

FROM INQUIRY TO ACADEMIC WRITING

A Text and Reader

FOURTH EDITION

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From Reading as a Writer to Writing as a Reader

Reading for class and then writing an essay might seem to be separate tasks, but reading is the first step in the writing process. In this chapter we present methods that will help you read more effectively and move from reading to writing your own college essays. These methods will lead you to understand a writer's purpose in responding to a situation, the motivation for asserting a claim in an essay and entering a particular conversation with a particular audience.

Much if not all of the writing you do in college will be based on what you have read. This is the case, for example, when you summarize a philosopher's theory, analyze the significance of an experiment in psychology, or, perhaps, synthesize different and conflicting points of view in making an argument about race and academic achievement in sociology.

As we maintain throughout this book, writing and reading are inextricably linked to each other. Good academic writers are also good critical readers: They leave their mark on what they read, identifying issues, making judgments about the truth of what writers tell them, and evaluating the adequacy of the evidence in support of an argument. This is where writing and inquiry begin: understanding our own position relative to the scholarly conversations we want to enter. Moreover, critical readers try to understand the strategies that writers use to persuade readers to agree with them. At times, these are strategies that we can adapt in advancing our arguments.

READING AS AN ACT OF COMPOSING: ANNOTATING

Leaving your mark on the page—**annotating**—is your first act of composing. When you mark the pages of a text, you are reading critically, engaging with the ideas of others, questioning and testing those ideas, and inquiring

into their significance. **Critical reading** is sometimes called *active reading* to distinguish it from memorization, when you just read for the main idea so that you can “spit it back out on a test.” When you read actively and critically, you bring your knowledge, experiences, and interests to a text, so that you can respond to the writer, continuing the conversation the writer has begun.

Experienced college readers don’t try to memorize a text or assume they must understand it completely before they respond to it. Instead they read strategically, looking for the writer’s claims, for the writer’s key ideas and terms, and for connections with key ideas and terms in other texts. They also read to discern what conversation the writer has entered, and how the writer’s argument is connected to those he or she makes reference to.

When you annotate a text, your notes in the margins might address the following questions:

- What arguments is this author responding to?
- Is the issue relevant or significant?
- How do I know that what the author says is true?
- Is the author’s evidence legitimate? Sufficient?
- Can I think of an exception to the author’s argument?
- What would the counterarguments be?

Good readers ask the same kinds of questions of every text they read, considering not just *what* a writer says (the content), but *how* he or she says it given the writer’s purpose and audience.

The marks you leave on a page might indicate your own ideas and questions, patterns you see emerging, links to other texts, even your gut response to the writer’s argument—agreement, dismay, enthusiasm, confusion. They reveal your own thought processes as you read and signal that you are entering the conversation. In effect, they are traces of your own responding voice.

Developing your own system of marking or annotating pages can help you feel confident when you sit down with a new reading for your classes. Based on our students’ experiences, we offer this practical tip: Although wide-tipped highlighters have their place in some classes, it is more useful to read with a pen or pencil in your hand, so that you can do more than draw a bar of color through words or sentences you find important. Experienced readers write their responses to a text in the margins, using personal codes (boxing key words, for example), writing out definitions of words they have looked up, drawing lines to connect ideas on facing pages, or writing notes to themselves (“Connect this to Edmundson on consumer culture”; “Hirsch would disagree big time—see his ideas on memorization in primary grades”; “You call THIS evidence?!”). These notes help you get started on your own writing assignments.

Annotating your readings benefits you twice. First, it is easier to participate in class discussions if you have already marked passages that are

important, confusing, or linked to specific passages in other texts you have read. It's a sure way to avoid that sinking feeling you get when you return to pages you read the night before but now can't remember at all. Second, by marking key ideas in a text, noting your ideas about them, and making connections to key ideas in other texts, you have begun the process of writing an essay. When you start writing the first draft of your essay, you can quote the passages you have already marked and explain what you find significant about them based on the notes you have already made to yourself. You can make the connections to other texts in the paragraphs of your own essay that you have already begun to make on the pages of your textbook. If you mark your texts effectively, you'll never be at a loss when you sit down to write the first draft of an essay.

Let's take a look at how one of our students marked several paragraphs of Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton's *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (1993). In the excerpt below, the student underlines what she believes is important information and begins to create an outline of the authors' main points.

1. racist attitudes

2. private behaviors

3. & institutional practices lead to ghettos (authors' claim?)

Ghetto = "multistory, high-density housing projects." Post-1950

I remember this happening where I grew up, but I didn't know the government was responsible. Is this what happened in There Are No Children Here?

Authors say situation of "spatial isolation" remains despite court decisions. Does it?

The spatial isolation of black Americans was achieved by a conjunction of racist attitudes, private behaviors, and institutional practices that disenfranchised blacks from urban housing markets and led to the creation of the ghetto.

Discrimination in employment exacerbated black poverty and limited the economic potential for integration, and black residential mobility was systematically blocked by pervasive discrimination and white avoidance of neighborhoods containing blacks. The walls of the ghetto were buttressed after 1950 by government programs that promoted slum clearance and relocated displaced ghetto residents into multi-story, high-density housing projects.

In theory, this self-reinforcing cycle of prejudice, discrimination, and segregation was broken during the 1960s by a growing rejection of racist sentiments by whites and a series of court decisions and federal laws that banned discrimination in public life. (1) The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed racial discrimination in employment, (2) the Fair Housing Act of 1968 banned discrimination in housing, and (3) the Gautreaux and Shannon court decisions prohibited public authorities from placing housing projects exclusively in black neighborhoods. Despite these changes, however, the nation's largest black communities remained as segregated as ever in 1980. Indeed, many urban areas displayed a pattern of intense racial isolation that could only be described as hypersegregation.

Although the racial climate of the United States improved outwardly during the 1970s, racism still restricted the residential freedom of black Americans; it just did so in less blatant ways. In the aftermath of the civil rights revolution, few whites voiced openly racist sentiments; realtors no longer refused outright to rent or sell to blacks; and few local governments went on record to oppose public housing projects because they would contain blacks. This lack of overt racism, however, did not mean that prejudice and discrimination had ended.

Subtler racism, not on public record.

Lack of enforcement of Civil Rights Act? Fair Housing Act? Gautreaux and Shannon? Why? Why not?

Notice how the student's annotations help her understand the argument the authors make.

1. She numbers the three key factors (racist attitudes, private behaviors, and institutional practices) that influenced the formation of ghettos in the United States.
2. She identifies the situation that motivates the authors' analysis: the extent to which "the spatial isolation of black Americans" still exists despite laws and court decisions designed to end residential segregation.
3. She makes connections to her own experience and to another book she has read.

By understanding the authors' arguments and making these connections, the student begins the writing process. She also sets the stage for her own research, for examining the authors' claim that residential segregation still exists.

READING AS A WRITER: ANALYZING A TEXT RHETORICALLY

When you study how writers influence readers through language, you are analyzing the **rhetoric** (available means of persuasion) of what you read. When you identify a writer's purpose for responding to a situation by composing an essay that puts forth claims meant to sway a particular audience, you are performing a rhetorical analysis. Such an analysis entails identifying the features of an argument to better understand how the argument works to persuade a reader:

- how the writer sees the situation that calls for a response in writing
- the writer's purpose for writing
- intended audience
- kinds of claims
- types of evidence

Starting with Inquiry

Habits of Mind of Academic Writers

WHAT IS ACADEMIC WRITING?

In the strictest sense, *academic writing* is what scholars do to communicate with other scholars in their fields of study, their *disciplines*. It's the research report a biologist writes, the interpretive essay a literary scholar composes, the media analysis a film scholar produces. At the same time, *academic writing* is what you have to learn so that you can participate in the different disciplinary conversations that take place in your courses. You have to learn to *think* like an academic, *read* like an academic, *do research* like an academic, and *write* like an academic—even if you have no plans to continue your education and become a scholar yourself. Learning these skills is what this book is about.

Fair warning: It isn't easy. Initially you may be perplexed by the vocabulary and sentence structure of many of the academic essays you read. Scholars use specialized language to capture the complexity of an issue or to introduce specific ideas from their discipline. Every discipline has its own vocabulary. You probably can think of words and phrases that are not used every day but that are necessary, nevertheless, to express certain ideas precisely. For example, consider the terms *centrifugal force*, *Oedipus complex*, and *onomatopoeia*. These terms carry with them a history of study; when you learn to use them, you also are learning to use the ideas they represent. Such terms help us describe the world specifically rather than generally; they help us better understand how things work and how to make better decisions about what matters to us.

Sentence structure presents another challenge. The sentences in academic writing are often longer and more intricate than the sentences in popular magazines. Academics strive to go beyond what is quick, obvious, and general. They ask questions based on studying a subject from multiple points of view, to make surprising connections that would not occur to someone who has not studied the subject carefully. It follows that academic writers are accustomed to extensive reading that prepares them to examine an issue, knowledgeably, from many different perspectives, and to make interesting intellectual use of what they discover in their research. To become an adept academic writer, you have to learn these practices as well.

Academic writing will challenge you, no doubt. But hang in there. Any initial difficulty you have with academic writing will pay off when you discover new ways of looking at the world and of making sense of it. Moreover, the habits of mind and core skills of academic writing are highly valued in the world outside the academy.

Basically, academic writing entails making an **argument**—a text that is crafted to persuade an audience—often in the service of changing people’s minds and behaviors. When you write an academic essay, you have to

- define a situation that calls for some response in writing;
- demonstrate the timeliness of your argument;
- establish a personal investment;
- appeal to readers whose minds you want to change by understanding what they think, believe, and value;
- support your argument with good reasons; and
- anticipate and address readers’ reasons for disagreeing with you, while encouraging them to adopt your position.

Academic argument is not about shouting down an opponent. Instead, it is the careful expression of an idea or perspective based on reasoning and the insights gathered from a close examination of the arguments others have made on the issue.

Making academic arguments is also a social act, like joining a conversation. When we sit down to write an argument intended to persuade someone to do or to believe something, we are never really the first to broach the topic about which we are writing. Thus, learning how to write a researched argument is a process of learning how to enter conversations that are already going on in written form. This idea of writing as dialogue—not only between author and reader but between the text and everything that has been said or written about its subject beforehand—is crucial. Writing is a process of balancing our goals with the history of similar kinds of communication, particularly others’ arguments that have been made on the same subject. The conversations that have already been going on about a subject are the subject’s historical context.

WHAT ARE THE HABITS OF MIND OF ACADEMIC WRITERS?

The chapters in the first part of this book introduce you to the habits of mind and core skills of academic writing. By **habits of mind**, we mean the patterns of thought that lead you to question assumptions and opinions, explore alternative opinions, anticipate opposing arguments, compare one type of experience to another, and identify the causes and consequences of ideas and events. These forms of **critical thinking** demand an inquiring mind that welcomes complexities and seeks out and weighs many different points of view, a mind willing to enter complex conversations both in and out of the academy. We discuss academic habits of mind in the rest of Chapter 1 and refer to them throughout this book.

Such habits of mind are especially important today, when we are bombarded with appeals to buy this or that product and with information that may or may not be true. For example, in “106 Science Claims and a Truckful of Baloney” (*The Best American Science and Nature Writing*, 2005), William Speed Weed illustrates the extent to which the claims of science vie for our attention alongside the claims of advertising. He notes that advertisers often package their claims as science, but wonders whether a box of Cheerios really can reduce cholesterol.

As readers, we have a responsibility to test the claims of both science and advertising in order to decide what to believe and act upon. Weed found that “very few of the 100 claims” he evaluated “proved completely true” and that “a good number were patently false.” Testing the truth of claims—learning to consider information carefully and critically and to weigh competing points of view before making our own judgments—gives us power over our own lives.

The habits of mind and practices valued by academic writers are probably ones you already share. You are behaving “academically” when you comparison shop, a process that entails learning about the product in the media and on the Internet and then looking at the choices firsthand before you decide which one you will purchase. You employ these same habits of mind when you deliberate over casting a vote in an election. You inform yourself about the issues that are most pressing; you learn about the candidates’ positions on these issues; you consider other arguments for and against both issues and candidates; and you weigh those arguments and your own understanding to determine which candidate you will support.

Fundamentally, academic habits of mind are *analytical*. When you consider a variety of factors before making a shopping choice—the quality and functionality of the item you plan to buy, how it meets your needs, how it compares to similar items—you are conducting an **analysis**. That is, you are pausing to examine the reasons why you should buy

something, instead of simply handing over your cash and saying, “I want one of those.”

To a certain extent, analysis involves breaking something down into its various parts and then reflecting on how the parts do or don't work together. For example, when you deliberate over your vote, you may consult one of those charts that newspapers often run around election time: A list of candidates appears across the top of the chart, and a list of issues appears on the side. With a chart from a credible news source in hand, you can scan the columns to see where each candidate stands on the issues, and you can scan the rows to see how the candidates compare on a particular issue. The newspaper editors have performed a preliminary analysis for you. They've asked, “Who are the candidates?” “What are the issues?” and “Where does each candidate stand on the issues?”; and they have presented the answers to you in a format that can help you make your decision.

But you still have to perform your own analysis of the information before you cast your ballot. Suppose no candidate holds your position on every issue. Whom do you vote for? Which issues are most important to you? Or suppose two candidates hold your position on every issue. Which one do you vote for? What characteristics or experience are you looking for in an elected official? And you may want to investigate further by visiting the candidates' Web sites or by talking with your friends to gather their thoughts on the election.

As you can see, analysis involves more than simply disassembling or dissecting something. It is a process of continually asking questions and looking for answers. Analysis reflects, in the best sense of the word, a *skeptical* habit of mind, an unwillingness to settle for obvious answers in the quest to understand why things are the way they are and how they might be different.

This book will help you develop the questioning, evaluating, and conversational skills you already have into strategies that will improve your ability to make careful, informed judgments about the often conflicting and confusing information you are confronted with every day. With these strategies, you will be in a position to use your writing skills to create change where you feel it is most needed.

The first steps in developing these skills are to recognize the key academic habits of mind and then to refine your practice of them. We explore five key habits of mind in the rest of this chapter:

1. inquiring,
2. seeking and valuing complexity,
3. understanding that academic writing is a conversation,
4. understanding that writing is a process, and
5. reflecting.

ACADEMIC WRITERS MAKE INQUIRIES

Academic writers usually study a body of information so closely and from so many different perspectives that they can ask questions that may not occur to people who are just scanning the information. That is, academic writers learn to make **inquiries**. Every piece of academic writing begins with a question about the way the world works, and the best questions lead to rich, complex insights that others can learn from and build on.

You will find that the ability to ask good questions is equally valuable in your daily life. Asking thoughtful questions about politics, popular culture, work, or anything else—questions like, What exactly did that candidate mean by “Family values are values for all of us,” anyway? What is lost and gained by bringing Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy to the screen? What does it take to move ahead in this company?—is the first step in understanding how the world works and how it can be changed.

Inquiry typically begins with **observation**, a careful noting of phenomena or behaviors that puzzle you or challenge your beliefs and values (in a text or in the real world). Observers attempt to understand phenomena by **asking questions** (Why does this exist? Why is this happening? Do things have to be this way?) and **examining alternatives** (Maybe this doesn’t need to exist. Maybe this could happen another way instead.).

For example, Steven Pearlstein, a professor of public affairs at George Mason University, *observes* that only a small percentage of the students he teaches are enrolled as majors in the humanities. This prompts him to *ask* why this is the case, particularly because students express their appreciation for the opportunity to read popular works of history. In his essay “Meet the Parents Who Won’t Let Their Children Study Literature,” he also points out that faculty at other universities, including Harvard, share his concern that fewer and fewer students are majoring in English or history. He wonders why this is the case and finds that parents, the media, and politicians all advise students to steer clear of the liberal arts. He wonders further why parents in particular would adopt such a view, and he *examines different explanations* such as parents’ anxieties over debt, the trends toward professionalism, and parents’ own interests. Parents, he concludes, want to see a “direct line” between what their children study and a job. This, Pearlstein argues, is unfortunate since the available data show that students completing a major in the humanities have many job opportunities. In the end, he *asks* what happens to students who major in fields to please their parents and who lack the motivation to study what they are passionate about. For that matter, what will happen if fewer and fewer students learn “discipline, persistence, and how to research, analyze, communicate clearly and think logically”?

In her reading on the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, one of our students *observed* that the difficulties many immigrant groups experienced when they first arrived in the United States

are not acknowledged as struggles for civil rights. This student of Asian descent *wondered why* the difficulties Asians faced in assimilating into American culture are not seen as analogous to the efforts of African Americans to gain civil rights (Why are things this way?). In doing so, she *asked* a number of relevant questions: What do we leave out when we tell stories about ourselves? Why reduce the struggle for civil rights to black-and-white terms? How can we represent the multiple struggles of people who have contributed to building our nation? Then she *examined alternatives*—different ways of presenting the history of a nation that prides itself on justice and the protection of its people’s civil rights (Maybe this doesn’t need to exist. Maybe this could happen another way.). The academic writing you will read—and write yourself—starts with questions and seeks to find rich answers.

Steps to Inquiry

- 1** Observe. Note phenomena or behaviors that puzzle you or challenge your beliefs and values.
- 2** Ask questions. Consider why things are the way they are.
- 3** Examine alternatives. Explore how things could be different.

A Practice Sequence: Inquiry Activities

The activities below will help you practice the strategies of observing, asking questions, and examining alternatives.

- 1** Find an advertisement for a political campaign, and write down anything about what you observe in the ad that puzzles you or that challenges your beliefs and values. Next, write down questions you might have (Do things have to be this way?). Finally, write down other ways you think the ad could persuade you to vote for this particular candidate (Maybe this could happen another way instead.).
- 2** Locate and analyze data about the students at your school. For example, you might research the available majors and determine which departments have the highest and lowest enrollments. (Some schools have fact books that can be accessed online; and typically the registrar maintains a database with this information.) Is there anything that puzzles you? Write down any questions you have (Why are things the way they are?). What alternative explanations can you provide to account for differences in the popularity of the subjects students major in?

ACADEMIC WRITERS SEEK AND VALUE COMPLEXITY

Seeking and valuing complexity are what inquiry is all about. As you read academic arguments (for example, about school choice), observe how the media work to influence your opinions (for example, in political ads), or analyze data (for example, about candidates in an election), you will explore reasons why things are the way they are and how they might be different. When you do so, we encourage you not to settle for simple either/or reasons. Instead, look for multiple explanations.

When we rely on **binary thinking**—imagining there are only two sides to an issue—we tend to ignore information that does not fall tidily into one side or the other. Real-world questions (How has the Internet changed our sense of what it means to be a writer? What are the global repercussions of fast-food production and consumption? How do we make sense of terrorism?) don't have easy for-or-against answers. Remember that an issue is open to dispute and can be explored and debated. Issue-based questions, then, need to be approached with a mind open to complex possibilities. (We say more about identifying issues and formulating issue-based questions in Chapter 5.)

If we take as an example the issue of terrorism, we would discover that scholars of religion, economics, ethics, and politics tend to ask very different questions about terrorism and to propose very different approaches for addressing this worldwide problem. This doesn't mean that one approach is right and the others are wrong; it means that complex issues are likely to have multiple explanations, rather than a simple choice between A and B.

In her attempt to explain the popularity of hip-hop culture, Bronwen Low, a professor of education, provides a window on the steps we can take to examine the complexity of a topic. In the introductory chapters of her book, *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip Hop and Spoken Word Classroom*, she begins with the observation that hip-hop “is the single-most influential cultural force shaping contemporary urban youth culture in the United States, and its international reach is growing.” She then defines what she means by hip-hop culture, distinguishing it from “rapping,” and helps readers understand hip-hop culture as encompassing graffiti art and “a whole culture of style,” including “fashion” and “sensibility.” Motivated by a sense of curiosity, if not puzzlement, Low asks questions that guide her inquiry: What is it that makes hip-hop culture so compelling to young people across such a wide spectrum of race, culture, and gender? Further, how can social, cultural, and literary critics better understand the evolution of new forms of language and performance, such as spoken-word poetry, in “youth-driven popular culture”? Notice that she indicates that she will frame her inquiry using the multiple perspectives of social, cultural, and literary critics. In turn, Low explains that she began to answer these questions by giving herself a “hip-hop education.” She attended spoken-word poetry festivals (“slams”) across the United States, listened to the music, and read both “academic theory and journalism” to see what others had to say about “poetry’s relevance and coolness to youth.”

In still another example, one of our students was curious about why her younger brother struggled in school and wondered if boys learn differently than girls. She began her inquiry by reading an article on education, “It’s a Boy Thing (or Is It?),” and realized that researchers have begun to study the question that she was curious about. However, rather than presenting a clear-cut answer, the author of this article, Sara Mead, pointed out that researchers have generated a number of conflicting opinions. Mead’s article motivated our student to deepen her inquiry by examining different perspectives in the disciplines of cognitive theory, education, counseling psychology, and sociology. She was able to refine her question based on an issue that puzzled her: If educators are aware that boys have difficulty in school despite receiving more attention than girls receive, how can research explain what seems like a persistent gap between the achievement of boys and girls? In looking at this issue-based question, the student opened herself up to complexity by resisting simple answers to a question that others had not resolved.

Steps to Seeking and Valuing Complexity

- 1** Reflect on what you observe. Clarify your initial interest in a phenomenon or behavior by focusing on its particular details. Then reflect on what is most interesting and least interesting to you about these details, and why.
- 2** Examine issues from multiple points of view. Imagine more than two sides to the issue, and recognize that there may well be other points of view, too.
- 3** Ask issue-based questions. Try to put into words questions that will help you explore why things are the way they are.

A Practice Sequence: Seeking and Valuing Complexity

These activities build on the previous exercises we asked you to complete.

- 1** Look again at the political ad you selected earlier. Think about other perspectives that would complicate your understanding of how the ad might persuade voters.
- 2** Imagine other perspectives on the data you found on the students in your school. Let’s say, for example, that you’ve looked at data on student majors. How did you explain the popularity of certain majors and the unpopularity of others? How do you think other students would explain these discrepancies? What explanations would faculty members offer?

ACADEMIC WRITERS SEE WRITING AS A CONVERSATION

Another habit of mind at the heart of academic writing is the understanding that ideas always build on and respond to other ideas, just as they do in the best kind of conversations. Academic conversations are quite similar to those you have through e-mail and social media: You are responding to something someone else has written (or said) and are writing back in anticipation of future responses.

Academic writing also places a high value on the belief that good, thoughtful ideas come from conversations with others, *many* others. As your exposure to other viewpoints increases, as you take more and different points of view into consideration and build on them, your own ideas will develop more fully and fairly. You already know that to get a full picture of something, often you have to ask for multiple perspectives. When you want to find out what “really” happened at an event when your friends are telling you different stories, you listen to all of them and then evaluate the evidence to draw conclusions you can stand behind—just as academic writers do.

Theologian Martin Marty starts a conversation about hospitality in his book *When Faiths Collide* (2004). *Hospitality* is a word he uses to describe a human behavior that has the potential to bring about real understanding among people who do not share a common faith or culture. As Marty points out, finding common ground is an especially important and timely concern “in a world where strangers meet strangers with gunfire, barrier walls, spiritually land-mined paths, and the spirit of revenge.” He believes that people need opportunities to share their stories, their values, and their beliefs; in doing so, they feel less threatened by ideas they do not understand or identify with.

Yet Marty anticipates the possibility that the notion of hospitality will be met with skepticism or incomprehension by those who find the term “dainty.” Current usage of the term—as in “hospitality suites” and “hospitality industries”—differs from historical usage, particularly biblical usage. To counter the incredulity or incomprehension of those who do not immediately understand his use of the term *hospitality*, Marty gives his readers entrée to a conversation with other scholars who understand the complexity and power of the kind of hospitality shown by people who welcome a stranger into their world. The stranger he has in mind may simply be the person who moves in next door, but that person could also be an immigrant, an exile, or a refugee.

Marty brings another scholar, Darrell Fasching, into the conversation to explain that hospitality entails welcoming “the stranger . . . [which] inevitably involves us in a sympathetic passing over into the other’s life and stories” (cited in Marty, p. 132). And John Koenig, another scholar Marty cites, traces the biblical sources of the term in an effort to show the value

of understanding those we fear. That understanding, Marty argues, might lead to peace among warring factions. The conversation Marty begins on the page helps us see that his views on bringing about peace have their source in other people's ideas. In turn, the fact that he draws on multiple sources gives strength to Marty's argument.

The characteristics that make for effective oral conversation are also in play in effective academic conversation: empathy, respect, and a willingness to exchange and revise ideas. **Empathy** is the ability to understand the perspectives that shape what people think, believe, and value. To express both empathy and respect for the positions of all people involved in the conversation, academic writers try to understand the conditions under which each opinion might be true and then to represent the strengths of that position accurately.

For example, imagine that your firm commitment to protecting the environment is challenged by those who see the value of developing land rich with oil and other resources. In challenging their position, it would serve you well to understand their motives, both economic (lower gas prices, new jobs that will create a demand for new houses) and political (less dependence on foreign oil). If you can demonstrate your knowledge of these factors, those committed to developing resources in protected areas will listen to you. To convey empathy and respect while presenting your own point of view, you might introduce your argument this way:

Although it is important to develop untapped resources in remote areas of the United States both to lower gas prices and create new jobs and to eliminate our dependence on other countries' resources, it is in everyone's interest to use alternative sources of power and protect our natural resources.

As you demonstrate your knowledge and a sense of shared values, you could also describe the conditions under which you might change your own position.

People engaging in productive conversation try to create change by listening and responding to one another rather than dominating one another. Instead of trying to win an argument, they focus on reaching a mutual understanding. This does not mean that effective communicators do not take strong positions; more often than not they do. However, they are more likely to achieve their goals by persuading others instead of ignoring them and their points of view. Similarly, writers come to every issue with an agenda. But they realize that they may have to compromise on certain points to carry those that mean the most to them. They understand that their perceptions and opinions may be flawed or limited, and they are willing to revise them when valid new perspectives are introduced.

In an academic community, ideas develop through give and take, through a conversation that builds on what has come before and grows stronger from multiple perspectives. You will find this dynamic at work in your classes when you discuss your ideas: You will build on other people's

insights, and they will build on yours. As a habit of mind, paying attention to academic conversations can improve the thinking and writing you do in every class you take.

Steps to Joining an Academic Conversation

- 1** Be receptive to the ideas of others. Listen carefully and empathetically to what others have to say.
- 2** Be respectful of the ideas of others. When you refer to the opinions of others, represent them fairly and use an evenhanded tone. Avoid sounding scornful or dismissive.
- 3** Engage with the ideas of others. Try to understand how people have arrived at their feelings and beliefs.
- 4** Be flexible in your thinking about the ideas of others. Be willing to exchange ideas and to revise your own opinions.

A Practice Sequence: Joining an Academic Conversation

The following excerpt is taken from Thomas Patterson's *The Vanishing Voter* (2002), an examination of voter apathy. Read the excerpt and then complete the exercises that follow.

Does a diminished appetite for voting affect the health of American politics? Is society harmed when the voting rate is low or in decline? As the *Chicago Tribune* said in an editorial, it may be "humiliating" that the United States, the oldest continuous democracy, has nearly the lowest voting rate in the world. But does it have any practical significance? . . .

The increasing number of nonvoters could be a danger to democracy. Although high participation by itself does not trigger radical change, a flood of new voters into the electorate could possibly do it. It's difficult to imagine a crisis big and divisive enough to prompt millions of new voters to suddenly flock to the polls, especially in light of Americans' aversion to political extremism. Nevertheless, citizens who are outside the electorate are less attached to the existing system. As the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset observed, a society of nonvoters "is potentially more explosive than one in which most citizens are regularly involved in activities which give them some sense of participation in decisions which affect their lives."

Voting can strengthen citizenship in other ways, too. When people vote, they are more attentive to politics and are better informed about issues affecting them. Voting also deepens community involvement, as

the philosopher John Stuart Mill theorized a century ago. Studies indicate that voters are more active in community affairs than nonvoters are. Of course, this association says more about the type of person who votes as opposed to the effect of voting. But recent evidence, as Harvard University's Robert Putnam notes, "suggests that the act of voting itself encourages volunteering and other forms of government citizenship."

- 1 In this excerpt, Patterson presents two arguments: that increasing voter apathy is a danger to democracy and that voting strengthens citizenship. With which of these arguments do you sympathize more? Why? Can you imagine reasons that another person might not agree with you? Write them down. Now do the same exercise with the argument you find less compelling.
- 2 Your instructor will divide the class into four groups and assign each group a position—pro or con—on one of Patterson's arguments. Brainstorm with the members of your group to come up with examples or reasons why your group's position is valid. Make a list of those examples or reasons, and be prepared to present them to the class.
- 3 Your instructor will now break up the groups into new groups, each with at least one representative of the original groups. In turn with the other members of your new group, take a few moments to articulate your position and the reasons for it. Remember to be civil and as persuasive as possible.
- 4 Finally, with the other members of your new group, talk about the merits of the various points of view. Try to find common ground ("I understand what you are saying; in fact, it's not unlike the point I was making about . . ."). The point of this discussion is not to pronounce a winner (who made the best case for his or her perspective) but to explore common ground, exchange and revise ideas, and imagine compromises.

ACADEMIC WRITERS UNDERSTAND THAT WRITING IS A PROCESS

Academic writing is a process of defining issues, formulating questions, and developing sound arguments. This view of writing counters a number of popular myths: that writing depends on inspiration, that writing should happen quickly, that learning to write in one context prepares you to write in other contexts, and that revision is the same as editing. The writing process addresses these myths. First, choosing an idea that matters to you is one way to make your writing matter. And there's a better chance that writing you care about will contribute in a meaningful way to the conversation

going on about a given issue in the academic community. Second, writers who invest time in developing and revising their ideas will improve the quality of both their ideas and their language—their ability to be specific and express complexity.

There are three main stages to the writing process: collecting information, drafting, and revising. We introduce them here and expand on them throughout this book.

■ Collect Information and Material

Always begin the process of writing an essay by collecting *in writing* the material—the information, ideas, and evidence—from which you will shape your own argument. Once you have read and marked the pages of a text, you have begun the process of building your own argument. The important point here is that you start to put your ideas on paper. Good writing comes from returning to your ideas on your own and with your classmates, reconsidering them, and revising them as your thinking develops. This is not something you can do with any specificity unless you have written down your ideas. The following box shows the steps for gathering information from your reading, the first stage in the process of writing an academic essay. (In Chapter 2, these steps are illustrated and discussed in more detail.)

Steps to Collecting Information and Material

- 1** Mark your texts as you read. Note key terms; ask questions in the margins; indicate connections to other texts.
- 2** List quotations you find interesting and provocative. You might even write short notes to yourself about what you find significant about the quotations.
- 3** List your own ideas in response to the reading or readings. Include what you've observed about the way the author or authors make their arguments.
- 4** Sketch out the similarities and differences among the authors whose work you plan to use in your essay. Where would they agree or disagree? How would each respond to the others' arguments and evidence?

■ Draft, and Draft Again

The next stage in the writing process begins when you are ready to think about your focus and how to arrange the ideas you have gathered in the collecting stage. Writers often find that writing a first draft is an act of

discovery, that their ultimate focus emerges during this initial drafting process. Sometimes it is only at the end of a four-page draft that a writer says, “Aha! This is what I really want to talk about in this essay!” Later revisions of an essay, then, are not simply editing or cleaning up the grammar of a first draft. Instead, they truly involve *revision*, seeing the first draft again to establish the clearest possible argument and the most persuasive evidence. This means that you do not have to stick with the way a draft turns out the first time. You can—and must!—be willing to rewrite a substantial amount of a first draft if the focus of the argument changes, or if in the process of writing new ideas emerge that enrich the essay. This is why it’s important not to agonize over wording in a first draft: It’s difficult to toss out a paragraph you’ve sweated over for hours. Use the first draft to get your ideas down on paper so that you and your peers can discuss what you see there, with the knowledge that you (like your peers) will need to stay open to the possibility of changing an aspect of your focus or argument.

Steps to Drafting

- 1** Look through the materials you have collected to see what interests you most and what you have the most to say about.
- 2** Identify what is at issue and what is open to dispute.
- 3** Formulate a question that your essay will respond to.
- 4** Select the material you will include, and decide what is outside your focus.
- 5** Consider the types of readers who might be most interested in what you have to say.
- 6** Gather more material once you’ve decided on your purpose—what you want to teach your readers.
- 7** Formulate a working thesis that conveys the point you want to make.
- 8** Consider possible arguments against your position and your response to them.

■ Revise Significantly

The final stage, revising, might involve several different drafts as you continue to sharpen your insights and the organization of what you have written. As we discuss in Chapter 12, you and your peers will be reading one another’s drafts, offering feedback as you move from the larger issues to the smaller ones. It should be clear by now that academic writing is done

in a community of thinkers: That is, people read other people's drafts and make suggestions for further clarification, further development of ideas, and sometimes further research. This is quite different from simply editing someone's writing for grammatical errors and typos. Instead, drafting and revising with real readers, as we discuss in Chapter 12, allow you to participate in the collaborative spirit of the academy, in which knowledge making is a group activity that comes out of the conversation of ideas. Importantly, this process approach to writing in the company of real readers mirrors the conversation of ideas carried on in the pages of academic books and journals.

Steps to Revising

- 1** Draft and revise the introduction and conclusion.
- 2** Clarify any obscure or confusing passages your peers have pointed out.
- 3** Provide details and textual evidence where your peers have asked for new or more information.
- 4** Make sure you have included opposing points of view and have addressed them fairly.
- 5** Consider reorganization.
- 6** Make sure that every paragraph contributes clearly to your thesis or main claim and that you have included signposts along the way, phrases that help a reader understand your purpose (“Here I turn to an example from current movies to show how this issue is alive and well in pop culture.”).
- 7** Consider using strategies you have found effective in other reading you have done for class (repeating words or phrases for effect, asking rhetorical questions, varying your sentence length).

ACADEMIC WRITERS REFLECT

Reflection entails pausing and taking note of what you are doing—finding answers to complex questions about why unemployment persists or solving a problem to ensure that schools can be safe places where all kids can learn—and observing yourself for a moment. For example, as you are skimming articles to find answers to questions or searching for possible solutions, it's valuable to *monitor* what you feel you are learning, particularly if you are accustomed to doing research in an online environment where it's easy to get distracted. Monitoring entails asking yourself a few

questions: What did I just read? Did I comprehend the writer's argument? Do I need to go back and reread the argument? It's equally useful to *evaluate* what you are learning and what you still want or need to know to ensure that you discuss an issue in complex ways that avoid binary thinking. Try to *formulate strategies*, based on your own self-assessment, to address any challenges, such as comprehending a technical argument. What other sources of information can you consult? Whom can you ask for additional help? Finally, *apply what you learn about your own learning* by compiling a repertoire of strategies that can guide you in the reading, writing, and problem solving that you are doing in different classes.

Reflection is essentially having an awareness of our own thought processes. What do I want to accomplish? Is this the right question to ask? What other questions could I be asking? Where should I look for answers? What steps should I take? Why? Educator Jackie Gerstein developed the following cycle of questions for taking control of our own learning:

- Was I resourceful in terms of finding information, resources, and materials?
- Did I ask other people for feedback and information; to collaborate?
- Did I share my work and findings with others?
- Did I learn something new?
- Did I try to either make something better or create something new, rather than just copy something that already exists?
- Did I approach learning as an open-ended process, open to new and all possibilities?
- Did I accept failure as part of the process and use it to inform my learning?

—JACKIE GERSTEIN

Gerstein is insistent when she explains, “If we don’t create a process of reflecting . . . then we are leaving learning up to chance.”

Reflection in writing can focus on different types of knowledge: (1) the *content* of an issue, such as how economic resources are distributed in different neighborhoods and schools or trade policies that affect employment; (2) the *strategies* one might use to write an essay to persuade readers that immigration policies do not affect opportunities in employment as much as trade policies do; (3) the *procedures* for developing an argument, such as using stories of people affected by unemployment or the failures of providing safe environments for kids in and out of school; and (4) the *conditions* under which certain kinds of strategies might work in one context or another. That is, stories might be a powerful way to raise an issue for a class in sociology or education, but some hard data might be more appropriate in developing a persuasive argument in economics. Making decisions like this one emphasizes the role of reflection—monitoring, evaluating, developing strategies, and taking control over your own learning.

Finally, reflection is an important habit of mind because the act of thinking and questioning encourages us to critically examine our own lived experiences. In his memoir *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes about a moment in his life when he first became literate, and he explains in the following passage how literacy—reading and writing—opened up a world that he wanted to know more about. Here Coates, recipient of a MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant,” addresses his son, as he does throughout his memoir, to tell a story of a time when his mother would make him write when he was in trouble. For us, the story he conveys is about the power of reflection that comes from writing—the significance of writing to make thinking visible, to ask questions that prompt Coates to consider his actions in the present, and to envision future actions based on what he has learned.

Your grandmother taught me to read when I was only four. She also taught me to write, by which I mean not simply organizing a set of sentences into a series of paragraphs, but organizing them as a means of investigation. When I was in trouble at school (which was quite often) she would make me write about it. The writing had to answer a series of questions: *Why did I feel the need to talk at the same time as my teacher? Why did I not believe that my teacher was entitled to respect? How would I want someone to behave while I was talking? What would I do the next time I felt the urge to talk to my friends during a lesson?* [Our emphasis].

Coates admits that his mother’s assignment never really taught him to “curb” his behavior, but these early lessons were a powerful source of learning to “interrogate” the world. Reflecting on the past, present, and future drew Coates into “consciousness,” as he puts it. “Your grandmother was not teaching me how to behave in class. She was teaching me how to ruthlessly interrogate the subject that elicited the most sympathy and rationalizing—myself.”

Researchers are consistent in describing the importance of encouraging us to think critically on our own lived experiences before we begin to think about how we can participate in a project, take action, and create meaningful change in our surroundings. The following steps can help you pause and make sure learning is actually happening.

Steps to Reflection

- 1 Monitor.** Pause and ask yourself some questions: Did I comprehend the writer’s argument? Do I need to go back and reread the argument?
- 2 Evaluate.** Assess what you are learning and what you still want or need to know to ensure that you discuss an issue in complex ways that avoid binary thinking.

- 3 Formulate strategies.** Identify some next steps, based on your own self-assessment, for addressing any challenges, such as comprehending a technical argument, solving a problem you have formulated, or answering a question you have posed. What other sources of information can you consult? Whom can you ask for additional help?
- 4 Apply what you learn about your own learning.** Write down some of the challenges you have faced in writing—formulating a question, collecting materials, drafting, or revising, for example. How have you dealt with those challenges? How would you apply what you have learned to completing other academic writing assignments?

A Practice Sequence: Reflection Activities

The activities that follow will give you an opportunity to practice monitoring your work, evaluating what you are learning, formulating strategies, and documenting how you will apply what you learned.

- 1** Reflect upon and write about the steps you are taking to collect information for what you are writing, to draft your essay, and to revise your work.
 - Pause and consider the approach you are taking and whether this is the best way to fulfill your goals as a writer and reach your audience.
 - Assess what you are learning about taking a process approach to writing.
 - Formulate some next steps for your writing.
 - What have you learned so far about writing that you can apply to this and other kinds of academic tasks? That is, if you have faced some uncertainties, what did you do to address these moments? Did you talk to others in your writing group? Were they helpful? Or did you seek other forms of help to get what you needed?
- 2** Earlier we suggested that you might find a political advertisement or data about majors at your school to analyze. Choose one of these two areas of inquiry.
 - As you try to find information, monitor the steps you are taking by pausing for a moment. How is the process going for you? Are you getting what you need? Why or why not?
 - Assess what you are learning from your search for relevant information and data.

- Formulate next steps if you are having trouble finding what you want.
- Write down what you have learned about locating information and what you still need to know in order to find relevant, timely information in an efficient way.

The five academic habits of mind we have discussed throughout this chapter—making inquiries, seeking and valuing complexity, understanding writing as a conversation, understanding writing as a process, and reflecting—are fundamental patterns of thought you will need to cultivate as an academic writer. The core skills we discuss through the rest of the book build on these habits of mind.

Moreover, the kind of writing we describe in this chapter may challenge some models of writing that you learned in high school, particularly the five-paragraph essay. The five-paragraph essay is a *genre*, or kind, of writing that offers writers a conventional formula for transmitting information to readers. Such a formula can be useful, but it is generally too limiting for academic conversations. By contrast, academic writing is a genre responsive to the role that readers play in guiding writing and the writing process. That is, academic writing is about shaping and adapting information for the purpose of influencing how readers think about a given issue, not simply placing information in a conventional organizational pattern. We expect academic readers to critically analyze what we have written and anticipate writers' efforts to address their concerns. Therefore, as writers, we need to acknowledge different points of view, make concessions, recognize the limitations of what we argue, and provide counterarguments. Reading necessarily plays a prominent role in the many forms of writing that you do, but not necessarily as a process of simply gathering information. Instead, as James Crosswhite suggests in his book *The Rhetoric of Reason*, reading “means making judgments about which of the many voices and encounters can be brought together into productive conversation.”

BECOMING ACADEMIC: THREE NARRATIVES

In the following passages, three writers describe their early experiences as readers. A well-known journalist and writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates reflects upon his growing sense of curiosity at Howard University, which he refers to as Mecca, the site where he is motivated to learn about the history of black people and where he learns to formulate questions to help him better understand who he is as an individual. The passage we include here is taken from his award-winning book *Between the World and Me*, and is addressed to his son. Coates makes many references to authors he has read and public figures he admires. We invite you to do some research to learn about who these people are and their significance in the ways Coates