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THE WRITER'S RHETORIC AND HANDBOOK

Elizabeth McMahan Susan Day



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THE WRITER'S RHETORIC AND HANDBOOK

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Preface

We have tried to follow our own advice in this book and write in a tone and style appealing to students, our primary audience. Although the tone is sometimes light, the content is always serious: instructors who are accustomed to a conventional text will feel at home with this one. We rely mainly on the techniques that have proved successful in our own teaching, and we aim at a level of competence which should be possible for most students to achieve: to write standard English that is clear, coherent, and economical.



PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO TRADITIONAL MATERIAL

The structure of *The Writer's Rhetoric and Handbook* is informed by our concern for pedagogy. The first eight chapters, or Rhetoric, contain instruction in basic writing techniques. The remaining chapters compose the Handbook, which outlines the rules of standard English grammar and usage.

Our approach in the Rhetoric begins with how to put together a paragraph, continues with how to improve the sentences within that paragraph, and concludes with how to organize several paragraphs into a coherent essay. Perfecting sentences in isolation first, as many textbooks encourage students to do, seems to us an artificial exercise. We prefer to examine the sentence in its natural environment, the paragraph. Instructors who want to teach sentences before paragraphs can do so by assigning the chapters in reverse.

Since sound organization is essential for clarity, we devote a great deal of attention to patterns of development. We include methods for organizing essays according to seven rhetorical types, arranged from the simplest to the most complex. Each explanation includes the following:

Ways to introduce and conclude the essay
 Sample essays and outlines written mainly by students
 Appropriate transitional techniques
 Short prewriting topics, handy for in-class practice
 Special revision checklists for troubleshooting
 Topics for full-length essays
 Examples and topics designed with the wide range of students' ages in mind

Examples by professional writers illustrate good paragraph development, but as models for essays, we have used student themes as well—and lots of them. Essays by professionals are almost always far longer and more complex than the standard freshman theme. We have found that our students profit most by analyzing each other's essays, discovering why one paper is successful, why another is less so. Thus we include sample themes in each rhetorical pattern with discussion questions designed to lead students to critical judgments.

In the *Handbook*, we've limited our discussion of grammar to the concepts applicable to writing. Instead of abstract theory, we offer sentence diagramming—a useful tool, which lets students actually see how sentence elements function. We've alphabetized the chapters on mechanics, punctuation, and usage for easy reference. The *Handbook* is keyed to the theme correction symbols which appear inside the front and back covers of the book. The Glossary of Usage reflects current standard English usage and relies mainly on the research of Robert C. Pooley in *The Teaching of English Usage*, Roy H. Copperud in *American Usage: The Consensus*, and Theodore Bernstein in *Dos and Maybes of English Usage*. We urge instructors to look through the usage chapter since we often found ourselves surprised by recent changes.

Exercises—for prewriting, writing, and discussion—are interspersed throughout the book. There are three comprehensive exercises—one on sentences, one on grammar, and one on mechanics and style—at the ends of the appropriate chapters. The suggested writing topics include over a hundred ideas for writing.

TEACHING CONSIDERATIONS

The Writer's Rhetoric and Handbook includes several practical sections which students will find useful.

Chapter 4, "Writing Strong Essays," contains a section on logic which is streamlined and simplified and avoids confusing Latinate labels.

Chapter 7, "Researched Writing," covers library techniques and provides

documentation styles for all disciplines as well as complete styling information following the *MLA Handbook*.

In addition, we offer chapters that many instructors may not find time to cover in the traditional composition course. This material will, nonetheless, prove valuable for students to study on their own.

Chapter 5, "Reading and Writing in College Classes," provides helpful advice on how to read textbooks, take notes, and pass tests.

Chapter 6, "Writing about Literature," has easy-to-follow suggestions for outlining and writing nine types of literary papers and is aimed at non-English majors.

Chapter 8, "Practical Business Writing," includes useful instruction on how to write effective job application letters, résumés, memorandums, and reports.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Instructor's Manual

We've written the *Instructor's Manual* as a resource book. Beyond suggesting answers for exercises and discussion questions and an answer key for *The Writer's Workbook*, the *Instructor's Manual* offers further suggestions for classroom activities and a set of duplicating masters that provide three diagnostic tests (on sentences, punctuation, and usage) plus extra samples of student writing for in-class criticism.

Workbook

The Writer's Workbook is designed to provide extra practice and remediation for students who are not prepared for the level of difficulty the text exhibits. It includes exercises on thesis, sentence, and paragraph development and exercises that parallel the material in the *Handbook* portion of the text.

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RHETORIC

PART ONE

 **WRITING WELL**

WRITING FOR YOUR READERS

Chapter One

The first half of this book is a *rhetoric*. *Rhetoric* is a broad, useful term that includes all the elements of writing—structure, style, diction, rhythm, tone—the works. In this part we're going to refresh your memory about the whole writing process. The last half of the text is a *handbook*, a reference guide which outlines the rules that govern standard English grammar and usage.

Standard English is the language as it is written and spoken by educated people. *Dialects*, which are varieties of language spoken by regional or foreign-born or minority groups are often rich, colorful, vigorous—but standard English is expected of college graduates. Virtually all the writing done by millions of people employed in white-collar jobs requires the use of standard English. By the time you finish reading this book you will understand what standard English really is.

COMMUNICATION IS THE GOAL

Writing is one of the most taxing jobs around—especially if you're bent on doing it skillfully. But writing well is also one of the most useful crafts you can develop—essential, even—and valuable to prospective employers. You will greatly improve your chances of landing a good job if you can write clear, correct *expository prose*. That's the kind of writing we deal with in this book: not poetry or drama or fiction, but informative writing. And if you'd like to consider a more immediate need, there's no honest way to get through college without being able to write. You simply can't hope to get into law or medical school without a thorough knowledge of standard English. Whether you're planning to enter engineering, teaching, social work, or any business or professional career, you'll have to write—memos, letters, reports, summaries.

There is, as you may know, something of a national scandal over the general level of illiteracy in our country. Surveys have shown that many high school graduates are “functional illiterates.” That is, they cannot read signs or labels and cannot write a simple letter. More and more, it seems, people are finding it difficult to express themselves in writing. And the reason for putting words on paper in the first place is to communicate, to convey ideas, information, or impressions from your mind into the minds of your readers.

Let's face it: you need to be able to write. This book can help you learn to write well. We've tried to make the process as painless as possible, but writing is seldom easy because it requires precision. We struggle and sigh and squint and swear; we chew our nails, twiddle our thumbs, furrow our brows, and gnash our teeth—but eventually we write. And you can, too, if you're willing to work at it.

WHAT IS GOOD WRITING, ANYWAY?

What we consider good writing today would not necessarily have been admired a few hundred years ago when people put great stock in measured rhythms, rhetorical flourish, and elaborate words. Tastes change in language, just as in dress, but luckily not with such frequency and splash. There always remain common elements of good writing. Professor F. L. Lucas, noted scholar, lists these basic principles as *honesty*, *clarity*, *brevity*, and *variety*.¹ His advice boils down to this:

1. Be honest: don't try to fake your ideas.
2. Be clear: don't puzzle your readers.
3. Be brief: don't waste your readers' time.
4. Seek variety: vary sentence length; work on liveliness.

Lucas mentions other attributes of effective writing: “Good humor, good sense, vitality, imagination.” But if you can master the four essentials—honesty, clarity, brevity, and variety—you'll be a competent writer.

Clarity Is the Keynote

Of the four characteristics of good writing listed by Lucas, the one that relates most directly to the goal of communication is clarity. When you write, you need to let your readers know at the outset what you're

¹ “On the Fascination of Style,” *Holiday*, March 1960, pp. 11–21.