Barbey Nyce Dougherty

COMPOSING CHOICES FOR

A Cross-Disciplinary Rhetoric

COMPOSING CHOICES FOR WRITERS
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Barbey Nyce Dougherty

University of Michigan
at Ann Arbor

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To my husband Ned and my
three sons Mark, Christopher, and Jesse,
whose support and love have been invaluable.

Preface

To the Student

I wrote this book to help you understand the theory behind the practice of effective writing and to help you use that understanding to become a more effective writer. It has grown out of twenty years of classroom teaching and has been shaped by my work on the English Composition Board at the University of Michigan, work that brought me in contact with the different demands of a variety of disciplines and that pointed to the need to help writers find an approach to composing that transcends individual disciplines and the separation so often seen between academic and nonacademic writing tasks.

In *Composing Choices for Writers,* you will learn to view each writing task as a series of choices you must make about your audience and purpose, and then about the plan and stance most appropriate to achieve your purpose for your intended audience.

A composing questionnaire helps you assess your own writing practices and compare the approaches you use to those of experienced writers. A planning questionnaire asks you to consider your audience, your purpose, your plan, and your stance for each writing task, while an audience question-

naire helps you focus on those people who constitute your audience, what they know and value, and what you need to do to meet their expectations. Separate chapters on audience, purpose, plan, and stance help you understand more fully the implications of each composing choice you need to make, while chapters on reader response and how readers construct meaning help you adopt your reader's perspective and give you a framework for revising and editing. The revision questionnaire asks you to evaluate your choices about audience, purpose, plan, and stance to assess whether you have consistently followed through on the most appropriate choices for your intended audience. The chapter on editing at the text and the mid-level encourages you to map your meaning for readers visually and verbally, while the chapter on editing for readability and style encourages you to revise individual sentences to communicate most effectively with your readers. The last chapter has you view your punctuation as another way of making your intended meaning clearer for readers.

Throughout *Composing Choices for Writers,* you are asked to consider the broader picture as the basis on which you make informed choices as you plan, write, and revise individual sections of your paper. By being more conscious of your own intellectual processes as you write, you should become more aware of the power and potential of the choices you make. You should also be able to read what others have written more critically.

This book also helps you view writing as a way of discovering your purpose, your commitments, and your meaning and shows you how your initial language choices are tentative and need to be revised as you discover more fully your own ideas and the needs of your intended audience.

The organization of *Composing Choices for Writers* mirrors in a general way the process all writers go through as they plan, write, and revise. Initial chapters focus on prewriting and planning activities and show you how to discover your purpose and how to establish your personal connection to your topic. You also learn how to shape your message to your audience and how to plan for the most effective organization and stance to achieve your purpose. In later chapters, you learn how readers construct meaning and how they respond emotionally to a piece of writing. This knowledge helps you adopt your readers' perspective as you evaluate, revise, and edit your work with their needs in mind.

This book also shows you the intimate connection between writing and reading. You will learn how to assess your audience's prior understanding of a subject and to use that knowledge to help you select and then arrange the details in your text in order to provide an easy movement from familiar information to new information. You will also learn the importance of reading and then rereading what you have written in order to discover more fully your own meaning and to pick up words and images that help create a cohesive thread of meaning for readers. Finally, you will learn to adopt your reader's perspective and to use that knowledge to revise and edit your text.

The writing samples come from a variety of disciplines and reflect both academic and nonacademic tasks. You will increase your own understanding if you are alert to the composing choices other writers have made in everything you read and if you bring some of the better examples to class for discussion. When you finish reading this book, you should be more conscious of the range of options open to you as you plan, write, and revise. And you should also have had ample practice in writing and in evaluating your own work and the work of your classmates.

To the Teacher

The problem with most courses is that you want to teach everything before you have students begin to write and yet nothing is worth teaching until students actually start writing.

At the beginning of the semester, I get around this problem by assigning daily writing that will eventually grow into a finished piece. At the same time, I ask students to start thinking about how they are writing by having them read the first three chapters of this book. The composing questionnaire in Chapter 1 provides a good warm-up for it generates discussion about how people write and gives you and your students a way of sharing your successes and your failures. Chapter 2, which discusses what we can learn from experienced writers, gives students a context for evaluating their own composing strategies in relation to what the research suggests experienced writers do. Chapter 3 has students focus on how the assigned task affects their planning choices in academic and nonacademic tasks.

I try to design the daily writing at the beginning of the semester around the first finished paper that is to be handed in. Even though the focus of my course is primarily transactional as opposed to expressive, I have always started with narrative and descriptive writing because it draws on personal experience and provides students with a way of seeing how writing helps them discover their own meaning and commitments. I also begin here because I believe that all good writing grows out of subjects to which the writer is personally connected, no matter how formal the final product might be. I usually spend no more than three weeks on this kind of writing.

If the thrust of your course is more argumentative or persuasive, it is possible to begin daily writing on topics designed to get writers to think about their own commitments to a position. The exercises on focused freewriting and on talking through a paper that begin in Chapter 2, for example, are good warm-ups for developing a full-blown argument and can be worked in with Chapter 8 on argumentation. Or you can begin with Chapter 5 on audience and start with assignments that ask students to write about something they are an expert in.

The examples in the book are deliberately nonliterary and draw on a variety of disciplines. Students learn to view each piece of writing as the

product of a series of choices a writer makes in a particular rhetorical context about audience, purpose, plan, and stance. This broad approach makes it possible to use a rhetorical perspective to analyze all kinds of writing, from newsletters, to appeals for funds, to grants proposals, to applications for graduate school. This contextual approach also underscores the importance of knowing who your audience is and writing to meet their needs and expectations. You can make the selections you analyze in class most relevant if you choose timely examples that engage student interest. For example, two such works I have used are Ted Kennedy's speech before the Democratic convention in 1980 and a letter sent out on behalf of President Reagan by the Republican National Committee in 1982. The first was a masterpiece of rhetoric, the second was a rhetorical nightmare. In general, students enjoy seeing how the written or spoken word has the potential of shaping the response of a nation and understanding how their own work has the potential of shaping the response of those to whom they write.

Feedback from classmates provides the ideal opportunity for students to understand more fully how well they are gauging their readers' needs and expectations. You can help students receive multiple feedback on their work by structuring your class so that student response to each other's work is an integral part of the course. You can create an arrangement where one or two people share their work with the class each period and receive both oral and written feedback from everyone. Or you can set up on-going groups where three or four students work together over the semester by responding to each other's work. As writers, students learn to use the responses they get to clarify their meaning and they are given the opportunity to revise their papers according to their developing sense of audience and purpose. As readers, students learn more about their own reading process and how their expectations influence their perception of a text's meaning.

Suggested assignments in most chapters offer a range of possibilities. One line of assignments asks students to analyze the effectiveness of what another writer has done; for example, analyzing the differences in two articles on the same subject that are directed to different audiences. Another line of assignments asks students to produce their own work; for example, writing on the same subject to different audiences. The first approach is typical of most academic assignments and works well for students who have trouble finding topics to write about. However, it limits the purpose of writing only to analysis. This second approach works well for more experienced writers and gives them practice in the kinds of writing done outside the university. However, this approach allows students to produce work that is nontraditional by academic standards. I usually ask students to do some writing reflecting each approach, assigning about ten papers a semester and having them revise and submit for a final grade the six to eight pieces they find themselves most comfortable with. Many students find the case study assign-

ment in Chapter 3 an interesting way of exploring the kind of writing they may be doing in their professional life.

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