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## Introduction

# THINKING THROUGH WRITING

Let us “think through writing” together. To do this, we will think about the ways we can write, why we might want to communicate with writing, what we hope to convey, and how we sometimes fail. This also means that we think about how we read, when to ask questions, what questions to ask, what to outline, where to make an argument, and which words need to be placed in what order. Thinking through writing is an invitation to consider the intimate relationship between “right” thinking and the creative, critical, semimiraculous act of writing. Essentially, that is what *Thinking through Writing* is all about.

When it comes to learning how to negotiate the world and navigate your future classes in thoughtful ways, it is not always helpful, much less ideal, to be taught how to write in one book and how to think critically in another. Yet that is how most books are organized—into two categories, the writing guides and the critical thinking handbooks. We do things differently in this book: in *Thinking through Writing*, we offer a concise and practical manual for developing reading, writing, and thinking skills in tandem. With short, manageable, and practical chapters, our book is intended to get you to think critically about yourself and the world at large, to read carefully and get the necessary literary support, to write clearly and persuasively, to stay on point, and to finish your work as cleanly and compellingly as possible.

Drawing on a decade of teaching Harvard’s Freshman Expository Writing Course, as well as developing philosophy

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courses on writing and critical thinking for a variety of online and in-person classes, this book provides a personal and impassioned guide to writing and critical thinking for those who need to form arguments at the university and beyond. We will also draw on a variety of perspectives and tips from interviews with some of the most interesting and brilliant writers working today, in addition to exercises and templates in critical thinking and writing to get you to realize your full potential in practice. If education is training for the “real world,” then *Thinking through Writing* is training for one’s life in the real world of thinking critically and writing well.

*Thinking through Writing* is the Swiss Army knife of college-level writing and critical thinking. If you’ve ever been at a loss for words, you should read this book. If you want to make an argument, but don’t know where to start or how to end, you should read this book. If you struggle to support your ideas, to provide evidence that convinces and compels, you should read this book.

At one point or another, we all need to express in written words our own thinking, and this is a manual or handbook for these pivotal moments. *Thinking through Writing* is spring training for your life in the world of words, images, and arguments. Practice does not make perfect, but it does enable progress: reading, writing, and thinking are skills that can be taught. And those who fail to take the time to learn will miss the rare and therefore precious opportunity to make their mark.

Students are often quoted as saying that the whole point of college is to get through it as quickly as possible in order to enter “the real world.” The real testing ground for our minds, some assume, will be found in adulthood. There may be some truth to this, but here’s the rub: by the time you reach the “real testing ground” of mature life, it is, in one sense, a heavier lift to think critically. The more fluid

flow of intelligence in one's youth crystallizes with age, which makes learning new and challenging ideas harder (though not impossible—far from it!). We think the best time to acquire skills is always as soon as possible. One of the greatest, if not the greatest, mathematician-philosophers of the last one hundred years, Alfred North Whitehead, warned against such delays and deferrals:

The mind is never passive; it is a perpetual activity, delicate, receptive, responsive to stimulus. You cannot postpone its life until you have sharpened it. Whatever interest attaches to your subject-matter must be evoked here and now; whatever powers you are strengthening in the pupil, must be exercised here and now; whatever possibilities of mental life your teaching should impart, must be exhibited here and now. That is the golden rule of education, and a very difficult rule to follow.<sup>1</sup>

We offer a guide on writing and critical thinking that is meant to appeal to your “delicate, receptive, responsive” mind. We aim to evoke your interest, through enjoyable examples, strengthen your powers, through creative exercises, and nourish your mental life “here and now.” You have the power to communicate something vitally important to your reader or listener, to your audience both immediate and imagined, but you may need help to hone that power.

We are all rhetoricians—to greater or lesser extent—as soon as we learn to gesture or speak. Our minds and our words are fellow travelers. Plato, in the voice of Socrates questioning Phaedrus, an Athenian aristocrat, puts to us

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1. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, rev. ed. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1950), 9.

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these questions about rhetoric: “Is not the art of rhetoric a method of influencing men’s minds by means of words, whether the words are spoken in a court of law or before some other public body or in private conversation? And is not the same art involved whatever the importance of the subject under discussion, so that it is no more creditable to use it correctly on a serious matter than on a trifle?”<sup>2</sup> In other words, rhetoric is everywhere, and its power affects us in everything we do. Plato’s most famous student, Aristotle, suggested that we can persuade others in three distinct ways: we can appeal to an audience’s character (*ethos*), to their emotions (*pathos*), and to their reason (*logos*). Let’s think through that viewpoint.

If you’ve ever tried to get a child to eat their vegetables, you can argue on the basis of character (“Be a good boy, listen to your Mama, and down those carrots”), or you can appeal to their emotions and scare them into it (“If you don’t eat your carrots, your Dear Old Dad will send a horrible monster to get you in the night”), or you can appeal to their sense of reasoning and craft a practical argument (“Eating your carrots will help your stomach feel good tomorrow”). In each case, you take a slightly different rhetorical stance, but with the common objective of changing a listener’s mind—and getting those carrots eaten before you go insane. You don’t want to fight with the kid—resorting to physical violence or threat won’t do, no matter how tempting it is—instead you want to give an argument that changes the little bugger’s mood, and then their mind, and then their actions. Ideally, at the end of the argument, an audience will actually want to change their mind, or not even notice that they have already. In a fight,

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2. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 52–53.

you try to win, to destroy, to humiliate. In an argument, you try to entice a listener to agree with you. That is what becoming an effective rhetorician and writer means.

*Argument by Character (ethos):* This is the attempt to persuade a listener by presenting yourself as the sort of speaker they could and should trust. People care about people (it is sort of in our interpersonal DNA). When you make an argument by character, you are presenting yourself as the “informed and responsible adult” to your audience, the sort of person they can believe in.

*Argument by Emotion (pathos):* You know what else is in our interpersonal DNA? The capacity to *feel something* on the basis of the words we hear or read. Manipulating the emotions of a listener sounds more devious than it has to be. Start by thinking about the feelings of your audience and figure out how to recognize those fears and desires to make your point. Logic can only get you so far, but as we know from as far back as the Romantics of the early nineteenth century, something in the “gut,” so to speak, is often what moves us to action.

*Argument by Logic (logos):* Think of arguments as co-workers. Some you really respect (arguments by character), and some you fear or desperately want to date (arguments by emotion). But then there are the nerdy ones who are always there with the right answer and all the right evidence. Meet the argument by logic: it persuades by sound reasoning, but, more helpfully, figures out what reasons will matter to a particular audience and lays them out cogently.



Plato believed that being fully human involved an active commitment to three interlocking ideals: the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. We are, in life, supposed to speak and write on behalf of these ideals. No one thinker can ever understand these ideas in their entirety, which is why we spend so much of our lives talking things out, trying, for example, to get as real as we can. Rhetoric, at its base, assumes that certain aspects of our world deserve to be reconceived, revised, and reworked. And here is the amazing thing about words: when we put them in the right order—in an argument—they can change moods, minds, and actions. This, in turn, can change the world.

So rhetoric, critical thinking, and composition are important, even vitally so. For consider the alternative: to live a thoughtless, easy life, in which you are manipulated by someone else's words, taken in by their bullshit, used for their purposes, and defined by their vision of reality. No, thank you. So, if thinking through our words seems tough, just remember what the stakes are. Now let's get to work.

## BECOMING A WRITER AND THINKER

When John was a teenager, his single mother, Becky, called him into the kitchen with a very simple invitation: "Why don't you do your *writing* homework in the kitchen? Just *think* about it a little more, John." He was in the middle of a horrible essay for his high-school English class. Becky, who was doing the dishes at the sink, was a substitute English teacher. From that point forth, night after night, John took to the small round table in central Pennsylvania to join his first writing-thinking coach to train him in this crucial art. He needed help: he was a stuttering, shy student who hated to read and write. He just couldn't get his ideas in the right order. He also was more than a little bit arrogant and even

inflammatory, which meant that even if he did get his ideas in the right order, no one was going to listen to him. Before they started, his mother-teacher gave John some advice that seems like the very best way to start a crash course in writing and critical thinking: “John,” she said, “becoming a better writer involves becoming a better person. Don’t take this the wrong way, but before you pick up that pen, you need to become more thoughtful.” What did his English teacher want to see in the essay? What was she like as a person? What did she think was most important about the book they had been reading in class? This was a not-so-subtle way of encouraging her son to acknowledge his audience—their values, interests, and concerns—and then to approach his audience accordingly, gently and persuasively. In short, she urged him to become the sort of rhetor-writer people wanted to listen to and like.

This took a while. Exactly how long is a matter of dispute. But after her first lesson, John’s mother offered another: “When you have an idea, write it down.” It seemed so simple, but it’s really not. So many ideas—original, horrible, even brilliant but not fully formed—go extinct only because we never document their short lives. Some deserve to go the way of the dodo or woolly mammoth, but others don’t, and those are the ones worth mourning. So, write them down. That was the advice of John’s mother. And she gave him two very practical gifts that we would like you to afford yourself. The first was a pen—and not just any pen, a Pilot 233, a \$1.50 rollerball (which was a fortune in his family)—and the second was a new notebook that he had permission to write anything he wanted in.

Times have changed, but the idea hasn’t: become a writer by acting like one. If you have your own version of the Pilot 233, we promise you it will increase the chances that you put words to the page. Buy something that is just expensive enough that you will really miss it—and curse

your bad luck when you misplace it—but not so expensive that you can't replace it. The experience of laying down ink should be a pleasure. If you have never owned such a pen, then it is high time. Keep it in a pocket and don't put it through the washing machine. If you don't wear pants with pockets, then clip it to your waistband.

What should you write in that notebook? We would not recommend writing “whatever,” as John's mother did. That led to a half a life of wondering whether he was writing about the right things. Instead, we would suggest that you write down what is already in your head. Say you are stuck in traffic for fifteen minutes. What are you thinking about? (Be honest.) When you arrive at your destination, before you get out of the car, write it down in two sentences that start in the following way: “I am thinking \_\_\_\_\_. I am thinking \_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_.” This is an easy method to begin thinking about logical structure and reasoning. It is also a good way to document over time trends in your thought-life that often go unnoticed. If you do this once a day for a month, you will observe patterns in your own thought (“Who knew I was thinking about waffles that much!”) and omissions (“I should really think about my brother's feelings more”). From here, take a look at the boxed exercise that will be your first real chance to think through writing in a meaningful argument. Expressing a meaningful argument involves the delicate balancing act between taking your audience's concerns and interests seriously and being audacious enough to think that you can change their minds. Expressing an argument also involves knowing exactly what one is, to see it emerge on the page.

In ancient Rome, shopkeepers would put mosaics at the opening of their shops that read “caveat emptor,” or “buyer beware,” which warned shoppers to look carefully at the wares of the store and make sure that they were

## Get to Work

### USING A WRITER'S JOURNAL

What you have just created is a writer's journal. When the renowned nature writer Henry David Thoreau was a young man, his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson approached him with a question: Do you keep a journal? Thoreau began, and by the end of his life his journal edged toward two million words. Let's start with a just few dozen words. We suggest that you try to write down your thoughts on an argument that recently bothered you, really pissed you off. Pick the one that you had with your sibling or partner, your colleague or your housemate. Write down both of your positions in that little journal of yours. Then list all the reasons you both (not just you) had for thinking that your position was the right one. Your opponent's reasons may seem stupid, but they probably aren't. They just aren't *your* reasons. So, write all of them down, if only in the name of fairness. The entry that you have made in your journal details, in a very rudimentary way, the structure of an argument that occupied your mind for some reason. The positions that you described are the conclusions that you and your opponent advanced. The reasons for believing you were right are the premises or supporting claims in your arguments. Now, three more steps:

1. Write the word "motivation" at the top of the page (or below your reasons if you don't have space). Next to it, in three sentences, write the reason you think the argument mattered to you and the person you were arguing with.
2. Next to each premise, write one piece of evidence that could be (or actually was) presented to support it.
3. Finally at the bottom, write out who won the argument and why.

getting what they wanted. So “*Caveat Emptor*.” Get what you came for.

*Thinking through Writing* is familiar enough in organization that it will easily substitute for many books in both writing and critical thinking courses. The book emerged over the course of a decade teaching Harvard’s Freshman Expository Writing Course, Expos 30. Every Expos preceptor at Harvard has to go through what is fondly known as “Expos Bootcamp,” which is about the best prep course to teach college writing and critical thinking—to anybody who wants to form arguments in college and beyond. Kaag completed this training and went on to win Harvard’s Bok Award for Teaching Excellence (awarded to 2 percent of the instructors each year). Blah, blah, blah—an argument from authority. “Now give me the real reason to read *Thinking through Writing*,” you say. OK.

The rough and ready order of every Expos course at Harvard is as follows:

1. Close Reading
2. Analysis and Synthetic Reasoning
3. Asking Good Questions
4. Thesis Formation
5. Argument Structure (which includes all the baby logic and fallacy work you would ever want to do)
6. Assessing Evidence
7. Essay Structure (which includes everything from topic sentences to transitions)
8. Outlining
9. Entering a Critical Debate
10. Using Sources
11. Citations
12. Drafting and Revision

One thing should become clear: this course is about critical thinking (which includes critical reading) *and* writing. And one thing we want to make clear in *Thinking through Writing*: the skills and lessons in this book should be useful for those teaching and learning in the fields of writing *and* critical thinking. In part, this is the way that the authors of the guidebook in your hands became writers themselves.

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