authors with the *whys* and *hows* of their own composing process. It doesn't always get them in dialogue with writers or explain the inner workings of text-making from a writer's point of view, which is so often the view our writing students need to adopt.

The selections in *On Writing: A Process Reader* help your students to talk more expertly about composing and to produce engaging and effective written products. Consider using *On Writing: A Process Reader* in one of several ways. It

can function as a rhetoric when you assign reading selections and the three types of chapter exercises ("Connecting to Reading," "Connecting to Writing," and "Writing Projects") in a manner that supports your own, current class plan. I've offered suggestions for how these invitations and activities can work to encourage reflection in a writing process journal, prepare an author for small- or large-group discussions, and lead to collaborative writing (through e-mail exchanges with class partners or by posting to a class on-line discussion board), and so on. Most of the end-of-chapter activities, in fact, can be adapted to any of these modes and methods.

Early in the term, for a first draft of a paper, you might choose selections from Chapter 4, "Writing to Find Your Topic: Inventing, Exploring, Discovering" to help classroom authors generate topics. You might also choose to assign the literacy narrative as a first paper, using samples in Chapter 2, or you can begin by focusing on readings in Chapter 1, "Writers and Ways of Writing" to help students begin a review of their own writing history as part of their literacy narrative or to set the scene for their term-long writing activities. *The Instructor's Manual for On Writing: A Process Reader* offers additional advice on course design.

Equally, you can use *On Writing: A Process Reader* for a course themed to literacy and cultural study since there are many essays that delight but also instruct. For instance, Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer" offers models of parody and humor and illuminates the how-to form. Fan Shen's "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition," Gerald Graff's "Disliking Books at an Early Age," and Haunani-Kay Trask's "Tourist, Stay Home" are all, different, yet teachable versions of the essay: the kind of essays we and our classroom authors want to, need to, and are often asked to write. A course might begin by examining essays like these. Read selectively, *On Writing: A Process Reader* can also support a number of term-long themes. Using this text, you can shape a course around issues of memory, language, access, writers' worlds, and other literacy and writing topics.

For each chapter in *On Writing: A Process Reader*, you'll find a brief overview of the readings and an explanation of how these readings connect to the chapter's theme. You'll notice that I don't provide the traditional author's biography for each reading; rather, I've mixed together biographical information, invitations to read the style of an essay (suggestions for rhetorical analysis), discussions of theme, and pre- and post-reading activities in a headnote titled "Consider This."

Despite numerous drawbacks (among them, unjuried posting of information which makes all sites look equally valuable and appealing), the World Wide Web allows writing students to become more active as researchers. For instance, before reading work by Mike Rose, your students might be encouraged to consult a useful search engine such as google.com, finding 6,109 hits for "mike rose" in an 0.87 second search (as I just did). Several of those hits will be valuable, an interview with Mike Rose, a homepage, discussion groups commenting on his writings; on the other hand, a researcher will have to sort out the Mike Rose

Soccer Complex, Mike Rose Hobbies (another Mike Rose), and so on. Only about every tenth listing on this search is potentially useful for learning more about this author (for Lorrie Moore, I found 4,070 hits, for Gerald Graff, 1,170, for Richard Rodriguez 6,060). In fact, you and your students may be writing in a computer-supported classroom where materials like these can be accessed immediately, or you may still ask your no-doubt-networked students to perform this type of pre- or post-reading exercise at any time during the term. Doing this creates an opportunity to talk about the strengths and weaknesses of web-based research.

The fact that *On Writing: A Process Reader* asks students to be active co-creators of their writing process knowledge illustrates how this collection of writings on writing does—intentionally—represent a very different theory of textbook design. I've collected here the most student-friendly selections I could find but also selections that are united by their rendering of writers' actual experiences, thoughts, reflections, and practices, and I've included numerous examples of undergraduate *and* graduate writing. I've chosen to include graduate writing because these drafts demonstrate the rich possibility of student work and challenge undergraduates to become better writers (and in several cases, the graduate writers whose work I share began as undergraduate writing students in my courses). Classroom-generated texts are printed in a typewriter font to indicate that they developed out of the same assignments that are shared before or after readings.

This is a textbook of textbooks, an anthology that compiles the best writing on writing from other anthologies. I've surveyed collections to see what essays seemed to endure and I've gone into my own teaching files and those of friends to gather additional materials in order to compile the best advice I could find concerning writing. In a way, I've tried to make orderly the normal, disorderly collections all teachers and writers keep in a big file called memorable and practical advice. *On Writing: A Process Reader* shares voices that can substitute for your teacher's voice when your student is away from class and in need of a quick instructional pick-me-up. For the new teacher or for the seasoned teacher who wants a bit more discussion of the teaching theory that informs this collection, again, consider the *Instructor's Manual*.

# *Acknowledgments*

Teacher: one who carries on his [and her] education in public.

—THEODORE ROETHKE

My deep gratitude to the many classroom and professional authors who have allowed me to showcase their work here (and to their publishers). I've learned from every piece I've read and, hopefully, these authors' fine examples have informed my prose style. Lisa Moore, Katherine Glynn, Alexis Walker, and the McGraw Hill editorial and production staff all deserve tremendous thanks for their insights, patience, and support for this project. I also hope this collection pleases my family who have watched it develop, page after page.



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