



# 2

## The Classroom Situation

### AIMS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter views each class as an organized system of communications — those you receive and those you create. Each statement you speak or write in a course fits within a web of statements and can be shaped to be most effective for the situation. Seeing the classroom in this way will help you recognize the rhetorical situations the class presents.

### KEY POINTS

1. Your writing in any class is part of the way you participate in its learning activities. Your writing will become more effective as you understand the communication structure of the course.
2. College courses can be seen as communication systems in which the teacher initiates reading assignments, lectures, and discussion questions and students respond in discussions and assignments. However, each class is also a unique system that you must evaluate in order to understand your own opportunities.
3. Although all students learn to get by in classrooms by trying to understand what the teacher wants, you will gain more from defining your own goals and activities.
4. Writing is open-ended, requiring you to frame your own goals and motives appropriate to the situation for which you are writing.

### QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- Have you ever written a paper or said something in a class that you felt was “not yourself”? Have you ever not spoken up in class or not written something because you felt those parts of yourself you would be ex-

pressing would not be well received? Have you ever felt you had to silence yourself to get by in a class? What made you feel that way? What kinds of things would you have written or said if you were being more honest to “your self”? What does being “yourself” in class really mean?

- Compare two classes, one where you felt involved and one where you did not. What made for the difference?
- How do classrooms set up different situations for your writing? How do you write differently in different classes?

Writing in any course, not just a writing class, joins together what you bring with what the course and other people have to offer. Participating in the unfolding discussions of a class challenges you to confront the new ideas, information, and skills presented by your textbook, your teacher, and the other students. As you address new intellectual challenges, learning becomes an active search for useful and meaningful knowledge.

To participate in any class, you must obviously engage in certain activities, such as listening to the teacher reading the assignments, participating in class discussions, writing papers of the assigned length, turning in assignments on time, and taking exams. But what does it mean to do these things? How do they fit together? How specifically should you do them? There are many ways to listen, many ways to read, and many ways to write papers. What do all these activities, moreover, add up for you, your goals, your interests, and your commitments? How do all these activities come together when you are on the spot to write a paper or exam essay?

To answer these questions you need to determine what is going on in the classroom, what the teacher is asking you to do, and what kinds of responses will be received well and rewarded. Then you need to line up the situation as you see it with your own goals. Once you take this last step, the classroom turns from a set of obligations into a set of opportunities.

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## Sizing Up a Class Instead of Psyching Out the Teacher

Sizing up a class and what you do in it is, at one level, easy. You have done it all your life. Some teachers make it even easier by laying out exactly what is expected of students. When the teacher does not explicitly tell students exactly what to do, students have learned a classroom etiquette that, no matter how much minds may wander, keeps them in their seats doing the teacher-identified task. Some students create active places for themselves by aggressively seeking information from the teacher and maximizing their participation. Other students take more passive roles, never testing the limits, never seeking individual conferences, and rarely participating in discussions. Still others are confrontational, looking for weaknesses in the teacher's position in order to rise in the esteem of classmates, who are amused at the disruption of classroom power.

Whatever stance a student takes, however, the teacher takes a central role in the classroom. Students always make choices by scrutinizing the teacher's expectations, demands, and behavior, even when the teacher encourages individualized student activity or reorganizes the class into peer work groups. This control is exerted by assignments, grades, minute-by-minute praise and correction, responses to different student behaviors, or particular questions. Students, recognizing this fact, frequently talk of "psyching out" the teacher — figuring out what's in the teacher's mind.

"Psyching out" a teacher, however, is not a very satisfactory way of dealing with your own participation in the classroom, for it leaves your own needs, motivations, and ideas out of the picture. To draw on all your resources and to make the classroom as satisfying as it can be, you must put yourself into the picture. Rather than "psyching out" the teacher, you must "size up" the situation as an opportunity for your own participation. This is often difficult for freshmen because of the many differences students find among their college classes (see below).



### NEWS FROM THE FIELD

#### One Freshman's Struggle

**I**n a field study on the experience of college writers, Lucille Parkinson McCarthy spent three semesters in three separate classes with Dave Garrison, a beginning student at a private liberal arts college in the Northeast. McCarthy conducted extensive interviews with Dave, his peers, and his professors, and she attended classes with him and read all drafts of his writing assignments. The three courses included in the study were freshman English, poetry, and cell biology. McCarthy selected the first two for their emphasis on writing, and the last because Dave was a biology major. The study gives us a revealing inside view of college writing

that may remind you of what you are experiencing as you try to make sense of the demands of your classes. Where those demands matched Dave's own interests and needs, he did best.

McCarthy observed that Dave viewed each new writing situation as something completely new and unfamiliar — even when the same skills had been covered in previous courses. For example, even though the freshman English course had covered summary writing, Dave saw the summary writing required by the biology class as fundamentally different than anything he had ever done before. As a result, he felt lost. McCarthy commented that students in introductory-level classes are often so overwhelmed by the vocabulary and analytical style that they must learn for a given discipline that they cannot access their own past experiences productively — even when those past experiences would be helpful.

McCarthy also observed that Dave's success or failure in the classes depended on how he valued the writing assignments. In both the freshman English class and the biology class, Dave was able to identify a number of personal benefits he could get from the assignments. For example, he saw the papers he wrote as helping him prepare both for a career and for future college classes. Consequently, he was motivated and did well in both classes. In the poetry class, however, Dave saw only one function of the writing assignments: to demonstrate academic competence to his professor. He received the lowest grades in this class.

McCarthy finally observed that Dave had to figure out on his own what constituted an appropriate response to an assignment. He used six different strategies for, as he put it, "figuring out what the teacher wanted": These six strategies were: (1) the teachers' comments about writing in class; (2) model texts provided by the teachers; (3) discussion with other students; (4) teachers' written comments on earlier papers; (5) his own previous experience; and (6) personal talks with teachers.

McCarthy's study led her to describe college students as "strangers in strange lands." Each new class presents, not only a new subject matter, but new ways of talking, reading, writing, and understanding the world. Students often go from class to class unsure of what to expect and unable to use the specialized language that each discipline demands of them. Ideally, instructors should act as guides to the conventions and communication styles of the new discipline. However, they are often unable to recognize — or unwilling to assist — students who are struggling with an unfamiliar language. Ultimately, then, the responsibility for mastering the rules of the "strange lands" falls to individual students. Dave recognized this responsibility when, at the end of the 21-month study, he was asked what advice he would give to an incoming freshman about college writing. "I'd tell them," he said, "first you've got to figure out what your teachers want. And then you've got to give it to them if you're gonna' get the grade. . . . And that's not always so easy."

## Writing for Reflection



When assigned writing in your courses, have you ever felt as Dave felt? In what way? How did you deal with the situation? Did you follow similar strategies as Dave, or did you go down a different path? What was the outcome? In retrospect, did you have any more effective options? Is there anything the instructor might have done or said that would have made the experience more useful or successful?

## Writing Is Open-Ended

As we have seen, an overly narrow focus on a teacher's signals creates an obstacle to self-motivated learning, the kind of learning that becomes increasingly important at higher levels of education. When your choices are limited to only how to respond to each question or direction presented by the teacher, you never have to think about the underlying meaning of the activity or what you might gain from it. If you feel that all the serious decision making of the classroom is totally in the teacher's hands, you never have to take responsibility for your own education.

Writing, however, almost always involves taking responsibility. You make your own statements in an open-ended situation. No one can say ahead of time exactly what you should write, what you will think, or what ideas you should express. To come up with something interesting, important, and challenging to write, you must think about the meaning and possibilities of the situation.

No matter how narrow a writing assignment appears, it contains many possibilities of going beyond the minimal adequate response. Even assignments that ask you to summarize a textbook give you options in phrasing, focus, detail, and depth of presentation. In the next few years you are likely to run into assignments that ask you to frame original issues in a subject area, draw on a range of sources, read widely on your own, seek new data from research, provide novel analyses, and come up with new ideas and arguments.

The most open-ended work is often a major term project submitted as a paper. Typically, as you advance in your subjects, more responsibility is put upon you to develop ambitious papers that reflect more of your own choices and judgment and rely on more of your own preliminary work, thought, and research. In such major written assignments you decide how to develop the topic, what skills and knowledges to draw on, how to organize your time and activity, how to structure the work that leads up to the completion of the assignment, and what form your final presentation will take.

Your problem in open-ended tasks is to find a way to draw on your own motivations, interests, skills, and resources to create something original. Then you will have work you can feel committed to and involved in, that will

show the teacher what you can do, that will extend your own learning in ways that are important to you, and that you will be proud of.

## Writing Your Self into College

As you find involving and motivating ways to take part in the activities of your classes, you are more likely to elicit engaged responses from your instructors. They see you as potential professionals making original contributions to knowledge and the community. Generally, they look for and reward those students who seem to have an original drive and personal commitment. They notice students who show a knack for the subject or for addressing problems. They notice students who treat the course content not as pre-packaged knowledge to be memorized, but as a complex area to be explored and become familiar with. When you really start talking with your teachers about the ideas and problems posed by your courses, you will be involved even more deeply.

Sometimes teachers describe at length ways to approach the novel problems posed by your assignments. At other times they may leave you to your own devices, with only your experience to help you figure out what to do. No matter how informative the instructor is about the expectations of the assignment, you must determine the kinds of resources and work that need to go into the assignment and the kind of result you should aim at as your final product. That is, figuring out the assignment is part of the assignment.

The way to figure out the assignment is not to search for obscure hints about what is in the back of the teacher's mind, but to size up the organization of the class and activities. Teachers often spend much time thinking about what goes into a course, how it is structured, and what the students ought to be doing. They are setting up an experience for you to take part in. When you start to understand what they have set up, you can see more clearly what kind of part you can play in it. You can then think about what you might want to say in class and write in papers.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on understanding the dynamics of communication within the classroom structure. It provides a general way of looking at classrooms to see what kind of rhetorical situation you are in every time you are asked to write. The next chapter will examine the social and personal processes through which you write your papers and make your statements. Then the remainder of the book will examine in detail the typical activity systems that occur in classes and the kinds of writing assignments that fit within them.

## Writing for Reflection



1. To help develop an understanding of the difference between psyching out the teacher and sizing up a classroom, write two short informal pieces. First, in a few paragraphs describe an incident when you or a classmate psyched out a teacher by determining what the teacher was looking for and then by providing it. Second, describe in a few paragraphs how a current class provides specific opportunities for you to learn what you want to learn, grow in directions you wish to grow in, or carry out a project you want to carry out. In class discussion, compare your various experiences.
2. Write a short description of a time when you had to put up a false front in writing or speaking for a course. Then describe another time when you could really express who you were. Using those two examples, consider what you think “integrity” consists of and how it is relevant or not to your education.

## Classrooms as Communication Systems

Most classrooms in college look bare. In elementary school the teacher would decorate the room with seasonal signs and decorations, alphabets, and math problems. In high school, class projects and papers, maps, and educational posters might have given you something to look at. Once you step into most college classrooms, however, there is little else to do but look at and listen to the teacher and the other students.

It is communication that fills up the room for the hour and the many hours that go into preparing for class. The communication is centered on you, the student. Many messages are given for you to process: textbooks and other assigned reading, lectures, blackboard writings, overhead transparencies, electronic bulletin boards, questions and observations, assignment sheets and exam papers. In turn, some communications are expected from you: questions about your confusions, answers to questions posed by the teacher, discussion, homework papers, term projects, and exam answers.

For the most part, the communications directed to you transmit what you are supposed to learn, frame your assigned activities, and provoke you into communicative action. The communications that come from you help you put together what you have learned, develop your intellectual and critical skills, and show the teacher what you have learned. Most of the communications flow directly from the teacher (and teacher-assigned materials) to you and from you back to the teacher. In some classes, however, information flows as well from student to student — sometimes in ways set up and structured by the teachers, but sometimes in ways students arrange on their own.

Some classes also send you out into the world to communicate with others — perhaps through the books in the library, or through cooperative work experiences or fieldwork research.

Each class is a communication system. Your learning is at the center of each of these communicative systems. The writing assignments, in particular, are your most serious, formal, lasting, and well-thought-out contributions to the communication system in each class, and thus your most important way of participating in the learning process in each class.

## The Communication Systems of Three Classes

As an example of communication systems, we might consider one course, Introduction to Psychology, taught at three neighboring colleges by different professors with different philosophies about the course. All three courses use the same textbook.

The first course, in a small liberal arts college, is taught in small discussion sections. The overall aim is to help students learn to relate the concepts and research of psychology to their own lives and to observe and reflect on psychological processes in themselves and in others. The daily textbook readings become the topic of class discussions about whether psychological concepts fit with the students' experiences and observations, where the students have seen these concepts in action, and how these concepts help clarify or make more complex their view of human behavior. Assigned papers follow directly from the connections made in class discussions. Students are expected to write about their own experiences and link them to the concepts presented in lectures and textbooks. Instructors are likely to recognize and reward deep application of concepts and discussions of their possible implications. They welcome bold thinking by the students, even if the ideas aren't fully precise or supported.

At the second college, part of a large research university, introductory psychology is taught in large lectures supplemented with a weekly small meeting led by a graduate teaching assistant. The course introduces students to the research and theory developed by research psychologists. The lectures explain experiments that support the concepts in the chapter. A major distinction is made between everyday life and psychological research. Movies supplement lectures to show what happens in controlled laboratory settings. Weekly section meetings help clear up students' uncertainties about material presented in the lectures and textbooks. Exams are a mixture of multiple-choice questions and short essays, testing students' memory of theories and research as presented in books and lectures. Several short essays are required throughout the term asking students to compare how different theories would address certain questions. In all instances students are discouraged from bringing in their own experiences from the uncontrolled messy confusion of life. On all assignments the instructor grading the work (usually the teaching assistant) is looking for knowledge of the material, precision in the



use of concepts, and awareness of the specialized nature of thinking in the discipline.

The third introduction to psychology, at an engineering college with a strong emphasis on computer science, emphasizes models of human cognition and how those models relate to models of computer thinking. Students are given puzzles as to what a certain theory would mean about behavior, or how a behavior could be modeled in a robotics or artificial intelligence system. Included in the readings are descriptions of cognitive models of human behavior and artificial intelligence projects. As in the research university, classes are taught primarily in large lectures, but the weekly section meetings taught by graduate students are run as workshops where students are asked to look into their own mental operations and describe what they are doing. They are also asked to consider the logic by which computer programs work and to think of hypothetical automated systems. Writing assignments tend to be either highly speculative in terms of how various processes might be modeled or quite concrete in describing a possible artificial intelligence project. Exams consist of puzzles of human or machine behavior that are to be analyzed in terms of the models studied. On exams and essays teachers like ingenious solutions, plausible but unproven suggestions, hypothetical models, and concrete applications.

In these three cases the instructors have different views of their subject — psychology — and the uses to be made of it. Each instructor builds those views into a structured set of activities that present and apply the subject knowledge. We can even think of the three classes as three different dramas where students play different roles and learn different things (see Burke's dramatism, page 29). The student learning psychology would have a different experience depending on which institution and class he or she was in; nonetheless, in each case the student can rapidly become oriented by paying attention to the pattern of communicative activity in each of the settings. Participating in the small personal-experience course is different than participating in the large lecture or computer science courses.

Even without such extreme variants, however, differences among courses are not simply random, but rather reflect differences in faculty, departments, and colleges. In finding out these differences, you will see that each course makes a kind of sense, and you can get the most out of each if you understand that sense.

The typical parts of classroom communication systems are already familiar to you, although you may not have thought about them in this way. There are the elements brought into the classroom by the teacher and by you, there are the elements spontaneously created in the classroom interaction, and then there are those generated in response to formal requirements — the demands put upon you to say or write various sorts of things. This last is what puts the most pressure on you, what may most worry you, and what this book is aimed to help with. But this last must be understood in relation to the other parts and how they are held together in the teacher's structuring of events and activities. These elements all set the stage for your major productions. They all define the spot you are put on when you are given a writing assignment.

## Writing for Reflection

1. Following the example of the descriptions of psychology courses on pages 27–28, describe a class you are taking now as a communication system. Discuss such things as what you expect to get from the course, how you believe the knowledge will be useful for you, how the professor thinks the knowledge will be useful, what actually appears to be offered in the class, and how the class is structured communicatively. What kinds of communications will you receive, from whom, and what kinds of communications will you produce, for whom and with what purpose? Then in class discussion compare the different communication systems of the courses you and your classmates are taking.
2. Imagine an alternative version of the course you described in answer 1, set in a different kind of college and based on different goals. Describe the communication structure and activities of this hypothetical course. Then consider whether this alternative course might be more or less to your liking than the version you are taking.



## USEFUL CONCEPTS FROM RHETORIC

### Dramatism

In his book *A Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke, one of the pioneers of twentieth-century rhetorical theory, outlined a model that can be used to tell what is happening in communication. Burke thought that acts of communication could be best understood when compared to the actions in a stage play. To understand the dialogue in a play, we must interpret the lines in their dramatic context, taking into account such factors as the type of play that it is, the actions of the other characters, the way that the play is staged, and the time and place of the action. Similarly, Burke argued, we should try to study communication between people by considering all the elements of the human drama in which the communication is situated. Thus he developed the theory of **dramatism**, which identified five dramatic components that appear in any human communication:

1. The **act** is the actual text of the communication. It is not limited to written or spoken words. Burke defines communication broadly and insists that gestures and actions, and even silences and omissions, contain a rhetorical purpose and are therefore “communications.”
2. The **agent** refers to the person, people, or institutions who perform. In a play, the agents would be the actors themselves. In a communicative situation, the agents are the people who initiate, or are otherwise involved in, the communication.

The pentad of Kenneth Burke's dramatism is illustrated in the public briefing (act) delivered by General Norman Schwarzkopf (agent). Through maps, printed and spoken words, gestures, dress, and flags (agency) he explains, justifies, and maintains support for U.S. actions (purpose) to the press and through them to the American public during Operation Desert Shield in the Gulf War (setting).

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3. The **scene** consists of all the background information that sets the stage for the communicative act. Scenic considerations include the physical locality as well as the social, cultural, economic, philosophical, or religious values that shape the way that communication occurs in a particular context.
4. The **agency** deals with how the act is accomplished by the agent. All of the tools of rhetoric and communication, all of the various skills of writing, speaking, debating, and denouncing, are part of what Burke labeled "agency."
5. The **purpose** refers to the reason for the communication. Although it isn't always possible to determine exactly what someone's motives may be, there are always purposes — some stated and some obscured — for every kind of speech act. Analyzing these purposes is an essential part of understanding the communication.

Burke called these five terms, taken together, the **pentad** and devoted most of his book to showing how the various relationships and ratios between these five items can explain much of the history of Western philosophy and rhetoric. Each of the parts of the pentad influences each of the others in a reciprocal fashion. If we change something about the scene of a communication, for example, then we will automatically change the act and the agents; in doing so, we also alter the agencies and the purpose. To illustrate the way that Burke's pentad works in rhetorical analysis, consider the following drama of communication:

An elderly male professor (an **agent**) is giving a lecture on the poetry of Keats (an **act**). The professor is employed by a small, private, prestigious liberal arts college on the East Coast that caters primarily to upper-class students (a **scene**). The professor has a strong belief that poetry is its own reward, and he refuses to lecture on Keats's life or attempt to explain the poetry. He believes, instead, that, if he reads the poems with enough feeling and emphasis (the **agency**), the students will see how beautiful poetry can actually be. In this way, he hopes to instill in his students the same love of the great masters that he has always felt (a **purpose**).

If any one of these factors were different, the entire drama would change. The age, gender, status, and personal philosophy of the agent affect the entire drama. If the teacher were a young woman, or a graduate student, or a Keats hater, then everything about the lesson would change. Likewise, if the scene were an understaffed, poorly funded urban city college or a large state university, the teacher would have to do things much differently. To analyze what is happening in this communication, we must take into account all of the relevant factors and the way that they affect each other.

Dramatism provides a series of questions that takes us beyond the written or spoken text of a given conversation. The meaning of a word depends, to a very large degree, on the context in which it is used, and the elements of the pentad help us see all of the factors that go into creating that context. The five parts of the pentad were designed to answer five key questions about any rhetorical instance: who, what, where, why, and how. For Kenneth Burke, as for many contemporary students of rhetoric, these factors represent the minimum amount of information that must be known for any communication to make sense.

From Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

## The Teacher's Role in Classroom Communications

Some of the most visible communications in the classroom system are those defined by the teacher — from assigned readings, to lectures, to handouts of statistics. The readings — frequently from textbooks, but also from other books and articles — are usually done before the class. Instructors sometimes prepare you by providing background or by focusing your attention on certain issues. Lectures and discussions also sometimes review material you have just read to help you see how it fits into the themes the professor is stressing. However, no matter how much support the professor gives you for the reading, it is up to you to understand the reading and fit it into the puzzle of the course.

## Textbooks

Textbooks are of various types. Some set out large bodies of information organized in an appropriate way, making connections among the various facts and ideas — such as history textbooks. Others introduce you to a range of theories, approaches, and research findings that make up the developments of a field — such as sociology textbooks. Still others identify various topics studied in the field and explain the research and concepts the field has developed to help you understand them — some experimental psychology textbooks do this. Some textbooks focus on different areas of practice or problems you will need to understand in professional work. Examples would be textbooks in nursing or management. Still others, such as mathematics or physics textbooks, introduce you to a set of skills and concepts that you will learn to manipulate through a set of sequenced exercises and problems. But all of these books are written for you, the college students taking the courses, and they provide sequences of learning appropriate to the subject.

Teachers may use the textbook as the framework of the course, working through the book chapter by chapter with explanations and discussions of the material followed by assignment of problem sets, exercises, and activities from the end of each chapter. For such textbook-driven courses it is especially important to see the position the textbook puts you in, how in a sense the textbook surrounds you in order to direct and support certain activities on your part. Other instructors may have the classes and lectures run parallel, but not overlap, with the readings, providing an alternate view or a second way into the subject. Still other instructors leave the textbooks far behind, having students use the books just as background reading or as a reference resource.

Although teachers use textbooks in different ways in the lectures, discussions, and assignments, it is also worth understanding the structure of

each textbook you are assigned, the kind of information it delivers, the sequence and development of materials, and what the textbook expects students to learn and be able to do. Since teachers or departments usually choose textbooks that fit their conception of the courses and that will help students fulfill those expectations, orienting yourself to the textbook will orient you to the assumptions and expectations of the course.

## Writing for Reflection

1. Describe and compare two textbooks you are currently assigned in two different courses. What kind of information does each textbook provide, in how much detail? What kinds of concepts are explained, and what are you expected to do with them? What kinds of skills or instructions are explained? What kinds of questions, problems, and activities does the book provide? How is each book related to the aims of each course?
2. After asking permission, observe a roommate or friend preparing a textbook assignment for a subject in which you have not taken a course. First ask the friend about the course and ask to look over the book for a few minutes. Then watch and take notes as your friend begins to study. Does he or she read straight through, skip around, or refer back to earlier sections? What parts does he or she take more or less time on? Does your friend take notes, underline, or highlight? Does he or she answer questions or solve problems, and how does the material of the book help in those activities? Then write a few paragraphs describing what you observed and your thoughts about how work with the textbook fits into the learning of the course.

## Other Readings and Resources

Assigned readings in college often come from a wide variety of sources beyond the textbook. They might be newspaper articles, popular books, economic reports, selections from specialized professional journals, or any kind of text written for any audience. Instructors may have many different reasons for including such materials and may ask you to use them in different ways.

Clippings from newspapers and general circulation magazines may be assigned as supplements to textbooks, to provide late-breaking developments in a field, or to explain specialized concepts. Current materials could also be assigned to provide examples of how the concepts of the course, such as Economics, work their way into daily life. Articles may also provide a case study — for example, in the political process — that you will be expected to

examine using the concepts and methods you have been learning. You might be asked to compare how the press treats issues with the more specialized, professional perspective you are obtaining in the course. For example, you may be asked to describe how issues of discrimination are portrayed in the popular media. If you keep in mind both the source of the articles and why they are made part of the course, you will know what kinds of attention to give to them.

Similarly, articles from the professional literature in a discipline are frequently used in college courses. Sometimes teachers use these to present the most current and advanced thinking and research in the area. Instructors may also want you to become familiar with how new findings are communicated using the specialized language, reasoning, and methods of the field. In that case you need to pay attention to how the arguments are built as well as the ideas and information presented. If the teacher wants you to become aware of the different approaches and debates in the field, you need to contrast articles, positions, and evidence with each other. Finally, the teacher may want you to learn to question the validity of some arguments and methods, and so you will need to evaluate the articles. As you advance in your fields, you will be asked to take more complex stands toward what you read.

In addition to newspaper and journal articles, you may be asked to read books written for different audiences. Some may provide specialized information (such as histories or presentations of the latest theories in science), but others may raise large issues that are of general public interest (as in books arguing for a new educational policy). You may be asked to engage in discussion with these texts, criticize the approaches they take, examine their role in the formation of public attitudes, or (as in literature or philosophy classes) interpret, analyze, place in context, and theorize about them.

Teachers may also bring in many other communications, from outside speakers to films and videos to computer programs. Some may be required; others may be supplementary or recommended, kept on library reserve, or in an audiovisual resource room; and still others may be only mentioned in a bibliography handed out for you to consult as you become interested in a topic or develop a term project.

## Interacting with the Written Material

Each of the readings or other materials presented in a class was written for a specific audience at a specific time with particular purposes. In a way the text asks you to take on the role of that original reader. A French political editorial from the eighteenth century asks you to take sides on an issue of French politics of the period, even though the dispute is long dead and from another country; a comic strip, even if it is from a World War II GI newspaper, aims to make you laugh; and a classic essay in Renaissance science still aims to persuade you of its truth, even though the science has since moved on. Even if you know enough about French politics or the situation of GIs or Renais-

sance science to understand the issues, you may no longer find the politics acceptable, the science convincing, or the joke funny. From the perspective of the original reader, you may not find the old texts interesting or useful. Even if you did, you still may not be getting from them what the instructor hoped for by making the assignment. These texts become useful, relevant, and interesting for the course only when taken from a special perspective that ties them into the work and thinking of the course, such as understanding the violence of emotion that overtook the French Revolution, the role of humor in American culture to mediate between beliefs in individualism and the compulsions of military life, and the changes in scientific thinking over time.

Only with textbooks (and a few other materials used in a similar direct instructional way) are you clearly in the position of the primary user and can take a natural attitude of a reader, following the cues and directions the author sets for you. Even with textbooks, as we have discussed, it helps to reflect on what the text asks you to do and how. With all other readings you need to be even more reflective, asking yourself what the text attempted to do for original readers, how the teacher is asking you to read it, and what the reading adds to the total learning of the course.

Teachers frequently give some explanation and justification for the various readings and other materials, perhaps on the first day of the course in going over the syllabus. It is easy to overlook this beginning-of-the-term information if you are focused more on how many pages you will have to read and write. Sometimes teachers may give a sentence or two of explanation at the end of a class meeting to prepare you for the next reading. Again, it is easy to ignore such orientations as you are packing your books and rushing to your next class. You will gain much, however, by paying attention to such clues about how the teacher uses these resources in class and about what questions you will be asked about them. If you have any doubt about why you are assigned any reading or other material, what kind of attention you are supposed to give it, or what you are supposed to get from it, just ask the instructor.

## Writing for Reflection



Describe a recent instance when a teacher assigned nontextbook reading for one of your courses. What was the course? What was the material? What was the source? What was the original purpose of the material? For what purpose did the teacher assign it? What attitude or perspective did you need to have to the material to relate it to class activities? How did your role of reader differ from the role of the original readers? Given the difference in your perspective, what things did you see or understand about the text that might not have been evident to the original readers?



## How the Instructor Shapes What Happens in Class

In addition to setting materials for you to read or otherwise use, the instructor determines the plan for each day's class. If the instructor fills class hours with lectures, films, or other spectator events, your success lies in figuring out when and how to engage actively with the material. Alternatively, if the instructor structures the class around student participation, your success lies in participating most fully. In either case much is determined by what the teacher brings to the class, how he or she structures the class, and how he or she prompts student activity.

### Lectures and Active Listening

Although lectures seem to hand authority totally over to the lecturer for the hour, really they call upon all your resources to be an active listener. Lectures can do many things:

- Deliver information
- Provide understandable explanations of difficult concepts
- Lead through a sequence of related information and ideas to build a sense of connections
- Apply concepts of the course to situations of interest or concern
- Explain procedures
- Provide examples and models of tasks that will be assigned
- Define the teacher's expectations

The college classroom is a complex communicative system where students' comments respond to textbooks, other readings, films, lectures, questions, and discussion in order to communicate with classmates and the instructor.

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- Provide provocative arguments to get reactions from the students
- Be enriched by handouts, overheads, slides, or films

Each of these tasks and techniques requires different kinds of listening, processing, and thinking. Lectures are not undifferentiated information to be memorized, but rather complex resources and prods for activity.

Lectures are central to most courses; they identify what the teacher thinks is important and what the teacher thinks the student ought to be learning and doing. Making some record of the lecture, therefore, is essential. Whether you should take notes or record lectures, and in what format, is a personal decision based on your sense of the course and your own sense of how you work best. Everyone has his or her own style of organizing thoughts, remembering information, and taking notes. Each course has its own demands and its own relation to material in the lectures.

However, note taking has the unfortunate effect of putting the student in the position of a passive receiver of authoritative words, concerned with transcribing rather than responding or thinking about the words. When you come to study your notes, you may be simply tempted to memorize the lectures rather than working them into your own way of thinking.

Depending on how the lecture relates to what is in the textbook, how well you know the material, and how your own memory works, you may also use your notebook for your own thoughts about the lecture as it happens, for questions, or just for the major ideas covered. To encourage students to think about what is being said, lecturers sometimes provide their own set of notes, or notes may be available from a student service. There is nothing wrong with using prepared notes if you use them to free yourself to really listen and think about the lecture. If you find that you do want to spend the lecture taking notes, you can use the few minutes after the lecture, perhaps walking to the next class, to reflect about what went on and how it relates to the overall development of the course. Step out of the maze of the lecturers' words to encounter your own thoughts and reactions.

## W riting for Reflection

Closely observe a lecture you are required to attend for one of your classes. Take notes on the style of delivery and presentation. Does the lecturer use anecdotes, charts, slides, videos? Is the material formally organized around an obvious outline, or does it seem to follow a flow of ideas? Is it delivered from notes, a prepared text, or apparently spontaneously? What kind of information is provided? What do you think you were supposed to get out of it? What kinds of things are you supposed to be able to do as a result of hearing the lecture?

Describe what you found and your thoughts about the lecture in several paragraphs.



## Discussion

Discussion, as opposed to lecture, gives you moment-by-moment clues on what you ought to be thinking about. Teachers are constantly providing prompts for you to think about, posing problems, or asking questions. Each of these prompts defines an activity in which you can engage. Usually teachers expect that you will prepare assigned materials, readings, and exercises before the class meeting so that the prompts can build on this material. The questions may also call on other material you may have studied or skills developed in a previous class. If there is something about the questions that you don't understand, or if you don't understand where other students' replies are coming from, you can always ask the teacher to explain what he or she is looking for and what kind of knowledge would help in providing an answer.

Where and how the teacher guides the class discussion are particularly revealing about what the teacher thinks is important and what you ought to be able to do with the material. Some teachers may be open to taking discussions in directions that reflect your interests and concerns, whereas others may be more resistant. By staying tuned to teachers' questioning, you can see what skills, ideas, and assumptions the teacher relies on and note characteristic patterns or interests that develop over the term.

More deeply than simply providing clues to teacher expectations, these questions and other discussion-leading devices establish the immediate framework for your activity. The teacher's questions are like scaffolds within which you can construct your answers. By asking particular kinds of questions, the teacher prompts you to think about particular kinds of things. If the teacher asks you to locate where a character in a story first shows uncertainty about his beliefs, that question focuses your attention on what the character believes and then sets you to searching through the story for phrases that indicate uncertainty. That search through the story helps you build a view of the changing beliefs of the character.

Through many such techniques, teachers focus your attention on specific kinds of information and thoughts, helping you develop your skills and ideas. How the teacher arranges the seating in the class, whether the teacher establishes group activities and in what ways, at what point in each class the teacher shifts back and forth from lecture to discussion, whether there is a lab attached to the course and what activities are scheduled for those periods, what kinds of explicit instructions, advice, or rules govern activities — all these things and others shape how you participate in the classroom and thus what information, ideas, and skills you learn as a participant. By seeing more clearly the activities the teacher is asking you to participate in, you can see how you can extend yourself to new learning.

## Writing for Reflection



In the next discussion section of another class, write down the questions and other prompts used by the teacher to get students to talk. What do you think the teacher is looking to get from the students? What is his or her strategy? Also describe how the students respond to the various prompts. How did they get a sense of what the teacher was looking for? How did different students respond? To which responses did the teacher react most favorably? Which responses did you like best? Least? To what extent did students fulfill what the teacher was hoping for, and to what extent did they go in different directions? How did the teacher deal with the new directions? Describe in several paragraphs what you found.

## The Student's Role in Classroom Communications

While the teacher may provide information and frames classroom activity, all classroom communication ultimately sets the stage for your participation, what you communicate. Some of your communications will help teachers evaluate your work, such as the papers, tests, and class presentations that will be graded. Whether these will be formally graded or not, they are constant indicators of your participation, involvement, and learning, to which the teacher can respond. More than that, however, your communicative activities *are* what you learn. You learn to solve certain kinds of puzzles, answer certain kinds of questions, produce certain facts and concepts in particular circumstances, and develop and articulate certain kinds of thoughts. While you may remember a certain amount of information that you may passively listen to, the more you actively use what you have heard to carry out meaningful tasks, the more you will remember, and the more you will be able to apply that learning when you need it. How you understand what is being asked from you (see Task Representation, page 40) will shape what you do.

In developing your own communications you are involved with knowledge and ideas, trying to shape them in ways that meet the standards and interests of the class.

Especially in more extended and open-ended projects, you focus your attention and knowledge for a substantial period of time in order to build structures of thought around the subject matter and materials of the course. In this way you draw on all the communications that have occurred previously in class, whether from the textbook, discussions, lectures, lab activities, or extensions of classrooms through assigned library projects or field work. You fit together what has come before to extend it in a way appropriate to the assignment. In other words, you incorporate the entire communication sys-

tem of the class in the process of creating your own communication. Those patterns then become part of you, always available for you to use in later courses and after you graduate.



## REVIEWING WRITING PROCESSES

### Task Representation

Success or failure in college may depend, not on how well you compose sentences or organize ideas, but on how accurately you interpret your writing assignments. In an experimental study on task representation, Linda Flower, a composition researcher at Carnegie Mellon University, has determined that, even when given the same assignment, students may devise very different strategies for organizing information and presenting ideas.

Flower began her experiment by having a group of students read a series of comments and opinions about revising papers. The students were given a typically open-ended assignment to “make a brief (1- to 2-page) comprehensive statement about the process of revision in writing.” However, instead of composing the paper as they normally would, students were instructed to think out loud while they were writing.

By examining what the students said as they wrote and comparing that to what they wrote, Flower determined that the students chose from five general strategies for responding to the assignment, depending on how they represented the task to themselves:

1. *Summary.* Some students approached the assignment as a summary. They read the information carefully, selected what they considered to be the most important ideas from each paragraph, and wrote a paper highlighting and explaining these main points.
2. *Response.* Other students used the assignment as a springboard for their own responses. Students who wrote response-type papers generally searched the text of the assignment for some point or key phrase that they could use as a reference point for their own experiences or opinions. Often the finished papers were only tangentially related to the text of the assignment.
3. *Review and comment.* Another group of students settled on a combination of summary and response. These students would either summarize a point briefly and then add their own response to it, or they would summarize in the first part of their paper and then add an “opinion paragraph” at the end.
4. *Synthesis.* A fourth group of students attempted to create a structure that connected the various statements about revision into a single controlling thesis. These students went well beyond the requirements of a summary by creating a concept Flower describes as “a substan-

tive, informative idea rather than an immediately obvious inference.”

5. *Interpretation for a rhetorical purpose.* A final group of students wrote papers that were designed to set up an issue or argue a point. They interpreted the information as either supporting or refuting a general proposition about the nature of writing or revision. These students interpreted the assignment as an invitation to make or explore a controversial issue, and they organized the information accordingly.

None of these responses could be considered right or wrong, since the assignment did not give the students enough information to choose among the strategies. All five strategies represent valid types of academic writing. Many teachers give similarly open-ended assignments even though they expect students to employ (or to avoid) specific strategies. In such cases, the student has to determine the best way to organize the paper and process the information. If you have the chance to ask your teacher whether your representation of the task matches the teacher’s expectations, you can approach the assignment with greater confidence.

Flower, Linda et al. *Reading to Write: Exploring a Cognitive and Social Process*. Oxford UP 1990.

## Being on the Spot

When you recognize a moment when you must say or write something, you may feel on the spot. You are in what is called a rhetorical situation (see page 42). In class you may place yourself on that rhetorical spot by raising your hand in a discussion, or the teacher may place you in it by assigning a paper, but in both cases the next move is yours. You feel pressure to respond, to make a statement. What do you say? What do you write?

What you say or write, however, does not need to come out of the blue. The more attention you pay to the situation, the more clues you will have to

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find both what will fit the situation and what you want to say in it. For example, usually a major paper is preceded by many smaller events, such as class discussions, meetings with your professor to talk over your planned project, perhaps smaller pieces of assigned writing, or after-class discussions with classmates. These less demanding events prepare you for the bigger statements.

The school term is a series of activities developing your skill with the material and your relationship with those around you in the class. The big moments are only later points in a process of development. Teachers who are aware of this process create a sequence of activities that lead to more ambitious writing projects at the end of the term. Sometimes, however, you have to leap from a series of small-scale, limited activities, like taking notes in a lecture, to a single complex performance, as in a major analytical paper. When you are suddenly on that very big and unprepared spot, you have to build that bridge from daily activity to the larger, more independent response.

Over your education, these moments add up. Over your college career you will write many papers, each one an experience that prepares you for the next. If all goes well, by your senior year you will be writing at an entirely different level. Looking back then at the papers you wrote over your college years, you may be amazed at how far your thinking, knowledge, and ability to write effectively about difficult subjects have come.



## USEFUL CONCEPTS FROM RHETORIC

### The Rhetorical Situation and Rhetorical Timing

**A** *rhetorical situation* is a situation that appears to ask you to make a statement. It is defined both by other people, in what they are saying and doing, and by your own motivations. For example, your friends may be discussing where to go for a snack, but since you have to run off to a class in a few minutes, you have no stake in the discussion. So this is not a rhetorical situation for you. However, another friend passes you and says that class has been canceled. Suddenly you have reason to urge the group to choose your favorite coffee bar; the situation is now a rhetorical one for you. But before you can speak, they have already agreed to go there, so the rhetorical situation has evaporated. All you have to say is, real coolly, “Whatever.”

*Rhetorical timing* has to do with the right moment to make your statement. You may be in a situation where you have something very important to say, but if you blurt it out at the wrong moment, people won’t listen, may react negatively, or may not understand what you are talking about. As you listen to your friend who is depressed over a bad grade in a frustrating class, you may be aware that the situation calls for you to oppose her plan to drop out of college. On the other hand, you realize that this is

not the right moment to tell her how much she is getting from the experience. Instead it may be the right moment to help her figure out just what is so frustrating about this class. Later, once she can start to see the bigger picture again, may be a better moment to encourage her to stay in school.

Much of the art of rhetoric is in recognizing those situations in which making a statement will have some useful effect, being able to perceive what is going on, identifying your own stakes or interest in influencing the situation, and choosing the right time to make your statement most effectively. Since situations often change moment by moment, those people who recognize the opportunities of the moment and are ready to act rhetorically can make themselves heard and can accomplish things that would be impossible at other times and places.

Of course, the situation and timing of college writing is often set by the teacher through the assignment and the deadline. Still, understanding the situation of the classroom, your own interests, and exactly where the assignment fits in the unfolding of the course over time will help you write more appropriately for that moment in that course.

## Writing for Reflection



Describe one situation in which you were assigned to write something to be read by the instructor or the class. How did the assignment depend on reading assignments, class lectures and discussions, or other previous communications? When was the assignment due, and how did that affect what was expected and what you were able to accomplish? How detailed was the teacher in defining the assignment and in setting specific goals and expectations? Were there specific class or group activities to help you write the paper, such as brainstorming or editing sessions? How did your own interests and knowledge influence what you chose to write and the approach you took? How did you expect the teacher would respond to your paper, and were you surprised by the actual response? In retrospect, would you have approached the assignment any differently?

## Getting Involved Electronically



Find out how to log on to the World Wide Web. Visit the home page of your college. (Your instructor will provide you the URL address.) See what kind of information your college makes available and what kind of image it presents to the world. Write a few paragraphs describing how your college represents itself.