



On Writing, Editing, and Publishing
Jacques Barzun

Telling About Society
Howard S. Becker

Tricks of the Trade
Howard S. Becker

*Permissions, A Survival Guide:
Blunt Talk about Art as Intellectual
Property*
Susan M. Bielstein

The Craft of Translation
John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte,
editors

The Craft of Research
Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G.
Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams

Glossary of Typesetting Terms
Richard Eckersley, Richard
Angstadt, Charles M. Ellerston,
Richard Hendel, Naomi B. Pascal,
and Anita Walker Scott

Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes
Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz,
and Linda L. Shaw

Legal Writing in Plain English
Bryan A. Garner

From Dissertation to Book
William Germano

Getting It Published
William Germano

A Poet's Guide to Poetry
Mary Kinzie

*The Chicago Guide to Collaborative
Ethnography*
Luke Eric Lassiter

Doing Honest Work in College
Charles Lipson

How to Write a BA Thesis
Charles Lipson

Cite Right
Charles Lipson

*The Chicago Guide to Writing about
Multivariate Analysis*
Jane E. Miller

*The Chicago Guide to Writing about
Numbers*
Jane E. Miller

Mapping It Out
Mark Monmonier

*The Chicago Guide to
Communicating Science*
Scott L. Montgomery

Indexing Books
Nancy C. Mulvany

Getting into Print
Walter W. Powell

*A Manual for Writers of Research
Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*
Kate L. Turabian

Tales of the Field
John Van Maanen

Style
Joseph M. Williams

*A Handbook of Biological
Illustration*
Frances W. Zweifel

Writing for Social Scientists

How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article

Second Edition

Howard S. Becker
with a chapter by Pamela Richards



The University of Chicago Press *Chicago and London*

Preface to the Second Edition

I wrote the first version of this book in the early 1980s. It came very easily. I had been teaching writing to graduate students for a few years, and that experience had given me a lot to think about and a lot of stories to tell. The stories generally had a point, a small lesson about why we have the problems we do in writing, or a possibility of avoiding those problems, or a way of thinking that would make the problem seem less problematic. After the first chapter appeared in a journal, and excited some discussion, I saw that that I had a beginning, and the rest of the book almost wrote itself.

Nothing prepared me for the steady stream of mail from readers who had found the book helpful. Not just helpful. Several told me that the book had saved their lives; less a testimony to the book as therapy than a reflection of the seriousness of the trouble writing failure could get people into. Many told me that they had taken to giving the book to friends who were having se-

rious problems. It's not surprising, given the degree to which our fate in the academic environments we write in as students, teachers, and researchers hangs on our ability to turn out acceptable prose on demand. When you can't do that, your confidence goes down and that makes it harder to get the next writing chore done, and before you know it you can't see a way out. So the book, suggesting new ways of looking at these dilemmas, gave people hope and helped at least some of them get the spiral going in the other direction.

I wasn't prepared, either, for the thank yous from people in fields far from my own discipline of sociology. Much of the analysis in the book is straightforwardly and unapologetically sociological, finding the roots of writing problems and the possibilities of their solution in social organization. Many of the specific problems that produce the convoluted, almost unreadable prose readers complain of as "academic" seemed to me then to arise from such specifically sociological worries as wanting to avoid making causal statements when you knew you didn't have the proof that kind of talk required (that's taken up in Chapter 1). I found out that people in many other fields—art history, communications, literature, it was a long and surprising list—had similar difficulties. I hadn't had them in mind, but the shoe seemed to fit.

Many things haven't changed since this book first appeared. But some have, which made it seem like a good idea to say something about the changes and how they affect our situations as writers. The major changes have occurred with respect to computers, which were just beginning to be the way everyone wrote when I started this book and now have become the standard; I talk about those changes in an optimistic spirit in the additions to Chapter 9. And the organization of universities and academic life, about which I have less optimistic things to say, in Chapter 10. I hope these additions will make the book continue to seem relevant to your concerns.

Howard S. Becker
San Francisco, 2007

Preface

Several years ago I began to teach a seminar in writing for graduate students in sociology at Northwestern University. As the first chapter explains, I found myself giving private lessons and therapy to so many people that it seemed economical to deal with them all at once. The experience was so interesting, and the need for something like that class so obvious, that I wrote a paper (the present first chapter) describing it. I sent the paper to a few people, mostly students who had taken the class and some friends. They, and others who eventually read it, suggested other topics that could profitably be covered, so I kept on writing.

I had expected that helpful response from friends and colleagues, especially those in sociology, but not the mail that began to arrive, from all over the country, from people I didn't know, who had gotten the paper from a friend and found it useful. Some of the letters were very emotional. The authors said that they had

been having great trouble writing and that just reading the paper had given them the confidence to try again. Sometimes they wondered how someone who didn't know them could describe their fears and worries in such precise detail. I liked the paper but knew it wasn't that good. In fact, most of the specific advice in it was commonplace in English composition classes and books. I supposed that my readers found the paper so pertinent and useful because, in a version of C. Wright Mills's distinction between "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure" (1959, 8–11), it did not analyze unique private problems at all, but common difficulties built into academic life. The paper dealt only with problems of sociological writing (I am, after all, a sociologist by trade), but the letters, surprisingly, came from people in fields as diverse as art history and computer science.

Although what I had to say seemed useful to this variety of people, I don't know enough about all those fields to talk knowledgeably about their specific difficulties. I have focused, therefore, on the specific problems of writing about society, especially in sociology, and leave readers from other fields to make the translations for themselves. That translation should be easy because so many sociological classics now belong to the intellectual world at large. Durkheim, Weber, and Marx speak to a larger audience than the American Sociological Association.

A large number of excellent books on writing already exists (for instance, Strunk and White 1959; Gowers 1954; Zinsser 1980; and Williams 1981). I read some of them in the course of teaching my class but did not know then that there was a field of research and speculation called "composition theory." As a result, I invented ideas and procedures already invented by others and discussed in that field's literature. I have since tried to repair my ignorance and refer readers throughout to these lengthier descriptions. Many books on composition contain excellent advice on the com-

mon faults of writing, especially academic writing. They warn against passive constructions, wordiness, using long foreign-sounding words where small American ones would do better, and other common errors. They give solid, specific advice on how to find your mistakes and deal with them. Other writers (for example, Shaughnessy 1977; Elbow 1981; or Schultz 1982) talk about these problems too—it's impossible to talk about writing without mentioning them—but go further and analyze why writing itself is such a problem. They tell how to overcome the paralyzing fear of having others read your work. Their years of experience teaching writing to undergraduates shows in the specificity of their advice and in their greater attention to the process of writing than to results. The best research on writing (see, for instance, Flower 1979 and Flower and Hayes 1981) analyzes the process of writing and concludes that writing is a form of thinking. If that's true, the advice often given to writers—first get your thought clear, and only then try to state it clearly—is wrong. Their results give some support to my own practice and teaching.

Standard texts in composition traditionally address college undergraduates (not surprisingly, since that is where the market and the need are strongest), though they generally say, correctly, that people in business, government and the academy might profit from them too. But the graduate students and scholars I work with (in sociology and other fields) have all had Freshman English, very likely taught by people who know the modern theories of composition and use the new methods, and it hasn't helped them. They have been told to use active constructions and short words, to make sure their pronouns and antecedents agree, and similar useful things, but they don't follow the advice. They don't consult the composition books that might help them write clearer prose, and probably would ignore their useful advice if they did. They even ignore the scoldings their own colleagues periodically offer (see,

for instance, Selvin and Wilson 1984 and Merton's parody, "Foreword to a Preface for an Introduction to a Prolegomenon to a Discourse on a Certain Subject" [1969]). A book meant to help them must deal with why they write that way, given that they know they shouldn't. It must not only show them what they've done wrong and how to fix it, but also move from the situation of the undergraduate to their very different one.

Undergraduates don't have the same problems with writing that older people have. They write short essays they would not write of their own choice, in a few weeks, on subjects they know nothing about and aren't interested in, for a reader who, as Shaughnessy says, "would not choose to read it if he were not being paid to be an examiner" (1977, 86). They know that what they write in this one paper will not affect their lives much. Sociologists and other scholars, on the other hand, write about subjects they know a lot about and care about even more. They write for people they hope are equally interested, and they have no deadlines, other than those their professional situations impose on them. They know that their professional futures rest on how peers and superiors judge what they write. Students can distance themselves from their required writing. Scholars, novice or professional, can't. They impose the task on themselves by entering their discipline and have to take it seriously. Being serious, writing scares them more than it does students (Pamela Richards describes the fear in Chapter 6, below), which makes the technical problems even harder to solve.

I have not, despite the title of the opening chapter, rewritten a freshman English text for use by graduate students. I can't compete with the classic works in English composition, whose authors know more about grammar, syntax and the other classic topics than I do or ever will, and I haven't tried. Some of these matters appear briefly, largely because I am pretty sure that graduate students and young professionals in sociology

and related disciplines simply will not search out or pay attention to advice from outside their own field. They ought to. But if writing about society will improve only when sociologists study grammar and syntax seriously, it never will. Further, problems of style and diction invariably involve matters of substance. Bad sociological writing, as I argue later, can't be separated from the theoretical problems of the discipline. Finally, the way people write grows out of the social situations they write in. So we need to see (this summarizes the book's perspective) how social organization creates the classic problems of scholarly writing: style, organization, and the rest. Instead of trying to write a Freshman English book I'm not competent to write, then, I have tried to meet the need for an analysis that addresses the peculiar problems of writing about society by approaching the technical problems other authors write about sociologically. I deal specifically with scholarly, and especially sociological, writing and set its problems in the context of scholarly work. (Most of Sternberg's "How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation" is concerned with the politics of the process—choosing dissertation advisers, for instance—rather than with the actual writing.)

I have, immodestly, written personally and autobiographically. Others have done that (Peter Elbow, for one), probably for the same reason I did. Students find it hard to imagine writing as a real activity that real people do. As Shaughnessy (1977, 79) says, "The beginning writer does not know how writers behave." Students do not think of books as the result of someone's work. Even graduate students, who are much closer to their instructors, seldom see anyone actually writing, seldom see working drafts and writing that isn't ready for publication. It's a mystery to them: I want to remove the mystery and let them see that the work they read is made by people who have the same difficulties they do. My prose is not exemplary, but since I know what went into its making, I can discuss

why I wrote it that way, what the problems were and how I chose solutions. I can't do that with anyone else's work. Since I have been producing sociological writing for over thirty years, many students and young professionals have read some of it, and readers of this book in manuscript have said that it is useful to know that those pieces troubled and confused me in the same way their work bothers them. For that reason, I have devoted a chapter to my own experiences as a writer.

Chapter 1 originally appeared, in a slightly different form, in *The Sociological Quarterly*, 24 (Autumn 1983): 575-88, and is reprinted here with the permission of the Midwest Sociological Society.

I thank all the people who helped me, especially (in addition to the people in the classes I have taught) Kathryn Pyne Addelson, James Bennett, James Clark, Dan Dixon, Blanche Geer, Robert A. Gundlach, Christopher Jencks, Michael Joyce, Sheila Levine, Leo Litwak, Michal McCall, Donald McCloskey, Robert K. Merton, Harvey Molotch, Arline Meyer, Michael Schudson, Gilberto Velho, John Walton, and Joseph M. Williams. I am especially grateful to Rosanna Hertz for writing the letter that prompted the chapter "Persona and Authority" and for letting me quote from it so extensively. A letter Pamela Richards wrote to me about risk was so complete as it stood that I asked her if she would let it appear in this volume under her name. I'm glad she agreed. I couldn't have said it half so well.

One



Freshman English for Graduate Students

A Memoir and Two Theories

I have taught a seminar on writing for graduate students several times. This requires a certain amount of "chutzpah." After all, to teach a topic suggests that you know something about it. Writing professionally, as a sociologist, for almost thirty years, gave me some claim to that knowledge. In addition, several teachers and colleagues had not only criticized my prose, but had given me innumerable lessons meant to improve it. On the other hand, everyone knows that sociologists write very badly, so that literary types can make jokes about bad writing just by saying "sociology," the way vaudeville comedians used to get a laugh just by saying "Peoria" or "Cucamonga." (See, for instance, Cowley's [1956] attack and Merton's [1972] reply.) The experience and lessons haven't saved me from the faults I still share with my colleagues.

Nevertheless, I took the chance, driven to it by stories of the chronic problems students and fellow

sociologists had with writing. I listed the course.

The turnout for the first class surprised me. Not only did ten or twelve graduate students sign up, the class also contained a couple of post-Ph.D. researchers and even a few of my younger faculty colleagues, and that pattern of enrollment continued in succeeding years. Their worries and troubles with writing overshadowed the fear of embarrassing themselves by going back to school.

My "chutzpah" went beyond teaching a course whose subject I was no master of. I didn't even prepare for the class, because (being a sociologist, not a teacher of composition) I had no idea how to teach it. So I walked in the first day not knowing what I would do. After a few fumbling preliminary remarks, I had a flash. I had been reading the *Paris Review Interviews with Writers* for years and had always had a slightly prurient interest in what the interviewed authors shamelessly revealed about their writing habits. So I turned to a former graduate student and old friend sitting on my left and said, "Louise, how do you write?" I explained that I was not interested in any fancy talk about scholarly preparations but, rather, in the nitty-gritty details, whether she typed or wrote in longhand, used any special kind of paper or worked at any special time of day. I didn't know what she would say.

The hunch paid off. She gave, more or less unself-consciously, a lengthy account of an elaborate routine which had to be done just so. Although she was not embarrassed by what she described, others squirmed a little as she explained that she could only write on yellow, ruled, legal-size pads using a green felt-tip pen, that she had to clean the house first (that turned out to be a common preliminary for women but not for men, who were more likely to sharpen twenty pencils), that she could only write between such and such hours, and so on.

I knew I was on to something and went on to the next victim. A little more reluctantly, he described his

equally peculiar habits. The third one said he was sorry but he'd like to pass his turn. I didn't allow that. He had a good reason, as it turned out. They all did. By then they could see that what people were describing was something quite shameful, nothing you wanted to talk about in front of twenty other people. I was relentless, making everyone tell all and not sparing myself.

This exercise created great tension, but also a lot of joking, enormous interest, and eventually a surprising relaxation. I pointed out that they all were relieved, and ought to be, because, while their worst fears were true—they really were crazy—they were no crazier than anyone else. It was a common disease. Just as people feel relieved to discover that some frightening physical symptoms they've been hiding are just something that is "going around," knowing that others had crazy writing habits should have been, and clearly was, a good thing.

I went on with my interpretation. From one point of view, my fellow participants were describing neurotic symptoms. Viewed sociologically, however, those symptoms were magical rituals. According to Malinowski (1948, 25-36), people perform such rituals to influence the result of some process over which they think they have no rational means of control. He described the phenomenon as he observed it among the Trobriand Islanders:

Thus in canoe building empirical knowledge of material, of technology, and of certain principles of stability and hydrodynamics, function in company and in close association with magic, each yet uncontaminated by the other.

For example, they understand perfectly well that the wider the span of the outrigger the greater the stability yet the smaller the resistance against strain. They can clearly explain why they have to give this span a certain traditional width, measured in fractions of the length of the dugout.

They can also explain, in rudimentary but clearly mechanical terms, how they have to behave in a sudden gale, why the outrigger must always be on the weather side, why the one type of canoe can and the other cannot beat. They have, in fact, a whole system of principles of sailing, embodied in a complex and rich terminology, traditionally handed on and obeyed as rationally and consistently as is modern science by modern sailors. . . .

But even with all their systematic knowledge, methodically applied, they are still at the mercy of powerful and incalculable tides, sudden gales during the monsoon season and unknown reefs. And here comes in their magic, performed over the canoe during its construction, carried out at the beginning and in the course of expeditions and resorted to in moments of real danger. (30-31)

Just like the Trobriand sailors, sociologists who couldn't handle the dangers of writing in a rational way used magical charms, that dispelled anxiety, though without really affecting the result.

So I asked the class: What are you so afraid of not being able to control rationally that you have to use all these magical spells and rituals? I'm no Freudian, but I did think they would resist answering the question. They didn't. On the contrary, they spoke easily and at length. They feared, to summarize the long discussion that followed, two things. They were afraid that they would not be able to organize their thoughts, that writing would be a big, confusing chaos that would drive them mad. They spoke feelingly about a second fear, that what they wrote would be "wrong" and that (unspecified) people would laugh at them. That seemed to account for more of the ritual. A second person who wrote on legal-sized, yellow, ruled tablets always started on the second page. Why? Well, she said, if anyone walked by, you could pull down the top sheet and cover what you had been writing so the passerby couldn't see.

Many of the rituals ensured that what was written could not be taken for a "finished" product, so no one could laugh at it. The excuse was built in. I think that's why even writers who type well often use such time-wasting methods as longhand. Anything written in longhand is clearly not yet done and so cannot be criticized as though it were. You can keep people from taking your writing as a serious expression of your abilities even more surely, however, by not writing at all. No one can read what has never been put on paper.

Something important had happened in that class. As I also pointed out to them that first day, they had all told something quite shameful about themselves, and no one had died. (Here what had happened resembled what might be called the "new California therapies," which rely on people revealing their psyches or bodies in public and discovering that the revelation, similarly, does not kill.) It surprised me that people in this class, many of whom knew each other quite well, knew nothing at all about each other's work habits and, in fact, had hardly ever seen each other's writing. I decided to do something about that.

I had originally told prospective class members that the class would emphasize, instead of writing, copy editing and rewriting. Therefore I made the price of admission to the class an already written paper on which they would now practice rewriting. Before tackling these papers, however, I decided to show them what it meant to rewrite and edit. A colleague lent me a rough second draft of a paper she was working on. I distributed her three or four page "methods section" at the beginning of the second class, and we spent three hours rewriting it.

Sociologists habitually use twenty words where two will do, and we spent most of that afternoon cutting excess words. I used a trick I had often used in private lessons. With my pencil poised over a word or clause, I asked, "Does this need to be here? If not, I'm taking it out." I insisted that we must not, in making any change,

lose the slightest nuance of the author's thought. (I had in mind here the rules C. Wright Mills followed in his well-known "translation" of passages from Talcott Parsons [Mills 1959, 27-31.]) If no one defended the word or phrase, I took it out. I changed passive to active constructions, combined sentences, took long sentences apart—all the things these students had once learned to do in freshman composition. At the end of three hours, we had reduced four pages to three-quarters of a page without losing any nuance or essential detail.

We worked on one long sentence—which considered the possible implications of what the paper had so far said—for quite a while, removing words and phrases until it was a quarter as long as it had been. I finally suggested (mischievously, but they weren't sure of that) that we cut the whole thing and just say, "So what?" Someone finally broke the stunned silence: "You could get away with that, but we couldn't." So we talked about tone, concluding that I couldn't get away with it either, unless I had properly prepared for that sort of tone, and it was appropriate to the occasion.

The students felt very sorry for my colleague who had donated the pages we did this surgery on. They thought she had been humiliated, that it was lucky she hadn't been there to die of shame. In empathizing like that, they relied on their own unprofessional feelings, not realizing that people who write professionally, and write a lot, routinely rewrite as we just had. I wanted them to believe that this was not unusual and that they should expect to rewrite a lot, so I told them (truthfully) that I habitually rewrote manuscripts eight to ten times before publication (although not before giving them to my friends to read). Since, as I'll explain later, they thought that "good writers" (people like their teachers) got everything right the first time, that shocked them.

This exercise had several results. The students were exhausted, never having spent so much time on or looked so closely at one piece of writing, never having

imagined that anyone could spend so much time on such a job. They had seen and experimented with a number of standard editorial devices. But the most important result came at the end of the afternoon when, exhaustedly, one student—that wonderful student who says what others are thinking but know better than to say—said, "Gee, Howie, when you say it this way, it looks like something anybody could say." You bet.

We talked about that. Was it what you said that was sociological, or was it the way you said it? Mind you, we had not replaced any technical sociological language. That had not been the problem (it almost never is). We had replaced redundancies, "fancy writing," pompous phrases (for instance, my personal *bête noire*, "the way in which," for which a plain "how" can usually be substituted without losing anything but pretentiousness)—anything that could be simplified without damage to the thought. We decided that authors tried to give substance and weight to what they wrote by sounding academic, even at the expense of their real meaning.

We discovered some other things that interminable afternoon. Some of those long, redundant expressions couldn't be replaced because they had no underlying sense to replace. They were placeholders, marking a spot where the author should have said something plainer but had at the moment nothing plain to say. These spots nevertheless had to be filled because otherwise the author would only have half a sentence. Writers did not use these meaningless phrases and sentences randomly or simply because they had bad writing habits. Certain situations evoked meaningless placeholders.

Writers routinely use meaningless expressions to cover up two kinds of problems. Both kinds of problems reflect serious dilemmas of sociological theory. One problem has to do with agency: who did the things that your sentence alleges were done? Sociologists often prefer locutions that leave the answer to that

question unclear, largely because many of their theories don't tell them who is doing what. In many sociological theories, things just happen without anyone doing them. It's hard to find a subject for a sentence when "larger social forces" or "inexorable social processes" are at work. Avoiding saying who did it produces two characteristic faults of sociological writing: the habitual use of passive constructions and abstract nouns.

If you say, for example, that "deviants were labeled," you don't have to say who labeled them. That is a theoretical error, not just bad writing. A major point of the labeling theory of deviance (outlined in Becker 1963) is precisely that someone labels the person deviant, someone with the power to do it and good reasons for wanting to. If you leave those actors out, you misstate the theory, both in letter and spirit. Yet it is a common locution. Sociologists commit similar theoretical errors when they say that society does this or that or that culture makes people do things, and sociologists do write that way all the time.

Sociologists' inability or unwillingness to make causal statements similarly leads to bad writing. David Hume's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* made us all nervous about claiming to demonstrate causal connections, and though few sociologists are as skeptical as Hume, most understand that despite the efforts of John Stuart Mill, the Vienna Circle and all the rest, they run serious scholarly risks when they allege that A causes B. Sociologists have many ways of describing how elements covary, most of them vacuous expressions hinting at what we would like, but don't dare, to say. Since we are afraid to say that A causes B, we say, "There is a tendency for them to covary" or "They seem to be associated."

The reasons for doing this bring us back to the rituals of writing. We write that way because we fear that others will catch us in obvious errors if we do anything else, and laugh at us. Better to say something innocuous

but safe than something bold you might not be able to defend against criticism. Mind you, it would not be objectionable to say, "A varies with B," if that was what you really wanted to say, and it is certainly reasonable to say, "I think A causes B and my data support that by showing that they covary." But many people use such expressions to hint at stronger assertions they just don't want to take the rap for. They want to discover causes, because causes are scientifically interesting, but don't want the philosophical responsibility.

Every teacher of English composition and every guide to writing criticizes passive constructions, abstract nouns, and most of the other faults I mentioned. I did not invent these standards. In fact, I learned them in composition classes myself. Although the standards are thus independent of any particular school of thought, I believe that my preference for clarity and directness also has roots in the symbolic interactionist tradition of sociology, which focuses on real actors in real situations. My Brazilian colleague Gilberto Velho insists that these are ethnocentric standards, strongly favored in the Anglo-American tradition of plain speaking, but having no more warrant than the more flowery, indirect style of some European traditions. I think that's wrong, since some of the best writers in other languages also use a direct style.

Similarly, Michael Schudson asked me, not unreasonably, how someone ought to write who believes that structures—capitalist relations of production, for instance—cause social phenomena. Should such a theorist use passive constructions to indicate the passivity of the human actors involved? That question requires two answers. The simpler is that few serious theories of society leave no room for human agency. More importantly, passive constructions even hide the agency attributed to systems and structures. Suppose a system does the labeling of deviants. Saying "deviants are labeled" covers that up too.

Much of what we removed from my colleague's paper in class consisted of what I named, for class purposes (with Wayne Booth's criticism of academic "Greek-fed, polysyllabic bullshit" (Booth 1979, 277) as legitimating precedent), "bullshit qualifications," vague phrases expressing a general readiness to abandon the point being made if anyone objects: "A tends to be related to B," "A might possibly tend to be related to B under some conditions," and similar cowardly qualifiers. A real qualification says that A is related to B except under certain specified circumstances: I always shop for groceries at the Safeway unless it's closed; the positive relationship between income and education is stronger if you are white than if you are black. But the students, like other sociologists, habitually used less specific qualifications. They wanted to say that the relationship existed, but knew that someone would, sooner or later, find an exception. The nonspecific, ritual qualifier gave them an all-purpose loophole. If attacked, they could say they never said it was always true. Bullshit qualifications, making your statements fuzzy, ignore the philosophical and methodological tradition which holds that making generalizations in a strong universal form identifies negative evidence which can be used to improve them.

As I asked people in the class about why they wrote the way they did, I learned that they had picked up many of their habits in high school and solidified them in college. What they had learned to write were term papers (see Shaughnessy's [1977, 85-6] discussion of the conditions of undergraduate writing). You write a term paper by doing whatever reading or research is required throughout the term and working out the paper in your head as you go along. But you write only one draft, perhaps after making an outline, usually the night before handing it in. Like a Japanese brush painting, you do it, and either it's OK or it isn't. College students have no time for rewriting, since they often have several papers due at the same time. The method

works for undergraduates. Some become very adept at the format and turn out creditable, highly polished papers, working on them in their heads as they walk around campus, putting the words on paper as the assignments come due. Teachers know all this. If they aren't aware of the mechanics, they know the typical results and don't expect papers more coherent or highly polished than such a method can produce.

Students who habitually work that way understandably worry about the draft they produce. They know it could be better but is not going to be. Whatever they put down is *it*. As long as that document is kept confidential, in the conventionally private teacher-undergraduate relationship, it won't embarrass the author too much.

But the social organization of writing and reputation changes in graduate school. Teachers talk about your papers, for good or bad, to their colleagues and to other students. With luck, the papers grow into qualifying papers or dissertations, read by several faculty members.

Graduate students also write longer papers than undergraduates do. Students expert at the one-shot term paper cannot hold a longer paper in their heads so easily. That's when they start losing their ability to write. They cannot produce a one-draft paper and be confident that it will not provoke ridicule and criticism. So they don't write.

I didn't tell the students all this during the first class sessions, though I eventually did. Instead, I gave assignments that would get them to give up the one-draft method of producing papers. They might then find alternate routines that were less painful and equally effective in earning academic rewards. A few adventurous students in each of the several classes I have taught have trusted me enough to go along with these experiments. My reputation for not being fierce weakened the traditional student fear of professors, and those who had taken other classes with me trusted my eccentric-

ities. Teachers who lack that advantage might have more trouble using some of these tricks.

I told students that it didn't make much difference what they wrote in a first draft because they could always change it. Since what they put on a piece of paper was not necessarily final, they needn't worry so much about what they wrote. The only version that mattered was the last one. They had gotten a hint of how things could be changed and I promised to show them more.

Our classroom editing and my interpretation of it sobered the students. I asked them to bring the papers I had required as a prerequisite for admission to the class (but had not yet collected) to the next session. (Some students balked at this. The second year I taught the course, one said she wasn't going to bring a paper because she didn't have one. I got angry: "Anyone who has been going to school as long as you have has plenty of papers. Bring one." Then the real reason came out: "I don't have one that's good enough.") After collecting the papers and shuffling them thoroughly, I passed them out again, making sure that no one got his or her own. I asked them to edit the papers thoroughly. The next week they returned them to their authors. Students sat soberly, looking to see what had been done. Plenty, was the answer. There was red ink everywhere.

I asked them how they liked editing someone else's paper. They spoke at length, angrily. They had been surprised by how much work there was to do, at how many silly mistakes people made. After an hour of complaining, I asked them how they liked having their papers edited. Again they spoke angrily, but this time they complained that the person who read their paper lacked compassion, couldn't see what they had meant, had changed their text to say things they hadn't intended at all. The smarter ones soon realized that they were talking about themselves, and the group fell silent as that sank in. I said it was a lesson they ought to think about, and that now they could see that they had to

write so that well-meaning editors—and they had to assume their colleagues were well-meaning—could not mistake their meaning. Editors and colleagues would often rewrite their work, I told them, and they had better get used to it and not let their feelings be hurt by such experiences. They should try instead to write so clearly that no one could misunderstand and make changes they didn't like.

Then I said that they could really start by writing almost anything, any kind of a rough draft, no matter how crude or confused, and make something good out of it. To prove it, I had to get someone to produce a first, uncensored draft, some ideas written with little care and no corrections. I explained that such a draft would help them find out what they might have to say. (This was one of the places where I invented what I did not know was likewise being developed by people in composition theory. Linda Flower [1979, 36], for instance, describes and analyzes the same procedure as "Writer-Based prose," which "allows the writer freedom to generate a breadth of information and a variety of alternative relationships before locking himself or herself into a premature formulation.") It took some work to find someone who would try such a risky process. I distributed copies of the resulting document to the class.

The person who contributed the piece made some nervous self-deprecating jokes about putting herself in jeopardy by allowing people to see it. To her surprise, what she had written amazed her classmates. They could see that it was mixed-up and written badly, but they could also see, and said, that she had some really interesting ideas there that could be developed. They also openly admired her courage. (Other brave students have had the same effect on their peers in succeeding years.)

This draft showed the author approaching her subject circuitously (like the writers described in Flower and Hayes 1981), not sure of what she wanted to say,

saying the same thing in several different ways. Comparing the versions made it easy to see the idea she had been circling around and to formulate it more concisely. We found three or four ideas to work with in that way and could see, or sense, some connections between them. We agreed that the way to work with such a draft was to take notes on it, see what it contained, and then make an outline for another draft. Why bother avoiding redundancy or any of the other faults we had worked so hard to eliminate the week before, since it would be easy to get rid of them, using those newly learned skills, later? Worrying about those faults might slow you down, keep you from saying something in one of the ways that would give you the clue you needed. Better to edit afterward, rather than as you went. The students began to see that writing need not be a one-shot, all-or-nothing venture. It could have stages, each with its own criteria of excellence (as Flower and others could have told them, but perhaps it was better for them to discover it in their own experience). An insistence on clarity and polish appropriate to a late version was entirely inappropriate to earlier ones meant to get the ideas on paper. In coming to these conclusions, they replicated some of Flower's results and began to understand that worrying about rules of writing too early in the process could keep them from saying what they actually had to say (a point made in the language of cognitive psychology in Rose 1983).

I don't want to exaggerate. My students did not throw away their crutches and start to dance. But they saw that there were ways out of their troubles, which was all I had hoped for. Knowing what was possible, they could try it. Just knowing wasn't enough, of course. They had to use these devices, make them part of their writing routine, perhaps replacing some of the magical elements we had discussed.

We did a number of other things in the seminar. We discussed rhetoric, reading Gusfield (1981) on the rhetoric of social science, and Orwell's "Politics and the

English Language" (1954). Surprisingly, Gusfield the sociologist had a stronger impact than Orwell the writer. He showed how writers in the students' own field manipulated stylistic devices to sound "scientific," particularly noting how passive constructions could produce a facade of impersonality the investigator could hide behind. We talked about scientific writing as a form of rhetoric, meant to persuade, and which forms of persuasion the scientific community considered okay and which illegitimate. I insisted on the rhetorical nature of scientific writing, although the students believed, with many of their elders, that some ways of writing illegitimately attempt to persuade while others just presented the facts and let them speak for themselves. (Sociologists of science and students of rhetoric have written extensively on this point. See, especially, Bazerman 1981, and Latour and Bastide 1983 and the accompanying bibliography.)

That student I was so fond of helped me out again here. After we had discussed the rhetoric of science at length, he said, "Okay, Howie, I know you never like to tell us what to do, but are you going to tell us or not?" "Tell you what?" "How to write without using rhetoric!" As before, everyone had been hoping that I would reveal that secret. Just hearing it said aloud confirmed their worst fears. They couldn't write without using rhetoric and therefore they couldn't evade questions of style.

During several years of teaching the course, I developed a theory of writing which describes the process that produces both the writing people do and the difficulties they have doing it. (The theory, in a more general form, appears in *Art Worlds* [Becker 1982a], as a theory of the making of art works of all kinds. Though it grows out of a sociological social psychology quite different from the cognitive psychology dominating work in composition theory, my notions resemble those of Flower and Hayes and their colleagues.) Any work's eventual form results from all the choices made

by all the people involved in producing it. When we write, we constantly make such choices as which idea to take up when; what words to use, in what order, to express it, what examples to give to make our meaning clearer. Of course, writing actually follows an even lengthier process of absorbing and developing ideas, similarly preceded by a process of absorbing impressions and sorting them out. Each choice shapes the result.

If that is a reasonable analysis, we kid ourselves when we think, sitting down to write, that we are composing freshly and can write anything at all. Our earlier choices—to look at it this way, to think about this example in developing our ideas, to use this way of gathering and storing data, to read this novel or watch that television program—rule out what we might otherwise have chosen. Every time we answer a question about our work and what we have been finding or thinking, our choice of words affects the way we describe it the next time, perhaps when we are writing notes or making outlines.

Most of the students had a more conventional view, embodied in the folk maxim that if you think clearly, you will write clearly. They thought they had to work everything out before they wrote Word One, having first assembled all their impressions, ideas, and data and explicitly decided every important question of theory and fact. Otherwise, they might get it wrong. They acted the belief out ritually by not beginning to write until they had every book and note they might possibly need piled up on their desks. They further thought they had a free choice in most of these matters, which led to remarks like "I think I'll use Durkheim for my theory section," as if they hadn't already decided the theoretical issues that invoking Durkheim (or Weber or Marx) had suggested long before, in the way they had done their work. (Scholars in other fields will know which Great Names to substitute here.)

My theory leads to the opposite view: you have already made many choices when you sit down to write, but probably don't know what they were. That leads, naturally, to some confusion, to a mixed-up early draft. But a mixed-up draft is no cause for shame. Rather, it shows you what your earlier choices were, what ideas, theoretical viewpoints, and conclusions you had already committed yourself to before you began writing. Knowing that you will write many more drafts, you know that you need not worry about this one's crudeness and lack of coherence. This one is for discovery, not for presentation (the distinction is C. Wright Mills's [1959, 222], following Reichenbach).

Writing an early rough draft, then, shows you all the earlier decisions that now shape what you can write. You cannot "use" Marx if Durkheim's ideas shaped your thinking. You cannot write about what the data you gathered don't tell you about, or your method of storing them doesn't let you use them for. You see what you have and don't have, what you have already done and already know, and what is left to do. You see that the only job left—even though you have just begun to write—is to make it all clearer. The rough draft shows you what needs to be made clearer; the skills of rewriting and copy editing let you do it.

It's not that easy, of course. The next choices, made in editing and rewriting, also shape the result. You can no longer do anything you want, but there are plenty of choices left. These further questions of language, organization, and tone often give authors great trouble because they imply commitments other than the ones already made. If you use Durkheim to discuss Marxian ideas or the language of survey research to discuss an ethnographic study, you will probably find yourself working at cross purposes. Such confusions had caused the theoretical difficulties we discovered in our copy editing exercises in the seminar.

If you start writing early in your research—before you have all your data, for instance—you can begin

cleaning up your thinking sooner. Writing a draft without data makes clearer what you would like to discuss and, therefore, what data you will have to get. Writing can thus shape your research design. This differs from the more common notion that you do your research first and then "write it up." This extends the Flower-Hayes (1981) idea that the early phases of writing lead writers to see what they will have to do in the later stages.

Making your work clearer involves considerations of audience. Who is it supposed to be clearer to? Who will read what you write? What do they have to know so that they will not misread or find what you say obscure or unintelligible? You will write one way for the people you work with closely on a joint project, another way for professional colleagues in your subspecialty, still another for professional colleagues in other specialties and disciplines, and differently yet for the "intelligent layman."

How can you find out what readers will understand? You can give your early drafts to sample members of your intended audience and ask them what they think. That is what the seminar members found so frightening and troublesome, because showing people early drafts exposed them to ridicule and shame. So the prescription, while simple, may not be workable. You can only show your less-than-perfect work to people if you have learned—as I hoped the seminar's members had from our class exercises—that you will not be harmed if people see it. Naturally, not everyone is a good audience for early drafts. We discovered that while editing each other's papers. Some people, finding it difficult to treat early drafts as early, insist on criticizing them with the standards appropriate to finished products. Some readers have better editorial judgment than others, and you need a circle of people you can trust to respond appropriately to the stage your work is in.

In addition to a theory of the act of writing, then, we also need a theory of the social organization of writing

as a professional activity. Because most people write in absolute privacy, readers attribute the results to the author alone and credit or debit them to his or her professional reputational account. I use bookkeeping language because most people secretly think of it that way.

Why do writers work so privately? Most of them, as I said earlier, acquire their writing habits, complete with all the rituals designed to eliminate chaos and laughable results, in high school or college as adaptations to the situations in which they then write. The student's situation rewards quick, competent preparation of short, passable papers, not the skills of rewriting and redoing. (According to Woody Allen, "Eighty percent of life is getting it done and handing it in on time.") Smart students—the smarter they are, the quicker they learn—don't bother with useless skills. The first draft, being the only one, counts.

Students find the skill of writing short papers quickly less useful as they advance in graduate school. During their first few years, they may, depending on the department, have to write the same kind of papers they wrote as undergraduates. But eventually they have to write longer papers, making more complex arguments based on more complicated data. Few people can write such papers in their heads and get it right on the first try, though students may naively think that good writers routinely do. ("Getting it right" means putting the argument so clearly that the paper begins by asserting what it later demonstrates.) So students flounder, fear "getting things wrong," and don't get it done on time. Writing at the last minute, they produce papers with interesting ideas, superficial coherence, and no clear underlying argument—interesting early drafts which they nevertheless want treated as end results.

Some young sociologists (and many other young scholars as well) get into situations after graduate work that reward that style of work even less. Scholarly disciplines do not furnish such neatly marked dead-

lines as schools do. There are no simple "on times." Of course, there are professional "on times": if you do not publish enough articles at a rate fast enough for your department or dean, you might not be promoted or get a raise or be able to find another job. But the timetables for these productions are loose and partly shaped by administrative whim, and people may mistakenly think that more pressing concerns—preparing lectures or university service—require their immediate attention. Young scholars may thus find that time has slipped away and that they have not met a production quota less explicit than that of the undergraduate years, one they let themselves ignore because the organization did not press it on them.

Since there is no fixed time at which a paper must be submitted and no single judge who will give it a grade, scholars work on their own schedules, at their own pace. They submit the results to that amorphous body of judges, "the professional community," or at least to the representatives of that community who edit journals, make up programs for professional meetings, and give editorial opinions to book publishers. Taken together, these readers embody the diversity of opinion and practice in the discipline. That diversity makes it likely that, in the long run, authors seldom go unpublished simply because they have the wrong views or work in the wrong style. So many organizations publish so many journals that every point of view finds a home somewhere. But editors still reject papers or send them back with the instruction "revise and resubmit" because they are mixed-up—because their authors write unclearly or misstate the problem they want to address.

As a result, professional writing gets "privatized." No peer group shares the writer's problem. No group has the same paper to hand in on the same day. Everyone has a different paper to hand in whenever they get ready. So sociological writers do not develop a culture, a body of shared solutions to their shared problems. As a result, a situation that has been called

pluralistic ignorance arises. Everyone thinks that everyone else is getting it done and will be ready to hand it in on time. They keep their difficulties to themselves. This may be one reason why sociologists and other scholars write in such isolation.

In any event, their work requires extensive rewriting and editorial work. Since the only version that counts is the last one, they have every reason to keep working on something until it is right. Not as right as it can be, given the time available—that is the college model—but as right as they can imagine it ever being. (This, naturally, is subject to some realistic constraints, so that it will get done sometime. Remember, though, that some major works have taken twenty years to prepare and that some scholars are willing to pay the price of slow production.) But many authors don't know how to rewrite and think that every version of anything they produce will be used to judge them. (They are partly right. Such work will be used to make judgments, but if they are lucky, the judgments will be appropriate to the stage of work.) So they don't produce, or they produce in very painful ways, attempting to get whatever they put on paper into perfect form before anyone sees it.

An interesting exception to this pattern occurs in group projects where, if the work is to proceed at all, the participants must occasionally produce documents bringing each other up to date. Participants in successful projects learn to look at each other's work as preliminary, thus relieving everyone of the necessity of producing perfect drafts the first time.

More commonly, writers solve the problem of isolation by developing a circle of friends who will read their work in the right spirit, treating as preliminary what is preliminary, helping the author sort out the mixed-up ideas of a very rough draft or smooth out the ambiguous language of a later version, suggesting references that might be helpful or comparisons that will give the key to some intractable puzzle. That circle may contain friends from your graduate school cohort,

former professors, or people who share some interest. These relationships are usually reciprocal. As the trust between author and reader grows, the reader will ask the author to do some reading in return. Some promising relations of this kind die when the favor isn't returned.

Some people cannot read things in an appropriate way. They fixate on small things—sometimes just a word that could easily be replaced by one that avoids the problem—and cannot think about or comment on anything else. Others, usually known far and wide as excellent editors, see the core problem and give helpful suggestions. Avoid the former. Search out the latter.

The above can be read as helpful hints suggested by the rudimentary theory of professional situations and writing problems I have been discussing. The seminar group, always interested in helpful hints, often lured me into pontificating about my experience. Although much of what I said in response to these seductions consisted of bad imitations of Mr. Chips, a few of the concerns are worth mentioning.

Those who had some professional experience and had had papers rejected or sent back for extensive revision worried about how to respond to criticism. They frequently reverted to school talk: "Do I have to do such and such just because they said so?" They sometimes talked like artists whose masterwork had been mauled by philistines. I thought they were reverting to the attitude that sees most students through college, the notion that "they" are whimsical, have no real standards, and just decide things capriciously. If the authorities really have no stable standards you cannot deal with their criticisms rationally, by inspecting the document you have created to see what it needs; instead you have to find out what they want and provide it. (See the analysis in Becker, Geer, and Hughes 1968, 80–92.) Authors found the evidence for this in the often contradictory advice they received

from critics: one told them to take something out while another suggested they expand the same section.

My practical tip on this point was that readers are not clairvoyant, and therefore, when an author's prose is ambiguous or confused, they don't immediately see what was really meant, but produce their own, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. A common problem arose when an author began a paper by suggesting that it was going to deal with problem X and then proceeded to analyze, in a perfectly satisfactory way, problem Y, a characteristic fault of early drafts, easily cleaned up in revision. Some critics, spotting the confusion, will suggest that the analysis, or even the research, be redone so that the paper can really deal with X. Others, more realistic, tell the author to rewrite the introduction so that it says that the paper is about Y. But critics of both kinds are responding to the same confusion. The author need not do what any of them says, but should get rid of the confusion so that it will no longer be there to complain about.

Another problem the seminar members worried about was coauthorship, and the example came out of our own class. Toward the end of the term, when we had done everything I had planned and I was at a loss for entertainments to fill the remaining seminar hours, I suggested that we write a paper together on a topic we all knew something about: problems of writing in sociology. We took turns, in a variation of an old parlor game, dictating the next sentence of the paper. Each person added to the body of the text as it grew. Some tried to follow the line suggested by their predecessors. Some ignored it and began all over again. Some made cute remarks. Several people wrote the sentences down as they were produced and read out the accumulation on request.

When we finished, we had eighteen sentences, and to everyone's surprise, despite all the non sequiturs and wisecracks, it wasn't a bad first draft, given the way we had agreed to appreciate and use first drafts. In fact, it

was so interesting that I suggested we expand it for publication. That immediately raised a question: where should we publish it? We discussed the kinds of journals that might be interested in such a topic, and we finally decided on *The American Sociologist*, a journal devoted to professional problems which the American Sociological Association has unfortunately stopped publishing. I left the room to get some coffee. When I came back, the cozy atmosphere had degenerated. People were glowering at each other and confessed that they had, in my absence, begun quarreling over a predictable trouble. If some people did more work than others, who would put their names on the final paper and in what order?

I got angry at this, which was unreasonable. Many people have fought over that very real question. I told them my solution: to lean over backward and give everyone credit who conceivably might have had anything to do with it. They quickly pointed out that a tenured full professor could afford such ideas, but younger people couldn't. I don't know if they were right or not, but the idea is not foolish on its face.

We continued to talk and soon saw that only four or five students were really interested in pursuing the job. The seminar took place in the spring, and they agreed to work on it over the summer. Social organization intervened again. Graduate work is organized into classes that meet for a quarter or semester and then are over, and projects whose lives depend in some substantial way on money being available to sustain them. Since neither of these forms of automatic coordination existed beyond the end of the term during which the seminar occurred, the would-be coauthors had nothing to make them meet and continue their work, and they didn't. They never wrote the paper.

In some ways, this chapter is that paper, the residue of the work done by the participants in that class, and a lot of other people, over the last several years. When the organizations which support collective work are

that ephemeral, if the work is to be done at all (and usually it isn't), one of the survivors must take it on as an individual project. Which is what has happened here.

An Afterword. I should not have said an "individual" project, because of course it wasn't. I do practice what I preach and I did send this chapter (in its original version as a stand-alone paper) to a number of people who helped me with suggestions, most of which I accepted. So my collaborators include, in addition to all the people in the three classes I have taught, the people named in the Preface.