# ISSUES and PERSPECTIVES

## READING AND WRITING IN COMMUNITIES

# *Issues and Perspectives*

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# *Preface*

THE DESIGN FOR *ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES* originated in my conviction that reading and writing are closely related, that success in one is necessary for success in the other, and that success in both is required for success in college. Much academic writing is based on reading, on using information that is already available, rather than on developing new information. The writer's job is to take control of that information, integrate it into what she or he already knows, evaluate it, consolidate it with other information, and use it to make a point or support a conclusion. For these reasons, George Hillocks's inquiry method, which provides students with a ready-made data base of information, has been an important inspiration for the text's apparatus. The reading selections in each chapter provide a base of information and ideas that students can use as a resource for their own writing. The questions and activities at the end of each selection and each chapter ask students to understand, summarize, consolidate, compare, and verify the information from the reading selections, and then incorporate it into their own writing. Students can do this by writing about the subject of the chapter, or by extending the ideas, methods, and data from that chapter into other areas of inquiry. For example, after reading about birds in chapter 6, students can apply the methods and insights to the study of adaptive behavior in other animals and humans.

But information is never simply information. People approach the world from a variety of perspectives, and these perspectives influence the way they see the world and their views of what is right or wrong, good or bad, and true or false. In some cases these perspectives may coincide with academic disciplines, but they may also be based on ethical, political, religious, social, or other consideration. Being an effective critical reader and writer requires an understanding both of the information itself and the way various perspectives can affect that information.

Because people see the world from a variety of perspectives, readers need to be aware of how these perspectives shape the way writers approach the world and present information. To help students understand this, chapters 1 and 2 are devoted to explaining methods of critical reading and writing. Using reading selections to illustrate the main points, these chapters take students through the processes of reading critically and

analytically, taking notes, writing summaries, and incorporating information from their reading into their own writing. Both chapters provide frequent writing exercises and activities that allow students to practice the skills being presented.

### *The Reading Selections*

Each chapter of *Issues and Perspectives* treats a single subject from a variety of different personal and disciplinary perspectives, including science, social science, business, the humanities, history, law, and politics. The subjects themselves were chosen for a variety of reasons, ranging from personal idiosyncrasy to their social significance. Most of the writers represented here have not been widely anthologized in texts of this type. Their newness may help both students and teachers respond to them with a freshness and unconventionality that more familiar subjects and reading selections might not permit.

For example, chapter 5 considers the present situation of young African-American men in the United States. Briefly stated, that situation is not good. Young black men seem to provoke considerable hostility among other groups in the population. In addition, they are more likely than members of any other group to be in trouble of some kind, to be incarcerated, to be the victims of violent crime, to be unemployed or underemployed, or to live in poverty. But there are no simple explanations or solutions for this situation. The writers in this chapter illustrate the complexity of the problems involved by approaching the subject from a variety of directions. Donna Britt tells of her brother's death at the hands of police officers; Harry Edwards analyzes the role of black men in college and professional sports. Shelby Steele writes from the perspective of a successful black man about what he calls "race holding," i.e., using race as an excuse. Novelist John Edgar Wideman writes about himself and his brother who is serving a life sentence for murder. Combined, these perspectives deprive students of easy answers and invite analysis, discussion, and debate. Each chapter takes the shape of an extended, sometimes digressive discussion that may have been under way for some time. After reading the selections in the chapter, students should be prepared to join the discussion on their own terms.

### *The Apparatus*

The apparatus is designed to encourage students to respond critically and thoughtfully to the reading selections. Each chapter of reading selections begins with a set of prereading exercises to help students establish what they already know and believe about the subject. These questions are designed to encourage students to make their own knowledge of a

subject explicit and to use that knowledge to form a context for the new information they will encounter in the readings that follow.

Questions at the end of each selection and chapter do not ask for simple recall of information. Instead, they focus on the critical reading and thinking skills presented in chapters 1 and 2. Students are asked to summarize and analyze the central concepts in each selection and chapter. "Questions for Critical Readers," which occur at the end of each selection, ask students to demonstrate their understanding of the selection's central concepts, the major support or illustration the writer provides for those concepts, and the perspective from which the writer views the subject. Next, the questions for "Analysis and Discussion" ask students to use the information and ideas from the selection as the basis for an analysis and discussion of the writer's subject or a related subject. Finally, a suggested writing assignment asks students to apply the ideas and information they have encountered in each selection.

At the end of each chapter, "Suggestions for Writing and Research" invite students to draw on the entire chapter and compare the information, ideas, and methods of the various selections with each other, and then provide suggestions for writing and research. Writing assignments may relate directly to the chapter itself or may ask students to apply the methods and concepts of the chapter to issues and questions in their own lives.

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# *Reading and Writing in Communities of Belief*

WHILE YOU ARE IN SCHOOL, reading and writing will be your primary means of learning. Through your reading you will learn about important ideas and information, and when you write you will learn to express your own ideas and to use what you know to argue for positions and solve problems. Once you get beyond the most elementary level of any subject, however, you will discover that disagreements about information and ideas are at the heart of most academic discussions. Writers will disagree about how to solve problems and answer questions. They will also disagree about how to understand or interpret facts. They will even disagree about whether facts exist.

Some people react to disagreements among experts by concluding that the experts are wrong. These people are usually looking for a single, all-encompassing truth. When they do not find it, they retreat into their own preconceived ideas about what the world is like or what it should be like. And they go further. Other people are fascinated when experts disagree. Instead of retreating in confusion, they get excited.

In chapter 1 you will read about a recent controversy over burning the United States' flag. There is much to disagree about on this subject. Some believe burning the flag is an act of desecration. Others take it as an act of political protest and say it should be protected as free speech. Instead of allowing these disagreements to confuse you or make you angry, try to see them as opportunities to explore the world from several different perspectives and learn about it in new ways. If you can accept the different perspectives you encounter as part of the richness of the intellectual world, then you are ready to learn, and you will discover that learning can be exciting, even if it is a bit bumpy along the way.

## Consensus and Dissent

Most societies value consensus, just as most people believe that life is just easier if people can agree with each other. Social units such as families, churches, and clubs, and political units such as cities and nations find it easier to maintain themselves if most of their members agree about

important issues. Current controversies about flag burning and abortion have led to intense conflicts about the basic principles that govern the nation's life, such as privacy and freedom of speech. In the face of these conflicts, it may become increasingly difficult to maintain agreement about the beliefs that citizens of the United States hold in common. Consensus usually helps preserve group cohesion by limiting or preventing discussion of potentially divisive questions that might threaten the group's survival. When consensus is valued in this way, people tend to discourage dissent and disagreement. People who challenge accepted ways of thinking and acting often find themselves being ignored, treated rudely, or dismissed as cranks, as though their ideas were silly or stupid. Sometimes they are even threatened.

It is true that some people disagree with others just for the fun of it. Perhaps they enjoy being difficult. But many disagreements arise from fundamental differences in the ways people look at and make sense of the world. These disagreements cannot be made to disappear by simply reviewing the facts or enforcing consensus. They require extensive inquiry, discussion, and debate if the people involved are to agree or even understand why they disagree. Most people now recognize that the earth is a sphere that revolves around the sun, not a flat surface that sits at the center of the universe. And most also know that diseases are caused by bacteria and other microorganisms, rather than evil spirits. To question these facts may seem silly today, but they have not always been accepted as facts. People believed in a flat earth or evil spirits for what they regarded as important reasons, and they believed that those who disagreed with them posed a threat to society—even to the survival of the earth itself. In some cases, people who disagree with widely accepted views have been put to death.

Although questions about the shape of the earth and the existence of bacteria were resolved long ago (for most people—there is still a Flat Earth Society), other questions remain and new ones come up all the time. For example, should burning the U.S. flag be protected as an exercise of free speech or prosecuted as a crime? Should advertising be banned from children's television programs? Should English be declared the official (or only) language in the United States? People often disagree profoundly about how to answer these questions because they have come to look at and make sense of the world in radically different ways; they belong to different communities of belief.

## Communities of Belief

The world does not make sense by itself. People confer meaning on events and objects through their actions and interpretations. Making sense of the world appears to be a peculiarly human need and activity. But

individuals do not have to face this task alone; much of it is done for them by the social, cultural, and intellectual groups in which they live. These communities of belief teach their members a way of making sense of the world. Individuals come to understand the world by learning the sense-making and meaning-giving strategies of the communities of belief in which they live.

The family is the first community of belief that most people encounter. Parents, grandparents, and siblings teach children practical lessons, such as to avoid fire, to stay out of the street, and to brush their teeth. They also teach them about what is right and wrong. As children grow, they encounter other communities of belief, many of which differ from the family and its way of looking at the world. Peers, schools, and the adult world present people with increasingly diverse views. Each new person one encounters presents a potentially new community of belief. College students encounter a bewildering array of new and different communities of belief as they learn about cultures, academic disciplines, and ideas that they have never encountered before.

Each new community of belief brings with it potential conflicts, as people attempt to reconcile their established ways of looking at the world with the new ones they have encountered. A child who has been taught to be patriotic and to support elected officials may experience anger and shock when other people question the government's actions. These conflicts are not simply between individual behaviors but between communities of belief.

It is possible to belong to several communities of belief without experiencing inconsistencies or contradictions that cannot be reconciled. Many people live simultaneously within the frameworks of religion, politics, and business without conflicts. And sometimes they can do this even when it seems that conflicts are inevitable. For example, many scientists find that science and religion are not incompatible, despite the many issues on which these communities of belief appear to disagree. But some conflict is inevitable, because communities of belief have rules of membership. They require those who belong to them to believe certain things and make sense of the world in certain ways. For example, psychology is an academic discipline, and it is also a community of belief. Psychologists believe that behavior can be explained rationally through systemic, empirical observation and experimentation. People who believe that behavior is caused by demons or divine intervention, or that it cannot be explained at all, simply cannot be psychologists. They do not belong to the community of belief that constitutes psychology as an academic discipline.

Individuals experience internal conflict when they cannot reconcile the inconsistencies between the communities of belief to which they belong. Scientists who accept theories of evolution and the biblical creation story have found some way to resolve the obvious inconsistencies between

these two ways of making sense of the world. Perhaps they see one as an explanation of the other, or perhaps they do not see them as inconsistent. But not everyone can do this, and not all communities of belief can be reconciled with one another. For example, a community of belief that accepts and advocates white supremacy cannot be reconciled with one that promotes racial equality and civil rights for all.

Some people resolve their internal conflicts over different communities of belief by adopting the rules and point of view of a single community and using it as their primary or only reference point in making sense of the world. They conform to what that community says is right or appropriate, and they may dismiss the views of other communities as misguided or wrong. This provides a comfortable, consistent world view, and it may remove their immediate discomfort, but it may not solve the problem that brought the inconsistency to light.

## Communities of Belief in the Academic World

In the academic world, communities of belief tend to be aligned with academic disciplines. Thus, physicists will seek scientific explanations for events and behaviors, while philosophers may seek logical or ethical explanations, and artists may explain the world in terms of aesthetics rather than logic or science. Several different communities may study the same thing, and each discipline will present its own interpretations of how the world works. Thus, what most of us see as identical events may have several different, but quite plausible, explanations. For example, human behavior is endlessly fascinating, and it has been studied in many different ways. Though it may seem the private preserve of psychology, it has also been examined by philosophers, sociologists, novelists, poets, scientists, economists, and many others. Each of these sees human behavior somewhat differently than the others. Each one asks different questions and reaches conclusions in terms acceptable to its own community of belief.

For example, in attempting to understand alcohol abuse, a philosopher might write from an ethical perspective. A psychologist might discuss the issue as a compulsive or addictive behavior. A biologist would look for physiological or genetic causes for the behavior. Economists and sociologists would explore the causes and consequences of alcohol abuse within the setting of society at large. A novelist might write about one alcoholic, the relationships with the family and others, and the effects of drinking on the alcoholic's own life.

Like other communities of belief, academic disciplines impose rules on those who would belong to them. That is, they ask their members to think and act in certain ways. The foundation of membership in the

academic world is the belief that problems can be solved and the world can be understood through knowledge. Knowledge is an alternative to ignorance and narrow-mindedness, and it is the product of inquiry. To understand something, we must examine it carefully and thoroughly, from many different perspectives by observing, experimenting, and questioning. Knowledge gained through inquiry is subject to testing and verification in various ways. Those who question or doubt conclusions can repeat observations and experiments for themselves under the same and different conditions. They can ask for evidence and proof, and they can subject that evidence to rigorous examination. Evidence is then subject to discussion and debate. Once the debate and discussion are over, and knowledge has been accepted, it becomes part of the sense-making procedures of a community of belief.

## Beyond the Academic World

Teachers can be very forceful and intense about what they know and believe because, like everyone else, they belong to communities of belief. They do not necessarily want to impose *what* they believe on others. They do hope that their students will learn to make sense of the world in a thoughtful, systematic way through inquiry, knowledge, and discussion. They also want their students to realize that those who belong to other communities of belief are not necessarily wrong, but simply different, and that there are reasons for their differences.

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