8

Autobiographical Writing: Connecting Concepts and Experience

AIMS OF THE CHAPTER

The richest source of knowledge you bring to the class is yourself. This chapter describes how you can connect your own experiences and memories with what you learn in class, especially when your instructor gives you the opportunity to do so. Making this connection will increase your presence as a contributor to the class interaction.

KEY POINTS

1. Writing about your own experiences in relation to the subject matter of the course helps you understand the meaning and relevance of academic concepts.
2. While writing about your experience puts you on the line, and while you always have a right to have your privacy respected, thinking about personal experience in relation to academic concepts deepens your understanding of the material and heightens the reality of your learning. Hearing and reading the relevant experiences of other members of the class also extends your understanding.
3. An essay of illustration describes something that you have witnessed or experienced as an example of some category, concept, pattern, process, phenomenon, or other general idea that you have studied in the course.
4. An essay comparing everyday common-sense views of your experience with more specialized disciplinary ways of looking at those events deepens your appreciation of course material.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- When have teachers asked you to write or talk about your own experience? When have you found such writing most useful?

- Have you ever felt uncomfortable sharing personal information with a teacher or a class? What boundaries would you set up to define what you would or would not care to share?
- What material have you learned that has helped you understand some part of your experience? What experiences have you had that have helped you understand the material you have studied?

Each of you as you enter the classroom brings broad swaths of the world with you. Depending on the subject, each of you may have had experiences that relate to the ideas and information presented in class. Whether the issue is the political process, human behavior and psychology, symbols in culture, the mass media, or literature and the arts, each of you has seen and been through much that relates directly to class studies. If you are discussing the influence of the media on children, you have watched many hours of television and have seen its effect on yourself, your peers, and your relatives. If you are discussing changes in American economy, you have witnessed the changing presence of corporations and business, the changing marketing of products, and changing employment opportunities. If you are discussing the plot structure of narratives, you have movie, video, and novel plots in your memory. If you are discussing the effects of stress on behavior, your personal and college life may provide many incidents to think about.

By asking students to speak and write about their experiences, instructors help students examine the personal relevance of what they are learning. Other classmates' experiences and analyses of those experiences further enrich this understanding.

Personal Issues and Privacy

However, as lively and motivating as personal experience is to consider in the classroom, it is not always easy to work with. Discussing your experience

reveals something of who you are and what you think about life. These complications are great advantages for making the subject real and personally important, but they can make discussions more challenging or threatening. As you examine your life and experience in new ways, you may come to question long-held assumptions and beliefs. Moreover, in some cases, the pressure to draw on your own experience may ask you to reveal more of yourself than you want to share. What seems like a lively discussion to one person can seem like an invasion of privacy to another.

Those things you have witnessed and experienced are part of yourself. Your sense of identity has in part developed through what you have learned to deal with and how you have learned to deal with it. In describing what you have observed and lived you expose both your experience and the way you look at things.

Most teachers who ask for personal experiences are aware of these issues of privacy, even though they may have different thoughts and expectations about the assignment. Whatever a teacher's approach may be, you should always have the right not to discuss some matter or view that you feel is private, that you feel is inappropriate for the classroom, or that you feel uncomfortable about sharing with any particular group. You also have the right to raise the question of privacy with the instructor. Most teachers are quite reasonable if you approach them about these reservations. Similarly, if your instructor shares student writing with the rest of the class, you should let the teacher know when you feel a piece of writing is too private for other class members to read.

It is useful to keep in mind that teachers asking for personal experiences are not usually asking for deep dark secrets, but just ordinary everyday things students see about them, such as how clothes-buying decisions are affected by the media. Often instructors and classmates are surprised when a student responds to a question about experience with an intimately personal story. In those cases, no one forces the student to share such a story, but the student trusts the class and feels the need to tell it. However, this kind of response should always be voluntary.

Sharing in the Classroom

These cautions aside, once students start to bring more of themselves into the classroom, the teacher can respond more to them and to the material they present. For example, I have had truly wonderful discussions with students of all backgrounds about social mobility as they examine their family histories to see the kinds of opportunities and obstacles provided by society in different countries, regions, and time periods, and how their parents, grandparents, and other relatives coped with the hand life dealt them. Moreover, these students were then able to reflect on how their own choices about college and major fit into their ideas about how society is organized and how they can make their own best and most satisfying way in it. Because of their different backgrounds and experiences, students have different patterns of

perception. A student who grew up in a rural country with few choices except to follow in his parents' footsteps can see the many opportunities of a modern urban economy but may not grasp the many ways that parents try to protect economic and social position for their children in a society where family class position can easily fall in a single generation. On the other hand, a student from an affluent background may see her family's rise in individualistic terms that emphasize the persistence, hard work, or just good luck of particular ancestors but that same student may have a hard time seeing how opportunities depend on the structure of society and the economy. As students start to see how they view the social-economic terrain, they come to understand each other and the complexity of the subject.

Participation in a discussion of personal experiences requires directness, honesty, and an openness to people's experiences. While granting authority to each individual to speak for his or her own experience, these discussions also create a picture that is bigger than any one person's story. When you leave a classroom, you can always reject the collective terms developed there, and inside the classroom you can hold an alternate position and argue for it. But it is important to entertain the possibility that the experience of the class as a whole adds up to more than the experiences or thoughts of any one person.

Different classes have different languages in which students learn to express experiences. If a sociology class is discussing family history, the discussion will use sociological terms and concepts. If that same material is discussed as part of an economics course, the discussion will use economic terms and concepts. Nonetheless, the particular histories that students tell will focus and change the discussion in light of the experiences the students bring.

In some cases personal experience papers are directed just to the teacher, who will then respond to them in detail. In that case the thinking you develop will enter into wider class discussion only indirectly through your classroom comments, which are likely to draw on the specifics of the essays. Your papers are also likely to influence how the teacher directs the class. If your papers are to be read by your classmates, they become a way of representing your experience to others who have not seen what you have seen or had the perspective you have had. The papers then become part of a larger body of material for the whole class to think about.

USING READING TO THINK ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Write a journal entry about one of the following autobiographical passages. Compare the quotation to your own experiences and describe any insight into your life that the passage gives you.

1. In New Mexico the land is made of many colors. When I was a boy I rode out over the red and yellow and purple earth to the west of Jemz Pueblo. My horse was a small red roan, fast and easy-riding. I rode among the dunes, along the bases of mesas and cliffs, into canyons and arroyos. I came to know that country,

not in the way a traveler knows the landmarks he sees in the distance, but more truly and intimately, in every season, from a thousand points of view. I know the living motion of a horse and the sound of hooves. I know what it is, on a hot day in August or September, to ride into a bank of cold, fresh rain.

From N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969) p. 67.

2. We children lived and breathed our history — our Pittsburgh history, so crucial to our country's story and so typical of it as well — without knowing or believing any of it. For how can anyone know or believe stories she dreamed in her sleep, information for which and to which she feels herself to be in no way responsible? A child is asleep. Her private life unwinds inside her skin and skull; only as she sheds childhood, first one decade and then another, can she locate the actual, historical stream, see the setting of her dreaming private life — the nation, the city, the neighborhood, the house where the family lives — as an actual project under way, a project living people willed, and made well

N. Scott Momaday (b. 1934), a Native American of the Kiowa tribe, won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *House Made of Dawn.*

or failed, and are still making, herself among them. I breathed the air of history all unaware, and walked oblivious through its littered layers.

From Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 74.

3. In the world of the southern black community I grew up in, "back talk" and "talking back" meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it meant just having an opinion. In the "old school," children were meant to be seen and not heard. My great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents were all from the old school. To make yourself heard if you were a child was to invite punishment, the back-hand lick, the slap across the face that would catch you unaware, or the feel of switches stinging your arms and legs.

To speak then when one was not spoken to was a courageous act — an act of risk and daring. And yet it was hard not to speak in warm rooms where heated discussions began at the crack of dawn, women's voices filling the air, giving orders, making threats, fussing. Black men may have excelled in the art of poetic preaching in the male-dominated church, but in the church of the home, where everyday rules of how to live and how to act were established, it was the black women who preached. There, black women spoke in a language so rich, so poetic, that it felt to me like being shut off from life, smothered to death if one were not allowed to participate.

From bell hooks, *Talking Back* (Boston: South End Press, 1988).

4. The professor spoke like an Englishman, although he was an American. He played the part of Continental sophisticate — mentioning Josephine Baker, American jazz, and the like. He graded our compositions anonymously. One day he was reading my composition as an example of an A theme, praising the flow, the length of sentences, and so on. About midway he had a question and asked whose paper it was. I raised my black hand and like magic the quality of the paper went from A to F. He ripped it to shreds from that point on. I received a C for the course. From Sumner's standpoint, blacks could sing, dance, and play jazz, but what could they possibly know about English composition.

From James P. Comer, M.D. *Maggie's American Dream* (Penguin Books, 1989), p. 157.

Excerpt removed for copyright reasons.

From Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982) pp. 124–25

NEWS FROM THE FIELD

Intrinsic Motivation and Doing Something for Its Own Sake

While receiving a reward for accomplishing the goals that others set for you can motivate hard work and can make you a more productive student, as Edwin Locke has shown (see pages 175–176), externally set goals and rewards, such as grades, at some point reach a limit. Some psychological and organizational researchers point out that the highest, longest-lasting, and most productive motivation comes when an activity is rewarding in itself. In his 1993 book *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes,* Alfie Kohn examines the limitations of systems that motivate by offering rewards. Kohn considers a "reward" to be anything that a parent, educator, manager, or employer uses to acknowledge and encourage specific positive behaviors. Rewards can come in the form of verbal praise, high grades, money, or tangible prizes, but they all have the same basic effects.

Kohn points out that *rewards and externally set goals ignore your reasons for wanting to do things.* Rewards and incentives focus on the results of a behavior instead of its causes, and therefore they treat surface symptoms only. When students do badly in class or when employees perform poorly on the job, they do so for some reason. Setting goals and offering rewards may improve short-term results, but will do nothing to get to the real problems behind the behavior; once the reward is no longer offered, the problems will almost always resurface. Thus to really improve your ability to learn in the long run, you need to explore your underlying reasons for wanting to learn as well as the underlying reasons that might be inhibiting your learning.

External goals and rewards discourage risk taking. When people work toward a goal for a reward, they tend to work only for the reward and to ig-

nore anything that will not directly qualify them to receive it. Kohn points out that this often decreases people's overall productivity by narrowing their focus to those things that will ensure the reward. For example, a student who is working only for an A in a class will learn everything that it takes to pass tests and write papers but will be unlikely to learn or retain other things that do not directly relate to evaluations. Rewards decrease our field of vision and emphasize short-term accomplishment over long-term growth.

Finally, *externally set goals and rewards decrease intrinsic motivation.* Intrinsic motivation is the personal satisfaction that comes from the activity itself, as well as from the satisfaction of doing it well. Enjoying playing soccer or working on the computer and the feeling that you are doing it well are far more likely to lead you to spend more time with greater attention at those activities than if you are paid an hourly rate to be on the field or in front of a computer.

A study by a psychologist at the University of Rochester in the early 1970s supports the assertion that rewards actually decrease interest in a task. In the study, two groups of college students were asked to work on a spatial relations puzzle. One group was promised money for their participation and another group was not. After a set amount of time, the students were told that the first phase of the study was over and that they should sit alone in a room and wait for the next phase. The researchers observed that the students who had not been paid were far more likely to continue working on the puzzle than those who had received a monetary reward. The students who had been paid had come to be motivated primarily by the money, but the students who received no reward developed an intrinsic interest in the puzzle that motivated them to want to solve it.

For Kohn, and for many other researchers and motivators, the ideal school or work environment is the one in which tasks become their own rewards. External motivation can only increase productivity temporarily and superficially, but internal motivation can increase satisfaction, cooperation, and output permanently. Students study best when they love the subjects they study, and workers work best when they love their jobs. Although your instructors may try to build your motivation by sharing their enthusiasm for the subject or helping you develop your own goals, only you can really identify what it is you find important and rewarding.

Two Kinds of Personal Experience Paper

Although instructors may find many formats and ways of asking you to bring your experience to the classroom, these assignments are generally variants of two basic processes: presentation and discussion. You may be asked to present some relevant experience in a way that *illustrates* what you have learned from the course, or you may be asked to *discuss* experience in ways that have been developed in the course.

Experience as Illustration

An essay of illustration describes something that you have witnessed or experienced as an example of some category, concept, pattern, process, phenomenon, or other general idea studied in the course. The general idea is central to the paper, and the experience is selected for how well it fits the idea. Then the experience is described to make that connection obvious.

In assigning such exercises the teacher usually wants you to see that what is talked about in class also exists in the world, that you can associate specific events with those classroom ideas, and that you can use the classroom concepts to identify details, aspects, or parts in the actual experience. If, for example, in psychology you have been studying how people deal with inconsistent or contradictory thoughts (called *cognitive dissonance*), in discussing a personal illustration you do more than tell a story about your thought processes and just call it cognitive dissonance; you *show* how the discomfort and attitude change you went through fit with the typical ways people react to cognitive dissonance *as described in the textbook.*

Developing a Personal Illustration

The following suggestions are guides to the process of developing an essay that uses personal experience to illustrate a concept from an academic discipline:

- Identify the concept, pattern, phenomenon, or idea that the teacher is asking you to illustrate. Review the relevant course materials to make sure you understand the concept. If the teacher offers you a choice of concepts to work with, select the one that you suspect has the most direct and interesting connections with experiences you might write about.
- Locate an area of experience that seems to be relevant to the concerns of the course and the specific concept to be discussed. Then list various specific experiences that you might discuss, and mentally walk through them. If the topic is related to work, for example, you could review the various jobs you have had by listing them and then jotting down possible examples for your paper. If the topic concerns marketing, you could think of the products you use regularly and the marketing campaigns associated with them. To remind yourself about the marketing of common products, you might want to leaf through a magazine or walk through a shopping mall.
- Think about which example will give the richest presentation in both detail and concept. A bare-bones example that fits the precise specifics of the concept will usually produce an adequate answer. More elaborated presentations will probably be seen as more advanced work and be rewarded accordingly. You can also think about the kinds of examples the teacher has presented in lecture and discussion.
- Once you have selected an incident or situation to retell, then brainstorm details from memory. To refresh your memory, you might look at pho-

tographs, memorabilia, or other things you associate with the event, or perhaps speak with a friend or relative who is familiar with the event. The textbook or lecture definition or discussion can be used as a framework through which to recall further details. See how the concept and its parts remind you of new aspects of the incident, make the incident look different, or give you a new angle on the events.

- As the details build, you create a mental picture of the event, object, or experience. As you build up the picture, you need to keep adding details, using charts, networks, diagrams, or whatever kind of representation is helpful.
- Write out a first sketch of the experience. As you read it over, underline those aspects that most directly relate to the central idea. Think about how you could elaborate those aspects with even more details and specifically identify their relevance.

Writing an Essay of Personal Illustration

The essay should open with an overview, summary, or definition of the central concept, pattern, or phenomenon to be illustrated, along with some indication of the specific experience that will be described.

The main body should recount the experience while also emphasizing the connection to the general concept. *Each sentence* should make a clear connection with the concept or pattern you are illustrating, even if only with a word or phrase that comes from the conceptual definition. Each detail should be told to bring out its connection to the general pattern or idea. Expand most on those parts that are most related to the main theme. Summary or overview sentences at the beginning or end of each paragraph should expand on the relation to the concept.

If any aspects of the illustration do not fit well with the main idea or even seem to point in a contradictory direction, you should point that out, not try to hide the difficulty by not mentioning the contradicting details or slipping past them rapidly and without comment.

Writing this kind of essay involves always doing two things at once. Even as you keep the readers' attention on the idea behind the description, you also always make sure they get a clear picture of the events or experiences being described. Nonetheless, even as you get involved in painting your picture, you try not to lose sight of the concept being illustrated.

In your conclusion you can expand upon what the illustration shows about the concept or pattern, whether it shows how the concept changes in the real world, how further details fit in, or how forcefully reality illustrates the abstractions taught in the classroom.

Sample Student Essay

In the following essay Ai-Lin Young discusses the way she has experienced racism. She builds her discussion around the concept of racism described in the paragraph by writer James Comer earlier in this chapter. First she clearly

explains the concept of racism Comer uses. Then she applies that concept to illustrations from her own life. Before reading this essay, reread the paragraph by Comer on pages 171–172.

No I Don't Speak Chinese, I'm an American
Ai-Lin Young

In a short description of a classroom experience, James Comer presents racist stereotypes as appearing to have two sides, positive and negative, but ultimately both sides are harmfully racist. In this incident the professor first demonstrates that he holds seemingly positive stereotypes of black culture. The professor admires jazz and the famous American black singer Josephine Baker. But then he shows that he holds negative stereotypes when he changes his opinion about Comer's writing once he realizes who wrote it. The racism is not just in the negative stereotype, it is also in the positive one. Both are harmful in that they define what is expected of a person, that there are certain things they are supposed to know and do on the basis of their race, just as they define what a person is supposed not to be able to know and do. What neither the positive nor the negative stereotype allows is the person to define his or her self based on who he or she is. My experience of people's reaction to my race shows

People growing up in the United States share in the experiences the country has to offer.

how this works, even though they may express no obvious negative feelings.

As an Asian-American woman at a primarily white school, I often find myself occupying a strange and strained position. So far I have not encountered obvious kinds of negative racism directed towards me personally; no one has called me a "chink" or a "jap" or a "gook." In fact, more often than not, the people I meet are curious about my cultural heritage. They will ask me what my name means when I first meet them, and then they will ask me if I speak Chinese. Perhaps then they might even compliment me on my straight, long black hair.

All of this attention is supposed to be good, isn't it? Then why am I so often left with a bad taste in my mouth, as though accepting these compliments and responding to these enquiries is something my stomach can't quite handle? When other students ask me if I speak Chinese (after they have established to their satisfaction that that is what I am) I often wonder, and sometimes ask, if they speak the language of their parents and grandparents who immigrated to this nation? When I ask it, this question usually comes as a surprise, as though no one has ever suggested before that they might speak anything but English or be anything but "Americans."

But I'm an "American" too. As a young girl, I watched the same T.V. shows, listened to the same music, went through the same school system, and read the same books and magazines as everybody else in my generation. Even though my mother is a first generation immigrant from Hong Kong, she never really spoke to me in Chinese — perhaps because she was always trying to perfect her English. My stepfather, a fourth generation Chinese American, had to go to school to pick up the stilted Cantonese he uses when discussing money matters. So I wonder, when white students look at me, why is it they imagine I don't really speak the same language as they do? Why is it they imagine I have some secret knowledge of authentic Chinese culture, when I have been only a visitor to Chinatown and have never even seen China?

The difference between what I know and what they know is not as large as they imagine, but how can I convince them of this when even my teachers will ask me to share my secret knowledge in the classroom? When we

read Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* in an English class, my instructor turned to me and asked if the book really described "the way it really was" to be Chinese. I had no idea how to answer. My mother had never talked to me of ghosts, and I had never felt unvalued or unappreciated as a female child in our home. I really didn't know enough about "the way it really was" to answer the question. Though I know that this instructor wasn't trying to be overtly prejudiced, he did put me on the spot unfairly because he made unwarranted assumptions about me based on my name and the color of my skin. Ultimately, isn't that what "racism" really is? Isn't that what James Comer experienced?

Though I have never been overtly insulted or dismissed or marked down on the basis of race as James Comer has, I have had many experiences of a more subtle kind of prejudice. Whenever a friend or a classmate assumes that I speak a different language or have a different background than they do, they are suggesting that I am not as "American" as they are. Whenever a teacher acts as though I am the resident expert on an Asian subject, I feel like I don't quite belong to the class as much as other students do. They assume who I am rather than letting me tell them. Though I know that, for the most part, these are liberal, open-minded individuals who do not consider themselves racist or prejudiced in the slightest degree, their occasional inability to look beyond my foreign-sounding name and my darker-than-average skin shows that even our most tolerant citizens have a long way to go in recognizing that racism is still a pervasive problem in our society.

Thinking About Student Writing

1. What is the issue that Ai-Lin Young finds in James Comer's description? How does this issue relate to her life?
2. In what way do others treat the author as Chinese? What do they assume she knows and has experienced? To what aspects of her are they responding in making these assumptions?
3. Why does Ai-Lin Young consider herself an American? On what aspects of herself is that identification made? How is her knowledge and experience similar to that of her classmates? To what extent do her teachers and classmates recognize that similarity? What is the effect of their assumptions about her experience?

4. How does the author define racism? In what way does that definition fit her experience? What has been the effect of that racism? Do you agree with her definition of racism and her characterization of the meaning of her experience?
5. In what sentences does the author focus on the concept of racism? In what sentences does she focus on her experience? In what sentences are the two brought together? How is the linkage made in those sentences?
6. In what way has Ai-Lin Young's experience helped you understand some aspects of racism more clearly?
7. If you were the author, how might you have felt about writing this essay about yourself and then having your classmates read it?

Assignments

ESSAYS OF PERSONAL ILLUSTRATION

1. Using the quotation from James Comer or one of the other quotations on pages 169 to 172, write a 500-word essay using your own experience to illustrate a concept presented in the quotation you choose.
2. Identify a personal experience that illustrates the concepts presented in one of the following passages. Write an essay of personal illustration of 500 to 800 words about your experience in relation to those concepts.

A. Falling in Love

Of all the misconceptions about love the most powerful and pervasive is the belief that "falling in love" is love or at least one of the manifestations of love. It is a potent misconception because falling in love is subjectively experienced in a very powerful fashion as an experience of love. When a person falls in love what he or she certainly feels is "I love him" or "I love her." But two problems are immediately apparent. The first is that the experience of falling in love is specifically a sex-linked erotic experience. We do not fall in love with our children even though we may love them very deeply. We do not fall in love with our friends of the same sex — unless we are homosexually oriented — even though we may care for them greatly. We fall in love only when we are consciously or unconsciously sexually motivated. The second problem is that the experience of falling in love is invariably temporary. No matter whom we fall in love

with, we sooner or later fall out of love if the relationship continues long enough. This is not to say that we invariably cease loving the person with whom we fell in love. But it is to say that the feeling of ecstatic lovingness that characterizes the experiences of falling in love always passes. The honeymoon always ends. The bloom of romance always fades.

From M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Touchstone, 1978), pp. 84–85.

B. Social Identity

The socialized part of the self is commonly called *identity.* Every society may be viewed as holding a repertoire of identities — little boy, little girl, father, mother, policeman, professor, thief, archbishop, general, and so forth. By a kind of invisible lottery, these identities are assigned to different individuals. Some of them are assigned from birth, such as little boy or little girl. Others are assigned later in life, such as clever little boy or pretty little girl (or, conversely, stupid little boy or ugly little girl). Other identities are put up, as it were, for subscription, and individuals may obtain them by deliberate effort, such as policeman or archbishop. But whether an identity is assigned or achieved, in each case it is appropriated by the individual through a process of interaction with others. Only if an identity is confirmed by others is it possible for that identity to be real to the individual holding it. In other words, identity is the product of an interplay of identification and self-identification.

From Peter L. Berger and Brigitte Berger, *Sociology, A Biographical Approach* (New York: Basic Books, 1972) 66.

C. Opportunity Costs

A choice is simply a comparison of alternatives: to attend college or not to attend college, to change jobs or not to change jobs, to purchase a new car or to keep the old one. An individual compares the benefits that one option is expected to bring and selects the one with the greatest *anticipated* benefits. Of course, when one option is chosen, the benefits of the alternatives are foregone. You choose not to attend college and you forego the benefits of attending college; you buy a new car and forego the benefits of having the money to use in other ways. *Economists refer to the foregone opportunities or foregone benefits of the next best alternative as* **opportunity costs** — the highest-value alternative that must be foregone when a choice is made.

From William Boyes and Michael Melvin, *Economics,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994) 33–34.

D. A Legal Definition of Nuisance

A nuisance exists when an owner's use of his or her property unreasonably infringes on other persons' use and enjoyment of their property rights. Nuisances are classified as public, private, or both. A public nuisance exists when a given use of land poses a generalized threat to the public. It is redressed by criminal prosecution and injunctive relief. Examples of public nuisances include houses of prostitution, actions affecting the public health (such as water and air pollution), crack houses, and dance halls. A private nuisance is a tort [that is, a private injury or wrong] that requires proof of an injury that is distinct from that suffered by the general public. (It differs from trespass because the offensive activity does not occur on the victim's property.) A party injured by a private nuisance can obtain both damages and injunctive relief.

From Harold Grilliot and Frank Schubert, *Introduction to Law and the Legal System*, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) 385–87.

From Illustration to Discussion

Once you bring your own experience into class, it is available to think about in the context of your courses. The instructor will ask you to think in new ways about events and experiences. In the past you probably used common sense to think about experience, but now you are being asked to think in ways that relate to disciplines. These specialized ways of thinking enable you to see events in ways that extend beyond everyday approaches. You may find that common-sense thinking serves some important purposes, and disciplinary thinking serves others.

Comparing Everyday and Disciplinary Thinking

As we take part in daily events and observe the behavior of others, we make sense of what we see through various commonsense methods — attributing motives to people, recognizing typical causes for events, believing certain actions will have certain consequences. Those same events, whether they are political, economic, interpersonal, or international, are also the subject of various fields or disciplines. However, these specialized disciplines have developed special ways of seeing these same events. They highlight certain facts, consider some issues worth doing research on, and use special concepts and theories to organize their perceptions and facts. Thus a disciplinary account of an event may be very different from a common-sense one.

Consider the explanations people give for their actions. For example, we are having lunch with a friend. If the friend tells us that he went to Boston

last weekend and explains that he wanted to visit a high school friend now at a different college, we might take the reason at face value and ask how the friend was and whether they had a good time. If we think that reason is not the full story, we may ask probing questions to get at the real reason — such as a need to escape the pressures of the college or a budding romance with someone in Boston. But these reasons still assume self-conscious intentions, desires, and motivations.

On the other hand, social scientists may approach the reasons from other perspectives. One might look at what is called "accounting behavior" and therefore consider what kind of account the person was creating for his actions and what the situation was that established the need to create an account. That is, what kind of story was the friend telling, and why was he telling it at that moment? Perhaps he was simply being polite in response to a question, or perhaps he gave a simple, easily accepted standard story because he wanted to maintain the appearance among his friends of being a conventional young man who did things for ordinary reasons.

Another social scientist might look at how lunchroom conversations are part of a process of building friendships. Still another, interested in how people take turns in conversations, might examine when people interrupt each other. And yet another researcher, interested in power, would look at who has the final word. Each of these approaches offers new insights into the situation, and each is worth considering.

In college courses teachers are interested in teaching certain specialized approaches to events. They may ask you not only to describe events in specialized ways (as in the previous assignment) but to compare how the events look from the specialized perspective and from the everyday common-sense perspective.

This is not to say that disciplinary perspectives are necessarily opposed to common sense — as though common sense were deluded and specialized knowledge could see clearly. Sometimes it may be like this, as when we discover a poem has a powerful effect not because of its disturbing subject but because of its disrupted rhythms and its clashing images. But at other times disciplines can build a more elaborate and precise view on the basis of a familiar common-sense point of view, as when the idea that people will vote for their own interests becomes the basis for complex quantitative studies of voting patterns. The connection between disciplinary knowledge and common sense may also run the other way, as disciplinary concepts enter into everyday thinking; for example, much of our everyday thinking about people is now filled with such professional psychological concepts as anxiety, repressed thoughts, or phobias. You may find that as you become convinced of the value of the disciplinary perspectives you are studying, you may incorporate some of those perspectives in your everyday approach to life. On the other hand, sometimes you may have very good reasons to hold two different kinds of views — a commonsense way of relating to friends and a more disciplined way of understanding what role the relationships play in your life.

It is not always easy to see an event in two separate ways. If you have already been involved in the course, your point of view probably already incorporates some disciplinary perspectives, so you already are seeing through special lenses. In that case, to recover a commonsense point of view, you go

backwards to recall how you viewed events before studying this subject. As you recall your earlier understanding, you may also become aware of how different it is from your newer view.

Developing a Comparison of Everyday and Disciplinary Thinking

The following suggestions can help you develop an essay comparing everyday and disciplinary perspectives on an event.

- *Identify a relevant event.* Identify an event that is relevant to the course and concepts but about which you and others have a fairly developed commonsense view.
- *Develop a neutral account of the event.* Having identified such an event, you need to get some view of it independent of the disciplinary considerations presented in the course. Unlike in the previous assignment, here you begin by keeping some distance from both commonsense and disciplinary thinking. You describe the event in as neutral and concrete terms as possible, without explanations, causes and effects, motivations, evaluations, or other comments. In discussing actions, you do not attribute reasons or feelings to those people you are describing or take any pattern or general category for granted. You simply report what people said and did — that is, what happened.
- *Recover commonsense explanations.* Once the facts are down, you then recover what commonsense explanations people might give them. People give explanations for various reasons: so they know how to act in the situation, or so they can explain the events, categorize them for memory, and not be puzzled or troubled by them anymore. One way to recover the commonsense point of view is simply to recall your state of mind when you saw the event as it happened, especially if it was important and your feelings and perceptions stayed with you. Even better would be an instance where you retold the story a number of times, such as an often-repeated family story about your childhood or the reactions of your high-school class to a shocking incident. In this way you can recover how you and others characterized the events. A written document presenting your views at the time, such as a letter, would be especially helpful.

  You may also remember what other people said at the time or the explanations they gave after the event. Another approach is to speak with someone who has observed or participated in the event but has not studied the subject for which you are writing the paper. Finally, you may take some published but nonprofessional account, as in a local newspaper, to represent a commonsense view.
- *Develop a disciplinary perspective on the events.* As in the previous assignment of illustrative description, identify those concepts you have studied that are most relevant to the event. Then describe each detail in relation to those concepts. If disciplinary terms suggest further details,

try to recall them, or at least point out their absence from commonsense memory or standard news reports. Think about what additional information you would have gathered had you been a discipline-trained researcher present at the event. You may gather your thoughts and descriptions together in a sketch, outline, or informal series of freewritten paragraphs.

- *Compare the disciplinary and commonsense views.* As you start to develop the two accounts, set them side by side in some chart or matrix so you can see what kinds of details and patterns the disciplinary account clarifies versus what kinds of details and patterns common sense points to. As you start to draw conclusions, write a few sentences that encapsulate the difference between the two perspectives. When your thoughts and notes are developed, you are ready to draft the paper.

Writing an Essay Comparing Everyday and Disciplinary Thinking

In this paper, the final form can reflect to some extent the organization of the work that brought you to your conclusions. The paper can begin with a neutral, concrete account of the events or phenomena to be discussed, and then a statement indicating that you are comparing two ways of looking at these events.

The next section can elaborate on how participants, or you in your commonsense mode, saw the events, and perhaps how that perception was related to how you and others acted. Then you might explain the disciplinary perspective that relates to the event. You might even recount the event as seen from that perspective.

Having established the two points of view, you can then discuss what the disciplinary perspective highlights or explains in contrast to the commonsense view, and vice versa. Your aim is to show what is gained and lost from either view. You may also wish to discuss how the two perspectives make visible different aspects of the event, based on the different goals of participants and disciplinary researchers. The conclusion can talk about the nature or value of either view or of both.

Another approach is to narrate how your understanding of the event changed as you moved from a commonsense perspective to a disciplinary one, and then evaluate the implications of that change. That is the strategy taken in the following sample essay.

REVIEWING WRITING PROCESSES

Editing

Even after several drafts of a paper have been written, editing is still important. In editing, try to step back from the paper and read it as someone encountering it for the first time. After spending a long

time struggling with ideas, it is easy to assume that the reader shares your knowledge of the topic. But things that seem obvious to you may not make sense at all to the reader. Often you need to add clear transitions between major ideas and define unfamiliar terms and concepts so that the reader will not be lost.

Editing is also done to improve style — including word choice and sentence construction (see the discussion of sentence combining on pages 130–135). The following guidelines help in making appropriate stylistic decisions. They are suggestions only; final decisions should be based on what is appropriate for the assignment.

- **Look for ways to replace passive-voice constructions with active-voice ones.**

  Unedited: It is believed currently that the Bering Strait *was crossed* by people from the Asian continent who became the first inhabitants of America.
  Edited: Anthropologists currently *believe* that people from the Asian continent *crossed* the Bering Strait and *became* the first inhabitants of America.

- **Avoid slang, jargon, or unnecessarily big words.**

  Unedited: The laudatory reception of the novel in the journalistic media that appealed to the working-class audiences impressively demonstrated the pseudo-Romantic revolutionary impulses of a trammeled industrial proletariat.
  Edited: The favorable reviews of the novel in the popular newspapers showed that many English workers were frustrated with the conditions in their own country.

- **Express ideas concisely; never use five words where two will do.**

  Unedited: It is a well-respected, commonly held belief that violent actions seen on TV can precipitate imitations of that violence among those who constitute the TV audience.
  Edited: Many people believe that violence on television causes people to behave violently.

- **Vary your sentence length; combine strings of short sentences into longer ones.**

  Unedited: In A.D. 350, Rome extended into parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The Romans provided a stable political environment for many people.
  Edited: In A.D. 350, Rome provided a stable political environment for people in parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa.

- **Avoid multiple prepositional phrases.**

  Unedited: A crucial part *of* psychology is the study *of* the tendencies *in* human beings *for* kinds *of* inclinations that lead to antisocial behavior.
  Edited: Psychology studies human tendencies to engage in antisocial behavior.

- **Express parallel ideas with parallel grammatical constructions.**

  Unedited: Some sociologists prefer a functionalist view of society, whereas a conflict perspective is advocated by others.
  Edited: Some sociologists prefer a functionalist view of society, whereas others prefer a conflict perspective.

- **Limit the use of "there is" and "there are."**

  Unedited: There are a number of problems with Marx's view of worker revolution.
  Edited: Marx's view of worker revolution has many problems.

- **Use strong verbs instead of nouns formed from verbs.**

  Unedited: Electrification led to the *transformation* of domestic *lighting* to electricity and the *abandonment* of gas as a light source, leaving gas *utilization* for heating.
  Edited: When people *started to light* their homes with electricity, they *began to use* gas more for heating.

Sample Student Essay

In the following essay Jenn Rosario discusses how the rhetorical way of thinking about writing she gained from the opening chapters of this book helped clear up confusions she had about writing. Those confusions came from a common everyday idea that there is a one best way to write. Rhetoric gave her a way to make sense of the many different things people had told her about the "best" way to write.

High School English Teachers and "the Right Way" to Write
Jenn Rosario

In school over the years, I have written essays in a fair number of classes and have usually gotten good grades. I am not saying I have written as much as I ideally should have or am an ideal writer, but I seem to have satisfied my teachers. But in satisfying the teachers' demands I have gotten confused as to what they want. Each asks for something different and criticizes different things. They each acted as though they each knew exactly what good writing was, but the problem was that they didn't agree. Good writing was a different thing for each of them. To deal with the different demands of each class, I developed a common-

sense rule: "Don't try to make sense of it. Just find out what they want and give it to them."

I am not alone in thinking this was good common sense. Every time we had an assignment due, my friends would make jokes about what this or that teacher wanted, and we would trade tips about how to do well. There was even a folklore that got passed down from one class to the next about what you needed to do to make each teacher happy. Our collective common sense was that writing made no sense. We might like writing something, we might feel we had learned something by the writing, but we should never get too secure that we knew how to write. Inevitably, the next teacher we had would tell us that we got it all wrong.

Let me tell you some examples. When I was a junior in high school, my English teacher, Mrs. Spaulding, opened my eyes to a new way of writing. She taught me to explore my thoughts and feelings and use writing as a tool to understand myself in a new and interesting way. She encouraged a very personal writing style and taught me that my own experiences really were worth writing about. We wrote personal journals, and when we wrote about literature we put ourselves in the characters' positions to feel what they must have felt. I did well on all of the papers, got an A in the class, and left that year so confident of my writing ability that I couldn't wait to take senior English the next year.

However, my senior English teacher, Mr. Dauite, immediately stifled my enthusiasm. Our first assignment was to analyze the pressures that led a character in a novel to act as she did. I wrote that paper the way Mrs. Spaulding had taught me, but I did everything the wrong way. He criticized my use of personal experiences as "irrelevant and subjective." He told me that my narrative style was "rambling and loosely organized" and that I "needed to come to a point quickly and defend that point throughout the entire paper." At the end of the paper, he wrote a big, fat "C–." After a couple of papers, though, I did find out what he was asking for and I got back to getting my A's. And I learned something about how to analyze ideas without putting myself in the middle of it. But if someone asked me what good writing was, I could only tell them I was confused.

In fact I went through the term with two opposite ideas running through my head:

1. Mrs. Spaulding had taught me the wrong way to write and that, even though she made me feel good about myself, she had done me a disservice by failing to teach me the correct principles;

2. Mr. Dauite was old-fashioned and unreasonable and wasn't aware of the modern writing techniques that Mrs. Spaulding knew.

Since I couldn't decide between these two ideas, I just decided, along with my friends, that writing made no sense.

The problem was that all of us, Mrs. Spaulding, Mr. Dauite, my friends, and myself all were going on the assumption that there is one "correct" way to write and that the duty of good writing teachers is to teach that method — and nothing else — to their students. I wasn't quite sure which of my teachers had been derelict, but, working from this assumption, I was sure that one of them had to be guilty of teaching flawed material to unsuspecting students.

Since I have learned how to adopt a rhetorical perspective on writing, however, I have a new view of what went on, a way that makes sense out of what went on in the different classes. No one was at fault; no one did anything wrong. In each of the classes the teachers taught me and my friends important things about writing, and we improved our writing abilities. Our only mistake was to look for a single "right way" to write. Rhetoric teaches that there are many ways to write, depending on where you are and what you are doing. Chapter One of the textbook for this course sums up the rhetorical point of view:

> Successful communication varies from person to person and situation to situation. There is no simple, single "good rhetoric," no one way to write. You must always think about the specifics of the situation; what you want to accomplish, with whom, and through what available means. (6)

From this perspective, Mrs. Spaulding and Mr. Dauite were two different audiences with two different sets of rhetorical expectations. Mrs. Spaulding's purpose in the class was to teach writing as a method of self-exploration and discovery. She told us on a number of

occasions that we could use writing to communicate with ourselves and make sense out of our own experiences. Mr. Dauite, on the other hand, believed that the primary purpose of writing was to construct well-reasoned arguments that communicated our ideas effectively to others. He continually stressed the importance of good communication and effective presentation of one's position.

Each teacher taught me something valuable. Both types of writing they taught have their place, and both have contributed to my development as a writer. But an even more important lesson is the one that I learned by putting the two experiences together: that there is no "correct" way to write a paper. Since there is no one way to write a paper, my responsibility, as a student, is to evaluate each rhetorical situation I approach and determine what kind of writing fits the activities going on. The way of writing I choose is just part of taking part in the kind of learning that the classroom offers, and there are many kinds of learning. I have already begun to notice that teachers often give hints about what they want, and even though these hints may not be too specific and may change from teacher to teacher, they do give me a good place to start thinking about what kind of writing is called for in each case. But even more than those little hints, I am noticing that teachers usually make it very clear what kinds of things they want students to learn and what they will be evaluating the students on. What I have to do is think about what kind of writing best shows the kind of learning the teachers are looking for.

Of course, I would still like it much better if there actually were set guidelines that I could simply follow all the time. Life would be simpler. But since life is complicated, and learning is complicated, and school is complicated, it really helps to know that I should stop looking for that one way to write "correct" papers and start looking for what works in each situation. That is my new common sense.

Work Cited

Bazerman, Charles. Involved: Writing for College, Writing for Your Self. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997.

Thinking About Student Writing

1. What was Jenn Rosario's common-sense view of writing? What experiences seemed to confirm it? How did that common-sense view lead her to react to assignments in different classes? To what extent was that view useful? In what way did it have less fortunate consequences?
2. How does the author present her experiences to show clearly that a common-sense explanation was not adequate?
3. What is her new view? How does this new view lead her to reevaluate her previous experiences? What aspect of her previous view does she call a mistake? What aspects of her previous experience and views does she still find useful? What kind of guidance does her new view give her in facing new writing assignments and situations? In what way has her new view become a new kind of common sense?
4. Where does Jenn Rosario first present her new view? How does she elaborate on that view and show its value? How does the presentation of the new view allow her to re-present her experience from a new perspective?
5. How does Jenn Rosario's use of her personal experience help her develop and present her ideas clearly and forcefully?
6. If you were the author, how might you have felt about writing this essay about yourself and then allowing your classmates to read it?

Assignments

COMPARING EVERYDAY AND DISCIPLINARY THINKING

1. Choose one concept that you have learned from this book or this course that has given you a new way to think about some aspect of writing. Write a paper about your own experience in writing, comparing your new way of thinking about that writing with your previous way.
2. Identify one powerful concept or topic you have learned in one of your courses this year that has changed the way you look at something. Write an essay of 800 to 1,000 words comparing how you see events using this disciplinary approach with how you used to think of the events using everyday common sense.
3. Using one of the selections from question 2 on pages 179–181, write an essay of 500 words comparing how the concept presented in the

selection differs from more everyday ways of looking at the subject. Use your own experience to illustrate the different ways of looking at events.

4. Select a controversial political or social issue in your community. Write an essay of 800 to 1,000 words describing how certain concepts or ways of thinking used in one of your college courses might help people resolve their differences, understand their difficulties, or come to a reasonable solution.

Getting Involved Electronically

Locate on the World Wide Web personal home pages set up by individuals, and pick one that interests you. Examine both how the person represents himself or herself and his or her interests and what kind of links are made to other Web resources. Pay particular attention to links people might make to academic or other professional information on the Web: that is, to what extent people tie their personal statements to knowledge and issues explored in a serious academic or professional way. Write up your impressions of how one individual represents himself or herself on the Web.