

# What Do Writers Do?

How do I know what I think  
until I see what I say?

E. M. Forster



## *To Jackson Pollock*

~~Some say that the process~~  
~~of writing is simply a matter~~  
~~of getting things you can write~~  
not simply ~~taking composing~~  
thoughts on paper. ~~It is~~  
~~difficult Composing~~ Writing  
is ~~tough hard to do to~~  
~~accomplish easily~~ work.

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By MICHAEL C. FLANIGAN

### Part I

**A** national authority on the neglected art of composition, Michael C. Flanigan was brought to the University of Oklahoma from the University of Indiana as the Earl A. and Betty Galt Brown Professor to revamp and revitalize completely the teaching of English composition, that perennial impediment to freshman education. With "To Jackson Pollock," (above) which has become a kind of logo for writing workshops, Flanigan equates his theory of writing as a pro-

cess rather than a product to Pollock's avant-garde view of art which also broke with representationalism. On the following pages, Flanigan explores the nature of writing and of writers and discusses the new teaching program at OU. In the next issue of *Sooner Magazine*, he will offer practical, step-by-step instruction in the writing process, a mini-workshop for those to whom writing is both a mystifying and frightening undertaking.

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## WHAT DO WRITERS DO?

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Everybody knows what writing is about, it's merely getting ideas down in simple, well-ordered, thoughtful, flawless prose. Nothing to it. Why then do most people panic when they are asked to write something? Why do they stare at the page and wait to be ravished by the Muse?

The reason most people give up trying to write is because they are rendered virtually helpless by their conception of what writing is. The stress on *simple, well-ordered, thoughtful, and flawless* prose is a focus on the finished product. Notice that the emphasis is not on how one writes, or why one writes, or what one writes, but on what good, finished pieces look like when we see them in print.

Many people, when they sit down to write, expect to produce perfect prose in the first draft. They concentrate immediately on spelling, punctuation, grammar, and other surface concerns. They often hope they can manage to produce enough words to fill the assigned number of pages. Poorer writers often write a piece flat-out. They do not reread what they have written and rarely examine whether or not they have said what they want to, whether or not what they have written is appropriate for their audience, or whether or not they have used enough evidence and organized that evidence in the most effective way. Their approach seldom allows them to become personally and imaginatively involved in the ideas they are writing about. The goal is to get the thing finished as quickly as possible and with as little difficulty as possible.

Such writing behavior is learned. It is learned when teachers give writing assignments, send students home to struggle on their own, and then simply correct and hand back papers with copious red marks and a helpful "Try harder" or "Good." Often students will go through years of so-called composition instruction in which, instead of being taught how to write, they simply are admonished to do so. Correction comes after the fact of writing and not in the process of writ-

ing; it is imposed by the teacher.

Such writing behavior is also learned when students are first taught grammar (the forms of verbs, etc.), then are asked to write sentences, then paragraphs, and finally an entire piece. This sort of constituent-element approach, which theoretically sees writing as a series of parts and not as a total process with a purpose, runs counter to what professional, technical, and serious writers of all kinds do when they write.

Serious writers start with the idea of writing whole pieces for particular purposes to some kind of real audience, and about things that concern them. They are reaching out in an effort to form mutual bonds for these concerns. Good architects conceive of total structures and environments that serve certain purposes. They do not know where every light fixture will be placed, nor do they always have in mind exactly what materials they will use, but once they get an overall idea and produce a working model, they can attend to details.

When they get to the details, things may have to be changed around a little, but the changes will be accomplished easily because the purposes of the structure—along with the architect's talent and personal way of seeing—will help shape each change so that it reinforces the architect's central intention. When architects do not envision the whole, the results are buildings that add to traffic congestion in our cities, suburbs that are flooded because the environment was ignored, houses that plunge into Lake Erie, and a host of other created problems.

Writing as an art, like architecture, painting, or sculpture, begins with a general idea, notion, conception, or feeling. At the same time, some notion exists about what is to be created, whether it is a proposal for a grant, a magazine essay on James Dickey's poetry, a report on the potential benefit or harm of nuclear plants, a technical manual for assembling a computer, or a first-person narrative founded on the writer's experience. We cannot know exactly what our piece will look like until we are finished, but we have a general

idea of what it will be like, and the form we choose, by its very nature, will impose certain limitations.

So in teaching people to write we need to attend first to the process used by professional writers. This is not a new idea. Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* says that by observing the behavior of those who by experience have acquired the knack of good public speaking an observer can discover patterns of behavior that are common to most or all. This process then can be taught directly, and others can learn in a quickened way the art of the rhetorician.

By observing what professional writers do, we can identify a number of stages that are generally constant, though variations in the stages occur and depend on the skill of the writer and the nature of the writing project. My description here of the general stages is an abstraction of general principles from specific behaviors. It should be remembered that these general stages are not intended to describe the particular process one individual goes through in writing a particular piece. The intent is to lay out these processes as a way of indicating what can be taught about the act of writing during the act of writing.

The writing process is flexible and open. No set of absolutes will serve in an activity that is as varied as writing. We cannot tell students all they need to know before they write. We must teach writing as it evolves, for it is a dynamic process. In fact, recent research on how professionals write reveals that good writers remain exploratory, tentative, open to discovery and do not reach closure prematurely. Poor writers want a map where no map really can exist.

The writer needs to remain open to possibilities, if writing is to be done well. One of the goals in teaching writing is to show students that *they* must make choices. Whatever they write must reflect what they believe, think, and feel. I believe that this cannot be taught in a rule-centered writing program where students learn formulas for writing that pretend that all people have to do is follow the rules. Writing is a tentative business. So, in teaching writing, we need to show students optional ways

of doing the same thing (e.g., in organizing material people write outlines, make lists, use notecards, write flat-out, etc.), and then discuss with them how these various approaches work for them. If they are to be independent, we need to build into our classes ways of teaching them what independence and choice are about.

Writing is a humanizing experience at the same time that it is a way of learning. It becomes dehumanizing, bland, and mechanical when it becomes rule-centered. No wonder

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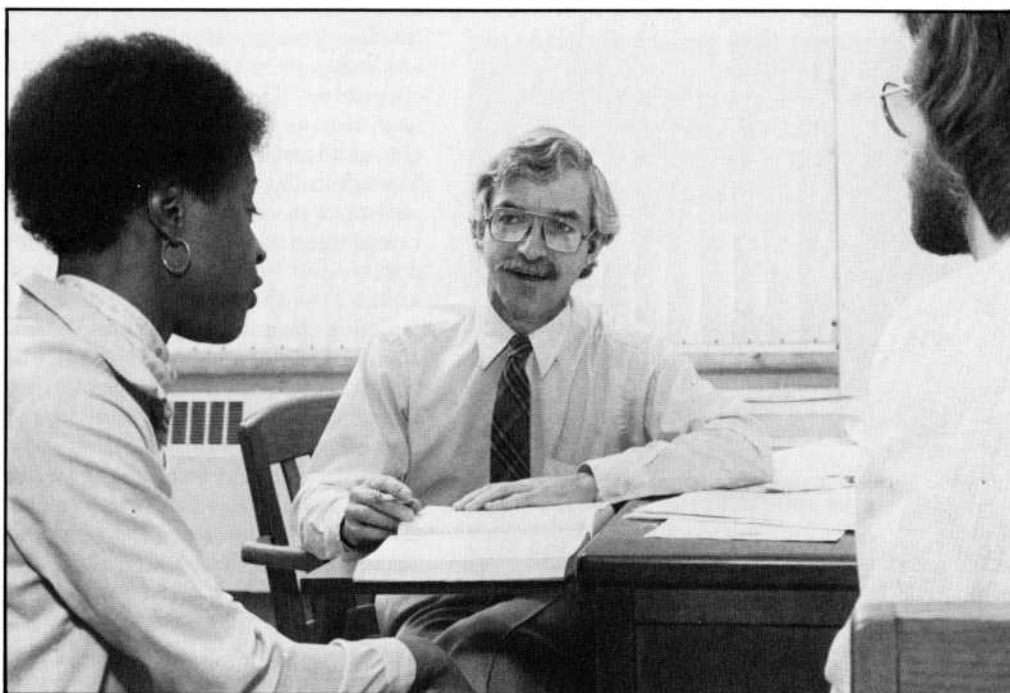
### IMPROVING WRITING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

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Writing is a complex and slowly developed art that is created in response to life (personal, social, natural, intellectual, and so forth). I use the word *art* here intentionally, because writing is not scientific or mechanical. It is not primarily learned by following a set of rules. Yes, writing and its processes and

But we need to be cautious not just to expand for the sake of expansion, but to ensure that we think clearly about what is needed and make certain we provide the best writing experiences possible, ones based on sound theory and knowledge.

In the past, writing programs often were seen as a necessary evil — ever since Harvard in the last half of the 19th century instituted written entrance examinations and discovered students who were incapable of handling complex ideas, feelings, and



**“Most freshman writing programs were put together with little thought and no underlying theory . . .”**

*Professor Flanigan talks over composition teaching techniques with graduate teaching assistants.*

thousands of people have learned to hate writing. When its personal, tentative, intellectually challenging nature is trivialized to a set of dos and don'ts and restrictive forms like the five-paragraph theme, then people usually feel helpless when asked to write. They think they must know everything from the beginning instead of realizing that what they have to say will unfold in the act of writing. Shaping is not done beforehand completely; shaping takes form as we write, and what we have written helps shape what will come.

Writing is a sloppy, disorderly, and at the same time, wondrous art. When done well it taps our rational, emotional, and creative powers and mixes them so that individuals with their own personal voices can make contact with others.

products can be studied so that we can gain knowledge about them that will improve our understanding of them and make them more teachable.

To simply teach writing without a good deal of knowledge about it makes us vulnerable to every passing whim and notion that comes along. What I want to discuss here is what I think needs to be done to improve writing and writing programs throughout Oklahoma, and, for that matter, the entire country. A little background first.

The writing program at the University of Oklahoma is expanding rapidly, and students throughout the University in the sciences, arts, and technical fields continue to demand more upper and graduate-level courses in writing. This trend is evident throughout the United States.

beliefs in thoughtful communicative prose. The result of this discovery was to require at Harvard, and finally all universities, what has become known as freshman composition.

Freshman writing programs became a standard part of most university English departments. Most of these programs were put together with little thought and no underlying theory about what was to be accomplished. To make matters worse, the least-trained people (graduate students) were given responsibility for writing courses because few regular English faculty members wanted to teach courses that they saw as remedial and beneath their talents.

The results were not gratifying. Graduate students were untrained in composition and were often given little or no help in figuring out what to

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do. They turned to textbooks which were (and most still are) rule-centered, simplistic, and narrow in their vision of what was involved in writing. (For a full discussion of the weaknesses of composition texts see Richard Ohmann's *English in America*.)

The programs grew topsy-turvy with little direction and with little sense that they had real value. Rarely was there any theoretical basis for the courses that evolved. And research in the composing process, the ways in which writing is learned, and pedagogical techniques based on theories of invention, organization, revision, style, and so forth, was almost unheard of. It was assumed that nothing could be learned about writing except how to give better assignments and how to develop consistent techniques for grading.

Programs frequently came under attack and were difficult to justify because often students left them with no more apparent skills than when they entered. That such programs did not improve student writing should not be surprising if one considers the way courses were staffed, the lack of any theoretical basis for them, the lack of ongoing research on program design and effectiveness, and the lack of a knowledgeable, committed and professionally trained staff. Teaching composition was viewed typically as something a person suffered through as a graduate student but quickly got out of as soon as possible.

In the last ten or fifteen years attitudes toward composition have undergone serious change. Considerable research has begun on the writing process — how people learn to write and how they can improve their writing — and on designing effective writing programs based on theory and research. Universities are beginning to recognize that writing programs cannot be left to chance, but instead need to be clearly directed and staffed by persons who are trained in composition and who see it as intellectually and pedagogically challenging. A few universities such as Iowa, Carnegie Mellon, Louisville, and Southern California have designed graduate programs that are producing scholars who are committed to composition re-

search and teaching. These graduate programs are small, but the people who are in them are learning to do theoretical, historical, empirical, and experimental research in all areas of composition.

Training scholars and teachers in composition is in a beginning stage. Research that will expand our knowledge of this neglected field — that thousands of students are exposed to in almost all universities — is necessary if we are to have enlightened teaching in our writing courses. For example, Peter Schiff, in a research piece on using written models to improve writing, calls into question our traditional way of using such pieces to improve our students' writing.

Probably no university can hire an entire staff of composition scholars, nor should they. In many universities all members of the English department teach writing (at the University of Oklahoma everyone from the chairman on down teaches freshman composition), but these teachers are also responsible for scholarship and teaching in literature, language, and film. It is extremely difficult to be a scholar in more than one field. But a small staff of composition scholars in a department can help train graduate students who teach writing. They also can work with other professors who teach freshman writing by keeping them informed of recent research, theory, and course design. In addition, they can conduct intradepartmental research on the various courses offered and on the various teaching strategies used within courses. Further, they can train other composition scholars for the schools, colleges, and universities of the state and country. Finally, they can work with other departments to develop courses that are specifically designed to meet the needs of students (e.g., courses in technical writing for engineers and other technical and scientific areas).

The administration and the faculty of the English department of the University of Oklahoma has decided that the teaching of composition is important enough to deserve full support. In 1981 the department, with the aid of funds for a named professorship from Earl A. and Betty Galt Brown of

Houston, hired a senior person trained in composition and rhetoric. The first task of the Brown Professor of Rhetoric and Composition was to design a graduate program that would give students a solid background in ancient and modern theories of rhetoric, provide a background in composition research, and teach students research design. The program also would allow students to explore ways composition, language, and reading theories and research inform one another, to expose students to a variety of productive ways of teaching composition, and to have students do considerable writing themselves. The plans for a number of new courses then were submitted to the graduate faculty for approval. The administration supported the department in hiring three scholars in composition to help teach in the undergraduate and graduate programs and to do research to further our understanding of composition.

The next stage of development will be to recruit and thoroughly train graduate students who are interested in careers in composition. This will be a difficult task, because it takes money to attract good graduate students. Present salaries for graduate students are not competitive, but the department is committed to encouraging the administration to put more resources into the graduate program. Without strong support these programs have little chance of realizing their potential.

At the same time that the graduate program is improved, the faculty of rhetoric and composition plans to propose an annual conference that will attract a variety of people doing scholarly work in composition. These scholars will deliver public lectures, work with graduate students, and meet with the composition faculty to discuss current research and work in composition. Our hope is that the conference will be coordinated with summer sessions of the Oklahoma Writing Project so that high school teachers enrolled will have the chance to work with outstanding scholars in composition. This should benefit the school children of Oklahoma.

In addition to the development of

the graduate program, other areas of composition also need to be supported. Courses in writing at all levels (graduate and undergraduate) fill immediately, and the demand continues to increase. For example, technical writing enrolled 55 students in 1978-79, 166 in 1979-80, 221 in 1980-81, and 221 in 1981-82. Estimates from the College of Engineering alone indicate that 405 students will need the course in 1982-83. Other professional schools have expressed interest in having their students take a similar course.

All upper level undergraduate courses in expository writing, persuasive writing, and autobiographical/personal writing fill immediately, and more of these courses could easily be offered. The same is true of creative writing courses. Students want more writing experience, and we need to try to fill this need.

Finally, the OU Writing Center, where students are tutored individually, is overtaxed. At present 160 students take course work related to the Center, but the projection for next year is around 600. Of course the Center could serve students at all levels who want help with the writing they do in other courses, but under present conditions tutoring of this sort is not possible.

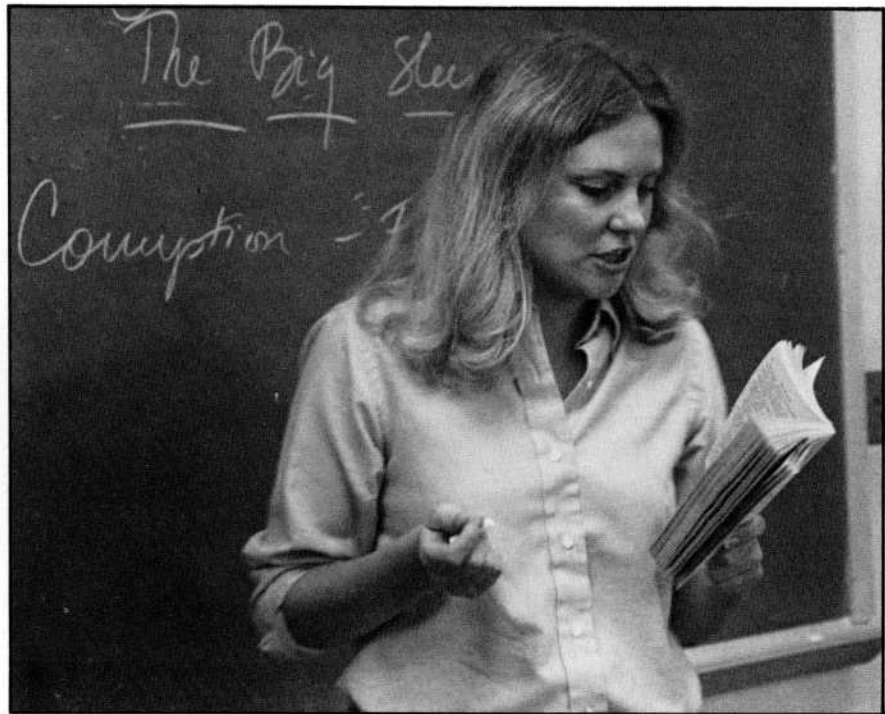
To meet these growing needs in composition, the administration has indicated a willingness to hire additional faculty to improve the program in technical writing, in the Writing Center, in creative writing, and in the advanced writing courses. In fact, the administration has approved the search for a creative writer with a national or international reputation who is also an experienced, committed teacher. Such support from the administration, responding to concerns of the English faculty, promises a bright future for students in Oklahoma.

With the new composition staff that will start teaching in 1982-83 will come some important changes in training new teachers for the undergraduate program. The English department has proposed a week-long workshop for new graduate assistants and part-time staff that will introduce them to a writing-process ap-

proach, recent research in composition, and a host of writing techniques that will prepare them for the first weeks of their teaching. While they teach the first semester, new graduate assistants will take an additional course that combines ongoing issues in the teaching of composition with wide reading in and discussion of theory, research, and teaching strategies. These new teachers' classrooms will be visited frequently by senior personnel to help them find the best ways of teaching — ones that fit their natural styles — and to extend

people to know what is meant by good writing and, as a result, how to improve or emulate it.

The hope in all this work is to foster the growth of thinking, caring, committed writers. Education is supposed to make young people knowledgeable and independent. It is supposed to help them examine life and society — to allow them to move beyond a narrow vision restricted by ignorance of their language and culture. Writing is a way of thinking that allows people to examine their feelings, to explore issues that are important to



*Graduate assistant Linda Padden is rated tops in teaching freshman English.*

the repertoire of teaching techniques open to them.

The new composition staff also will develop a series of detailed course designs that will help both graduate assistants and faculty explore different approaches to the introductory composition courses. The same kind of detailed plans now are being developed for courses in technical writing and will be developed for the advanced writing courses.

The purpose is not to bind people into one "right" system, but to make concrete approaches that then can be discussed and improved. Vague talk about good writing does little to improve it, but concrete plans allow

them, to make contact through words, and to see themselves as part of the community of human beings.

Writing is not simply a way to prepare for a job. People started to write because they wanted to share the wonders and works of their creation — from the first writers of the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *The Book of the Dead*, through those writers who recorded history, explored mathematics, examined the heavens, and puzzled about what it is to be human. All of this writing and all present writing — whether it intends to or not — tells us what it is to be human and what is meaningful to humans. It is an art that all of us can learn to use. 