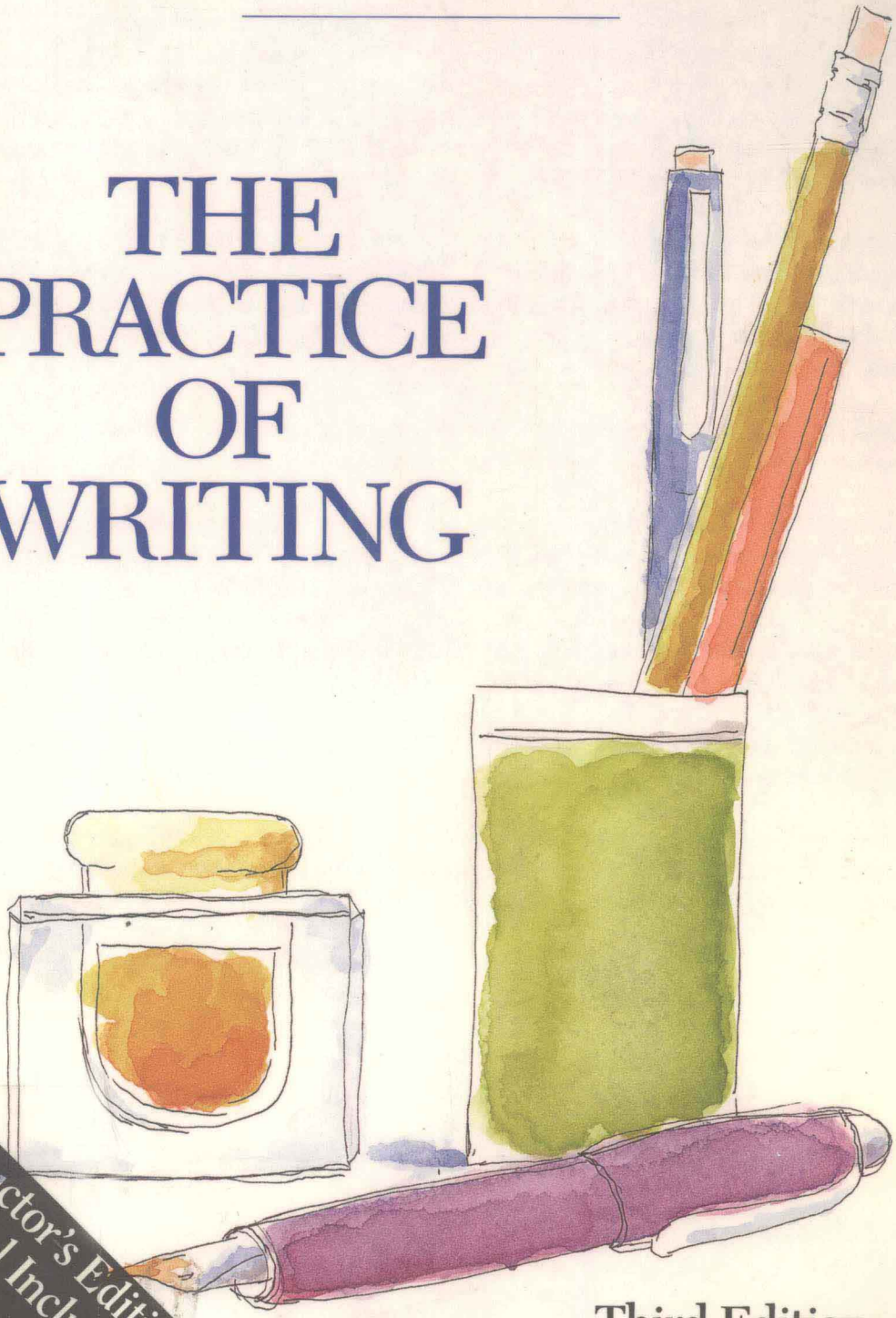
ROBERT SCHOLES
NANCY R. COMLEY

THE PRACTICE OF WRITING



Third Edition

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To Our Students,
who have taught us so much

Practice, practice. Put your hope in that.
W. S. MERWIN

Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

ROBERT FROST

Give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth.

OSCAR WILDE

First question: who is speaking? Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives from it his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true? What is the status of the individuals who—alone—have the right, sanctioned by law or tradition, juridically defined or spontaneously accepted, to proffer such a discourse?

MICHEL FOUCAULT

In our society, and probably in all others, capacity to bring off an activity as one wants to—ordinarily defined as the possession of skills—is very often developed through a kind of utilitarian make-believe. The purpose of this practicing is to give the neophyte experience in performing under conditions in which (it is felt) no actual engagement with the world is allowed, events having been "decoupled" from their usual embedment in consequentiality. Presumably muffing or failure can occur both economically and instructively. What one has here are dry runs, trial sessions, run-throughs—in short, "practicings."

ERVING GOFFMAN

A man knowing little or nothing of medical science could not be a good surgeon, but excellence at surgery is not the same thing as knowledge of medical science; nor is it a simple product of it. The surgeon must indeed have learned from instruction, or by his own inductions and observations, a great number of truths; but he must also have learned by practice a great number of aptitudes. Even where efficient practice is the deliberate application of considered prescriptions, the intelligence involved in putting the prescriptions into practice is not identical with that involved in intellectually grasping the prescriptions. There is no contradiction, or even paradox, in describing someone as bad at practising what he is good at preaching. There have been thoughtful and original literary critics who have formulated admirable canons of prose style in execrable prose. There have been others who have employed brilliant English in the expression of the silliest theories of what constitutes good writing.

GILBERT RYLE

P R E F A C E

The way to write better is to write more—but not alone, not aimlessly, not without guidance and encouragement. This text is designed to facilitate the tasks of those engaged in learning and teaching about writing. It has been composed by two teachers who are themselves committed to writing as both a field of study and an occupation.

Our philosophy of composition is implicit in the epigraphs we have chosen for our book. As Frost says about all deeds, writing must be work *and* play, both serious *and* joyful, if it is to be done well. Any text in writing, then, must preserve the joy of composition for those who use it, even while providing the work that needs to be done.

We also believe, with Wilde, in the usefulness of masks. Nowhere in all their work are students so vulnerable as in their writing classes. Nowhere do they feel their personalities, their very selves, so open to criticism of a very painful sort. If the style is the person, to criticize the style is to wound the individual behind it. Many of our assignments are designed to free students from the burden of self by offering them personae, voices, and roles already chosen for their suitability to a given form of writing. The true self of a writer must be given space to grow in and should be protected while growing.

There is a public dimension to writing, as well. As Michel Foucault reminds us, certain forms of writing accompany certain social, economic, and political roles. In a society that encourages self-development and economic mobility, the skills of language—and foremost among them, writing—are the major path to advancement, whether personal, professional, or social. The language games and writing exercises presented here must be undertaken with the awareness that each individual's ability to develop and function socially will depend partly on the compositional skills of that individual. Our play at writing is for "mortal stakes" indeed.

Yet it is still play—what Goffman calls "utilitarian make-believe." In writing classes students are "neophytes" engaged in "dry runs, trial sessions . . . 'practicings'." As Gilbert Ryle points out, we learn some things by instruction, but the actual doing of anything must be learned by practice. For that reason we have provided models for analysis and discussion, short exercises for the classroom, and a range of longer assignments for homework papers. We take our motto from W. S. Merwin: "Practice, practice. Put your hope in that."

Users of previous editions may be interested in knowing exactly what we changed in the present edition and why we did so. Here is a quick sum-

mary of our thinking. Reviewing the reports and surveys from adopters and taking into account what we heard from instructors using the book at Queens College, we decided that people in general liked our shorter readings more than the longer ones, and that in general they wanted to get quickly through the first four chapters and into what they perceived as more consequential forms of writing. Accordingly, we streamlined the first four chapters a bit. From Chapter 1 we cut three practices that were getting little use. In Chapter 2, Expression, we replaced the Handke piece, which people found difficult, with a practice oriented to three visual works of art, and we cut the longest material, the Hemingway story and its related practice. Chapter 3, Reflection, seemed to us very tight already, and so we simply made slight revisions in two of the practices. Chapter 4 was too long, and a couple of items were getting very little use; we cut them, making the Direction chapter much tighter.

Three of the next four chapters were getting good use and good ratings, but one, Narration, was perceived as the weakest in the whole book, and we concentrated on it. Chapter 5, Persuasion, was judged one of our most successful, and so we made very minor revisions in one practice, and we updated the résumé practice. Chapter 6 got a thorough revision. We cut five of the readings and their attendant practices, and we wrote a new introduction for the Narration chapter, using it to lead into a new first set of readings and practices. These very short narrative passages are from the same four books used at the beginning of the Description chapter, and each is carefully framed with an introduction and with questions and exercises. We follow this with the Stephen Crane material on biographical narrative, which ties in with our other Crane material (in Chapters 10 and 11), and we moved to the end of the chapter the imaginative narrative of Cortázar, which we expect to get more use in this new arrangement. We think the revised Narrative chapter is much stronger as well as considerably shorter.

We also made a few changes in Chapter 7, Description, to take advantage of the revised Narration material. Chapter 7 now begins with the four descriptive passages from the same novels used in Chapter 6, and we hope that instructors will capitalize on this new continuity between the two chapters. To strengthen this, we moved the Hogarth exercise to the middle of the chapter, but we left the rest of this successful chapter alone. Chapter 8, Classification, was also deemed very tight and quite successful, and we left it unchanged.

The Argumentation material in Chapter 9 got major revision last time around and was clearly more successful in the Second Edition, but we have tried to strengthen it again. First, we took the Plato exercise—which seemed to frighten people more than we thought it would—and moved it to the last position, where challenge is expected. Then we cut the exercise using baseball statistics, which got very little use, and we added another

pro/con section, since this idea was well received by users of the book. The problem was to find something that would not require a lot of expertise, and our solution was to insert two pieces on bilingual education—an issue that should be around for a while—and to set up a practice that enables students to argue either side of the case. These readings are shorter than the ones about crime and punishment, which we kept because they were used heavily. We assume that instructors will choose between the crime issue and the education issue, or will give students a choice. Thus, we have enlarged the Argumentation chapter a bit.

Analysis, Chapter 10 is also slightly enlarged. We have added one new reading here, President Reagan's second inaugural address. We accompany this with a set of questions like those asked about President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural, in the Persuasion chapter, and we then offer a practice in comparison and contrast of the two speeches—which are, in fact, more alike than many people expect. We also have replaced the sample analysis of an advertisement with a new one that we think will be at least as effective and as interesting.

In Chapter 11, Synthesis, we open with a major new project based on photographs, with plenty of verbal material to stimulate thinking and help students generate ideas about photography, along with a strong selection of photographs on which to base their papers. We added some new material to the project on working; the journalism project did not work well and has been dropped. The section on Stephen Crane is a strong project and is well integrated with other material in the book, and so we kept it as it was. The last project, on the elegy, has always worked well; we kept it, only removing some of the older elegies and adding pieces by living poets, including W. S. Merwin's marvelous "Elegy."

In all these changes we paid careful attention to what our reviewers were telling us. In particular we appreciate the guidance offered by Thomas C. Bailey, Western Michigan University; Stephen A. Bernhardt, New Mexico State University; John Burt, Brandeis University; James V. Catano, Tulane University; Stefan Fleischer, State University of New York, Buffalo; Richard Lid, California State University, Northridge; Elisa Sparks, Clemson University; Harold Sunshine, Broome Community College; and Wayne Warncke, Virginia Polytechnic & State University. In addition we appreciate the questionnaires completed by Heidi A. Mintz, Kathleen Pfeiffer, Gary D. Pratt, and Elizabeth H. Sagaser of Brandeis University; by Ann Avery of Central Wyoming College; by Scott Dalrymple, John Dings, Mike Freeman, Sheri I. Hoem, Bruce Holsapple, Jan Lakin, Susan G. Nygaard, Jim Pangborn, Daniel G. Payne, Margo A. Penman, Jennifer Swift, and Kim Turnage of State University of New York, Buffalo; and by Susan A. Ariew and Nancy Coughlin of Virginia Polytechnic & State University.

As always, special thanks go to our colleagues and students at Brown

University and Queens College of the City University of New York. Our experiences with them over the first two editions have taught us a lot about what our strengths and weaknesses are, which encouraged and enabled us to make the right kind of changes this time. Teachers and students who use the Third Edition will doubtless let us know whether we are right about this.

R.S./N.R.C.

About
THE PRACTICE OF WRITING

This book is devoted to the *practice* of writing. It presents more opportunities for writing—"practices," as we call them—than anything else. The book also contains numerous "readings." This is so because we believe that, just as talking is based on listening, and drawing is based on looking, writing is based on reading. The readings in this book are not meant to be put upon pedestals and admired, however admirable they may be. They are there to be worked with and responded to—in writing. They are there to be transformed, imitated, analyzed, argued with, and incorporated into new writing by the students who use this book.

Actually, there is more material here than anyone could possibly use in a single quarter or semester. The reason for this abundance is to provide instructors with options, choices, flexibility. After the first chapter, which is introductory, the writing opportunities move from the personal to the more impersonal and academic. The weight of the book, however, falls upon the more academic or scholastic kinds of writings, the forms and processes required for college courses. Thus, the last four chapters move from classification and argument to the kinds of analytic and synthetic writing required in research papers.

Obviously, we think that work in all the forms of writing is useful, or we would not have included them all in the book. But we understand also that there are many reasons why an instructor may wish to touch only lightly on the materials in Parts Two and Three, in order to concentrate heavily on Part Four. The book is designed to allow for this emphasis. There is, in fact, more material in every part than would be needed if all the parts were emphasized equally. The instructor will find that this text will support any emphasis that he or she chooses to make, though we have anticipated an emphasis on argument, analysis, and synthesis, providing the greatest depth in those chapters.

Within each chapter we present a particular form of writing, beginning with the most basic kinds of practice and moving toward more extended and demanding assignments. Using the chapter introduction, the first reading/practice set, and one further set will allow an instructor to treat a particular chapter without lingering over it for too long; there is enough variety so that the second assignment can be chosen to suit the interests and capabilities of a given class.

Although we think the order in which we present the forms of writing in this book makes sense, we have tried not to be dogmatic. The forms of writing may in fact be covered in any order, so long as the arrangement

leads to synthesis at the end. In the chapter on synthesis, we have provided sufficient material so that library research is not necessary, but many of the suggested assignments there can be expanded and enriched by library work if the instructor desires it.

It is our conviction that writing is a form of thought and that thinking is a pleasurable activity. Have fun.