

153149  
Third Edition

JEAN WYRICK

# Steps To Writing Well

A Concise  
Guide  
to  
Composition

41.683  
W 993(-3)

# **STEPS TO WRITING WELL**

**A CONCISE GUIDE TO COMPOSITION**

**THIRD EDITION**

**JEAN WYRICK** *Colorado State University*

**HOLT, RINEHART AND WINSTON, INC.**

New York Chicago San Francisco Philadelphia  
Montreal Toronto London Sydney Tokyo

RB285/02

*This book is dedicated to DAVID  
and to SARAH, KATE, and AUSTIN*

Cover: Richard and Mary Magruder/Image Bank

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wyrick, Jean.

Steps to writing well.

Includes index.

1. English language—Rhetoric. I. Title.

PE1408.W93 1987 808'.042 86-14223

ISBN 0 03 004473 1

Copyright © 1987, 1984 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Copyright © 1979 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston

Address correspondence to:

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

111 Fifth Avenue

New York, N.Y. 10003

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in Canada

7 8 9 0 090 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

The Dryden Press

Saunders College Publishing

# To the Teacher

The third edition of *Steps to Writing Well* has been written and revised for teachers of composition who have had trouble finding a text that is accessible to their students. Too many texts on today's market, these teachers rightfully complain, are still unnecessarily complex, sophisticated, or massive for the majority of students. Written simply in an informal, straightforward style and addressed to the student, this text is designed to provide a clear step-by-step guide to writing a variety of 500-to-800-word essays. The combination of concise, practical advice, twenty student and professional essays, and a brief handbook should provide more than enough helpful information for students enrolled in a one-semester or one-quarter course without intimidating them with more material than they can possibly master.

Although many parts of the book have been revised or expanded for this edition, its organization remains essentially the same. Part One offers advice on "The Basics of the Short Essay"; Part Two discusses the "Modes and Strategies"; and Part Three presents "A Concise Handbook." The text still begins with the essay "To the Student," which not only argues that students can learn to write better with practice and dedication but also gives them a number of practical reasons why they *should* learn to write better.

Part One, containing seven chapters, moves students sequentially through the process of writing the short essay. Chapter 1, on prewriting, stresses finding the proper attitude ("the desire to communicate") and presents helpful suggestions for selecting a subject. Student samples illustrating two more prewriting techniques, clustering and cubing, have been added to this chapter, which now offers students a half-dozen methods for finding a significant focus for their essays. An

expanded section on audience should also help student writers identify their particular readers and communicate more effectively with them. After finding a topic and identifying their audience, students are then ready for Chapter 2, devoted almost entirely to a discussion of the thesis statement. This chapter first explains the role of the “working thesis” in early drafts and then clearly outlines what a good thesis is and isn’t by presenting over two dozen new examples to illustrate the advice. Also included in this chapter is explanation of the “essay map,” an organizational tool that can help students outline their essays and plan their body paragraphs.

Chapter 3 discusses in detail the requirements of good body paragraphs: topic sentences, unity, order and coherence, adequate development, use of specific detail, and logical sequence. Over forty paragraphs—many of them new to this edition—illustrate both strengths and weaknesses of student writing. These paragraphs are not complex literary or professional excerpts but rather well-designed, precise examples of the principles under examination, written on subjects students can understand and appreciate. A new section in this chapter twice provides the opportunity for students to see how a topic may progress from a working thesis statement to an informal essay outline, which, in turn, helps produce well-developed paragraphs in the body of an essay. To complete the overview of the short essay, Chapter 4 explains, through a number of helpful samples, how to write good introductions, conclusions, and titles.

Chapter 5, “Revising Your Writing,” has also been expanded in this edition. Because too many students still think of “revision” as merely proofreading their essays rather than as an integral part of composing, this chapter is devoted to explaining the revision process and to stressing the necessity of revision in all good writing. These pages guide the students through the various stages of revision, carefully cautioning novice writers against trying to analyze and revise too many parts of their papers at once. The chapter also includes hints for overcoming writer’s block, a checklist for essays, and two student essays for revision practice.

Chapter 6, on effective sentences, emphasizes the importance of clarity, conciseness, and vividness, with nearly one hundred and fifty sample sentences illustrating the chapter’s advice. Chapter 7, on word choice, presents practical suggestions for selecting accurate, appropriate words that are specific, memorable, and persuasive. This chapter also contains a new section on avoiding sexist language.

Each chapter in Part One contains numerous new samples and exercises. As before, the “Practicing What You’ve Learned” exercises follow each major section in each chapter so that both teacher and students may quickly discover if particular material needs additional attention. Moreover, by conquering small steps in the writing process,

one at a time, the students should feel more confident and should learn more rapidly. Assignments, which also follow each major section in these chapters, suggest class activities and frequently emphasize "peer teaching," a useful method that asks students to prepare appropriate exercises for classmates and then to evaluate the results. Such assignments, operating under the premise that "you don't truly learn a subject until you teach it," provide engaging classroom activity for all the students and also remove from the teacher some of the burden of creating additional exercises.

Part Two concentrates on the four rhetorical modes: exposition, argumentation, description, and narration. Chapter 8 on exposition is divided into separate discussions of the expository strategies: example, process, comparison/contrast, definition, classification, and causal analysis. Each discussion in Chapter 8 and each of the chapters on argument, description, and narration follow a similar format by offering the students (a) a clear definition of the mode (or strategy), explained with familiar examples; (b) practical advice on developing each essay; (c) warnings against common problems; (d) suggested essay topics on subjects that appeal to students' interests and capabilities; (e) a sample student essay with marginal notes; (f) a professional essay followed by questions on content, structure, and style, and a vocabulary list; (g) a revision worksheet to guide student writers through their rough drafts. The advice on developing the essay and the section on common problems are both explained in easy-to-understand language accompanied by numerous examples. The ten student essays, some new to this edition, should encourage student writers by showing them that others in their situation can indeed compose organized, thoughtful essays. The student essays that appear here are not perfect, however; consequently, teachers may use them in class to generate suggestions for still more improvement. The ten professional essays were also selected to spur class discussion and to illustrate the rhetorical principles presented in this text. The four professional essays most popular with users of the second edition were retained in this revision; six new essays replace older readings.

Two important additions to Part Two bear noting. First, the chapter on argumentation has been greatly expanded to give students more help preparing and organizing their own persuasive points as well as developing effective counter-arguments. A sample topic is presented in various stages of the writing process and then in a completed student essay. Suggestions such as the pro-and-con sheet and the "although-because" thesis may also prove useful in the early writing stages. Finally, two professional essays arguing different sides of the same issue provide students with an opportunity to compare and contrast the effectiveness of two argumentative approaches.

The other most important change in this edition is the addition of

Chapter 12, "Writing the Research Paper." In this chapter students will learn how to use the library, take notes, and incorporate source material into their essays. Examples are provided to help students understand the difference between summary and paraphrase and between plagiarism in its various forms and proper documentation. The chapter also contains information on the current MLA parenthetical documentation format and samples of the most often used bibliographic entries, as well as a "problem-solving" student essay that uses research material to support its points.

Part Three contains a concise handbook with non-technical explanations and new, easy-to-understand examples showing how to correct the most common errors in grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. This edition also includes nine sets of exercises over the grammar and punctuation rules. Instead of following each and every rule with five or ten simplistic sentences containing the error in question, this text offers a series of exercises systematically placed so that the students may practice applying several rules at one sitting, just as they must do when they write their own prose.

Once again, readers of this edition may note an occasional attempt at humor. The lighthearted tone of some samples and exercises is the result of the author's firm belief that while learning to write is serious business, solemn composition classrooms are not always the most beneficial environments for anxious beginning writers. The author takes full responsibility (and all of the blame) for the bad jokes and even worse puns.

Finally, an updated and expanded Instructor's Manual with suggestions for teaching and answers to exercises and essay questions is available from the English Editor, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 383 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

Although a third edition of this text has allowed its author to make a number of changes and additions, the book's purpose remains the same, as stated in the original preface: "While there are many methods of teaching composition, *Steps to Writing Well* tries to help inexperienced writers by offering a clearly defined sequential approach to writing the short essay. By presenting simple, practical advice directly to the students, this text is intended to make the demanding jobs of teaching and learning the basic principles of composition easier and more enjoyable for everyone."

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my deep appreciation to Developmental Editor Kate Morgan for her excellent work throughout every stage of this revision; without her unfailing support, patience, and good humor, there would be no third edition this year. I'm always grateful to English Editor Charlyce Jones Owen for her guidance and consistent encourage-

ment. I am also indebted to my editorial production team: Jeanette Ninas Johnson, Annette Mayeski, Stefania Taflińska, and Louis Scardino. My appreciation to the following colleagues for their useful suggestions: Professors Philip Tetreault, Dean Junior College; Kathleen Dubs, University of San Francisco; Donnasue Farrell, Manatee Community College; Elizabeth Fifer, Lehigh University; Steve Flaherty, DeVry Institute of Technology; Mary Helen Halloran, University of Wisconsin; Sandra Hanson, La Guardia Community College; Mary Anne Hutchinson, Utica College; John Huxhold, St. Louis Community College; Hannah Laipson, Quinsigamond Community College; Jo Ann Little, Pima Community College; W. C. Truckey, Lewis and Clark Community College.

Finally, many thanks to my husband, David Hall, for his assistance and understanding, and to my three children for whom—even though none of them can read yet—"Mom's book" has special meaning.

JEAN WYRICK  
*Director of Composition*  
*Colorado State University*



# To the Student

## Finding the Right Attitude

If you agree with one or more of the following statements, we have some serious myth-killing to do before you begin this book:

1. I'm no good in English—never have been, never will be.
2. Only people with natural talent for writing can succeed in composition class.
3. My composition teacher is a picky, comma-hunting liberal/conservative/hippie freak/old fogey/whatever, who will insist I write just like him or her.
4. I write for myself, not for anyone else, so I don't need this class or this book.
5. Composition classes are designed to put my creativity in a strait jacket.

The notion that good writers are born, not made, is a widespread myth that may make you feel defeated before you start. But the simple truth is that good writers *are* made—simply because *effective writing is a skill that can be learned*. Despite any feelings of insecurity you may have about composition, you should realize that you already know many of the basic rules of good writing; after all, you've been writing since you were six years old. What you need now is some practical advice on composition, some coaching to sharpen your skills, and a strong dose of determination to practice those skills until you can consistently produce the results you want. Talent, as the French writer Flaubert once said, is nothing more than long patience.

Think about learning to write well as you might consider your tennis game. No one is born a tennis star. You first learn the basic rules and movements and then go out on the court to practice. And practice. No one's tennis will improve if he or she stays off the court; similarly, you

must write regularly and receive feedback to improve your composition skills. Try to see your teacher not as Dr. Frankenstein determined to reproduce his or her style of writing in you, but rather as your coach, your loyal trainer who wants you to do the very best you can. Like any good coach, your teacher will point out your strengths and weaknesses; she or he will often send you to this text for practical suggestions for improvement. And while there are no quick, magic solutions for learning to write well, the most important point to remember is this: with this text, your own common sense, and determination, *you can improve your writing.*

### **Why Write?**

“OK,” you say, “so I can improve if I try—but why should I bother? Why should I write well? I’m not going to be a professional writer.”

In the first place, writing helps us explore our own thoughts and feelings. Writing forces us to articulate our ideas, to discover what we really think about an issue. For example, let’s suppose you’re faced with a difficult decision and that the arguments pro and con are jumbled in your head. You begin to write down all the pertinent facts and feelings, and suddenly, you begin to see that you do, indeed, have stronger arguments for one side of the question than the other. Once you “see” what you are thinking, you may then scrutinize your opinions for any logical flaws or weaknesses and revise your argument accordingly. In other words, writing lays out our ideas for examination, analysis, and thoughtful reaction. Thus when we write, we (and the world at large) see who we are, and what we stand for, much more clearly. Moreover, writing can provide a record of our thoughts that we may study and evaluate in a way that conversation cannot. In short, writing well enables us to see and know ourselves—our feelings, ideas, and opinions—better.

On a more practical level, we need to write effectively to communicate with others. While a part of our writing is done solely for ourselves, the majority of it is created for others to share. In this world, it is almost impossible to claim that we write only for ourselves. We are constantly asked to put our feelings, ideas, and knowledge in writing for others to read. In four years of college, no matter what your major, you will repeatedly be required to write essays, tests, reports, and exercises (not to mention letters home). Later, you may need to write formal letters of application for jobs or graduate training. And on a job you may have to write numerous kinds of reports, proposals, analyses, and requisitions. To be successful in any field, you must make your correspondence with business associates and co-workers clearly understood; remember that enormous amounts of time, energy, and profit have been lost because of a single unclear office memo.

There’s still a third—more cynical—reason for studying writing techniques. Once you begin to improve your ability to use language,

you will become more aware of the ways others write and speak. Through today's mass media, we are continually bombarded with words from politicians, advertisers, scientists, preachers, and teachers. We need to understand and evaluate what we are hearing, not only for our benefit but also for self-protection. Language is frequently manipulated to manipulate us. For example, years ago some government officials on trial preferred us to see Watergate as an "intelligence information gathering mission" rather than as simple breaking and entering, and today some politicians claim to merely "misspeak themselves" when caught in lies. Similarly, military officers and CIA members may discuss the "neutralization" of their enemies, possibly through the use of weapons with names such as "Peacekeeper," designed to obscure their potential for our total destruction. Common household products are given lofty names and descriptions to increase sales—a new mother who opens an official-looking package labeled "infant sensory development material," for instance, may be disappointed to find only a baby pacifier inside. Advertisers frequently try to sell us "authentic art reproductions" that are, of course, fakes all the same; the television networks treat us to "encore presentations" that are the same old summer reruns.

By becoming better writers ourselves, we can learn to recognize and reject the irresponsible, cloudy, and dishonest language of others before we become victims of their exploitation.

### ***A Good Place to Start***

If improving writing skills is not only possible but important, it is also something else: hard work. H. L. Mencken, American critic and writer, once remarked that "for every difficult and complex problem, there is an obvious solution that is simple, easy and wrong." No composition text can promise easy formulas guaranteed to improve your writing overnight. Nor is writing always fun for anyone. But this text can make the learning process easier, less painful, and more enjoyable than you might anticipate. Written in plain, straightforward language addressed to you, the student, this book will suggest a variety of practical ways for you to organize and write clear, concise prose. Because each of your writing tasks will be different, this text cannot provide a single, simple blueprint that will apply in all instances. Later chapters, however, will discuss some of the most common methods of organizing essays, such as development by example, definition, classification, causal analysis, comparison/contrast, and argument. As you become more familiar with, and begin to master, these patterns of writing, you will find yourself increasingly able to assess, organize, and explain the thoughts you have about the people, events, and situations in your own life. And while it may be true that in learning to write well there is no free ride, this book, along with your own willingness to work and improve, can start you down the road with a good sense of direction.

J.W.

# Contents

To the Teacher iii

To the Student viii

## PART ONE : THE BASICS OF THE SHORT ESSAY

### 1 : Prewriting 3

Getting Started, or Soup Can Labels Can Be Fascinating 3

Selecting a Subject 4

Finding Your Essay's Focus 6

**Practicing What You've Learned 14**

Discover Your Audience 14

How to Identify Your Readers 15

### 2 : The Thesis Statement 19

After Selecting Your Subject 19

What Does a Thesis Do? 19

What Is a "Working" Thesis? 20

What Is a Good Thesis? 20

Avoiding Common Errors in Thesis Statements 24

**Practicing What You've Learned 26**

**Assignment 27**

Using the Essay Map 28

***Practicing What You've Learned 29***

***Assignment 30***

**3 : The Body Paragraphs 31**

Planning the Body of Your Essay 31

Organizing the Body Paragraphs 33

The Topic Sentence 33

***Practicing What You've Learned 38***

***Assignment 41***

Paragraph Development 41

Paragraph Length 44

***Practicing What You've Learned 45***

***Assignment 46***

Paragraph Unity 46

***Practicing What You've Learned 48***

Paragraph Coherence 50

***Practicing What You've Learned 55***

***Assignment 59***

Paragraph Sequence 60

Transitions between Paragraphs 61

Chapter Summary 62

**4 : Completing the Essay 63**

How to Write a Good Lead-in 63

Avoiding Errors in Lead-ins 66

***Practicing What You've Learned 67***

How to Write a Good Title 67

How to Write a Good Concluding Paragraph 68

Avoiding Errors in Conclusions 70

***Practicing What You've Learned 70***

***Assignment 71***

**5 : Revising Your Writing 72**

Preparing the First Draft 73

Revising the First Draft 73

Revising the Second Draft 74

Revising the Third Draft 75

The Final Touches 75

Some Last Advice: How to Play with Your Mental  
Blocks 76

A Checklist for Your Essay 78

***Practicing What You've Learned 78***

***Assignment 81***

**6 : Effective Sentences 82**

Develop a Clear Style 83

Develop a Concise Style 89

***Practicing What You've Learned 93******Assignment 95***

Develop a Lively Style 96

***Practicing What You've Learned 100******Assignment 101***

Develop an Emphatic Style 101

***Practicing What You've Learned 105******Assignment 107*****7 : Word Logic 108**

Selecting the Correct Words 108

***Practicing What You've Learned 115***

Selecting the Best Words 116

***Practicing What You've Learned 126******Assignment 128***

The Basics of the Short Essay: Part One Summary 129

**PART TWO : MODES AND STRATEGIES****8 : Exposition 133**

The Strategies of Exposition 133

Strategy One: Development by Example 134

***Essay Topics 138***

Sample Student Essay 139

Professional *Example Essay*: "So What's So Bad about Being So-So?" 141

The drive for perfection is preventing too many people from enjoying sports and hobbies, says author Lisa Wilson Strick (who proudly plays the piano badly but with great pleasure).

Strategy Two: Development by Process Analysis 144

***Essay Topics 148***

Sample Student Essay 148

Professional *Process Essay*: "To Bid the World Farewell" 152

By describing the embalming process in vivid, step-by-step detail, social critic and author Jessica Mitford questions the value—and necessity—of the entire procedure.

Strategy Three: Development by Comparison and Contrast 158

**Essay Topics 162**

Sample Student Essay 163

Professional *Comparison/Contrast Essay*: "Prufrock before the Television Set" 165

As he notes the similarities between airplane trips and television viewing, TV critic Michael J. Arlen ponders "the new state of passivity" today's technology may promote.

Strategy Four: Development by Definition 170

**Essay Topics 174**

Sample Student Essay 175

Professional *Definition Essay*: "Gobbledygook" 176

Author Stuart Chase exposes and ungobbles an assortment of pretentious, bureaucratic jargon in this essay, as well as offering some good advice on how to rid one's own writing of murky language.

Strategy Five: Development by Classification 183

**Essay Topics 185**

Sample Student Essay 186

Professional *Classification Essay*: "Four Hang-Ups" 188

Writing teacher William Zinsser describes four kinds of psychological blocks that discourage people from trying a word processor, a valuable tool he thinks can help writers clarify their prose.

Strategy Six: Development by Causal Analysis 194

**Essay Topics 197**

Sample Student Essay 198

Professional *Causal Analysis Essay*: "The Great American Cooling Machine" 200

America's addiction to air conditioning may have altered our technology and personal habits more than we might think, according to magazine editor Frank Trippett, whose essay notes both positive and negative effects of the popular twentieth-century invention.

**9 : Argumentation 205**

Developing Your Essay 205

Problems to Avoid 213

**Essay Topics 218**

Sample Student Essay 219

Professional *Argumentation Essays (2)*: "Should Youth Be Paid Subminimum Wage?" (Yes/No) 221

To alleviate the problem of youth unemployment, Secretary of Labor William Brock argues *for* the adoption of a lower minimum wage for teenagers during summer months; in his essay Congressman Julian Dixon argues *against* the lower-wage proposal, which he believes will benefit employers rather than the unemployed.

## 10 : Description 227

How to Write Effective Description 227

Problems to Avoid 232

### **Essay Topics 233**

Sample Student Essay 233

Professional *Descriptive Essay*: "Down in the Coal Mines" 235

A descent into the hellish sights, sounds, and smells of a cramped coal mine is recreated in gritty detail by novelist George Orwell, whose journey miles underground gave him new admiration for the men who worked there.

## 11 : Narration 241

How to Write Effective Narration 241

Problems to Avoid 243

### **Essay Topics 244**

Sample Student Essay 245

Professional *Narration Essay*: "Shame" 247

Civil rights activist Dick Gregory recounts a painful lesson he learned in school, one that had nothing to do with academics.

## 12 : Writing the Research Paper 252

Searching for Your Topic 252

Taking Notes 255

Distinguishing Paraphrase from Summary 257

Choosing Your Sources 258

Incorporating Your Source Material 260

Avoiding Plagiarism 261

### **Practicing What You've Learned 263**

#### **Assignment 264**

Finding the Proper Format for Your

Documentation 265

New MLA Form 265

Footnote/Endnote Form 266

Using Supplementary Notes 267

Compiling a Works Cited List 268

Sample Entries for a List of References 268

Sample Research Paper 275

## PART THREE: A CONCISE HANDBOOK

## 13 : Major Errors in Grammar 289

Errors with Verbs 289

### **Practicing What You've Learned 294**

Errors with Nouns 294



Errors with Pronouns	295
<b><i>Practicing What You've Learned</i></b>	<b>298</b>
Errors with Adverbs and Adjectives	299
Errors in Modifying Phrases	300
<b><i>Practicing What You've Learned</i></b>	<b>301</b>
Errors in Sentences	301
<b><i>Practicing What You've Learned</i></b>	<b>305</b>

#### **14 : A Concise Guide to Punctuation 306**

The Period	306
The Question Mark	307
The Exclamation Point	307
The Comma	307
<b><i>Practicing What You've Learned</i></b>	<b>312</b>
The Semicolon	313
The Colon	313
<b><i>Practicing What You've Learned</i></b>	<b>314</b>
The Apostrophe	315
Quotation Marks	316
<b><i>Practicing What You've Learned</i></b>	<b>317</b>
Parentheses	318
Brackets	319
The Dash	320
The Hyphen	321
Italics	322
The Ellipsis Mark	323
<b><i>Practicing What You've Learned</i></b>	<b>323</b>

#### **15 : A Concise Guide to Mechanics 325**

Capitalization	325
Abbreviations	326
Numbers	327
<b><i>Practicing What You've Learned</i></b>	<b>328</b>

Index	330
-------	-----