

Textbook review for *inReview*
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Rise B. Axelrod and Charles R. Cooper *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, 6th edition
Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004 912 pages

Experience with this text: I have used *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* twice, both times for ENG 107: First-Year Composition for International Students. At the time I taught these courses, this was the required text.

I have heard mainly negative criticism of *The St. Martin's Guide* and much seemed to be based on the fact that those instructors were required to use this text. While I can empathize with some concerns, I find it unfortunate that this useful text has received such harsh criticism. My own experience was, on the whole, positive, even though I was required to use the text. No text is perfect, but this one has some qualities that may appeal to other instructors, as well. Most of my comments relate directly to using this text in an ESL classroom. The following is an attempt at a balanced review, but (positive) biases do intrude. Hopefully these comments will encourage some instructors to reconsider the value, as well as the weaknesses of this *Guide*. The text may be better suited to certain teaching styles and student populations. Each instructor will need to make that call.

The organization of the text is easy to follow with separate units on Writing Activities, Critical Thinking Strategies, Writing Strategies, Research Strategies, Writing for Assessment, Writing & Speaking to Wider Audiences, and a Handbook. Each of these units focuses the reader's attention on a specific component of the writing process; the Writing Activities section is the exception since it integrates several elements, though still focuses on specific genres. The

text's structure is convenient for locating a specific aspect of the writing process; however, the instructor will want to emphasize that all these elements work together, many overlapping, to remind students that the process isn't composed of isolated steps, but integrated steps. This can be particularly important for ESL students, who are often unfamiliar with the types of writing expected in American schools. The *St. Martin's Guide* provides useful structure without limiting the instructor's approach to one, linear model. For ESL students, the text's structure tends to make the material more accessible.

The Writing Activities unit is probably the strongest portion of the text because it leads the students through several stages of the writing process. However, the limited amount of space given to each stage requires the instructor to supplement each writing chapter with portions of the other units. This is not an unreasonable or unusual approach for instructors to take with textbooks; such a structure indicates more flexibility than limitations. Yet, students may find it challenging to follow the process if they have the impression they are jumping around in the text. The instructor may want to map out the writing activity chapters and point out where specific material from the other units coordinates with the essay assignments. Each writing activity chapter focuses on a particular type of genre and takes the student through the process of generating an essay in that genre. For each writing activity, the chapter introduces what the genre is, how it works in various communities, from other classes, to the workplace, to the larger community. This reminds the students that writing is not isolated, and that it is an interpersonal activity and product. Segments on invention work, with individual and collaborative activities, are interspersed between the reading selections that illustrate the genre. These activities ask students to analyze the readings as well as plan their own essays. A balance of individual and group work exercises allows for practice of different strategies and communication skills.

The "Guide to Writing" section of each genre chapter focuses the students on their individual writing process for the type of essay at hand. A number of useful heuristics are provided, and students are challenged to come up with some of their own. While this section appears to be very useful from an instructor's position, the students may have difficulty seeing it as more than passive information or busy work (depending on how the instructor uses the material). In order for this section to make sense to the students, the instructor may want to go over the material step-by-step with the students, drawing on a sample essay to illustrate the process. The lack of enthusiasm students show for this section may have a good deal to do with the layout. The section is crammed full of heuristics on bland white pages with pale-moss borders and a font that appears smaller because there is so much information per page. Even for the instructor it may be difficult to maintain attention when reading through this section--it can seem monotonous. However, this section walks the student through most of the writing process from invention through revision to proofreading (self-reflection is addressed later).

For some ESL students painstakingly working their way through each reading, the amount and appearance of the text on these pages may be daunting. Breaking up the material in the section is one option--the students won't be doing all the steps at once. However, even breaking the material down may not make it appear any more appealing or useful to students, who want to get to the point (write the essay) and not have to "deal" with more steps. "Haven't we already talked about these things when we discussed the readings and did the earlier exercises?" Well, yes to some extent, but not in this detail or with this amount of focus. Breaking the section up and distributing it throughout the chapter may be more useful; then, students can see how each component directly relates to the reading and writing exercises they've already done, and how these exercises translate into writing their individual essays. Since the text isn't

physically broken up this way, the instructor may want to map out the chapter, indicating how these various steps in the process works with the rest of the material.

The "Writer at Work" section of the writing activity chapters is particularly useful not only for illustrating the writing process, but also for illustrating how other students have tackled the same essay assignment. Providing student examples among the readings and in the "Writer at Work" sections makes the text and writing seem more accessible to students using the *Guide*. When they see how other students have successfully written a similar type of essay, their confidence rises (of course, this does not apply to all students, but class discussion has indicated that the student examples make the assignments seem “real” and more approachable). In other words, student writing samples help students move past the myth that only professionals or people “born to write” can be good writers. The supplementary reader, *Sticks and Stones*, focuses on sample student essays that match the writing assignments. These additional examples are useful resources for group discussion and practice peer review.

The final segment in the writing activities chapters is "Thinking Critically About What You have Learned." This section provides helpful guidance for self-reflection and exercises, which build critical thinking skills. However, layout and placement are concerns. This section, which should be stimulating, appears bland and packed with text. Students want something to re-energize them after writing their final essay drafts. This section has the potential to be re-energizing if a visually appealing layout were combined with the content. The segment in this section about analyzing social dimensions of the essays could be the springboard for a creative, cultural discussion. Certainly we can't put all the emphasis on the layout, but coming at the end of the chapter, it doesn't draw the students' or the instructor's interest much. “What's all this text squashed on the last few pages?” “Do we have to read it?” By the time we get here we're ready

for something fresh. Less text per page, more color, and a font that's easier on the eyes would help. Who would expect a splash of color and excitement at the end of the chapter? While it makes sense to reflect at the end of the chapter, it may also be effective to reflect along the way. Not all the items in this section need to come after the students have written their final essay draft, particularly the reflection on social connections.

The other units focus attention on particular elements in the writing process and provide useful exercises, which help students make sense of different components as they apply them to their own writing. Part Two on Critical Thinking Strategies illustrates the different ways writers can approach invention work. Students like to see that they have choices that fit their styles and comfort levels. The mapping techniques are often a positive surprise to students, who like to use visual representations to get started. They can “picture” what they want to do, which helps them move past the daunting white page. The reading strategies provide helpful tips for critically reading and taking notes, but students find these tips make more sense when class time is taken to practice with one of the assigned readings. Some of the words used to describe the reading techniques, like “synthesizing,” “paraphrasing,” and “contextualizing,” can be obstacles to understanding the ideas. While the text provides clear definitions of each term, finding simpler synonyms for the terms makes them more accessible to students. This is not to say that all “big words” need to be simplified, but, at first, a polysyllabic term can get in the way of learning a new concept. It’s not the word itself, but how it appears and sounds—especially if it’s hard to pronounce.

Part Three on Writing Strategies lays out aspects of the essay development, such as paragraphing, narrating, defining, and describing, in manageable chapters. Each chapter focuses on one of the aspects, defining what it is, how it works, how to develop it during the writing

process, and exercises to practice analyzing and using the aspect in their own writing. There are numerous illustrative examples throughout each chapter, so students can see what the text is trying to explain. The examples are not merely tagged on, but have accompanying analyses to demonstrate why they are useful examples.

Parts Four and Six, Research Strategies and Writing and Speaking to Wider Audiences, respectively, are crucial complements to writing assignments, which incorporate research elements (primary and secondary), as well as presentation and portfolio components. Each unit provides a range of examples with analyses to illustrate why and how these elements are being used. When students understand that citing sources has more to do with credibility than with busy work, they are typically more interested in the research and documentation process. In regards to addressing different and broader audiences, students may not only develop a better understanding of the how and the why behind the approaches, but also may discover how creative the delivery and layout can be.

Part Five, Writing for Assessment, is most useful for the discussion of portfolios. When the portfolio purpose and assembly is combined with material from Part Six on strategies for wider audiences, the end result can be more than a binder of papers from each student. Creative outlets and approaches regarding design, technology, and oral presentation visuals, open up more facets of the writing process for students. The amount and type of creativity involved can be determined by each student. Not everyone wants to be artistic, and those who are artistic need to be aware that art does not substitute for writing. Learning to balance their creativity can be just as challenging as composing the essays.

The Handbook is a good resource for quick refreshers on grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. The segment on ESL Troublespots is a nice addition, but an expanded segment on

this material would be useful. Perhaps the next edition could include ESL tips throughout chapters, instead of hiding it at the end. The placement of the ESL Troublespots is not convenient; a reader really needs to be intent on finding it. A rephrasing of the segment could also promote ESL student confidence rather than underscoring the idea that ESL students have troubles. These ESL concerns will probably not affect the majority of users, but for those of us teaching this text in an ESL classroom, they are important.

The overall writing of the text is accessible to students. Some ESL students are not used to reading an English textbook or the types of writing encountered in the reading selections. At times the reading selections, like Wolff's "On Being a Real Westerner," can be frustrating for ESL students who are not used to American slang. When Wolff writes that his mother "caved in," some students are wondering what happened (physically) to his mother. A reasonable concern, but one that needs careful attention from the instructor if students are not to be frustrated by the readings. While the writing of the explanations and exercises is accessible, the layout of the pages may make the writing appear to be less so. A different, easier-to-read font with less text packed on each page (or at least designed so it doesn't look packed) would help. This isn't a concern in the first portions of the chapters on Writing Activities, but it is a concern in the later sections, which discuss process and critical thinking (see earlier comments on specific sections). The layout and colors of the reading selections and introductory material are easier on the eyes and appear more accessible. If similar design could be used in those crucial end sections, that would make them easier to read. The way the pages look can negatively and positively affect the readers' perceptions about the difficulty and accessibility of the content before they even read it.

Despite picking at the layout and font, I believe that the authors have an undergraduate student audience in mind. The Introduction is probably the best example of this. Introductions are not usually the most interesting portion of a textbook for students to read; however, instructors who assign the Introduction to this *Guide* and discuss it with their students will find it both interesting and useful for beginning the course. This introduction is talking to the students, addressing up-front several questions they may have about writing and why they are taking a writing course. By addressing these questions from the start, students see that the text can be a useful tool for making sense of the assignments, the purpose of the class, and the lectures/discussions the instructor facilitates. The text is not trying to impress the students or bore them; the authors give straightforward answers about the importance of writing, critical thinking, reading for individuals (personal, professional, or academic), the workplace/school, and the larger community. While instructors are aware of the complexity of addressing why these skills are important, the text does a good job of breaking down this complex issue into understandable terms for the students.

According to the Preface, the authors are aiming to combine classical rhetoric with current composition theory. This combination has the potential of appealing to a wider variety of instructors, who can choose which aspects they like best. One of the authors' goals was to make the text flexible for instructors. The organization of the text material enables this flexibility. Instructors can take a linear approach if they like, or they can mix and match material from various units to complement their assignments and approach to teaching writing, critical thinking, and reading. Some instructors find the *Guide* inflexible, particularly the first unit on writing activities. The structure does not appear to allow for creativity or divergence from the step-by-step process linked to the reading selections and exercises. Instructors who like less

structure and more room to adapt their own reader will probably not like using this *Guide*. The Writing Activities, Part One, may be too structured for some instructors, who would prefer to make their own reading selections rather than having readings matched up for them with corresponding exercises. An alternative would be to use the *Sticks and Stones* supplement or to bring in other readings that challenge students to apply the writing strategies and analyses to outside material. On the other hand, new instructors may find the *Guide's* structure useful as they develop confidence in their own pedagogical style. They can move away from the structure of the text, or the text itself, as their teaching experience leads them in different directions regarding style and pedagogy. As mentioned above, instructors of ESL classes may also find the structure more accessible to their students. Sometimes a methodical format can add to the students' comfort level because they can see how each step builds on the other in the text as well as through in-class discussion and writing.

The authors also aim to make the text accessible to students. The language, the friendly rather than stuffy style, and the straightforward explanations of the how and why of the writing, reading, and critical thinking process, all contribute to the overall student-oriented tone and approach. I commented earlier about difficult terms (mainly for ESL students), but there are some terms that are not addressed, like *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*, which would give the students a sense of the philosophical side of writing and the history behind various approaches. This is not to say that students should be force fed classical terms and theory, but at least addressing them would open up another perception of writing, particularly in regard to argument strategies. The concepts represented by these terms are addressed by the text, but, in this case, the terms themselves may prove to be useful. (Using other texts that address these terms has made a

difference in how students learn to structure and support their arguments. The terms themselves seem to be viewed as useful structural items from which the students can build their essays.)

The authors do an excellent job of situating the material within the “real” world. Particularly in Part One, Writing Activities, the text points out how each type of writing connects with individual, professional, academic, and community needs and goals. The students can then see their own writing within a larger social, cultural scope. The activities complement this approach by asking students to analyze and make connections between the readings and the world around them. Group work highlights the social aspect of reading and writing that may not be apparent when students are concentrated on generating their individual essays. The text prompts students to keep context and audience in mind, as well as purpose.

The St. Martin’s Guide can be used effectively, particularly in an ESL class, but much depends on the instructor’s pedagogy and preferences. If genre-based writing does not fulfill the objectives of the writing course, then this is not the text to use. This text is probably best suited to a beginning instructor, who would like the structure, or an experienced instructor, who finds genre assignments useful and can navigate the text in a non-linear fashion. If we approach *The St. Martin’s Guide* as a throw-away text simply because it appears to be linear and inflexible, then we may find ourselves relying to heavily on the text layout rather than the text content to determine our opinion.