

# TEXTS *and* CONTEXTS

*A Contemporary Approach to College Writing*



William S. Robinson • Stephanie Tucker

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## *A Contemporary Approach to College Writing*

Fourth Edition

William S. Robinson

*Emeritus, San Francisco State University*

Stephanie Tuck

*California State University, Sacramento*

SELL YOUR BOOKS DURING FINALS

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This book is dedicated to the memory of  
Susan Skov and Steve Stedman.  
Their students never had better teachers.

***One learns to write by writing and revising,  
not by consciously learning and rhetorically  
applying the "rules."***

***Robert J. Connors***

# *To the Student,*

or, What You've Gotten Yourself Into  
and How to Get Out of It

Here you are, after twelve years of school, and you're in still *another* English class, and you're probably thinking, "Now what?"

Meanwhile, your new English teacher is going to look at your first paper, which you are probably going to put a lot of work into and which you'll probably think is pretty good, and he or she is going to think, "How could anyone who's gone to school for twelve years write like this?"

And to make matters worse, the first time you and your fellow students hand in an essay test or a paper for some other college class, *that* teacher is going to groan, "Why don't they teach them to write anymore?"

On the one hand, the students are saying, "What's wrong with my writing anyway? Its always been okay before." And on the other hand, the teachers are saying, "This stuff is terrible. They can't even write a sentence."

What do we have here, a failure of communication?

I don't know whether it's going to make you feel any better about this or not, but college teachers have been complaining about their students' writing since people were dipping quill pens into little bottles of ink. And colleges have been running special writing classes for their weaker writers since long before you (or I) were born.

There are probably numerous reasons why college students don't write as well as their teachers think they ought to, but the main point is that for the most part they don't, and there are a few things you ought to know about this.

One is that the teachers are right; most students don't write as well as they should be able to.

Another is that if you think poor writing won't hold you back, you may be right, but there is a good chance that you're wrong. You can cast this proposition in the form of a bet, if you want. You can bet against needing to write fairly well; you can say, "Learning English is a pain, and I probably won't need it anyway, so why bother?" In this case, if you turn out to be wrong, you've lost the bet and suffered major financial and career disadvantages. Your poor writing has held you back from promotion or, in some cases, even employment in the first place.

Or you can bet the other way; you can say, "Learning English is a pain, but I might need it, so I better do it." In this case, if you turn out to be wrong (you didn't need to learn to write well after all), you haven't lost anything. But if you turn out to be right, you've gained a lot. So which bet makes more sense?

One of the mildly amusing things about all this from an English teacher's point of view is that in precisely the fields where the majority of students think writing is unimportant — business and engineering — the people who do the hiring think it's extremely important.

Anyway, regardless of how you bet, you still have to pass this course, so you might as well know what you're in for and why. This book is designed to help you improve your writing in certain very specific ways, for certain very specific reasons, and here's what they are.

First, the most important thing about writing is to be able to get your ideas across. Obviously. But that isn't always so easy. Someone once said, "Writing is God's way of showing you how sloppy your thinking is." So the main part of this book is a series of writing assignments like the ones you'll have to do in college, assignments in which you gather information either from personal observation or from readings, decide what you think the information means or shows, and then organize an essay to explain the issue and your ideas on it. You'll be working on summarizing, analyzing, classifying, comparing, and arguing, and you'll be working on organizing your ideas into coherent papers that will get them across. It is, literally, easier said than done.

Second, you'll be working on developing your sentences. A famous study of the writing of fourth graders, eighth graders, twelfth graders, and published writers showed a number of interesting differences among them. One difference was that as the writers got older and more experienced, their sentences got longer. The fourth graders wrote sentences averaging 13.5 words long, the eighth graders 15.9 words, the twelfth graders 16.9 words, and the published writers 24.7 words. (You might count the words in the sentences in a page of your writing and see where you come out.)

This doesn't mean that a long sentence is automatically better than a short one or that you should never write short sentences. It does mean that

more capable writers are able to say more in each sentence and have more different ways of doing so. In other words, better writers have more tools.

Besides that, writing that averages seventeen words a sentence is so childish and monotonous that it would drive you, as a reader, crazy in fifteen minutes. You do want mainly to communicate, but you also want someone else to be able to read it.

So a major part of this book consists of what are called "sentence-combining" exercises, which are designed not just to enable you to get more into your sentences, as professional writers do, but also to begin using certain kinds of structures that most inexperienced writers tend to use very infrequently. If you apply what you learn in these exercises to your own writing, you will start sounding on the page like an intelligent human being.

Finally, and most uninterestingly, if you are still making mistakes in matters that you should have learned by the seventh grade — stuff like using apostrophes correctly — this book provides the usual explanations and exercises. For God's sake, learn it.

No book or workbook, no explanations or exercises, can make anyone into a good, or even capable, writer. You can no more learn how to write by reading a book than you can learn how to ride a bicycle, water-ski, or fly a jet fighter by reading a book. Learning *how to do* anything requires someone there to help you, to show you the right techniques and correct you when you do something wrong. That's the teacher's job. It also requires a learner who wants to learn, who is willing to learn both from the teacher and from his or her own mistakes, someone who will try to make active use of the lessons given. That's your job. This is your big chance.

WSR

# *Preface: To the Instructor*

## **TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP**

What do we do when we write? We think about what we want to say, formulate some sort of plan or goal, and get at it. In the process, we employ what we know about English in general and written English in particular. Seeing flawed and inexperienced written texts, writing teachers used to think that the writer's main, or only, problem was error, and that the solution to that problem was to teach the writer grammar and the correction of errors. Of course, many writing teachers still advocate this approach.

But researchers in composition, linguistics, and psycholinguistics have found that this approach — which is now called the “bottom-up” approach — does not correspond with, to rephrase the question above, what we do when we write and so does not address the most basic difficulties writers have or the *sources* of their errors.

At least three sources of the writing problems that students encounter have been identified. One is the knowledge source — not knowing certain rules (and thus producing errors). A corollary of this is not using certain syntactic structures with the frequency competent writers use them (and thus producing choppy, monotonous, undeveloped sentences). A second is the process source — the writer's not understanding how capable writers work and therefore trying to write in unproductive ways, usually trying to pro-

duce perfect first drafts. Much has been written about these two sources, but somewhat less has been written about the third source, what we might call the text source.

Under one circumstance every basic writer faces, the text itself may be the source of numerous writing problems — everything from disorganized, undeveloped essays to errors of usage. That circumstance is *when the writer doesn't understand the characteristics of the text he or she is being asked to write*.

Students who have been put through drills in sentence structure, usage, and paragraph organization will still be completely at sea when asked to write an essay if they have no idea what an essay looks like — what its structural and substantive features are. Students who learn to write personal essays with competence characteristically fail at every level, from text to word, when required to write a piece of literary analysis. How can they not? They don't know what those texts look like.

The traditional solution to this problem has been the infamous five-paragraph essay, but the five-paragraph essay is not an example of academic, professional, or any other kind of writing, nor even a stepping stone to them, but merely a formula for getting words on paper.

Because doing exercises that do not involve communication is stultifying, because learning rules in a vacuum is fruitless, and because the text itself is a major source of problems for the inexperienced writer, it has become an axiom of current composition theory — as found, for instance, in Theresa Enos' *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers* — that we should tackle the job of teaching inexperienced writers in the same way writers write — from the top down — working on building meaning as a primary goal rather than attempting to extirpate errors first.

Yet most composition texts for basic writers still work from the contrary idea — that you can't write an essay until you can write a paragraph and that you can't write a paragraph until you can write certain esteemed kinds of sentences and that you can't even write those sentences until you have learned a lot of grammar. Thus, we find a bottom-up approach to a top-down activity.

An assumption of this book is, then, that if inexperienced writers are to learn to write essays, they must begin writing essays as soon as possible — that is, immediately — and that the part of the writing process most central to their learning is the one involving shaping the whole text. That is not to say that they won't need help at the lower levels; they will. And this text provides that help. It is to say that the traditional order of priorities has been reversed here.

## GETTING PERSONAL

A second assumption behind this book is that students in developmental writing courses are still college students. That means that they are being

assigned college-level readings and college-level writing tasks right away, depending to a limited extent on their majors and other curriculum requirements. What, then, are they to do in these other classes if their English curriculum defers until some later date their preparation for this work? Poorly prepared students need immediate help in doing college-level reading and writing.

A growing number of teachers has come to realize that we give these students the most effective help if we assign them not the traditional personal-experience essay, a form derived from the belletristic tradition, but essays more nearly of the kind they will be assigned in their other courses. There, characteristically, they must read and then write about their readings. They may have to summarize, analyze, synthesize, compare or contrast, figure out what they think and argue for it, discuss implications. They will be asked to make discoveries in fields alien to them and think about what those discoveries mean. In short, they will be asked to join the educational enterprise as the academic world defines it (not write five-paragraph essays).

And so the assignments in this book are based on readings or other data from which the student writers are asked to extract meanings and implications as the basis for their essays.

That does not mean that students must not draw on their own experience. It is surely a crucial part of their educations that students look at their own lives in the light of what they are learning, and so most assignments begin by asking them to think about questions related to the assignment that bear on their own experience. Additionally, some assignments require students to use what they know and can observe as an important part of their essays. The assignments vary considerably in this respect. But all emphasize making valid inferences about both the readings and the students' experiences.

## **WRITING TO WRITE OR WRITING TO LEARN**

Another salient characteristic of the writing assignments is that they involve writing to learn rather than merely writing for writing's sake. Too many textbooks suggest, for instance, "classification" assignments in which the writer categorizes students into types (always three) or describes three different kinds of friends — in one classic case, "best friends," "good friends," and "hi and bye friends." Never is there an indication of why one would want to do such a thing nor what one would learn from doing it, and so the result is invariably vacuous and formulaic, the counterfeit of writing.

In the assignments in this text, students use common thinking strategies — classifying, comparing, arguing, discussing — for genuine purposes.

- They may classify a typical list of contemporary jobs in order to find out what kinds of skills, training, and education the job market today and tomorrow will be asking for, or they may set up their

own research project to investigate ethnic or gender representation in Saturday morning children's television.

- They may compare American and Asian educational methods in order to learn the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to education and thus to look at their own experiences in school, or they may compare the treatment in school and at home of boys and girls in the light of genetic and learned gender differences.
- They may examine the arguments for and against handgun control or the U.S. English movement in order to decide for themselves on an informed basis how they stand.

*There is always a reason for the writing assignment and something to be learned by doing it.*

## CHALLENGE AND CONFIDENCE

It is a truism that the initial work in basic writing courses should, among other things, promote the confidence of student writers. No one performs well when he or she feels doomed to failure. The easy way to promote such confidence is to assign work that the student already knows how to do. Unhappily, such assignments do not promote learning.

Assignments must push students toward what Lev Vygotsky calls their "zone of proximal development" — that is, the next stage at which they can succeed *with help*. In short, from the very beginning, a skills course should work to edge the students' skill level ever higher. Consequently, this text includes enough assignments of every kind — both essay and sentence — that students can solidify in their new skill levels before they advance.

Some classes may need to spend more time in solidifying skills than others and so may not move as far through the book. In one of the courses we teach, the students take two full semesters to work through Chapter 5, while in another, many sections get into Chapter 6 in one semester. With the right pacing, all students begin to develop a strong sense that they can do college-level work.

## ERROR'S ENDLESS TRAIN

Linguists have known for many decades that native speakers of English have mastered pretty much the entire grammar of English by the time they are four years old. This grammar is, of course, the grammar of speech rather than that of writing, but while the two differ in ways that may seem more or less obtrusive, depending on the spoken dialect, these grammars are, for all practical purposes — such as communication — virtually identical. If they weren't, we wouldn't be able to understand one another.

As we noted earlier, inexperienced writers face the problem that because the cognitive demands of written communication are so great, they may have difficulty using the grammar they know and so produce ungrammatical structures. A second problem is that they may use structures grammatical in speech but not in writing. And finally, and much more frequently and obtrusively, they usually demonstrate degrees of unfamiliarity with written usages, the kinds of things covered in handbooks and workbooks (and covered in Part III of this book). These elements, however, should not be confused with grammar.

In writing there are “errors” of omission as well as errors of commission, the kind of “error” represented by choppy, childish syntax. As Kellogg Hunt noted many years ago, while inexperienced writers use the same syntactic structures used by experienced writers, they don’t use them as frequently. Even a fourth grader will turn up with an occasional appositive phrase, but the frequency of appositives in published writing will be scores of times greater.

Sentence combining, though no panacea, is helpful in dealing with many of the difficulties outlined above, and research strongly suggests that it is particularly effective with developmental writers. A consistent program of sentence combining, one in which the students do exercises one or more times a week, helps develop fluency and consequently a greater ability to produce grammatical structures. If properly designed, it can also promote the use of structures — such as concessive clauses, appositives, and verbal phrases — that inexperienced writers rarely use, structures that not only add texture to writing but also tend to promote more mature thinking.

Usage errors are another matter, and that is what the workbook section is for, though again it is important for the teacher to distinguish between usage errors that crop up as production problems and those that are truly knowledge problems. For knowledge errors, explanations and exercises are essential. For process errors, only practice and help in proofreading will do. (For a complete discussion of the different kinds and sources of error, see my article “Towards a Theory of Error” in the September 1998 *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, reprinted in the Instructor’s Manual.)

## WRITING PROCESS, TEACHING PROCESS

As a result of the work of Nancy Sommers and others, we now understand that “the writing process” is not a linear, step-by-step affair, beginning, say, with invention activities, proceeding to an outline, moving on through various drafts, and winding up with proofreading, each step discrete and individual. We know that writers actually work in a much messier and more recursive fashion, one that involves these activities but tends to conflate them.

While this knowledge is very important to us as writing teachers, it is not necessarily very helpful to us as *basic* writing teachers. Learning special-

ists have also shown us that when we learn a new activity we go through (among others) three basic stages:

1. Ignorance of how to perform the activity
2. Ability to perform it only by closely following rules or directions
3. Ability to perform it without reference to rules or directions

Moreover, it is impossible to go directly from stage 1 to stage 3. Inexperienced writers, writers who may think, for example, that the way writers write is to sit down and produce polished, finished articles and stories, must have guidance, “rules” even, to help them achieve workable composing processes. Both Chapter 1 and the writing assignments in Chapters 3 through 6 attempt to give that guidance without being excessively prescriptive and linear. Still, carefully taking classes through recognizable steps in the process helps students to begin finding themselves as writers.

## **Examples of Student Writing**

There are a number of examples of student writing in the text. They are used to demonstrate key points and as readings. You will find these examples in

- Chapter 2 (Student Writers at Work)
- Chapter 3 “We’ve Come a Long Way, but Magazines Stayed Behind”
- Chapter 4 “School Here in the United States and There in Vietnam”

In addition, the revised Instructor’s Manual includes more examples of student writing, should you wish to use them in the course.

## **New to This Edition**

- Twelve new readings on such topics as hot jobs for graduates, free speech on campus, single parenting, gun control, and child care.
- Updated and revised sentence-combining exercises throughout.

## **Teaching Aids**

### ***Print Supplements***

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- **Instructor’s Manual** (0-534-50774-3). This edition has been revised to provide additional help, particularly to new users. It includes more examples of student writing, background and information on the elements of the text and how to use them, a sample course outline, a journal article on the approach of this text,

chapter-by-chapter strategies for teaching the writing assignments, and teaching tips for using the Workbook.

- **Newbury House Dictionary** (0-8384-5613-8). Make this developmental-level dictionary available to your students at a reduced cost by bundling it with this textbook. Contact your sales representative for information about this option.

### ***Electronic and Online Supplements***

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- **Web Site.** Visit Wadsworth's Developmental English web site at <http://www.devenglish.wadsworth.com>.
- **The Wadsworth Developmental English Internet-at-a-Glance Trifold** (0-534-54744-3). This handy guide shows your students where to find online reading and writing resources. Package this trifold card with any Wadsworth Developmental English textbook for a small cost. Contact your local Wadsworth representative for more information.
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