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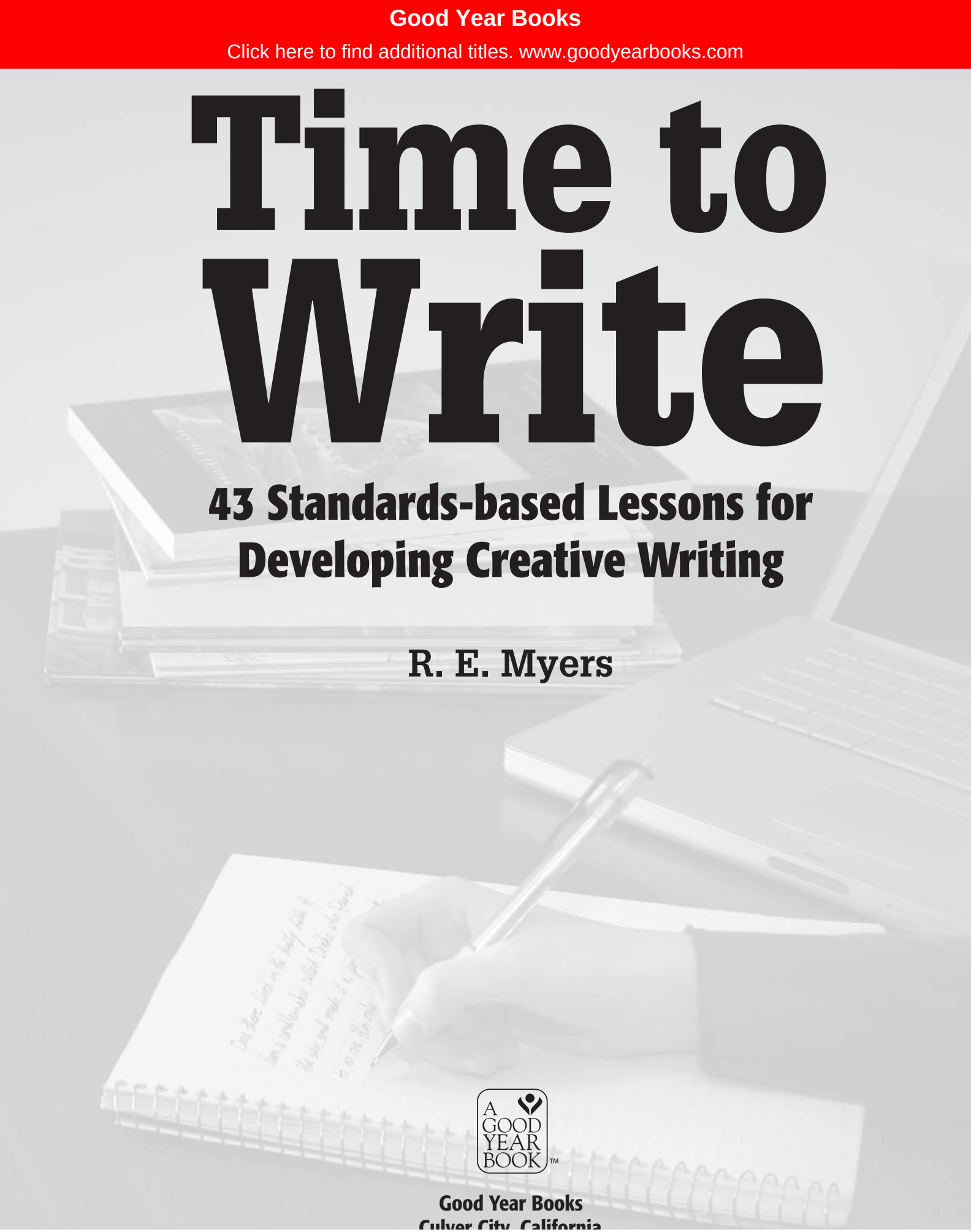
Time to Write

43 Standards-based Lessons for Developing Creative Writing

R. E. Myers



A GOOD YEAR BOOK™

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Culver City, California

Dedication

To my son Ted, with the greatest admiration and affection.

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Preface

Time to Write is not a short course in how to become a professional writer. Nor is it a "by-the-numbers" course in composition. What this book targets is broader and more vague: a student's growth in self-expression. To be truthful, there is an infinite number of ways in which teachers can encourage students to express themselves in words. It is not really difficult to think of devices for stimulating young people to write. However, it *is* difficult to work with each student in such a way that his or her abilities to think and to express himself or herself will grow. Most of the time teachers hope that students will acquire skills and insights as a result of an exposure to literature, life, and teachers' attempts to analyze and clarify issues of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and style. It is a hit-or-miss procedure, but there is none better.

This book does not purport to solve the English teacher's eternal dilemma, but it does attempt to shift some of the responsibility for growth back to where it belongs—on the student's shoulders. Thus I have included self-evaluation techniques in several of the exercises. By inviting students to judge their stories with a scoring guide, by asking them whether they were successful in devising their own exercise in logical thinking after they have tried it out on someone, and by repeatedly asking them to select their most promising reaction in a stimulus word, I have attempted to persuade students that they are capable of evaluating their progress in writing—with your guidance.

In addition to helping students become more self-critical (in a positive way), I hope to encourage them to become more perceptive in viewing their world. That world includes the here and now, and so I have presented them with rather challenging questions regarding their surroundings. Their world also includes this troubled planet, and so I have asked them to think about relationships among countries and peoples. Most importantly, their world is colored and shaped by their own feelings, and so I have invited them to think about themselves and their reactions to a variety of things. If you present students with these exercises at judicious moments, the results could be highly beneficial.

Time to Write, like nearly all of the titles of its units, has several meanings. First of all, it means students should have enough time in which to react to ideas, to digest them, and then to formulate their own ideas in a manner that is consistent with their values and skills. Second, it means that it is high time that students learn to write; when they have reached middle school, we believe they should have begun to develop the skills of expression that will mean so much to them personally and professionally. Finally, *Time to Write* is a book for a student's private thoughts; it is a receptacle, a storage place, for ideas when he or she feels it is time to write. I sincerely hope that this book can be all of these things to you and your students.

—R. E. Myers

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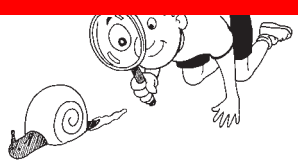

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Introduction

Getting Students Ready to Write

To obtain satisfactory writing efforts from your students, you should create an atmosphere in which there is no threat of evaluation or ridicule. Although young people are naturally fearful of what their peers may do or say when they attempt to express themselves, you can set an example that will be contagious by being nonjudgmental and accepting.

The warm-up or pre-writing stage is particularly important. You must ready students for their thinking and writing by leading into the lessons with appropriate remarks and activities. For example, you can talk about funny misconceptions, show objects or pictures, project transparencies, or play recordings in order to get boys and girls into a writing mood. Note that oral warm-ups are most effective.

Be careful, though, not to put thoughts into their heads. Let their writing result from their own perceptions and insights, not yours. If you can pull off this kind of lesson, you will be delighted with the ideas your students will express.

The Writing Process

After students get their ideas down on paper, the next step is to encourage them to *reflect* upon those ideas. Give them time to consider what they have written. Then they can examine the structure of their writing. That is, after writing two or more sentences, they can examine the order in which they have set down their ideas. Then they can determine whether these notions are consistent with one another ("Does it make sense?"). This activity leads naturally into any rewriting that they find necessary. Students as young as eleven are capable of writing several drafts.

When they are satisfied that they are saying what they want to say, your students can attend to the formal aspects of writing, such as spelling, punctuation, grammar, and manuscript form. (Incidentally, most teachers agree that in the early stages of inspiration it is disastrous to insist that they worry about these matters, and it is inappropriate to fret about handwriting—if students are not use word-processing software—until the final draft.) It is terribly important that they do their own proofreading. Otherwise, the mistakes that you point out could block them from developing their own ideas.

The wise writing teacher, however, does engage in a certain amount of "guiding." Without resorting to the red pencil, he or she can ask pertinent questions about both the form and the substance of the student's work. Students do not usually resent a supportive teacher who asks a few questions during a conference over the first draft.

A last and vital phase begins after students have revised, proofread, corrected, and rewritten their work. This phase occurs when you encourage students—not force them—to share their productions. And, unless a student is especially shy or the writing is very personal, sharing isn't a problem. Students can read their writing aloud or publish it in a student publication. Some teachers like to make bulletin boards of successful assignments. The results of a well-planned and relaxed writing lesson are exciting for the teacher and students alike.

An Overview of the Lessons

There is a wide range of difficulty in the lessons in *Time to Write*. "Winning by Losing," for example, is quite challenging, and so is "A Mixed Blessing." On the other hand, "More or Less" and "A-Mazing" are straightforward and don't make the demands upon a student's knowledge and resources that other lessons do.

By reading through a lesson, you will have a fairly good idea of how your students might respond to it. You won't *know*, of course, because any lesson can have its surprises. The materials in this book are especially designed to bring forth unseen consequences, asking students to think in a way that is different than they are used to doing.

Note that the didactic element is played down in nearly all of the lessons. There are definitions given in some of the lessons, but for the most part the methodology consists of trying to get a student's interest, and then involvement, and then having him or her do some writing as a result. There is little emphasis on making sure that the student knows what a preposition, declarative sentence, or stanza is. *Time to Write* is an *ideabook*, not a workbook.

As suggested above, it is an excellent plan to become thoroughly familiar with instructional material before presenting it to students. For example, if you take a few minutes to read "Finish the Story," you can get an idea of how to administer it and how long it might take for the majority of your students to finish it—if, indeed, you think they should complete all of the

lessons. There are nine story starters in the lesson, and you may want to give your students the option of doing only some of them, rather than all of them. You can also adapt or modify any or all of the lessons and thereby improve them.

How to Use This Book

The lessons in this ideabook follow a pattern. It is one that is based upon the creative thinking process. There are usually three parts or levels to an exercise:

1 The First Level

Many teachers have found that giving students the initiating or first-level activity orally is a good way to warm them up for a writing experience. The warm-up is a well-established and necessary part of the creative thinking process, and it is especially important in allowing young people to orient their thinking and free themselves of inhibitions. This "playing around" stage is critical for anyone who would attempt to engage in a creative endeavor, and putting words together that have been inspired by one's own mental efforts is certainly a creative activity.

These lessons are an attempt to set the stage for creative-thinking-with-words by contriving situations in which young people will be challenged to combine ideas and elements, redefine objects and processes, elaborate upon ideas, predict consequences, explore possibilities, and analyze ideas. Several of the lessons include humorous situations. Along with a playful attitude, a sense of humor is a wonderful lubricant for freeing a flow of original ideas.

2 The Second Level

The second stage generally takes the student a little deeper into the subject. There is a slight push to get the student more involved in thinking about the topic at hand.

3 The Third Level

It is quite possible that a class or an individual student won't really accept an invitation at the third level to express themselves. There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that suggests that in creative thinking activities it is probably wise not to demand a product. Encourage, but do not insist.

Following Through

Many lessons include additional extension ideas so you can take students even further with a particular type of writing.

The lessons in this ideabook will appeal to some of your students more than others, just as some parts of the curriculum fascinate some young people but bore others. You should, however, discover that students who generally aren't "turned on" by regular assignments come alive when they are presented with a creative thinking activity. One of your rewards for engaging your students in activities such as these is to see someone who has been indifferent suddenly begin to shine brightly.

All of these lessons convey a conviction that learning and thinking are continuous and personal. To engage in creative thinking is to rely primarily upon one's own resources, so it follows that the individual student must have practice in expressing himself or herself in order to become an independent thinker. This ideabook provides a number of opportunities for students of widely varying talents and backgrounds to think for themselves in a classroom setting.

LESSON 1

Really Good

Producing Synonyms

About the Lesson

"Really Good" is a short lesson that will have students thinking about synonyms. Except when in class, they probably don't worry that they are often repetitious in their choice of words, especially adjectives and verbs. This lesson will probably not alter the way they talk, but it may give them a nudge when it comes to writing compositions and stories.

Targeted Learner Outcomes

The student will:

- produce synonyms for twelve words, and
- rephrase two sentences, replacing the overworked words.

1 The lesson begins with a brief discussion of the nuances in the meanings of adjectives. You might very well enlarge upon what we say with a discussion of words that have no exact synonyms and others that have an abundance of them.

2 The first part of this section of the lesson requires your students to come up with synonyms that come readily to mind for such words as *car*, *fast*, and *funny*. (The main meanings for *funny* are *humorous* and *peculiar* in ordinary language, and most likely one or more of your students will point this out.) The second part of this section asks your students to think of synonyms for six more words that are perhaps less easy to call up, although most of your students will not have to resort to a dictionary.

Common synonyms for the first six words are:

1. car = automobile
2. fast = swift
3. funny = humorous
4. sweat = perspiration (perspire)
5. eyeglasses = spectacles
6. flower = blossom, bloom

These are acceptable synonyms for the next six words:

7. enemy = foe
8. dry = arid
9. calm = tranquil, serene, quiet
10. lie (noun) = falsehood
11. tuneful = melodious
12. trite = stale

There are probably many overworked expressions other than "really good" that could be used in a two- or three-sentence paragraph such as the one in this lesson about Bert. At one time the adjective *awesome* was used so frequently, especially by young people, that the vocabularies of Americans seemed to be devoid of other superlatives. If *awesome* is still in vogue with your students, you might ask them for other adjectives to substitute for it in the following paragraph. They may have a little trouble in doing so.

> **"Laura's oldest brother's car is the most awesome one I've seen," enthused Rebecca. "Besides being gorgeous, his Corvette is really cool. If you've ever seen it, you probably just about fainted. Not only is it a great color—it's an awesome shade of red—but it goes really fast!"**

3 The two sentences presented in the last section of the lesson are loaded with *really* and *good*. (We believe that the young person speaking would have actually said "*real good*," but for the purposes of this lesson we didn't bother about the grammar.) Students are to find substitutes for those two overworked words. This may be difficult for them.

Following Through

Other overworked words such as *you know, totally, hopefully*, and *awesome* could be discussed in conjunction with this lesson. One wonders if we'll ever be free of *you know* in American speech. Words such as *totally* are contagious, and you might also discuss that aspect of language with your students.