Steps to Writing Well

Thirteenth Edition

Jean Wyrick

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Steps to Writing Well

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THIRTEENTH EDITION

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***Steps to Writing Well*, Thirteenth Edition**

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Brief Contents

Part One: The Basics of the Short Essay

Part Two: Purposes, Modes, and Strategies

Part Three: Special Assignments

Part Four: A Concise Handbook

Detailed Contents

MindTap® Online Chapter — Writing about Visual Arts

MindTap® Online Chapter — Writing about Film

LIST OF ARTWORKS

LIST OF ADVERTISEMENTS

To the Teacher

With the most extensive coverage of the writing process of any rhetorical writing guide, *Steps to Writing Well* has been used by thousands of teachers and has helped thousands of students learn to write effective academic essays. This text is written for composition teachers who want a writing guide that students can easily read and understand. Too many writing texts are unnecessarily dry, complex, or massive. Written simply, in an informal, friendly style directly addressed to the student, *Steps to Writing Well* offers a step-by-step guide to writing a variety of academic essays. The combination of practical advice; almost 40 student and professional samples; a wealth of short, long, and collaborative assignments; and a brief handbook should provide more than enough helpful guidance for students, without intimidating them.

About the New Edition

New discussions, student and professional writing samples, classroom activities, and assignments appear throughout this tenth edition, in addition to updated and expanded features that are popular with instructors and students who have used previous editions. This edition features useful new visual learning aids; 50% new student sample essays; more than 30% new professional readings and visual selections; all new essay assignments that promote using sources and using multiple rhetorical strategies; a new organization for expository writing assignments and for writing researched essays; and all new coverage of how to read multimodal texts.

Once again, readers of this edition may note an occasional attempt at humor. The lighthearted tone of some samples and exercises is the result of the author's firm belief that while learning to write is serious business, solemn composition classrooms are not always the most beneficial environments for anxious novice writers. The author takes full responsibility—and all of the blame—for the bad jokes and even worse puns.

New to This Edition

New Visual Learning Aids. New flowcharts have been added to this edition to summarize key processes and to help students who may be visual learners. These new "Visualizing the Process" flowcharts highlight the steps in the writing and revision process in Part One, the key steps in the composing process for each type of rhetorical essay featured in Part Two, as well as important research strategies in Chapter 19.

New Stand-Alone Exposition Chapters in Part Two. Chapters 9–14 in this new edition focus on individual exposition strategies (exemplification, process analysis, comparison/contrast, definition, division/classification, and causal analysis) and allow students and instructors to more easily find the rhetorical strategies that they need.

New Sample Student Essays. Eight new student essays (of 16 total) in Parts One, Two, and Three offer new models for drafting, composing, and researching. New student samples include a draft and revised essay in Chapter 5; new exemplification, process analysis, comparison/contrast, and argument essays; new MLA and APA research papers; and a new summary response essay in Chapter 21. Topics of the new essays include the fear of success, finding the best place to study, why campus food establishments should use food calorie labels, and the perils of computers that monitor people's emotions.

New Professional Readings. *Steps to Writing Well* includes a wealth of professional reading selections (20 in all, with about 30% new to this edition) offering students numerous models for their own writing. New selections feature work by well-known contemporary authors such as Rick Bragg and Jessica Lahey, and touch on contemporary issues such as why more young people are buying smartphones than cars, whether voting should become mandatory for all citizens, and why college may be better suited for "grown-ups" than for young adults right out of high school.

New Coverage of Reading Multimodal Texts. Chapter 8 includes an all new section on reading multimodal texts, offering strategies to help students analyze visual and multimedia texts, and also includes an all new sample annotated advertisement that demonstrates how to use these analytic strategies.

New Assignments Offer Practice with Research and Multiple Modes. New end-of-chapter "Using Strategies and Sources" assignments in Part Two offer new opportunities for students to practice using multiple rhetorical strategies and using secondary sources to explore topics and develop an essay.

Chapter 5 Offers More on Drafting. Chapter 5 now includes an all new draft and revised version of a student essay, to better demonstrate the composing process for students, as well as a revised and expanded discussion of drafting.

Research Is Now Discussed in Two Chapters. Coverage of writing a research project is now divided into two chapters (Chapter 19, "Conducting Research and Using Sources," and Chapter 20, "Documenting Sources"), to allow students and instructors to more easily navigate the research process. Chapter 20 also includes a new sample student research paper: "Pervasive Computing and Privacy Rights: Who Owns Your Emotions?"

New Online Chapters. Two chapters are now available only online in the MindTap® for *Steps to Writing Well*—"Writing about Visual Arts" and "Writing about Film."

Organizational Overview

Although many parts of the book have been revised or expanded for this edition, its organization remains the same. The book still begins with the essay "To the Student,"

which not only argues that students can learn to write better with practice and dedication but also gives them a number of practical reasons why they *should* learn to write better. Part One offers advice on "The Basics of the Short Essay"; Part Two discusses "Purposes, Modes, and Strategies"; Part Three focuses on "Special Assignments"; and Part Four presents "A Concise Handbook." A diamond-shaped reference symbol ◆ often appears within discussions, alerting readers to related information or exercises in other parts of the book.

Part One: The Basics of the Short Essay

Part One, containing eight chapters, guides students through the process of writing the short essay. Each chapter concludes with a summary of the most important points.

Exercises and Assignments

Each chapter in Part One contains exercises, activities, and assignments, many new to this edition. As in the previous editions, the "Practicing What You've Learned" exercises follow each major section in every chapter so that both teacher and students can quickly discover if any particular material needs additional attention. Moreover, by conquering small steps in the writing process, one at a time, students should feel more confident and should learn more rapidly. The Practices and the Assignments, which also follow each major section in these chapters, offer opportunities for both individual and collaborative work. Activities called "Applying What You've Learned to *Your* Writing" encourage students to "follow through" by incorporating into a current draft the skill they have just studied and practiced. By following a three-step procedure—reading, practicing, and then applying the advice directly to their own prose—students should improve their writing processes.

Part One includes the following chapters:

Chapter 1, Prewriting

Chapter 1, on prewriting, stresses finding the proper attitude ("the desire to communicate") and presents helpful suggestions for selecting a subject. This chapter then offers students ten methods for finding a significant purpose and focus for their essays. In addition, a section on using a journal explains more than a dozen ways students can improve their skills through a variety of nonthreatening—and even playful—assignments. The section on audience awareness should help student writers identify and communicate effectively with their particular readers.

Chapter 2, The Thesis Statement

After considering their essay's purpose, focus, and audience, students are ready for Chapter 2, which first explains the role of a "working thesis" in early drafts and then discusses in detail the usefulness of a clear thesis statement by presenting a host of examples to illustrate the advice. Also included in this chapter is an explanation of the "essay map," an organizational tool that can help students plan and structure their essays.

Chapter 3, The Body Paragraphs

Chapter 3 presents over forty samples to illustrate the qualities of effective body paragraphs: topic sentences, unity, order and coherence, adequate development, use of specific detail, and logical sequence. This chapter provides opportunities for students to see how a topic can progress from a working thesis statement to an informal essay outline, which in turn helps produce well-developed paragraphs in the body of an essay.

Chapter 4, Beginnings and Endings

To complete the overview of the short essay, Chapter 4 explains, through dozens of examples, the creation of good introductions, conclusions, and titles.

Chapter 5, Drafting and Revising: Creative Thinking, Critical Thinking

Chapter 5 begins by clarifying the revision process. Because too many students still think of revision as merely proofreading their final drafts rather than as an essential, recursive activity, this chapter emphasizes the importance of revision in all stages of good writing. Updated and expanded tips for efficient drafting practices appear next, and a section on procrastination explains why this bad habit interferes with a writer's critical thinking process and suggests practical ways to challenge this behavior. These pages then offer a system for revising drafts in stages to avoid overload that might result in Writer's Block, a malady helpfully addressed at the end of this chapter. Chapter 5 now includes an all new draft and revised version of a student essay ("The Fear No One Talks About") to better demonstrate the composing process for students.

Chapter 5 also presents an expanded section on critical thinking and visual literacy; this discussion encourages students to analyze and evaluate their ideas and those of others as they read, write, and select evidence for any writing assignment. Shaped by current composition research, a section in Chapter 5 on collaborative activities explains the value of peer workshops, small-group exercises, and team projects to foster discussion and new ideas, encourage audience awareness, teach critical thinking, promote revision, and polish editing skills. Students receive practical advice here to help them gain the most benefit from various kinds of paired peer-work and group activities.

Chapter 6, Effective Sentences

Chapter 6, on effective sentences, emphasizes the importance of clarity, conciseness, and vividness, with nearly one hundred fifty samples illustrating the chapter's advice. A section addressing fused sentences, comma splices, and fragments offers additional help resolving these common problems.

Chapter 7, Word Logic

Chapter 7, on word choice, presents suggestions for selecting accurate, appropriate words that are specific, memorable, and persuasive. This chapter also contains advice for avoiding sexist language and "bureaucratese," as well as commentary on the importance of understanding appropriate audiences for texting and Internet language.

Chapter 8, The Reading–Writing Connection

Chapter 8 points out that by learning to read analytically, students can improve their own writing skills. The chapter contains step-by-step directions for reading and annotating essays, suggesting ways students can profit from studying the rhetorical choices of other writers. A new annotated professional essay ("College for Grown-Ups") demonstrates how to use these critical reading strategies. Chapter 8 also includes an all new section on reading multimodal texts, offering strategies to help students analyze visual and multimedia texts, and an all new sample annotated advertisement that demonstrates how to use these analytic strategies. Guidance on how to write effective summaries and how to participate in class discussions concludes the chapter.

Part Two: Purposes, Modes, and Strategies

Part Two discusses the most useful organizational patterns, or strategies, for short essays whose primary purposes are exposition, argument, description, and narration. Each discussion in this Part follows a similar format by offering students (a) a clear explanation of the strategy's purpose; (b) practical advice for developing each essay; (c) identification of common problems; (d) suggested essay topics; (e) a topic proposal sheet; (f) sample student essay(s) with marginal notes; (g) professional essay(s) with questions and additional writing suggestions; (h) a revision worksheet; and (i) new "Using Strategies and Sources" assignments that offer opportunities for using multiple rhetorical strategies and secondary sources to explore topics and develop essays.

Professional and Student Essays

The sixteen student essays (eight of them new to this edition) in Parts One, Two, and Three of this text should encourage student writers by showing them that their peers have indeed composed organized, well-developed essays. The student essays here are not perfect and, as such, provide opportunities for classroom discussion of further revision. Fifteen essays (and five literary selections) by professional writers illustrate the rhetorical principles and stylistic advice presented throughout the chapters; seven new essays are included in this edition.

Suggestions for Writing

Nine lists, each containing twenty suggested essay topics, appear throughout the chapters in Part Two. These lists of possible topics, updated for this edition, offer students a wide range of choices that may draw on their academic, professional, or personal interests. Students who are visual learners will always find options for writing about images reproduced in this book. (For quick reference, complete lists of the artworks and advertisements appear at the end of the Detailed Table of Contents.) Other suggestions for writing follow each professional essay in Chapters 9–18.

Part Two contains the following chapters:

Exposition (Chapters 9–14)

Chapters 9–14 in this new edition focus on individual exposition strategies (exemplification, process analysis, comparison/contrast, definition, division/classification, and causal analysis). Formerly all contained in one chapter, the separate chapters in the new edition allow students and instructors to more easily find the rhetorical strategies that they need. New "Practicing What You Learn" assignments have been added to each of these chapters, along with new end-of-chapter "Using Strategies and Sources" assignments. New exemplification, process analysis, and comparison/contrast student essays are included in these chapters, along with a new professional causal analysis essay.

Chapter 15, Argumentation

Chapter 15 discusses the argumentative essay and includes a new student essay, as well as a new pair of professional essays that take different views on whether voting should become mandatory for all U.S. citizens. In addition, a series of advertisements, many new to this edition, offer opportunities for students to improve their critical thinking skills through analysis of the various appeals used in the ads. New suggestions for writing include many current topics of controversy relevant to students' lives.

Chapter 16, Description, and Chapter 17, Narration

Chapters 16 and 17, on writing description and narration, may be assigned prior to the expository strategies or may be used as supplementary material for any kind of writing incorporating descriptive language or extended example. Both chapters include new professional reading selections and contain visual art selected to stress the importance of vivid details in support of a dominant effect.

Chapter 18, Writing Essays Using Multiple Strategies

Although this text shows students how to practice individual rhetorical strategies, one pattern at a time, writers often choose a combination, or blending, of strategies to best accomplish their purpose. Chapter 18 concludes Part Two by offering advice to writers ready to address more complex topics and essay organization. This chapter also contains both a student essay and a new professional article to illustrate different uses of multiple strategies to accomplish the writer's purpose.

Part Three: Special Assignments

Part Three, "Special Assignments," allows instructors to design their composition courses in a variety of ways, perhaps by adding a research paper, a literary analysis, an in-class essay, a classroom presentation, or a business-writing assignment. Coverage of writing a research project is now divided into two chapters (Chapters 19 and 20) to allow students and instructors to more easily navigate the discussions of conducting research and documenting sources.

Part Three contains the following chapters:

Chapter 19, Conducting Research and Using Sources

Chapter 19 focuses on the research process and follows a student from her topic selection to the final essay. This chapter shows students how they can focus on a subject, search for information in a variety of ways, evaluate the sources that they find, paraphrase and quote sources, avoid plagiarism, and effectively incorporate source material in their essays. This edition includes three new visual flowcharts that summarize and highlight key steps in the research process, and it emphasizes the role critical thinking plays in evaluating sources, especially those found online. In addition, this chapter includes practical advice for how to conduct primary research, with specific guidance on collecting material through interviews and questionnaires.

Chapter 20, Documenting Sources

Chapter 20 contains updated and expanded coverage of the very latest guidelines for both MLA and APA documentation formats, including citations for a variety of online and multimedia sources. New indexes to the MLA Works Cited and APA Reference List citation models included in the chapter will help students more easily find the models that they need to document their sources. A new sample student research paper, presented in two forms to model both MLA and APA styles ("Pervasive Computing and Privacy Rights: Who Owns Your Emotions?"), concludes the chapter.

Chapter 21, Classroom Writing: Exams, Timed Essays, and Presentations

Chapter 21 begins with advice designed to help students respond quickly, accurately, and calmly to a variety of in-class writing assignments by understanding their task's purpose and by recognizing key directional words. Because many composition courses today include some variation of the "summary-and-response" assignment (often as a timed placement or exit test), this chapter specifically addresses that kind of writing and offers a new sample student essay. A final section of the chapter discusses various kinds of in-class presentations and suggests ways writing assignments can be best shaped for listeners, as well as offering hints for effective classroom delivery.

Chapter 22, Writing about Literature

Chapter 22 discusses ways literary selections can be used as prompts for personal essays or for papers of literary analysis. Students are offered suggestions for close reading of both poetry and short fiction, advice illustrated through an annotated poem, an annotated short story, and two student essays. Two additional poems and a brief story are presented for classroom discussion or for writing assignments.

Chapter 23, Writing in the World of Work

Chapter 23 allows students to practice composing business letters, office memos, electronic mail, and résumés. This edition also contains expanded advice for writing effective cover letters to accompany job seekers' résumés.

Two chapters are now available online in the MindTap® for *Steps to Writing Well with Additional Readings*:

MindTap® Online Chapter, Writing about Visual Arts

This chapter encourages critical thinking and good writing practice in discussions of paintings, photographs, and sculptures. To illustrate the guidelines for analysis, this chapter includes a student's prewriting notes and subsequent essay on Edward Hopper's well-known painting *Nighthawks*. Composition students may choose their own subject matter from more than twenty artworks reproduced in this chapter and others throughout the text. Artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, Claude Monet, Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, Francisco Goya, Salvador Dali, and many others offer a variety of styles from social realism to abstract expressionism. The art in this chapter and throughout the print text can provide effective prompts for other assignments, such as descriptive paragraphs or comparison/contrast essays.

MindTap® Online Chapter, Writing about Film

This chapter offers an opportunity for students to practice good writing skills in essays using movies as subject matter in a variety of ways. Suggestions for critical thinking and writing about films and a glossary of cinematic terms are included, as well as a student essay and a new movie review (of "The Theory of Everything") that can be critiqued in class.

Part Four: A Concise Handbook

Part Four presents a concise handbook with accessible explanations and examples showing how to correct the most common errors in grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. Brief discussions on the parts of speech and sentence components preface the three chapters; exercises throughout the Handbook provide ample opportunities for practicing its advice. Each chapter begins with unique diagnostic tests for students to self-score; by comparing their corrections to the answers provided, students can assess their strengths and their needs for reviewing handbook material.

Instructor and Student Supplements

MindTap® English

MindTap® English for *Steps to Writing Well*, thirteenth edition, engages your students to become better thinkers, communicators, and writers by blending your course materials with content that supports every aspect of the writing process.

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- Visual analytics track student progress and engagement.
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In addition, instructors and students will find this content in MindTap® English for *Steps to Writing Well*:

- eBook for *Steps to Writing Well*, thirteenth edition. The acclaimed MindTap® Reader boasts a multimedia-rich experience with tagged note-taking, highlighting, and bookmarking for easy study guide creation.
- Video Tutorials and Quizzes. New short videos provide examples of students using each of the rhetorical strategies discussed in Part Two of the text to give students additional help with these key strategies.
- MindTap® Online Chapters in Part Three. "Writing about Visual Arts" and "Writing about Film" are online-only chapters that offer instructors additional assignment options for their course.
- Chapter Learning Objectives. These Learning Objectives are linked to the key points in each chapter to keep students focused on the important learning outcomes.
- Homework Assignments. Interactive assignments give students the practice they need with grammar and writing.
- Writing Assignments. Papers can be assigned and graded online via a writing app that also features peer review, sample rubrics, and an originality checker.
- Reflection Activities. These activities, styled like notebook entries, encourage students to think deeply about what they've learned in each part of the book and apply that knowledge to future skills.
- Resources for Teaching. A separate folder on the learning path contains additional instructor materials, including the instructor's manual.

MindTap® lets you compose your course, your way.

Instructor's Companion Site and Instructor's Manual

For additional instructor support materials, including PowerPoint slides and the instructor's manual, go to login.cengage.com. The instructor's manual provides teaching suggestions, suggested answers to exercises, and a sample course syllabus to assist instructors in teaching the course.

Concluding Thoughts

Although a new edition of this textbook has allowed its author to make changes and additions, the book's purpose remains as stated in the original preface: "While there are many methods of teaching composition, *Steps to Writing Well* tries to help inexperienced writers by offering a clearly defined sequential approach to writing the short essay. By presenting simple, practical advice directly to the students, this text is intended to make

the demanding jobs of teaching and learning the basic principles of composition easier and more enjoyable for everyone."

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To the Student

Finding the Right Attitude

If you agree with one or more of the following statements, we have some serious myth killing to do before you begin this book:

1. I'm no good in English—never have been, never will be.
2. Only people with natural talent for writing can succeed in composition class.
3. My composition teacher is a picky, comma-hunting old fogey/radical who will insist I write just like him or her.
4. I write for myself, not for anyone else, so I don't need this class or this book.
5. Composition classes are designed to put my creativity in a straitjacket.

The notion that good writers are born, not made, is a widespread myth that may make you feel defeated before you start. But the simple truth is that good writers *are* made—simply because *effective writing is a skill that can be learned.* Despite any feelings of insecurity you might have about composition, you should realize that you already know many of the basic rules of good writing; after all, you've likely been writing since you were six years old. What you need now is some practical advice on composition, some coaching to sharpen your skills, and a strong dose of determination to practice those skills until you can consistently produce the results you want. Talent, as the French writer Flaubert once said, is nothing more than long patience.

Think about learning to write well as you might consider your tennis game (or some other sport). No one is born a tennis star. You first learn the basic rules and movements and then go out on the court to practice. And practice. No one's tennis will improve if he or she stays off the court; similarly, you must write regularly and receive feedback to improve your composition skills. Try to see your teacher not as Dr. Frankenstein determined to reproduce his or her style of writing in you, but rather as your coach, your loyal trainer who wants you to do the very best you can. Like any good coach, your teacher will point out your strengths and weaknesses; she or he will often send you to this text for practical suggestions for improvement. And while there are no quick, magic solutions for learning to write well, the most important point to remember is this: with this text, your own common sense, and determination, *you can improve your writing.*

Why Write?

"OK," you say, "so I can improve if I try—but why should I bother? Why should I write well? I'm not going to be a professional writer."

In the first place, writing helps us explore our own thoughts and feelings. Writing forces us to articulate our ideas, to discover what we really think about an issue. For example, let's suppose you're faced with a difficult decision and that the arguments

pro and con are jumbled in your head. You begin to write down all the pertinent facts and feelings, and suddenly, you begin to see that you do, indeed, have stronger arguments for one side of the question than the other. Once you "see" what you are thinking, you can then scrutinize your opinions for any logical flaws or weaknesses and revise your argument accordingly. In other words, writing lays out our ideas for examination, analysis, and thoughtful reaction. Thus when we write, we (and the world at large) see who we are, and what we stand for, much more clearly. Moreover, writing can provide a record of our thoughts that we can study and evaluate in a way that conversation cannot. In short, writing well enables us to see and know ourselves—our feelings, ideas, and opinions—better.

On a more practical level, we need to write effectively to communicate with others. While some of our writing might be done solely for ourselves, the majority of it is created for others to share. In this world, it is almost impossible to claim that we write only for ourselves. We are constantly asked to put our feelings, ideas, and knowledge in writing for others to read. During your college years, no matter what your major, you will be repeatedly required to write essays, tests, reports, and exercises (and possibly e-mail home). Later, you might need to write formal letters of application for jobs or graduate training; your writing might make that important first impression. At work, you might have to write numerous kinds of reports, proposals, analyses, and requisitions. To be successful in any field, you must make your correspondence with business associates and co-workers clearly understood; remember that enormous amounts of time, energy, and profit have been lost because of a single unclear office memo.

There's still a third—more cynical—reason for studying writing techniques. Once you begin to improve your ability to use language, you will become more aware of the ways others write and speak. Through today's mass media and electronic highways, we are continually bombarded with words from politicians, advertisers, scientists, preachers, teachers, and self-appointed "authorities." We need to understand and evaluate what we are hearing, not only for our benefit but also for self-protection. Language is frequently manipulated to manipulate us. For example, the CIA has long referred to the "neutralization" of enemies, and the former Bush-Cheney administration authorized "enhanced interrogation techniques" on suspects, which others saw as torture. On occasion, Pentagon officials have carefully soft-pedaled discussion of misdirected "physics packages" (bombs) falling on "soft targets" (civilians). (One year not so long ago, the National Council of Teachers of English gave their Doublespeak Award to the U.S. officers who, after accidentally shooting down a plane of civilians, reported that the plane didn't crash—rather, it had "uncontrolled contact with the ground.") Some members of Congress have seen no recessions, just "meaningful downturns in aggregate output," so they have treated themselves to a "pay equalization concept," rather than a raise. Advertisers frequently try to disguise their pitches through "infomercials" and "advertorials"; realtors may promote dumps as "designer-ready" houses; the television networks treat us to "encore presentations" that are the same old summer reruns. And "fenestration engineers" are still window cleaners; "environmental superintendents" are still janitors; "drain surgeons" are still plumbers.

By becoming better writers ourselves, we can learn to recognize and reject the irresponsible, cloudy, or dishonest language of others before we become victims of their exploitation.

A Good Place to Start

If improving writing skills is not only possible but important, it is also something else: hard work. H. L. Mencken, American critic and writer, once remarked that "for every difficult and complex problem, there is an obvious solution that is simple, easy, and wrong." No composition textbook can promise easy formulas guaranteed to improve your writing overnight. Nor is writing always fun for everyone. But this text can make the learning process easier, less painful, and more enjoyable than you might anticipate.

Written in plain, straightforward language addressed to you, the student, this book will suggest a variety of practical ways for you to organize and write clear, concise prose. Because each of your writing tasks will be different, this textbook cannot provide a single, simple blueprint that will apply in all instances. Later chapters, however, will discuss some of the most common methods of organizing essays, such as development by example, definition, classification, causal analysis, comparison/contrast, and argument. As you become more familiar with, and begin to master, these patterns of writing, you will find yourself increasingly able to assess, organize, and explain the thoughts you have about the people, events, and situations in your own life. And while it might be true that in learning to write well there is no free ride, this book, along with your own willingness to work and improve, can start you down the road with a good sense of direction.

Part 1

The Basics of the Short Essay

The first section of this text is designed to move you through the writing process as you compose a short essay, the kind you are most likely to encounter in composition class and in other college courses. Chapters 1 and 2, on prewriting and the thesis statement, will help you find a topic, purpose, and focus for your essay. Chapter 3, on paragraphs, will show you how to plan, organize, and develop your ideas; Chapter 4 will help you complete your essay. Chapter 5 offers suggestions for revising your writing, and Chapters 6 and 7 present additional advice on selecting your words and composing your sentences. Chapter 8 explains the important reading–writing connection and shows how learning to read essays and other kinds of texts analytically can sharpen your writing skills.

Chapter 1

Prewriting

Getting Started (or Soup-Can Labels Can Be Fascinating)

For many writers, getting started is the hardest part. You may have noticed that when it is time to begin a writing assignment, you suddenly develop an enormous desire to straighten your books, water your plants, or clean out your closet. If this situation sounds familiar, you may find it reassuring to know that many professionals undergo these same strange compulsions before they begin writing. Jean Kerr, author of *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, admitted that she often found herself in the kitchen reading soup-can labels—or anything—to prolong the moments before taking pen in hand. John C. Calhoun, vice president under Andrew Jackson, insisted he had to plow his fields before he could write, and Joseph Conrad, author of *Lord Jim* and other novels, is said to have cried on occasion from the sheer dread of sitting down to compose his stories. Writer Ernest Hemingway once confessed that the most frightening thing he ever confronted in his life of adventures was "a blank sheet of paper," and contemporary horror writer Stephen King agrees that the "scariest moment" of all occurs just before one starts writing.

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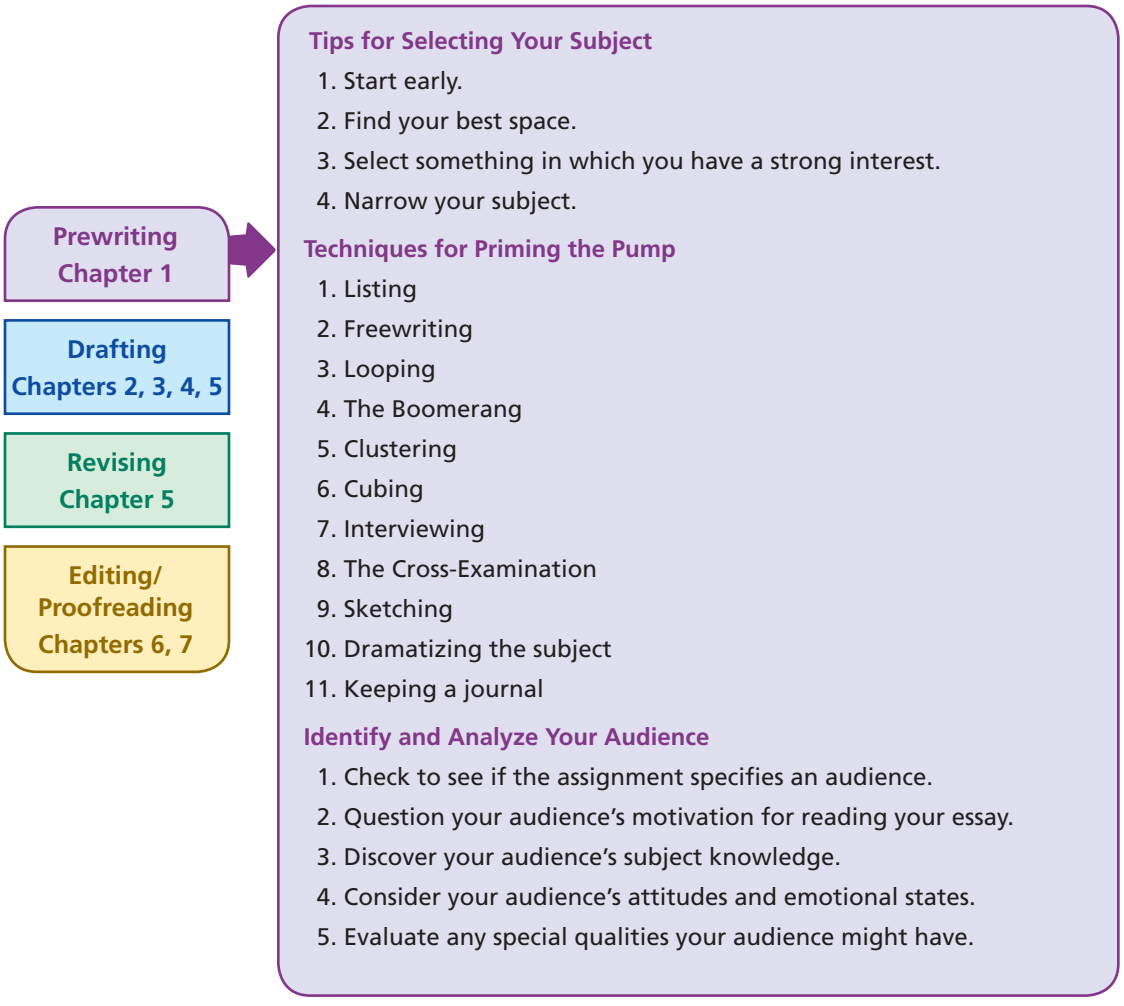
To spare you as much hand-wringing as possible, this chapter presents some practical suggestions on how to begin writing your short essay. Figure 1.1 summarizes some of the prewriting tips and techniques discussed in this chapter. Although all writers must find the methods that work best for them, you may find some of the following ideas helpful.

Figure 1.1 VISUALIZING THE PROCESS: PREWRITING



No matter how you actually begin putting words on paper, it is absolutely essential to maintain two basic ideas concerning your writing task. Before you write a single sentence, you should always remind yourself that:

1. You have some valuable ideas to tell your reader, and
2. More than anything, you want to communicate those ideas to your reader.

These reminders may seem obvious to you, but without a solid commitment to your own opinions as well as to your reader, your prose will be lifeless and boring. If *you* don't care about your subject, you can't very well expect anyone else to. Have confidence that your ideas are worthwhile and that your reader genuinely wants, or needs, to know what you think.

Equally important, you must also have a strong desire to tell others what you are thinking. One of the most common mistakes inexperienced writers make is failing to move past early stages in the writing process in which they are writing for—or writing to—themselves only. In the first stages of composing an essay, writers frequently "talk" on paper to themselves, exploring thoughts, discovering new insights, making connections, selecting examples, and so on. The ultimate goal of a finished essay, however, is to communicate your opinions to *others* clearly and persuasively. Whether you wish to inform your readers, change their minds, or stir them to action, you cannot accomplish your purpose by writing so that only you understand what you mean. The burden of communicating your thoughts falls on *you*, not the reader, who is under no obligation to struggle through unclear prose, paragraphs that begin and end for no apparent reason, or sentences that come one after another with no more logic than lemmings following one another to the sea.

Therefore, as you move through the drafting and revising stages of your writing process, commit yourself to becoming increasingly aware of your readers' reactions to your prose. Ask yourself as you revise your drafts, "Am I moving beyond writing just to myself? Am I making myself clear to others who might not know what I mean?" Much of your success as a writer depends on an unflagging determination to communicate clearly with your readers.

Selecting a Subject

Once you have decided that communicating clearly with others is your ultimate goal, you are ready to select the subject of your essay. Here are some suggestions on how to begin:

Start early. Writing teachers since the earth's crust cooled have been pushing this advice—and for good reason. It's not because teachers are egoists competing for the dubious honor of having the most time-consuming course; it is because few writers, even experienced ones, can do a good job when rushed. You need time to mull over ideas, organize your thoughts, revise and polish your prose. Rule of thumb: Always give yourself twice as much time as you think you'll need to avoid the 2:00-A.M.-why-did-I-come-to-college panic. (◆ For help overcoming procrastination, see pages 103–104.)

Find your best space. Develop some successful writing habits by thinking about your very own writing process. When and where do you usually do your best composing? Some people write best early in the morning; others think better later in the day. What time of day seems to produce your best efforts? Where are you working? At a desk? In your room or in a library? Do you start drafting ideas on a computer, or do you begin with notes on a piece of paper? With a certain pen or sharpened pencil? Most writers avoid noise and interruptions (the lure of social media sites, phone calls or texts, TV, friends, etc.), although some swear by playing music in the background. If you can identify a previously successful writing experience, try duplicating its location, time, and tools to help you calmly address your new writing task. Or consider trying new combinations of time and place if your previous choices weren't as productive as you would have liked. Recognition and repeated use of your most comfortable writing "spot" may shorten your hesitation to begin composing; your subconscious may

recognize the pattern ("Hey, it's time to write!") and help you start in a positive frame of mind. (Remember that it's not just writers who repeat such rituals—think of the athletes you've heard about who won't begin a game without wearing their lucky socks. If it works for them, it can work for you.)

Select something in which you currently have a strong interest. If the essay subject is left to you, think of something fun, fascinating, or frightening you've done or seen lately, perhaps something you've already told a friend about. The subject might be the pleasure of a new hobby, the challenge of a recent book or movie, or even the harassment of registration—anything in which you are personally involved. If you aren't enthusiastic enough about your subject to want to spread the word, pick something else. Bored writers write boring essays.

Don't feel you have nothing from which to choose your subject. Your days are full of activities, people, joys, and irritations. Essays do not have to be written on lofty intellectual or poetic subjects—in fact, some of the world's best essays have been written on such subjects as china teacups, roast pig, and chimney sweeps. Think: what have you been talking or thinking about lately? What have you been doing that you're excited about? Or what about your past? Reflect a few moments on some of your most vivid memories; special people, vacations, holidays, childhood hideaways, your first job or first date—all are possibilities.

Still searching? Make a list of all the subjects on which you are an expert. None, you say? Think again. Most of us have an array of talents we hardly acknowledge. Perhaps you play the guitar or make a mean pot of chili or know how to repair a sports car. You've trained a dog or become a first-class house sitter or gardener. You know more about computers or old baseball cards than any of your friends. You play soccer or volleyball or Ping-Pong. In other words, take a fresh, close look at your life. You know things that others don't . . . now is your chance to enlighten them!

If a search of your immediate or past personal experience doesn't turn up anything inspiring, try looking in your local or campus newspaper for stories that arouse your strong feelings; don't skip the editorials or "Letters to the Editor" column. What are the current topics of controversy on your campus? How do you feel about a particular graduation requirement? Speakers or special-interest groups on campus? Financial aid applications? Registration procedures? Parking restrictions? Consider the material you are studying in your other classes: reading *The Jungle* in a literature class might spark an investigative essay on the hot dog industry today, or studying previous immigration laws in your history class might lead you to an argument for or against current immigration practices. Current news magazines or Internet news blogs might suggest timely essay topics on national or international affairs that affect your life. In addition, there were, according to the search engine Technorati in 2009, over 200 million individual English-language blogs; more recent estimates now put that number at over 450 million. Personal Web logs today may offer information and opinions (often controversial) on almost any subject one can name, with topics including politics, cultural trends, business, travel, education, entertainment, and health issues, to name only a few examples. Some blogs are directed to specific groups with shared interests or professional objectives, while others may have more in common with personal diaries or daily logs. Although all readers should always carefully evaluate any information provided online, a professional

or personal blog might present an idea or argument that invites your thoughtful investigation and response.

In other words, when you're stuck for an essay topic, take a closer look at your environment: your own life—past, present, and future; your hometown; your campus and college town; your state; your country; and your world. You'll probably discover more than enough subjects to satisfy the assignments in your writing class.

Narrow a large subject. Once you've selected a general subject to write on, you may find that it is too broad for effective treatment in a short essay; therefore, you may need to narrow it somewhat. Suppose, for instance, you like to work with plants and have decided to make them the subject of your essay. The subject of "plants," however, is far too large and unwieldy for a short essay, perhaps even for a short book. Consequently, you must make your subject less general. "Houseplants" is more specific, but, again, there's too much to say. "Minimum-care houseplants" is better, but you still need to pare this large, complex subject further so that you can treat it in depth in your short essay. After all, there are many houseplants that require little attention. After several more tries, you might arrive at more specific, manageable topics, such as "houseplants that thrive in dark areas" or "the easy-care Devil's Ivy."

Then again, let's assume you are interested in sports. A 500- to 800-word essay on "sports" would obviously be superficial because the subject covers so much ground. Instead, you might divide the subject into categories such as "sports heroes," "my years on the high school tennis team," "women in gymnastics," "my love of running," and so forth. Perhaps several of your categories would make good short essays, but after looking at your list, you might decide that your real interest at this time is running and that it will be the topic of your essay.

Finding Your Essay's Purpose and Focus

Even after you've narrowed your large subject to a more manageable topic, you still must find a specific *purpose* for your essay. Why are you writing about this topic? Do your readers need to be informed? Persuaded? Entertained? What do you want your writing to accomplish?

In addition to knowing your purpose, you must also find a clear *focus* or direction for your essay. You cannot, for example, inform your readers about every aspect of running. Instead, you must decide on a particular part of the sport and then determine the main point you want to make. If it helps, think of a camera: you see a sweeping landscape you'd like to photograph, but you know you can't get it all into one picture, so you pick out a particularly interesting part of the scene. Focus in an essay works in the same way; you zoom in, so to speak, on a particular part of your topic and make that the focus of your paper.

Sometimes part of your problem may be solved by your assignment; your teacher may choose the focus of your essay for you by asking for certain specific information or by prescribing the method of development you should use (compare running to aerobics, explain the process of running properly, analyze the effects of daily running, and so forth). But if the purpose and focus of your essay are decisions you must make,

you should always allow your interest and knowledge to guide you. Often a direction or focus for your essay will surface as you narrow your subject, but don't become frustrated if you have to discard several ideas before you hit the one that's right. For instance, you might first consider writing on how to select running shoes and then realize that you know too little about the shoe market, or you might find that there's just too little of importance to say about running paths to make an interesting 500-word essay.

Let's suppose for a moment that you have thought of a subject that interests you—but now you're stuck. Deciding on something to write about this subject suddenly looks as easy as nailing Jell-O to your kitchen wall. What should you say? What would be the purpose of your essay? What would be interesting for you to write about and for readers to hear about?

At this point, you may profit from trying more than one prewriting exercise designed to help you generate some ideas about your topic. The exercises described next are, in a sense, "pump primers" that will get your creative juices flowing again. Because all writers compose differently, not all of these exercises will work for you—in fact, some of them may lead you nowhere. Nevertheless, try all of them at least once or twice; you may be surprised to discover that some pump-primer techniques work better with some subjects than with others.

Pump-Primer Techniques

1. Listing

Try jotting down all the ideas that pop into your head about your topic. Free-associate; don't hold back anything. Try to brainstorm for at least ten minutes.

A quick list on running might look like this:

fun
healthy
relieves tension
no expensive equipment
shoes
poor shoes won't last
shin splints
fresh air
good for heart
jogging paths vs. streets
hard surfaces
muscle cramps
going too far
going too fast
sense of accomplishment
training for races
both sexes
any age group
running with friend or spouse
too much competition
great expectations
good for lungs
improves circulation
firming
no weight loss
warm-ups before run
cool-downs after run
getting discouraged
hitting the wall
marathons

As you read over the list, look for connections between ideas or one large idea that encompasses several small ones. In this list, you might first notice that many of the

ideas focus on improving health (heart, lungs, circulation), but you discard that subject because a "running improves health" essay is too obvious; it's a topic that's been done too many times to say anything new. A closer look at your list, however, turns up a number of ideas that concern how *not* to run or reasons why someone might become discouraged and quit a running program. You begin to think of friends who might have stuck with running as you have if only they'd warmed up properly beforehand, chosen the right places to run, paced themselves more realistically, and so on. You decide, therefore, to write an essay telling first-time runners how to start a successful program, how to avoid a number of problems—from shoes to track surfaces—that might otherwise defeat their efforts before they've given the sport a chance.

2. Freewriting

Some people simply need to start writing to find a focus. Facing a blank page, give yourself at least ten to fifteen minutes, and begin writing whatever comes to mind on your subject. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, or even complete sentences. Don't change, correct, or delete anything. If you run out of things to say, write, "I can't think of anything to say" until you can find a new thought. At the end of the time period you may discover that by continuously writing you will have written yourself into an interesting topic.

Here are examples of freewriting from students who were given ten minutes to write on the general topic of "nature."

Student 1:

I'm really not the outdoorsy type. I'd rather be inside somewhere than out in nature tromping through the bushes. I don't like bugs and snakes and stuff like that. Lots of my friends like to go hiking around or camping but I don't. Secretly, I think maybe one of the big reasons I really don't like being out in nature is because I'm deathly afraid of bees. When I was a kid I was out in the woods and ran into a swarm of bees and got stung about a million times, well, it felt like a million times. I had to go to the hospital for a few days. Now every time I'm outside somewhere and something, anything, flies by me I'm terrified. Totally paranoid. Everyone kids me because I immediately cover my head. I keep hearing about killer bees heading this way, my worst nightmare come true.

Student 2:

We're not going to have any nature left if people don't do something about the environment. Despite all the media attention to recycling, we're still trashing the planet left and right. People talk big about "saving the environment" but then do such stupid things all the time. Like smokers who flip their cigarette butts out their car windows. Do they think those filters are just going to disappear overnight? The parking lot by this building is full of butts this morning where someone dumped their car ashtray. This campus is full of pop cans, I can see at least three empties under desks in this classroom right now.

These two students reacted quite differently to the same general subject. The first student responded personally, thinking about her own relationship to "nature" (defined as being out in the woods), whereas the second student obviously associated nature with environmental concerns. More freewriting might lead student 1 to a humorous essay on her bee phobia or even to an inquiry about those dreaded killer bees; student 2 might write an interesting paper suggesting ways college students could clean up their campus or easily recycle their aluminum cans.

Often freewriting will not be as coherent as these two samples; sometimes freewriting goes nowhere or in circles. But it's a technique worth trying. By allowing our minds to roam freely over a subject, without worrying about "correctness" or organization, we may remember or discover topics we want to write about or investigate, topics we feel strongly about and wish to introduce to others.

3. Looping*

Looping is a variation on freewriting that works amazingly well for many people, including those who are frustrated rather than helped by freewriting.

Let's assume you've been assigned that old standby, "My Summer Vacation." Obviously, you must find a focus, something specific and important to say. Again, face a blank page and begin to freewrite, as described previously. Write for at least ten minutes. At the end of this period, read over what you've written and try to identify a central idea that has emerged. This idea might be an important thought that occurred to you in the middle or at the end of your writing, or perhaps it was the idea you liked best for whatever reason. It might be the idea that was pulling you onward when time ran out. In other words, look for the thought that stands out, that seems to indicate the direction of your thinking. Put this thought or idea into one sentence called the "center-of-gravity sentence." You have now completed loop 1.

To begin loop 2, use your center-of-gravity sentence as a jumping-off point for another ten minutes of freewriting. Stop, read what you've written, and complete loop 2 by composing another center-of-gravity sentence. Use this second sentence to start loop 3. You should write at least three loops and three center-of-gravity sentences. At the end of three loops, you may find that you have focused on a specific topic that might lead to a good essay. If you're not satisfied with your topic at this point, by all means try two or three more loops until your subject is sufficiently narrowed and focused.

Here's an example of one student's looping exercise:

Summer Vacation

Loop 1

I think summer vacations are very important aspects of living. They symbolize getting away from daily routines, discovering places and people that are different. When I think of vacations I think mostly of

* This technique is suggested by Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

traveling somewhere too far to go, say, for a weekend. It is a chance to get away and relax and not think about most responsibilities. Just have a good time and enjoy yourself. Vacations can also be a time of gathering with family and friends.

Center-of-gravity sentence

Vacations are meant to be used for traveling.

Loop 2

Vacations are meant for traveling. Last summer my family and I drove to Yellowstone National Park. I didn't want to go at first. I thought looking at geysers would be dumb and boring. I was really obnoxious all the way up there and made lots of smart remarks about getting eaten by bears. Luckily, my parents ignored me and I'm glad they did, because Yellowstone turned out to be wonderful. It's not just Old Faithful—there's lots more to see and learn about, like these colorful boiling pools and boiling patches of mud. I got interested in the thermodynamics of the pools and how new ones are surfacing all the time, and how algae make the pools different colors.

Center-of-gravity sentence

Once I got interested in Yellowstone's amazing pools, my vacation turned out great.

Loop 3

Once I got interested in the pools, I had a good time, mainly because I felt I was seeing something really unusual. I knew I'd never see anything like this again unless I went to Iceland or New Zealand (highly unlikely!). I felt like I was learning a lot, too. I liked the idea of learning a lot about the inside of the earth without having to go to class and study books. I really hated to leave—Mom and Dad kidded me on the way back about how much I'd griped about going on the trip in the first place. I felt pretty dumb. But I was really glad I'd given the Park a closer look instead of holding on to my view of it as a boring bunch of water fountains. I would have had a terrible time, but now I hope to go back someday. I think the experience made me more open-minded about trying new places.

Center-of-gravity sentence

My vacation this summer was special because I was willing to put aside my expectations of boredom and learn some new ideas about the strange environment at Yellowstone.

At the end of three loops, this student has moved from the general subject of "summer vacation" to the more focused idea that her willingness to learn about a new place played an important part in the enjoyment of her vacation. Although her last center-of-gravity sentence still contains some vague words and phrases ("special," "new ideas," "strange environment"), the thought stated here may eventually lead to an essay that not only will say something about this student's vacation but may also persuade readers to reconsider their attitude toward taking trips to new places.