

Expository Writing Program: Self-assessment reading and writing exercise.

Typically teachers in *Writing the Essay* ask students read and write during class, and students are expected to be able to do this within a 20 minute time-frame. This diagnostic exercise asks you to give yourself twenty minutes to read and then write about the passage below, an excerpt from an essay by John Berger entitled "Steps toward a small theory of the visible." This essay is from the required course text for both *Writing the Essay* and the *International Writing Workshop* sequence: Occasions for writing: evidence, idea, essay (edited by Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy: Boston, MA, Thomson Heinle, ©2008.)

Read the passage without stopping to look up unfamiliar words. After reading, **write** in response to the prompt (the prompt can be found below the passage, at the bottom of this page.) After **twenty minutes**, note where you are in the process. If after twenty minutes you find you need more time, continue reading and writing, but note the amount of time it has taken you to do both parts. After completing both the reading and writing portion, download the discussion section of the self-assessment.

Reading Passage:

Today images abound everywhere. Never has so much been depicted and watched. We have glimpses at any moment of what things look like on the other side of the planet, or the other side of the moon. Appearances registered, and transmitted with lightning speed.

Yet with this something has innocently changed. They used to be called *physical* appearances because they belonged to solid bodies. Now appearances are volatile. Technological innovation has made it easy to separate the apparent from the existent. And this is precisely what the present system's mythology continually needs to exploit. It turns appearances into refractions, like mirages: refractions not of light but of appetite, in fact a single appetite, the appetite for more.

Consequently -- and oddly, considering the physical implications of the notion of *appetite* -- the existent, the body, disappears. We live within a spectacle of empty clothes and unworn masks.

Consider any news-reader on any television channel in any country. These speakers are the mechanical epitome of the *disembodied*. It took the system many years to invent them and to teach them to talk as they do.

No bodies and no Necessity -- for Necessity is the condition of the existent. It is what makes reality real. And the system's mythology requires only the not-yet-real, the virtual, the next purchase. This produces in the spectator, not, as claimed, a sense of freedom (the so-called freedom of choice) but a profound isolation.

Until recently, history, all the accounts people gave of their lives, all proverbs, fables, parables, confronted the same thing: the everlasting, fearsome, and occasionally beautiful, struggle of living with Necessity, which is the enigma of existence -- that which followed from the Creation, and which subsequently has always continued to sharpen the human spirit. Necessity produces both tragedy and comedy. It is what you kiss or bang your head against.

Today, in the system's spectacle, it exists no more. Consequently no experience is communicated. All that is left to share is the spectacle, the game that nobody plays and everybody can watch. As has never happened before, people have to try to place their own existence and their own pains single-handedly in the vast area of time and the universe.

Writing Prompt:

Explain to someone who has not read this passage what John Berger suggests about the relationships he sees among technology, necessity, and the existent. For instance, why is necessity a condition of the existent, according to Berger? Or, why does he think that necessity in the present system "exists no more"?