

Strategies For Academic Writing

by Irvin Hashimoto, Barry M. Kroll, and John C. Schafer

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Grace Rueter and Francelia Clark

English Composition Board

The University of Michigan

The aim of *Strategies for Academic Writing* is to teach students how to deal with problems they face when they write academic papers. This short, clearly-written book grew out of the authors' experiences with college students in a writing workshop, and it speaks to real student needs. It is a guide to thinking, to moving through the processes of conceptualizing, focusing, and connecting. We think *Strategies* can be useful in several academic settings: In workshops, in high school and college composition classes, and in subject-area courses that require writing. But although the book is versatile, teachers and students should be aware that it is frankly a book of strategies: Students should be cautioned to be aided, not limited, by these strategies. Moreover, *Strategies* does not pretend to be a self-contained writing course, and it isn't. As students work their way through the book's exercises, they fill in blanks, rewrite sentences, and answer questions, but they do not write. Since the gap between doing exercises and writing papers is wide, students and teachers will need to devise ways of relating the text's exercises to the writing students themselves produce. Yet the value of these exercises is that they do lead students thoroughly through the thinking techniques the book presents. A student struggling with the question "What does a thesis statement do?" can learn what a thesis statement does and how to formulate one here, guided through the formulation experience by the exercises.

The topics *Strategies* treats in its six chapters are presented in the traditional order, step by step. Chapter 1 focuses helpfully on assignments, showing students how to uncover implied plans and create schemes for finding, assessing, and organizing information. Discussing standard formats for four kinds of papers (book review, research report, history paper, and other papers) and two types of assignments (directed and undirected), it shows how to devise plans through four organizational strategies (categorizing, sequencing, comparing/contrasting, and finding causes and effects). Learning to analyze the words in an assignment is useful to students and has been touched in other writing guides, but we have not seen a guide draw the student through the thinking process as effectively as this chapter does. Chapter 2 shows how the four methods for devising initial plans are also methods for developing main points. Chapter 3 shows how to arrange main points along a continuum (best to worst, simple to complex, low to high, old to new, and so forth), and how to decide which arrangement (climax, anticlimax, or extremes first, middle ground last) may suit their purposes. Chapter 4 teaches what should be accomplished by introductions (provide background, state

the thesis) and conclusions (summarize the main points, answer the question "So What?") and how to write them. Chapter 5 shows how to write and sharpen thesis and topic statements that will help make papers coherent, and how to use linking signals that contribute to coherence. Chapter 6 follows a student through the writing of an academic paper to illustrate how the strategies presented in the first five chapters can work together. Throughout the book, the authors include sample student papers and exercises; they answer the more problematic exercises in an end note.

The book's neat classifications and its prescriptivism may be just what some students want, though other students may find them confining. Taking great care through their typologies to show students how to approach writing tasks, the authors have neglected to encourage students to conceive their own approaches. In addition, the step-wise presentation does not make clear to students the non-linear, free-wheeling nature of the writing process. In the sixth and final chapter, the authors do suggest that students may want to devise strategies of their own, and that the writing process is, in fact, non-linear; but these warnings should probably have been woven into the earlier material. The final chapter, illustrating how all the strategies appear as a student prepares a research paper, is an aesthetically pleasing conclusion, but it is less practical than the rest of the book. Students here are simply asked to read the chapter to see how the book's strategies can make their writing better, and, because they are given no closer guidance for using the material, students may lack the patience to deal with it.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book lies in the authors' efforts to make students think about what they are doing. The authors' pattern is to teach an obvious strategy, and then to sharpen it through exercises and problems which push students toward thinking and refining. In Chapter 2, for example, students are taught to categorize subjects in conventional ways and are then asked to categorize *sports*, *college students*, *pets*, and *rocks* conventionally. The authors then demonstrate that if the results of the categorizing seem dull (and they are sure to), students can create new categories and thereby a fresh focus. As their own strategy, the authors wisely predict excesses and follow many of the basic lessons with an exercise in good judgment. Again, we have not seen a guide so useful in leading students past the oversimplifications that can mislead them.

The first five chapters of *Strategies for Academic Writing* are

highly successful in accomplishing the book's purposes. First, they address problems many students have. Even bright, capable students often have trouble conceptualizing, developing, and organizing academic papers. Second, they provide useful strategies for dealing with the problems. Through these strategies, students can gain control over planning and thinking processes involved in writing a wide range of academic papers. Third, they encourage students to think about what they are doing when they apply the strategies. Throughout the book, the authors warn students that the strategies can produce bad as well as good results,

and they sensibly teach ways of keeping papers from becoming simple-minded. Finally, the book is short, clearly organized, and easy to read. Students should have no trouble understanding the text and making sense of the exercises. We would keep this book on hand as a reference for students who have organizational problems in their writing. The superior student will not need it; the uncertain student, with the teacher's note of caution, will welcome it. According to the authors, "The ultimate test of any textbook is its practicality." For many students, *Strategies for Academic Writing* can be eminently practical.