



# TEXT

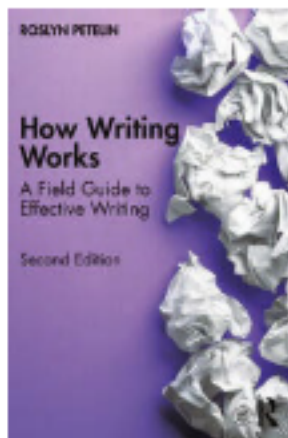
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TEXT review

## Despite the chatbots, writing still works

*review by Rosemary Williamson*



Roslyn Petelin

*How Writing Works: A Field Guide to Effective Writing*, 2nd edition

Routledge, New York, 2022

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The second edition of Roslyn Petelin's *How Writing Works: A Field Guide to Effective Writing* correctly describes itself as:

an engaging and broad-ranging introduction to the elements of grammar, sentence structure, and style that will help you to write well across a range of academic, creative, and professional contexts, deftly combining practical strategies with scholarly principles. (p. iii)

In other words, it is 'an essential handbook for working writers and writing workers' (p. iii).

These phrases – working writers, writing workers – have long helped my students, from undergraduate to postgraduate levels, to conceptualise their writing selves and aspirations. In class, we have talked about career writers and those whose careers involve writing, and the potential to move between the two. I have recommended the first edition of *How Writing Works* as a resource to support and inspire writers of all guises and will do the same for the second edition.

Teachers of writing who have come to rely on *How Writing Works* will be pleased that much of the tried and trusted content of the first edition carries over to the second. Like its predecessor, the second edition contains eleven chapters. Readers begin with clear explications of writing (Chapter 1) and reading (Chapter 2) before moving to chapters on more technical matters such as word usage (Chapter 3), sentences, grammar and paragraphs (chapters 4 and 5) and punctuation (Chapter 6). Chapters 7 and 8 cover structure and design, and genres and workplace documents respectively; Chapter 9 covers academic research and writing. Chapter 10 introduces digital writing and has sections on the ‘insistent and indelible email’ and workplace-related social media and websites, as well as blogs, Twitter and texting. Finally, Chapter 11 addresses revision, editing and proofreading. The frequent inclusion of illuminating facts, examples, quotations and anecdotes enlivens content throughout. Each chapter has activities to complete, with answers supplied for some. Chapters 1 to 7 conclude with lists of further reading, which is a change from the first edition where the lists were placed together later in the book.

Other adjustments as well as updates have been made for the second edition. Some content within chapters has been re-ordered or revised; some examples have been refreshed. New quotations in chapters on grammar and on proofreading will no doubt be welcomed by those readers challenged by what can be seen as ‘drier’ content. Petelin has also simplified some terminology: ‘form-class words’ are now ‘content words’; ‘structure-class words’ are now ‘structure words’. Up-to-date references bring *How Writing Works* into the current decade; for example, the first page draws attention to the ubiquity of writing in daily life by quoting a 2020 estimate of 3.5 billion social media users. Examples of the effect of COVID-19 on language (p. 51) and on online writing (p. 238) remind readers of the social context in which language and writing evolve. All such changes represent refinement of the first edition rather than radical changes to it, which attests to the durability of *How Writing Works*. They also attest to Petelin’s ongoing commitment to supporting an up-to-date community of practice.

Staying up-to-date extends to the second edition of *How Writing Works* acquiring an open-access companion website. This is the most notable change, although the book can stand alone, with its 311 pages providing as comprehensive an explication of writing as did its predecessor’s 325 pages. The website, therefore, functions as an optional supplement to the book. Readers who would benefit from more than what the book itself offers may, however, overlook the website. Only a keen eye will notice the ‘companion website’ logo on the book’s cover because it is small, positioned on the lower-right and overwhelmed by the background image. The introductory page (p. iii) refers to the website, but the URL – [www.routledge.com/cw/petelin](http://www.routledge.com/cw/petelin) – comes later, on the copyright page (p. vi). Readers who miss the URL there can resort to

googling, which leads to Routledge's webpage for *How Writing Works*. That webpage does provide a link to the companion website, but the link is found only after scrolling down past the book's purchase details, description, table of contents, author details and reviews.

However it is accessed, the companion website is worth visiting. The book states that the website 'includes links to video interviews and presentations from leading grammarians ... in addition to online quizzes and activities to support readers' learning' (p. iii), and so it does. But it is also a treasure trove for teachers of writing keen to extend their ideas and resources for classroom activities. The website typically reproduces the activities for each of the book's chapters – although not the answers – and supplements them, sometimes abundantly; for example, Chapter 4 in the book has 21 activities on sentences and content words whereas it has 36 on the website. Some occasional glitches, such as misnumbering of activities, mar the website and at times the presentation falls short of the book: some activities are entirely left-justified when judicious indenting or contrasting font would have aided readability. These details can be altered online, so users of the site may see improvements. Even if they do not, students and teachers of writing alike will find plenty of interest on the website, including links to Petelin's own absorbing writing about writing in such places as *The Conversation*.

In an environment with guides to writing aplenty, *How Writing Works*, through its second edition, continues to stand out as a field guide for writers in a university context and beyond. That said, the second edition was published before generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, appeared, so anybody on the lookout for up-front affirmation of the ongoing relevance of (human) writers may be disappointed. A section on 'Using computers for writing and editing' (pp. 272–73) does acknowledge the promises and the pitfalls of technological interventions in writing and mentions an essay in *The Guardian* ('A robot wrote this entire article', 2020) as a 'not-very-convincing' attempt to show that artificial intelligence can replace writers (p. 273). Much has changed since then, and many of us now grapple with questions about what generative AI tools mean for writers and their teachers.

A question for readers – of the book itself and of this review – is whether guides to writing will become redundant. We can now feed prompts into a chatbot that writes for us and even generates text that shows us, as human beings, how to interact via the written word with other human beings. Yet writing essentially concerns communication between people and involves understanding of the attendant complexities. As Anne Surma (2005, pp. 17–18) says about professional writing, we can see writing 'as a creative, critical and dialogic process, central to which is the imaginative negotiation of rhetorical and ethical issues and choices relating to language and to its forging of specific relations between writers and readers'. Imagination, then, is the very human attribute behind writing that works, and that ensures the ongoing need for guides such as Petelin's.

Amid the recent flurry of experiments, webinars and commentary on ChatGPT, I asked students in my professional writing class whether they will choose to use chatbots for writing. The resounding answer was no. They said they want to experience the satisfaction of being working writers and writing workers who are informed and skilled, and confident in their craft. They

said they value writing of all kinds as a process and product that enables them to connect with other people.

All of us should hope for a third edition of *How Writing Works*.

## References

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