WRITING UNDER PRESSURE

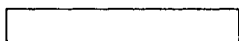## The Quick Writing Process

SANFORD KAYE

Writing Under Pressure

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for my mother and father

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Preface

This is an unconventional book. Most of the thousands of books about writing fall into a few categories. The larger group consists of handbooks which provide variations on an idealized version of the ''mechanics'' of writing. A smaller group consists of texts that present a personal pedagogy with strong, practical recommendations. A few eminently useful books offer a consistent point of view on matters of style or diction.

This book assumes that anyone can write well under pressure, and sets out to make that possible. The first half combines theory and practice: a case study of a writing assignment with a close deadline that demonstrates what I call the Quick Writing Process—QWP—in an organic way. The writer's work of preparing, planning, and generating material is governed by a timetable to ensure good writing without the familiar last minute scrambling and rearranging that throws essays out of balance and confuses the reader. In the producing stage, QWP employs two levels of editing: a rough first cut for coherence and consistency, and then a second reading for unity.

The second half of the book, applying this system, enriches the general theory by illustrating specific practices. The chapter on exam-writing provides the most direct application, and presents a good example of how to plan and then produce good writing under pressure for a reader who holds power (such as a grade or promotion) over you. The chapters on research writing develop the system for discovering and presenting meaning. The chapters on organizational writing take the system into the environment, analyzing some of the subtle pressures against writing well that we all face in our daily work. These applications, with the final chapter, illustrate how you can adapt your own, thorough version of QWP to any writing assignment.

The idea that anyone can write well is not a popular notion. There is so much mythology and mystery surrounding the writing process and product that writing a book for everyone who needs or wants to write requires a good deal of support, encouragement, and constructive crit-

icism. I have been extremely lucky in this regard. My brother, Professor Jerome Kaye, guided me in the idea that everyone deserves the best education possible, and that this often means the freedom to learn on one's own. I hope this book provides its readers with some helpful theory and practice as they teach themselves to write. My sons, Anders and Anson Kaye, patiently but persistently encouraged me through their understanding and experience of the writing process, as I hope this book will sustain readers in their independent work. My wife, Susan Shepherd, elegant writer and profound reader, is responsible for whatever aspects of content and style make this book readable. Her advice is the kind that I have incorporated into the QWP model: talking through a topic or a writing block; getting constructive feedback on a rough draft; and completing the conscious act of writing by shaping it into a product for readers. The idea of putting twenty-five years of teaching and consulting experience into book form arose in discussions with my colleague, Sandra Sanneh, at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Incisive, inspiring comments, questions, and recommendations by Paul Schlotthauer, my editor at Oxford University Press, made preparing the manuscript for publication as stimulating as writing the first draft. This book envisions writing as an independent, lifelong skill; that vision is put into practice with the support of people who believe we all have a right to speak, and to be heard.

Finally, anyone who has taught for twenty-five years has had thousands of students. For a writing teacher, this does not mean people in a lecture hall, but writers—students and clients—seated around a table sharing their work. These people from different backgrounds, with a variety of needs, have taught me what I know about the teaching and learning of writing. *Writing Under Pressure* comes from all of them— their experiences, frustrations, and discoveries in the act of writing—to help you develop your own personal, adaptable system for good writing on time.

Hanson, Mass.   S.K.
January 1988

Contents

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PART ONE

QWP: The Quick Writing Process

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CHAPTER

1
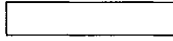
Preparing

Drawing a Blank

Most people would rather talk than write. Pressed to write, they draw a blank, or feel either that they have nothing new to say or that whatever they have to say could be said better by someone else. Yet when you talk to hesitant writers about assignments at work or school, you find they have *too* much to say: they are swamped by their research, and feel helpless in trying to sort out their own arguments in a clear and forceful way.

The concept of writing with confidence or pleasure is even more mysterious, one reserved for "born writers." This debilitating illusion is reenforced by our cultural myth that "writing can't be taught." Yet most of us *have* to write; and we wish we could do it well, with less frustration and more control. Fortunately, common sense tells us anyone can learn to write well, with both energy and satisfaction.

After twenty-five years of teaching writing, I've found that most writers share some unpleasant experiences. We feel a sense of dread when we are asked to answer a question that is often not of great interest to us. We have the dull knowledge that we most often write not to explore or to understand, but to demonstrate to a teacher or a supervisor that we have covered certain material, or adopted a particular way of looking at an issue. We remember those writing assignments that require us to condense a book's worth of material or six months of research into two pages. We've discovered that what we have struggled to say is not always read carefully. It isn't any wonder, then, that people normally write without a sense of self-discovery; they write not to engage the reader but to get an onerous job done.

3

When I was very young, it never occurred to me that I had "nothing to say." My friends and I talked all the time about everything. We asked everyone we knew about the questions on our minds, the discoveries we made every day. We wanted to know everything; and we certainly didn't mind telling anyone what we'd learned. But during the early years of school, we realized that what excited us most had almost nothing to do with education. Our teachers presided over a strict world of words and numbers and expected responses, none of which seemed to have anything to do with what we needed to know. The best we could do, trusting the advice of an older sister or a respected uncle, was to create a second self, that of the student who learned the things in school that were supposed to make sense later on in life. We relegated our own private searches to after-school hours. In time, this habit of neglecting what we really cared about took over. School was serious and exhausting; our feelings and ideas were only kid stuff. We stopped sharing, stopped comparing our ideas and feelings. We stopped wondering out loud.

In high school, the time-killing, predictable exercises meant to discipline our writing skills confirmed this need for a second self. We could not ignore the red marks in the margins of our compositions. Although it was quite clear that what we had to say was of little interest to our readers, the way we said it did elicit feelings, usually anger, irritation, and a lot of exclamation points. Our anxiety about mechanical errors was linked with an even deeper concern about grades, or winning a scholarship to college. Although I did write a column for our school newspaper ("Kaye's Korner"), my compositions in class were increasingly mindless as they became increasingly perfect. The goal, as our honors English teacher told us, was to leave her with "no work to do." In this system the best papers received no response at all.

I did win a scholarship, but when my first writing assignment in college was to "define Thoreau's concept of conscience," I drew a complete blank. I read Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" three times, and still had nothing to say. Why ask *me* for Thoreau's concept of conscience? Didn't he know himself? I asked my roommate, who had written a Thoreau paper as a sophomore in prep school. He lectured me for an hour about the relationship between the individual and the state.

He could have written fifty pages on the spot, and I couldn't think of two! I got my paper done, but it was a humiliating experience. I pieced together a series of quotes from Thoreau and threw in a few transitions: "Then Thoreau says," "Then he points out." There was nothing of my own thinking in the paper, and certainly no pleasure or pride in writing it. Turning it in was an act of survival, which left me dreading the next paper even more.

I wish I had known then that everybody goes through writing anxieties, and that I was just beginning to teach myself how to find out what I had to say, and then apply it to the question posed. Through the process and product, I could enlighten myself and the reader; and I could make the whole experience open-ended, so that each time I wrote I not only answered the reader's questions, but also learned something more about my own writing.

That first semester in college, I realized that although my roommate might be one of those "born writers," I was not. My job was to rebuild the bridge between my instincts, feelings, experiences, and ideas, and my words on the page. I had to heal the torn and atrophied muscle of communication so that writing became what talking had been earlier in my life: an extension of personality, a reaching out to others with the excitement of real inquiry, and the conviction that it all mattered. I didn't need checklists or rules for making writing into a game to be played with teachers. I had to transform my cynicism about writing into a lifelong skill for staying in touch with myself and with the world. QWP, the Quick Writing Process, is a way of doing this, of transforming all our pent-up resistance to writing into a process of writing efficiently, with confidence and pleasure.

QWP depends on two different kinds of planning. First, you prepare to write by making an assessment of what is involved in answering the question or fulfilling the requirement. Then you plan the time and structure to get the job done. The QWP timetable is practical, not theoretical. Although you will want to establish the timetable for your whole project *before* you set out to write, the technique for planning writing time will be clearer if demonstrated in the context of a case study position paper in Chapter 3. Here, I want to consider the writer's preparation.

The Reader's Questions

Scientists speak of elegant solutions, engineers of ''quick and dirty'' results. In both cases, the issue is a process for getting work done in the most efficient manner. This simplicity, cutting away the fat in both the thinking and doing processes, is the essence of QWP. The result, at least in the beginning of one's experience with QWP, will fall somewhere between elegant and quick and dirty, depending upon the preparation and the kind of deadline. Perhaps the best way of viewing the goal is through the operative description, ''quick and clean'': a process for producing results somewhat short of perfection, but in a far more comprehensive, and persuasive manner than the untrained writer's unbalanced, unfocused, frantic method. QWP practice and experience strengthens the writer's capacity to write at his or her best in the most spontaneous way, by consciously integrating audience awareness; a provisional thesis that generates a balanced argument-outline with a beginning, middle, end; appropriate examples, and a practical look at the ''other side''; and ideas and sentences connected by the internal logic of the thesis. All these elements drive toward a forceful conclusion that puts the question into a new context and provides the reader with a clearer perspective.

Any writing job requires some adjustment of the relationship between writer and reader. If you are writing under pressure, it is particularly important to make this relationship as conscious as possible when planning, and as visible as possible in the writing. The immediate benefit of such conscious planning is that it counteracts the sense of ''drawing a blank.'' You begin at once by clarifying the relationship between writer and reader: is the reader someone who will understand a shorthand transcription of the way your mind works, so that you do not need to define your terms or make explicit all the connections among your thoughts? If the reader cannot provide those invisible connections, or supply his or her own examples for your abstract assertions, you need evidence and examples to reenforce your essay, memo, or letter.

Once this relationship between writer and reader becomes a conscious part of the planning process, it yields more useful information. A

teacher or superior at work imposes personal or even institutional restrictions on the writer. Important decisions must be made if, for example, your writing makes an argument that will counter the beliefs of your reader. How much of a risk can you take? Is your writing a demonstration of knowledge, or of loyalty? Are you expected to speak your mind or, whether stated or implied, to "keep a low profile"? How much persuasion is appropriate: is there a genuine need to win the reader over to your point of view, or must you convince your reader you have covered a certain amount of material, sorted it out in your own mind, and integrated it with other information and ideas?

Everyone who writes has encountered each of these situations at one time or another. Whatever the writing task, this relationship must be considered when deciding your approach and style. Neutral prose definitely will not be appropriate in a personal essay for a college application, or in an experiential sociology paper. A strong personal voice may be out of place in a scientific monograph or government agency memo. The use of the first person pronoun may be risky in professional writing. There is no defense for dead prose, but in some environments, there are severe drawbacks to writing that is inappropriately intimate. The resolution of such questions affects the tone, the stance, and the texture of your writing. Once you define this relationship, you can anticipate some of the questions your reader will ask, and include the answers as you plan your writing.

Discovering the most appropriate relationship to the reader should not be a time-consuming process, of course. It's akin to a photographer's decision about which lens to use. The more consciously you make that decision, the better you control what most untrained writers consider a mystery: the reader's feeling of intimacy or distance—of personal involvement—with your writing.

The Writer's Question

Unless you've been part of a well-run writing group in which each person is responsible for giving constructive feedback, you may not

have a sharp, balanced view of when to answer readers' questions as
they naturally arise, and when to raise questions for readers to ponder.
Writing is generally overkill. Studies have shown how little people
remember of what they hear and read, but inexperienced writers often
insist that either they thought their readers "already knew" what they
had left out, or they didn't want to "shout at" readers for fear of losing
them. This question about how much to say is cleared up immediately if
you realize that there is never a good reason to leave the reader in doubt
about what you mean.

Readers may find your argument difficult to grasp or wrongheaded:
"Is the writer mistaken, or can I learn something here?" But if it is all
there, you've done your job. When your writing is unclear, a reader
wonders: "What's missing here? Why aren't there any good exam-
ples?" One set of questions results from the reader's active engage-
ment, the other from the reader's confusion.

Writers under pressure do well to anticipate and accommodate the
reader's and writer's inevitable questions. Writing under pressure is
necessarily more deductive than inductive, leaving less to chance or
mystery than writing that can be tested against readers, written again,
and then rewritten. For a writer under pressure, there has to be a safety
net underlying the process, and that safety net is established by making
an early commitment to what you're going to say. This may be uncom-
fortable at first; and as the writing process continues, you may see the
need to alter your basic argument. But the main purpose of QWP is to
allow you to do the best job you can, in the time available, and that
means accepting some of the discomfort and anxiety of knowing that,
with *more* time, you might do a better, fuller, more elegant job. More-
over, as you continue to use QWP, you move closer and closer to fuller
and more elegant pieces of writing.

Your goal is a process which allows you to write efficiently and
confidently for a reader whom you have placed in an appropriate rela-
tionship to your words, and whose questions you have anticipated with-
in the planned structure of your essay, memo, or exam. As these initial
preparatory steps help you avoid "drawing a blank," you may begin to
feel that now you have *too* much to say. Here you need to make one
final preparatory decision.

Representation

No amount of planning can make the reader hear the music in your mind, or see the abstract design you perceive as you look out over a cranberry bog coming to fruition in late September. Writing can convey only certain things well, and others not at all. Therefore, you want a writing process based on realistic expectations. Your essay on banning cigarettes in public places, or your memo on how to maximize profits while still maintaining goodwill, almost never convinces readers directly or gives them a sense you have the final answer. Writing a scene between a husband and wife, even if based on an amalgam of your own experiences and those of your friends and relatives, will not match the actual time, space, or feelings of such moments. Writers can evoke similar responses, but such attempts involve risk and experimentation, because words on a page create a particular kind of experience in the reader's mind. Writers depend on *representations,* distillations of experience, thought, and imagination. These representations have the capacity to enact, in the theater of the reader's mind, passionate thoughts, feelings, and images. Conscious, careful selection, whether the representation is a word, symbol, or underlying metaphor, is crucial to both power and clarity in prose.

Representation is an act of economy in writing. I am not talking here about being brief, or "boiling it down." That is a different kind of economy, and one that is often dangerous. I had a writing client in government whose instructions were to reduce everything to one page, no matter what the subject or how much work had gone into the report. Almost half of the allotted page concerned who the writer was and where he could be found in the Pentagon. Distilling ideas or feelings into the symbols that are words on a page is not a matter of falsely or foolishly simplifying meaning. This skillful selection of the best words, evidence, examples, and structure out of an infinite number of possibilities, and of building a bridge to readers, forms the basic act of good writing. As a writer, you will always have too much material, most of which you will have to leave out. What you want is to suggest, to prompt the reader's mind. You are always sorting, scanning with incredible speed the different whorls of thought and feeling and instinct

in order to pick out the best for your neat, linear rows of words on the page, or the bright letters on the screen. Writing well, under pressure, pushes this process to an even higher intensity. Writers constantly look for ways, in both structure and content, to signal, to indicate, to say more of what they have to say than they can actually get down on the page. If your task is to write one page, you need to fill it with the knowledge of a hundred pages. If your job is to read twenty books and thirty articles and come up with a twelve-page paper in a week, you must *select* with the greatest concentration, leaving crucial evidence behind, striving always to find the most representative, the most characteristic examples of your argument: not only the facts, experiences, and opinions, but the words themselves.

Many people cannot come to terms with this need to select. Some do not write at all or fail to finish their writing on time, because they are so keenly aware that they can never tell the *whole* story. When writing under pressure, it is as important to understand this need to select, to represent, as it is to analyze the writer's relationship to readers, to anticipate the readers' questions, and to resolve the writer's questions. But as with all of these preparatory questions, a writer's appreciation of representation must be tucked away finally, to let the process of writing begin.

CHAPTER
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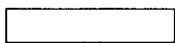
Planning and Generating

Pressures

Suppose I am under pressure to write about whether to have an English competency exam as a requirement for graduation at, say, Shakespeare College of the Communicable Arts, where I teach writing. This (thankfully) purely fictional assignment is due tomorrow morning, and I am expected to write "about three pages." The dean is the audience. He doesn't need background: he wants evidence for a point of view—a position paper.

This imaginary assignment has the familiar characteristics of many such writing tasks: there isn't enough time to do a good job; there is a strong likelihood that what I say will not *convince* the reader as he weighs my views against those of others closer to him; but there is the possibility of doing something useful. It is also a topic I would never willingly choose to spend time on, so I immediately resist the task. If we took the example of a student paper in a college course, we could substitute other limitations roughly in the same range: the required length might be anywhere from two to fifteen pages; the paper might be due not in twenty-four hours but in a week; the audience would be a professor who either wanted to compare the student paper with some ideal paper in his or her mind, or hoped to find some fresh thinking on an old topic. Or we might take a memo, due in a few hours, for a supervisor who is depending on the writer to survey options and put forward a recommendation in one easily readable page. Each of these cases presents particular problems of its own; but they all share the general characteristics of writing under pressure. And probably all are accompanied by a certain sense of dread.

11

Writers react to the pressures of time constraints in different ways. Even if a deadline is several months or a year away, some people scramble to get started early, and still find themselves rushing at the last minute. Others *need* pressure to get anything done. Space requirements exert similar pressures: some writers dread condensing material, others dread expanding it. The power relationship between reader and writer intimidates some writers and provokes others. You may not want to write your memo or your paper in Modern Civilization, but you know you must do it. That gives the pressures of deadline, length, and the relationship with your reader real force, and you must respond, either unconsciously by letting them dominate your writing process and product, or consciously by transforming them into advantages. QWP harnesses the writer's energies against these pressures by shaping his or her commitment to the task.

The Writer's Commitment

The writer's commitment is a matter of planning, and is unique with each project. Such planning involves answering the following questions:

- How much does the reader know?
- How much has the writer learned?
- How much does the reader want to learn?
- How much does the writer want to tell?

Each of these questions pushes at the boundaries of the writer's task. I don't know of any method of writing that can turn a half-done, grudgingly written draft into a satisfying product. Readers immediately sense a tone of resistance, a lack of structure, a failure to explain or illustrate. Writing without commitment is the writer's curse. You have to find some way of making every topic unleash your energy and conviction. Otherwise, the process will be remorselessly painful, for both writer and reader.

In our scenario, then, I am writing for the dean of my college, a man for whom I have some respect, who is both creative and timid to the

same degree as most of us. We are friendly, but not close; we know almost nothing about each other personally. I'm not sure how he feels about a competency exam, and I don't want to alienate him unnecessarily. Yet he has asked for my opinion as a teacher of writing, and I do have to respond.

My own attitude prevents me from cranking out meaningless writing simply to get the job done. Even if I have reservations, I know from experience that if my initial goal is to figure out what I *think* about this issue, I will learn something. If I can manage the writing process so that I approximate in words what I think and feel, then I will strengthen my writing skills as well. Beyond that, if I can get the reader *engaged* in my words, I will be especially pleased. It may well be that however committed I am to the subject, my reader will disagree and take an action I oppose; no one ever claimed that if you write well everyone will agree with you. But a writer can *learn,* and then tell readers what he or she has learned.

Generating a Provisional Thesis and *Because*-clauses

Having resolved issues of audience, reader's and writer's questions, and my commitment to this project, I am prepared to begin.* My instinctive response to the dean's request is that a competency exam in English is a terrible idea. I'm aware, however, that many people in and out of the profession feel differently, and the dean may be among them, or at least may be depending on such people for his decision. Even though research or the exchange of views might well change my mind, I don't have the time to engage in much reading or discussion. Writing under

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*With QWP, it is important to have a realistic sense of time and space *before* writing. For the purpose of demonstrating this system the first time through, I want to get to *content* immediately, because QWP is based on discovering and presenting meaning. But at this point in a project I would set out a timetable and a structural plan. Roughly half the time in the QWP timetable is for preparing, planning, and generating material; the remaining time is for producing: moving from raw to final draft. The timetable is also integrated with a structural plan, sketched out against a framework of beginning, middle, and end (see Chapter 3).

pressure, I can do only *some* exploring. Most of the material for this kind of assignment is found in the mind of the writer, not in books, journals, or other people. If this were a research paper (Chapters 11 and 12), writing under pressure would still involve the skill of knowing what to look for in the available material.

My job, then, is to sort out my own views and decide how best to present them to the reader. Generating a provisional thesis gives me the head start I need. I really don't want a competency exam. Committing myself to that position in a thesis enables me to *start* the writing job honestly and energetically. If I discover other arguments, or convincing opposing views, then the material itself will shape my raw draft. I can write this paper without worrying much about the various pressures because I will actually discover what I believe and why I believe it, and then present the reader with the truth as I see it.

Writing, after all, is discovery, a way of finding out what I think and what my experience or learning tells me. My own thinking may include conflicting ideas. But writing under pressure will be somewhat less discovery and somewhat more development: you find the site, and you construct the city. You've settled on a decision, and now you make the most of it. Whatever you discover in the process adds to the power and clarity of the writing product, or has to be acknowledged as something you need to study further. Under pressure, some of that will always have to wait until the next writing project.

Here, then, is the start of the thesis which, by the end of the rough draft, will become my full-fledged introduction:

A writing competency exam is a bad idea *because*—

The work of generating *because*-clauses, which at this point should have a strong element of spontaneity in it, now begins. What follows "*because*—" forms the foundation for the rest of the process of writing well under pressure.

The competency exam is a bad idea. *Why?* If I had to create a twenty-minute oral presentation on the subject, I only would have time for the few best reasons. If I were writing a book on the subject, I would need plenty of reasons, covering a variety of related issues. For this three-page paper, I want to generate ten or twelve ideas as freely as possible,

without judging their merits or importance, and then focus on three or four to develop into my position paper.

A writing competency exam is a bad idea *because*—

(1) No one would want to read it.

(2) Who would define "competency"?

(3) How will the exam be useful for students who don't pass?

(4) Who would teach the failing students and help them to pass? Where would we get the money to pay these teachers?

(5) What would it mean for the teaching of writing in general if we tailor it to an exam? Many of our students need to be less afraid of writing, not intimidated by an exam.

(6) What will be the impact on younger teachers? How could we convince them that they will not be judged for promotion based on how many of their students pass the exam, but on how well they accomplish the ideal goal of helping everyone to write with power and clarity, on whatever level, as a lifelong skill?

(7) What will the existence of a writing competency exam do to the relationship between the English department and other departments of the college? Will it create a sense that everything we do is "remedial," and that they themselves don't have to work at helping students write well? (Face it, you never hear: "I have such good writers in my history class, the English department must be doing its job.")

(8) What function would the exam serve? To give peace of mind to some people on the faculty or in the administration because so many people don't write well? It's a national concern, after all. How can you ensure that all students will write well as judged by a single essay, or even a series of essays? You might do this with math, or computer competency, or even with a writing inventory to place people in the appropriate level of writing class, but what is our goal here as teachers of writing? (More on this later.)

(9) I define "competency" in writing as the writer's capacity to say with power and clarity what he or she thinks, whether

asked by teachers, bosses, prospective employers, or on his
or her own initiative. How will this be tested by a competen-
cy exam if in fact a student works hard and moves toward that
goal in the fourteen weeks of a writing course? If we insist
that students repeat writing courses or get help to pass the
exam without getting credit for it, then we can throw in the
sponge! It's a miracle anyway when students take the idea of
writing well seriously, and the more cynical you become
about writing, the less you do it. Training people to write in
order to pass an exam is one sure way of stopping them from
learning *how* to write with clarity and power as a lifelong
habit. People get up for a chemistry exam and never want to
look at a chemistry book again. But while you may never
need to know the chemistry equations once the exam is over,
you will certainly have to write, again and again, throughout
your life. (More on this, too.)

(10)   Actually, I admit the competency idea *is* a tantalizing one.
Wouldn't it be nice to draw a line and say, "Yes, Robert
writes well enough to get our degree; Judy can't yet, and
needs another semester; Tim may need to take writing each
semester until he graduates, and even then. . . ." The idea is
appealing. The more people working at writing, the better.
But no competency exam has ever been accompanied by a
whole new series of credit courses in writing, with the hiring
of additional staff, and a college-wide commitment to teach-
ing writing. Usually, such exams are meant to "certify" that
students have been trained in some way, as we might certify
that a student can run a computer program. What should we
certify in writing? That a student can write an engaging cover
letter for his or her resume? A good essay for a transfer
application? A strong, clear letter to the editor of the home-
town newspaper? A paper free of mechanical errors that says
nothing, and leaves the teacher "no work to do"? I know the
sheer dread most people have of writing in the first place, and
the fear that a standardized exam might prevent graduation

will kill the whole deal, especially for the very students who need the most attention. (*Much* more on this.)

(11) "Competency" for what? I keep coming back to this: competency for a test, for writing decent papers in a course, or for a lifelong skill? In some ways, these are mutually exclusive goals if all we have is one semester of required writing—an issue that should be at the heart of this argument anyway.

(12) All right, what do *I* suggest instead? A year-long required writing course for everyone? A writing staff charged not only with the theoretical (and now machine-correctable) mechanics of writing, but with the task of helping students express themselves, not only in our courses, but throughout their lives as citizens of a society? Because if we don't do this, we will be responsible for permitting the vacuum that is filled not by real, hard thinking and explanation but, instead, by the incessant yapping of advertisers and photogenic newscasters who smile about weather, drought, starvation, parades, and invasions as if the words they speak have no more meaning than the drone of the refrigerator, and the people of whom they speak no more substance than objects without feeling.

Commentary on Generating the *Because*-clauses

Okay, that's enough. Listing the potential reasons against a competency exam was an intense, exhausting activity, but doing it without stopping to judge these ideas, I felt my energy flowing into several of the *because*-clauses. I even got to the point of realizing (clause 12) that I have the basis for an alternative to a competency exam. I also took a look at the possible good points of a competency exam (clause 10), but I'm not convinced, so those will become part of my own argument against one. I know already, as I prepare to look back over the list (Chapter 4) that I have more than enough good material and some of the actual language I'll use in my raw draft. I've discovered things I would not have thought

of before. Even if I don't make use of some of them in the final product, I have learned plenty about myself and my attitude toward these questions by spontaneously listing more than enough *because*-clauses.

For a longer paper, I might have used a directed freewriting exercise first, before committing myself to a thesis and listing reasons why I support (or oppose) it. But although a page of nonstop, uncensored writing on the subject would have helped me find what Peter Elbow, in *Writing with Power,* calls the "center of gravity" of the piece of writing, my list of clauses gives me a convenient way to analyze the various ideas and opposing views, and provides some of the language I will use later. As with all the stages of QWP, this listing is useful in itself and ignites the next activity: analysis of the *because*-clauses. Analysis produces an argument-outline, which leads to the raw draft. This *continuous* process is one advantage of using QWP instead of mapping strategies or brainstorming. It begins with *meaning;* and the provisional thesis, the *because*-clauses, the constant integration of inductive and deductive thinking create a sense of order. A psychologist has a hunch in a family therapy session; a biochemist has an inkling of where to look for something useful. Anyone who writes has a whole storehouse of ideas and feelings that will come into play in the writing process. QWP takes the energy of thinking and turns it into a system for writing.

Of course, no process can assure that I will find the ultimate explanation or the basis of my instinct against a competency exam. Although I fully expect to discover ideas and evidence that I haven't thought of before, it is not always possible to find what Sheridan Baker, in *The Practical Stylist,* calls the "public reasons for . . . private convictions." The process of writing under pressure may or may not force them out into the open before the deadline. Perhaps I'll find them later on, as I think over what I've written and what I've left out, or as people respond to my paper. I may change my mind as I learn new things. But for now, within the deadline, I can approach, clarify, and represent my thoughts, and acknowledge, as part of the power of writing, the things I *don't* know, the things I'm not sure about. There will be more chances, more writing tasks. This particular one may lead to others, or it may be forgotten. All I can do is work with as much intensity and concentration as possible in the available time and get *this* job done.

The more you use QWP and make it your own, the more you will be able to depend on having enough information, analysis, and ideas. There will be ample discovery for the writer and food for the reader's thoughts. It's not a foolproof process. The history of writing is a history of attempts. Think of Faulkner writing the second section of the *The Sound and the Fury* because he felt the first didn't work, and then the third and the fourth, and finally, putting them all together as a book although he still was not satisfied. There's tremendous effort and limited success in most writing. Incidentally, that's not the kind of truth a competency exam would allow—another thought to consider as I move toward integrating meaning and structure in my position paper.

Time and Space

The QWP Timetable Related to Structure

At this point, I have much more than enough raw material for my paper, more than I would have imagined when I began to analyze my relationship to the intended reader, and my own feelings about taking a stand on the competency exam question. QWP delivers you headlong into the writing process, neutralizing the familiar resistances to starting. Besides, in this case study, I don't have *time* to put it off: the paper is due in the dean's office tomorrow morning. My limit is three pages, and I'm about to sift through and analyze the list of freely generated *because*-clauses linked to my thesis, to put them into the order of a balanced argument-outline.

Before the analysis, it's important to understand the relationship between time and structure in the writing process. Managing time is essential to the writer's control and independence. Most writers don't appraise their time realistically and, invariably, the result is a distortion of the writing process. The writing we do under pressure (an exam essay, a memo due in the afternoon, a cover letter for a wonderful job that has to be mailed today) has a last-minute feel to it. We know it as we write, and we feel it as soon as we turn in the bluebook or memo, or send off the letter. We hope it will "get by," or we resign ourselves to a disappointing response. But this familiar experience reflects something more than an unsatisfactory process. The deeper issue is that most people are not fully aware of the way words strike readers, and so they use their writing time inefficiently.

Readers may not have an inkling of a writer's most difficult struggles. Novelists are often fondest of the writing that has given them the

most trouble, but readers are grateful for books that seem to have been written "easily," as if without effort. Two different goals are involved here: the writer develops his or her craft; and the reader seeks enlightenment or pleasure, or both. If you explore the diaries, notebooks, and letters of writers, you may be surprised to find that what gave the writer a private feeling of accomplishment may have little to do with a reader's experience of the work. This is generally true, at one time or another, of everyone who writes. But for inexperienced writers, it is usually destructive. "Sorry, I know this is full of comma errors," a student says, even though her essay, read aloud, has overwhelmed the class with its power. Another writer will assure you the meaning's *there*. "I haven't bothered to put in all the connections," he says, "but you know what I mean." Both writers have little perspective on the way readers perceive their work. With some constructive feedback about the effect of their words, they could redistribute their energies throughout the writing process to strengthen communication.

The most common and debilitating distortions in writing result from this failure to manage energy and time. It is extremely common for people who dread a particular writing task to spend most of their available time on one small part of the process, so that the final product is out of balance, lacking any sense of focus, and constructed so loosely that the reader can't keep the message or method in view.

It's easy to see this in terms of structure. Some people will spend almost all their time and energy on the beginning of a piece, getting it "right," but leaving no time for the middle or the end. There are people who never write conclusions even though this ensures that whatever they have to say will spill out and evaporate. (No matter how good the beginning and middle of a piece of writing, if there is no sense of an ending, and of pointing the way to a new perspective, the reader may retain only an example or a vague general impression.) There are people who only write conclusions. They give the reader their general assertions, even a sense of perspective; but the writing is abstract, without the necessary specificity of the argument, the anchored examples, the progression of evidence that supports general statements. The whole essay drifts away.

Most familiar are the writers who have no time, inclination, or confi-

dence for beginnings and endings, and give the reader only a middle, with perfunctory opening and closing statements. The result, for readers, is irritation and disorientation: "What was this really about?" or, "Oh, I see. Why didn't you tell me you were talking about that in the first place? For most of your paper I thought you were writing something else entirely and now I don't have the time to go back over it." Planning time, in QWP, is important for avoiding these writer's distortions. It is done within a basic sense of structure, so that your essay or memo has the balance of an interesting, useful beginning, a solid, specific middle, and an inspiring conclusion.

If I have less than a day for my position paper I must commit myself to a timetable for the whole project even before I generate a thesis and *because*-clauses. Planning time and space is best done even before considering the fundamental questions about the writer and the reader that initiate the writing process. QWP acknowledges the boundaries of a writing project because its goal is to get the job done. Underlying this principle is the inescapable fact that setting these boundaries is the writer's responsibility. It is an act both of independence and of control, and gives the writer motivation and confidence. Deciding *first* the time you can realistically allot to your writing project to get it done thoroughly is essential, and liberating.

Amid the pressures, fears, hopes, excuses, and good intentions, you simply say, "This is what I'm willing to do—set aside this much of my best time and energy to complete this job." You may wish you could do more; you may want to do nothing at all. But the decision about time helps you resolve the issue of your commitment to the project immediately, and that is a tremendous help.

The QWP timetable ensures that none of the writer's energies are wasted, and that each activity in the process initiates the next. For example, although I've written about twenty pages of explanation about QWP so far, I've actually spent less than an hour in writing time on the position paper itself, preparing and then generating a thesis and *because*-clauses. Now I have a quarry of raw material, which assures me I have "enough" to say, and can do a thorough job. The real virtue of QWP is that everything you do counts, in producing the best piece of writing in the given circumstances. The QWP process transforms time

from one of the pressures against writing well to one of the writer's most important resources.

Here, then, is the timetable for this project as I worked it out *before* even preparing to write. It is predicated on three hours of writing (an evening's work) for a three-page paper. This timetable includes everything we have done so far to arrive at our list of *because*-clauses, and includes the *producing* part of the process, to be described in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Timetable: "Competency Tests?" (3 pages; 3 hours)

(1) Timetable related to structure: Beginning, Middle, End. (*5 minutes*)

(2) Who is my audience? What is my relationship to the reader: power, professional, collegial? What is the appropriate approach, distance, and level of specificity, given time and space pressures? What needs to be put in, and what can be left out? (*5 minutes*)

(3) What is my commitment to the project? How are my instincts, feelings, fears, and energy related to my commitment? (*5 minutes*)

(4) The provisional thesis, up to the "*because-*": the answer I propose, based on experience, learning, instinct, or passion. (*10 minutes*)

(5) Plenty of spontaneous *because*-clauses to support and oppose my provisional answer, enough for a paper three times as long as the one I have to write. (*25 minutes*)

(6) Analyzing the list of *because*-clauses to choose the most important ideas for my argument, the ones that elicit the most from me as a writer and turn the question to my strongest interests. (*20 minutes*)

[*first hour*]

(7) Ordering the most important *ideas* into a quick Beginning, Middle, End argument-outline that organizes the best raw blocks of *because*-clause writing. The provisional thesis, cor-

related with the ordered ideas of the Middle section (including a look at the "other side") becomes the introduction. Note perspectives for the conclusion. (*15 minutes*)

(8) Filling out the argument-outline with the selected material from the *because*-clauses. Rough-cutting this raw draft for coherence and consistency. (*30 minutes*)

(9) Reading the roughly final draft aloud (or having someone give me constructive feedback) to find missed connections, loose ends, flat places where I can polish the draft down to size. (*15 minutes*)

[*second hour*]

(10) Making the roughly final draft *final:* ensuring unity through powerful transitions, and integrated examples and comparisons to engage the reader's thinking. Filling out the End (the conclusion) with a new perspective for the reader. Correlating the Beginning (the full-fledged introduction), with the whole argument, including the final perspective. (*30 minutes*)

(11) Proofreading for a flawless final copy. (*20 minutes*)

[*third hour*]

My *because*-clause list was the first real writing for this position paper. The list took about half an hour to generate (even though many of the clauses, as written out in Chapter 2, for purposes of explanation, are much longer than they need to be). But it was a half-hour well spent. Already I have language I can use in the final draft of the paper. I know the tone and the attitude I will take toward my reader. I have a sense of the places where I have the strongest ideas and feelings to convey, and those where I have less investment. I have my beginning, based on my provisional thesis. Later, in the roughly final draft, I might want to add a few introductory sentences to capture my reader's attention or assure him that I am going to answer the question.

I have no doubt that once I analyze my list of *because*-clauses, I will discover something new that will form the extra sense of perspective beyond a summary a good conclusion needs. In less than an hour, then,

I have the essence of my paper: its psychological underpinnings, a quarry of ideas for my logical argument, and a good feeling for the way the structure will enable me to write efficiently and, at the same time, permit the reader to follow a balanced argument.

If I spend the next half-hour analyzing the main ideas, and then arranging them in the most effective order just as they are, I will be well on the way to the argument-outline that provides the framework for the raw draft.

Writing under pressure doesn't permit the painstaking build-up or filling-in that most writers do when they begin a paper, those first few pages or early paragraphs that exist to get the writer started and disappear in later drafts. The planning stages of QWP serve that function by committing the writer to the project and to the provisional thesis. Generating the *because*-clauses for the thesis locates the argument's center of gravity. Sifting through the *because*-clauses culls the best material into the most coherent structure.

The first hour, then, consists of preparing, planning, and generating a solid thesis, and the central argument of a balanced paper. By the end of the second hour, I will have a coherent rough draft containing more than enough good material. In the final hour, I can ensure unity, anchor examples, and fashion a conclusion that goes one step beyond anything I've said so far to give the reader a broader, deeper, or clearer perspective. Then I can polish, proofread, and type the final product.

This three-hour commitment ensures a paper that gives my answer, in my own voice and style, to the question posed by my intended reader. QWP allows me to *discover* my answer through a relatively spontaneous process within the allotted time, a process over which I exert a good deal of control. I will have done the best I can, not only for the reader but for myself as a writer under pressure.

When I was a student, my first two-page paper took me forty hours. For other papers, I spent ten or twelve hours painstakingly trying to get the beginning "right," without leaving time for the middle or the end. On some assignments, I spent so much time trying to fill in the reader on the rich background for my topic or my thesis that I left no time or energy for the middle—the argument. Most often, this happened on final exams, where I would squander the forty-five minutes allotted to

"Essay Question One" on only one of the issues involved in a full answer (see Chapter 10 for the application of QWP to examwriting). Occasionally, I wrote what I meant in general terms, but could not discover the specifics or the examples to provide concrete evidence. QWP time-planning prevents you from falling into these ineffective patterns. You discover and commit yourself to your own thesis early in the writing process; you also make a *time* commitment and stick to it. Even if you start your writing project weeks in advance, you still need a process-related timetable to ensure that you will complete the *whole* job through the flawless product, on time.

One of the keys to good writing under pressure is the realization that you must do each part of the process with equal vigor, and as thoroughly as possible within the time limit. You want the good material on the page, not left over in your mind to regret a day later. Moreover, each activity in QWP initiates the next, in a continuous process. We've imagined, here, that I was asked to prepare my position paper on an English competency exam less than a day before the dean needed it. Given such an urgent assignment, I might have sat down at the keyboard and squeezed out three pages word by word. I might have had a hot streak and come out with more material than I needed, giving me the luxury of cutting back. More likely, I would have hit a blank wall, stymied after a paragraph or page, aware that I really didn't know what I meant, or where I was going, or that I simply meant too many things to proceed without planning. I might have found out what I really wanted to say too late to do anything about it; or that everything I'd written up until five minutes to nine (shooing students and colleagues away from my office with a wave of the hand) was suddenly rendered vulnerable by a thought that only emerged as the tower clock rang out the hour.

That's why QWP includes a timetable for each project, within the boundaries of available time: a complete timetable for the forty-five minutes in which you must produce a one-page memo for your boss before he or she leaves for lunch; or the three months for your undergraduate thesis; or the half-hour for the brief speech at your town meeting tomorrow night. You make the time-commitment in order to get the *whole* job done. After using QWP once or twice, with additions or adaptations that suit you in unique ways, you will find that the job of

writing under pressure no longer induces a mystifying and debilitating terror.

It took me about a year in college to come up with a reliable process for writing; in graduate school, I adapted the process to longer papers. It was only after I began teaching writing that I realized how few people had any system at all. With QWP, your writing improves because you use more and more of your best energy appropriately, instead of wasting time on the needless anxieties and fears, the dislocations and distortions, that result from a failure to plan time and space.

Developing the QWP Model for My Position Paper

I am a little less than a third of the way through my timetable for this project. I have plenty of ideas in my list of *because*-clauses to analyze for the most compelling blocks of material. Now, I'll order these blocks into a quick, balanced Beginning-Middle-End argument-outline (Chapter 4).

    (A) Preparing and Planning

        (1) Timetable related to structure: Beginning, Middle, End (Chapter 3).

        (2) Audience, level of generality, scope, scale (Chapter 1).

        (3) Writer's own investment in the project (Chapter 2).

                             (*total allotted time:* 10%)

    (B) Generating

        (4) Provisional thesis (Chapter 2).   (5%)

        (5) *because*-clauses (Chapter 2).   (15%)

CHAPTER

4

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Generating the Argument-Outline

Analyzing What to Keep

Everyone who writes has been told at one time or another to "sharpen the focus" of a paper, a report, or a memo. But that is the kind of advice that often creates more trouble than it resolves. How do you know what to put in and what to take out of a piece of writing, especially if you are writing under pressure?

Most people imagine an analogy between sharpening the image in a viewfinder and focusing their words on a page, but locating the center of gravity in an essay can be far more complicated. Writers do not sharpen as much as they _transform_ what they observe into their own perspective. A piece of writing re-creates the world as an hypothesis, whether stated or implied, with proposed evidence to support it. Orwell's essays are good examples of this re-creation. Although it's impossible to tell, from reading "A Hanging," or "Shooting an Elephant," whether they are "true" or "made up," Orwell states, in a straightforward way and in a strategic place in each essay, exactly what question he hopes to discover for us, and what answer he proposes. You might think of Tolstoy's philosophical "Epilogue" in _War and Peace_ in the same way, an explanation that makes explicit an underlying principle that has been dramatized in the book. We may not agree with what the writer says, but we can interact with it, weigh it, judge it, and see if we have a use for it.

If there is an analogy between making a photograph and writing, it is more appropriately Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment," the image

taken at the exact moment when it presents the photographer's discovery of meaning. But in writing, as in music, this presentation of meaning occurs not in a sentence or in a single word but in a structure built over time. The principle is to put in anything that can help *reveal* meaning, and take out everything that will obscure it. The writer sorts through his or her own ideas, feelings, and experiences to find the best relationship to the material: that point of view which elicits the most energy and precision, with the least wasted motion. The mystery of ''focus,'' is replaced by control over the process, and the writer's principle of selection corresponds to his or her own wisdom and passion.

With QWP, the writer sorts through the *because*-clauses to find evidence of where he or she stands, and of what matters most. These selected blocks of raw material become the center of the argument. The analysis of the *because*-clauses also yields the ''glue,'' the internal coherence that holds the argument together. You find it as you sift the rough blocks of *because*-clauses, discovering how opinions, experiences, and examples cluster around your thesis. You lay bare the underlying structure, the unifying principle for the whole paper.

I'll begin, then, by testing each of my twelve clauses, asking the same questions about them that any good reader who needed to decide about a writing competency exam might ask. I'll want to see whether each *because*-clause holds up as an idea; whether it elicits more information as I think about it; and whether it should have a place in the raw draft of my position paper.

Clause 1: *No one would want to read it.*

First: Test the *because*-clause as an idea.

''No one would want to read it.'' Why? (a) Because it's excruciatingly dull to read essays on set questions as if they were real pieces of writing; (b) because it's a dead-end process in which the student gets no useful feedback except a number, or a sheet with inscrutable checkmarks that teach nothing, and which the disembodied reader has filled in perfunctorily; (c) because most of all, no one who teaches writing wants to pretend that one exam question, on any given

afternoon, can possibly represent conclusive evidence about any student's writing. The idea of an essay invariably written at the worst possible time for both writer and reader (usually, in the midst of registration, or as classes begin) fulfilling such a function is an illusion maintained by those who don't participate, and a futile exercise for those who do.

Second: Test the implications of the *because*-clause.

"No one would want to read it"—that's undoubtedly true. People can be paid to do it, but then they have to be instructed in what to look for, and their own values and skills have to be integrated with or subordinated to those of the English staff. Or the younger or newer part-time members of the staff can be saddled with the job, which is grossly exploitative.

Third: Relevance of the *because*-clause to my position paper.

For my argument, this *because*-clause is a minor but solid point, to be inserted somewhere in the larger argument as a sentence or two.

Naturally, writing out this analysis took a good deal longer than thinking it through. For a longer paper, with a timetable that allows for it, writing out these analyses will provide you with some of the language that finds its way into your final draft. But with a shorter schedule, you can simply make notes next to each clause, or use a tape recorder. In either case, you are gathering essential ingredients for the rest of the process: ideas, language, and the glue that holds your argument together.

As you become experienced with QWP, you will find you can combine some analysis *with* the first spontaneous listing of your clauses. But to begin, you should allow that initial generating process to go on freely, until you have three times as many *because*-clauses as you need. Then analyze, amplify, and draw connections. Harvesting the *because*-clauses, questioning their assumptions, implications, and relevance, yields blocks and sentences and hints of new ideas for the public version of your private argument.

Clause 2: *Who would define "competency"?*

A philosophical question if taken seriously, but it probably won't be, in view of the narrow-minded pomposity of some academics and the near exhaustion of others. (If we all faced the fact that anyone can and should get proofreading help from a friend or teacher or editor—as professional writers do—or from a machine, the whole question of competency would be seen in a clearer light: not "mechanics," but *meaning* plus proofreading.) What defines "competency" for a person who struggles to write neat, bland essays compared to someone who can think, and who says a good deal in a powerful way, but doesn't know some of the conventions of punctuation? Most college students have elements of both extremes, anyway; and this debate among English teachers is endless, from generation to generation. Having seen that pendulum swing back and forth, I know it won't be one that interests me for this paper, because it leads to dead ends.

Clause 3: *What about the students who don't pass?*
Clause 4: *Who would teach them and where would we get the money to pay these teachers?*

Time and money questions: do we give failing students course after course, in addition to their full load? Or force them to add time to their four years of college until they pass an exam? When would we give such an exam—during their junior year? Do writing skills need *re*-testing in senior year? How would we test 250 seniors, and what would we do with those who failed? We would be valuing the test above teaching and learning. Who would be hired to teach chronic failers? What would this continual focus on failure mean to students and teachers? Sections full of failing students *have* ensured jobs for English teachers at the nearby state college, but no one I've met teaches them with any passion or interest. Besides, at Shakespeare College of the Communicable Arts, we could never support it financially. (This is a little more interesting as an issue, but again, not one for which I want to make room at the center of my essay.)

Clause 5: *What would it mean for the teaching of writing in general?*

Ah, now that's a little more like it. At this point, my teaching experience, in all kinds of settings, with or against all kinds of teaching policies, pushes toward the center of the stage. I've learned that exams invariably become ends in themselves. That would be a disaster for writing—and I see writing as a personal accomplishment, a lifelong skill. Moreover, our students need to be less afraid of writing, not intimidated by an exam, and the same holds true for teachers. With something as difficult as writing well, everyone looks for an easy way out. A competency exam would be a destructive illusion, a way of avoiding the real task: to help people tell each other what is really on their minds. (Definitely hold on to this.)

Clause 6: *Impact on younger teachers.*

This is related to clause 5 but adds the pressure of promotion to the writing teacher's job, which accentuates the wrong things: if you, the teacher, train students to pass a competency exam, you will have done your job. If you fail at that, you will be judged a failure as a teacher. Forget about meeting students at their present level, and helping them to discover and tell what they mean. Get them through the exam. We don't care what happens afterward. But the hitch here, as always, is that passing or failing an exam may have almost nothing to do with the lifelong need to adapt one's capacity to write to a variety of demands and situations.

But . . . here's the discovery of something really important to me, worth struggling to write about: how do you show someone who knows little about the possibilities for learning and teaching writing that an exam is exactly the wrong emphasis to give to a course? My students, even those who start by not being able to write a sentence in an hour, could pass an exam at the end of the term if it were a genuine task (a step in their development toward independent writing with imagination and skill), and if this developing skill were reenforced elsewhere in their school life. But that would also involve educating teachers who give students no feedback on their papers, or who correct only typos and

punctuation. The emphasis, instead, must be on giving people the self-confidence to share, to believe in an audience despite their experiences in school that militate against such confidence. A competency exam works against all of those goals. (This may be the heart of my paper, the place where my own feelings, experiences, and ideas ignite the act of *writing* it. Come back to this!)

Suddenly, half-way through reviewing my list of *because*-clauses, I have a vision of how this position paper can satisfy the needs of the reader *and* the writer. I see that clause 7 is related to this discovery as well: of course a competency exam will weaken the image of the English department in relation to the rest of the faculty. We will be seen as a "remedial" department, which is what most academics think anyway ("you writing teachers have the toughest job in the college, why can't you teach those illiterates how to spell?").

So, too, with clause 8. The competency exam is really not for the student or for the English department; it is for the comfort of people who really know nothing about the teaching and learning of writing, but who imagine it as a testable skill that can be measured in increments on a false analogy with computer literacy or statistics. These people are probably skeptical about what students have to "say" anyway.

Clauses 9 and 10 directly address this point, too: what I consider necessary in the teaching of writing is actually *undercut* by the competency exam. They can go right into the middle section of my essay, in their present wording. Clause 11 adds the point that more writing should be required of *everyone,* while clause 12 explains why, and goes on to the more general point about the connection between writing, educational goals, and society, reflecting our larger responsibilities as teachers of writing and as educators. Certainly, part of the twelfth clause will find its way into the conclusion of my paper.

Looking through my original list, then, has yielded lots of information about my essay; not only a sense of the whole design, but the center of the argument, and the feelings, the anger, the ideals, the energy I can bring to a question that at first seemed dreary and futile. I know, too, that I'll be able to use some of the language of the original clauses. This analysis might take about fifteen or twenty minutes, with a few notes

sketched on the page as you go along. But you will feel confident that, writing under pressure, you can make your paper, memo, or report clear and powerful.

Discovering What's Left Out

Now I have a good opportunity to make a crucial discovery: what have I left out of my argument that needs to be in it? I have the major argument of my essay, a sense of the overall design, and some usable language, but I still have the nagging feeling that I can't quite get at the heart of the question of a competency exam. I need to look at the "other side" before I make my outline, not only for perspective, but because if I do so now, I'll have time to integrate whatever I discover. This is much more efficient than rearranging, as any writer knows who has discovered a useful or crucial point too late in the writing process.

What would the little world of Shakespeare College of the Communicable Arts be like *with* a competency exam? Aside from the practical problems of administering a test, and forgetting for the moment any philosophical debate about its wisdom, there are, after all, precedents in other areas, such as computer science and swimming. The swimming test is something everyone who graduates from SCCA must pass: up and back the length of the pool. Writing is every bit as important in the modern world as computer skills, although probably not as important as swimming. Dedicated teachers of writing should jump at the chance to reenforce what they do by requiring that students pass a test. Besides, wouldn't it raise the level of literacy throughout the college, and raise the reputation of Shakespeare College at the same time? Why don't more schools, especially the so-called "elite" schools, have a competency exam? We could be in the forefront. Harvard would follow us! A competency exam would put old Shakespeare on the map. We would be known as the school that demanded and got a minimal standard of writing from its students.

I'm not convinced by making a case for the other side, but I am disturbed. Why shouldn't we *try* it? What harm would it do?

But writing is not like swimming or computer skills. For one thing, it

is not a life and death matter; people get along without writing easily and well, and society trundles along with a mostly mute citizenry while still managing to put a man on the moon and lower interest rates. Moreover, writing does not lend itself easily to incremental learning; and there isn't any program tailored specifically to the kind of learning writing *does* require. Swimming saves lives; computers get bills out faster. Writing doesn't have an easily achieved, demonstrable payoff. It's not surprising, then, that people are interested in cutting losses: if you can't write, at least learn how to spell. And even that futile goal is unrealizable. The truth is, you can't *make* people write well unless you provide a supportive learning environment over time. No exam has ever created that. Fear, panic, and anxiety do not create a good writer; instead, they discourage risk, and prevent people from tapping their deepest resources and sharing them with readers.

The real problem with a competency exam is that it would work *against* the goal of competent writing, intimidating both students and teachers, rather than invigorating the learning process. A self-paced course in statistics, with good tutors available, is a workable endeavor. But writing is an unfolding process in which practice is linked to the discovery of meaning, and the motivation to reach an audience. Students will not learn to find their own voice for an exam. Teachers will not support students in attempting new, risky kinds of thinking and writing if they are to be judged on how well their students perform on an exam. Teaching people to swim once up and back the length of the pool is a marvelous goal; and students will find computer skills useful in their work lives, and in their personal lives. But writing requires nurturing, patience, honesty, and wisdom. Some people will not write clearly or powerfully without a great deal of help and support. A competency exam completely misses the goal for teaching writing, and will consume everyone's best energies at a time when resources are dangerously scarce. *The exam undercuts the very goal it is intended to achieve.*

Adding an *Although*-clause to the Thesis

Now I feel better. That was the insight, the piece of structure that was missing from my argument, showing that the appeal of the competency

exam (bringing everyone up to a standard writing level) is not only illusory but self-defeating. If I incorporate this insight into my thesis:

> *Although* the idea of a writing competency exam is appealing on the surface as a way of strengthening a basic skill, such an exam would be self-defeating because . . .

then there are two benefits for my paper. First, I'll have the opportunity to refute the major argument for such an exam. Second, in doing so, I gain a structural benefit as well, linking my opening thesis statement to my conclusion, where I'll suggest a better way to strengthen students' writing skills while urging writing teachers and others across the curriculum to help. By taking a look at the "other side," I have clarified my own view, and forced my conclusion on the whole question out into the open. (When we integrate the QWP system in Chapter 8, it will make sense to include an *although*-clause in the original provisional thesis.)

Although it has taken some thirty pages to explain each of the QWP decisions so far, I actually have used less than half the time allotted for the whole project in my timetable. Much of what I have written here for the reader takes place in the conscious writer's mind: assessing the relationship between writer and reader; devising a thesis; and analyzing possible material for the raw draft. Actual *writing* time and energy is devoted to what matters most: the spontaneous *because*-clauses that provide the material, the language, the explanations, and the passion for the whole project. Now I can weave ideas I have selected from my *because*-clauses into the main strands of thought by combining, connecting, and rearranging them into the persuasive order of a quick argument-outline.

The Argument-Outline

English teachers have always been fond of outlines, but when people write history papers, or memos, or reports, they rarely use them. One of the lessons I remember most vividly from grammar school is Miss Gaffney's fourth-grade outline lesson, demonstrated at the board and tested over and over again. This outline, in increasingly meticulous

versions, was the mysterious treasure map to success that term, demarcated by Roman numerals, large and small letters with prime marks and sometimes even double-primes. Some of our outlines were beautiful; others were chaotic disasters. Nobody mentioned at the time, least of all Miss Gaffney, that outlines could help us order our thoughts. Instead, we took quizzes on what kind of thought went where: did a phrase including a noun and an adjective get a prime or a double-prime? When did a generalization merit a capital letter? There was much anguish about these matters, although a few people seemed to thrive on them. Still, I wish someone had linked those exercises with the act of *writing,* because it took years of frustrating, disappointing work before I understood the usefulness of thorough planning, and years more before I taught myself how to speed up the writing process by using, among other things, a good outline.

The QWP argument-outline is neither theoretical nor abstract. It is a quick Beginning-Middle-End outline that will help you create the best order for the chunks of material you've selected in analyzing the *because*-clauses. Almost all rhetoric books and writer's handbooks spend at least some time listing possible patterns of organization. English courses spend weeks on such exercises: compare and contrast; classification; definition. As a writing teacher, I would be happy to know that everyone understood the characteristics of deductive and inductive thinking and had developed some facility for combining the two, as Orwell does in many of his essays. But patterns and outlining exercises can become ends in themselves, without reference to what the writer needs to discover and then tell the reader. Whatever pattern you might choose, however complex the comparisons or the underlying metaphor, your reader will still expect and seek a beginning, middle, and end, so it's safe and efficient to begin with that sense of structure.

After analyzing the *because*-clauses to select those blocks of material I want to include in my raw draft, I see that the first several clauses point out problems in giving a competency exam. The next few have to do with the negative effects such an exam will have on students, teachers, and the college environment. Then there are blocks of material that express my own feelings and ideas about specific and general alternatives. Almost always, there is this inherent order in the material.

Writers, like sculptors, work to bring the figure out of the stone. First, I can group my selected material under these three main ideas: problems, negative effects, and my own alternatives. Next, I can arrange the three groups in the most persuasive order. I'll put the other side first, setting up the tension to counter it with my own views. If it comes first in the middle section, I'll have the rest of my paper for what *I* want the reader to think about.

Immediately after the other side, I'll want to state my most pragmatic arguments against the exam. These are the least open to interpretation, and may appeal to the reader's common sense. If I remind the reader that such an exam would be too expensive, too inefficient to administer, and labor intensive, my more complicated arguments might not even be necessary.

Next I want to explain the more general idea of how such an exam would demoralize not only students and teachers, but also the environment for learning at the college. Once that is established, I'll combine the problems of giving the exam with the difficulties caused by the exam itself to explain how an exam will not ensure competency. Finally, I'll end the middle section of my paper with my discovery that the exam is self-defeating and destructive to the *goal* of competency. This idea, in turn, provides a natural transition to the conclusion, where I'll recommend alternatives.

With the order of the middle section roughed out, I can rearrange the several clauses or sentences of the thesis to fit it, and this now becomes a full-fledged introduction. The conclusion will provide the reader with my alternatives, and then go one step beyond anything I've said so far to a new perspective on the subject. This, too, will be reflected in a final adaptation of my original thesis.

The quick argument-outline balances material in the best order. Once you're satisfied with it, you can move on to block out and then cut the raw draft.

A Quick [Annotated] Argument-Outline

(I) BEGINNING [The thesis, condensing the selected, ordered *because*-clauses into the phrases and sentences of a full-fledged intro-

duction, including the other side—the *although*-clause—and the broader perspective of the conclusion.]

> Although the idea of a writing competency exam is appealing on the surface as a way of strengthening a basic skill (*see below*, IIA1), such an exam would be self-defeating and destructive (IIB4). It is expensive, inefficient to administer, and demoralizing for both students and faculty (IIB1). It would destroy the English department's effectiveness in helping all students to learn (IIB2), and will not ensure competency in writing, a skill that cannot be legislated for a wide spectrum of our students in a set period of time, or through programmable steps (IIB3). Such a goal can only be accomplished by a creative, flexible, highly motivated teaching staff making instruction as individualized as possible toward the goal of writing as a lifelong skill (IIIA) and, in a broader perspective, as a citizen's advantage in a democratic society (IIIB).

(II) MIDDLE [Main points of my argument, structured in a balanced order of importance, beginning with a look at the other side and leading toward my most important discovery which, through a transition, opens out to a broader perspective at the END.]

   (A) Arguments *for* the competency exam (the other side)

      (1) [Introduced by the appropriate phrase in the thesis.] "*Although* the idea of a writing competency exam is appealing on the surface as a way of strengthening a basic skill. . . ." (use *because*-clause 10)

   (B) Arguments *against* the competency exam (transition phrases taken directly from the thesis statement to introduce separate, interrelated points)

      (1) *Practical problems in giving the exam:* would be expensive and inefficient to administer (use analysis of *because*-clauses 1, 3, and 4)

      (2) *General negative effects:* demoralizing for both students and faculty (use analyses of clauses 5 and 6)

      (3) *Specific negative effects:* would destroy the English department's effectiveness in helping all students to learn (use clauses 6, 7, 8, and analyses)

(4) *Summarizing issue:* would not ensure "competency" in writing, a skill that cannot be legislated (use analysis of clause 2)

(5) *Discovery and transition:* would be self-defeating, and destructive (use clause 8 and analysis, and new writing from the analysis of the other side)

(III) END [Concludes the argument by recommending alternatives and a broader perspective.]

(A) Summary and critique

(1) Exams become ends in themselves (clause 5 analysis)

(2) But writing is a lifelong skill (clause 12 and analysis)

(B) Recommendation and new perspective

(1) *Specific alternative:* a new writing requirement, a new commitment among writing teachers (clause 6 analysis; clause 12 and analysis)

(2) *Larger perspective:* the new goal of empowering people to have their say beyond the college walls, throughout their lives as members of society (clause 12 and analysis)

So far, I've used about half my allotted time to arrive at a solid outline correlating the language of my thesis with the key points supporting it, and a broader perspective arising from it. Now I can fill out the raw draft on the framework of the argument-outline. The time for generating material is over; the time for *producing* has begun.

The Developing QWP Model

(A) Preparing and Planning

(1) Timetable related to structure: Beginning, Middle, End (Chapter 3).

(2) Audience, level of generality, scope, scale (Chapter 1).

(3) Writer's own investment in the project (Chapter 2).

(total allotted time: 10%)

(B) Generating
    (4) Provisional thesis (Chapter 2). (5%)
    (5) *because*-clauses (Chapter 2). (15%)
    (6) Analysis of *because*-clauses (Chapter 4).
        Provisional thesis revised to include *although*-clause
        (''other side'') (Chapter 4). (10%)
    (7) Ordered argument-outline (Chapter 4).
        Thesis revised into full-fledged introduction to reflect
        order of ideas in argument-outline (Chapter 4). (10%)
                  (*total allotted time:* 50%)

5

Producing the Raw Draft

Overcoming the Anxiety of Revising

Most of us are trained from our first exercises in school to think of revising as a painful, unrewarding act, changing a word or two here or there without actually improving our writing. We don't really know what to do. Later on, we learn to cut and perhaps to rearrange a few blocks of writing, but often we do this with a draft that is already fragmented, filled with remnants of discarded thoughts and passages that need *more* rather than less explanation for a reader. Writing becomes the easier part of the process, and *revising* a series of unpredictable, disjointed acts that can spoil the whole thing. People often feel they have squeezed the life out of the writing in revising it, or that they can't change one part because then they would have to rewrite the rest. No wonder, then, that some people settle for eliminating passive voice or unnecessary commas from their rough drafts; there isn't time, energy, or confidence to do more. But revising should be as exciting as composing a draft. We may not be as intrepid as Dylan Thomas, who delighted in ''improving'' Shakespeare in his public readings, but we should anticipate some refreshing surprises as we *improve* an essay or memo. The parts of your raw draft are interdependent; they influence each other, and have a relationship to the whole design that gives revising the sculptor's sense of freeing the figure from the stone. In the context of the raw draft, some pieces of the argument will seem too fragmentary, or too isolated; others will call for greater emphasis or illustration. Eliminating the fragmentary pieces scales the draft down to size and provides internal coherence. The improvements for unity on your roughly final draft filter and shift material organically, as would

occur naturally over a longer period of maturation. QWP simply speeds up the process by harnessing the pressures of time, space, and audience.

Freeing the Figure from the Stone: An Overview

If I cut and paste, or move blocks on the screen to run together all the selected, unedited material in the order of my quick argument-outline, I have before me the raw draft of my position paper, written under pressure.

This raw draft will be about twice as long as the final product needs to be. Placing the blocks in sequence reveals gaps, shows where connections need to be made, and inspires good examples. I have plenty of room for cutting what isn't absolutely essential, and then polishing the roughly final draft. You needn't be rigid or timid about what to keep or what to let go. Once you know you have more than enough good material, you regain the excitement of discovery and presentation even in the revising process. Now you can be as hard-nosed and creative an editor as you like. Since QWP ensures all along that you select the best of the best material, you're free now to chop away digressions, repetitions, remnants of discarded thoughts, and inconsistencies in content and tone.

You can read the cut raw draft aloud to gain a measure of detachment and objectivity. Try reading into a tape recorder and then listening as if you were hearing your words for the first time. Have someone else read the draft back to you; you can hear flat places, lost connections, undeveloped meanings, and inappropriate emphases. Although a reader's responses at this point can tell you a lot about how the piece of writing works, give some thought to the kind of feedback you need. Too often, people close to a writer either try to ''soften the blow,'' holding back comments that might be really useful in revising, or attempt to protect the writer from imagined criticism by giving stifling or intimidating advice. What you need most is someone who will read over your words with a fresh eye, and simply tell you how they sound, what they mean—without either protecting or disciplining you. For this ''second reading,'' you need feedback, not misguided therapy.

As the roughly final draft becomes the final product (see Chapter 6), new writing adds transitions and examples, and reenforces overall unity in tone and content. But this project, which you planned from start to finish so you would be sure to complete it on time, reaches an end in the polished final draft, the clearest, most honest, most powerful piece of writing you could manage under the circumstances. The last look at the writing, especially if someone else types it for you, should be a flawless proofreading, to ensure that your reader is not distracted from the power of your meaning and the clarity of your style. Many people are not good proofreaders of their own work (even if they are experts at helping others); software programs can do some of it, or you may have a colleague or teacher who will help. But no matter how proficient you are at the process of writing well under pressure, the product must be perfect.

It's important to distinguish between revising and proofreading. Once you've expended your best energies on a piece of writing under pressure, a proofreader's reservations about content or style will probably hurt more than help. At the end of a project, you need someone to perform the simple, friendly act of reading through the final draft for any words left out, word processing idiosyncrasies, or chronic misspellings. By then, your timetable has expired (see Chapter 7). Turning in your paper or memo is the immediate goal. It is also an act of liberation, the one way you can integrate what you've learned about your writing skills on this project and free yourself for the next one.

Cutting the Raw Draft Down to Size

My raw draft (on right-hand pages 47–61) is composed of the fourteen unedited blocks of material I ordered in my argument-outline. Block (A) is the introduction developed from the provisional thesis. Blocks (B) through (O) are introduced through simple transitions taken from either the introduction, or the argument-outline. I include working headings in the text of the raw draft (''Suppose that . . .'' or ''But . . .'') to remind myself of the goal of each section as I cut the draft down to size.

On the corresponding left-hand facing pages are the explanations for

keeping, moving, or deleting passages. (Boxed passages with diagonal slashes in the raw draft text are to be deleted; passages to be kept for the roughly final draft are bracketed in the left-hand margin.) I also note questions that need resolving, and places where I will want to *add* new material in the roughly final draft.

Freedom in cutting the raw draft arises from having more than enough usable material. Once you experience the fun and mastery of revising with confidence, you will automatically clarify and tighten your editing skills. You will also feel differently about *beginning* a writing project. You will know beforehand that improving the draft is as creative as writing it, and this will allow you to begin the whole process with less hesitancy, less anxiety, and more energy.
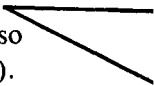
Commentary on the First Cuts
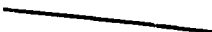
As the author of this position paper I would not have needed, of course, to write out my explanations for the changes in the raw draft. But I wanted to demonstrate the fun of freely cutting a raw draft when you know you have more than enough good material. Without the usual dread and anxiety, you can see your own thinking and writing more clearly, and you are better able to judge what will help or hinder coherence. This leaves more energy for shaping a powerful product for the reader.

What's left, then, is a draft on the screen or in cut-and-paste form, that is now roughly scaled to size, and basically coherent: most of what needs to be there is in; almost all of what should come out is out. Some of the deletions from the raw draft in this first round of cuts were fragments of larger issues, or allusions to broader arguments that would demand much more explanation to make sense to the reader. I deleted a few general passages stating opposing views because they were so far removed from the *immediate* issue that refuting them would be a waste of time and space. Other passages were in the wrong tone for the intended audience. Finally, there were the inevitable passages written for myself as part of the composing process but not for a reader, and these were deleted as well.

The Writer's Rationale for the First Cuts

(1) KEEP opening paragraph—but CUT to correspond with the selected material in the rest of the raw draft.

(2) CUT—these points are too abstract and require too much groundwork to explain in so short a paper (I'm not going *that* far, am I?).

(3) KEEP—I can use the challenge in this statement to engage the reader.

(4) CUT—don't need these anecdotal examples.

(5) KEEP—this sets up the false analogy I'm going to knock down (but turn the question about certification into a rhetorical one). QUESTION: how to show the goal of a "cover letter" isn't *enough?*

First Cuts on the Raw Draft Text

(A) Although the idea of a writing competency exam is
appealing on the surface as a way of strengthening a basic
skill, such an exam would be self-defeating and destructive.
It is expensive, inefficient to administer, and demoralizing
for both students and faculty. It would destroy the English
department's effectiveness in helping all students to learn,
and cannot ensure competency in writing, a skill that cannot
be legislated for a wide spectrum of students in a set period
of time, or through programmable steps. Such a goal can only
be accomplished by a creative, flexible, highly motivated
teaching staff making instruction as individualized as
possible toward the goal of writing as a lifelong skill
and, in a broader perspective, as a citizen's advantage in a
democratic society.

SUPPOSE THAT...

Arguments for competency exam (the "other side")

(B) Actually, the competency idea is a tantalizing one.
Wouldn't it be nice to be able to draw a line and say: "Yes,
Robert writes well enough to get our degree; Judy can't yet,
and needs another semester; Tim may need to take writing each
semester until he graduates, and even then..."? Usually, such
exams are meant to "certify" that students have been trained
in some way, the way we might certify that a student can run
a computer program. What should we certify in writing? That
a student can write an engaging cover letter, or a letter to
the editor of the hometown newspaper? Or a paper free of
mechanical errors that leaves the teacher "no work to do"?

47

(6) CUT—I'm only going to have room to allude ⎯⎯⎯
to the computer analogy later.

(7) KEEP—might provide a transition to my own ⎯⎯⎯
argument.

(8) CUT—what I say here might be so, but it's ⎯⎯⎯
too far afield for this paper. Besides, its
sarcastic tone is inappropriate in a position
paper for the dean.

(9) KEEP—each states an important practical ⎯⎯⎯
objection in a simple, straightforward way.

(10) CUT—these objections need more explanation ⎯⎯⎯
than I can give in so short a paper, and
without fuller explanation, they *seem* less
troublesome than they really are. I would
rather not cut this, but pressures of time and
space force my hand.

(C) There are, after all, pre edents in other areas, such as computer science and the wimming test. The swimming test is something everyone who g aduates from SCCA must pass: up and back the length of the p ol. Surely we should do the same for writing. Writing after all, is every bit as important in the modern world as computer skills....Dedicated teachers of writing should jump at the chance to reenforce what they do by requiring that students pass a test. Besides, wouldn't it raise the lev of literacy throughout the college, and raise the reputa ion of Shakespeare College?...We could be in the fo efront. Harvard would follow us! A competency exam w uld put old Shakespeare on the map. We would be known as he school that demanded and got a minimal standard of wr'ting from its students.

BUT...

Arguments against the competency exam

Practical problems in giving the exam: would be expensive and inefficient to administer.

(D) But who would teach them...and where would we get the money to pay these teachers?

(E) No one would want to read it... People can be paid to do it, but then they have to be ins ructed in what to look for, and their own values and skills ave to be integrated with or subordinated to those of th English staff. Or the younger or newer part-time members of the staff can be saddled with the job, which is g ssly exploitative.

(F) And what about the students who don't pass? Time and money questions: do we give failing students course after

49

(11) KEEP—these are hard questions to ignore, so they're good for my argument.

(12) CUT—seems *too* specific here. Moreover, stated simply as questions, without adequate explanation, they lend themselves to simple-minded answers like "Oh sure, we could do that."

(13) KEEP—ah, a good, focusing phrase for the reader to consider.

(14) CUT—don't need; will *seem* an irrelevant example to someone not in the field.

(15) KEEP—within the politics of the school this all pretty much counts, but CUT unsupportable generalization (and old grudge).

(16) KEEP—points to the shortsighted pragmatism of some administrators and teachers on so important an issue.

course, in addition to their full load? Or force them to add time to their four years of college until they pass an exam? When would we give such an exam--during their junior year? Do writing skills need re-testing in senior year? How would we test 250 seniors, and what would we do with those who failed? We would be valuing the test above teaching and learning.

Generally demoralizing for both students and faculty.

(G) Who would be hired to teach chronic failers? What would this continual focus on failure mean to students and teachers? Sections full of failing students have ensured jobs for English teachers at the nearby state college, but no one I've met teaches them with any passion or interest. Besides, at Shakespeare College of the Communicable Arts, we could never support it financially.

Specifically, it would destroy the English department's effectiveness in helping all students to learn.

(H) Of course a competency exam will weaken the image of the English faculty. We will be seen as a "remedial" department, which is what most academics think anyway. And an exam excuses other faculty from doing their part of the job of teaching writing across the curriculum.

(I) Impact on younger teachers...accentuating the wrong things: if you, the teacher, train students to pass the competency exam, you will have done your job. If you fail at that you will be judged a failure as a teacher. Forget about meeting the students at their level, and helping them to discover and tell what they mean. Get them through the exam.

(17) MOVE to (20)?—could be the conclusion to
the several points about the difficulties in the ————
concept of a "test" for writing competency,
because it transfers attention from the student
in school to the citizen in society.

(18) KEEP—more valuable questions for my side, ————
leading to the *real* situation in teaching
writing, as I see it.

(19) CUT—don't need (stated in a less ————
threatening—and less self-righteous—way
elsewhere).

We don't care what happens afterward. The hitch here, as
always, is that passing or failing an exam may have almost
nothing to do with the lifelong need to adapt one's capacity
to write to a variety of demands and situations... My
students, even those who start by not being able to write a
sentence in an hour, could pass an exam at the end of the
term if it were a genuine task, a step in their development
toward independent writing, with imagination and skill....The
emphasis, instead, must be on giving people the self-
confidence to share, to believe in an audience despite their
experiences in school that militate against all of those
goals.

<div align="center">THUS...</div>

Summarizing issue: Will not ensure competency in
writing, a skill that cannot be legislated for a wide
spectrum of our students in a set period of time, or through
programmable steps.

(J) Who would define "competency"? A philosophical
question if taken seriously, but i probably won't be, in
view of the narrow-minded pomposi y of some academics and the
near exhaustion of others. (If e all faced the fact that
anyone can and should get proo reading help from a friend or
teacher or editor as profess' nal writers do, or from a
machine, the whole question of "competency" would be seen in
a clearer light: not "mec nics," but meaning plus
proofreading.) What defines "competency" for a person who
struggles to write neat, bland essays compared to someone who
can think, and who says a good deal in a powerful way,

(20) MOVE passage from (17) here?

(21) KEEP—the basic premise of my argument as
I discovered it in the process of analyzing the
because-clauses and the other side.

(22) CUT—some of this is offensive, some of this
is unnecessary, and all of it will seem off the
track without further elaboration.

(23) CUT—certainly the wrong tone for a dean's
request for a position paper.

(24) CUT—basically repetitive.

but doesn't know some conventions of punctuation? Most college students have aspects of both these extremes, anyway.

MOREOVER...

Discovery and transition: Such an exam would be self-defeating and destructive.

(K) What function would the exam serve--what is it really for? To give some people on the faculty or in the administration peace of mind because so many people don't write well? It's a national concern after all. How can you ensure that all students will write well, judged by a single essay, or even a series of essays? You might do this with math, or computer competency, or even with a writing inventory to place people in the right level of writing class (if you had the different offerings in the curriculum), but what is our goal here as teachers of writing?

(L) The competency exam is really not for the student or for the English department; it is for the comfort of people who really know nothing about the teaching and learning of writing, but who imagine it as a testable skill that can be measured in increments on a false analogy with computer literacy or statistics. These people are probably skeptical about what students have to "say" anyway.

(M) Why shouldn't we try a competency exam? What harm would it do? Writing isn't like swimming or computer skills. For one thing, it is not a life and death matter; and it does not lend itself easily to incremental learning. Teaching with only an exam in mind would destroy any possibility of creative teaching as soon as teachers realized, once again,

55

(25) KEEP—as is: holds together as the underlying
     thrust of my argument, and embodies some
     of my deepest feelings on the subject.

that you can't _make_ people write competently unless you provide a good, open, supportive learning environment. Fear, panic, and anxiety do not create a good writer. Instead, they discourage risk and prevent people from tapping their deepest resources and then sharing them with readers. The real problem with a competency exam is that it would not accomplish the goal of competent writing and, in fact, would work against it, intimidating both students and teachers, rather than encouraging the learning process. A self-paced course in statistics with good tutors available is a workable endeavor. But writing is an unfolding process in which practice must be linked with meaning, motivation, and the belief in an audience. Students will not learn to find their own voice for an exam; teachers will not support students in attempting risky and new kinds of thinking and writing if they are to be judged on how well their students perform on an exam. Teaching people to swim once up and back the length of the pool is a marvelous goal; students will find computer skills useful in their work lives and even their personal lives. But writing requires nurturing, patience, honesty and wisdom....A competency exam completely misses the goal for teaching writing, and will consume everyone's energies at a time when resources are dangerously scarce. The exam undercuts the goal it is intended to achieve.

THUS...

Summary and critique: Exams generally become ends in themselves.

57

(26) CUT—has the passion I need to draw the
reader's attention to my conclusion, but I've
said all this elsewhere.

(27) KEEP—my alternative, clearly stated, to
balance my criticism of the competency exam.

(28) CUT—offensive, the wrong tone for the
intended audience (this passage really was
written for *me,* not for a "public" audience).

(N) It would be a disaster for wr' ing...which I see as a personal accomplishment, a lifelo skill. Moreover, our students need to be less afraid o writing, not intimidated by an exam, and the same holds rue for teachers. With something as difficult as wr ting well, everyone looks for an easy way out. A competenc exam would be a destructive illusion, a way of avo' ing the real task: to help people tell each other what is really on their minds.

INSTEAD...

Recommendation and new perspective: specific alternative.

A new writing requirement, a new commitment among writing teachers.

(O) A year-long, required writing course for everyone. A writing staff charged not only with the theoretical (and now machine-correctable) mechanics of writing, but with the task of helping students have their say, not only in our courses, but throughout their lives as citizens of a society. If we don't do this, we will be responsible fo permitting the vacuum that is filled not by real, ha thinking and explanation but, instead, by the in essant yapping of advertisers and photogenic newsca ters who smile about weather, drought, starvation, rades, and invasions as if the words they speak have no ore meaning than the drone of a refrigerator, and the peop e of whom they speak no more substance than objects w thout feeling.

59

(29) ADD—example of the summer writing project
at Bard College that impressed me so much as
a potential solution to the problem of writing
competency . . . a perfect lead-in to my
conclusion.

(30) ADD—summary and crystallization: "no
competency from an exam if the exam
enforces incompetent teaching."

FURTHERMORE...

Larger perspective: the new goal of empowering people to have their say beyond the college walls throughout their lives as members of society.

Once freed of inappropriate, inconsistent, or irrelevant material, a cut raw draft clearly reveals what is *missing*. This is usually the moment when you think of your best examples. At the end of my raw draft, it was obvious that I needed a larger perspective for the reader, some example that would illustrate in a concrete way many of the issues I had raised so far: money, time, academic goals, ideals. I needed something to help convince the reader of the *reality* of improving writing instead of the illusion fostered by the advocates of a competency exam. Thinking about what other schools have done, I realized that the example of the Bard College writing project was exactly what I needed. I can develop that example in my roughly final draft. Moreover, thinking about that summer writing program at Bard, where the best teachers of writing were chosen to work with all incoming freshmen, I realized that although an exam won't inspire competency among students, it *will* permit incompetent teaching. I'll want to work that simple statement into the *conclusion* of my roughly final draft, too.

The concentration and freedom of these first cuts, then, gave me the opportunity to trim away the fat, emphasize the coherence of my argument, and to see what was still needed. All along, I have been selecting the best material, knowing I'll have more than enough, and that I am working within a system that will enable me to get the *whole* job done well, on time. As I removed from the raw draft what did not fit, settled on what *did,* and discovered what was missing, the argument crystallized for me organically. In my roughly final draft I want to ensure that the reader will similarly experience the organic unfolding of meaning.

When and How to Use Feedback

It is almost always worthwhile to get the perspective on your paper that only another reader can provide, but if you write under pressure, waiting for or wading through a reader's comments may seem impractical and risky.

Talking through a topic as you begin a writing project can be the most useful feedback of all. You needn't find an expert in the field, only

someone who can ask good questions: Why are you interested in this topic? What are you really hoping to say? What do you think you will conclude? Such questions inspire you to clarify your own intentions, and it's likely that if you record the talk-through, some of your answers will find their way into the draft of your paper, article, or memo.

You can also make direct use of feedback before you polish the roughly final draft into the final product. When writing under pressure, you concentrate on finding out what you really want to say: integrating ideas, feelings, experiences, and learning into a clear, powerful argument for the reader; and finally, improving your capacity to write well. Feedback is most useful if it is related to these three issues. The timetable for writing under pressure will not accommodate (and your increasing experience as a writer will not tolerate) the comments of people who insist that you revise your writing in their image: either the way they think about a question, or the way they approach an audience.

In most cases, you will be able to include feedback in your timetable for completing the project. The benefits of feedback make the allocation of time well worth it. A few minutes of discussion about your cut draft can save you untold misery in trying to crystallize an argument or demonstrate its coherence to a reader. With my position paper, due at nine in the morning in the dean's office, I'm going to have to trust my experience with the issue and the QWP sequence of conscious decisions that have led me to the carefully selected material of my roughly final draft. But I know from thirty years of writing experience that I will need someone to give the final draft a thorough proofreading before I print it out for the dean.
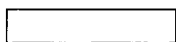
Producing the Roughly Final Draft

Unifying the Cut Draft

Rough cutting the raw draft is an absorbing activity commanding the largest portion of the QWP timetable. Now, a second reading will reveal the gaps left by cutting repetitious, tangential, undeveloped, and inconsistent material, and combining related points. You will discover the need for transitions, a good example to crystallize an idea, and new material to reenforce the internal coherence of your argument. This second reading, especially with the constructive feedback of an objective reader, gives you the opportunity to develop a broader perspective for the conclusion, and then to transform your thesis into the complete introduction. You establish the unity of your paper, memo, or report. Finally, you attend to the vitality of the language, integrating style and argument on the word, sentence, and paragraph levels.

The roughly final draft (on the following right-hand pages) has only a little more material than I'll need for my position paper for the dean. There is still some room to cut, combine, and add new material, as in passages (A) through (J) on the left-hand facing pages that follow. But the goal is to use all the remaining time, except what you have reserved for proofreading, to unify the clearest, most powerful product.

Improving the Roughly Final Draft

Now, almost all the familiar, often frantic work of revising is completed. With QWP, it has been part of a developing process, selecting

what to keep and what to leave out, to engage the reader in the unfolding structure and meaning of your argument. Cutting the raw draft down to size to make it coherent and consistent, and then unifying the roughly final draft, is intensely absorbing, bringing out the passion and personality of your thoughts and words. In this way, QWP makes a necessity of a luxury most writers under pressure cannot afford: having done the hard work of thinking through, setting out, and analyzing your argument, you become your own sympathetic, totally committed editor, bringing fresh energy to the task of improving words, sentences, paragraphs, transitions, tone—anything that has to do with the clarity and power of your product.

I've had thousands of students and writing clients who have never felt this kind of involvement in the process and product of writing. The ultimate reason may have to do with our view of education and communication, our vision of democracy; but it is clearly not a matter of talent. Any writer or teacher can tell you about talented people who never wrote. QWP assumes that *anyone's* writing is worth doing well, for both the writer and his or her readers. This second reading, then, in which you improve the roughly final draft, is not the usual slapdash substitution of words and phrases, or a last-minute attempt to impose order on chaos, but the natural efflorescence of an organic process, bringing ideas to life before the reader's eyes. People may experience this organizing, shaping, vivifying intensity in their work, in their relationships, in their recreation; but they don't expect it from writing. Creating a piece of writing *should* be exciting and fun, challenging your deepest resources, and making you vulnerable in a healthy way. These are, after all, the qualities we admire in our favorite writers.

Improvements

The introductory paragraph of my roughly final draft carried the assertions I intended to develop for the reader throughout my paper. On a second reading, the next two paragraphs seemed to meander, to imply rather than state, depending too much on a sympathetic reader. They

(A) *Combine, fill in gaps left by cutting, and tie in more* ───── *directly with overall tone and theme:* "The competency idea *is* a tantalizing one, but it raises serious questions. Usually, as in computer literacy, such exams 'certify' that students have been trained in some way. But what could we or *should* we 'certify' in writing? Who would make that decision? What are we prepared to do for the students who fail? What kind of teacher could we hire to read such uninspired essays, or to preside over a competency-test prep course? Generally, what would the mechanization of writing instruction mean to our students and teachers of writing? These and other questions suggest how a competency exam will force us to put our resources into a test rather than into teaching and learning."

Although the idea of a writing competency exam is
appealing on the surface as a way of strengthening a basic
skill, such an exam would be self-defeating and destructive.
It is expensive, inefficient to administer, and demoralizing
for both students and faculty. It would destroy the English
department's effectiveness in helping all students to learn,
and cannot ensure competency in writing. Such a goal can
only be accomplished by a creative, flexible, highly
motivated teaching staff making instruction as individualized
as possible toward the goal of writing as a lifelong skill.

The competency idea _is_ a tantalizing one. Usually, such
exams are to "certify" that students have been trained in
some way, the way we might certify that a student can run a
computer program. What should we certify in writing? That a
student can write an engaging cover letter, or a letter to
the editor of the hometown newspaper? Or a paper that leaves
the teacher "no work to do"?

Surely we should do the same for writing. Writing is
every bit as important in the modern world as computer
skills....Dedicated teachers of writing should jump at the
chance to reenforce what they do by requiring that students
pass a test. But who would teach them...and how would they
be paid? No one would want to read it....And what about the

67

(B)   *Combine, substitute more consistent, formal language for* ——— *the casual metaphor:* "Of course, a competency exam will reduce the role of the English department to that of a remedial service, with no realistic expectation that faculty in other departments would take up the responsibility of teaching writing."

(C)   *Combine passages, and change to a "public" tone, more* ——— *consistent with the overall texture:* "The impact on new and younger faculty will also be devastating, accentuating just the wrong things: training students to pass an exam, a narrow skill that may have almost nothing to do with the lifelong need to adapt one's capacity to write to a variety of demands and situations."

(D)   *Set off with transition that ties this point to the overall* ——— *theme and establishes progress toward the conclusion:* "In short, the exam creates an untenable paradox for writing teachers and, by extension, for the college as a whole: what is 'competency' for a person who struggles to write a neat, bland essay, compared with someone who says a good deal in a powerful way, but doesn't know some of the testable conventions of grammar? What problem would a competency exam *solve*?"

(E)   *Cut: inconsistent, private, not public tone.* ———

students who don't pass? Time and money questions: do we give failing students course after course, in addition to their full load? We would be valuing the test above the teaching and learning. What would this continual focus on failure mean to students and teachers?

Of course a competency exam will weaken the image of the English faculty (we will be seen as a "remedial" department) and excuse other faculty from doing their part of the job of teaching writing across the curriculum. If new faculty's students fail the competency test, they will be judged failures as teachers. Forget about meeting students at their present level and helping them to discover and tell what they mean. Get them through the exam. We don't care what happens afterward.

Who would define competency? What defines "competency" for a person who struggles to write neat, bland essays compared to someone who can think, and who says a good deal in a powerful way, but doesn't know some conventions of punctuation? Most college students have aspects of both these extremes, anyway.

But the hitch here, as always, is that passing or failing an exam may have almost nothing to do with the lifelong need to adapt one's capacity to write to a variety of demands and situations.. My students, even those who start by not being able to write a sen ence in an hour, could pass an exam at the end of the term if it were a genuine task, a step in their developmen toward independent writing, with imagination and skill... he emphasis must be on

69

(F) *Make transition more dynamic, and make language more active:* "In many ways, such an exam is self-defeating and destructive. You can't make people write well unless you provide a supportive learning environment."

"... but, instead, will intimidate both students and teachers. A self-paced course ..."

(G) *Cut: the analogy seems indirect at a point where I want to bring in my alternative sooner, directly after the key last line of the paragraph.*

giving people the self-confidence to share, to believe in an
audience despite their experiences in school that militate
against all of those goals.

Such an exam would be self-defeating and destructive.
Teaching with only an exam in mind would destroy any
possibility of creative teaching as soon as teachers
realized, once again, that you can't make people write
competently unless you provide a good, open, supportive
learning environment. Fear, panic, and anxiety do not create
a good writer. Instead, they discourage risk and prevent
people from tapping their deepest resources and then sharing
them with readers. The real problem with a competency exam is
that it would not accomplish the goal of competent writing,
and in fact, would work against it, intimidating both
students and teachers, rather than encouraging the learning
process. A self-paced course in statistics, with good tutors
available, is a workable endeavor. But writing is an
unfolding process in which practice must be linked with
meaning, motivation, and belief in an audience. Students
will not learn to find their own voice for an exam; teachers
will not support students in attempting new kinds of thinking
and writing if they are to be judged on how well their
students perform on an exam. Teaching eople to swim once up
and back the length of the pool is a arvelous goal; students
will find computer skills useful i their work lives and even
their personal lives....But the ompetency exam completely
misses the goal for teaching iting, and will consume
everyone's energies at a ti e when resources are dangerously

71

(H) *Transition, and development of language:* "Instead of a competency exam, we need a new writing requirement, and a new commitment among our faculty to teach writing in every department. We should have a year-long, two-semester writing course, and a writing staff charged not simply with teaching the theoretical (and now machine-correctable) mechanics of writing but also with the task of helping students have their say, and helping teachers in all departments improve the writing of their students."

(I) *Save this largest generalization for the conclusion.*

(J) *Add example and new material to anchor it in overall theme; move passage (I) to end and broaden its implications to unify the whole paper:* "For perspective, consider the summer writing program for all incoming students at Bard College. Teachers, tutors, and students read, analyze, and give feedback on writing. The results have been gratifying: students produce better writing, and teachers are more engaged with their students' ideas and words. The initial program's budget was $192,000. As far as I know, Shakespeare College can't afford that. But neither can we afford the illusion that we will achieve anything really useful for our students by spending a little money on an inefficient, demoralizing exam that doesn't test for the skills and wisdom we all hope to inculcate in our students.

"Competency cannot be achieved through the incompetent teaching an exam will elicit. Instead, we should work for writing competency in a larger perspective of empowering our students to think and write with clarity and power, not only while they are in college, but throughout their lives as members of a democratic society."

scarce. The exam undercuts the goal it is intended to achieve.

Specific alternative: a new writing requirement, a new commitment among writing teachers. A year-long, required writing course for everyone. A writing staff charged not only with the theoretical (and now machine-correctable) mechanics of writing, but with the task of helping students have their say, not only in our courses, but throughout their lives as members of society.

New conclusion, beginning with the Bard College example, and including the summary and crystallization....

were too *personal*. I combined them in (A) so that my objections, my series of "serious questions" about giving a writing competency exam have a cumulative effect, leading the reader through time, money, and pedagogical concerns to my conclusion about the inevitable danger of putting the test before teaching and learning. I wanted, also, to tighten the language and make it more straightforward (less dependent on an understanding or on an identity in values between writer and reader), and to make the passage more consistent with the overall tone and texture.

The next paragraph, too, wasn't as clear as I wanted it to be: the "image" of the English department *is* important in the politics of the college. Although there may be people who would like to see the English faculty immersed in "remedial" instruction, it is important to identify the dependent relationship among the different departments of the college. To diminish the role of the writing faculty alters the responsibilities of *other* faculty members, especially those who see themselves as conscientious teachers. Improvement (B) made this clearer.

The fourth paragraph also needed to be stated in a more direct way, in a "public" tone consistent with the rest. The irony, and the hypothetical arguments were holdovers from the moment when I first felt really engaged in this topic and my own experiences and frustrations and ideals about teaching writing suddenly became relevant to the writing of the paper. However useful in *generating* material that led me to an important private discovery, casual irony is not appropriate for the reader. More important, in so short a paper, I need each point to serve as many purposes as possible, so I re-created this passage about new teachers by combining two others to reflect a sense of my overall theme: that we should teach writing as a lifelong skill (C).

Then, with a simple transition, I brought all the separate points to bear on the ultimate question about an exam: how do we define "competency"? Instead of another series of questions, I illustrated this issue in the form of one of the many paradoxes it raises, hoping to prompt the reader's thinking (D).

There was certainly no need to include the next passage, filled with self-righteousness, drawing attention away from the argument and toward the writer. Although the passage was fun to write, and stated what

I believe, it was not consistent with the overall tone of the paper. The second reading saved me from myself there (E).

The next paragraph was really the turning point of the paper, moving from a criticism of the details of giving an exam to the larger issue of teaching and learning writing in a liberal arts college, a larger *context* in which I wanted the reader to consider the exam. I needed a stronger transition (F). I already had the example of a self-paced course in statistics, so I could delete the others at the end of the paragraph. But I did want to keep the last line as a summary, an indication that there is a better way to achieve the goal (G).

A new transition turned the reader's attention away from the competency exam (H) to a better idea, the alternative I briefly wanted to develop. The last line of the original paragraph was one that kept coming back throughout the whole writing process, and I retained it for my conclusion.

The flaws and illusions involved in the competency idea could be typified by comparing it to the comprehensive Bard College program. (The play of words on ''affording'' an illusion may help draw the reader's attention to these basic issues as well.) The final sentence of the paragraph expressed my deepest conviction about teaching writing, and offered a perspective in which a competency exam at best is trivial and irrelevant, and at worst is a black hole for our scarce resources and energies (J).

The new conclusion, including the sentence retained from (H), matched the order and feeling of the introduction, and went one step further than a summary, to leave the reader with a larger context, a comprehensive perspective for thinking about the question posed (I).

Proofreading

No matter how many times I read over the final draft of a paper I miss some typos, a chronic misspelling, a word left out in the cutting or polishing process. Sometimes I fail to see a difference in number between subject and verb, or a cumbersome adverb between the parts of

an infinitive, a habit I've found hard to break. On the other hand, in publishing jobs, in committee work, and as a teacher, I've been an excellent proofreader for other people. The only satisfactory solution I've found for this irritating paradox is to barter: I will proofread their work if they will proofread mine.

The fact that when I type I sometimes reverse letters (a learning disability) doesn't help. When I was in college, I could never show my rough drafts to anyone because they looked as if they were in a language only vaguely related to English. The papers I turned in were readable only because I put in twice as much time as anyone else making them so. I knew that some teachers equated proofreading with intelligence. But I had no idea how little inclined *any* reader is—whether conscientious, exhausted, or jaded—to put faith or energy into what seems at best the work of a sloppy writer, or at worst, an illiterate one.

Any reader feels jolted by a typo, whether in a *New Yorker* article or in a personal letter. Professionally, this natural recoil can be devastating: grants are not granted, jobs are not offered on the grounds that "if they don't care enough to proofread their work then we don't want them here." Beneath this impatience is the myth of the perfect draft springing as if by magic from the hand of the perfect writer. Yet a look at the drafts of some of our favorite authors corrects this notion. Thomas Wolfe delivered his chaotic manuscripts in boxes, to be shaped into novels with the help of his editor. Most professional writers and most professional people who write have editorial help: an editor, an executive secretary, the "secretarial pool." Writing well does not necessarily mean proofreading well. If you can't proofread flawlessly, find someone who can do it for you, and view their help as a conscious necessity that some other people can take for granted.

The goal is to make sure the spelling, punctuation, grammar, the whole final draft is free of distractions: typos or word processor quirks (a sentence missing inexplicably, a word repeated or placed out of order). You simply want to ensure that the reader *reads* what you have written, as you intended it. Unfortunately, the myths about final drafts (if they are not perfect the writer is unintelligent, sluggardly, illiterate, defiant, insulting) are shared by many people who are trying to write:

"If I can't get it perfect myself," they say, "then it doesn't deserve to be read."

Teachers often are not much help. If they fail to transform a student into a good proofreader through their red marks and exclamation points in the margin, they find it hard to suggest that the student get help elsewhere. In fact, the myths of the final draft preclude getting help ("Your father read this over for you? That won't do you any good in the real world!" or, "You should take a course in grammar and clear up this mess before you expect anyone to read your writing!"). Some people back off: they write less or not at all. I've had countless students who dreaded writing because they equated it with the act of proofreading; and I've known too many teachers who find that equation appropriate, and continue to apply it.

Writing is difficult enough. Few people do it at all, except under pressure. Fewer people do it with any pleasure. Fewer still do it well. If the myths of the final draft prevent you from writing, or from writing with pleasure, or from writing well, you have to permit yourself, slowly and with determination, to give them up. Proofreading is the *end* of a complicated process of finding out what you think, and how to *say* it with clarity and power to readers. It's a process people need to call on throughout their lives. Proofreading is absolutely essential; but it is a simple act that neither measures intelligence nor talent. It is an act devoid of morality or nobility. It involves no more wisdom than putting the stamp on an envelope in which you mail your application or the article you've spent six months writing. Without the stamp, you won't get *any* reading; without proofreading, you may get a poor, or irritable, or unenthusiastic reading. If you need help, have someone proofread your work for you.

Burnout is clearly evident in those teachers who can only respond to typos and "mechanical errors." I don't blame them, of course. After reading thousands of *un*-proofread papers, who would want to crank up energy again to try and find the ideas and personal style in someone's garbled writing? But the advent of software that corrects spelling and even grammar puts the whole question in a new light. For the writer, correcting the final draft by machine is a blessing. Without the burden

of circling errors and weeding out good writers (or applicants, or subor-
dinates) from bad based on the myth of proofreading, some readers will
have to retrain themselves to look for meaning in the words on the page.

And that is all to the good. Writers have been doing the hard part long
enough. Writing done well, on time, and flawlessly proofread, shifts
the burden to the reader. Let the reader be *vulnerable;* that makes
communication possible.
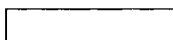
Producing the Final Draft

The Final Product

Here is the final draft of my position paper.

Teachers, Not Testers

Although the idea of a writing competency exam is appealing as a way of strengthening a basic skill, such an exam would be self-defeating and destructive. It is expensive, inefficient to administer, and demoralizing for both students and faculty. It would destroy the English department's effectiveness in helping all students to learn, and cannot ensure competency in writing. Such a goal can only be accomplished by a creative, flexible, highly motivated teaching staff making instruction as individualized as possible toward the goal of writing as a lifelong skill.

The competency idea *is* a tantalizing one, but it raises serious questions. Usually, as in computer literacy, such exams "certify" that students have been trained in some way. But what could we, or *should* we "certify" in writing? Who would make that decision? What are we prepared to do for the students who fail? What kind of teacher could we hire to read such uninspired essays, or to preside over a competency-test prep course? Generally, what would the mechanization of writing instruction mean to our students and teachers of writing? These and other questions suggest how a competency exam will force us to put our resources into a test rather than into teaching and learning.

Of course, a competency exam will reduce the role of the English faculty to that of a "remedial" service, with no realistic expectation that faculty in other departments would take up the responsibility for teaching writing. The impact on new and younger faculty will also be devastating, accentuating just the wrong things: training students to pass an exam, a narrow skill that may have almost nothing to do with

the lifelong need to adapt one's capacity to write to a variety of demands and situations.

In short, the exam creates an untenable paradox for writing teachers and, by extension, for the college as a whole: what defines "competency" for a person who struggles to write a neat, bland essay, compared with someone who says a good deal in a powerful way, but doesn't know some of the testable conventions of grammar? What problem would a competency exam *solve?*

In many ways, such an exam is self-defeating and destructive. You can't make people write well unless you provide a supportive learning environment. Fear, panic, and anxiety do not create good writing. Exams discourage risk and prevent people from tapping into their deepest resources and then sharing them with readers. The real problem with a competency exam is that it will not accomplish the goal of competent writing but, instead, will intimidate both students and teachers. A self-paced course in statistics, with good tutors available, is a workable endeavor. But writing is an unfolding process in which practice must be linked with meaning, motivation, and belief in an audience. Students will not learn to find their own voice for an exam; teachers will not support students attempting risky or new kinds of thinking and writing if they are to be judged on how well their students perform on an exam. The exam undercuts the goal it is intended to achieve.

Instead of a competency exam, we need a new writing requirement, and a new commitment among all our faculty to teach writing in every department. We should have a year-long, two-semester writing course, and a writing staff charged not simply with teaching the theoretical (and now machine-correctable) mechanics of writing but also with the task of helping students have their say, and helping teachers in all departments to improve the writing of their students.

For perspective, consider the summer writing program for all incoming students at Bard College. Teachers, tutors, and students read, analyze and give feedback on writing. The results have been gratifying: students produce better writing, and teachers are more engaged with their students' ideas and words. The initial program's budget was $192,000. As far as I know, Shakespeare College can't afford that. But neither can we afford the illusion that we will achieve anything useful for our students by spending a little money on an inefficient, demoralizing exam that doesn't test for the skills and wisdom we all hope to inculcate in our students.

Competency cannot be achieved through the incompetent teaching an exam will elicit. Instead, we should work for writing competency

in a larger perspective of empowering our students to think and write with clarity and force, not only while they are in college, but throughout their lives as members of a democratic society.

The Writing Blues

With QWP, it took me about as long to arrive at the final draft of "Teachers, Not Testers" as it has taken you to read this far in *Writing Under Pressure*. After two rounds of revision, what remains must stand for a lot of thinking and some writing that is no longer visible in the final draft. But the paper has a substantial feel to it, representing more than it actually states as information or opinion. QWP's organic process enabled me to select for the best material, and to strip away excesses and inconsistencies in tone, style, and meaning. I see the main argument clearly, and it is expressed with some of the passion that I feel about it. It is also a paper I've worked hard over, and that gives me a sense of satisfaction as well.

Any piece of writing can be improved, and most of all the one the writer has just finished. That's part of the writing blues. Years ago, a writer told me there was nothing worse than coming to the end of a book. She had never experienced writing blocks (certainly not the kind that John Steinbeck described with such anguish in *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*). But whenever she came to the end of a project, she suffered the writing blues. For some people, the intensity and involvement of writing makes *finishing* unbearable. Having devoted so much energy to the challenges, compromises, and struggles, the writer can't let go, even when other projects call for attention. It's not surprising that some people finish the job, turn in their paper or memo, or send off their manuscript, and then experience an awful restlessness that the writing could have been better.

Writing is never "finished." Every generation "rewrites" the Bible to make it more "readable." We've seen with fascination the original version of Eliot's *Waste Land* before Pound's editing. And there are classic examples of the writing blues: Kafka, Dickinson, and Hopkins repudiated or hoarded their writing, work we might never have known

except for the intervention of the people involved in complicated relationships with them. Readers add, truncate, and interpret from one generation to the next, and then that accumulation of wisdom and folly is mixed into subsequent readings of those works as well. Can a writer *know* his or her intentions fully? Can intentions be imparted to readers, or is writing a kind of Rorschach test in which readers see only what they are prepared to see? What were the unfulfilled possibilities in the draft of Melville's unfinished *Billy Budd?* As readers, we are grateful for what we have. As writers we can take some measure of reassurance from the fact that writing is one of the few good ways we have of finding out what we think, and of informing (or learning from) others. Writing doesn't give us a final answer; but it helps both writers and readers think, and so it is worth the imperfect effort, again and again.

Finishing a piece of writing we have worked hard over and intend to present to an audience of one reader or many is scary. We may not want to do it. We may put it off; we may hope to make it better, first. But for certain kinds of writing—writing under pressure—it *is* necessary to finish and let go, in order to begin again with increased knowledge and skill, and higher expectations for both the process and the product.

You can never do enough. Having finished my position paper on time, I wish now that I had transformed the opening paragraph to read more simply, more directly—something like this: "Although we can improve our students' writing skills if we use our resources wisely, an English competency exam would be destructive and self-defeating. . . ." This would immediately give the paper a positive, practical tone, rather than the slightly defensive tone it takes. I would also want to think about changing some of the questions in the second paragraph into statements, or at least explanations. I would make more room to explain my conviction that we must teach writing as a lifelong skill rather than a school-bound "competency." I would want to draw out the distinction between a neat, dull piece of writing, and a powerful ungrammatical one. (*Is* that clear? How many people can understand that point without having taught writing?) How can I hope to convince inveterate testers that there is another, perhaps better way to educate people? And who can I reasonably expect to agree with me that writing well is worth the extra effort and commitment, not only for each indi-

vidual student, or for the papers in all our courses at Shakespeare College, but for all of us, as we try together to make our lives less disconnected, clearer, more empathic, more powerful?

Too late. The paper is on the dean's desk. As I walk toward my office, I see some ways it might have been better. Perhaps it is only *because* it is done that I can see these possibilities. But it is as good as it could be under the circumstances. And what I've learned from writing it will help make my next piece of writing better.

These writing blues are inevitable, but they diminish as your writing experience grows. One alternative was not to do the paper at all. There are people who have left projects unfinished, or abandoned finished ones not because of flaws in their reasoning, or weaknesses in their skill, but because they have made too much of what is really the natural recoil, the vulnerability following intense, personal effort. I prefer the example of Trollope: if he finished one novel in the middle of his daily writing session he began another.

Real and Imaginary Readers

Of course, on the way to my office in the humanities building I wonder, too, about the readers. Not only my intended reader, the dean, but the people with whom he will discuss the issue of a competency exam, and then those others I would *want* to reach: people I know or know of, people I will never meet, people who don't agree with me, people who or may not be capable of persuasion. These are such black and white times, with a craving for simple answers to enormous questions, that I wonder if I could convince the parents of our own students, or even the students themselves.

My position paper acknowledges some of the possible uses of competency testing rather than avoiding them; won't that lessen its appeal? Still, I know what I'm talking about; I've thought it through in writing the paper, and had my say. It's up to the reader to sort out his or her own view.

When I was in college, it was fashionable to say, about one student or another, ''He won't ever write, he feels Dostoevsky looking over his

shoulder''; or, ''Who cares about her mountain people? She should be writing about Cambridge love affairs.'' Those comments, from teachers and students, always struck me as bizarre, mixing ignorance with envy and perhaps cruelty as well. People trying to write are particularly vulnerable to readers' pronouncements. But one need only listen to the comments at a public reading or the questions in a writing class to know how foolish this can be. Readers' comments are revealing more often for what they say about the *reader*. I try hard in my writing classes to make sure this is clear to everyone. Feedback *is* invaluable to a writer, but readers often adopt those criteria which were applied to them in school, and they often act as if they were now the teachers who put *them* off writing in the first place. Some writers, too, aren't comfortable unless they get the ''tough,'' pre-manufactured comments they were used to in school, the comments which are the easiest for readers to make and, in the long run, the least constructive for the writer. If the reader hopes to sound profound, then the comment will probably push for some ideal the writer clearly has failed to reach. The reader may have good examples of that ideal, and sound advice for the writer about the ''correct'' way. If, on the other hand, the reader decides that the writing is a pale reflection of what the writer ''wanted'' to say, then the reader may back down, to spare the writer's feelings (''That's nice, dear, but I think you must have a lot more to say'').

There is a familiar repertoire of such double messages, based on the relationship between writer and reader. But, as I've indicated in discussing feedback, such comments are less useful to a writer than the plain, energetic explanation of what works and does not work. Such readings are hard to come by. Good editors are as rare as good writers, and far less appreciated. Yet, over time, it's extremely healthy for a writer to replace anxiety over possible failings in the finished piece of writing, or misinterpretations by readers, with a sense that he or she has a large measure of control over the writing process, including a reasonably good sense of how readers will respond.

The writer delivers the product and moves on, learning something new each time. Developing your own skill is a private matter. You take pleasure and some pride in it, and these feelings are mainly private as well. The completion of a painting or a musical composition or a piece

of writing is not usually cause for widespread celebration. I first understood that when a professor came into the office of my freshman advisor to announce that he had just finished a book he had been working on for five years. My advisor looked up with a faint smile: "Well, now you can begin the next one," and looked down again at my study card. It's like that more often than not. Writers need to build in their own rewards, and not get caught up in longing or perfecting themselves for acceptance, gratitude, or honor. The writing that you do is, finally, your own, however clear you are about your reader's needs.

Moreover, talking about or responding to writing is extremely difficult to do well. First responses can be quite different from more mature ones. The insights that matter to writers are often time-locked. They come privately to the writer during a later rereading, or long after the project is done, when he or she is working on another. Such insights (the real point of an essay, the more appropriate structure) seem to be a product of persevering, wrestling with the problems intrinsic to writing over and over again. Real readers may or may not help; imaginary readers may or may not hinder. But I would feel more confident of my position paper if I had gotten some useful feedback. However pressed for time, I will definitely include feedback in my next project. The reassuring thing is that the fear of *being read* loses its power to block or stifle, or to give you a bad case of the writing blues. Writing becomes, instead, a realistic possibility for expression, for connection, and for communication.

CHAPTER

8
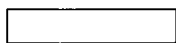
The Integrated QWP System

The QWP Model

Here is the QWP model as we have developed it through the first part of this book.

(A) *Preparation.* The writer's point of view on the question posed; his or her relationship to the reader; the writer's own commitment.

(B) *Timetable.* From planning the process to completing the final product.

(C) *Plan of overall structure.* The intrinsic characteristics of beginning, middle, other side, and conclusion.

(D) *Provisional thesis.* The writer's commitment as a challenge to the reader.

(E) Because-*clauses.* Completing and supporting the thesis, and generating the other side.

(F) *Analysis of* because-*clauses.* Selecting the best material for the argument, and for developing the conclusion.

(G) *Analysis and integration of the other side.* Extending the provisional thesis to include an "*although*-clause."

(H) *Argument-outline.* Arranging the best material in the best order.

(I) *Full introduction.* The amplified thesis incorporating the other side, and the main ideas in the sequence of the argument-outline.

(J) *Filling in the raw draft, and first cuts.* For internal coherence and consistency.

(K) *Feedback.* What works and what does not work for a reader.

(L) *Second reading: improving the roughly final draft.* Overall unity: powerful transitions, integrated examples, a polished introduction, a conclusion that gives the reader a new perspective. Vital language.

(M) *Proofreading* the final draft.

(N) *A writing policy.* Integrating new knowledge into the writer's version of QWP.

Integrating the QWP System

QWP allows you to prepare, plan, and generate writing in a continuously self-correcting process that allots adequate time and energy to improve the final product. The system focuses on both meaning and the most compelling structure to clarify and enrich meaning. Since QWP emphasizes efficiency, your writing continuously serves two purposes simultaneously: moving toward meaning; and providing the basis for the next stage in the evolution of the project. The logic and concentration of QWP, driven by the writer's alliance with time, produces good writing under pressure.

Preparation

The writer's analysis of the question posed and of his or her commitment to answering it initiates the process. Imagining different approaches, you seek the one that will teach you the most, and elicit as much of your own experience, knowledge, and feelings as possible. You clarify the power relationship between you and your reader. How much and what kind of information does the reader want? How free are you to provide that information? What point of view enables you to set the appropriate scope, scale, and style for the project?

Part of this initial preparation is to get started by immersing yourself immediately in the material. You want to transform the topic or the question into a subject you can write about with a sense of discovery.

You may need to explain your divergence from the question, or your interpretation of it, and this explanation also becomes part of your argument. The boundaries of a writing project often seem narrowly defined by format or convention. You may need to redefine those boundaries for learning, and for teaching the reader.

Timetable

In beginning a writing process that drives toward a balanced, clear, powerful product, the writer makes an early decision about time. In some cases, you will have little choice: a memo is due the same day; a case study must be in the teaching assistant's mail slot by nine in the evening. In other instances where the writer can schedule work for a deadline a week or several months away, a realistic timetable ensures thoroughness and balance. Skill in making this productive alliance with time increases as you use QWP, ensuring that *each* part of the writing process will receive your best energy.

QWP insists on a realistic timetable for completing the *whole* project before you write the first word. Once you create a schedule for writing under pressure, you abide by it. You may have more to say. There may be unresolved issues. There may be no ultimate, convincing proof for your thesis. But your job is to acknowledge what you know and what you don't know *now,* and to complete the project on time. Perhaps you will have an opportunity later on to continue, or to return to the project, or to use what you've written under pressure as the stepping stone to a longer, more comprehensive work. But with QWP, about half of your time is for planning and generating material (the *because*-clauses that elaborate your thesis, and their analysis), and the other half is for transforming the selected, ordered raw material into a coherent, consistent, unified product. The timetable will ensure a comprehensive, balanced piece of writing under pressure.

Plan of Overall Structure

After considering the reader's needs and the writer's commitment, and setting a timetable for the whole project, make a quick sketch of the

overall structure. Structure enriches, at times even conveys content. The beginning of a piece of writing should set the context and deliver a challenge to the reader; the middle should provide a sense of comprehensiveness, including a view of the other side; and the conclusion should offer the reader a new perspective, a new context in which to view the question. This underlying structural plan facilitates both the process of writing and the act of being read. Some writers expect their readers to fill in gaps and find the lost connections in their writing. That is not a promising expectation. A good reading is rare enough; an intense, symphathetic second reading is almost nonexistent. The clearer your concept of structure at the beginning of a writing project, the greater the likelihood your reader will follow you through that first and only reading.

Provisional Thesis

A thesis takes a stand on a question, commiting the writer to provide an answer, with reasons, explanations, and examples. It is the internal energy driving good writing: the writer's struggle to make sense, and to engage the reader in the quest for meaning. The answer must be clear before it can be persuasive. In scientific writing, the answer must be clear enough for other researchers to duplicate the work in their own laboratories. In an action memo, the reader must first understand the writer's judgment of various options before adopting or rejecting the recommendation for action. A provisional thesis, then, immediately moves the writer and reader toward *meaning.* The thesis may become more elaborate as the project unfolds, or it may lead the writer to an unexpected point of view, but its continuous influence is to point the writer to careful selection, explanation, and illustration in organizing his or her thinking.

Because-clauses

The spontaneous list of *because*-clauses, the "reasons" for a thesis, works on a number of different levels. By freely generating ideas you

move beyond the anxiety of a blank page toward the center of gravity of your commitment to the project. Moreover, *because*-clauses provide some of the actual language for the raw draft. It's important to generate far more *because*-clauses than you need, before judging the material. If you are writing a three-page position paper, give yourself at least a dozen ideas to analyze; for a term paper of twenty-five pages, you might want to sketch out twenty-five ideas. The goal is to explore widely, discovering specific and general issues, and perhaps some examples. You also want to uncover your own feelings toward the material, those issues about which you have a good deal to say, and good reason to say it. You want to gather as much raw material as possible for discovering the project's center of gravity, and for the breadth, power, and clarity of your final draft.

Analysis of the *Because*-clauses

Once you have generated more than enough reasons to support your thesis, you can begin to select the best material to order into an argument-outline. Test each clause to see if it is true or useful in your argument, making notes to develop the ones that mean and matter the most. Analyzing the *because*-clauses reveals the writer's passion for a topic, the aspect of the thesis that will teach the writer the most, or that the writer most wants to explore. You see this clearly in the clauses that run on to paragraphs or pages. *Because*-clauses are the heart of the QWP system. They lead to meaning and they provide the language of fresh ideas. And fresh ideas are what you need. Imagine, for example, what it is like for a teacher to receive yet another set of papers on a topic given year after year. Most of the papers cover familiar ground, in familiar language. Even the selection of quotations from sources will be predictable. (Of course, the teacher *could* ask new questions, or think of new approaches to basic material; but, under pressure, many do not.) When you analyze your raw material, respect the fresh ideas which impart your own way of looking at familiar issues. Just as generations of students have been trained to evade responsibility for their words by the prohibition against using the first person singular pronoun, so, too, most people have been trained to neglect the very material that best

represents their own thinking. The drabness in our private and public discourse to some extent reflects the devastating effects of this training. Take some risks in proposing your ideas; stretch *too* far, at least in generating raw material. Vision depends on it. Your own learning demands a larger context, linking your present argument, your struggle for meaning in a paper or memo or article, to the ideas and concerns that will endure beyond it.

Analysis and Integration of the "Other Side"

When writing under pressure, many people feel they should ignore evidence that runs counter to their argument: "Why should I spend valuable time making the case for the opposition?" But writing is different from face-to-face debating before an audience. If you can think of opposing arguments, so will your readers, even those inclined to agree with you. It is far better to acknowledge the other side and to integrate it into your own argument. Moreover, by generating some reasons *for* the other side, you discover fresh ideas for your own.

If you leave too many unanswered questions about what you have failed to consider, or if you make a show of knocking down a straw man, you undercut your reader's trust. A convincing, honest look at the other side strengthens your argument, engaging readers, even those who may not agree with you. By including the other side in your introduction and exploring it at the beginning of your argument, you demonstrate on a structural level a confidence and power that naturally attracts readers.

If you think of the extended provisional thesis as containing an *although*-clause first, and then several *because*-clauses ("*Although* _____, it is better to _____, *because*: _____"), then you will have the structure for a reasonably comprehensive argument written under pressure.

Argument-Outline

Once you've analyzed the *because*-clauses, and selected your raw material, make a quick outline of your argument to establish coherence

among your ideas. It often makes sense to put your most convincing point last in the middle section, where it will naturally lead the reader to your conclusion. (You may, of course, want to *write* the most important point first to develop it fully, and devote less time and energy to subordinate points.) Moreover, by grouping related ideas under headings in the quick outline, you create the separate phrases that combine to become the introduction and the transitions of your raw draft.

Full Introduction

Selecting and ordering the best of the raw material into an argument-outline, including the other side, enables you to adapt your provisional thesis to the sense and sequence of your argument. Read the thesis back from the headings of your argument-outline, and then develop it, if appropriate (as in an article), into a full-fledged introduction.

Filling in the Raw Draft; First Cuts

Filling in the argument-outline with the blocks of selected material creates a raw draft much longer than you need. This gives you the freedom to cut freely, deleting passages that are inconsistent, tangential, or too abstract. This freedom to choose only the best material, one of the great benefits of QWP, is the exact opposite of what most people experience in revising. When an anxious writer cranks out a draft in a headlong rush, or piles up evidence and examples, revising almost always reveals the lack of planning. Usually, it's too late at that point to do anything about major weaknesses. With QWP, you keep only the best material from your ample raw draft, balancing the specific with the general, and ensuring coherence and consistency among the parts.

Feedback

The questions a reader asks invariably elicit answers from the writer that ought to have been included in the writing. Such questions often chal-

lenge parts of the argument the writer has taken for granted, or conflicts the writer has failed to resolve. Readers can also tell you where your language is unclear or lacking in vitality. This kind of feedback is a gift; one's writing is always stronger and clearer because of it. It's important to ask for it, and to make use of it.

Second Reading

The first cuts that transform the raw draft into a leaner, coherent, consistent roughly final draft leave some loose ends and missed connections. Although each piece of evidence in an argument should relate to what comes before and what comes after it, it also must be linked clearly with the overall thesis. At every point in the final product, the reader should be able to sense this unity: the clear relationship between evidence, example, and thesis. Moreover, unifying the elements of your argument, you gather momentum for a powerful conclusion that not only summarizes but creates a new perspective for the reader.

Proofreading

It is the writer's responsibility to present his or her reader with a flawlessly proofread document. In some cases, the absence of proofreading can put a whole project in jeopardy. There are readers who confuse proofreading with intelligence, who are more concerned with "errors" than with meaning. Such readers should be required, at the very least, to read what you have written as you meant it.

A Writing Policy

The *process* of writing well on time has a beginning, middle, and end in itself. You need to assimilate what you've learned and move on. You may or may not get a response from your intended reader. There may or may not be more work to do: more reading, writing, and talking about the subject; another essay, memo, or research article to write. But under

pressure, a writer works with intensity and concentration, and it is important to let go once the project is finished. It takes skill and experience to permit yourself to do this, but it is crucial in fashioning a strong writing policy that allows you to approach each new project with increasing confidence, energy, and pleasure.

Adapting QWP to Your Own Needs

Writers have to bridge the reader's natural defenses, the natural reluctance to take on still another job of making sense of someone else's words, and testing their authenticity.

Adopting a new system for something as complicated and personal as writing may seem more trouble than it is worth. You have to give up some old habits that, however unsatisfying, work well enough, and are familiar. But applying new strategies that organize your work more efficiently and make it more consistent opens up exciting possibilities for change. The clearer you are about your commitment to a project and what you can learn from it; the clearer your relationship to the reader and your anticipation of the reader's legitimate questions; the clearer your sense of how to select the most representative material, the more confident you become. If your writing process is based on solutions to problems rather than on compromises with writing blocks or a sense of powerlessness induced by the old mythologies of pedagogy and culture, then your writing will become more flexible, resilient, and powerful. You will discover fresh, elegant ways to represent the complexity of your thoughts.

Unfortunately, most teaching dwells on small details, without attending to the continuous activity of writing. QWP emphasizes discovery, flexibility, and mastery. Adapting the QWP model to your own needs, you will discover a stronger voice, a sense of structure reenforcing meaning, and a new energy in choosing words.

QWP also changes the way you *read* (see Chapter 9). You examine whether the writer has set the context for his or her argument in the beginning of an article; whether he or she has embedded a challenge to the reader in the texture of an essay. You look for coherence in reason-

ing, and comprehensiveness in scope. You come to expect new perspectives, a broader context at the end. Everything you read with this heightened awareness contributes to making your own writing clearer and more powerful.

Knowing that you can write well under pressure changes your policy toward any kind of writing, from exam essays (Chapter 10), to research papers (Chapters 11 and 12), to memos and reports (Chapters 13 and 14). Runners speak of the "right" feeling in their muscles; painters and pianists tell of the confident feeling "in their hands," because their art is the disciplined physical expression of a mental process. Writers also experience this intense clarity and elegant simplicity. For them, too, the feeling arises not so much from the mystery of talent as from attention to process, to perfecting their own form and style for accomplishing work.

QWP depends on common sense and writing experience, not on magic or talent. It is a system for resolving writing questions, and a policy about writing. With QWP, the writing product is suffused with the writer's own style and substance, and that may well be the real magic.

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PART TWO
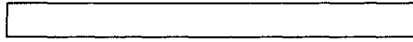
The Writer Under Pressure

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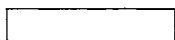
Applying QWP: Reader and Writer

Enriching Writing

The first part of this book presents a system and a general policy for writing well, on time, under pressure. This second part applies QWP to common writing situations in a public context.

QWP is constructed out of common sense and writing experience. The essence of the system is discovering and presenting meaning. The emphasis, then, is on a planned, *continuous* process, from thinking about the subject and the audience, to structuring more than enough raw evidence for a provisional thesis, through fashioning the most powerful ideas and examples into the clearest language. With this kind of preparation and planning, anyone can write well under pressure. Moreover, each time you use QWP, you make personal adaptations in the system until it becomes an instinctive approach to any writing assignment.

The next several chapters consider writing under familiar pressures that emphasize different aspects of the writing process. The pressure in examwriting, for example, is to *demonstrate* what you have learned clearly and efficiently to the reader. QWP examwriting focuses meaning through the lens of time. The pressure in research writing, however, is to *discover* and then *present* material effectively. Using QWP in research writing helps you find, select, and structure material clearly for your reader. At work, the pressure is to integrate the qualities of good writing with the demands of different kinds of readers: subordinates, supervisors, clients, colleagues. QWP allows you to accomplish two jobs simultaneously: to approach specific issues from a comprehensive

perspective; and to increase the flow of authentic communication in the environment.

Every piece of writing, whatever its subject, is also about writing; every completed memo, letter, or essay reflects the writer's view of what it is possible to accomplish in writing. This concentration on the writing process enriches the product: reading an essay by James Baldwin or George Orwell, we learn about the subject from the author's point of view and are set to thinking about our own ideas. But we are also prompted to think about the writing as well: how and why the essay is so clear, so powerful. The result is a renewed awareness of good writing, and the inspiration to improve our own.

The way we write inescapably tells our reader a good deal about what and how we mean. If we adopt conventions or approaches at school or at work that are inappropriate for what we know, or what we want to say, then our writing necessarily suffers: meaning diminishes, style and tone reflect internal conflict, and the reader is confused. It is inappropriate to write an answer that only obliquely refers to the question on an exam. But it is equally futile to repeat what the lecturer has said in class if your own reading and thinking have led you to other perspectives. It is inappropriate to begin a research paper or article without a survey of the work that has been done before. But it is equally self-defeating to gather material without continuously integrating it with your own thinking. It *is* inappropriate to prepare a position paper when you've been asked for a one-page action memo. But it would be irresponsible to allow any sort of organizational code to prevent you from telling the reader what you think is most important about the issue. So many pressures work against our sharing our knowledge that we continue to write with a low level of satisfaction in school or at work, meeting arbitrarily narrow conventions and expectations. QWP helps us to shape what we know into our own words.

Transforming the Pressures Against Authentic Writing

The pressure of school, work, or profession often forces us to hold our common sense and experience in abeyance. We *know* better, but we

don't have the time or the confidence to struggle for authentic writing. Part of the skill in applying QWP is to overcome those pressures within each situation that make good writing on time so difficult. Some of these pressures against writing are internalized. We think that we don't have anything to say, or that someone else can say it better, or that it really doesn't matter because no one is listening. Other pressures, imposed by an environment, result not from wisdom about communication, but from unexamined habits, false analogies, or illusions about efficiency. Every writer needs to acknowledge these pressures in order to transform them. By analyzing them from a *writer's* standpoint we provide a strong foundation for improving writing.

Writing courses may make improvements possible through a structured environment and constructive criticism. But once a course is over, the *intensity* diminishes unless something has caught the individual writer on his or her deepest level of motivation. (That is why I encourage students to form subgroups during a term and ongoing groups at the end of a semester, as one way to ensure that the struggle to write well continues in a supportive environment.) If a student wrote one hundred pages in a semester, without attending a class, he or she would learn something useful about writing. But the solitary writer misses a public perspective on his or her writing, and loses the benefit and inspiration of exchanging views with others engaged in the same struggle. The discipline of writing three pages every day for three months would be instructive; but not many people can systematically improve their writing on their own.

Books about writing usually gather rules and conventions. A few may even inspire a new attitude toward writing. But there are thousands of such books, and most disappear before anyone makes much use of them. Part of the trouble is our stance toward the whole process of learning to write. Writing is a frustrating business. It is also one of those skills we want everyone else to have, instantly. Teachers, supervisors, and colleagues all want better writing from their students, subordinates, and peers. But once we conceive of good writing as good thinking made public, and as a claim on our reader's thinking, we pull back, scaling down our expectations: ''No one should be allowed to graduate until he or she can write a good cover letter''; or ''Tell them what they want to hear''; or ''Just get them to spell correctly.'' Yet writing is not learned

in increments, and thinking clearly is not simply a matter of good intentions or hard work. That is why handbooks, courses, and workshops have not been widely successful in improving writing. Some people can learn that way, but even so, the question remains of whether they will continue to struggle to write well once the workshop, course, or book is finished.

In writing classes, I ask people to read the chapters on the internal structure of an essay in Sheridan Baker's *The Practical Stylist*. It is hard-edged in an old-fashioned sort of way, and seems to me a good summary of what the best handbooks have had to say. But I also ask people to read about freewriting (a timed, nonstop exercise to circumvent self-censorship), sharing, and the two different kinds of responses to writing (''reader-based,'' and ''criterion-based'') which Peter Elbow describes in *Writing with Power*. His focus on the struggle to write well, beyond the conventional (and more ''teachable'') issues of grammar and patterns of organization, invites the writer to take control of his or her own process. Writing is much more difficult to teach and to learn than most people realize because it represents so much that is personal about the individual writer: not only the capacity to share, but the many different reasons we might have for *not* wanting to make our thoughts and feelings clear. *Writing Under Pressure* is not a handbook for reference, but a *system* for application to familiar writing assignments. As the writer makes the system his or her own, it becomes an instinctive approach to process and product. Experience in using QWP makes it a personal skill, and that is why it can help where courses, workshops, or handbooks may not: the emphasis is on becoming an independent writer.

There are, of course, other applications for QWP than those I will consider in the next several chapters. Speechwriting, for example, is vulnerable to the same pressures that complicate writing in organizations: there is the same pressure of audience, the same need for compression in form and content, and the same intention to elicit an immediate response. QWP can prepare and focus the speechwriter's efforts appropriately. Group writing projects, in gathering and integrating material efficiently, need to make the most of the differences among the people involved. The QWP timetable and agenda can organize such

projects effectively. The basic system, as demonstrated in the first part of this book and applied in this second part, can be adapted to *any* kind of writing project. But before moving on to applications, there is a less visible, yet equally important benefit: by using QWP in your own writing you transform the way you read.

QWP Writing and the Enlightened Reader

As you use QWP in your own writing, you will discover almost immediately that you read with an increased awareness of how a memo, essay, or report was put together and how the writer struggled to express meaning clearly and powerfully. For some people, this new perspective has the power of a revelation: taking control over writing enables you to understand the writing of others from the inside out.

At times, this new understanding will make you impatient. You sense the writer at work, but you cannot ignore the clear signs of *lack* of work, the lost opportunities to think through and present an issue. This more realistic view of writing restores authenticity to the process: it enables the reader to see writing as a struggle to communicate rather than as a service or magical talent. While you may be more aware of what does not work in writing, you will also appreciate what does: those qualities of good writing that result from concentration and experience.

Readers often view writing through a paradoxical vision. On the one hand, they attribute magical powers to the writers they admire. On the other hand, they cannot imagine the writer consciously struggling to achieve those magical qualities. "She couldn't possibly have *meant* all that," a reader says, as if the writer were capable only of magic, and not the thought and feeling that the writing inspires in them. This paradoxical combination of awe and lack of insight is a familiar response. We may admire a tennis player, but find it hard to believe that placing a ball down the line just out of reach of an opponent is the instinctive result of daily practice. Such an act seems to be all the more a magical gift because it appears effortless. The idea that such skill results from and depends on conditioning and hours of drills seems farfetched. But to a large extent, talent *is* consistent preparation. Writing in general, and our

own writing in particular, cannot be understood fully until we write several hours a day, for months at a time. Some readers may view the words on the page as if they were placed there through grace or good luck. But if you write with control, you read with a new understanding of how much more the writer had to say, and of how carefully the writer arranged his or her words to represent as much meaning as possible in as few words as possible.

A QWP Reader's Agenda

This sharpened awareness enables you to detect writing that short-changes or misleads the reader, obscures meaning, or presents fragmented, incomplete, or distorted information. You will weigh the writer's thesis and evidence more deliberately in textbooks, memos, and reports. As you employ QWP in your own writing, you inevitably apply it as a standard, and a key to your reading.

The Writer's Preparation

As you read, assess the decisions the writer made about his or her relationship to the reader. What tone, style, or level of intimacy did he or she consider appropriate? How did the writer understand the power relationship: are you, the reader, dependent on the writer for instructions or crucial information? Does the writer need you to feel or think the way he or she does?

The Writer's Planning and Generating

As a reader with experience at writing consciously, be aware of how well the writer has defined the issue. Is the underlying or explicit thesis appropriately supported in the material? Is the thesis comprehensive? Does it include a view of the other side, and generate a coherent essay, in a balanced structure?

The Writer's Product

Test what you read to see whether the writer has illuminated the most important issues with the richest details and examples. Do the examples really *represent* the point the writer is trying to make? Do the analogies hold true, or do you sense the writer groping for authority through them? Are the explanations adequate? Are general statements and underlying assumptions anchored in specific facts, experiences, or analyses? Is the *order* of the argument appropriate to the task of making it clear and interesting to the reader? Is there, throughout, a sense of the writer's awareness of vulnerability: is he or she straightforward about the distinction between evidence and opinion? Can you disagree with some of the ideas or explanations and still trust the writer?

Experienced in the struggle to say as much as you can in a clear, powerful way under pressure, you will expect the writer's conclusion to integrate the whole argument, as reflected in the most vivid examples or evidence. Does the conclusion broaden your perspective, and give some sense of what comes next, or of what direction to follow? Did the writer acknowledge the problems inherent in his or her argument, while putting forth a new way to look at the issue? After you've read a piece of writing, can you state the main argument in a sentence that contains a sense of the best evidence and the opposing side?

Finally, can you appreciate, even admire, the freshness of the words, the way the sentences hold your attention, the way grammar and punctuation facilitate meaning? Do you feel the writer understands the work the reader must do in completing the transfer of meaning?

As readers, we ask such questions because, in a common sense way, the answers govern whether the writing enlightens and entertains us. But we ask them because we have asked them of our own writing, in the hope of moving the reader to feel, to think, to understand, to change. As the whole process of communication becomes more conscious, we imbue it with more meaning and more possibilities. Reading and writing become inseparable: we read with an awareness of how good writing is possible, and we write with an awareness of what the reader will need to make good communication possible.

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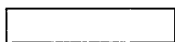
Examwriting

The Eighth Bluebook

Imagine that you are an undergraduate taking a three-hour final exam in Renaissance Literature. You have done fairly well on two short papers in the course, but your hour exam was disappointing. If they ask the right questions on this final, you should get at least a B in the course.

You have reviewed your lecture notes. You did the readings carefully, and distilled your notes into a comparison of the major themes and methods of the important writers. You've browsed through one of the books on the recommended reading list, a study supporting most of your lecturer's interpretations. Taking five courses, playing intramural basketball, and trying to discover who you are and how you fit into the world beyond home and family, you are about as well prepared as you can be for a final exam. But literature is not your major, and you don't speak the language of literary criticism the way English majors do. You chose the course because you have always found reading a comfortable way to compare your own ideas and experiences with those of others, but you would hate to have a class that you took for fun pull your average down. A good exam will make a difference; a poor one will do some damage.

You read the first question on the exam and find it incomprehensible. Perhaps you missed a phrase, a verb, some sort of key. But the second time through is no better. It's as if the question were for a different course entirely, on a graduate level. You can't figure out what they are really asking. It's so frustrating! All term long the lecturer has emphasized the readings instead of the technical details. But this question is much too abstract, phrased in such a way that only a literature major

could understand. You race through the other questions, but there's no comfort to be found there, either. This is going to be a disaster, one of those exams you write in panic, trying to pile up enough information to show that at least you have done the reading.

Now consider this exam from the point of view of an instructor in the English department who is serving as section head in an undergraduate survey course in Renaissance Literature. You suffer the anxieties and frustrations of an interminable apprenticeship as a junior member of a department which, once you finally get your degree, will escort you to the door of the job market. No matter how conscientious and supportive you want to be with your students, and how devoted you are to the poetry of Andrew Marvell, you don't look forward to reading your allotment of sixty rushed, chaotic essays about the material you know and love best. One or two students will have gotten a sense of the poems and essays in their intellectual, social, and political contexts, but most people take the course because it is a distribution requirement that no one ever fails.

This year, the professor has asked you to prepare rigorous questions to weed out the good students from the bad, because he hopes to raise the reputation of the course. You set aside the weekend to do the exams, dividing up the work to give each one as fresh a reading as possible. You'll look for familiarity with the texts and lectures, and an appreciation of the professor's approach to the material. You hope the essay questions challenge the best students and inspire the weaker ones. The professor is your thesis advisor, and you don't want him to be disappointed with his undergraduate course.

The first two bluebooks are sketchy, leaving out most of the examples you had in mind when you wrote the questions. You are shocked at how little undergraduates retain from their readings and lectures, how unreflective they are about applying the course *method* to the texts. You're beginning to feel the burden of repeating comments from one bluebook to the next. But after four more uneven ones, you read an exam that is so complete it makes the others seem abysmal. Why was this student able to put it all together when the others could not? Now you have a clearer sense of what is possible, and you feel you were right all along: the exam questions *are* good. Maybe at the end you can go

back over the first few tests and do a better job of explaining what's missing.

Then you begin the eighth bluebook. It's unreadable. You try the first sentence over again. Maybe you missed a verb, a phrase, something left out that might make sense of it all. But you can't track the meaning in these scrambled words. Is this student pulling a fast one because he didn't do the work in the course? Your doubts make you guilty. What if he is really trying to say something? And then you get angry. The bluebook is twenty pages of disconnected, illegible scribbling, and a second bluebook is nested inside it with more. You look up at the clock. If you reconstruct this exam word by word, idea by idea, you won't get any of the others done. Why should one student deserve so much of your attention at the expense of the others? You skim through it one more time hoping to find some of those touchstones of a good answer, something you can hold onto and grade. If the rest of the exams are anything like this, the professor is going to feel the course was a failure.

Exam Pressures

There's no doubt that exams can make fools of us all. They are often unpleasant to make, unpleasant to take, and unpleasant to read. They may not show what the student has learned, or what the teacher wanted students to learn. They may not teach the writer or the reader anything, and instead may reenforce those experiences that work *against* teaching and learning.

Examwriting is too important to leave to the classroom or to a particular course. You can transform examwriting from an exercise in meeting arbitrary pressures into a process for discovering and presenting meaning; and no matter how narrow an assignment, the act of writing can teach the writer something useful about his or her own writing process. With QWP, the task of examwriting is twofold: first, to do a good job of writing under pressure; and second, to improve your process of matching ideas, perceptions, and feelings with words on the page.

People not used to planning writing almost always upset the balance

of an essay in some way: too much middle, not enough beginning, or no conclusion. They may have too many specifics and not enough generalizations. They may fail to develop their most convincing piece of evidence and give too many subsidiary points, or they may leave out the best examples to illuminate their argument. On exam essays, without the benefit of a second draft, a lack of planning can be disastrous.

Exams foster anxiety and increase the writer's sense of helplessness. Some people put their faith in *quantity,* and race through an exam at top speed. But you can write a lot and *say* very little; and you can think a lot, write only a little, and still answer questions fully. Sprinters *prepare* for the few moments of their race through months of continuous work with weights and training runs, and by shaping their diets and work habits around competition; examwriting requires the same kind of preparation. Other people envision examwriting as entirely unpredictable. Their sense of helplessness is reenforced by the common notion that you cannot study for some tests: "Either you know the stuff or you don't." Finally, there are the loopholes in the exam process. A few students who have done little work in a course will do well on an exam because, understanding the inherent weaknesses in the system of making, writing, and reading exams, they substitute style for substance.

But once you understand the *context* for an essay exam, the relationship between the method and the material in a course, the unarticulated agenda and the stated expectations of the exam maker, then essay exams are not very mysterious at all. Good examwriting depends on preparation before and during the exam, and a determination to make the exam useful not only in itself but as a way of improving your skill as a writer.

The essay exam is an immediate challenge within a larger context of common-sense preparation: attending lectures and taking good notes to review for the test; keeping good notes on the assigned readings; reviewing course handouts and the papers and comments you get back during the term; reading beyond the required list; and discussing questions throughout the term with your instructor. In some schools, you can review previous exams on file in the library. A few students do all these things as preparation for an exam; some do nothing at all. But a good deal of what takes place on the day of the exam depends on consistent

preparation. In this context, QWP examwriting helps you plan, generate, and produce good essays, while constantly improving your capacity to discover and present ideas.

The QWP Examwriting Model

Planning takes place on two different levels: *structuring* each essay around a thesis supported by an argument with a beginning, middle, and end; and managing the *time* to produce a good essay—from analyzing the question to proofreading the final product. Essay questions usually ask the student to demonstrate facts, compare theories, or extrapolate from facts or theories. The facts may be as simple as dates, or as complicated as the steps in a complex argument; comparisons may simply require familiarity with material, or may involve interpretation; extrapolation may involve applying a theory, or may challenge you to critique the assumptions and methods of the course. In each case, you can plan a framework and a procedure for making the most of what you know in the available time by taking a project view of the whole exam.

A Project View of the Whole Exam

Exams generally are created as projects, either by an instructor or by a dedicated staff working under a professor. The unarticulated goal is to epitomize the course method (the instructor's approach to the material) and to reiterate the significance of typifying events, ideas, and shifts in thought. When you read through the whole exam as if it were a coherent work, you find out how the exam makers value the course material. You also discover what they anticipate from good essays: the level of generality, the intensity of focus, the breadth of references and examples.

You will see, too, of course, where your preparation is weak or strong: the events or issues or theories about which you could write for hours, and those about which it will be difficult to write anything at all. To plan effectively, it is better to know this at once, so that your mind

can begin retrieving as much information as possible. Everyone has had the experience of remembering a fact or an example *after* an exam is over. Acknowledging a difficult question at the start prompts recall.

A good exam will inspire you to think hard about the material. It will cover a lot of ground, and ask you to draw on the books, articles, and cases you have studied. Each question requires a full answer; you cannot hope to make up for what you don't know on one question by doing a wonderful job on another. Essays on the two questions may be read by different readers, who may not have written those questions in the first place. Viewing the whole exam as a coherent piece of writing, however fragmented it may appear, allows you to use time and space efficiently, and to do a thorough job.

Time and Space

If the exam allots time or credit to each question (''fifty minutes, forty-five points''), you take this into account as a signal of the importance of the material. But your *personal* timetable should be realistic and practical in harnessing your energies.

For every exam, of whatever difficulty or importance, set aside time for planning at the beginning, and proofreading at the end. Most people do far too little of either, under the mistaken notion that the main goal is to pile up as many words as possible. There may be exams in which that is a temptation: you might have learned from experience in a course that your readers only skim your exam book, and give little or no comment except a letter grade. These signals of poor readings are clear enough, and you and your friends may decide that ''they'' are less interested in what you know than in how much you can get down on the page. But a writer's assumption that the reader is irresponsible is self-defeating, the counterpart to the illusion that a reader will supply the words and ideas the writer meant to say, the steps left out of an argument or remembered after an exam is over. Exams are a burden to most people, too serious as a symbolic ritual to be taken lightly, and not serious enough to be transformed into an opportunity for learning. The danger for the exam-

writer is that such illusions about audience undercut control over the writing process. Instead, imagine your audience as a willing but pressured reader fully capable of understanding what you have to say, as long as you say it with reasonable care.

Focus briefly on what each question asks. It is not necessary to pin down everything at this point. You will return to each question once you've created a quick set of argument-outlines for the whole exam. But the overall perspective you build by working quickly through the whole exam enables you to rearrange or change the emphasis of material in each outline once you begin writing. Moreover, you will be able to integrate new material prompted by thinking through each question, instead of trying to squeeze it in later on or leaving it out entirely.

Write out a provisional thesis, condensed *because*-clauses that represent evidence in support of it, and one or two good examples. If you start your provisional thesis with "Although . . ." you will be sure that you sketch out at least one opposing argument as well. Review these condensed *because*-clauses, number them in order of importance, and you will have a miniature argument-outline, an efficient design for a structured essay. If you do this for *each* question first, before you begin to write, you create a safety net for the whole exam.

Concentrating briefly on all of the questions first gives you the confidence that you are going to make the most of what you know. Planning twenty minutes or so at the end to proofread what you've written ensures that you will get a decent reading. (A simple way to keep the writing process open for new ideas even as you actively proofread is to write your exam essays on the right-hand pages of the exam booklet, and use the left-hand facing pages for words, phrases, examples, or qualifications to be inserted into the text with arrows.) Your preparation, planning, and structuring enables the reader to follow your argument; the proofreading allows your reader to make out the words on the page. Papers can go through successive drafts; exams cannot. Your essay exam proofreading brings what is essentially a rough draft closer to the level of a finished product.

At first, planning may seem to take more time than you can afford. But consider this typical case.

> A final exam lasts three hours. There are three thirty-five minute questions, each worth twenty points, and a seventy-five minute question worth forty points.

With the QWP approach, you know at once that you need about twenty minutes at the end for proofreading, and a little more than that at the beginning to review the whole exam, planning each question to the point of a quick argument-outline. This will leave about two and a quarter hours for the actual writing. No matter how you do on the shorter questions, you will want to do a good job on the long one because it carries so much credit. If you plan twenty-five minutes for each of the shorter essays, you will have about an hour for the long one, a timetable corresponding roughly to the amount of credit allotted to each question.

You may want to do the long question first, to give it your best energy; or you may want to save it for the second hour because you know from experience that as you write the shorter essays you will remember more facts, examples, and theories from the lectures, readings, and handouts. Whatever your decision, if you take control of the examwriting process consciously, you will ensure your best product, and learn the most about your own writing under pressure.

Pace and Intensity

One advantage of starting with an easy question is that the process of writing with confidence goes a long way toward diminishing the anxieties inherent in the examwriting situation. Once you have an idea of what you want to say, hesitation in committing words to the page only increases fear and panic, making clear thinking difficult. Writing what you know first gets you started. Invariably, writing what you do know helps you recall other things that can be applied to the questions about which you have less to say.

But there is another benefit as well. As you select the most representative material for an easy question, you store up fresh energy and time

for the more difficult ones. This is a simple matter of pacing. If you expend all your energy writing out everything you know about one question, you will feel drained, and find it all the more difficult to turn to the questions for which material is harder to recall. People don't often think of *pace* as a skill in writing. But consider the analogy with a runner in a mile race who goes out too fast in the first quarter, opens a lead, and then begins to fade as the other runners who have maintained a steady pace draw on their reserves of energy for the last turn. An examwriter's race against time requires pacing; each part, the difficult as well as the easy, must be done with appropriate energy to ensure a thorough job.

Whether you've chosen the easiest, or the most important question first, you will have taken into account pace, time, and structure in shaping your answer. When the time is up for one question, move on to amplify the outline for the next.

Answering the Question

Essay questions are not often clearly stated. Few are challenging. Translating each question into a working outline before you write gives you a perspective on the goals of the whole exam. Then, you will have a better sense of how to come to terms with what each question really asks, and what kind of answer it anticipates. This may be evident upon the first reading with some questions, such as those framed to elicit facts or steps in a sequence. But with others that are abstract, obliquely worded, or deliberately open, you can begin by clarifying, narrowing, or transforming the question in order to write what you know in the most effective way. This isn't as difficult or as risky as it sounds.

Every question on an exam is the result of compromises in the exam creator's mind. There is too much material in a course to cover in a few questions or in a few hours. Conscientious teachers may try to cram too much into a question, or use the exam to make a point they feel was neglected during the term. They may work very hard on their exam questions and overdo it, as in this example from a core science course:

"How does energy on the earth flow to and through living organisms?" This might make an interesting title for a lecture to a sophisticated audience, but it represents an inappropriate level of abstraction for freshmen in a survey course. In this particular case, the instructors were appalled by the lack of details in their students' answers. Even the most conscientious students were appalled by the lack of specificity in the question.

Here is a more concrete example, a take-home essay in a graduate course: "Trace the history of American foreign policy from George Washington to Ronald Reagan. Limit your answer to one page." What can one say for a question that asks for so much in so little space? The exam maker could not reasonably anticipate a chronological recital of doctrines and manifestoes. The question calls for a conclusion only, perhaps a restatement of the underlying principle of the course. However puzzling (or absurd) this question seems, you can respond by translating what you know into the appropriate level of generality. Writing good exam questions is a skill few people possess. Questions that evoke learning or elicit knowledge are rarer still. The examwriter should take this into account in transforming poorly posed questions into issues worth writing about.

The standard advice about exam essays is to begin by simply restating the question: "Energy on the earth flows to and through living organisms in many ways." Perhaps this may help you get started. But there is usually some latitude, and even an obligation to *take a stand* toward the question, to show not only that you have covered material, but thought about it, too, making comparisons, and drawing connections: "Both plant and animal cells . . ."; or, "Although American foreign policy has fluctuated between. . . ." Turning the question to your own interests is an essential first step in the writing process. If you diverge from the main thrust of a question, or redirect it, your explanation for doing so becomes your introduction.

Keep in mind how dull it can be to read a set of bluebooks. A few essays approach an ideal in the reader's mind; most others fall far short in one way or another. Any reader welcomes a piece of writing that is fresh and full of energy. If your reasons are interesting in themselves, and if the turn you take allows you to demonstrate the kind of knowl-

edge called for in the question, you will produce one of the few essays that can be read with pleasure.

Focusing Meaning through the Lens of Time

Moving from one question to the next, you abide by a timetable and quick argument-outlines. You've reserved time for proofreading at the end. Once you have shaped a question in a way that will bring the best out of you under pressure, you can write clearly and efficiently. Since examwriting is so concentrated, examples from the course material are especially important.

The issue here is representation: choosing material that can reflect more than itself by crystallizing an explanation or standing for related material. This selection is a skill in itself. If you read an abstract essay, you feel relief at every concrete example, not only for the specificity but as a resting place to gather your thoughts. Concrete examples keep the reader involved in the work. To the reader of an exam, the examwriter's views are a set of abstractions which can only be made clear, in the limited time available, through good examples. If a philosopher develops a theory in one or several works, then an exam question about that theory will usually ask the student to apply it to a particular case. The examwriter's job is to make an example represent as much as possible about the whole theory: its origins, strengths, and weaknesses. Again, as was the case in transforming the question, the writer does best to choose examples that reflect his or her own interest in the material. Careful selection of examples that represent your own understanding of the material extends your essay beyond its severe space and time boundaries.

Internal coherence and overall unity in writing ensure clarity. Since you won't have a second chance, your transitions must alert the reader to the connections among the specific points, and the relationship of each to your overall thesis. It is possible to find a striking, fresh example and neglect to show how it illustrates or explains an idea, yet such connections are rarely self-evident. If your example represents your point of view, anchor it in the context of your whole essay.

Finally, you have to *write out* the conclusion of your essay for the reader, rather than hoping to save time by implying it, or depending on the reader to interpret it for you. A reader may or may not know what you are driving at; your job is to explain, to let the reader in on your thinking and then present your conclusions. A good conclusion returns the reader to the question, but seen now through the lens of the examwriter's thesis and examples.

Proofreading

Nothing is harder to read than a piece of writing chaotically produced under pressure. Most students and professionals at every level fail to realize this simple fact. Some students assume the professor in a large survey course (instead of the teaching assistant) will read their papers. In the same way, people who take exams imagine a meticulous reader capable of making sense out of what is usually little more than a rough draft, annotated between the lines, with crossings out and perhaps a note or two added (''misspelled?''; ''sorry—no time to fill in here''). But professors and teaching assistants rarely have the time to decipher illegible writing, fill in gaps, forge missing connections, or rectify errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and diction. Instead, the reader's difficulty in understanding your words on the page will be reflected in his or her evaluation of your writing. QWP examwriting insists on a timetable, structured essays, a practical distribution of the writer's energy, and a sustained level of intensity. But this practical system for organizing your thinking efficiently is rendered useless if your essays are impossible to read.

Students rarely understand why an active proofreading is so important. But if they are asked to read their own writing or that of a fellow student aloud, they discover words missing, ideas truncated by revision and not completed, repetitions, and unresolved paradoxes. A typewritten paper usually can be *read;* handwritten exams can be largely illegible. More often than a student imagines, at least part of what he or she wrote in a bluebook contributed nothing to the grade. As with all writ-

ing, but particularly on an exam, the writer needs to take responsibility
for every word to ensure a decent reading.

An Examwriting Policy

Exams almost always disappoint the exam makers: "We prepared them
for a whole week. We gave them handouts. We even gave them the
questions the night before, and still they did a lousy job!" Students
usually don't realize that the *way* they take an exam is a message in
itself: "What!" the insulted reader thinks, "Five pages without a single
example. . . . How can I read this!" But carefully planned, compre-
hensive essays with appropriate examples show a familiarity with
course material and an appreciation of method, integrating facts and
ideas in clear, fresh ways. They allow writer and reader to transform the
ritual of testing into a learning and teaching experience.

I began this chapter on examwriting by describing the futility for both
writer and reader of an "eighth bluebook" that is written frantically and
read grudgingly. But an exam that is undertaken as a writing project,
with an awareness of both the reader's need for clarity, examples, and
comprehensiveness, and the writer's need to learn something useful and
increase skill and confidence in writing, is bound to be satisfying.

An Examwriting Agenda

(A) Preparing
    (1) Reader's questions
        (a) The relationship between method and material
        (b) The exam maker's unarticulated agenda
        (c) The exam maker's expectations
    (2) Writer's questions
        (a) Examwriting habits, grade pressure
        (b) Preparation throughout the term
        (c) The writer's short-term commitment and long-
            range goals

(B) Planning

    (1) A project view of the whole exam

    (2) Timetable for the whole exam: planning the process from preparation to proofreading

    (3) Structure: provisional thesis, including an *although*-clause for the opposing side; condensed *because*-clauses as evidence; argument-outline in beginning-middle-end form for each question

    (4) Write the essays on the right-hand pages, and use the left-hand pages for insertions while proofreading

    (5) Pace and intensity: distributing energy appropriately throughout the exam

(C) Generating

    (1) Answering the question; explaining the divergences

    (2) Representation: typifying examples

(D) Producing

    (1) Focusing meaning through the lens of time: coherence, consistency, transitions, and unity

    (2) Conclusion: a new perspective

    (3) Proofreading

(E) An Examwriting policy

CHAPTER
11

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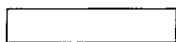
Preparing and Planning Research Writing

Resolving a Research Writing Block

Imagine that you are writing a political science paper on back-channel diplomacy. The topic is "Nixon's Opening toward China." Your professor admires that act of diplomacy, and she has presented material in the course to indicate that it depended a good deal on back-channel negotiations. There's not much time so you decide you won't need to plan extensively; once you get going, there will be plenty to say.

How far back should you start? What about Nixon's long history as an anticommunist, and then his sudden turn toward China? You realize immediately you'll have to push these questions aside until you've compiled a basic narrative of the steps that led to the change in policy. You've read Nixon, and now you read Kissinger's huge book. Much of the opening *was* back-channel diplomacy, but you can see that your narrative, based on different, sometimes contradictory versions, is becoming increasingly complex. In five rough pages you have only the barest outline. By the time you have to start writing, you realize you have too much to say, and time is running out.

What should you do? Is the narrative itself going to have to be the paper? But the professor already knows the sequence of events. What is *your* paper about? You started with admiration for the policy, but something is missing. You're blocked; you need to talk through the topic with an objective listener.

Even (or perhaps, especially) a person unacquainted with the subject can help you rediscover your subject by asking you to explain it in

simple terms. Such an objective listener might ask, for example, why the policy worked, and whether back-channel diplomacy was the only way to accomplish the opening toward China. Were there any long-range disadvantages? In answering these questions, you recall that you were fascinated by how well back-channel diplomacy fit the personal styles of both Kissinger and Nixon. Shouldn't this be included in your paper? And why that policy at that moment in time? As you think aloud, the listener may ask you if you really need to know why, in order to explain how. In the ensuing silence, the question seems unnervingly rhetorical. But how much of the opening to China was a domestic political move? Could Nixon have done anything that wasn't political? Was it a strategic way to shift attention from other issues? Was it an attempt to form an alliance against the Soviet Union? Was it a combination of all those things?

"How are you going to work all of that into a twelve-page paper by Friday?" your objective listener asks.

Suddenly, you're impatient to get back to work. What about other examples of back-channel diplomacy? How much background do you have to give? You didn't think all of this through because you took the success of the opening toward China for granted. If you spend too much time on the background and the narrative, you won't have any space left over for your own ideas.

"When doesn't it work?" your listener asks. "Has back-channel diplomacy ever backfired?"

"Of course. Selling arms to Iran, for example. When it goes wrong, it's really a disaster! Maybe I'd better include a section on that. I don't know. She's never mentioned it in class. Maybe back-channel diplomacy has to be conducted with the right people at the right time. Maybe there are times when the risks aren't worth taking."

"Well," your listener says, "I don't know anything about back-channel diplomacy, but if it worked for Nixon and not for Reagan, that's interesting in itself."

"Yes," you say, clarifying at last a thesis about the relationship between personal style and back-channel diplomacy, "but Reagan is not my topic."

This is probably as much help as you need. Your objective listener is

missing the point, *your* point. Although you're grateful for his time and effort, now you have to get back to work. The conversation has returned you to where you began, only now you have a better sense of direction, based on active ideas of your own that you lost sight of as you became immersed in conflicting details and interpretations. In a long-term study, a scholar might try to resolve the conflicts about what actually happened, and when. But *that's* not your paper either. You want to write about the relationship between policy and style as it is exemplified in back-channel diplomacy. Talking through the block with an objective listener has given you back the paper you wanted to write.

Three Schools of Disenchantment

Research is an opportunity to build personal and professional discoveries on the foundation of previous work, and to present those discoveries to readers who, in turn, may build upon them. How is it that such an exciting prospect can come to seem so exhausting and futile to so many people? How is it that research writing so often reduces confident writers to confusion and helplessness?

It's useful to understand the larger context, the political and economic pressures that have transformed research writing from a skill into an exclusive privilege. These pressures are brought to bear early in the educational process, when the burden for teaching research writing falls on English teachers. Caught between the chaotic, unsupported opinions of students, and the insistence on certifiable competencies by the culture, high school English teachers have few truths to grade objectively. After all, their colleagues in chemistry or math can give multiple-choice quizzes, draw up grade curves, and rank students. English teachers have to make up the criteria and the curve in full knowledge that the teacher down the hall might judge the same student's paper very differently. As class enrollments rise, it is not surprising that teachers settle on the conventions of grammar, punctuation, and documentation as their "subject." Rather than encouraging students to discover connections and present interpretations, they shift attention from thought to appearance. The effect on writing in general has been devastating; on

research writing, it has been catastrophic. Teachers drill and quiz their students on footnote form, or train them to build fantasy bibliographies. A student who spends weeks on his or her research paper and sees little or no comment on the content, but instead finds points deducted for incorrect footnote form, gets a clear message about the teacher's priorities and grading policy. These priorities are by now so familiar that teaching genuine research writing on almost any level seems impossible.

When the student gets to college, he or she finds that expectations for research writing have broadened to include the proper use of sources. But although plagiarism is clearly condemned in the college catalog and a cause for immediate dismissal, students are rarely instructed in how to *integrate* their own experiences, opinions, and ideas with what they read. Because they do not consider their students mature thinkers, college writing teachers emphasize not thinking but a series of steps in a research writing process that gives the appearance of thought. This sequence of steps has little to do with learning how to think clearly or write powerfully. Once again, the English teacher's job is to prepare students for writing ''real'' research papers later on, in graduate school.

How much more helpful it would be to train people from the start to look for meaning, gathering, filtering, and assembling material to present ideas to readers. In high school, for example, we would have been fascinated to know that accurate documentation instructs a reader, or that an annotated bibliography introduces a reader to works he or she did not know. We would have been able to see research writing in the context of communicating our own discoveries and interpretations, and we might have come to expect an exchange of ideas with our teachers. In college, it would have been gratifying to be liberated from the restrictions against taking a stand, and encouraged in our research writing to integrate our own views as we gathered material. We would have seen research writing in the context of developing and presenting a more precise yet more comprehensive perspective than we (and perhaps even our readers) had before.

Finally, in graduate school, we are expected to say something. But instead of coming to the end of our training, we have only begun an apprenticeship. We apply our knowledge of the conventions of research

writing to carefully circumscribed topics: the minor poet, the marginal issue, the footnote to history—an endless series of flat subjects which we are expected to bring to life with the energy of ambitious disciples. The opportunity to write about a subject of our own choosing is a long delayed, jealously guarded reward, despite the fact that professional success depends more and more on publication. In the same way that training for law school and medical school involves adopting appropriate attitudes, training in research writing involves obedience in choosing humble topics.

Thus, the long development of research writers begins with empty forms, and all too often ends with empty content. We lose the pleasures of genuine research writing; as readers we are deprived of discovery, new knowledge, and the inspiration to learn more. Trained to list a certain *number* of sources, and *how* to list them, we lose sight of what sources are for, and how to weigh one against another. We compile information in the absence of a compelling principle or a unifying interpretation. Under pressure to demonstrate dependability, we substitute tenacity for intensity as if deeply felt thought were wholly disconnected from the pursuit of knowledge.

It's easy to see, in this three-stage progression, why many people come to dread research writing. It is not a matter of organization or editing. If you want to do authentic research writing, you have to free yourself from the culturally induced inhibitions against the vigorous exchange of ideas. High school students should know that footnotes and bibliography are editorial matters that emerge from the active process of gathering and filtering material. Proper form can be found in any number of handbooks, consulted in the same way mathematicians consult logarithm tables. In college, taking a stand should not be considered a luxury or a reward. An essay that sticks too closely to sources results from the writer's failure to develop a thesis of his or her own to test in the material. Moreover, because the very selection of material is bound to be subjective, an independent, honest writer must work to distinguish his or her own point of view. In graduate school, writing should be an authentic challenge engaging the student's enthusiasm for learning. This is the risk and the value of research writing: being fair and comprehensive while having something important to say. Why else would we want to make a claim on a reader's time?

The Personal Discovery of Meaning for a Public Audience

The pulse of any research writing project is the writer's passion for the subject. Writing assignments on demand in school or at work without the personal commitment of the writer often become chaotic or mechanical. A project that reflects the writer's conscious decision to discover and present meaning takes on a life of its own, with internal coherence and sustained energy.

Readers are especially sensitive to this commitment, or the lack of it. If, out of confusion or conflict, the research writer avoids defining the connection between material and commitment, or else comes to it too late in the writing process, then he or she can only give the project a superficial unity. The reader is left with the impossible task of assembling the fragmented argument around a latent or unarticulated thesis. This is especially true when there is an obvious tension between the writer's selection of material and his or her conclusions. Whatever the subject, however limited or complex the presentation, your reader needs a sense of your active connection to the life of your argument.

Some people are interested in everything they read. Others habitually skim, or look through the introduction and conclusion before deciding whether to continue. At times, the writer knows his or her fate in advance: a research report at work will be filed away; a term paper will not be returned with any comments. Even so, the most efficient, effective way to do clear, powerful research writing on time is to discover the inner, *active* life of your project—why, and how you care about the subject and the reader— and to integrate those concerns into your work.

This is where the skill, craft, and art of writing coincide. Recording data for an accident report requires discipline; evoking the power of a dream requires intensity. But research writing combines the clarity of analysis with the power of conceptual thought; and the relationship between details and concept must be demonstrated thoroughly in a process that continuously engages the reader. Experienced research writers have a feel for their own kinds of question, the level of generality at which they are comfortable drawing inferences, establishing connections, and making assertions. This kind of confidence arises out of experience with the organic development of ideas: how one piece of

information settles and reacts with others. Research scientists and disciplined artists proceed with patience and concentration, as evidence gathers into explanation. The issue in research writing is not an unattainable conclusiveness, but an enduring passion for inquiry linked with the satisfaction of communicating discoveries.

Most people do not have much experience linking the two. Instead, they fall victim to one of the familiar anxieties: ''I have so much material that I don't know what to say!''; or ''I have so much to say I don't know where to begin!'' To avoid this, research writing requires an initial working principle for filtering facts, opinions, theories, and raw data. With QWP, the provisional thesis provides that principle, enabling the writer to sift through readings, interviews, or experimental data for support or refutation of an idea or concept. Then, this material is constantly tested *as because*-clauses. Does the passage support or refute the provisional thesis? Does the evidence elaborate the thesis or point to a more clearly defined one?

Research writing requires this kind of prior commitment. In theory, the scientific method instructs us to gather as much information as possible without, for the moment, ruling out things that cannot be explained. But most works of art (Henry James' ''germ'' of a novel, for example), and most scientific experiments begin in hunches, theories, or images of a product that establish direction. Good research writing capitalizes on what the writer knows as he or she searches for meaning. The process requires conscious choice about scope, scale, and style, time and space, and the efficient gathering, sifting, and integrating of material.

Preparing: The Writer's Choices

Scope

The goal of research writing is seldom to state the ''final'' answer to a question. Instead, the writer provides *an* answer, with supporting evidence. Each research writing product is part of a continuum that embraces past and future work on the subject. The best way to begin is to

consider the point at which you are entering that continuum. Is the larger context of your project that of a student coming to the material by request from an expert in the field who will grade the product? Or is your approach that of a worker expected to produce a report on an assigned topic by supervisors who need to evaluate or initiate a new project? Are you a researcher whose audience is limited to the members of your profession, or a translator of technical knowledge for a general audience? Clarifying the context for your work ensures an appropriate fit between your goals and the reader's expectations. For example, applying decision-making models to a particular problem might make a satisfying undergraduate paper, but without a critique of the models themselves, it would fall short of the expectations for a graduate paper. A professional article might go a step further and test the critique against other cases. The scope of the first paper is to demonstrate learning; the scope of the second is to demonstrate analytical skill; the scope of the third is to create new knowledge through analytical skill. Each format has requirements of its own, and it is often not possible to do a good job in one format by meeting the expectations of another. It might seem reasonable to transform your undergraduate paper into an article for a general audience, for example, but the intrinsic requirement that students demonstrate ''coverage'' of material will not make the transformation to a general audience an easy one.

Begin a research writing project, then, with a realistic appreciation of your reader's expectations, and of how much you can accomplish given your experience and your present knowledge of the subject. A high school student writing a research paper about William Lloyd Garrison might be able to convey a general description of the man, of other abolitionists, and perhaps of the power of the press by reading histories or biographies. A college student developing research skills might place Garrison in his historical context. A graduate student, after a thorough review of previous research, might consider a small point that has not yet been discussed thoroughly. A historian, on a personal timetable, might explore the undercurrents or themes in American history that, in his or her view, are reflected in Garrison's life and work. An article for a general reader might see Garrison in the light of subsequent history, drawing comparisons with the present time. We don't expect a high

school student to see the range of possibilities inherent in a topic, or a college student to move easily from specific to general, or a graduate student to cover an important topic fully, partly because we have been so busy with forms, conventions, and prohibitions that we have neglected the reason and method of authentic research. But with so much material available from laboratories, journals, books, and computer-assisted searches, it's easy to feel swamped, to have so much material that you don't know where to begin, or where you fit in. Some realistic view of the *scope* of your project is essential preparation for writing.

Scale

Once you have a sense of the kind of project you are engaged in, you want to know how much ground you can reasonably expect to cover. How will you illuminate the *specific* issue you choose within the context of all the available material? How can you make the most of your time and energy immediately, as you begin to read through your sources or analyze your data? Mathematicians estimate an answer before doing a calculation. Research writers need to do some of the same sort of estimating in order to settle on the *scale* of their project.

An experienced writer senses patterns and relationships in any material that would be valuable in a potential project. This research wisdom results from knowing your own capabilities, and experiencing what research projects can and cannot accomplish. Working through a series of projects enables anyone to develop these instincts. But all research writing benefits from thinking through the scale of your work before you begin, so that you can select material from the start either for its intrinsic interest, or for its direct relation to your project.

Imagine, for example, that you are near the end of a course in Soviet Foreign Policy and it is time to pick a topic for the term paper. You've been interested in decision-making in the Soviet Union, and although there has not been a great deal of information about it during the course, wherever it has come up you have gone beyond the assigned chapter or article to find more. You feel there is probably a strong political bias submerged in the conflicting scholarship on the subject. There is a

definite split between those scholars who apply models for decision-making in the United States to the Soviet Union, and those who hold that there may be significant differences. There is another conflict, as well, between those scholars who see decision-making as immutable, linked inextricably with the past, and those who see the potential for change. You know you have something to say about all of this, but you're not sure what. The professor in the course is very skeptical of change in the Soviet Union, and you are aware of her hard-line approach. But you also know that she is interested in what her students have to say, and you feel pretty secure in approaching the project with the goal of finding out something for yourself and then articulating it clearly for the reader, without worrying about whether she agrees.

The point is to do a comprehensive, careful job of gathering and sifting material in support of an active idea, one that is interesting in the way it explains actions, events, or apparent conflicts and contradictions: an idea that looks to the past and present and has something to say about the future. But as exciting and worthwhile as this would be, you realize you are a student pressed for time, with only so much background in the subject and experience in research. You wish you could take a month off and do only this project. After all, the paper might turn out to be the most important thing you do as a student. But then you come back down to earth. The scope of the topic is intimidating. You are far from being an expert, and the experts disagree violently. Your paper is due in three weeks. You don't see how you can possibly say it all in twenty pages, so you'll need to ask the professor if she's serious about the page length and the deadline. But more than that, you really want to do a good job for yourself and for the course, which has been inspiring.

You realize you have to scale down your expectations. This paper will not be the ultimate answer, the resolution of all the conflicting evidence on the subject. You won't be able to do as complete a job as you wish, and even in what you do you will have to make room for demonstrating in some way that you have understood the course method. You're not going to be able to read everything that has been written on the subject to get a thorough background. You may not get much beyond the standard works and a few current articles or books. You'll need to be efficient as you gather material, discarding work that simply

reiterates what others have written instead of adding anything new. (You've learned from previous research that there are both seminal writers and imitators or elaborators.) You're only going to have time for the main ideas, the best evidence. You may want to read your professor's book as well, but you're not sure it will be relevant to your specific topic.

Scaling down, then, you need to choose a *specific* instance, a representative example of your topic, decision-making in Russia, for which there is some reliable evidence that adequately reflects the larger questions and conflicts. If your specific example is good enough, then what you say in a few pages can stand for a lot more: you will represent a good deal of thinking and reading by focusing everything you know on the details of the specific case. In the past, when you have been clear and thoroughly prepared, your writing has been charged with active information, encompassing specifics but imbued with a general perspective. You are going to do something small, but make it reverberate with larger overtones. That's the best you can do in your present relationship to the material. (Later on, for a thesis, or a research report as an intern in Washington, you might do a deeper, wider study.)

An issue that has captured your attention is the peculiarly amiable agreement of the Soviet Union to set up two agencies—one in Russia, one in the United States—to monitor nuclear emergencies. You read about it in the newspapers, and you know there is some sort of disagreement among the experts about how and why the Soviets have been so willing to agree. You wonder how that decision was made; and you wonder, too, if you have enough background to offer some reasonable comments on the subject. Couldn't you show what you've learned about Soviet foreign policy *and* come up with some fresh ideas by focusing on this issue? You know there's no final answer on the question: it's a matter of current debate; within that context, you may have the room and the right to put forth your own idea.

It seems a good way to start. If you do write this paper, what do you think you might discover—that the monitoring agreement is a trick, a propaganda device? Or that it represents something new in the way the Russians look at the issue or make decisions? You've read that the

pressure for the decision came from a group in the Soviet Union known for generating propaganda, yet Gorbachev seems to have made the decision to go ahead suddenly, as if on his own. Could this be possible? And if so, what might it mean for other issues? Is the United States prepared to take into account changes in the Soviet Union, or are we too committed to our present views? Musing, you become enthusiastic again: suppose it is a change? Suppose we need to understand it and respond to it in a fresh way? This paper might actually help. . . .

Exploring the scope and scale of a paper delivers you to your research with energy and interest. Clear about what you are looking for, yet open to discovery, you are fired with a desire to enlighten the reader. If you begin your research writing this way, you can judge immediately whether your readings, data, and evidence hold potential for your project. Everything you do from the start will count. You won't be caught in the middle changing your mind about the kind of project you're doing, or what you can reasonably expect to accomplish, and then having to go back over all the material you've already considered.

There are countless ways in which research writing is sheer drudgery. You can thrash around in the material without confidence or patience, attracting the sharks of research anxiety. But to enjoy research writing for what it can teach you, and for what you can teach your reader, carefully think through the scale of the project to get a realistic sense of what you can include, and what you will have to leave out to finish the job on time.

Style

Even careful preparation cannot resolve the problems in organization and consistency created by fragments of previous attempts at a subject, or data gathered at different times for different reasons. In addition to scope and scale, you should give early consideration to *style* as a function of meaning. What organizing principle locks the pieces of your argument together? What gives the whole paper consistency and balance, from introduction to conclusion? Scope and scale may undergo

refinement throughout a project, but style is so thoroughly embedded in structure that the writer must make choices at the start to avoid frustration later on.

Organization

Imagine you are an architecture student who becomes fascinated with the fragments of the past that are evident in the buildings in your neighborhood in London. Each day, on your walk to school, you study those remnants of earlier design that were once functional but, in the mid-nineteenth century, became ornamental. Through the winter of your first semester in London, you explore other neighborhoods to see if this pattern of structural memory applies. By early spring, you are convinced that there is a fascinating article to be written, not only for students and practitioners, but for a wider audience: people who would be interested in seeing more of the world around them. Here is a chance to explain what structures reveal about social change and values, through a familiar example. And the example is perfect: reflecting the need to move country life to the city, even if in image only, as the wretched, closed-in quality of city life, with its loss of privacy and sunlight, came to be accepted as a compromise with the need to find work.

You begin your article one night sitting at your new word processor. Before sunup, you have fifteen pages about the economic and social influences on design. You take the draft off to school, but a few weeks later your professor still hasn't returned it, and exams have begun. You shelve the project. In Design Seminar the next semester, the assignment is to choose a structure at least a hundred years old, and describe it as a person of that time would have seen it. Perfect! You know exactly what to say; in fact, somewhere on one of your floppy discs you have the beginning of this paper already. The assignment is supposed to be three pages long, but you have enough to fill an article.

When you retrieve it, you're surprised at how abstract the writing is, how turgid the prose. You'll need to rewrite, adding a practical section about the surface of a building, simply describing the details of the

ornamentation. It's a silly requirement, but that will take only a page. A few photographs would be better. The real issues are the shift in population, the transfer of wealth, the change in the manufacture of goods, all of which can clearly be seen in the attempt to make row houses look like miniature castles.

But through draft after draft—certainly not in three pages, and probably not in fifty—you cannot bring the two chunks of material together; you cannot reconcile the abstract and the concrete. They are pieces of two different arguments, one of which interests you, and one of which is a requirement; and they simply do not fit together. They don't even belong together. You approve of one question, and would like to dwell on it; you reject the other question, and don't want to waste your time on it. Months go by and neither the fascinating article nor the required paper gets written, until finally the director of second-year studies gives an ultimatum, a final deadline. She's not interested as much in the political and social influences on design as she is in the reason why you can't produce your work on time.

Under pressure to get the paper in, you would have been better off if you had read and thought about the subject first, without writing that enthusiastic fragment. It is often easier to start fresh than to try to mesh different pieces of writing from different times. But there they are, fifteen pages representing real interest and excitement. Facing the deadline, your only recourse is to use the early material as an invisible foundation for a less exciting paper. It's possible; it does not need to be deflating, or disappointing. But it requires a decision about style as it relates to coherence and unity, and as it facilitates process and product, under pressure.

Consistency

Sometimes, as you read through a paper or an article, you are struck by a quotation, an example, or an assertion that seems entirely out of context, or of a texture different from everything that has come before. You notice it in compilations, of course: those articles and books put together out of lectures or essays from different times. But it is also

evident in self-contained projects. Such inconsistencies, representing a disjuncture in the process of assembling a piece of writing, diminish the force of any argument.

Let us say, for example, that you are having a hard time finishing a journal article on welfare. Your thesis is that welfare must be separated from politics because the real needs of human beings cannot be met by programs that fail to take those needs seriously. It's not a popular idea to propose in a time when people have turned away from social or community goals. But you have done your homework. You've studied various programs that have worked, and you've found a recurrent theme: the ones that do the most good are run by the wisdom of the people themselves, not by bureaucrats whose careers depend on cutting costs instead of helping the hungry, the abandoned, the battered people in misery and despair.

You have also gathered evidence about another cause of failure, those programs run by well-intentioned, highly educated people who do believe in help, but who see themselves as the indispensable arbiters of what is best. Even with willing administrators programs have blocked or diverted the very help that people need. This is your subject, your issue. Part of your responsibility is to try to educate people. In your article, you want to focus on two community-run programs that the bureaucrats expected to battle over scarce resources, but that agreed, instead, to share the money equally.

Part of the difficulty with the article is that your perspective, rooted in thirty years of experience, reaches past the immediate issues toward the larger questions of hierarchy and inequality. These certainly are not issues you can cover in a thirty-page article that would convince any but a few like-minded readers. Had you known from the start that you would end up with such vast issues on your mind, you might have done your research in a different way, or you might not have agreed to write the article in the first place. But you weren't thinking about scope or scale; you had an idea, a good example, and an urgent desire to communicate it immediately. Now you know, as you come to write the conclusion of your draft, that your experiences and examples have led inexorably to a general question: how to empower the powerless. You should really start all over, but the article is due in a week.

For relief, you browse through a classic text on institutions by one of your favorite writers. Now, as if for the first time, you understand some of the things he says, and see how they relate to your article. In an hour of browsing you find at least ten good quotes, exactly what you need to illustrate what you want most to say. You choose one and draw a conclusion from it. The language of the quotation is so graceful, the thought so powerful that you want more. You quote him again; and then you realize the best way to end your whole article is with a really good quote from his last chapter. Your article will be the stronger for it, more powerful than you imagined when you started, leading the reader to the larger issues.

But it's really three-quarters of a paper, with a broken ending, and interesting quotes tacked on. The reader who has followed your argument may see the relevance of the quotes but wonder where you've gone, what you had to say in conclusion. The reader who had trouble following will be left in the dark by the introduction of quotations from a book which is apparently about a much more general subject.

Changes in the texture or established style of an argument are often difficult for the writer to see, especially in a draft written under pressure. Feedback helps. What's at issue is a balance between the specific and the general, between experience and learning, and between your own thoughts and feelings and those of others.

Balance

Consider the example of a nursing student's report of an OB-GYN rotation that suddenly stops to give a textbook description of the birthing process, and then ends on a dramatic personal statement about the beauty of motherhood. For a reader, such shifts in balance need to be accounted for in the writing itself. Otherwise, no matter how powerful the writing, they raise questions about how well or thoroughly the writer has thought through the project.

Organization and consistency determine balance as an element of personal style. Each writer strikes this balance in his or her own unique way. Research writing, whether meticulous in its objectivity or passionate in its advocacy, carries a message through its style about the inten-

sity and thoroughness of the writer's approach. There are clear, persuasive monographs in biochemistry; there are interesting, active technical manuals; there are papers, theses, and articles on every conceivable subject that have made a difference to their readers. A balanced style in research writing is crucial because it clearly conveys a message about the quality of thought. It is important to sort through these issues before you begin, and to resolve them as you proceed.

Planning: Time and Space

Time

As in any writing project, QWP research writing engages time as an organizing principle. Some people spend months, or years, or their working lives painstakingly tracking meaning through a particular body of material. Ideally, we all would want this freedom to read, experiment, ponder, read and experiment again. Writing without the immediate pressure of time is a blissful experience: the writing process takes whatever turns it wants, day after day, until the material teaches you what you need to know. It is a unique and self-affirming experience. If you ever have the good fortune to work that way, you will gain confidence and pleasure in the process and product of research writing that is difficult to achieve in any other way.

This is one reason why Peter Elbow's concept of freewriting is so wholesome and liberating: it gives the writer, no matter how inexperienced or lacking in confidence, a taste of the researcher's freedom to discover the content of the material from his or her unique point of view. After a week of freewriting exercises (writing non-stop, ten minutes a day, without self-criticism or an audience) you find that you have indexed thoughts, feelings, and connections you may not have been clear about or even aware of before. Recapturing this material is thrilling, and the freewriting process, as a perspective on your writing habits, inspires confidence. Although freewriting is a timed exercise, the liberating sense of writing simply to see what turns up, without categorizing, censoring, or sorting for a particular goal or audience, gives you a hint

of what it is like to work toward a product without time limits. Long-term, open-ended research writing is similar to freewriting in emphasizing exploration. You cast your net wide to see what you will catch, without regard to usefulness. Some long-term projects, in fact, proceed as a series of freewritings: disposable drafts, one after the other, moving ever closer to the writer's real subject.

Of course, working without the pressure of time is not an unqualified blessing. There is the danger of amorphousness, or of such obsessive thoroughness that the desire to connect with a reader is blunted past the moment of presentation. This meticulousness is reflected in Camus' "obscure hero," Joseph Grand, in *The Plague,* who spends years on the first sentence of his novel. Open-ended projects present a tremendous challenge to the writer's motivation, especially if some of the questions inherent in the material become unmanageable as the project opens out. There is also the possibility that such immersion in the material becomes an end in itself, supplanting the writer's desire to communicate it.

To adapt the QWP timetable to a research writing project, make a reasonable estimate of the time you can allot to the whole project, from thinking through scope, scale, and style, to gathering and ordering, building the raw draft, and refining the final product. Because each research project is unique, it is not possible to establish an abstract notion of the balance of the research process—reading, interviewing, or experimenting—with the writing timetable, but it *is* essential to estimate the proportions of time and energy to complete the job. It may be that you need to balance research time for a term paper with a writing timetable so that you can finish the project in a month. In that case, you might set aside two weeks for reading, and then two weeks for writing: process and product. Balance in planning your time is necessary from the start.

As you will see in the next chapter, however, the QWP research writing model transforms much of the discovery process into usable material for presentation. You can make an early decision, about when to stop collecting material so that, by the time you embark on the *writing,* you will have accomplished most of the preparation, planning, and generating.

Space

Even though research projects are longer and more complex than other kinds of writing, they still require the most fundamental attention to readers' expectations for order. You need to have a sense of the structure of your project before you begin. Keep in mind a basic conception of beginning, middle, and end, with the functions appropriate to each. The beginning invites the reader in and clearly states the thesis. The middle presents your evidence in the best order, beginning with arguments for the other side, and ending with your most persuasive point. This leads the reader to the conclusion, where you push beyond summary or restatement to a broader perspective. Of course, as in all writing, there may be an important reason or a format requirement to adapt or diverge from this fundamental order. But before you embark on a sustained project, it is essential to think through the structure not only as it relates to meaning, but as it provides a safety net for the writer at work.

CHAPTER
12

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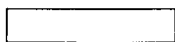
Generating and Producing Research Writing

Generating: Thesis and Themes

The Direction of Your Interest

Clarifying your particular approach to the reader and to the material gives you a sense of the scope of your project. Estimating the scale gives you a sense of how to organize general ideas, specific information, and representative examples into a consistent, balanced structure within your timetable. On this foundation, a provisional thesis, including *because*-clauses, provides a framework for gathering and sifting the material.

The provisional thesis for a research writing project is rougher and more malleable than that of an exam essay or an urgent position paper: it is less an *answer* and more a means of driving questions into the open for your consideration. In research writing, concepts mature over time. Generating a provisional thesis and condensed *because*-clauses is an efficient way to begin your search. Whether you have been assigned a topic or choose your own, whether you already know a good deal about it or nothing at all, it makes sense to put your own interest in the subject into words at the start. You have at least three major aims: getting the project done well, on time; finding answers to questions and finding new questions to consider; and enlarging your capacity to discover and present information. A provisional thesis reflects each of these goals, providing the basis for both the research writing process and product, *and* your own developing writing policy.

You may begin, as many scientists and artists do, by transforming a hunch, or an instinct, or a conviction into a provisional thesis to be tested or transformed in the material. You might want to discover where your interest leads by freewriting about the question. You might want to talk through the topic with a careful listener, to discover what you do and don't know, and what you think you need to know. The object is to take direction from your own interests and your own style of learning so that you can make use of every interview, every experiment, every book and article you read. With QWP, the process of doing research is not divorced from the process of writing. Gathering and filtering material is done within the framework of assembling it for presentation to the reader. On the foundation of preparation and planning, generating a provisional thesis enables you to proceed on two levels simultaneously: you are constantly learning as you prepare to teach the reader what you have learned.

Given the rarity of authentic writing at every level of education, it is not surprising that few people pursue research projects with any sense of pleasure or confidence. They rush into research with a kind of anxious energy and then bog down in confusion or lack of direction. Or they may discover in the middle of a rough draft that they have gathered information on an aspect of the topic that is tangential to the meaning they have begun to read back from their analysis. But a provisional thesis gives you a system for comparing material with your *because*-clauses on two levels: what you are looking for, and what you want to say about it. In the course of your research, the original clauses may transform or deepen or be replaced by new ones specifically related to your developing interests. You may find that your provisional thesis is incomplete or too narrow. Clarifying the direction of your interests at the start makes these discoveries an organic part of the research process itself. You make the most of what you know in order to find out what you don't know, collecting and comparing data to construct meaning.

The provisional thesis is disposable; it exists to give direction and a basis for comparison. But the process of generating the provisional thesis and *because*-clauses strengthens the whole project. Transforming a hunch, a feeling, or a conviction into a provisional thesis is at the heart

of almost everything we write. The provisional thesis simply brings these hunches, feelings, and convictions to a conscious level and fits words to them to be tested in the material. The thesis is not a magnet that inexorably draws material to it, but a compass to orient the writer in relation to it. In some cases, the thesis need serve only that function; in others, it will sustain the whole project and lead to new ones. You may find that your original feelings on the subject were based on too little evidence, or were too fragile to withstand analysis. You then construct a new thesis, adapted to the material you are gathering. Or you may find that your original hunch, although stated too simply, was a good one, leading to interesting questions which direct your search more efficiently.

If your assigned research topic is dull or narrow, do a directed free-writing on the subject, generating thoughts and ideas for about ten or fifteen minutes without regard to the quality of the writing. Don't edit, don't go back, and don't stop writing. Freewriting helps you avoid self-censorship: when you read over what you have written, you will find ideas, feelings, and questions that point you in the direction of your own interest. If your topic is overwhelmingly interesting, a directed freewriting will protect you from feeling swamped, and will lead you to a manageable thesis to be tested in the material.

Open assignments or articles can be especially difficult. Free to choose a topic, you may draw a blank, or feel overwhelmed. In that case, talking through the requirements of the project will help you establish reasonable boundaries. Talk-throughs serve some of the same purposes as directed freewritings, but go further. If you discuss an assignment with a willing listener for an hour, you will find some issues that interest you: you'll *hear* the interest in your voice, or your listener will point it out to you. You will hear, too, your own frustrations and confusions. As you answer your listener's questions you will begin to shape your own ideas, and your own method of investigation. If you discover paradoxes and contradictions early in the project, these will lead you to new paths of inquiry, rather than blocking your way in an avalanche of anxiety later on. If your listener takes notes for you, or if you use a tape recorder, you can keep track of the questions, the con-

nections, the examples you uncover during your conversation. Although the goal of a talk-through is to come up with a provisional question and some possible answers, you may find, in addition, that you have generated some material for your beginning, middle, or end, and perhaps a sense of a larger perspective for you and your reader.

Freewritings and talk-throughs are absorbing and effortless, and their yield is disproportionately large for a writer's investment. Both furnish the inexperienced writer with some of the advantages of professional writers who keep journals, or establish lifelong files of notes, or habitually air their work in discussions with friends and colleagues. Most people are cut off from this kind of nourishment. They don't keep track of their thoughts and interests on a wide variety of subjects systematically, and they don't get much help from others. Often, the most vivid insight people have into the research writing process is when it goes wrong: the dishonest work of an investigative journalist, a research scientist, or a staff writer. Overburdened teachers give less and less feedback on student papers; insecure students don't often seek out busy professors in office hours; and supervisors at work don't know what to say to help improve the draft of a report. But without such nourishment, research projects can be isolating and exhausting, depriving the writer of the pleasure of learning and teaching. Watson's *The Double Helix* shows how productive the continual dialogue between colleagues can be. Talking and writing about the questions and tentative answers will sustain the energy of any research writing project.

Research writing that is free of the pressure of time, and not directed toward a grade, a promotion, or a grant is a unique pleasure. It is a kind of freedom that has become increasingly rare, not only in school but at work and in the scholarly professions. Usually, only those people who have made the choice (with all its attendant sacrifices) to devote their lives to research experience it. There are people who do research but who have not been able to write about it with satisfaction. There are people who can write about other people's research, but who have not been able to sustain their own. Yet anyone can link a sense of discovery with the power of presentation if they proceed with common sense in a systematic way. Once you have constructed the QWP provisional thesis, you can begin gathering material efficiently.

Discovering and Developing Material

Let us say that you are under pressure to write about research on an assigned topic. By transforming a hunch, or adapting the question to your own interests through a focused freewriting, or talking through the subject first, you have found a direction into the material that you have put into words as a provisional thesis.

People usually begin to gather sources through a course reading list or a bibliography in a text. They may get an overall sense of a subject by reading an encyclopedia article. You will certainly need to search the card catalog, the entries in the reference bibliographies in the field, and the guides to current periodicals and books. A reference librarian can direct you to these standard sources, and there are handbooks that list them in useful categories. But your provisional thesis enables you to begin your research in a more personal way by conducting you, through the card catalog, to the appropriate library shelves for some purposeful browsing.

Experienced research writers are inveterate browsers. They constantly gather information, whether or not it is immediately useful, and develop their own systems for keeping track of it. A science writer, for example, will have file cabinets full of notes and articles on several subjects of interest which may or may not lead to articles or books. This kind of specialized, personal research file (easily indexed now with a personal computer) gives the professional writer a place to start, the impetus to explore a subject thoroughly, and a profile of his or her own interests. But such a file is built up over time as a lifelong professional resource.

For almost everyone else, getting started is hard, and taking down specific titles at the card catalog and from indexes to literature is a tedious, often frustrating way to begin. If, instead, you use the catalog to discover where to look, in general, you have at your command a library within a library, devoted entirely to your subject and topics related to it. This focused browsing gives you some of the freedom of the unpressured, experienced researcher. You will discover articles and books that help you make connections and direct you to other helpful books. Because you can survey a whole range of related readings at the

shelves, you deepen your sense of your subject. By examining the most recent books, you will get an immediate sense of the present context for the issue, and this sense can be augmented by browsing through the latest journals in the field.

As with talking through a subject, there is no great investment of time or energy in this purposeful browsing among the stacks and periodical shelves. A few hours will put you in contact with the subject in a personal way that allows you to make practical choices. You will find books you want to read thoroughly. You will take direction from the bibliographies of some of the books on the shelves and immediately seek out references that seem especially interesting. You can pass over books that are derivative, sketchy, or too general for your purposes. Later on, as your knowledge of the subject matures, you will come back to the library with specific needs in mind, books or articles you want to consult, questions you need to answer. But to start, you will find interesting passages, approaches, and writers; and finding them on your own through unhurried browsing increases your involvement and confidence. It's an unexpected pleasure at the beginning of a research writing project, more efficient and more wholesome than tracking down a few specific titles from a fistful of call number slips that may or may not be what you need.

Reading the material you have gathered, you will note immediately what intrinsically interests you and what is related to your provisional thesis. These may be two different functions at first, but both are important in efficient research writing. Since you have an *idea,* a hypothesis to test in the material, you can pursue evidence and examples that support or refute some part of your thesis. But in the long run, you are discovering and refining the *because*-clauses of your eventual final thesis in the material. You want to be open to new ideas, or a more useful approach, or a more appropriate thesis in light of your developing interests. Record whatever strikes you as really interesting, whether or not you can see its immediate relevance.

This is not as complicated as you may think. You want to establish your own level of discourse for the project: the boundaries for your hypothesis, evidence, generalizations, and conclusions. Although you have a sense of the scope, scale, and style of the project, you can't be

precise about these boundaries at the start. As you read, you continually adjust them to include as much as you can find of the richest material. This continuous concentration on a thesis, and your openness to new ideas, provides more than enough good material. A simple way to keep track of it is through a research journal, on the model of a scientist's lab notebook or an artist's working diary.

The Research Journal: Emerging Themes

Students required to write research papers are often asked to deliver a series of products to their teacher: the selection of the topic, an outline, a bibliography, note cards, and the rough and final drafts. In theory, each stage is both a demonstration of work done, and an opportunity for guidance, for mid-course corrections. But in practice, each stage becomes a hurdle in itself rather than part of a continuous process of discovery and presentation. The criterion for success at each stage might be the length of an outline, the number of sources, the thickness of the pack of note cards. But there is usually little interaction between student and teacher about how ideas mature into an argument. The whole process degenerates from a formal exercise to a frustrating ritual.

That's why it is important, when teaching yourself to do efficient, authentic research writing, to look for ideas—both those of the writers you read, and your own. Make your reading notes as simple as possible: not full quotations, or underlined paragraphs, but key words or phrases, a couple of sentences, the essence of what interests you either for itself, or because it relates to your thesis. Record the location so you can go back to it for a quotation or a reference. If you are reading an article, head a note card with the bibliographic material you'll need later, and then keep track of what interests you page by page, in as few words as possible.

As they accumulate, your notes become a running record of your interest in the subject. Review your notes periodically. This will enable you to discover your own unique insights, the concepts and connections you will want to shape and order for your reader. As you gather more and more material, these periodic reviews will reveal emerging themes

that support, deepen, or redirect your provisional thesis. If you add a commentary in your notes about these emerging themes (again, in a few words), you build the inner structure of your argument, the blocks of language for your raw draft. In essence, this series of periodic reviews is the research writer's version of generating *because*-clauses, only now you construct them from the material itself, *and* from your ideas about that material.

Most people have some sort of a system for taking notes, but this periodic review to build emerging themes allows you to filter material in a way that broadens and deepens your understanding of your subject and sharpens your own thesis within it. Instead of simply gathering as much material as you can within the limits of time and space, you track ideas as you go along, and develop your own view of the importance of those ideas. This makes the project intensely personal and unique, and this intensity constantly renews your momentum and confidence.

Analyzing the Research Journal: Theme-Families

You have notes and comments keyed to a list of emerging themes in your research journal. As you read, some of these themes gather a large number of references, others only a few. Analyzing these theme-families is analogous to analyzing the *because*-clauses freely generated to fit a provisional thesis. You select what counts, what keeps your interest, what draws the most energy and feeling out of you for the project. You leave behind whatever is tangential, indirect, or dull. You will discover gaps in your argument, and issues that need further examination. This is the time for focused research to balance, amplify, or illuminate an idea, or to develop the argument for the ''other side.'' Now you return to the library with specific needs: a book or an article that may be useful; an idea that must be tested; interpretations you need to consider or reconsider for your own argument.

When you have completed this final research, you have comprehensive notes and comments selected for their relevance to the main ideas of your project.

The Argument-Outline: An Index to Meaning

Some of the theme-families can be combined to make a major point in your argument. Others can be grouped together to form a whole section of interrelated ideas, evidence, and interpretation. The range of material will run from specific to general. This range will contribute to shaping your argument-outline around the progression from the simplest to the most complicated ideas. Once you have established the order of your raw draft, you read back from it a fuller thesis, which becomes the full introduction of your paper.

With research writing, the argument-outline is not only the pattern for the raw draft but, with the attendant references in your notes for each theme, an index to meaning. You can order the notes and comments for each separate point in your argument, and then write freely with confidence. You do not need to move through your outline in order. If you choose to write the most complicated part of your argument first, to give it adequate time and energy, you can arrange the notes for that section and start writing. The outline is at hand; you needn't worry that you will lose your way or bog down. The goal of the raw draft, after all, is to get a sense of the whole paper. Then you can begin to cut.

Producing: Amplifying Meaning

A "Treatment" First

Before you compose the raw draft, write a compact "treatment," a narrative of the whole project in not much more than a page or two. Begin with your thesis, then describe the progress of your argument in the middle section, and propose your conclusion, the new perspective your paper or article will offer the reader.

This treatment serves several good purposes. It provides a project narrative for reference; it forces an early examination of the balance and emphasis of your presentation; and it may well become the actual transition from the introduction to the middle section of your paper. (It could

easily be the source for the abstract, or a proposal for publishing your article.) But there is a simpler, practical benefit that has to do with the anxiety of beginning a research paper. Usually, in whatever we write, the first few paragraphs (or in longer works the first several pages) actually serve to start the writer. We almost always abandon these pages later as we find the project's center of gravity. A treatment serves this catalytic function.

Drafting the Product

Raw Draft

Your notes are a quarry for excavating facts and examples. Research journal commentaries provide the internal glue of your argument in explanations and interpretations. It is a great pleasure to begin a re-search writing project with a stack of notes, commentaries, examples, and quotations sorted under the major themes in your outline. You can move confidently through the raw draft with the single purpose of developing meaning.

Your project may require a particular format, but you will confront that issue in transforming the raw draft into the roughly final draft. Since the goal of the raw draft is to set out the material you have selected in the order of your argument, it will be longer than your final draft. Write freely, without unduly worrying about repetition, or con-sistency. For the raw draft, you simply want to get the selected material down on paper or up on the screen. Take delight in translating your notes and comments into solid evidence for the ideas that reveal your thesis to the reader.

First Cuts

The raw draft will be too long, somewhat inconsistent, perhaps re-petitious here and there, and lacking some transitions. But this raw draft will contain your whole argument, in its most powerful order. Those two qualities ensure that you will get your project done well, on time.

You can cut freely, without the familiar timidity or remorse people feel at "losing all that material." You have more than enough. You want to take out *everything* that doesn't count, that doesn't add to your method and to your meaning. If you have always been unsure about editing, this round of free cuts delivers you from the usual pressure and anxiety and allows you to see your writing from a *reader's* standpoint. You can distinguish between what was really a shorthand or truncated explanation for yourself, or a defensive argument with an imaginary reader, and what advances your argument in a publicly comprehensible way. You may find evidence scattered throughout the draft for another subject entirely, which could provide material for your *next* paper. But you remove it all from this draft without hesitation.

In writing this book, for example, I have taken out far more material than I have left in. Some of the material I cut was really process-oriented, resolving questions of method. But much of it was about the teaching of writing, a subject which has concerned me for almost thirty years (either as a victim or as a practitioner). I have kept only those teaching issues that seemed to me to illuminate the reasons why most people find writing such a struggle, especially under pressure. Although QWP lends itself easily to a supportive classroom setting, it is a system for anyone to adopt independently. This was the principle underlying my first cuts: to keep whatever material was necessary to enable any reader, whatever his or her background, or experience as a writer, to acquire QWP and adapt it to any writing situation. In what I deleted I have accumulated almost enough material for a book about the teaching and learning of writing in America. This is characteristic of QWP: shaping the research writing process around finding, developing, and presenting meaning yields enormous benefits beyond the present project.

The Objective Listener

You have been working with great concentration, discovering and developing meaning, and then playing it back in your own mind to see how clearly it sounds. At this point, it is extremely helpful to have someone else tell you how it *reads*.

You may have talked through the topic even before you started to plan, or you may have had the consistent help of a teacher or a colleague throughout the process. But the cut raw draft is still malleable, and a reader may be able to tell you something useful about the inadequacy of an explanation, the need for an example, or an inconsistency in tone that helps you shape the cut draft into the roughly final draft in a clearer, more powerful way. The objective reader's function is to freshen your perspective on the writing. Almost always, the reader can help by telling you where transitions are missing, an idea is not linked to the thesis, or a particular passage would have more impact in another place. A reader can also tell you what is missing in the presentation of your method, the framework of your project. These questions about content or structure will give you insights into the way the writing *reads* that would be difficult to achieve on your own. In writing the drafts of this book, I sought feedback at several stages. Each time the reader's observations and questions sharpened my perspective.

Of course, if you bog down in the writing, feedback from an objective listener is essential. I began Chapter 11 with an imaginary conversation that resolves a research writing block. But any piece of writing can stall for a time while ideas mature, or the writer's approach crystallizes. We all have been trained to write in artificially compartmentalized stages in which it is easy to lose concentration, instead of in a continuous process. Talking through a problem saves you time and energy and sharpens your perspective on the continuous struggle to link specific issues to overall themes.

When my tennis teacher calls out, "Turn your shoulder!" after I've hit a weak forehand, it restores my concentration. The same sort of thing holds true for writing. Even if you know better, from experience, you may convince yourself your notes are good enough and you don't need an outline, or that you really know the subject and can just sit down and write. Someone outside the process can remind you of what you have neglected, or where you took a short cut and got lost. Talking your way through a problem with an objective listener is a reality test: if he or she can follow you, then you have a good indication of an appropriate fit among your ideas, your written words, and your reader's understanding.

Improving the Roughly Final Draft

Once you have removed what doesn't fit in the draft, and gotten feed-back from an objective listener, reconnect what does fit. In effect, you have freed the figure from the stone, the essential argument from its more amorphous context in which there may have been confusions, undeveloped or unexplained fragments, repetitions, and distractions. Your cuts have ensured coherence and consistency among the parts of the argument. Each part fits what came before it, and leads clearly to what comes after. Now you want to bind the parts of your argument together into a unified, smoothly flowing draft.

At every point in your paper or article, your reader should be able to relate the specific fact, explanation, or example to your overall thesis. This means writing solid transitions which explicitly refer to the frame-work underlying the whole project. Anchor every example in the overall argument, and make sure that the importance and relevance of each illustration, diagram, and table is clear. You may have to enlarge, or alter the tone of the introduction, or strengthen your conclusion. Read-ers of papers habitually skim beginnings and endings before they read through the argument, and you want to be sure everything is there, in compact form.

You need to test the relevance of every piece of structure in this roughly final draft, from the introductory section, to the development of themes, the running commentary on method, the examples, the specific conclusion, and the broader perspective you hope to provide your read-er. Furthermore, you want ample paragraphs, clear and varied sen-tences, vital language, and helpful punctuation. Finally, you need to be certain that your references and quotations are accurate, extending to the reader the opportunity to use your research as a springboard to further study. Then, of course, have someone proofread the final draft.

Product and Policy

The QWP method should be especially useful for people who have viewed research writing as chaotic or unmanageable. The underlying principle is that research writing is a *continuous* process in which the

writer simultaneously discovers meaning and prepares it for presentation. Finding facts, ideas, and examples, the writer shapes the most effective product for sharing them with a reader.

This synergism at the heart of research writing explains why some people find such pleasure and excitement in every project, no matter what the format, or how much patience or meticulousness the work requires. Even the painstaking introductory section of a long paper, chronologically reviewing earlier research and providing a clear rationale for taking up the subject within that context, can be imbued with the style and tone of your argument, as any article in *Scientific American* demonstrates.

Most people never experience the enlightenment and stimulation of authentic research writing; those who do usually discover it on their own. The QWP research writing agenda leads the writer to discover meaning, and to present that meaning *as* discovery for his or her readers through an improvable, adaptable system. It is one of the most powerful accomplishments of an independent writer.

A Research Writing Agenda

(A) Preparing: the writer's choices
- (1) Scope
  - (a) The writer's commitment to discovery and presentation
  - (b) The writer's relationship to the material
  - (c) The active inner life of the project
  - (d) Choosing the context
  - (e) What you can and cannot accomplish
- (2) Scale
  - (a) Choosing the issue
  - (b) Representation: the specific for the general
  - (c) Getting *this* project done
- (3) Style
  - (a) Organization; consistency; balance

(B) Planning: time and space
    (1) Timetable
        (a) A research timetable correlated with a QWP writing timetable: preparing; planning, generating, and producing the writing
    (2) Space
        (a) Structure: beginning, middle, end—including a broader perspective.

(C) Generating: thesis and themes
    (1) Provisional thesis: the direction of your interest
    (2) Purposeful library browsing
    (3) Discovering and developing material
    (4) Periodic review of notes
    (5) The research journal: emerging themes
    (6) Analyzing the research journal: theme-families
    (7) Argument-outline: an index to meaning

(D) Producing: amplifying meaning
    (1) A "treatment" first
    (2) Drafting the product
        (a) Raw draft
        (b) First cuts for coherence and consistency
        (c) The objective listener: when in doubt, talk it out
        (d) Improving the roughly final draft
        (e) Ample, varied, vital language
        (f) Synergism: product and policy

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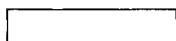
Writing for Organizations: The Communication Problem

Colonel North's Memo

What could be more exciting for a writer than discovering ideas and words that help people make decisions or take actions? Yet no other writing assignment is more difficult, more vulnerable to external and internal pressures, or more likely to cause mischief. Take, for example, the text of Colonel Oliver L. North's "Action Memorandum for the President," printed in the *New York Times* on January 10, 1987.

This top-secret memo outlines an Israeli plan to "bring about a more moderate government in Iran" by "unilaterally . . . selling military matériel to Western oriented Iranian factions." The Israelis are convinced these resources will result in "long-term changes in personnel and attitude within the Iranian government." The Israelis' only requirement is "that they will be allowed to purchase U.S. replenishments for the stocks they sell to Iran." Although U.S. law requires that recipients of U.S. arms notify the government of transfers to third countries, Attorney General Smith determined that a presidential finding could authorize the CIA to sell arms "outside" the reporting provisions of the law. (The President's "Covert Action Finding," of the same date, is attached to the memo.)

The heart of the memo is that the "Israelis are also sensitive to a strong U.S. desire to free our Beirut hostages and have insisted that the Iranians demonstrate . . . good intent by an early release of the five Americans. Both sides have agreed that the hostages will be immediately released upon commencement of this action. . . . [T]his ap-

proach . . . may well be our only way to achieve the release of the Americans held in Beirut.'' The memo notes that ''since this dialogue began with the Iranians in September, Reverend Weir has been released and there have been no Shia terrorist attacks against American or Israeli persons, property or interests.'' After describing the details of the arms transfer, the memo calls for an ''urgent response,'' and notes that while Secretaries Shultz and Weinberger ''do not recommend . . . the plan,'' Attorney General Meese and Director Casey believe the ''objectives of the plan warrant the policy risks involved.'' The memo ends with a recommendation to ''withhold notification of the Finding to the Congressional oversight committees until such time that you deem it to be appropriate.'' A handwritten note by John M. Poindexter, for whom the memo was prepared to present to the President, reads: ''President was briefed verbally from this paper. VP, Don Regan, Don Fortier were present.''

My purpose here is not to view this memo with the advantage of political hindsight, or to argue policy. Instead, I want to focus on the *writing* for what it can tell us about the problems involved in writing for organizations.

The memo at first seems to present a no-fault plan, conceived by another country whose own interests happily coincide with those of the United States, requiring nothing more than the purchase and shipment of arms, but with the potential for immediate, and perhaps long-term benefits for the United States. On a second reading, however, the memo, on so sensitive an issue, bringing together such disparate groups with so many different needs and values, seems disturbingly seamless. Even for an action memo, it is *too* perfectly constructed around its recommendation. There is no consideration of potential dangers or drawbacks, except for the unexplained reference in the next to last sentence to undefined ''policy risks.'' The legal problem about reporting transfers of arms to third countries is brushed aside by Attorney General Smith's ''determination'' that the President can authorize the CIA to sell arms. Conveniently, the Israelis ''well understand our position on not making concessions to terrorists.'' Finally, ''If all of the hostages are not released after the first shipment of 1,000 weapons, further transfers would cease.'' With no apparent political, legal, or

strategic drawbacks it seems an offer *too* hard to refuse. Furthermore, although the memo proposes an action in direct conflict with the President's stated policy, the *style* is earnest, energetic, and decisive, as if free of internal struggle.

But there is something troubling here, and since the brief memo is so important it is worth reading again. Now, questions arise. Why, for example, is there no concern anywhere in the memo that the Israelis might be wrong? "The Israeli plan is premised on the assumption that moderate elements in Iran can come to power if these factions demonstrate their credibility in defending Iran against Iraq and in deterring Soviet intervention." *Are* there "moderate elements?" If so, who are they? Is the Israeli premise sound—that moderate elements will come to power because they acquire arms? What is the connection between this purported Israeli strategy and freeing the American hostages: what *connection* do "Iranian moderates" have with the fate of the American hostages? How is it that the Israelis "understand" this arms sale, with the hope of freeing hostages, is "not making concessions to terrorists?" Is their "understanding" in any way related to how other parties (terrorists, for example, or our allies enlisted in the struggle against terrorism) might interpret it?

On further analysis, the memo begins to unravel. What *were* the objections of Secretaries Shultz and Weinberger? What were the undefined "policy risks"? Why does the memo have no sense of the other side to the argument? Surely, on such an emotional and politically sensitive issue as the hostages, there were other perspectives or reservations. Why does the memo contain no evaluation of the *moral* and *political* implications? For example, any reader might ask: Should we be involved in an attempt to bring "moderates" to power in another country? What would the political impact be if our role became known? An action memo for the President should necessarily represent the most thorough analysis as the basis for a decision. Is that what we have here?

The memo raises many of the familiar questions about any poorly written argument. It substitutes energy and urgency for evidence; it distances the writer and the reader from responsibility; it attempts to fill in the gap left by lack of analysis with an unquestioning faith in its own

efficacy: "Both sides have agreed that the hostages will be immediately released upon commencement of this action." Reading this memo simply as a piece of writing, it is hard to believe that anyone could take it seriously.

Could all of these questions have been discussed earlier? Were they resolved when Mr. Poindexter "verbally briefed" the President? If that were the case, what is the status of so deficient a memo? Why write it as if it were the basis for a decision if it is entirely lacking in analysis? (What if Mr. Poindexter added his own interpretation when he briefed the President "verbally"?) Perhaps the memo simply confirms a policy already agreed to by the President, and merely records the grounds for his presidential finding. But if that is the case, how could a presidential finding be based on such precarious evidence?

The function of the memo could not have been to inform; it may have been to persuade or confirm. But despite its seamless surface, the low-cost, fault-free appearance of its recommendation, there is chaos and fantasy within. Beneath the concise, decisive exterior, there is defensiveness, inflexibility, and desperation in the writing. In its context, among consenting adults in the White House, the memo may have made perfect sense. Perhaps it really was meant to justify one policy by linking it as if through good luck to another: ransoming the hostages as a fortuitous by-product of an Israeli plan to reach moderate elements in Iran who, with the acquisition of 4000 TOW missiles as a demonstration of their "credibility in defending Iran against Iraq and in deterring Soviet intervention," will topple the Ayatollah. A need for justification, even after the fact, might explain the unsettling indications that it is a fantasy memo: too perfect; too eager; and totally lacking in analysis and perspective.

There are other possible scenarios here, from North's point of view as the writer. Perhaps the memo presents what North thinks the President wants to hear. But by writing what you think a superior wants to hear, you may be ignoring the very data he or she needs the most; and in making such a decision before writing a memo, you may be putting him or her in jeopardy. This may have been the case with North. If the President depended almost entirely on North's memo, without counter-

vailing arguments or more comprehensive discussions, then, in a broader context, North's interpretation of what the President wanted to hear would be extremely dangerous.

Another possibility is that North is presenting his own view in the most persuasive way he can, deliberately omitting an assessment of the possible problems and alternatives. This, too, would leave the President in a vulnerable position, and his vulnerability would extend far beyond the walls of the Oval Office. In the end, your reader may not want to know the truth; but as the writer, you must provide the basis for an informed decision.

Any writer in an organization faces such questions. He or she does not want to write a memo that will displease a superior, or is afraid to write a memo that includes the "cons." But as we have learned with North's memo, the results can be disastrous, putting in jeopardy not only individuals or agencies, but even the nation. To write well in an organization is not simply a matter of writing clear, concise, persuasive prose. The writer's ultimate responsibility, especially when making the best case for an argument, is to give the reader a comprehensive, analytical view of the problems and alternatives, a balanced perspective, and an honest look at the other side. As a writer you can not assume the responsibility of the decision maker. Your own point of view must not be allowed to distort the data. Your role as the person who culls the material and presents a point of view is crucial, because the decision-maker depends on your honesty and thoroughness.

It may never be clear whether North's memo was intended to create, affirm, or obscure policy, but his presumed dedication and loyalty backfired: the memo left the President blind-sided. North's responsibility in constructing his memo, whether he was assuming or supporting a goal of the President or presenting his own strategy, was to keep the President fully informed.

North's memo reads as if it were written in a political and moral vacuum, an extreme case of the problems inherent in writing that is intended to help other people decide or act. Writing in an organization can be exciting or frustrating; it can strengthen or undermine policy. But to be able to do it well, it is necessary to understand some of the causes of our communication problem.

The Uniform Writing Code

Many of the persistent problems for writers and readers in organizations can be understood within the framework of what I call the uniform writing code. This code, explicit or implied in the structure of almost all organizations, confronts the writer with choices that often bring loyalty and responsibility into conflict. Such conflicts create ethical questions that, unresolved, make good writing under pressure impossible. Successful writing in organizations depends on transforming the code.

The Organizational Point of View

The writing code includes a number of injunctions about tone and attitude. Organizational writing is expected to be *positive;* to present, internally and externally, the best case for the organization's conduct. At times, this may mean not writing what the writer knows. Organizations blessed with consensus have an energy that turns problems into prospects. Labs, departments, and new or revivified organizations have this spirit when everyone feels they contribute to a common goal. But organizations in trouble almost always begin by attributing their problem to a failure in "getting their story out." There is an inevitable tension between reality and appearance, and one pressure on anyone who writes in an organization, in good times or bad, is the need to consciously avoid any subject, fact, or analysis that might shake the reader's confidence in either the organization or the writer's role within it. A writer who wants to survive adopts the organizational point of view.

For many people, this positive attitude is a learned behavior that eases daily life, especially in relation to colleagues and supervisors. In some organizations, there may be only a rare occasion when the organizational story does not fit the writer's experience or knowledge. In others, such a conflict can be a constant of daily life. A staff assistant or a manager may see the difference between stated policy and actual practice. A professor may be surprised by the story the college catalog presents to the outside world. But for the writer, there is the pressure not

only to affirm the organization's conduct but to avoid communication that might cast doubt upon his or her *capacity* to affirm it. A writer's inquiring or deliberative tone might be interpreted as "indecisive" or "negative." Your intended reader may want to know what to *do*, not what to doubt or ponder.

Communication is greatly simplified if both reader and writer share the organizational point of view. But the price for such consensus is often high. While the formats for writing in organizations—different memo forms, models for correspondence, guidelines for research summaries and proposals—seem to require objectivity, they reenforce the underlying, subjective version of the organization's conduct. The pressure of this injunction to display an unquestioning, positive attitude while writing from the accepted point of view, stifles thinking and undermines the writing process and product.

Tact

Tact supports this commitment to an organizational stance: no matter what a writer has to say, it is almost always more important to say it in the *right* way than to say it at all. If there is room for negotiation or dialogue, it is initiated through an understanding of the vulnerabilities of those above and below the writer in the department or agency. Skill in working with others takes on a special quality in the day-to-day life of an organization because it signifies not only maturity but predictability. Professionally, for a writer, this predictability may become far more important than identifying problems, proposing alternatives, or resolving conflicts. But it is an expectation that wrecks havoc on his or her capacity to think clearly. Anyone with supervisory responsibility in small or large organizations understands the appeal of these attitudinal expectations. But when they pressure writers to contribute to an *illusion* of meaning, they create a communication problem that corrodes an organization from within.

Almost all of my writing clients from business and government have been convinced, at one time or another, that writing is a matter of affirming the values and goals of those above them in a hierarchy. The

concept of "telling them what they want to hear" is reflected daily in a sluggish flow of documents, memos, and letters, few of which are worth reading, although we may be required to write or to respond to them. Such writing assignments contain no *argument;* no deliberation. We recognize useless writing, but we don't have a sense of how to make *good* writing matter in an organization. We feel helpless to change the environment.

People who complain about the writing in an organization generally mean one of two things: either the writing isn't clear, or the writing doesn't "look" professional. But "clear" writing about a point not worth making, or empty correspondence perfected by a word processor's spelling checker, deepens the communication problem. The self-defeating effects of inadequate or cynical writing expectations may be delayed, but they are inevitable.

As people who write, *we* all feel much more resilient and energetic than the uniform writing code permits. We have far more creativity than our organizations elicit from us. If an organization defines dependability for its writers as a positive, tactful, loyal approach and style, it cannot realistically expect writing to be clear, responsible, and powerful. Especially under pressure, the code conflicts with our struggle to write well because that struggle always requires the writer to take responsibility for his or her own words.

Brevity

In any organization, brevity is the familiar ideal of writing. People in general—especially people under pressure—admire writing that "doesn't waste words." These injunctions carry over from our school days: "Cut all excess words," or "Be concise." The theory makes sense: never use a word unless it contributes to meaning. But in practice, this expectation creates confusion and fear. People try to be brief instead of explaining what they mean, or struggling to put their ideas into words. In institutions, these fears are sometimes linked with professional survival. A cabinet secretary gave classic expression to the organizational ideal of brevity some years ago: "Anything that can't be put

down on one page isn't worth reading.'' The damage within the department and outside resulting from people trying to live up to such a foolish ideal can be enormous.

Given the amount of writing we all read in organizations, this pressure for brevity is certainly understandable. Even before scientists, doctors, and scholars began to complain that they could no longer keep up with the literature in their fields, people in business and government were swamped by reports, memos, documents, and articles they were expected to read, analyze, and respond to every day. But if there is so much writing, and so little of it is worth reading, why hasn't the ideal of brevity been the obvious solution?

This paradox results from a failure to distinguish between causes and symptoms. Brevity is valued as an organizational skill to resolve the crush of time and information. But in a context in which a positive approach, tact, and loyalty to an organizational point of view are insistent pressures on the writer, brevity becomes a quality of *appearance*, not of meaning. Writers with a great deal of experience learn to squeeze as much meaning as they can into each word and sentence, and to take out every word that does not count. Their priority is not a word count, but fitting meaning to a structure that efficiently and adequately expresses it. But under the pressure to be brief, people without much writing experience fail to explain their ideas, conclusions, and recommendations. They leave out those connections that give their arguments coherence and unity. That is why we read so many memos, letters, and reports that make almost no sense at all. In some cases, they present the disconnected, fragmented surface of an unarticulated argument. In others, they offer little more than an assertion without evidence, compactly crafted to the assumed needs of a particular reader.

How could it be otherwise? Being brief is a blessing if writing has a point to make, and evidence to support it. But it may be impossible to make that point and support it in one page, or even in one hundred. I remember reading a one-page summary of a one-thousand-page report that had taken eight people six months to write. Even the summary, on the basis of which a cabinet secretary made his decision, consisted of half a page of titles and numbers identifying the manager of the project.

The report's recommendations, compressed into a few sentences, affected thousands of people, and involved a great deal of money and resources. But reduced to a few lines, these recommendations lost their rough edges, their indigenous warning signals, their internal conflicts. They were reduced to little more than a predictable slogan. The research may as well never have been done. You might argue that there is a time for thinking and a time for acting. But the appearance of efficiency was deceptive and dangerous. The cabinet secretary's demand for brevity neither ensured efficiency within his department nor, ultimately, hid the actual chaos from public view.

Instead of inspiring intense research, analysis, evaluation, and then compression, the writing code moves people in the opposite direction. If a writer knows that only his or her recommendation will be considered, and if he or she is expected to anticipate the recommendation the reader wants to hear, then the whole process of research and writing takes on the air of a performance, the appearance of thought, not the process and product of thinking. If the one-page summary of a report is written by someone who did not do the research, and who interposes his or her own interpretation of what the reader wants (or ought) to hear, then brevity reenforces confusion and even deception.

The pressure of time is not an excuse for incomplete, confusing, or misleading writing. The problem lies in a concept of efficiency that at best fails to take into account the nature of good writing, and at worst seeks to streamline policy around the values, goals, or work habits of a few people. It may be that describing gray areas, raising ethical questions, or analyzing the nature of a policy will slow readers down. But the virtue of good organizational writing is that it enables a reader who has delegated thinking and writing to others to examine material more thoroughly, and compare alternatives.

Brevity is not the cure for the communication problem. It may be one of the causes. As an abstract notion, brevity can be a comfort to people who don't want to read. But as a concrete reality of day-to-day life in organizations, where people inexperienced in the process and product of writing abide by a code of tact and team spirit, brevity becomes the resolution of an inability to think issues through.

"Tell Me What You Want Me to Say"

It's not surprising that writers in organizations struggle to discover what their readers want to hear. But in this kind of environment, communication becomes a self-sealed system with a restricted set of permissible statements within a rigid format. Thinking and meaning give way to affirmation and the appearance of meaning. Brevity, reenforcing appearance, narrows the channel of communication and clogs the flow of creative energy.

The effect of the code on the individual writer is equally dramatic. People who return to school for mid-career degrees or executive training programs find it hard to explain what they think, or to give evidence for why they think it. Habituated to the shorthand of their own organizations, and to meeting the narrow expectations of an audience which has power over them, they find it difficult to criticize underlying assumptions, consider other perspectives, or integrate their own experiences with new information and ideas. The uniform writing code has resulted in a model of communication that is the antithesis of discovering and presenting meaning. The writer's process of finding out what he or she thinks, of using writing as a way to discover meaning, has atrophied in the practice of telling readers what they want to hear. Once people realize they have more to offer, more to say, and better ways of saying it, they may try to change the environment to encourage better writing. But there is an even more fundamental problem, over which the individual writer has almost no control, contributing an enormous pressure against good writing: we all inherit the dialects of our organizations.

Dialects

Business, government, and the professions have idiosyncratic, exclusive languages of their own. These dialects are often the subject of satire. There are recurring lists of words that shouldn't be used, and classic examples of indecipherable or absurd memos. The older lists are fascinating as verbal nostalgia. Looking back over the last thirty years or so, we can review our history through the words, phrases, and metaphors that saturated the language: ''separate but equal,'' ''domino

theory,'' ''the light at the end of the tunnel,'' ''trickle down.'' Contemporary lists of words that have lost their meaning may help make us self-conscious about the words we use. But while these lists give us insight into the relationship between language and culture, they remind us of how vulnerable we are in our search for meaning. Dead words replace living ones, and diminish our capacity to discover and present ideas. Dialects are not simply a shorthand to save time but a protective covering for the ingrained policies and practices of an organization.

To gain some perspective on the pressure these dialects exert on writers, imagine a software program that incorporated all current and past lists of dead words and rejected them in our letters, memos, and reports. This would certainly shorten our documents. What would remain?

Try this with one of the documents that comes across your desk. Cross out everything that doesn't convey fresh meaning, even the old standby, ''You have asked me to . . .'' (you knew that already, and so did the writer). Then read it again, to take out everything that the writer has put in simply to win you over to his or her message. Take out everything that merely demonstrates a positive attitude, tact, or loyalty to the organization.

There probably isn't much left over. But that's not as surprising as the *nature* of what remains. Instead of the kernel of an idea or the real substance of a proposal, as you might expect, there are only fragments of both. What's left is not the essence of the subject, but the introduction to an argument or an explanation. As the reader, you're probably left with a question like: ''Yes, but *why?*'' or ''What do you mean?''

Perhaps you missed something. But if you go back over what you have cut, all you'll find are those dead words, the stroking words to win the reader over, the words and phrases that automatically accompany certain formats. For all its pragmatic appearance, the substance of much organizational writing is not explicit but implicit. What is explicit is not terribly complicated, and usually not very useful. What is implicit is fascinating, but often confused, fragmented, and unresolved. Part of the function of a dialect is to obscure this confusion. In any piece or organizational writing there is an inherent tension between surface appearance and inner turmoil.

It is extremely difficult to subdue language in this way and then try to use it to write with clarity and power. Writers in societies less free than our own have had to depend on allegory, symbolism, or fantasy to circumvent moral or political censorship. But the potential for discovering meaning is one of the main reasons why writing is useful, and why the possibility of sharing that discovery with a reader is so exhilarating. That is where jargon and dialect fit in, and why they survive. Dead words take up the space that thought might fill. In an environment in which fresh, passionate thinking is unsettling, adherence to a dialect constitutes a message in itself: that the usual rules apply, that the hierarchy is in order. This is how we know we can ignore almost everything that comes across our desk unless we find a key word or a phrase that calls for closer attention. We can skim with confidence because there will be no surprises, nothing fresh to respond to or consider.

The languages of organizations and professions are filled with indigenous jargon. Even highly trained writers who use a dialect self-consciously, with irony or chagrin, can be convinced of its necessity. People with little writing experience may not even question a dialect, struggling instead to become proficient at it. But organizational languages encode conflicting ideas, values, and goals, and cancel out meaning. Jargon survives not because we are lax in weeding out the latest vicious set of meaningless or overused words, but because the words we use often have more to do with survival in an organization than with fresh ideas, clarity of analysis, or meaning.

Our organizational dialects code the underlying assumptions of our work lives. They allow us the brevity, decisiveness, and loyalty we admire, under the pressures of time and the need for tact. But they make it difficult to *think* on paper; and in narrowing the basis for taking responsibility for meaning, they obscure information, confuse analysis, and undermine communication.

From "I" to "It"

Nothing points up the loss of the writer's responsibility for meaning more vividly than abandoning the first-person pronoun, "I," in favor of its organizational or professional surrogate, "It is to be believed. . . ."

Although it raises the word count, this shift to passivity, ostensibly to prevent subjectivity, saves the reader time. "I" can be troublesome, raising time-consuming questions: "Who is the writer? Has he or she any right to claim my attention? From what point of view is this person speaking?" By avoiding the first person pronoun, the writer participates in an institutional authority.

Science writing long ago established a peculiar authority for impersonality and the use of passive voice. This machine-style prose, apparently swept clean of personal interest, gathers into itself a kind of generalized responsibility: the *organization,* or the *profession* speaks, not the individual whose thoughts, whether superficial or thoroughly supported, are expressed in his or her own style and voice. The distinction between "It" and "I" is certainly not the difference between objectivity and subjectivity. In organizations, it is more often the difference between obedience and responsibility. With impersonal language that studiously avoids the first person pronoun, it is often impossible to trace the history of a decision in an organization. Instead of insuring objectivity, the shift from "I" to "It" protects subjectivity from analysis and judgment.

The impersonality of business, government, and professional writing not only inhibits thinking, but permits all kinds of mischief. In a discussion among collegues about the war in Vietnam an economist referred over and over again to "human resource units": moving two hundred thousand here, a hundred thousand there. I envisioned the docks in Oakland filled with neatly stacked cardboard boxes, but when I asked him about it, he seemed puzzled: "Human resource units? They're *people,* of course." I'm sure that is perfectly good professional shorthand, but it is an example of the mischief dialects create: language stripped of human reference, content devoid of humanity. The shift from "I" to "It" (reenforced by teachers at every level of education) pressures us to separate thoughts and feelings from responsibility.

The Ethics of the Uniform Writing Code

The uniform writing code at its best elicits compact, supportive writing. If it is done well, the writing will distinguish clearly among various

perspectives, needs, or clients. But not many writers have the confidence and experience to overcome the destructive pressures of the code. In many organizational settings, conversations among people who work well together are more important than the written word in making policy or adopting new ideas. Writing, by people not involved in the original discussions, *follows* such conversations. The writer's work is seen as a service: making clear, lobbying for, or enforcing decisions made by others. Since there is almost always this distance between the decision-maker and the writer, it is easy to see why there is so much frustration and disappointment with organizational writing. If you are in a supervisory position, you want to hire people whose job is to write what you meant to say, or would say if you had the time or skill. But that service function as it exists throughout a hierarchy is neither one of the great virtues of good writing nor one of the inducements for writers to struggle to write well.

If writing in an organization was simply a service, all the books and courses on business or government writing would long ago have solved the communication problem. These textbooks are full of sample letters, and the courses are full of memo exercises. There is a general understanding that writing should be brief and clear. Yet much of the writing in organizations is unreadable because of the inherent conflict between obedience and responsibility.

The documentary history of the Vietnam war, the correspondence leading up to the Challenger tragedy, and the developing history of the Iran-Contra scheme provide countless examples of memos, position papers, reports, and letters that adhere to the uniform writing code. They are impersonal, decisive, and loyal, and they are expressed in the appropriate style and language. Yet they are terrible pieces of writing which have caused tremendous suffering. Reading them over, anyone would wonder how the gaps in thinking, the incompleteness of evidence, and the bizarre fantasies expressed in dehumanized dialects could have escaped notice. But the writing code forces words and responsibility apart. At any point in any of these tragedies, a writer could say, in his or her own defense, "I was only doing my job."

Obedience and good writing do not mix. Writing well, especially under pressure, requires hard thinking and taking responsibility for

one's words. It's no wonder that so many people in organizations adopt the code without question. Responsibility for a policy, a product, or a program is a heavy burden, but the uniform code disperses responsibility: no one takes the blame. In such an environment bad writing drives out the good. If the environment hardens into regimented affirmation, implementing policies that cannot be continuously analyzed and evaluated, it becomes unstable and dangerous. When incomplete, biased, or deliberately misleading writing pierces the walls of an institution and enters the public domain, it causes considerable damage. Writing is no different from any other skill that combines carftsmanship and art. You can apply a brilliant coat of words to a deteriorating argument, or persuade people that a glittering fantasy is a sturdy possibility. But these uses of language undermine communication.

To say that we have a ''communication problem'' is to identify an issue much deeper than spelling, jargon, tone, or format. Writing is hard enough. To find ideas that matter and words to express them requires patience and confidence, in situations characterized by insecurity. Writing in organizations is embedded in still another layer of pressure: telling readers what they want to hear. How do people resolve these pressures and produce thoughtful, clear, powerful writing? Part of the answer is that writers in organizations have to do *more* of the kinds of things every writer must do: more preparing and planning, more sifting of thoughts, more balancing of writer's and reader's needs. Organizational writing has a responsibility to educate its readers. Writers have to press for authentic communication in everything they write, whether to a supervisor, a customer, or a colleague. To write well in an organization one must overcome a communal numbness to meaning, and begin to help people develop the skill of good reading. Writers and readers form the act of communication together, and they both must take responsibility for it. Our ''communication problem'' will not be solved by isolated writers toiling to find the right tone or the appropriate format, but by organizations transforming the pressures of the environment in such a way that effective communication is possible.

CHAPTER

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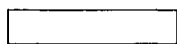
Improving Organizational Writing

Improving the Process and Product

Enriching Writing

Keats' advice in a letter to Shelley to "load every rift in your subject with ore," may strike you as far removed from writing in organizations. But in their effort to pack meaning into the fewest words, and to be visually clear on the page, poets share a good deal with the writers of memos, letters and manuals. However different in motivation and in intended audience, good poetry and good organizational writing resemble each other in distilling meaning to evoke an immediate response. In poetry, the private effect on the reader can be enduring. In organizational writing, the effect is social and catalytic. But the compactness of poetry and of organizational writing creates an opportunity for immediate, powerful communication. Wallace Stevens, the American poet, worked as the vice president of an insurance company. He participated in both worlds: that of the patient writer creating art for its own sake, and that of the businessman admired for the clarity and power of his correspondence. The supreme poet as successful businessman points to an unexpected relationship between thought and action.

Imagination and Power

We rarely have an opportunity for self-expression beyond the circle of people close to us. Writing in an organization allows us to cross those

boundaries, but this privilege exacts compromises. We are expected to adopt a non-critical approach, tactfully working within appropriate formats in a coded language. We rely on institutionalized authority. We substitute a superficial efficiency for ethical responsibility. In these ways, the potential power involved in writing for others is carefully circumscribed by the environment. Personal writing does not have the capability for immediate social impact, but it offers the writer the satisfaction of crafting a lasting product according to his or her deepest vision. The two kinds of writing exemplify complementary passions in a writer, one promoting action, and the other creating meaning.

But organizational writing is usually mission-oriented, emphasizing action and product over thought and process. That is why it is much harder to do well than most people realize, and is so difficult to improve. To write deeply and analytically about a subject without reference to a deadline would be futile in an organization: such writing would not find an eager audience, and would be rendered useless once the time for decision or action had passed. But to write shallowly and quickly, simply to fulfill the short-term needs of an intended reader, undermines the decision-making process. In both cases, the writer works from weakness, not strength. Yet the memos, letters, and proposals that people admire are almost always characterized by fresh ideas presented within a comprehensive perspective. In structure and content, they reflect Keats' ideal of loading every rift with ore; in organizations, where people chronically say too little, too much is never enough. To improve communication, thought and action, and imagination and power, must reenforce each other. In order to achieve this integration we need to redefine economy in writing.

Economy Follows Analysis

Economy is among the most sophisticated of writing skills. It does not result from cutting out all excess words, but from determining what you think, and then conveying it fully, forcefully, and efficiently to the reader. Poets, selecting as few words as possible, create symbols, and orchestrate the music of their words to make the transfer of meaning

immediate. Metaphors, whether in poems or political speeches, connote much more to the reader or listener than their few words denote.

Economy *follows* analysis. You can only reduce something to its simplest terms if you understand it in its most complicated terms. The writer's private thought processes are made public through precise explanations that represent the twists, turns, and connections that led to meaning. Three different acts are involved: finding out what you think; clarifying the connections among your ideas; and integrating them for a reader. The first is an intense search, the second a disciplined analysis, and the third a focused presentation. Compression of meaning and adequate representation are not steps to be added on to the writing process as you might run a final draft through a word processor's spelling checker. For the poet, the risk of compression is that meaning becomes too private, inaccessible to readers. In organizations, the risk is that form substitutes for content. It *is* possible to write briefly and well, but it requires thorough analysis as the basis for clear, compact presentation.

Thinking in Three Dimensions

Authentic writing can only arise from fresh, comprehensive thinking, an activity that often has a low priority under the pressure of organizational life. Some people may not even realize what they are missing. By way of analogy, imagine that I have reached the end of a transatlantic flight to Boston. My fellow passenger slides his calculator into his attaché case and stands up, ready to leave.

"What's that book you've been reading?" he asks.

"*War and Peace,*" I say.

"Oh, what's that about, anyway?"

The two of us move down the aisle with our bags. I only have a minute to characterize the novel, so there's not much hope. "It's about Russia," I say. "In the nineteenth century."

It sounds silly. I could have said something about the contrast between Pierre and Prince Andrei, or the relationship between the setting of the novel and its themes—something to give a sense of what the book says, or what it means to me.

"I don't read very much," the traveller says, putting on his jacket. "Skip the frills. Give me the main point."

I hold up the book, laughing: "This has lots of frills."

But the truth is that it *doesn't*. The characters, incidents, and themes are the main point, the "meaning" of *War and Peace*. They represent the resolution of years of struggle on the part of the writer, clearly revealed in wide manuscript sheets full of minute additions in both margins. That is why I feel silly about my two-dimensional response, locating the book in space and time as a dictionary might: "Russia, in the nineteenth century." How could I put my feelings about the one-thousand-page book into a few sentences? Could I have described the tremendous power that gathers as you read through the novel? If my fellow passenger had asked, "Why do people say it's such a great book?" or "Why do *you* like it?", it might have been easier. But the neutral question, "What's that about?", was an even greater burden because I felt a responsibility to be objective.

Now compare my ineffective answer to this imprecise question with the task of writing a one-page summary of a one-thousand-page report for a cabinet secretary. The writer of the summary may or may not have been one of the researchers, may or may not understand the conclusions, may or may not agree with them, and may simply decide to tell what he or she thinks the secretary wants to hear. Each of these margins for error regularly causes trouble in organizational writing, but they all matter less than the simple fact that you can only give a certain kind of answer in one line or one page, or in a particular format. Whether or not it is free of the familiar organizational tension between appearance and meaning, the answer will be linear and narrow. The secretary may want that, for the sake of efficiency, but will be getting the illusion of efficiency while sacrificing meaning. To improve communication in organizations we have to change the way we evaluate information, especially under pressure.

Analysis and the Axes of Evaluation

With questions that require quick thinking on issues affecting many people, what should you put in and what should you leave out? Suppose the question were: "What can we do to improve our students' writ-

ing?'', or "What should we try to accomplish at the national con-
ference?'', or "How can we get the engineers to communicate with the
sales force?'' Under the usual pressures, we would piece together an
answer that: (1) would not cost the organization very much; and (2)
would not upset anyone above us, or needlessly concern anyone below
us whose support we need. But our answer might be entirely off the
point of the question. Confined to the two dimensions of budget and
teamwork, both filled with assumptions that may or may not be accu-
rate, we get our part of the job done quickly and obediently, and pass on
the responsibility for thinking hard about the real question to someone
else.

"Who will this rub the wrong way?" (or, at higher levels in the
hierarchy, "How will this make us look?''), and "How much will it
cost?'' are the organizational counterparts of time and space in my one-
line description of *War and Peace*. They are the customary, easily
identifiable axes for our two-dimensional, organizational answers. They
don't arise from an analysis of a problem, but from an anticipation of
how an answer will be evaluated, even when the basis for evaluation
may be inadequate. These axes of evaluation confine answers to the
needs of the immediate reader, a supervisor or section head, leaving
little room for the analytical dimension and the long-range perspective
that are the real strengths of good writing. I might have told my fellow
passenger that *War and Peace* was about the way we shape our souls
amid the pressures of the world. That's not so two-dimensional, and
contains something of the struggle to bring my thoughts and feelings to
bear on the question—the kernel of an idea. That answer might have
prompted another question from the traveller, or at least given him a
thought to ponder. It would not have given him the illusion of under-
standing something extremely complicated that is difficult to explain in
a quick answer.

Any piece of writing that neglects an analysis of the question, and of
the writer's assumptions about communicating meaning to the reader,
will be narrow and incomplete. It will reveal a conflict between mean-
ing and the appearance of meaning. Such writing is what people refer to
when they say that there is a communication problem in their organiza-
tion. They may not be experts in writing, but they know something is
wrong. They may think it would be solved if people spelled and punctu-

ated correctly, or if they cut out all excess words and got directly to the point. But the real problem is the writers' resignation, fear, or simple lack of experience in authentic writing for good readers. One page of timid writing, punctuated perfectly in a visibly structured layout, with a recommendation in boldface type, is still timid. Worse, it gives both writer and reader the illusion of communication. We know this as readers, but we don't know what to do about it. If the organization's lines of communication carry only narrow, predictable thoughts, writers become frustrated, and then cynical about their words.

The few good memos, letters, and reports we see are memorable. They are written on the assumption that there is much more to say than can ever be put down on paper. The writer's job is not to reduce all thought to dictionary-like definitions, but to represent as much meaning—and the context for that meaning—as possible. The organization's policy may or may not be based on the two-dimensional axes of "How does this make us look?" and "How much will it cost?" But the writer can address each question as a request, whether explicit or not, for fresh ideas and a comprehensive perspective.

On a grid composed of the two-dimensional axes of evaluation, ideas are guilty until proven useful by external pressures; even if a writer discovers something new there may be no audience for it. No one can write well, for long, under these conditions. If people resign themselves to this fate, their writing becomes detached, unimaginative, and predictable. They produce writing that does not need to be read. One of the functions of any piece of writing in an organization is to provide wisdom about the process of thinking questions through: not backing away from meaning, but arguing clearly and tactfully for it.

The Mask of Formality and the Conversational Ideal

When two people talk, they have the opportunity to build something together:

> "You know," one says, "we really should. . . ."
> "Yes," the other replies, "but to do that we'd have to. . . ."

  "Well, couldn't we . . . ?"
  "Sure, but we'd have to lay that out clearly."
  "But could we afford . . . ?"
  "It might cost less than what we're doing now. Let's not worry
about that until we see if it works."

Some version of this conversation takes place in an office, corridor,
or laboratory every day in every organization, accomplishing more in a
few minutes than months of memos and reports. A flowing, energetic
conversation is exciting because it involves both speakers in creating
something useful. They can exchange perspectives, experiences, and
ideas in building a concept that is stronger than what either of them
could achieve alone. Such conversations depend on trust and directness,
and freedom from the confined, coded language of formal written com-
munication. For almost everyone in organizations, the ease and energy
of such conversations make writing seem dull and tedious.

But if either participant in our imaginary dialogue wrote a memo
about this conversation to a third person, it would contain little sense of
excitement and enthusiasm. The memo would be formal, ostensibly
objective, and written as if by a machine rather than a person with
energy and ideas. The writer would struggle with appearance (headings,
bullets, graphics), and format (should this be a "discussion" memo or
an "action" memo?). He or she would be tactfully attentive to the
particular needs of those above, below, and to the side of the organiza-
tion. But the excitement of active participation in creating meaning
would be missing.

Under the pressure of organizational writing, the formal appearance
of our letters and memos gives them an illusory finality. That is why a
proposal with completely unacceptable arguments, unsupported by any
substantial evidence, in page after page of somber, formal language,
will be received *as if* it were a serious document. Its immediate effect
within the organization will be political. But the wasted effort in re-
sponse to it diminishes trust and corrodes the lines of communication.
In a conversation, such a tactic could be countered directly, but in
dense, formal prose, it exerts a cumulative psychological impact far
beyond what the individual writer imagines.

The quick, rough writing we do in organizations, lacking the clarity

of a well-thought-out-argument, appears to be "final." Yet if formality masks lack of preparation or analysis under pressure, it drains the meaning and energy from carefully prepared arguments. The result is the flat, dull writing we all hate to waste our time reading. People in organizations take the life out of their writing because they think they are supposed to, in the same way that they think they are supposed to write oversimplified memos and reports. The remedy for this loss of vitality in communication is to restore the writer's responsibility.

Restoring the Writer's Responsibility

Good writing cannot exist in a vacuum, because it requires good readers. While readers are not likely to acknowledge this, writers know it and often feel hopeless about it. In many organizations, writers assume that the intended reader already has defined the issue. They assume their job is simply to meet the reader's needs in a dependable, predictable way. Books and courses about organizational writing reenforce this notion. They present models of tactful, formal letters, memos, press releases, and speeches in conventional formats, tailored to readers above, below, and to the side of the writer, and to people outside. But writing that makes a difference bursts the restraints of conventional formats with fresh analysis, genuine energy, and personal voice.

Good organizational writing takes little for granted. It poses useful questions and defines issues in incisive ways. Recommendations are presented in the context of enlightening comparisons, choices, and alternatives. The language is active, fresh, and alive, to engage a reader in completing the act of communication. To achieve these qualities, the writer must meet his or her reader's stated or assumed requirements, and go beyond, to broaden the channel for communication—whether or not the reader is aware of the need.

There are, of course, situations in which the writer is *not* expected to communicate as, for example, when issues are "staffed out" expressly to stall for time. Such bureaucratic strategies may be part of an administrative style, but it would be far better for the writer to turn in blank sheets, or printed flash cards reading "Not in today," than to short-

circuit the communication process. (Consider what it would do to a tennis player to insist that she lose a match for the good of the team.) Even more oppressive is the common situation in which a writer has learned through repeated experience that no matter what he or she writes, the reader will ignore it, or use it within the organization for a different purpose from what the writer intended. It is useless to talk about improving writing if writers have so little control over the expectations for authenticity in an organization.

Good writers are flexible, and can adapt their skills to a variety of situations. The need for this versatility is nowhere so strong as in organizations. It is often necessary, under the pressure of time, to write from the materials at hand rather than from carefully sifted research. QWP can help the writer make the most of what he or she has to say, and to acknowledge what is missing. But skill and power are not at issue if someone is asked to do writing that is futile. Restoring a writer's sense of responsibility for his or her own words, in an authentic context, will help prevent the conflicts with the environment that inevitably erode skill and power.

Organizations conceive of writers as providing a neutral service in the same way that engineers contribute to projects whether or not they "approve" of the result. Writers are expected to do their jobs objectively, writing clearly and positively, on demand. The uniform writing code is the policy for implementing these expectations. Although engineers and scientists can refuse to work on certain projects, writers are expected to confirm and support. But if an organization defines the dependent writer's professional responsibility as a function of loyalty, then his or her writing cannot prevent mischief, and may instead contribute to it. It is neither "objective" nor "professional" to compose inaccurate or misleading writing. It may be "loyal," but it is unethical. One necessary step in improving writing in organizations is to open up communication so that people take responsibility for what they say, and what they refrain from saying. Then, there will be far less wasted time, and far more energy for genuine communication.

Power in writing can come from meaning; but it can also come from the appearance of meaning. In the long run, the appearance of meaning (a company "story" that is essentially a fantasy; an administrative line

that has no connection with reality; a fraudulent research project) becomes an obsession, requiring disproportionate amounts of time and energy. Words can have power when they are separated from wisdom. Part of a writer's responsibility in an organization is to struggle constantly for meaning, and to try to make that struggle matter.

Improving the Environment

Providing a Framework for the Question

A quick, spontaneous page or two, written without reference to any sort of self-censorship, will help a writer sort through conflicting issues or constituencies. This initial "treatment" serves some of the same constructive purpose as talking through a subject with an objective listener. When you read it over, you find, especially in your own resistance to spontaneity, those unresolved issues that may create confusion. You will also discover ideas or examples that reveal your own interest in the subject.

This is particularly important when a question delivered to the writer under pressure is accepted as an ultimatum. Experienced writers shape questions so that the process of answering them will bring out their best energies. An initial treatment can give you a sense of the scope, scale, and style of the whole project, and a usable framework for generating the provisional thesis and *because*-clauses. Within the piece of writing, this framework, communicated explicitly to your reader, becomes a road map to your argument. Within the organization, this framework can become a new way of looking at the question.

Engaging Your Readers

If you talk through a writing assignment with your intended reader, you may discover that he or she has been unable to frame the question adequately. Especially under pressure, people often don't know what they really want to know, or they have an imprecise conception of what

writing can and cannot do to clarify or solve a problem. Successful managers and supervisors in organizations have the tenacity and experience to stick with projects from inception to implementation. But while they may understand that policies or products arise from false starts, dead ends, redefinitions, and endless revisions, they may not be aware that writing is the same sort of process. The QWP writer who has prepared and planned a writing project is in an excellent position to help the intended reader redefine his or her question.

Such conversations enable writers and their readers to discover things they did not know about the issue, and about the way each sees the issue. They also discover how the project is important—its context. These discoveries sharpen the question and shape the design for the answer. As more and more people get a realistic sense of the value of authentic writing, and of how it is accomplished, they learn to frame questions more effectively, improving communication throughout the organization. QWP enables you to write well, on time; but under the pressures of organizational life, you have to engage others actively in the writing process, particularly those people who ask (or pay) you to write for them.

A Community of Readers

Where there is poor communication, there is not likely to be a habit of constructive feedback, of give and take about a piece of writing. Without the expectation of feedback, there is little impetus to improve writing. Writers in feedback-poor organizations withdraw from taking risks; eventually, *thinking* itself comes to be seen as a risk.

Constructive Feedback

Constructive feedback is different from "criticism." A person giving feedback is not expected to be an expert on style, or grammar, or even punctuation. He or she is simply expected to tell you how your writing "works." The importance of this distinction is worth exploring. A high school guidance counsellor was amazed when students brought in per-

fect drafts of their college application essays the day after they had discussed the rough drafts with him.

"I don't get that kind of dedication out of my creative writing class," he said.

I asked him to explain the difference between his teaching and his counselling.

"I told them how their essays *sounded,* what I thought they had left out. I didn't mention grammar or spelling until the end. The important thing was for them to say what they really wanted to say because that's what the colleges are looking for."

Student and counsellor could work together without the authoritarian pressure of the classroom on a genuine piece of writing that was worth the effort to improve. But in the process, the counsellor discovered the distinction between feedback and criticism. People criticize writing when they tell the writer what he or she has done wrong, what rules or conventions have been broken. A critic speaks as an authority, holding up an abstract although subjective (and perhaps inappropriate) ideal. But constructive feedback depends on *listening* for meaning, for interruptions in the flow of energy and in the clarity of the writer's voice. Criticism is an act performed by the critic without much regard for what comes after. Feedback, on the other hand, is a gift from the reader to the writer, with the intention of helping improve the writing process and product.

Such an exchange *is* possible in an organizational setting, but it is hard to establish an atmosphere that permits it. Few people see themselves as good writers. Even fewer see themselves as knowledgeable about writing. They are eager to disqualify themselves as constructive readers. But feedback depends only on a reader's willingness to help the writer see his or her work from a fresh perspective. In a community of people willing to help each other with writing, feedback helps define the question, resolve a writing block, improve a roughly final draft, or polish the final copy. In such an atmosphere, too, group writing projects derive the benefits of different perspectives and skills.

There is no surer way to improve writing in an organization than to create this atmosphere of constructive feedback. People come to expect it, and then to depend on it as a natural part of their writing process. In such an environment, energy and creativity flourish.

Authentic Writing in Organizations

I began Chapter 13 with the question: ''What could be more exciting for a writer than discovering ideas and words that help people make decisions or take actions?'' The few people who have this opportunity on a grand scale are usually well supported by staff and protected from pressure by hierarchy. But on a smaller scale, in our own daily opportunities to communicate, we can transform the task of writing what people may want to hear (which is usually far less than they need to know or we need to say), into a process of empowering ourselves and others to ask, to learn, and to say more.

Organizational writing is harder to do well than most other kinds of writing. In addition to the ordinary work of preparing, planning, generating, and producing, you have to educate your reader about writing. You have to hold the line against any sort of pressure from the environment that impedes thinking, and then try to reach a specific audience. You need to develop your own voice, your own writing process in the midst of arbitrary or self-defeating pressures for homogenization and routinization. And you have to do the best you can with your own writing to inspire and invigorate the reading and writing of others.

You may have to say ''no'' sometimes. You may have to acknowledge what you don't know, or haven't had time to find out. You may have to learn how some people mean what they say. You will have to help people understand what you have to say. Your work will then present an alternative to the common expectation of thin, dull, predictable writing, and your capacity to discuss ideas, talk through problems, and work with other people will reflect a more practical, more humane organizational style.

QWP and the Uniform Writing Code

Every piece of writing says something about its subject and about the possibility of authentic communication. Conscious writing that is carefully prepared, skillfully planned, freely generated, and energetically produced opens the channel for communication. If, in addition, you help clarify unrealistic expectations that either diminish or overwhelm the writing process and product, persuade others to discuss what good

writing means, and apply steady pressure for constructive feedback, then you will contribute solidly to improving the environment.

The more people talk about the writing they do in organizations, the more likely they are to overcome the self-defeating limitations of the uniform writing code. No one should be let off the hook. Good writing is hard work, made all the harder in an environment in which people are allowed to plead ignorance, or say they haven't the time, or that it isn't their job. Good writing requires good readers. Moreover, involving readers in this search for meaning is humanizing work. Part of the excitement in writing for others is this opportunity for authentic contact.

Writing well under pressure in an organization means reuniting thoughts and words. It is a risky and difficult job. The goal may not always be the comfort of the reader. The capacity to write well is easily taken hostage under the pressure of a classroom, a profession, an organization, or a culture. People can be persuaded that they have no right to speak, that they should wait until they have the proper credentials, or that they ought to say only what others want to hear. They can be made to fear teachers, peers, supervisors, or colleagues. But what does "free speech" mean if we give only certain people the right to speak?

An Organizational Writing Agenda

(A) Preparing
   (1) Resolve the writing issues raised by the uniform writing code: the abstract pressure for brevity; a professional dialect; the substitution of impersonal authority, tone, and style for individual responsibility and personal voice.
   (2) Begin the writing process with a sense of responsibility for the meaning of your product.
(B) Planning
   (1) Sketch out a realistic QWP timetable.
   (2) Plan for too *much* material, in order to compress and represent analysis, evidence, and perspective adequately.
   (3) Plan a structure that will portray the energy and dynam-

ics of a dialectical conversation instead of an abstract notion of formality.

(C) Generating

(1) Engage the reader in the writing process; talk through the project, and establish a basis for feedback.

(2) Create an adequate framework for longer projects by writing a quick "treatment" that sharpens the scope, scale, and style of the project, and will provide the reader with a road map of your argument.

(3) Generate the provisional thesis and *because*-clauses freely, without self- or organizational censorship.

(4) Analyze the clauses into the argument-outline of an authentic response to the question, acknowledging what you don't know or haven't had time to discover.

(5) Include an authentic account of the "other side."

(D) Producing

(1) Promote an atmosphere of give and take about writing in progress, especially after the first cuts on the raw draft.

(2) Carry out the QWP agenda through the roughly final draft to the proofread final copy with as much feedback as possible.

(3) Maintain a policy that authenticates your own work, and raises the level of literacy throughout the organization.

CHAPTER

15

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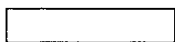
Becoming Independent Writers

Integrating the Writing Process and Product

Writers constantly shuttle between extremes. In constructing a piece of writing the writer goes through two distinct forms of activity: the *process* of discovery, and the *presentation* of his or her discoveries. We know from experience that when our writing is going well these two extremes of spontaneity and conscious control reenforce each other. The goal of QWP is to help the writer achieve this integration.

The QWP system envisions writing as a continuous process, from defining the writer's relationship to the reader and the environment, to estimating the scope, scale, and style of each project. You plan the structure of your answer around meaning, transforming the topic or question into a provisional thesis supported by *because*-clauses. You gain perspective on gathering, selecting, and ordering material by talking through a subject or a writing block with an objective listener. For longer or more complicated projects, you start with a provisional "treatment" as a road map, or as a working framework for moving from argument-outline to raw draft. You record emerging themes in your research journal, and then gather them into theme-families in an argument-outline that will serve as an index to meaning in your long, raw draft. Cutting the draft for coherence and consistency produces a roughly final draft—an excellent opportunity for feedback before you polish the final draft into the unified product.

By contrast, the familiar compartmentalization of the writing process imposes upon it an unnatural sequence. Crucial writing issues arise at inconvenient times. If, out of anxiety over getting the job done, you wait until the final draft to find out what you are really trying to say, you

can be sure your final product will lack balance and confuse the reader. If you try to perfect the elegance of a particular style from the moment you begin to work, you will waste a tremendous amount of time and energy on writing that is only useful for what it makes possible later.

Writing Polarities

A number of polarities accompany this familiar compartmentalization of the writing process. Instead of prompting useful writer's questions, they become writing problems, internal pressures that increase the writer's sense of helplessness. But by integrating process and product, QWP strengthens the writer's independence. For example, all good writing is characterized by the writer's discovery of how to present specific evidence with general application. Such writing not only informs readers, but invites them to integrate the material with their own ideas and experiences. This tension between the concrete and the universal is best resolved by making the level of generality a continuous concern throughout the QWP process. As you freely generate *because*-clauses, you work within a chosen range and order of material, from concrete examples to generalizations, that will help you build a bridge to your reader.

Some pieces of writing encompass both a public and a personal style. The material may suddenly shift from analytical to experiential with great effect. But analysis provides a basis for understanding new experiences, and the structure of your writing can elucidate that relationship. There are times in constructing a piece of writing when you feel the pull toward trusting your reader to understand more than you can put into words, and other times when the pull is in the opposite direction, toward meticulous explanation or documentation. Resolving these inherent tensions among possibilities is part of the underlying excitement of writing well. The more *consciously* you choose among the possibilities, the more independent you become as a writer. QWP encourages conscious choice.

Generations of teachers and books have presented writing as a limited series of immutable forms: ''comparison and contrast,'' or ''cause and

effect.'' The familiar outlines to be filled in, the formats and conventions to imitate, inevitably erode the power of writing, substituting conventions for decisions. To become an independent writer, you need to think continuously about the process as you create it.

The Ultimate Pressure: Competing with Yourself

It is possible to immerse yourself in a project (even to make an outline first), finish thirty pages of an article or paper in a few days, and then discover on reading the draft that your tone is all wrong, or that the whole article is too abstract. When this happens, you may not have the time or the energy to fix it or begin again. It would be a great help if you could use what you have as a rough draft, written primarily to discover what you wanted to say, or how to say it; but a full, rough, exploratory draft is a luxury most writers under pressure cannot afford. Unpleasant rough-draft surprises almost always result from unresolved issues in your own writing process. For example, one of the fundamental tensions in writing is the expectation that the struggle to get it ''right'' will overwhelm the satisfaction of *doing* it. Few people are eager to write; almost everyone has some personal reason to dread it. Our teachers, organizations, and professions demonstrate that the act of writing is not very well understood or appreciated. Nor are the rules and conventions that have come to represent readers' expectations much help. We all know from the start that writing involves suffering. But if we begin every project on that assumption, everything we write will be out of balance, confused, or inappropriately addressed to the reader. You cannot write well with a divided spirit because the simple fact of not wanting to do it is immediately communicated to readers. Although they may not be able to articulate their response, readers stop after a first paragraph, or make a minor correction, or ask a rhetorical question containing their sense that your writing is working against itself.

Even when you free yourself of external pressures and self-censorship, there is still the internal pressure of competing with yourself. Shaking off the conventions and expectations that limit thinking—whether they are grades in school, or an organizational writing code, or

the criticism of someone close to you—brings you face to face with your own confidence, experience, and values. This intensely personal responsibility can become the most difficult pressure of all, involving your deepest feelings. This is the tug of war at the heart of good writing, the dynamic tension between security and risk, caution and confidence.

Struggling through these pressures one writing assignment at a time, you create your own style. QWP assists you in that struggle by focusing on meaning. You become independent as a writer when the personal discovery of meaning coincides with your capacity to present it to your readers.

QWP and the Common Effort for Change

Imagine, for a moment, a culture in which *everyone* wrote well and easily, with the fun of spontaneity and the satisfaction of conscious control. What would that mean in our work, our institutions, and our society?

We would write the letters that are so pressing and yet so difficult. We would send our proposals to organizations and administrators. We would make the connections that are so difficult now because we do not trust our capacity to express what we feel and think in a way that will be understood as we mean it. Moreover, by taking responsibility for our words, we would read with more energy. Instead of being a frustrating burden, communication would become an exciting exchange of ideas and feelings.

Instead, our writing on the job, in school, and in our professions is characterized by the expectation of *not* being heard, of *not* being understood. As people who write, we learn early in school that our ideas, experiences, and feelings will be squeezed through a template of "mechanical errors." We take those red marks in the margins to heart and back down, protesting we have nothing to say or that someone else can say it better. Some people keep diaries, but their discoveries are private, and we all learn much too late in life that "other people felt the same way, too."

Our fear of mechanical errors, reenforced by teachers in high school,

college, and even graduate school, numbs the passion to write, and diminishes our capacity to understand others. That is a terrible personal loss, and a staggering deficiency for a society. Professions enforce these barriers, requiring that we write in a denatured, impersonal voice, as if our thoughts had been produced by a machine without passion or responsibility.

In most organizations, even a "low-profile accountability" is risky from the standpoint of survival. But disguising the decision-making process or obscuring the responsibility for final decisions exerts tremendous pressure against the authenticity of language. The paradoxes revealed in our daily papers continually erode our faith in communication. We reinterpret what we hear instantaneously, translating "We have never . . ." into "We already have . . .", or "We care . . ." into "We haven't the slightest interest. . . ." This resignation to the corruption of language, together with our experience that what *we* have to say does not matter, isolates us. We can slide by, privately making our peace with day-to-day life. But this will mean that we are oblivious to any common ground.

Our public communication, from whatever point of view, seems eerily consistent. Opponents in a public debate will share the same cynicism about the process of communication, and about the tolerance of their audience. Much public writing is barely readable in its dullness, not simply in style but in thought. As the audience, we have no way of demanding more, or of finding out what is true.

What if this were *not* the case? What if people expected that by writing clearly and forcefully, their readers would be eager to learn, or debate with them? We would know more about each other, and face each other with less illusions. We would certainly find that we are more resilient than we have been led to believe.

Time after time we find ourselves on the edge of this realization. A reporter asked a white teen-aged girl in Philadelphia why she participated in a riot to run a black couple out of her neighborhood.

"I wouldn't want my kids to get to know the blacks," she said.

"Why?" the reporter asked.

"Because they might get to like them!"

It isn't amazing that we accept our muteness and fragility. It's easy to

see why we are willing to give up a voice of our own to save ourselves some of the pain of self-knowledge. But despite the conditioning of our schools, professions, and culture, there is a tug of war in each of us between ritualized thinking and genuine communication. We know that insisting on meaning would help us achieve power over our own lives; we know that that desire runs counter to what the culture expects from us. Sometimes this paradox comes crashing in on our numbness. But it is impossible to act on this knowledge in isolation.

Why would a society want the act of writing to remain difficult and mysterious? If everyone had a voice, if everyone believed in the value of authentic communication in personal, professional, and political life, we would continually transform our relationships, our institutions, and our vision of society. The more we tried to say, the less we would need to hide, and the less manipulable we would be by those to whom we habitually yield the power of communication.

Society tells its educators not to give everyone an equal share, but instead to "weed out the good from the bad." Experts in one field or another, whom we may mistrust but still obey, tell us: "This idea, this person is worthwhile, that one is not." Within such a culture, in which power is a reward for charm or obedience, communicating our own thoughts and feelings has a low priority. We dread the loss of freedom, but we have relinquished our right to communicate freely with each other.

The struggle to write well nourishes us, and gives us more power over our lives and our interactions with others. Through it we gather our best energies and make connections with the best energies of others. It is a private accomplishment for independent writers, and contributes to the common effort for change.