*Introduction: Ways of Reading*

David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky

[edited, modified, amended by Mr. Geary]

*Ways of Reading*

Reading involves a fair measure of push and shove. You make your mark on a book and it makes its mark on you. Reading is not simply a matter of hanging back and waiting for a piece, or its author, to tell you what the writing has to say. In fact, one of the difficult things about reading is that the pages before you will begin to speak only when the authors are silent and you begin to speak in their place, sometimes for them—doing their work, continuing their projects—and sometimes for yourself, following your own agenda.

This is an unusual way to talk about reading, we know. We have not mentioned finding information or locating an author’s purpose or identifying main ideas, useful though these skills are, because the purpose of this course is to offer you occasions to imagine other ways of reading and writing. We think of reading as a social interaction—sometimes peaceful and polite, sometimes not so peaceful and polite.

We’d like you to imagine that when you read the works offered in this course, somebody is saying something to you, and we’d like you to imagine that you are in a position to speak back, to say something of your own in turn. In other words, we are not presenting these pieces as a miniature library (a place to find information) and we do not think of you, the reader, as a term-paper writer (a person looking for information to write down on three-by-five cards).

When you read, you hear an author’s voice as you move along; you believe a person with something to say is talking to you. You pay attention, even when you don’t completely understand what is being said, trusting that it will all make sense in the end, relating what the author says to what you already know or expect to hear or learn. Even if you don’t quite grasp everything you are reading at every moment (and you won’t), and even if you don’t remember everything you’ve read (no reader does—at least not in long, complex pieces), you begin to see the outlines of the author’s project, the patterns and rhythms of that particular way of seeing and interpreting the world.

When you stop to talk or write about what you’ve read, the author is silent; you take over—it is your turn to write, to begin to respond to what the author said. At that point this author and his or her text become something you construct out of what you remember or what you notice as you go back through the text a second time, working from passages or examples but filtering them through your own predisposition to see or read in particular ways.

If ten of us read the same essay, each would begin with the same words on the page, but when we discuss or write about it, each will retell and interpret the content differently; we will emphasize different sections. Each of us will come to his or her own sense of what is significant, of what the point is, and the odds are good that what each of us makes of the essay will vary from one to another. Each of us will understand the author’s meaning in his or her own way, even though we read the same piece. At the same time, if we are working with the essay (and not putting it aside or ignoring its particular way of thinking about its subject), we will be working within a framework the author has established.

Reading, in other words, can be the occasion for you to put things together, to notice this idea or theme rather than that one, to follow a writer’s announced or secret ends while simultaneously following your own. When this happens, when you forge a reading of an essay or a story, you make your mark on it, casting it in your terms. But the essay makes its mark on you as well, teaching you not only about a subject but about a way of seeing and understanding a subject. The text provides the opportunity for you to see through someone else’s powerful language, to imagine your own familiar settings through the images, metaphors, and ideas of others. The essay, in other words, can make its mark on readers, but they, too, if they are strong, active readers, can make theirs on it.

Readers learn to put things together by writing. It is not something you can do, at least not to any degree, while you are reading. It requires that you work on what you have read, and that work best takes shape when you sit down to write. Writing gives you a way of going to work on the text you have read. To write about a story or essay, you go back to what you have read to find phrases or passages that define what for you are the key moments, that help you interpret sections that seem difficult or troublesome or mysterious. If you are writing an essay of your own, the work that you are doing gives a purpose and a structure to that rereading. Writing also, however, gives you a way of going back to work on the text of your own reading. It allows you to be self-critical. You can revise not just to make your essay neat or tight or tidy but to see what kind of reader you have been, to examine the pattern and consequences in the choices you have made. Revision, in other words, gives you the chance to work on your essay, but it also gives you an opportunity to work on your reading—to qualify or extend or question your interpretation.

We can describe this process of “re-vision,” or re-seeing, fairly simply. You should not expect to read any complex work once and completely understand the essay or know what you want to say about it. You will work out what you have to say while you write. And once you have constructed a reading—once you have completed a draft of your essay, in other words—you can step back, see what you have done, and go back to work on it. Through this activity—writing and rewriting—you become a strong, active, and critical reader.

Not everything a reader reads is worth that kind of effort. The pieces chosen for this course all provide, we feel, powerful ways of seeing (or framing) our common experience. The selections cannot be quickly summarized. They are striking, surprising, sometimes troubling in how they challenge common ways of seeing the world. Some of them have captured and altered the way our culture sees and understands daily experience. The selected essays have changed the ways people think and write. In fact, each selection has given students and scholars that dramatic experience, almost like a discovery, when we suddenly saw things as we had never seen them before and, as a consequence, we had to work hard to understand what had happened and how our thinking had changed.

Readers face many kinds of experiences, and certain texts are written with specific situations in mind and invite specific ways of reading. Some texts, for instance, serve very practical purposes—they give directions or information. Others, like the short descriptive essays often used in English textbooks and anthologies, celebrate common ways of seeing and thinking and ask primarily to be admired. These texts seem self-contained; they announce their own meanings with little effort and ask little from the reader, making it clear how they want to be read and what they have to say. They ask only for a nod of the head or for the reader to take notes and give a sigh of admiration (“yes, that was very well said”). They are clear and direct. It is as though the authors could anticipate all the questions their essays might raise and solve all the problems a

reader might imagine. There is not much work for a reader to do, in other words, except, perhaps, to take notes and, in the case of textbooks, to work step-by-step, trying to remember as much as possible.

This is how assigned readings are often presented in university classrooms. Introductory textbooks (in biology or business, for instance) are good examples of books that ask little of readers outside of note-taking and memorization. In these texts the writers are experts and your job, as novice, is to digest what they have to say. And, appropriately, the task set before you is to summarize—so you can speak again what the author said, so you can better remember what you read. Essay tests are an example of the writing tasks that often follow this kind of reading. You might, for instance, study the human nervous system through textbook readings and lectures and

then be asked to write a summary of what you know from both sources. Or a teacher might ask you during a class discussion to paraphrase a paragraph from a textbook describing chemical cell communication to see if you understand what you’ve read.

Another typical classroom form of reading is reading for main ideas. With this kind of reading you are expected to figure out what most people (or most people within a certain specialized group of readers) would take as the main idea of a selection. There are good reasons to read for main ideas. For one, it is a way to learn how to imagine and anticipate the values and habits of a particular group—test-makers or, if you’re studying business, Keynesian economists, perhaps. If you are studying business, to continue this example, you must learn to notice what Keynesian economists notice—for instance, when they analyze the problems of growing government debt—to share key terms, to know the theoretical positions they take, and to adopt for yourself their

common examples and interpretations, their jargon, and their established findings.

There is certainly nothing wrong with reading for information or reading to learn what experts have to say about their fields of inquiry. These are not, however, the only ways to read, although they are the ones most often taught. Perhaps because this is primarily a writing course, we are concerned with presenting other ways of reading in the college and university curriculum.

A danger arises in assuming that reading is only a search for information or main ideas. There are ways of thinking through problems and working with written texts which are essential to academic life, but which are not represented by summary and paraphrase or by note-taking and essay exams.

Student readers, for example, can take responsibility for determining the meaning of the text. They can work as though they were doing something other than finding ideas already there on the page and they can be guided by their own impressions or questions as they read. We are not, now, talking about finding hidden meanings. If such things as hidden meanings can be said to exist, they are hidden by readers’ habits and prejudices (by readers’ assumptions that what they read should tell them what they already know), or by readers’ timidity and passivity (by their

unwillingness to take the responsibility to speak their minds and say what they notice).

Reading to locate meaning in the text places a premium on memory, yet a strong reader is not necessarily a person with a good memory. This point may seem minor, but we have seen too many students haunted because they could not remember everything they read or retain a complete essay in their minds. A reader could set herself the task of remembering as much as she could from Walker Percy’s “The Loss of the Creature.” Students who read Percy’s essay as a memory test, however, end up worrying about bits and pieces (bits and pieces they could go back and find if they had to) and turn their attention away from the more pressing problem of how to make sense of a difficult and often ambiguous essay.

A reader who needs to have access to something in an essay can use simple memory aids. A reader can go back and scan, for one thing, to find passages or examples that might be worth reconsidering. Or a reader can construct a personal index, making marks in the margin or underlining passages that seem interesting or mysterious or difficult. A mark is a way of saying, “This is something I might want to work on later.” If you mark the selections as you read them, you will give yourself a working record of what, at the first moment of reading, you felt might be worth a second reading.

A reader could go to an expert to solve the problem of what to make of the essay—perhaps to a teacher, perhaps to a book in the library. And if the reader pays attention, he could remember what the expert said or she could put down notes on paper. But in doing either, the reader only rehearses what he or she has been told, abandoning the responsibility to make the essay meaningful. There are ways of reading, in other words, in which an essay is not what it means to the experts but what it means to you as a reader willing to take the chance to construct a reading. You can be the authority; you don’t have to turn to others. The meaning of the essay, then, is something you develop as you go along, something for which you must take final responsibility. The meaning is forged from reading the essay, to be sure, but it is determined by what you do with the essay, by the connections you can make and your explanation of why those connections are important. This version of the essay will finally be yours; it will not be exactly what the author said. (Only the words in the order the author wrote them would say exactly what is said.) You will choose the path to take through the essay and support it as you can with arguments, explanations, examples, and commentary.

If an essay or a story is not the sum of its parts but something you as a reader create by putting together those parts that seem to matter personally, then the way to begin, once you have read a selection in this course, is by reviewing what you recall, by going back to those places that stick in your memory—or, perhaps, to those sections you marked with checks or notes in the margins. You begin by seeing what you can make of these memories and notes. You should realize that with essays as long and complex as those in this class, you will never feel, after a single reading,

as though you have command of everything you read. This is not a problem. After four or five readings (should you give any single essay that much attention), you may still feel that there are parts you missed or don’t understand. This sense of incompleteness is part of the experience of reading, at least the experience of reading serious work. And it is part of the experience of a strong reader. No reader could retain one of these essays in her mind, no matter how proficient her memory or how experienced she might be. No reader, at least no reader we would trust, would admit that he understood everything these writers had to say. What strong readers know is that they have to begin, and they have to begin regardless of their doubts or hesitations. What you have after your first reading of an essay is a starting place, and you begin with your marked passages or examples or notes, with questions to answer, or with problems to solve. Strong readings, in other words, put a premium on individual acts of attention and composition.

*Strong Readers, Strong Texts*

The essays chosen for this class invite strong readings. They require more attention (or a different form of attention) than a written summary, a reduction to gist, or a recitation of main ideas. They are not “easy” reading. The challenges they present, however, do not make them inaccessible. The essays are not specialized studies; they have interested, pleased, or piqued general and specialist audiences alike. To say that they are challenging is to say, then, that they leave some work for a reader to do. They are designed to teach a reader new ways to read (or to step outside habitual ways of reading), and they anticipate readers willing to take the time to learn. These readers need not be experts on the subject matter. Perhaps the most difficult problem for students is to believe that this is true.

You do not need experts to explain these stories and essays, although you could probably go to the library or search the internet and find an expert guide to most of the selections. Though it is often important to seek out other texts and to know what other people are saying or have said, it is often necessary and even desirable to begin on your own. Writing can be read outside any official system of interpretation. When writers address the reader, they address a person—not a term-paper writer.

The question, then, is not what the author’s words might mean to a literary critic, or generally to those who study contemporary American culture. The question is what you, the reader, can make of those words given your own experience, your goals, and the work you do with what is written. In this sense, the essay is not what it means to others (those who have already decided what it means) but what it means to you, and this meaning is something you compose when you write about the essay; it is your account of what the author says and how what he or she says might be said to make sense.

A teacher, poet, and critic we admire, I. A. Richards, once said, “Read as though it made sense and perhaps it will.” To take command of complex material like the selections in this course, you need not subordinate yourself to experts; you can assume the authority to provide such a reading on your own. This means you must allow yourself a certain tentativeness and recognize your limits. You can speak with authority while still acknowledging that complex issues *are* complex.

There is a paradox here. On the one hand, the essays and stories are rich, magnificent, too big for anyone to completely grasp all at once, and before them, as before inspiring spectacles, it seems appropriate to stand humbly, admiringly. And yet, on the other hand, a reader must speak with authority.

In “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson says, “Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books.” What Emerson offers here is not a fact but an attitude. There is creative reading, he says, as well as creative writing. It is up to you to treat authors as your equals, as people who will allow you to speak, too. At the same time, you must respect the difficulty and complexity of their texts and of the issues and questions they examine. Little is to be gained, in other words, by turning an essay into a message that would fit on a poster in a dorm room: “Be Yourself” or “Stand on Your Own Two Feet.”

*Reading with and against the Grain*

Reading, then, requires a difficult mix of authority and humility. On the one hand, a reader takes charge of a text; on the other, a reader gives generous attention to someone else’s (a writer’s) key terms and methods, commits his time to her examples, tries to think in her language, imagines that this strange work is important, compelling, at least for the moment.

Most of the time you will be moving back and forth in these two modes, reading with and against the grain of a text, reproducing an author’s methods, questioning his or her direction and authority. In order to create your reading you may need to extend the essay by extending the discussion of the writer’s examples. You may need to give yourself over to the essay—recognizing that this is not necessarily an easy thing to do. Or, you may need to tell a story of you own experience, a story similar to the one the author tells, one that can be used as an example to illustrate or illuminate a claim or argument. Here we are saying, in effect, read your world in the essay’s terms. Notice what the author would notice. Ask the questions she would ask. Try out his conclusions.

To read generously, to work inside someone else’s system, to see your world in someone else’s terms—we call this “reading with the grain.” It is a way of working *with* a writer’s ideas, in conjunction with someone else’s text. As a way of reading, it can take different forms. You may need to summarize and paraphrase, to put others’ ideas into your terms, to provide your account of what they are saying. This is a way of getting a tentative or provisional hold on a text, its examples and ideas; it allows you a place to begin to work. And sometimes you will be asked to extend a writer’s project—to add your examples to someone else’s argument, to read your experience through the frame of another’s text, to try out the key terms and interpretive schemes in another writer’s work.

You also need to read against the grain, to read critically, to turn back, for example, *against* the author’s argument, to ask questions you believe might come as a surprise, to look for the limits of his vision, to provide alternate readings of her examples, to find examples that challenge the argument, to engage the writer, in other words, in dialogue.

Some of the readings in this course provide examples of writers working against the grain of common sense or everyday language. This, we’ve found, is the most difficult work for students to do, this work against the grain. For good reasons and bad, students typically define their skill by reproducing rather than questioning or revising the work of their teachers (or the work of those their teachers ask them to read). It is important to read generously and carefully and to learn to submit to projects that others have begun. But it is also important to know what you are doing—to understand where this work comes from, whose interests it serves, how and where it is kept together by will rather than desire, and what it might have to do with you. To fail to ask the fundamental questions—Where am I in this? How can I make my mark? Whose interests are represented? What can I learn by reading with or against the grain?—to fail to ask these questions is to mistake skill for understanding, and it is to misunderstand the goals of a liberal education. All of the essays, we would argue, ask to be read, not simply reproduced; they ask to be read and to be read with a difference. Our goal is to make that difference possible.

*Working with Difficulty*

Many of the selections for this class are difficult to read. Students are not the authors’ primary audience (the selections may not speak directly to you). We chose them, in other words, knowing that we would be asking you to read something you were most likely not prepared to read. But this is what it means to be a student and it was our goal to take students seriously. Students have to do things they are not yet ready to do; this is how they learn. Students need to read materials that they are not yet ready to read. This is how they get started; this is where they begin. It is also the case that, in an academic setting, difficulty is not necessarily a problem. If something is hard to read, it is not necessarily the case that the writer is at fault. The work can be hard to read because the writer is thinking beyond the usual ways of thinking. It is hard because it is hard, in other words. The text is not saying the same old things in the same old ways.

We believe the best way to work on a difficult text is by rereading, but you can also work on the difficult text by writing—by taking possession of the work through sentences and paragraphs of your own, through summary, paraphrase, and quotation, by making another writer’s work part of your work. The course is organized to provide ways for you to work on these difficult selections by writing, rereading, and discussion.

So, how do you work with a difficult text? You have to get started somewhere and sometime and you will almost always find yourself writing before you have a sense that you have “mastered” the text, fully comprehended what you have read. (We would argue that these are dangerous goals, “mastery” and “comprehension.” We value what students can bring themselves to do with what they read and we measure their success in relation to the success of the project.) You have to get started somewhere and then you can go back to work again on what you have begun by rereading and rewriting.

Once you have an entry point, where you have entered and how you have entered will help to shape your sense of what is interesting or important in the text. In this sense, you (and not just the author) are organizing the essay or story. The text will present its shape in terms of sections or stages. You should look for these road signs—breaks in the texts or phrases that indicate intellectual movement, like “on the other hand” or “in conclusion.” You can be guided by these, to be sure, but you also give shape to what you read—and you do this most deliberately when you reread. This is where you find (and impose) patterns and connections that are not obvious and not already articulated but that make sense to you and give you a way to describe what you

see in what you are reading. Teachers often talk to students about “scaffolds.” The scaffold, we say, represents the way you organize the text, the way you put it together. A scaffold is made up of lines and passages from the text, the terms you’ve found that you want to work with, ideas that matter to you, your sense of the progress of the piece.

The scaffold can also include the work of others. In groups or in class discussion, take notes on what other students say. This is good advice generally (you can always learn from your colleagues), but it is particularly useful in a class that features reading and writing. Your notes can document the ideas of others, to be sure, but most importantly they can give you a sense of where other people are beginning, of where they have entered the text and what they are doing once they have started. You can infer the scaffold they have constructed to make sense of what they read and this can give highlight and relief, even counterpoint, to your own. And use your teacher’s comments and questions to get a sense of the shape of your work as a reader and a writer. This is not a hunt for ideas, for the right or proper or necessary thing to say about a text. It is a hunt for a method, for a way of making sense of a text without resorting to simple summary.

This course allows you to participate in an extended academic project, one in which you take a position, revise it, look at a new example, hear what someone else has to say, revise it again, and see what conclusions you can draw about your subject. These activities always take time—they go through stages and revisions as you develop a command over the material, push against habitual ways of thinking, learn to examine an issue from different angles, reject quick conclusions, see the power of understanding that comes from repeated effort, and feel the pleasure scholars take when they find their own place in the context of others whose work they admire. This is the closest approximation we can give you of the rhythm and texture of academic life. This is an introduction to its characteristic ways of reading, thinking, and writing.