

A BRIEF
GUIDE
TO

Writing
from

READINGS

SECOND EDITION

STEPHEN W.
WILHOIT

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A BRIEF GUIDE TO WRITING FROM READINGS

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PREFACE

A Brief Guide to Writing from Readings has evolved from my work with teachers across the curriculum who want to include more writing assignments in their general education classes. As a writing consultant at the University of Dayton, I am frequently asked for advice on how to teach writing more effectively. The types of assignments teachers include in their classes vary greatly by discipline, but talking with instructors over the years and reviewing course and program requirements across the curriculum have revealed one consistency: the importance of writing from readings. Whether students are taking classes in history or philosophy, biology or sociology, they will likely be asked to base some or all of their essays on readings, especially in introductory, general education courses. Surveys indicate that at colleges and universities across the country, regardless of the other types of assignments they will be asked to complete, most students will be asked to write from readings.

In offering advice to teachers, though, I face a dilemma. They ask their students to complete many different types of source-based essays: responses to textbook chapters in history, summaries of research in chemistry, critiques of arguments in philosophy. I am not an expert in these fields; I do not know exactly what historians expect chapter summaries to sound like, how philosophers expect the responses they assign to look on the page. However, I do know that certain writing and thinking skills are fundamental to composing summaries of or responses to readings, skills that students can develop regardless of specific disciplinary conventions of form, style, or documentation. In discussing writing with my colleagues, I find myself offering advice on teaching these basic skills, pointing out how instructors can build on them when teaching students to compose work appropriate for readers in their disciplines. I have focused this book on the basic skills students need to write from readings successfully.

This textbook is based on a few basic assumptions about writing and writing instruction. While I hold these assumptions with varying degrees of conviction, they largely guide my views concerning the type of writing instruction we should offer students in introductory courses across the curriculum:

1. One skill college students ought to acquire is the ability to read, analyze, and write the type of conventional academic prose appropriate not only for English courses but also for classes across the disciplines.
2. Underlying a wide variety of specific discipline-based writing assignments is a set of general critical reading and writing skills.

3. Instructors across the curriculum are interested in helping their students produce effective source-based essays but may not know how to teach students the basic skills they need to compose successful papers.
4. Writing textbooks intended for use by students and teachers across the curriculum ought to be practical, brief, and accessible, avoiding jargon whenever possible.

While not all composition theorists would endorse these assumptions, I have found them fundamental in my effort to work with teachers across the curriculum and in writing this text.

The book contains advice on reading critically; keeping a writing journal; quoting and paraphrasing material; summarizing, responding to, critiquing, and synthesizing readings; avoiding plagiarism; and documenting essays. At the end of every chapter is a summary chart students can consult as they work on assignments, and at the end of the book are checklists students can use when revising and proofreading their work. A discussion of three documentation styles is included, those advanced by the American Psychological Association (APA), the Council of Biology Editors (CBE), and the Modern Language Association (MLA). Numerous sample reference citations are provided for each style in alphabetical order: APA first, followed by CBE and MLA.

Finally, I want to describe the kinds of readers I had in mind as I wrote this book. I wanted the book to appeal to experienced English instructors teaching an expository or argumentative writing course. These teachers might ask their students to purchase a handbook or research guide but probably would not be interested in having their students purchase a fully developed rhetoric. *A Brief Guide* could serve as a reference tool for students in such a class or even as a primary textbook if teachers required their students to compose summaries, responses, or critiques.

I also had in mind instructors across the curriculum who are looking for a writing textbook to use in their introductory, general education classes. I hope this book will prove useful to teachers who employ source-based writing assignments in these courses and want to offer instruction on fundamental critical reading and writing skills. The instructors could build on these skills to teach their students how to write essays that conform to conventions of particular disciplines.

Most importantly, I tried to keep students in mind. I wanted to write a book they would find useful and accessible. I assumed that students in some classes might be asked to consult this book when completing an assignment without direct instruction from the teacher. Consequently, I tried to offer clear, sequential instruction that will help students working on their own. I also wanted to write a textbook that could help students write papers in a number of different classes. In *A Brief Guide to Writing from Readings* I offer instruction and advice that students will find useful throughout their years in college.

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Chapter 1

CRITICAL READING

DEFINITION AND PURPOSE

Most successful college writers are also sophisticated, critical readers. They assume a skeptical attitude toward texts: instead of believing whatever they read, they critically examine the author's ideas and their own responses to the reading. They are active, *reflective* readers who ask questions about the words on the page, mark passages, take notes, and draw connections between the author's ideas and their own experiences and knowledge. They are open to new ideas, but do not accept them without serious, *reflective* consideration. Unreflective readers, however, tend to accept unquestioningly what they see in print. In their view, if something has been published, it must be accurate. Instead of asking questions about what they read, they tend to accept the author's words at face value.

A major difference, then, between reflective and unreflective readers is the way they try to learn from what they read. Unreflective readers usually believe that the meaning of a text can be found in the words on the page: to understand a text, all a reader has to do is understand the meaning of the author's words. For them, reading is a rather simple, straightforward process: they read through a text, look up any words they do not know, isolate the author's main ideas, perhaps take some notes, then move on to the next reading. They also tend to believe that because the meaning of a text resides in the author's words, students reading the same material ought to come away with the same

information: the text should mean roughly the same thing to any competent reader who studies it.

Reflective, critical readers, however, tend to adopt a different view of reading. They believe that the meaning of a text resides in the *interaction* between the reader and the words on the page: to understand a text, readers must be aware of how their own knowledge, feelings, and experience influence their *interpretation* of the words on the page. For them, reading is a rather dynamic, fluid process: they read through a text skeptically, assess the author's words and ideas in light of their own knowledge and experience, jot down some notes that capture their questions and responses, reread the text after they have had some time to consider what the author had to say, then move on.

Viewing reading as an interactive process can help you better understand the complex nature of writing from sources and the need to be an active, critical reader. For example, it helps you understand why a story you read your first year in high school means something different to you when you read it again your first year in college. The words on the page have not changed, you have, and because you have changed, the “meaning” of the story has changed for you as well. This interactive view of reading also helps explain how twenty students in an introductory philosophy class can read the same meditation by Descartes and come away with twenty slightly different interpretations of the piece. Active, critical readers understand that for any given person the meaning of a text results from the interaction between the words on the page and that reader's knowledge, feelings, and expertise; reading involves more than a simple transfer of information from the words on the page to the mind of the reader.

Does this mean that all interpretations of a reading are equally valid? No. While every person forms his or her own understanding of a reading, people can and often do misread texts: they may not read carefully, they may not understand certain terms or ideas, or they may lack the knowledge and experience they need to form an adequate interpretation of the text. As a safeguard against misinterpretation, critical readers discuss the material with others who have read it. Comparing their own reading of a text with a teacher's or a peer's reading can help clarify the material and prevent misunderstanding.

In addition, the author of the piece plays an important role in reading. Good writers try to influence their readers' understanding of and response to a text. When writing, authors manipulate the language, structure, and content of their prose to achieve a certain effect on their audience. Success is never guaranteed, but good writers know that they can at least influence how readers might respond to their work through the choices they make while composing. Critical readers take this into account when approaching a text—they try to be aware not only of what they bring to the reading, but also of the choices the writer has made to achieve a certain goal.

Learning to read material actively and critically can be difficult. However, critical readers tend to understand course material more fully, prepare for class

more efficiently, and write from readings more effectively. Below you will find a number of suggestions aimed at helping you become a more active, critical reader. Central to this process is the ability and willingness to ask good questions about your reading of a text and to keep a written record of your responses. Critical readers refuse to sit back passively while they read; they actively question and respond to texts in light of their own knowledge, feelings, and experience.

ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT YOU READ

Instead of passively accepting the ideas an author presents, a critical reader attempts to engage in a dialogue with the text, posing and working out answers to tough questions concerning the material's purpose, audience, language, and content.

The most productive critical questions center on the connections that exist between a text's author and his or her audience, subject, and language. Everything you read has been written by someone for someone about something using certain words on a page. Learning how to identify and question the relationship between these various aspects of a reading can help you understand the material more fully and determine its meaning and importance.

Typical questions you should ask of a reading include:

- Who is the author of the piece?
- What is her stand on the issue she's addressing?
- What are her interests, qualifications, or possible biases?
- What was her intent when writing this piece?
- Who is the intended audience?
- How does the author support her contentions?
- What language has she used to convey her ideas on this topic to this audience for this purpose?
- Based on my own knowledge and experience, what do I think about her ideas, intent, language, and support?
- How well does the author achieve her goal?

When you are confronted with conflicting sources of information on a topic (as is frequently the case in college), asking questions such as these is a particularly important way to sort out the authors' different positions, evaluate the worth of each source, and decide who presents the clearer, more convincing case.

Forming a full, critical understanding of a reading requires asking the right kinds of questions about the author, subject, audience, and language of the piece. Below you will find a series of questions to ask before, during, and after your reading. However, these questions are merely suggestive, not exhaustive; they indicate only starting points for your critical assessment of a text.

Your teacher and peers may suggest other questions to ask as well. Finally, it is a good idea to write out your answers to these questions. Do not rely on your memory alone to keep track of your responses.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU BEGIN A CLOSE READING OF A TEXT

Whether you are assigned to read material in history or art, biology or sociology, before you begin you need to ask yourself a series of questions concerning the author and publication of the piece as well as your own knowledge of and attitude toward the topic. Answering these questions may help you determine any biases present in the reading and help ensure that you remain open to any new perspectives or information the author has to offer.

Questions Concerning the Author

- Who is the author?
- What are her credentials?
- What else has she written on the topic?
- What possible biases might have influenced her work?

Before you begin to read a text, try to assess the credibility and expertise of the person who wrote the piece. Who is the author, and what are his or her qualifications for writing on this topic? If, for instance, you are writing a paper about global warming for your English class and find an article you want to use in your essay, note whether you are reading a research report produced by a scientist who conducted her own studies on the topic, an informative article composed by a reporter who interviewed that scientist, or an opinion piece written by a television star who has no particular expertise in climatology. The first author is probably well qualified to offer expert opinion; the second author, while less qualified than the first, may still be a legitimate source of information. However, approach the third author skeptically: good actors are rarely good scientists. If you plan to use any of these readings to support a position of your own in an essay, understand that academic readers will tend to believe authors with solid, professional credentials and demonstrated expertise in the topic.

Also, determine, as best you can, any biases operating in the authors' work. Note who the writers work for, who supported their research, who publishes their results. No writers are completely objective; all writers bring to their work certain biases or preferences—political, religious, methodological. These biases may influence the type of study authors conduct, the type of evidence they use to support their contentions, the language they employ, the conclusions they draw. When researching a paper on abortion, for instance, it would be important to note whether the author of a piece is a member of the National Abortion Rights Action League or Operation Life, even if the writer claims to be presenting the results of an objective study. In college you will