

# VISIONS AND REVISIONS

Critical Reading and Writing

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*For Dinah and Jackie*

*Democratic nations care but little for what has been,  
but they are haunted by visions of what will be.*

Alexis de Tocqueville  
*Democracy in America*

*There will be time . . .  
. . . for a hundred visions and revisions. . .*

T.S. Eliot  
"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

# TO THE INSTRUCTOR

At the heart of good writing is a person saying something to another person. While this simple statement may sound like a truism, all three of its elements have been overlooked in composition classes at one time or another. Writing involves a person, a human being with opinions, one whose vision of the world is shaped by personal experience. This person has something to say that only he or she can say, not merely a rehash of clichés or other people's opinions. And this person tells his or her idea to another person, who perhaps has different opinions shaped by different experiences.

At one extreme, the wish to remove the threat presented by a blank sheet of paper has led teachers to declare that anyone can write, inadvertently fostering the belief that unexamined bias and informed opinion are equally valid. At the other extreme, attempting to wean students from the overly personal "What I Did Last Summer" essay has led teachers to ban the word *I* and the phrase *in my opinion*—as if objectivity is the absence of opinion.

A middle ground, however, exists between personal writing with no knowledge and impersonal writing with no personality. Good writers treat the reader to the joy of watching an intelligent person use his or her experience to come to terms with important ideas in an analytical way.

This text takes for granted the importance of teaching writing as a process. However, writing is more than its process. Writing requires having something to say; and this comes from information. The beginning of knowledge is knowing what others have said—the great thinkers, the influential ideas. But there comes a time when critical mass is reached and new knowledge explodes.

We have seen this mental fusion light up the faces of students who suddenly

understood something about themselves they had never understood before. And we ourselves have been enlightened by the insights of students whose world view is very different from our own.

In our courses—as reflected in this book—we strive to make students part of the intellectual discourse that shapes our country and world, while not creating clones of ourselves. This is done through teaching students *how* to think, not *what* to think.

## · ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Introduction explains how this book produces the results we have just outlined. In summary:

- “Re-vision”—the process of looking again at our ideas—is central to intellectual growth, not just to writing. Students begin by writing from personal experience but then revise—“re-see”—their essays in light of reading selections.
- Major historical and literary documents show how America has revised its view of itself over the centuries; sample essays show students engaging similar issues as they write, read, and revise what they have written.
- Reading selections and writing assignments are totally integrated. “Making Connections” questions in each chapter ask students to connect new ideas to previous readings and essay topics in order to generate class discussions and new topics.
- Questions after the reading selections stress previewing, call attention to significant passages, and ask students how they would use this new information.
- Short exercises give practice in applying such techniques as identifying details, connecting ideas, and analyzing logical relationships.

## · ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# TO THE STUDENT

This book will help you become a personal but objective writer. You will begin by writing about your personal experience, but you will then read what others have experienced. Based on this new information you will revise, or reconsider, your original essay. In this way you will build the kind of "knowledge base" that allows educated people to analyze their personal experiences in a way that is relevant to others as well.

Too often, students remove themselves and their opinions from their writing—they present lifeless summaries of conventional wisdom or common prejudices; they write what they hope the instructor wants to read. But more than anything, teachers want to read lively, engaging essays that reward the time spent grading them. Teachers who have to read fifty or a hundred papers are thrilled to discover a creative or thoughtful mind, especially if the essay makes them see familiar texts or ideas in a new light.

Ignorance is not creative and thoughtful. Believing something because you never bothered to analyze it is death to your essay. The reader will turn away with disdain. On the other hand, showing that you have thought about important issues—their history, consequences, controversies—will impress even the reader who disagrees with your conclusions.

Gaining the kind of knowledge we are describing takes effort. But the benefits extend far beyond your composition course. More valuable even than writing skills, this book will involve you in a process of intellectual growth that we are convinced will make you a wiser, better person.

## • ABOUT THIS BOOK

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