

THE COMMITTED WRITER

Mastering Nonfiction Genres

Harry H. Crosby □ Duncan A. Carter





The Committed Writer:

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Boston University

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Preface

We have noticed that there is a “new seriousness” among students these days. Less intent on the here and now than in former days, they are more inclined to look to the future. Although they want to mend the world politically, they also realize that they will sooner or later be looking for jobs. World menders and job seekers alike need to be able to write and to write well. Students know they may land their first jobs because they can audit books, program a computer, or sell a product. However, they also know they must be able to write an application. After they secure their entry-level jobs, writing becomes even more important. What brings progress—the promotions, the salary increases—after the first appointment is the ability to work with people, which includes the ability to communicate, especially to write.

This book is for committed writers. You may have decided to become a journalist, a professional writer, or someone who occasionally submits articles to the writer’s market. You may wish to become a lawyer, doctor, teacher, diplomat, or a member of another profession for which writing is essential. Or you may realize that no matter what you do, your well-being depends heavily on how well you write.

We assume that you are not starting from scratch, whether you are a committed writer or want to become one. This book is for students who have some confidence in their ability but want to improve. It is for students who have had solid high school or college-level instruction, but who want broader experience as writers without covering the same old ground. This book may be used by students who are taking their first college writing course, but they must be willing to make a quick, intensive study (or

review) of some basic rhetorical principles to make sure they are speaking the same language as their professor. The Introduction in this text summarizes what committed writing students should know about writing. If you are already familiar with the goals and principles of effective writing, good—but you may still profit from the review. If you are not confident about the basic principles of rhetoric, consider the Introduction essential.

At the heart of most forceful and effective writing is a highly developed sense of audience. Beginning writers often produce *writer-centered* prose, of the variety: “But *I* know what I meant!” This text will help you write *reader-centered* prose.

There are several direct ways to find out about your audience. Advertisers regularly send out questionnaires. Politicians conduct polls and spend a lot of time shaking hands and listening to people. For some of the writing you do, you may have this kind of direct knowledge of your audience. You may know their expectations, needs, dreams, prejudices, even their religious or political beliefs. But when you are writing for a mass audience, for individual readers you have not met and may never even see, the task of getting into their minds is more difficult. Walter Ong, a widely respected literary scholar, argues that writers in this position actually *fictionalize*, or imagine their audience. The audience invented by the writer is not, however, made up out of thin air. Rather, the audience and its expectations are inferred from wide reading and from careful study of the assumptions that other writers who do a similar kind of writing have made about their audience. The process of making inferences about audiences is central to the design of this text; it is the process in which the committed writer must excel.

In short, we are asking you to work like a professional. When professional writers move from their customary type of writing to a different genre—when novelist Norman Mailer is asked to describe a prizefight, or Tom Wolfe sets out to write about astronauts—they check to see how one writes in that genre. If an editor asks a poet to do a review, he or she may send the poet several past issues of the magazine to illustrate the kinds of reviews its readers expect. When a free-lancer visits Latin America and decides to write a travel article, he or she gets out some travel magazines to see how other writers do it.

The immediate function of this text is to help you master the process of writing in some of the most widely published genres of nonfiction. You find these genres in magazines, newspapers, and books; many of the same forms are assigned in college courses. Perhaps even more important than mastering these forms, you will also learn what to do when you meet other new forms, ones *not* included in this text. When, say, you are a senior in a graduate course and one of your professors asks you to write an *explication de texte*, instead of panicking because everyone but you seems to know how to do it, you will be able to find out what you must do. You will know what questions to ask more experienced students and your profes-

sor; you will know how to analyze similar papers written by other students or published in academic or trade journals. When you are done with this book, you should be able to ascertain the requirements of any new genre or writing assignments you confront in the future.

With this aim in mind, this book is *developmentally* organized. You will move from genres that are essentially ways of gathering information (journals and interviews), to the kinds of writing you can do out of your own experience (profiles, family writing, how to . . . , sports, and travel) and which tend to be written almost by formula. Finally, you will investigate the more difficult and advanced genres which demand broader knowledge—and mature judgment (nature and rural, city and town, reviews).

The Introduction sets forth a method for analyzing essays. We encourage you to apply this analytic approach to each of the essays in this book. This method provides a means of reconstructing the process by which a given author crafted a finished piece of work and of understanding where he or she began, what kind of preparation was involved, why certain stylistic or structural choices were made, and so on. The idea is that the more you have thought about the choices other authors have made, the easier it is to make your own.

We do not just encourage; we also demonstrate. In most sections, we analyze one of the essays ourselves, as an example. You will find a number of other useful features throughout the book. Usually we examine at least one essay in each section to understand the kind of preparation or research involved. Another essay is scrutinized for style and structure. At some point we advance our inferences about the characteristics of the genre under consideration. We make a point of naming some of the leading practitioners in the genre and often of attaching a brief bibliography in case you wish to read more in or about a genre, or to become better acquainted with a particularly interesting writer. Finally, we encourage you to apply what you have learned: we provide opportunities for you to try your own hand at writing in each genre.

In this book you will find much discussion about writers and how they write. In the section on journals you will find an article by Freya Stark about how to write journals. Among the how to . . . articles are recommendations by Art Spikol and Malcolm Forbes on how to write certain types of letters. There is an interview of Norman Mailer. Also included are an interview *by* Oriana Fallaci and another *of* her.

There is no real question about whether the ancient writers are relevant. When you see that the craftsmanship and often even the subject matter of the Greeks link them as writers to the writers of the present, including you, then the distance between you and Homer, Plato, or Theophrastus suddenly narrows. Similarly, we are confident that you will be receptive to Henry David Thoreau, Francis Bacon, Geoffrey Chaucer, William Blake, and others.

This emphasis on writers, their craft, and their history is deliberate. We think of you as a committed writer. We believe that this means you are interested or will become interested in the world of writers: how they think, what words they select, what rewards they seek, what makes them happy. Writers are interesting people. Their insights can make our lives more thoughtful, more interesting, more fun.

While working on *The Committed Writer*, we mentioned the title to a friend. Her response was, "It sounds like a book for someone in an institution." Deflated, we cast around for a new title but finally decided to stick to our original choice. By "committed," we mean "involved," or "dedicated." But writing *is* a kind of institution; you can become locked into it. Writing *can* become a commitment in all senses, almost an obsession. Yet with this commitment come important rewards. Few human triumphs are as satisfying as reading your own well-written document, particularly when you see it in print. We invite you to make this commitment and experience these rewards.

No book is ever the product only of its authors. We therefore would be remiss unless we were to acknowledge, to the best of our ability, the people to whom we are indebted. We thank our editors at McGraw-Hill, Phil Butcher, James Dodd, Emily Barrosse, and Barry Benjamin, without whose constant wisdom and quiet, gentle nudgings the book would have been completed poorer and later; we thank our reviewers, Miriam Brody, Ithaca College; Roger B. Hinkle, Brown University; John M. Lee, James Madison University; Tivila Yates Papay, Hofstra University; James E. Porter, University of Indiana-Purdue; and Annette Schneider, Rockland Community College, without whose help the book would have been completed poorer—but sooner. We thank Dean Brendan Gilbane, of Boston University, for his support, especially in making it possible for us to attend conferences where we encountered many of our insights. Duncan Carter thanks Charles Sanders, and Harry Crosby thanks John Gerber, their early mentors. Harry Crosby recognizes a great debt to a textbook of some decades back, *Five Kinds of Writing*, by Theodore Morrison. Years after he used the book, Professor Crosby now lives in a house once the residence of Professor Morrison, one of those coincidences that give extra interest to life. Speaking of an interest in life leads us to express our deepest gratitude and affection to our wives, Mary Alice Brennan-Crosby and Patricia Carter, to whom this book is dedicated.

Harry H. Crosby
Duncan A. Carter

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Introduction

Anyone who has read autobiographies or biographies of writers undoubtedly has been impressed with how much time writers spend thinking about their craft. They think about subjects and how to handle them. They think about their own style. Another preoccupation is their audience. “Who,” they ask, “are my readers? What do they expect? Want? Need?” These questions are central to this book, as they are to the writer’s craft. Our aim in this text is to introduce you to a strategy professionals regularly use to answer them.

At every stage in the composition of this textbook we asked these same questions of ourselves. Who is our audience? What do they need? Here, in part, are our answers.

We assume that you and every student who uses this text have had instruction in writing, whether in high school, college, or both. Your current instructor must assume that some of this instruction has stuck. If he or she repeats much of it, most of the class will be bored and all of you will lose the opportunity to forge ahead with more interesting and advanced principles of writing. When you submit your first paper, therefore, your instructor will probably make certain assumptions about what you already know.

You will be expected, for instance, to demonstrate familiarity with the content and function of an introduction, body, and conclusion. Your instructor will expect your paper to be structured. Your paper should have an appropriate balance of assertion versus evidence, of generality versus detail, of abstract versus concrete. Your paper should conform to the so-called manuscript conventions and be relatively sound in mechan-

ics, that is, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Above all, you should have some understanding of the writing process.

The Writing Process

At one time or another, most writers have thought about the hours they have spent agonizing over a blank sheet of paper, the innumerable false starts, the crumpled pages filling the wastebasket, and the many drafts they have had to write to arrive at something relatively polished. At such times they may imagine that others write without all this fuss. Particularly when they read the seemingly effortless prose of established authors, they wonder whether such writers have some secret formula which permits them to churn out perfect writing painlessly.

There is no such formula.

Few writers turn out polished work on the first try. As a matter of fact, one of the main problems that writers have to live with is that, as Elaine Maimon has put it, “the creative process is a mess.” What established authors *do* have that others may not is faith in a process, the writing process. They do not wait for inspiration to strike before they begin writing. They begin—trusting that something like inspiration or insight will occur along the way. Though they usually have a plan, they do not wait for their ideas to assume final shape before they start. They start—expecting the discipline of working through a series of successive drafts to lend those ideas shape and coherence. They know that their final draft may bear little resemblance to their first, because writing is often less a matter of recording ideas than of discovering them. And they develop a variety of strategies for use in different situations so that they can take a second tack when the first does not work. As the old maxim has it, “Easy reading is hard writing.”

Speaking of “*the* writing process” can be a little misleading, since it is different for everyone. It would be more to the point to encourage you to become conscious of *your* writing process, picking and choosing from among the strategies that have worked for others, developing a sense of which strategies work for you, and refining your own. Yet even while acknowledging that writing is an individual matter, we see value in discussing the writing process in a general way. Every writer can expect to face certain predictable problems; most writers recognize some clearly identifiable stages in the process by which these problems are solved:

Planning: clarifying purpose, analyzing audience, gathering information about a subject, developing a preliminary sense of structure.

Drafting: writing an initial draft. Trying to establish a flow but not worrying about gaps—those can be taken care of in revision.