

part i

THE MAKING OF MEANING


Introduction: Assisted Invitations to Explore the Composing Process

This book teaches a method of composing that focuses on the ways in which writing is related to everything you do when you make sense of the world. This method is meant to serve both the inexperienced writer and the student who has written many papers but who finds the next one almost impossibly difficult. Here are some things about composing which this book can teach you:

- How to get started writing
- What to do next
- How to get started again when you come to a dead end
- How to repeat yourself on purpose with effects that you are controlling
- How to define, limit, expand, eliminate, amalgamate, subordinate, coordinate, recapitulate
- How to know when to stop

A method of composing isn't a set of rules, but it does provide guidelines and procedures. A method helps you find your way around, but it is not like a map, since a map for one territory is not much use in another—and there's no such thing as a general map. But if you have a method, you can make your own map

according to the terrain and the nature of transport, depending on where you want to go and how far you want to travel. A method of composing is a critical method, a way of getting thinking started and keeping it going. The more you can learn about composing, the better able you will be to argue with yourself and others; to take notes and study for exams; to read poems and textbooks; to think through problems and to formulate questions that practically answer themselves. The main justification for learning a method of composing is that it can help you think clearly.

This book offers down-to-earth suggestions as well as general principles; theory and practice need one another because principles are easily forgotten unless they are put to the test, and practical suggestions can't be counted on to help you more than once, unless they are grounded in principle. Invitations to explore what is involved in the composing process, how it is related to the everyday use of your mind, are indicated by this little sign: 

They are *assisted invitations*; that is to say, all exercises and suggestions for composing practice are accompanied by explanations and analyses.

Whatever you really learn, you teach yourself. If you only learn what you are told, then you are only keeping in mind, for a longer or shorter interval, what was put there by somebody else. What you really learn is what you discover—and you learn to discover by questioning. This book offers you assisted invitations to learn to question what it is that you do when you compose and thereby how to do it better—more easily, more quickly, more confidently.

Nothing in the book is important only for itself: everything is intended to encourage you to adapt the method of composing to your own needs. This method takes advantage of the fact that when you do anything, the *what* and the *how* depend on one another. The more you can learn about what goes on when you compose, the more you will learn about how to compose. In order for that to happen, the composing process has to be slowed down; in this book, everything gets repeated. My hope is that the repetition will have a cumulative, not a deadening effect, but I can't be sure. Something that you find perfectly obvious will be obscure to someone else, and something that is self-evident to another reader may give you trouble. Developing a method of composing means explaining explanations, writing about writing,

10 *FORMING/THINKING/WRITING*

thinking about thinking; sometimes that can make you dizzy. But if you find a sentence that makes no sense, don't reread it until you've finished the paragraph. Then, if things are still obscure, go back and reread. The second time around, rereading a sentence can be useful, but you should avoid backtracking until you see what's ahead. Learning to read critically means, for one thing, finding what it is that you don't understand.

Throughout this book, I have taken the stand that learning to write is a way of learning to think and that thinking requires knowing how to discover and put to use the resources of language. Part I concerns the relationship of language and thought, the ways we have of making meaning. Part II develops a method of composing that is seen as a matter of forming concepts, developing ideas as a way of shaping your language. Part III offers advice about how to use this method in both critical reading and critical writing.