



**Writing, Reading, and Thinking
About Visual and Popular Culture**

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- Many instructors ask their students to write personal essays, especially in the first semester of composition courses, so in the final section we include a short guide to this process in Part VIII's cleverly entitled "How Am I a Text? Writing Personal Essays." You should always adhere to the guidelines your professor provides, but this short section should supplement what you discuss in class.

Although this section might not be as compelling as essays on *The Simpsons* or *Seinfeld*, it is important nonetheless. Reading and writing feed each other in complex ways, so try to give both your attention.

PART I . HOW DO I WRITE A TEXT FOR COLLEGE? MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL WRITING

by Patty Strong

Writing is thinking. This is what we teachers of college writing believe. Hidden inside that tiny suitcase of a phrase is my whole response to the topic assigned me by my colleague, Jonathan Silverman, one of the authors of the textbook you are currently reading. Knowing my background as a former teacher of high school English, Dr. Silverman asked me to write a piece for students on the differences between writing in high school and writing in college. I have had some time to ponder my answer, and it is this: Writing is thinking. Now that's not very satisfactory, is it? I must unpack that suitcase of a phrase. I will open it up for you, pull out a few well-traveled and wearable ideas, ideas that you may want to try on yourself as you journey through your college writing assignments.

Writing is thinking. I suggest that this idea encompasses the differences between high school writing and the writing expected from students on a college level, not because high school teachers don't expect their students to think, but rather that most students themselves do not approach the writing as an *opportunity to think*. Students might construct many other kinds of sentences with writing as subject: Writing is hard. Writing is a duty. Writing is something I do to prove that I know something.

When I taught high school English, I certainly assigned writing in order to find out what my students knew. Did they, for example, know what I had taught them about the light and dark symbolism in Chapter 18 of *The Scarlet Letter*? Did they know precisely what Huck Finn said after he reconsidered his letter to Miss Watson ("All right, then, I'll go to hell!") and did they know what I, their teacher, had told them those words meant in terms of Huck's moral development? Could my students spit this information back at me in neat, tidy sentences? That's not to say I didn't encourage originality and creativity in my students' writing, but those were a sort of bonus to the bottom line knowledge I was expecting them to be able to reproduce.

College writing is different precisely because it moves beyond the limited conception that writing is writing what we already know. In college, students write to discover what they don't know, to uncover what they didn't know they knew. Students in college should not worry about not having anything to write, because it is the physical and intellectual act of writing, of moving that pen across the page (or tapping the keyboard) that produces the thoughts that become what you have to write. The act of writing will produce the thinking. This thinking need not produce ideas you already know to be true, but should explore meanings and attitude and questions, which are the things that we all wonder and care about.

My discussion of these matters has so far been fairly abstract, caught up in the wind of ideas. Practical matters are of importance here, too, so I will address some points that as a college

student you should know. First, your professors are not responsible for your education—you are. While your teachers may in fact care very much that you learn and do well in your coursework, it is not their responsibility to see that you are successful. Your college teacher may not do things you took for granted like reminding you of assignments and tests and paper deadlines. They probably won't accept your illness or the illness of a loved one or a fight with a girlfriend as legitimate excuses for late work. Sloppy work, late work, thoughtless work, tardiness, absences from class—these things are the student's problems. Successful college students accept responsibility for their problems. They expect that consequences will be meted out. Successful students do not offer excuses, lame or otherwise, although they may offer appropriate resolutions. Successful students understand that their education is something they are privileged to own, and as with a dear possession, they must be responsible for managing it. If you wrecked your beloved car, would you find fault with the person who taught you how to drive?

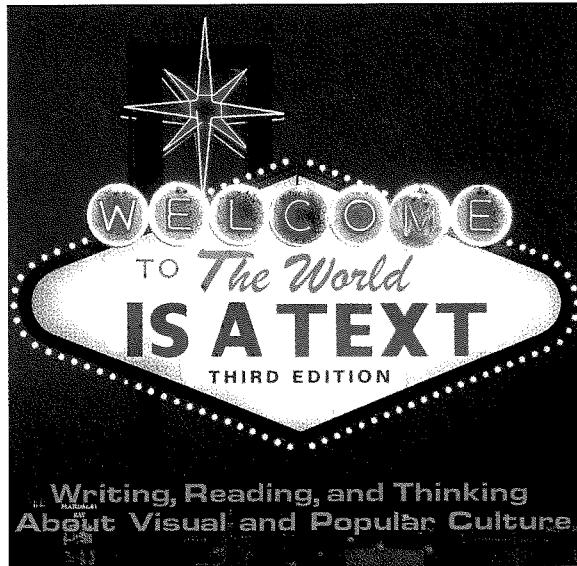
On to the writing task at hand. You will want to write well in college. You probably want to write better and more maturely than you have in the past. To do this, you must be willing to take thinking risks, which are writing risks. I read an interesting quote the other day that I shared with my writing students because I believed it to be true and pretty profound. The American writer Alvin Toffler wrote that "The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." And so it's true that when you come to the university for your "higher education," you must be willing to unlearn some old things and relearn them in new ways. That's probably true for just about every academic subject you will explore during your university career, and it is certainly true about the writing courses you will take.

Writing is thinking. Writing will lead you toward thought. Your college writing teachers will expect more of your thinking, thinking you have come to through the process of writing and rewriting. In order to get where you need to be, you must relearn what writing is. You must see that writing is not duty, obligation, and regurgitation, but opportunity, exploration, and discovery. The realization that writing is thinking and that thinking *leads* to writing is the main idea behind this book—the simple notion that the world is a text to be thought and written about. The successful college writer understands that he or she writes not just for the teacher, not just to prove something to the teacher in order to get a grade, but to uncover unarticulated pathways to knowledge and understanding.

PART III. FROM SEMIOTICS TO LENSES: FINDING AN APPROACH FOR YOUR ESSAYS

by Dean Rader and Jonathan Silverman

In the first eight pages of this book, we talk a great deal about semiotics as that pathway to knowledge and understanding. Formal and informal decoding of cultural and visual cues can be pretty interesting stuff, but you may be wondering what bearing this has on college, grades, and your class. You are going to have to write some papers for this course, and these concepts will help you land on a topic for your paper. Your next step, however, is to select an approach for that paper. Only rarely can essays be simply observational; most of the time you have to turn those observations into arguments. Thus, in order to make an argument, you have to have an approach, or what talk show host Jim Rome might call a "take." There are any number of **approaches** or **lenses** when writing about nontraditional/popular culture/visual texts. We began with **semiotics** as it explains how texts make meaning through signification



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