# Rethinking WRITING



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To our students, past, present, and future

### Preface

One of the primary aims of *Rethinking Writing* is to bring students and teachers together in a supportive community of writers and readers. We believe that, even as students learn from teachers, teachers can learn from students. We are all writers and readers, and regardless of our status, we all share in the challenges and rewards that writers inevitably confront.

#### The Second Stage in Process

This book represents what might be called the second stage in the "process revolution" that has transformed the college composition classroom over the past twenty years. In the first stage, following the lead of researchers in the field, teachers and textbooks began to stress the value of drafting and revising as opposed to the traditional last-minute, single-draft approach to paper writing. One of the implications of this new emphasis was that students were urged to see writing as a form of discovery, not just a way of communicating what they already knew.

The idea of the "first stage" was good, and we pursue it enthusiastically in *Rethinking Writing* by urging students to follow the steps and methods that experienced writers tend to use as they compose. But further research and classroom experience have shown that writing like an experienced author involves more than simply following a regimen of drafting and revising. Hence the need for a "second stage," which focuses on the *social context* of writing.

What we see as crucial is the writer's need to be an authority figure of sorts—to gain motivation, for example, from the urge to speak out and at the same time supply readers with what they need to know. To operate as a true writer, a student (no less than a published writer) should feel a strong engagement with the material and should feel needed as a source of information and opinions. In other words, student writers should feel that the readers of their essays are being enlightened in some way by reading them. After all, knowing that you are providing something useful or entertaining or informative for a reader is one of the great rewards of writing.

#### The Writer's Community and the "Ongoing Conversation"

To encourage authoritative writing, *Rethinking Writing* invites students and teachers to see classroom writing as part of what noted scholars have come to call an "ongoing conversation." This written dialogue occurs among the members of a community, some of whom are present physically, while others may be represented only by what they have written. That is, student writers will be invited to write papers in response to the writing of other people: students from past classes whose papers appear in the book, professional writers and scholars, and classmates.

As with any real conversation, there will be give and take. Although students will often be working from the ideas of writers who have gone before them, they will not simply repeat them, but will add their own particular contributions, based on their experiences, thoughts, and ways of viewing life. They will also have an immediate community of writers to work with: classmates and the instructor, who will be the actual audience and who will tend to influence the way students participate in the written "conversation" very directly.

#### Focus on Student Writing

We strongly believe that the central focus of the composition class should be student writing. *Rethinking Writing* reflects this belief in two ways. First, the chapters themselves deal centrally with questions of how to write and what to write within the classroom situation. Second, the book contains more than four dozen student writing samples, ranging in length from a single paragraph to a long research paper. While there are a few works by professional writers, the student samples far outnumber them.

Over the years our own students have benefited greatly from working with student writing samples. At one level, student samples are helpful because they can serve as models for writing. When used for that purpose, student samples are much more accessible and less intimidating than professionally written pieces. But there is an even more important reason for the inclusion of so many student writing samples in this book. The wealth of student writing helps create the sense of a wider student community of writers,

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a community that stretches the boundaries of the actual classroom community in which the book might be used. Students will have access to the thoughts and words of many other students who have made their contribution over the years to the ongoing conversation.

#### The Link Between Personal and Academic Writing

In recent years, a scholarly debate has raged over whether students should work on personal writing or academic writing in the composition classroom. We believe that both are important. Academic writing is obviously useful for people who will be taking many courses in a range of subjects before they graduate. Personal writing and autobiographical writing are crucial to the development of confidence and flexibility. *Rethinking Writing* is perhaps unique in attempting not only to include both types of writing but also to explore the *link* between the two.

In the first three chapters the Suggestions for Writing and other activities ask students to explore various aspects of their personal experience. The goal is to increase their sense of authority as writers, moving them as well into gradually more analytic assignments. Chapter 4, "Crossing Boundaries: Personal-Academic Writing," looks at ways in which autobiographical experience may overlap with academic-style inquiry in writing.

#### The Composing Process and the Rhetorical Situation

All of *Rethinking Writing* is concerned with showing students how to develop a good and effective writing process. The middle section (Chapters 5 through 8) takes an especially detailed look at the various aspects that make up the writing process. We include advice on drafting and revising and spend a lot of time on the importance of understanding the rhetorical situation for each piece of writing. In addition, separate chapters are devoted to techniques for generating ideas and organizing essays.

Throughout, as individual aspects of composing are discussed, the link between them and purpose and audience is made explicit. If, as suggested, peer response sessions have been ongoing, then students should be comfortable in the dual role of reader-writer and increasingly more aware of the influence of readers in the construction of meaning.

#### Traditional College Writing Assignments and Reference Guide

While we are particularly enthusiastic about conveying the latest techniques and research findings in *Rethinking Writing*, we think it is also important to include chapters discussing the sorts of assignments that many composition students have traditionally been asked to do. Thus the third section of the book (Chapters 9 through 12) covers argumentative writing, research writing, essay examinations, and writing for disciplines across the curriculum.

We have sought to discuss these traditional assignments in a way that reflects the newer approaches that appear in the rest of the book. We continue to encourage students, for example, to view writing contexts such as examinations or research papers as opportunities to exercise their authority as writers in communicating with specific audiences. We have also included a detailed "Reference Guide" at the end of the book to provide answers to questions about grammar, mechanics, usage, and style.

#### Writing and the Multicultural Nature of Society

Society is becoming increasingly culturally diverse, as people of varying heritages and ethnic backgrounds interact. This is especially true in the modern college or university, where not only U.S. residents from different cultural groups but also large numbers of international students come together. Inevitably, the meeting of people from different backgrounds will have an effect on the way everyone thinks, speaks, and writes.

We have tried to reflect this increasing diversity in the work of the writers whose papers we have included. Even a brief sampling of the names of student writers included in the book will illustrate this: Lisa Jervis, Bill Waite, Lilia Vish, Atsushi Yoshida, Meaghan Boice, Moustapha Diop, Katy Luo, Jennifer Shackleton, Regina Yung, Nduucu wa Ngugi, Kemi Fiator, Madhu Kolli, Noelle Howey, Damon Higgins, Cara Chaney, and Anarelly Conde. Muliculturalism is not a separate theme or emphasis grafted on to the book. Rather, we have attempted to let students who happen to represent diverse cultures speak in their own voices.

#### Writing and the Computer Revolution

Beyond the obvious advantages for writers inherent in word processing, the computer revolution has also made it easier than ever before for writers to benefit from social interaction during composing. The sharing of files, the ease of electronically posting responses to texts, and the ability to have conferences in real time with groups of other writers are but a few of the ways technology has created a new spirit of community in which writers can participate.

Many of the exercises in *Rethinking Writing* explicitly suggest such activities or readily translate to them. The text, of course, includes detailed instruction on strategies for negotiating the electronic research process, with sample screens from typical research databases.

#### Acknowledgments

Since *Rethinking Writing* owes so much to recent theories and research on the social nature of the composing process, we are particularly conscious of our indebtedness to the many people who have helped us shape the text. As the cliché in writing acknowledgments goes, any glory that settles upon the

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project can be attributed in large measure to their contributions, but the responsibility for any deficiencies most certainly rests with us.

To the many students in our classes during the past quarter century we are indebted most deeply. This book is inextricably linked with all that they have taught us about writing and the teaching of writing. To those students whose work appears in *Rethinking Writing* we have expressed our thanks individually, but we thank you wholeheartedly again.

We also appreciate the help and encouragement given us by Patrick Mannix and Donna Trivison of Dyke College and by the the students of Expository Writing 481 at Oberlin College during the last five years.

We further wish to thank the many colleagues from other institutions who served as reviewers of our manuscript at various stages. Almost without exception they provided advice and inspiration that resulted in a more effective end product. This group served as our "writers' community," the audience with whom we attempted to carry on our "ongoing conversation." Again, we thank the following: Chris Anderson, Oregon State University; Kathleen L. Bell, University of Central Florida; Christopher Gould, University of North Carolina-Wilmington; Stephen Hahn, William Paterson College; Maria Peoples Halio, University of Delaware; Maureen Hoag, Wichita State University; Gloria John, Catonsville Community College; David A. Jolliffe, University of Illinois at Chicago; William B. Lalicker, Murray State University; Elizabeth Larsen, West Chester University; Carolyn B. Matalene, University of South Carolina; Lisa J. McClure, Southern Illinois University; Lolly Ockerstrom, Northeastern University; James E. Porter, Purdue University; Richard N. Ramsey, Indiana University / Purdue University, Fort Wayne; Elizabeth Rankin, University of North Dakota; Mary Sauer, Indiana University/Purdue University, Indianapolis; Lucille M. Schultz, University of Cincinnati; Mary Trachsel, University of Iowa; Karen Vaught-Alexander, University of Portland; Irwin Weiser, Purdue University; James D. Williams, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; Michael M. Williamson, Indiana University of Pennsylvania; Randy Woodland, University of Michigan-Dearborn; Richard J. Zbaracki, Iowa State University.

Our sincere thanks also go to the editorial staff at Allyn and Bacon. We thank Joe Opiela for recognizing and encouraging whatever talent and experience we might have and for helping us channel it into a book of which we are truly proud. Joe managed both to support us and challenge us at the same time, and he was always ready to provide us with professional assistance. We also thank Brenda Conaway, who helped us negotiate the system, and Susannah Davidson, who was an invaluable aid as we brought the project to completion.

Lastly, we acknowledge each other and give thanks that our collaborations continue.

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# PART I Approaches to Writing

## Chapter $m{1}$

# Rethinking Writing

### SETTING GOALS: WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH IN YOUR COMPOSITION COURSE?

Rethinking Writing will encourage you to reconsider the wide spectrum of activities the word writing suggests—not only writing itself, but also thinking, reading, and listening. Many of the assignments and exercises you will be completing will allow you to place those activities within the various social contexts in which you write. Throughout the book, a major goal will be to enable you to develop the writing abilities you already have and to acquire new strategies for effective personal and academic writing.

#### Setting goals for yourself in your composition course is the first step in rethinking writing.

Throughout your life, writing can help you to achieve many of your goals, whether in school, in your career, or in your personal life. The first step toward improving your writing in your current composition course is to set goals for yourself as a writer.

To help you think about goal setting, read the following comments written by students in a first-year composition course at the start of the semester. The first student emphasizes that his goal of improving the way he organizes and expresses his ideas will heighten the impact of his writing:

One thing I hope to accomplish while enrolled in this course is to better organize how I write. I also want to further improve on being able to take thoughts and translate them into words that people can accurately interpret and understand. Furthermore, I would also like to strengthen the effects and influence that my writing has on other people. (Patrick Simmons)

The next two students, both of whom are business majors, comment on their hope that they will be better able to use writing in their jobs after taking a composition course:

In this course I would like to enhance my writing skills. The job I have now does not require very much writing, but occasionally I do have to compose a letter in my supervisor's absence. . . . I would also like to improve my grammar, which has never been my best subject. (Angelia Pearcy)

I hope to learn how I can improve my writing skills.... I write letters and draft pleadings every day during my working hours. Sometimes I can easily write a letter, but other times I can't seem to think of the words I want to express or get the point across.... Many times I wonder as I'm proofreading my draft if I should word this sentence this way or that way. (Barbara Bibro)

Finally, a student from Jamaica wishes to broaden his exposure to various writing styles in addition to improving his own:

Taking English 120 I am hoping to further develop my writing ability. I have come to realize that writing plays an important part in everyday life. I am also looking forward to learning new ideas and different styles of writing, and gaining new experiences and different ideas from my fellow students. My reason for this is because I was raised in a different culture and society where things are done differently. . . . I am looking forward to becoming a better writer. (Mervyn Campbell)

You can see some common threads in the comments these students have made: they all hope to develop their abilities as writers, and they all confirm the value of writing in their lives. Some see writing as a path to success, and others mention the value of writing as a tool for learning.

As you think about your own goals, consider the following questions:

- Has anyone advised you to take a writing course? If so, why?
- Will you be doing a lot of writing for your other courses?
- How might writing figure in your career plans? If you are already employed, how much writing do you do at work?
- Do you do much writing for yourself? Do you write letters to your friends or family? Do you keep a journal or diary?

**NOTE:** The exercises at the ends of most of the sections in this book will ask you to discuss further the ideas the chapter contains. Your instructor may ask you to write your answers in the form of journal entries or informal para-

graphs, and they may form the basis for class discussion as well. In many cases you will find that your responses to the exercises will be helpful in completing the suggestions for writing that also follow many of the sections.

#### **EXERCISE**

Referring to the questions in the preceding list, state your goals for this course. Please respond in some detail. Is the course required? If so, why do you think your institution requires such a course? If not, what were your particular reasons for electing to work on your writing?

You and your classmates may already have had some discussions regarding your goals in taking a composition course. If you have not already done so, take some time to write down your aspirations as you begin the course. Compare what you have written with the student comments that we have presented. Do you see any similarities or differences? If possible, read what you have written to the other students in your class, and compare your perspectives on the course.

LEARNING FROM ONE STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE

The following article originally appeared in the annual September "off to college" issue of *Seventeen*. Lisa Jervis, the writer, had previously served an internship at *Seventeen*, and when the editor needed an article from a "veteran" college student, she called Lisa and asked her to write one. The editor wanted Lisa to write something that might help brand-new students to relieve some of the stress associated with being in college. Here is the complete essay as it appeared in the magazine:

#### Freshman Frenzy: Major Anxiety

Lisa Jervis

Choosing a major? Easy. At the end of my first semester in college I marched into Professor Peterson's office, and when I marched out again about three minutes later, I was an official English major with a concentration in creative writing. I didn't have family members breathing down my neck telling me to be premed or anything. I didn't have professors discouraging me from pursuing my chosen field. I've never changed my major; I've never wanted to. No problem.

Not for me, anyway. A lot of people I know had just the opposite experience. Take my roommate, Rachel. Like most freshmen, she arrived on campus with absolutely no idea what she wanted to major in. She took classes in