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CHAPTER 1

Getting Started: From Personal Response to Field Stance

Overview

The basic premise of this chapter (and the book as a whole) is that writing is *rhetorical*: that we communicate best when we write (1) with a clear purpose, (2) with knowledge of how to go about achieving that purpose, (3) for a specific audience, and (4) in context. This chapter introduces the four contexts for learning that we'll explore together—the *social*, *institutional*, *textual*, and *field* stances. We'll also look at how understanding those stances will help your critical writing. To help put a human face on our subject, you'll find an interview with a literary scholar, Professor Harold Kolb, Jr., on his life as a literature student, critic, and teacher. The chapter concludes with some practical advice on how to write your first critical paper.

We begin with a review of some key rhetorical concerns.

Writing Is Rhetorical

Rhetoric was first developed in ancient Greece as the art of using language effectively in specific situations. The Greeks found that to communicate effectively we need to define our purpose, know our audience, explore our subject fully (keeping our purpose and audience in mind), and arrange our exploration of the subject in a manner that will affect the reader's attitudes and actions.

The better you understand your purpose, the better your writing will be. This means more than producing a list of facts in response to an assigned task (e.g., "Write an analysis of death imagery in 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky'") or asking the teacher what he or she wants. To communicate effectively, you need to write your *self* into the essay: you need to clarify your own purpose. Ask yourself whether you want your essay to:

- express your feelings on a particular subject
- explain the significance of a particular subject
- survey what has already been said on the subject

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- persuade your reader to agree with your interpretation or point of view
- change your reader's attitude or correct a general misunderstanding

Documenting Your Personal Response

When writing an essay on literature, you should begin by comparing the work with your own experience. For example, how do you connect personally with a particular story? What does the story mean to you? Think about the ways your *personal experiences* or *beliefs* affect your understanding of the story.

For example, when reading Stephen Crane's "The Bride," you might consider the general awkwardness of the newly married couple. What are your attitudes toward love, romance, and marriage? How do those attitudes compare with the representation of love, romance, and marriage in the story? Have you ever felt out of place in a new social setting? Can you identify with the discomfort felt by any of the major characters? What do you think of the other passengers' responses to the couple?

You could also focus on your knowledge of the Old West. What do you know about the characters and history of this period? How did you learn about the Old West? From books, film, TV? Does this period hold any attraction for you? Does Crane's representation of the Old West match your understanding of this period? Does he tell the kind of story you'd expect to read about the Old West?

The questions you ask yourself will depend on your interests and personal background. The important thing is to find some *personal connection* with the story. One of the best ways to document your personal responses is to keep a *response journal* detailing what and how you read. Unlike a diary, a response journal is a place where you can gather your thoughts and reflections, where you can decide on your purpose. Jot down the sort of questions or observations you might normally write into your class notes or in the margins of the text. Keep the journal entries informal, even fragmentary. Use it as a place to sort out your feelings and intentions regarding what you have read. Some of the questions posed in this chapter should offer you a good place to start. If you write in and reread your journal regularly, you'll likely find many strong topics waiting to be developed.

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How to Use Your Personal Response

Once you have documented your responses, turn again to the text and look for places (words, descriptions, scenes, attitudes) that seem to contradict or challenge your expectations and values. Trust your intuition here. *Literature is inherently unsettling*: it often encourages us to see the world and ourselves from a new or different perspective. The process of identifying when and where a story unsettles us is a good first step toward writing the essay.

Can you see any pattern to the way the text challenges your expectations? For example, in "The Bride," at the end of the first paragraph, the word "precipice" strikes many readers as a funny way to talk about landscape passing by a train window. If you have ever ridden on a train, you have probably experienced the kind of optical illusion that the narrator describes, where it looks as if the ground is moving and the train is standing still. But how many of us would describe the horizon as a "precipice"? The word disrupts our expectations. It suggests something treacherous, even deadly.

As we proceed through the story, we begin to see other death-related references, some obvious and some very subtle: we are told that the sheriff's marriage "weigh[s] upon him like a leaden slab"; that he speaks "in a mournful cadence, as one announcing death"; that there's a "chapel-like gloom" over the Weary Gentleman saloon; that an "arch of a tomb" seems to form over the outlaw, Scratchy Wilson; that, when he meets Scratchy in the street, the sheriff's "mouth [seems] to be merely a grave for his tongue." "What," we might well ask, "has all this death imagery got to do with marriage and the Old West?" A question like this can form a strong basis for a critical essay.

Other features of the text disturb some readers. The references to clothes seem, to some, excessive, or at least curious. The couple's fascination with time seems a little incongruous. The many nautical references seem, at first glance, out of place in a cowboy story. The description of the bride as a "drooping, drowning woman" needs explaining—as does her reaction to the gunfight scene, where she is described as "a slave to hideous rites gazing at the apparitional snake." There are many, many more possible *entry points* into the story. They all begin with some negotiation between your personal experience and the representation of experience in the text.

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Box 1.1: Field Notes from Critical Theory and Psycholinguistics: "How We Read"

In 1968, critic and theorist Louise Rosenblatt published an important reminder that reading is "A Way of Happening." According to Rosenblatt, literature "makes nothing happen"; literature, she explains, "is not a tool, an instrument for accomplishing some end or purpose or task beyond itself." The reader makes literature "happen by calling it forth from the text": for Rosenblatt (and many other readers), literature must be *experienced*, not just decoded:

> We are directly involved; we are active participants in the "Happening." We are aware of what the symbols [in the text] call forth in us. They point to sensations, objects, images, ideas. These we must pattern out of the material that we bring to the work from our past knowledge of life and language. (340–41)

Rosenblatt's notion of reading as "a happening," a process of "patterning out" meaning, corresponds with contemporary psycholinguistic models of how we read.

Old "bottom-up" models suggested that we find meaning *in the text* by decoding letter by letter, word by word. Today, reading is understood as a "top-down" or "interactive" process. Experienced readers, we've learned, do not sound out each letter of a word like C-A-T. Similarly, when we read a phrase like "Once upon __ _____," we have little difficulty filling in the blanks. Reading thus proceeds by installments of *predictions* against which are tested the actualities of the text.

Kenneth Goodman calls reading a "psycholinguistic guessing game," where readers test hypotheses by guessing what comes next in the text. Reading may be seen as a matter of getting your questions answered, and advanced modes of reading (like literary criticism) are largely a matter of knowing the right questions to ask of the text.

Sources: Louise Rosenblatt. "A Way of Happening" *Educational Record*. Washington: American Council on Education, 1968): 339–46. Print; Kenneth Goodman. "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," *Journal of the Reading Specialist* 6.4 (1967): 126–35. Print.

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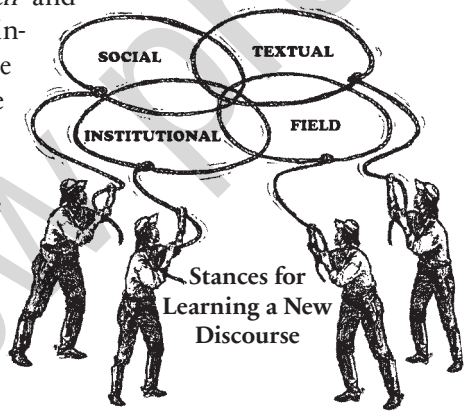
Becoming a Literacy Researcher

Entering the critical conversation means engaging in some preliminary research. To understand the rhetoric of writing literary criticism, you'll need to take on the role of a detective—or, better yet, a "literacy researcher"—searching out the clues to good writing.

Here we move from documenting your personal response to finding the best means of expressing that response. We move from purpose to *audience* and *context*. This move requires you to investigate how the critical community communicates: its purposes, its forms, its places of publication, its values, etc. The work of rhetoric and composition specialists Richard Beach and Susan Hynds is helpful here. They maintain that there are four stances to be taken when developing new discourse practices:



- the "social," where someone like you, new to a discipline, negotiates ideas in collaboration with others
- the "institutional," where you learn to adopt the roles and language norms of academe
- the "textual," where you focus on text features and conventions
- the "field," where you engage and exchange ideas as someone knowledgeable about the conventions of a particular academic discipline

The objective here is to look at the task of writing critical essays from as many angles as possible. Literature and composition professor Russell Hunt says that learning to write essays means learning to "invent the genre" for yourself (227). If you are going to become a critic, you need to find out how things are done. But you need to find out for yourself. You are unlikely to learn by simply following someone else's directions. Like painting by numbers, following a prescribed format produces only marginal results—and it does not guarantee that you can do it all (write or paint) yourself. Learning to write for any field means involving yourself in that field; it means becoming so familiar with the field's ways of thinking and writing

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that you begin to (1) use its conventions—its word choice, phrasing, metaphors, formats, etc.—with facility, and then, (2) "invent" a form of critical response that best expresses your interests, experiences, and purposes.

To some extent we all learn through trial and error, but it's probably best to learn with our eyes wide open. Social and institutional learning, where we are immersed in the experience, can sometimes make us feel that in "gaining access" to new discourse conventions and attitudes we must give up old ways of speaking, thinking, and writing. This is normal. College programs are designed to make you evaluate (and re-evaluate) your preconceptions. That does not mean that you need to accept every new idea that comes along; it does mean that learning requires a somewhat open mind. When reading a short story, for example, if an idea or a new way of expressing an idea disturbs your usual way of thinking, you should try not to reject it without analysis. Instead, take note of the differences and then pursue an *informed stance*. Learn the conventions so you can use them for your own purposes.

New Contexts for Reading and Writing

The Social Stance

The social stance involves learning from and with others. The social stance is oral, aural, and gestured: you learn by speaking and listening and observing.

During class discussion, what words, ideas, or phrases are repeated by the instructor?

- What questions are asked? Which seem important?
- Do you notice any specialized vocabulary, any metaphors or unusual turns of phrase?
- Which interpretations seem the most convincing? Why?
- What evidence is used to support positions taken?
- When you receive feedback on your essays, which areas receive the most attention?
- When you compare notes with other students, do you notice any pattern of response in the instructor's comments?

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The Institutional Stance

Understanding the institutional stance means gaining insight into the institution's premises, rituals, conventions, and goals. Note: these are complex questions, but ones your instructor can help you understand and answer.

- How would you characterize the kind of language used in your college or university?
- How does the college or university organize knowledge?
- What is the college or university's purpose? Can you discover if that purpose has changed over the years?
- What is your relationship to the college or university? What is your family's relationship to the college or university? Are you, for example, the first member of your family to go to university?
- What are the formal expectations for written work?
- What does it mean to construct and conserve knowledge?
- How does the university divide itself into separate faculties and disciplines?
- What constitutes evidence in the different disciplines?
- Why would different academic disciplines develop different ways of communicating?
- How do different disciplines define "literacy" in their fields?
- What do most disciplines have in common?
- How would you characterize the general attitude or tone expressed by academic writing?
- How do academics use writing to communicate with one another? With students? With the general public?

The Textual Stance

The textual stance focuses on professional genres, on forms of writing studied. In English, the textual focus is especially important: to support or prove an interpretation, critics turn first to the text. Critics tend to use direct quotation rather than paraphrase. When writing about a short story, critics will discuss specific textual features such as setting, imagery, point of view—the so-called "formal elements of prose fiction."

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THE ESSAY FORM

- How is the critical essay organized?
- What is the logic of this organization?
- What is its tone? Its purpose?
- How would you characterize the audience for such an essay?
- What is the relationship between student essays and professional essays written in the field?
- What special vocabulary do literary critics use?
- How do critics use quotations as evidence?
- What are the elements of an effective introduction? An effective conclusion?
- How is the evidence documented?

LITERARY FORMS

- What is form or genre? How would you define the form of a short story? A novel? A poem? A play? An essay?
- How many different forms of prose fiction can you identify?
- What parts make up each form?
- How are the parts connected?
- What is meant by pattern in literature?
- What is the form's relationship to its audience? To its historical context?
- How and/or why did such a form develop?

Box 1.2: Field Notes from Composition Studies: The Five-Paragraph Theme

At some point most students have come in contact with the five-paragraph theme: an introduction, with the thesis sentence placed at the end of the first paragraph; the body of three paragraphs, each dealing with a different aspect of the thesis; a conclusion, where you summarize your main points.

This five-paragraph structure remains a staple form of high-school English writing, but it has little currency in college. Why?

First of all, we should note that this kind of "format" does some things very well: it helps organize your thoughts; it provides a predictable structure for both writer and reader; it echoes the basic logic of most academic writing (introduce a position and support that position with evidence); and it is highly efficient—an aid to quick writing.

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The downside of the form is that it tends to treat all topics as if they can be slotted into a preconceived format: not all topics can—or should—be divided into three parts. In fact, college audiences prefer a narrower focus, one where you say "more about less." The five-paragraph form also leaves little room for either personal exploration or nuanced discussion.

The word "essay" comes from the French *essai*—a try. Writing is a process of discovery, an opportunity to try out new ideas. Each essay in college English should be an exploration, where your treatment of the subject, not the format, determines its organization.

Instead of learning a format, let your purpose, your subject, your audience, and your developing awareness of field concerns guide the form of your essay. The model essays in Chapter 4 of this book and the critical statements in Chapter 6 offer you some alternative models worth considering.

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The Field Stance

Learning the field stance means learning how to *think critically about literature*; it means becoming aware of the models, metaphors, values, and assumptions that inform critical practice. Your instructor can help you answer the following questions.

- Where do English departments come from?
- How is the field of English studies organized? What are its areas of study?
- Are all English programs the same?
- *How* do the demands of graduate school differ from what is required of you as an undergraduate?
- *How* would graduate school training affect the way English professors approach literature?
- *How* do critics define their roles socially, academically, and professionally?
- What differences are there in how English professors teach literature and how they write about literature?
- *What* professional associations represent the field? What are the mandate and purpose of these associations?
- How does English (in particular, literary criticism) define itself in relation to other academic disciplines?
- What specialized language and key metaphors do English instructors use? (Hint: see how often they talk of "meaning" in

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spatial terms: about reading "deeply," "closely"; about looking for meaning "in the text"; about "layers of meaning.")
- What values do members of the discipline share? How are those values embedded in the metaphors used?
- What constitutes evidence in English studies?
- What critical methods and approaches do critics use?
- What are the major issues in English studies?

Summary: Why It Is so Important to Become Aware of All Four Stances

It might be tempting to focus simply on the textual stance and let the others slide. In practice, however, some knowledge of each stance proves crucial to effective communication and academic success.

The more you know about your purpose, audience, and context, the better your writing will become. Those writing without knowledge of all four stances are likely to misunderstand either the nature of their task or the nature of the instructor's response. For example, the student who writes only an extended *plot summary* (showing that she understands the material by retelling the story) has misunderstood both task and audience. The institutional stance calls for independent thought and a contribution to existing knowledge on the subject. A plot summary does neither. The social stance calls for a collaborative sharing of views. A plot summary is not helpful there, either. The textual stance calls for some formal written analysis of textual features. The plot summary does little of this. And the field stance calls for a framing of the critical issue and the use of disciplinary language, assumptions, and approaches. The plot summary neither identifies an issue nor reflects normal disciplinary practice.

Think also of the student unsure of how much he or she should quote from the text (or incorporate ideas gleaned from class discussion). After all, if the instructor has already read the story (and likely knows it better than the student), what's the point of reminding her of what she already knows? This confusion involves an over-emphasis on the social stance. Remembering that your role is to contribute to the conversation in the field should help here: the textual and field stances require you to write not for a specific instructor, but for the field. If you write your essay for someone *like* your instructor—someone interested in your topic but who was *not privy* to the class discussion (so you may draw on that somewhat) and who read the story several weeks ago (and can bear certain reminders)—you will find yourself addressing an appropriate audience.

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Box 1.3: Field Notes from Linguistics: The Effect of Context on Reading

A change in context often affects the way we comprehend—or fail to comprehend. College presents us with new contexts for reading and writing. Not coming to terms with these new contexts prevents many students from succeeding. That's why knowing how you relate to all four stances is so important.

Consider the following experiment, which demonstrates how context affects comprehension. Most students find the following passage difficult to read and hard to remember after reading:

> The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups depending on their makeup. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step; otherwise you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo any particular endeavor. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many. In the short run this may not seem important, but complications from doing too many can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. The manipulation of the appropriate mechanisms should be self-explanatory, and we need not dwell on it here. At first the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another facet of life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future, but then one can never tell.

Did you find it difficult to understand? Now try again, but this time reading the passage "in context." The missing element is the title, "Washing Clothes." Try this passage out on some friends, first asking them to read it out of context, and then providing the title.

Source: John Bransford and Marcia Johnson, "Consideration of Some Problems of Comprehension," *Visual Information Processing*, ed. William G. Chase (New York: Academic Press, 1973), print.

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