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Preface

Ways of Reading is designed for a course where students are given the opportunity to work on what they read, and to work on it by writing. When we began developing such courses, we realized that the problems our students had when asked to write or talk about what they read were not "reading problems," at least not as these are strictly defined. Our students knew how to move from one page to the next. They could read sentences. They had, obviously, been able to carry out many of the versions of reading required for their education—skimming textbooks, cramming for tests, strip-mining books for term papers.

Our students, however, felt powerless in the face of serious writing, in the face of long and complicated texts—the kinds of texts we thought they should find interesting and challenging. We thought (as many teachers have thought) that if we just, finally, gave them something good to read—something rich and meaty—they would change forever their ways of thinking about English. It didn't work, of course. The issue is not only what students read, but what they can learn to do with what they read. We learned that the problems our students had lay not in the reading material (it was too hard) or in the students (they were poorly prepared) but in the classroom—in the ways we and they imagined what it meant to work on an essay.

There is no better place to work on reading than in a writing course, and this book is intended to provide occasions for readers to write. You will find a number of distinctive features in Ways of Reading. For one thing, it contains selections you don't usually see in a college reader: long, powerful, mysterious, and difficult pieces like John Berger's "Ways of Seeing," Judith Butler's "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy," Susan Griffin's "Our Secret," Edward Said's "States," John Edgar Wideman's "Our Time," David Foster Wallace's "Authority and American Usage," or Michel Foucault's "Panopticism." These are the sorts of readings we talk about when we talk with our colleagues. We have learned that we can talk about them with our students as well.

When we chose the essays, we were looking for "readable" texts—that is, texts that leave some work for a reader to do. We wanted selections that invite students to be active, critical readers, that present powerful readings of common experience, that open up the familiar world and make it puzzling, rich, and problematic. We wanted to choose selections that invite students to take responsibility for their acts of interpretation. So we avoided the short set-pieces you find in so many anthologies. In a sense, those short selections misrepresent the act of reading. They can be read in a single sitting; they make arguments that can be easily paraphrased; they solve all the problems they raise; they wrap up life and put it into a box; and so they turn reading into an act of appreciation, where the most that seems to be required is a nod of the head. And they suggest that a writer's job is to do just that, to write a piece that is similarly tight and neat and
Introduction: Ways of Reading

Reading involves a fair measure of push and shove. You make your mark on a text, 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. We need only look to the complex social interactions we engage in every day to imagine the multiple possibilities for reading—sometimes peaceful and polite, sometimes contentious, sometimes hesitant and difficult. If you imagine your reading as a particular kind of social interaction, then you might be able to imagine, for example, a text you might feel shy around, perhaps because it is behaving in a way you find unusual or difficult. You might imagine a text that encourages you, like a friend might—or a text that provokes you like an older brother. Thinking about reading this way means, of course, that you have to do your part of the interaction. Engaging with reading in these ways is an essential part of engaging with reading as a writer.

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 summarize or report).

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, and you attempt to relate what the author says to what you already know or expect to hear or learn, trusting that it will all make sense in the end. 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 responding 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 essay can be seen as Rodriguez's attempt to weigh what he has gained against what he has lost.

If ten of us read his essay, each would begin with the same words on the page, but when we discuss or write about the essay, 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. We will all understand Rodriguez's story in our own ways, 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, 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 active reading, a way of reading we like to encourage in our students, a way of reading that invites students to think of themselves as strong readers, readers capable of creating their own unique and innovative readings even when they are not experts on the subject an author undertakes.

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 to either abandon his family and culture or 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. And some students have imagined Rodriguez's piece as raising complex questions rather than inviting us to come to particular conclusion about education, culture, or family. Interacting with texts might mean, at times, making arguments or drawing conclusions about that text. But sometimes it can also mean recognizing the aspects of a text that might be posing unanswerable and complicated questions, questions that invite us to explore or inquire rather than to take a stance. When you begin to speak, what you have to
say might not be a statement; it might be a question, an unsolvable problem, or a way of extending the work you see the author doing.

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, to articulate or acknowledge what you think the set of questions an author raises invites you to ask. 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 also 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 active readers, can make theirs on it. Just as you engage in various ways of reading while you read “The Achievement of Desire,” Rodriguez, through his writing, also engages in ways of reading; he offers you his angle of looking; his writing invites you to see as he sees, to take up what it might mean to see the world from his viewpoint. An active reader tries, in her first reading, to understand the way of reading enacted by an author. Understanding the angle from which Rodriguez sees and reads the world helps an active reader respond more powerfully as a writer.

Readers learn to put things together by writing. This 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 this 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 an essay, you go back to what you have read to find phrases or passages that define what for you are the key moments, those 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 and self-reflexive. 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.”

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 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 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 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, about what questions are central to their inquiry, 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 influence our seeing, talking, reading, and writing. This power of influence 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 active, 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 and conventional ways of 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. These readings mostly require us to behave ourselves, to accept what they offer and recall it later.

This is how assigned readings are often presented in university classrooms. Introductory textbooks (in biology or business, for instance) are good examples of books that ask to be read dutifully and passively. In these texts, the writers are experts, and your job, as novice, is to digest what they have to say. And, perhaps appropriately at times, the task set before you is to summarize—so you can speak again to 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 our academic, professional, and personal lives, but that 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 say what they notice or to pose their own questions).

Reading to locate meaning in the text places a premium on memory, yet an active 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 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. 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 the Internet or 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 (or in an e-file). But in doing either, the reader only rehearses the thoughts of others, abandoning the responsibility to make the essay meaningful, to become invested in the essay for one’s own purposes. 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. 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.

You'll notice (and we will discuss later) that we offer some "Questions for a Second Reading" once you've read through a piece one time. But what about that first reading, that first time you read a challenging and multidimensional piece of writing like the ones you find here? There are many ways to engage with a text as you read it for the first time. It's important to have a way to write on the text itself—not just to highlight sections you find interesting, troubling, or confusing (though you might do that, too), but to keep notes to yourself in the margins, perhaps writing questions that come up for you as you read, or writing down key words that will help you remember why you marked that particular place. Sometimes, with particularly difficult readings, we ask students to mark words, names, or phrases that they think would be useful hyperlinks—moments in the text where you wish you could click on the word or phrase in order to find out more. If you try this on your first read-through, you might learn something important; you might learn what you don't yet know about the text. Often times, being an engaged reader means paying attention both to what is familiar and what is unfamiliar about what you are reading.

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 to you, 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 can even return to those moments in which you didn't know exactly where the text was trying to lead you.

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. And it is part of the experience of an active 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 claim that he understood everything that Michel Foucault or Judith Butler or Edward Said had to say. What engaged and active readers know is that they have to begin, and they have to begin regardless of their doubts or hesitations. After your first reading of an essay you have a starting place, and you begin with your marked passages or examples or notes, with questions to answer, or with problems to solve. Active readings, in other words, put a premium on individual acts of attention and composition.

ENGAGED READERS, ENGAGING TEXTS

We chose pieces for this book that invite engaged 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. These 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, John Berger's essay "Ways of Seeing." You could go to the library to find out how Berger is understood and regarded by experts, by literary critics or art historians, for example; you could learn how his work fits into an established body of work on art and representation. You could see what others have said about the writers he cites—Walter Benjamin, for example. You could see how others have read and made use of Berger. You could track one of his key terms, like "mystification."

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. Berger can also be read outside any official system of interpretation. He is talking, after all, about our daily experience. And when he addresses the reader, he addresses a person—not a five-paragraph formula writer. When he says, "The way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe, you are part of that construction, part of the "we" he is invoking.

The primary question, then, is not what Berger's words might mean to an art historian or to those with credentials as professors or as cultural critics. 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 he has written. In this sense, "Ways of Seeing" 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, even if the meaning you construct is tentative or uncertain.

I. A. Richards, a teacher, poet, and critic we admire, 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 all the problems these essays present. You can speak with authority while still acknowledging that complex issues are complex.

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 a complex 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

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. If, as we suggested earlier, reading is a kind of social interaction, this means you are equally a listener and a responder. It might help to think about what it really means to listen to another person, to try to understand their point of view before offering your own response.

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 Susan Bordo’s essay “Beauty (Re)discovers the Male Body,” for example, we have asked students to look at images from the contemporary media, to think about them in terms of her argument, and to write about them as she might — to see them and to understand them in her terms, through the lens of her essay. We have asked students to give themselves over to this essay, in other words — recognizing that this is not necessarily an easy thing to do. Notice what she would notice. Ask the questions she would ask. Try out her conclusions.

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 Bordo’s 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 Bordo’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. Susan Bordo, we say, is quite specific about her age and her experience, her point of view. You are placed at a different moment in time, your experience is different, your schooling and your exposure to images have prepared you differently. Your job, then, is not simply to repro-

duce Bordo’s project in your writing and thinking, but to refine it, to extend it, to put it to the test.

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 Judith Butler, Susan Griffin, and Kwame Anthony Appiah, whose writings show the signs of their efforts to work against the grain of the standard essay, of 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 working against the grain. For reasons good 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 listen to the projects 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.

Reading with and against the grain is one way to think about the work of reading. And even within this metaphor, there are more than two ways of reading. But we might also extend the work of the metaphor. Our students have explored this metaphor and have even come up with metaphors of their own for thinking about what reading is and what it means to do a reading. One student described reading as much like walking to the grocery store — one could take a direct route, focusing on the ultimate goal, perhaps making a list of items as he walked. One could also meander, not worrying about time or what items to purchase, but thinking instead about the sunset or the traffic patterns. Readers can be, in many ways, like walkers — sometimes focused and clear on their goals, sometimes allowing their minds to wander or notice something other than getting to the grocery store, sometimes ending up in places they didn’t think they were going. Another student likened her reading to looking through a telescope in her astronomy course. For her, reading was like forming constellations, looking at a night sky for those sets of glimmers that might form something familiar, something she could name. A student who was studying civil engineering explained how reading, for him, seemed much like designing a bridge that connects two places. “It can look simple,” he writes in an in-class writing activity. “When you drive over a bridge, you don’t think about how many tiny details have
gone into making the bridge stand. Reading is like that, too. Seems simple, but it's not. You might think of reading in a number of ways. The important part is that you broaden your understanding of what it means to read, that you challenge yourself to read in new ways so that you might then write in new ways as well.

**WORKING WITH DIFFICULTY**

When we chose the selections for this textbook, we chose them with the understanding that they are difficult to read. And we chose them knowing that students are not their primary audience, that the selections are 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 is our goal to take our students seriously. Students need to read materials that 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 but 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. 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 simply 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 to say. You hear that in this statement: "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 hold of Freire, to open a door or to get 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. 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. 225). He states, "Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence" (p. 225). 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?" 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:

He states, 'Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence' (p. 225). I believe what Freire is speaking of here is...

The key moment in writing like this is the moment of translation: "I believe what Freire is speaking of here ..." 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 he couldn't quite understand, couldn't sum up easily, couldn't command. 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 fully comprehended what you have read. 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 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 text or phrases that indicate intellectual movement, like "on the 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 important, 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 only to summary.

READING AND WRITING: THE QUESTIONS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Active readers, we've said, remake what they have read to serve their own ends, putting things together, figuring out how ideas and examples relate, explaining as best they can material that is difficult or problematic, translating phrases like Richard Rodriguez's "scholarship boy" into their own terms. At these moments, it is hard to distinguish the act of reading from the act of writing. In fact, the connection between reading and writing can be seen as almost a literal one, since the best way you can show your reading of a rich and dense essay like "The Achievement of Desire" is by writing down your thoughts, placing one idea against another, commenting on what you've done, taking examples into account, looking back at where you began, perhaps changing your mind, and moving on.

Readers, however, seldom read a single essay in isolation, as though their only job were to arrive at some sense of what an essay has to say. Although we couldn't begin to provide examples of all the various uses of these ways of reading, it is often the case that readings provide information and direction for investigative projects, whether they are philosophical or scientific in nature. The reading and writing assignments that follow each selection in this book are designed to point you in certain directions, to give you ideas and projects to work with, and to challenge you to see one writer's ideas through another's.

You will find that the questions we have included in our reading and writing assignments often direct you to test what you think an author is saying by measuring it against your own experience. Paulo Freire, for example, in "The Banking Concept of Education" talks about the experience of the student, and one way for you to develop or test your reading of his essay is to place what he says in the context of your own experience, searching for examples that are similar to his and examples that differ from his. If the writers in this book are urging you to give strong readings of your common experience, you have access to what they say because they are talking not only to you but about you. Freire has a method that he employs when he talks about the classroom—one that compares "banking" education with "problem-posing" education. You can try out his method and his terms on examples of your own, continuing his argument as though you were working with him on a common project. Or you can test his argument as though you want to see not only where and how it will work but also where and how it will not.

Readers, as we have said, seldom read an essay in isolation, as though, having once worked out a reading of Kwame Anthony Appiah's "Racial Identities," they could go on to something else, something unrelated. It is unusual for anyone, at least in an academic setting, to read in so random a fashion. Readers read most often because they have a project in hand—a question they are working on or a problem they are trying to solve. For example, if as a result of reading Appiah's essay you become interested in questions of race and identity, and you begin to notice things you would not have noticed before, then you can read other essays in the book through this frame. If you have a project in mind, that project will help determine how you read these other essays. Sections of an essay that might otherwise seem unimportant suddenly become important—Gloria Anzaldúa's unusual prose style, or John Wideman's account of his racial politics in Pittsburgh. Appiah may spur you to read Wideman's narrative differently. Wideman may spur you to rethink Appiah. In a sense, you have the chance to become an expert reader, a reader with a project in hand, one who has already done some reading, who has watched others at work, and who has begun to develop a method of analysis and a set of key terms. Imagining yourself operating alongside some of the major figures in contemporary thought can be great fun and heady work—particularly when you have the occasion to speak back to them.

You may find that you have to alter your sense of who a writer is and what a writer does as you work on your own writing. Writers are often told that they need to begin with a clear sense of what they want to do and what they want to say. The writing assignments we've written, we believe, give you a sense of what you want (or need) to do. We define a problem for you to work on, and the problem will frame the task for you. You will have to decide where you will go in the texts...
you have read to find materials to work with, the primary materials that will give you a place to begin as you work on your essay. It might be best, however, if you did not feel that you need to have a clear sense of what you want to say before you begin. You may begin to develop a sense of what you want to say while you are writing. It may also be the case that the subjects you will be writing about are too big for you to assume that you need to have all the answers or that it is up to you to have the final word or to solve the problems once and for all. When you work on your essays, you should cast yourself in the role of one who is exploring a question, examining what might be said, and speculating on possible rather than certain conclusions. Consider your responses provisional. Think of yourself as a writer intent on opening a subject up rather than closing one down.

Let us turn briefly now to the three categories of reading and writing assignments you will find in the book.

Questions for a Second Reading

Immediately following each selection are questions designed to guide your second reading. You may, as we’ve said, prefer to follow your own instincts as you search for the materials to build your understanding of the reading. These questions are meant to assist that process or develop those instincts. Most of the selections in the book are longer and more difficult than those you may be accustomed to reading. They are difficult enough that any reader would have to reread them and work to understand them; these questions are meant to suggest ways of beginning that work.

The second-reading questions characteristically ask you to consider the relations between ideas and examples in what you have read or to test specific statements in the essays against your own experience (so that you can get a sense of the author’s habit of mind, his or her way of thinking about subjects that are available to you, too). Some turn your attention to what we take to be key terms and concepts, asking you to define these terms by observing how the writer uses them throughout the essay.

These questions have no simple answers; you will not find a correct answer hidden somewhere in the selection. In short, they are not the sorts of questions asked on SAT or ACT exams. They are real questions. They pose problems for interpretation or indicate sections where, to our minds, there is some interesting work for a reader to do. They are meant to reveal possible ways of reading the text, not to indicate that there is only one correct way, and that we have it.

You may find it useful to take notes as you read through each selection a second time, perhaps in a journal you can keep as a sourcebook for more formal written work. We will often also divide our students into groups, with each group working together with one of the second-reading questions in preparation for a report to the class. There are important advantages for you as a writer when you do this kind of close work with the text. Working through a second time, you get a better sense of the argument and of the shape of the argument; you get a sense of not only what the author is saying but what she is doing, and this prepares you to provide not only summary and paraphrase but also a sense of the author and her project. The work of rereading sends you back to the text; the second time through you can locate passages you might very well want to use in your own writing—passages that are particularly interesting to you, or illustrative, or even puzzling and obscure. These become the quotations you can use to bring the author’s words into your essay, to bring them in as the object of scrutiny and discussion.

Assignments for Writing

This book actually offers three kinds of writing assignments: assignments that ask you to write about a single essay or story, assignments that ask you to read one selection through the frame of another, and longer sequences of assignments that define a project within which three or four of the selections serve as primary sources. All of these assignments serve a dual purpose. Like the second-reading questions, they suggest a way for you to reconsider the essays; they give you access from a different perspective. The assignments also encourage you to be an engaged reader and actively interpret what you have read. In one way or another, they all invite you to use a reading as a way of framing experience, as a source of terms and methods to enable you to interpret something else—some other text, events and objects around you, or your own memories and experience. The assignment sequences can be found at the end of the book and in Resources for Teaching Ways of Reading. The others (“Assignments for Writing” and “Making Connections”) come immediately after each selection.

“Assignments for Writing” ask you to write about a single selection. Although some of these assignments call for you to paraphrase or reconstruct difficult passages, most ask you to interpret what you have read with a specific purpose in mind. For most of the essays, one question asks you to interpret a moment from your own experience through the frame of the essay—adapting its method, using its key terms, extending the range of its examples. Other assignments, however, ask you to turn an essay back on itself or to extend the conclusions of the essay by reconsidering the examples the writer has used to make his or her case.

When we talk with teachers and students using Ways of Reading, we are often asked about the wording of these assignments. The assignments are long. The wording is often unusual, unexpected. The assignments contain many questions, not simply one. The directions seem indirect, confusing. “Why?” we’re asked. “How should we work with these?” When we write assignments, our goal is to point students toward a project, to provide a frame for their reading, a motive for writing, a way of asking certain kinds of questions. In that sense, the assignments should not be read as a set of directions to be followed literally. In fact, they are written to resist that reading, to forestall a writer’s desire to simplify, to be efficient, to settle for the first clear line toward the finish. We want to provide a context to suggest how readers and writers might take time, be thoughtful. And we want the projects students work on to become their own. We hope to provoke varied responses, to leave the final decisions to the students. So the assignments...
try to be open and suggestive rather than narrow and direct. We ask lots of ques-
tions, but students don't need to answer them all (or any of them) once they begin to write. Our questions are meant to suggest ways of questioning, start-
ing points. "What do you want?" Our own students ask this question. We want writers to make the most they can of what they read, including our questions and assignments.

So, what's the best way to work with an assignment? The writing assignments we have written will provide a context for writing, even a set of expecta-
tions, but the assignments do not provide a set of instructions. The first thing to do, then, is to ask yourself what, within this context, do you want to write about? What is on your mind? What is interesting or pressing for you? What direction can you take that will best allow you to stretch or to challenge yourself or to do something that will be new and interesting? We will often set aside class time to talk through an assignment and what possibilities it might suggest for each student's work. (We don't insist that everyone take the same track.) And we invite students to be in touch with us and with one another outside of class or online. Writers and scholars often rely on their friends and colleagues to help them get an angle, think about where to begin, understand what is new and interesting and what is old and dull. And, then, finally, the moment comes and you just sit down to the keyboard and start writing. There is no magic here, unfortunately. You write out what you can, and then you go back to what you have written to see what you are saying, and to see what comes next, and to think about how to shape it all into an essay to give to readers in the hope that they might call it "eloquent," "persuasive," "beautiful."

Making Connections

The connections questions will have you work with two or more readings at a time. These are not so much questions that ask you to compare or contrast the essays or stories as they are directions on how you might use one text as the context for interpreting another. Mary Louise Pratt, for example, in "Arts of the Contact Zone" looks at the work of a South American native, an Inca named Guaman Poma, writing in the seventeenth century to King Philip III of Spain. His work, she argues, can be read as a moment of contact, one in which different cultures and positions of power come together in a single text — in which a conquered person responds to the ways he is represented in the mind and the language of the conqueror. Pratt's reading of Guaman Poma's letter to King Philip, and the terms she uses to describe the way she reads it, provide a powerful context for a reader looking at essays by other writers, like Gloria Anzaldúa, for whom the "normal" or "standard" language of American culture is difficult, troubling, unsatisfactory, or incomplete. There are, then, assignments that ask you both to extend and to test Pratt's reading through your reading of alternative texts.

Reading one essay through the lens of another becomes a focused form of rereading. To write responses to these assignments, you will need to reread both of the assigned selections. The best way to begin is by taking a quick inventory of what you recall as points of connection. You could do this on your own, with a colleague, or in groups, but it is best to do it with pen and paper (or laptop) in hand. And before you reread, you should come to at least a provisional sense of what you want to do with the assignment. Then you can reread with a project in mind. Be sure to mark passages that you can work with later when you are writing. And look for passages that are interestingly different as well as those that complement each other.

The Assignment Sequences

The assignment sequences are more broad-ranging versions of the "Making Con-
nections" assignments; in the sequences, several reading and writing assign-
ments are linked and directed toward a single goal. They allow you to work on projects that require more time and incorporate more readings than would be possible in a single assignment. And they encourage you to develop your own point of view in concert with those of the professionals who wrote the essays and stories you are reading.

The assignments in a sequence build on one another, each relying on the ones before. A sequence will usually make use of four or five reading selections. The first is used to introduce an area of study or inquiry as well as to establish a frame of reference, a way of thinking about the subject. In the sequence titled "The Aims of Education," you begin with readings by Paulo Freire. The goal of the sequence is to provide a point for you to work from, one that you can open up to question. Subsequent assignments ask you to develop examples from your own schooling as you work through other accounts of education in, for example, Mary Louise Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone," Susan Griffin's "Our Secret," or Richard E. Miller's "The Dark Night of the Soul."

The sequences allow you to participate in an extended academic project, one in which you take a position, revise it, look at a new example, hear what someone else has to say, revise it again, and see what conclusions you can draw about your subject. These projects always take time — they go through stages and revisions as a writer develops a command over his material, pushing against habitual ways of thinking, learning to examine an issue from different angles, rejecting quick conclusions, seeing the power of under-
standing that comes from repeated effort, and feeling the pleasure writers take when they find their own place in significant conversations that connect to their lived experience.