



STEPS TO WRITING WELL

Eighth Edition

Jean Wyrick



WEB-ENHANCED

STEPS TO WRITING WELL



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Jean Wyrick

Colorado State University

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*This book is dedicated to DAVID
and to SARAH, KATE, and AUSTIN*

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STEPS TO WRITING WELL



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To the Teacher

The eighth edition of *Steps to Writing Well* has been written for teachers of composition who have had trouble finding a textbook that students can easily understand. Too many books on today's market, these teachers rightfully complain, are still unnecessarily complex, dry, or massive for the majority of students. Written simply, in an informal style and addressed to the student, this textbook offers a step-by-step guide to writing a variety of 500-to-800-word essays. The combination of concise, practical advice, a number of student and professional samples, and a brief handbook should provide more than enough helpful information for students enrolled in a one-semester or one-quarter course, without intimidating them with more material than they can possibly master.

Although many parts of the book have been revised or expanded for this edition, its organization remains essentially the same. Part One offers advice on "The Basics of the Short Essay"; Part Two discusses "Purposes, Modes, and Strategies"; Part Three focuses on "Special Assignments"; and Part Four presents "A Concise Handbook." This textbook still begins with the essay "To the Student," which not only argues that students can learn to write better with practice and dedication but also gives them a number of practical reasons why they *should* learn to write better.

Part One, containing eight chapters, moves students through the process of writing the short essay. Chapter 1, on prewriting, stresses finding the proper attitude ("the desire to communicate") and presents helpful suggestions for selecting a subject. This chapter then offers students ten methods for finding a significant purpose and focus for their essays. In addition, a section on using the journal explains more than a dozen ways that students may improve their skills by writing a variety of nonthreatening—and even enjoyable—assignments. The section on audience should also help student writers identify their particular readers and communicate more effectively with them. After finding a topic and identifying their audience, students are ready for Chapter 2, devoted almost entirely to a discussion of the thesis statement. This chapter first explains the role of the "working thesis" in early drafts and

then clearly outlines what a good thesis is and isn't by presenting a host of examples to illustrate the advice. Also included in this chapter is an explanation of the "essay map," an organizational tool that can help students outline their essays and plan their body paragraphs.

Chapter 3 discusses in detail the requirements of good body paragraphs: topic sentences, unity, order and coherence, adequate development, use of specific detail, and logical sequence. Over forty paragraphs illustrate both strengths and weaknesses of student writing. These paragraphs are not complex literary or professional excerpts but rather, well-designed, precise examples of the principles under examination, written on subjects students can understand and appreciate. This chapter twice provides the opportunity for students to see how a topic may progress from a working thesis statement to an informal essay outline, which in turn helps produce well-developed paragraphs in the body of an essay. To complete the overview of the short essay, Chapter 4 explains, through a number of samples, how to write good introductions, conclusions, and titles.

Chapter 5, "Drafting and Revising: Creative Thinking, Critical Thinking," focuses on the revision process. Because too many students still think of revision as merely proofreading their essays rather than as an essential, recursive activity, this chapter emphasizes the importance of revision in all good writing. These pages offer a system for revising drafts in stages, with an expanded discussion of drafting and revising on a word processor now included. A section on critical thinking shows students how to analyze and evaluate their ideas and those of others and stresses the role of critical thinking skills in the selection of evidence for all writing assignments. Chapter 5 also offers advice for participants in "peer workshops" (instructors may also find useful advice on organizing effective peer workshops in the Instructor's Manual for this edition). Also included in this chapter is a student essay, annotated to show how a writer (or a workshop partner) might use the questions suggested in the discussion of the revision process. This chapter ends with a list of suggestions for beating Writer's Block.

Chapter 6, on effective sentences, emphasizes the importance of clarity, conciseness, and vividness, with nearly one hundred and fifty sample sentences illustrating the chapter's advice. Chapter 7, on word choice, presents practical suggestions for selecting accurate, appropriate words that are specific, memorable, and persuasive. This chapter also contains sections on avoiding sexist language and "bureaucratese." Chapter 8, "The Reading-Writing Connection," maintains that by learning to read analytically, students can improve their own writing skills. The chapter contains step-by-step directions for reading and annotating essays and suggests many ways students may profit from studying the rhetorical choices of other writers. A professional essay, annotated according to these steps, is included, as well as a new section with advice on writing a summary of any reading selection. Teachers may wish to assign this chapter before asking students to read the professional essays that appear throughout this textbook.

Each chapter in Part One contains samples and exercises. As in the previous editions, the “Practicing What You’ve Learned” exercises follow each major section in each chapter so that both teacher and students may quickly discover if particular material needs additional attention. Moreover, by conquering small steps in the writing process, one at a time, students should feel more confident and should learn more rapidly. Assignments, which also follow each major section in these chapters, suggest class activities and frequently emphasize “peer teaching,” a useful method that asks students to prepare appropriate exercises for classmates and then to evaluate the results. Such assignments, operating under the premise that “you don’t truly learn a subject until you teach it,” provide engaging classroom activity for all the students and also remove from the teacher some of the burden of creating exercises.

Throughout the chapters in Part One, activities called “Applying What You’ve Learned to *Your* Writing” follow the exercises and assignments. Each of these activities encourages students to “follow through” by incorporating into a current draft the skill they have just read about and practiced. By following a three-step procedure—reading the advice in the text, practicing the advice through the exercises, and then applying the advice directly to their own prose—students should improve their writing processes. In addition, each of the chapters in Part One concludes with a summary, designed to help students review the important points in the material under study.

Part Two presents discussion of the kinds of essays students are most often asked to write. Chapter 9, on exposition, is divided into separate discussions of the expository strategies: example, process, comparison/contrast, definition, division and classification, and causal analysis. Discussions in Chapter 9 and the chapters on argument, description, and narration follow a similar format by offering the students (a) a clear definition of the mode (or strategy), explained with familiar examples; (b) practical advice on developing each essay; (c) warnings against common problems; (d) suggested essay topics on subjects that appeal to students’ interests and capabilities; (e) a topic proposal sheet; (f) sample student essay(s) with marginal notes; (g) professional essay(s) followed by questions on content, structure, and style, a vocabulary list, and writing suggestions; (h) a revision worksheet to guide student writers through their rough drafts; and (i) a progress report. The advice on developing the essay and the section on common problems are both explained in easy-to-understand language accompanied by numerous examples.

The fifteen student essays in this text should encourage student writers by showing them that others in their situation can indeed compose organized, thoughtful essays. The student essays that appear here are not perfect, however; consequently, teachers may use them in class to generate suggestions for still more revision. The fourteen professional essays were also selected to spur class discussion and to illustrate the rhetorical principles presented in Part Two of the text. (The process analysis and comparison/contrast sections of Chapter 9 contain two professional essays so that students may see examples of two commonly used methods of organization.) The nine professional

essays most popular with the users of the seventh edition have been retained; five essays in Parts One and Two are new to this edition.



Chapter 10 discusses the argumentative essay, presenting a new pair of professional essays with opposing views and other new classroom activities designed to help students analyze rhetorical appeals and supporting evidence. Chapters 11 and 12, on writing description and narration, may be assigned prior to the expository strategies or may be used as supplementary material for any kind of writing incorporating descriptive language or extended example.

Although this text shows students how to master individual rhetorical strategies, one essay at a time, experienced writers often choose a combination, or blending, of strategies to best accomplish their purpose. "Writing Essays Using Multiple Strategies," Chapter 13, concludes Part Two by offering advice to writers who are ready to address more complex topics and essay organization. This chapter also contains both student and professional essays to illustrate clear use of multiple strategies to accomplish the writer's purpose.



Part Three, called "Special Assignments," allows instructors to design their composition courses in a variety of ways, perhaps by adding a research paper, a literary analysis, an in-class essay, or a business writing assignment. Chapter 14, "Writing a Paper Using Research," shows students how to focus a topic, search for information in a variety of ways, choose and evaluate evidence, avoid plagiarism, and effectively incorporate and cite source material in their essays. This chapter presents samples of both MLA and APA documentation styles and offers a student essay illustrating MLA citations. This edition also contains new discussions of electronic sources, including advice (and warnings) for Internet users.

"Writing about Literature," Chapter 15, discusses multiple ways literary selections may be used in the composition class, either as prompts for personal essays or for papers of literary analysis. Students are offered a series of suggestions for close reading of both poetry and short fiction. The chapter contains an annotated poem, an annotated short story, and two student essays analyzing those works. Another poem, without marginal notes, is included for classroom discussion or assignment.



Users of previous editions may note that Chapter 16 has been expanded and renamed "Writing in Class: Exams and 'Response' Essays" to reflect its new material. As in the previous edition, this chapter is designed to help students respond quickly and accurately to a variety of in-class assignments by understanding their task's purpose and by recognizing key directional words. Advice for successfully organizing and completing timed writing should also help decrease students' anxiety. To satisfy requests from teachers, a new section has been added. Because so many composition courses today include some variation of the "summary-and-response" assignment (used not only as an in or out-of-class essay but also as a placement or exit test), this chapter now addresses this kind of writing and offers a sample student essay.



An entirely new Chapter 17, “Writing in the World of Work,” allows students to practice composing business letters, office memos, electronic mail, and résumés. With the increasing use of technology in the workplace, students may also profit from a section discussing “netiquette” that encourages writers to cultivate a sense of civility and professionalism, as well as clarity, in their electronic communications.



Part Four presents a concise handbook with accessible explanations and examples showing how to correct the most common errors in grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. Sections in Chapters 18, 19, and 20 are now numbered so that teachers may easily refer students to particular discussions.



At the end of many chapters in this new edition, teachers and students may note the addition of annotated bar codes. Through :CueCat technology, students may now access a variety of helpful Web sites, such as those of the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the American Psychological Association (APA), to see additional discussion of advice in the text. For more information on using this technology to complement *Steps*, teachers should contact their Harcourt representative.

Once again, readers of this edition may note an occasional attempt at humor. The lighthearted tone of some samples and exercises is the result of the author’s firm belief that while learning to write is serious business, solemn composition classrooms are not always the most beneficial environments for anxious beginning writers. The author takes full responsibility (and all of the blame) for the bad jokes and even worse puns.



Finally, a complimentary Instructor’s Manual, updated for this edition by Colleen Schaeffer, is available from Harcourt College Publishers. It contains suggestions for teaching and answers to the exercises and essay questions. A new workbook by Peggy Jolly is available for the first time with this edition. The workbook contains exercises and activities to accompany many chapters of the text. Interested instructors should contact their Harcourt representative for more information.

Although a new edition of this textbook has allowed its author to make a number of changes and additions, the book’s purpose remains as stated in the original preface: “While there are many methods of teaching composition, *Steps to Writing Well* tries to help inexperienced writers by offering a clearly defined sequential approach to writing the short essay. By presenting simple, practical advice directly to the students, this text is intended to make the demanding jobs of teaching and learning the basic principles of composition easier and more enjoyable for everyone.”

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C. M. Schaeffer has contributed many valuable additions to the Instructor's Manual, and Peggy Jolly has created a useful workbook to supplement the text. On-going gratitude is due the students at Colorado State University who allowed me to reprint their writing and also to Sharon Straus, whose essay "Treeclimbing" was a prize winner at the College of Charleston.

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To the Student

FINDING THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

If you agree with one or more of the following statements, we have some serious myth-killing to do before you begin this book:

1. I'm no good in English—never have been, never will be.
2. Only people with natural talent for writing can succeed in composition class.
3. My composition teacher is a picky, comma-hunting old fogey/radical, who will insist I write just like him or her.
4. I write for myself, not for anyone else, so I don't need this class or this book.
5. Composition classes are designed to put my creativity in a straitjacket.

The notion that good writers are born, not made, is a widespread myth that may make you feel defeated before you start. But the simple truth is that good writers *are* made—simply because *effective writing is a skill that can be learned*. Despite any feelings of insecurity you may have about composition, you should realize that you already know many of the basic rules of good writing; after all, you've been writing since you were six years old. What you need now is some practical advice on composition, some coaching to sharpen your skills, and a strong dose of determination to practice those skills until you can consistently produce the results you want. Talent, as the French writer Flaubert once said, is nothing more than long patience.

Think about learning to write well as you might consider your tennis game. No one is born a tennis star. You first learn the basic rules and movements and then go out on the court to practice. And practice. No one's tennis will improve if he or she stays off the court; similarly, you must write regularly and receive feedback to improve your composition skills. Try to see your teacher not as Dr. Frankenstein determined to reproduce his or her style of writing in you, but rather as your coach, your loyal trainer who wants you to

do the very best you can. Like any good coach, your teacher will point out your strengths and weaknesses; she or he will often send you to this text for practical suggestions for improvement. And while there are no quick, magic solutions for learning to write well, the most important point to remember is this: with this text, your own common sense, and determination, *you can improve your writing*.

WHY WRITE?

“OK,” you say, “so I can improve if I try—but why should I bother? Why should I write well? I’m not going to be a professional writer.”

In the first place, writing helps us explore our own thoughts and feelings. Writing forces us to articulate our ideas, to discover what we really think about an issue. For example, let’s suppose you’re faced with a difficult decision and that the arguments pro and con are jumbled in your head. You begin to write down all the pertinent facts and feelings, and suddenly, you begin to see that you do, indeed, have stronger arguments for one side of the question than the other. Once you “see” what you are thinking, you may then scrutinize your opinions for any logical flaws or weaknesses and revise your argument accordingly. In other words, writing lays out our ideas for examination, analysis, and thoughtful reaction. Thus when we write, we (and the world at large) see who we are, and what we stand for, much more clearly. Moreover, writing can provide a record of our thoughts that we may study and evaluate in a way that conversation cannot. In short, writing well enables us to see and know ourselves—our feelings, ideas, and opinions—better.

On a more practical level, we need to write effectively to communicate with others. While some of our writing may be done solely for ourselves, the majority of it is created for others to share. In this world, it is almost impossible to claim that we write only for ourselves. We are constantly asked to put our feelings, ideas, and knowledge in writing for others to read. During your college years, no matter what your major, you will be repeatedly required to write essays, tests, reports, and exercises (and possibly letters home). Later, you may need to write formal letters of application for jobs or graduate training. And on a job you may have to write numerous kinds of reports, proposals, analyses, and requisitions. To be successful in any field, you must make your correspondence with business associates and co-workers clearly understood; remember that enormous amounts of time, energy, and profit have been lost because of a single unclear office memo.

There’s still a third—more cynical—reason for studying writing techniques. Once you begin to improve your ability to use language, you will become more aware of the ways others write and speak. Through today’s mass media and electronic highways, we are continually bombarded with words from politicians, advertisers, scientists, preachers, teachers, and self-appointed “authorities.” We need to understand and evaluate what we are hearing, not only for our benefit but also for self-protection. Language is frequently manipulated to manipulate us. For example, the CIA has long referred to the

“neutralization” of enemies, and during the Gulf War, Pentagon officials carefully avoided discussion of times when our misdirected “physics packages” (bombs) fell on “soft targets” (civilians). (One year not so long ago, the National Council of Teachers of English gave their Doublespeak Award to the U.S. officers who, after accidentally shooting down a plane of civilians, reported that the plane didn’t crash—rather, it had “uncontrolled contact with the ground.”) More recently, a murderer of nineteen children in Oklahoma City tried (but failed) to minimize the crime by referring to his victims as mere “collateral damage.” Some members of Congress have seen no recessions, just “meaningful downturns in aggregate output,” so they have treated themselves to a “pay equalization concept,” rather than a raise. Advertisers frequently try to sell us “authentic art reproductions” that are, of course, cheap mass-produced copies; the television networks treat us to “en-core presentations” that are the same old summer reruns. And “fenestration engineers” are still window cleaners; “environmental superintendents” are still janitors; “drain surgeons” are still plumbers.

By becoming better writers ourselves, we can learn to recognize and reject the irresponsible, cloudy, or dishonest language of others before we become victims of their exploitation.

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