



**MYRON
TUMAN**

VISIONS

READINGS FOR A CHANGING WORLD

Visions

Readings for a Changing World

Myron C. Tuman

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PREFACE

“We must find topics for our writing courses,” writes Robert Scholes in *The Rise and Fall of English*, “that enable students to focus on their culture at the points where it most clearly impinges upon them, where they already have tacit knowledge that needs only to be cultivated to become more explicit” (p. 102). *Visions* attempts to be a college reader providing just such topics—a college reader for students who find themselves in the midst of a new information age. While there are many other thematic readers that raise large questions about human beings and their place in the world, as well as an increasing number of more specialized thematic readers that ask students to read and write about computers and the Internet, *Visions* is the first reader that brings a broad humanistic focus (what some might call a “non-techie” focus) to important questions relating to technology.

The readings are organized in six parts, each of which asks students to consider important questions not just about how technology is changing all our lives for better or worse, but also about what it is we really want from technology—or, stated differently, what is our vision for the future? Why is it, for instance, that at some moments most of us seem attracted to simple, elegant solutions to problems (and hence seek the kinds of things that technology seems so good at providing), whereas at other times we seem more interested in creating obstacles for ourselves: in climbing a mountain instead of driving around it, in trying to catch fish with a lure instead of bait? What vision do we have for our own lives? What problems emerge when our lives become too simple or too complex, too easy or too difficult? And what role does technology play in helping us make the right choices?

This is a reader for teachers who want their students to think deeply, not only about the future and about the best uses of technology but also about the puzzling relationship between technology and human nature—and about how the interplay of work and play remains a crucial factor in our leading happy, productive lives and building solid communities. The one issue throughout most of the readings and Explorations in *Visions* is the conflicting, often competing roles that simple and complex technologies play in our lives.

The book consists of eighteen chapters grouped into six parts. The three chapters that make up the first part (Objects of Desire) deal with everyday objects (basically tools, toys, and gadgets); the three chapters that form the last part (Future Thoughts) deal most broadly and most directly with issues related to technology and the future. In between, there are clusters of three chapters under parts entitled At Home, At Play, At School, and At Work. Although technology is a common thread in the eighteen chapters, the intent throughout is to offer an extremely wide range of readings and, hence, discussion and

writing topics—on the different ways (high tech versus traditional) that we make new friends; decide where we live; and choose where we shop, what we eat, how we entertain ourselves, how we keep in shape, and how we earn a living, to list just some of the most basic issues in our lives shaped in part by technology.

The readings themselves are clustered on the assumption that the best discussions will involve student responses not to individual readings but to the series of broad topics raised directly or indirectly in each chapter's set of four or five readings. In the case of the first chapter (Simple Things), for example, class discussion and writing would normally follow the students' reading all five of the selections: Thoreau's praise for his simple homemade furniture; George Carlin's monologue about his stuff; Henry Petroski's tribute to the lowly pencil; Eric Brende's analysis of Amish technology; and Alan Thein Durning's list of seven ultraefficient, albeit thoroughly unglamorous, tools.

What broadens the assignments even more is that each group of readings is followed by a set of six Explorations related to the readings. Each Exploration is itself based on a new but related topic and contains (a) a group activity, (b) Web work, or links for further research, and (c) a suggested writing assignment. Embedded in this reader, therefore, are 108 directed assignments that take students out from the cluster of readings in many exciting, unexpected ways.

Just what students discuss and write about will vary greatly from class to class. Each individual reading has a suggested reading prompt that can be the basis of a writing assignment, just as each of the eighteen chapters has an initial set of questions for all the readings. Yet each of the eighteen chapters concludes with Explorations that, while thematically related to the readings, can take the class as a whole or students working individually or in small groups in countless directions as they respond to the suggested writing topics or to other writing assignments generated within the class.

Following the five readings in Chapter 1 listed above, for example, are six related Explorations, on (1) hammers and other low-tech tools, (2) what gives some objects "glamour," (3) packaging, (4) bicycles, (5) clutter, and (6) organizers. When discussing simple tools, for instance, students are directed to the Best Buys page at Ace Hardware's Web site; when discussing clutter, they are asked to visit the Dallas-based Container Store on the Web; when discussing organizers, the Dayrunner Corporation. The goal here is to use the Web as a quick and easy resource through which students can do field research; this is comparable to asking students to visit a local hardware or office supply store when brainstorming for their papers. Links to all the sites mentioned in the text, plus some more up-to-date links, are included in the Web site that accompanies this book (www.abacon.com/tuman).

While *Visions* can be used strictly as a traditional reader, teachers with limited experience using online resources with their students will find the

Web work section that accompanies each Exploration an engaging, non-threatening way to extend the boundaries of their classes. The dual goal in having students visit the suggested Web sites is to raise students' interest in the topic and to enrich their base of knowledge—all in preparation for a writing assignment that will ask them to reflect on their own vision of the future and to ponder just what kind of simple and complex structures they want in their own lives. The Web work sections of each Exploration, therefore, are part of the larger aim of the book to help students become more familiar with, and, hence, less in awe of, many aspects of the new information age. The Web is a strange and wonderful place where students can do research on Wal-Mart, for instance, in part by visiting the Wal-Mart corporate site—likely not a place for an objective assessment of the company and yet a site rich with information for anyone trying to understand problems confronting small towns and small businesses. What students learn on the Web, in other words, is designed to complement, not to replace, the reading and writing that has long formed the core of college writing classes.

All of us—the most critical of students and most critical of teachers alike—are already awash in expertly produced advertising designed to flatter and cajole us: to play effectively to our longings and insecurities even when we know better, even when we are intellectually aware of just how we are being manipulated. As skillful flatterers know, we can all be seduced by our desires. “I can resist anything but temptation,” quipped Oscar Wilde—and perhaps the defining experience of modern life is the dangerous, alluring interplay of desire and technology. That interplay forms the backdrop of *Visions*: the way our craving for new solutions—for progress—is sometimes a rationalization for new pleasures.

One of the goals of this text is to help students attain a critical awareness of this rationalization process. Such awareness can be difficult, given that our attachments to technology are often much deeper, much harder to pin down than we may care to admit. Analysis has its limits, in other words, even for the most intelligent among us. This is why the pedagogy at the core of this book constantly asks students for personal reflection as well as research and analysis. True understanding of how we as individuals fit into the complex interplay of new technology and ordinary experience (what might be called *deep* or *authentic understanding* of the interplay of technology and desire) is likely to come only when students move back and forth between detailed narrative accounts of their own experience and the ideas of others as presented in the readings, class discussions, and Web work. The critical moment for students using this book will come in their writing, when they test for themselves what they encounter in readings here and on the Web (for example, about the value of technology in the schools) against their own real-life experiences. Central to *Visions* is the premise that students cannot achieve critical understanding of the Web or of the world at large without thinking and writing deeply about their own lives.

THE VISIONS WEB SITE

References to Web materials appear in two recurring places in the text—in the headnote for each of the readings and in the Web work section of each of the 108 Explorations. This printed text ordinarily contains a brief reference to these Web materials, but more complete references as well as the actual links to these places (as well as links to sites mentioned in the readings) can be found at the accompanying Web site: www.abacon.com/tuman.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I can still remember a fellow teacher raving about a student of his who had won an art contest with a drawing she had executed by looking only at the model, not the picture. Why bother? was my first response then. How wonderful! my second. Here some twenty years ago was the core idea of this book: just how, when, and why we shun the easy way and instead cultivate difficulty. How can we explain the perseverance of low technology in a high-tech world?

Now, all these years later, I still owe a real debt of gratitude to Tim Trapolin and the entire faculty at the McGehee School for helping to teach me that much of the joy of teaching and of learning comes from doing things the hard way.

I also owe a different debt to my father, Walter Tuman, who, at age 86, provided serendipitous help with the title of this book, when in a phone conversation of March 1999, he referred to his own interests and current readings in new, visionary technologies. Once again, thanks, Dad.

At a more immediate level, I have benefited from the meticulous attention of Genie Davis in the preparation of the manuscript, from the general editorial assistance of Kathryn Tuman, and from the computer expertise of Genie and Warren Eckstein in the creation of the accompanying Web site. I would also like to thank the following helpful readers of the manuscript: Joe Opiela at Allyn and Bacon; Nick Carbone, Marlboro College; John Clark, Bowling Green State University; Ray Dumont, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Douglas Eyman, Cape Fear Community College; Paul Heilker, Virginia Tech; Will Hochman, University of Southern Colorado; Joseph Janangelo, Loyola University; Bill Lalicker, West Chester University; James McDonald, University of Southwestern Louisiana; Clyde Moneyhun, Youngstown State; David Roberts, Samford University; Peter Sands, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; and Margaret Syverson, University of Texas at Austin.

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The great American writer Henry David Thoreau (a person of intense desires and strong opinions about technology and progress) referred to most human inventions as “improved means to an unimproved end.” This textbook seeks to encourage students and their teachers to look closely at what things are changing in our world and what things are staying more or less the same—and, in particular, to consider the often competing effects of increasing simplicity and complexity in our lives.

What kinds of changes really do make our lives better (lead to progress), and in what areas of our lives are we content with older and possibly simpler processes? And finally, can we use the readings and explorations offered here to separate what is truly important (improving our goals or ends) from the constant distraction and hype related to new, “improved” ways of doing things?

The goal of *Visions*, then, is to get people to think about the interplay between technology and four other key concepts that continue to reshape our world: progress, community, desire, and sustainability.

Envisioning the Future

TECHNOLOGY

How does technology make my life better—easier, safer, more convenient, even simpler? Does it work much the same for other people of my generation? For people generally? And how does technology make my life (and the lives of other people) worse—more expensive, less convenient, more complex? What new gadgets do I absolutely depend on each day—and how did others ever live without them? What new gadgets am I convinced I could live happily without the rest of my life? What would the world be like if everyone had some wonderful new technology? Or if suddenly some seemingly indispensable technology such as electricity disappeared, and no one had it?

PROGRESS

Will our lives be better than those of our parents? Will our children's lives be better than ours? And their children's lives better than theirs? And just what do we mean by *better*: more material prosperity (more cars, TVs), more leisure