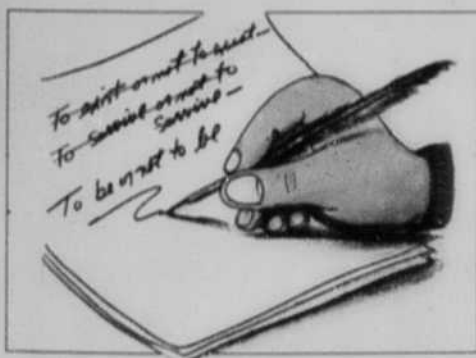


words possible? If not, change them. Does each sentence you have written precisely convey the meaning you intended? If not, try again. "Good writing is extraordinarily time-consuming," observes Richard C. Marius, director of Harvard's Expository Writing Program. "You have to sit and shut out the rest of the world."

And remember: spelling and grammar do count—not because they satisfy what UT's Trimble calls "formalistic old fuddy-duddies," but because they help clarify and refine meaning. "I smelled the oysters going down the stairs for dinner"—a student solecism supplied by the University of Wisconsin's Madison campus writing lab—does not convey what the writer meant.

■ **Read your prose aloud.** This is a most useful way to determine whether your writing is



awkward or stilted. If it sounds strange or incomprehensible to your ear, it probably will strike the reader the same way. This is also an excellent exercise for checking the rhythms of your writing. If every single sentence is a simple declarative statement (or, alternatively, too long and convoluted), you will hear it immediately—and be able to vary your pace to make it better.

■ **Practice.** You learn to write by reading and writing as much as you can. English



courses are not the only places to work on your writing: strive for the same tight thinking, the same clarity and even elegance of expression by writing for your biology or business or art classes—even if no writing is formally required. It's not simply a matter of honing the skill. The discipline of writing also forces you to think in a way that enhances your learning. And although many students—and even some professors—contend that writing is not useful in disciplines outside English, that is arrant nonsense. It is no accident that an economist like John Kenneth Galbraith and scientists like Lewis Thomas and Stephen Jay Gould are renowned in their respective fields. They have mastered the art of communicating difficult disciplines to nonspecialists with grace, lucidity and wit.

■ **Seek criticism.** If you can't get harried professors to critique your writing, don't despair. Many schools maintain one-on-one tutorial programs that will help with everything from a term paper to a cover letter for a job application. Wisconsin's writing lab, for instance, operates much like a clinic: students make appointments with instructors who examine their work closely, then work with them on their weaknesses. Even if your school does not have such a resource, don't give up. Ask friends and classmates to read your work—and be honest in their reactions.

Remember, there are no set formulas for good writing. Many students arrive at college with the notion, imparted in high school, that the perfect essay is exactly five paragraphs long with five sentences within each paragraph. Too many "have no conception that you can think or write in any other way," says Princeton writing instructor Madeleine Picciotto. "That's what got them A's in high school—a certain kind of pompous, pretentious, automatic writing." In fact, of course, there is no easy formula. Good writing involves rigorous thought, a lot of work and—at its very best—the inspiration and courage to take some risks. Economist Galbraith, who cautions that he never achieves his wonderful "spontaneity" of expression before the seventh revision, quotes an editor he once worked for: "Anyone who says writing is easy is either a bad writer or an unregenerate liar."

MERRILL SHEILS with ALAN DEUTSCHMAN in Princeton, N.J., TIM KELLEY in Madison, Wis., BEN SHERWOOD in Cambridge, Mass., and KELLY KNOX in Austin, Texas

You learn to write by reading and writing as much as you can. Try practicing your skills even in courses where writing is not formally required

