

# Writing Your Way Through College

Writing Your Way Through College  
*A Student's Guide*

Sheryl I. Fontaine and Cherryl Smith

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*This book is dedicated to our sons  
David Fontaine-Boyd and Jeremy Smith-Danford,  
for their laughter, patience, and wisdom.*

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# Writing Your Way Through College

# CHAPTER

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# 1

## Getting Ready to Write

### *Reading and Writing for Essays 1 and 2*

#### **What Do You Expect to Find in This Book?**

As you open this book, it would be interesting to think about what expectations you are bringing to it about college writing. Your individual expectations may be based on previous experiences you have had with writing textbooks or with writing in school, and some of your expectations may have emerged from ways you have seen college depicted on TV or in films, from conversations you have had with friends or relatives who have taken college writing courses, or from your own experiences in other college courses you have already completed. Your expectations for college writing may also be influenced by popular myths about what it means to write, particularly about what it means to write in college.

As composition professors, we are familiar with at least three beliefs about college writing that we would call myths. One myth is that writing is primarily the skill of learning certain rules and patterns that could have been mastered before entering college. We call this a myth because, as you will learn in this text, all writing occurs in a specific context, and these shifting contexts make it impossible for the art of writing ever truly to be mastered or for writers ever to finish growing and learning. Although you may have taken other courses that included writing assignments similar to those found at the university, they were, nevertheless, very context specific. Courses you took in high school, for example, may have increased your range of experience with writing and helped you gain confidence as a writer, but these courses in no way replace or make unnecessary a college writing class. This is because the constraints on a college

writer—the expectations of the audience, the length of the assignments, and the writer’s relationship to his or her subject matter—are different from those that occur in any other context. College writing is the form of written communication found in the academic world of universities and colleges—and nowhere else.

A second common myth is that writing courses are not really about anything, that they lack subject matter and are simply prerequisites for the “real” writing students do in their other college classes. We argue in this book, however, that there is nothing preliminary about college writing courses. First, there is subject matter related to the study of writing. The academic discipline of Composition and Rhetoric is devoted to the study of writing, to researching and theorizing about every aspect of what it means to write. This study informs what is taught in college writing classes. Second, any time you write, you must choose some subject to learn about or reflect on with enough sustained attention that you find thoughts of your own to express. This book and the writing course you are currently taking do not present you with the prerequisites for writing at college but provide you with the experience of *being* a college writer.

A final myth about college writing is that it is something you can take in a semester or two and get over with quickly. The writing placement exams and discretely defined writing requirements at many colleges falsely suggest that writing can be mastered once and for all before you enter college or by the end of a specific course or two. You may have the impression that one need only learn a particular format or some new vocabulary in order for the difficulties of college writing to be resolved.

However, it is important to remember that all writing requires creativity and involves writers in a process of using language to create new meanings in new contexts. Whether you are enrolled in basic or advanced writing, freshman composition or a senior seminar, or you are writing on your own, every phrase, every sentence you write, has never been said just that way before, nor has it appeared before in precisely that context. Presented with this endless variety of contexts in which to write, no writer—college or professional—can ever really finish learning how to write.

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**1****Reflection*****Your Expectations, Fears, and Hopes About Writing***

After taking a few minutes to reflect on the following questions, write out your thoughts for each one: Do the myths about college writing classes that we have described sound familiar? What other beliefs or myths have you brought with you? What do you expect will change for you as a writer by the time you finish this course? What fears do you have about college writing? What do you imagine might get in the way of your development as a writer? What do you hope to learn?

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## Using This Book

This text is a resource for understanding the setting of college writing; it is something like a tour book that is helpful when you are traveling or have moved to a new city. It is a book to help you find your way, to help you understand the unusual signs and odd markings on the map. This book can also help you see yourself in relation to this particular territory in which you are traveling. There are certain customs to college writing that may seem unusual in relation to your previous experiences; places of particular interest to be visited; blind alleys that might be avoided or, at least, identified; there are names that may require translation.

Although writing at college certainly resembles writing outside of college, the academic environment where it takes place is, in a sense, a community with its own set of expectations and values. The positions of authority that academics are expected to hold and the kind of value that academics place on conveying knowledge result in language and essay structures that may be, to the outsider, mysterious or imposing. This book provides an insider's view. You will find information about kinds of writing courses and assignments, about how teachers and programs evaluate writing, about the demands of college writing and ways to meet those demands, and about the particular expectations of the various disciplines and majors that make up the college curriculum.

Our aim, in *Writing Your Way Through College*, is to familiarize you with the idiosyncrasies of the college writing community and with the particular ways of using language that you will encounter in college. At the same time, we want to help you use the language experiences you already have to make college writing personally meaningful and, ultimately, to provide your writing with a sense of purpose and focus. What we have learned through many years of teaching college writing and through our own experiences as academic writers is that writing well, at the university or elsewhere, depends on not only understanding the expectations of one's audience but finding one's own identity as a writer. The voice in which you write and the language you use to shape ideas grow from your own individual experiences, from your cultural background and history, and from your sense of yourself both as a writer and as an individual. While introducing you to the culture of the academic environment as it relates to writing, our goal is also to help you identify personal and cultural resources that bring you power as a writer and that can be your foundation for writing in college.

Beyond helping you develop the connection between yourself and the ideas about which you are writing, our final aim for *Writing Your Way Through College* is to remind you that as a college writer, you are not alone. Although writers usually compose by themselves, writing is very much a social activity; to some degree, all writing is part of a collaboration with a number of individuals who, themselves,

bring to the writing situation their own set of experiences and cultural histories. College writing puts you into an interaction with instructors, other students, professional writers, and scholars, with people who may be sitting right next to you and with others whom you will never, could never, meet.

As a student, sometimes you may choose to sit quietly at the back of a classroom, listening to and recording material from a lecture. Other times you may sit silently at your desk, reading and recording information from a written text. In both cases, as a listener and as a reader, you have the option to be still, even to remain detached, as you hear or read someone else's words. When you write, however, it is impossible to remain detached. Intentionally or not, your own words and identity create a connection between yourself and the material about which you are writing. Furthermore, your words create a connection between yourself and your reader.

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## 2

### **Reflection**

#### *Sharing Expectations, Fears, and Hopes About Writing*

Read aloud or exchange your Reflection 1 with another member of the class. When you are listening or reading, your job is to take in what the writer has to say—his or her expectations, fears, and hopes about writing—to listen or read attentively and nonjudgmentally. Give yourself a chance to reread the writing or to hear it again one or more times.

Write your reactions to what your classmate said. How is his or her experience different from or similar to your own? Offer your own insights into what he or she has said. You might raise questions, if you have some, and write about what the other's reflection triggers in your own thinking.

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### **Writing to Find Meaning**

One overarching conclusion we make from our own academic writing experience and our work with college writers is that the single best way to improve your writing is to immerse yourself in writing, to write as much and as reflectively as you can. If you write a note like this: "Gone to the gym—be back around 7:00," you are using writing to record and convey information. To produce this kind of writing, you usually compose quickly and without much thought since you already know what you want to say. Of course, most of the writing you do in college involves not merely recording something you already know, but using written language to help figure out what you want to say—even to help figure out what you do not yet know. When we write reflectively, in thoughtful and examining ways, we do much more than record our thoughts for later reference. If we give ourselves the oppor-

tunity to write freely and deeply, without limiting ourselves, writing actually can help us to understand our own thoughts, experiences, and observations in a way we would not have otherwise.

We arrived at this conclusion, that writing is a tool for understanding and reflecting, after many years of research and study. Donald Murray (2004), Anne Lamott (1995), Anne Berthoff (1981), and Janet Emig (1983) all demonstrate from their experiences as teachers, writers, and researchers that writing can lead us to make connections that would not be visible to us otherwise. And although it is certainly not necessary for you to have read this research in order to write well, throughout the text, we will identify authors whose works we recommend if you are interested in learning more about writing.

When any of us write, the words we put on a sheet of paper or computer screen have emerged from a long journey, most of which has taken place without our awareness. Before we write—or even speak—we experience a sense of wanting to say something, a physical or emotional desire to express a thought. Drawing on the work of Eugene Gendlin (1982), writer and theorist Sondra Perl (2004) explains that we have a “felt sense” of our thoughts even before we may be able to articulate them in words.

Finding words for our felt sense is a natural process that often happens so quickly we are unaware of it. In everyday speaking, this process usually takes place quite rapidly, and as we attempt to express ourselves, our minds select and reject several possible words or phrases instantaneously. However, since we cannot write as quickly as we can speak, when we write, this process occurs more slowly, and so we may notice ourselves shuttling back and forth between our sense of what we want to say and the words we are finding. As the match between our sense of what we want to say and the words we choose becomes closer, we may become more conscious of our choices. Although much of the time, in both speaking and writing, we find the words we’re seeking, sometimes we may labor in our search. In speaking, if we are trying to figure something out or grapple with a difficult idea, we may struggle a bit with our words or interrupt ourselves to say more clearly what we are thinking. Sometimes we pause, rephrase an idea, or reject our statement altogether. When we write, these pauses can bog down our progress as we struggle to find words that capture what we are feeling and thinking. It is then that writers are likely to complain, “I know what I want to say. I just can’t write it!”

Yet something powerful is happening during this struggle. As we reject words, selecting only those that come closest to our sense of what we are trying to say, we are taking something that is vague and intangible and crystallizing it into visible, written language. This is a complicated process. We make connections between our initial felt sense and the words we use; we create new thoughts that would not have existed had we not attempted to represent our ideas and feelings in words. When we

find just the right word or phrase, when we reach an “I got it!” moment, we are experiencing the power of language to help us find meaning. We discover we can learn from our own writing.

## Exploratory Writing

To help themselves focus on the emerging meaning of their writing, many writers make use of freewriting, a technique that you may already know and that we ourselves learned from Peter Elbow (1980), Ken Macrorie (1985), and other teachers. This technique is also sometimes called quickwriting, nonstop writing, brainstorming, and exploratory writing. Because it is the most useful strategy we know for generating writing, we have incorporated freewriting extensively into the writing tasks assigned in *Writing Your Way Through College*.

One of the difficulties of writing is that since it is slower than speaking, we have more time to get in our own way. That is, we may tend to criticize our work even before figuring out what we are going to say. In the process of shuttling back and forth between our felt sense and the written words, we may pause so long to debate our choice of words that we lose our train of thought. Or we might think ahead to how a reader may view our writing, worrying whether we have said something correctly to such an extent that we can't concentrate on the meaning. Mike Rose (1985), has described the difficulty that writers can experience when these “rigid rules” block their ability to write freely. Freewriting takes advantage of the meaning-making power of written language by removing these blocks that can keep us from letting words guide our writing; it focuses our attention on whatever felt sense is emerging as we write.

When you freewrite, you are able to shut out the critic in your head who distracts you from thinking about what you are writing with worries about how you are writing. Instead of pushing ahead, following the ideas you are generating, the critic nags at you to pause and rewrite, edit, cross out, get a cup of coffee, send a text message—anything that will prevent you from attentively and insistently writing to capture what it is you want to say. In order to use freewriting to silence that critic, you must do two things: *write without stopping* and *write without rereading or correcting*. Just keep your pen or cursor moving, even if you write, “I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck,” or “What'll I say? What'll I say?” until you find you've moved on to saying something else. There will be time later for rereading, revising, editing, or discarding what you've written; while you are freewriting just keep the flow of thought pouring onto the page or computer screen.

Freewriting is a way of brainstorming or free-associating. At first, it may seem like a difficult (or counterproductive) task to write without worrying about writing well. But with practice it becomes easier and, as many professional writers, teach-

ers, and researchers have attested (see Belanoff, Elbow, and Fontaine 1991) and as you yourself will see, because it helps you to generate writing, to get your ideas down, freewriting is a powerful technique for developing your abilities as a writer.

## Freewriting About an Idea

Most of the time, writers do not compose an entirely free-associative kind of freewriting. Freewriting, in which you write anything at all that is on your mind, is the way you are likely to write in a private journal or a letter, or an email to someone you know well or, occasionally, to a wider, less familiar audience. It is the best way to get feelings, first impressions, or initial thoughts down in words on screen or paper. However, even in entirely free-associative freewriting, our natural tendency is to focus on particular subjects or ideas, to follow the lines of our thinking in particular directions.

Just as you can use freewriting to explore and create ideas, you can also use it to focus on any specific ideas you find interesting. Often, writers begin their freewriting in this way, with the intention of focusing on a particular subject, what Peter Elbow (1998) calls “focused freewriting.” Rather than write randomly what comes to mind, you write what comes to mind on a certain question or subject you wish to analyze. The idea you begin with provides both a starting place and a reference point as you compose—nonstop—without your critic’s nagging interference. Freewriting can help you explore an idea, expand your sense of what that idea is, refine your understanding of it, or see connections between this idea and others.

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### 3

#### Reflection

##### *Trying Out and Reflecting on Freewriting*

1. Freewrite for six or seven minutes about any topic or idea that comes to mind. You do not have to write quickly, just steadily, without pausing to reread or make changes as you write.
  2. Starting with the topic of “what keeps me from writing,” freewrite for another six or seven minutes, letting your thoughts and writing travel wherever they want within that general topic.
  3. Reread what you wrote for steps 1 and 2 and write for a few minutes about the experiences of freewriting. What surprised you or frustrated you? How did having a topic as a starting point seem to affect the writing? Are there differences in structure or style between the two pieces of writing? Did you write things that you would not have predicted?
-

## Reading and Writing in This Text

*Writing Your Way Through College* uses both reading and writing to engage you in the kind of specialized, insider conversation shared by people who work in the same place or study the same subject. This textbook asks you to read about college writing as it is perceived by people who study the subject closely and then to write your own college essays in six different assignments.

In the first part of *Writing Your Way Through College*, we have included information about the way one speaks and writes within various language communities; about the history of college writing and your place in this history; and about how one learns the conventions of language communities, especially the communities of academic disciplines. Following this introduction, Chapters 2 and 3 describe the ways in which people find themselves moving through many language communities in the course of a single day or over the course of a lifetime. An awareness of how we shift language communities in daily life is useful as you move through the college writing community. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the particular language community of college, the one in which you currently find yourself. These chapters talk about the historical evolution of college writing in the academic community and provide ways for you to think about how you, as an individual, intersect with that history today. Because each area or discipline has its own unique set of conventions and expectations, Chapters 6 and 7 move from the general college language community to the specific one of your major area of study. These chapters examine how we come to see and know the conventions of academic language communities and, ultimately, how you, as a student, can identify and use them in your prospective major.

Interspersed with reading about these topics, we ask you to reflect, in quick, focused freewriting, on what you have read. The reflections, like the ones you already completed earlier in this chapter, ask you to pause in your reading and to use freewriting as a way of thinking about what you have read, making connections between and among ideas, and making meaning of all of this for yourself. The reflections represent your first thoughts or impressions about what you have read, so they may vary in length and depth. Some questions we provide and some sections of the text will rouse more reaction and response from you than others. As a general guideline, spend at least ten minutes freewriting; sometimes this will be all the time that is needed and other times you will want to go on longer. You can think of the reflections as ideas in the making—first impressions, thoughts, and reactions.

At the same time that the reflections will serve as a way to record and examine your thoughts, they will also provide you with ideas that can be used in the essay assignments that appear in Part 2 of the text. As you read each chapter and complete its corresponding reflections, you will be creating material that may serve as starting points for your essays. Consequently, the more thought you devote to the

reflections, the more ready you will be for drafting an essay when you get to that point in the process.

All of the essay assignments included in Part 2 of *Writing Your Way Through College* are instances of college writing, that is, writing that uses a particular source of information in order to analyze a subject and find evidence for the purpose of conveying an explicitly stated focus or meaning. With the goal of identifying and, ultimately, conveying an explicit focus or meaning, you will be asked to select a subject to write about and a source of information from which to analyze and produce appropriate evidence.

In this text, we identify three sources of evidence that inform all college writing: evidence that emerges from conversation and observation, from the writer's own recollections and memories, and from written texts. Each essay you write will reflect on and analyze a specific subject using one or more of these sources to identify a focus and the points of evidence you will use to support and develop that idea. Essay assignments 1, 3, and 5 ask you to address subjects or questions about language and writing that have emerged from reading Part 1 of *Writing Your Way Through College*. Essays 2, 4, and 6 ask you to write about subjects or questions that interest you personally about any topic you choose.

Each assignment includes exploratory writing activities designed to help you discover ideas and find the focus of your essay. These activities will help you to analyze your material from multiple perspectives in order to identify what you want to write about, to reflect on the subject, to focus your writing, and to determine what additional evidence you need to support your points.

Part 3 of the text includes three chapters that are intended to help you as you draft and revise your essays. First, we have provided several pieces of writing that our own students have completed while using this text. Rather than thinking about these as models or best examples, consider these essays as providing you and your classmates with the opportunity to examine and discuss how other student writers handled the same writing assignments you will be facing. In each essay, we have embedded questions that will help you to think about different ways that writers focus their writing and use their gathered information to make and support their ideas.

The last two chapters in the book, "Guidelines for Reading and Responding to Writers' Drafts" and "Guidelines for Editing Final Revisions," can be used as you move from a rough draft of your essay to a more focused and well-supported revision and, finally, to a clean, well-edited final copy. First we provide instructions and questions for classmates or friends to answer about your draft so that you can learn how well you are conveying and supporting the focus of your essay. The last chapter provides a similar list of questions that you can use in order to edit the grammar, syntax, and spelling in your nearly completed essays.



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