

# THINKING IN WRITING

• Third Edition •



Donald McQuade & Robert Atwan

# *Thinking in Writing*

Third Edition

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Third Edition

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FOR

*Max Anthony Maxwell*

# Preface

*Thinking in Writing*, Third Edition, is designed to help students overcome two of the most frustrating obstacles to effective and productive writing: getting ideas and developing them. Writing instructors have long noted that a major part of their students' difficulties with composition derives from these two problems. Students often complain that it takes them an unendurably long time to think of "something to say" so that they can begin writing and that once they've finally begun they discouragingly "run out of things to say" very quickly. For many students, then, the act of writing becomes a physically and mentally exhausting cycle of getting started and getting stuck.

This book—through its methods and models—offers a practical approach to the ever-difficult task of finding ideas and developing them in composition. A large part of the problem we all face in trying to write fluently and intelligently is not how we think or how we write but rather how we handle the continuous interplay between both activities while composing. If our tendency is to wait patiently for ideas to come to us fully expressed and "paper ready," we will sooner or later come to view composition as a kind of mental torture. We may never get started. On the other hand, if our tendency is to slap down whatever ideas come into our heads without paying attention to the structural patterns that can be generated from them, our compositions will always remain haphazard and undeveloped—a mental torture to our readers.

Clearly, if we're the type of person who likes to see solid results

after spending a reasonable amount of time at our desk writing, we need to become conscious of how the interaction of thinking and writing can remarkably improve our motivation and momentum. We need to learn how we can extend and develop our ideas by seeing how small segments of writing contain the germ of larger organizational units. We need to see how a thought pattern can lead to an essay structure, how single words and metaphors can sometimes shape an entire piece of writing. And, most importantly, we need to trust our own intelligence; we need to relax into our own eloquence.

The main instructional principle of this book can be stated quite simply: we think most rigorously and productively when we make the effort to put our thoughts down in writing, and we write most fluently and maturely when we recognize the underlying patterns of our thinking. In the chapters that follow, thinking and writing will be considered as interrelated mental processes that stimulate and reinforce each other. So closely intertwined are these two indispensable human activities that the writer and educator Carlos Baker claims quite simply: "Learning to write is learning to think."

In one respect, this book runs counter to a deeply rooted idea about the relationship between thought and language. We are accustomed to consider thinking as a kind of internalized, preparatory activity and writing as its external, finished expression. Our very language constantly reinforces this venerable notion; we speak quite casually of "expressing an idea" or "putting our thoughts into words." The assumption, of course, is that our thoughts and ideas truly exist in some formidable fashion *before* they exist in words. This may be so. But the question we should be in the habit of asking ourselves when we write is: Do we really know what we want to say before we actually say it? That is one of the tough, basic questions that pertains to the contemporary study of rhetoric and it is one that has fairly recently begun to occupy the attention of psycholinguists and other theorists whose concern is primarily with the deep connections between mental and verbal behavior. For the purposes of this book, however, we want to encourage writers to consider this question from a practical point of view. What are the benefits of working as though thinking were not a preparatory activity but rather one that can and does proceed *simultaneously* with writing? In other words, what are the benefits of learning to do our thinking *in* writing? In this respect, consider the wisdom of Gertrude Stein's advice on trying to make meaning in composition: "You will write if you will write without thinking of the results in terms of a result, but think of the



writing in terms of discovery, which is to say that creation must take place between the pen and the paper, not before in a thought or afterwards in a recasting. Yes, before in a thought, but not in careful thinking." The instructional design of *Thinking in Writing*, especially in the early sections, will help students explore both the potential of thinking in writing as well as the practical benefits to be gained by focusing their attention on the interaction between what is going on in their heads and what is happening on paper.

Obviously, anyone who tries to think about thinking is on shaky ground. Though human beings have been having thoughts for presumably well over two million years, no one really knows for certain exactly what thinking is. This book does not intend to come up with a solution to that ultimate philosophical problem. But just as we can ride a bicycle without being able to say exactly how we do it, so too we can think—and sometimes do so incessantly—without knowing precisely how it happens. Throughout this book, thinking will be considered not in an abstract, theoretical fashion but in a concrete, operational way. It will also be regarded as a wide-ranging mental activity that includes far more than the power of logical reasoning. To be sure, reasoning is one of the principal types of thinking (it will be treated at some length in the section entitled "Argument") and is usually what we first think of when we think about thinking. Yet cognitive behavior encompasses a broad spectrum of activities. Surely we are thinking when we discover interrelations between dissimilar ideas; when we find resemblances in seemingly disparate things; when we perceive sequential arrangements; when we move back and forth between our observations and inferences or between the abstract and the concrete, the general and the specific; when we recognize similar ideas within different contexts; when we sift relevant points from extraneous material, and so on. Quite clearly, our capacity to think involves many different operations, just as does our ability to walk, see, or feel.

*Thinking in Writing* responds to both the growing concern for the mental development of college students and the professional need to combine a systematic introduction to rhetoric with the actualities of the writing process. The book demonstrates in accessible language how familiar rhetorical structures can stimulate the production of thoughts to the point where they will do us the most good—as words on paper. From there, once we can see, read, and rethink our thoughts, we will find ourselves in a position to use the structures and strategies that will help us shape and extend those thoughts into

coherent essays. The book's organization represents a traditional approach to rhetoric, placed within the context of some of the most distinguished theoretical and practical work done in the fields of composition and cognitive studies. In this respect, the particular arrangement of material in *Thinking in Writing* continuously highlights the interconnectedness—in fact, the simultaneity—of thinking and writing. This overriding interest in the relation of rhetoric to the overlapping processes of thinking and writing is apparent in the scope of the book and helps determine the distinctive order of the following sections.

**Generating Ideas.** This section tackles the fundamental problems of getting our thinking and writing started and reminds writers of the opportunities various types of informal and fragmentary prose can offer. While all the selections in the book are meant to activate thinking and writing, those in the first two chapters, on "*Exploring Key Words*" and "*Making Metaphors*," focus on words as the center of composition. Working with the denotations and connotations of individual key words and trying out metaphors represent two practical procedures for generating ideas and getting preliminary thoughts about a subject down on paper where they can start working for us.

**Shaping Ideas.** This section features two basic patterns of thinking that help shape ideas and make writing possible—the intellectual rhythms of *observation and inference*, *abstract and concrete*. An understanding of these primary mental operations can help writers establish a controlling idea about a subject and prepare the way for more extended compositions.

**Developing Sequences.** Writers frequently develop ideas by tracking our familiar patterns of thinking that depend on spatial, temporal, and causal sequences. What follows what, Where? When? How? and Why? These are instinctive human concerns that appear to have an underlying basis in thinking and language. This section shows how *description*, *narration*, *process analysis*, and *cause and effect* function in the production and arrangement of our thoughts and compositions.

**Clarifying Ideas.** Clarity and distinctness—these are two rock-bottom criteria by which people have always judged the effectiveness of thought. In this section, we examine the mental and rhetorical



workings of *definition, classification, and illustration*. Mastery of these mental processes will help us avoid vagueness and confusion; their skillful rhetorical management will help us refine our ideas and arrange them into the larger structures of paragraphs and essays.

**Discovering Resemblances.** According to Jacob Bronowski, "the discoveries of science, the works of art are explorations—more, are explosions—of a hidden likeness." This section concentrates on how mapping our resemblances through *comparison and contrast* as well as *analogy* can stimulate our thinking and immeasurably extend the context of our ideas. These two procedures can help us move beyond the initially perceived limits of our thinking and supply us with larger structures in and through which we can make unexpected connections, uncover differences, and explore similarities.

**Making Claims.** As speakers and writers, we are continually making claims, some of which we back up with inductive and deductive reasoning and some of which we support with ethical, emotional, or authoritative appeals. In this section, the rhetorical procedures of *argument* and *persuasion* are examined separately in order to show the different types of logical reasoning involved in each and the organizational strategies commonly used to gain an audience's assent and consent.

The organization of *Thinking in Writing* has been designed to allow composition classes to cover traditional rhetorical territory, to concentrate on the interaction of thinking and writing, and to try out some well-tested methods for getting thoughts started and essays launched. Yet, because instruction necessarily proceeds sequentially, it is difficult to reflect the simultaneous, overlapping nature of various cognitive and rhetorical skills. Obviously, each category and procedure included in the following sections deserves to be studied and practiced both in isolation and in conjunction with other categories and procedures—most especially with a good deal of healthy attention to rethinking and rewriting what we want to say. Aside from the first two sections, the book's organization is not intended to reflect any *necessary* sequence of rhetorical modes and strategies. The book's organization does offer, however, a reasonable instructional order based on expected difficulty, the level of cognitive ability required, and the syllabi of many introductory composition courses.

To accomplish its instructional purposes, *Thinking in Writing* contains the following main features:

- An accessible blend of classic and contemporary selections that represent an appealing cross-disciplinary spread and that are arranged within each section according to length and increasing complexity
- Fifteen detailed, “how-to” introductions that provide thorough coverage of basic rhetorical and compositional procedures
- Sets of discussion questions for each selection that build in increasing difficulty and place specific reading skills and responses in the context of thinking and writing
- A set of “Additional Rhetorical Strategies” for nearly every selection—designed to highlight the realistic mixture of rhetorical forms that marks most good writing
- A convenient glossary that defines the critical terms most commonly used to discuss writing styles and strategies

In addition, prior to each selection, an informative headnote supplies significant biographical details and directs attention to relevant compositional elements.

To underscore the practical, realistic purposes of *Thinking in Writing*, we have added another rhetorical feature to this new edition. Each rhetorical section is introduced by a selection from Lewis Thomas, the celebrated American physician and essayist. Our intention is to show students that writers are not characterized by a single dominant rhetorical mode but are able to adopt different organizational strategies from essay to essay. Since such rhetorical changes are expected of students in most writing courses, we thought it only fair that they have an opportunity to observe a single writer moving from one form to another. To make the selections more useful, each Lewis Thomas essay is preceded by a brief consideration of his rhetorical goals and is followed by a longer, paragraph-by-paragraph discussion of how those goals are achieved. We trust that such “hands on” coverage of one writer’s methods will help bridge the instructional gap that usually exists between a section introduction’s discussion of a rhetorical form and the several readings that illustrate it.

This book will have succeeded if students view clear-headed thinking and effective writing as far more manageable, more “do-able” activities than they may now be inclined to consider them. Thinking, after all, is a basic need—“reason’s need,” the philosopher Hannah Arendt calls it. And writing, too, is a need—a powerful social

and professional one. Neither activity should feel particularly strange to anyone; we use practically all of the rhetorical procedures discussed and demonstrated in this book in our “off-duty” language every day. To be sure, learning to write well requires the conscious mastery of these time-honored rules and procedures. That is an educational fact that nearly everyone who wants to learn how to write must face up to. But the act of writing doesn’t begin with the mastery of basic compositional skills. It begins, quite simply, with something far more fundamental and broadly human: the stubborn itch to think for ourselves and the corresponding urge to say something that means something.

Donald McQuade

Robert Atwan

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