

# 1

## READING

This collection of essays has one purpose: to help you become a better reader and writer. It combines examples of good writing with explanations of the writers' methods, questions to guide your reading, and ideas for your own writing. In doing so, it shows how you can adapt the processes and techniques of others as you learn to communicate clearly and effectively on paper.

Writing well is not an inborn skill but an acquired one: you will become proficient only by writing and rewriting, experimenting with different strategies, listening to the responses of readers. How, then, can it help to read the work of other writers?

- *Reading others' ideas can introduce you to new information and give you new perspectives on your own experience.* Many of the essays collected here demonstrate that personal experience is a rich and powerful source of material for writing. But the knowledge gained from reading can help pinpoint just what is remarkable in your experience. And by introducing varieties of behavior and ways of thinking that would otherwise remain unknown to you, reading can also help you understand where you fit in the scheme of things. Such insight not only reveals subjects for writing but also improves your ability to communicate with others whose experiences naturally differ from your own.
- *Reading exposes you to a broad range of strategies and styles.* Just seeing that these vary as much as the writers themselves should assure you that there is no fixed standard of writing, while it should also encourage you to find your own strategies and style. At the same time, you will see that writers do make choices to suit their subjects,

their purposes, and especially their readers. Writing is rarely easy, even for the pros; but the more options you have to choose from, the more likely you are to succeed at it.

- *Reading makes you sensitive to the role of audience in writing.* As you become adept at reading the work of other writers critically, discovering intentions and analyzing choices, you will see how a writer's decisions affect you as audience. Training yourself to read attentively and critically is a first step to becoming a more objective reader of your own writing.

## Reading Attentively

This chapter offers strategies for making the most of your reading in this book and elsewhere. These strategies are reinforced in Chapters 5–14, each of which offers opportunities for careful reading with two paragraphs, one student essay, and two professional essays. Each chapter also introduces a method of developing a piece of writing:

narration	process analysis
description	comparison and contrast
example	definition
division or analysis	cause-and-effect analysis
classification	argument and persuasion

These methods correspond to basic and familiar patterns of thought and expression, common in our daily musings and conversations as well as in writing for all sorts of purposes and audiences: blogs, social-networking pages, and online discussion boards; college term papers, lab reports, and examinations; business memos and reports; letters to the editors of newspapers; articles in popular magazines.

As writers we draw on the methods, sometimes unconsciously, to give order to our ideas and even to find ideas. For instance, a writer narates, or tells, a story of her experiences to understand and convey the feeling of living her life. As readers, in turn, we have expectations for these familiar methods. When we read a narrative of someone's experiences, for example, we expect enough details to understand what happened, we anticipate that events will be told primarily in the order they occurred, and we want the story to have a point—a reason for its being told and for our bothering to read it.

Making such expectations conscious can sharpen your skills as a critical reader and as a writer. A full chapter on each method explains how it works,

shows it at work in paragraphs, and gives advice for using it to develop your own essays. The essays in each chapter provide clear examples that you can analyze and learn from (with the help of specific questions) and can refer to while writing (with the help of specific writing suggestions).

To make your reading more interesting and also to stimulate your writing, the sample paragraphs and essays in Chapters 5–14 all focus on a common subject, such as childhood, popular culture, or stereotypes. You'll see how flexible the methods are when they help five writers produce five unique pieces on the same theme. You'll also have a springboard for producing your own unique pieces, whether you take up some of the book's writing suggestions or take off with your own topics.

## Reading Critically

When we look for something to watch on television or listen to on the radio, we often tune in one station after another, pausing just long enough each time to catch the program or music being broadcast before settling on one choice. Much of the reading we do is similar: we skim a newspaper, magazine, or Web site, noting headings and scanning paragraphs to get the gist of the content. But such skimming is not really reading, for it neither involves us deeply in the subject nor engages us in interaction with the writer.

To get the most out of reading, we must invest something of ourselves in the process, applying our own ideas and emotions and attending not just to the substance but to the writer's interpretation of it. This kind of reading is critical because it looks beneath the surface of a piece of writing. (The common meaning of *critical* as “negative” doesn't apply here: critical reading may result in positive, negative, or even neutral reactions.)

Critical reading can be enormously rewarding, but of course it takes care and time. A good method for developing your own skill in critical reading is to prepare yourself beforehand and then read the work at least twice to uncover what it has to offer.

## Preparing

Preparing to read may involve just a few minutes as you form some ideas about the author, the work, and your likely response:

- *What is the author's background, what qualifications does he or she bring to the subject, and what approach is he or she likely to take? The*

biographical information provided before each essay in this book should help answer these questions; many periodicals and books include similar information on their authors.

- *What does the title convey about the subject and the author's attitude toward it?* Note, for instance, the quite different attitudes conveyed by these three titles on the same subject: "Safe Hunting," "In Touch with Ancient Spirits," and "Killing Animals for Fun and Profit."
- *What can you predict about your own response to the work?* What might you already know about the author's subject? Based on the title and other clues (such as headings or visuals), are you likely to agree or disagree with the author's views? *The Compact Reader* helps ready you for reading by providing two features before each selection. First, quotations from varied writers comment on the selection's general subject to give you a range of views. And second, a journal prompt encourages you to write about your thoughts on a subject before you see what the author has to say. By giving you a head start in considering the author's ideas and approach, writing *before* reading encourages you to read more actively and critically.

### Reading Actively

After developing some expectations about the piece of writing, read it through carefully to acquaint yourself with the subject, the author's reason for writing about it, and the way the author presents it. (Each essay in this book is short enough to be read in one sitting.) Try not to read passively, letting the words wash over you, but instead interact directly with the work to discover its meaning, the author's intentions, and your own responses.

One of the best aids to active reading is to make notes on separate sheets of paper or, preferably (if you own the book), on the pages themselves. As you practice making notes, you will probably develop a personal code meaningful only to you. As a start, however, try this system:

- Underline or bracket passages that you find particularly effective or that seem especially important to the author's purpose.
- Circle words you don't understand so that you can look them up when you finish.

- Put question marks in the margins next to unclear passages.
- Jot down associations that occur to you, such as examples from your own experience, disagreements with the author's assumptions, or connections to other works you've read.

When you have finished such an active reading, your annotations might look like those below. (The paragraph is from the end of the essay reprinted on pp. 9–13.)

The first half of our lives is spent stubbornly denying it. As children we acquire language to make ourselves understood and soon learn from the blank stares in response to our babblings that even these, our saviors, our parents, are strangers. In adolescence when we replay earlier dramas with peers in the place of parents, we begin the quest for the best friend, that person who will receive all thoughts as if they were

her own. Later we assert that true love will find the way.

True love finds many ways, but no escape from exile.

The shores are littered with us, Annas and Ophelias,

Ophelia + Juliet  
from Shakespeare.

Others also?

around us and find solace there and a friend in our own voice.

In other words,  
just give up?

To answer questions like those in the annotations, count on rereading the essay at least once. Multiple readings increase your mastery of the material; more important, once you have a basic understanding of a writer's subject, a second and third reading will reveal details and raise questions that you might not have noticed on the first pass. Reading an essay several times also helps you to uncover how the many parts of the work—for instance, the sequencing of information, the tone, the evidence—contribute to the author's purpose.

### Using a Reading Checklist

When rereading an essay, start by writing a one- or two-sentence summary of each paragraph and image—in your own words—to increase

**CHECKLIST FOR CRITICAL READING**

- Why did the author choose this subject?
- Who is the intended audience? What impression did the author wish to make on readers?
- What is the author's point? Can you find a direct statement of the thesis, or main idea, or is the thesis implied?
- What details does the author provide to support the thesis? Is the supporting evidence reliable? complete? convincing?
- How does the author organize ideas? What effect does that arrangement have on the overall impact of the work?
- What do language and tone reveal about the author's meaning, purpose, and attitude?
- How successful is the work as a whole, and why?

your mastery of the material (see p. 365). Then let the essay rest in your mind for at least an hour or two before approaching it again. On subsequent readings, dig beneath the essay's surface by asking questions such as those in the checklist above. Note that the questions provided after each essay in this book offer more targeted versions of the ones above. Combining the questions in the checklist with the questions for individual readings will ensure a thorough analysis of what you read.

**Analyzing a Sample Essay**

Critical reading—and the insights to be gained from it—can best be illustrated by examining an actual essay. The paragraph on page 7 comes from “The Box Man” by Barbara Lazear Ascher. The entire essay is reprinted here in the same format as other selections in this book, with quotations from other writers to get you thinking about the essay's subject, a suggestion for exploring your attitudes further in your journal, a note on the author, and a note on the essay.

**ON HOMELESSNESS**

You are where you live. —Anna Quindlen

People who are homeless are not social inadequates. They are people without homes. —Sheila McKechnie

How does it feel / To be without a home / Like a complete unknown / Like a rolling stone? —Bob Dylan

**JOURNAL RESPONSE** In your journal write briefly about how you typically feel when you encounter a person who appears to be homeless. Are you sympathetic? disgusted? something in between?

**Barbara Lazear Ascher**

Born in 1946, American writer Barbara Lazear Ascher is known for her insightful, inspiring essays. She obtained a BA from Bennington College in 1968 and a JD from Cardozo School of Law in 1979. After practicing law for two years, Ascher turned to writing full-time. Her essays have appeared in a diverse assortment of periodicals, including the *New York Times*, *Vogue*, the *Yale Review*, *Redbook*, and *National Geographic Traveler*. Ascher has also published a memoir of her brother, who died of AIDS, *Landscape Without Gravity: A Memoir of Grief* (1993), and several collections of essays: *Playing After Dark* (1986), *The Habit of Loving* (1989), and *Dancing in the Dark: Romance, Yearning, and the Search for the Sublime* (1999). She lives in New York City.

**The Box Man**

In this essay from *Playing after Dark*, the evening ritual of a homeless man prompts Ascher's reflection on the nature of solitude. By describing the Box Man alongside two other solitary people, Ascher distinguishes between chosen and unchosen loneliness.

The Box Man was at it again. It was his lucky night.

The first stroke of good fortune occurred as darkness fell and the night watchman at 220 East Forty-fifth Street neglected to close the door as he slipped out for a cup of coffee. I saw them before the Box Man did.