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## Book Reviews

### ***Great Writing 2: Great Paragraphs (4th ed.)***

Keith Folse, April Muchmore-Vokoun, Elena Vestri Solomon.  
National Geographic Learning/Cengage Learning, (2014)  
(302 pages). ISBN: 978-1-285-19490-5 Price: 2,960 yen

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Textbooks rarely get through four editions without doing something right, and *Great Writing 2* certainly does a lot well. However, this latest edition, the intermediate-level volume in a six-level academic writing series, often attempts to do too much and gets some of it wrong for the Japanese market.

The first two units of *Great Writing 2* present the main features of a paragraph, provide suggestions for peer editing, and briefly introduce the brainstorming process. The following three units familiarize students with the basic components of the academic paragraph (topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence). After a brief paragraph review unit, the next five units focus in turn on five common rhetorical modes: Definition, Process, Description, Opinion, and Narrative. These modes are presented roughly in order of complexity and difficulty for students (though the unit on Narrative might come earlier or even be omitted). The final unit begins work on developing five-paragraph essays, which is the focus of the next level in the textbook series.

Each unit opens with several model paragraphs, moves on to grammar and vocabulary exercises, and finishes with peer editing and timed writing activities.

The book has enough material for 60-80 hours of instruction, or a year-long course meeting twice a week; however, the authors suggest that the material can be completed in 40 hours, which would fit a course meeting once a week if writing assignments are completed outside of class.

The two units on topic sentences and supporting sentences are especially useful. Through a series of careful and well-ordered exercises, students learn to write topic sentences that are specific and control paragraph content. The concepts of topic vs. topic sentence, controlling idea, and adequate support can be difficult, as they are a bit rigid and artificial; moreover, they are rarely used in more common non-academic forms of English prose writing (such as popular essays and journalism) that Japanese students might have read. Some academic writing textbooks (e.g., the *NorthStar: Reading & Writing* series and the *Longman Academic Writing Series*) describe the topic sentence merely as a sentence at the beginning of a paragraph which gives the topic or main idea. Further, they do not discuss or give very much practice to the functions of and differences between topic, topic sentence, and controlling idea until the third or fourth volumes in their series, at a point where students are already working on full essays. Other non-academic writing textbooks, such as the *Writing from Within* series, do not deal with the distinction at all.

The grammar points selected for most units are well motivated, for example, using adjective clauses in definition paragraphs and employing prepositions of location in descriptive writing. However, the accompanying grammar exercises are often too brief and require supplementation. Each unit also has two vocabulary activities, one on synonyms and antonyms and another on collocations. However, this attempt to develop vocabulary skills seems better suited for a reading textbook than for a writing one.

A “Brief Writer’s Handbook” at the end of the book provides guidance in the writing process, editing, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, citation of source material, and avoidance of plagiarism. It also offers valuable lists of words/phrases commonly used in the five rhetorical modes covered. Somehow, however, phrase lists for two other modes (cause/effect and comparison/contrast), which are not part of the main textbook material, are also included. The handbook ends with a

series of sentence-combining exercises for each unit, which should help improve students' ability to write longer and more complex sentences.

A variety of supplementary materials is available, some free and some for purchase. The most valuable is the free textbook companion Web site, which offers useful online materials for both teachers and students. The "Instructor Downloads" section provides an Answer Key, Peer Editing Sheets, and Teacher's Notes. "Student Resources" include Flashcards, a Glossary, and Peer Editing Sheets. However, most of the peer editing worksheets need to be adapted in order to review and reinforce points studied in previous units.

There is also a wide array of optional resources, including a CD-ROM containing numerous interactive activities. An "Online Workbook" also provides extra grammar, vocabulary, and editing exercises. A software program allows teachers to use the textbook material on an interactive whiteboard or with a computer and projector. The textbook is also available in eBook format, which will probably not be suitable for most students since eBook readers have yet to catch on in Japan.

So, what is new in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition? Primarily, the impressive graphics and the layout. Each unit begins with discussion-prompting questions based on a striking National Geographic photograph. Many more pages throughout the book are half filled with large photos, some quite dramatic and others merely charming, related to paragraph topics. In addition, the "Grammar for Writing" sections have been slightly redesigned and, in some cases, expanded. For instance, an activity on two common sentence errors, comma splices and sentence fragments, now also deals with run-on sentences. Finally, this new edition includes Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List.

Unfortunately, some of the model paragraph topics are unduly obscure. For example, Unit 3 (Topic Sentence) opens with a paragraph on the benefits of driving a car with a manual transmission, which is something that few students are familiar with. Unit 6 (Definition Paragraphs) previews its opening model paragraph about gumbo, the spicy seafood dish, with the following questions: "What do you know about the people of Louisiana? Do you know anything about the Cajun people?" For most Japanese students, these prompts will not

elicit much discussion or provide any schema building. In addition, all units have more model paragraphs than are necessary at this level. I have found that two or three model paragraphs per unit are sufficient, rather than the six to ten provided. Most teachers will find it more productive and time saving to limit the number of model paragraphs and, on occasion, substitute more accessible topics (e.g., the benefits of a new smartphone app). Furthermore, teachers who wish to focus purely on expository writing can easily skip the units on descriptive and narrative paragraphs, as these two modes are not very common in academic writing.

A final caveat concerns the textbook's size and weight. The 4<sup>th</sup> edition is only slightly longer (19 pages) than the 3<sup>rd</sup>; however, due to its thick paper stock, it is much heavier. This has been a complaint among my students, who are accustomed to books that are easier to carry.

Finally, it should be noted that *Great Writing 2* definitely seems to have been designed for lower-intermediate level students in an ESL environment rather than an EFL one, such as Japan. However, I have found it completely usable and effective in my upper-intermediate level required first-year writing courses (average class size of 25-30 students, meeting twice per week) for Global Communication majors at a Japanese university. The National Geographic color photographs are much more appealing and motivating to students than the simple, dull graphics found in the average writing textbook. In addition, the amount of supplementary material and resources is impressive, allowing for considerably more flexibility and variety in lesson planning and presentation than is normal with most textbooks. By the end of the year, I find that the majority of my students have thoroughly learned the basics of paragraph organization, produced multiple drafts of paragraphs in five different rhetorical modes, and begun exploring how these paragraph structures can be expanded into five-paragraph essays.

Although comprehensive and valuable, *Great Writing 2* does offer a rather heavy instructional diet for Japanese students, who are used to smaller portions in their lessons. With a certain amount of reduction (model paragraphs and vocabulary exercises) and supplementation (grammar points and peer editing

worksheets), *Great Writing 2* will help students learn to produce coherent, complete paragraphs and get them on the path to writing full academic essays.

## References

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