

**Textbook review for *inReview***  
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**Axelrod, Rise B. and Charles R. Cooper *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, 6th edition  
Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003 912 pages**

*The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* is used at my university in several first year writing courses: a two-semester course entitled Writing Across the Curriculum 101 (WAC 101) for native-speaker students who did not master reading and writing skills in high school, the one-semester English 101 (ENG 101) for native-speaker students who are prepared to learn reflexive writing at the college level, WAC 107 and ENG 107, which are the equivalents of WAC 101 and ENG 101, but oriented toward students for whom English is a second or foreign language, and English 108 (ENG 108), a second semester course that introduces extensive and research writing to speakers of English as a second or foreign language. I have used the textbook and reader for ENG 107, ENG 108, AND WAC101-ENG 101, and plan to use it again for these courses.

Three main characteristics make this an excellent textbook for these students. First, the examples of essays in each genre being taught engage the students through unexpected but socially significant topics; the model essays exhibit stylistic variety with accessible lexicon and grammar. The model essays serve well for students who lack experience with linear English-language rhetorical designs that include thesis and supports that all directly lead toward a conclusion or summary. Second, clearly written commentary and instructions guide the students to understand real-world applications for the genres, how to read critically, and how to compose their own essays step-by-step. Third, multi-modal presentation of the key features of each genre being taught prompt students to think about the genres and the processes of composing; the key features of each genre are presented through a) prompts that direct thinking, including genre-

evoking pictures, b) models of writing, c) a textual summary of the features, d) a flow chart presentation of the features, and e) clear instructions that take the students through the writing process, from invention to planning to drafting to outlining to writing to revising to reviewing peer's work to editing and proofreading.

In addition, the clever textbook format warrants mention. There is intelligent use of mostly earthtone colors to separate and highlight sections of text, scant use of pictures, and wide margins that include cross references and space for note-taking. Two-inch margins facilitate note taking in the text. The margins include line numbers of the readings and notes about where in the textbook to find additional information about composition topics. The color schemes throughout the textbook include calming earth tones. Color and font variety set off readings, headings, charts, and highlight key information clearly; these uses of colors and fonts are consistent throughout the textbook. Chapters on rhetorical genres open with photographic collages that are topically relevant to the genre being presented. The Handbook section is a pleasant pale blue, which makes it easy to locate for reference. The result is a book that is visually attractive and comfortable to work with.

The authors' theoretical approach is to employ a cognitive process-centered modal approach that integrates different genres of writing and critical reading techniques. The text guides students from reflexive to extensive modes of writing and teaches composing as a process of recursive activity that focuses on the generation of ideas. While some might argue that the prewrite-write-rewrite notion encourages a linear, stage-oriented view of the composing process, the *Guide's* activities lead students through a hierarchically organized network of contemplative and communicative goals. In line with the New Rhetoric, the authors situate writing in the realities of the student's individuality, culture, purpose, and audience, providing heuristics to

help students discover what they know, how they know it, and how to communicate their knowledge and ideas effectively.

The *Guide* is divided into six parts and a handbook, which are intelligently and coherently organized to facilitate use of the book. The chapters and sections of the text are also well organized and uniform in their presentation of activities for reading, analysis, and writing. The *Guide* has a companion reader, *Sticks and Stones and Other Student Writings*, the chapters of which coordinate with the genres presented in Part One of the *Guide*. The main sections of the textbook are

- Part One – Writing Activities
- Part Two – Critical Thinking Strategies
- Part Three – Writing Strategies
- Part Four - Research Strategies
- Part Five – Writing for Assessment
- Part Six – Writing and Speaking to Wider Audiences
- Handbook

The organization of the chapters within the major parts of the textbook is also intelligently sequenced. The first three chapters of Part One set the stage for successful student writing by teaching reflexive modes: remembering events, people, and places are based on students' personal experiences and emotional reactions to them. The next five chapters focus on extensive modes as students are taught how to define and explain a concept, argue a position, and justify an evaluation—all essential components of virtually any essay. Speculating about causes and proposing solutions are taught separately, which enables students to focus on the issues involved in dealing with each of these genres. The final chapter of this section teaches how to

write about story interpretation, which pulls together what students have learned about reflexive and extensive writing.

The model essays exhibit excellent topical and stylistic diversity, and the scope and sequence of activities within chapters is consistent and provides a wide range of ways in which to think and write about each genre being taught. Each chapter of Part One presents four essays that model a particular genre, most written by professional writers. These essays exhibit diverse styles and organizational approaches with topics that engage students' interest and likely, the teacher's as well. The essays themselves display a range of strategies to approach the rhetorical task at hand; the optional reader provides three to six more model essays for each genre taught in Part One, with each chapter opening conveniently with brief introductions to the readings.

The writing in every model is concise, economic, and elegant, but very accessible to the students and topically relevant to the lives and interests of young adults. The essays in the main text present young adults' blossoming awareness of themselves as individuals and of those around them, exploration of unexpected places like a mortuary, a beet field, a soup kitchen or the brain; concepts like the chemistry of love, internet addiction, the new terrorism, and cannibalism; evaluating fairness and children's involvement in athletics as well as proposing solutions to problems in those arenas and the workplace; speculating about why we need Miss America, why boys become depressed, and why there is a rise in reporting of sexual harassment in the workplace; and finally how to interpret and write about short stories, with examples from Kate Chopin, William Carlos Williams, Toni Cade Bambara, James Joyce, Sally Crane, and David Ratnov. These thought-provoking essays include Stephen King's intriguing speculation, "Why We Crave Horror Movies," Maya Angelou's poignant portrait of "Uncle Willie," and Richard Estrada's sincere argument against using Native American symbols for mascots in "Sticks and

Stones and Sports Team Names.” Happily in my experience, my international students have been as familiar with most of the readings’ topics as students educated in the U.S., and equally interested in them.

The essays in the reader, equally elegant and thought provoking, are examples of student writing solicited by the publisher. The publisher’s solicitation of student essays to be included in updates of the reader is a nice incentive for students to try harder. It is also very nice for a teacher to be able to point to her undergraduate students’ published writings.

Each chapter in Part One situates the genre in focus in a hypothetical real-world setting, opening with pictures that evoke the genre and examples of how that type of writing has its place in the community, the workplace, and in other college courses. This is followed by a collaborative activity designed to engage the students with the genre being taught, for example, student groups are prompted to consider situations where the genre in focus might have applied in their own lives. Each reading is prefaced by a brief biography of the author and an indication of how the reading relates to the author’s life. The readings range from two to four single-spaced pages, about the length we would want our students to produce. The research articles include in-text and Works Cited citations. Each reading is followed by a “critical apparatus” that guides students in connecting the reading to their own cultures and experiences; these comprehension and discussion questions focus on the writers’ strategies to teach critical reading and thinking skills. Among the activities for this are reviewing the readings with a scratch outline, a technique helps teach students to focus on key events and issues and leads naturally to summarizing, a technique critical to research writing. The students’ own writing is then guided through heuristics that focus them on strategies key to that genre, their own writing purpose and audience.

One caution, however: the teacher must reiterate to students the relevance of the critical reading and thinking activities, otherwise, the students may see them as “busy work” since these questions focus on the model writer’s thought processes and stylistic choices rather than overtly saying what the student should do. It may be necessary to clearly explain how the reading strategies being taught could translate into the students’ own composing strategies.

As they begin their own essays, students are guided through invention activities that help them find a subject to write about, explore that subject, analyze their potential readers, test their choices, develop their argument, consider document design, define their purpose for the readers, and formulate a thesis statement. The next section of each unit opens with a summary of key techniques and heuristics for planning and drafting that include seeing what they have, setting goals, outlining, and drafting. This is followed by a flow chart guiding that rhetorical form and detailed activities taking the students through exploring topics and supporting details, writing, revising, editing, and proofreading both their own and their classmates’ work. The text also includes examples of how the student writers went about revising their own drafts of the readings, showing that editorial decisions can and should be articulated retrospectively in order to increase students’ awareness and control of their composing and editing strategies. Finally, each of the genre-based units concludes by having students reflect on their experiences writing each paper, which further increases their awareness of themselves as writers.

The exemplary pieces provide practical models on which native and non-native speakers can base their own creativity. My students have consistently and unanimously enjoyed reading and discussing all of the essays in both books and have found the writing techniques and plans easy to follow. My basic teaching strategy with native and non-native speaker students has been to explore contexts for each genre in turn, present all of the model essays for that genre, analyze

and clarify the different structural and lexical techniques used in each model. The students then brainstorm individually and in groups as they select their own topics and the aspects of the models that they are comfortable trying as they develop their own essays. We then work through a four to five draft process of writing, peer-review, revising and polishing. This has proven a successful strategy with both native and non-native speaker students.

The chapters in Parts Two through Six of the textbook include strategies for critical thinking, writing, conducting research, writing for assessment, and writing and speaking to wider audiences. The clearly written explanations and step-by-step instructions in how to read critically, take notes, and organize one's ideas are crucial to success in college or in business. These definitional and explanatory sections, which include their own reinforcing activities, are easily and logically incorporated into activities relating to the essay genres of Part One.

Depending on class needs, the teacher may want to spend the first week or two of the semester on Parts Two (critical reading and thinking) and Three (basic writing strategies of cueing the reader, narrating, and describing, etc.) and the handbook in order to prepare the students for the work of Part One. I have found this a most valuable procedure with non-native speaker students as well as the students in WAC 101. Such students need the narrower focus of the reading and writing tasks in these sections. Then they are more successful at incorporating these basic strategies into their essay writing activities.

In Part Two, novice college students are carefully guided through strategies for reading, including annotating, analyzing their annotations and other notes, outlining, paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing, contextualizing, exploring the significance of figurative languages, looking for patterns, reflecting on challenges to their beliefs and values, evaluating the logic of an argument, recognizing emotional manipulation, judging writers' and credibility.

In Part Three, students are guided in how writers map out their ideas and cue their readers through orienting statements, paragraphing, cohesive devices, connectives, and headings and subheadings. Students are also taught a wide range of strategies for narrating, describing, defining, classifying, comparing and contrasting, and arguing.

Part Four details issues involved in doing field research, including conducting observations, interviews and designing and using questionnaires. Students are also carefully guided in conducting library and Internet research, and in using and acknowledging sources. Directions are adequate for students to do that work easily and independently. Part Four concludes with how to use and acknowledge sources.

Part Five prepares students for essay examinations and writing portfolios, also crucial aspects of the college experience. Part Six shows students how to design their documents to enhance their presentation, make oral presentations, write with others on their own or joint projects, and how to use service experience as source material for writing. The activities of working with others, making oral presentations, and preparing portfolios are particularly important since cooperative, student-centered learning and portfolio evaluation have become popular teaching techniques.

Part Six includes a chapter on designing documents to help students consider appropriate document format for specific writing contexts. Other chapters help students prepare oral presentations, work with others on one's own as well as group writing projects, and write in the community, using one's service experience as source material.

The brief Handbook is perhaps the weakest aspect of the text. It is 139 pages long, and covers all crucial issues, including sentence boundaries and structure, grammatical sentences, effective sentences, word choice, punctuation, mechanics, troublespots, and misused words. In

addition, preferential grammar and corrections are inserted over the original example of error. However, the examples are not always comfortable for the students for whom this text would be selected, e.g., some sentences are very long and complex. Teachers likely would also want more examples of each grammatical issue.

Overall, *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* is one of the best college textbooks for foreign students or any students who need detailed, step-by-step guidance to perfect their reading and writing skills. The sample essays model a wide range of designs and topics that accomplish similar rhetorical goals. Reading the models is also pleasure for the instructor because the readings convey sincerity of the writers and offer unexpected issues and views that invite thought and discussion. The amount and variety of interesting reading material and activities in the *Guide* are more than sufficient for a year-long course, so instructors need not seek elsewhere. However, because the readings often involve the sort of issues one commonly finds in the newspaper, it is easy for the teacher to locate supplementary pieces to point out the real-world relevance of the model essays, which in my experience, increases their interest in the textbook readings and provides the students with extra opportunities for applying what they learn. In addition, the design of the *Guide* is visually appealing and comfortable to use with the only exception being the physical weight of the hardcover volume.

A final note: In the Preface, the authors note that an instructor's manual is available. Personally, I find the aims and activities of *Guide* so clearly explained and comprehensive that a manual would likely seem redundant. They also note that Writing Guide Software and companion Web sites for students and instructors are also available ([www.bedfordstmartins.com/theguide](http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/theguide)). While I have not worked with these yet, based on the intelligence and care with which the textbook was designed, I would trust that the authoring team

has done an excellent job of supplementing the handbook section, keeping the research and documentation information up-to-date, and providing instructors with additional materials (including transparency masters of features for each genre) and more ideas for designing curricula.