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DEAN MEMERING
FRANK O'HARE



THE WRITER'S WORK

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FRANK O'HARE

The Writer's Work: Guide to Effective Composition

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TO THE INSTRUCTOR

Composition instructors of the 1980s are heirs to a complex history and stewards of an uncertain future. The 1960s were a decade of unrest and experimentation; in many schools where it had been traditionally taught as a mechanical skill, composition became self-expressive writing, a change some found refreshing and others disturbing. In the 1970s there has been much public and professional concern about an alleged loss of direction in composition and a presumed deemphasis of basic skills in composition courses. As SAT scores have fallen, critics of the profession have insisted that composition has become dichotomized, divorcing content from style, invention from expression, the larger issues of composition from the lesser. The skills of writing have always been difficult to teach, more difficult to learn, and—especially when divorced from more creative aspects of writing—they are often the least rewarding components of the writing process. Yet writers themselves seldom view the skills as trivial. The dichotomy between ideas and skills of expression does not exist in the work of experienced writers, most of whom hold that the quality of an idea is limited by the writer's power of expression. The notion that style and substance are separable creates a hardship for our students if this notion means that they are being offered a choice between ideas and language skills: between large, important matters in one composition course and small, unimportant matters in another composition course. Because we believe this split between form and content is false, and contrary to both the theory and the practice of good writing, we have attempted to present both and to show the interaction between them in *The Writer's Work*.

Chapter by chapter, as they move through a progression of increasingly formal writing tasks from personal to expository to critical to research writing, students will see how these choices of style and substance work together regardless of the writing task. The nonfiction

writer's commitment to truth, accuracy, and integrity in writing requires not only factual honesty but dedication to accuracy of expression. Even such mundane matters as spelling and punctuation are seen as a writer's tools, the means of precise expression. Because of the special nature of the relationship between the writer and the reader of nonfiction, all accidents of expression both interfere with the intended message and send another message about the author's view of self and attitudes toward the reader and the subject. After more than a decade of controversy over form and substance, it is time to replace the dichotomy with a unified theory of composition.

Part of the impulse behind *The Writer's Work* has been the discovery that inexperienced writers are capable of dedication to their craft. We have discovered, for example, that students can move from the inherently rewarding pleasures of personal writing and autobiographical narratives to the more demanding work of other kinds of writing. The "term paper," or research paper, is not beyond inexperienced writers and need not be a routine and uninspired collection of footnotes. Class testing of the materials in *The Writer's Work* has demonstrated that students can succeed at academic writing. Leading students through increasingly more demanding writing tasks and building into those tasks an accumulation of skills that develop into formal and impersonal kinds of writing, the text provides a natural bridge from free writing to research writing.

Chapter 1, "The Composing Process," first presents the writer's choices and then describes the stages of writing in which the choices operate. All writing is governed by the writer's purpose, but having said that, we must go on to explore the choices a writer makes as a part of that purpose: choices about audience, experience, self, and especially choices about code—the language a writer selects. These elements must unite in the writer's overall design, either through conscious decision or writer's intuition, to produce the concept and the expression of that concept, which we call composition. Decisions about each of these aspects must be made during all four phases of the writing process: prewriting, writing, rewriting, and proofreading. Chapter 1 explains and illustrates the composing process with both student and professional writing and provides activities to help students understand and practice the process.

Chapter 2, "Personal Writing," offers students a variety of writing situations, starting with the least structured and most self-expressive—free writing and journal writing—and progressing to more structured personal-experience writing. The chapter ends with a ghost-writing assignment that requires students to search beyond themselves for materials for composition. The chapter contains student and professional examples, activities, and principles for effective personal writing.

Chapter 3, "Strategies of Exposition," moves from the personal to a focus on subjects in the world outside the self. The chapter begins with more formalized invention procedures than those in Chapter 2:

students are shown several ways to find material and analyze subjects for expository writing, including field analysis and Burke's *pentad*. There are many opportunities for writing, including the thesis and support paper, the comparison and contrast paper, the classification paper, the process paper, and the definition paper, with examples from student and professional writers.

Chapter 4, "Reasoned Writing," extends the progression into structured writing with evaluative and persuasive writing. The chapter features critical writing; a full treatment of logic, including syllogistic reasoning and the fallacies; and the techniques of argumentation involved in writing that seeks to convince the reader of the writer's reliability and authority. In addition to illustrative compositions, there are many specific suggestions for writing activities.

Chapter 5, "Writing with Sources," describes an introduction to the library, including a library-search assignment that will help to familiarize students with the contents and organization of their school library, and writing assignments leading to the full research paper: the objective summary, the critical summary, and the comparison of sources. There is a comprehensive treatment of the research paper entailing finding and limiting a researchable thesis, finding and evaluating data, and using evidence to develop a research concept. The chapter provides a stylesheet based on the *MLA Handbook* and also an example of APA documentation style. Students are given a step-by-step guide through the research paper, a complete model paper, and a selection of popular research topics. Chapter 5 is the culmination of the progression from unstructured, informal, personal writing to structured, formal, and impersonal writing.

Chapter 6, "Sentence Combining," contains exercises based on the signal system developed by O'Hare, as well as new unsigaled and creative exercises in exploring prose. While we view sentence-level problems as just one of many difficulties in writing, students often view sentence problems as the chief difficulty in writing. Students who tediously write one word at a time (like those who read one word at a time), students who labor to produce a sentence and then discover that the sentence is incomprehensible—students who lack syntactic fluency—are often not able to attend to larger problems of composition. The sentence-level barrier is absolute for them. As most instructors know, efforts to drill grammar into these students have usually failed. But the new research incorporated into *The Writer's Work* should make this kind of language handicap a thing of the past for most students. O'Hare's work, *Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction*, NCTE Research Report No. 15, 1973, demonstrated that syntactic fluency is a discrete skill and that most students can acquire an ease with sentences characteristic of mature writers. Based on O'Hare's research and the subsequent revisions and adaptations of that work for the college classroom by Memering and O'Hare, sentence combining makes possible the dedica-

tion to skills required by the view that composition is a union of thought and expression. With periodic exercises throughout a semester, students will first lose their "scribal stutter," and second, acquire something of the grace and maturity of the professional writers whose prose illustrates this chapter.

Chapter 7, "Effective Paragraphs," presents principles of paragraph composition and demonstrates the application of topic sentence, development, unity, and coherence in mature paragraphs. The chapter introduces a number of approaches to paragraph structure, including Christensen's generative rhetoric of the paragraph. The chapter includes various approaches to such problem paragraphs as the introductory and concluding paragraphs of formal nonfiction. "Effective Paragraphs" is illustrated with student and professional writing and contains many suggestions for writing activities at the paragraph level.

Chapter 8, "Effective Sentences," covers rhetorical and stylistic considerations of effectiveness in sentence structure based on principles of clarity, economy, emphasis, and variety. The chapter demonstrates flaws to be avoided as well as the many options available to writers. Chapter 8 complements Chapter 6; together they offer students comprehensive treatment of sentence options, and they allow teachers flexibility in determining how much of each they wish to emphasize with students. The chapter is profusely illustrated with professional and student examples of effective prose contrasted with less effective sentences.

Chapter 9, "Effective Diction," highlights the vocabulary choices writers make, as well as those they avoid, based on the overall purpose and stance of the writer who is interested in clear, concise, and accurate writing. This chapter contains a dictionary section discussing entries and connotative and denotative definitions. As in Chapter 8, the choices are presented in pairs exemplifying effective diction contrasted with less effective writing. The chapter uses many examples of professional and student writing and contains review exercises to help students distinguish between effective writing and poor.

Chapter 10, "Usage," describes grammatical choices and problems. As we use the term, "grammar" is restricted to such things as agreement of subjects and verbs, the reference of pronouns to their antecedents, and so forth—what is frequently called "usage." Since usage questions can involve minority dialects, linguistic prejudice can become a real problem in any classroom in which instructors teach a "standard English." But the nonfiction writer's task is to affect his or her audience; the reader-writer relationship is created and controlled through the language the writer uses. The writer cannot ignore the usage expectations of readers. Educated readers expect subjects and verbs to "agree," pronouns to refer clearly to antecedents, and so forth. Thus, for the writer, usage choices become a means of fulfilling the expectations of the reader. The more intimate and self-expressive the writing is, the less the reader expects the writer to conform to conventional usage;

but as the writing becomes more formal, less focused on self, readers have greater expectations of conventional usage. Chapter 10 explains and illustrates with effective prose the usage choices typically found in formal writing today. The chapter includes a Dictionary of Usage Problems and abundant exercises, to help students familiarize themselves with conventional usage.

Chapter 11, "Mechanics," provides a reference guide to punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. Mechanics rules and principles are explained and illustrated, as are significant options and variations. The spelling section contains a guide to trouble spots in spelling and a dictionary of frequently misspelled words.

The Glossary of Language Terms amounts to a twelfth chapter—an extensive glossary of grammatical, linguistic, rhetorical, and lexicographical terms that students may encounter in *The Writer's Work*, and elsewhere, as they study composition and undertake research for writing assignments. This glossary and the comprehensive index complete the text and make of it not only a classroom guide but a reference work for students, writers, and others who may have questions about nonfiction writing.

TO THE STUDENT

There is little about writing that all writers will agree to, except, perhaps, that all writers are different. You may approach writing one way; your friend may do just the opposite. Some writers compose standing up, some make endless notes and preliminary outlines, some work very fast, others are very slow. Despite these differences, many writers—especially inexperienced writers—share a common fear: the fear of writing. You may be one of those who feel writing is too complex, too subjective, too mysterious to learn. There are even some writers who fear that writing requires some special talent or genius they lack.

Our experiences with writers have shown that these fears are usually unfounded. Most people can learn to write. Writing is not mysterious. We cannot promise that you can learn to write with the artistry of a great author, but we do promise that most inexperienced writers can learn to write well. We are certain you will be able to understand what effective writing is. We believe that anything important to writers can be explained in simple language, and we rely on examples to help explain and illustrate every concept and problem in writing. We have drawn on the work of many published authors—some famous, some not so famous—to demonstrate the power and variety of modern writing. All the writing assignments are illustrated with student examples.

Through these examples and plain-English explanations, we have attempted to focus on the work of the writer. The nonfiction writer uses data, information, facts. These have to be collected and arranged.

While work is not necessarily easy, most work has procedures and guidelines you can follow. The key to work is practice; the more you do of it, the better you get at it. Writers too have methods and techniques in their work, and for writers too, practice is the key. We have tried to show how writers do their work, and for that reason we have titled our book *The Writer's Work*.

Because writers are different, some need to start with free writing and journal writing to help themselves gain confidence and a degree of fluency before moving on to more structured assignments. Most writers enjoy personal writing and gain insight into their writing techniques through it. In both fiction and nonfiction writing, storytelling is very popular. But in nonfiction writing there are other forms the writer should explore too. Beyond narrative writing there are equally rewarding forms of expository and critical writing. Eventually nonfiction writers should be able to use any form or technique appropriate to their purpose, including research writing. How much you do of any one kind of writing depends a lot on you. Some writers need a good deal of work in personal writing before they feel ready to move on. Others may be ready to start immediately with expository or critical writing. Some inexperienced writers have felt that research writing is too difficult to attempt at all. But sooner or later research becomes a primary tool for the nonfiction writer, and we have attempted to go beyond mere footnote advice to show you how to find data, how to evaluate evidence, and how to put together a research paper step by step. Research writing needn't be mechanical or uninspired. Since few nonfiction writers can get along without research, we have attempted to show some of the interest, the challenge, and the reward of research writing. Still, how much research any given writer is ready for depends on the writer. Some may be ready for it immediately; others may need preparatory work first.

A writer must have ideas to write about, of course, and the first half of *The Writer's Work* is devoted to the writing process and invention procedures that will help you find your own ideas. To further help you, we have included many of the ideas our students have suggested. But a writer must have skills too. Very few professional writers are indifferent to spelling, punctuation, grammar. To help you review your skills, we have provided many exercises. We don't mean to imply that the second half of the book should be used like a workbook nor even that you should wait until you have finished the first half of the book before turning to "Skills." Some writers need to review when problems come up in their own writing. Others may need to do some of the exercises. In some cases your instructor may wish to go over some of the exercises in class. We do not think writers learn skills merely by drilling away at them, and we have not provided exercises for that purpose. Our experience has been that limited, periodic review of skills is most effective with inexperienced writers.

Nothing in writing can be approached in a mechanical and unthinking way, and nothing in writing can be seen as too trivial to bother with. Some writers make the most improvement in the quality of their writing when they gain control over their skills. Sometimes it is the lack of skills that gets in the way and prevents a writer from finding his or her ideas: "I know what I mean; I just can't say it!" It is as if a barrier to expression is formed at the skills level, and it is this barrier that is removed when students improve in skills. It is true that when you have your ideas clearly in mind, writing is easier than when your ideas are not clear. It is also true that when you can express yourself clearly and easily, your ideas will flow with greater ease.

Our students have been pleased to discover the relative ease with which they have been able to turn their sentences into mature and effective writing. One of the best techniques for untangling sentence problems is sentence combining, a creative exercise in which writers experiment with different ways to write sentences. With sufficient practice in generating well-formed sentences, most writers gain surprising strength and effectiveness in writing. The aim of sentence combining is to give you flexibility and control so that you can easily produce long, short, simple, complex, or any other kind of sentences that suit your purpose, and without struggling with grammar or traditional advice about when to do what in writing.

The Writer's Work is a complete guide to all the skills. There are two attitudes about modern usage. One is that there are correct and incorrect language choices. (Most of us were taught that "ain't" was incorrect.) The other is that there is no such thing as "correct" or "incorrect" language. All language must be judged on its suitability to the author's purpose. Language should be appropriate to the context. We think appropriateness is the best guide for language choices. But we also think that inexperienced writers need more guidance and more to hang on to than the concept of appropriateness. Therefore, throughout *The Writer's Work* we have attempted to specify the contexts of appropriateness. In general we suggest a middle-level style stressing clear, concise, and accurate English. And we show the changes in appropriateness as writers move from informal, personal writing to formal, impersonal writing.

To make it easier to find answers to your questions about how best to express what you want to write, the pages of Chapters 6–11 are colored—one color for Chapters 6–9, in which the larger issues of paragraphs, sentences, and words are discussed, and a different color for Chapters 10 and 11, in which you will find guidelines on usage and mechanics. The table of contents is especially helpful, too, for locating specific information about documentation (Chapter 5), usage (Chapter 10), and mechanics (Chapter 11).

You may wonder, as others have, whether writing is worth the effort it requires. What is the point of writing anyway? There are two very good answers to that question. Nonfiction writing is a salable skill.

Business, science, law, medicine, education—all modern careers have heavy demands for writers. And the demand is growing. Reports, proposals, letters, speeches, and dozens of other writing tasks arise today in all sorts of jobs. Try to imagine the numbers of writers required in a visual and oral medium like television: everything you see and hear on television must first be written by someone. Quite an astonishing percentage of the work in our so-called oral world is conducted through the written word.

But the best answer is that, for many writers, writing is fun. Writing is a totally involving and demanding activity, calling upon all your inner resources. It is a means of self-expression and a means of communication. Even for the nonfiction writer, writing is creative work. It can produce something as functional and simple as a straight news item, or it can produce something meaningful and artistic like a nonfiction novel. Nonfiction writing today need not be mere drudge work, pointless exercises in formula writing. As you can see from the examples throughout *The Writer's Work*, the people with whom we have worked over the years have enjoyed writing (even though there may have been a lot of hard rewriting and polishing to produce the final version). And from the many enjoyable pieces our students have provided for examples, we believe you can see that there can be a tremendous feeling of satisfaction in writing. Like other forms of self-fulfillment, writing leaves many writers pleased and proud of a job well done. Our students have said so. We think you will agree with them.

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DEAN MEMERING

FRANK O'HARE

Preface, v

WRITING

ONE

THE COMPOSING PROCESS

4

GOOD WRITING, 5

SPEAKING AND WRITING, 7

THE WRITER'S CHOICES, 9 THE WRITER'S PURPOSE, 10

THE WRITER'S AUDIENCE, 11 THE WRITER'S SELF, 12

Writing activity, 13 THE WRITER'S EXPERIENCE, 13

THE WRITER'S CODE, 14 *Writing activity, 14*

Writing activity, 16

THE WRITING PROCESS, 17 PREWRITING: THE FIRST

STAGE, 17 WRITING: THE MIDDLE STAGE, 19 REWRITING:

THE THIRD STAGE, 19 PROOFREADING: THE FINAL

STAGE, 21 *Writing activity, 21*

TWO

PERSONAL WRITING

22

THE WRITER'S VIEW OF REALITY, 23

FREE WRITING, 26 *Writing activity, 28* *Writing activity, 29*

JOURNALS, 29 HOW TO WRITE A JOURNAL, 32 *Writing activity, 32* *Discussion activity, 33*

VOICE IN PERSONAL WRITING, 37

DIALOGUE, 39 *Writing activity, 41* *Discussion activity, 41*

PERSONAL-EXPERIENCE STORIES, 42 *Writing activity*, 47
DISCUSSING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, 47 *Discussion activity*, 48
GHOST WRITING, 50 *Writing activity*, 53

THREE

STRATEGIES OF EXPOSITION

54

INVENTION, 56 PARTICLE-WAVE-FIELD ANALYSIS, 56
Writing activity, 60 BRAINSTORMING, 60 *Writing activity*, 64
THE THESIS AND SUPPORT PAPER, 65 THE THESIS
STATEMENT, 65 SUPPORTING THE THESIS, 67 THE THESIS
ON TRIAL, 69 WRITING THE THESIS AND SUPPORT PAPER, 73
Writing activity, 74
COMPARISON AND CONTRAST, 75 WRITING THE COMPARISON
AND CONTRAST PAPER, 80 *Writing activity*, 83
CLASSIFICATION, 84 WRITING THE CLASSIFICATION PAPER, 93
Writing activity, 93
THE PROCESS PAPER, 94 WRITING THE PROCESS PAPER, 103
Writing activity, 103
DEFINITION, 104 WRITING THE DEFINITION PAPER, 111
Writing activity, 111

FOUR

REASONED WRITING

112

CRITICAL WRITING, 113 WRITING THE CRITICAL PAPER, 116
Writing activity, 120
REASONING AND REASONABLENESS, 120 CLEAR
STATEMENTS, 121 *Practice*, 124 INDUCTION AND
DEDUCTION, 125 TESTING STATEMENTS, 126, *Practice*, 128
Practice, 129 UNIVERSAL NEGATIVES, 129 *Practice*, 130
Review, 130
LOGICAL FALLACIES: ERRORS TO AVOID, 131 FALLACIES
BASED ON INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE, 131 FALLACIES BASED ON
IRRELEVANT INFORMATION, 132 FALLACIES BASED ON
AMBIGUITY, 134 FALLACIES BASED ON FAULTY LOGIC, 135
Practice, 136
PERSUASION, 139 THE WORTHY OPPONENT, 141 FIGHT
FAIR, 141 ACCEPT COMPROMISE, 142 CONVINCING THE
READER, 145 WRITING THE PERSUASION PAPER, 147
Writing activity, 150

USING THE LIBRARY, 155

THE KEYS TO THE LIBRARY, 157 THE CARD CATALOGUE, 157

THE INDEXES, 159 THE GENERAL REFERENCE WORKS, 161

EXPLORING THE LIBRARY, 162 *Library activity*, 162

THE OBJECTIVE SUMMARY, 164 WRITING THE OBJECTIVE SUMMARY, 166 *Writing activity*, 167

THE CRITICAL SUMMARY, 167 CRITICIZING CONTENT, 168

CRITICIZING STYLE, 169 *Writing activity*, 171

COMPARING SOURCES, 171 WRITING THE COMPARISON OF SOURCES, 174 *Writing activity*, 175

THE RESEARCH PAPER, 176 FINDING A THESIS, 177
Thesis exercise, 180

EVIDENCE: DATA AND DOCUMENTATION, 181 TAKING NOTES, 181 USING STATISTICS, 182

USING SOURCES, 185 CONVINCING WITH EVIDENCE, 186

EVALUATING THE DATA: A TEST CASE, 188

DOCUMENTATION: BACKING UP WHAT YOU SAY, 195

STYLESHEETS, 195 DOCUMENTATION NOTES, 196

SUBSTANTIVE NOTES, 196

WHAT TO DOCUMENT, 196 DIRECT QUOTATIONS, 196 IDEAS AND WORDS FROM A SOURCE, 197 PARAPHRASES AND RESTATEMENTS, 197 ALLUSIONS AND INCOMPLETE REFERENCES TO SOURCES, 197 REFERENCES IN THE TEXT, 198 MAJOR SOURCE, 198 SOURCE WITHIN A SOURCE, 198

WHAT NOT TO QUOTE, 199

HOW TO DOCUMENT, 200 BOOK, ONE AUTHOR, 200 BOOK, TWO AUTHORS, 200 BOOK, MORE THAN TWO AUTHORS, 201 BOOK WITH AN EDITOR, 201 CHAPTER IN AN EDITED WORK, 201 BOOK, COMMITTEE OR GROUP AUTHOR, 201 BOOK, TRANSLATION, 201 MAGAZINE ARTICLE, AUTHOR NAMED, 202 MAGAZINE ARTICLE, NO AUTHOR GIVEN, 202 NEWSPAPER ARTICLE, 202 PROFESSIONAL JOURNAL, EACH ISSUE STARTS WITH PAGE 1, 202 PROFESSIONAL JOURNAL, PAGES NUMBERED BY VOLUME, 202 DISSERTATION (UNPUBLISHED), 202 HANDOUT, MIMEOGRAPH, AND SO ON, 203 LECTURE OR SPEECH, 203 FILM, 203 PLAY, 203 MUSICAL PERFORMANCE, 203 RADIO OR TELEVISION PROGRAM, 203 RECORD ALBUM OR TAPE, 204 PERSONAL LETTER, 204 PERSONAL INTERVIEW, 204 APA STYLE, BOOK, 204 APA STYLE, ARTICLE, 204

ABBREVIATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC TERMS, 204	
WRITING THE RESEARCH PAPER, 206	I INTRODUCTION, 206
II THE OPPOSING VIEW, 207	III THE BETTER VIEW, 207
IV CONCLUSION, 208	V REFERENCES, 209
VI BIBLIOGRAPHY, 209	"THE POWER AND PERIL OF NUCLEAR ENERGY," 211
	<i>Popular research topics, 228</i>

SKILLS

SIX

SENTENCE COMBINING

232

WORKING THE PROBLEMS, 236 *Practice, 237*

COMBINING BY ADDITION, 238 *Addition practice 1:
combining with signals, 239 Addition practice 2:
creating alternative combinations, 241 Addition
practice 3: combining without signals, 242 Addition
practice 4: imitation, 243*

COMBINING BY DELETING, 244 *Deletion practice 1:
combining with signals, 245 Deletion practice 2:
creating alternative combinations, 248 Deletion
practice 3: combining without signals, 248 Deletion
practice 4: imitation, 250*

COMBINING BY EMBEDDING, 251 THE (THAT) AND (THE
FACT THAT) SIGNALS, 251 THE (IT . . . THAT) SIGNAL, 252
*Embedding practice 1: combining with signals, 253
Embedding practice 2: creating alternative
combinations, 255 Embedding practice 3: combining
without signals, 256 Embedding practice 4:
imitation, 258*

COMBINING BY TRANSFORMING, 258 THE (ING) AND (WITH)
SIGNALS, 259 THE ('S), (OF), AND (~~IF~~) SIGNALS, 260
THE (FOR . . . TO), (IT . . . TO), AND (IT . . . FOR . . . TO)
SIGNALS, 261 THE DISCOVER → DISCOVERY SIGNAL, 261
*Transformation practice 1: combining with signals, 262
Transformation practice 2: creating alternative
combinations, 264 Transformation practice 3: combining
without signals, 264 Transformation practice 4:
imitation, 266*

COMBINING BY PUNCTUATING, 267 THE COLON (:) AND
DASH (—) SIGNALS, 267 *Punctuating practice 1:
combining with signals, 268 Punctuating practice 2:*

creating alternative combinations, 271 Punctuating practice 3: combining without signals, 271 Punctuating practice 4: imitation, 273

BEYOND THE SENTENCE, 274 SENTENCE CHUNKS, 274
SENTENCE CHUNKS WITH SIGNALS, 276 *Sentence chunks practice 1: combining with signals, 277 SENTENCE CHUNKS WITHOUT SIGNALS, 279 Sentence chunks practice 2: combining without signals, 281* PARAGRAPHS: COMBINING WITH SIGNALS, 282 *Paragraphs practice 1: combining with signals, 283*
PARAGRAPHS: COMBINING WITHOUT SIGNALS, 288
Paragraphs practice 2: combining without signals, 289

SEVEN

EFFECTIVE PARAGRAPHS

294

TOPIC SENTENCE, 296
PLAN OF DEVELOPMENT, 297
SUPPORTIVE DETAILS, 298
UNITY, 299
COHERENCE, 300 COMMON TRANSITIONAL SIGNALS, 302
PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE, 304 *Paragraph development analysis, 309*
VARIATIONS ON PARAGRAPH BEGINNINGS, 310 THE TRANSITIONAL SENTENCE, 310 TOPIC + RESTRICTION, 311
IMPLIED TOPIC SENTENCE, 311 *Coordinate-subordinate paragraph practice, 312*
INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPHS, 313 PROBLEMS TO AVOID, 313
EXAMPLES OF INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPHS, 314
CONCLUDING PARAGRAPHS, 318 PROBLEMS TO AVOID, 318
EXAMPLES OF CONCLUDING PARAGRAPHS, 318 *Writing activities, 321*

EIGHT

EFFECTIVE SENTENCES

322

CLARITY, 323 ILLOGICAL SENTENCES, 323 RAMBLING SENTENCES, 324
ECONOMY, 324 WORDINESS, 325 REDUNDANCY, 325
EXCESSIVE "WHO," "WHICH," "THAT," 326
EMPHASIS, 326 EFFECTIVE REPETITION, 326
PARALLELISM, 327 INVERTED SENTENCES, 327 PASSIVE SENTENCES, 328 SENTENCE RHYTHM, 328 OTHER OPTIONS, 329
VARIETY, 330 VARIED BEGINNINGS, 330 VARIED TYPES OF SENTENCES, 333 *Sentence evaluation practice, 336*

EFFECTIVE DICTION

CONNOTATION AND DENOTATION, 341
 USING THE DICTIONARY, 342 READING THE ENTRIES, 343
 USING WORDS, 345
 ABSTRACTIONS, 345
 CLICHE, 346
 CONFUSING NEGATIVES, 346
 EFFECTIVE MODIFIERS, 347
 EFFECTIVE NOUNS, 347
 EFFECTIVE VERBS, 348
 EMOTIONAL LANGUAGE, 349
 EUPHEMISM, 349
 FIGURES OF SPEECH, 350 METAPHOR, 350 SIMILE, 350
 PERSONIFICATION, 351 MIXED METAPHORS, 351 DEAD
 METAPHORS, 351
 JARGON, 352
 NEOLOGISMS, 352
 OVERSTATEMENT, 353
 SWITCHING TENSE, 354
 SWITCHING VOICE, 355 SWITCHING FROM PERSONAL TO
 IMPERSONAL, 355 SWITCHING FROM FORMAL TO
 INFORMAL, 356 CHOOSING A STANCE, 356
 UNCONSCIOUS ECHOES, 357
 UNDERSTATEMENT, 358
 WORD PLAY, 358 *Diction evaluation practice*, 359

USAGE

AGREEMENT, 366 GROUP WORDS, 366 CONFUSING
 SINGULARS, 367 *Agreement practice 1*, 367 CONFUSING
 PLURALS, 368 *Agreement practice 2*, 369 IRREGULAR
 PLURALS, 370 SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN AGREEMENT, 370
Agreement review, 372
 PRONOUNS AS SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS, 373 *Subject-object
 practice 1*, 375 "WHO" AND "WHOM," 376 *Subject-object
 practice 2*, 377
 PRONOUN REFERENCE, 378 AMBIGUOUS, 378 VAGUE, 378
 ILLOGICAL, 378 EXCESSIVE, 379 *Pronoun reference
 review*, 379
 VERBS, 380 SLANG VERBS, 381 UNCONVENTIONAL VERB
 FORMS, 381 "LIE" AND "LAY," 382 *Verb practice 1*, 382
 xviii