

DISCOVERY AND COMMITMENT

A GUIDE
FOR COLLEGE
WRITERS



LEONARD J. ROSEN

***Discovery
and
Commitment***
A Guide for College Writers


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Preface

Discovery and Commitment: A Guide for College Writers is a rhetoric intended for first- and second-semester composition courses. Two principles distinguish this text from the many rhetorics currently available: first, that good writing, produced by students or by professionals, is nearly always motivated by a personal commitment to an essay's idea; and second, that writing at the college level nearly always involves the use of source materials. I did not presume to write a new book without first searching for an existing one that satisfied my teaching needs. Specifically, I looked for a rhetoric that did not drive a wedge between a student's personal interests and experience and topics suitable for academic writing. As it happened, I did not find such a book.

In Search of Motivated College Writing

Like so many of my colleagues, I have struggled over the years with too many flat, uninteresting essays, and I have been buoyed by (admittedly fewer) essays in which the real voice of a real person emerges and works hard to communicate something important. I learn from virtually every essay I read; but I *enjoy* reading the essays of those who clearly care about their own work and who want me and others to care. These are the writers hungry to learn and use time-tested rhetorical strategies, including the judicious use of sources. Because I assume that all students have their interests and loyalties, and because I assume that the best writing is motivated by the personal, I put two questions to myself continually: How can I change my practice to better help students discover in themselves and in their materials a personal link to the writing task at hand? How can I then help students broker this discovery into the commitment needed to sustain them from an essay's conception, through the messy process of drafting and revision, and forward to a finished product?

Answers for me come slowly, for I am always testing and adjusting through practice in the classroom. Over the years, I have designed and redesigned individual assignments and whole courses; hatched and tinkered with strategies that prompt ownership of ideas; juxtaposed readings to highlight shadings of difference; read the work of and conversed with colleagues; and discussed with students, particularly those who have produced both flat and committed essays in the same semester, what motivates them to write. *Discovery and Commitment* is the product of this work, of two decades of thinking about how to help students find ideas worth writing about both in their own experience and in their course-related reading.

This Book's Organization and Features

The text opens with an exercise/introduction intended to make a point: A writer's job is to discover a personally meaningful or useful idea and then to make it public. To have an idea is *not* to have an essay, however. The move from personal to public is a move from monologue to discussion, in some respects a move from solipsism to a recognition that others, who may hold different ideas, exist and must be addressed. The brute fact that there *is* an audience out there changes everything for a writer; still, insights for an essay begin with the individual. A bridge must be built from the personal to the public, from writer to audience. This tension between the private and public is the springboard from which I develop materials in the first two parts of the book. The language introduced in Part I is used throughout Part II, where students will find twelve source-based "Occasions for Discussion and Writing."

Part I of *Discovery and Commitment* follows directly from the principles laid out in the opening exercise. Students are shown a process of writing, and are shown what an idea is (my students, anyway, have never been quite sure what an idea looks like in the context of college-level writing). Then they are shown techniques for discovering ideas in their own experience and in their course materials. Finally, they are shown techniques for taking personal ideas and making them public.

The Personal *with* the Academic in College Writing

Chapter 1 is devoted to discovery. I urge students *not* to separate the personal from the academic, as so many guides to writing seem to do, but rather to infuse the personal *with* the academic, *with* course materials, so that a strong commitment to writing may arise. In chapter 2, students learn how to gauge and control the level of their commitment to an idea by writing and rigorously examining a working thesis. A passage from Justice Holmes provides a playful but powerful metaphor for thinking of writers as having a one-, two-, or three-story commitment to an essay. Chapter 3 is devoted to strategies for creating *in* an essay the points of reference, or common ground, necessary to ensure a reader's full understanding. Anticipating what readers know and need to know is the first step writers take in making their ideas public. Chapter 4 presents specific strategies for incorporating source materials in an essay through "cycles of development." The chapter introduces the idea of synthesis and provides a technique for "quizzing" a working thesis in order to project the structure of an essay. Chapter 5 presents techniques for reading to understand and evaluate and for preparing two related forms of writing, summary and critique, that students will draw on repeatedly in their college careers.

Throughout Part I, students have ample opportunity to practice the strategies discussed by working through numerous exercises in each

chapter. One of the threads binding these chapters is the recurring example of a single student essay: "Technology, History, and Jazz" appears in its entirety in the book's "Opening Exercise"; parts reappear, with the author's commentary, in the final section of chapters 1–5, "A Student Writer at Work."

Part II of the text consists of six chapters that introduce students to the most common occasions for writing at the college level: the familiar essay (chapter 6) and essays of explanation (chapter 7), analysis (chapter 8), problem/solution (chapter 9), literary interpretation (chapter 10), and argument (chapter 11). Each chapter takes the following form:

- Definitions and examples, with questions for critical thinking.
- Structures and strategies—advice on the processes of writing in each form.
- Occasions for Discussion and Writing—assignment occasions, with source readings to spark ideas on two related topics.

Writing Occasions That Spring from Evidence and Reading

The example essays in "Definitions and Examples" are followed with questions to prompt student thinking about the ideas and structure of the piece. Two example essays are accompanied by "Commitment Statements" from the authors, discussing the personal motivations underlying their writing of a public document.

"Structures and Strategies" uses the language and the concepts from Part I to present how writers discover ideas for and then construct a particular form of writing. The Part II chapters present *particular* strategies—a fine tuning of the broader principles introduced in Part I—for each form of writing. Throughout, explanations are grounded in examples, usually from the example essays that open each chapter.

Each chapter in Part II concludes with a pair of casebooks to provide "Occasions for Writing." The first of these is suitable for discussion and the second, longer one provides a good occasion for writing. Each gathers source materials on a tightly defined topic—for instance, student dress codes or the race riots at Crown Heights. These readings provide the occasion for discussion and writing, just as readings typically do for students in their courses beyond the composition classroom. *Discovery and Commitment* is the only comprehensive rhetoric that prepares students for writing beyond freshman composition by asking them to write essays that spring from evidence found in written materials.

Instructional Flexibility in Parts III, IV, and V

A major goal for this text is to offer flexible approaches to the teaching of writing. After introducing the process of discovery and development of

ideas in Part I, instructors can choose to direct students toward “Writing Occasions” to develop ideas and assignments from readings in Part II, or they can show students how the discovery processes are integrated with the other recursive aspects of the writing and rewriting process, as demonstrated in Part III. The three chapters in Part III cover specific elements of the writing process that grow out of the processes shown in Part I. Chapter 12 covers “Drafting, Paragraph Development, and Early Revision”; chapter 13 demonstrates “Rewriting, Paragraph Structure, and Final Revision”; chapter 14 gives guidance on collaborative efforts in “Writing and Rewriting in Groups.”

Part IV offers an extension of the process of advancing writing ideas with sources; its four chapters present extensive material on the research process and documentation, using detailed models to demonstrate what students need to launch their own independent research projects. Part V provides guidance on specialized strategies, with unique support in chapter 19 for writing and rewriting with a computer, often as part of a collaborative effort. Chapter 20 gives concrete help for writers taking essay exams or writing under pressure.

Handbook

Part VI provides a brief handbook of grammar and usage with several distinctive features: a “spotlight” guide for troubleshooting common errors, a reference guide for standard topics of usage and style, and a special reference for students needing help with ESL topics, as well as a glossary of usage.

The Instructor’s Resource Manual

Each section, assignment, and reading selection in *Discovery and Commitment* is closely supported with instructional background material in *The Instructor’s Resource Manual*, a 350-page teaching companion to the text compiled by Deanne Harper of Northeastern University and myself. Here instructors will find chapter overviews, question and exercise discussions, and extensive suggestions to amplify discussion and writing assignments. The Manual offers a wide range of short writing or critical thinking exercises and activities for students to work on individually, in small groups, or in combination. Assignment suggestions present varied opportunities to write—for background to writing, for critical thinking or note taking about evidence, for clarifying writing ideas, or for drafts and revisions of sections or essays. Numerous cross-references among different parts of the book show a wealth of options and potential connections between rhetorical elements as well as between themes or issues raised in the readings.

My Commitment to This Book

I have written this text to help students produce the sort of writing that engages a reader’s interest. Before readers—outside of college or inside,

across disciplines—can make their own commitment to a piece, they need to see the writer make a commitment. And they need to see a recognition on the writer's part that his or her own ideas exist in relationship with those of others. They also need to see that sophisticated writing acknowledges and makes productive use of others' ideas. Whatever the merits of the many rhetorics I examined, I did not find any that placed at the center of every writing occasion the robust combination of strategies for discovery, commitment, and use of sources that has so enlivened my students' writing. The pedagogical initiatives I have developed and presented in this text have worked in my classroom and in others. My earnest intention is that they will work for you in yours.

Discovery and Commitment is a book in process. After twenty years in the profession, I have presumed to take a snapshot of one stage in my evolution as a teacher and writer and to present my thinking. Preparing a comprehensive guide to college writing has been a daunting and humbling experience; and while I am confident that the ideas and strategies presented here will prove useful, I am certain that they are evolving still through my own classroom practice and through contacts I continue to make with interested colleagues across the country. Write with your comments and suggestions, and pass along student essays sparked by any of the materials in the pages that follow. I invite and welcome your contributions.

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Leonard Rosen
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Credits

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