How A Writer Works
by Roger Garrison
Harper and Row, 1981

That famous inexpensive "little book" about
writing (Elements of Style) had best make way
for the latest, not so inexpensive ($5.95) little
book of advice from a working writer and
teacher of writing. Roger Garrison's How A
Writer Works is a succinct, readable, usable
guide to the process of writing. Garrison
considers his book "shoptalk about a craft," not
a textbook for a writing course, nor a
traditional handbook.

Garrison's forte is one-to-one tutorial in-
struction in freshman composition. The Garri-
son method is explained in the Instructor's
Manual, One-to-One: Making Instruction
Effective, a helpful reference except for one
minor shortcoming: the primary bibliographic
reference for research (Sherwin, 1969) is out-
dated by fourteen years. This expertise in one-
to-one tutorial instruction sparks the chapters
that chart the writing process from prewriting
through drafting, revision, and editing. Clear
examples and amusing, instructive analogies
enliven the explanations for all stages of the
process (the book abounds with memorable
analogies—as Garrison suggests, "Use the
familiar to explain the unfamiliar"). The chap-
ter "Writing is Building" leads into the writing
process: prewriting, the gathering of informa-
tion through compilation of fact lists ("making
a list is already writing"), choosing one's point
of view, and writing a rough draft. "Revision—
Seeing Again" justifies ordering the book for
all composition students because it provides a
masterful demonstration of precisely what
Garrison means by writing as discovery and
development.

Just what a writer does during the step-by-
step revision becomes clear as Garrison guides
us through five revisions of a paragraph from
his own journal. With a savvy teacher's flair for
instruction and a writer's sensitivity for detail,
he records an imaginary talk between two
characters in his mind. He dubs them "the
writer (me) and a Reader/Editor (also me),
who represents anyone who reads what I
write." A student can easily follow this writer/
reader dialogue which is printed next to the
typescript of the draft. Together, the dialogue
and text present a remarkably revealing, help-
ful glimpse of nitty gritty decisions a writer
makes along the way to a polished piece of
writing.

Five concise chapters cover the stock-in-
trade matters of conventional handbooks, but
with a difference. Garrison cuts all "elabora-
tion and fancywork." He believes "if you want
to learn to write, do it." Sentences and gram-
mar ("muscles and bones"), punctuation, para-
graphs, wordiness, cliches (ten dozen of them)
—all the traditional subjects are attended to
with dispatch. Appropriate examples and sug-
gestions coach the student when necessary.

A long chapter rounds off the volume by
giving a number of "problems in expression,"
writing tasks of increasing difficulty ranging
from descriptive writing, the writing of instruc-
tions, letters, opinions, and speeches, writing
about writing, writing a poem. Many of these
tasks seem routine, the discussion obvious.
(Garrison notes in his Preface that "a percep-
tive and imaginative instructor can find dozens
of 'appropriate assignments' throughout.")
Buried in this uneven, catch-all chapter, how-
ever, are truths worth repeating.

Garrison's list of practicing writers' responses
will give a flush of encouragement to any
struggling writer. A selection of abbreviated
examples:

• Writers do not count on being inspired.
  They write regularly, whether they feel
  like it or not.
• They work in stages.
• They work slowly.
• They continually go back and reread what
  they have written . . .
• They have writing blocks.
• They put off writing—any excuse . . .

Bits of writers' know-how are set throughout
the book—a stylistic touch which makes it
readable and instructive. Because Garrison
writes from long experience (forty-five years as
a writer and thirty-three as a teacher), I don't
doubt that he practices what he describes. His
delight in his craft and his honest interest in
students come through in passage after pas-
sage. Indeed, his little book deserves to be
read and studied, and it does what he hopes it
would—it "communicates."

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