To the Class of 2016:

Welcome to the challenging world of New York University. This collection of fine essays can make your own intellectual journey less daunting. Savor the essays; they have been left for you by your predecessors.

Near the end of the last spring semester, a student exclaimed to her writing teacher, “If I had just read this Preface at the beginning of the year, I would have understood this course so much sooner.” At about the same time a former dean was asking members of a committee to describe a particular writing course so clearly that the students would be able to understand immediately what would be expected of them, what their intellectual experiences would be like. Would that things were so easy! We know, from years of classroom experience, that learning rarely happens instantaneously. Pen-in-the-hand experience continually trumps talk and easy reading. Doing is of utmost importance. So too is failure.

If this course does not unsettle you in serious ways, we will have failed you. We must necessarily ask of you things that you do not yet know and understand how to do.

In the film Iris, Dame Iris Murdoch plays seriously with her audience: “Education doesn’t make you happy. Nor does freedom. We don’t become happy just because we’re free, if we are, or because we’ve been educated, if we have, but because education may be the means by which we realize we are happy. It opens our eyes, our ears—tells us where delights are lurking, convinces us that there is only one freedom of any importance whatsoever, that of the mind—and gives us the assurance, the confidence, to walk the path our mind, our educated mind, offers.”

Seven years ago, during the first semester, I noticed that my students were only partially reading the assigned essays. I had asked them to select a single written text and to put that text in conversation with two or three other like-minded but different texts. The resulting conversation—staged in the
students’ minds and on the page—would, I had hoped, eventually yield ideas worthy of serious essays.

I discovered that my students were paying primary attention to personal connections with the texts, showing little interest in the larger body of ideas, or the way those ideas were presented. Their resistance, coupled with impatience, often led to hasty conclusions about meaning—to an erasure of parts of the various texts. They were looking for a single point instead of a network of complementary ideas. The thesis chase diverted them from the pleasures of the texts and kept them from making discoveries that could eventually lead to an understanding of complex issues.

Later, when I asked my advanced course students what they considered the most difficult thing they had to learn in the college writing classroom, their answer repeatedly came down to this: a different kind of thinking. Denise Scarfi, a former student editor, put her difficulty this way: “I have struggled with inductive reasoning, with a form that starts with evidence and progresses to idea, rather than the other way around. High school did not prepare me for this kind of writing.”

Many of you have learned to take shortcuts, to intuit a thesis, to intuit propositions to support it, and to find examples to support the thesis, moving habitually from thesis to evidence—leaving out contradictions, challenges, complications. The learned emphasis has been not on the rigorous analysis of evidence but on a fact-based, highly structured response: thesis, proposition, examples.

In your work with us in the Expository Writing Program, you will learn to reverse the emphasis, setting in motion a progression from evidence to idea to essay. The examination of evidence begins with inductive reasoning—reasoning that does not lead to certainty or to a thesis that can, out of necessity, be proved; it leads instead to discovery, to the rigorous combination and application of analysis and imagination, to ideas that must, like the evidence itself, be continually reassessed and re-conceptualized to represent more accurately whatever truth the evidence suggests to you, the researching writer. The focus will always be on developing a dialectical frame of mind—a questioning, a weighing of contradictions and dichotomies, that leads not to certainty but to ideas that will forever be subject to reassessment by others.

At the heart of this inductive and dialectical process of discovery lies the complex business of reading complex written texts, texts that do not reveal themselves to cursory examination. Reading these more complex texts is similar to reading any body of evidence (essays, books, research findings, newspapers, movies, visual art, music). Central to such reading is the presumption that conceiving an idea is exciting, complicated work and that all one needs to know to express that idea cannot be contained in a simplified thesis state-
ment and a series of topic sentences. This kind of work leads to the delights that are lurking in the texts and in your minds, waiting for you to discover them.

To grapple is to begin to understand the meaning of thought. For the writer, such grappling leads eventually to clarification and the use of nuanced language, to a form of expression more complex than a formulaic set of declarations and a series of examples. The act of writing—writing itself—is central to this learning process and the development of ideas.

The inductive process is, of course, the same process that leads to discovery in science or in any other academic discipline. It provides the foundation for making sense. It lies at the heart of all reasoning and reading. Without it, we have no way of discovering what the evidence means.

Essays, you will learn, do not prove, repeat, or reiterate. They do not confine themselves to making a single point. Instead, essays, like ideas, develop, change, expand, turn on themselves—and captivate the reader, when the writer gets the words right. As you read the essays in this collection for your own pleasure and instruction, know that the student writers are asking you to see—just for a moment—as they see. They are trying to persuade you that their ideas have merit.

When one of these essays surprises you—or perhaps confuses you—pause to figure out what the writer is doing. During that long moment, you may unearth a hidden secret—a writing technique that enlivens the essay and gives you an idea for your own writing. Assume always that both surprise and confusion warrant further study and that the secret is worth discovering. Call on these writers often. Given the chance, they will help you create your own compelling and persuasive essays.

All of us in the Expository Writing Program, along with a group of amazing student editors, wish you the very best during your first year at New York University.

Pat C. Hoy II
Director, Expository Writing Program
Professor of English

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We bid farewell to Andrea McKenzie and Nancy White whose superb work has refined this collection for a decade.

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CONTENTS

WRITING THE ESSAY

Beyond the Sensory 1
Clarissa Lehne

Imagining “I” 7
R. Paul McAdory

Marlboro Man and Migrant Mother 13
Kathleen McClure

Looking Past the Present 19
Jake Goldberg

On Fire 25
Lok Yue Louie Nam

Lethem’s Beards 33
Chloe Isacke

Fact (in Fiction) 39
Clarissa Lehne

Redefining the Literal 45
Yihyang Amy Yang

Who’s There? 53
Eddie Zhang
Divine Blasphemies 129
Samara Hennet

Unintended Wholes 137
Maithreyi Nandagopalan

Of Curses 145
Phillip R. Polefrone

WRITING ART IN THE WORLD

Capturing Autonomy 159
Hanna Novak

In Pursuit of Authenticity 165
Hanna Novak

A Window’s Reflection 171
Matthew Puccini

Alive to Boredom 177
Mariel Victoria Mok

Now We Are All Sons of Bitches 189
Michael Bontatibus

5Pointz: Regulating Revolution 201
Siddhi Sundar

EDUCATION AND THE PROFESSIONS

Living in Truth 211
Esumi Fujimoto

Dangerous Desire 217
Connor Zickgraf
SPECTRUM OF ESSAYS

God as Order 225  
*Michelle Chen*

After the Curtain 235  
*Katrina Pullop*

Ego and the Moon 243  
*Phillip R. Polefrone*

On Shivers 253  
*Evan Bobella*

How Monsters Might Read 265  
*Alyssa Boeble*

NOTABLES 275