

## DEVELOPING RESPONSES TO READINGS: ESSAYS

**T**o discover how your reading relates to your own patterns of thinking or your image of the world, you must develop your responses into extended, coherent statements. The *argumentative essay* establishes your position either agreeing or disagreeing with an idea you have read about. The essay *comparing reading and experience* allows you to explore how your reading relates to those experiences that have helped shape your thinking; on the basis of your experience you can begin to evaluate the validity of what you read. These two forms of essays will enable you to thoughtfully choose and defend positions, a necessary skill in all professions.

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## Argument

The privacy of making annotations and keeping a reading journal allows you to explore your reactions without committing yourself to any public statement, but sometimes you must take a stand on what you read. On a philosophy exam, in responding to a business report, or in a late-night bull session, you will be cornered into agreeing or disagreeing with something you have read. It starts in school, when you are asked to agree or disagree with one statement or another in an exam question. Lawyers argue against the opposing lawyers' briefs; the judge agrees with one side or the other. Managers must argue for or against proposals affecting corporate decisions. Technical experts must give their opinions about projects. Political life is a constant debate.

The more important and public the situation is, the more focused, developed, and organized your argument must be. A random catalog of your top-of-the-head opinions—as expressed in annotations and journal entries—will not form a coherent, well-developed response. Your thinking must go through several stages of development before it can lead to an argumentative essay.

### Understanding and Developing Arguments

Because each argumentative situation is different, you will find it useful to think through the elements of each situation. These can be expressed in a few simple questions.

*With whom are you arguing and why?* First and most obviously, you need to know with whom you are arguing and why. In an argument you define your claims or beliefs in opposition to the claims of another person. But why would you want to oppose yourself to someone rather than just try to get along in an agreeable way? You usually argue only at special times when you have something to gain, protect, or help. If somebody accuses you of a crime and brings you to court, you certainly need to argue in your own defense to avoid fines, a penalty, and a criminal record. It is so important that you do this well that you will probably hire a lawyer to argue for you. Or you may argue with a friend to keep him or her from making a mistake. If you want to gather votes for your candidate, you may argue with someone who you hope may come to vote your way. If you are working cooperatively with someone else and need to agree on some plan of action, you may each argue for your separate proposals so that you can together make the best decision. And if you want to understand an issue more deeply, you may argue with someone thoughtful who holds an opposite opinion. In each case you identify a specific person with whom you are arguing and perceive a benefit coming from the argument. If you do not identify whom you are arguing with and why, you are likely to get into useless, unfocused quarrels or to miss important situations in which you really do need to present your differences. More importantly, your arguments will probably not lead to any kind of useful resolution. You will end up quarreling just for the sake of quarreling unless you know what you want to accomplish and drop the debate when you have either achieved your goal or recognized that you cannot gain anything by further attempts at persuasion. If you and your friend support opposite political parties, for example, a disagreement over a candidate could lead to a continuous quarrel. You can contain the debate by recognizing that you will never convince each other and that your friendship is more important than politics. Or you may recognize that it is enough to get your friend to agree to one point rather than to accept your whole philosophy. On the other hand, you can keep the debate going as long as you realize that the point of the disagreement is to explore each other's ideas rather than to actually convince each other.

*To whom is the argument really directed?* You should also be aware for whose sake you are arguing. Often you do not argue to convince the person with the opposite view but to convince

some third party, an audience to the debate. When two lawyers argue in court, they are not each hoping to get the opponent to cry uncle. Each is trying to convince the jury to support his or her side. In school or on the job you are often in that situation, trying to convince the teacher or your boss that you have a better view than some other view presented in your reading or by a coworker.

Frequently, too, you argue for your own benefit, to clarify your own thinking, and to see exactly where you stand and how well you can support your position. Many college assignments serve this purpose: the teacher challenges you primarily to help you develop your thinking by articulating a position. In this chapter, the essay arguing with reading is this sort of assignment.

*What is the key issue in the argument?* Next you need to identify the specific point at issue. Although you may generally dislike a plan proposed by your business partner, for example, you are more likely to develop some workable alternative if you can identify specifically what you find wrong in it. Is the plan based on unrealistic or vague ideas about the size of the potential market, or does it expose the company to excessive debt? You are more likely to get your partner to see your point by expressing and supporting your specific complaint than by launching an overall attack against the entire plan. Then your partner can either change the plan to take your objections into account or even recognize that your objection is so fundamental that the entire plan is unworkable.

The more narrowly you can identify the issue, the less you will have to prove, the more you can concede to your opposition, and the more easily your audience can give way on specific points without having to give up all its cherished beliefs and commitments. Moreover, on a narrowed, focused issue you will probably be better able to argue your case with specific evidence and focused, plausible reasoning.

*Is the key issue truly arguable?* Once you have identified the issue, it may turn out that it is not arguable. At one extreme are questions of purely personal preference, such as which flavor of ice cream is most delicious or which music you would rather listen to. Although it may be fun to argue about these purely arbitrary individual choices, you are unlikely to persuade anyone to change his or her taste.

At the other extreme are issues of fact that can be resolved by checking a reference work or collecting some data. The date of a novel's publication, the charge of an electron, and the major league baseball record for the most stolen bases in a season are not in the usual sense matters of argument; they are empirical issues to be determined by checking a scholarly biography, a physics handbook, and the baseball record book. And behind each of those reference works is some kind of empirical experience such as an examination of publication records, some scientific experiments, and some baseball record keeping. Although one may argue more fundamentally about whether we have an appropriate concept of electrical charge or whether the Millikan oil-drop experiment is a sufficiently accurate measure, the actual data generated by any empirical procedure are what they are, and not a matter of argument. You can look them up.

Truly arguable issues are in the middle, where substantial reasons and relevant evidence may actually change someone's mind.

*How will you argue the issue most effectively for your audience?* Only after you have your issue, audience, and goals well defined can you really begin to evaluate what specific points you want to make and how you can effectively persuade your audience. Of course, throughout the process of defining the argumentative situation, you will be coming up with things you will want to write, but only once you know what you want to accomplish in your writing can you really focus and develop those ideas appropriately to your task.

Classical rhetoric (the art of argumentation) identifies three ways of persuading an audience: through ethos, pathos, and logos. *Ethos* is the image you project of yourself as a good,

trustworthy, believable person whose word should be given appropriate respect. Of course, what makes a believable image varies from situation to situation. Someone who knows the inside story about a football team will sound different from someone who knows the latest developments in quantum physics. Thus you need to be able to project the appropriate ethos for each subject; if you are too obviously faking an expertise or personality that does not fit what you know and who you are, your ethos will appear untrustworthy. Teachers can usually spot students who fake an expertise in their subjects. In academic argument, at least, it is best to present yourself as knowing only as much as you do know; then you will gain a trustworthy ethos for those things you do know or have thought through.

*Pathos* is the appeal to any of the emotions or feelings of your audience. In some situations the appeal can be very direct, as when an international charity appeals to our concern for children. Feelings are always a component of arguments, even of the most abstract kind. To be convincing, even a mathematical proof requires the reader's interest in mathematics and the special problem area; otherwise, the reader will not read and think deeply enough to be persuaded. On the other hand, you must be careful not to appeal to emotions that are inappropriate for the situation or that might bring the discussion down to a level of dangerous emotionality. If you try to appeal to a teacher to change your grade out of pity for your heartbroken parents, you are likely to only discredit yourself even more as a serious student. Or if you are a politician and appeal to people's hatreds and prejudices rather than their hopes for the future and concern for social improvement, you may win an immediate victory, but in the long run you may be doing serious harm—to them and to yourself.

*Logos* is the logic or reasoning of your argument. Part of logos is formal deductive logic, or syllogistic reasoning; part is inductive logic, or the use of evidence and experience; and part is informal reasoning using the assumptions, beliefs, and reasons generally accepted by your audience.

**Formal Logic** Formal logic (or deductive logic) is the most precise method of reasoning but is limited in its scope. Its most important use is to help you avoid obvious errors, in making deductions, that would discredit your arguments as clearly faulty. In this way deductive logic is like the rules of arithmetic: it does not tell you when to add or what numbers to add up, but it does keep you from adding incorrectly.

To have a convincing argument, you must respect the rules of formal logic in all your deductions. These rules define what conclusions follow from a given set of propositions. In their most familiar form, deductive arguments appear as *sylogisms*, which consist of a series of *premises* and a *conclusion* that follows from the premises. Consider this example:

*No human being has feathers.*  
*Johnson is a human being.*  
*Therefore, Johnson does not have feathers.*

Actually, there are four types of deductive arguments. The above example is called a *categorical argument* (in which the conclusion is based on the general category to which the specific example belongs). The next example is a *hypothetical argument* (in which the conclusion depends on some hypothetical condition being true):

*If gas supplies are short, gas prices will rise.*  
*Gas supplies are short.*

*Therefore, gas prices will rise.*

The third type is the *alternative argument* (which is based on the elimination of a limited number of possible alternatives):

*Either Jones is evil or he is stupid.*

*Jones is not stupid.*

*Therefore, Jones is evil.*

The final type of deductive argument is the *disjunctive argument* (in which a situation is shown to be impossible):

*A person cannot be in two places at one time.*

*The person Lucretia was in Washington last Saturday evening at 10 P.M.*

*Lucretia was not in Boston last Saturday evening at 10 P.M.*

Formal logic serves very well for determining all that can be inferred from a given set of *propositions*, or first statements. In abstract fields of study, such as mathematics and formal logic itself, chains of syllogistic logic can produce complex conclusions of great certainty. Deduction plays a role in most areas of study.

However, formal logic does not help you in judging the truth of first propositions or in making statements beyond those that are implicit in the first propositions. That is, formal logic will not help you prove whether, indeed, human beings do or do not have feathers or whether Johnson is the name someone has given to a pet parakeet. Moreover, such a set of propositions will not help you discover why human beings do not have feathers. Formal logic does not cover most arguments, questions, and statements that people are actually interested in. In practice, formal logic at most tells you what you cannot do—what is a breach of basic ground rules of rational argument—rather than what you should do.

Further, there are dangers in relying too heavily on deductive logic in any but the most abstract disciplines. Although some mathematical propositions—such as *parallel lines never meet*—are true by definition, most propositions about actual people, objects, or situations in the world are only simplifications and approximations, such as *politicians must pay attention to the interests of their constituents if they hope to be reelected*. The specifics of any situation referred to by this general statement are much more complex than the general words indicate; for example, the politician's constituency may include many conflicting interests. Even in such an abstract field as theoretical physics, the basic propositions of Newtonian mechanics were found to be only approximations that did not apply under extreme conditions, such as speeds approaching the speed of light. Even Albert Einstein's revisions of the propositions of mechanics are held by many physicists to be only simplifications and approximations. If you take approximate statements and combine them with other approximate statements and run them all through many deductive operations, the possible errors can compound dramatically. You may wind up with conclusions that are not at all reasonable. Thus you should not try to deduce too much from simplified statements about the world.

**Inductive Logic and Evidence** Many of the arguments we make depend on the evidence we provide in their support. In providing evidence we are using inductive logic, drawing generalizations from

specific observed events. Sometimes the generalizations flow very directly and certainly from the evidence, but sometimes the link is more distant and less certain. The statement that in World War II hostilities between the United States and Japan began on December 7, 1940, is supported by so many witnesses' observations of the attack on Pearl Harbor, so many destroyed ships and lost lives, so many documented news reports, and by the well-publicized declaration of war by the U.S. Congress on the following day that the statement is beyond argument. The claim that the United States was not prepared for the attack on Pearl Harbor is almost equally certain. We know this because of the well-observed absence of organized U.S. military resistance to the devastating attack and later analysis of communications indicating that clues about the attack were overlooked just because nobody expected it. Far less certain and therefore more arguable are more general claims, such as that the U.S. leadership deliberately ignored clear warnings of the attack and thereby sold out the United States. The evidence for such claims does not go beyond the evidence that clues to the attack (such as intercepted secret Japanese cables not being taken seriously) were ignored and the previous claim that the United States was not prepared; moreover, the claim goes against much other evidence revealing the serious concern of the U.S. leadership for military preparedness in the months preceding the war.

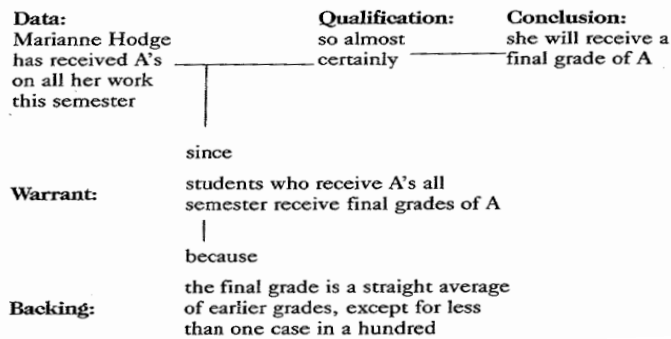
Every discipline uses its own particular kind of evidence, with its own methods and standards for collecting, interpreting, and drawing conclusions from the data; these are examined in Part 3 of this book. Induction as a form of argument is especially well developed in the experimental sciences. As evidence mounts for any claim in academic disciplines, that claim becomes treated with increasing certainty and takes on the appearance of reliable knowledge.

**Informal Reasoning** Much argument does not proceed fully by either induction or deduction but rather relies at least in part on assumptions that the audience is willing to grant, either because they are self-evident or because they are so well established in a particular community that they are not open to question. In classical rhetoric, arguments based on unspoken assumptions are called enthymemes. For example, in the United States, with our well-established belief in freedom of speech as formalized in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, we immediately assume that anyone has a right to criticize actions of our government. When we criticize, we do not have to justify our right to do so or argue that we are not intending to harm our society by the criticism. That assumption is not common in most other countries, including major Western democracies.

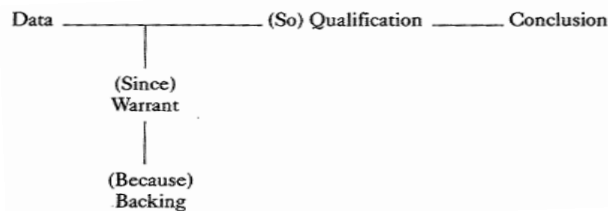
In each community one can rely on many such assumptions for communal assent in argument without having to prove them from first principles. Although some of these beliefs could in fact be argued much more fully, one no longer needs to do it because they are so well established. In physics, for example, one can invoke the conservation of energy as a reason without having to retrace the whole argument for that principle. Cold fusion, on the other hand, has little acceptance and will not be accepted as a reason for another claim.

Some beliefs are not very deeply founded on prior arguments and merely reflect some local belief, such as that a man who wears a suit and tie is more responsible and trustworthy than one who does not. Although this point is quite debatable, many men show respect for it both in how they dress for business and in how they evaluate the people they do business with. Many women, as well, adopt business clothes that imitate male styles. So even though this belief may not be well founded, one could use it to help convince an audience that someone in a suit is a more respectable businessperson than someone who does not adopt business dress. Some social assumptions upon which people can base successful arguments are even less well founded and more harmful, such as those that rely on ethnic or racial prejudice and hatred. If people see through your manipulation of unfair and unfounded social beliefs, you will lose their trust and will be branded with the unacceptable ethos of racist, cynical manipulator, and demagogue.

The philosopher Stephen Toulmin has given us a method for analyzing these ordinary informal methods of argument. Toulmin believes that we draw conclusions from given data by means of *warrants*, which act as bridges between data and conclusions. For example, starting with the information that Marianne Hodge has made As throughout the semester in her writing course, we draw the usual conclusion that she will receive an A as the course grade. The warrant that allows us to go from data to conclusion is that students who receive A's all semester long receive a final grade of A. If we were pressed to give *backing* for this warrant, we might further say that the final grade in this particular course is based on a straight average of all grades for the semester, except for special circumstances that do not occur more than one time in a hundred. The last phrase “except for ...” gives the necessary qualification to the conclusion. Schematically, the argument would appear as follows:



In general, ordinary arguments take the following schematic form:



In order to make a convincing argument, you must have warrant and backing that your particular audience finds acceptable. If, for example, a student believes that Professor Jones assigns final grades by randomly pulling letters from a fishbowl and not by taking an average of the grades, our warrant and the conclusion that follows will not be convincing to that student. In writing arguments for any of the academic disciplines, you must use warrants and backings that are accepted as valid and relevant by the appropriate discipline.

Examining arguments by this method will help reveal what assumptions lie behind the warrants and backings of those arguments. You can then decide whether others will accept the same warrants and backings and whether those backings and warrants are ones with which you wish to be associated. Similarly, in reading other people's arguments, you will be able to evaluate how acceptable their assumptions are.

### Steps in Developing an Argument

1. Identify whom you are arguing with.
2. Identify why you are arguing.
3. Identify to whom you are directing your argument.
4. Identify what you are arguing about.
5. Judge whether the issue is really arguable.
6. Examine your potential supporting arguments.
7. Evaluate how well your supporting arguments are likely to work at this time on this issue for this audience. Consider the ethos and pathos of the argument.
8. Organize, develop, and present your arguments. Realize your arguments in a forceful statement directed at the audience you wish to influence. Consider the forms of logic you can use to advance your arguments.

### EXERCISES

1. Discuss with the class the following editorial essay from the *New York Times*, “Reading, Writing, Narcissism,” by Lillian G. Katz, a professor of early childhood education. Using your knowledge and experience of education and public debates over educational approaches, discuss the argumentative situation, audience, strategy, and effect of this essay. Consider the ethos, pathos, and logos of the argument.

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2. Discuss with the class the following pair of opposing arguments from the *American Bar Association Journal*, the professional journal of lawyers. The arguments are for and against active euthanasia; that is, doctors assisting in the death of terminally or otherwise seriously ill patients.

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3. Discuss with the class what kind of argument the anonymous author of the following selection, “It’s Over, Debbie,” was making. The article appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Try to determine what position the author is taking, on what issue, for which audience, to achieve what effect. Also consider the roles of ethos, pathos, and logos. To help you better understand the background of this article, review the article “JAMA’s Jam” reprinted on page 57. You may also wish to compare the point, audience, and strategy of this article with those of the arguments on active euthanasia reprinted in question 2 above. What are the differences between them?

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4. For each of the arguments presented in the first three exercises above, discuss how the argument directly or indirectly arises out of and refers to previous statements made by people other than the author. Which of those statements of others help set up the situation? Which help frame the issues? Which are evaluated positively or negatively in the argument? Which provide direct points of opposition? Which provide support for the author’s argument?



5. Using the basic questions posed on pages 68-69 and the steps outlined on page 73, in a class discussion analyze each of the following situations and how you might handle it.
  - a. You are brought before the dean of students for violating the college's social regulations.
  - b. Your teacher has given you a low grade on a paper you believe deserved a much higher one.
  - c. You find an editorial in the college newspaper to be offensive or harmful to some group or organization which you either belong to or sympathize with.
  - d. You wish to convince some friends or classmates to support a candidate for school or local office.
  - e. You are a member of a group project team, and you want the group to follow your plan and avoid the mistakes you see in alternative plans by other group members.
6. Describe a situation from your academic, family, or community life in which you recently felt the impulse to argue with someone. Use the questions presented in this section and the "Steps in Developing an Argument" on page 73 to analyze the argumentative situation, sharpen your goals, and identify an argumentative strategy. After discussing with the class your ideas about developing the argument, write an argument of an appropriate length to the appropriate audience.
7. Think of a controversial schoolwide, local, national, or international issue about which you feel strongly. Try to answer the questions presented earlier in this section, and then write an argument defending the opposite position from the one you hold. Remember to look at the issue logically, and try to keep your own emotions out of your defense. Once you have established the logical position for the opposition, write an argument for your own side on this issue that specifically addresses those opposing arguments.

### Writing an Argumentative Essay in Response to Your Reading

In college one frequent assignment is to discuss some idea you have obtained from your reading or lectures. Discussion in this situation means arguing for or against the validity, importance, or applicability of what you have been learning. You might discuss how an economic principle explains or does not explain the growth of the service sector in the American economy or whether a particular interpretation of the motivations of a character in a novel seems accurate to you. Such questions are all forms of argument, but very special kinds of argument. The purpose of this essay is primarily educational, to help you develop your reasoning and involvement with the subject. Thus in a sense it is not so important to persuade others of the absolute correctness of your view as to persuade yourself that you understand the issue as well as you can.

Your most obvious audience is usually your teacher, who only needs to be persuaded that you have developed your thinking carefully, have used appropriate knowledge of the subject, and have shown some special insight into the issues. Since the teacher is usually more expert on the subject than you, you cannot realistically expect to change his or her mind. The people who wrote the texts you are arguing about also are unlikely ever to read your responses, so you cannot aim at persuading them. So the main aim is to persuade yourself and then demonstrate to the teacher that you had good reasons to believe yourself.

For this kind of paper the ethos (or character) you project is that of a good, committed student of the subject, which should affect the pathos (or feelings) of the instructor, for most teachers have good feelings toward those who show commitment toward and understanding of their

specialty. But the major emphasis, of course, must be on the *logos*, the reasoning and evidence you develop to support your position. Your ability to develop a logical, well-supported argument will both project your *ethos* as a good student and appeal to the *pathos* of academics' love for the intellect.

In the argumentative essay about reading, or the discussion essay, you present and support a direct opinion about an idea, position, or piece of information you have encountered in your reading. You need not list all your ideas, associations, and reactions to the entire piece; you need only locate one specific thought or theme to comment on. You might agree or disagree with *anything* in the reading—from how a word is spelled to the truth of the main idea—but obviously, the more important the aspect you choose to discuss, the more forceful and significant your own comment is likely to be.

Whether you agree or disagree with what you read depends, for the most part, on how well it fits with what is already in your mind, or what Kenneth Boulding calls your “image of the world.” That is, everything you have heard, read, thought, said, done, or experienced has been combined in your mind to create your own picture of the way the world is. Some readings are consistent with that picture, and you are likely to say that those readings sound right, that you agree with them. Other readings clash with parts of your image of the world, so you will disagree. (We will discuss in Parts 2 and 3 those special cases wherein you withhold judgment until you go out and gain some more information, adding to your world view through new primary experience, reading, or other forms of research.)

Because your world view is deeply ingrained, you may not always be fully aware of why you agree or disagree with what you are reading. You will have to work hard to discover your reasons. You need well-developed reasons to make your essay convincing, to show that you are giving more than a glib comeback. Without well-supported reasons, the reader has only your word to go on. No doubt, you are an honest and trustworthy person, but that alone will hardly convince readers who do not know you.

The human mind being what it is, you can often come up with strong reasons for disagreement more easily than you can think of reasons for agreement. Disagreement creates friction. The mind objects to something and comes up with counterarguments: “But doesn't that stupid writer see....” What you are seeing (that the writer does not) is the source (or underlying reason) of your opinion in the first place. Explaining your reasons fully, giving examples, citing experiences, and referring to other ideas that you have read or simply know will help you develop a convincing argument.

Agreement is harder, because when you agree you are at peace with the reading. You can easily nod your head yes and read on. Unless you push your reasons for agreement very hard, you are likely to come up with little more than a summary of the original with occasional declarations of agreement: “Another valid point this author makes is. . . .” In order to create a well-developed statement of agreement, you must either (1) recall those experiences, ideas, or pieces of information that previously led you to the same conclusions or (2) take the idea in the reading further to show how well it conforms to other aspects of your knowledge.

## Developing the Essay

To develop an argumentative essay, first *read over your annotations and journal entries* on the text you are going to discuss. See which comments seem the most significant in retrospect, and determine whether several comments may be related to a common theme of agreement or disagreement.

Second, *decide which of your comments will become the basis for your essay*. A single comment may be the source of your essay, or you may develop a single consistent theme out of several comments that seem to point in the same direction. Try to pick a theme that raises a significant issue in the reading and that you will be able to support and develop convincingly. Commenting on an idea central to the original article or essential to a fundamental criticism or having application to other broader issues will add to the interest of your essay and keep you from nit-picking on side issues.

You may find that some of your comments agree with certain aspects of the article and other comments disagree. Remember, you need not cover every aspect of the article, so try to pick an aspect on which you have a consistent, clear position. If you find that you have mixed feelings on every significant issue, some in agreement and some in disagreement, you can write your paper partly agreeing and partly disagreeing. But if you do this, make sure the paper remains focused on the single issue you choose and develops the complexity of your reaction fully. Let the reader know how your agreements and disagreements balance each other. Sometimes the complexity of reaction may even be connected to a single source, as when the daring of a political proposal seems to cut right to the core of a problem, but such boldness seems unrealistic given the difficulties of the political process. However you organize your complex position, do not let the paper deteriorate into a checklist of statements you like and do not like.

Third, *formulate your agreement or disagreement into a thesis or main conclusion* that will guide the overall direction of your paper. The essay should provide a single strong reaction stemming from one issue suggested by the original text.

Fourth, *list and develop all the arguments that support your disagreement or agreement*. Look deeply into why you feel the way you do, and convey to the reader in concrete and substantial detail the good reasons you have.

Fifth, *reread the original text and your previous comments* to consider two points. First, make sure your reaction is substantial and clearly justified. Sometimes the original will differ from your memory of it. A strong reaction to an idea can lead your memory to oversimplify the original to make the idea more clearly agreeable or objectionable. After having written out your own feelings, you may be in a better position to read the original more dispassionately and accurately. In addition, rereading the original and your first reactions may enable you to advance your ideas further and may suggest more key passages, details, and examples that you can use to develop your discussion. Your focus on a topic will let you know much better exactly what details you need to support your argument.

Sixth, after you have gathered, selected, focused, and developed your ideas, *plan how this material will fit together*. Although there are many ways to organize an argumentative essay, often a very straightforward pattern is all that is necessary. The opening should include (1) the book or article that evoked your response, (2) the particular item, idea, or theme to which you are responding, and (3) a clear statement of whether you agree, disagree, or take a more complex, mixed position. The opening section should also include whatever background is necessary to understand either the idea you are responding to or your response. But do not feel you need to summarize all the original text or tell your whole life story as background. Just tell enough to make your discussion intelligible.

The substance of your agreement or disagreement should form the main body of the essay. If you have several separate points to make in support of your position, you might simply build a paragraph around each of these points. Carefully consider, however, the order in which you place the paragraphs so that the argument will get stronger instead of sliding downhill. If you wish to make a series of logically related points, again you might devote one paragraph to each point, but you should arrange the paragraphs to bring out the logic of their connection. Finally, if you are

making only one, extended point, break that single, large reason down into a series of stages or aspects to be developed in several paragraphs. That will make your reasoning easier to follow and your point more memorable.

No matter how you organize your essay, the reader should be able to follow the organization and ideas readily and fully. Carefully chosen examples will help the reader grasp your complete idea. Using appropriate transitions between ideas and constantly tying each point to the main idea will help the reader see how your whole essay fits together. The ending should offer a sense of completion by linking your ideas effectively in some strong statement of your position. Because this essay is responding to a text, the conclusion might recall the original idea to which you are responding, reminding the reader exactly what you are agreeing or disagreeing with.

### Guidelines for Developing an Argumentative Essay

1. Read over your annotations and journal entries on the text you are going to discuss.
2. Decide which of your comments will become the basis for your essay.
3. Formulate your agreement or disagreement with the author into a thesis.
4. List and develop arguments that support your thesis.
5. Reread the original text and your previous comments.
6. Plan how you will organize your essay.

### AN EXAMPLE: TWO READERS DISAGREE WITH AN EDITORIAL

During the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton outlined his plan for a national service program designed to provide an alternative to government loans. After taking office in January 1993, President Clinton began to take steps toward implementing this plan. In an editorial published on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* on June 3, 1993 (reprinted below in assignment 1 on page 80), Michael S. McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro express skepticism about the feasibility of Clinton's plan. Claiming that the price is too high, they argue that few students will be motivated to commit themselves to two years of community service at minimum wage just to get forgiveness of a \$10,000 school loan. Their prediction, based on projected average earnings for college graduates, is that participants would lose at least \$20,000 in earnings for two years of service; thus they conclude that only the most altruistic of graduates would choose to serve. McPherson and Schapiro believe that in order to make the plan more attractive, the Clinton administration would have to offer a larger stipend, increase the annual ceiling on loan forgiveness, or do both; and that the cost of doing so, absorbed by the taxpayers, would make the plan economically unsound.

Ten days after this editorial appeared, the *New York Times* published two letters to the editor by readers who argued with McPherson and Schapiro's views. One reader represents the voice of pragmatism; the other, the voice of idealism. In his letter, Duane J. DeBruyne, a Peace Corps volunteer in the late 1970s, draws parallels between criticism of Clinton's plan and early criticism of the Peace Corps. He claims that, like the Peace Corps, the national service plan will be economically beneficial both to those who serve and to the nation as a whole. Long-term benefits—measurable in terms of salary gains and upward career mobility—as well as the desire to serve will attract recruits to the program. He also argues that McPherson and Schapiro overlook the long-term benefits to the country as a whole.

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Greg J. Scholl develops a different kind of argument, focusing on the assumptions behind the editorial's reasoning. Taking issue with what he sees as a shortsighted, number-crunching view of the costs and benefits of Clinton's national service plan, he claims that McPherson and Schapiro underestimate the altruism of many of today's college graduates.

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### A STUDENT EXAMPLE FOR DISCUSSION

After reading McPherson and Schapiro's editorial on Clinton's national service plan, and the two letters to the editor sent in response, James Margolis, a student pursuing a degree in history with the goal of becoming a high school teacher, found himself disagreeing with McPherson and Schapiro. In his essay's introductory paragraph, James clearly states why he disagrees with the argument presented in the editorial and in what ways he agrees with the counterarguments presented in the letters: he shares DeBruyne's and Scholl's enthusiasm for Clinton's national service plan but admits that his enthusiasm comes from personal and perhaps even selfish considerations of the short- and long-term benefits.

In the body of his essay, James spells out in detail his reasons for disagreeing with McPherson and Schapiro and draws on relevant points from the letters to strengthen his own counterarguments. Although in the course of his essay he refutes the argument presented in the editorial, his primary concern, like that of DeBruyne and Scholl, is to present his own argument for implementing Clinton's national service plan. In the second and third paragraphs, he addresses the short-and long-term financial benefits of the plan; in the fourth and fifth, he addresses its career benefits.

### Sample Argumentative Essay

#### The National Service Plan: A Student's View

As a third-year college student majoring in history who has already acquired a bit over \$10,000 in student loan debt, I find McPherson and Schapiro's rejection of Clinton's national service plan to be shortsighted and insensitive to the experiences of many college students who are struggling to put themselves through school only to face enormous financial burdens upon graduation. Although I know that some of my peers do not share my predicament, and that some who do would rather pay off their loans than put off starting lucrative careers, I share DeBruyne's and Scholl's enthusiasm for Clinton's national service plan. However, I must admit that, should this plan be implemented, I would consider volunteering primarily due to its short and long term personal benefits.

For students from middle income families, like myself, who do not qualify for government grants and whose high school performance was above average but not extraordinary, national service would provide an alternative to starting out their adult lives in debt. At this point in time, the only alternative to government loans is military service, an option I seriously considered prior to enrolling in college. In exchange for four years of service in the armed forces, I would have received the GI bill, which in turn would have enabled me to attend the college of my choice without going deep into debt. I chose debt because I did not want to graduate from college at the age of 26 and then attempt to compete for jobs with younger, fresher faces. I also did not think I would do well in a military environment.

Like DeBruyne, I question the accuracy of McPherson and Schapiro's number-crunching. Their account of the short term loss seems minimal when considering the long term financial

payoffs of service. I wonder what the cost of the interest on my loans will be over ten years—surely at least as much as the loans themselves.

Also, given the extent of my debt, I will be paying out at least \$130 per month for the next ten years. I want to be a teacher, which is not a particularly lucrative career, nor one with much job security at this time of state budget problems. The income I might lose in the short term while doing national service will not be so great as to outweigh the long term cost of paying off the loan on my own.

National service also would provide an opportunity for graduates to obtain much needed experience in their chosen fields. The only alternative at this point is for students to volunteer as interns or, if they are lucky, find paid summer employment in their chosen field. For students like myself who must hold down part time jobs during the school year and make even more money over the summer in order to finance their educations, internships are luxuries they cannot afford. If they could gain experience in national service after graduation I believe that many would volunteer, especially if doing so would have the added benefit of relieving financial obligations.

In addition, the experience gained in national service would make those who participate better equipped to compete in today's shrinking job market. Unlike McPherson and Schapiro, I do not feel optimistic about the economy in the next two to four years, and many economic analysts think that things are going to get worse before they get better. In my home community, there are at least fifty applicants for each teaching position that opens up. Having hands-on experience would set me apart from other applicants with similar academic credentials.

Finally, obtaining a teaching credential requires an additional year of school and, before I invest the time and the tuition, I would also like to be sure of my choice. Serving the community in the field of education for two years would test my commitment to this career.

In their emphasis on the short term monetary cost to participants in Clinton's national service plan, McPherson and Schapiro overlook its long term benefits. Even students who are not "altruistic" have good reason to find the plan appealing.

### **WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

1. Write an essay either agreeing or disagreeing with some aspect or issue in the following editorial on national service, the letters to the editor sent in response (see page 79), or the student's response on pages 79-80. In arguing, also develop and argue for your own position on national service. Direct your essay to your classmates as part of a class discussion.

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2. For a special supplement to your school newspaper on values in modern life, write an argumentative essay responding to the following article reprinted from *Psychology Today* magazine on how our attitudes toward money are changing.

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## **Writing an Essay Comparing Reading and Experience**

Whenever you read, you understand what the writer writes only because you are already partly familiar with the objects and concepts the writer symbolizes in the form of language. If the writer uses words you do not know to describe objects you have never seen, you might as well be



reading gibberish. An advanced physics textbook or a specialist's book on horse racing will mean little if you are ignorant of these subjects.

Even when you recognize all the words, if the writer puts them together in a way that contradicts your knowledge, you will reject the statement as nonsense contrary to sense. You are not likely to accept a writer's construction of reality if he or she claims that “babies are found under cabbage leaves.”

However, just because statements make sense to you—you understand them and they fit your perceptions of the world—does not guarantee that they are absolutely true. Your knowledge can grow by the conflict between what you have already accepted as sense and new claims that at first seem to be contrary to sense. To Europeans in 1492, Columbus's claim that he would sail around the globe violated both their sense of possibility and their sense of specific fact. Only when other navigators, following Columbus, sailed entirely around the world and returned alive did new possibilities and new facts replace the old. Evidence for a curved earth had been noticed by Greek astronomers two thousand years before Columbus; Eratosthenes could even calculate the earth's diameter. But the same evidence, easily observable without special equipment, was ignored by the astronomers of Columbus's time. They “knew” the world was flat, so they had no motivation to look for evidence of roundness. Human beings tend to observe only what they already believe is there. Such examples point to a difficult situation: we must rely on what we know to understand and judge what other people say, yet we must keep in mind that what we know may be eventually proved wrong.

If we are to be thoughtful and critical as readers, we must rely on what we know to identify and judge the ideas presented by the reading. Yet reliance on previous knowledge stands in the way of learning and accepting new ideas. There is no way to escape this dilemma. But by keeping it in mind and trying to accept a book *on its own terms* before judging it on ours, we can be both critical and open to new ideas. By being attentive to a writer's claims, by doing our best to see what that writer wants us to see—even though the writer's claims go against our prior knowledge—we may discover new ideas we can accept as part of our own view of the world. Finally, no matter how sympathetic a reading we give to any piece of writing, we must return to the question of whether it makes sense. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to judging any piece of reading by using common sense and experience in a more careful, less biased way.

In sociology, psychology, political science, and other social science courses, you are often called on to relate the concepts presented in the course to your personal experience. Making such comparisons helps you understand what the concepts mean and how they work in the real world. You may even be assigned an essay comparing reading and experience.

Out of school, when you write to persuade people to accept your ideas, evidence drawn from your own experience will help convince readers that your ideas are more than nice-sounding abstractions. Opinion essays in newspapers and magazines often advance ideas based on the essayist's experience. The essay comparing reading and experience is also the first step toward the more disciplined use of evidence that you will learn in your academic and professional specialties, as discussed in Part 3.

### **Experience, Memory, and Common Sense**

To see both the value and the problems of that grab bag of personal experience and random knowledge we bring to any particular reading, let us look at the case of George Washington Plunkitt, the Tammany Hall politician. In the late nineteenth century, the government of New York City was run by a group of politicians known collectively as *Tammany Hall*. Under the leadership of Boss Tweed, they took advantage of the power they held for their own profit and the

profit of their friends. Eventually a number of journalists, including Lincoln Steffens, exposed the Tammany Hall politicians as crooks; since then Tammany Hall has become the symbol for political corruption. However, from George Washington Plunkitt's inside view as a member of the Tammany organization, the situation didn't look nearly as bad as it appeared to the reforming journalists on the outside. When Plunkitt came to read Lincoln Steffens's expose, *The Shame of the Cities*, he reacted by presenting his own insider's viewpoint. He expresses his down-to-earth thinking in down-to-earth language, thus making his position, though corrupt, seem almost plausible.

*On The Shame of the Cities*

I've been readin' a book by Lincoln Steffens on *The Shame of the Cities*. Steffens means well but, like all reformers, he don't know how to make distinctions. He can't see no difference between honest graft and dishonest graft, and consequent, he gets things all mixed up. There's the biggest kind of a difference between political looters and politicians who make a fortune out of politics by keepin' their eyes wide open. The looter goes in for himself alone without considerin' his organization or his city. The politician looks after his own interests, the organization's interests, and the city's interests all at the same time. See the distinction? For instance, I ain't no looter. The looter hogs it. I never hogged. I made my pile in politics, but, at the same time, I served the organization and got more big improvements for New York City than any other livin' man. And I never monkeyed with the penal code.

The difference between a looter and a practical politician is the difference between the Philadelphia Republican gang and Tammany Hall. Steffens seems to think they're both about the same; but he's all wrong. The Philadelphia crowd runs up against the penal code. Tammany don't. The Philadelphians ain't satisfied with robbin' the bank of all its gold and paper money. They stay to pick up the nickels and pennies and the cop comes and nabs them. Tammany ain't no such fool. Why, I remember, about fifteen or twenty years ago, a Republican superintendent of the Philadelphia almshouse stole the zinc roof off the build in' and sold it for junk. That was carryin' things to excess. There's a limit to everything, and the Philadelphia Republicans go beyond the limit. It seems like they can't be cool and moderate like real politicians. It ain't fair, therefore, to class Tammany men with the Philadelphia gang. Any man who undertakes to write political books should never for a moment lose sight of the distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft, which I explained in full in another talk. If he puts all kinds of graft on the same level, he'll make the fatal mistake that Steffens made and spoil his book.

A big city like New York or Philadelphia or Chicago might be compared to a sort of Garden of Eden, from a political point of view. It's an orchard full of beautiful apple trees. One of them has got a big sign on it, marked: "Penal Code Tree—Poison." The other trees have lots of apples on them for all. Yet the fools go to the Penal Code Tree. Why? For the reason, I guess, that a cranky child refuses to eat good food and chews up a box of matches with relish. I never had any temptation to touch the Penal Code Tree. The other apples are good enough for me, and O Lord! how many of them there are in a big city!

Steffens made one good point in his book. He said he found that Philadelphia, ruled almost entirely by Americans, was more corrupt than New York, where the Irish do almost all the governin'. I could have told him that before he did any investigatin' if he had come to me. The Irish was born to rule, and they're the honestest people in the world. Show me the Irishman who would steal a roof off an almshouse! He don't exist. Of course, if an Irishman had the political pull and the roof was much worn, he might get the city authorities to put on a new one and get the contract for it himself, and buy the old roof at a bargain-but that's honest graft. It's goin' about the thing like a gentleman, and there's more money in it than in tearin' down an old roof and cartin' it to the junkman's-more money and no penal code.

Plunkitt's candid firsthand observations reveal some everyday facts about the political world of his time. His distinction between honest and dishonest graft amuses us because both types are crooked enough by our standard laws-but apparently Plunkitt believed the distinction existed in



his world. From his insider's view we also get a sympathetic portrait of the human desire to profit from situations. Plunkitt presents a working system that makes civic improvements by spreading the money around to friends. He even has some firsthand observations on ethnic and moral differences between New York and its rival in corruption, Philadelphia. If Plunkitt doesn't disprove Steffens's accusation that he and his friends are crooks, at least he lets us know the human workings of the corrupt system.

On the other hand, Plunkitt's comments are bigoted, self-interested, and narrow-minded. The whole point of the distinction between honest and dishonest graft is to show that he and his cronies are honest fellows, much better than those rascals in Philadelphia. To make his own crowd look better, he flatters his own Irish ethnic group and insults older mainline Americans. Since his whole life has been committed to the Tammany system, what he knows and thinks are mostly Tammany rationalizations and self-defense. For intellectual, emotional, and legal reasons, George Washington Plunkitt cannot step outside the Tammany viewpoint in order to consider the criticisms of reformers like Lincoln Steffens. He finds some sense in Steffens only when he can bend the reformer's statements to prove what he already believes—that Philadelphia is more corrupt than New York.

In Plunkitt's case the stakes are unusually high. To accept Steffens's book as making sense, the Tammany Hall politician would have to admit that he and his friends were dishonest. Very few people have that much intellectual honesty. Even under less extreme conditions, we tend to defend our existing opinions and commitments. We would rather not pay much attention to ideas that might upset our personal apple carts.

Yet a stubborn defense of our personal opinions is not simply narrowness; those apple carts we have constructed in the course of our experience are the sum of all we have come to know. We usually work to make sense of our past experiences, so that our generalizations—those structures of thought that form our common sense—are worth taking very seriously and should not be given up simply because a writer comes along with an opposite viewpoint.

Writing an essay in which we compare our experiences to the claims of an author allows us to develop in explicit form our knowledge about the accuracy of the writer's claims. With all the issues out in the open, we can see how much we agree or disagree, and we can begin to judge where the better sense lies. Intellectual honesty enters if we are able to rearrange or even add to our apple carts on the basis of some new and convincing ideas we have read.

### **Developing the Essay Comparing Reading and Experience**

The essay comparing reading and experience is simply a paper in which you compare the ideas described in your reading to personal experiences that the text reminds you of. As you carry out the early steps of reading, annotating, and journal writing, keep in mind two key questions: “What experience does this reading bring to mind?” and “How do the generalizations in this passage compare to what I have learned from personal experience?” In your marginal comments and journal, list as many related examples from your own life as you can.

When you read through your first responses and marginal comments, think about them in two ways. First, see whether your personal experiences generally agree with or contradict the ideas of the passage. Second, see which of these personal associations presents your general train of thought most accurately. Follow through all the implications of your chosen comments—those that are most promising and forceful. Analyze in detail how your examples and ideas support or diverge from the statements in the reading. You can develop your thoughts through extended reading notes, journal entries, preliminary outlines, or even sketchy first

drafts. Remember that you can always revise these early attempts to cut out digressions and tighten up the organization and logic.

In the opening part of your essay, identify both the specific passage and the specific experiences or personal beliefs that you are comparing to that passage. Then set up the general pattern of agreement, disagreement, or qualified agreement that will ultimately emerge from your comparison.

The main body of the essay will, of course, be comparative in structure. Because the reading stands independently of your essay—and can be referred to by the reader—you will probably devote more space to your personal experiences than to the reading. However, you need to summarize or paraphrase the passage with enough precision to enable your reader to know exactly what you are comparing from the original passage. Decide whether a short quotation, tight paraphrase, or compact summary will be most effective in acquainting your reader with the original. Exactly how much of the original you repeat will depend, to some extent, on how familiar your readers are with it; further guidance on methods of referring to the original appears in Chapter 11.

The body of your paper should be devoted to those experiences that bear favorably or unfavorably on the reading. Always make sure that your experience is discussed in relation to the ideas from the reading; do not allow the narrative of your experiences to become an end in itself. The purpose of the essay is to illuminate and to evaluate, through your experience, the ideas contained in the reading.

### Four Frameworks for Making Comparisons

Your comparison may be organized in one of several ways. The first method is to use your personal experiences to explain and develop one or more of the important ideas in the original passage. If you use this method, your introduction will consist of a concise statement of the major ideas of the original. In the body of the essay, you will explore these ideas by examining carefully chosen, effective examples taken from your own life and experiences. In the conclusion, you will reassert the general truths of the ideas as confirmed by your personal understanding of them. You may be familiar with this organization under the name of *exemplification*, or illustration.

A second organization is the *traditional comparison*, where ideas are compared on a point-by-point basis. The first point from the reading is discussed with your first related experience; the second point, with your second related experience; and so on. For the conclusion of this essay, you sum up all the smaller insights that you reached by the point-by-point comparisons.

A third *method-patterned contradiction* is useful when the reading presents a consistent point of view that directly contradicts a consistent point of view suggested by your experience. In the first part of the essay, you draw together all the points from the reading to show the consistent pattern; then you draw together all the observations from your own experience to show the opposite pattern. In the conclusion, you discuss the specific differences between your point of view and the point of view of the original writer. The trick of this method is to maintain the comparative tension between the two points of view, even though you discuss them separately; otherwise, the essay may simply fall into two unrelated parts. You can avoid this pitfall and keep your reader aware of the two opposing viewpoints (1) by making clear cross-references and explicit comparisons between the two parts, (2) by repeating key phrases, and (3) by maintaining parallel order of points between the two parts.

In a fourth method, if the reading and your experience agree, you may use the reading to *explain the experience*. Then the essay will punctuate a personal narrative by references to the reading to show the full meaning of the experience. You may focus the conclusion directly on the

usefulness of the ideas you derived from the reading. This last method is particularly good for demonstrating how compelling ideas, presented persuasively by a writer, can reveal to the reader the order behind the apparently haphazard events of day-to-day life.

### Four Frameworks for Comparing Reading and Experience

1. Exemplification. Use your personal experience to explain one more main ideas of your reading.
2. Traditional comparison. Compare your personal experience on a point-by-point basis with the reading.
3. Pattern of contradiction. Draw observations from your own experience that show a pattern contradicting that of the points made in the reading.
4. Explanation of the experience. References to your reading punctuate a personal narrative, revealing the full meaning of your personal experience.

### A STUDENT EXAMPLE FOR DISCUSSION

The following essay illustrates the first method of organization, exemplification. The student Lai Chung Leung uses the experience of himself and his family as they immigrated from China to Hong Kong to the United States to exemplify the ideas about social mobility presented by Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix (reprinted on pages 87). Lai Chung Leung begins his essay with a summary of several related major ideas from the section that he considers important. Then he connects those ideas to his experience. As he elaborates on the experience, he shows how Lipset and Bendix's ideas provide a framework for viewing what happened. Just as his family's experience illustrates the ideas, so the ideas illuminate the experience. The discussion deepens both Lai Chung Leung's and our understanding of the ideas and his life. By the end he is able to add some further thoughts about the significance of Lipset and Bendix's thinking.

### Sample Essay Comparing Reading and Experience

#### Class, Mobility, and the Lai Family in Three Societies

In Social Mobility in Industrial Society, Lipset and Bendix describe and explain mobility in social terms and go on to analyze the importance of mobility opportunities to the well-being and stability of a society. They see a balance in every society between the tendency of those who have wealth and power to keep these things for themselves and their relatives and the society's need for new talents, skills, and energy. When power and wealth are held too tightly by closed classes, the society becomes stagnant and those without wealth and power may become so disenchanting that they may pose a revolutionary threat to the social order. My family's experience and my own personal experience in three different societies show exactly the kinds of differences Lipset and Bendix describe, with precisely the political consequences they predict. Where there was social stagnation, in China, my family suffered from lack of opportunity along with many others; this problem led to a very unstable political situation, which in turn led to recurrent revolutionary threats. In the more dynamic society of Hong Kong, my parents could improve their situation a bit and became less disillusioned, but they still recognized that opportunities for themselves and their children were limited because patterns of education

still tended to keep real success and power in the hands of the families of the already successful and beyond the reach of most working people. In the United States, however, real educational opportunities made it possible for me to move slowly toward a better way of life. Although life is hard here, I still feel as though I have a real future as part of the American society.

As my parents have often told me, from time immemorial my ancestors were hard-working but poor peasants in mainland China. For many centuries China had a very strong caste system, and there were few ways to move out of the rural peasant class. Society was stagnant, mobility was limited to a lucky few, and one's role was almost always determined by birth. The descendants of peasants, as my family was, would remain peasants, to be exploited by the ruling class.

Centuries of exploitation led to great resentment and resulted in the Communist Revolution of 1949, which crushed the existing caste system. The events of 1949 exemplify what Lipset and Bendix call group mobility, whereby a formerly lower class displaces an entire upper class. Severely exploited peasants and urban workers were denied access to the ruling class and became actively discontented, especially during the economic setbacks that followed the Second World War. In order to create new opportunities for themselves, they overthrew the long corrupted and outdated imperial regime. A society that provides no mobility asks for its own destruction.

At the beginning of the revolution, both my parents were delighted to see the changes taking place. They thought that for the first time new opportunities would open for them. They thought they might get more money for the rice they grew, that their children might be trained for better jobs, or that the government would simply ensure that their lives would be more prosperous. They were soon disillusioned. Economic conditions became worse after the Communist takeover, and rather than what wealth there was being shared, that wealth fell into the hands of the new ruling class of Communist leaders. Only the families of the new political and military rulers enjoyed improved lives. One oppressive ruling group had been displaced only to be replaced by another. We see in recent years how much new resentment has built up against the protected privileges of the ruling party elite and the resulting social stagnation, finally erupting in the temporarily squashed revolution of 1989.

However, fifteen years before the Tiananmen Square massacre, my parents had already left China, crossing the border to Hong Kong, where opportunities were comparatively many, but they soon discovered that for them those opportunities were limited. They were able to support the family. My father worked in a dockyard and my mother became one of the third world female factory workers in the global assembly line as she assembled parts for an international electronics corporation. All members of the working class, though, they had no chance to improve their situation. They had become part of the permanent Hong Kong working class. This was because they were only semiliterate and Hong Kong at that time presented only limited education for them or for their children.

As Lipset and Bendix point out, education is both a major pathway for social advancement and a method of keeping power in the hands of the powerful. If education is expensive or in other ways restricted to wealthy or powerful families, people from the lower classes will never have access to the positions of social leadership that require an education. This is precisely what happened in Hong Kong, where the British colonial powers restricted higher education to only the overseas British officials, executives, and owners, along with a very small and trusted group of socially powerful Chinese families. The large Chinese working class was denied advanced educational opportunities (except for a few extremely talented students who were quickly brought into the ruling class). Basic education was provided for everyone, but only a small percentage were allowed to go on to higher secondary and university education. Thus most Hong Kong workers could improve their lives only so far, and few of their children could escape the working class.

My parents encouraged me to study hard and I did well in school, but I was not lucky enough to be among that 1 percent chosen from the working class to be given a chance for higher education. With no family money for private education, I was at a dead end. My parents and I decided to take a risk. We knew that education was the surest pathway to success if I could obtain it and use it in a society that would accept my talents. We had

always heard of the opportunities for education and jobs in the United States, and particularly the education available at public universities. But we also knew that life had been very hard for many Chinese immigrants who were never able to escape the bottom end of the American working class. We decided to take the risk.

Public education may be inexpensive for Americans, but it is astronomical when compared to Hong Kong wages. I worked for two years and saved almost everything. And my parents added in almost their entire life savings. With that I could afford an air ticket, one term's tuition, and a few months' rent for a small room in a distant relative's apartment in New York. And so I came to the City University of New York, where I am pursuing my educational opportunities. I have been here three years and I see that there are many risks. Not all students succeed. Not all successful students can get a good job. There is still some discrimination against nonwhite people and immigrants. And life in New York itself is very hard and full of many risks just to walk down the street. And yet here I believe I have a chance to make a better life for myself. Here my hard work may mean something. Here my talents can grow through education. Here I can learn those skills that society needs and will reward. As Lipset and Bendix say, there is always a need for hard-working, talented people to carry out the important tasks of society. Here I think I will be allowed to be one of those hard-working, talented people.

Perhaps the most important idea that comes from Lipset and Bendix as it relates to my experience goes beyond the idea that there is such a thing called social mobility that is in tension with the desire of the socially powerful people to maintain the power. The important idea is that different societies deal with this tension in different ways. How your society deals with this tension can make all the difference in the world for you. Unless you are in a society that provides opportunity and recognition, all your hard work and struggles for advancement may mean little. I have lived in three societies. With my parents' help I think I have finally found the right one to live in.

### **WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

1. Write an essay comparing your own or your family's experience of social mobility with the following sociological definition and discussion of social mobility by Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix. Consider your audience to be your classmates in a course in sociology, where you are all trying to understand the practical meaning of concepts such as social mobility.

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2. Write an essay comparing the following article by Kate Moody on the effects of television watching on children's concepts of human relationships to your own experience as you grew up and the experience of people you know. Consider your audience to be a group of parents concerned about the influence of television on their children. Your experiences may serve either to calm their fears or to make the parents more likely to take action.

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3. Write an essay comparing your experience to the concepts and arguments presented in either a or b. Consider your classmates your audience as you explore the meaning and implications of your course reading.
  - a. Gordon Allport's discussion of groups (page 19)
  - b. Lilian G. Katz's editorial, "Reading, Writing, Narcissism" (page 74)