

Reading
AND
Writing
FROM
Literature

Schwiebert

Reading *and*
Writing *from*
Literature

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Preface

Designed for use in literature courses that are also writing courses, *Reading and Writing from Literature* offers a fresh new approach to reading and writing in those classes. The book invokes a “conversation” model of reading and writing that empowers students to interact proactively and constructively with all texts, both literary and their own.

Reading and Writing from Literature presents reading as the primary resource for writing. Rather than only writing *about* literature, student users of this book write *from* literature; they use texts to produce texts. Being personally and culturally diverse, students are encouraged to identify and use those aspects of a text that interest them most as starting points for composing. Throughout the book, the guiding assumption is that, by creating, students also become stronger readers of the literature of past and present.

Inviting Students to Read and Write Intertextually

The theoretical basis of this book can be distilled into a single word—intertextuality, the primary engine that drives composing. In this book “text” is defined broadly to include all kinds of printed works, such as stories, poems, essays, and plays, as well as non-print phenomena such as movies, pictures, songs, conversations, and experiences. Intertextuality posits that every “text” is related to and evokes other texts, that one text is enmeshed in others. To compose a story, poem, or essay is not to invent something out of nothing but to produce a new text out of a complex and interwoven fabric of other texts already “written into” the writer’s life.

For a writer, reading is useful because it facilitates getting the texts of one’s life on paper. The process begins when the writer reads a springboard text, such as a short story. Some aspect of the story—a character, an image, a phrase, a described incident—resonates with other texts in his or her life, thereby bringing these texts to consciousness. The writer composes a piece of his or her own, and the focus of the resulting composition is not the springboard text but the writer’s *intertextual web*—the intricate and unique fabric of texts that constitutes who that writer is.

Intertextuality provides a rationale for reading and for writing in response to reading: through the process of writing, ideas can be articulated that might not have surfaced if the writer hadn’t read and written from that particular text.

In addition, intertextuality explains how a person can respond in writing to another text and still produce work that is individual, exciting, and “independent”: because each person’s intertextual web is unlike anyone else’s.

Finally, intertextuality provides a rationale for the student to pursue an ongoing, lifelong program of reading and writing. By demonstrating that no text, great or humble, is final, autonomous, or definitive, it validates every act of composing. In addition to being seen as ends-in-themselves, student texts and literary texts alike can be read temporally as parts of a continuing interplay of words and ideas, as “pre-texts” for additional thought, creation, and re-creation.

Rhetoric Chapters

This textbook is organized into rhetoric chapters and anthology chapters. The rhetoric chapters introduce students to techniques of reading, writing, and sharing that they can use throughout the term. Chapters are short and accessible enough that students can master most of the material on their own with minimal expenditure of in-class time.

Part I, “Writing and Reading: Interrelated Activities” (Chapters 1–4), presents writing and reading as conversational acts in which students “talk back” to the texts they read and use the conversation as a springboard for creating texts of their own. In addition, Part I introduces the “reading notebook,” the special kind of journal students can use for collecting their own writings—notes, thoughts, responses to literary works, and creative writings of many kinds that may be prompted by the texts they read. The reading notebook breaks down the wall between composing for school and composing for life and a lifetime; while developing techniques of reading and writing that will be useful to them in this course, students also learn strategies for producing meaningful writings of their own independently of this class or this textbook.

Part II, “Writing Essays About Literature” (Chapters 5–8), emphasizes the intertextual or recursive process of such composing. Students’ essays do not materialize out of nothing; they are generated from previous work and from literary texts, the texts in their own notebooks, and the texts of lecture and discussion. With strategies described in Part II, students learn how to use these texts to make a new text, i.e., an essay about literature.

Part III, “Creating a Writing Portfolio” (Chapters 9–11), shows students how to assemble a portfolio of their best writing for the quarter or semester. A portfolio is the result of a sustained process of recursive reading and writing in which students set aside their failed or mediocre work and concentrate on perfecting their best. Part III also provides students with strategies to continue reading and writing conversationally once this course is over. Thus, the ultimate aim of Part III is to liberate students from this textbook, to make

them strong and independent readers of literature—and active writers—for life.

Part IV, “An Introduction to the Four Major Genres” (Chapters 12–15), introduces students to the four genres of literature (short stories, poetry, nonfiction/essays, and plays) represented in the anthology. The chapters acquaint students with key literary terms and concepts that will help them to talk and write about short stories, poems, essays, and plays. In addition, Part IV is intended to increase students’ technical knowledge of the four genres so that they can write in multiple forms themselves.

The Anthology of Readings

Part V, “A Thematic Anthology of Readings” (Chapters 16–21), offers an anthology of 132 readings in the four major genres, arranged under six thematic headings: Gender and Relationships, Families, Experience and Identity, Individual and Society, Cultural and Racial Identity, and The Greater Universe.

I have chosen a thematic arrangement over a genre-based arrangement for two reasons: first, to avoid breaking whole texts into fragmentary “elements” (those of the short story, of poetry, of drama), which is the almost inevitable result of a genre-based organization; and second, to place primary emphasis on issues and experiences that relate intertextually to students’ lives.

In making selections I have worked consistently for variety: a mix of familiar and less-familiar authors, of frequently anthologized works and infrequently collected ones. Texts in each thematic grouping represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences, as the Gender and Relationships chapter (Chapter 16) illustrates. Doris Lessing’s story about male objectification of the female body (“A Woman on a Roof”) is balanced by Scott Russell Sanders’s male perspective on the same subject, “Looking at Women.” Robert Bly’s portrait of wounded male identity (“My Father’s Wedding 1924”) is complemented by Adrienne Rich’s “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” which addresses injured female identity. Texts about sexual grief and frustration are balanced by Walt Whitman’s and Ray Bradbury’s expressions of exuberant sexuality in “Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore” and “[A Story About Love].”

Finally, in order to encourage strong responses from students of diverse backgrounds and both genders, I have weighted selections toward the modern and contemporary and have included a significant number of multicultural and international selections.

Accompanying Apparatus

I believe that students accustomed to making their own texts will also become better readers of others’ texts. A student who writes stories has a special motivation to understand the story elements of point of view, character, and plot

because those elements have a context within his or her work as a creator. Similarly, students who write poems have an incentive to understand meter, metaphor, and diction in order to apply them in their own composing.

Accordingly, the book's apparatus is aimed primarily at prompting students to produce as well as consume texts. Such apparatus includes:

- Parts I–IV of *Reading and Writing from Literature*, described above;
- Activities for Writing and Discussion, following approximately half of the selections. These activities are designed to motivate many kinds of textual creation besides literary analysis. Activities involve students in both creative and analytic work as well as in sharing their work and ideas.
- Additional Activities for Writing and Discussion, at the end of each thematic section. The Additional Activities encourage students to make connections among the various readings within the section. In addition, they help students develop habits of recursiveness as they review and reconsider those readings and the notebook writings they have composed in response to them.
- Numerous examples of student-written texts, both within individual chapters and in the appendices, that will stimulate students in their own composing.

Summary: Distinctive Features of Reading and Writing from Literature

- Treats reading and writing as thoroughly interrelated: rhetoric chapters and other apparatus assure that students are always writing as they read and reading as they write.
- Empowers students both to *study* literary texts and to *use* literary texts as springboards for making texts of their own.
- Provides guidelines for a reading notebook that students use recursively: they accumulate writings—notes, thoughts, responses to readings, drafts, revisions—reread them regularly, and continuously revise their selected best work.
- Offers activities and apparatus that get students to look repeatedly at literary texts and their own texts, thereby promoting habits of recursive reading, thinking, and writing.
- Includes an anthology of 132 readings (short stories, poems, essays, and plays) that are weighted toward the contemporary and multicultural to encourage strong responses from students of diverse backgrounds.
- Features a simple and uncluttered apparatus that students can use in class and also navigate independently, without detailed guidance from the instructor.

- Contains numerous examples of student writings in many forms, both creative and analytic.
- Gives students incentives and strategies for continuing to read and write conversationally once this particular course is over.

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“Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. . . . They are for nothing but to inspire.”

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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