1. The Composing Process Is a Continuum

You don't suddenly become another person when you sit down to write, though that may be what it feels like sometimes. Composing means putting things together—and that is something you do all the time. When you take in a scene or an event or a piece of news, you are interpreting, putting things together to make sense. When you see what is happening or understand what has happened or imagine what might happen, you are composing: figuring out relationships, working out implications, drawing conclusions. What is currently called "getting your head together" used to be known as "composing yourself."

When we think, we compose: we put this with that; we line things up; we group and classify and categorize; we emphasize or pass over, start and stop and start up again, repeating ourselves, contradicting, hedging, declaring and questioning, lying and denying. Even in dreaming we are composing, although for different purposes and in a mode different from the ones common to waking hours. When we read, we *re*-compose, juxtaposing this character with that character, the theory with the supporting evidence, the argument with the alleged facts, etc. We compare premises and conclusions, ifs and thens, the beginning of the story with the ending, seeing what goes together to make up the whole, seeing how the composition is put together, enjoying it, learning from it.

Composing—putting things together—is a continuum, a process that continues without any sharp breaks. Making sense of the world is composing. It includes being puzzled, being mistaken, and then suddenly seeing things for what they probably are; making wrong—unproductive, unsatisfactory, incorrect, inaccurate—identifications and assessments and correcting them or giving them up and getting some new ones. And all these things happen when we write: writing is like the composing we do all the time when we respond to the world, make up our minds, try to figure out things again. We aren't born knowing how to write, but we are born knowing how to know how.

Although writing has a lot in common with that composing we could simply call *consciousness,* writing doesn't just happen as a matter of course; the writer has to make it happen. Writing is not a "natural-born" capacity that we normally and necessarily develop, the way a child learns to walk and talk. Nor is learning to write like learning the facts in an anatomy text or making a Shaker footstool out of a kit. When you write, you don't follow somebody else's scheme; you design your own. As a writer, you learn to make words behave the way you want them to.

Up to a point, writing can be explained and taught as a skill. And it can be demonstrated, as dovetailing the joints of a drawer can be demonstrated. Composing means working with words, and, in some ways, that is a skill comparable to working with wood. But woodcraft is not just assembling some pre-cut forms, nor is wordcraft gluing statements together. Composing is more than a skill, though the writer must be skilled with words and syntactic structures, just as a cabinetmaker has to know how to use a gimlet and an auger. Composing is more than craft, and it requires more than skill, because working with words requires working with meanings, and meanings are not like walnut planks or golfballs or bulldozers or typewriters or anything else that simply requires skilled handling. Learning to write is not a matter of learning the rules that govern the use of the semicolon or the names of sentence structures, nor is it a matter of manipulating words; it is a matter of making meanings, and that is the work of the active mind.

Writing, as it is discussed in this book, involves you in thinking about thinking and the making of meanings by means of language. That doesn't mean that you must have a detailed knowledge of neurophysiology and linguistics any more than a swimmer needs a theory of hydrostatics. But having some knowledge of how the mind makes meanings is the way to under-

stand how writing has to do with making sense of the world and thus to take advantage of the fact that the composing process is a continuum, an unbroken and continuing activity. The work of the active mind is seeing relationships, finding forms, making meanings: when we write, we are doing in a particular way what we are already doing when we make sense of the world. We are composers by virtue of being human.

You don't have to philosophize or master psychological theories in order to learn to write, but it's important and, I think, comforting to know that the means of making meaning which you depend on when you make sense of the world and when you write are in part made for you by your brain and by language itself. You don't have to learn to focus your eyes or to control the responses of your eardrums. You don't have to re-invent English grammar when you compose a sentence (though you may have to learn to adjust your ways of using it to those of your reader) any more than you have to take grammar lessons to learn to talk. What you do within the limits provided by language and perception, how you use them to make meanings, is up to you, but you don't begin from scratch.