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READING AND WRITING ABOUT PAST EVENTS: THE HUMANITIES AND HISTORICAL SCIENCES

Disciplines that use evidence from the past to come to new statements of knowledge can be either reconstructive or interpretive. Reconstructive disciplines—such as history, geology, and archeology—attempt to determine what happened in the past. Interpretive disciplines—such as literary criticism—attempt to understand human creations made in the past. Guidelines for reading and writing *essays about the past* and *interpretive essays* will help you understand your reading and prepare written work for courses in both kinds of historical disciplines.

Traces of the Past

In order to answer the questions they find interesting, fields as diverse as literary criticism, archeology, geology, history, evolutionary biology, and investigative criminology rely on the remaining traces of past events. Sometimes solid remnants like fossils or pieces of rock reveal the past; sometimes more fragile traces like fingerprints provide the only clues to what happened; and sometimes we must look at events through someone's account, as in historical documents or paintings. Indeed, in some fields such as literary criticism the interpretation of the historical document (a poem, story, novel, or play) forms the very subject of inquiry.

Reconstructive disciplines, particularly history but also the historical aspect of any discipline, attempt to reconstruct what happened or what people did during past events. They necessarily rely on previous accounts of the same events or on reports of related information. Accounts of people who witnessed the original events (e.g., private journals as well as newspaper reports), documents instrumental to the unfolding of events (e.g., correspondence between two leaders negotiating a pact), or other written records (e.g., old bills found in a desk or the registration of a business contract) may be supplemented by nonverbal objects (e.g., archeological remains of a battlefield), but historians inevitably depend on the written record prepared by others. In using such written records, historians must constantly consider the meaning, interpretation, reliability, purpose, and bias of the primary documents and the secondary literature. *Primary documents* are those that come directly from the time of events under discussion, and *secondary documents* are those that follow to discuss the earlier events. Thus the historian's basic problem of how to use the evidence of the written record resembles that of any person attempting library research; such problems are discussed throughout this book, but particularly in Chapters 7, 9, and 10. The guidelines for writing an essay about the past and the example on page 405 show how one can harness the historical record to test statements from a wide range of disciplines.

Disciplines like archeology, paleontology, and historical geology, on the other hand, 'must reconstruct past events and patterns of change and development through physical objects that remain behind. Since these objects—a broken clay pot, a few bones, or an unusual rock formation—are rare and do not speak, the researcher may not know at first what to make of them. So these disciplines have developed many techniques for finding, identifying, and dating objects. Even more important, these disciplines have found ways of relating the individual object to others that are found at the same place or are in some other way similar. Thus an archeological dig starts to provide significant meaning only if all the objects and physical traces fit together to create a total picture, both of what was happening at a single time period and what happened before and after as revealed by traces found at other layers of the dig. Moreover, the dig is compared to other digs from the same region or similar cultures. Careful classification systems allow rigorous comparisons, so that, for example, paleontologists can decide whether a fossilized tooth found at one site is from the same species of animal as the jawbone found at another site.

Interpretive fields attempt to understand the creations left by other human beings, such as literature, music, art, or even ideas. Discussion in these fields always refers back to the evidence of the poem, artwork, piece of music, or philosophic text that is the subject of discussion. Although we can never be sure what the creator was thinking or feeling, or what the creator intended to accomplish by the work, we can know what has been passed down to us in the created object. So whenever we want to check the truth of anything we read about a human creation, we need to look at the creation itself. We need to consider how well the details of the created object fit the generalized interpretation. Consequently, to verify any interpretation, you must refer back constantly to the object you are analyzing through quotation, paraphrase,

summary, and description of relevant examples. Doubtless you have had experience in English classes of writing analytical interpretations of literary works and evaluating the interpretations of others. In this book, the analysis of purpose and technique in Chapter 7 requires you to use the evidence of the analyzed text in just this way. Further advice on interpretive analysis follows in the latter part of this chapter.

Reading About the Past

We read about the past from both primary and secondary documents. To find out about the Great Depression of the 1930s, we read old newspapers, letters by people describing their experiences, economic reports, and presidential speeches; we also read history books written more than fifty years later. The two kinds of documents provide us with different kinds of information and need to be read differently. Primary documents, the statements of people at the time of the events, are themselves active parts of the events; we read them as part of the story. Secondary documents tell stories of events from a distance; we read them to learn how events have been interpreted later.

Primary documents need to be read as speeches in a drama. We need to think who is writing and why. What are the circumstances the writer is embroiled in and what role is the writer playing in them? What are the writer's character, beliefs, interests, and goals? Some of that information we must get from other primary and secondary documents to gain important contextual knowledge. But much of the drama of primary documents can emerge from careful reading of the texts themselves. In reading a slave owner's defense of slavery delivered to a state legislature just before the Civil War, we can find traces of his racial beliefs and his direct economic interest in the maintenance of slavery. It is not difficult to see the slave owner's attempts to diffuse threats to a system he is committed to and profits from. Our modern repugnance for these beliefs does not need to stand in the way of our understanding as researchers the slave owner's place in history and his speech as an event in a historical drama. Just as we can see an abolitionist's letter to a Northern newspaper as part of the same drama. Analyzing the author's purpose and technique, as you did in Chapter 7, will help you see a primary document as reporting a historical action by participants.

Reconstruction by a historian writing long after events have taken place puts the drama played by primary-source actors into a narrative. This history is given a meaning and coherence through the historian's vision, selection of material, and structured argument. Other historians have probably written about the same event, but each tells the story in a new way, bringing different evidence to bear, relying on differing assumptions about how people and societies make history, showing different sympathies, and arguing for separate points. A historian writes a new history of past events to tell the story in a new way; otherwise, the work would not make a contribution to historical knowledge. The narrative would only be a retelling of existing knowledge, as in a history textbook or a historical entertainment. In reading a secondary account of past events you need to understand how the story is being told and why.

Some historians explicitly discuss what kind of story they are telling and what makes their particular version special. Such information will help you understand what is going on in the text. Other historians, however, simply tell their story. You are left to figure out how the history is being told and why. In either case, if you understand the following four elements of historical narratives, you will start to understand what you are reading.

First, the most obvious element to consider is the overall shape of events as the historian tells them. The writer presents events as more than a hodge-podge of unrelated occurrences. The

author will narrate events in a sequence, revealing coherence and perhaps meaning. As you read, therefore, pay attention to connections the writer makes. If you are taking notes or underlining, you are probably paying most attention to the events in the story, but a brief summary of twenty-five to fifty words can help you become aware of the story's gist. As part of creating coherence, an author will choose from the available evidence and present certain events or facts as more significant than others. Noticing the choices the historian makes and being aware of what events and facts have been left out (especially if you are familiar with other accounts of the same events) helps you see how the narrative would be changed if other choices were made. Knowledge about alternative historical accounts of the same events will help you see by contrast what kind of history is constructed in the narrative before you.

Second, consider the ideas and assumptions that lie behind a historian's account. Although professional historians are trained to avoid overt bias in their narratives, they nevertheless find certain stories worth telling because of their beliefs about how history operates. They make choices as writers to support their ideas about how to make sense of history.

Third, pay attention to how a historian has gathered and selected the material in the story. Does the writer simply rely on the work of previous historians? If so, then the writer's main contribution must be in the interpretation or synthesis of existing evidence. Or does the writer seek new evidence, even new kinds of evidence to address a new question or a new way of looking at an old question? To understand where a history is leading, you need to understand what evidence the historian has gathered and why.

Fourth, determine how a historical narrative relates to stories about the same events told by other historians or accepted by scholars as historically accurate. Historians retell history to change what they believe is inaccurate knowledge about the past, because prior histories were based on incomplete evidence, inaccurate ideas, social prejudices, improper analysis, or another shortcoming. Historians believe that their narratives correct or complete what we currently accept as valid historical knowledge. There is an ongoing drama played by those who write about history just as there is a historical drama of primary events played by history's participants. To understand the drama played by historians, we must understand well the stories they tell, for theirs is a competition of storytellers. The stories historians construct from the evidence they find are the tools they use to shape society's vision of what it has been and what it is today. How we see ourselves in the present, as we make new history, is based on the vision of our past and of our ancestors constructed by historians.

Elements of Historical Narratives to Consider

1. The overall shape of events as presented by the historian
2. The ideas and assumptions behind the narrative
3. The selection of sources and evidence
4. The narrative's relation to other historical accounts

Seeing historical accounts as stories written to restructure our view of the past enables us to read history with a critical eye as well as with personal interest and involvement. More than just names and dates, even more than an account of people and events dead and gone, history becomes the attempt by scholars to understand human beings and their culture. The selection that follows provides practice in reading historical texts. A series of questions follows, based on the four elements to consider.

AN EXAMPLE: THE HISTORY OF THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

The following short history of equal rights amendments in the United States raises issues about the changing purposes and motivations for such a constitutional amendment. In particular it examines the protective labor legislation that set the stage for an earlier movement, in the 1920s, to pass an Equal Rights Amendment. The previous legislation had attempted to protect working women from exploitation in the workplace, and the early Equal Rights Amendment was intended to remove such protective restrictions. In comparing that movement to the one of the 1980s, author Elyce J. Rotella notes that, although the ERA in the 1920s was a right-wing conservative cause, in the 1980s it was seen as a left-wing cause. Nonetheless, she finds underlying this contrast that support of such amendments has always come from those who put the rights of the individual first, while opposition has come from those who see women as part of a group. Her historical discussion helps us see the politics and issues of the Equal Rights Amendment in a new way.

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READING STUDY QUESTIONS

1. According to Elyce J. Rotella, what were the issues that led to the 1920s movement for an Equal Rights Amendment? What specific events helped define those issues? How did legislation and court decisions define policy choices? Where did various groups stand in regard to those particular issues? How do the issues defining the more recent ERA movement contrast with issues defining the earlier one? How do the positions of various groups in regard to the more recent movement contrast with positions adopted in the earlier one? What similarity is there between positions taken earlier and those taken more recently? What does the author see as the underlying choice involved in considering an Equal Rights Amendment?
2. On what assumptions does Elyce Rotella base her account? Does she seem to favor an ERA? Which does she consider more important, rights of individuals or rights of groups? How can you tell whose rights she is endorsing? In retelling history, does she treat people more as individuals or as groups? What tells you this? How does her political position compare with her analysis of history? Does she seem to describe any groups or individuals more favorably--or less favorably--than others? How does she balance concern for both the individual and the group? What does she pose as the alternative facing the country and the courts?
3. What sources and evidence does Elyce Rotella use? Where do her quotations come from? What kinds of laws and court decisions does she focus on? Are there any, involving rights of women, that are not considered here, such as those concerning property, marriage, divorce, and voting? Why, do you think, does she not discuss these? How might discussing them complicate her story or lead to a different analysis?
4. Does Elyce Rotella refer in any way to other historians' accounts? If so, how does her account fit with theirs? What does she imply is the usual view of the meaning and political support of the Equal Rights Amendment? How does the history she recounts modify, enrich, or

challenge that usual view? Does her account describe the view you have held of the Equal Rights Amendment? What questions or issues does Rotella's essay raise for you?

Writing an Essay About the Past

In school you learn many facts about history and how past events have led up to present situations. You must judge much of this information simply on the basis of accounts given in different books, for you may not have the opportunity to engage in a major archeological dig or read through the church records of a small French village. Other evidence, however, you can easily check out against your own judgment, and you too can make generalizations from the primary sources. Just as a historian does, you can read through Abraham Lincoln's letters and other private papers to decide Lincoln's exact motives for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. All the relevant documents have been published and are probably available in your college library. By walking around your town, you can check out statements about its recent architectural history and come to your own conclusions. Television reruns of "I Love Lucy" and "Father Knows Best" provide easily available evidence for comments about cultural attitudes in the 1950s. The world is filled with traces of the past for you to see. The following guidelines for developing an essay about the past show how you can reconstruct a general pattern from separate traces.

Guidelines for Developing an Essay About the Past

1. Know why you are interested in the topic.
 2. Turn your general interest into specific questions.
 3. Identify a statement or specific claim to be tested.
 4. Choose appropriate evidence to support your claim.
 5. Gather the evidence in an organized way.
 6. Analyze the data.
 7. Organize the essay.
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1. *Know why you are interested in a particular topic.* Although the world is filled with evidence, we usually look at only a few pieces at a time. We focus our attention because we are trying to answer a question or solve a problem or because we believe a particular piece of information will help us understand a bigger issue. In the student example by LaShana Williamson on page 238, specific attitudes and policies help us see the overall relationship between the way people think and the way the government responds to the needs of people with disabilities. (Because this discussion of the history of the disability rights movement in the United States on pages 238-240 will be used as an example throughout this section, you may wish to read it now).
 2. *Turn your general interest into specific questions.* Your underlying interest in the subject will lead you to ask certain questions of the material you find. In the example, LaShana's interest in the newest social policy concerning people with disabilities, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, leads her to ask about the legislation that preceded it, the attitudes that shaped and influenced it, and whether it reflects progress in the struggle for equality by people with disabilities. If she had been interested in a different issue—such as

civil rights cases involving people with disabilities—she would have gathered different kinds of information, perhaps court reports and legal analyses of key state and federal cases involving disability rights.

3. *Identify a statement or specific claim to be tested.* After examining the data, you should start to formulate an answer in a specific statement or claim. This statement might come directly from something you read; it might be a modification or expansion of something you read; or it might be a totally new conclusion. The relationship of the statement to previous statements in the literature helps provide a continuity of thinking among people interested in the subject and helps increase the likelihood that the different investigations will fit together in a larger structure, that they all will add up to more than a collection of totally separate pieces. Nonetheless, sometimes an examination of a specific case may lead your thoughts in very different directions than previous writing on related subjects. Suong new claims or ideas may persuade other writers to follow your lead, building a structure of knowledge on the basis of your work. That, however, does not happen as often as most authors would like to imagine.

The student example presents a single dominant idea about the history of the disability rights movement, an idea that ties together all the details about public attitudes and social policy: that the history of disability rights in the United States is characterized by the shift from a functional-limitations model to a minority model, with corresponding shifts in definitions of disability. This statement comes directly from one of the sources that LaShana read: a discussion of the history of ideas underlying the disability rights movement, written by Harlan Hahn, a political scientist. The discussion of the history of social policy—particular pieces of legislation and particular details about the experiences of people with disabilities—help establish, support, and enrich our understanding of the central claim, which we come to accept, due to the fullness and detail of the account.

4. *Choose appropriate evidence to support your claim.* Having decided on the statement to be tested, you must decide on the appropriate evidence. What will best establish the shift from a functional-limitations model to a minority model, for social policy concerning people with disabilities? LaShana clearly thought that brief descriptions of the kinds of social policy enacted during specific periods, along with a discussion of the corresponding definitions of disability accepted during these periods, would establish this more clearly than would, for example, extensive analysis of particular pieces of legislation or statistical evidence showing which definitions people held.

In considering appropriate evidence, you may find that certain Statements are not testable. Other statements may require evidence you cannot obtain. In such cases the best that the author can do is to suggest the various historical and cultural forces tending in that direction, and then hedge by using the word *probably*. You can make unprovable statements in the form of your own personal judgments or opinions, but they must clearly be identified as personal judgments and you must provide as much evidence as you can to make your opinion appear at least plausible if not absolutely certain.

5. *Gather the evidence in an organized way.* You must gather the evidence methodically and carefully, organizing it in categories relevant to the issue you are testing and seeing what patterns develop. Although the student example is based on basic familiarity with the disability rights movement, which gained momentum and visibility during the past three decades, the methods by which this familiarity was gained are not explicitly discussed.

We can, however, assume that the author certainly made a catalogue of key pieces of legislation and central ways of defining disability. The list of works cited on page 410 clearly shows that LaShana Williamson explored two different approaches to the issue at hand--the *historical approach* (in scholarly articles and books detailing the history of social policy concerning people with disabilities, and in popular news magazines reporting recent events) and the *theoretical approach* (in scholarly articles that trace the ideas and assumptions behind these historical events).

6. *Analyze the data.* The analysis of the data involves seeing exactly what the data indicate about the statement you are testing. Since Lashana uses Harlan Hahn's categories to describe the ideological shift behind changing social policy, she constantly relates the historical details to these categories. For example, the description of the 1920 Rehabilitation Act is presented to exemplify how the economic definition of disability shaped the functional-limitations model for social policy. Each piece of historical evidence cited is likewise linked to one of the two models for social policy and is discussed in terms of the definition of disability (either medical, economic, or socio-political) underlying it.
7. *Organize the essay.* As in all essays, you should state your main idea early in the introduction. This can be an explicit claim to be tested or a generalization or idea that draws the following narrative together.

Making an explicit claim leads to an essay similar to the social sciences essay about contemporary events described in the next chapter. In such an essay you must then explain the kind of evidence you used to test the claim and how the evidence was gathered. The major findings should follow, organized either around major themes or around categories of evidence. Finally, the meaning of the evidence and the conclusions to be drawn from it should be given. Dividing the essay into separate sections may help the reader understand the organization, although such formal divisions are not always necessary.

Throughout the essay, you should present and discuss your findings in as specific, and concrete a way as possible, relying heavily on the evidence you have found. Remember that the main point of the essay is to see how specific evidence relates to or supports a general claim. So keep returning to that evidence even as you interpret its meaning and pass judgments on the general statement being tested.

The second option, of simply announcing a general idea that ties your narrative together, leads to an essay like the traditional historical account, as in the following student example about the disability rights movement. This essay establishes its claim persuasively by drawing a picture of social forces (prevailing definitions of disability and models for social policy) and unfolding events (specific legislation and trends concerning the rights of people with disabilities). In this unfolding picture, the events seem almost to speak for themselves as they expose a central meaning or idea. Nonetheless, the writer works hard to present the history of social policy in the way she wants her readers to see it as reflecting and at the same time shaping public attitudes toward people with disabilities. Like LaShana Williamson, you should have a coherent vision of what happened and why; you should make that vision dear to your readers; and you should then show how all the factual details fit into that vision. Without such a controlling vision of the pattern and meaning of events, chronological narratives can deteriorate into pointless, rambling collections of disjointed facts. A history of the disability rights

movement could easily become just a list of key pieces of legislation. It is exactly this student's ability to make sense of disabilities legislation through the underlying ideas, such as the functional-limitations and minority models, that gives her essay interest and meaning.

Sample Essay About the Past

Public Attitudes and Social Policy: A History of the Disability Rights Movement in the United States

The history of the disability rights movement in the United States indicates not only that "social policy emanates from a social context" (Biklen 515) but that social policy shapes and influences that social context. Perceptions of people with disabilities have changed, and continue to change over time; they have been viewed as "subhuman organisms, menaces, objects of pity, eternal children, burdens of charity, objects of ridicule, objects of shame, holy innocents, sick persons, and developing individuals." Not surprisingly, social policies have varied to match prevailing views (Darling and Darling 31-33). According to political scientist Harlan Hahn, the history of American social policy concerning people with disabilities is a history of the shift from a "functional-limitations model" grounded in medical and economic definitions of disability to a "minority model" which defines disability in socio-political terms.

Prior to 1850, people with disabilities were viewed as objects of charity or humanitarian concern and the definition of disability was, some argue, fundamentally social (Lazerson 37). Policy focused on "moral" treatment" (education, reform, rehabilitation) with the goal of returning people with disabilities to society. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, long term custodial, care and segregation replaced "moral treatment" (Doll; Lazerson). This shift can be seen as a response to increased demand and decreased funding, a 'growing belief that deviancy constituted a social threat, and, perhaps most significantly, a shift from a social to a biological definition of disability (Lazerson ,37-39).

The functional-limitations model, informed by medical and economic definitions of disability, was the basis of social policy concerning people with disability for most of the twentieth century. According to Hahn, the medical definition "imposes a presumption of biological or physiological inferiority upon disabled persons" and "inhibits a recognition of the social and structural sources of disability"(88-89). It views the person with a disability or rather the disability itself as a "problem" or "misfortune" and turns to medical treatment and/or rehabilitation as a "solution" (DeJong 39). As many historians have noted, social policy during the early part of the century, grounded in the medical definition of disability, was shaped by a mixture of scientific knowledge and fear and had as its goal social control. Medical research with an emphasis on diagnosing, classifying, and measuring disabilities (Hahn; Lazerson; Doll; Funk) provided the basis for social policy aimed at social control: the eugenics movement and increased segregation (Ryan and Thomas 108).

The economic definition of disability, which emphasizes functional limitations on amounts and kinds of work (Hahn 91-92), to some degree softened the policy effects of the medical definition. The Rehabilitation Act of 1920 attempted to promote economic security for people with disabilities and in 1950 Congress passed legislation granting Aid to the Permanently Disabled. Although these measures were motivated more by economic considerations (long term custodial care was less cost effective than rehabilitation) than by the desire to insure the Civil and benefit rights of people with disabilities, they nonetheless led to deinstitutionalization. The period between 1920 and 1960 marked a shift from custodial care to parole or controlled release, guardianship, family care and treatment emphasizing individual variation (Doll 68-90). However, because the economic definition of disability is grounded in the assumption that "the justification of vocational rehabilitation is based on its economic return" and implied "that the ability to work is determined principally

by a person's functional capacities" (Hahn 90-91), it ignored or neglected persons judged to be incapable of gainful employment.

Although the functional limitations model was dominant during the first half of the twentieth century, there was movement in the direction of a minority model. According to Hahn, the socio-political definition of disability regards disability as the product of a "disabling environment" rather than the functional limitations of individuals and "implies that disability stems from the failure of a structured social environment to adjust to the needs and aspirations of disabled Citizens rather than from the inability of a disabled individual to adapt to the demands of Society" (93). In the early 1960s, corresponding with the civil rights movement and the women's movement, the first signs of a disability rights movement began to be seen. By the early 1970s, growing public awareness of the struggle for legal and benefit rights by people with disabilities was leading to a shift to a socio-political definition of disability (DeJong; Funk). As a result, social policy began to address society as a whole rather than people with disabilities as "the problem."

The landmark Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the beginning of the end of an era of "benign neglect" in social policy. Passed after Congress overrode two Nixon vetoes of earlier legislation, the Rehabilitation Act established a board to supervise the removal of artificial barriers which prevented people with disabilities: from full participation in society and Section 504 directly prohibited discrimination based on functional limitations: "No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States ... shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (Gliedman 63; Hahn 94-95). In 1975, in an attempt to end segregated education for children with disabilities, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) which established the right of disabled Children to receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (Gliedman 64) and began the push toward "mainstreaming."

The government's failure to effectively implement these two policies fueled the fire of activism sparked in the 1960s. The American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities (ACCD), a group comprised of fifty-five organizations addressing the concerns of a wide range of people with disabilities, was founded in 1974. It states as its goals, "improved education, expanded rehabilitation programming, enhanced employment, and self-determination and integration into the mainstream of American life" (Isbell 61). In 1977, after massive demonstrations and sit-ins by ACCD protesters, the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare finally signed the rules for administering Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Hahn 95; Isbell 61) and, in the same year, President Carter held a White House Conference on Handicapped Individuals. In 1978, statutory authorization for IL services was passed and the signing of PL 95-602 created a new Title VII establishing "Comprehensive Services for Independent Living" to be administered by state rehabilitation agencies (DeJong 45).

The increased political activism of people with disabilities and their advocates also played a central role in the emergence of the Independent Living-(IL) movement, which has strongly influenced the direction of public policy from the 1970s to the present by shifting from a focus on rehabilitation and benefit rights to civil rights, consumer rights, self-help, demedicalization, and deinstitutionalization (Dejong 40). The IL movement first gained visibility in the early 1970s when the Center for Independent Living (CIL), a self-help group providing a range of services for people living within the community, was founded in Berkeley, California. A GIL in Boston opened in 1974 and soon afterward similar centers sprang up throughout the country (DeJong 43).

Despite the growing political strength of people with disabilities and growing public awareness, during the Reagan years little progress was made toward implementing already existing laws. In fact, many of these laws were repeatedly challenged in the courts, with mixed results. Although the attempt to guarantee the rights of Americans with disabilities through social policy based on the minority model remained unfulfilled, there was nevertheless a shift toward seeing disability as "an injustice which is intolerable in society" rather than a misfortune warranting charity or pity (Dejong 39). The socio-political definition of disability emerged in popular culture as well as in academia--in the depiction of people with disabilities in the media as well as increased research in the social sciences and in the push for "disability studies" curriculum.

In the late 1980s, increased public awareness coupled with growing political strength of disability rights groups led to the creation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a disability rights bill. Two issues—access and reasonable accommodation—were (and still are) at the center of the struggle for equality for people with disabilities. The ADA, which includes definitions, exclusions, exemptions, prohibitions, and incentives for compliance as well as time limits on passing regulations for implementation, aims at providing "a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities" as well as "clear, strong, consistent enforceable standards." Specifically, it invokes "the sweep of congressional authority, including the power to enforce the 14th Amendment and to regulate commerce, in order to address the major areas of discrimination faced day-to-day by people with disabilities": employment, public services (including public transportation), public accommodations and telecommunications (Rovner 2437).

In the summer of 1990, after seemingly endless debate and extensive lobbying by disability rights activists, Congress passed, and President Bush signed, the ADA. This was, however, just the beginning. As Geeta Dardick notes, "passing a law is only a first step to full equality. Implementation is the second step, and it is just as important" (100). Since going into effect on January 26, 1991, the ADA has been discussed thoroughly in the media and has been challenged repeatedly in the courts. So far, it has withstood these challenges. Given the growing insistence on minority status by people with disabilities and the increasing acceptance of the sociopolitical definition of disability by the general public, the future of the ADA—and the disability rights movement—seems optimistic.

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Interpretation and Analysis

The humanities and fine arts, unlike the sciences, have long memories. The creative works of the past continue to be of current interest, even though we may no longer produce works like them or agree with ideas presented in them. Students of architecture try to understand buildings of the past; students of art study artworks; students of literature study literary texts; students of music study musical compositions and performances; students of philosophy study the great philosophic texts of the past even though some of these texts may no longer be considered to be correct or true. Interpretation helps us appreciate what others have accomplished; it also helps us create new works by seeing how older works convey their meaning. Both art historians and working artists gain by understanding the work of the great masters.

Whenever you study a human creation, an artifact left behind by another human being, you must interpret that creation—that is, you must find out exactly what the creation is and does. As part of that understanding you need to look beneath the surface meaning or surface effect of the work to see how that meaning or effect was evoked. In walking into the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, you may be struck by the somber mood and monumental scale of the sculpture. You may also feel close contact with Lincoln the man. Such sensations begin an appreciation of the monument. But until you can analyze how the controlled space creates a sense of largeness and intimacy at the same time, until you see how the central statue draws your attention through its placement and contrasting stone texture, until you notice the many other details that create the experience, you will not really understand the monument.

A monument creates meaning and effect differently from a piece of music or a work of philosophy. Some critics even suggest that a modern poem creates meaning in significantly different ways than an eighteenth-century poem. In studying particular kinds of creations, you will learn the different ways they work and the different levels on which they may be interpreted and analyzed. The critical tools of your specialty will give you the means to understand works on deeper and deeper levels.

Reading an Interpretation

A critical interpretation, by its nature, usually keeps a consistent focus on the creation being interpreted, although occasionally an interpretation of a single work may lead to broader interpretation of a whole class of works or of a spirit within all the works of an artist or of an age. Because the interpreted work is so central to the essay of interpretation, you need to be familiar with the work before you begin reading the -essay. It helps to keep the work near at hand as you read. If an essay is about a literary work, read the text and have it to refer to as you read the interpretation. If the essay is about an architectural work, look at photographs and plans. If it is about music, listen and listen again to a recording. Often an interpretive essay will include excerpts from a text, a photograph of the art, or architectural diagrams. However, the more familiar you are with the creation, the better you will be able to understand and evaluate its interpretation, so it is best to experience the work on your own before reading the interpretive essay.

Usually an interpretation attempts to highlight a particular theme, emotion, technique, or other aspect of the creative work. The interpreter wants to emphasize a feature that you may have missed in your experience of the work or to present a new way of looking at it. In reading the interpretation try to identify the special thing the interpreter is trying to help you see. The writer

may open with an explicit statement: "The symphony keeps surprising the listener by apparently violating the obvious expectations set up in each of the sections, yet at a higher level fulfilling the expectations in a less obvious but more satisfying way." The reader is warned what to look for in the interpretation: a definition of the obvious expectations, the kinds of violations, and the more pleasing fulfillments. By pointing to a pattern, the writer promises to show exactly how the pattern works out through details of the music. If the critic does not make an explicit statement, the reader must see whether a pattern emerges from the various details that are highlighted.

In support of an interpretive theme, meaning, or mode of perception, the writer will most likely identify details of the work. As you examine the examples offered, think about how they relate to the interpreter's overall view of the work and consider how typical the details are of the work as a whole. A critic will choose the specifics that best fit his or her viewpoint only an independent familiarity with the work discussed will help you judge if other details of the work fit the critic's ideas or whether other details suggest another interpretation. Even more than judging whether the interpretation logically fits the work as a whole, your personal experience of the work will help you judge whether a critic's ideas help you understand a work better or provide new insights into the work. A critical interpretation may make sense but may be so obvious as not to add anything new to your experience of the work. The ultimate question to ask about an interpretation is, what does it add to how I see the work? After reading the interpretation, you might do well to reexperience the original, reread the text, listen again to the music, or reexamine the art work to see whether you find new ideas, feelings, or experiences in it as a result of your critical reading.

In addition to evidence of the work's details, an interpreter may offer contextual evidence, such as what the artist or contemporary critics said of the work or what cultural concerns seemed important to the society of the time. Consider exactly how the critic connects the work to such a context and how that connection enriches your understanding of the work.

The interpreter may develop his or her interpretation out of a general view of life or art. It will help you understand such an interpretation if you can identify the critic's ideas or analytic framework. Each analysis will explore different aspects of a work, and if you grasp the analytic framework of the interpretation, you will see more readily what the critic is presenting. You may then evaluate better how the interpretation adds to your own experience of the work. A religious interpretation, looking for the spiritual meaning of a work, will identify very different details than a formalist one, which considers how parts together create a pattern.

Just as the interpretation begins with the creative work, so it ends with it. Whether or not you actually reexperience the work, after your reading you should carry in your mind a new perception of it. Ask yourself, "How did the interpretation change the work for me?" Unlike a historical narrative, a critical interpretation does not tell a story in itself: it serves another event. Even as you are reading the interpretation, your mind should be looking through that interpretation toward the creative work. If the interpretation is successful, it will reconstruct your experience of the work.

Guidelines for Reading an Interpretation

1. Be familiar with the creative work discussed and, if possible, have some form of the original available for reference.
2. Identify the aspect of the work the critic is concerned with.
3. Consider how the interpretation fits with and enhances your personal experience of the work
4. Identify the ideas or analytical framework behind the interpretation.

Writing an Interpretation

The process of writing an interpretation should begin and end with your own experience of the creative work you are interpreting. No matter how many subtle techniques and powerful frameworks for analysis you may learn, if those techniques and frameworks do not fit with your experience of the work, they are not the right tools for this particular job. Interpretation should enrich, not replace, direct experience of the work. An interpretation you develop in an essay that ignores, say, the overwhelming fear you feel whenever you watch Macbeth become embroiled in the plans that lead to his destruction will not help your readers understand the play's text as you experience it.

The guidelines below suggest generally how to turn your immediate experience into critical interpretation. With the critical tools of your specialty, you can develop more specific procedures for writing interpretive essays. For example, combining standard types of literary analysis--analysis of character, conflict, and figurative language--can lead to an analysis of how a character's outward traits metaphorically reveal that character's internal conflict. Literature often works through complex and original interplay of its various elements. The experienced interpreter of literature discovers ways to reveal that complex originality.

Guidelines for Writing and Interpretation

1. Choose a work or part of a work to interpret.
 2. Make sure you understand the work's surface features, meaning, or events.
 3. Experience the work again to identify the dominant effect or meaning that your essay will explore in depth.
 4. Identify the particular interpretive problem and its appropriate mode of analysis.
 5. Examine the work to isolate details important for your chosen interpretive problem.
 6. Consider all your evidence to find new levels of the work's meaning or effect.
 7. Organize and write the essay.
1. *Choose a work or part of a work to interpret.* You should choose material that had a powerful effect on you, either positively or negatively, for then you will have something to understand. Obviously, you must experience the work before you commit yourself to studying it in detail. If a novel leaves you cold, then in a sense the novel has not worked for you, and you have no

dominant effect or meaning to examine. In order to have something to say in your paper, you may be tempted to make up a meaning or effect that the work did not in truth have for you. If, however, you strongly sense that you missed an important element of the work, close interpretive attention may open up the meaning of a work that initially eluded you.

2. *Make sure you understand the work's surface features, meaning, or events.* This step necessarily precedes any deeper look into a work. In a novel, make sure you know who the characters are and what happens to them. In a philosophic text, make sure you understand the words and can follow the author's ideas. For a piece of architecture, make sure you understand what kind of structure it is, what all the parts of it are, and how it is constructed.
3. *Experience the work again to identify the dominant effect or meaning that your essay will explore in depth.* Successful works of art and thought often achieve many effects and meanings at many levels. In such cases, no interpretive essay can hope to encompass an entire work. Rather, you should focus your attention on that aspect that is in the forefront of your mind and personal experience.
4. *Identify a particular interpretive problem and its appropriate mode of analysis.* The effect or meaning you wish to explore will point you to particular technical issues to investigate. Depending on the interpretive issue and the particulars of the work, you will need to choose a level of analysis or interpretation. Some stories or poems raise issues of character, others of setting, and still others of the interaction of several elements. Unless your instructor assigns you a particular mode of analysis, you need to choose the mode that reveals the most crucial issues in the piece of literature.

For the particular interpretive issue that you wish to address, you may have to develop a less standard or combined mode of analysis. The peacefulness of a particular painting may suggest that you look at how colors and shapes are harmonized. Or, given the details of the painting, you may wish to consider the relaxed body postures of the figures portrayed. Or you may wish to examine all these and more, but only in relation to the issue of how the details of the painting reduce visual tension.

5. *Examine the work to isolate details important for your chosen interpretive problem.* If you have decided to look at body postures in a particular painting, you need to go back to the painting to note all the details of body posture. In examining a literary work, you need to look at the text in respect to the particular issue or feature you wish to concentrate on.
6. *Consider all your evidence to find new levels to the work's meaning or effect.* After finding all relevant details, look for the pattern that emerges from the evidence. The pattern may suggest a reconsideration of the text. Interpretations develop through the interaction of critical ideas and direct experience with the creative work. As you start to develop ideas, you are likely to heighten your experience of the work and see new aspects of it. These insights can extend your critical thinking.
7. *Organize and write the essay.* The interpretive essay can be more flexible and open-ended in form than other types of disciplinary writing, in part because an interpretation may move through a number of levels and involve a number of side issues. Moreover, the meaning or projected effect of the work examined often deepens and becomes transformed as the interpretive essay proceeds. In most cases, one cannot properly reduce the meaning of the

interpretive essay to a single Statement to be then expanded and supported in an obvious fashion. Nonetheless, you must present your interpretation in as clear, orderly, and coherent a manner as possible.

In the opening paragraph, you need to identify the work to be discussed and raise the general interpretive problem. Depending on the complexity of the problem; you might explain the nature of the problem further or you might illustrate the importance of the interpretive issue for the work through a well-chosen example.

The next paragraphs of the essay should present the details of the analysis, giving supporting evidence to show how the general -ideas are realized in a concrete way. You want the reader to get a substantial feel for the work and your way of viewing it. The paragraphs may each look at different types of details, present a series of different levels of analysis, or follow through a series of related ideas, or they may take on another organizational principle. As long as you can develop a clear and justified rationale for the progress of your argument and present the structure of your argument clearly enough for the reader to follow it, you may develop any organization that seems appropriate for the paper.

As your interpretation develops, however, you should be giving the reader a deepened sense of the work. Toward the end of the paper you should be able to make certain observations about the work that you could not earlier. The detailed work of the earlier part of the paper frequently prepares new levels of analysis that come later. The more powerful thoughts thus tend to come toward the end, once the reader has seen enough to understand the full importance of your statements. Certainly, by the conclusion of the essay you should give some sense of the importance of your interpretation for the meaning or significance of the work.

AN EXAMPLE: AN INTERPRETATION OF RAP MUSIC

The following essay, "Orality and Technology; Rap Music and Afro-American Cultural Resistance" by Tricia Rose appeared in the journal *Popular Music and Society*. The essay goes beyond examining a single piece of rap music to find the forces and meanings that run throughout all rap music. After an introductory discussion of the power and Cultural influence of rap music, Rose begins her interpretation by placing the music in historical and technological contexts. These contexts define the situation the music responds to, reacts against, and uses to make its an: a music of resistance within an electronic age of post-literate orality--that is, where most people are literate, but much of the culture is presented in spoken language, widely transmitted and reproduced electronically. Rose explains how many standard practices of rap musicians combine the literate and the oral to create a new kind of music and lyric. The essay includes several examples from different rap pieces but ends with a detailed discussion of a single rap. Throughout, Rose shows a familiarity with the music, the messages and feelings it conveys, the culture it is part of, and how the music is best understood as part of a way of life.

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WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. In your college library locate one or more journals of historical scholarship. Choose an article that discusses a period, event, or concept that appeals to you. Read and summarize its argument in two hundred words. Then write an informal journal entry discussing what is

unusual, special, or enlightening about the argument; the ideas or assumptions that seem to influence the writer's view of history; and the evidence the author uses to reconstruct history.

2. Write an essay in response to Elyce J. Rotella's short-history of the Equal Rights Amendment on page 234. In particular you may want to discuss how recent events in the early 1990s continue the historical progression of the ERA cause:
3. Write an essay in response to the student sample on the disability rights movement on pages 238-240 continuing to trace into the 1990s events and attitudes concerning people with disabilities: for example, you may want to consider how successful the Americans with Disabilities Act is being administered and implemented or how it has held up under challenges in the courts.
4. Write an essay applying the two models for social policy outlined in the student sample on the disability rights movement (pages 238-240) to images of disabled persons shown in advertising, on television, or in films. Consider which models seem dominant in each example you examine.
5. Imagine you are on a committee preparing for a commemorative celebration of a historical person, event, discovery, or invention of importance to your community. In your library, locate several primary and secondary documents relating to the commemorative subject. On the basis of this research write a ten-minute speech on the historical, modern, or personal significance of the subject.
6. Observe reruns of old television shows to test one of the following statements, and then report your results in a short paper (300 to 500 words), as though for a course on recent history. Be sure to define key concepts precisely.
 - a. Television shows of the 1950s and 1960s had fewer incidents of violence than the shows of the 1970s and 1980s.
 - b. In the 1950s and 1960s, nonconforming or unusual characters on television shows were treated unfavorably as villains, comic fools, or otherwise unattractive persons more often than they were treated favorably as heroes and heroines or otherwise sympathetic human beings.
 - c. Female characters in television shows of the 1950s and 1960s were confined to more traditional roles than female characters in shows of the 1970s and 1980s.
 - d. The configuration of the family portrayed in television shows of the 1950s and 1960s was more traditional than the configuration of the family portrayed in shows of the 1970s and 1980s.
 - e. Devise a Statement of your Own.
7. Using a few selected issues of a magazine published regularly since 1900, test one of the following statements, about magazine advertising. Present your results in a short report (300 to 500 words), as though for a class in advertising.
 - a. Since 1900, magazine advertisements have increasingly used more art and fewer words.
 - b. Over this century, the positive lure of becoming sexually attractive and socially and economically successful has replaced for marketing purposes the negative avoidance of becoming a social misfit as a major theme in magazine advertising.
 - c. Devise a statement of your own.

8. After reading Tricia Rose's essay on the cultural implications of rap music (page 245), listen to several examples of rap music Or watch several rap videos on television. Then write an informal journal entry explaining whether Rose's interpretation of rap music as cultural resistance helped you make sense of the examples you examined. Be as specific as possible in identifying what Rose's essay showed you about the texts, or what you found, in examples, that did not fit Rose's interpretation.
9. For any poem, short story, or novel you have read in a literature course, find and read an interpretive essay in a journal or book of literary criticism. Write an essay in response to the article, describing whether and in what way you found the interpretation useful.
10. For any painting, sculpture, building, musical composition, film, or literary work that has had a strong effect on you, write an informal journal entry describing its impact on you. Then, on the basis of that effect, develop a critical interpretation of the creative work. Write your interpretation up for a course in literature or the arts.
11. In a short essay (300 to 500 words) discuss how the lyrical or musical elements--or both--of a piece of music with which you are familiar creates its effect. Choose either classical or popular music and imagine you are writing this essay for a music appreciation course.
12. In a short essay (300 to 500 words) discuss how a film with which you are familiar uses various techniques to develop its impact. You may want to consider how the techniques you examine contribute to a particular theme that the film expresses.
13. In a 500- to 750-word essay discuss how Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" on pages 47-48, or any other appropriate poem assigned by your instructor, compares with lyrics from a currently popular song with similar themes.
14. Go to the college library and find data on legislation over the last thirty years concerning a contemporary ethical issue-for example, euthanasia, abortion, surrogate motherhood, capital punishment. Write a five-page historical narrative of the patterns you see emerging from these data.