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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 2015:

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

Let me begin with a story. Six years ago, in the middle of the first semester, I noticed that my students were only partially reading 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 resulting conversation—staged in the students’ minds and on the page—would, I had hoped, eventually yield ideas worthy of serious essays.

But as my students worked through the various exercises, I discovered they 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 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 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. Matthew Margini, the senior student editor for this collection of essays, said that “the biggest problem was learning to let the texts contradict” him. 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.”

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. The learned emphasis, however, had 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, which 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 statement and 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 form of expression more complex than a formulaic set of declarations and a series of examples. The process leads eventually to a compelling idea, but the discovery and development of that idea come from both analyzing 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. 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 unable to see what 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 both surprise and confusion warrant 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, along with the 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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