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Illustrative Writing: Connecting Concepts and Real Examples

AIMS OF THE CHAPTER

Academic knowledge has meaning and value beyond the classroom. To help you understand the meaning and power of what you are learning for the many kinds of events that happen, your teachers may ask you to connect your learning with events that occur outside the walls of the university. This chapter aims to help you see that academic study has powerful connections to many parts of life.

KEY POINTS

1. Each discipline, or area of academic study, provides a way of looking at, understanding, and acting in the world. It provides a way of getting involved in and improving some important human activity.
2. Instructors are likely to believe deeply in the value of their subjects and will try to express that value by showing how learning relates to the world outside the classroom.
3. In discussions and assignments you may be asked to make specific connections between course materials and contemporary events presented through newspaper and magazine articles or in videos and films produced for nonacademic audiences.
4. In writing about contemporary events, you need to make detailed and frequent connections between the academic concepts or information and the specific details of the events.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- Why do teachers and researchers study the specialized and unusual things you are being taught?
- Just what do your teachers get enthusiastic about and why?

- Have you ever felt either in school or on your own that you have learned something really important and useful? When?
- How can what you learn in your coursework give you a better understanding of the world?

Most professors deeply believe that their subjects are important and useful ways of looking at the world and life. For example, psychologists really are curious about how their own and other people's minds operate and why people think and behave as they do. To them knowledge of psychology can be immediately and profoundly helpful. It can help people use their minds more effectively, overcome personal difficulties, find more satisfying ways of living, and understand how people interact. Moreover, if you ask psychologists how they view the world around them, their descriptions will be saturated with concepts and perspectives they have developed as part of their professional experience. Although they may be cautious about overgeneralizing from current psychological knowledge or making judgments about aspects of personality and behavior that they don't yet fully understand, they approach daily life as psychologists.

Similarly, economists look at the world through the lens of their economic knowledge. They look at people, businesses, and governments in terms of finances and exchange. As professionals and as private citizens they are likely to offer others economic analyses and advice about how to conduct economic affairs.

Almost all teachers believe that the study of their subject can lead to more satisfying lives. Teachers of literature, art, music, history, and philosophy see their subjects as their passions and their way of being in the world. Teachers in the sciences see beauty in their subjects. In the knowledge of their fields, they find powerful ways of understanding the world, creating new technologies, and addressing problems, whether in medicine, the future of the planet's ecology, or the sources of energy. Professors of applied fields believe that much human happiness depends on creating wiser and more competent public administrators, lawyers, businesspeople, teachers, engineers, and counselors.

Snapshots of the World

Because of their commitment, instructors want students also to understand the beauty and strength of their subjects. They want students to see how specialized knowledge can reveal and change the world beyond the classroom.

Sometimes this desire may only be an undercurrent of the class, perhaps increasing the teacher's personal intensity. In passing, the teacher may com-

ment on how what you are studying explains some familiar daily phenomenon. The biology teacher may remark that a chemical process first noticed in the nervous system of flatworms may hold the key to improving human memory, or a literature teacher may point out that the development of symbols of nationhood in Renaissance poetry helps us understand how we think about nations today. Such comments may have little direct effect on what is expected of you; you will still be expected to understand the major systems of flatworms and to interpret sixteenth-century poems. Nonetheless, these insights into the implications of the knowledge will increase your personal sense of connection, motivation, and commitment.

In some courses, teachers go further and bring the world outside of the classroom directly into the communications of the classroom, in ways that become a central part of the course.

Representations of the World

Teachers can bring the world into the classroom through articles from current magazines and newspapers, through films and videos of contemporary events and communities, or through Internet access. These representations of current situations and issues help you think about the meaning and implications of what you are studying. In an economics course on international trade, the teacher may use debates in a news magazine over free trade agreements to trigger a discussion of current economic developments. In an urban anthropology class a documentary film concerning the life in the *favillas* (shantytowns) of Buenos Aires might reveal how the social forces discussed in texts affect real lives. An art history class examining the relationship of art to the rise of museums might consider recent controversies over public funding for the exhibition of avant-garde art. You can probably think of many other examples from your own courses.

The Internet also is providing a large amount of information about different aspects of the world, especially through the *World Wide Web*. The Web allows easy access in convenient format to information, magazines, data, or whatever people wish to make available, from the latest facts about health foods or a political movement to the full text of classic books of literature and religion. You can even get a visual tour of famous art galleries around the world or sound recordings of political speeches. Many kinds of material are now being posted onto World Wide Web servers, and in the next few years the Web will provide nearly instant access to enormous stores of information linked together. The links are created in *hyper-text* format, meaning that cross-references from one document to another are directly linked electronically. If a document about some research in Missouri mentions a research group doing similar work in Bolivia, you can retrieve information about the Bolivian group and their work by clicking your *mouse* (a device that points to items on the screen) on a marked word or button.

These current articles, films, and electronic documents will probably not

have been created for classroom use in the way textbooks are; they are directed to the world outside the classroom. You might be tempted to treat them in the same way you do when you see them in the morning paper, on television in the evening, or while surfing the net in your spare time. However, in the class you need to see such "real-world" documents in relation to the concepts and methods of the course or in comparison to other cases you have studied. The teacher may first draw these connections, and in class discussion and papers you may be asked to follow up, expanding on the connections the instructor has made or bringing in new examples from the news or other media. Here are the basic steps:

- Identify what aspect of the course materials this event or situation is related to. Is this case meant to be a comparison with a historical case? Or is it an illustration of an analytic concept you have been working with?
- Given the specific relevance of the materials for the work of the course, identify which details or aspects of the materials are most important.
- Given the connection between course and materials, analyze, evaluate, or otherwise think about the contemporary materials in a way appropriate to the course. Construct an account of the case or situation that is relevant to the course.

In other words, you identify (1) how the case fits the course; (2) what details to focus on; and (3) how the approach of the course suggests thinking about it. For example, if you have been studying group loyalties in a sociology course and your teacher assigns a magazine article based on undercover interviews with a local youth gang, you know that the teacher is asking you to consider how group loyalties hold the gang together. With the issue of group loyalties in mind, you then find in the article all the signs and factors related to group loyalty that you have considered throughout the course, such as similarity in dress and appearance, claims of kinship with other members of the gangs, fears expressed about the world outside the group, locales and times for gathering, rituals, and so on. Finally, you might consider which ideas about group loyalty this case fits best. In class discussions, instructors may draw you through this process in a step-by-step way.

Assignments

FINDING REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES

1. Choose a course that presents material that might apply to contemporary events or situations. Examine your local newspaper for several days and clip several articles that seem to exemplify or otherwise relate to concepts, events, processes, or other things you are studying in that course. Write three questions that relate your clippings to the course materials. Then bring your clippings and questions to this writing class along with textbook passages and discuss the different ways in which school learning applies to the world.
2. Access the World Wide Web through one of the terminals in the college library or campus computer center. After exploring the Web for awhile, locate some pages that are interesting and relevant to a course you are currently taking. If you can, print out images of several of these pages to bring to class. If not, take notes on the information on the page and the links to other pages. Keep a record of the URL addresses of the most interesting pages so that you can revisit them.
3. Read several of the sidebars in this book entitled "Useful Concepts from Rhetoric." From newspapers, magazines, or other printed materials, bring into class three real-life situations in which any of these concepts might apply. Be ready to discuss how the concepts apply to the examples.

Writing Papers About Real-Life Situations

Although some class discussions of outside contemporary materials may be passing events in a course to highlight certain concepts, instructors may use those discussions as the basis for more extended assignments or papers. In certain courses, applying learning to current issues and case studies may also be the specific purpose of the course, as in courses on contemporary social problems. When you write a paper on a real-world case or a current event, the following steps can help you develop ideas:

- *Consider what the question asks you to do with the material.* Particularly, see if it indicates what elements of the course ought to be related to the case or current event, and in what way. Does the question specify the methods you might use to collect information? Does the question define what attitude you should take to the material or what task you must accomplish? Are you to take the material as a case to be solved, an illustration of ideas you are learning, or as an exception? Are you asked to consider how the participants in the case view events and how those views match up with the concepts you are studying? Are you to provide a critique of or evaluate current policies adopted for the situation? Does the question

specify certain formats you might use to present your answer? In short, what does the assignment ask you to do?

- *Identify which materials, methods, and models from the course are most relevant for the assignment.* For your working notes, make a list of those concepts, theories, or facts from the course that might be most useful to understand the case or events you are examining. If necessary, review your notes and readings. Review discipline-specific methods of collecting information that might be useful for the assignment. Also search your course readings and lecture notes for any examples that might give you a model for what your final paper might look like. Try to identify the typical ways of discussing example cases in this subject area.
- *Develop a general approach to the question.* Identify what you wish to accomplish, what you need to cover, and what kinds of discussion you will have to present. Then write a brief one- or two-sentence direct answer to the question as you best understand the issues. In the course of working on the paper, you may wish to refine, develop, or even change this main idea or thesis statement. Nevertheless, identifying a tentative main idea in the beginning helps focus your thought, direct your activity, and provide a framework for developing the essay.
- *Go through the case materials again, keeping in mind the question that you are developing.* Identify the specific details, facts, and statements that are most relevant to the issues on which you are focusing. These can be recorded by highlighting, annotating, or making a set of working notes.
- *Connect the specifics of the case with the relevant materials from the course.* You may first do this by keeping a set of journals or notes that start to sketch out your ideas. As seems appropriate, go back to the course notes and readings to pull out details, quotations, definitions, charts, or other items that will help elaborate the ideas more fully in relation to the case. At the end of this process, bring together your ideas in a single page with the details of the case so you can see how course materials and case fit together.
- *Plan an organized answer.* The answer should address the task and bring in a detailed examination of materials from both class and case. In every section of the planned essay (or every heading in the outline), bring the class and case materials together. You do not want just two separate sections, one about the course materials and one about the case: you want the two brought together at every point. Write sentences that explicitly connect the two.
- *In the final paper, show the interaction between case and course.* The relation between the two should help bring out the meaning of both. The paper should be presented to make that interaction evident:

  1. The *introduction* of the essay should directly address the task and identify how course materials and case materials inform each other. Explicitly state the relationship between the two sets of materials in a thesis sentence, a clear statement of the main point.

2. *Each paragraph in the essay's body* should support the main point, discussing some aspect of how the case sheds light on the ideas of the course or how the course ideas shed light on the case. As mentioned above, make explicit connections between the case and the course, especially in the introductory sentences of the paragraphs. These connections should also add up in a coherent way and be presented in a comprehensible order, with one idea leading to the next.
3. The *conclusion* should again directly address the primary task set by the question, showing how the case fits into course issues, or how course issues would help understand, resolve, or provide a more sophisticated way of handling the case. Based on the analysis and discussion of the paper, the conclusion should provide some specific evaluations, recommendations, insights, or other advances on thinking.

REVIEWING WRITING PROCESSES

Revision and Drafting

Professional writers rarely submit *first drafts* (their first attempt at a piece of writing) for publication or presentation. Many writers see first drafts merely as broad outlines of what they eventually intend to say. Good writing usually means *revision:* looking again at your writing to see how you can make it better. Students tend to see revision much differently than professional writers. Some students only look over a paper to correct obvious mistakes or typographical errors. Such correction is really only *proofreading* (see page 145). Others look over their papers to try to make their meaning more precise or their prose more economical. This sharpening of the phrasing is what is called *editing* (see pages 184–186). The most successful students, however, realize that revising means looking over everything: the statement of the main idea, the logic and reasoning, the major supporting ideas, the organization, and the examples and details, as well as the grammar, word choice, and spelling.

Contemporary writing research shows that, whereas inexperienced writers tend to divide the writing process into a "thinking" stage and a "writing" stage, experienced writers see their writing as a part of their thinking process. The English novelist E. M. Forster once said, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" From Forster's perspective, writing becomes a way to create, refine, and modify ideas, rather than just a way to express thoughts that have already been sufficiently formed. Through each draft you bring your thoughts more into being, as you look at the shape your ideas are taking and bring out that shape more fully.

Most students have had the experience of writing a paper and discov-

ering that, by the time they reach their conclusion, they are expressing ideas that had not occurred to them when they began. When this happens, inexperienced writers often think they have done something wrong. Experienced writers, on the other hand, recognize that their writing has helped them create new ideas. They then go back to the beginning to incorporate these insights into their writing, eliminating the stray statements they needed at first to warm up. After writing another draft, a writer may discover even more new ideas that need to be included.

Writing on a computer or a word processor makes revising a paper much easier. But even students who use word processors must make a conscious effort to rework and rethink their ideas during every stage of writing. This requires foresight and planning, since papers hastily prepared the night before they are due will almost always be unrevised first drafts. Where possible, you should try to complete your first draft several days before the paper is due, giving yourself time to come back several times to revise your prose and work through the main ideas. When you do this, you may find that your final paper might not look anything like your original version.

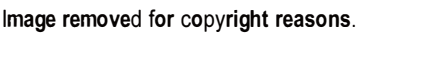
Sample Student Essay

The following student essay was written for an introductory Psychology course. After reading a chapter entitled "The Individual and the Social Group" from the textbook, students were asked to find and discuss a news story that exemplified one of the concepts presented in the chapter. The student James Dilling found a story in a political magazine describing the decline of a New England fishing community that seemed to fit precisely with the concept of "tragedy of the commons." The essay presents both the main points of the concept and the primary facts of the case, and then clearly discusses how the case fits the concept.

A Common Tragedy in Gloucester
by James Dilling

We often assume that rational individuals will create rational public policies; however, this assumption does not always hold true. Individuals acting intelligently, rationally, and defensibly in their own best interests can often contribute to the decline of the communities to which they belong. Deborah Cramer's article "The One That Got Away" on pages 40–41 of the July/August 1994 issue of *Mother Jones Magazine* tells the story of Gloucester, Massachusetts, a small fishing village that has learned this lesson the hard way. The Gloucester case illustrates the psychological principle known as the "tragedy of the commons." This principle states that in cases of communal property or resources, the best interests of rational individuals are often at odds with the best interests of the communities to which they belong.

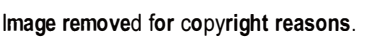
The idea of the tragedy of the commons was first identified by a psychologist named Garret Hardin in 1968. Hardin used the image of the village commons—large areas in the middle of a town where everyone had the right to graze their cattle—as a metaphor for all of the commonly held resources in our society today. Consider the case of a town where ten townspeople each kept two cows on the commons. Everyone prospered by this arrangement. If, however, one of the ten put a



The town common in Sterling, Massachusetts.

third cow on the commons, then that one person would have an increased yield by 33 percent, and the difference to the rest would have been unnoticeable. However, as Laird and Thompson point out in *Psychology,* what makes sense for one person proves disastrous for a community:

> The problem is that what one villager found reasonable, other villagers did too. Soon each villager had three, then four cows on the commons. They added more and more cows until the commons was no longer a pasture, until there was too little grass to support even one cow. . . . The cumulative effect of individually rational behavior was the destruction of the commons. (556)



Fishermen's desire to increase their individual catch depleted the fish population, leading to a decline in the industry.

While Hardin deals primarily with a theoretical commons in a fictional town, Deborah Cramer presents an all-too-real example of this tragedy. Once a thriving fishing village, Gloucester has experienced a sharp decline in business as the fish population off its coast has steadily declined. For years, boats would travel out to sea and come home full of fish, and, even though the fish population is now at a "record low" (40), industry advocates are reluctant to accept conservation standards that would limit the number of fish caught now in order to rebuild the population of fish for future generations. Even important and moderate regulations—such as regulating the time that a fishing boat can spend at sea and increasing the size of the holes in the nets to protect smaller fish who have yet to spawn—have been shouted down by angry fishers who are "yelling and hollering that the council is trying to put them out of business" (41).

The angry reactions of the townspeople can best be understood when viewed as an example of Hardin's psychology of the commons. Each individual fishing operation is concerned, first and foremost, with its own best interests. For these individual operations, this means that, to act rationally and in their own best interest, they should try to catch as many fish as they possibly can—even though such a strategy will eventually destroy the common fishery. For any one operation to stop its fishing unilaterally would be irrational, since others would still find it profitable to overfish the same area and the only losers would be those who stopped. Unless everyone decreases fishing operations together, nobody stands to gain by decreasing them alone. To put it in Hardin's terms, what would be rational and farsighted for the collective level becomes irrational and self-defeating for the individual.

This all-too-common tragedy serves as an eloquent rebuttal to the popular theory of laissez faire economics, or the belief that government industries regulate their resources best when the government takes a strict hands-off approach. Without some government regulation, the common fishing grounds of Gloucester and other New England ports are doomed to certain extinction. Individuals cannot rationally decrease their fishing efforts, but the industry as a whole must do so in order to survive. In order to preserve the resource for the

future, local, state, and national government regulators must step in and place reasonable controls on all members of the fishing industry equally. While such regulations may be unpopular, they are made necessary by the peculiar psychology of the commons that Hardin identified in his research in 1968.

Works Cited

Cramer, Deborah. "The One That Got Away." Mother Jones Magazine Jul.-Aug. 1994:40-41.

Laird, James, and Nicholas Thompson. Psychology. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

Thinking About Student Writing

1. What points does James Dilling present to explain the concept of the tragedy of the commons? What sources does he use to present the concept? Where in the essay does he use these sources, and in what form does he present the material from them?
2. What facts does Dilling present about the case of Gloucester fishermen? What source does he use for this information, and in what form does he present information from that source?
3. What connection does Dilling make between the concept and the Gloucester case? On the basis of that connection, what further point does Dilling make about politics and government policy?
4. How does Dilling organize the parts of his essay to bring different points together into a whole?

Assignments

WRITING ABOUT REAL-LIFE SITUATIONS

1. Select one of the following readings from an academic discipline and then locate a recent news item that relates to it. Study the news item and write a brief (500- to 750-word) essay explaining the story in light of the reading.

   A. Economics
   In summary, when trade has opened up, and when each country concentrates on its area of comparative advantage, everyone is better off. Workers in each region can obtain a larger quantity of comparative advantage and trade their own production for

goods in which they have a relative disadvantage. When borders are opened to international trade, the national income of each and every trading country rises.

From Paul A. Samuelson and William D. Nordhaus, *Economics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989) 904.

B. Sociology

The media provide instant coverage of social events and social changes, ranging from news and opinions to fads and fashions. They offer role models, viewpoints, and glimpses of lifestyles that people might otherwise never have access to. Through the media, children can learn about courtroom lawyers, cowboys, police detectives, or even such improbable characters as Batman, E.T., and Rambo. (The fact that many of these images are not very realistic does not necessarily lessen their influence.) Through media advertising, too, the young learn about their future roles as consumers in the marketplace, and about the high value the society places on youth, success, beauty, and materialism. Changing social norms and values are quickly reflected in the media and may be readily adopted by people who might not otherwise be exposed to them. The rapid spread of the new trends in youth culture, for example, depends heavily on such media as popular records, television, FM radio, youth-oriented magazines, and movies.

From Ian Robertson, *Sociology* (New York: Worth, 1987) 130.

C. Psychology

A subtle process that contributes to prejudice is the *just-world phenomenon* — another special case of the balance principle, that good goes with good. Many people behave as if they believed in a just world, in which bad things don't happen to good people. Of course, the world isn't just; and earthquakes, hurricanes, famine, and disease all strike at random. However, to the extent that people follow the just-world principle, they tend to think that the victims of tragedy somehow deserve their fate. Certainly we all know better; but as with other cases in which balance processes occur, if we are not paying attention we may tend to exhibit the just-world phenomenon.

From James Laird and Nicholas Thompson, *Psychology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) 509.

D. Anthropology

Law and order in stratified societies depends on an infinitely variable mixture of physical compulsion through police-military force and thought control. . . . In general, the more marked the social inequalities and the more intense the labor exploitation, the

heavier must be the contribution of both forms of control. The regimes relying most heavily on brutal doses of police-military intervention are not necessarily those that display the greatest amount of visible social inequity. Rather, the most brutal systems of police-military control seem to be associated with periods of major transformations, during which the governing classes are insecure and prone to overreact. Periods of dynastic upheaval and of prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary turmoil are especially conducive to brutality.

From Marvin Harris, *Culture, People, Nature: An Introduction to General Anthropology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988) 389.

2. Find an article in a newspaper, magazine, news broadcast, or other source of current information that describes how a professional or a researcher used his or her knowledge to resolve a conflict or solve a problem. In a few paragraphs, describe the events or findings presented in the article, and then write several more paragraphs discussing the value of the kind of knowledge and research described in the article.

3. In a newspaper, magazine, television program, or other source of current information, locate a story that reveals the relevance of any material you have studied in any course this term. Write an essay of five hundred words describing the relationship between the story and the concepts or information from your class. Give your instructor copies of course or media materials he or she might need to understand or evaluate your essay.

Search the World Wide Web to find materials relevant to any topic you are studying in one of your courses. Write a few paragraphs describing your findings.