

Chapter 1

A Lifetime of Writing

Objectives for Chapter 1

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore the writing you do in your life
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write about Reading
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading and Writing Problem Areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your Handwriting on the Page

I. A Lifetime of Writing

Writing is a major form of communication that affects many areas of your life. To use an analogy, it is equivalent to learning to talk. Instead of using your physical voice, you will use your written words to create your “authorial” or writing voice. When successful, the person who reads your writing will be able to hear your voice come off the paper as though you were speaking aloud. You may be taking this class as a prerequisite for another course or as a requirement for a future degree. Yet the writing skills that you develop in this course will affect you for a lifetime of writing.

It’s hard to think of a career that does not incorporate writing. Students going into the sciences might discover the cure for a disease, but if the discovery can’t be written down in a logical and sensible manner that colleagues can read, it will be meaningless. The scientific community is multinational and, as a result, multilingual - all the more reason to write in a clear and logical way. Let’s try another scenario. What about students studying music? Of course

they will need to write music and lyrics, but how will an audience be attracted to hear their talented compositions? Many musicians use a website as a form of advertisement to attract new fans, to sell CD's, and to get jobs. Strong writing skills will provide the ability to attract readers to a website. Of course, websites are used for all types of businesses - restaurants, hair salons, clothing stores, contractors, veterinarians, car dealers, computer stores, and on and on.

Still not sold? Take a look at the classified section of your local newspaper or a popular website that advertises jobs. Most positions offered will state that "excellent writing skills are a *bonus*." Further, most ads will also state "no phone calls." Instead a *letter of interest* is required. The *letter of interest* is the only representation a job applicant will have to impress a perspective employer. The content of the letter may get you an interview - or not.

Daily lifestyles involve writing as well. What if a next door neighbor's tree is dead is leaning toward your house? If it falls, your roof may be damaged or someone inside your house or yard may be injured or worse. Further, let's say that you do not know your neighbor, so it is uncomfortable to approach her with a request to cut down the tree posing the hazard. What are your choices? You can hire a lawyer to write the letter. At two-hundred-and-fifty dollars an hour minimum, plan on spending at least four hundred dollars. On the other hand, the issue can be resolved with a well written *objective* letter that is clear, inoffensive, and allows your neighbor to understand your point of view as well as the liability involved should the tree fall. This is where your ability to assess your *audience* to enable you to select the appropriate *tone* and *language* will increase the success of your *purpose*. In addition, using *evidence* as *support* will also help you succeed. Once you point out the seriousness of the situation with specific illustrations, your neighbor will get the idea. Every single time you sit down to write, you have a

purpose. It may be as simple as leaving a roommate a note or as important as medication instructions written in a patient's chart by a nurse or doctor. The writing scenario list is infinite and will last for your entire lifetime.

II. The Learning Curve is Different for Everyone

Learning a new skill or, in some cases, relearning an old skill, can feel very frustrating at times. Reading and writing require the same effort as any difficult endeavor that requires practice. Have you ever tried to tap dance or to play a musical instrument? It is extremely awkward at first, but the more you practice, the easier it becomes. From practicing you will begin to build your self-confidence. Reading and writing may feel uncomfortable at first, but the more you practice and break-down the processes of reading and writing, the better you will become.

A frequent comment I receive from students is, "Do you know how much time I spent on this assignment?" The comment is made one of two ways. The first way we can call the "good news way," which is when the student receives a high grade. The second way is "the bad news way," which is when the student is not happy with the grade she received. The point is that if a student spends six hours on a writing assignment and does not receive the grade hoped for; either the student did not understand what was being asked, or the student needed to spend *more* time on the project. Reading and writing are different processes for all of us, which is actually good news because life would be way too boring if we were all the same. This means that the process each of us goes through to read and write is different. A lucky classmate may be able to

accomplish a writing assignment in less time than you. It does not matter. Writing is an individual activity. The only wrong way to read and write is to not read or write one single word.

This text will guide you through the steps to become a successful reader and writer. The order of the processes may be different for you than for classmates. As stated, reading and writing are individual processes and the goal of this book is for you to learn the way that works best for you. Most importantly, by the identification of your individual problem areas in both reading and writing, you will be able to create a game plan to overcome any obstacles that stand in your way.

Exercise 1

1. Make a list of the different areas of your life that involve writing.
2. Do you enjoy writing? Do you dislike it? Give examples.
3. What is your favorite film? Book? TV show?
4. You will be given a reading assignment.

Answer the following questions in response to the reading:

- A. Who wrote it?
- B. Why did they write it?
- C. How did it make you feel?
- D. Did you understand the language used? What did you do if you came upon a word that was unfamiliar?
- E. If you were to rewrite it, what would you change?
- F. Write a generalization statement about the reading: In one sentence, state the main point or idea the author is attempting to convey to the reader.
- G. Take your answers to your group. Compare responses. From everyone's list, compile a final list to present to the class.

Exercise 2

1. Take your Generalization Statement from the previous exercise and write it out at the top of a piece of notebook paper. Underneath it, explain what your Generalization Statement means. Then prove it by adding examples from the reading. Add transitions that lead from one sentence to the next. Make sure that what you have written about the reading supports the Generalization Statement. If not, you may need to adjust your Generalization Statement.

2. After writing your paragraph, write a brief reflection letter in which you list the process you went through to create the writing assignment. What steps did you take to prepare to write? What was hard? What was easy? How would you change the process for yourself next time?

Exercise 3

- A. Writing Process Interviews: Ask three students the following questions:
 - 1. When assigned an academic topic, how do they begin to write?

2. What order of writing, if any, do they follow? Pre-writing? Outlining?
3. How do they find ideas on a topic?
4. Do they have suggestions on how to maintain a tight focus?

Exercise 4

1. Write a page or two on your very own writing process. List the areas where you feel lost or have the most trouble. You will compare your process to others in the class. We will collaboratively be looking for areas of difficulty and ways to resolve the problems.

III. Your Handwriting on the Page - Meet Your Inner Writer

It was only during the 1990's that home computers became a common way of life. Prior to their mass production, which made them affordable, most people wrote with pen and paper. The only other option was a typewriter. The life of all writers has become increasingly easier in that computers format easily, save documents, and check grammar and spelling. Although letter writing has become an art of the past, handwriting is important. Let's discuss the ways you use handwriting.

Note Taking

As a college student, taking notes is a good place to start. This is something that is done in all your classes whether you are jotting down important information your professor is giving you, or whether you are writing down the homework assignment for the day. Another place where handwriting is important is in making annotations of what you are reading. As you read, if you don't take notes, interruptions such as the phone ringing, or taking a break to have a snack

and running into friends in the cafeteria, can likely cause you to forget what you have read. This means that valuable time will have been wasted. With a **reading log**, life becomes easier because you have listed questions, created summaries, and collected other meaningful information as you read. This prepares you for in-class discussions and provides you with notes to use when creating a writing assignment or when studying for texts and quizzes.

Homework Assignments and Exams

Homework Assignments are another area where handwriting comes into to view. Although some students prefer to use a word processor, most students will handwrite their responses to homework questions. A neatly written paper that is easy to read makes a better impression on the reader than one that is difficult to understand.

In-class exams, usually written in “Blue Books” make handwriting critical. As an instructor of many English composition courses, I don’t like to spend extra time reading an exam because the handwriting is impossible to read. A reader’s first impression of a messy exam or assignment may leave a negative impression. As your reader attempts to decipher through the difficult handwriting, it may appear that the student is attempting to cover up the fact that his exam or homework response is poorly written. Although this may be true, in some instances this is usually not the case. Instead I find the student has written a good exam or homework response, but by the time I wrestle through the handwriting, I will feel annoyed and frustrated. Clearly poor handwriting affects the reader.

Exercise 5

Take a handwriting inventory. Answer the following questions.

1. When you handwrite an assignment, do you write a heading at the top of the page? Is the heading neatly written with your *first name followed by your last name*?

2. Under your name, do you list the name of the course and the name of the instructor followed by the date?

3. Under the heading is there a reference to the page number, chapter, or specific assignment worked on? Here is a sample heading:

Rocky Luna

English 21, Section 1022

Professor Ladinsky

Jan. 3, 2008

Chapter 2, pages 29-32

4. Is the handwriting in a dark ink or in light pencil that is hard to read?

5. Have you written neatly so that the instructor can easily read through the assignment?

Take a moment to consider the above list. **If you answered no to any of these questions, list ways you can improve.**

The Handwriting on the Page

Let's take a look at handwriting in general. Why might a student write in a handwriting style that resembles hieroglyphics? There are manual dexterity issues that make precise handwriting difficult. For these types of situations, a word processor is a good alternative. But not counting muscular conditions that may exist in rare instances, it is usually a discomfort level that the student is feeling that pushes her handwriting into the overly slanted blur that causes frustration for the reader. Students may be unsure of where to punctuate or how to spell. Instead of stopping to look up spelling, or stopping to read the sentence out loud to examine what type of punctuation should be used and where to place it, the student might use handwriting that is so

jammed together on the page that it's hard to guess what the letters spell. Punctuation errors are harder to hide from the reader, but an unsure writer may avoid punctuation or may guess.

Your handwriting is an extension of yourself and it is hard, if not impossible to change.¹ But by examining your handwriting, you will be able to see it through the eyes of others. By the discovery of what it is that drives you to write in an illegible manner should help you to improve. In order to improve your handwriting you may need to take more time as you write. As you move through this process, you will find yourself creating improved writing habits and improved self-confidence will also emerge.

Exercise 6

Keep the Handwriting Flowing

Let's complete an orientation inventory of the current college you are attending. On the top of a piece of notebook paper, write the name of your school. Answer the following questions:

1. Who are college students today?
2. What college do you attend?
3. What was the predominate reason for selecting this college?
4. What kind of lifestyle is associated with your school? For example, does your school have dormitories, or is it a commuter school? Is the campus big or small? Does the campus have areas where you can relax in peace and quiet such as a stretch of lawn lined with trees. Or is it urban style?
5. Do you attend sports events at your school? Which ones? Do you wear clothes or caps that have your college's logo on it?

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6. Are you on a school team?
7. Have you met any new friends at your college?
8. Are you a member of any study groups? If so, where does your study group meet?
9. Go to the college's website and list five types of clubs on campus.
10. How do you get a student identification card? A student email address?
11. What types of technology are you expected to be familiar with as a college student?
12. Find the tutoring and writing services available from the college's website.
13. Name the locations of computer labs on campus.
14. Where is the best food on campus? Name the vendor, its location, and your favorite thing to eat.
15. How has your social life changed since becoming a college student?
16. Do you find that your "non-student" friends and relatives have compassion for your difficult lifestyle as a student?
17. How has the financial drain of tuition, books, parking, and less time to spend at work affected your life?
18. What is your academic goal?
19. What standards of living will change when you reach your academic goal?
20. What dreams will come true for you when you reach your goal?

Exercise 7

1. Use your observations from the above brainstorming list to create a "generalization statement" about being a college student.
2. Based on your generalization statement, handwrite a paragraph that proves your generalization statement.

3. In groups, switch papers and rate the handwriting. At the bottom of the page, rate your colleagues' handwriting. A 5 is clear and easy to read. A 1 is hieroglyphics. Take the average of the results that your group gives you. If your score is a 3 or lower, consider what strategies will help you to improve? Slowing down? Getting paper that has more space between the lines? Now go into a group of students all of whom have a similar score as you do. As a group, discuss ways to improve your writing and prepare to present your findings to the class. If you are in a group that has scored a 5, share your secret to success.