Francis A. Hubbard

How Writing Works

Learning and Using the Processes

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ST. MARTIN'S PRESS New York

Senior Editor: Nancy Perry
Development Editor: Michael Weber
Project Editor: Beverly Hinton
Production Supervisor: Julie Toth
Cover Design: Judy Forster

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 87-060577

Manufactured in the United States of America.
21098
fedcba

For information, write:
St. Martin's Press, Inc.
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

ISBN: 0-312-89467-8

To the Instructor

How Writing Works was written to answer as many "hows" and "whys" as possible. When an instructor announces some obvious truth about writing, such as that an essay has a beginning, a middle, and an end, it is the brighter student who asks, "Why?" And it is the active learner who asks, of the answer the instructor provides, yet *another* "why." Why should sentences vary in length? Because readers would get bored. But how and why would sentences of similar length bore a reader, rather than make the material easier to assimilate?

When writing instructors can answer several such questions in a row, I believe we have begun to do our job. When we have encouraged students to ask several such questions in a row, we have gotten them to begin to do theirs. All the more reason, then, for our textbooks and courses to avoid arbitrary pronouncements and instead to encourage inquiry. Why are examples effective? Why use concrete details? Why are paragraphs necessary? Through such questions we make progress toward a better understanding of "how writing works."

I have offered answers to such questions by looking at what readers do as they read, well aware that these answers lead to additional questions, perhaps more interesting ones still. I have left room for experienced teachers to supplement the text with further answers. But at the same time I have made the writing activities in the text rich enough in themselves so that beginning teachers can rely on their students to find many useful answers. Most of all, however, I have encouraged the inquiry process itself, believing that experienced and inexperienced teachers alike would prefer that atmosphere in their classes.

Perhaps the most difficult "why" for instructors to answer is "why should I write this assignment?" I believe beginning writers—freshmen are generally beginners in the sense that they have not experienced much of what writing can do—first need points about writing from which to take off. So my answer to that fundamental "why?" is that the assignments allow students to experience what writing will be like for *them*. The very first assignment, which merely requires students to paraphrase, is meant to begin providing the experience in question.

How Writing Works is built on a sequence of such assignments or activities. My exposition is meant as accompaniment to the main business of a writing course as I conceive it: students writing, discussing writing, and then writing some more. I have tried to write a book which stays out of the way of this main business, by simply arranging what students do in a useful order and allowing students to discover for themselves the points about writing that they need in order to generate, structure, and present their thoughts. *What the students write is the main text of the course.* I hope in this way to help students continue to improve their writing after they leave the writing course by establishing a pattern of self-guided learning which is also self-sustaining.

A key assumption of my particular kind of writing activity is that language use will improve with awareness. As we speak and write, much of what happens linguistically must be automatic; there isn't time to consider everything. But all the parts of writing, from generating ideas to proofreading, seem to me to benefit from de-automating. I mean the activities in this book to bring attention to the ways we get ideas, the ways we reason, the ways we structure and arrange, the ways we polish and present, and above all the ways writing works for each of us. It is this awareness, I believe, more than anything else we do in writing classes, that will prepare our students for the writing tasks they must perform in the future.

There are enough activities in *How Writing Works* so that an entire course can be built by doing each in turn, however briefly, and I have taught my own course this way. But a better plan, I think, is to allow students to revise some few that they select (say, four) from the set of activities you require (say, twenty) and compile them in a portfolio to be submitted at the end of the course. Better still, perhaps, is to require that students *construct*, out of groups of activities, three or four papers, revised again into a portfolio.

In Chapter One, for example, a paper could be written on the effects of paraphrasing. In the paper, the student would examine the "Star-Spangled Banner," the Pledge of Allegiance, a prayer, a song, and some other piece he or she knows "by heart," comparing the effects of paraphrasing through these five experiences. Has paraphrasing been helpful? How might the automatic character of these pieces be defined? Could the de-automating effect be achieved in other ways? And so on. As I have reused these materials, I have grown comfortable with this last method, although it may not be suitable the first time you use the book.

I have indicated, where I could naturally do so, how essays

may develop out of the activities. Since I did not want to interrupt the exposition with sections that might not be necessary, more on essay development may be found in the instructor's manual.

The activities, of course, do not need to be done *in toto*. Some can be left to students to read and think about. I have tried to include a sufficient number so that no one activity is critical for any chapter (with the exception of the first in Chapter One). Courses on the quarter system may have time for only one activity per chapter, which need not be written out. And even if activities are written out, they may not always need a full-length response. Sometimes a few minutes suffice to articulate the necessary points. This is not true of the information-gathering activities which send students out in all directions and then bring them back to compare what each has found.

To be consistent with my approach to writing, I have written a textbook which *cannot* be followed exactly or step by step. Instead, I have supplied materials and suggested experiences, out of which readers (instructors) can create their own courses from which *their* readers (students) can construct *their* own.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The sequence of assignments on which this book is based was written during the NEH/University of Iowa Institute on Writing in 1979. Credit for getting me to see what I was trying to do belongs to the staff of that Institute: Carl H. Klaus, Richard Lloyd-Jones, David Hamilton, Cleo Martin, Lou Kelly, and visitor William E. Coles, Jr. In particular the research project of Nancy Jones and the chance to write about the sequence in *Courses for Change* (Boynton-Cook, 1984), edited by Carl H. Klaus and Nancy Jones, helped me understand how such a book could be written.

This book has taken several years to write, and a number of very capable people have had a hand in it. Both my oldest and most recent debts are to Karen Pelz of Western Kentucky University, who encouraged me long ago to think I could write it and whose careful and supportive reviews have had much to do with my completing it. Stanley E. Fish, Jr., now of Duke University, taught me much of what I know about reading. Tom Broadbent, then of St. Martin's Press, gave me the impetus to begin, and Nancy Perry of St. Martin's has given me the will to continue; Michael Weber has

been a patient and helpful editor as I have finished. In addition I would like to thank my other reviewers, who went out of their way to show me what I was doing that they found useful: David Bartholomae of the University of Pittsburgh, Patricia Burnes of the University of Maine at Orono, Cleo Martin of the University of Iowa, Thomas Newkirk of the University of New Hampshire, Mike Rose of the University of California at Los Angeles, Nancy Sommers of Harvard University, and Ross Winterowd of the University of Southern California.

The people who have made the greatest difference to this book have been the students who have tried it and told me what was wrong. Anonymous students from the class of Laurie Ewert-Krocker at Cleveland State; Cindy Carpenter, Rick Lewis, and Lisa Ward from California State University at Sacramento; and Bob Neura, Charles Park, and Carl Smith from Cleveland State will all recognize that I took their suggestions seriously.

Francis A. Hubbard

To the Student

As you begin this book, you probably know some reasons for improving your writing. You want to do well in college, and you know you'll have to write essay exams and term papers. You want a good job, and you know you'll have to write good proposals and reports.

These are good reasons for learning how to write better. They are also external reasons, reasons outside you, the learner. These reasons focus on what *other* people will get out of your improved writing: They will see more clearly that you have learned your history, your psychology, your economics; or later on they will get the information they need from your reports. The benefits to you are *indirect*, coming through their approval.

Are there *direct* benefits to you in learning to write better? The answer is "yes," although as Joe Louis once said, "There are some people that, if they don't know, you can't tell 'em." For one thing, the direct benefits are not the same for everyone; different people find that writing does different things for them. In addition, the benefits are almost impossible to understand or believe until you have experienced them, so Louis is right again: Until you know, no one can tell you why writing will be important to you and in what ways.

The most we can do in writing courses and textbooks is to help you find out and experience what writing can do for you. Then, once you discover what you will use writing for, you will learn techniques and strategies much more easily because they won't seem arbitrary. They will connect directly to what you really want to do.

A best-selling book provides an example of what I am talking about. Every year in this country more than five million blank journals and diaries are sold. Many people have discovered, entirely on their own, that keeping a diary or journal lets them watch themselves as they live their lives and gives them the chance to live more fully, regardless of how they actually keep the diary and make entries in it.

People who haven't actually kept a diary wouldn't understand. ("If they don't know . . ."). And people who do keep journals or diaries probably wouldn't give the same reasons why they keep

them; published writers seem to have as many uses for them as there are writers. Still, just the simple activity of recording thoughts at regular intervals does provide for many people one of the benefits I was talking about and does give an internal reason for writing.

We know from recent research that people improve their writing more easily and more quickly when they are learning for internal reasons, for their own purposes and for immediate benefits. Since I cannot know what those purposes and benefits are for you, however, I cannot *sell* writing to you. All I can do, all this book tries to do, all your writing course can do, is give you as many of the experiences as possible that other writers have found valuable. Then you can make up your own mind what to pursue and what to leave out.

Research also shows that we learn by doing. It is especially true of writing, apparently, that lots of talk about writing isn't as much help as a little actual *doing of it, in situations* as realistic as possible. The more isolated a particular writing activity is from the way writing is actually used, the less helpful it seems to be—I am thinking particularly of drills on grammar and usage. Unless you have written the drill yourself (see Chapter Ten, "The Glamor of Grammar"), you will probably retain very little of it.

Many of the writing activities in this book are meant to be like writing done by managers, engineers, lawyers, doctors, technicians, political workers, teachers, and others. Think of the procedure of a working group, in which each person investigates some part of a problem and brings in a brief report, which the group as a whole analyzes, puts together with all the other reports into a larger report, and then implements. Such activities are common in this book because they make it possible for you to learn from twenty or more people instead of merely from one, as well as because they are like the writing you can expect to do after college. They have the added advantage that everyone's contribution counts, rather than being just repetitious busywork.

Since writers are so different and since writing situations vary so much, I don't present a method which you *have* to follow. Instead, I have built each chapter around several activities from which you can get material to write about, and I have made suggestions about how to do that writing. I hope your experiences with these activities will help you design flexible writing processes to meet your needs both during college and after, processes that suit your personality as a writer as well as the readers you will

encounter. I hope they will let you find out how writing works for you and encourage you to continue to develop as a writer after the course is over.

The best approach for you, I think, is experimental. Students who have worked with these activities have not done identical work. Each one has done something different, and the student writers who have tried new things wholeheartedly, who have gone to extremes, and who have extended their own methods, approaches, and structures beyond what they started with have often told me afterward that they weren't sure they got what I intended, but they had gotten something useful. *That was in fact all I intended.*

Contents

PART TWO
LEARNING TO WRITE FOR READERS 37

Chapter 3 How People Write—for Readers 39

Chapter 4 How People Write—the Processes 56

Chapter 5 How People Learn to Write 74

Chapter 8 How People Structure and Organize 124

Chapter 9 How People Manage Sentences and Words 133

PART FOUR IMPROVING YOUR WRITING 151

Chapter 10 The Glamor of Grammar 153

PART ONE

LEARNING AND READING

While you work with these first two chapters, you will focus on *learning* and *reading*. The activities ask you to examine a successful learning experience of your own and to explain—among other things—what kind of reader you are. These activities are meant to help you understand how to become a better writer. You can also use them as the basis for a paper, or at least the draft of a paper (revising is discussed in later chapters), about you as a learner. As you work through these two chapters, consider the activities as providing occasions to draft sections of this larger paper, which you can then fit together into a whole.