

WRITE TO LEARN

Donald Murray



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**for Minnie Mae
without her there would be no books**

Preface

How to Make This Book Work for You

Writing isn't magic, but then magic isn't magic either. Magicians know their craft, and writers must also know their craft.

Study how effective writers write—writers of all kinds: science writers, novelists, business writers, critics, poets, journalists, technical writers, playwrights, historians, scholars, movie and TV writers, memo writers, essayists—and you will discover that there are more similarities than differences among those who practice the writer's trade.

This book is written in the faith that beginning students can understand the techniques used by effective writers in all fields and adapt them to their own needs. In these pages you watch a working writer—me—making a piece of writing. You will see all my false starts, the failures, the bad writing that is necessary to produce writing that works. Each technique of writing I suggest you try, you will see me trying. Unlike most books on writing, you will not just see the final game of the season, you will be beside me in the weight room and on the practice field.

There are many ways to make use of what you know and to make use of what this book reveals. There is no one way to write, and there is no one way to read. There are a number of ways you can make this book work for you.

1. Read the book as fast as possible; fly over its pages to get a glimpse of what is in the book so you will know where to look for help when you need it. Reading it this way, you will also get a feel for the way I wrote one piece of writing, an essay about my grandmother. You will see raw material shaped into a final essay. You will also see many writers' techniques defined and used. This backstage glance at the writing process will help you understand how writing is made, and you will be able to turn to it when you run into a problem in your own writing.
2. Read the notes and drafts I used to create a portrait of my grandmother. All these sections are printed in type like this. Don't worry, during this first reading, about anything except seeing how I discovered my grandmother by writing about her. Few of us have seen a piece of writing evolve from rough notes, through early drafts, to a final draft. Once you get a feel for the way my essay evolved you can go back and see what I said I was doing.
3. You can use this book to produce a piece of writing this week, and you may be able to do it in less than an hour a day. On Monday use the brainstorming technique on pages 19–25 to help you collect what you may have to say.

On Tuesday use the technique for finding meaning on pages 60–61 to help you discover focus. On Wednesday organize your material according to Outline 1 on page 100 so you have a sense of direction. On Thursday write a fast “discovery” draft according to the instructions on pages 140–144. On Friday edit it with the three quick readings described starting on page 166. You will have experienced in one week the basic writing process described in this book. Then you will be able to go back and use the book to develop other techniques on other pieces of writing.

4. Work through the book slowly, taking the time to try a number, or perhaps all, of the collecting activities in Chapter Two before moving on to the focusing techniques in Chapter Three. You can continue this process, spending a week or two on each chapter while slowly building an extended piece of writing about the same size as my grandmother piece.
5. Start writing and use the book as a resource. Work on your writing, and then read the sections that relate to what you’re doing. The checklists, “Help for Your Writing Problems” and “Writing Techniques,” at the front of the book are designed to help you find solutions to problems you face while writing. Use the book to reinforce the techniques you already know. Use the book to help you solve the writing problems you, your classmates, and your teacher discover in your writing.

You will see other ways to use the book, and so will your teacher. It is not a book of rules; it is not an instruction manual to be followed like a set of military orders; it is a toolbox, a book of choices, filled with techniques that you will learn to use as you face the demands of your own writing tasks.

This book will not teach you to write, and neither will your teacher teach you to write. This book, your classmates, and your teacher may help you to teach yourself to write.

There’s not much that any of us can say in advance of your writing that will help you learn to write. If you read this book and do not write, nothing much will happen. But if you read this book while you write it may help you to do your own learning.

There are a number of other things you can do that will help you teach yourself to write. You should read the best writers of your own time who are illuminating your world with their language. Then read back to those writers who have developed a tradition that made it possible for the writers of your time to write. Read their language to hear its music and feel its strength. Explore the forms of writing to see how they keep reinventing and renewing themselves.

Most of all, through reading discover how much the human condition remains the same. As the contemporary poet Alan Dugan says, “I’m still doing business at the same old stand—love, work, war, death, what the world is like outside this window tonight.” You, and Dugan, and Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, John Milton, Joan Didion, your classmates, and Keats are all writing the same basic themes.

Also read television and movies and plays and newspapers and magazines to see how the masters of these crafts use language to celebrate and comprehend life.

Read your classmates to see how they use language to make meaning evolve. Read their early drafts as well as their final ones to see how they discovered the writing problems they had to solve—and how they solved them.

Most of all, read your own writing—notes, scribbles, outlines, fragments, early drafts and late drafts—to discover from your own experience how your own writing is being made. That is the most important reading you can do.

Pay close attention to your own self, learn from your own learning. Richard Hugo was a fine poet and teacher who told his students, “You’ll never be a poet until you realize that everything I say today and this quarter is wrong. It may be right for me, but it is wrong for you. Every moment, I am, without wanting or trying to, telling you to write like me. But I hope you learn to write like you. In a sense, I hope I don’t teach you how to write but how to teach yourself how to write. At all times keep your crap detector on. If I say something that helps, good. If what I say is of no help, let it go. Don’t start arguments. They are futile and take us away from our purpose. As Yeats noted, your important arguments are with yourself. If you don’t agree with me don’t listen.”

Good advice. In the end, the writer at eighteen or eighty is alone with the writer’s own experience and the writer’s own language. The writer, in that loneliness, keeps learning to write. I learned by writing this book, and I will go on learning in writing the next one. “One thing that is always with the writer—no matter how long he has written or how good he is—is the continuing process of learning how to write,” says Flannery O’Connor. “As soon as the writer ‘learns to write,’ as soon as he knows what he is going to find, and discovers a way to say what he knew all along, or worse still, a way to say nothing, he is finished.”

You’ll have to keep setting your own standards, putting the bar high enough so it trembles but does not fall when you jump over it. If your standards are too high you will choke and not write; if your standards are too low you will not learn and you will not be read. Those standards are always changing, and it is your job to keep inching the bar up, deciding what you can attempt this day at your desk.

Good luck.

Instructor's Preface

Learning while Writing

Can we teach writing?

Yes, but we can't teach writing in advance of our students writing. Our students do not learn to write, then write. Few students can listen to a lecture on writing or read a textbook on writing in advance of writing and understand the lessons they may need to learn. We are asking them to imagine and understand an experience they have not yet had.

Neither can our students learn to write with increasing effectiveness without instruction. Students need, just as professional writers need, response to their drafts in process. They need test readers who can help them see what is working and what needs work. Students also need to learn the principles and the techniques of their craft. We do know what good writing is, and with the research of the past two decades we better understand how effective writing is made.

The challenge is to combine experience with instruction. This textbook attempts to demonstrate that interplay as it reveals me writing while I am instructing. Each student should experience the same interaction between the act of writing and the process of learning about writing.

There is no one way to teach writing, but the most effective ways of teaching writing all combine a great deal of writing with instruction that is appropriate to what the student has experienced rather than what the student may experience. This textbook is designed to be used with both traditional and experimental curricula because it demonstrates the interaction between experience and instruction.

The book may be studied formally, with the student moving slowly through the stages of the writing process. It may be used quickly, with the student experiencing the writing process in a week, as described on page ix, then studied repeatedly as the student moves through the writing process again and again. The student may study how the writer wrote the grandmother piece, then study the techniques. The text may be used almost entirely as an individual resource, with the student depending heavily on the checklists on pages xvii–xx.

I believe in the diversity of writing, and I'm eager to learn how this book is being used, as well as to discover the strengths and weaknesses of this first edition. I would appreciate hearing from instructors—and students—who use this first edition so that I can make subsequent editions more effective. Please send responses to the English Editor, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 383 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

Acknowledgments

It is traditional when acknowledging all those who have helped you with a book to place the name of one's spouse at the end. It would be totally inappropriate in this case. My wife, Minnie Mae, has been my closest colleague and strongest supporter on this writing project, as she has on every other one.

The lineage of this book goes back to the late Mortimer B. Howell of Tilton School, who turned my life around when he taught me Freshman English. When I first taught Freshman English he gave me my own Freshman English papers, which he had saved—a humbling gift. At the University of New Hampshire I have learned from and with many colleagues. Among those who deserve special mention is Lester A. Fisher. Our early shouted arguments in the corridors about the teaching of writing settled down to a relationship that underlies all my teaching and constantly reminds me of the importance of respect for the individual student. Thomas A. Carnicelli first got me involved in directing Freshman English, and he has been a constructive, tough-minded critic of my work through the years. Thomas R. Newkirk's scholarship has helped me keep my work in perspective. I've shared almost daily discussions of writing and the teaching of writing with Donald H. Graves. We have learned about writing and the teaching of writing together.

In writing this book I am particularly indebted to Brock Dethier, who has made especially perceptive comments on an early draft. He is one of the many master teachers of writing I've been able to work with on the staffs of the Freshman English and Advanced Composition courses at the University of New Hampshire. We have all shared our teaching and our learning, and I am indebted to all of them for contributing so much to my education. I've also enjoyed the chance to work with the writers who teach in our department, especially my colleague in nonfiction, Andrew H. Merton. I've learned most from the more than two thousand students with whom I've had weekly writing conferences at the University of New Hampshire.

I've also been fortunate in those away from Durham who have taught me about writing and the teaching of writing. A few who must be mentioned include Dr. Carol Berkenkotter of Michigan Technological University, for whom I was a laboratory rat who grew, I hope, into a research colleague; Susan Sowers, now at Harvard University, whose scholarly eye has scanned much of my work in process; Christopher Scanlan of the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, who has been a stimulating writing colleague; John and Tilly Warnock, Stephen Kucer, and Stuart Greene, who made my residence at the University of Wyoming intellectually stimulating; and dozens of others who have influenced my thinking by their efforts to understand the process of writing.

I am indebted to the fifty students and twenty teachers from Idaho in the Whittenberger Foundation—State Department of Education Summer Program who read and attacked the first draft of this book and who are responsible for many improvements in the text.

I must also pay tribute to the officers of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, whose work has made it possible for those of us

interested in studying writing to get together and exchange our views in print and in person.

And I owe special thanks to my editor, Nedah Abbott, the only editor I've ever let see incomplete drafts in process. I am also indebted to Melanie Miller, who supervised the production of this book with wit, intelligence and care, to Tessa DeCarlo, the copyeditor, who made certain I stayed within the boundaries of good sense and good taste, and to Lou Scardino, who supervised the design of this book so the graphic art supported my words and my meaning, and to all the people at Holt, Rinehart and Winston who gave me freedom and support.

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4 Order 86

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The reader is given counsel on how to start writing and principles to keep in mind during the writing of the draft. Draft writing is demonstrated by the evolving essay written by the author.

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Writing as Process

I write to find out what I'm thinking about.

Edward Albee

How do I know what I think until I see what I say?

E. M. Forster

For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew.

Robert Frost

