
MERCER street

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a collection of essays from the expository writing program

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EXPOSITORY WRITING PROGRAM
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCE

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To the Class of 2014:

This collection of fine essays can make your own intellectual journey during this next year less daunting. Savor the essays; they are a gift from your predecessors.

I want to begin with a teaching story. Five years ago, in the middle of the first semester, I noticed that my students could not actually read the essays they had chosen to work with during a series of reading, writing, thinking, and imagining exercises. I had asked them to select a single written text (a complex essay) as a primary source and to put that text in conversation with two or three other like-minded but different texts. The conversation, staged in the students' minds and on the page, would eventually yield ideas worthy of serious essays.

As my students worked through the writing exercises, I discovered they were paying primary attention to personal connections with the texts and 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 text. They were looking for a single point instead of looking for a network of complementary ideas. The thesis chase diverted them from the pleasures of the texts they were reading and kept them from making the kinds of discoveries that could eventually lead to the 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. Matthew Margini said that “the biggest problem was learning to let the texts contradict him.” Denise Scarfi 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.”

Instead of learning to reason from evidence before coming to college, many students had 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. Undoubtedly, much of the intuitive work they did was based on some kind of evidence gleaned from reading or experience, but the learned emphasis had been not on the rigorous analysis of evidence but on a fact-based, highly structured response: thesis, proposition, examples.

In our Program we 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 the researching writer.

At the heart of this inductive 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 not all one needs to know to understand the material can either be found or expressed in a simplified thesis statement or in a series of topic sentences.

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 more complex form of expression than a formulaic set of declarations and a series of examples can provide. The process leads eventually to a compelling idea, but the discovery and development of that idea come from both analysis of evidence and writing about it. The act of writing—writing itself—is central to learning.

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 of research, no matter what the subject matter. It lies at the heart of all reasoning and all reading. Even tightly reasoned deductive syllogisms depend on premises formulated through a process of induction. The reliability of those premises determines finally whether the syllogism itself is reliable—so convincing that one is willing to act on its conclusion. This inductive process of reading—reading a given text or reading a given body of

evidence—is crucial to all academic work. It leads to ideas. Without it we are left partially blind, unable to see clearly 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 convince you that their ideas have merit. The art of persuasion informs the whole process.

When one of these essays surprises you, or perhaps confuses you, pause to figure out what the writer is doing. During that long pause, 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 either surprise or confusion warrants further study and that the secret is worth discovering. Given the chance, these writers will help you create your own compelling and persuasive essays. Call on them often.

All of us in the Expository Writing Program 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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