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LANGUAGE AWARENESS

Readings for College Writers

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WRITERS ON WRITING

WRITING: THE TRANSACTION

What Happens When People Write?

Maxine Hairston

Maxine Hairston is Professor Emerita of Rhetoric and Compo-
sition at the University of Texas at Austin, where she served as
coordinator of advanced expository writing courses, director of first-
year English, and associate dean of humanities. She is a past chair
of the Conference on College Composition and Communication
and has written many articles on rhetoric and teaching writing.
She has also authored and coauthored several textbooks, including
The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers, 5th ed. (1996) and

In the following selection, taken from Hairston's textbook Suc-
cessful Writing (1998), now in its fourth edition, she takes the mys-
tery out of writing by giving an overview of the writing process. By
looking at the way professional writers work, she shows us how to es-
ablish realistic expectations of what should happen each time we sit
down to write. Next, Hairston focuses on the differences between
two major types of writing—explanatory and exploratory—that
writers should master and value equally. She explains how a
writer's writing process can change depending on the type of writ-
ing someone is doing.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: Think about what happens when you sit
down to write. Do you have one particular pen that you like to use, or
do you compose on a personal computer? Where do you like to write?
Do you have any special rituals that you go through before settling into your task? Briefly describe the process you go through from the time you make the decision to put an idea in writing (or are given an assignment) to the time that you submit final copy. Is the process roughly the same for all the different types of writing that you do? Explain.

Many people who have trouble writing believe that writing is a mysterious process that the average person cannot master. They assume that anyone who writes well does so because of a magic mixture of talent and inspiration, and that people who are not lucky enough to have those gifts can never become writers. Thus they take an “either you have it or you don’t” attitude that discourages them before they even start to write.

Like most myths, this one has a grain of truth in it, but only a grain. Admittedly the best writers are people with talent just as the best musicians or athletes or chemists are people with talent. But that qualification does not mean that only talented people can write well any more than it means that only a few gifted people can become good tennis players. Tennis coaches know differently. From experience, they know any reasonably well-coordinated and healthy person can learn to play a fairly good game of tennis if he or she will learn the principles of the game and work at putting them into practice. They help people become tennis players by showing them the strategies that experts use and by giving them criticism and reinforcement as they practice those strategies. In recent years, as we have learned more about the processes of working writers, many teachers have begun to work with their writing students in the same way.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE WRITING PROCESS

How Professional Writers Work

- Successful writers usually have some audience in mind and stay aware of that audience as they write and revise.
- Most successful writers work rather slowly, four to six double-spaced pages is considered a good day’s work.
- Even successful writers often have trouble getting started, they expect it and don’t panic.
- Successful writers seldom know precisely what they are going to write before they start, and they plan on discovering at least part of their content as they work. (See section below on explanatory and exploratory writing.)
- Successful writers stop frequently to reread what they’ve written and consider such rereading an important part of the writing process.
- Successful writers revise as they write and expect to do two or more drafts of anything they write.
- Like ordinary mortals, successful writers often procrastinate and feel guilty about it, unlike less experienced writers, however, most of them have a good sense of how long they can procrastinate and still avoid disaster.

Explanatory and Exploratory Writing

Several variables affect the method and speed with which writers work—how much time they have, how important their task is, how skilled they are, and so on. The most important variable, however, is the kind of writing they are doing. I am going to focus on two major kinds here: explanatory and exploratory. To put it briefly, although much too simply, explanatory writing tends to be about information, and exploratory writing tends to be about ideas.

Explanatory writing can take many forms: a movie review, an explanation of new software, an analysis of historical causes, a report on a recent political development, a biographical sketch. These are just a few possibilities. The distinguishing feature of all these examples and other kinds of explanatory writing is that the writer either knows most of what he or she is going to say before starting to write or knows where to find the material needed to get started. A typical explanatory essay might be on some aspect of global warming for an environmental studies course. The material for such a paper already exists—you’re not going to create it or discover it within your subconscious. Your job as a writer is to dig out the material, organize it, and shape it into a clearly written, carefully supported essay. Usually you would know who your readers are for an explanatory essay and, from the beginning, shape it for that audience.

Writers usually make plans when they are doing explanatory writing, plans that can range from a page of notes to a full outline. Such plans help them to keep track of their material, put it in some kind of order, and find a pattern for presenting it. For explanatory writing, many writers find that
the traditional methods work well; assertion/support, cause and effect, process, compare/contrast, and so on. Much of the writing that students do in college is explanatory, as is much business writing. Many magazine articles and nonfiction books are primarily explanatory writing. It's a crucially important kind of writing, one that we depend on for information and education, one that keeps the machinery of business and government going.

Explanatory writing is not necessarily easy to do nor is it usually formulaic. It takes skill and care to write an accurate, interesting story about the physician who won a Nobel Prize for initiating kidney transplants or an entertaining and informative report on how the movie Dick Tracy was made. But the process for explanatory writing is manageable. You identify the task, decide what the purpose and who the audience are, map out a plan for finding and organizing information, then divide the writing itself into doable chunks and start working. Progress may be painful, and you may have to draft and revise several times to clarify points or get the tone just right, but with persistence, you can do it.

**Exploratory writing** may also take many forms: a reflective personal essay, a profile of a homeless family, an argument in support of funding for multimillion dollar science projects, or a speculative essay about the future of the women's movement. These are only a few possibilities. What distinguishes these examples and exploratory writing in general is that the writer has only a partially formed idea of what he or she is going to write before starting. A typical piece of exploratory writing might be a speculative essay on why movies about the Mafia appeal so much to the American public. You might hit on the idea of writing such a piece after you have seen several mob movies—Goodfellas, Miller's Crossing, and Godfather III—but not really know what you would say or who your audience would be. The material for such a paper doesn't exist; you would have to begin by reading, talking to people, and by drawing on the ideas and insights you've gleaned from different sources to reach your own point of view. And you would certainly expect some of your most important ideas—your own conclusions—to come to you as you wrote.

Because you don't know ahead of time exactly what you're going to say in exploratory writing, it's hard to make a detailed plan or outline; however, you can and should take copious notes as you prepare to write. You might be able to put down a tentative thesis sentence, for example, "American moviegoers are drawn to movies about the Mafia and mob violence because they appeal to a streak of lawlessness that has always been strong in American character." Such a sentence could be an anchor to get you started writing, but as a main idea, it could change or even disappear as the paper developed.

Many papers you write in college will be exploratory papers, for example, an interpretive paper in a literature course, an essay on the future of an ethnic community for a cultural anthropology course, or an argumentative paper for a government course proposing changes in our election laws. Many magazine articles and books are also exploratory, for example, an article on the roots of violence in American cities or an autobiographical account of being tagged a "slow learner" early in one's school career. Both in and out of college, exploratory writing is as important as explanatory writing because it is the springboard and testing ground for new ideas.

Exploratory writing isn't necessarily harder to do than explanatory writing, but it is harder to plan because it resists any systematic approach. That makes it appealing to some writers, particularly those who have a reflective or speculative turn of mind. They like the freedom of being able just to write to see what is going to develop. But although exploratory writers start out with more freedom, eventually they too have to discipline themselves to organize their writing into clear, readable form. They also have to realize that exploratory writing usually takes longer and requires more drafts.

When you're doing exploratory writing, anticipate that your process will be messy. You have to tolerate uncertainty longer because ideas keep coming as you write and it's not always clear what you're going to do with them and how—or if—you can fit them into your paper. Exploratory writing is also hard to organize—sometimes you'll have to outline after you've written your first draft in order to get the paper under control. Finally, you also have to have confidence in your own instincts; now that you are focusing on ideas and reflections more than on facts, you have to believe that you have something worth writing about and that other people are interested in reading it.

Of course, not all writing can be easily classified as either explanatory or exploratory; sometimes you'll be working with information and ideas in the same paper and move from presenting facts to reflecting about their implications. For example, in an economics course you might report on how much Japan has invested in the United States economy over the last decade and where those investments have been made; then you could speculate about the long-range impact on American business. If you were writing a case study of a teenage mother for a social work class, you would use mostly explanatory writing to document the young woman's background, schooling, and important facts about her present situation, then you could go to exploratory writing to suggest her options for the future can be improved.

In general, readers respond best to writing that thoughtfully connects facts to reflections, explanations to explorations. So don't hesitate to mix the two kinds of writing if it makes your paper stronger and more interesting. At this point, you might ask "Why do these distinctions matter to me?" I think there are several reasons.

First, it helps to realize that there isn't a writing process, and some work better than others in specific situations. Although by temperament and habit you may be the "just give me the facts, ma'am," kind of person who prefers to do explanatory writing, you also need to become proficient at exploratory writing in order to write the speculative, reflective papers that are necessary when you have to write about long-range goals or speculate about philosophical issues.
on the other hand, by temperament you'd rather ignore outlines and pre-
fer to spin theories instead of report on facts, you also need to become
proficient at explanatory writing. In almost any profession, you're going
to have to write reports, summarize data, or present results of research.

Second, you'll become a more proficient and relaxed writer if you de-
velop the habit of analyzing before you start, whether you are going to be
doing primarily explanatory or exploratory writing. Once you decide, you
can consciously switch into certain writing patterns and write more ef-
ciently. For instance, when you're writing reports, case studies, research
papers, or analyses, take the time to rough out an outline and make a
careful list of the main points you need to make. Schedule time for re-
search and checking facts, details are going to be important. Review some
of the routine but useful patterns you could use to develop your paper.
cause and effect, definition, process, narration, and so forth. They can
work well when you have a fairly clear idea of your purpose and what
you're going to say.

If you're starting on a less clearly defined, more open-ended paper —
for example, a reflective essay about Picasso's portrayal of women for an
art history course — allow yourself to be less organized for a while. Be
willing to start without knowing where you're going. Look at some
paintings to get your ideas flowing, talk to some other students, and then
just start writing, confident that you'll find your content and your direc-
tion. Don't worry if you can't get the first paragraph right — it will come
later. Your first goal with exploratory writing should be to generate a
fairly complete first draft in order to give yourself something to work
with. Remember to give yourself plenty of time to revise. You'll need it.

Finally, reassert the idea that one kind of writing is better than another.
It's not. Sometimes there's a tendency, particularly in liberal arts classes,
to believe that people who do theoretical or reflective writing are su-
perior; that exploratory writing is looser and more admirable than writing in
which people present facts and argue for concrete causes. That's not
really the case. Imaginative, thoughtful writing about theories and opin-
ions is important and interesting, but informative, factual writing is also
critically important, and people who can do it well are invaluable. Anyone
who hopes to be an effective, confident writer should cultivate the habits
that enable him or her to do both kinds of writing well.

FOCUSBING ON CONTENT
1 According to Hairston, in what ways is a writing teacher like a tennis coach?
Does this analogy help you to view your writing teacher differently? (Glossary
Analogy) Explain

2 Review the list of items that Hairston provides to explain how professional
writers work. How many points on the list are you already doing? What
items if any, surprised you?

3 What are the main differences between explanatory and exploratory writing?
Which type do you usually find yourself doing? Is Hairston's essay explana-
tory, exploratory, or a combination of both types of writing?

FOCUSING ON WRITING
1 Carefully examine Hairston's dictum or choice of words in this selection
(Glossary Dictum) Would you consider any of her words the technical lan-
guage or jargon of writing teachers? (Glossary Technical Language) Is her
language appropriate for her intended audience? Explain

2 Discuss how Hairston uses comparison and contrast to explain the differences
between explanatory and exploratory writing. (Glossary Comparison and Con-
trast) What examples does she use to illustrate her points? (Glossary Examples)

3 What transitions does Hairston use to connect the ideas in paragraphs 15
and 16? (Glossary Transitions) Briefly explain how her transitions work

4 How would you describe Hairston's tone in this essay? (Glossary Tone) Explain
how her choice of words helps her create this tone (Glossary Diction)
Use examples from the text to show what you mean. How important is tone
to writers? To readers?

LANGUAGE IN ACTION
Consider the following cartoon from the New Yorker. What insights into the
writing process does the cartoon give you? How does humor help people
talk about situations that might otherwise be difficult to discuss? Explain
Writing Suggestions

1. (Writing from Experience) How well do you know yourself as a writer? Drawing on what you wrote in your Writing to Discover entry for this selection, write an essay in which you describe the process you normally follow in writing a composition. Do you begin by brainstorming ideas, thinking before you write, or do you simply start writing, hoping that ideas will come to you as you write? How many drafts does it usually take before you have a piece of writing that satisfies you? What part of the process is the most difficult for you? The easiest for you?

2. (Writing from Reading) In list form, describe the processes for writing an explanatory and an exploratory essay. Discuss your lists with others in your class. What are the main differences between the two processes? Write an essay about these differences.

3. (Writing from Research) How useful do you find outlining? When in the writing process do you usually prepare an outline? Do your outlining practices vary according to the type of writing you are doing? What recommendations about outlining have your previous teachers made? Consult several texts in the library about outlining. Then, using the preceding questions as a starting point, compose a brief questionnaire about outlining practices and the benefits of outlining, and give the questionnaire to the other students in your writing class. What conclusions can you draw from your tabulated questionnaires? Based on your findings, write an essay arguing for or against the benefits of outlining.

Writing for an Audience

Linda Flower

Linda Flower is professor of English at Carnegie-Mellon University, where she directed the Business Communication program for a number of years. She has been a leading researcher in the composing process, and the results of her investigations have shaped and informed her influential writing and Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing, now in its fifth edition (1999).

In this selection, which is taken from that text, Flower’s focus is on audience—the people for whom we write. She believes that writers must establish a “common ground” between themselves and their readers, one that lessens their differences in knowledge, attitudes, and needs. Although we can never be certain who might read what we write, it is nevertheless important for us to have a target audience in mind. Many of the decisions that we make as writers are influenced by that real or imagined reader.

Writing to Discover: Imagine for a moment that you just received a speeding ticket for going sixty-five miles per hour in a thirty-mile-per-hour zone! How would you describe the episode to your best friend? To your parents? To the judge in court? Sketch out the three versions, and then write about how the three versions of your story differ. How do you account for these differences?

The goal of the writer is to create a momentary common ground between the reader and the writer. You want the reader to share your knowledge and your attitude toward that knowledge. Even if the reader eventually disagrees, you want him or her to be able for the moment to see things as you see them. A good piece of writing closes the gap between you and the reader.

Analyze Your Audience

The first step in closing that gap is to gauge the distance between the two of you. Imagine, for example, that you are a student writing your parents, who have always lived in New York City, about a wilderness survival expedition you want to go on over spring break. Sometimes obvious differences such as age or background will be important, but the critical differences for writers usually fall into three areas: the reader’s knowledge about the topic; his or her attitude toward it, and his or her personal or professional needs. Because these differences often exist, good writers do more than simply express their meaning; they pinpoint the critical differ-
ences between themselves and their reader and design their writing to reduce those differences. Let us look at these areas in more detail.

KNOWLEDGE. This is usually the easiest difference to handle. What does your reader need to know? What are the main ideas you hope to teach? Does your reader have enough background knowledge to really understand you? If not, what would he or she have to learn?

ATTITUDES. When we say a person has knowledge, we usually refer to his conscious awareness of explicit facts and clearly defined concepts. This kind of knowledge can be easily written down or told to someone else. However, much of what we “know” is not held in this formal, explicit way. Instead it is held as an attitude or image — as a loose cluster of associations. For instance, my image of lakes includes associations many people would have, including fishing, water skiing, strolled outboards, and lots of kids catching night crawlers with flashlights. However, the most salient or powerful parts of my image, which strongly color my whole attitude toward lakes, are thoughts of cloudy skies, long rainy days, and feeling generally cold and damp. By contrast, one of my best friends has a very different cluster of associations to him a lake means sun, swimming, sailing, and happily sitting on the end of a dock. Needless to say, our differing images cause us to react quite differently to a proposal that we visit a lake. Likewise, one reason people often find it difficult to discuss religion and politics is that terms such as “capitalism” conjure up radically different images.

As you can see, a reader’s image of a subject is often the source of attitudes and feelings that are unexpected and, at times, impervious to mere facts. A simple statement that seems quite persuasive to you, such as “Lake Wampago would be a great place to locate the new music camp,” could have little impact on your reader if he or she simply doesn’t visualize a lake as a “great place.” In fact, many people accept uncritically any statement that fits in with their own attitudes — and reject, just as uncritically, anything that does not.

Whether your purpose is to persuade or simply to present your perspective, it helps to know the image and attitudes that your reader already holds. The more these differ from your own, the more you will have to do to make him or her see what you mean.

NEEDS. When writers discover a large gap between their own knowledge and attitudes and those of the reader, they usually try to change the reader in some way. Needs, however, are different. When you analyze a reader’s needs, it is so that you, the writer, can adapt to him. If you ask a friend majoring in biology how to keep your fish tank from clouding, you don’t want to hear a textbook recitation on the life processes of algae. You expect a friend to adapt his or her knowledge and tell you exactly how to solve your problem.

The ability to adapt your knowledge to the needs of the reader is often crucial to your success as a writer. This is especially true in writing done on a job. For example, as producer of a public affairs program for a television station, 80 percent of your time may be taken up planning the details of new shows, contacting guests, and scheduling the taping sessions. But when you write a program proposal to the station director, your job is to show how the program will fit into the cost guidelines, the FCC requirements for relevance, and the overall programming plan for the station. When you write that report your role in the organization changes from producer to proposal writer. Why? Because your reader needs that information in order to make a decision. He may be interested in your scheduling problems and the specific content of the shows, but he reads your report because of his own needs as station director of the organization. He has to act.

In college, where the reader is also a teacher, the reader’s needs are a little less concrete but just as important. Most papers are assigned as a way to teach something. So the real purpose of a paper may be for you to make connections between two historical periods, to discover for yourself the principle behind a laboratory experiment, or to develop and support your own interpretation of a novel. A good college paper doesn’t just rehash the facts, it demonstrates what your reader, as a teacher, needs to know—that you are learning the thinking skills his or her course is trying to teach.

Effective writers are not simply expressing what they know, like a student madly filling up an examination bluebook. Instead they are using their knowledge: reorganizing, maybe even rethinking their ideas to meet the demands of an assignment or the needs of their reader.

FOCUSING ON CONTENT

1. How, according to Flower, does a competent writer achieve the goal of closing the gap between himself or herself and the reader? How does a writer determine what a reader’s “personal or professional needs” (2) are?

2. What, for Flower, is the difference between knowledge and attitude? Why is it important for writers to understand this difference?

3. In paragraph 4, Flower discusses the fact that many words have both positive and negative associations. How do you think words come to have associations? (Glossary: Connotation/Denotation) Consider, for example, such words as home, anger, royalty, welfare, politician, and strawberry shortcake.

4. What does Flower believe constitutes a “good college paper” (9)? Do you agree with her assessment? Why or why not?

FOCUSING ON WRITING

1. Flower wrote this selection for college students. How well did she assess your knowledge, attitude, and needs about the subject of a writer’s audience?
Does Flower’s use of language and examples show a sensitivity to her audience? Provide specific examples to support your view. (Glossary, Examples)

2. Flower notes in paragraph 4 that many words often have “a loose cluster of associations.” Explain how you can use this fact to advantage when writing an argument. A personal essay. An informative piece.

3. When using technical language in a paper on a subject you have thoroughly researched or are already familiar with, why is it important for you to know your audience? (Glossary, Audience) What language strategies might you use to adapt your knowledge to your audience? Explain. How could your classmates, friends, or parents help you?

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Analyze the language of the advertisement on the following page for a hard drive workstation from Corporate Systems Center. Based on your own familiarity with computer language, identify those words that you consider computer jargon. (Glossary, Technical Language) Which words are appropriate for a general audience? An expert audience? For what kind of audience do you think this ad was written? Explain.

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. (Writing from Experience) Write an essay in which you discuss the proposition that honesty is a prerequisite of good writing. Ask yourself what it means to write honestly. What does dishonesty look like and sound like? Do you have a responsibility to be an honest writer? How is honesty in writing related to audience? Be sure to illustrate your essay with examples from your own experiences.

2. (Writing from Reading) In order to write well, a writer has to identify his or her audience. Choose a topic that is important to you, and taking into account what Flower calls your audience’s knowledge, attitude, and needs, write a letter about that topic to your best friend. Then write a letter on the same topic to your instructor. How does your message differ from letter to letter? How does your diction change? (Glossary, Diction) What conclusions about audience can you draw from your two letters? How successful do you think you were in “closing the gap between you and the reader” in each letter?

3. (Writing from Research) When you become an expert or authority on a subject, you learn its special language or jargon. (Glossary, Technical Language) In your library or on the Internet, research the technical language of a field that interests you, such as the language of a college major, a sport, or a hobby. What is the function or purpose of the technical language you researched? Write an essay in which you discuss the benefits of technical language as well as the potential drawbacks of using it with inappropriate audiences.
The Case for Short Words

RICHARD LEDERER

A lifelong student of language, Richard Lederer taught for twenty-seven years at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire. Anyone who has read one of his nine books will know why he has been called “America's wittiest verbalist.” Lederer loves language and enjoys writing about its marvelous richness. His books include Crazy English (1988), Anguished English (1988), The Play of Words (1991), Adventures of a Verbivore (1994), and Nothing Risqué, Nothing Gained (1995). Lederer holds a doctorate from the University of New Hampshire and is currently vice president of SPELL, Society for the Preservation of English Language and Literature. He is a language commentator on New Hampshire public radio and writes a weekly column, “Looking at Language,” for the Concord Monitor.

In the following selection, a chapter from The Miracle of Language (1991), Lederer sings the praises of small words. Too often we think that someone is measuring the quality of our work by counting the number of long words we use. Nothing could be further from the truth. Lederer reminds us that well-chosen monosyllabic words can be a writer's best friends because they are functional and often pack a powerful punch.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: Are you impressed by writers who use long words with seeming ease? Do you consider long words to be more intelligent than short words? Clever? How would you describe your own writing vocabulary? Explain how word length affects writing—your own and others.

When you speak and write, there is no law that says you have to use big words. Short words are as good as long ones, and short, old words—like sun and grass and home—are best of all. A lot of small words, more than you might think, can meet your needs with a strength, grace, and charm that large words do not have.

Big words can make the way dark for those who read what you write and hear what you say. Small words cast their clear light on big things—night and day, love and hate, war and peace, and life and death. Big words at times seem strange to the eye and the ear and the mind and the heart. Small words are the ones we seem to have known from the time we were born, like the hearth fire that warms the home.

Short words are bright like sparks that glow in the night, prompt like the dawn that greets the day, sharp like the blade of a knife, hot like salt tears that scald the cheek, quick like moths that flit from flame to flame, and terse like the dart and sting of a bee.

Here is a sound rule. Use small, old words where you can. If a long word says just what you want to say, do not fear to use it. But know that our tongue is rich in crisp, brisk, swift, short words. Make them the spine and the heart of what you speak and write. Short words are like fast friends. They will not let you down.

The title of this chapter and the four paragraphs that you have just read are wrought entirely of words of one syllable. In setting myself this task, I did not feel especially caged, cribbed, or confined. In fact, the structure helped me to focus on the power of the message I was trying to put across.

One study shows that twenty words account for twenty-five percent of all spoken English words, and all twenty are monosyllabic. In order of frequency they are: I, you, the, a, to, is, it, that, of, and, in, what, be, this, have, do, she, not, on, and they. Other studies indicate that the fifty most common words in written English are each made of a single syllable.

For centuries our finest poets and orators have recognized and employed the power of small words to make a straight point between two minds. A great many of our proverbs punch home their points with pithy monosyllables. “Where there's a will, there's a way,” “A stitch in time saves nine,” “Spare the rod and spoil the child,” “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”

Nobody used the short word more skillfully than William Shakespeare, whose dying King Lear laments.

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all?
Do you see this? Look on her, look, look her lips,
Look there, look there!

Shakespeare's contemporaries made the King James Bible a centerpiece of short words—“And God said, Let there be light. And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good.” The descendants of such mighty lines live on in the twentieth century. When asked to explain his policy to Parliament, Winston Churchill responded with these ringing monosyllables: “I will say, it is to wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all our strength that God can give us.” In his “Death of the Hired Man” Robert Frost observes that “Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.” And William H. Johnson uses ten-two-letter words to explain his secret of success “If it is to be, It is up to me.”

You don't have to be a great author, statesman, or philosopher to tap the energy and eloquence of small words. Each winter I ask my ninth graders at St. Paul's School to write a composition composed entirely of one-syllable words. My students greet my request with obligatory moans.
and groans, but, when they return to class with their essays, most feel that, with the pressure to produce high-sounding polysyllables, they have created some of their most powerful and luminous prose. Here are submissions from two of my ninth graders:

What can you say to a boy who has left home? You can say that he has done wrong, but he does not care. He has left home so that he will not have to deal with what you say. He wants to go as far as he can. He will do what he wants to do. 

This boy does not want to be forced to go to church, to comb his hair, or to be on time. A good time for this boy does not lie in your reach, for what you have he does not want. He dreams of ripped jeans, shorts with no starch, and old socks.

So now this boy is on a bus to a place he dreams of, a place with no rules. This boy now walks a strange street, his long hair blown back by the wind. He wears no coat or tie, just jeans and an old shirt. He hates your world, and he has left it. — Charles Slaffler

For a long time we cruised by the coast and at last came to a wide bay past the curve of a hill, at the end of which lay a small town. Our long boat rode at an end, we all stretched and stood up to watch as the boat nosed its way in.

The town climbed up the hill that rose from the shore, a space in front of it left bare for the port. Each house was a clean white with sky blue or gray trim, in front of each one was a small yard, edged by a white stone wall strewn with green vines.

As the town basked in the heat of noon, not a thing stirred in the streets or by the shore. The sun beat down on the sea, the land, and the back of our necks, so that, in spite of the breeze that made the vines sway, we all wished we could hide from the glare in a cool, white house. But, as there was no one to help dock the boat, we had to stand and wait.

At last the head of the crew leaped from the side and strode to a large house on the right. He shoved the door wide, poked his head through the gloom, and roared with a fierce voice. Five or six men came out, and soon the port was loud with the clank of chains and the crack of planks as the men caught ropes thrown by the crew, pulled them taut, and tied them to posts. Then they set up a rough plank so we could cross from the deck to the shore. We all made for the large house while the crew watched, glad to be rid of us. — Celia Wren

You too can tap into the vitality and vigor of compact expression. Take a suggestion from the highway department. At the boundaries of your speech and prose place a sign that reads "Caution: Small Words at Work."

FOCUSDING ON CONTENT

1. In paragraph 4, Lederer offers us one rule for better writing: "Use small, old words where you can. If a long word says just what you want to say, do not fear to use it." Is this a rule that you can live with? Why or why not?

2. In the new millennium, do you think Lederer's case for using small words is still relevant? Explain. What did you think about small words before reading Lederer's essay? What public perceptions of small words does Lederer have to combat?

3. In paragraphs 7-9, Lederer presents a number of examples ranging from proverbs and biblical passages to quotations from well-known writers. What point about small words does he make with these examples?

FOCUSING ON WRITING

1. As you were reading Lederer's essay for the first time, were you surprised by his announcement in paragraph 5 that the preceding paragraphs contained only single-syllable words? If not, when were you first aware of what he was doing? What does Lederer's strategy in his opening paragraphs tell you about small words?

2. In paragraph 3, Lederer builds his case for small words with a series of similes. (Glossary: Figures of Speech) Explain how each of these similes works and how each affects your image of small words.

3. Carefully analyze the two student essays Lederer presents. In particular, circle all the main verbs that each student uses. What, if anything, do these verbs have in common? After studying the two essays, what conclusions can you draw about verbs and strong, powerful writing?

4. In paragraph 6, Lederer shifts from an emotional argument for small words to a logical one. How did his numerous examples affect you? (Glossary: Examples) Which examples made the greatest impact on you? Why?

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

In his 1990 book, The Play of Words, Richard Lederer presents the following activity called "Verbs with Verve." What do you learn about the power of verbs from this exercise? Explain.

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Researchers showed groups of test subjects a picture of an automobile accident and then asked this question: "How fast were the cars going when they ——?"

The blank was variously filled in with bumped, contacted, hit, collided, or smashed.

Groups that were asked "How fast were the cars going when they smashed?" responded with the highest estimates of speed.

All of which proves that verbs create specific images in the mind's eye. Because verbs are the words in a sentence that express action and movement, they are the spark plugs of effective style. The more specific the verbs you choose in your speaking and writing, the more sparkly will be the images you flash on the minds of your listeners and readers.

Suppose you write, "No, she said and left the room." Grammatically there is nothing wrong with this sentence. But because the verbs say and leave are
among the most general and colorless in the English language, you have missed
the chance to create a vivid word picture. Consider the alternatives

SAID

apologized             jabbered
asserted              minced
blubbered             mumbled
blurted               murmured
boasted               shrieked
cackled               sighed
commanded             slurred
drawled               snapped
giggled               sobbed
groaned               whispered
gurgled               whooped

LEFT

backed               sauntered
bolted               skipped
bounced              staggered
crawled              stamped
darted               stole
dreaded              stole
drew                stroke	
flew                 strode
hobbled              strutted
lurched              stumbled
marched              tripped
plodded              wandered
pranced              whirled

If you had chosen from among these vivid verbs and had crafted the sen-
tence “No,” she sobbed, and stumbled out of the room,” you would have cre-
ated a powerful picture of something quite distraught.

Here are brief descriptions of twenty different people. Choosing from the
two lists of synonyms for said and left, fill in the blanks of the sentence “No,”
he/she ____________, and ____________ the room.” Select the pair of
verbs that best create the most vivid picture of each person described. Through-
out your answers try to use as many different verbs as you can.

1. an angry person       11. an excited person
2. a baby               12. a frightened person
3. a braggart           13. a happy person
4. a child              14. someone in a hurry
5. a clown              15. an injured person
6. a confused person    16. a military officer
7. a cowboy/cowgirl     17. a sneaky person
8. someone crying       18. a timid person
9. a drunkard           19. a tired person
10. an embarrassed person 20. a witch

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. (Writing from Experience) How would you characterize your own writing?
   Do you think of yourself as a short-word person or a long-word person?
   Write a paper analyzing several paragraphs of one of your essays to see
   whether or not your perception of your own writing is accurate. What pat-
   terns emerge? How does your use of long and short words affect the main
   point of your writing?

2. (Writing from Reading) Write an essay in which you argue for the impor-
   tance of using a varied, extensive vocabulary in your writing. Be sure to an-
   ticipate and counter any objections you believe Lederer might have to your
   argument. You may find it helpful to read Malcolm X’s “Coming to An
   Awareness of Language” (pp. 63–66) before starting to write.

3. (Writing from Research) Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, “The
   limits of my language are the limits of my world.” What do you think he
   meant? Have you ever been at a loss for words? Do you remember how it felt
   to be unable to express yourself the way you wanted to? Does a large, far-
   ranging vocabulary really expand one’s world? Write an essay in which you
   support or argue against Wittgenstein’s generalization. In developing your
   essay, use carefully selected examples from your own experience, interviews
   with peers, and research in the library or on the Internet to support your
   position.
The most damning revelation you can make about yourself is that you do not know what is interesting and what is not. Don’t you yourself like or dislike writers mainly for what they choose to show you or make you think about? Did you ever admire an empty-headed writer for his or her mastery of the language? No.

So your own winning style must begin with ideas in your head.

1. FIND A SUBJECT YOU CARE ABOUT

Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

I am not urging you to write a novel, by the way—although I would not be sorry if you wrote one, provided you genuinely cared about something. A petition to the mayor about a pothole in front of your house or a love letter to the girl next door will do

2. DO NOT RAMBLE, THOUGH

I won’t ramble on about that.

3. KEEP IT SIMPLE

As for your use of language: Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. “To be or not to be?” asks Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long. Joyce, when he was frisky, could put together a sentence as intricate and as glittering as a necklace for Cleopatra, but my favorite sentence in his short story “Eveline” is this one. “She was tired.” At the point in the story, no other words could break the heart of a reader as those three words do.

Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred. The Bible opens with a sentence well within the writing skills of a lively fourteen-year-old: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

4. HAVE THE GUTS TO CUT

It may be that you, too, are capable of making necklaces for Cleopatra, so to speak. But your eloquence should be the servant of the ideas in your head. Your rule might be this. If a sentence, no matter how excel-
lent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out.

5. SOUND LIKE YOURSELF

The writing style which is most natural for you is bound to echo the speech you heard when a child. English was the novelist Joseph Conrad's third language, and much that seems piquant in his use of English was no doubt colored by his first language, which was Polish. And lucky indeed is the writer who has grown up in Ireland, for the English spoken there is so amusing and musical. I myself grew up in Indianapolis, where common speech sounds like a band saw cutting galvanized tin, and employs a vocabulary as unornamental as a monkey wrench.

In some of the more remote hollows of Appalachia, children still grow up hearing songs and locutions of Elizabethan times. Yes, and many Americans grow up hearing a language other than English, or an English dialect a majority of Americans cannot understand.

All these varieties of speech are beautiful, just as the varieties of butterflies are beautiful. No matter what your first language, you should treasure it all your life. If it happens not to be standard English, and if it shows itself when you write standard English, the result is usually delightful, like a very pretty girl with one eye that is green and one that is blue.

I myself find that I trust my own writing most, and others seem to trust it most, too, when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am. What alternatives do I have? The one most vehemently recommended by teachers has no doubt been pressed on you, as well: to write like cultivated Englishmen of a century or more ago.

6. SAY WHAT YOU MEAN TO SAY

I used to be exasperated by such teachers, but am no more I understand now that all those antique essays and stories with which I was to compare my own work were not magnificent for their datedness or foreignness, but for saying precisely what their authors meant them to say. My teachers wished me to write accurately, always selecting the most effective words, and relating the words to one another unambiguously, rigidly, like parts of a machine. The teachers did not want to turn me into an Englishman after all. They hoped that I would become understandable—and therefore understood. And there went my dream of doing with words what Pablo Picasso did with paint or what number of jazz idols did with music. If I broke all the rules of punctuation, had words mean whatever I wanted them to mean, and strung them together higgledy-piggledy, I would simply not be understood. So you, too, had better avoid Picasso-style or jazz-style writing, if you have something worth saying and wish to be understood.

Readers want our pages to look very much like pages they have seen before. Why? This is because they themselves have a tough job to do, and they need all the help they can get from us.

7. PITY THE READERS

They have to identify thousands of little marks on paper, and make sense of them immediately. They have to read, an art so difficult that most people don't really master it even after having studied it all through grade school and high school—twelve long years.

So this discussion must finally acknowledge that our stylistic options as writers are neither numerous nor glamorous, since our readers are bound to be such imperfect artists. Our audience requires us to be sympathetic and patient teachers, even willing to simplify and clarify—whereas we would rather soar high above the crowd, singing like nightingales.

That is the bad news. The good news is that we Americans are governed under a unique Constitution, which allows us to write whatever we please without fear of punishment. So the most meaningful aspect of our styles, which is what we choose to write about, is utterly unlimited.

8. FOR REALLY DETAILED ADVICE

For a discussion of literary style in a narrower sense, in a more technical sense, I commend to your attention *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White (Macmillan, 1979). E. B. White is, of course, one of the most admirable literary stylists this country has so far produced.

You should realize, too, that no one would care how well or badly Mr. White expressed himself, if he did not have perfectly enchanting things to say.

FOCUSBING ON CONTENT

1. Vonnegut believes that we like to read certain writers for what they "choose to show [us] or make [us] think about" (4). Why else do you read? Explain.

2. According to Vonnegut, what is the relationship between a writer's style and his or her audience? What responsibilities does he believe writers have to readers?

3. Which of Vonnegut's seven pointers on writing do you find most useful? Least useful? Why?

4. Teachers of writing often assign essays and stories for their students to read. What advantages does Vonnegut see in such reading? What, for you, is the connection between reading and writing?
FOCUSING ON WRITING

1. How would you characterize Vonnegut's style in this piece? Do you think he has followed his own advice? Explain.
2. Did you feel Vonnegut's respect for you as a reader as you read his essay? Specifically, what in his essay led you to this conclusion?
3. Identify several of the metaphors and similes that Vonnegut uses. (Glossary, Figures of Speech) How does each one work in the context of this selection? What advantages does figurative language afford the writer?

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Read the following poem by New Englander James Hayford. What insights does it give you about style? Would Vonnegut be likely to agree or disagree with Hayford's view? How would you characterize Hayford's own style in this poem? Explain.

STYLE

As the cold currents of the brook
Render its sands and pebbles clear,
Just so does style in man or book
Brighten the content, bring it near.

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. (Writing from Experience) Have you read any of Vonnegut's novels? If so, write a letter in which you share your reactions to his work. If not, write a letter to an author whose work you have read. Be sure that in writing your letter you follow Vonnegut's advice in this selection.

2. (Writing from Reading) How do you suppose Vonnegut would react to Richard Lederer's essay "The Case for Short Words" or William Zinsser's "Simplicity," which follows? Write an essay in which you explore some of the reasons why writers find it difficult to follow Vonnegut's third rule. Keep It Simple.

3. (Writing from Research) As Vonnegut suggests, look at a copy of Strunk and White's The Elements of Style. Does the size of the volume surprise you? Write an essay in which you argue for or against requiring this book for every incoming first-year student at your school. Support your position with references to Strunk and White and to other sources you discovered in the library or on the Internet.

REVISING AND EDITING

Simplicity

WILLIAM ZINSSER

Born in New York City in 1922, William Zinsser was educated at Princeton University. After serving in the army in World War II, he worked at the New York Herald Tribune as an editor, writer, and critic. During the 1970s he taught a popular course in nonfiction at Yale University, and from 1979 to 1987 he was general editor of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Zinsser has written more than a dozen books, including The City Dwellers (1962) Pop Goes America (1966), Spring Training (1989), and three widely used books on writing: On Writing Well (6th ed., 1998), Writing with a Word Processor (1983), and Writing to Learn (1988). Currently, he teaches at the New School in New York City, and his freelance writing regularly appears in some of our leading magazines.

The following selection is taken from On Writing Well. This book grew out of Zinsser's many years of experience as a professional writer and teacher. In this essay, Zinsser exposes what he believes is the writer's number one problem—"clutter." He sees Americans "strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills, and meaningless jargon." His solution is simple: Writers must know what they want to say and must be thinking clearly as they start to compose. Then self-discipline and hard work are necessary to achieve clarity, simple prose. No matter what your experience as a writer has been, you will find Zinsser's observations sound and his advice practical.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: Some people view writing as "thinking on paper." They believe that by seeing something written on a page they are better able to "see what they think." Write about the relationship for you, between writing and thinking. Are you one of those people who likes to "see" ideas on paper while trying to work things out? Or do you like to think through ideas before writing about them?

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills, and meaningless jargon.

Who can understand the viscous language of everyday American commerce: the memo, the corporation report, the business letter, the notice from the bank explaining its latest "simplified" statement? What
member of an insurance or medical plan can decipher the brochure explaining his costs and benefits? What father or mother can put together a child's toy from the instructions on the box? Our national tendency is to inflate and thereby sound important. The airline pilot who announces that he is presently anticipating experiencing considerable precipitation wouldn't think of saying it may rain. The sentence is too simple—there must be something wrong with it.

But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur in proportion to education and rank.

During the 1960s the president of my university wrote a letter to mollify the alumni after a spell of campus unrest. "You are probably aware," he began, "that we have been experiencing very considerable potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction on issues only partially related." He meant the students had been hassling them about different things I was far more upset by the president's English than by the students' potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction. I could have preferred the presidential approach taken by Franklin D. Roosevelt when he tried to convert into English his own government's memos, such as this blackout order of 1942:

Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and non-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination.

"Tell them," Roosevelt said, "that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something across the windows."

Simplify, simplify. Thoreau said it, as we are so often reminded, and no American writer more consistently practiced what he preached. Open Walden to any page and you will find a man saying in a plain and orderly way what is on his mind.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

How can the rest of us achieve such enviable freedom from clutter? The answer is to clear our heads of clutter. Clear thinking becomes clear writing; one can't exist without the other. It's impossible for a muddy thinker to write good English. You may get away with it for a paragraph or two, but soon the reader will be lost, and there's no sin so grave, for the reader will not easily be lured back.

Who is this elusive creature, the reader? The reader is someone with an attention span of about 30 seconds—a person assailed by other forces competing for attention. At one time these forces weren't so numerous: newspapers, radio, spouse, home, children. Today they also include a "home entertainment center" (TV, VCR, tapes, CDs), pets, a fitness program, a yard and all the gadgets that have been bought to keep it spruce, and that most potent of competitors, sleep. The person snoozing in the chair with a magazine or a book is a person who was being given too much unnecessary trouble by the writer.

It won't do to say that the reader is too dumb or too lazy to keep pace with the train of thought. If the reader is lost, it's usually because the writer hasn't been careful enough. The carelessness can take any number of forms. Perhaps a sentence is so excessively cluttered that the reader, hacking through the verbiage, simply doesn't know what it means. Perhaps a sentence has been so shoddily constructed that the reader could read it in several ways. Perhaps the writer has switched pronouns in mid-sentence, or has switched tenses, so the reader loses track of who is talking or when the action took place. Perhaps Sentence B is not a logical sequel to Sentence A—the writer, in whose head the connection is clear, hasn't bothered to provide the missing link. Perhaps the writer has used an important word incorrectly by not taking the trouble to look it up. The writer may think "sanguine" and sanguinary mean the same thing, but the difference is a bloody big one. The reader can only infer (speaking of big differences) what the writer is trying to imply.

Faced with such obstacles, readers are at first tenacious. They blame themselves—they obviously missed something, and they go back over the mystifying sentence, or over the whole paragraph, peeling it out like an ancient rune, making guesses and moving on. But they won't do this for long. The writer is making them work too hard, and they will look for one who is better at the craft.

Writers must therefore constantly ask. What am I trying to say? Surprisingly often they don't know. Then they must look at what they have written and ask: Have I said it? Is it clear to someone encountering the subject for the first time? If it's not, some fuzz has worked its way into the machinery. The clear writer is someone clearheaded enough to see this stuff for what it is, fuzz.

I don't mean that some people are born clearheaded and are therefore natural writers, whereas others are naturally fuzzy and will never write well. Thinking clearly is a conscious act that writers must force upon themselves, as if they were working on any other project that requires logic: adding up a laundry list or doing an algebra problem. Good writing doesn't come naturally, though most people obviously think it does. Professional writers are constantly being bedeviled by strangers who say they'd like to "try a little writing sometime"—meaning when they retire from their real profession, which is difficult, like insurance or real estate. Or they say, "I could write a book about that." I doubt it.
Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is not accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard. It's one of the hardest things people do.

FOCUSBING ON CONTENT

1. What exactly is clutter? When do words qualify as clutter, and when do they not?
2. In paragraph 2, Zinsser states that “Our national tendency is to inflate and thereby sound important.” What do you think he means by inflate? Provide several examples to illustrate how people use language to inflate.
3. In paragraph 9, Zinsser lists some of the language-based obstacles that a reader may encounter in carelessly constructed prose. Which of these problems most try your patience? Why?
4. One would hope that education would help in the battle against clutter, but, as Zinsser notes, wordiness “usually occurs in proportion to education and rank” (4). Do your own experiences or observations support Zinsser’s claim? Discuss.

FOCUSING ON WRITING

1. What assumptions does Zinsser make about readers? According to Zinsser, what responsibilities do writers have to readers? How do these responsibilities manifest themselves in Zinsser’s writing? How do you think Linda Flower (pp. 139–41) or Kurt Vonnegut (pp. 150–53) would respond to what Zinsser says about audience? (Glossary: Audience) Explain.
2. Zinsser believes that writers need to ask themselves two questions—“What am I trying to say?” and “Have I said it?”—constantly as they write. How would these questions help you eliminate clutter from your own writing? Give some examples from one of your essays.
3. In order “to strip every sentence to its cleanest components,” we need to be sensitive to the words we use and know how they function within our sentences. For each of the “adulators that weaken the strength of a sentence,” which Zinsser identifies in paragraph 3, provide an example from your own writing.
4. Zinsser knows that sentence variety is an important feature of good writing. Locate several examples of the short sentences (seven or fewer words) he uses in this essay, and explain how each relates in length, meaning, and impact to the sentences around it.

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

The following two pages show a passage from Zinsser’s final manuscript for this essay. Carefully study the manuscript, and discuss how Zinsser eliminated clutter in his own prose. Then, using Zinsser as a model, judiciously eliminate the clutter from several paragraphs in one of your papers.
The Maker's Eye: Revising Your Own Manuscripts

DONALD M. MURRAY

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1924, Donald M. Murray taught writing for many years at the University of New Hampshire, his alma mater. He has served as an editor at Time magazine, and he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1954 for editorials that appeared in the Boston Globe. Murray's published works include novels, short stories, poetry, and a textbook for teachers of writing, like A Writer Teaches Writing (1968), The Craft of Revision (1991), and Learning by Teaching (1982), in which he explores aspects of the writing process. Write to Learn (6th ed., 1998), a textbook for college composition courses, is based on Murray's belief that writers learn to write by writing, by taking a piece of writing through the whole process, from invention to revision.

In the following essay, first published in The Writer in October 1973 and later revised for this text, Murray discusses the importance of revision to the work of the writer. Most professional writers live by the maxim that “writing is rewriting.” And to rewrite or revise effectively, we need to become better readers of our own work, open to discovering new meanings, and sensitive to our use of language. Murray draws on the experiences of many writers to make a compelling argument for careful revising and editing.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: Thinking back on your education to date, what did you think you had to do when teachers told you to revise a piece of your writing? How did the request to revise make you feel? Write about your earliest memories of revising some of your writing. What kinds of changes do you remember making?

When students complete a first draft, they consider the job of writing done—and their teachers too often agree. When professional writers complete a first draft, they usually feel that they are at the start of the writing process. When a draft is completed, the job of writing can begin.

That difference in attitude is the difference between amateur and professional, inexperience and experience, journeyman and craftsman. Peter F. Drucker, the prolific business writer, calls his first draft “the zero draft”—after that he can start counting. Most writers share the feeling that the first draft, and all of those which follow, are opportunities to discover what they have to say and how best they can say it.

To produce a progression of drafts, each of which says more and says it more clearly, the writer has to develop a special kind of reading skill

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. (Writing from Experience) Think about what you do every time you write. Does your process differ from that described by Haraun (pp. 131-36) or Zinsser? Write an essay in which you discuss the differences you discover between your own writing process and those described by Haraun and Zinsser. Does your writing process change with the type of writing you are doing? Explain.

2. (Writing from Reading) Each of the essays in Chapter 6, “Writers on Writing,” is concerned with the importance of winning well, of using language effectively and responsibly. Write an essay in which you explore one of the common themes (audience, revision, dictation, simplification) that is emphasized in two or more of the selections.

3. (Writing from Research) Visit your library and/or local bookstore and examine the reference books offering advice on writing. What kinds of books did you find? What does the large number of such books say to you about Americans' attitudes toward writing? Compare and contrast the approaches several books take and the audiences at which each book is aimed. What conclusions can you draw from your comparisons?
In school we are taught to decode what appears on the page as finished writing. Writers, however, face a different category of possibility and responsibility when they read their own drafts. To them the words on the page are never finished. Each can be changed and rearranged, can set off a chain reaction of confusion or clarified meaning. This is a different kind of reading which is possibly more difficult and certainly more exciting.

Writers must learn to be their own best enemy. They must accept the criticism of others and be suspicious of it; they must accept the praise of others and be even more suspicious of it. Writers cannot depend on others. They must detach themselves from their own pages so that they can apply both their caring and their craft to their own work.

Such detachment is not easy. Science-fiction writer Ray Bradbury supposedly puts each manuscript away for a year to the day and then rereads it as a stranger. Not many writers have the discipline or the time to do this. We must read when our judgment may be at its worst, when we are close to the euphoric moment of creation.

Then the writer, counsels novelist Nancy Hale, “should be critical of everything that seems to him most delightful in his style. He should excise what he most admires, because he wouldn’t thus admire it if he weren’t...in a sense protecting it from criticism.” John Cardinal, the poet, adds, “The last act of the writing must be to become one’s own reader. It is, I suppose, a schizophrenic process, to begin passionately and to end critically, to begin hot and to end cold; and, more important, to be passion-hot and critic-cold at the same time.”

Most people think that the principal problem is that writers are too proud of what they have written. Actually, a greater problem for most professional writers is one shared by the majority of students. They are overly critical, think everything is dreadful, tear up page after page, never complete a draft, see the task as hopeless.

The writer must learn to read critically but constructively, to cut what is bad, to reveal what is good. Eleanor Estes, the children’s book author, explains: “The writer must survey his work critically, coolly, as though he were a stranger to it. He must be willing to prune, expertly and hard-heartedly. At the end of each revision, a manuscript may look... worked over, torn apart, pinned together, added to, deleted from, words changed and words changed back. Yet the book must maintain its original freshness and spontaneity.”

Most readers underestimate the amount of rewriting it usually takes to produce spontaneous reading. This is a great disadvantage to the student writer, who sees only a finished product and never watches the craftsman who takes the necessary step back, studies the work carefully, returns to the task, steps back, returns, steps back, again and again. Anthony Burgess, one of the most prolific writers in the English-speaking world, admits, “I might revise a page twenty times.” Roald Dahl, the popular children's writer, states, “By the time I'm nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread and altered and corrected at least 150 times. . . . Good writing is essentially rewriting. I am positive of this.”

Rewriting isn't virtuous. It isn't something that ought to be done. It is simply something that most writers find they have to do to discover what they have to say and how to say it. It is a condition of the writer's life.

There are, however, a few writers who do little formal rewriting, primarily because they have the capacity and experience to create and review a large number of invisible drafts in their minds before they approach the page. And some writers slowly produce finished pages, performing all the tasks of revision simultaneously, page by page, rather than draft by draft. But it is still possible to see the sequence followed by most writers most of the time in rereading their own work.

Most writers scan their drafts first, reading as quickly as possible to catch the larger problems of subject and form, and then move in closer and closer as they read and write, reread and rewrite.

The first thing writers look for in their drafts is information. They know that a good piece of writing is built from specific, accurate, and interesting information. The writer must have an abundance of information from which to construct a readable piece of writing.

Next writers look for meaning in the information. The specifics must build to a pattern of significance. Each piece of specific information must carry the reader toward meaning.

Writers reading their own drafts are aware of audience. They put themselves in the reader's situation and make sure that they deliver information which a reader wants to know or needs to know in a manner which is easily digested. Writers try to be sure that they anticipate and answer the questions a critical reader will ask when reading the piece of writing.

Writers make sure that the form is appropriate to the subject and the audience. Form, or genre, is the vehicle which carries meaning to the reader, but form cannot be selected until the writer has adequate information to discover its significance and an audience which needs or wants that meaning.

Once writers are sure the form is appropriate, they must then look at the structure, the order of what they have written. Good writing is built on a solid framework of logic, argument, narrative, or motivation which runs through the entire piece of writing and holds it together. This is the time when many writers find it most effective to outline as a way of visualizing the hidden spine by which the piece of writing is supported.

The element on which writers may spend a majority of their time is development. Each section of a piece of writing must be adequately developed. It must give readers enough information so that they are satisfied. How much information is enough? That's as difficult as asking how much garlic
belongs in a salad. It must be done to taste, but most beginning writers underdevelop, underestimating the reader's hunger for information.

As writers solve development problems, they often have to consider questions of dimension. There must be a pleasing and effective proportion among all the parts of the piece of writing. There is a continual process of subtracting and adding to keep the piece of writing in balance.

Finally, writers have to listen to their own voices. Voice is the force which drives a piece of writing forward. It is an expression of the writer's authority and concern. It is what is between the words on the page, what glues the piece of writing together. A good piece of writing is always marked by a consistent, individual voice.

As writers read and reread, write and rewrite, they move closer and closer to the page until they are doing line-by-line editing. Writers read their own pages with infinite care. Each sentence, each line, each clause, each phrase, each word, each mark of punctuation, each section of white space between the types has to contribute to the clarification of meaning.

Slowly the writer moves from word to word, looking through language to see the subject. As a word is changed, cut, or added, as a construction is rearranged, all the words used before that moment and all those that follow that moment must be considered and reconsidered.

Writers often read aloud at this stage of the editing process, muttering or whispering to themselves, calling on the ear's experience with language. Does this sound right—or that? Writers edit, shifting back and forth from eye to page to ear to page. I find I must do this careful editing in short runs, no more than fifteen or twenty minutes at a stretch, or I become too kind with myself. I begin to see what I hope is on the page, not what actually is on the page.

This sounds tedious if you haven't done it, but actually it is fun. Making something right is immensely satisfying, for writers begin to learn what they are writing about by writing. Language leads them to meaning, and there is the joy of discovery, of understanding, of making meaning clear as the writer employs the technical skills of language.

Words have double meanings, even triple and quadruple meanings. Each word has its own potential of connotation and denotation. And when writers rub one word against the other, they are often rewarded with a sudden insight, an unexpected clarification.

The maker's eye moves back and forth from word to phrase to sentence to paragraph to sentence to phrase to word. The maker's eye sees the need for variety and balance, for a firmer structure, for a more appropriate form. It peers into the interior of the paragraph, looking for coherence, unity, and emphasis, which make meaning clear.

I learned something about this process when my first bifocals were prescribed. I had ordered a larger section of the reading portion of the glass because of my work, but even so, I could not contain my eyes within this new limit of vision. And I still find myself taking off my glasses and bending my nose toward the page, for my eyes unconsciously flick back and forth across the page, back to another page, forward to still another, as I try to see each evolving line in relation to every other line.

When does this process end? Most writers agree with the great Russian writer Tolstoy, who said, "I scarcely ever reread my published writings, if by chance I come across a page, it always strikes me all this must be rewritten, this is how I should have written it."

The maker's eye is never satisfied, for each word has the potential to ignite new meaning. This article has been twice written all the way through the writing process [...]. Now it is to be republished in a book. The editors made a few small suggestions, and then I read it with my maker's eye. Now it has been re-edited, re-revised, re-read, and re-re-edited, for each piece of writing to the writer is full of potential and alternatives.

A piece of writing is never finished. It is delivered to a deadline, torn out of the typewriter on demand, sent off with a sense of accomplishment and pride and frustration. If only there were a couple more days, time for just another run at it, perhaps then.

FOCUSING ON CONTENT

1. How does Murray define information and meaning (13-14)? Why is the distinction between the two terms important?

2. According to Murray, at what point(s) in the writing process do writers become concerned about the individual words they are using? What do you think Murray means when he says in paragraph 24 that "language leads [writers] to meaning"?

3. The phrase "the maker's eye" appears in Murray's title and in several places throughout the essay. What do you suppose he means by this? Consider how the maker's eye could be different from the reader's eye.

4. According to Murray, when is a piece of writing finished? What, for him, is the function of deadlines?

FOCUSING ON WRITING

1. What does Murray see as the connection between reading and writing? How does reading help the writer? What should writers be looking for in their reading? What kinds of writing techniques or strategies does Murray use in his essay? Why should we read a novel or magazine article differently than we would a draft of one of our own essays?

2. According to Murray, writers look for information, meaning, audience, form, structure, development, dimension, and voice in their drafts. What rationale or logic do you see, if any, in the way Murray has ordered these items? Are these the kinds of concerns you have when reading your drafts? Explain.
3. What are the essential differences between revising and editing? What types of language concerns are dealt with at each stage? Why is it important to revise before editing?

4. Murray notes that writers often reach a stage in their editing where they read aloud, "muttering or whispering to themselves, calling on the ear's experience with language" (23). What exactly do you think writers are listening for when they read aloud? Try reading several paragraphs of Murray's essay aloud. Explain what you learned about his writing. Have you ever read your own writing aloud? If so, what did you discover?

5. Compared to the paragraphs of many other writers, Murray's paragraphs are short. Why do you suppose Murray chose to use short paragraphs? What, for example, would be lost if paragraphs 12–14 or 24–25 were joined together? Explain

**LANGUAGE IN ACTION**

Carefully read the opening four paragraphs of Annie Dillard's "Living Like Weasels," which is taken from *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982). Using two different color pens, first circle the subject and underline the verb in each main clause in one color, and then circle the subject and underline the verb in each subordinate clause with the other What does this exercise reveal about Dillard's diction (nouns and verbs) and sentence structure?

A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks? He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose. Sometimes he lives in his den for two days without leaving. Outside, he stalks rabbits, mice, muskrats, and birds, killing more bodies than he can eat warm, and often dragging the carcasses home. Obedient to instinct, he bites his prey at the neck, either splitting the jugular vein at the throat or crushing the brain at the base of the skull, and he does not let go. One naturalist refused to kill a weasel who was socketed into his hand deeply as a rattlesnake. The man could in no way pry the tiny weasel off, and he had to walk half a mile to water, the weasel dangling from his palm, and soak him off like a stubborn label.

And once, says Ernest Thompson Seton — once, a man shot an eagle out of the sky. He examined the eagle and found the dry skull of a weasel fixed by the jaws to his throat. The supposition is that the eagle had pounced on the weasel and the weasel sweated and bit as instinct taught him, tooth to neck, and nearly won. I would like to have seen that eagle from the air a few weeks or months before he was shot. was the whole weasel still attached to his feathered throat, a fair pendant? Or did the eagle eat what he could reach, gutting the living weasel with his talons before his breast, bending his beak, cleaning the beautiful airborne bones?

I have been reading about weasels because I saw one last week. I started a weasel who startled me, and we exchanged a long glance.

Twenty minutes from my house, through the woods by the quarry and across the highway, is Hollins Pond, a remarkable piece of shallowness, where I like to go at sunset and sit on a tree trunk. Hollins Pond is also called Murray's Pond; it covers two acres of bottomland near Tinker Creek with six inches of water and six thousand lily pads. In winter, brown-and-white stoats stand in the middle of it, merely dampening their hooves, from the distant shore they look like miracle itself, complete with miracle's nonchalance. Now, in summer, the stoats are gone. The water lilies have blossomed and spread to a green horizontal plane that is terra firma to plodding blackbirds, and tremulous ceiling to black leeches, crayfish, and carp

**WRITING SUGGESTIONS**

1. (Writing from Experience) According to Murray, many professional writers view first drafts as something they have to do before they can get started with the real work of writing — revision. How do you view your first drafts? Why do you suppose teachers report that revision is the most difficult stage in the writing process for their students? What is it about revision that makes it difficult, or at least makes people perceive it as being difficult? Write an essay in which you explore your own experiences with revision. You may find it helpful to review what you wrote for the Writing to Discover prompt at the beginning of this essay.

2. (Writing from Reading) What, for you, is the difference between revising and editing? Using information from Murray's essay as well as material from at least one other selection in this chapter, write an essay in which you highlight the distinctive characteristics of these two off-confused stages in the writing process.

3. (Writing from Research) Writing about pressing social issues usually requires a clear statement of a particular problem and the precise definition of critical terms. For example, if you were writing about the increasing number of people being kept alive by machines, you would need to examine the debate surrounding the legal and medical definitions of the word death. Debates continue about the meanings of other controversial terms, such as: *morality, minority (ethnic), alcoholism, racism, sexual harassment, life* (as in the abortion issue), *pornography, liberal, gay, censorship, conservative, remedial, minority, literacy, political correctness, assisted suicide, lying, high crime and murderers, and kidnapping* (as in custody disputes). Select one of these words or one of your own. After carefully researching some of the controversial people, situations, and events surrounding your word, write an essay in which you discuss the problems associated with the term and its definition.