THE ESSENTIAL RHETORIC

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Preface

The idea for this textbook came from my experiences as a director of composition at a university and as a teacher of brief writing workshops for businesses and government agencies. As a composition director, I increasingly came to see the encyclopedic textbooks we adopted or examined as too prescriptive. None of them even approximated a good fit for our program. Some approached the teaching of writing from positions radically different from ours, whereas others had philosophies we agreed with but included material that was inappropriate for our students.

In addition, these comprensive textbooks (and the accompanying manuals, guides to teaching writing, course packs, and handouts) overwhelmed our overburdened and inexperienced TA's and adjunct instructors with more information than they could possibly assimilate. I often ran into TA's in the campus bookstore clutching copies of Strunk and White or Zinsser's *On Writing Well,* hoping they had found a concise skeleton key to the reams of information they had been given. My repeated encounters with TA's made me realize something that should have been obvious: Although TA's and adjuncts who teach in composition programs are well-trained literary critics and talented creative writers, many of them are not thoroughly trained in rhetoric, and their chances of being able to discern the conceptional framework under the welter of readings and exercises in most comprehensive writing guides are slim. Nor would Strunk and White and *On Writing Well* be much help to them as guides to rhetorical concepts, because both volumes are compendia of writing do's and don'ts rather than systematic guides to the writing process.

Furthermore, my colleagues and I had problems coming to agreement about the suitability of reading selections in the rhetorics we used over the years. However, supplementing a rhetoric by adopting a reader created other problems. Not only did it substantially increase the total cost of books for the course, but it also added more and different information, in the form of the reader's apparatus, to an already overloaded teaching and learning situation.

All of this led us into discussions about what it was we really needed, and we decided what we needed was less, not more. What we really were seeking to find was a concise book that focused on rhetorical concepts we could use in conjunction with a pedagogically appropriate reader as a delivery system for our own ideas.

At the same time that I was directing our university's writing program, I also was running one- and two-day workshops for people in business and government who had never expected to write as part of their work but were increasingly being asked to do so. The workshop participants were demanding and highly motivated, and designing concentrated sessions on writing that would be valuable to an exacting audience of adults forced me to pare the writing process down to its practical essentials and focus on problem solving throughout the process. You will find what I learned from planning those workshops reflected in *The Essential Rhetoric's* brevity. You also will find it in the emphasis on revision and in the problem-solving strategies that give shape to that emphasis.

I have designed this volume to be used on its own as a personal guide to writing or in conjunction with a reader as a classroom textbook. *The Essential Rhetoric* is flexible enough to be used with a variety of course syllabi. For example, the textbook can be used for classes with assignments based on the purposes of writing (emphasis on Chapter Three, The Rhetorical Situation), for classes with assignments based on modes of discourse (emphasis on Chapter Five, Organizing Written Texts), for classes with assignments based on process and revision (emphasis on Part Two, Composing and Revision), and for classes with assignments based on reading and responding (emphasis on Chapter Two, Writing Begins with Reading). Beyond the classroom, however, this is a textbook for anyone who wants to improve his or her skill at writing while learning more about how writing works.

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PART ONE

Writing: An Introduction

CHAPTER

1 *Why Write?*

Whether you are a college student, or a person who writes as a part of your job, or even someone who writes for pleasure alone, you would not be reading this book if you were not in some sense a working writer. Some people become working writers only when required by instructors or employers to write. Other people are compelled to write by their own passion. For people such as these, writing is as necessary as breathing. It is impossible for them not to write. In the act of writing they create themselves and give meaning to the world around them. Moreover, their reasons for writing are as varied as the writing they produce.

For Roald Dahl, writing was a "form of therapy," whereas for James Baldwin it was "a political instrument." In her essay "Why I Write," Joan Didion said, "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear . . . what is going on in these pictures in my mind."

However, even for people not compelled by passion to write, the ability to write well is extraordinarily empowering. On a purely practical level, students who are good writers get better grades than students who are not. Professionals and even non-professionals who write well are more likely to succeed in the workforce than their counterparts who do not. Even more significant, however, than the worldly success associated with writing proficiency is the fundamental role that language (and its visible form, writing) plays in human existence. Language is the only thing we have at our disposal for making meaning out of experience and communicating that meaning to other people.

Furthermore, rather than being a mysterious inborn talent, writing is a learned skill. We learn to write by being exposed to language through reading, listening, and speaking. We develop

our skill as writers by examining how writing works and practicing what we have learned. Whatever your skill level, you can continue to grow as a writer by studying the writing process and applying what you learn as you write.

CHAPTER

2

Writing Begins with Reading

> "Read, read, read. Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master."
>
> William Faulkner

The evidence for a profound connection between reading experience and writing ability is overwhelming. People who read regularly simply are better writers than their counterparts who do not. In much the same way that humans learn spoken language from listening to those speaking around them, people learn written language by being exposed to it on the page. The repeated practice of reading gives you the opportunity to internalize the structures of written language so you can reproduce those structures when you write.

In addition to learning general structures of written language through reading, people are introduced to the specific kinds of writing that goes on in the communities they enter by reading texts produced by those communities. For example, people entering the business community are introduced to the forms of business communications by reading memos, reports, and business letters. Similarly, individuals who enter a particular academic community are introduced to the scholarly writing that goes on in that community by reading its journals and other publications.

The Critical Reading Process

Like the writing process, critical reading is a process with discernible steps. Furthermore, people who learn the steps of the

process and follow those steps consciously are apt to read challenging texts more accurately and efficiently. The critical reading process contains the following steps:

Prereading
Holistic reading
Reading for meaning.
Formulating a response

The critical reading strategies explicated in the following sections can help you determine the meaning of challenging written texts.

Prereading

Prereading is the step of the reading process in which the reader familiarizes him- or herself with the text and looks for signals about where to start. Prereading includes the following activities:

Determining the Genre and Completeness of a Text

Determining the genre of a text you are about to read will help you read more efficiently by pointing you in the direction of the text's purpose. In French, the word *genre* means "species." In literary parlance, the word means "specific type." For example, is the text a work of fiction or nonfiction? If nonfiction, is it an essay in which you can expect to find the writer's opinions and reflections? Is it a report in which you can expect to find facts rather than opinions? Is it some other kind of nonfiction prose? If so, what kind, and what are the general characteristics of that particular genre? In addition, is the text complete as originally published, or has it been excerpted from a longer piece of writing?

Scanning

Scanning is reading rapidly some parts of a text looking for clues to the text's meaning. Quickly skimming introductory and concluding paragraphs, headings, and other organizational or formatting features can point you toward the writer's main and supporting points, thus helping you to get more out of that text later when you read it straight through during the holistic reading stage of the critical reading process.