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PARAGRAPH PRACTICE

Writing the Paragraph
and the Short Composition

SIXTH EDITION

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PRACTICE

Writing the Paragraph and the Short Composition

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Preface

The sixth edition of *Paragraph Practice: Writing the Paragraph and the Short Composition* has been revised to include a new opening chapter, "Getting Started," designed to prompt students to plunge into the writing process before they later begin to analyze the basic elements of composition. The chapter opens with a recognition of the blank paralysis beginners often feel when asked to take up the unfamiliar activity of writing, proceeds to validate their ordinary daily experiences as valuable source material and themselves as authentic and dynamic voices, and then moves on to methods by which they may trigger their best written responses. The major portion of the chapter consists of prewriting exercises using Gabriele Rico's technique of clustering, each followed by exercises, with examples in writing practice paragraphs. The chapter concludes with a list of additional topics for clustering and paragraphing and with some simple relaxation exercises to help ease tension before writing. In addition, the sixth edition includes improvements in the text and exercises in Parts I and II as well as new model exercises in the paragraph and short composition. It is the aim of this edition to be clearer and more comprehensive than its predecessors.

With the expansion of Part I in the fifth edition, which introduced the chapter "Coherence and Continuity," and the enlargement of Part II in the fourth edition, which added new chapters in organizing, developing, introducing, and concluding the short composition, *Paragraph Practice* combines virtually two little books into one. The first half of the book concentrates on the topic sentence and the paragraph, and the second half focuses on the thesis statement and the short composition. This expansion should make it possible for *Paragraph Practice* to serve the needs of a broader range of college students than it did in its original edition, as well as to increase the extent of its usefulness to the students for whom it was originally designed. This new edition also contains Appendix B, "Correction Symbols," which was expanded in the third edition into a mini-handbook of grammar and usage.

Like its predecessors, the sixth edition is a workbook designed not so much to talk about the paragraph as to provide models and exercises in writing the paragraph. It is intended to give the same experience with the topic sentence, the

thesis sentence, and the short composition. The main theme of this workbook, as Professor Strunk might have put it, is *practice, practice, practice!*

Why practice the paragraph? The paragraph is ideally suited to meet the needs of college students who, for one reason or another, need extra practice in writing. The paragraph is comparatively short and contains many of the basic elements to be considered in studying any form of writing. Because of its brevity, the paragraph permits frequent writing practice without overburdening either the student or the instructor. In addition, the brevity of the paragraph makes it ideal as a medium for controlled composition in which specific mechanics or techniques of writing can be studied.

Organization is the primary concern of this workbook. Organization does not come naturally to most students in college composition courses. Because it is unfamiliar and strikes many students as unnecessary pain, they often resist it. As a result, instructors frequently neglect it. Nonetheless, organization is vital to good composition. It is the aim of this workbook to make it as painless to learn and as enjoyable to teach as possible. Consequently, the book begins with relatively simple problems and proceeds, by degrees, to problems of greater complexity.

The order of the text and exercises in Part I that precede the actual practice of the paragraph may be modified. For example, the section in Chapter 4 called "Find the Right Word" may be deferred as a refinement that digresses from more essential requirements of the topic sentence. It can easily be taken up later when, for instance, problems of variety and imagination are introduced in Chapter 8.

Paragraph Practice may be used in combination with other books, or it may serve by itself as a reader and as a workbook in composition. The subject matter of the model sentences, paragraphs, and compositions can serve as topics for class discussions and for written exercises based on the discussions that will be of genuine interest to both instructor and students.

The advice and suggestions of many people have contributed greatly to improving this edition of *Paragraph Practice*. I would especially like to thank Anne Anderson, Marjorie Smith, Marion Trentman, Richard Vietti, and my editor, D. Anthony English, for their understanding and help.

K. E. S.

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1

Getting Started

1. DO YOU RECOGNIZE THIS EXPERIENCE?

As a student you are probably familiar with the following experience: You are sitting in a classroom, paper in front of you, pencils sharp, pens poised for action. Your assignment is to write a five-hundred-word composition within the hour. You understand the directions and are ready to begin. But the clock on the wall begins to jerk away the minutes as you stare at the blank page, defying you to write on it. What can you write about? What is there to say? You feel as blank as the page itself and sit there, paralyzed, waiting for inspiration. No ideas come. You begin to twist and turn in your hard chair, desperately looking around the room for some kind of miracle. Why can't you get started?

2. YOU HAVE PLENTY TO WRITE ABOUT

Deep down you know you have a lot to say. Just think about your last telephone call. Can you hear how you jabbered away to one of your best friends? You had plenty of ideas then. Think about the last time you griped to someone about your life. You were loaded with complaints, weren't you? Or consider all

the effort you have made to find a decent job and the humiliation and frustration you have experienced. You have had no trouble sharing your feelings with people close to you, some of them in the same boat. How about the directions you recently gave a younger sister or brother who was trying to learn to do something you already knew all about? That effort took clear explanation as well as patience, didn't it? Think of all the skill you have developed in discussing controversial issues with your parents and others older if not wiser than you. You have proved to be quite a survivor, haven't you? Remember the intricate beginnings when you met that very important person in your life. Conversation may not have been easy at first, but you ultimately learned to speak volumes to each other. Take stock of the fact that you are an authority about your life and your experiences, and that you have a lot to say and plenty to write about.

3. BE YOURSELF

You have within you a gold mine of source material to draw on for writing. Moreover, you are unique. No one else has lived your life. No one else knows quite what you know or sees through your particular eyes. Therefore, what you have to say is special and should be alive and interesting. If you can reveal what you know, value, think about, worry about, fear, or look forward to, you are bound to find an attentive audience. But you must write from yourself and with your own authentic voice. Do not be a phony. Do not try to sound like someone else, some stranger, and do not distance yourself from what you write, trying vaguely to deliver what you imagine is expected from those writing (or not writing) with you in the classroom. Do not nonperson yourself or become bland, colorless, and dull. Be yourself when you pick up that pen to write. Be genuine. Be willing to risk showing your reader who you are.

Revealing who you are, of course, also includes letting your imperfections as a writer show. For example, you may not always be as clear or as well organized as you would like to be. Your vocabulary may not be as exact and as fully developed as you might wish. You may be shaky about mechanics such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation. However, you cannot afford to worry about these problems when you are first getting started. If you do, you may risk blocking yourself, being unable to write at all, becoming self-conscious, intimidated, confused, stiff, and wooden instead of your spontaneous, dynamic self! Since no one expects you to be perfect in the beginning, anyway, you may as well relax and be yourself, all the best and worst of you. Perfection can come later. First you must worry about getting your thoughts on paper, no matter how they may come out, before they slip away!

4. THINK ABOUT *WHAT* MORE THAN *HOW*

In the beginning, think about *what* you want to say more than *how* you want to say it. In most writing situations, you will be able to write more than one version or "draft" of what you want to say. In the first or "rough draft" of your composition, you should dwell on *content*—that is, on subject matter, the thoughts or ideas you want to express—more than on *form* or the various means by which you express those ideas. Your rough draft may be quite sketchy, in fact, and consist of little more than notes to yourself in a kind of shorthand that only you can read and understand. Form is not important at this point. What is important is to pin down those thoughts that come to you just as they appear, direct and honest, maybe even crude or half-conceived, semithoughts, ghosts of thoughts, but possibly very vital fragments that you can later develop more clearly. If time permits, and your energy and motivation are strong enough, you may write several drafts, gradually developing and refining your composition. In your final drafts, your attention can rightly turn to form, structure, and mechanics, but not in the beginning, when you need to focus on content.

5. CONTENT MAY NEED TO BE TRIGGERED

Content will not always leap to your call. Although you have within you an abundant source of subject matter to draw on for writing, what you need at any given moment may not always be immediately accessible. You may not always know what you know or be able to bring it to mind with ease so that you can write about it. Suppose you "can't think of anything"? What can be done to trigger your thoughts or to tap into them?

6. THE OUTSIDE WORLD CAN BE HELPFUL

The thoughts or ideas that exist somewhere in the hidden reaches of your mind may be teased into your consciousness with the help of the outside world or may depend on your own ability to trigger them. Forces in the outer world can be very helpful. For instance, writing assignments are frequently preceded by classroom discussion that can stimulate your thoughts. Your instructor may put penetrating questions to the class that make you think, that remind you of something in your past experiences, that encourage you to put together new

combinations or fresh applications of ideas. Besides your classroom activities, your personal world is probably full of people who can assist you. It may prove enjoyable as well as enormously helpful for you to go to family members or other people who know you well and ask them, "Can you remind me of what I know about this subject? Have I had experience with this topic? Help me remember." The result can be not only entertaining but can bring you still closer together.

To illustrate, suppose you are asked to write a composition in which you have to discuss your earliest experience with right and wrong behavior, particularly in relation to violation of law. You think back through your career as a less-than-perfect child, and you realize you are hazy on the subject, but fortunately a parent is available. You sit down together and begin to reflect on your childhood, one of you remembering one thing, the other another. The discussion calls to mind a poignant memory of your stealing a small item from a neighborhood store, and you remember how bothered you were as weeks went by and your guilt about the theft mounted until you finally revealed your secret to your parent. Sharing this memory, you both smile as you recall the lesson you learned that day when the two of you returned to that small store, your parent watching as you made your apology and paid the proprietor.

Bringing what you know to consciousness is not always so much a matter of *remembering* as it is of *realizing* something about which you may be only vaguely aware or which you may not have thought about at all. For instance, imagine a classroom discussion of a complex word such as *ambivalence*, which means feeling conflicting emotions about a person or thing, such as love and hate, at the same time. Suppose you are asked to write about the word and you wonder what to say. You have lunch with a friend after class, and you begin to toss the word around, trying it out. At some point your friend says, "Isn't that how you used to feel about your Ex? Didn't you sometimes love and hate him at the same time?" Of course, you "know that" or sometimes almost let yourself feel that, but it may take your friend to bring your dim awareness to full recognition. When you realize you have had real experience with the word—that is, with the feelings the word represents—you have much to write about. Thus can the outside world help you to tap into your inner resources.

7. YOU MAY NEED TO HELP YOURSELF

Although your writing can benefit from the outside world in this and other ways, some of your most vivid writing may depend on your ability to tap into your memory or to trigger your realization on your own. To do this requires a special state of mind and may also be facilitated by some special prewriting exercises.

8. CONSIDER A SPECIAL STATE OF MIND

All writing classes might well begin with relaxation exercises, for one of the greatest blocks to good writing is tension—feeling “uptight,” threatened, insecure, defensive. Notice how you hold your pen or pencil as you write in class. Do you squeeze it so tightly that it feels like a weapon stabbing the page and your dented hand in armed combat? While a rush of adrenaline or excitement may help you to write well, feeling tense and defensive will likely make it difficult for you to write. Hopefully, you will have a chance, before you write, to stretch, breathe deeply, and loosen up, just as you would before engaging in an athletic event requiring intense concentration and skill. (For some simple exercises designed to help you relax before writing, see the end of this chapter.) Further, early in your class, you may also have an opportunity to get acquainted with your classmates, at least those sitting in your vicinity, to discover that they are human, too, and quite possibly as unsure of themselves as you may be. Sharing your mutual anxiety can do much toward making it tolerable or even diminishing it to the point that it ceases to matter. These activities should help you feel more relaxed, confident, and ready to write.

Feeling stimulated but not tense and defensive, you are ready to experience the special state of mind called for in the beginning or “rough draft” stage of writing. (Remember, at this point you are concentrating on *content*, on *what* you want to express, *not* on *form* or *how* to express it, which comes later.)

First you need to “look outward” to your instructor or elsewhere for direction, for as clear a sense of the writing assignment as you can obtain. After that, however, you must become somewhat detached from the outer world and “look inward.” At this stage you need to tap into your inner resources, to become creative and original. This is when you want most to be your unique self, to dwell on subject matter, attitudes, or feelings only you know about. This is also the moment when you need most to trust yourself, indeed, to allow yourself to *be*, to see who you are, to learn how you think and feel. This can be a striking moment of self-discovery, certainly a prime benefit of writing. A scary but exciting time, this is when you need to take a risk, to be open and therefore vulnerable, if only to yourself. No one should intrude on this moment, nor should you look to others for help, for this is your time to be with yourself. Look inward to your own experience, to your own reality. Listen to yourself. Get in touch with your own inner voice. Discover, explore, and develop your unique core.