The Elements of Teaching Writing

A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines

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CHAPTER

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Undergraduate Visions of Writing: First Draft as Last Draft

All professional writers, including scholars, know that good writing usually results from extensive revision, often with the help of friends, colleagues, and peer reviewers in the process. As a professor in the sciences once told us, "A first draft confronts you with the nature of your own confusion on the subject. Revision gives you a chance to recover from that confusion." In other words, first thoughts on a topic aren't often our best thoughts, and "re-vision" offers us the opportunity to look at the matter again, from a different angle. Most of us find this process frustrating at times, but we know from experience that first drafts rarely meet standards for professional scrutiny and publication. Fluent, thoughtful, polished writing may sound as though the author produced it at one sitting, without hesitation. But like all fine performance, good writing conceals its own history and hides the effort required to produce that sense of effortless expression.

Because they see only the products of this labor, undergraduates tend to assume that the fluency and cohesion of the published writing they read in their courses results from the sheer brilliance or inspiration of talented, experienced authors, not from painstaking revision. In her studies of the writing strategies of college freshmen, Nancy Sommers found that these students thought of writing as something akin to inspired, unrevisable speech. With this conception of writing, they confined alterations of their papers to editorial substitutions, deletions, and corrections. In fact, they did not use the term *revision* because they did not really revise ("Revision"). We have further evidence that when left to their own devices the majority of undergraduates attempt to complete their papers (even long research papers) in a single draft, without major changes in the ideas and organization.

> This effort of undergraduates to make the first draft the last accounts for many weaknesses we observe in their writing, including shallow and narrow perspectives, internal contradictions, loose organization, awkward sentences, and a stiff, demonstrative style that results from the writer's struggle to assemble first thoughts into something that sounds thought-through. These are not just the symptoms of weak writing ability; they are more fundamentally the characteristics of first drafts, including most of our own.

Two Kinds of Revision

If avoidance of revision causes many of these problems in student writing, asking students to revise their papers would appear to offer the solution. The results, however, are often disappointing. When we simply give students the opportunity to revise their papers, without detailed guidance, they tend to make only the cosmetic, editorial changes

Sommers described. When we offer detailed suggestions, student writers tend to confine their revisions to the changes we recommend, leaving us in the awkward position of evaluating the fruits of our own labor. Peer reviews from other students often yield haphazard or superficial revisions, and monitoring these reviews adds substantially to our workload. Because all of these procedures are time-consuming, teachers often decide that the costs of assigning revision outweigh the benefits.

To understand what is going wrong, we need to recognize that the term *revision* refers to changes writers make at different stages of the writing process and for different reasons. Two categories of revision, made at two stages of writing, present the sharpest contrasts:

- *First stage:* The changes writers make in order to complete a draft before they give it to the intended reader
- *Second stage:* The changes writers are obliged to make after they have submitted a complete draft, with the hope that it is finished

Most of the revision teachers assign is of the second type, which corresponds with the suggestions we receive from editors and peer reviewers on manuscripts for publication. And in that stage of the process, most of us respond to suggestions as our students do: we change what we can't avoid changing.

For individual writers, therefore, the willingness to revise is not a constant. Instead, this motivation changes with differing circumstances and at different stages of the writing process. We can better understand these variations if we think of writing as a substance that "sets up" at some point in the process, like concrete. Beyond that point, when language and thought have lost malleability, extensive changes require something on the order of dynamite.

Delaying this point of solidification, most experienced writers revise their work extensively, as a malleable substance, *before* they submit a complete draft. Student writing, by contrast, tends to set up almost at the moment it hits the page, as a linear sequence of words and sentences. "It's exactly like building a wall," a Cornell freshman said, explaining why he does not revise. "You can't take anything out once you've put it in. I think that each sentence is something I really wanted to express, and just to take it out is like . . . like breaking the wall down."

First thoughts thus become last thoughts, and second thoughts seem disruptive. So do teachers' comments that require extensive changes to a paper the writer considers virtually finished.

> Most student writing seems unfinished, in other words, because it is finished too soon. The student has never lingered in the first stages of writing during which revision usually takes place for experienced writers.

Why do undergraduates try to make the first draft the last? From her research on college freshmen, Nancy Sommers concluded that "it is not that students are unwilling to revise, but rather that they do what they have been taught to do in a consistently narrow and predictable way" ("Revision" 383). Learned, linear procedures such as constructing and following outlines can discourage writers from altering the viewpoint and organization of their papers.

In our own investigations, however, undergraduates most often say that they try to complete papers in one draft because they have neither the time nor the motivation to revise their work. When their teachers assign finished papers with tight deadlines in the midst of other homework and exams, students tell us, the most efficient way to complete the assignment is to begin with the intention of producing only one draft. As a junior said, when describing the process of writing a thirteen-page research paper, "Right from the beginning I knew that my first draft was going to be my last." She did not revise the ideas or organization of this paper, she explained, "because they were already determined before I started writing." She attributed this approach both to "time constraints" and to a "sense of completion" that substantial revision would disrupt.

These explanations suggest that the circumstances in which we typically assign writing discourage students from revising their work before they turn it in, as finished writing. And if they view assigned "drafts" as virtually finished products (like submitted manuscripts), our students will be reluctant to revise those drafts beyond the changes we prescribe. If we want undergraduates to view revision as a normal, essential part of the writing process, therefore, we must create circumstances in which revision seems normal and necessary.

Because revisions before and after the submission of a draft occur in different circumstances, with different goals, we will discuss these types of revision separately.

Revision before Submission of a Draft

If students avoid revising first drafts (and first thoughts) because their writing sets up too quickly, we need to delay that "sense of completion" that weds writers to the ideas and language they first used. For this purpose we can create circumstances in which writing in the early stages of the process remains unfinished, malleable, and expendable, as work in progress.

Ways to Assign Writing as Work in Progress

Most types of informal and preparatory writing that we will describe in Chapter 5 serve this purpose of delaying the production of a final draft. The "writing to learn" activities we list there (such as reflective journals, study questions, and reading notes) support specific purposes

of learning, but they also produce material for further writing through extensive revision. Workshops on paper topics, written debates, groundwork assignments, and other "preparations for performance" either generate or encourage revision of early drafts.

Here are some other, related ways to assign writing as work in progress:

- *Assign writing **about** the paper.* If you assign a "draft" of a paper, students will still attempt to produce the finished product with the hope that serious revision won't be necessary. Instead, you can establish the tentative, exploratory nature of a first draft if you ask students to write at some length *about* the ideas, arguments, and evidence they are considering for their papers. Writing *about* the paper ensures that students do not think of this work as the final version.

- *Assign introductions to the paper before a draft is due.* These introductions should include the central question, thesis, or argument the paper will address and might include an outline of the supporting points and evidence that will follow. This material is especially useful for work in small groups or in paired exchanges outside class. In response to your comments as well, writers are more likely to make significant changes to early portions of a draft than to full versions of the paper.

- *Assign multiple proposals or introductions.* First thoughts can't be last thoughts if students have to come up with more than one. Two or three options will also give you more room for constructive advice. You won't have to invent alternatives if one proposal doesn't work, and you can suggest combinations of approaches.

- *Assign counterarguments.* When students have proposed or drafted an argument, ask them to describe the most effective counterarguments. In the next version, they should take these other views into account, either by reformulating the original argument or by addressing the opposing points. Students can also do this work in pairs, writing counterarguments to each other's draft either in or outside the class.

Revision after Submission of a Draft

Through the lens of grading, teachers often view revision as a second chance for students to produce solid, fluent papers that will receive good grades. Accordingly, they ask students to turn in papers that they will have the opportunity to change and resubmit before they receive grades. For reasons we have explained, however, when writers have reached a sense of completion, they are reluctant to make substantial changes beyond the ones teachers or publishers directly tell them to make. At this stage, voluntary, undirected revision rarely yields major

improvements, and detailed instructions usually involve more work for the teacher than for the writer.

If you want students to rewrite completed drafts, not just to correct them, you need to get the draft dismantled — open to reconstruction — in the mind of the writer. Skillful comments can do some of this disassembly, as we will observe in the next section of this chapter. But there are other strategies for motivating writers to make serious revisions on their own, even when they hope the task is finished.

Strategies for Eliciting Revision of Drafts

- *Elicit students' written plans for revision.* Students are more likely to undertake extensive revisions if they have first described the changes they need to make. Written plans for revision, following your comments or peer review, become an informal contract for the new version. And if writers do not do the work they propose, this document will be a useful reference in your evaluation of the final draft.
- *Use peer review for motivation and guidance.* Students can be of great help to one another in providing guidance for revision of drafts if they have guidelines for peer review, which we will discuss in the last section of this chapter. If the writers receive two or more reviews of a paper from other students, their written plans for making use of this advice will be especially helpful. Such statements of intention from writers are required in many peer-reviewed journals.
- *Grade portfolios of papers.* Portfolio systems postpone the finality of grading because they allow students to revise their work extensively before the portfolios are evaluated at the end of the term, and in some courses also at midterm. In most cases students submit assigned drafts at scheduled times, but further revisions remain open possibilities until the portfolios are graded.
- *Respect the draftiness of drafts.* To remain open to revision, a draft should represent a tentative, exploratory approach to the subject. But teachers often read and respond to first drafts as flawed versions of the finished product, even when they have assigned "rough" drafts. Students then feel penalized for loose ends or undeveloped ideas and revert to caution.

Responding to Drafts for Revision

The purposes of responding to finished papers (for evaluation) and to drafts (for revision) differ in important ways that teachers need to keep in mind:

- When responding to finished papers, let the writers know how well their papers worked and offer suggestions that might be useful in future projects.
- When responding to drafts, open these versions of the papers to revision, with guidance for making improvements.

If you want to avoid doing most of the revising yourself, however, you should refrain from being *too* helpful. Extremely helpful and extremely critical teachers share the tendency to tell students in detail what is wrong with their papers and how the problems can be fixed. In other words, they think of response as "correcting papers." Students who are simply following instructions learn most of all how skillful their teachers are at revising drafts.

If you want your students to learn how to revise their own work, you need to stimulate their motivation to make changes and leave the primary responsibility for revision with them. If you pause to consider what you are doing, you can probably sense when you are assuming the responsibility for revision, through copy editing or giving detailed instructions. Limited amounts of prescriptive and corrective advice can be useful, or even necessary when students can't understand specific problems on their own. If you fall into the general habit of providing instructions for revision, however, your students will fall into the habit of following those instructions. You will see further improvements in their writing only when you devote more time and attention to showing them what they should change.

Because individual students need specific kinds of help, no single type of response will always work. As a rule, however, as we noted in the previous chapter when discussing comments on essays, comments for revision should

- illuminate the apparent argument and structure of the draft
- offer comments about strengths and about further possibilities
- identify fundamental limitations and problems
- leave the task of solving those problems with the writer

Sample Commentary

The following are some of the final comments on the first draft of a report on the religious affiliations of Korean students, written for a course on social research.

David,

I'll start by explaining what remains mysterious to me in your report on a fascinating study of changing religious affiliations among Korean students. Although you interviewed ten students, synopses of

> only five interviews appear here. And although these were apparently long interviews — between 30 and 90 minutes — some of the accounts of them are extremely short, as though there wasn't much content. I should add that these accounts are nicely written and interesting in themselves — especially the interview with C, which is full and beautifully composed with a mixture of quotations, paraphrases, and explanations. As the paper progresses they remain nicely composed, but get shorter, as though there was less and less to say.
>
> I realize that this is a draft and that you probably had trouble figuring out how you could fit all this material coherently into a single paper. But when you get to the conclusions you also seem to dismiss that interview material as inconclusive, and turn back in the end to a "personal hypothesis" without reference to your data, suggesting that the whole question is confusing, unspecific to Koreans, and illogical.
>
> Can you find patterns that allow you to use more of this rich material? If you can't, what happens if you think of inconsistency itself as a pattern, allowing you to present a greater variety of perspectives?

This example illustrates some of the following strategies for eliciting real revision.

Strategies in End Comments for Eliciting Revision

- *Describe rather than prescribe.* If you simply describe what the writers have and have not done in first drafts, they can often see gaps, contradictions, and alternatives as observations of their own that they can and should act upon. Prescriptive statements (*You need to revise your thesis*) represent *your* observations and incentives to revise.
- *Describe the experience of reading the draft.* Letting the writer know what is happening as you read can be a very efficient, effective way to stimulate revision without prescribing it. Such accounts of reading work especially well in the margins: *I could follow the argument easily to this point, but now I'm lost. I can't see how these conclusions follow from the examples above.*
- *Ask questions.* Whether in the margins or in final comments, questions function as little prybars that open the draft to further thought yet leave responsibility for finding answers with the writer. Many statements (*You need a transition here*) can be posed more effectively as questions (*What is the connection between the argument in this paragraph and the example in the next?*).

- *If possible, find the basis for revision in the draft itself.* Even very rough and undeveloped drafts usually contain some promising ideas and useful material for revision. Identifying these foundations for reconstruction allows students to retain a sense that this is their own work, with its own potential for improvement (*The most interesting argument appears in the middle of paragraph 6. What would happen if you restructure the paper around that idea?*).
- *Limit editorial and stylistic changes to examples and brief passages.* If there are problems of style and error running through the paper, simply point to a couple of examples or edit a single paragraph for illustration. Be sure that you choose sentences and paragraphs most likely to remain in the revised version. If you edit an introductory paragraph *and* suggest that the student write a new introduction, these messages will seem to conflict and the writer will probably retain the edited portions.
- *Don't be shy.* When teachers complain that students did not make serious revisions, we often find that their comments did not directly call for serious revision. In many cases, to avoid sounding discouraging they began with generous statements such as *On the whole, this paper works very well,* even when they saw major problems of logic and organization. Noting these problems on a finished paper might be read as condemnation, but on a draft they represent an opportunity to salvage the work. If your comments are evasive, you deprive writers of this opportunity.
- *Teach students to follow these same principles when responding to each other's drafts* (see "Methods for Structuring Peer Review"). Students respond with alacrity to instruction in how to comment effectively on each other's work, but they will need the following help: models (such as your own responses); definitive guidelines, preferably provided for each task of response in a handout; and practice — students will tend to avoid criticism the first couple of times. Such practice will help them learn to think more critically about the subject, and it will help them learn how to read and critique writing, a facility most will need throughout their careers and lives.

In-Class Work on Revision

Much of the discussion to this point has assumed that work on revision takes place primarily through individual essays submitted to instructors and comments returned to individual students or through individual conferences.

Sometimes, however, it may also be appropriate to address issues of revision with your entire class. Here are some methods for doing so, along with reasons for trying them.

Methods for Working on Revision in Class

- Bring in samples of revision (before-and-after models) to discuss. These can include samples from your own writing (students appreciate this); from students who are doing interesting, productive rewriting; or from published work (such as drafts of the Declaration of Independence). Students learn from concrete examples of what we mean by revision, and most are surprised at the radical changes characteristic of professionally revised prose.
- When you have returned a batch of drafts on which you've written comments, ask students to use the next 20 to 30 minutes to begin rewriting. Use this time to confer with individuals about what you meant and about what they might do.
- Ask students to bring all their essays to class. Then have them review all your comments and summarize, in writing (through lists and analysis), what they find. What are they good at? What mistakes or weaknesses appear most frequently? In what areas do they now need to work? This can be an excellent strategy if you believe students are not transferring the principles of your comments from one paper to the next. They may be surprised to find that you have repeatedly given the same advice. This activity could also take place at home; students then submit their written reports to you.

Methods for Structuring Peer Review

Peer review is an essential guide to revision in almost every field of academic publication. Because publishers do not entirely trust themselves (and scholars do not entirely trust them) to make independent decisions about the value and clarity of a manuscript, they request help from members of the intended audience. In turn, authors benefit from the advice offered by their peers, even if opinions of their work differ. Editors mediate these differences and negotiate productive changes to work in progress.

There are good reasons for extending the benefits of peer review to student writing:

- Like the editor of an article or a book, the teacher holds final authority over the revisions necessary to bring student writing to completion, but advice from the writer's peers can be very useful in this process.
- Like scholars, student writers learn from several views of their work in progress.
- Students appreciate the opportunity to read one another's responses to an assignment.
- As writers, they can also gain valuable skills from the challenge of helping other writers improve their drafts.

- The skills involved in peer review are valuable not just in the classroom, but also in most professions.

Yet teachers are often reluctant to include peer review, or often discontinue the practice, because the advice students offer one another can be shallow or misleading. Although they are the writer's peers, students are not experienced reviewers or experts in the subject of the work, and they are sometimes reluctant to offer advice that seems critical. Some student readers can be *too* critical and will feel obliged to "correct" writing that you, the teacher, consider fluent and effective. Monitoring these reviews and negotiating their differences can require more time than responding directly to drafts, without peer review.

It is certainly true that if you just ask students to review one another's drafts, without guidelines, the results will be inconsistent at best, especially on the first occasion. Some readers' comments will be confined to bland praise and empty generalization (*I thought this was a really good paper; It could be clearer in some places*). Other readers will try to correct specific phrases and sentences, ignoring general problems with organization and development. You might well conclude that the exercise was a waste of time.

Like the value of other teaching strategies, however, the value of peer review will depend on the way you structure and supervise the activity, in line with the design and goals of your class. Professional writing teachers who emphasize the writing process sometimes devote most of their class time to collaborative work on drafts, in pairs or small groups. These teachers gradually train their students to provide useful feedback at different stages of the writing process, and their students learn to assume responsibility for helping one another. From the repeated experience of giving and receiving comments, these students figure out which kinds of advice are most helpful, and they realize (as other writers do) that they can offer useful suggestions even if they struggle with their own writing projects. As students become more skillful at helping one another, peer review begins to repay the time and effort teachers spend in supervising this work. When student writers receive thoughtful, constructive suggestions from their peers, they will need less detailed commentary from their teachers.

Movement in the direction of independence from the teacher is not a dereliction of duty. Student writers *should* become less dependent on teachers and more reliant on themselves and their peers in the revision and evaluation of their work.

If you have time available for peer review in class, here are some basic requirements for making this work productive.

Suggestions for In-Class Peer Review

- Form *peer review groups of three or four*; these can work better than pairs because no one gets stuck with just one, possibly ineffective or irresponsible, reviewer. If there is insufficient time for multiple readers, have students work in pairs.

- Decide whether you want to let students determine *who will read* their drafts or if you want to choose readers for yourself. If the latter, prepare the list of who will exchange with whom in advance.
- Make sure that students bring the necessary *multiple copies of their drafts* to class for distribution to the peer readers.
- Distribute *clear, written instructions* for the kind of feedback you want reviewers to provide at that stage of the process — for instance, attention to general organization and development in an early draft, qualities of evidence and other support for an argument, revision of sentences in a work that is nearly finished. It makes good sense to provide precise lists of questions the reviewers should answer or, perhaps better yet, forms they should fill out.
- If you do not use *review forms*, tell students to *write comments on the draft*, including general comments at the end.
- Make sure the students have *time in class to discuss these comments* with each other to clarify lingering questions. If all the work is done in class, schedule ample time.
- *Be on hand* to provide assistance and resolve doubts while the students are working together in class.
- Remind students of *collegiality* — that they should provide the kinds of help they would like to receive from others.
- *Repeat these exercises* as frequently as you can throughout the term. With practice, students will become more skillful at providing and utilizing peer reviews.

Out-of-Class Peer Review

In topical courses that include writing assignments, you might not have time available for peer review in class, but these exercises also work very well outside class, much as they do in the professional review of manuscripts. In fact, some teachers use professional models for peer review in their fields, especially in advanced courses where majors become familiar with professional literature. In advanced laboratory science courses, for example, teachers sometimes organize anonymous student peer reviews of lab report drafts, according to professional guidelines, and serve as the "editors" for these manuscripts. When the student authors have received the reviews, they write letters addressed to the editor, thanking the reviewers and explaining how they plan to implement the advice in a revised report. This letter, for which most science teachers can provide models, serves as a contract or promise for making changes, which the teacher can further negotiate if necessary.

If professional models and anonymous reviews seem inappropriate for your course, you can shift most features of an in-class peer review to out-of-class activities to ensure productive work.

Suggestions for Out-of-Class Peer Review

- Require students to bring sufficient *copies* of their drafts to exchange in class.
- Distribute written review *guidelines* or forms.
- Set a *deadline* for submission of peer reviews.
- Ask that students write comments directly on the essay, fill out the form you provide, or, better yet, type up a *review letter*, following the guidelines you provide.
- Provide *time in class for students to discuss these comments* with one another, to clarify lingering questions.
- Again, *repeat* this exercise as frequently as you can throughout the term.

Like journal editors, you will need to monitor these reviews to some extent; many teachers want to see all of the peer comments before they compose their own responses to drafts. If peer review is an important part of the course, the quality of these reviews may constitute part of the final grade as well.

Although it involves more paper, along with some delay, one strategy is to ask all of the reviewers to submit copies of their comments to you. Teachers who want to avoid this additional paperwork and delay structure all or parts of the peer review process as electronic exchange. Students can exchange drafts as e-mail attachments and exchange their general comments in e-mail messages, copied to you. For sentence-level and marginal comments on work that is nearly finished, they can insert suggestions in the texts and return them as attachments. Even with these electronic exchanges, however, it is a good idea for student writers to meet to discuss the drafts. These interpersonal contacts almost always raise new issues and resolve misunderstandings.

More than any other teaching practice, peer review can help students view their writing as a malleable substance that they can shape and reshape with the help of attentive readers before they submit their work to you, the final judge of its quality. The tendency for student writing to set up prematurely, like poured concrete, results in part from the sense that the first reader of this work will be its grader. Peer review delays that moment of submission and thus extends the time when writing remains a creative process, open to substantial revision.

CHAPTER

5

Informal and Preparatory Writing

Key Elements

Practice and Performance 77

For most undergraduates, writing has been assigned as a series of performances for potentially critical, authoritative audiences, without rehearsal. Written performance is a necessary basis for grading and necessary preparation for competitive careers. Yet in all performing arts (including athletics and scholarship) good performance results from preparation: practice, rehearsal, or coaching. It is naive, therefore, to assume that your students will write well without opportunities to prepare, or rehearse, for these performances.

As a teacher or "coach," how can you build practice and rehearsal into courses that emphasize writing?

Writing to Inform Teachers 79

Teachers often feel that they should just know, somehow, who their students are and what they need to learn. Yet students rarely volunteer information about their interests, needs, and difficulties. Here are some direct and timely ways to learn about who your students are and what is going on in class:

- Beginning-of-term questionnaires
- Written midterm course evaluations
- One-minute essays in class
- Notes on writing and thinking

Writing to Learn 80

Outside of the more traditional methods of writing to learn, like note taking on lectures and readings, other, informal writing techniques can contribute to learning:

- Reflective journals
- E-mail discussion lists
- Study questions
- Reading notes
- Concept papers

Writing in Preparation for Performance 82

Few undergraduates will produce the kind of writing you have in mind on the first try. Therefore, it is beneficial to create occasions for practice and rehearsal. These informal writing exercises can improve the quality of the formal writing you assign:

- Rough drafts (see Chapter 4)
- "Writing to learn" techniques described in the previous section
- Workshops on paper topics
- Written debates
- Alternative audiences
- Writing before reading
- Groundwork assignments
- Models for writing

Practice and Performance

In addition to their specific functions in a course as exercises in learning, the finished papers that students turn in for evaluation and grading are essentially performances. In these formal essays, research papers, or reports, students demonstrate to you, their primary audience, how well they understand the subject; the extent to which they can think through an issue, pursue a line of inquiry, or develop an argument; and their ability to convey their understanding and ideas in writing.

In a course that emphasizes writing, performance is a necessary basis for grading, and it also helps to prepare students for writing in their careers. Most of the writing that graduates complete in their professions will demonstrate to audiences of colleagues and supervisors

their ability to perform their jobs, and much of that writing will be at least implicitly "graded," as a basis for performance reviews and promotions. It would be naive to assign writing only as a medium of learning or only as performance.

Analogies to music and to other performing arts will help illustrate what we mean. Imagine that students in a school of music (or theater, dance, or visual arts) were taught that performance is the means to its own end: that musicians learn to perform well entirely by performing before informed, critical audiences, without practice. Imagine that in each of these performances novice musicians must play a new piece and a new kind of music without rehearsal. And imagine that to prepare for these alarming recitals they are told only to listen to the performances of experts, read music, and read about musical performance.

Instead, music teachers know, and want their students to know, that although fine performance might seem to be effortless, it results from many hours of rehearsal, many years of practice and coaching. And these means to the ends of performance are not confined to the performing arts. Imagine that athletes were not allowed to practice before competitive events, but only watched and read about athletics. Practice, rehearsal, or coaching are essential preparations for all kinds of performance, including academic publication. Scholarly books and published articles typically result from years of education and research in the discipline, discussion with colleagues about work in progress, numerous drafts, peer review, and extensive revision.

For most undergraduates, however, writing has been a series of performances for potentially critical, authoritative audiences, without rehearsal. The great majority of their writing assignments have called for performances of certain types, submitted to teachers as finished products for evaluation and grading. And through this experience, to varying degrees, they have grown used to giving poorly rehearsed, flawed performances.

How, as a coach, can you build practice and rehearsal into courses that emphasize writing?

We have already suggested ways to design courses that encourage students to write and speak in the process of learning, and our advice on assignment sequences in Chapter 2 includes assignments that build constituent skills used to meet the demands of more complex assignments later. Further chapters will discuss ways of including revision, peer review, and staged assignments for research papers. All of these methods provide forms of practice and rehearsal for written performance.

In this chapter we will focus on types of informal, typically ungraded writing that contribute to learning, stimulate informed discussion, and sometimes lead to formal papers or revisions. Although informal writing often has multiple functions, we can roughly categorize types of informal writing according to their main purposes, with some examples of each type.

Writing to Inform Teachers

Teachers often feel that they should just know, somehow — through experience, authority, or intuition — who their students are and what they need to learn. Rarely volunteering information about their individual interests, needs, and difficulties, students help maintain this shaky assumption that we have all the information we need to teach effectively. Through formal writing, exams, conferences, and discussions we gradually become more familiar with our students and the ways in which they learn. But there are more direct, timely ways of finding out who students are and what is really going on in the class, from their perspective.

Ways to Use Writing to Learn about Your Students

- *Beginning-of-term questionnaires* can give you some immediate information about your students and will let them know that you are interested in them as individuals. In addition to basic information (such as their e-mail addresses, majors, and hometowns), you can ask about particular interests, motives, and needs relevant to your teaching:

  What are your main reasons for taking this course?

  What do you hope to get out of it by the end of the term?

  What are your academic interests and career goals?

  What other courses are you taking this term?

  What other writing courses (or courses in this field) have you taken?

  What reading in this field have you done?

  What kinds of writing and reading do you prefer?

  Are there particular difficulties with writing you hope to overcome?

  What experience do you have with languages other than English?

  Is there anything you would like me to know that will help me, as your instructor?

- *Written midterm course evaluations* allow students to give you feedback on the way the course is working and particular difficulties they encounter. While final course evaluations are essentially post mortem, like the final grades you give students, assessments at midterm or earlier offer students a voice in the direction of the course and provide information you can use to improve teaching and learning. These evaluations work best if you tell students to write little essays in response to your questions, either in class or as take-home assignments. Like final evaluations, however, they should be anonymous.

- *One-minute essays* in class offer students the opportunity to give you immediate feedback on what they understand, find confusing, or want to know more about in response to the course material. Teachers often leave time for students to write these notes and collect them at the end of a class period, when thoughts and questions are fresh. These notes (which are more often five-minute essays) are an excellent basis for planning and continuity between classes.
- *Notes on writing and thinking* allow students to tell you how they actually think through and complete the formal writing you assign. These notes — which you can ask students to turn in with their papers or write in class — might alert you to difficulties in the writing process, confusion about the assignment, ideas that didn't appear in the finished paper, and other information that can help you address students' needs. While you can observe strengths and weaknesses in the finished papers they submit, notes about the writing process often help explain patterns and focus the guidance you offer for revisions and future assignments.

Writing to Learn

In *Writing to Learn Science and Mathematics*, Paul Connolly and Patricia Vilardi note that the term "writing to learn" acknowledges "the powerful role language plays in the production, as well as the presentation, of knowledge." Connolly and Vilardi go on to link writing to learn with "informal writing": "language that is forming a meaning," or language used as "the most important mediator of concepts we do not yet fully hold" (3–4). Such writing is therefore a medium used to grasp or construct understandings, while more formal writing might serve to demonstrate knowledge the writer has come to possess.

In this sense, notes on lectures and readings are common forms of "writing to learn." So are laboratory notebooks and other research notes used in the process of developing investigative papers. But many other kinds of informal writing contribute to learning. While teachers usually refrain from grading this writing, they usually read it as required work and often make a portion of the final grade contingent on completion of these exercises. Here we briefly describe just a few examples of this kind of writing, each with many potential variations.

Ways to Use Writing to Help Students Learn

- *Reflective journals* serve to capture what we sometimes call "hidden discourse" relevant to the class. While conventional notes on lectures and readings primarily record information, reflective journals record what students are thinking *about* this material and at once stimulate inquisitive and critical thinking that otherwise would not occur or would be forgotten.

Teachers who assign reflective journals usually ask students to write entries in a separate notebook and require certain amounts of writing each week — either entries for each class and assigned reading or a certain number of pages — and they restrict the content to varying degrees, according to their purpose. Some teachers use journals explicitly to ensure that students have thought about specific lectures and readings, as a basis for informed discussion and further writing. Others permit entries on any thoughts related to the subject of the course. Unless you want to learn a lot about your students' social lives and personal problems, you will want to distinguish these journals from diaries and limit their content to issues relevant to your course.

Most teachers collect these journals periodically and read them. Some also write comments on points of particular interest or confusion or identify promising ideas for future essays. Because the exploratory function of reflective journals depends upon some measure of privacy, entries should not be distributed to the class. If you want to use journal material in class, however, you can tell students at the beginning of the term that they will select passages for distribution and discussion or use selected ideas as a basis for brief presentations.

- *E-mail discussion lists* extend the exploratory function of reflective journals to written conversation among members of the class. At most institutions you can easily set up an exchange group that limits access to your students. In most cases, however, exchanges will be sporadic and of limited value unless you require participation. You can initiate discussions by posting specific issues or questions each week, or you can assign this task to individual students or groups.
- *Study questions* ask students to respond through informal writing to specific issues or to synthesize understandings assembled from course material. Teachers usually ask students to complete these brief responses before the class period when the topic will be discussed. This preparation can stimulate lively discussions that include everyone, and because reticent students will have thoughts on paper, you can ask them to participate with less concern for intimidating them. These written responses also facilitate small-group discussions, where students can compare positions they have developed, or formal debates. Teachers usually collect these papers at the end of the class and, if they have time, respond to the ideas they present.
- *Reading notes* are informal summaries of, or responses to, assigned readings for a particular week. Like study questions, they can be used to stimulate discussion, but their main function is to strengthen the students' understanding of and engagement with assigned texts. They will also give you a clearer sense of the ways

in which students are reading and understanding the material and alert you to common points of confusion. Some teachers assign these notes in three parts: a brief summary of the author's position, an evaluative response to the position, and a discussion of the connections between the text and other course material.

- *Concept papers* ask students to explain, usually in a paragraph or two, especially important or difficult concepts essential to understanding the subject of the course. All teachers can identify concepts central to learning in their courses; experienced teachers can also identify concepts that students typically have difficulty understanding thoroughly. Students can best come to grips with these concepts by trying to explain them clearly in their own words, and their efforts will then facilitate further discussion and clarification. A biology teacher, for example, might ask students to define cell lines or to explain the relation between genetic drift and natural selection. In a political theory class, a concept paper might ask students to explain the most fundamental difference between the views of history in Marx and Hegel.

  In a large class you do not need to respond individually to these papers. When you have read them, you can address the most common misunderstandings in class or in a handout, and (with permission from the writers) you can distribute the most clear, cohesive explanations to the class.

Writing in Preparation for Performance

Because most undergraduates attempt to complete assignments in a single draft, often shortly before the deadline, few of them will produce the kind of writing you had in mind unless you create occasions for practice and rehearsal. As one of our students said, describing the kind of stage fright she experienced in unrehearsed performance, "I feel my writing should be coherent, intelligently composed, and interesting in order to reflect some of my nonexistent characteristics." How can we help students to bring these characteristics into existence?

Rough drafts are the most obvious forms of rehearsal for written performance, and in Chapter 4 we described ways of assigning drafts and revisions productively. Most of the writing to learn activities we have described in the previous section — reflective journals, study questions, and reading notes — can also become preparations for developing formal papers. Used to generate first thoughts on a topic, they allow emerging essays to represent further thoughts, which are usually more cohesive and interesting. Here we present a few more informal writing exercises that can improve the quality of the formal writing you assign.

Written communication relies on a sense of exchange with readers. This is especially true of argument and interpretation, in which the development of a position presumes other positions, other uses of logic and evidence. In most of the following exercises, therefore, informal writing is also a subject of discussion in classroom activities.

Ways to Use Writing in Preparation for Performance

- *Workshops on paper topics* allow students to test alternative ideas and plans for writing before they become wedded to a single approach. In small groups of three or four students, in or outside class, these discussions can focus on a variety of materials for work in progress: thesis statements, central questions the paper might address, assertions with forms of evidence, or introductory paragraphs. In each case this exercise will work best if you ask students to bring in two or more options for their paper and give the groups clear goals and procedures for discussion. In small seminars you can do some of this work with the entire class.
- *Written debates* strengthen the writer's sense that good essays must acknowledge other positions and viewpoints. To develop these exchanges, assign students different sides of an issue and ask them to draft informal arguments. Have students from opposing sides exchange drafts and write counterarguments, which the writers must acknowledge and address in revised versions. These written exchanges can also be used as a basis for classroom debates and discussion.
- *Alternative audiences* encourage students to develop arguments and explanations informally, prior to final performance, in drafts they must extensively revise. Ask students first to explain the subject or argument of their assigned paper to a familiar audience, such as a parent or a close friend, in informal language that this reader can easily understand, perhaps in the form of a letter.
- *Writing before reading* exercises encourage students to develop tentative positions on an issue before they read what authorities have to say. This preliminary work allows them to recognize the positions of other writers more easily and to write *about* those texts, rather than simply adopting the views of the authors.
- *Groundwork assignments* ask students to define central terms or to explain relevant concepts and methodologies before they begin to draft formal essays. Without this initial clarification, many papers will be based on a weak grasp of basic terms and concepts essential to their arguments and explanations.
- *Models for writing* help to prevent basic misconceptions of the forms and styles of writing your assignments require. For some assignments you can find examples of published articles, essays, reports, or reviews close to the types of work you want students to produce. In other cases you can distribute examples of effective student papers from previous terms.

Teachers are sometimes reluctant to give students models for writing because undergraduates are entirely too good at imitating the form and style of a specific essay. The exercise begins to resemble "copying" and can limit variation and creativity. Models work best, therefore, if they are first the subjects of informal writing and discussions on the general features that make this piece an example of successful writing in a form or genre used for certain purposes. Using more than one example, or referring students broadly to certain types of articles in certain publications, can also reduce slavish imitation.

We've described informal writing as varieties of practice and rehearsal that can improve the quality of performance. From a slightly different perspective, however, we can think of informal writing as a way of *delaying* performance: keeping the imminence of performance from interrupting kinds of thinking and learning that are of great value in themselves.

We know teachers in a variety of fields, from English to physics, who want to delay the finished product indefinitely and work entirely with informal, unfinished writing as a mode of learning. Teachers in an advanced biochemistry course once explained that they did not want to assign complete reports on experiments because the goals of getting significant results and reaching conclusions — goals built into the form of a finished report — interfered with the kinds of attention necessary to conduct real experiments and thus learn experimental science. For these teachers, laboratory notes are both effective and sufficient forms of writing.

For related reasons, Europeans often argue that American undergraduates are overexamined: required to perform in graded papers, examinations, quizzes, or problem sets on a weekly basis throughout the term, as though the purpose of education were to strengthen and measure short-term memory. If students are accustomed to demonstrating knowledge shortly after they get it, they will view writing as a way of getting information and ideas assembled on paper as quickly as possible.

Few of us would say that we want to teach our students to jump to conclusions, but this is what formal writing assignments often invite students to do. Informal, unfinished writing can encourage students to suspend judgment and think of both writing and learning as works in progress.

Revision, the subject of Chapter 4, can also be used for these dual purposes: to improve performance and suspend premature judgments.

CHAPTER 6

Teaching Writing at the Sentence Level

Key Elements

Defining Terms to Clarify Instruction 87

When we talk about helping students write at the sentence level, we may have one of two quite different tasks in mind: helping students with *errors* or helping them with *style*. It can help to distinguish among important terms: mechanics, syntax (basic sentence grammar), punctuation, register, and style.

The Current State of Student Writing 88

We may ask if student writing has degenerated and if high schools have failed in their job, but a number of considerations suggest that we should modify this negative reaction.

The Recursive Nature of Learning to Write 89

Learning to write is not a linear progression. When students start to write in a new and difficult subject, they may run into trouble with sentence structure, with use of vocabulary, even with control over basic sentence correctness. Immediate and primary attention to errors or to stylistic choices may not solve the problem.