# Rewriting Writing ARHETORIC

O RAY MCCUEN | ANTHONY C. WINKLER

# Rewriting Writing

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### Preface

The principal aim of this book is to teach writing as rewriting. It assumes that all good writing has been rewritten, and it sets out to systematically teach students not only how to write, but also how to rewrite their work. We categorize the rewriting process into revising, editing, and proof-reading because experience teaches that students often confuse these three distinct stages, believing, for example, that to proofread (catch a spelling error here and there) is the same as to revise.

Rewriting Writing: A Rhetoric comes in two versions, hardback and paperback. The hardback version contains a handbook that covers familiar matters of grammar, syntax, and mechanics; the paperback is identical to the hardback, except that it has no handbook. Both versions of this text are divided into four sections, each of which emphasizes the writing and rewriting of some element of the essay.

Part I focuses on the *process* of prewriting, the back and forth movement of nearly constant revision that writers make to an initial plan. Part II covers the familiar range of rhetorical modes as helpful structures that students may use in the writing and rewriting process. Part III focuses on sentences, while Part IV emphasizes the argumentative essay, the literary paper, the essay exam, and the research paper. An appendix of proofreader's marks is included along with an explanation of what they mean. Here we have also included several students' essays along with guidelines for evaluating them.

This text teaches how to rewrite not merely by an exposition of theory, but through real-world examples of students' revisions. Indeed, its heavy reliance on students' works and models is an important feature of the

book. Every point we make about writing is underscored by a student's example. Every chapter, every major section ends with a student's paragraph or essay in at least two drafts: the first, a rough draft of the work with our marginal annotations indicating its weaknesses and mistakes; the second, the finished paper with corrections and revisions made by the writer. We do this throughout the text and in our exercises, giving students ample opportunity to develop an editorially critical eye and to perfect their revising skills.

Some of the student written material used in this book was taken from *The Polishing Cloth,* a faculty-supervised collection of student essays published by Dekalb Community College, Georgia. An ambitious magazine that gives students a well-deserved outlet for expository writing done to satisfy class assignments, *The Polishing Cloth* has proven to be a useful pedagogical tool as well as a medium in which the superior efforts of beginning essayists may be acknowledged.

We are grateful to the following students for allowing us to use various drafts of their work in our book: Byron T. Barnes, John Greene, William Funsten, Gwen Ashby, Eric Ernst, Larry James, Sandra Capparell, Joann Andrejka, Gary Brochette, Norma Collins, Stephen Davey, Brict Wom Dong, Nancy Demaagd, Bryant Ewing, Anthony Gendal, Kathy Greer, Mary Lu Hauser, Robin L. Kusiak, Susan Leonard, Betty Netupsky, Suzanne Ozawa, Kathy Redman, Jjion An Thung, Jennifer Travers, Michael Wilds, and Gwen Wright.

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ANTHONY C. WINKLER AND TO RAY McCUEN

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# PART ONE

# Prethinking and Prewriting the Whole Essay

# Chapter One

## Writing and Rewriting

Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying.

JOHN UPDIKE (b.1932)

At 37,000 feet the Lockheed L-1011 was flying from Chicago to Atlanta through a violent thunderstorm. Crammed into the center aisle of seats was a nervous instructor of English and, beside him, a student on her way back to school after a long weekend. Oblivious to the shuddering of the aircraft in the dark night, the student coolly took out a yellow legal pad, neatly outlined an essay, and began to write.

She was finished by the time the L-1011 had shaken itself loose of the storm and was rocking gently in the night sky seven miles above a speck of light the captain had identified as Louisville. Casting her eyes around the cabin at her fellow passengers, the student noticed the instructor watching her and struck up a conversation with him. It was plain to the instructor that she was proud of her freshly composed work and wanted to share it with someone, and since he was fascinated that anyone could even dream of writing under such nerve-wracking conditions, he eagerly accepted the invitation to read her essay.

When he was done, the instructor decided that produced under unthinkable conditions—in bad light aboard a crowded aircraft bouncing through a thunderstorm—the essay was a brilliant effort. But read on the good earth during a placid hour, it would rate at best a "C." Its main point was clear enough but supported only by weak generalizations and trite de-

tails. Its paragraphs seemed choppy, being held together neither by a strong narrative thread in the writing nor by smooth transitions. While the language occasionally sparkled with the personality of the writer, for the most part it was drab and obvious. In short, the essay was glib but not at all convincing.

"Do you like it?" the student asked, looking hopefully at her fellow passenger who, so far as she knew, could have been anyone from a plumber to a househusband.

Seven miles up in a stormy night sky aboard a crowded aircraft, the instructor reflected, was no place for academic criticism (prayer struck him as a better use of the time), so he said politely that it seemed like a "good first draft." The student heaved a heavy sigh at this faint praise.

"I'm in premed," she said with disappointment, putting the essay away. "I'm not a writer. It's the best I can do."

In fact, it was not her best effort, and only the belief in a mistaken theory of composing could have made the student think so. She seemed to think that writing an essay required little more than pen, paper, and fifteen makeshift minutes, even in a thunderstorm. She had made no attempt at rewriting, but had merely glanced at the finished work, made a spelling correction here and there, and then sat back radiating an expression of premature contentment. It struck the incredulous instructor, who was occasionally used to struggling for hours over a single paragraph, that a gifted writer working this way could hardly have done better. The student's essay was not badly written; but it had been written badly.

And so we come to the premise of this book, which is a simple one: if you write, you should rewrite. If you do not rewrite, you most likely will not write well. If you do rewrite, you will almost certainly write better than if you don't.

#### Why Rewrite?

Writers revise and edit their work for the simple reason that experience has taught that doing so will almost always make it better. You begin with a rough idea. You put it down on paper, perhaps in an explosion of inspiration. But if you then think you are done, you're mistaken: you've merely taken an exhilarating plunge on the tram down into the mine shaft. Hours of hard work still lie ahead. That is the labor of rewriting which nearly all writers who wish to perfect their work must practice.

Testimony to the truthfulness of this observation is common in literary history. Somerset Maugham, the English essayist and novelist, said of his style, which is regarded by many as effortlessly graceful, that "nature

seldom provides me with the word, the turn of phrase, that is appropriate without being farfetched or commonplace." Maugham admitted that he attained the effect of ease, if at all, "only by strenuous effort." Hemingway rewrote parts of *The Sun Also Rises* some seventeen times. The French writer Colette confessed to often spending an entire morning working on a single page. Then there is this poignant anecdote by Mark Twain, a writer whose homespun prose often strikes our ear as unaffectedly natural:

I began a story which was to turn upon the marvels of mental telegraphy. A man was to invent a scheme whereby he could synchronize two minds, thousands of miles apart, and enable them to freely converse together through the air without the aid of wire. Four times I started it in the wrong way and it wouldn't go. Three times I discovered my mistake after writing about a hundred pages. I discovered it the fourth time when I had written four hundred pages—then I gave it up and put the whole thing in the fire.

-The Autobiography of Mark Twain, ed. by Charles Neider.

The hard fact is this: Even for the gifted, writing is neither automatic nor easy. A writer's work may read with an effortless grace, but it is wrong to assume that the style cost no effort. What you read on the page as you lounge in a cushioned chair is hardly ever what the writer composed at one sitting. Most good writing is as laboriously cultivated as any drought-stricken farmer's crop and just as dependent on ceaseless labor mixed in with an occasional rain of inspiration.

We bring this up because students, like the one on the plane, often give up too quickly on their writing. Appearing in all its polished glory, the printed page too glibly conveys the mistaken impression that it sprang untouched from the writer's pen. Some such pages no doubt have sprung from writer's pens, but from our own have come no more than one or two in decades of writing. In the more ordinary course of events, a writer begins with a very rough first draft, which is made better only after repeated stabs at rewriting. Yet many students share the universal delusion that if they cannot write a flawless essay at one sitting it means that they cannot write at all. But the truth is that writers can no more be judged by their first drafts than books by their covers. Typically, almost all first drafts are insipid and unpublishable.

For example, here is a good student paragraph. It is clearly written and carries out a sharp sense of purpose with an unfaltering touch. As an experiment, we asked the student who wrote it as part of a paper on Arthur Conan Doyle—the creator of Sherlock Holmes—to save her successive drafts for us. Here is the paragraph as it finally appeared in her paper.

From the first. Conan Doyle tried to give his characters their own idiosyncrasies, strengths and weaknesses that would make them react humanly in all their adventures. creation of Dr. John Watson, the narrator for all of Sherlock Holmes' adventures, gives us a classic example of how he accomplished this. Watson was actually a composite of two men Doyle had known during his service in the South Seas. The first was a Dr. James H. Watson, who had been a close friend and whose slightly modified name became the character of whom Doyle wrote. "Good old Watson! You are the one fixed point in a changing age." Before lending his narrator the name of the real Dr. Watson, Doyle had called him "Orman Sacker," which he later rejected because he sensed that it "smacked of dandyism." The second person of whom the fictional Dr. Watson was made was another close friend of Doyle from his South Seas days. name was Major Wood, and it was from him that Doyle took his physical description of Watson with, "the square jaw, thick neck, moustache, burly shoulder and indeterminate bullet wound." Although Wood later became Conan Doyle's secretary, he is remembered today mainly for the image he gave the redoubtable Dr. Watson, the most famous of narrators in the detective story.