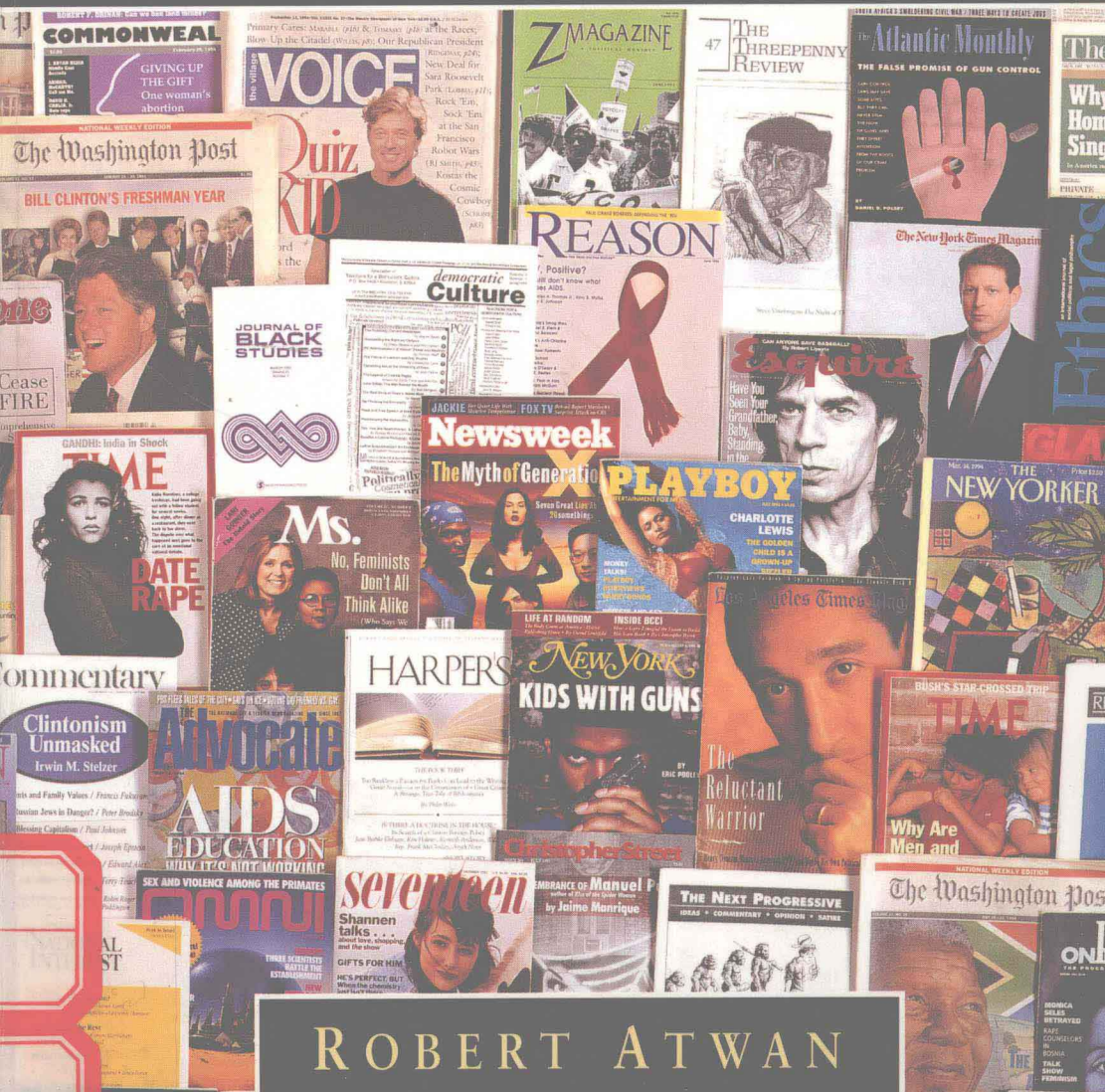




# Our Times

Readings from Recent Periodicals

FOURTH EDITION



ROBERT ATWAN



# **Our Times**

## **Readings from Recent Periodicals**

*FOURTH EDITION*

Edited by

***ROBERT ATWAN***

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## Preface for Instructors

Like its predecessors, the fourth edition of *Our Times* is a collection of contemporary nonfiction intended for use in composition courses. This wealth of very recent writing — over half of it published since 1993 and *all* of it since 1990 — is drawn from virtually every important American periodical. In its wide range of timely topics, the collection offers a distinctive and comprehensive view of life in America today.

### New to This Edition

This fourth edition contains fifty-four selections, forty-one of which are new. The readings are grouped into fifteen units that amply cover the dominant themes, issues, and ideas of our time. A number of these topics appeal directly to the everyday lives of today's students: ethnic and generational identity, physical appearance, gender differences, sexual relations, and interracial communication. Represented, too, are a variety of perspectives on some of our country's most compelling social and political issues: violence, AIDS, the homeless, gun control, and immigration. Other units deal directly with issues of considerable importance to both college faculty and students: speech codes, date rape, and racism. This edition also contains new supplementary selections, in the form of relevant excerpts or documents, that sharply focus the issues. Among such supplements are a *New York Times* news story on interracial dating, an advertisement marketing handguns to women, and an excerpt from Antioch College's now famous "Sexual Offense Policy."

Besides the many new selections and topics, this edition pays far greater attention to writing than did previous volumes. Instructors will now find compositional matters covered in a general introduction that suggests ways of moving from discussion to writing. Also new to this edition are the writing assignments that follow each selection. The instructor's manual now includes a table of contents that conveniently organizes the selections by rhetorical modes and compositional techniques. This alternate table of contents annotates key selections that are particularly good examples of writing strategies, and it includes exercises that help students apply those strategies.

These new features ensure that the fourth edition of *Our Times* will easily adapt to the agenda of most composition programs. The units are arranged in a familiar order, starting with topics close to students' personal experiences (e.g., physical appearance, identity), and then proceeding to more public topics (e.g., gun control legislation, immigration policy). The

progression of the topics is reflected in changes in the types of writing assignments in individual units. Though each chapter mixes different kinds of assignments, the apparatus with selections and units generally takes students through personal and expository work and then concentrates on argumentative papers. Instructors who want to focus on all or just some of the rhetorical modes will find them amply represented throughout the collection. In fact, many articles were especially selected to demonstrate rhetorical strategies that will help students shape persuasive arguments — exemplification, classification, and causal reasoning. More so than earlier editions, the reading material in this edition of *Our Times* gives instructors the opportunity to introduce first-year students to a wide variety of compositional models.

### The Units

In contrast to most thematically arranged readers, which contain a small number of broad categories, *Our Times* features a larger number of tightly focused units, most with only three or four selections that speak directly to each other. The advantages of using these smaller units in a composition course should be immediately apparent to instructors: they permit a wider range and variety of topics to be covered in a syllabus; they allow more focused discussion and writing; and they can be adequately handled in one or two class periods.

Like the previous edition, this collection also includes two expanded chapters designed to be used for more extensive assignments and class work. Placed at the end of the book, these “conference chapters” will allow instructors to cover a topic in greater depth and detail. Each chapter showcases a major campus issue: one examines the pros and cons of speech codes, and the other features a variety of opinions on date rape. Each conference chapter is designed to accommodate extended discussion and debate on topics close to students’ lives. In keeping with the spirit of *Our Times*, instructors may want to set up classroom “conferences” around one or both of these chapters. Such conferences would encourage a broad range of discussion and participation; students could form several panels to deal with the various aspects of the issue. Instructors could also use these chapters as a starting point for research papers.

### Reading, Discussion, and Writing

With its emphasis on recent issues and ideas, the fourth edition of *Our Times* invites class discussion and debate; in fact, the book is carefully designed to facilitate such student responses. Each unit is prefaced by a contextual note that not only helps students find their way into the readings but points the way to future discussion. Key biographical information about the authors is unobtrusively included in footnotes. Each unit ends with a section called “Discussing the Unit,” which includes three sets of interlocking study questions and tasks that help students prepare for class

discussion and then incorporate that discussion into their own writing. First, a “Suggested Topic for Discussion” lets students know beforehand what main topic their class discussion will cover. This topic gives students a common purpose in reading and helps keep the discussion focused. Second, “Preparing for Class Discussion” gives students questions and ideas to think about so they will come to class with something to say about the topic. Included in these preparatory activities are new “Prewriting Assignments” that ask the student to do some preliminary writing. Third, “From Discussion to Writing” gives students a writing topic that — without being redundant — draws on and applies the class discussion.

Finally, for instructors who don’t want to use the class discussion unit, or who don’t want to use it all the time, *Our Times* contains alternate apparatus. Two sets of questions follow each selection: “Responding as a Reader” and “Responding as a Writer.” These discussion questions and writing assignments (which require responses ranging from a single sentence to a full essay) can be used by instructors who prefer to concentrate on individual selections. They can also be used, of course, to supplement the unit apparatus.

A basic premise of *Our Times* is that class discussion — often overlooked as a pedagogical resource — can play an important role in composition by stimulating fresh ideas and creating a social context for writing. Instructors interested in using class discussion as a basis for writing (or in simply eliciting more discussion in general) are encouraged to have their students read “Reading, Writing, and Class Discussion,” which offers some practical advice on how to prepare for and participate in class discussion. *Our Times* is designed to get students reading, thinking, talking, and writing about the society they live in. Furthermore, the book acquaints students with the diverse viewpoints and controversial contents of America’s leading periodicals. In the hope that students will become regular readers of some of these, a subscription list describing the various periodicals represented in the book appears at the back of *Our Times*.

## The Instructor’s Manual

A fuller description of how to generate and direct class discussion can be found in my essay in the instructor’s manual, *From Discussion to Writing: Instructional Resources for Our Times*. For teachers interested in using discussion as a basis for composition, the manual features three other relevant essays. In “Forming Forums: Student Presentations to Encourage Research, Discussion, and Better Writing,” Liz de Beer of Middlesex County College offers many practical ideas for using *Our Times* in the classroom. In “The Morton Downey Jr. Model: Talk-Show Influence on Classroom Discussion,” Judith Rae Davis of Bergen Community College provides a provocative view not only of how talk shows influence student attitudes but also of how they influence classroom discussion in general. Davis’s essay, which originally appeared in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* (October 1989), won the Best Article of the Year Award

presented by that journal. And for this edition of the book, Scott Lloyd DeWitt of Ohio State University in Marion has contributed “Emerging Technologies, Changing Discussions: Using Computer-mediated Discussion in the Writing Classroom.” Instructors interested in developing a discussion-based writing agenda within the new electronic technologies will profit from DeWitt’s exciting proposals.

Prepared by Mary McAleer Balkun, the manual is an indispensable component of *Our Times*. Besides providing a convenient, brief summary of each selection and its relation to the topic, it offers numerous classroom activities for each unit. The manual encourages instructors to use a variety of collaborative tasks, from small-group writing exercises to informal panels and debates. It also contains suggestions for additional reading and research as well as recommendations for supplementing the readings with readily available material. Perhaps the most valuable part of the manual, however, is its “Suggestions for Directing Class Discussion.” Linked directly to the “Preparing for Class Discussion” questions in the book, these suggestions offer instructors practical ways to channel their students’ reading and preparation into lively and productive discussion — and then into interesting compositions.

In keeping with this fourth edition’s emphasis on writing, Mary McAleer Balkun’s manual contains several new compositional features designed to facilitate connections between reading, discussion, and writing. The manual now contains suggestions for a “reaction journal,” extra in-class writing activities and assignments, and suggestions for long-term projects and additional research. The manual also points up connections between selections in various units, offering alternatives to instructors who might want to work outside the main table of contents.

## The Revision Cycle

Why a new edition of *Our Times* after only two years? The reason is simple: to keep the selections as fresh and topical as possible. Any instructor who wants to use reading material that reflects recent controversies and trends knows how quickly issue-oriented anthologies become dated. It always surprises me how broadly most composition readers define “contemporary”; many books in use still contain “contemporary” essays from the sixties. These may be contemporaneous with the experiences of some instructors, but certainly not with those of younger teachers and especially not with their first-year students, who are often being asked to accept as “contemporary” material that was published well before they were born. All of the material reprinted in *Our Times* is truly contemporary with respect to the lives and experiences of students; in fact, most of the material was written during the year or two prior to the book’s publication. To keep each edition of *Our Times* as current as possible, the book will be revised every two years. For the convenience of instructors, each edition will be available for three years from the publication date. *Our Times/3*, for

example, remains available until November 1995. Each edition, moreover, will contain only a small proportion of material from the previous edition.

### Acknowledgments

As series editor of the annual *Best American Essays*, I monitor every issue of nearly every major national and regional magazine. I would like to thank the many editors and publishers around the country who generously keep me posted on relevant essays and articles. The selections in the fourth edition of *Our Times* are drawn from forty-six different magazines and newspapers. These periodicals represent a full spectrum of regions, interests, and points of view — from *Cosmopolitan* to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, from *People* to *Reconstruction*, from *The Nation* to *The World & I*.

I'd like to thank, too, my students in several writing classes I taught over the past few years at Seton Hall University, where I developed and tried out many of the ideas for this book. I hope some of these students learned as much from me about writing as I learned from them about teaching. A good part of my thinking about the links between writing and discussion grew out of a 1987 conference at Seton Hall, "Redefining the Essay for the Humanities," in which I participated with (among others) the late O. B. Hardison of Georgetown University, Donald McQuade of the University of California at Berkeley, William Howarth of Princeton University, Scott Russell Sanders of Indiana University, George Core of the *Sewanee Review*, Kurt Spellmeyer of Rutgers University, Thomas Recchio of the University of Connecticut, Michael Hall of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Jacqueline Berke of Drew University, and Alexander Butrym (the conference director), Barbara Lukacs, and Nancy Enright of Seton Hall.

For their assistance on the fourth edition of *Our Times*, I'd like to thank a number of friends, colleagues, and reviewers for many helpful suggestions. I especially extend my gratitude to the following people for their extremely helpful in-depth reviews of the previous edition: Linda Barry of Ohio State University at Marion; Ann Cavanaugh of Lehigh University; Scott Lloyd DeWitt of Ohio State University at Marion; Charles French of Lehigh University; Andrew Manno of Lehigh University; Lee Martin of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln; Margaret Meyer of Ithaca College; Erin Roland of Lehigh University; Timothy Skeen of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln; and Kathleen Spencer of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. The three previous editions of *Our Times* profited from the ideas and suggestions of numerous people and, since their influence is still felt in this edition, I would be remiss not to thank them again. Kathleen Shine Cain, Michael Meyer, and Thomas Recchio reviewed the earliest plans for *Our Times* and offered many cogent suggestions. Charles O'Neill and Matthew Kearney provided two enormously useful essay-reviews of the first edition. Charles O'Neill also prepared — and helped design — the instructor's man-



ual for the first two editions of *Our Times*. I also received good ideas from several teachers who generously responded to a comprehensive questionnaire: Liz de Beer (who also prepared the instructor's manual for the third edition of *Our Times*), Gunnar Gunderson, Peggy J. Hailey, Jeanne Pavy, Vonnie J. Rosendahl, Dian Wyle Seiler, and Robert Weinberger.

Working on all editions of *Our Times* would have been far more difficult (and certainly far less enjoyable) without the help of my friend Jack Roberts of Thomas Aquinas College. Jack helped in the preparation of apparatus for previous editions, and the series continues to be informed by his lively and intelligent discussion of topics and selections. I also receive help throughout editions from my friend Peter Lushing of the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, who generously advises me on relevant legal issues raised by selections and often supplies me with necessary material.

I also wish to thank several people at Bedford Books who helped me prepare this and earlier editions of *Our Times*. Bedford's publisher, Charles H. Christensen, brings a Montaignean spirit to these endeavors; he helps fashion and refashion, shape and reshape each book until it reaches a "go-ahead" form. My first editor, Joan E. Feinberg, in the best editorial tradition, not only helped me develop many of my thoughts but contributed many splendid ideas of her own — and continues to do so. Jane Betz, my editor through the second and third editions, participated in so many aspects of these books that she'll always be a presence in the series. I especially want to thank my editor, Beth Castrodale, who played a key role in helping to shape this new edition and whose insights into contemporary culture supplied a welcome and very productive stimulus. I also appreciate the help I received from Verity Winship, who provided valuable research assistance and edited the instructor's manual; Kimberly Chabot and Audrey Murfin, who helped track down articles and magazines for the fourth edition; and Laura Arcari, who cleared permissions under a tight deadline. Michelle McSweeney guided the book through production, paying careful attention to numerous details, and Heidi Hood and Alanya Harter assisted throughout the process. Elizabeth Schaaf managed the production of *Our Times* with her usual attentiveness and care. Once again, I was fortunate to receive Dan Otis's superb copyediting and perceptive comments. I thank, too, Jorge Hernandez and Mary Lou Wilshaw, who proofread the pages. Advertising and promotion manager Donna Dennison and her helpful staff also deserve warm thanks for their work.

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R. A.

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## **Introduction: Reading, Writing, and Class Discussion**

Students often begin their college writing courses with a popular misconception. They believe that writing is an intensely private activity demanding extraordinary inner resources. They picture writers sitting alone at their desks, staring at a blank page until inspiration strikes. Indeed, for centuries this romantic image of anxious solitude followed by a burst of creativity has served as a powerful model of how literature is produced. But for the average student, who has little knowledge of how writers work and who has perhaps never observed people writing professionally, this popular image can lead to a distorted view of the writing process and the role it plays in a person's intellectual development.

Most writers work within a lively social environment, one in which issues and ideas are routinely discussed and debated. They often begin writing on topics that grow directly out of specific situations: a journalist covers a murder trial; a professor prepares a paper for a conference; a social worker describes a complex case; an executive reports on an important meeting. Usually, the writer consults with friends and co-workers about the task and solicits their opinions and support. The writer will sometimes ask these friends and colleagues to comment on a draft of the work. If the work is to be published, the writer almost always receives additional advice and criticism in the form of editorial comment, copyediting, proofreading, and independent reviews. By the time the work appears in print, it has probably gone through numerous drafts (some writers do as many as ten or twelve) and has been subjected to a rigorous sequence of editorial efforts, from fact-checking to stylistic fine-tuning.

Nearly all the published work a student reads has gone through this process. Even the briefest article in a magazine has probably been checked several times by several people. Of course, none of this activity is visible in the final product. Students have little knowledge of the various levels of work and collaboration that go into a piece of writing: the author's often extensive reading and research; the time spent traveling, interviewing, and discussing; the organization of information, the composition of several drafts, and the concerted effort of editors and publishers.

Too often, the student writes in an intellectual and emotional vacuum. He or she may feel only minimally engaged with an assigned topic — which may seem to have come out of nowhere — and may not know anyone with

whom the topic may be seriously and intelligently discussed. Unlike the professional writer, the student often sits down alone and tries to write with little personal incentive or encouragement from others. No wonder students often find it hard to begin a paper. Instead of writing for a group of interested people, they often feel that they are only writing for one person — the instructor, who will read not for discussion but for evaluation.

This book is designed to help students fill in the intellectual and emotional vacuum that confronts them when they begin to write. The beginning student's two biggest problems in composition — finding something to say and getting started — most often arise when the student lacks a vital connection with what other people are saying about an issue or idea. In this sense, the basis of many student writing problems is not so much technical or psychological as it is *social*. These problems, at their worst, are reflected in prose that sounds oddly disconnected from current public discourse.

The art of writing and the art of discussion are closely linked. Experienced writers invariably write within a climate of discussion. Their writing often refers to the ideas and opinions of others. Many writers, especially in the academic community, directly respond to other writers: a scientist reexamines the experimental procedures of other scientists; a literary critic takes exception to a prevailing method of interpretation; a sociologist offers an alternate explanation of a colleague's data; a historian disputes the conclusions of another historian. Such people are not writing in a vacuum. Their ideas often originate in discussion, their writing responds to discussion, and their papers will inevitably provoke further discussion.

### The Art of Discussion

“Discussion” is one of those commonly used words from speech and rhetoric — like “essay” or “style” — that remains difficult to define precisely. The word has a long and complex history. It derives from the Latin verb *discutere*, meaning to dash, scatter, or to shake out. It gradually took on a legal and, later, a rhetorical sense of “breaking” a case or a topic down into its various parts for investigation. Though the word is ordinarily used today to mean “to talk over” or “to consider carefully,” it still retains the rhetorical sense of sifting a topic into separate parts for closer examination.

It is easier to say what discussion is not: it is neither conversation nor debate. Unlike conversation, discussion is purposefully conducted around a given topic. Unlike debate, it is not formally organized into two competing points of view. Think of discussion as a speech activity that falls between informal conversation and formal debate. For the purpose of this book, discussion is defined as “the free and open exploration of a specified topic by a small group of prepared people.” The goal of such discussion is not to arrive at a group decision or a consensus of opinion, but to investigate as many sides of a topic as possible.

To keep discussion from rigidifying into a debate between two competing sides or from drifting into aimless conversation, a discussion leader or moderator is usually required. The discussion leader may play an active role in discussion (a style we see displayed by many television talk-show hosts) or may choose to remain neutral. But regardless of the extent of the leader's role, he or she will ordinarily introduce the topic, encourage participation, maintain an orderly sequence of responses, and ensure that people stick to the point. If a group desires a greater degree of formality in its discussions, it may also appoint someone to keep notes of the meetings. With its regularly scheduled sessions, diverse members, and clear-cut academic purpose, the typical college composition class of fifteen to twenty-five students is an ideal discussion group.

There are many different kinds of discussion groups and techniques. Anyone who would like to learn more about various discussion groups and methods may want to consult such standard texts as Ernest G. Bormann's *Discussion and Group Methods* (3rd ed., 1989) or Mary A. Bany and Lois V. Johnson's *Classroom Group Behavior: Group Dynamics in Education* (revised edition, 1966). Heidi Hayes Jacobs's *The Discussion Types Model: Reconceptualizing the Discussion to Develop Critical Thought* (1988) is another valuable book on the subject. These and other similar studies can usually be found in the education, psychology, or speech sections of most college libraries.

## Participating in Class Discussion

Like writing, discussion is a learned activity. To be adept at group discussion requires the development of a variety of skills — in speaking, listening, thinking, and preparing. By taking an active part in class discussion, college students can help themselves become more intellectually mature and better prepared for professional careers. To help develop these skills, students should keep in mind the following five basic rules:

1. *Be willing to speak in public.* Good discussion depends on the lively participation of all group members, not (as so often happens) on the participation of a vocal few. Many students, however, do not join discussions because they are afraid to speak extemporaneously in a group. This fear is quite common — so common, in fact, that according to a leading communication consultant, Michael T. Motley, psychological surveys “show that what Americans fear most — more than snakes, heights, disease, financial problems, or even death — is speaking before a group.” To take an active role in your education you must learn to overcome “speech anxiety.” Professor Motley offers the following advice to those who are terrified of speaking before a group: stop thinking of public speaking as a performance and start thinking of it as communication. He believes that people choke up or feel butterflies in their stomachs when starting to speak because they worry more about how people will respond than about what they themselves have to say. “Most audiences,” he reminds us, “are more

interested in hearing what we have to say than in evaluating our speech skills.”

2. *Be willing to listen.* No one can participate in group discussion who doesn't listen attentively. Attentive listening, however, is not passive hearing, the sort of one-way receptivity we habitually experience when we tune in to our radios, cassette players, and television sets. A good listener knows it is important not only to attend closely to what someone is saying but to understand *why* he or she is saying it. Attentive listening also requires that we understand a statement's connection to previous statements and its relation to the discussion as a whole. Perhaps the most valuable result of attentive listening is that it leads to the one element that open and lively group discussion depends on: good questions. An expert on group dynamics claims that most ineffective discussions “are characterized by a large number of answers looking for questions.” When the interesting questions start popping up, group discussion has truly begun.

3. *Be willing to examine all sides of a topic.* Good discussion techniques require that we be patient with complexity. Difficult problems rarely have obvious solutions that can be conveniently summarized in popular slogans. Complex topics are multifaceted; they demand to be turned over in our minds so that we can see them from a variety of angles. Group discussion, because it provokes a number of diverse viewpoints, is an excellent way to broaden our perspectives and deepen our insight into complex ideas and issues.

4. *Be willing to suspend judgment.* Class discussion is best conducted in an open-minded and tolerant spirit. To explore ideas and issues in a free and open manner, you will need to develop a receptivity to the opinions of others even when they contradict your own. Discussion, remember, is not debate. Its primary purpose is communication, not competition. The goal of group discussion should be to open up a topic so that everyone in the group can hear a wide range of attitudes and opinions. This does not mean that you shouldn't form a strong opinion about an issue; rather, it encourages you to be aware of rival opinions. An opinion formed without awareness of other points of view — that has not been tested against contrary opinions — is not a *strong* opinion but merely a stubborn one.

5. *Be willing to prepare.* Effective discussion is not merely impromptu conversation. It demands a certain degree of preparation. To participate in class discussion, you must consider assigned topics beforehand and read whatever material is required. You should develop the habit of reading with pen in hand, underlining, noting key points, asking questions of your material, jotting impressions and ideas down in a notebook. The notes you bring to class will be an invaluable aid in group discussion.

To get the most out of your reading and discussion, take careful notes *during* class. You will want to jot down points that give you new insights, information that changes your opinion, positions you take exception to, questions you need to answer, ideas you want to consider more fully. You should think of class discussion as the first step toward your paper, as an opportunity to brainstorm ideas, form an approach, and discover a purpose. When you sit down to write, you will not be starting from scratch. If you've taken careful notes, you've already begun to write.

The art of discussion, as described in these five suggestions, involves speaking, listening, thinking, and preparing. Yet discussion is also closely connected to writing. By learning to participate in serious group discussion, by learning to exchange ideas freely and openly with others, students will also be learning some of the most fundamental principles of good writing.

### **From Discussion to Writing**

As they prepare to write for college courses, students confront difficulties that have less to do with the routine tasks of composition — correcting spelling, punctuation, and grammar — than with the deeper problems of finding something to say and a context in which to say it. It is not uncommon for beginning students to turn in papers that contain few serious mechanical errors, yet lack intellectual substance and a clear orientation. Using group discussion as a basis for composition can help remedy these problems. Group discussion can serve as a stimulus for an individual's ideas and provide a meaningful context in which to express them. Furthermore, as we will see, the art of discussion can function in many ways as an important model for the art of writing.

Finding something to say about a topic always ranks high on lists of student writing problems. This problem is the main reason that the blank sheet of paper (or the blank computer screen) so often triggers a set of anxious questions: What can I say? Where do I begin? Exploratory discussion offers a way out of this dilemma. Years ago, an advertising executive, Alexander F. Osborne, developed a group method of generating ideas that became enormously popular in many professional fields. With typical advertising savvy, Osborne gave his technique a memorable name — “brainstorming.” Osborne's goal was to stimulate creativity by presenting a small group of people with a problem or topic and then encouraging them to toss off as many ideas about it as quickly as possible. Speed, spontaneity, and free-association were essential to his method. But the most important part of the brainstorming technique was its complete absence of criticism. Nobody in the group was allowed to criticize or disagree with any idea, no matter how silly or farfetched it seemed. The absence of criticism, Osborne found, kept ideas flowing, because people were not afraid to sound ill informed or just plain stupid.

This brainstorming technique can clearly be applied to composition as a way to stimulate the flow of ideas. Brainstorming could be done briefly

by the whole composition class, or by small groups of students on their own. Moreover, most exploratory discussion — if it is free, open, and relaxed — will contain some degree of spontaneous brainstorming in which ideas can sprout and grow. Students who take note of these ideas will find that when they sit down to write they will not be starting out in a vacuum but will have a context of discussion out of which their composition can take shape.

Another type of brainstorming can also help students move from class discussion to individual writing. In this type of brainstorming (sometimes referred to as nominal brainstorming) each person in the class works alone, silently jotting down a brief list of ideas about a topic. Afterward, all the students compare the lists and, after some culling and combining, record their ideas on the blackboard. This brainstorming method can be used at the beginning of class to open up various avenues of discussion. The written list can also serve as a tangible source of ideas for individuals to pursue later in their papers. Since it involves some preliminary writing that can be done in preparation for class, this more focused form of brainstorming is frequently recommended in the instructional material of *Our Times*.

If exploratory discussion can help reduce the anxiety students feel while trying to develop ideas for papers, it can also alleviate another major writing problem — the feeling of alienation. Thinking and writing alone, with little awareness of an actual audience or of a practical context, the beginning student often composes papers that sound disembodied and disengaged. Ideas seem to come out of nowhere; transitions and connections are missing; conclusions that should grow out of the development of an idea are instead little more than blunt, unearned assertions. Though such papers are common, instructors find it difficult to pinpoint precisely what is wrong with them because the problems are vague and difficult to isolate, and therefore hard to identify by the usual marking symbols. The root problem of such essays will not be found in grammar or mechanics, but in the orientation of the writer. The problem is not one of style, structure, or content, but of overall *context*.

Experienced writers, as noted earlier, invariably work with a clear sense of audience and occasion. For example, a literature or composition teacher working on a critical article is writing within a clearly definable context: he or she has a sense of who the audience will be, where the article could be published, and — most important — *why* it is being written. No matter what its subject or point of view, the article will be intellectually oriented to a community of readers presumed to be aware of the topic and attuned to the various points of view involved in its discussion. The fact that so many academic papers are first delivered at professional conferences underscores the vital importance of a concrete audience and occasion.

As students discover the connections between discussion and composition, they will also find their bearings as writers. Their writing — no matter what the topic — will be oriented toward making a response. Their papers

will not only respond to an assigned topic but, more important, will respond within the context of a continuing discussion of that topic. The student, in other words, will write as an active participant, responding, as she or he would in group discussion, to the actual or anticipated responses of others. This texture of mutual response is what so often gives professionally written essays and articles their mature tone and clear orientation.

Once students see writing as a form of response, they will also become more conscious of their social and intellectual attitudes as writers: Are they closed off to other opinions? Are they overbearing in their attitudes? Do they try to see different sides of an issue? Are they patient with complexity? Do they oversimplify difficult problems? These are all values learned in group discussion that directly carry over into composition and all intellectual activities.

As students work through *Our Times*, they will also observe how participation in group discussion is relevant to all types of writing. It is easy to see how an awareness of conflicting opinions can play an important part in critical, analytical, and argumentative papers. Yet personal writing can also profit from exploratory group discussion. By discussing their personal experiences in class, students can begin to view them from broader social and cultural perspectives. *Our Times* starts out with a number of discussion topics and writing assignments that explore the connections between our personal experiences and some of today's dominant themes and issues.

The more students learn about discussion, the more prepared they will be to handle college writing *and* reading assignments. For reading, too, can resemble discussion. In this book, students are invited to view reading assignments as opportunities for intellectual participation. As they read, they should be actively responding to the material as though they were engaged in a discussion with the writer: assenting here, disagreeing there; doubting one point, accepting another; rejecting an example, offering a counterexample. Though they can't talk directly to a particular author, students can still enter into an imaginary discussion by responding to that author in writing. There is scarcely an essay in this collection in which the writer is not involved in such indirect discussions — reacting or responding to other writers (or interviews with other people) on the same subject.

Good writing, like nature, abhors a vacuum. That is why most experienced writers work within a climate of ideas generated by reading, discussion, and debate. We usually don't have to proceed very far into an essay or article to see how directly the writer is responding to the ideas of others. As you read the selections in *Our Times*, you will certainly notice how often the writers are engaged in a public exchange of ideas, how often they seem to be participating in discussion *as* they write. Throughout this book, students will see how frequently writers begin their essays and articles with the words of other people — quotations from reading, research, and interviews. In fact, many selections open with a direct reference to discussion



and debate. Here, for example, is how Peter D. Salins begins his essay on immigration: “The trouble with the immigration debate of the past year or so is that much of it is simply unreal. Intellectuals have been arguing over abstractions, while the insecurities of ordinary Americans have been inflamed by prejudice and misinformation” (p. 372). Or note how Ward Churchill gets into the topic of prejudicial language: “During the past couple of seasons, there has been an increasing wave of controversy regarding the names of professional sports teams like the Atlanta Braves, Cleveland Indians, Washington Redskins, and Kansas City Chiefs” (p. 76). Both writers begin by jumping straight into an ongoing controversy. We may not know what they are going to say, but we do know what topic they will be talking about.

If they think of their writing as a form of discussion, students will realize that they are not writing in a vacuum but as part of a group, part of a community. In written work, just as in discussion, someone is always speaking and someone (or some group) is always being addressed. *Our Times* encourages students to view their writing as an extension of group discussion, to see writing as public, not private, behavior, and to see that being a writer is a social, not a solitary, endeavor.

To think of writing as an extension of discussion, however, students need to reimagine themselves as writers. When they sit down to write they should do so not as isolated individuals anxiously awaiting inspiration but as active participants in a continuous communication process. Students then will not need to wait for ideas to come out of the blue. Rather, they will find their ideas where they are most likely to originate — in their own thoughtful responses to the ideas and opinions of others.