

Connections, Contexts, and Possibilities



STEPHEN MURABITO

Connections, Contexts, and Possibilities

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Introduction to the Student

Connections, Contexts, and Possibilities is a book that respects your intelligence as it challenges your thinking, reading, and writing abilities. This book will ask you to look and relook, to think and rethink. It will ask you to make valuable connections—among parts of a text, among different texts, among texts and your experiences, and among texts and the world around you. The book will ask you to place your ideas in fresh contexts and to entertain all sorts of possibilities as you discover meaning in all that you read, think, write, and live.

PART ONE: ADVICE ON WRITING

The first part of this book will examine how writers go about composing paragraphs and essays. You will find that a writer writes from a strong sense of purpose and that the words a writer employs serve the designs of that purpose. We will discuss the kinds of readers you will have in college, the expectations they will have for your writing, and the various ways you can meet those expectations successfully. As an added bonus to you, all of the discussion examples in Part One come from Part Two; therefore, as you read Part One, you will be getting key insights into the readings that await you. This connection has been made purposely to help you prepare for the challenging readings and questions in Part Two.

PART TWO: READINGS FOR WRITING

Part Two of this book is composed of six chapters of readings that are arranged by theme. Each chapter contains two essays, one short story, and one or two poems. I have chosen themes that I know from experience matter to students, and I have chosen pieces that students have enjoyed, argued over, and even read aloud to their friends.

You will note that there are three kinds of questions following each selection (or, in Part One, these questions end each chapter). The first two sets of questions—“Connections” and “Contexts” questions—call for short responses, perhaps a list or a paragraph. The third set of questions, the “Possibilities” questions, will require developed essays. For some questions, I suggest which sort of an essay you might compose (for example, I might say, “Write an argumentative essay about . . .” or “Write a descriptive essay on . . .”). In other cases, the choice of *how* you compose your essay will be up to you.

You will also notice that each chapter ends with a question called “The Longer Essay.” These questions are designed to help you to give essay topics your most thorough, in-depth treatments, and each response could easily become a term project. Your professor will, of course, assign his or her own minimum lengths; however, as a general rule, I recommend five or six double-spaced, typed pages as your target length for the longer essay.

Whether you are composing a paragraph, an essay, or a longer essay, my advice to you is to keep a journal and be a responsive reader. Keep a pencil in your hand while you are reading: Write in the margins; circle difficult words; underline beautiful or troubling passages, and reread them. Highlight sections that spark your thinking; agree with stances, or disagree with assertions. Whatever it takes, *take* control of the reading process. Attempt to apply what you learn in Part One to what you are asked to do in Part Two. Because you have kept a journal and you have been a note-taking, list-making, sentence-producing reader, you will produce essays more confidently.

GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

A unique aspect of this book is the ongoing conversation we will have about grammar (and other technical matters) at the ends of the chapters in Part Two. I will be speaking *with* you—instructing you, yes, but also *including* you in discussions of the reading you have already done. Why did the writer make that *kind* of sentence? What does that colon *tell* the reader? Is that sentence fragment *acceptable* to you? These are the sorts of questions we will ask about the highlighted passages in each chapter.

You will also notice two sets of exercises at the ends of the chapters in Part Two. The first set, “Understanding the Concepts,” uses passages from the book to gauge your comprehension of that chapter’s technical concepts. The second set, “Applying the Concepts to Your Writing,” asks you to find examples of the techniques we have been discussing, locating them in your own writing, your own journals and essays.

Yes, writing shorter and longer responses, such as those in journals and essays, *is* the goal of this course, and it (the task of writing) *is* probably the thing you fear the most at this moment. Rest assured that students like you have, indeed, risen to the challenge and produced fine work. I have compiled some of these examples in the “Responding to Student Work” sections that close each chapter of Part Two. The questions that follow these works are designed to help you critique and discuss the work of other students; the ultimate goal, of course, is that you, too, will produce work that is equally noteworthy and excellent.

Good luck with *Connections, Contexts, and Possibilities*. Good luck with your quest to understand the wonderful processes of composing. If you feel that your thinking, reading, and writing abilities improve and if you feel your-

self become a more assertive and self-confident reader and writer, then this book will have been my greatest composition.

Go sharpen your pencil, or turn on your computer.

Stephen Murabito
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Greensburg Campus

Introduction to the Teacher

Connections, Contexts, and Possibilities is a compositional rhetoric and a thematic reader designed to help student writers develop and intensify their thinking, reading, and writing abilities. Part One is a four-chapter discussion of the paragraph and the essay. I believe you will like how I ground everything in the writer's *purpose*, how my discussion of essays parallels the discussion of paragraphs, and how I then discuss the rhetorical modes in context.

Part Two is a six-chapter set of readings designed to help students entertain critical and interpretive possibilities about texts that are thematically connected (or modally connected if you follow the Alternative Contents). Because of the length of these six chapters, students have a chance to consider and write about the vital issues in each chapter and experience a sense of *completion* before they move along to the next group of readings. One of my prime missions, then, is that students complete all of the chapters of Part Two.

Of course, for all of us the most exciting aspect of teaching is seeing what the students make of a challenging set of materials. The questions at the ends of texts and chapters are intended to help students arm themselves with the critical tools necessary to engage in the demanding thinking, reading, and writing tasks waiting for them in your composition classes and beyond. In short, I think this book addresses both immediate and cross-curricular goals: We are sending the campus and the world individuals who have ways to respond to texts, to solve problems, and to handle challenging sets of reading materials—all born from the process of asking questions of purpose, structure, and effectiveness and looking for interior and exterior connections; this is a process you will initiate, guide, and encourage.

In terms of vital classroom exchanges, the practices of seeing textual connections, discovering contextual meanings, or entertaining critical possibilities open up the broadest spectrum of possible student responses: One student may see the differing ways two writers are handling similar themes; another student may see that a writer's use of the dash or the comma challenges his understandings and expectations and becomes problematic or stylistic; another student may see a personal connection between a story or poem and something she has experienced; someone else might imagine the great verbal exchange that could have occurred had Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, and James Baldwin met. The point is that students will be *responding* to texts from many relevant angles and perspectives as they individually and collectively discover that meaning can be actively pursued and not simply passively received, that thinking, reading, and writing are not static enterprises. Indeed, the book's "Grammar in Context" notes reinforce the multidimensionality of the whole enterprise because they never discuss technical elements at the expense of point of view or purpose.

GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

A unique approach used in this book is to teach grammar as it exists in the context of what has been read. Handled this way, the important grammatical concepts can be realized and subsequently applied by students in their own writing. Students see that grammatical issues concern professional writers, too, as they make choices, exercise options, take risks, and create styles. Grammar, then, ceases to be an abstraction.

The “Grammar in Context” and exercise sections at the ends of chapters explain concepts, raise issues, and importantly, *include* the students’ perspectives by asking them what they think about a writer’s choice. These grammatical materials may be used as either review for your more advanced composition students who still have problems or primary instruction for your beginning students who may be learning some of these elements for the first time.

Research has by and large shown that traditional grammatical instruction *alone* (memorization, sentence-combining exercises, or drills) has little developmental effect on the improvement of student writing or on helping students to produce more sophisticated or mature texts.¹ When grammar instruction takes place as *part of* a discussion of textual meaning and when grammar discussion actually *coincides* with reading discussion, your students will have a far better chance of remembering more about grammatical concepts, standards, expectations, and applications. Students will then become more contextually informed about the choices they make, and grammar can become not just a matter of right and wrong but also a matter of excited discussion, choice, option, risk, and ongoing writer-to-reader “negotiation.”² Grammar, at least by degree, becomes *part of* something writers *do* and not a prescription, a negative-sounding set of commandments—things writers *should not do*.

Whereas this book is certainly a living contention that grammar *can* be taught, it hopes to accomplish something significant in light of my belief that traditional grammar workbooks are too often compilations of boring, uninspiring, nitpicking, and systematic overkill having little to do with what a student is reading or writing. Obviously, when an entire class is given drills or exercises that demonstrate a “rule of usage,” some students are inevitably literally wasting their time because they might not have any problems with the concept in question. David Bartholomae expresses this common situation quite clearly with regard to one of his case-study students when he says, “Fif-

¹For an excellent study that objectively synthesizes much of the research, see Rei R. Noguchi, *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing*. Urbana: NCTE, 1991. For a more global assessment of the failures of exclusive drill-on instruction, see George Hillocks and Michael W. Smith, “Grammar and Usage.” *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*, ed. J. Flood. New York: Macmillan. 1991: 591–603.

²See Bruce Horner, “Rethinking the ‘Sociability’ of Error: Teaching Editing as Negotiation.” *Rhetoric Review* 11 (1992): 172–99.

teen weeks of drill on verb endings might raise his test scores, but they would not change the way he writes.”³

Likewise, I feel that we need to “change” or improve the ways students think, read, and write, and we can do this by making as much instructive material as possible as relevant as possible to their own writing. I am not saying that we should throw out all of the handbooks. Obviously, many sources will be used as you look subjectively at each student’s writing. My approach to grammar is particularly workable, then, for teachers who may already be diagnosing students individually, meeting with students in one-to-one conferences, and helping students to see the patterns of errors in their writing. All of these common approaches are well grounded in research.⁴

Finally, many grammar handbooks and workbooks attempt to cover everything; likewise, teachers using these sources often try to cover all topics in fifteen weeks. However, I have isolated a limited number of vital technical concepts that naturally appear in the reading selections. These concepts seem to me to be among the most common and important technical matters for developing writers—a “top forty,” if you will. This approach makes grammar both relevant and workable.

SIZE OF THE BOOK

As I mention previously, you will notice the relative smallness of this book. This size is intended to give students a sense of completion at the ends of the chapters and at the end of the term. Students often complete high school without having ever finished an entire book, which is why the “novel” approach to composition in general and basic writing specifically is such a multidimensional confidence builder. The size of the book, then, is part of the overall reading theory. And, of course, the broader reading theory—a theory you can take where you wish—is that reading is the act of asking structural, critical, and cultural questions, the act of seeking out connections, contexts, possibilities, and meanings.

One of the worst things we can do, though, is underestimate our students’ intellectual potential. Because they do not necessarily possess the articulation skills and sentence-forming abilities of confident writers, this is no reason to assume that they need to be spoon fed. Developmental writers are

³See *College Composition and Communication* 31 (1980): 262.

⁴It would be impossible to list all of the researchers expounding these beliefs, but some central works are the following: Muriel Harris, *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference* (Urbana: NCTE, 1986); Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977); Glynda Hull, “Acts of Wonderment: Fixing Mistakes and Correcting Errors” in *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfactuals*, eds. David Bartholomae and Anthony R. Petrosky (Upper Montclair: Boynton/Cook, 1986): 199-226; Beverly Lyon Clark, *Talking About Writing* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1985); and Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer, “Error-Analysis and the Teaching of Composition” in *College Composition and Communication* 29 (1978): 242-48.

among our brightest students; with some help, they will “get” the likes of Lopez, Woolf, Heilman, or Orwell. It has been my experience that students who might be expecting a grammar grind in a college composition course are respectfully happy that they have been more intellectually challenged. Such a challenge can only pay off as the students leave your classes to move on to college sociology, history, or political science courses with their demanding reading.

The texts in this book *are* challenging, to say the least, but if we are to expect insightful writing, then we must be willing to teach substantive texts rich with interpretive potential. The texts will occasionally need a good deal of your explanation, and you may find it useful to read selections aloud in the classroom. Doing so helps students to locate themselves as they hear the voice on the page, picking up on tone and texture and more thoroughly getting at meaning. I am sure we have all noticed that inexperienced students have difficulty *hearing* texts. This difficulty is evident when we call on a student to read aloud, and he or she stumbles through the passage and then says that he or she could not “get what the writer meant.”

Of course, some of the texts used in this book are famous and have been widely anthologized. Others are quite new, coming from more recent magazines and journals. Ultimately, I think you will find that the book gives solid, practical advice on writing and assembles a provocative, balanced, and inclusive set of materials that the students will take in many directions as they both define and refine their thinking, reading, and writing abilities.

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Contents

PART ONE: ADVICE ON WRITING

CHAPTER ONE: Paragraphs—What Makes Them Successful? 3

Let's discuss the purpose, structure, and effectiveness of the paragraph in terms of the five major kinds of paragraphs (argumentative, illustrative, descriptive, narrative, and factual/informative).

CHAPTER TWO: Successful Essays—Classic and Organic Essay Structures 18

Let's examine the difference between the classic essay, with its "thesis, body, and conclusion," and the organic essay, with its "unfolding" nature.

CHAPTER THREE: Successful Essays—Major Kinds of Essays 29

Let's define and take a close look at each of the five major kinds of essays, following the same "purpose" order we have established in Chapter One.

CHAPTER FOUR: Successful Essays—The Rhetorical Modes 58

Let's look at the ways that "rhetorical modes" sometimes go hand in hand with purpose and sometimes can serve many purposes.

PART TWO: READINGS FOR WRITING

CHAPTER FIVE: Place—Where Do We Call Home? 69

1. Robert Wrigley, "The Swing, the Snow, the Skull of a Hare" 70

What lessons of childhood, memory, place, and parenting can one writer derive from the "dramatic" landscape of the Pacific Northwest?

2. Barry Holstun Lopez, "Landscape and Narrative" 76

How can landscapes, the places we call home or the places we visit, come to inhabit us, making up who we are and how we think, act, and live?

3. Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ship Ahoy" 82

Can Rosemarie Tucket, a lonely, exhausted, and overwhelmed motel owner, help the vulnerable young man who is weeping in Cabin #9?

4. Maggie Anderson, "A Place with Promise" 91

"Why can't we hold this landscape in our arms?" asks poet Maggie Anderson. What is it we come to see in the places we call home?

5. Roberta Hill Whiteman, "Nett Lake, Minnesota" 93

How many worlds does this speaker see reflected in this lake?

CHAPTER SIX: Work—What Labors Occupy Us? 111**1. Mother Jones, "UMWA Convention Speech, 1902" 112**

Why does this outspoken supporter of workers' rights feel that her "boys," the coal miners, are so exploited by the owners and operators of the coal mines?

2. Richard Rodriguez, "Complexion and Labor" 119

The essential meanings of ethnic discrimination and prejudice come to this Mexican-American college student as he feels his body burn and blossom under the strains of intense physical labor.

3. Sheila Ballantyne, "They Call Me Mummy" 126

You will not soon forget the absolute chaos surrounding this "Berkeley Mother" who is concerned about everything from "Daffodil yogurt" to the Vietnam War.

4. Jim Daniels, "Still Lives in Detroit, #1, #2, and #3" 137

What are the real, long-lasting effects of the collapse of the automotive industry in Detroit? How has it created these still lives?

CHAPTER SEVEN: Reading/Seeing—What Does This Mean? 154**1. Virginia Woolf, "How Should One Read a Book?" 155**

This famous writer offers highly practical advice about a very difficult process—reading. How might you apply her advice to books, plays, or films you have read or seen?

2. Mark Twain, "Perplexing Lessons" and "Continued Perplexities" 160

Will this frustrated apprentice riverboat pilot learn to "read" the mysterious and dangerous Mississippi River? And what is the cost of such knowledge?

3. Raymond Carver, "Cathedral" 170

What can a blind houseguest teach a jealous husband about the world and, ultimately, himself?

4. Robert Frost, "Birches" 182

What lessons of life and love emerge from this famous reminiscence of youthful freedom, grace, and perfection?

5. Tu Fu, "Ballad of a Hundred Worries" 184

In contrast to the Frost poem, this one is a ballad of bitterness and anxiety. What do you suppose has caused all of this speaker's "worries"?

CHAPTER EIGHT: Teaching/Learning—What's Gained or Lost in This Process? 198**1. Robert B. Heilman, "The Great-Teacher Myth" 199**

In the film Dead Poets Society is the main character, John Keating (played by Robin Williams), an excellent teacher, or is he an egotistical fraud? Heilman provides an intriguing perspective.

2. David A. Fryxell, "Blackboard Immortality" 206

What makes a teacher truly outstanding, and how do we measure a teacher's success?

3. Robley Wilson, Jr., "Wasps" 213

Why is this woman so shy, so passive? And what will the exterminator teach her about reading, seeing, self-reliance, and problem solving?

4. Lola Haskins, “The Amateur” 221

What changes must this student make to become a successful pianist? What must happen “before her hands/come out to play”?

5. Li-Young Lee, “Persimmons” 223

What are the complex and beautiful messages in this poem about teaching, learning, seeing, living, and loving?

CHAPTER NINE: Science—What and How Do We Discover? 243

1. Harold J. Morowitz, “The Olive in the Martini” and “The Thermodynamics of Pizza” 244

In both of these pieces, Morowitz looks at the everyday stuff of life with extraordinary scientific precision, humor, and insight.

2. Lewis Thomas, “The Music of This Sphere” 250

Are we surrounded by a world of animals making noise, or are we in the aisle seats of nature’s great symphony? Dr. Thomas has your tickets.

3. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., “The Manned Missiles” 255

World War III hangs in the balance in this Cold War satire of science and politics gone awry.

4. Allison Funk, “August: A Lunar Eclipse” 264

Lost in an abusive love relationship, this speaker’s sense of self disappears like the waning moon. But, like the new moon, will she emerge whole again?

5. Al Young, “Chemistry” 266

In this intriguing mix of science and metaphor, poet Al Young looks at our “legendary” and “momentary” connections to the moon and gives us an interesting perspective on fear, joy, and love.

CHAPTER TEN: Politics—What and How Do We Control? 283

1. George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant” 284

A British police officer must decide the fate of a rampaging elephant: Will the narrator follow his convictions and let the animal live, or will this figure of authority and control capitulate to the will of the thousands of spectators urging him to shoot the beast?

2. James Baldwin, “Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem” 291

This is one of several of James Baldwin’s moving accounts of prejudice, racism, and the inevitable hopelessness of indomitable oppression. Baldwin is one of those most noble writers—he is blessed with the mission to speak for those who cannot.

3. Toni Cade Bambara, “My Man Bovanne” 299

What do you think will happen to a political movement if it ignores the elderly folks or simply exploits them for their votes? With typical humor and insight, Toni Cade Bambara teaches a lesson in political shortsightedness and human compassion.

4. W. H. Auden, “If on Account of the Political Situation” 305

Where is this political situation taking place? What is “this Horror” Auden describes?

Alternative Contents

(by Rhetorical Mode)

Narration

1. Mark Twain, "Perplexing Lessons" and "Continued Perplexities" 160
2. George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant" 284
3. Raymond Carver, "Cathedral" 170
4. Lola Haskins, "The Amateur" 221
Student Work: "Soul Searching" (Ch. 5); "Whispers on the Water" (Ch. 5); "The Guitarist" (Ch. 9); "Facing Sudden Death" (Ch. 10)

Comparison and Contrast

1. Lewis Thomas, "The Music of This Sphere" 250
2. James Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem" 291
3. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "The Manned Missiles" 255
4. Roberta Hill Whiteman, "Nett Lake, Minnesota" 93
Student Work: "Two Lonely Hearts" (Ch. 2); "Accepting or Rejecting One's Reality" (Ch. 6); "Fulfillment" (Ch. 6); "Turning Silver" (Ch. 7); "Collision, Death, and Reconciliation" (Ch. 9)

Process Analysis

1. Virginia Woolf, "How Should One Read a Book?" 155
2. Harold J. Morowitz, "The Olive in the Martini" and "The Thermodynamics of Pizza" 244
3. Sheila Ballantyne, "They Call Me Mummy" 126
4. Robert Frost, "Birches" 182
5. Tu Fu, "Ballad of a Hundred Worries" 184
Student Work: "Violence in Mummy" (Ch. 6); "A Response by Mrs. Miller" (Ch. 6); "Overworked and Never Paid" (Ch. 6)

Cause and Effect

1. George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant" 284
2. Mark Twain, "Perplexing Lessons" and "Continued Perplexities" 160
3. Robley Wilson, Jr., "Wasps" 213
4. Jim Daniels, "Still Lives in Detroit, #1, #2, and #3" 137
Student Work: "Whispers on the Water" (Ch. 5); "Drenching Means What?" (Ch. 7); "Music and Meaning" (Ch. 9)

Definition

1. Barry Holstun Lopez, "Landscape and Narrative" 76
2. Richard Rodriguez, "Complexion and Labor" 119
3. Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ship Ahoy" 82
4. Al Young, "Chemistry" 266
5. Li-Young Lee, "Persimmons" 223
Student Work: "Thoughts of the City Home . . ." (Ch. 5); "The Definition of a Good Teacher" (Ch. 8); "To Be Treated Like Men" (Ch. 10)

Argument

1. Mother Jones, "UMWA Convention Speech, 1902" 112
2. Robert B. Heilman, "The Great-Teacher Myth" 199
3. Toni Cade Bambara, "My Man Bovanne" 299
4. W. H. Auden, "If on Account of the Political Situation" 305
Student Work: "Heilman and Keating: What Is the Difference?" (Ch. 8);
"Keating: The Great Teacher?" (Ch. 8); "A Good Friend; A Bad Teacher"
(Ch. 8); "The Real Oppressor" (Ch. 10)