

WRITING CREATIVELY

A College Rhetoric

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SICHUAN PUBLISHING GROUP
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江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书章

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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

创造性写作 = Writing Creatively: A College Rhetoric / 李五全 丁启红 罗润田著. — 成都: 四川人民出版社, 2004. 9

ISBN 7-220-06807-7

I. 创... II. ①李... ②丁... ③罗... III. 英语—写作 IV. H315

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2004)第 102053 号

Writing Creatively: A College Rhetoric

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责任编辑	韩 波
封面设计	彭小柯
内文设计	彭小柯
出版发行	四川出版集团(成都盐道街3号) 四川人民出版社
网 址	http://www.booksss.com E-mail: scrmcbsf @ mail. sc. cninfo. net
防盗版举报电话	(028)86679239
印 刷	四川五洲彩印有限责任公司
开 本	850mm × 1168mm 1/32
印 张	13
插 页	2
字 数	320 千
版 次	2004 年 9 月第 1 版
印 次	2004 年 9 月第 1 次印刷
书 号	ISBN 7-220-06807-7/H·352
定 价	26.00 元

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本书若出现印装质量问题,请与工厂联系调换

Preface

“How do I know what I think until I see what I say.” (E. M. Foster). Professor Li Wuquan and his collaborators use this quotation to open their new book — *WRITING CREATIVELY: A COLLEGE RHETORIC*. Opening a book this way is really thought-provoking.

Writing is often compared to talking — talking to paper about the writer’s thoughts and feelings. This is a good analogy because in both talking and writing we try to inform, persuade or entertain our audience (listener and reader) by manipulating the message to achieve the goal of influencing them. This analogy, however, might also be misleading, for it might make one think that writing is a sort of packaging a preconceived idea. Writing is different from talking in that, in the process of writing, we do not communicate something already known; rather, we continue to invent new ideas, to gain new insights, and to experiment with new forms to clothe them. In this book, writing is described as a process of discovery at its all levels and stages, thereby providing an effective approach to training students in acquiring the art of prose writing.

Nowadays, in the English language teaching and learning, students are often put in a passive position, because we tend to treat the student’s mind as something like an empty bucket to be filled with information offered in our lectures. Actually in the learning process the student’s brain

does not work in a passive way. On the contrary, learning, especially writing, is a process of making sense of our new experience in the light of our old experience. While writing, we may surprise ourselves at hitting upon ideas we never thought we had before. A writer is an active explorer, not a mere receiver of ideas and knowledge or a passive medium for transmitting ideas and knowledge from books to essays. Good academic writing actually creates new knowledge and meaning.

In the writing process, we prepare and revise drafts to seek patterns that reveal meaning, just like the biologist looks through his microscope and the astronomer looks through his telescope to seek patterns that reveal meaning to them in their fields. Writing is the most disciplined form of thinking. When we write, we examine and re-examine our life. And through the words we weave the meanings of our life and share them with our readers. "Words do have power." Words are the carriers of our feelings and emotions, and of our history and culture. In writing we are building in words the meanings of our world. But words would not work themselves. Everything depends on how we use them. Writers then are the craftsmen who conjure up words to colour brilliant ideas. But this is no easy job. In *WRITING CREATIVELY: A COLLEGE RHETORIC*, Professor Li and his collaborators show us that writing is one of the most taxing jobs around, but, at the same time, they skillfully lead us through the writing process to discover the amazing world that we can reach. I am sure, every reader and writer using this book will make an agreeably surprising discovery at the end that he/she can write and write well.

Shi Jian , Professor of English
Sichuan University
Fall 2004

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Unit 1*Chapter One***Writing as a Process of Discovery**

This is a book for English learners, especially for those who wish to become good writers in this language. By "good writers," we mean people who can effectively communicate their ideas and feelings in the written form of a language.

STARTING POINT

Writing Creatively

INVENTING IDEAS AND DETAILS

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*Chapter One***Writing as a Process of Discovery**

This is a book for English learners, especially for those who wish to become good writers in this language. By “good writers” we mean people who can communicate thoughts and feelings effectively in the written form of a language. It’s true that few English learners dream to become professional writers and achieve greatness as such, but every English learner can learn to write well enough to handle any writing situation he or she encounters in college and later on the job. If you’re bent on becoming a good writer in this sense, this book is designed specially for you — for helping you to achieve your goal of writing well in English.

Writing is a very taxing job, especially when it has to be done in a foreign language. One has to make a prolonged diligent effort to learn the language and practise writing assiduously in it. However, taxing as it is, writing is not a mystery. On the contrary, it is a skill that anyone can learn to manage. If you’re determined to learn and practise and never give up halfway, there’s a guarantee that you’ll turn out to be a good writer in English.

INVENTING IDEAS AND DETAILS

Writing is a process of discovery — so say professional writers:

I don’t see writing as a communication of something already discov-

ered, as “truths” already known. Rather, I see writing as a job of experiment. It’s like any discovery job; you don’t know what’s going to happen until you try it.

William Stafford

How do I know what I think until I see what I say.

E. M. Forster

Writing is a discovery job because, first, you rarely understand your subject completely before you begin to write. So you have to gather facts and ideas to help you arrive at a better understanding about it. Then as you write, you can also make significant discoveries — new ideas and insights. Moreover, writing gives form to thought. When you write something down, you can examine it from one angle and then another, studying its many facets as you would a diamond. To sum up, writing is not a matter of packaging a preconceived idea, but an active process of discovery at all levels of the writing process.

In this section we’ll discuss several techniques writers use to explore their subjects and to find out what they have to say about them. These techniques can be used individually or in combination, at various stages in writing an essay. We’ll help you to learn these techniques, but you should keep in mind: the best way to learn these techniques is to use them as you actually write an essay.

Free Writing

Free writing is just like a sort of limbering-up exercises you do to prepare for a race, etc. by stretching your muscles. It involves nothing more than writing down your thoughts as they run through your head, without bothering about coherence (how they hang together) or correctness. You just keep writing as quickly as possible. You can do it by setting your

alarm clock, say for 2 minutes, and write until it goes off. If your mind goes blank when you try it, start writing a record of your day's activities so far. Or look at some object across the room and describe it in detail. Whatever runs through your head may serve for the material or topic of your writing.

This linguistic limbering-up requires that you should write quickly and never stop. Get your pen moving rapidly across the page, and free yourself from inhibitions. If you can't think of what to write, write "can't write" over and over till new words come to mind. Go on writing and don't worry about spelling and grammar — the goal is to put as many words on paper as you can. Here is an example of one student's accomplishment in two minutes of writing.

1.1 Professor Wang asked us to write something about me. Anything's OK. Don't know what to write. What to write? Can't find anything to write. A clear sky. A gentle breeze. What a good day! Luckily, sitting by the open window, I can inhale the faint fragrance wafted from the new-mown lawn. Who says Fortune is easily found, but hard to be kept? She never stops to accompany my endeavors this term.

Free writing, if you try it regularly as a good habit, will make writing easier. You still write consciously, but in a natural, relaxed manner, and so you'll feel comfortable with it. What you're doing in free writing is just talking naturally to your paper. Writing is no longer a painful task you would find ways to avoid in other cases.

Free writing enables you to bypass some of the mental blocks that used to get in your way. In order to write quickly, you're not worried much about things like grammar, spelling, punctuation, your readers' response and so on. These worries often pull your mind away from the hard struggle with words, the fight to form them into meaning. Free

writing enforces you to put your mind to the task at hand.

Free writing is recommendable because it generates ideas. The student wouldn't turn in 1.1 as a finished piece of writing, but there's a brilliant idea or a promising topic buried in that rough topic. We can imagine that, following the train of thought signaled by the last two or three sentences in it, he may compose a strong essay about his successful and happy life.

Exercise One (1) Write as many words as you can in 2 minutes. Write about any topic you're interested in. When you've completed two minutes of writing, count the number of words you've written. If you feel that you've made a promising start, then think about the possible way of developing it into an essay. Then go on writing quickly for several minutes more and again count the number of words you've written. (2) Try daily exercises in free writing over the next week or so.

Brainstorming and Listing

You probably have had this sort of experience. A problem arises in your class and the solution involves the unrestrained offering of ideas by all of your classmates. You gather together in your classroom and your monitor asks you to toss your ideas out freely as they come to mind, allowing no one to criticize individual ideas. Such a group problem-solving technique is called *brainstorming*. As an invention technique, brainstorming requires the writer to think as rapidly and as broadly as possible so as to hit upon ingenious ideas for your writing task.

A special kind of brainstorming is *listing*. In our ordinary life listing is a familiar activity. We make shopping lists and lists of errands to do or people to call. A list of things to accomplish can reassure us when we are