The Random House Handbook

FIFTH EDITION

Frederick Crews

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Frederick Crews
University of California, Berkeley

RANDOM HOUSE NEW YORK

Fifth Edition
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again and always

Preface

The Random House Handbook has been around for quite a while, but instead of aging gracefully, it is only getting friskier. Of five editions, this latest one marks the boldest departure from its predecessor.

To be sure, the *Handbook* retains its distinctive outlook and tone. It still treats the student writer as a colleague, sharing a common struggle for clarity and eloquence, and it still offers some laughs along with sober tips about composition. But much is radically new—so much that only a list can do justice to it:

1. In a smaller trim size, the fifth edition is now more literally a *hand*book, easier to carry and consult.
2. In this edition, everything of importance is graphically prominent and clearly stated. Instead of having to excavate points of advice from my prose, students will find alphanumerically ordered directives, along with a thumb index that makes short work of tracking down the ample cross references.
3. Obeying my own injunction to be concise, I have shortened some too-chatty discussions, thus making room for much fuller treatment of such classic problems as the run-on sentence, the fragment, subject-verb agreement, and faulty parallelism.
4. Where there used to be just three chapters attempting to amalgamate all "Problems of Usage," "Punctuation," and "Spelling and Other Conventions," there are now nineteen, allowing chapter-length concentration on pronoun reference, capitalization, the handling of quotations, and so forth.
5. One chapter appearing in previous editions has been scrapped: "A Review of Grammar." Though certain grammatical concepts are essential to effective revision, I now feel that they should be raised as necessary within the contexts where they apply. The trouble with the chapter-length grammar review was that for many students it *wasn't* a review but a baffling, intimidating new challenge. Partly through the Glossary of Terms (p. 581) and partly through expanded discussions of usage problems, this edition provides as much grammatical information as ever—but it does

so without putting a barrier between the student writer and the task of composing.

6. A student no longer has to consult separate parts of the book in order to learn how certain constructions are properly *formed* and properly *punctuated.* Chapter 11, for example, moves straight from the choice and placement of modifiers to rules for punctuating them. Surely that is the most natural and useful order. At the same time, the *Handbook* accommodates readers who want to track down a punctuation rule by its usual mark (the comma, the semicolon) instead of by the type of construction being punctuated. With cross referencing, anyone who needs to consult the fuller of two discussions is led directly to it.

7. Rather than begin with full essay modes, the *Handbook* now introduces students to paragraph-sized *strategies* of description, narration, analysis, and argument. How many full descriptive essays, after all, will be required in college work? My aim is not to isolate the modes artificially but to sharpen an array of skills that belong in the student's repertoire. Someone who conscientiously does the exercises in Chapters 1–4 will learn to move between strategies as the occasion requires.

8. The exercises just mentioned, along with most others in this edition, immediately follow the discussions pertaining to them. Thus the *Handbook* not only offers more exercises than ever before—142 sets—but places them where they logically belong. This reform gives the book a dimension of self-paced learning; by trying the exercises after a given discussion, students will discover whether they ought to proceed or review.

9. I have restored a popular early feature of the *Handbook:* the Index of Usage (p. 562), which covers points of typical uncertainty in student prose (*disinterested* versus *uninterested,* etc.).

10. Chapter 29 now offers full coverage of both "new MLA" and APA styles of documentation, yet it also explains the "alternative MLA" footnote/endnote style preferred by some instructors. Chapter 30 shows how the same list of references changes its form between MLA and APA styles.

11. For the first time, the *Handbook* addresses the task of writing about literature (pp. 48–55). Two complete student essays on literary topics have been included. And finally:

12. Wherever the use of a word processor offers a unique advantage, this edition includes a specially marked discussion, "With a Word Processor," explaining how to proceed.

Every change I have made renders this book more accessible to a wide audience, including students who would have found earlier editions mystifying. But there is no "talking down" here—just a better logic of organization, a greater clarity of statement, and a more pointed emphasis on common problems.

What has prompted so much fundamental revision? The answer is that between the fourth and fifth editions, Sandra Schor and I were busy devising a related text, *The Borzoi Handbook for Writers.* Using the fourth edition as a point of departure, we created a no-nonsense reference handbook containing almost all of the features named above. Now it is time for *The Random House Handbook* to catch up with *Borzoi,* incorporating the strong innovations while keeping its own purpose and tone. The two books are alike in many ways, but *Random House* contains more examples (including some droll ones), offers exercises, and gives central focus to the college essay. In contrast, *Borzoi* is an all-purpose reference tool.

Since this text comes shrink-wrapped with Michael Hennessy's superb *Random House Practice Book for Writers,* instructors who want to go beyond the exercises in the *Handbook* can do so without causing their students extra cost or inconvenience. I have prepared a new *Instructor's Manual* explaining alternative ways to use the book and providing answers to the exercises found in both the *Handbook* and the *Practice Book.* For students with access to IBM-compatible word processors, Random House offers a free diskette, *The Practice Program for Writers,* containing still further exercises and answers. The software is keyed specifically to this text, as is Hennessy's *Practice Book.*

I remain sincerely grateful to everyone who has been mentioned in previous acknowledgments. Space permits me to single out only those generous people who have enriched this edition in distinctive and indispensable ways: Jeannine Ciliotta, Marion Corkett, Michael Hennessy, Steve Pensinger, Sandra Schor, and Jennifer Sutherland.

Frederick Crews

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Introduction

Looking Ahead

If you are like most students entering a composition course, you arrive with a mixture of hope and worry. The hope is that the course will help you to put your thoughts into written words with greater precision and effect. The worry is that nothing of the sort will happen and that you will have to go through a painful, humiliating ordeal. Essays, you know, will be required of you on short notice. Will you be able to write them at all? Looking ahead, perhaps you experience a feeling that assails every writer from time to time—the suspicion that words may fail you. (And if words fail you, the instructor may fail you, too.)

It may seem odd at first that putting your thoughts into words should be so challenging. Since childhood, after all, you have been speaking intelligible English. When you talk about things that matter to you, the right words often come to your lips without forethought. Again, in writing letters to friends you scribble away with confidence that you will be understood. But in writing essays you find yourself at a disadvantage. You know that your prose is expected to carry your reader along with a developing idea, but you don't have a clear notion of who that reader is. Instead of exchanging views with someone who can see your face, interpret your gestures, and tell you when a certain point needs explanation or support, you have to assume a nonexistent relationship and keep on writing. It is

almost like composing love letters "to whom it may concern" and mailing them off to "Occupant" or "Boxholder."

Faced with this real but manageable challenge, some students make matters worse by conceiving of "good writing" as a brass ring to be seized or, more probably, missed on their first and only try. Condemning themselves in advance as people who lack a writer's mysterious gifts, they imagine that their function in the months ahead will be merely to produce errors of expression so that their instructor can continue to believe that the language is going downhill. For them, the game is over before its rules have been explained.

To stave off such defeatism you need only realize that effective prose is not like a brass ring at all; it is more like the destination of a journey, approachable by steps that anyone can follow. People who turn out dazzling work without blotting a line are so rarely found that you can put them out of your mind. Everyone who writes for a living knows what you too should remember: by and large, *writing is rewriting.* Even the most accomplished authors start with drafts that would be woefully inadequate except *as* drafts—that is, as means of getting going in an exploratory process that will usually include a good many setbacks and shifts of direction. To feel dissatisfied with a sample of your prose, then, is not a sign of anything about your talent. The "good writer" is the one who can turn such dissatisfaction to a positive end by pressing ahead with the labor of revision, knowing that niceties of style will come more easily once an adequate structure of ideas has been developed.

Thus it is also a mistake to think of yourself as either having or not having "something to say," as if your head were a package that could be opened and inspected for inclusion of the necessary contents. We do not *have* things to say; we acquire them in the process of working on definite problems that catch our attention. If you grasp that crucial fact, you can stop worrying about writing in general and prepare yourself for writing *within a context*—that is, inside a situation that calls for certain ways of treating a typical range of questions.

Everything you encounter in a college course provides elements of context, helping to make your writing projects less like all-or-nothing tests of your inventiveness and more like exercises in the use of tested procedures. Before long, in any course that calls for written work, you will have picked up important clues about characteristic subject matter and issues, conventions of form and tone, and means of gathering and presenting evidence. And as you do so, you will find yourself not only writing but also thinking somewhat like a historian, an economist, or whatever. That practice in operating within the idiom, or accepted code, of

various disciplines is a good part of what a successful college experience is about.

In a composition course, most of your contextual clues will be gleaned not from readings or lectures but from your instructor's way of explaining assignments, discussing common problems, and commenting on your submitted work. It is essential, therefore, that you get over any lingering image of the composition teacher as a mere fussbudget, hungry to pounce on comma faults and dangling modifiers. If you arrive with that stereotype in mind, you may start out by writing papers that are technically careful but windy and devoid of feeling. In other words, you may think that the game is to be won through negative means, by producing the lowest possible number of mistakes. You should realize instead that your instructor's standards, like your own when you pick up a magazine, are chiefly positive. It is perfectly true that English teachers prefer correctly formed sentences to faulty ones; so do you. But you also expect an article to engage you in a lively and well-conceived topic, to support a consistent central idea, and to convey information clearly and efficiently, without needless pomp. Your instructor will hope for nothing less—and nothing fancier—from your own essays.

Nevertheless, like many another freshman student, you may feel ill at ease addressing this still unknown and potentially troublesome person. Very well: don't even try. You can get the desired results if, while you compose, you think of your classmates, not the instructor, as your audience. This is not to say that you should write in dormitory slang. The point is that if you think of trying to convince people of your own age and background, you will get a reliable sense of what needs proving, what can be taken for granted, and what tone to adopt. If the student sitting next to you would probably choke on some contrived generalization, leave it out. If you suspect that the class as a whole would say *Make that clearer* or *Get to the point,* do so. Your instructor will be delighted by any paper that would impress most of your classmates.

Writing to Achieve Different Effects

Many college-bound students have been taught to aim at a prissy, rule-conscious, rigidly formal notion of "good English." The outcome is prose that sounds as if it were meant to pass a parade inspection rather than to win a reader's sympathy or agreement. In college and beyond you will find that no single formula can suit the variety of writing contexts you will meet. The rules you may have memorized in high school—*avoid the*

passive voice, never use I *and* me, *do not begin a sentence with a conjunction or end it with a preposition*—must now be reconsidered in the light of shifting audiences and purposes.

You will always want to adjust your **rhetoric** to the specific audience and purpose you have in mind. That advice may leave you uneasy if you think of rhetoric in its casual meaning of insincere, windy language, as in *Oh, that's just a lot of rhetoric.* But in its primary meaning rhetoric is simply *the strategic placement of ideas and choice of language*—the means of making an intended effect on a reader or listener. Rhetoric need never call for deceptive prose; it calls, rather, for making a strong case by satisfying your audience's legitimate expectations.

Confronting the Essay

By the end of your composition course you will almost certainly be better able to write papers for any other course, regardless of its subject matter. But your composition instructor will not be assigning such "disciplinary" papers. You will be asked instead to create *essays* conveying a characteristic blend of opinion and evidence, of intimacy and objectivity.

An **essay** can be defined as *a fairly brief piece of nonfiction that tries to make a point in an interesting way*:

1. *It is fairly brief.* Some classic essays occupy only a few paragraphs, but essays generally fall between three and twenty typed pages. Under that minimum, the development of thought that typifies an essay would be difficult to manage. Above that maximum, people might be tempted to read the essay in installments, like a book. A good essay makes an unbroken experience.

2. *It is nonfiction.* Essayists try to tell the truth; if they describe a scene or tell a story, we presume that the details have not been made up for effect.

3. *It tries to make a point . . .* An essay characteristically tells or explains something, or expresses an attitude toward something, or supports or criticizes something—an opinion, a person, an institution, a movement. A poem or a novel may also do these things, but it does them incidentally. An essay is directly *about* something called its **topic**, and its usual aim is to win sympathy or agreement to the point or **thesis** it is maintaining.

4. *. . . in an interesting way.* When you write an answer to a question on an exam, you do not pause to wonder if the reader actually *wants* to pursue your answer to the end; you know you will succeed if you concisely

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