

Welcome to class. These blue notes are the thoughts I have as I am reading. Bartholomae and Petrosky say reading should be a conversation, where we speak back. This writing is my way of showing you how I speak back to the text. Sometimes I just summarize a paragraph in a few words. Other times I ask questions, make a comparison, or even challenge the authors. I encourage you to speak as well.

Introduction: Ways of Reading

David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky

Making a Mark

Reading involves a fair measure of push and shove. You make your mark on a book and it makes its mark on you. Reading is not simply a matter of hanging back and waiting for a piece, or its author, to tell you what the writing has to say. In fact, one of the difficult things about reading is that the pages before you will begin to speak only when the authors are silent and you begin to speak in their place, sometimes for them—doing their work, continuing their projects—and sometimes for yourself, following your own agenda.

This is an unusual way to talk about reading, we know. We have not mentioned finding information or locating an author's purpose or identifying main ideas, useful though these skills are, because the purpose of our book is to offer you occasions to imagine other ways of reading. We think of reading as a social interaction—sometimes peaceful and polite, sometimes not so peaceful and polite.

We'd like you to imagine that when you read the works we've collected here, somebody is saying something to you, and we'd like you to imagine that you are in a position to speak back, to say something of your own in turn. In other words, we are not presenting our book as a miniature library (a place to find information) and we do not think of you, the reader, as a term-paper writer (a person looking for information to write down on three-by-five cards).

When you read, you hear an author's voice as you move along; you believe a person with something to say is talking to you. You pay attention, even when you don't completely understand what is being said, trusting that it will all make sense in the end, relating what the author says to what you already know or expect to hear or learn. Even if you don't quite grasp everything you are reading at every moment (and you won't), and even if you don't remember everything you've read (no reader does—at least not in long, complex pieces), you begin to see the outlines of the author's project, the patterns and rhythms of that particular way of seeing and interpreting the world.

When you stop to talk or write about what you've read, the author is silent; you take over—it is your turn to write, to begin to respond to what the author said. At that point this author and his or her text become something you construct out of what you remember or what you notice as you go back through the text a second time, working from passages or examples but filtering them through your own predisposition to see or read in particular ways.

In "The Achievement of Desire," one of the essays in this book, Richard Rodriguez tells the story of his education, of how he was drawn to imitate his teachers because of his desire to think and speak like them. His is not a simple story of hard work and success, however. In a sense, Rodriguez's education gave him what he wanted—status, knowledge, a way of understanding himself and his position in the world. At the same time, his education made it difficult to talk to his parents, to share their point of view; and to a degree, he felt himself becoming consumed by the powerful ways of seeing and understanding represented by his reading and his education. The

Reading could be a conversation. How so?

After we read, we write. This writing allows us to make sense of the text, and to do so in a way that aligns with our own vision and experiences. This is good.

essay can be seen as Rodriguez's attempt to weigh what he had gained against what he had lost.

If ten of us read his essay, each would begin with the same words on the page, but when we discuss the chapter (or write about it), each will retell and interpret Rodriguez's story differently; we will emphasize different sections—some, for instance, might want to discuss the strange way Rodriguez learned to read, others might be taken by his difficult and changing relations to his teachers, and still others might want to think about Rodriguez's remarks about his mother and father.

Each of us will come to his or her own sense of what is significant, of what the point is, and the odds are good that what each of us makes of the essay will vary from one to another. Each of us will understand Rodriguez's story in his or her own way, even though we read the same piece. At the same time, if we are working with Rodriguez's essay (and not putting it aside or ignoring its peculiar way of thinking about education), we will be working within a framework he has established, one that makes education stand, metaphorically, for a complicated interplay between permanence and change, imitation and freedom, loss and achievement.

In "The Achievement of Desire," Rodriguez tells of reading a book by Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*. He was captivated by a section of this book in which Hoggart defines a particular kind of student, the "scholarship boy." Here is what Rodriguez says:

Then one day, leafing through Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, I found, in his description of the scholarship boy, myself. For the first time I realized that there were other students like me, and so I was able to frame the meaning of my academic success, its consequent price—the loss.

For Rodriguez, this phrase, "scholarship boy," became the focus of Hoggart's book. Other people, to be sure, would read that book and take different phrases or sections as the key to what Hoggart has to say. Some might argue that Rodriguez **misread** the book, that it is really about something else, about British culture, for example, or about the class system in England. The power and value of Rodriguez's reading, however, are represented by what he was able to do with what he read, and what he was able to do was not record information or summarize main ideas but, as he says, "frame the meaning of my academic success." Hoggart provided a frame, a way for Rodriguez to think and talk about his own history as a student. As he goes on in his essay, Rodriguez not only uses this frame to talk about his experience, but he resists it, argues with it. He casts his experience in Hoggart's terms but then makes those terms work for him by seeing both what they can and what they cannot do. This combination of reading, thinking, and writing is what we mean by *strong reading*, a way of reading we like to encourage in our students.

When we have taught "The Achievement of Desire" to our students, it has been almost impossible for them not to see themselves in Rodriguez's description of the scholarship boy (and this was true of students who were not minority students and not literally on scholarships). They, too, have found a way of framing (even inventing) their own lives as students—students whose histories involve both success and loss. When we have asked our students to write about this essay, however, some students have argued, and quite convincingly, that Rodriguez had either to abandon his family and

It is not necessarily bad to "misread" the book, when that misreading allows us to make sense of the book based on our own experience.

culture or to remain ignorant. Other students have argued equally convincingly that Rodriguez's anguish was destructive and self-serving, that he was trapped into seeing his situation in terms that he might have replaced with others. He did not necessarily have to turn his back on his family. Some have contended that Rodriguez's problems with his family had nothing to do with what he says about education, that he himself shows how imitation need not blindly lead a person away from his culture, and these student essays, too, have been convincing.

Reading, in other words, can be the occasion for you to put things together, to notice this idea or theme rather than that one, to follow a writer's announced or secret ends while simultaneously following your own. When this happens, when you forge a reading of a story or an essay, you make your mark on it, casting it in your terms. But the story makes its mark on you as well, teaching you not only about a subject (Rodriguez's struggles with his teachers and his parents, for example) but about a way of seeing and understanding a subject. The text provides the opportunity for you to, see through someone else's powerful language, to imagine your own familiar settings through the images, metaphors, and ideas of others. Rodriguez's essay, in other words, can make its mark on readers, but they, too, if they are strong, active readers, can make theirs on it.

Readers learn to put things together by writing. It is not something you can do, at least not to any degree, while you are reading. It requires that you work on what you have read, and that work best takes shape when you sit down to write. We will have more to say about this kind of thinking in a later section of the introduction, but for now let us say that writing gives you a way of going to work on the text you have read. To write about a story or essay, you go back to what you have read to find phrases or passages that define what for you are the key moments, that help you interpret sections that seem difficult or troublesome or mysterious. If you are writing an essay of your own, the work that you are doing gives a purpose and a structure to that rereading.

Writing also, however, gives you a way of going back to work on the text of your own reading. It allows you to be self-critical. You can revise not just to make your essay neat or tight or tidy but to see what kind of reader you have been, to examine the pattern and consequences in the choices you have made. Revision, in other words, gives you the chance to work on your essay, but it also gives you an opportunity to work on your reading—to qualify or extend or question your interpretation of, say, “The Achievement of Desire.”

Why do we write? What is the purpose of revision?

We can describe this process of “re-vision,” or re-seeing, fairly simply. You should not expect to read “The Achievement of Desire” once and completely understand the essay or know what you want to say. You will work out what you have to say while you write. And once you have constructed a reading—once you have completed a draft of your essay, in other words—you can step back, see what you have done, and go back to work on it. Through this activity—writing and rewriting—we have seen our students become strong, active, and critical readers.

Not everything a reader reads is worth that kind of effort. The pieces we have chosen for this book all provide, we feel, powerful ways of seeing (or framing) our common experience. The selections cannot be quickly summarized. They are striking, surprising, sometimes troubling in how they challenge common ways of seeing the world. Some of them (we're thinking of pieces by Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault,

Not all essays or texts are worth “strong reading.” But the ones in this anthology are (as are the ones in our AMH 2042 course)

Clifford Geertz, and Adrienne Rich) have captured and altered the way our culture sees and understands daily experience. The essays have changed the ways people think and write. In fact, every selection in the book is one that has given us, our students, and our colleagues that dramatic experience, almost like a discovery, when we suddenly saw things as we had never seen them before and, as a consequence, we had to work hard to understand what had happened and how our thinking had changed.

If we recall, for example, the first time we read Susan Griffin's "Our Secret" or John Edgar Wideman's "Our Time," we know that they have radically shaped our thinking. We carry these essays with us in our minds, mulling over them, working through them, hearing Griffin and Wideman in sentences we write or sentences we read. We introduce the essays in classes we teach whenever we can; we are surprised, reading them for the third or fourth time, to find things we didn't see before. It's not that we failed to "get" these essays the first time around. In fact, we're not sure we have captured them yet, at least not in any final sense, and we disagree in basic ways about what Griffin and Wideman are saying or about how these essays might best be used. Essays like these are not the sort that you can "get" like a loaf of bread at the store. We're each convinced that the essays are ours in that we know best what's going on in them, and yet we have also become theirs, creatures of these essays, because of the ways they have come to dominate our seeing, talking, reading, and writing. This captivity is something we welcome, yet it is also something we resist.

Our experience with these texts is a remarkable one and certainly hard to provide for others, but the challenges and surprises are reasons we read—we hope to be taken and changed in just these ways. Or, to be more accurate, it is why we read outside the daily requirements to keep up with the news or conduct our business. And it is why we bring reading into our writing courses.

Ways of Reading

Before explaining how we organized this book, we would like to say more about the purpose and place of the kind of strong, aggressive, labor intensive reading we've been referring to.

Readers face many kinds of experiences, and certain texts are written with specific situations in mind and invite specific ways of reading. Some texts, for instance, serve very practical purposes—they give directions or information. Others, like the short descriptive essays often used in English textbooks and anthologies, celebrate common ways of seeing and thinking and ask primarily to be admired. These texts seem self-contained; they announce their own meanings with little effort and ask little from the reader, making it clear how they want to be read and what they have to say. They ask only for a nod of the head or for the reader to take notes and give a sigh of admiration ("yes, that was very well said"). They are clear and direct. It is as though the authors could anticipate all the questions their essays might raise and solve all the problems a reader might imagine. There is not much work for a reader to do, in other words, except, perhaps, to take notes and, in the case of textbooks, to work step-by-step, trying to remember as much as possible.

This is how assigned readings are often presented in university classrooms. Introductory textbooks (in biology or business, for instance) are good examples of books

The “main idea” style of reading requires foundational thinking, but not higher-level thinking.

that ask little of readers outside of note-taking and memorization. In these texts the writers are experts and your job, as novice, is to digest what they have to say. And, appropriately, the task set before you is to summarize—so you can speak again what the author said, so you can better remember what you read. Essay tests are an example of the writing tasks that often follow this kind of reading. You might, for instance, study the human nervous system through textbook readings and lectures and then be asked to write a summary of what you know from both sources. Or a teacher might ask you during a class discussion to paraphrase a paragraph from a textbook describing chemical cell communication to see if you understand what you’ve read.

Another typical classroom form of reading is reading for main ideas. With this kind of reading you are expected to figure out what most people (or most people within a certain specialized group of readers) would take as the main idea of a selection. There are good reasons to read for main ideas. For one, it is a way to learn how to imagine and anticipate the values and habits of a particular group—test-makers or, if you’re studying business, Keynesian economists, perhaps. If you are studying business, to continue this example, you must learn to notice what Keynesian economists notice—for instance, when they analyze the problems of growing government debt—to share key terms, to know the theoretical positions they take, and to adopt for yourself their common examples and interpretations, their jargon, and their established findings.

There is certainly nothing wrong with reading for information or reading to learn what experts have to say about their fields of inquiry. These are not, however, the only ways to read, although they are the ones most often taught. Perhaps because we think of ourselves as writing teachers, we are concerned with presenting other ways of reading in the college and university curriculum.

A danger arises in assuming that reading is only a search for information or main ideas. There are ways of thinking through problems and working with written texts which are essential to academic life, but which are not represented by summary and paraphrase or by note-taking and essay exams.

Student readers, for example, can take responsibility for determining the meaning of the text. They can work as though they were doing something other than finding ideas already there on the page and they can be guided by their own impressions or questions as they read. We are not, now, talking about finding hidden meanings. If such things as hidden meanings can be said to exist, they are hidden by readers’ habits and prejudices (by readers’ assumptions that what they read should tell them what they already know), or by readers’ timidity and passivity (by their unwillingness to take the responsibility to speak their minds and say what they notice).

Reading to locate meaning in the text places a premium on memory, yet a strong reader is not necessarily a person with a good memory. This point may seem minor, but we have seen too many students haunted because they could not remember everything they read or retain a complete essay in their minds. A reader could set herself the task of remembering as much as she could from Walker Percy’s “The Loss of the Creature,” an essay filled with stories about tourists at the Grand Canyon and students in a biology class, but a reader could also do other things with that essay; a reader might figure out, for example, how both students and tourists might be said to have a common problem seeing what they want to see. Students who read Percy’s essay as a memory test end up worrying about bits and pieces (bits and pieces they could go back and find if they

had to) and turn their attention away from the more pressing problem of how to make sense of a difficult and often ambiguous essay.

A reader who needs to have access to something in the essay can use simple memory aids. A reader can go back and scan, for one thing, to find passages or examples that might be worth reconsidering. Or a reader can construct a personal index, making marks in the margin or underlining passages that seem interesting or mysterious or difficult. A mark is a way of saying, "This is something I might want to work on later." If you mark the selections in this book as you read them, you will give yourself a working record of what, at the first moment of reading, you felt might be worth a second reading.

If Percy's essay presents problems for a reader, they are problems of a different order from summary and recall. The essay is not the sort that tells you what it says. You would have difficulty finding one sentence that sums up or announces, in a loud and clear voice, what Percy is talking about. At the point you think Percy is about to summarize, he turns to one more example that complicates the picture, as though what he is discussing defies his attempts to sum things up. Percy is talking about tourists and students, about such things as individual "sovereignty" and our media culture's "symbolic packages," but if he has a point to make, it cannot be stated in a sentence or two.

In fact, Percy's essay is challenging reading in part because it does not have a single, easily identifiable main idea. A reader could infer that it has several points to make, none of which can be said easily and some of which, perhaps, are contradictory. To search for information, or to ignore the rough edges in search of a single, paraphrasable idea, is to divert attention from the task at hand, which is not to remember what Percy says but to speak about the essay and what it means to you, the reader. In this sense, the Percy essay is not the sum of its individual parts; it is, more accurately, what its readers make of it.

A reader could go to an expert on Percy to solve the problem of what to make of the essay—perhaps to a teacher, perhaps to a book in the library. And if the reader pays attention, he could remember what the expert said or she could put down notes on paper. But in doing either, the reader only rehearses what he or she has been told, abandoning the responsibility to make the essay meaningful. There are ways of reading, in other words, in which Percy's essay "The Loss of the Creature" is not what it means to the experts but what it means to you as a reader willing to take the chance to construct a reading. **You can be the authority on Percy; you don't have to turn to others.** The meaning of the essay, then, is something you develop as you go along, something for which you must take final responsibility. The meaning is forged from reading the essay, to be sure, but it is determined by what you do with the essay, by the connections you can make and your explanation of why those connections are important, and by your account of what Percy might mean when he talks about "symbolic packages" or a "loss of sovereignty" (phrases Percy uses as key terms in the essay). This version of Percy's essay will finally be yours; it will not be exactly what Percy said. (Only his words in the order he wrote them would say exactly what he said.) You will choose the path to take through his essay and support it as you can with arguments, explanations, examples, and commentary.

This is good! Do this!

This is soooo critical. In this college course, I want you to make your own interpretations. Life becomes richer when we risk deciding for ourselves what a text means. That is the goal here.

If an essay or a story is not the sum of its parts but something you as a reader create by putting together those parts that seem to matter personally, then the way to begin, once you have read a selection in this collection, is by reviewing what you recall, by going back to those places that stick in your memory—or, perhaps, to those sections you marked with checks or notes in the margins. You begin by seeing what you can make of these memories and notes. You should realize that with essays as long and complex as those we've included in this book, you will never feel, after a single reading, as though you have command of everything you read. This is not a problem. After four or five readings (should you give any single essay that much attention), you may still feel that there are parts you missed or don't understand. This sense of incompleteness is part of the experience of reading, at least the experience of reading serious work. And it is part of the experience of a strong reader. No reader could retain one of these essays in her mind, no matter how proficient her memory or how experienced she might be. No reader, at least no reader we would trust, would admit that he understood everything that Michel Foucault or Adrienne Rich or Edward Said had to say. What strong readers know is that they have to begin, and they have to begin regardless of their doubts or hesitations. What you have after your first reading of an essay is a starting place, and you begin with your marked passages or examples or notes, with questions to answer, or with problems to solve. Strong readings, in other words, put a premium on individual acts of attention and composition.

This would be a good place to take a break. Maybe stop and take some notes. Try to summarize what you have learned without looking at the text. Go on a tangent if necessary; make personal connections with the lessons

Strong Readers, Strong Texts

We chose pieces for this book that invite strong readings. Our selections require more attention (or a different form of attention) than a written summary, a reduction to gist, or a recitation of main ideas. They are not “easy” reading. The challenges they present, however, do not make them inaccessible to college students. The essays are not specialized studies; they have interested, pleased, or piqued general and specialist audiences alike. To say that they are challenging is to say, then, that they leave some work for a reader to do. They are designed to teach a reader new ways to read (or to step outside habitual ways of reading), and they anticipate readers willing to take the time to learn. These readers need not be experts on the subject matter. Perhaps the most difficult problem for students is to believe that this is true.

You do not need experts to explain these stories and essays, although you could probably go to the library and find an expert guide to most of the selections we've included. Let's take, for example, Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." This essay looks at the history of women's writing (and at Rich's development as a poet). It argues that women have been trapped within a patriarchal culture—speaking in men's voices and telling stories prepared by men—and, as a consequence, according to Rich, "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us."

You could go to the library to find out how Rich is regarded by experts, by literary critics or feminist scholars, for example; you could learn how her work fits into an established body of work on women's writing and the representation of women in modern culture. You could see what others have said about the writers she cites:

Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, and Elizabeth Bishop. You could see how others have read and made use of Rich's essay. You could see how others have interpreted the poems she includes as part of her argument. You could look for standard definitions of key terms like "patriarchy" or "formalism."

Though it is often important to seek out other texts and to know what other people are saying or have said, it is often necessary and even desirable to begin on your own. Rich can also be read outside any official system of interpretation. She is talking, after all, about our daily experience. And when she addresses the reader, she addresses a person—not a term-paper writer. When she says, "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it," she means us and what we know and how we know what we know. (The "we" of her essay could be said to refer most accurately to women readers, leading men to feel the kind of exclusion women must feel when the reader is always "he.")

The question, then, is not what Rich's words might mean to a literary critic, or generally to those who study contemporary American culture. The question is what you, the reader, can make of those words given your own experience, your goals, and the work you do with what she has written. In this sense, "When We Dead Awaken" is not what it means to others (those who have already decided what it means) but what it means to you, and this meaning is something you compose when you write about the essay; it is your account of what Rich says and how what she says might be said to make sense.

A teacher, poet, and critic we admire, I. A. Richards, once said, "Read as though it made sense and perhaps it will." To take command of complex material like the selections in this book, you need not subordinate yourself to experts; you can assume the authority to provide such a reading on your own. This means you must allow yourself a certain tentativeness and recognize your limits. You should not assume that it is your job to solve the problems between men and women. You can speak with authority while still acknowledging that complex issues *are* complex.

There is a paradox here. On the one hand, the essays are rich, magnificent, too big for anyone to completely grasp all at once, and before them, as before inspiring spectacles, it seems appropriate to stand humbly, admiringly. And yet, on the other hand, a reader must speak with authority.

In "The American Scholar," Ralph Waldo Emerson says, "Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books." What Emerson offers here is not a fact but an attitude. There is creative reading, he says, as well as creative writing. It is up to you to treat authors as your equals, as people who will allow you to speak, too. At the same time, you must respect the difficulty and complexity of their texts and of the issues and questions they examine. Little is to be gained, in other words, by turning Rich's essay into a message that would fit on a poster in a dorm room: "Be Yourself" or "Stand on Your Own Two Feet."

Reading with and against the Grain

See this is the critical transition from being a student to being a scholar: it is finally time for you to ask YOURSELF. What do you think?

Do it. Argue with them. Or agree with them and find additional examples that strengthen their arguments.

Reading, then, requires a difficult mix of authority and humility. On the one hand, a reader takes charge of a text; on the other, a reader gives generous attention to someone else's (a writer's) key terms and methods, commits his time to her examples, tries to think in her language, imagines that this strange work is important, compelling, at least for the moment.

Most of the questions in *Ways of Reading* will have you moving back and forth in these two modes, reading with and against the grain of a text, reproducing an author's methods, questioning his or her direction and authority. With the essay "When We Dead Awaken," for example, we have asked students to give a more complete and detailed reading of Rich's poems (the poems included in the essay) than she does, to put her terms to work, to extend her essay by extending the discussion of her examples. We have asked students to give themselves over to her essay—recognizing that this is not necessarily an easy thing to do. Or, again in Rich's name, we have asked students to tell a story of their own experience, a story similar to the one she tells, one that can be used as an example of the ways a person is positioned by a dominant culture. Here we are saying, in effect, read your world in Rich's terms. Notice what she would notice. Ask the questions she would ask. Try out her conclusions.

What does it mean to read WITH the grain?

To read generously, to work inside someone else's system, to see your world in someone else's terms—we call this "reading with the grain." It is a way of working *with* a writer's ideas, in conjunction with someone else's text. As a way of reading, it can take different forms. In the reading and writing assignments that follow the selections in this book, you will sometimes be asked to summarize and paraphrase, to put others' ideas into your terms, to provide your account of what they are saying. This is a way of getting a tentative or provisional hold on a text, its examples and ideas; it allows you a place to begin to work. And sometimes you will be asked to extend a writer's project—to add your examples to someone else's argument, to read your experience through the frame of another's text, to try out the key terms and interpretive schemes in another writer's work. In the assignments that follow the Rich essay, for example, students are asked both to reproduce her argument and to extend her terms to examples from their own experience.

We have also asked students to **read against the grain**, to read critically, to turn back, for example, *against* Rich's project, to ask questions they believe might come as a surprise, to look for the limits of her vision, to provide alternate readings of her examples, to find examples that challenge her argument, to engage her, in other words, in dialogue. How might her poems be read to counter what she wants to say about them? If her essay argues for a new language for women, how is this language represented in the final poem or the final paragraphs, when the poem seems unreadable and the final paragraph sounds familiarly like the usual political rhetoric? If Rich is arguing for a collective movement, a "we" represented by the "we" of her essay, who is included and who excluded by the terms and strategies of her writing? To what degree might you say that this is a conscious or necessary strategy?

What does it mean to read AGAINST the grain?

Many of the essays in this book provide examples of writers working against the grain of common sense or everyday language. This is true of John Berger, for example, who redefines the "art museum" against the way it is usually understood. It is true of John Edgar Wideman, who reads against his own text while he writes it—asking questions that disturb the story as it emerges on the page. It is true of Harriet Jacobs,

Patricia Nelson Limerick, and Henry Adams, whose writings show the signs of their efforts to work against the grain of the standard essay, habitual ways of representing what it means to know something, to be somebody, to speak before others.

This, we've found, is the most difficult work for students to do, this work against the grain. For good reasons and bad, students typically define their skill by reproducing rather than questioning or revising the work of their teachers (or the work of those their teachers ask them to read). It is important to read generously and carefully and to learn to submit to projects that others have begun. But it is also important to know what you are doing—to understand where this work comes from, whose interests it serves, how and where it is kept together by will rather than desire, and what it might have to do with you. To fail to ask the fundamental questions—Where am I in this? How can I make my mark? Whose interests are represented? What can I learn by reading with or against the grain?—to fail to ask these questions is to mistake skill for understanding, and it is to misunderstand the goals of a liberal education. All of the essays in this book, we would argue, ask to be read, not simply reproduced; they ask to be read and to be read with a difference. Our goal is to make that difference possible.

Working with Difficulty

When we chose the selections for this textbook, we chose them with the understanding that they were difficult to read. And we chose them knowing that students were not their primary audience (that the selections were not speaking directly to you). We chose them, in other words, knowing that we would be asking you to read something you were most likely not prepared to read. But this is what it means to be a student and it was our goal to take our students seriously. Students have to do things they are not yet ready to do; this is how they learn. Students need to read materials that they are not yet ready to read. This is how they get started; this is where they begin. It is also the case that, in an academic setting, difficulty is not necessarily a problem. If something is hard to read, it is not necessarily the case that the writer is at fault. The work can be hard to read because the writer is thinking beyond the usual ways of thinking. It is hard because it is hard, in other words. The text is not saying the same old things in the same old ways.

We believe the best way to work on a difficult text is by rereading, and we provide exercises to direct this process (“Questions for a Second Reading”), but you can also work on the difficult text by writing—by taking possession of the work through sentences and paragraphs of your own, through summary, paraphrase, and quotation, by making another writer’s work part of your work. The textbook is organized to provide ways for you to work on these difficult selections by writing and rereading. Each of the selections is followed by questions designed to help you get started.

To get a better sense of what we mean by “working with difficulty,” it might be useful to look at an example. One of the selections in *Ways of Reading* is a chapter from a book titled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. The chapter is titled “The ‘Banking’ Concept of Education,” and the title summarizes the argument at its most simple level. The standard forms of education, Freire argues, define the teacher as the active agent and the student as the passive agent. The teacher has knowledge and makes deposits from this storehouse into the minds of

students, who are expected to receive these deposits completely and without alteration-like moving money from a wallet to the bank vault. And this, he argues, is not a good thing.

One of the writing assignments attached to this selection asks students to think along with Freire and to use his argument to examine a situation from their own experience with schooling. Here is an essay (a very skillful essay) that we received from a freshman in the opening weeks of class. It is relatively short and to the point. It will be familiar. You should have no trouble following it, even if you haven't read the selection by Freire.

The Banking Concept of Education

As a high school senior, I took a sociology class that was a perfect example of the "banking" concept of education, as described by Freire. There were approximately thirty students enrolled in the class. Unless each of our brains was computerized for long-term memorization, I don't understand how we were expected to get anything out of the class.

Each class began with the copying of four to five pages of notes, which were already written on the blackboards when we entered the classroom. Fifteen to twenty minutes later, the teacher proceeded to pass out a worksheet, which was to be filled out using only the notes we previously copied as our reference. If a question was raised, her reply was, "It's in the notes,"

With approximately ten minutes left in the period, we were instructed to pass our worksheets back one desk. Then, she read the answers to the worksheets and gave a grade according to how many questions we answered correctly.

During the semester, we didn't have any quizzes, and only one test, which consisted of matching and listing-type questions. All test information was taken directly from the daily worksheets, and on no occasion did she give an essay question. This is an example of a test question:

Name three forms of abuse that occur in the family.

- 1.*
- 2.*
- 3.*

In order to pass the class, each piece of information printed on her handouts needed to be memorized. On one occasion, a fellow classmate summed up her technique of teaching perfectly by stating, "This is nothing but education by memorization!"

Anyone who cared at all about his grade in the class did quite well, according to his report card. Not much intelligence is required to memorize vocabulary terms. Needless to say, not too many of us learned much from the class, except that "education by memorization" and the "banking" concept of education, as Freire puts it, are definitely not an interesting or effective system of education.

The essay is confident and tidy and not wrong in its account of the "banking" concept of education. In five short paragraphs, the writer not only "got" Freire, he also worked his high school sociology teacher and her teaching methods into the "banking" narrative. We asked the student (as we have asked many students since then): How did you do this? What was the secret? And he was quick to answer, "I read through the Freire essay and I worked with what I understood and I ignored the rest." And it's true. He did. And it is true that this is one way to get started. It's OK. You work with what you can.

The difficult sections of Freire's argument (the hard parts, the sections, and the passages our writer ignored) are related to a Marxist analysis of a *system* of education and its interests. Freire does not write just about individuals—a bad teacher and a smart student—although it is certainly easier (and in some ways more comforting) to think that schooling is just a matter of individual moments and individual actors, good and bad. What is happening in our classrooms, Freire argues, is bigger than the intentions or actions of individuals. He says, for example, “Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression.” He writes about how schools “regulate the way the world ‘enters into’ students.” He calls for “problem-posing education”: “Problem-posing education is revolutionary futurity.” What is at stake, he says, is “humanity.” What is required is “*conscientização*.” He is concerned to promote education in service of “revolution”: “A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation.” There is more going on here, in other words, than can be represented simply by a teacher who is lazy or unimaginative.

The student's essay marks a skillful performance. He takes Freire's chapter and makes it consistent with what he knows how to say. You hear that in this sentence: “. . . ‘education by memorization’ and the ‘banking’ concept of education, as Freire puts it, are definitely not an interesting or effective system of education.” Freire's language becomes consistent with his own (the “banking” concept can be filed away under “education by memorization”) and, once this is achieved, the writer's need to do any real work with Freire's text becomes unnecessary—“needless to say.” Working with difficult readings often requires a willingness to step outside of what you can conveniently control, and this process often begins with revision. As important as it was for this student to use his essay to get a hold of Freire, to open a door or to get a handhold, a place of purchase, a way to begin, it is equally important for a writer to take the next step—and the next step is to revise, particularly where revision is a way of reworking rather than just “fixing” what you have begun.

This was a student of ours and, after talking with him about the first draft, we suggested that he reread “The ‘Banking’ Concept of Education,” this time paying particular attention to the difficult passages, the passages that were hard to understand, those that he had ignored the first time around. And we suggested that his revised essay should bring some of those passages into the text. He did just this and by changing the notion of what he was doing (by working with rather than in spite of difficulty), he wrote a very different essay. This was real revision, in other words, not just a matter of smoothing out the rough edges. The revision changed the way the writer read and it changed the way the reader wrote. The revised essay was quite different (and not nearly so confident and skillful—and this was a good thing, a sign of learning). Here is a representative passage:

We never really had to “think” in the class. In fact, we were never permitted to “think,” we were merely expected to take in the information and store it like a computer. Freire calls this act a “violation of men's humanity” (p. 266). He states, “Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence” (p. 266). I believe what Freire is speaking of here is

We'll keep his conclusion to ourselves, since the conclusion is not nearly so important as what has happened to the writer's understanding of what it means to work on a reading. In this revised paragraph, he brings in phrases from the text and the phrases he brings in are not easy to handle; he has to struggle to put them to use or to make them make sense. The writer is trying to figure out the urgency in Freire's text. The story of the sociology class was one thing but how do you get from there to a statement about a "violation of men's humanity." So the passage that is quoted is not just dumped in for color; it is there for the writer to work with, to try to deploy. And that is what comes next:

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The key moment in writing like this, which is the moment of translation: "I believe what Freire is speaking of here is" This is where the writer must step forward to take responsibility for working inside the terms of Freire's project.

There is much to admire in this revision. It was early in the semester when writing is always risky, and it took courage and determination for a student to work with what she (or he) couldn't quite understand, couldn't sum up easily, couldn't command. We are a long way from the first draft and "needless to say." You can see, even in this brief passage, that the writing has lost some of the confidence (or arrogance) of the first draft and, as the writer works to think with Freire about education as a system, the characters of the "student" and the "teacher" become different in this narrative. And this is good writing. It may not be as finished as it might need to be later in the semester, but it is writing where something is happening, where thought is taken seriously.

So, how do you work with a difficult text? You have to get started somewhere and sometime and you will almost always find yourself writing before you have a sense that you have "mastered" the text, fully comprehended what you have read. (We would argue that these are dangerous goals, "mastery" and "comprehension." We value what students can bring themselves to do with what they read and we measure their success in relation to the success of the project.) You have to get started somewhere and then you can go back to work again on what you have begun by rereading and rewriting. The textbook provides guidelines for rereading.

When you are looking for help with a particular selection, you can, for example, turn to the "Questions for a Second Reading." Read through all of them whether they are assigned or not, since they provide several different entry points, different ways in, many of them suggested to us by our students in class and in their essays. You might imagine that these questions and the writing assignments that follow (and you might read through these writing assignments, too) provide starting points. Each suggests a different path through the essay. No one can hold a long and complicated essay in mind all at once. Every reader needs a starting point, a way in. Having more than one possible starting point allows you to make choices.

Once you have an entry point, where you have entered and how you have entered will help to shape your sense of what is interesting or important in the text. In this sense, you (and not just the author) are organizing the essay or chapter. The text will present its shape in terms of sections or stages. You should look for these road signs—breaks in the texts or phrases that indicate intellectual movement, like "on the

Get started somewhere.. To me that means that it is okay to begin writing my ideas (my understanding of the piece) even before I really get what the piece is all about.

other hand” or “in conclusion.” You can be guided by these, to be sure, but you also give shape to what you read—and you do this most deliberately when you reread. This is where you find (and impose) patterns and connections that are not obvious and not already articulated but that make sense to you and give you a way to describe what you see in what you are reading. In our own teaching, we talk to our students about “scaffolds.” The scaffold, we say, represents the way you are organizing the text, the way you are putting it together. A scaffold is made up of lines and passages from the text, the terms you’ve found that you want to work with, ideas that matter to you, your sense of the progress of the piece.

The scaffold can also include the work of others. In groups or in class discussion, take notes on what other students say. This is good advice generally (you can always learn from your colleagues), but it is particularly useful in a class that features reading and writing. Your notes can document the ideas of others, to be sure, but most importantly they can give you a sense of where other people are beginning, of where they have entered the text and what they are doing once they have started. You can infer the scaffold they have constructed to make sense of what they read and this can give highlight and relief, even counterpoint, to your own. And use your teacher’s comments and questions, including those on your first drafts, to get a sense of the shape of your work as a reader and a writer. This is not a hunt for ideas, for the right or proper or necessary thing to say about a text. It is a hunt for a method, for a way of making sense of a text without resorting to simple summary.