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Twelfth Edition

Steps to Writing Well

Jean Wyrick

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TO THE TEACHER

The twelfth edition of *Steps to Writing Well* has been written for composition teachers who have had trouble finding a textbook that students can easily read and understand. Too many books on today's market, these teachers rightfully complain, are unnecessarily dry, complex, or massive for the majority of their students. Written simply, in an informal, friendly style directly addressed to the student, this textbook offers a step-by-step guide to writing a variety of 500-to-800-word essays. The combination of practical advice, numerous student and professional samples, and a brief handbook should provide more than enough helpful information for students, without intimidating them.

About the New Edition

New discussions, writing samples, classroom activities, and assignments appear throughout this edition, in addition to updated and expanded features that were most popular with previous users of this text. This edition presents increased emphasis on the importance of practicing critical thinking, with expanded suggestions for developing students' analytical skills as both perceptive readers and trustworthy writers. In addition to a variety of new assignments, over two dozen collaborative classroom activities appear in this text, as well as over seventy photographs, paintings, and advertisements, many offered as exercises and writing prompts for today's visually oriented students.

Both new and classic readings in this edition provide models of good writing on thoughtful topics, and professional essays in Parts Two and Three are now introduced by "Pre-reading Thoughts," questions designed to immediately engage students' interest in the essays' subjects and styles. In response to teachers' requests, this new edition also includes tips for time-management, advice for writing and delivering a variety of classroom presentations, updated information on research methods and documentation styles, self-scored grammar and punctuation assessment tests, and many new assignments on contemporary issues.

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

New to This Edition

NEW Critical Thinking Emphasis

Throughout the book, students will see an increased emphasis on critical thinking skills to help them develop into both perceptive readers and effective writers. Chapter 5 now includes expanded discussions focused on the analysis and evaluation of information, especially from Internet and other media sources, showing students how to select reliable evidence that best illustrates, supports, or shapes their ideas. A new section on visual literacy, also in Chapter 5, adds to the discussion of trustworthy sources, as students are reminded of the problems posed by altered images.

NEW Section on Procrastination

A new discussion in Chapter 5, “Procrastination: Enemy of Critical Thinking, Thief of Time,” addresses the necessity of beginning one’s drafting process sooner rather than later, emphasizing the negative effects of last-minute work on critical thinking. To help students improve their time-management skills, this section offers practical advice for overcoming this enemy of good writing.

NEW Diagnostic Tests

A new diagnostic test introduces each chapter in Part Four, The Concise Handbook. Students may assess their knowledge of grammar and punctuation by comparing their answers to those provided at the end of each chapter; these self-scoring activities will guide them in their review of Handbook material.

NEW Professional Readings

Parts One–Three contain 20% new professional essays, retaining a mix of classic and contemporary authors, including the diverse styles and topics of Mark Twain, Langston Hughes, Roger Ebert, and the editorial board of the *USA Today* newspaper.

NEW Pre-Reading Thoughts

To help students receive the most benefit from the many professional essays in Parts Two and Three of the book, a new feature called “Pre-reading Thoughts” has been introduced. Before reading, students will find one or more brief questions designed to promote active connections between readers and writers. These questions may function as discussion starters, journal entries, or prewriting exercises; students might also turn their answers into essay topics.

NEW Paragraphs and Advertisements

Students who are visual learners may enjoy finding a number of classroom exercises and writing prompts based on the many classic and contemporary images reproduced in this text. Over seventy images—paintings, photographs, sculpture, and advertisements—accompany discussions, readings, classroom activities, and assignments; selections new to this edition add to the wide range of subject matter and styles. In addition, Chapter 17, “Writing about Visual Arts,” encourages critical thinking and good writing practice in a variety of essays about works of art.

NEW Section on Presentations

Chapter 15, “Classroom Writing: Exams, Timed Essays, and Presentations,” has been expanded beyond exams and timed essays to include a new section on presentations. Diverse activities, from individual reports to panel discussions, offer practice in the selection and shaping of essay material as well as increasing audience awareness. Advice for the effective delivery of presentations is also included here.

UPDATED Research Citations and Format**EXPANDED**

Chapter 14, “Writing a Paper Using Research,” has been updated and expanded for this edition. In addition to more emphasis on analysis of reliable sources and information, this chapter offers the most current guidelines for MLA and APA documentation styles, with more examples illustrating formats for frequently cited Internet and media sources.

NEW Activities and Assignments

Many new classroom activities (for both individual and group work) and assignment topics throughout the book reflect contemporary issues that will engage student interest. Many assignments, such as those based on expanded advice for effective résumé cover letters, are designed to remind students that composition practice has real-world application.

NEW New Digital Resource

This edition will be available with the most advanced and latest products for student and instructor choice, engagement, and outcomes. Through clear and succinct instruction, engaging assignments, and an integrated eBook, Aplia for *Steps to Writing Well* helps students build the confidence they need to master essential reading, writing, research, and grammar skills.

Organizational Overview

Although many parts of the book have been revised or expanded for this edition, its organization remains the same. The book still begins with the essay “To the Student,” which not only argues that students can learn to write better with practice and dedication but also gives them a number of practical reasons why they *should* learn to write better. Part One offers advice on “The Basics of the Short Essay”; Part Two discusses “Purposes, Modes, and Strategies”; Part Three focuses on “Special Assignments”; and Part Four presents “A Concise Handbook.” A diamond-shaped reference symbol ◆ often appears within discussions, alerting readers to related information or exercises in other parts of the book.

Part One: The Basics of the Short Essay

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

Exercises and Assignments

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

Part One includes the following chapters:

Chapter 1. Prewriting

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

Chapter 2, The Thesis Statement

After considering their essay’s purpose, focus, and audience, students are ready for Chapter 2, which first explains the role of a “working thesis” in early drafts and

then discusses in detail the usefulness of a clear thesis statement by presenting a host of examples to illustrate the advice. Also included in this chapter is an explanation of the “essay map,” an organizational tool that can help students plan and structure their essays.

Chapter 3, The Body Paragraphs

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

Chapter 4, Beginnings and Endings

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

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

Chapter 5 begins by clarifying the revision process. Because too many students still think of revision as merely proofreading their final drafts rather than as an essential, recursive activity, this chapter emphasizes the importance of revision in all stages of good writing. Tips for efficient drafting practices appear next, and, in response to teachers’ requests, a new section on procrastination explains why this bad habit interferes with a writer’s critical thinking process and suggests practical ways to challenge this behavior. These pages then offer a system for revising drafts in stages to avoid overload that might result in Writer’s Block, a malady helpfully addressed at the end of this chapter.

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

Chapter 6, Effective Sentences

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

Chapter 7, Word Logic

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

Chapter 8, The Reading-Writing Connection

Chapter 8 points out that by learning to read analytically, students can improve their own writing skills. The chapter contains step-by-step directions for reading and annotating essays, suggesting ways students may profit from studying the rhetorical choices of other writers. A professional essay, annotated according to these steps, is included, as well as guidance for writing summaries of reading selections. A last section offers students suggestions for effective participation in class discussions of reading and writing samples.

Part Two, Organizational Modes and Strategies

Part Two discusses the most useful organizational patterns, or strategies, for short essays whose primary purposes are exposition, argument, description, and narration. Each discussion in this Part follows a similar format by offering students (a) a clear explanation of the strategy’s purpose; (b) practical advice for developing each essay; (c) identification of common problems; (d) suggested essay topics; (e) a topic proposal sheet; (f) sample student essay(s) with marginal notes; (g) professional essay(s) with questions and additional writing suggestions; (h) a revision worksheet; and (i) a writing-skills progress report.

Professional and Student Essays

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

Suggestions for Writing

Nine lists, each containing twenty suggested essay topics, appear throughout the chapters in Part Two. These lists of possible topics, updated for this edition, offer students a wide range of choices that may draw on their academic, professional, or personal interests. Students who are visual learners will always find options for writing about images reproduced in this book. (For quick reference, complete lists of the artworks and advertisements appear at the end of the Table of Contents.) Other suggestions for writing follow each professional essay in Chapters 9–13.

Part Two contains the following chapters:

Chapter 9. Exposition

Following a brief overview of the rhetorical modes, Chapter 9 discusses essays developed by the most common expository strategies: example, process, comparison/contrast, definition, division/classification, and causal analysis.

Chapter 10. Argumentation

NEW

Chapter 10 discusses the argumentative essay and presents a new pair of professional essays with opposing views and a series of advertisements, all selected to help students improve critical thinking skills through analysis of logic, evidence, and rhetorical appeals. New suggestions for writing include many current topics of controversy relevant to students' lives.

Chapter 11. Description, and Chapter 12. Narration

Chapters 11 and 12, on writing description and narration, may be assigned prior to the expository strategies or may be used as supplementary material for any kind of writing incorporating descriptive language or extended example. Both chapters contain visual art selected to stress the importance of vivid details in support of a dominant effect.

Chapter 13. Writing Essays Using Multiple Strategies

TRAD

Although this text shows students how to practice individual rhetorical strategies, one pattern at a time, writers often choose a combination, or blending, of strategies to best accomplish their purpose. Chapter 13 concludes Part Two by offering advice to writers ready to address more complex topics and essay organization. This chapter also contains both a student essay and a new professional article to illustrate different uses of multiple strategies to accomplish the writer's purpose.

Part Three: Special Assignments

Part Three, "Special Assignments," allows instructors to design their composition courses in a variety of ways, perhaps by adding a research paper, a literary analysis, an in-class essay, a classroom presentation, a review of an artwork or movie, or a business-writing assignment.

Part Three contains the following chapters:

Chapter 14. Writing a Paper Using Research

EXPANDED

UPDATED

EXPANDED

Chapter 14 has been revised and expanded for this edition. Illustrating a research process by following a student from her topic selection to final essay, this chapter shows students how they may focus a subject, search for information in a variety of ways, choose the best information, avoid plagiarism, and effectively incorporate and cite source material in their essays. These pages present an expanded discussion of the role critical thinking plays in evaluating researched material, especially that found on Internet sites. This new edition also contains updated and expanded sections containing the very latest guidelines for both MLA and APA documentation formats, including citations for a variety of electronic sources. In

addition, this chapter includes practical advice for collecting material through interviews and questionnaires and concludes with a student essay presented in two forms, illustrating both MLA and APA styles.

Chapter 15, Classroom Writing: Exams, Timed Essays, and Presentations

Chapter 15 has a new title to reflect new content. The chapter begins with advice designed to help students respond quickly, accurately, and calmly to a variety of in-class writing assignments by understanding their task's purpose and by recognizing key directional words. Because many composition courses today include some variation of the "summary-and-response" assignment (often as a timed placement or exit test), this chapter specifically addresses that kind of writing and offers a sample student essay. A new section in this edition discusses various kinds of in-class presentations and suggests ways writing assignments may be best shaped for listeners, as well as offering hints for effective classroom delivery.

Chapter 16, Writing about Literature

Chapter 16 discusses ways literary selections may be used as prompts for personal essays or for papers of literary analysis. Students are offered suggestions for close reading of both poetry and short fiction, advice illustrated through an annotated poem, an annotated short story, and two student essays. Two additional poems and a brief story are presented for classroom discussion or for writing assignments.

Chapter 17, Writing about Visual Arts

Chapter 17 encourages critical thinking and good writing practice in discussions of paintings, photographs, and sculptures. To illustrate the guidelines for analysis, this chapter includes a student's prewriting notes and subsequent essay on Edward Hopper's well-known painting *Nighthawks*. Composition students may choose their own subject matter from more than twenty artworks reproduced in this chapter and others throughout the text. Artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, Jacob Lawrence, Claude Monet, Dorothea Lange, Edvard Munch, Ansel Adams, Francisco Goya, Salvador Dali, and many others offer a variety of styles from social realism to abstract expressionism. The art in this edition may provide effective prompts for other assignments, such as descriptive paragraphs or comparison/contrast essays.

Chapter 18, Writing about Film

Chapter 18 offers an opportunity for students to practice good writing skills in essays using movies as subject matter in a variety of ways. Suggestions for critical thinking and writing about films and a glossary of cinematic terms are included, as well as a student essay and a new movie review by Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic Roger Ebert that may be critiqued in class.

Chapter 19, Writing in the World of Work

Chapter 19 allows students to practice composing business letters, office memos, electronic mail, and résumés. This edition also contains expanded advice for writing effective cover letters to accompany job-seekers' résumés.

Part Four: A Concise Handbook

Part Four presents a concise handbook with accessible explanations and examples showing how to correct the most common errors in grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. Brief discussions on the parts of speech and sentence components preface the three chapters; exercises throughout the Handbook provide ample opportunities for practicing its advice.

NEW

Each chapter now begins with a diagnostic test for students to self-score; by comparing their corrections to the answers provided, students may assess their strengths and their needs for reviewing handbook material.

Supplemental Tools to Writing Well

Aplia

Aplia™ is dedicated to improving learning by increasing student effort and engagement. Aplia is an online, auto-graded homework solution that keeps students engaged and prepared for class.

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writing instantly and accurately but also to provide students with detailed revision goals and feedback on their writing to help them improve. Two key features of Write Experience, MYTutor and MYEditor, provide students with real-time, simultaneous feedback in their native language while they write.

Instructor's Manual

Available for download on the Book Companion Website and in print, this manual contains tips for using the text in the classroom, as well as chapter-by-chapter summaries; answers to exercises; responses to the questions on content, structure, and style that follow the professional essays; and definitions of vocabulary words.

Concluding Thoughts

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

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TO THE STUDENT

Finding the Right Attitude

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

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

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

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

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

In the first place, writing helps us explore our own thoughts and feelings. Writing forces us to articulate our ideas, to discover what we really think about an issue. For example, let’s suppose you’re faced with a difficult decision and that the arguments pro and con are jumbled in your head. You begin to write down all the pertinent facts and feelings, and suddenly, you begin to see that you do, indeed, have stronger arguments for one side of the question than the other. Once you “see” what you are thinking, you may then scrutinize your opinions for any logical flaws or weaknesses and revise your argument accordingly. In other words, writing lays out our ideas for examination, analysis, and thoughtful reaction. Thus when we write, we (and the world at large) see who we are, and what we stand for, much more clearly. Moreover, writing can provide a record of our thoughts that we may study and evaluate in a way that conversation cannot. In short, writing well enables us to see and know ourselves—our feelings, ideas, and opinions—better.

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

There’s still a third—more cynical—reason for studying writing techniques. Once you begin to improve your ability to use language, you will become more aware of the ways others write and speak. Through today’s mass media and electronic highways, we are continually bombarded with words from politicians, advertisers, scientists, preachers, teachers, and self-appointed “authorities.” We need to understand and evaluate what we are hearing, not only for our benefit but also for self-protection. Language is frequently manipulated to manipulate us. For example, the CIA has long referred to the “neutralization” of enemies, and the former Bush-Cheney administration authorized “enhanced interrogation techniques” on suspects, which others saw as torture. On occasion, Pentagon officials have carefully avoided discussion of times when misdirected “physics packages” (bombs) fell on “soft targets” (civilians). (One year not so long ago, the National Council of Teachers of English gave their Doublespeak Award to the U.S. officers who, after accidentally shooting down a plane of civilians, reported that the plane didn’t crash—rather, it had “uncontrolled contact with the ground.”) Some members of

Congress have seen no recessions, just “meaningful downturns in aggregate put,” so they have treated themselves to a “pay equalization concept,” rather than a raise. Advertisers frequently try to disguise their pitches through “infomercials” and “advertorials”; realtors may promote dumps as “designer-ready” houses; the television networks treat us to “encore presentations” that are the same old summer reruns. And “fenestration engineers” are still window cleaners; “environmental superintendents” are still janitors; “drain surgeons” are still plumbers.

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

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

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

Chapter 1

Prewriting

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

For many writers, getting started is the hardest part. You may have noticed that when it is time to begin a writing assignment, you suddenly develop an enormous desire to straighten your books, water your plants, or clean out your closet. If this situation sounds familiar, you may find it reassuring to know that many professionals undergo these same strange compulsions before they begin writing. Jean Kerr, author of *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, admitted that she often found herself in the kitchen



Roger Allyn Lee / SuperStock

reading soup-can labels—or anything—to prolong the moments before taking pen in hand. John C. Calhoun, vice president under Andrew Jackson, insisted he had to plow his fields before he could write, and Joseph Conrad, author of *Lord Jim* and other novels, is said to have cried on occasion from the sheer dread of sitting down to compose his stories. Writer Ernest Hemingway once confessed that the most frightening thing he ever confronted in his life of adventures was “a blank sheet of paper,” and contemporary horror-writer Stephen King agrees that the “scariest moment” of all occurs just before one starts writing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Selecting a Subject

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

Start early. Writing teachers since the earth's crust cooled have been pushing this advice—and for good reason. It's not because teachers are egoists competing for the

dubious honor of having the most time-consuming course; it is because few writers, even experienced ones, can do a good job when rushed. You need time to mull over ideas, organize your thoughts, revise and polish your prose. Rule of thumb: Always give yourself twice as much time as you think you'll need to avoid the 2:00-A.M.-why-did-I-come-to-college panic. (For help overcoming procrastination, see pages 98–100.)

Find your best space. Develop some successful writing habits by thinking about your very own writing process. When and where do you usually do your best composing? Some people write best early in the morning; others think better later in the day. What time of day seems to produce your best efforts? Where are you working? At a desk? In your room or in a library? Do you start drafting ideas on a computer, or do you begin with paper or a yellow pad? With a certain pen or sharpened pencil? Most writers avoid noise and interruptions (the lure of social media sites, phone calls or texts, TV, friends, etc.), although some swear by playing music in the background. If you can identify a previously successful writing experience, try duplicating its location, time, and tools to help you calmly address your new writing task. Or consider trying new combinations of time and place if your previous choices weren't as productive as you would have liked. Recognition and repeated use of your most comfortable writing “spot” may shorten your hesitation to begin composing; your subconscious may recognize the pattern (“Hey, it's time to write!”) and help you start in a positive frame of mind. (Remember that it's not just writers who repeat such rituals—think of the athletes you've heard about who won't begin a game without wearing their lucky socks. If it works for them, it can work for you.)

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

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

Still searching? Make a list of all the subjects on which you are an expert. None, you say? Think again. Most of us have an array of talents we hardly acknowledge. Perhaps you play the guitar or make a mean pot of chili or know how to repair a sports car. You've trained a dog or become a first-class house sitter or gardener. You know more about computers or old baseball cards than any of your friends. You play soccer or volleyball

or Ping-Pong. In other words, take a fresh, close look at your life. You know things that others don't . . . now is your chance to enlighten them!

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

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

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

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

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