

“To the Student.” *The Random House Guide to Writing*. 1st Edition.

To the Student

A student in one of our basic writing classes wrote about himself as a writer in this way:

When I start to write, it presents a lot of problems. For example, I am self conscious of what I am writing and I am always fearful of using incorrect grammar. Another problem I have is staying on the main topic. When I write, it's like having mini-explosions going off in my mind. Thousands of words, sentences, and ideas keep flashing in and out of my head. It is a nuclear war between my hand and my brain. The actual results usually amaze me. In my mind it is clear and concise on paper it becomes a jumble.

To many of you, this battle is nothing new. Most college students would like to write well but arrive at college shaken by previous skirmishes or with little or no real writing experience. A few believe they are already good writers only to find that the first paper they hand over to their college English instructor carries back disappointing news. Have they been misled? Or does the news from up front mean that here is yet another English teacher to be "psyched out" with another personal set of requirements they must learn to satisfy?

You may be one of these people, in one group or another, victimized by the mysterious demands of a mysterious skill. It is our belief that at least some elements of the writing process can be demystified, and this book has grown out of that conviction: Certainly we don't promise you a set of formulas that guarantee you will write effortlessly. Nor do we say that writing well will automatically land you a good job one day. But writing well has never *hurt* anyone's chances for a job and has *helped* a lot of people get their thinking in order. We know that in any art the magic of excellence eludes recipes. But we also know from our own writing and from our years teaching in the classroom and working individually with students in the writing lab that there are methods writers use and habits they cultivate to make writing less of an ordeal and, perhaps, an occasion for quiet pleasure. We hope the *Random House Guide to Basic Writing* will serve you in and out of class as a reliable guide to writing and as a flexible reference handbook to grammar and usage. It puts together writing and grammar, laying out the basic principles of writing essays and strong English sentences before it offers advice about problems in usage that cause most of the errors writers make.

Our purpose from the start is to get you writing and keep you writing, so that any improvements in organization and in grammar relate closely to your own writing. Because English grammar is at work everywhere, we exhibit grammatical forms from the writing all around you. For example, turn to p. 118 to see how an ad for a ski resort demonstrates parallel structures and the use of *-ing* words. Plenty of exercises are included in all the chapters, but the crucial exercise is the final one back on your own paper, because continuous drill work without reference to your own purposes can be as unproductive an exercise as sleepwalking.

We have tried in this book to create the atmosphere of purposefulness and trust that exists in a good classroom, where students feel supported and not judged, where practicing writing will build your confidence and not seal your doom. You will fall in and out of love with your own sentences, and that is to be expected. Since writing includes re-writing we encourage you to do many things that may have been drummed out of you: risk mistakes, start with what you may think are trivial ideas, seek reactions from friends and teachers before you hand a paper in, revise and recast the ending, the beginning, or any sentence in the process.

Chapters 1 through 5 begin with methods for getting started, getting something down on the page. We start with freewriting as a ten-minute exploration to uncover ideas and then move swiftly to a whole piece of writing---essays, letters, journal entries. From the whole, we coax lessons in the smaller units. We use the method of the "writing cycle" (discussed in Chapter 1) to give you a base of support you may never have had. You will find that every writing task requires you to perform roughly the same acts-among them

getting started, writing a rough draft, getting reactions, revising-which you can repeat and reverse wherever and whenever the stream of your writing requires it. You will discover that each fresh demand to write need not be a detached and threatening ordeal. These repeatable acts offer you a degree of assurance and confidence that may well make the difference between writing and a hard time.

Throughout the book we direct your attention to the whole essay *and* to sentences, because a writer's struggle is with sentences, and the sentences of a piece of writing pass through many stages before they are "ready." Chapters 6 through 9 guide you through the processes of seeing and writing sentences. Chapter 8 will help you eliminate fragments and run-ons while your sentences steadily gain power. Consult Chapter 16 on punctuation when you think your problems with sentences are not grammatical but concern your skill in separating into sentences the stream of writing on your page.

Chapters 10, 11, and 12 strengthen your control of the small parts-paragraphs, sentences, and words-by introducing options to make your writing not only correct, but effective.

The usage section, Chapters 13 through 17, continues to provide reference support and exercises for your uncertainties on verbs, subject-verb agreement, pronouns, punctuation, and spelling. Clearly, not all writers are stalled by all these problems, and you will begin by attending first to the issues you (and your teacher) consider urgent in your writing. Finally, the book recognizes that, ready or not, you will soon be putting your skills on the line, and a lot may hang in the balance. Taking exams, writing research essays, and writing job resumes often require knowledge of a few added conventions so that your writing can go public. Chapters 18, 19, and 20 provide a closer look at these practical concerns. We hope you will take advantage of the scope of the *Random House Guide*. Both publisher and authors feel that students in basic courses deserve, in a single book, a comprehensive guide to writing. But the book, remember, will never be a substitute for your own writing. When you are learning to write, your own writing is the primary text. Many whole essays are nonetheless included, some written by professional writers, others by students like yourself. Though you may feel you write better or worse than these students, we can assure you that your serious observations about the essays of your classmates are an indispensable turn in the "writing cycle." 'Since your writing deserves the reactions of a range of readers, not only those of your instructor, all of what you write need not be read by your instructor at all. Writing is a lifelong skill that should be tested in more places than on the English teacher's desk. Not until other people report to us how our words move them do we know exactly what the words on ' our page have managed to say. Now we invite all of you-students and teachers alike-to respond to this book in that same spirit, offering observations on what we have written and suggestions for change.