

DENNIS KEEN

READING IN COMMUNITY

EXPLORING INDIVIDUAL, SOCIAL, AND GLOBAL ISSUES



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Preface

To the Student

We live in a country and time where reading is not central to our life. We face a seemingly endless list of distractions: television, malls, sports, video games, parties, and music. We also face a seemingly endless list of responsibilities: working, raising a family, and making ends meet. All these activities, for better or worse, keep us from reading.

In college, however, reading is central to your experience. Reading textbooks and essays will occupy a good portion of your study time. When you are not reading, studying and writing about what you have read will take more time and additional effort. Since reading is so important in college, and since much of what you will read in your courses will be complex and difficult, this textbook was created to give you some useful strategies to help you gain more from the hours you spend reading books.

There are three central themes to this textbook. First, the text introduces some essential strategies for college reading. These include:

- Understanding the reading process
- Finding the main idea
- Separating the general from the specific
- Summarizing texts
- Drawing inferences
- Reading textbooks
- Reading analytic prose
- Monitoring comprehension
- Reading critically

Second, the text offers you over fifty reading selections on various themes. Some of the selections are short and clear; some are long and dense. And some offer differing views on the same problem. All should touch your experience in some fashion. The themes you will read about include the following:

- The family and identity
- Community
- The homeless
- Work, diversity, and violence
- The environment, international connections, and international perspectives

As you will note, the themes begin with individual matters, move outward to larger social issues, and end with global concerns.

Finally, the text offers you some clear guidelines on how to work with others in collaborative reading. We learn more from people than we do from things. Your understanding of what you have read alone will be enhanced and challenged as you read together with others. On the job, and increasingly in college, you will be asked to work in groups. Creating goals, understanding group culture, making collective decisions, supporting and challenging opinions, seeking consensus, and evaluating group efforts lie at the heart of collaborative reading, as well as being central to many occupations and careers.

This textbook, then, is designed to help you read better alone as you apply the reading strategies to complex texts; furthermore, the text is designed to help you read better together as you experience the rewards and frustrations of collaborative reading. Ultimately, this book will *help* you become a better reader; however, these pages alone will not *make* you a better reader. That goal—better reading—falls squarely upon you and the decisions you make every day as you struggle alone with texts and as you bring your ideas to the collaborative reading group.

Good luck. Read alone, thoughtfully and actively; and read together, civilly and vigorously.

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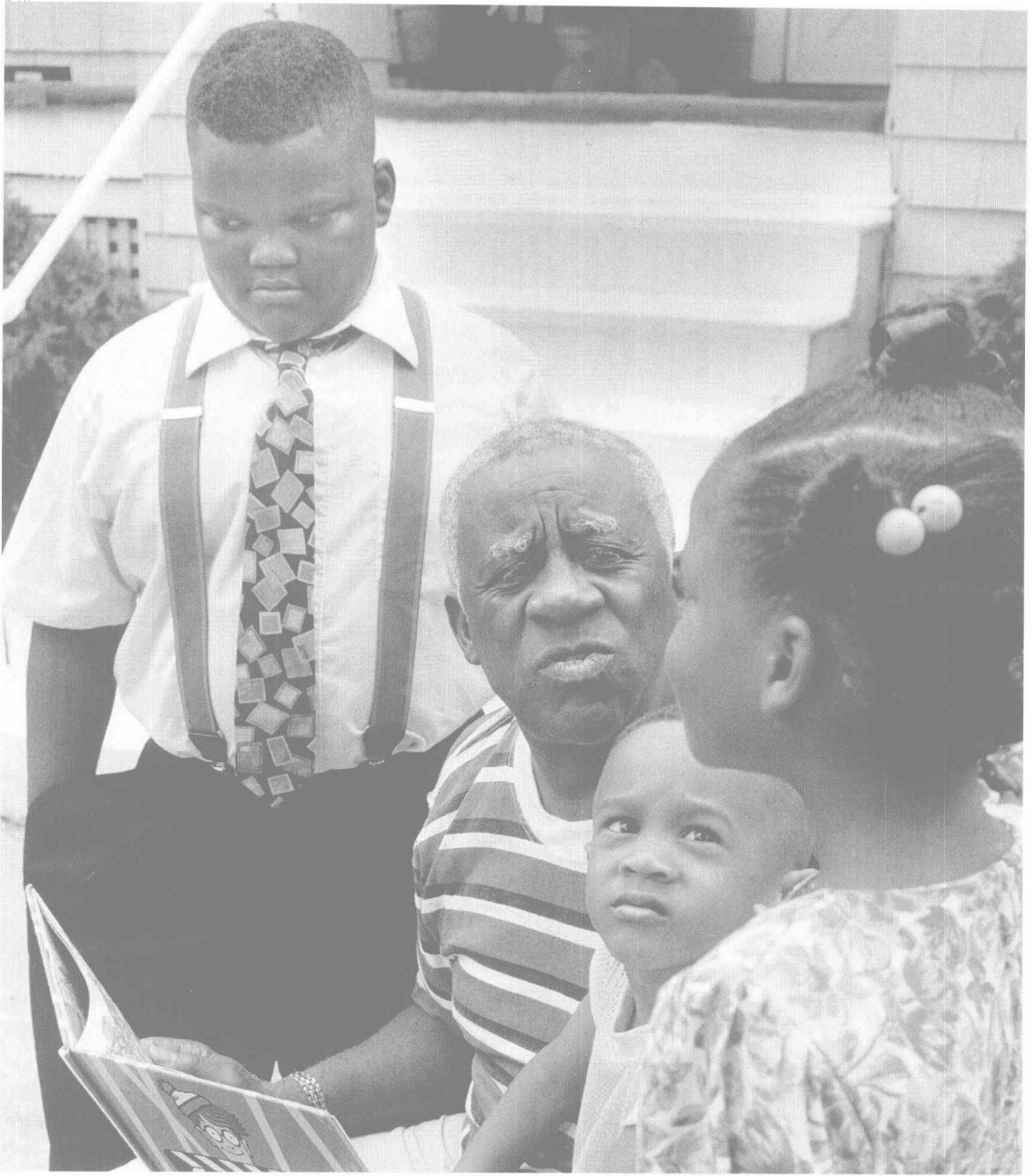
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PART

1

INDIVIDUAL MATTERS



The Family

Chapter

1

Much of the reading you are required to do in college is difficult. The ideas presented in your classes are often complex, and the essays and textbooks you read will sometimes be hard to understand. This is as it should be, for we live in a complicated world of complex problems.

Fortunately, many strategies can help you approach this difficult material. In addition, you and the people in your class, by working together, can cooperatively make sense of very dense, hard readings or textbook assignments. Reading alone with concentration and effort and reading together with honest discussion and careful problem solving are the two basic techniques you will use in this book to improve your reading and understanding of complex college reading assignments.

In this chapter, you will begin this dual process—reading alone and reading together. As you read alone, you will work through important prereading, active reading, and postreading strategies. And as you read with others, you will begin the complicated yet rewarding process of working with your peers to create fuller meaning from text and to form a community of readers.

I. READING ALONE

The Reading Process

Good reading involves three separate steps:

1. Preparing to read
2. Reading actively
3. Working with what you read

Throughout this book, you will work with these three steps and the many strategies each of the steps contains. In this first chapter, however, you will develop a general sense of what each step means and how each step works.

Preparing to Read

You must prepare your mind for new information or ideas. Before a smart runner runs, she warms up. Before skilled actors go before an audience, they rehearse. Successful builders lay strong foundations. Writers prewrite. Troops train. An architect builds with a plan. And so too do good readers prepare their minds for new ideas.

Some of this preparation is physical. For example, reading takes effort and concentration, so a good reader has the necessary materials gathered about her. She has pens or pencils, a dictionary, a notebook, and perhaps coffee or soda. She is prepared to write, placing comments in the text or in the notebook. She is not tired; she is in good light; and she has the time to think and concentrate.

Of course, such an ideal setting is often not available. Nevertheless, good readers try to prepare the physical surroundings with some thought. If they are tired and climb into bed with a difficult book, soft light, and low music, they will not read well.

Some of this prereading preparation is mental. You might ask yourself some of the following questions before you read:

- Why am I reading this?
- What do I hope to understand or learn?
- What should I know when I finish?
- What do I already know about this subject?
- What do I think the authors will write about?
- What are my values, attitudes, or biases toward the subject?

Taking the time before you read to answer these questions and to discuss them with others is time well spent. Your mind will be better prepared to absorb new information and new ideas. You will be more prepared for complexity.

Reading Actively

In addition to preparing to read, you must actively work and concentrate to get new information and ideas into your mind as you read. A skier who lacks concentration might find himself with a broken leg. A carpenter whose mind wanders will discover she has built a crooked wall. An inattentive surgeon leaves sponges in patients' stomachs. Negligent drivers have accidents. In the same way, readers who lack focus rarely understand what they have read. In fact, one of the most persistent problems facing even skilled readers is this lack of focus, this failure to concentrate on the material at hand. All readers will sometimes arrive at the bottom of a page only to realize they can recall little of what they have just read. Their eyes moved over the words, but their minds were inattentive, thinking of something else. They lacked focus.

To develop this concentration or focus, the reader's mind must be active with the many strategies that can occur while reading. In fact, a good reader is often very tired after a hard session with a difficult text.

Much of the work good readers must do involves understanding what the author has written. The reader must do this actively, regularly taking notes and responding to questions such as the following:

- What does this word mean?
- What is the main point the writer makes in this paragraph?
- How can I rephrase this sentence in a simpler way?
- What is the connection between these two paragraphs?
- How is the author organizing these ideas?
- How can I summarize this chapter or essay?

In addition, some of the work good readers must do involves carrying on a mental conversation with the author or text; again, through note taking, readers often work with questions like these:

- Do I agree with what the author has said?
- Does the experience of the author match mine?
- Who is the author writing to? Am I the intended reader?
- Do these ideas apply to my gender, my ethnic background, or my economic status?
- What values, biases, or assumptions does the author seem to have or promote?
- If the writer were speaking directly to me, what tone would I hear?

Finally, some of the work good readers must do involves carrying on a conversation with themselves as they monitor or check their understanding. Questions such as these frequently arise:

- Did I understand what I just read?
- What did I understand and not understand?
- What do I need to do to understand this?
- Am I reading too fast or too slow?
- Where exactly did my mind begin to lose its focus?

Monitoring or checking your comprehension of what you read is a very important reading strategy. In fact, Chapter 9 is devoted to this crucial element. You may want to refer frequently to some of the problem-solving suggestions described there as you read through the selections that follow.

All of these questions and mental activities would seem to make reading even more difficult. For example, if all these questions are demanding attention and answers, how can your mind possibly attend to the ideas of the text?

At first, all the reading tasks often seem overwhelming to the reader; however, over time and with experience and reflection, the reader knows that the tasks and questions are not only helpful but essential as well.

Working with What You Read

After you have read a selection, you must work with the ideas you have understood, so they may be firmly integrated into what you already know. Athletes, after an event or game, review and evaluate films of the game to improve future performance. After meetings, all committee members receive summaries or minutes, so that they can remember what happened. After a movie, couples might share coffee or a beer while they discuss the film and gain from others a broader perspective. And good readers reflect upon ideas from their readings—sometimes for days, sometimes for a lifetime, sometimes alone, sometimes with others.

The work readers do with the ideas they encounter in texts is quite varied and includes activities such as the following:

- Memorizing them for an exam
- Summarizing them for some future use
- Connecting them to other ideas from other texts or other experiences
- Evaluating their worth or usefulness
- Discussing or arguing about them with others
- Writing about them
- Using them to change how they see the world

Taking the time to summarize, elaborate, connect, reflect upon, evaluate, react and respond to, discuss, argue, and write about the ideas you have just read about is time well spent. These activities are at the heart of your work with this text and are among the core tasks of a college education. We live complicated lives filled with complex problems. Only through effort can we understand this world.

Exercises on the Reading Process

One critical piece of reading “equipment” you will need for this text is a reading notebook. In this notebook, you will include all of your responses to the questions and problems this book presents. In addition, you will use the notebook to record and participate in the many classroom discussions and seminars you will have. Finally, and perhaps most important, you will use the notebook to record your own thoughts, questions, and responses to the readings.