

WRITING MATTERS

PETER G. BEIDLER



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter G. Beidler is the Lucy G. Moses Professor of English emeritus at Lehigh University. He has published widely on medieval literature, American literature, American Indian literature, and teaching. In 1983 he was named national Professor of the Year by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education in Washington, D.C. He spent the 1987–1988 academic year as a Fulbright professor at Sichuan University in Chengdu, China. In 1995–1996 he was a visiting professor at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. He is now retired and living in Seattle, Washington.

PREFACE

This little book is designed to help college students learn to write better essays. In its earliest draft it was a simple set of mimeographed guidelines for my first-year students who seemed to learn better by seeing my mini-lectures than by hearing them. Although many of my examples are drawn from courses in which students write about their own lives and their reactions to college life, the principles of good writing that I discuss will apply to almost any courses in which students are expected to write argumentative essays.

This book is designed to teach itself. Each chapter is not only a self-contained lesson on some feature of writing, but is also a model of the kind of writing that students are expected to do in college. It has an introduction, a thesis or central argument supported by evidence or examples, transitions, and a conclusion.

In addition to designing *Writing Matters* for use in courses that require systematic writing, I have also designed it with a view to the kind of writing that professional men and women will do after they leave college. Not only do I include an early chapter specifically on “Writing in the Professional World,”

but the principles of good writing that I emphasize throughout the book will apply to such writing: the need to see most writing tasks as an argument for a specific view, the need for concrete evidence in support of that view, the need for clarity, and the need for an appropriate written “voice.” The brief final section on editing gives helpful hints that will prove useful for writers at all levels.

Some writing textbooks move from a discussion of sentences to a discussion of paragraphs and finally to a discussion of the whole essay. *Writing Matters* takes the opposite approach, beginning with the whole essay (see, for example, Chapter 3). I have found that most students learn to write better if they are asked to write full essays right off. Doing so gives them an argumentative context within which to polish their individual sentences and paragraphs. The chapters, however, are designed to be independent units, and teachers can assign the various chapters in any order they find convenient for their own classrooms.

I am grateful to the many students and colleagues who have helped me to develop this approach to teaching writing, particularly Lucy Bednar, Rob Dornsife, Kathleen Mayberry, Susan Haytmanek, and James Wallace. I am grateful to Gene Mater for his brilliant drawings. I owe special thanks to my former student, my collaborator, and my friend Marion Frack Egge, who worked with me during the various stages of production to give *Writing Matters* its current shape and to make this book happen.

TO THE STUDENT

When I began my teaching career at Lehigh University I had no idea how to teach writing. I knew something about how to write, because I had, after all, majored in English and had written lots of papers. But how in the world would I teach writing? In my first decade or so of teaching writing I learned a few tricks that made me sound like a teacher of writing some of the time, but I was still mostly confused and mystified and full of questions about how to teach writing. Finally I decided to try to be somewhat more systematic in my questioning. I asked myself three questions: How do I write? How did I learn to write that way? How can I teach in such a way that others can learn as I did?

How do I write? Well, of course, that depends on what I am writing. In a letter to my daughter I write one way. In a letter to my insurance company I write another way. In a newspaper article. . . . In a committee report. . . . In a short story. . . . In a poem. . . . I decided that in answering my question about how I write I had to focus on argumentative writing, the kind of writing I had done as a college student. I read a few of my early papers and noticed certain common features. Each

contained, for example, an introductory paragraph in which I stated my main idea. Each contained paragraphs in which I offered support for my main idea. Each contained transitional words and phrases that showed the connections between my various supporting paragraphs. There was nothing great about any of those papers, but in them I had found a way to express myself on subjects I had grown to care about. More important, I discovered that I still, in most of my professional writing, write essays that have most of those same features.

Having described how I wrote, I was ready for the question: How did I learn to write that way? I really was not sure. Certainly, I did not remember having been taught to write. I remember being taught something about dependent clauses in high school, but learning grammar is not learning writing. As for college, I had skipped the writing courses Earlham College offered and took instead courses like “Freshman Humanities” and “The Development of the Novel.” My teachers sometimes criticized my writing and gave me suggestions, especially about the content of my papers, but they spent little time actively teaching writing. I decided that I must have learned to write mostly by reading. I had always read for fun. It occurs to me now that perhaps I learned to write-through-reading in the same way that many students in other countries learn to speak-through-listening. I discovered that some of my best students the year I taught in China had learned to speak by listening to the Voice of America or to other English-language radio programs. They had trained

their tongues by noticing how good speakers talked. I must, similarly, have trained my pen by noticing how good writers wrote.

Having discovered a bit about how I wrote and having developed some notions about how I had learned, I was ready for the toughest question of all: How could I help my students learn to write as I had learned to write? It seemed impossible. My students, after all, had been raised watching television, not reading books. Still, maybe I could find a textbook that would give my students helpful models of good argumentative writing along with helpful commentary about what made them good. I tried, but in the end, I gave up the search and decided to write a few little essays that would do for my students what I thought needed to be done. I photocopied enough copies for my students and distributed them. My essays were about argumentative writing, but they were also models of the kind of writing that I thought would help beginning college writers do well. The next year, having noticed what I thought was an improvement in my students' writing, I wrote a few more essays. The year after that I wrote a few more. Before long it seemed sensible to put these free-floating essays into photocopied booklets. Soon those booklets evolved into this printed version, *Writing Matters*.

This book was born, then, because I did not know how to teach writing.

CHAPTER 1

WRITING IN THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD

You do not need a course in writing. After all, you have been taking English courses ever since you were seven. Because you are planning to major in engineering or accounting or computer science or biology, you will not need to know how to write anyhow. To succeed in that big world out there on the other side of graduation, all you will need are a telephone, a computer, a three-hour lunch conference, and a good secretary who will do your writing for you. You will do the creative thinking. Besides, you know that writing is not very important anyhow and that you will spend almost none of your time on the job doing the mundane tasks of writing. Right? Sorry. But do not take my word for it. Let me tell you what people who know the real world of professional work say about the most neglected skill in business, about the importance of writing in the professions, about the amount of time professional people spend

doing writing in their jobs, and about writing skills in high-tech corporations.

Well, what is the most neglected skill in business? In 1983 the *Los Angeles Times* reported the results of a nationwide survey of over two hundred business executives by Communispond, Inc., a communications research group. The survey asked these executives just that question. The answers were impressive. A full 80% of the executives surveyed listed writing as the most neglected skill in business—not accounting or technological literacy or electronics, but good old-fashioned writing. Why do so many executives think writing is a neglected skill? Surely it is in part because bad writing costs money. Another study revealed that bad writing costs American business an estimated one billion dollars a year in wasted time, lost contracts, and alienated customers (*Business Digest*, November 1984, p. 47).

If writing is the most neglected skill in business, how important do professional people think writing is for corporate executives? In 1984 Hodge-Cronin, a Chicago-based management consulting firm, conducted a survey of over eight hundred chief executive officers (CEOs) in many fields—insurance, manufacturing, banking, technology, utilities, and so on. Their survey showed that 98% of the responding CEOs said that writing was important for success in their own and other executive positions. More than 83% felt that their younger executives were not well trained in writing. At the end of the Hodge-Cronin report was the suggestion that companies trying to recruit top executive talent

should ask the candidates to write several paragraphs on how they understand the position they are being considered for, how they would fit into the organization, their management philosophy, and the like. Doing so, the report suggested, would help the companies not only to understand the views of the person being considered for the position but would help them to discover whether the applicant could write clearly and concisely.

If businesspeople know that writing is the most neglected skill in business, and if professional people know how important writing is to their success, just how much time do college-educated professionals spend at writing in their jobs? One study showed that most college-educated professionals spend at least 30% of their time on the job doing writing-related tasks: planning, organizing, drafting, and revising. In an average week they write three internal memos, five letters outside the company, and two business or technical reports (*College English*, October 1982, pp. 557–69). A 1990 Communispond survey of over three hundred business executives at the rank of vice president and above revealed that three-quarters of them wrote more than ten letters, reports, and other business documents per week. “But I am going to be an engineer,” you may say. “Indeed, I decided to major in engineering so that I would not have to write. I am a numbers person, a diagram person, a machine person, a computer person. As an engineer I will not have to write.” Sorry. That is not the way the world of engineering works. Separate studies conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the

University of Wisconsin showed that engineers spend, on the average, at least 25% of their time on the job doing writing tasks (*Graduating Engineer*, March 1984, pp. 25–28).

So much for business and engineering. What about the brave new world of high tech? Surely professionals in high technology can escape the need to write. Sorry. Not long ago mathematics professor Sharon K. Hauge interviewed thirty corporate executives in high-tech corporations in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. She reported that all of the executives she interviewed “stressed the importance of having excellent oral and written communication skills”:

These skills included the ability to listen, to write technical reports, to formulate problems in precise language, to communicate recommendations in a convincing way . . . to give instructions, to ask the right questions. . . . Everyone who was interviewed indicated that poor communication skills, particularly written communication skills, were the most common problem of new employees in their corporations. (“Skills for the New World,” *College Teaching*, 34, Fall 1986, 142)

I know what u r thinking—that my examples come from way back in the 1980s, before u were even born, and that in these modern twenty-first century times of e-mailing, thumbing instant messages, and twittering, do I really need 2 write anymore? OK, I c what u mean. Here are some more recent examples:

The Writing section [of the Scholastic Aptitude Test], which we introduced in 2005, has emerged

as the most predictive part of the SAT in terms of measuring the potential for college success. Furthermore, we see this predictive value in students from all racial and ethnic groups. The introduction of the Writing section has also encouraged high schools to place more emphasis on writing, which helps give students the skills they need to succeed in college. (Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board and former two-term governor of West Virginia, in a speech given August 26, 2008)

A survey of 120 major American corporations employing nearly 8 million people concludes that in today's workplace writing is a "threshold skill"

for hiring and promotion among salaried (i.e., professional) employees. Survey results indicate that writing is a ticket to professional opportunity, while poorly written job applications are a figurative kiss of death. Estimates based on the survey returns reveal that employers spend billions annually correcting writing deficiencies. . . . In a nutshell, the survey confirms our conviction that individual opportunity in the United States depends critically on the ability to present one's thoughts coherently, cogently, and persuasively on paper. (The National Commission on Writing, *Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . or a Ticket Out*, published September 2004, pp. 3, 5)

In terms of getting a job, knowing how to write is a good thing. (Barack Obama, then a presidential

candidate, in response to a question about what advice he would give to young writers, July 15, 2008)

But you already know how important writing is. In a 2008 study called *Writing, Technology, and Teens*, Amanda Lenhart and her colleagues report on the basis of an extensive survey that “Teens write a lot, but they do not think of their e-mails, instant and text messages as writing.” Indeed, we seem to have invented a new word, “texting” to distinguish these informal electronic messages from “writing,” which is a more serious and sustained endeavor. Lenhart goes on to say, “This disconnect matters because teens believe good writing is an essential skill for success and that more writing instruction at school would help them.” Indeed it would. Everyone agrees on that. Writing matters, so if you want a job, or want to be president, read on.

CHAPTER 2

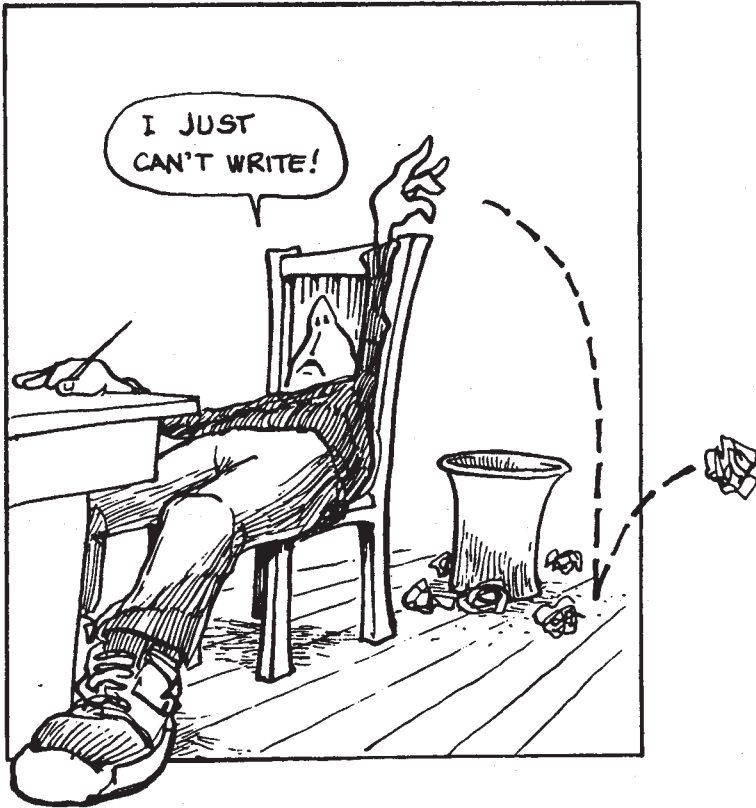
NERVOUS GRUMBLINGS ABOUT WRITING

Many beginning writers think that good writing is a special, almost magical, art. On the contrary, good writing is something that all of you can do right now. As someone who taught writing for forty years, I heard over and over again the nervous grumblings of beginning writers who had somehow become convinced that they could not write and who therefore did not like to try. Here are four of the most common of these nervous grumblings.

The first nervous grumbling is, “I just can’t write. I’ve been taking English for years, and I even got good grades a few times, but writing is still a mystery. Some people are born knowing how to write, but I was born untalented, I guess.” Nonsense. To be sure, some people write with greater grace and ease than others, but not because they were born that way. The chances are that they write with grace and ease now in part because

their parents read to them when they were very young and in part because as they grew up they spent many hours reading. Just as it is easier to learn French at a young age when surrounded by French-speaking people, so it is easier to learn to write if, at a young age, we read, and read, and read. Still, many men and women have learned French by studying it in college, and a far greater number of men and women have learned to write good, solid English prose in college. With hard work, concentration, and receptivity to criticism, you can learn to be a good writer. You will discover, of course, that when you have something that you *want* to write about, something you *need* to communicate to a *real* audience, you will automatically be a better writer than if you are writing exercises and examples just to fill an academic course requirement. Within the context of a college course, however, you can learn the basics of effective writing.

The second nervous grumbling is, “I don’t have a big enough vocabulary to write well.” Nonsense. You have a big enough vocabulary to read the daily newspaper and college-level math, science, and history textbooks. If you did not, you would never have been admitted to college in the first place. If your vocabulary is big enough for those activities, it is big enough for you to write well. Good writing does not depend on a big vocabulary. Indeed, a vocabulary that is *too* big can be a greater impediment to effective communication than one that is too small. Clear communication is often impeded by big words, because by using such words you run the risk that your audience will not know what the words



NONSENSE! YOU CAN LEARN TO BE A GOOD WRITER!

mean. The amazing thing about your vocabulary is that it develops along with you. As you expand your interests to include subjects requiring a larger vocabulary, you automatically develop the vocabulary to communicate about those subjects. If your Uncle Harry gave you a thesaurus for a high school graduation present so you could use it in college, I advise you to throw it away.

It will only get you into trouble. You already know the words you need to write well what *you* have to say.

The third nervous grumbling is, “I just can’t seem to figure out what the teacher wants me to say in these essays.” Nonsense. Your teachers do not much care what you say, if by that you mean what opinions you have. Your teachers will not criticize your writing because they disagree with your ideas. Your teachers do not care what you say about American politics, or whether you approve of your college’s dining service, or how you feel about the morality of stem cell research. That is your business. Your teachers care about what you say only to the extent that it has bearing on how you make a case for what you believe. If you think college admissions officers are trying to deceive innocent high school students, your teachers will care about how well you support that view with evidence, examples, and logic, how well you have structured your paragraphs, whether you develop your point consistently, whether your sentences convey your ideas clearly. Your teachers will be more enthusiastic about a well-constructed essay that makes a point they disagree with than about a badly constructed essay that reflects their own opinions. In short, your teachers want you to say what you want to say; what they care most about is that you say it well.

The fourth nervous grumbling is, “I just can’t think of anything to say about any of those topics.” Nonsense. If you have lived and observed and thought for any of the years you have been alive, and if you have read the materials that your teacher has assigned to you, then you will be able to think of something to say. If you

cannot, you must be dead, in which case writing will not matter much to you. It really does not take much to think of something to say about a topic. If you are asked to write an essay about your residence hall, for example, you might consider arguing that the aging rat barn should be torn down. You might consider arguing that its peaceful atmosphere reminds you of your own home back in Cherry Hill. You might argue that residence hall living has many advantages over fraternity or sorority living. Or that coed residence halls are an invasion of privacy. Or that some university students are discriminated against in your residence hall. Or that colleges should save money by having students perform many of the maintenance services now performed by professional cleaning staff. And so on. Any of those ideas about your residence hall could be developed into a fine essay. There is no end to what you might write about such a topic if you think and if you trust your own opinions.

Of course you can write. There is no special magic to it. You do not have to be an English or journalism major to do it. The nervous grumbling that I have not heard very often is this: "I can't write because I don't believe in myself." That fifth complaint might not be nonsense.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT IS AN ACCEPTABLE ESSAY?

No one expects you to write prizewinning essays in a college writing course. Some of you will if you work hard and believe in yourselves, but you do not have to do brilliant writing to succeed in such a course. To succeed, however, you must write acceptable essays. To write one of those you must, of course, have something of substance to say, and you must use proper grammar and decently constructed sentences. Beyond that, however, *an acceptable essay is a bold, clear, and well-developed argument presented in a unified, cohesive, and organized form.* It is as simple as that. If your essays do not get the same rave comments as those of your classmates, it will probably be because your work does not fully meet the standards set forth in that definition. There are eighteen words in the italicized portion of that sentence, but only six of them are important in the present context. The standards for acceptability

fall generally into two groups of three each. The first group has to do primarily with the content or subject matter of the argument, while the second group has to do primarily with the form, or arrangement, of it. Let us consider the subject matter of the argument first.

An acceptable essay should be *bold*. Try to find something unusual to say that will arouse the interest of the readers of your essay: a new twist on how to get rid of a blind date, a fresh statement about how educational TV is a waste of time, your own special interpretation of the Bill of Rights as it applies to life in a campus residence hall, what it is like being the only woman on a physics lab team, or whatever. An important part of what I mean here is that you should say something. Take a stand. Stand up in your essay and shout, "This is what I believe." Do you or do you not think colleges should offer no-need football scholarships? Get off the fence. Do not say, "Well, maybe they should, but, then again, maybe they shouldn't. There are advantages either way." Of course there are, but your job is to argue for one or the other. If you cannot, then pick another topic. Be firm and definite. Your readers will tend not to be much interested in a fainthearted, wishy-washy essay. Convey self-assurance and conviction.

In addition to being bold, an acceptable essay must be *clear*. If your readers must reread your essay, or a part of it, to figure out what you are saying, then you have failed. Your job as a writer is to make a reader's job easy, to make your meaning so absolutely and infallibly clear that everyone understands what you are saying. I have found that beginning writers are

frequently surprised when they are told that their meaning in an essay is not clear. They tend to think the fault lies with the readers, not themselves. Almost invariably the opposite is true. The discrepancy lies in the fact that the writers know what is in their minds, whereas the readers know only what is on the paper. There are various causes for lack of clarity: failure to state a clear or specific main point; failure to repeat or emphasize it; failure to use specific examples; failure to use direct language. The most common cause of lack of clarity, however, is that writers miscalculate what their readers know. They think that because they know or believe something, of course their readers know or believe the same thing. Writers, therefore, fail to raise certain arguments or to explain certain situations, but just charge on, not realizing that they have left their readers in bewilderment back at the last crossroads. All writers have to learn, then, to base their writing not on what they, the writers, know, but on what their readers know.

Besides being bold and clear, an acceptable essay must present a *well-developed* argument. You must select and present supporting evidence in such a way that your readers are convinced by what you say. There are various kinds of argument: you may want to inspire your readers to do something; or to see something from a different point of view; or to understand something; or to feel something not felt before. Whatever your purpose in writing the essay, you need support for your argument. For example, if you want to argue that solar heat is not practical, you may want to develop that idea

with a story about your neighbor who installed it last summer only to find that it will take him seventeen years to save enough in fuel bills to pay for the system, and then only if his solar system needs no maintenance in that seventeen-year period. Of course, if you do use this example to develop your point, be sure to relate it to the main point in your essay by stating the connection: “Therefore, solar heating costs too much to be practical.” If you do not develop your ideas sufficiently, your audience will not be convinced, and you will have failed.

Most of my discussion so far has been about the subject of your essay: what you must say to make your argument bold, clear, and developed enough to be convincing. The rest of my discussion deals more with the form of your essay, because how you say what is bold, clear, and well developed is obviously important also. To be fully acceptable, your argument must be unified, cohesive, and organized.

An acceptable essay must be *unified*. It must make one clearly identifiable point. The best way to ensure unity is to write a strong thesis sentence, and then to make sure that everything else you write in the essay somehow develops that thesis sentence. The thesis sentence—a capsule summary of your main point—is so important that I devote my next chapter to a discussion of how to write the kind of thesis sentence that will help you most as you write your essay. Do not be surprised if, in a conference concerning an essay you wrote about how hateful your roommate is, your instructor asks you to explain why you have a sentence in your third paragraph on your roommate’s dislike of hot dogs and

sauerkraut. That information probably has nothing to do with his hatefulness. If it does, your instructor will insist that you show why not liking hot dogs and sauerkraut makes your roommate hateful. Without unity, an essay falls apart.

In addition to being unified, an acceptable essay must be *cohesive*. Its parts must stick together. Cohesion is obviously closely related to unity. Unless the essay sticks together there will be—or will appear to be—no unity. Cohesion, however, is really a matter of connectives, of the glue or the strings that hold together the different parts of an essay. We sometimes use the word “transitions” to refer to the connective devices by which writers announce that they are finished with one part of an argument and going on to the next part. We sometimes use the word “signposts” to refer to the quite explicit information that writers give to their readers about where they are in the development of their support for their thesis. Whatever the terminology we use to explain cohesion, your readers will appreciate your telling them, quite directly, where you are and where you are going. Words or phrases like “next,” “on the other hand,” and “another example” help. Even more helpful are more extended signposts like, “Having considered how the community college prepares older students for professional jobs, let us consider now how it prepares them for continued study in four-year colleges.” The best place for these transitions or signposts is at the start of your paragraphs, because it is there that readers who initially like to skim a paper will look for evidence of the overall structure of your paper. In a

longer essay, cohesion usually also involves connective sentences or paragraphs explaining the relationships between the larger sections of your paper.

Finally, an acceptable essay must be *organized*. Some principle of arrangement must be made evident to your readers. If your readers are to know where they are at any given point in your argument, they must be given a clear notion of how you are structuring your essay. The structure of your essay, the organizational principle of it, can be shown by means of an outline, or skeleton sketch:

- A. Subject matter of argument
 - 1. Bold
 - 2. Clear
 - 3. Developed
- B. Form of argument
 - 1. Unified
 - 2. Cohesive
 - 3. Organized.

Normally writers do not give such a sketch. Rather, they make the structural principle of the essay so clear that readers can construct their own mental outline. My introductory paragraph in the essay you are now reading, along with the introductory sentences in each of the other paragraphs, is an attempt to direct your attention to that structural principle. In a later essay I discuss several kinds of organizational structures most frequently useful in college writing. For now, I want merely to emphasize that there are various ways of organizing essays. Your job as writer is first to choose the organizing principle that best presents and supports

your argument and then to make sure that your readers know that that is the organizing principle you have chosen. Unless the skeleton is strong, the essay looks like a formless blob.

It does not take much to write an acceptable essay, but it does take these six features. If your essays are substantial, if they are mechanically clean, and if they demonstrate that you can write bold, clear, and well-developed arguments that are unified, cohesive, and organized, you will find that your essays are quite acceptable.