

Contemporary Composition

Fourth Edition

Maxine Hairston

FOURTH EDITION

Contemporary Composition

Maxine Hairston

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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Four drawings for painting *Hotel Lobby*. Conte on paper. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph by Geoffrey Clements.

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The fourth edition of this book has a new name, *Contemporary Composition*, one chosen to reflect the text's increased emphasis on all the elements of the composing process. My purpose in showing the range of options open to writers when they face different kinds of writing tasks is to bolster students' confidence and demonstrate to them that the ability to write is not a mysterious power or a magical gift granted only to a few. Ordinary people who are willing to invest energy and time and to engage in disciplined practice can learn to write clearly and effectively. This text provides practical strategies and realistic writing assignments that will help them achieve that goal.

The text is still rhetorically based; that is, it sets each writing task in a context that requires students to think about why they are writing and to pay attention to their readers' needs and expectations. It also continues to stress that students need to become critical readers and analytical thinkers as well as competent writers, and it retains the argumentative edge that it has featured through the first three editions. In fact, the argumentative portion of the book has been updated and made more accessible to students by dropping the rather traditional section on deductive logic and substituting an illustrated section on informal logic or Toulmin argument, the approach to argument now featured in most texts on argumentation. The section on fallacies and propaganda has been retained.

The fourth edition features several other major changes and additions.

- It is now available in two formats: a hardcover edition, which includes a greatly expanded and clarified handbook, and a softcover edition, which omits the handbook.
- It begins with an explanation of the ways in which writing serves as a major mode of learning in all college courses.
- It introduces a fresh conceptual approach about different kinds of writing and the processes by which they are done.
- It combines two chapters on rhetorical theory into a single chapter titled "The Elements of Rhetoric."
- It features a completely new chapter on revision that explains revising as part of the composing process, sets priorities for revising, and demonstrates the revision process by including drafts and the final versions of two student papers.

- It introduces students to the concept of peer groups and gives guidelines to help them work together.
- It includes a new section on sexist language, discussing its implications and suggesting ways of avoiding it.
- It concludes with a completely rewritten, expanded, and updated chapter on the research paper that treats research as an ongoing learning activity pertinent to everyone's life. The section on documentation explains and illustrates new MLA style and APA style.
- Writing assignments throughout the book have been revised and updated to include the components of audience and purpose for each one.

I believe the changes in the fourth edition reflect changes and improvements in my own teaching of writing in the past four years and also reflect new knowledge and significant advances in the profession. I believe strongly that the two professional organizations that have done the most to bring about those changes and improvements are the National Council of Teachers of English and its subsidiary organization, the Conference on College Composition and Communication. I offer my thanks and appreciation to my colleagues in those organizations who have invested so much energy, talent, and commitment in the teaching of writing to all students.

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CONTEMPORARY COMPOSITION

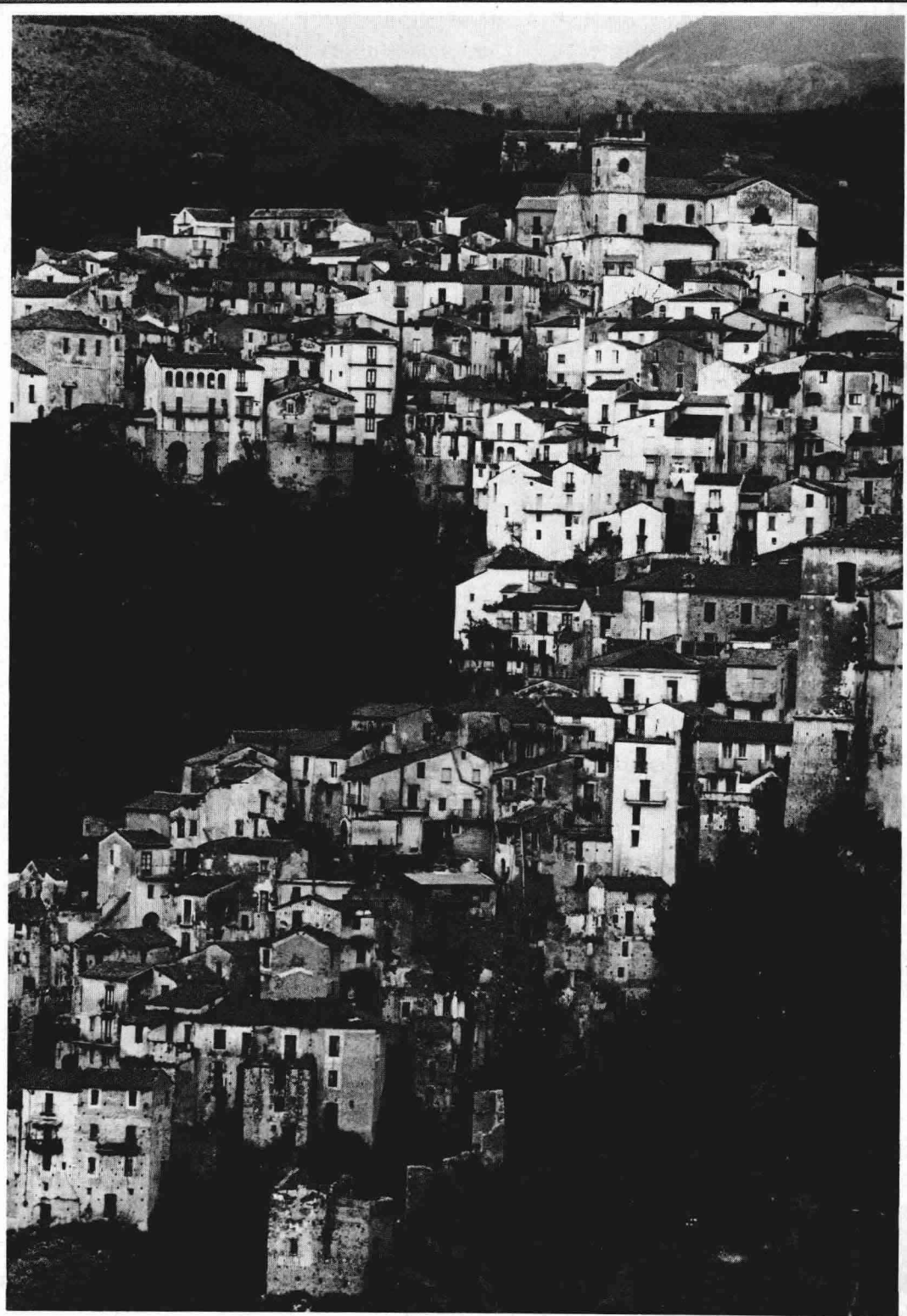
1 • Writing: An Overview, Part 1

Why Write in College?

As a college student, you are almost certainly going to have to write many papers during your years in school, and when you enter a profession after graduation, you will probably have to continue to write. A major purpose of this book is to help you to become an effective writer who can write clear, well-organized papers for your courses and then carry that skill over into your professional life.

Writing in college has another significant function, however: it is a major tool for learning. When you write, you do so to practice expressing ideas and to demonstrate to your instructors that you have mastered the material in their courses. But there are additional reasons for writing that may be even more important:

1. Writing is a tool for discovery. We stimulate our thought processes by the act of writing and tap into information and images we have in our unconscious minds. Writing helps us to “harvest” what we know.
2. Writing generates new ideas by helping us to make connections and see relationships.
3. Writing helps us to organize our ideas and clarify concepts. By writing down ideas we can arrange them in coherent form.
4. Writing down our ideas allows us to distance ourselves from them and evaluate them.
5. Writing helps us to absorb and process information; when we write about a topic, we learn it better.
6. Writing enables us to solve problems; by putting the elements of the problem into written form, we can examine and manipulate them.



7. Writing on a subject makes us active learners rather than passive receivers of information.¹

So as you become a more confident and facile writer, you will reap benefits that you may not have anticipated and find that writing can be a rich and productive experience.

Purposes of the Writing Course

People who are starting to write need to know a number of things all at once, because even relatively simple writing tasks require the mastery of several skills. But no one can master all these skills at once, so we have to set priorities and focus first on those that seem to be the most important for the novice writer. In my judgment they are as follows:

1. Recognizing and appreciating good writing.
2. Understanding the writing process.
3. Learning how to get started writing.
4. Learning how to organize writing.
5. Learning how to unify writing.

*Priorities for novice
writers*

The first two chapters of this book will give you guidelines for developing these basic abilities, and once you grasp the main principles, you should be able to approach writing your first papers with some confidence. At least you will understand what you are supposed to be doing even if you do it rather awkwardly and slowly the first few times. Gradually, as you master these skills and begin to supplement the early lessons with more complex ones, you will begin to write easily without always consciously thinking about what you are doing. But studied practice has to come first.

*You already have
good communication
skills*

In fact, you are probably already fairly well prepared to write that first paper even if you have not done much writing in high school, because all writing starts with the mind and the emotions, not with a pencil or typewriter or word processor. For a long time you have been using your interpersonal skills to communicate with people in conversations or letters. You have ideas or opinions, and you tell

¹List adapted from an article by Maxine Hairston, "Speculations About Writing Programs in the Eighties," *Association of Departments of English Bulletin* 67 (Spring 1981): 12.