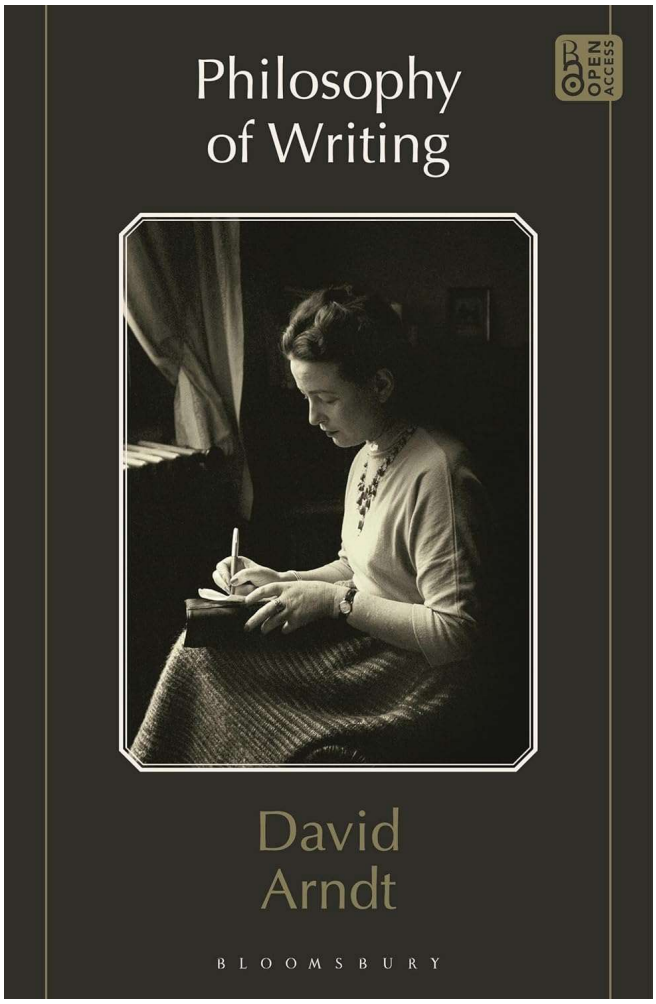
BOWLING GREEN DAILY NEWS

New book reveals writing as deeper than technique

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"Philosophy of Writing" by David Arndt. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026, 224 pages, $22.95 (paperback).



"Writing is seen as a way to communicate when language itself is viewed as a tool of communication," David Arndt explains near the beginning of "Philosophy of Writing," his exquisite new primer on a skill we all use but few truly understand. "But this view fails to see the place of language in human life. Every language articulates a common understanding of the world, in which things have sense and value for a community. To learn a language is to appropriate that common understanding and to move toward joining that community and entering its world. A child without language would not fully enter the human world or fully realize her potential as a human being. Language is not just a tool that humans have; it is in and through language that we become fully human."

"Writing can be a path to greater understanding because the act of composing a text pushes us to think," the author continues. "William Zinsser used to say, 'writing is thinking on paper.' Walter Kaufman said, 'Writing is thinking in slow motion.' Stanley Hauerwas wrote that 'Writing is hard and difficult work because to write is to think. I do not have an idea and then find a way to express it. The expression is the idea. So I write because writing is the only way I know how to think."

"But to link writing and thinking clarifies nothing as long as the nature of thought remains unclear," he adds. "We have to ask about thought itself: What is thinking? What does it mean to think?"

Full disclosure: I was immediately drawn to "Philosophy of Writing" when it was suggested by a colleague that this might be one that I'd enjoy reviewing. The person who made the recommendation obviously knows me well. I was hooked on Arndt's prose from the moment I read the first page. Those with a background in literature and philosophy will no doubt find this one intriguing and instructive, although anyone with even a passing interest in being a more effective writer will find this resource to be an invaluable addition to their tool kit.

Structurally, the book is comprised of four major sections: "Questions," "Kinds of Thought," "Kinds of Writing," and "Principles of Composition." Each of these major divisions consists of several relatively concise yet deceptively comprehensive chapters, each approaching the subject at hand from a very applications-oriented perspective. The narrative is well researched, with eight pages of citations and sixteen pages of source notes.

Everyone who takes the time to reflect on what Arndt is attempting to convey in “Philosophy of Writing” will undoubtedly have their own favorite chapters, which is one of the more attractive features of this effort. For me, one of those was “Perspective,” one of the insightful selections from “Kinds of Thought.” For reasons I am still contemplating, the following passage resonates with me on several levels:

“The truth of perspective is not just a matter of correspondence (correctness or rightness) but also a matter of aletheia (revelation or illumination). When we consider the truth of a perspective, we have to ask what it gets right: Does it offer a vision that accurately and fully corresponds to reality? But we also have to ask what it reveals and conceals. What does it let us see clearly? What does it let us see only in a distorted way? And what does it not let us see at all – what are blind spots proper to its point of view, and the horizon proper to the standpoint?”

Excellent questions that I find applicable to my own work, especially when I am developing and expanding upon a predetermined theme in one of my op-ed pieces. I often stop and ask myself: What am I really trying to say here? What are my underlying motivations? Am I honestly trying to be objective? Am I giving due diligence to the so-called opposing point of view? Arndt provides the framework for considering these aspects of our writing in a structured and systematic way.

After completing his undergraduate degree in literature and philosophy at Deep Springs College, Arndt went on to earn his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature (French, German, and Classical Greek) from UC Irvine, where he studied with Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida (working three terms as Derrida's research assistant). Currently he teaches literature, philosophy, and Attic Greek in the Integral Program of Liberal Arts at Saint Mary's College of California. His first book, “Arendt on the Political,” was published in 2019 by Cambridge University Press.

One of the more compelling explanations for why I found this book so fascinating lies in my ability to relate to something Arndt revealed in the Afterward:

“As a student, I had taken several courses on writing, and they all taught writing as a craft. Craft was understood as a matter of technical skills, and skills were taught through lists of imperatives that dictated how to construct sentences, organize paragraphs, lay out arguments, and structure stories. But these dictates were detached from any reflection on the practice of writing, and its final aims. Writing was reduced to a matter of technique, and the question of how to write was answered in purely technical terms.”

This has been a constant criticism of mine for literally decades: why are some writers (and especially those who also happen to be teachers) obsessed with the technical aspects of process as opposed to what you are actually trying to convey. Granted, you need to have some mastery of those aspects of writing, but it really comes down to what you are trying to say. Those who advocate format over content seem to be missing the point. I know some faculty members who would give a student a failing grade if they turned in a paper curing cancer but failed to get the manuscript in perfect APA style.

Appropriate or not, I could not help but see Arndt as a kindred spirit when it comes to his emphasis on this nontrivial point. My teachers in high school focused on critical thinking and imagination more than grammar (which we pretty much had mastered by sixth grade). I appreciate them more with each passing year.

As Anita Mohon observes in her review on Amazon.com, the book is “elegant and lucid, bolstered with insights from a range of thinkers/writers - this is an excellent addition to any composition class.”

I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.