Instruction at Michigan Technological University. One chapter honestly introduces the problems—the difficulty of finding the “right” personnel, access issues, resource allocation—and emphasizes ways of solving these problems that are convincing to administrators: increased collaboration by faculty and students, increased curricular “engagement,” and new possibilities for research in a pioneering field. Another chapter, “Making Connections,” urges teachers to discuss the laboratory and its possibilities not only among themselves but also “within a larger professional context,” and the chapter succinctly lists the organizations and journals in the field. The appendix illustrates what goes on in Selfe’s own facility, includes “Suggestions for Computer-Intensive Courses,” and offers brief descriptions of the word-processing programs, writing aids, document-design aids, and special communication aids found there.

Creating a Computer Supported Facility is notable for its clarity of style and writing. Each chapter proclaims what it is about, provides rich illustrative figures, and recaps its work. As fine as this encapsulation of the field may be, it is, however, Arthur P. Young’s stand in the Foreword that best expresses the book’s values. He writes, “The hidden benefits that accrue when teachers work together as a ‘community of scholars’ to articulate their assumptions about writing and learning and to make important decisions about the facilities which will support their teaching may be this book's most important message.”


Reviewed by Tim Peeples and Sharon Crowley, Northern Arizona University

This textbook for beginning writers is honest, graceful, and laced with character. Unlike your garden-variety composition textbook that reads like a reference tool, Writing Is Critical Action can be read and enjoyed like fiction or, better, like autobiography. It tells the story of the perilous adventures undergone by writers—novice writers, experienced writers, famous writers—as they try to get better at writing. Warnock is alternatively fellow adventurer, teacher, floundering writer, or awed admirer of some wonderful piece of writing produced by one of her students or by Oates or Dillard or Updike. Her voice accompanies us through the lessons and (re)discoveries of composition. She is honest and open about her own imperfect beginnings and restless writing process. She obviously wants to demystify writing, to disabuse students of the notion that pieces of writing are created by means of immaculate conception. Indeed, demystification is the key word of the first
Writing Is Critical Action is divided into only five chapters. The initial chapter discusses writers' attitudes about writing—both productive and non-productive. Warnock encourages her readers simply to think of themselves as writers, and she attempts to make the writing process seem more accessible and do-able than students commonly take it to be. She also provides an accessible process by which students can become better critical readers, both of their own work and that of others (something that is overlooked in many composition textbooks). In the process, she takes the steam out of some of the myths students subscribe to about finished products—"Don't begin a sentence with 'and'"—many of which have been instilled in them by well-meaning English teachers. The remaining chapters deal with the writing process: how to start, how to sustain writing, how to revise, and how to stop. The innovative final chapter gives advice about overdrafting and underdrafting, and it provides sensible advice for judging the caliber of one's own work. All of this is interlaced with generous selections of professional and student writing.

Each of the chapters is divided into three sections: "Attitudes," "Actions," and "Situations." Warnock's inspiration in this is Kenneth Burke's notion that language is symbolic action. But she goes beyond Burke's sometimes murky theorizing to put these notions to practical use. The "Attitudes" sections are aimed at arming writers with the courage to begin, continue, revise, or stop; they provide strategies for getting over rough spots: "let the lawn die," "expect messy, incoherent, meaningless drafts," "accept that no writing is perfect." The "Actions" sections engage students in writing-to-discover, while the "Situations" sections place students within specific rhetorical settings to which they must adapt their discovery drafts. Warnock's greatest energies are directed at altering writers' attitudes about writing: helping them decide where they fit into the tradition of writing, cajoling them into deciding that they do fit into that tradition, and convincing them that since their processes and products are distinctly their own, their potential place and power within the tradition are real, valuable, and capable of growth.

Warnock rationalizes her approach in the Preface: "The overall progress of the book parallels the movement in each chapter from attitudes to actions to situations—a shift from process to product, from self to other, from personal to public writing." Although the text necessarily pieces itself into these parts, Warnock incessantly reminds us that the boundaries between them are blurred and overlapping. She does make useful distinctions—between writing as discovery and writing for others to read, for example, or between rewriting to suit a particular situation and rewriting as an ongoing process of change and revision. Many writing texts struggle with the double-faceted nature of writing, which is messy, disseminatory, and uncontrollable on the one hand but which must satisfy certain conventions on the other. Often they
overemphasize one aspect of writing at the expense of the other. But Warnock gracefully leads readers through the schizophrenia writers experience when they cease writing for themselves and begin to accommodate their visions to the requirements imposed on them by readers.

Warnock identifies two types of writers: “Ekers” and “Gushers.” The first “tend to be critical more often than they write,” and the latter “tend to write with ease, but they read their own drafts with difficulty.” Warnock does not saddle writers with one of these two identities; eking or gushing can characterize any of us in any given writing situation. But she does use these terms, which represent poles on a continuum describing possible writing processes, to help students choose actions or strategies that will help them complete writing tasks.

The rhetorical power of Warnock’s text lies in its non-academic “pop” character. The book works out of the popular rhetorical tradition of self-help. It can be read as moving through the patient’s history, making a diagnosis, and providing a remedy. This move is effective precisely because of the present power of the self-help rhetorical tradition. If their own reports are to be trusted, few of our composition students have read a book cover-to-cover. But if they have done so, their reading will likely have been in the self-help genre. Our students are comfortable with this genre, and they are practiced in self-diagnosis and prescriptive application. If our goal is to motivate students to write, and if we heed the lessons of the history of rhetoric which instruct us that presentation through currently popular rhetorical forms will engage the greatest number of readers, we must agree that the format Warnock has chosen recommends her text for classroom use.

Our single reservation about Writing Is Critical Action stems from the very excellence of the text. When we began to read this book, we were ready to use it in our composition classes. But as we read we became more hesitant. Warnock’s book is densely packed with beautifully designed and sequenced exercises; it gives the best student-written examples of brainstorming, mapping, and freewriting that we have yet encountered in a composition text; and its exercises create a cooperative, egalitarian, collaborative environment for composing. However, the text is so dense with exercises, so carefully sequenced, and requires so much sustained reading that it is bound to usurp any syllabus with which it is used. It simply can’t be pared down or used up in bits and pieces. An instructor could extract the first exercises of each sequence, which are usually ten-minute freewrites, for class period warm-ups. But the misuse of such a good text would be practically immoral. Any teacher who uses this book should expect it to become the organizing force of her class. But she should be ready to enjoy this dissolution of her authority.