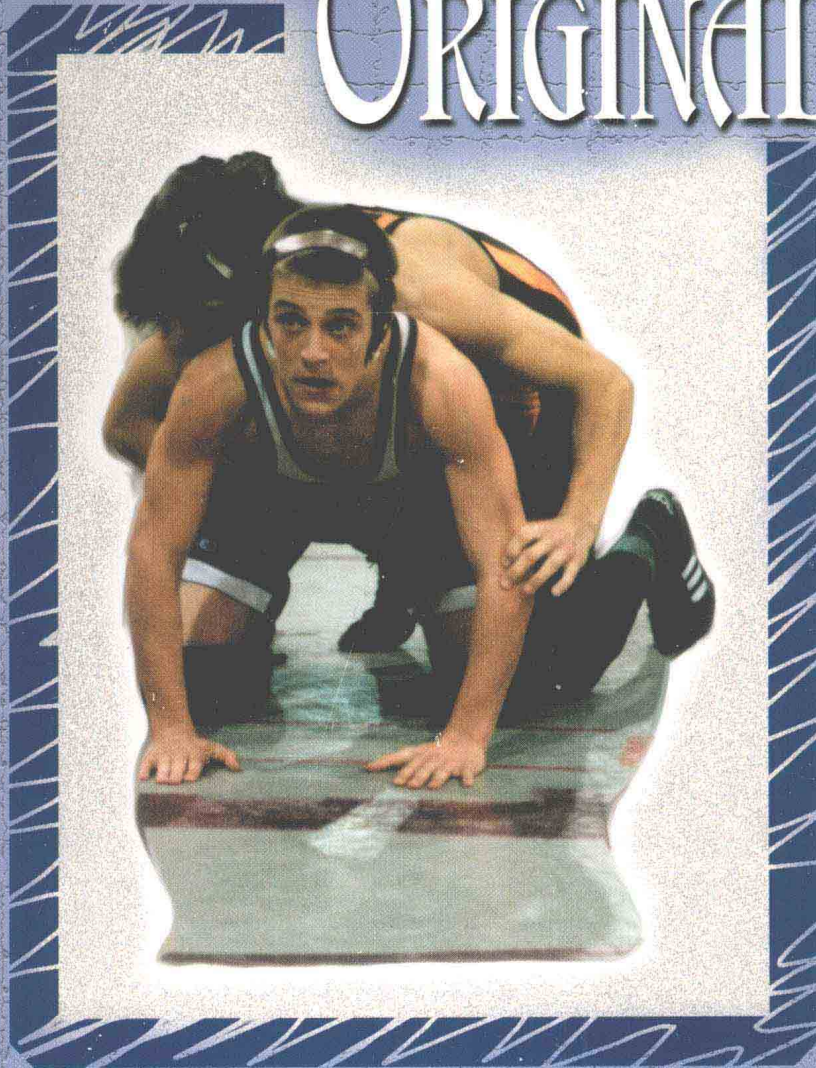


THE ORIGINAL



TEXT-WRESTLING BOOK

Foreword by Peter Elbow

The Original Text-Wrestling Book

**The Writing Program
University of Massachusetts Amherst**

**Marcia Curtis
Benjamin Balthaser
Michael Edwards
Zan Goncalves
Robert Hazard
Noria Jablonski
Brian Jordan
Shauna Seliy
with
Peggy Woods**



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*To Charlie Moran and Anne Herrington,
former Writing Program Directors,
without whom this program would not exist*

Cover photo of Sean Wooley wrestling is courtesy of David Wooley.

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Foreword

by Peter Elbow

And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." And then he blessed him.

—Genesis 32. 24–29

"Text wrestling" might seem an odd name for a kind of essay. But with this metaphor, we are trying to suggest a way of writing about a published essay in which you engage or grapple with that essay. When people wrestle, they are struggling and yet embracing. One of the most famous stories from the Bible is one in which Jacob wrestles with an angel of God and refuses to stop until he wins a blessing. A text-wrestling essay insists on winning a blessing from the text it is writing about.

No doubt it is helpful if I turn now from metaphor and myth to a plain literal description of two common kinds of essay that we are trying to avoid by using the term "text wrestling":

- An essay in which you don't present your own thinking or opinions—instead devoting yourself entirely to explaining the essay you are writing *about*. (This kind of essay of pure explication *can* be useful, but it's not the idea here.)
- An essay in which you do present your thinking and opinion strongly, but don't really explore or engage with the essay you are supposedly writing about. Writers sometimes fail to do justice to the published essay in one of two ways. They say how much they agree

with that essay but then just “pop in” quotes from it to “back up” and echo their own thinking. Or they say how much they disagree with the published essay, but develop only their *own* thinking and never really explore or enter into the thinking in the published essay.

It might seem as though the goals of a text-wrestling essay are paradoxical or contradictory. On the one hand, we ask you to put your attention outside yourself—to enter into someone else’s point of view: to read more closely, accurately, fairly, and thoughtfully. Yet on the other hand, we ask you to take your own thinking and your own point of view more seriously than some assignments or teachers ask for. That is, we want you to learn to “speak up” or “speak out” when you write in response to the texts of authoritative authors—especially when those authors are writing in somewhat difficult or scholarly or academic language. The goal is to learn to bring your own thinking into a kind of dialogue of equals with the thinking of an important published author—to write with authority and agency.

In a sense we are asking you to be both objective and subjective—to play the “believing game” and the “doubting game.” The common element here is respect: if you respect your own thinking, you will explore and develop your own train of thought and speak out vigorously; if you respect someone else’s thinking, you will read closely and enter into their thinking and point of view.

We also have a practical teaching goal for this assignment. Because the whole class may work on the same texts, you will be in a better position to share your reading and interpretation and get feedback from your teacher and fellow students. And since you will probably write about just one or two essays, you will have an easier time getting on top of some scholarly practices that are essential for writing about texts: how to summarize fairly and clearly; how to fold quotations of the words of others comfortably into the flow of your own words; and how to use academic citations according to the appropriate conventions.

Exploring the Reading Process

What actually happens when people read? It’s not so simple. Let’s start by looking at the *writing* process. There’s a common myth about writing as a hidden magical process—a myth that goes like this: some people are “good writers” because they have special talent and they can find good words and ideas in their heads. These people can sit down and write out perfect pieces of writing. But most of us—according to this myth—are poor writers or non-writers because we don’t seem to find good words and ideas when we sit down to write.

By now, I'm sure you realize that this myth is a very distorted picture of how writers actually function. You've had plenty of opportunity to experience the fact that writing is a gradual process of *constructing meanings*. You've been able to see concrete evidence of this gradual and often messy constructive process: early thoughts, notes or outlines or early drafts; middle drafts; revisions; final drafts. Almost all writers go through this process, and libraries often display drafts and revisions by famous writers (like Hemingway's twenty-some versions of a single passage). *Occasionally*, people get caught up into what feels almost like a trance state, and they can just pour down words that they find coming mysteriously to mind—and these words are good. It's tempting to speak of this as "inspiration"—that's what it feels like; it's probably happened to you. Freewriting can lead to this fortunate condition. And even when people write out only their *final* draft and don't seem to revise at all, they usually go through a process of constructing meanings as they pause again and again to decide which word to write next.

So let's compare the writing process to *reading*. Reading certainly seems more mysterious than writing—more *inner*. Reading usually happens faster—almost instantaneously: it looks as though you just pass your eyes over the words and the meanings pop into your head. It looks as though reading brings us back to that myth of mystery: good readers are people who come up automatically with the right meanings; bad readers are people who come up with wrong meanings or no meaning.

But in fact this is a myth for reading as much as it is for writing. If we look closely, we can see that reading, like writing, is a messy, active process of *constructing meanings*. It's just that in the case of reading, we have a harder time seeing this process. When we read, it *seems* as though we sit quietly and let the words print themselves on our retinas and thus pass inwards to our brains. But it's not that simple.

Consider what seems like an even simpler process—the process of vision. Consider the example of seeing a car down the road ahead of you. Cognitive psychologists have found out again and again, through complex experiments with high-speed cameras, that even vision is an active, exploratory process of creating meaning. It always occurs in stages through the passage of time, not instantaneously like an image passing through a lens. In the first stage of seeing, our mind receives the first pieces of information—the first trickles of electrical impulse—and quickly makes a guess or hypothesis about what we might be looking at. As we drive along, we instantaneously see a white car way down there ahead of us on the road. But the mind repeatedly checks this guess against further information, and we discover that it's actually a white boat being towed behind a car. In many situations, of course, our first guess is right—especially if the actual facts fit the context. A vehicle moving down the road is likely to be a car. For the

story of perception is the story of how context and expectation are just as important as sensory data. Thus, when the actual facts don't fit the context, we often start out seeing "the wrong thing"—start out with a wrong hypothesis and then have to change it as new information comes in—until we finally "see" what's really there.

When we understand plain seeing as a time-bound, exploratory process—like hearing and all the rest of our sense perceptions—it's easy to understand how this constructive process goes on in the more complicated process of reading. We can take in the whole scene of the car on the road in just one glance—or rather that boat on the road. But we can't read a whole page of print at once—any more than we can *write* a page all at once. As we read a page, we can only read a few words at a time. As we understand them, our mind inevitably develops some guesses and hypotheses about what the rest of the sentence or paragraph or whole piece might be about. As we read further, we inevitably revise our guesses and hypotheses. This process of *guessing and revising* continues until gradually we construct larger meanings. Sometimes our larger meanings change radically on a second or third reading. In short, reading, like writing, is actually a process of "drafting" and "revising." When we look at something or start to read or hear words, we tend to *understand what we expect to understand*—till evidence forces us to revise our expectation. We expect cars on the road, not boats. Our first perceptions or hypotheses always grow out of what's already in our minds.

Difficulty in Reading

When we understand that reading is an active process of constructing meaning, we get a better picture of a widespread difficulty with reading. Some people mistakenly try to make themselves into good little cameras. They try to become perfectly passive photographic plates on which the meanings on the page *print themselves* with photographic accuracy. But since reading doesn't work that way, their reading suffers. "Hold still. Don't jiggle." This is good advice for using old cameras, but it's bad advice for reading. The more activity and moving around, the better. More hypothesis making, more checking, more activity. Even simple vision is impossible if our eye is completely stationary. Our eyes move constantly, and usually we move our heads to get slightly different views.

We can sum up this truth about reading by pointing to a simple fact: there are no meanings *in* words. If the words on the page were chocolate chips, you could eat them and they would *give* you energy. But words on the page *contain* nothing; they are just black marks. The only meanings you can get *out* of the word "cat" are the meanings you bring *to* those black marks—

or heard sounds. Since *you* brought the meanings to the word “cat” that you find there, they are *your* meanings; they are amalgams of all your past individual experiences with the word “cat.” The only reason language works is that everyone more or less agrees to play the language game. We all seem tacitly to understand how convenient it is to use the same words for the same meanings: we try to give each other *more or less* similar experiences with, say, the word “cat.” Babies and toddlers often use words differently, but we seem instinctively to try to get them to follow the rules of the game. Because of this unspoken agreement to play the language game cooperatively, researchers can write dictionaries that specify meanings. These dictionaries give the illusion that the meanings are *in* the words, but meanings really only exist in people’s heads. And despite our best dictionaries, we have all had slightly *different* histories of experiences with the same word—sometimes very different histories. Have you noticed how often male and female readers—or young and old readers—have different reactions to the same event or movie or piece of reading? This is why it’s so interesting and useful to compare the movies that play in your mind as you read or listen to words with the movies that play in other people’s minds.

Notice, then, the social and cooperative dimension of reading and writing. Even if someone writes in a solitary hermit-like fashion (as Emily Dickinson is said to have done)—or reads alone without ever discussing a word—such people are cooperatively playing the language game with everyone else in their culture. If they weren’t, they wouldn’t be able to write or read meaningfully. And usually the collaborative dimension is much more outward and explicit. That is, most writers get some response from a friend or colleague on at least one draft before they give their writing to a wider audience. And those few brave souls who *finish* and publish a piece of writing without any discussion or sharing of a draft don’t generally spend all their time alone in their room as Emily Dickinson supposedly did; usually they have talked productively with others about the topic of their writing. So, too, there’s a pervasive social dimension with reading. Even though we usually sit silently as we read, we often discuss what we’ve read and try out our reactions and understandings with others to see what they think—just as we try out our writing on others for their reactions.

In what follows, you’ll find a selection of texts, each one ready for reading, discussing, and wrestling. You’ll also find a series of preparatory exercises and workshops. Each grows out of insights about the reading process just described. Each is also meant to help you engage with the writers and your fellow readers alike in both the solitary and social dimensions of reading and writing.

Peter Elbow, noted speaker and writer on composition, was director of the Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst from 1997 to 2000. More detailed descriptions of his ideas (such as his notions of the “believing game” and the “doubting game”) may be found in his books *Writing without Teachers* (1973), *Writing with Power* (1981), and *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (1986). Peter Elbow also contributed the three workshop descriptions included in the Appendix of this volume and adapted in the Preparatory Exercises. Some of the material here draws from the first-year writing textbook he wrote with Pat Belanoff: *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing*, 3rd edition, McGraw-Hill, 1999.

Acknowledgments

Though our editorial team began work on *The Original Text-Wrestling Book* in January 2001, the story of this volume goes back to 1997 when Peter Elbow, then director of the UMass Amherst Writing Program, introduced the text-wrestling essay into our First-Year Writing Program curriculum. The text-wrestling essay represented from the start an important and much needed addition to the Program syllabus. Many teachers embraced the concept, and its practice, enthusiastically. They sought out challenging short texts from every source available to them: literary and monthly magazines, essay collections, and other books. And the teachers photocopied their separate selections for use by individual classes aggregating some 3000 students annually.

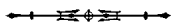
Despite the real importance of the text-wrestling assignment, I was concerned about a lack of consistency in the students' reading, and therefore writing, experiences across such a large program as ours. More, though, I worried about the costs of our photocopying and about its legality. I feared we were asking our teachers—most of them graduate student instructors and all of them writers as well as teachers of writing—to bend, if not break, the very permission laws designed to protect them and the nascent writers in their classes.

So in fall 2000, when Peter retired and I began serving as the Writing Program's acting director, I asked for volunteers among our eighty or so staff members to work with me on this book project. Six graduate student instructors and one English Department faculty member quickly stepped forward. Over the next five months, we worked as a team, soliciting preparatory exercises, sample student essays, and text suggestions from other teachers; reading through the piles of materials we received and enduring the difficult process of selection; finally composing and editing the introductory and prefatory matter for our volume.

For five months, I was impressed and inspired by the level of thought as well as the level-headedness of discussion taking place among us eight editors. Therefore, before we express our team thanks to those helping us in our work, I want to thank these seven editorial team members—Benjamin Balthaser, Michael Edwards, Zan Goncalves, Robert Hazard, Noria Jablonski,

Brian Jordan, and Shauna Seliy. I only hope our students learn as much from this book as I have learned from working on it with this group of writers and editors.

—Marcia Curtis



As an editorial team, not only do we credit Peter Elbow for introducing text wrestling into our program, but we also thank him for generously donating the Foreword to this book and for contributing the three seminal workshops that appear in our Appendix for Teachers. Peter coined the term “text-wrestling essay” and established its place in our curriculum. Without him, this would not be *The Original Text-Wrestling Book*. Yet he should not be held accountable for the concept of a text-wrestling book or its remaining contents; those matters, and any mistakes attending them, are strictly our own.

We thank others who contributed to our project and whose work is represented here, too: Christine Cooper, Asheley Griffith, Margaret Price, Claire Schomp, Rochelle Vigurs, and Peggy Woods. And we thank the students whose own text-wrestling essays will serve as models for other students to learn from as well as enjoy: Kristi Cousins, Nadine Hanna, Michael Ianello, Matthew Libby, and Kristina Martino.

We also owe a debt of gratitude, however, to those whose presence is less visible on these pages: to the many, many teachers in the Program who suggested texts for inclusion in the volume; to the teachers whose particularized exercises and workshops appear on our Text-Wrestling Web Site rather than among the more generally applicable exercises printed here; and to all those first-year students whose excellent text-wrestling essays were submitted by their teachers. We chose readings, exercises, and sample student essays that we believed best fit together in this first edition of the book but fully appreciated every submission we received.

Finally, we sincerely thank Asheley Griffith for lending us her sharp editor’s eye at the eleventh hour, when it really mattered.

—Editorial Team

(Benjamin Balthaser, Marcia Curtis, Michael Edwards, Zan Goncalves,
Robert Hazard, Noria Jablonski, Brian Jordan, and Shauna Seliy)

The Original Text-Wrestling Book Web Site <<http://writingprogram.hfa.umass.edu/otwb>> contains additional preparatory workshops and exercises for the text-wrestling essay, supplementary information on the authors represented in this volume, and links to other useful sites. We invite all readers to visit this site and to join in furthering our project by sending suggested readings, exercises, and links to curtis@acad.umass.edu.

In first setting up this assignment for students, I pursued the metaphor and asked a wrestling coach to try to explain to me the basics of wrestling as he would teach them to a newcomer. What he pinpointed first was the "*fear of the mat*," that is, not just the initial fear of trying it for the first few times, but also the sense that when you're out there, you're "*on your own*." It can be overwhelming to face the opponent with the awareness that it's just the two of you out there. I think this is the same initial problem most students have with text wrestling. The intimidation of the published text can reduce our best analysis efforts to mere summary or generalizing, total agreement, or total disagreement from a distance, when what is needed is close contact—*wrestling*!

So, what techniques does our coach recommend to his athletes to deal with this fear? First, you must realize that the opponent is someone just like you, with strengths, weaknesses, opinions and techniques. Confidence, practice, and knowledge of yourself are all keys to improving your chances of success. And when you're on the mat, you need a good understanding at all times of your placement and your opponent's: an awareness of balance and a visualization of where you are and where you are going next. A good wrestler will not only maintain a solid defense but will always be looking for chances to get a take-down. All of this is applicable to text wrestling. Focus, full understanding, and complete control of the information are all vital in successful text wrestling. Opponents will vary, and so will the teammates that a coach trains. But a match will always be good when the wrestlers take advantage of their strengths and remain in control of their position.

The key difference, of course, between the two types of wrestling is that text wrestling doesn't always have to be a *fight*. You may *agree* with the text and want to respond to *why* it is so successful. This is fine, as long as you maintain a close relationship with the text and refrain from simple summary or generalizations.

—Claire Schomp, *Wrestling with Texts*

Introduction

He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper.

—Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

You have engaged in conversations nearly all of your life—with friends, family, teachers, co-workers and occasionally strangers. Some of these conversations you began; some were already going on when you entered them. When you entered the university, you entered an on-going conversation among students and scholars, discourse that crosses the divides of time as well as geography. The conversation takes place in classrooms, in spoken discussions about the concepts central to every academic discipline individually and to intellectual life generally. More often, though, the conversation is a written one, conveyed in published texts, carried on in our reading of them, extended in the new texts produced in the form of essays, research papers, reports and eventually, perhaps, published articles.

As you undoubtedly know from your own experience, entering any conversation first calls for careful, attentive listening, not just to the main ideas, the gist, of what is being said but to all the details, nuances, and tone of their expression. In the sort of written conversation a text-wrestling essay represents, attentive listening means close, attentive reading of another person's essay, another person's text. It means making your own associations but withholding your own final judgments until you have studied carefully all the writer has to say and have analyzed the particular terms and tone, the metaphors and analogies, the logical reasoning and personal reasons at work within the text.

- Only by your own careful reading can you allow the writer to speak fully to you.
- Only when the writer has spoken fully to you can you represent the writer's ideas fairly in your written text.

And that fair, accurate representation of another writer's thoughts—in faithful summary, paraphrase, and quotation—is one hallmark of college writing and a successful text-wrestling essay.

True conversation also requires the active involvement of all participants and equal contributions from each one of them. Conversations are seldom satisfying if one participant feels too timid to speak up or is bullied by another into silence or simply repeats back what the other has said. So while you need to represent other writers' ideas fairly and fully in your text-wrestling essay, that is not all you need to do. You must respond to the other writer or writers whose texts you are reading with ideas of your own. Such responding requires your meeting the other writer as an equal, not always easy when facing a "professional" writer's published text. Careful reading and attention to the writer's reasoning as well as point of view will help remind you that every writer was probably once a student, just like you, and is certainly a human being, just like you—a human being deserving of your respectful listening but also your equally respectful and forceful response.

Finally, truly successful conversations are both collaborative and constructive. They do not bog down in passive agreement or lock up in uncompromising disagreement. True conversations find participants, as one writer has remarked, "drawing out each other's ideas, elaborating upon them, and building together a truth none could have constructed alone" (Clinchy 188). So in the text-wrestling essay, you may express agreement with some points a writer makes, disagreement with other points. But, more important, you will draw out that writer's ideas, perhaps by highlighting the terms or metaphors recurring throughout the text, or by comparing one writer's observations with observations made by another and examining both in the new light they shed on each other. You will elaborate upon the writer's thoughts, perhaps by applying them to different situations or by amplifying them with similar thoughts and experiences of your own. Together with writer and text you will construct "a truth" neither of you could have composed alone. And the "truth" you compose will be your text-wrestling essay, your own "text."

Why, then, do we call this written conversation the "text-wrestling" essay? The phrase *to wrestle with* means *to grapple with* or *to come to grips with*, and all three phrases—though denoting physical actions—are often used metaphorically to suggest profound intellectual or emotional activity. Through use of the term "text-wrestling essay," we mean to keep alive the physical, visceral sense of our metaphor as you, the reader, involve yourself fully in the act—the forceful and dynamic action—of reading. We also mean to call up the classical, even the mythical, vision of wrestlers, each battling yet simultaneously balancing the other in a close and highly controlled match between equals.

The “Text-Wrestling” Essay

Students who use this reader typically will write one or more text-wrestling essay, but what does that mean? What is a text-wrestling essay? What will it show you can do? Why is it valuable? How will you write it?

As you probably know, an essay may be defined as a person’s thoughts—expressed in prose—on a particular subject or theme. Many of the selections in this book are essays, rather demanding ones. The texts presented are prose writings, each short enough to read at a single sitting, but intellectually, verbally, structurally or otherwise complex enough to reward several more readings. The essay you write will show you can address one or more of these difficult texts. Your completed text-wrestling essay will show that you can engage with sophisticated texts, discuss and understand them, quote from them by using accepted conventions of academic discourse, and emerge with your own well-articulated thoughts and judgments or conclusions in a text of your own making.

The purpose of this book includes but goes beyond informing, challenging, and exercising the mind. As a college or university student, you will be gradually positioning yourself within communities of other readers, writers, speaker, and thinkers, and engaging in conversation with them. The value of wrestling with rich texts of others, and with writing a responsive text of your own, is that doing so immerses you in an atmosphere of advanced thinking and communicating. The overall goal of text wrestling is to help bring your thoughts into dialogue with those of published writers, and to help you move toward writing with increased authority, agency, and standing.

Within this broad set of intentions are more specific objectives. Engaging with sophisticated texts and writing your text-wrestling essay will provide the following:

- Practice in reading as a demanding and constructive process
- Exposure to various approaches to analyzing and interpreting written texts
- Familiarity with selections from some accomplished authors addressing, in various styles, a range of subjects
- Opportunities for discussion and collaborative learning, since class members usually will be focusing on a limited number of texts explored together
- Practice in addressing complex material—material that cannot be reduced to a simple “sound-bite” or pro-or-con position

- Practice in analyzing, summarizing, and synthesizing information into a reasoned and coherent whole
- Exposure to and practice in techniques for integrating the words and thoughts of others into your own writing, and for crediting the sources of those words and thoughts ethically and accurately, and according to the conventions of MLA style.

The varied kinds of practice you receive will help you find what you think and have to say about the subject considered. As one teacher has stated about physical wrestling and wrestling with texts: “Confidence, practice, and knowledge of yourself are all keys to improving your chance for success” (Schomp).

Possibilities for Writing

How will you write the text-wrestling essay? To a considerable extent, that process and the particulars of your assignment will be shaped by individual teachers and classes. Of the numerous possibilities, here are just a few that have already been used effectively.

Wrestle with a single reading and produce a single multi-draft essay.

Address two or more related readings to widen the conversation and broaden your essay’s content.

Draft beginnings of at least two essays on different readings—later completing or combining the most promising possibilities into one finished essay.

Wrestle not only with the readings but also with your classmates’ commentary on the readings or with a sample student essay in this book.

Regardless of the overall approach taken, composition of text-wrestling essays needs to come after engagement with one or more complex texts, and to be guided by the goals and objectives set off with bullets above. The essays will be well-developed and carefully crafted prose compositions, documented according to conventions of MLA style.

The Readings

The diversity and range of the essays contained in this volume may give you an idea of the difficulty we had in choosing them: there’s a broad scope of philosophies, topics, ideas and styles represented here, because we wanted this book to be as open, inclusive, and approachable as possible. We tried, as