

## Why Write? by Jane B. Hughey

### Introduction

*Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery. Henry Miller*

Writing can and should be a stimulating, challenging activity central to all learning and development because, as Imscher says, "Once we move students beyond those basic levels of proficiency (grammatical structure and basic punctuation), we then see new dimensions of expressiveness, imaginativeness, and intellectual growth that are accessible only to someone engaged in composing, whether that performance is acting, dancing, painting, or writing" (241).

Every sentence uttered is a composition. Each time a series of sentences is successful in gratifying some need, an effective composition has been created. Composing is thus inherent in using language, and every individual has the capability to compose (Petty 75). Naturally, the degree to which each of us uses this capability is highly variable. It is our responsibility as teachers to help learners discover that composing written discourse is a natural act, that it is a means to learn about themselves and the world around them, as well as an important means to express themselves.

Many learners see writing only as a classroom exercise, something done to satisfy the English teacher and then to be tossed aside. They view it as a series of "themes" or essay responses to teacher-generated questions. Thus, for most student-writers, writing becomes an isolated act, for an audience of one, with the sole purpose of being graded, returned, and then forgotten. Indeed, much of the writing produced as a result of this attitude is tossed aside and forgotten because, all too often, it expresses not the author's view but the teacher's views as perceived by the student-writer. The writing that results is artificial, projecting a "supposed" point of view rather than one developed by exploration of the self—of the writer's own ideas, values, and perceptions.

How much more rewarding writing will be if learners come to view writing as an essential lifetime skill—a skill which, because of its multiple uses and functions, will enable them to continually expand their personal horizons. Student-writers need to recognize that mastering the complexities of the writing process not only will help them attain their immediate goals—well-written essays, reports, and research papers—but will also serve them far beyond the confines of the English classroom.

One of our most critical responsibilities as writing teachers is to communicate to our students this broader view of the functions and benefits of writing. As a lifetime skill, writing serves four crucial, enduring purposes for the learner: communication, critical thinking and problem solving, self-actualization, and control of personal environment.

### 2.1 Writing is an Essential Form of Communication

*Almost all that we are is related to our use of words. Bergen Evans*

Through writing we express our feelings—our hopes, dreams, and joys as well as our fears, angers, and frustrations. Writing, then, is a letter to the family recounting the delights of discovering new friends or the loneliness of days spent in a new environment without the supportive bonds of family love. Writing is a letter to a manufacturer detailing the weaknesses of a recently purchased product. Writing is a daily journal recounting the delights of a vacation abroad. It is a letter to Santa Claus, a memo to the plumber, or a thank you note to a thoughtful friend.

Through writing we express our ideas—our plans, our recommendations, our values, and our commitments. We explain to others who we are, what we believe and understand, and why we believe and understand as we do. For students, writing is a primary medium through which they demonstrate their understanding and interpretation of concepts and theories studied for many weeks or months. For the city council representative, writing is a position

statement drafted to detail why increased property taxes will be detrimental to the community. For the engineer, writing is explaining a new design for a piece of equipment. For the lawyer, writing is the briefs and position papers prepared for clients. For the agronomist, writing is a proposal advocating more efficient harvest procedures and controlled use of fertilizers. Almost all these tasks, though disparate in purpose, invariably require use of the multiparagraph composing skills learned in the composition class.

In every composing task, the writer's success depends to a great extent on how well information, ideas, beliefs, and impressions are conveyed "across barriers of time and distance" (Murray 1). The person receiving information (the reader) not only must recognize and comprehend the points that the writer is trying to make but must also "assign to them the same relative importance and internal coherence" as the writer (Beaugrande 138). Thus written words are "the fragile bridges upon which our thoughts must travel" (Sasser and John-Steiner 359).

## **2.2 Writing is for Critical Thinking and Problem Solving**

*How do I know what I think until I see what I say? E.M. Forster*

Written words serve not only as bridges for our thoughts but also as barometers for our thoughts. Words are the vehicle to express our thoughts, which we then measure against our experience and that of others. Used as such, writing helps us think critically, a crucial ability in our complex, media-oriented society which constantly bombards us with information. Some of this barrage is entertaining, some depressing, some useful, some useless, some significant, some insignificant, some inspiring, some frightening. Some information evokes response or action; some does not. The mind is forced to sift through a kaleidoscope of perceptions and thoughts to establish a pattern of what is meaningful and to help us make some sense of our lives and the world around us.

Writing helps us sort through this kaleidoscope of thoughts, as Irmischer notes, to bring "thought into consciousness, making it available both for us and for others to see" (1979b:243). Through writing we can explore our deepest thoughts and feelings, discover and explore our biases, and confront our values. Writing can help us discover gaps in our understanding and flaws in our thinking. It can tell us when we need to gather additional information or insights, when we need to rethink a question, or when we need to discard a belief or idea. Writing becomes then a way of defining ourselves and our problems, of clarifying our knowledge and our ideas, of understanding and solving our problems.

Writing, then, is a means to sift and refine our perceptions of the world around us. It requires us to measure our thoughts on a continuum outside of the self. Once we have written an idea down, we become the reader, the evaluator of that idea, moving outside ourselves and putting distance between the idea and ourselves. From this vantage point we are able to look at and examine the thought, concept, or experience from a new perspective, within a larger framework than existed within us before the idea took shape on paper. We call upon what we have read, what we have observed, and what we have experienced to verify, modify, or crystallize our thoughts. By arranging and sorting perceptions and knowledge "under a relevant and more inclusive conceptual system (Ausubel 105), we gain new insights, discover different perspectives, and in the process, are led to the discovery of meaning.

## **2.3 Writing is for Self-Actualization**

*Language is the mother, not the handmaiden, of thought; words tell you things you never thought or felt before. W.H. Auden*

Edward Albee is quoted by Murray (1968) as saying, "Writing has got to be an act of discovery. I write to discover what I am thinking about." Writing, as a way of discovering and developing ourselves, is a means for self-actualization. What we learn about ourselves and

develop within ourselves through writing can help us to realize our individual potential and to achieve personal goals. Therefore, besides being an external activity through which we communicate with others, writing also serves our inner selves. As an inner directed activity, writing is, as Irmischer notes, "a way of connecting with ourselves, an internal communication. In writing, this externalizing and internalizing occur at one and the same time. Putting out is putting in" (242). Thus, when we write we are also discovering something about who we are and what we believe. Through writing we learn by becoming aware of ourselves.

As we continuously select, reject, codify, and modify the numerous bits of data and sensory impressions constantly impinging on our consciousness, our own understanding and perspective begin to take shape. Writing helps us make the connections, "fashioning a network of associations and increasing our potential for learning" (Irmischer 224). Writing is a contemplative, ever-developing skill which allows us to draw upon our inner resources to explore many different aspects of ourselves as unique individuals. This ability to realign, clarify, and reshape information makes possible the never-ending discovery of new ideas, ideas which themselves trigger whole new cycles of sifting, searching, and discovering. Writing thus enables us to continually grow and develop: We can willfully project goals for ourselves. We can more clearly define our own expectations. Pathways are opened and avenues are created, showing us the way for further exploration.

As part of the basic human quest for self-actualization, one immediate goal frequently held by student-writers is success in the academic world. They need to demonstrate their knowledge, their understanding of subject matter, and their ability to communicate that knowledge and understanding intelligently to another person. They are required to write reports, research papers, and essay examinations to show that they know and understand the thoughts of others and can synthesize the new knowledge into their own thinking. Their success is determined, at least in part, by how

efficiently meaning is conveyed. The ability to produce well-written papers will enhance students' academic success because of what Hirsch calls the principle of "relative readability":

Increased communicative efficiency is a universal tendency in the history of all languages. This trend is to achieve the same effects with less and less reader effort. . . . The tendency to greater linguistic efficiency is a universal because for mankind it is a human universal to minimize time and effort in order to produce the same effect (1977: 54).

Thus, student-writers need to have writing skills which enable them to address problems explicitly, accurately, and concisely.

Research data from second language learning suggest that writing also serves to foster development in the other modes of language (Oller 382). For second language students, writing becomes a means to improve other language skills. As learners seek to present and explain their ideas in writing, they search for precise word choices and suitable structures in which to frame their ideas. Writing enables them to expand these other areas as they work to develop fluency in the language. As they search for evidence to support a point of view or position on an issue, their reading skills are enhanced. Through reading, their writing skills are reinforced. They begin to acquire a feel for the readers' expectations which in turn influence each student's composing process.

## **2.4 Writing Helps us Control our Personal Environment**

*Rhetoric is the use of language to promote human cooperation in the human jungle. Kenneth Burke*

In our complex society, the world has shrunk immeasurably in the last 50 years. Communication is almost instantaneous. Those who are proficient in English are able to compete more successfully in English-speaking societies as well as to engage in social and

professional discourse with those in other societies who do not share a common first language but do share English as their second language.

ESL students often see speaking the language—being able to communicate with others in face-to-face encounters—as the only worthwhile goal of the language class. But they also need to recognize that writing in a second language serves them beyond the moments when they are with friends, teachers, other students, and colleagues in a classroom related setting. Through writing they can continue communication from afar once they have returned to their countries or taken jobs at great distances from familiar academic settings. Therefore, student-writers need to recognize that writing is a tool for survival in the "real world," that is, the world beyond the classroom. Writing is a tool upon which we continually rely.

ESL students frequently view writing in English as nonessential to meeting their urgent and daily needs. Yet writing is closely tied to daily communication in the "real world," and students need to be encouraged to believe that they will never attain full literacy in their second language until they have achieved competence in writing. Writing competence reflects overall achievement in language, and learners who have developed the ability to communicate effectively in the written medium of a language have indeed made the language their own.

With increasing numbers of nonnative speakers entering English-speaking countries each year, writing is a crucial component of the language these learners will need to acquire. Many come to acquire skills or technology in a given area and then return to their native countries. Though these students often argue that writing in a second language is not essential, we know that it is essential to their academic success while studying and that when they return to their countries and take up positions of leadership, their facility with the writing process will be critical to their success whether they are in business, industry, government, or social services.

Many other nonnative speakers become permanent residents or citizens of an English-speaking country. To be productive members of their adopted society, they must be able to use English, their adopted language, effectively. This means being able to manipulate the language to meet their daily needs. Nonnative speakers must be able to complete a job application, look up numbers in a phone book, write a note to a child's teacher, fill out a loan application, and read a daily newspaper. It means being able to participate fully in the democratic process by furthering an education and being able to evaluate stated positions in order to make wise decisions at the ballot box. Developing writing skill can foster these abilities, since writing enables writers to look within themselves to clarify ideas, attitudes, and beliefs. Writing, then, is a means to know the self, a means to control the personal environment.

## Discussion Topics

1. What is the dichotomy the authors present in the introduction?
2. What are four purposes for writing according to the authors? Give an example of each.
3. What is the fourth reason for writing, and why is it significant? What are some examples of "personal environment" for university students? Suggest instances in which control of personal environment is important both now for university students and in the future for independent business representatives serving the interests of Mexico.

*Why Write?* is Chapter Two of the following book:

Hughey, Jane B., et aliae. Teaching ESL Composition, Principles and Techniques. Cambridge: Newbury House Publishers, 1983.