To the Class of 2018:

Welcome to the challenging world of New York University. This collection of fine essays has been left for you by your predecessors. Their work can encourage you in your own journey as writers and scholars. By taking some time to recognize the efforts and achievements of those who came before you, you will get a better idea of the demands and rewards that await thoughtful writers at NYU.

Your writing seminar will introduce you to a variety of captivating materials from many disciplines: contemporary culture, science, psychology, politics, the visual and film arts, gender and sexuality studies, literature, economics, technology. Somewhat more important than these subject areas—since the writing seminar is a place where writing is unapologetically pre-eminent, is an adjacent set of capabilities you’ll acquire over the course of the semester. Among them—what does it mean to really read something well, with purpose? What does it mean to have a real question? How can we get beyond summary? As we read, how can we accommodate shifts in our own thinking? How can we create essays that have shape and unity while remaining flexible and responsive to countercurrents? These concerns belong to the rhetorical dimension of your writing seminar. To understand them is to understand some valuable secrets about thinking, writing, arguing and telling effectively. The writers presented in this volume became acquainted with those secrets, not by saying them out loud, but by composing in accordance with them.

Writing on this page one year ago, Professor Pat Hoy recognized the complex quality of our relationships to texts and people. He suggested that these interactions are seldom straightforward. If we are going to make sense of them, we soon discover that shortcuts, formulas and lucky intuitions do not work. The thoughtful essayist has to have patience and endurance to understand complexity.
To deal with the reality of complexity and contradiction, the writings presented in this edition of Mercer Street observed a process that may be called “longitudinal.” In every case the writer was encouraged to resist coming to immediate conclusions and to develop an acquaintance with texts and ideas over time. Among the benefits of slow reading and layered writing is the pleasure of watching your own mind grow. We hope you will experience it.

Your writing seminar will give you the time and the structure to observe your mind curving back on itself. We call this process “recursive.” It is a process that allows you to incorporate later impressions into earlier ones so that your thinking about assigned readings develops and becomes richer. A recursive writer possesses a high degree of self-awareness.

By asking you to read and write in this elastic, long-range way, your writing seminar will improve your endurance and refinement as a thinker. The essays in this book are validations of that statement. Your writing seminar will present you with many suggestive short readings; it will give you practice in revision, rethinking and critique; and it will show you how good arguments are discovered. One further word may be said for a concept of particular relevance to all who want to elevate their writing performance: inductive thinking, or speculative thinking.

Its twin—deductive thinking—also has great value. Deductive reasoning enables us to narrow things down from a known field of givens. To make a good deduction is always a pleasure. A writer operating by induction, on the other hand, is trying to build something new from the given facts through a speculative act of mind. This writer tries to hypothesize a reason for why the given facts are as they are, or for why she is confused by them. As I have suggested, this process involves a good deal of thinking, re-thinking, recursion and repairing. The inductive or speculative thinker finds herself in a vigorous dialogue with her givens, and the dialogue creates for her an awareness that had not been among the givens. Sometimes called “the dialectic,” this process is a call-and-response between the writer’s material and the writer’s mind. It works best when it is in the service of a question or a mystery that the writer wants to understand.

What is the location of the enlightenment this writer seeks? In a deductive situation, the answer will be located in the givens; we know it is in there, even if we don’t know it yet. We’ll find it. It exists. The inductive writer has no such luck, but in a way she is also more fortunate. That’s because the sought-for understanding is not there yet. It isn’t anywhere. A writer on the speculative path accepts this circumstance. She begins to think and to imagine potential relationships both within the field of givens and between her own
mind and the givens. The product of this double dialogue may be called thinking. Many instances are contained herein.

In an essay called “Repairer,” author Jennifer Parkhill appears to be writing about a piece of sculpture by Louise Bourgeois, but an underlying concern with issues of motherhood and regeneration soon emerges. In 1999 Bourgeois created a big red steel sculpture of a mother-spider, 30 feet tall—

*Maman*. The artist admired this clever, ever-mending creature enormously. The mother-spider is a monument to recovery and repair. She transforms obnoxious prey into eggs and silk. Jennifer examines *Maman* in very great detail, taking numerous soundings until her analysis sheds waves of meaning over the particular issues that concern her: persistence, intergenerational responsibility, ingenuity and fierce care. Would we then say that Jennifer’s essay was hatched from Bourgeois’s sculpture, or that the essayist has cast the sculpture anew, because of its significance to her? You can’t say. The reason is that both are somehow true: the writer has woven together observation and reflection.

You may read these essays for many reasons. Remember that each one, at its best, reveals a unique mind inductively spinning new thoughts from what had only been given. When you pick up one of these essays, especially when the writer’s concerns don’t match your own, stop and think about what the writer is trying to do. Very likely you will begin to make out a process of putting together and taking apart and mending. At that moment you will understand what Jennifer means when she writes, “I can be that spider.”

We in the Expository Writing Program, along with our team of amazing student editors, wish you every success during your first year at New York University.

Stephen Donatelli
Director, Writing-in-the-Disciplines
Editor, *Mercer Street*

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With this edition of *Mercer Street* we give special thanks to Pat Hoy and Darlene Forrest. The influence of their wise leadership persists.
Cover Photography by Denice Martone: “The most courageous act is still to think for yourself. Aloud.”—Coco Chanel.

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