Coming Up With Your Topic

Reading to Write

People read differently for different purposes. When you read in order to cram for a quiz, you might scan only the first line of every paragraph of a text. When you read for pleasure, you might permit yourself to linger for a long while over a particular phrase or image that you find appealing. It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that when you read in order to write a paper, you must adopt certain strategies if you expect your efforts to be fruitful and efficient.

Read Actively

When you know that you are going to write a paper about a book or article, prepare yourself to read actively. Don't read a text simply to get its information. This method of reading is passive: you "receive" the text as you read, and you hold off making any intellectual response to the text until after you've finished reading it.

This way of reading doesn't get you very far. While reading passively might enable you to understand the gist of the argument, you'll probably forget the many twists and turns that the argument took on the way to making its point. Can you, without a struggle, recall the structure of the argument? Its use of language? Its wealth of detail?

Probably not. And so you have to read the book again, this time making notes to yourself about the argument and its development. While a second -- or third or fourth -- reading of a text is always a good idea, it's certainly better to read well the first time through. You can then ensure that your subsequent readings will take you deeper and farther than you might otherwise have gone.

But how do you become an active reader?

Break the Linear Tradition

To become an active reader, you have to rid yourself of the idea that reading is the first of three steps in a linear writing process. Maybe you believe that the most efficient way to write a paper is to read first, think later, and write last of all. In talking with students, we've found that they rarely write *as they read*. Sometimes, they don't even *think* as they read. When you read, do you stop to ask questions? Do you challenge the writer? Do you search your soul for what you really believe about the topic at hand? And once you've begun writing, do you ever go back to the text? Maybe you go back to find a piece of evidence that will support your claims, but do you ever do the kind of re-reading that will

force you to reconsider the text and your own position on it? If you answered "no" to most or all of these questions, then perhaps you are reading passively. Your thinking will not go as far as it might, and your papers will suffer accordingly.

Trust Your Gut

Once you understand that you ought to be thinking actively as you read, you'll begin to pay more attention to your reactions to the text. It's not a bad idea to keep track of how a text makes you feel while you are reading it. If you find yourself getting angry or growing bored, ask yourself why. Is the argument coming apart? Are there too many details? Not enough? Is the writer a misogynist? bigot? liberal? conservative? jerk? Pay attention to your own responses. They might be the seeds for your paper.

It's possible, too, that you'll find yourself "wowed" by a text. Or that some particular detail, which the author touches on in passing, seems to you to hold the key to a problem that you've been thinking about for a long time. Again, pay attention to yourself as you read. Monitor your reactions. Interrogate them. They might lead you to an interesting paper topic.

Enter the Conversation

When a writer writes a book she is, in a sense, inviting you into an ongoing conversation. She is taking a position in the great human debate, and she is asking you to take yours. When you write a paper in college, you are entering this conversation.

Understand that scholarship is the written exchange of a particular community -- in this case, the academic community. As a student, you have joined this community, attending it like you might attend a cocktail party that has the peculiar quality of going on for four years. In essence, what is expected of you as a student isn't far different from what is expected from you as a party-goer. As is true of any party, there are rules that govern your behavior -- rules that tell you what you might and might not say, and how you might or might not say it. But the basic rules of conversation are the same in the academy as they are at the cocktail party: you must listen well, you must think on your feet, and you must contribute to the conversation in a way that is relevant, thoughtful, and interesting.

In order to enter the conversation fully as a writer, you must first enter the conversation fully as a reader. Pay attention to the text. Take note of how you feel about what the author is saying. Then consider the argument that she is presenting to you. Are there gaps in her argument? Do you want to challenge these gaps? Do you want to fill them in? Do you want to acknowledge the validity of her argument and then apply it to things that she hasn't seemed to consider?

All of these questions move you beyond your own reactions to a consideration of the argument. Your conversation with the writer has begun.

Use the Margins

Maybe the best practical advice we can give you about reading more actively is to make use of the margins. An unmarked book is an unread book. Marking a text as you read it ensures that you are reading actively. Even the simple act of underlining a passage requires you to ask yourself what is most important in a text. The act of weighing importance is one way of breaking the habit of passive reading.

But you can do much more in the margins than simply make note of important passages. You can ask questions in the margins. You can draw arrows, establishing obscure connections in the text. You can note patterns of imagery or language as you see them. You can locate contradictions. You can get feisty, even, and call the author out for a debate.

You also might find that you can demystify a text by writing in it. After all, reading Socrates or Freud or Marx or Einstein might leave you feeling unsettled, intimidated, even. These minds seem so original, so perfect in their way, that it seems impossible at first that your professor is asking you to make some comment on them. Even when you read unknown writers you might feel intimidated. After all, they are published. Their work is deemed good enough to find its way into print. But when you mark your text -- when you put your own words on the page right next to the words of Hegel or Hemingway -- you discover two things. First is that there is "room" for you on the page. Neither Hegel nor Hemingway has the last word on any subject. Second, you come to see that your process is not so much different from theirs. They read texts and they responded to them by writing. Now you are, too.

Moving Outside the Text

One important idea to understand when you read is that every text has a context. Remember that every writer is in conversation: with other writers, with history, with the forces of her culture, with the events of his time. It is helpful, for example, to read Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud with some knowledge of their moment in history. Virginia Woolf and Simone deBeauvoir were responding to writers and events in their cultures, too. When you understand the context of a work, you can better see the forces that moved the author to write that work. You will gain clarity about what and why the writer was writing. You may even gain clarity about what you yourself would like to say.

But how do you place a work in context if you know nothing about the historical time in which it was written? You might take a trip to the library or do some on-line research. Perhaps your professor has reserved some books on the subject. Maybe she has discussed the context of a particular book in class.

Even if you know nothing about the context of a particular book or writer, you know a lot about the context of a particular reader: you. You are a member of a complex culture that provides you with a particular context for your reading experience. Your gender, race, and socio-economic class provide context(s) for your understanding of a text. You bring your own context(s) with you when you read texts as diverse as the Declaration of

Independence, the Koran, the films of Fellini, and the transcriptions of the Watergate tapes.

One word of caution: context needs to be examined with care. Don't assume that the context of your own class or gender or culture is informing you correctly. Read context as actively and as rigorously as you read text!

Reading Differently in the Disciplines

Each of the different academic disciplines -- English, History, Sociology, Psychology, Biology, and so on -- asks you to read differently. Sometimes, in fact, they ask you to "read" things that you wouldn't normally consider as "text." For example, in a Sociology class, you might be asked to "read" the behaviors of a particular group of people. In a History class, you might be asked to "read" a sequence of events. In a Geography class, you might be asked to "read" a certain space. You might, in the course of your college career, be asked to "read" a painting, a film, an advertisement, an event, a laboratory experiment, or any number of fascinating things.

Before you take on the task of reading any sort of text, you'll want to make sure that you understand the practices of the discipline and the requirements of the assignment. Are you being asked to observe? To argue? To compare? Is there some requirement that you order your observations temporally? Spatially? Logically? What are the conventions for reading, writing, and thinking in this particular discipline?

For more information on writing in the different disciplines, see: Writing in the Humanities, Writing in the Social Sciences, or Writing in the Sciences.

Resources for Improving Reading

Some students have other, more general problems with reading. Perhaps they read too slowly, or they have a problem with retention. If you feel that you are one of these students, or if you simply want to learn strategies for reading more effectively, contact the Academic Skills Center for information about their workshops and other resources.

Using Critical Theory

Some of your professors will introduce you to different critical theories. These theories -- which might include feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, psycho-analytic criticism, new historicism, deconstruction, and reader-response criticism -- can lead you to understand texts in new ways.

Understanding critical theory requires serious study. It's not our aim here to review for you all of the important theorists and their contributions to their fields. What we *do* aim to do is to provide you with a very brief overview of the important theories and to show you how these theories might provide you with different "lenses" for reading. Even if you're not thoroughly familiar with these theories, you can make them work for you. The

most basic understanding of new historicism, for example, can yield ideas for papers. Bringing feminist theory to a text will help you to see things in it that you otherwise might not have seen. And so on.

At the risk of being simplistic we've summarized very briefly what these theories are and how they might be used to facilitate your reading and writing processes. For the sake of example we imagine here that you have been given the assignment of writing a paper on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. The novel concerns a woman named Edna who, at the turn of the century, finds that her life as a mother and wife requires her to give up her individual self. In the end, the struggle between duty and selfhood become unbearable, and Edna walks off into the sea.

(Note: For more fully developed examples of these ways of reading, please see the Bedford Books Edition of *The Awakening*, Nancy A. Walker, Editor.)

Feminist criticism: Feminist criticism invites readers to consider women's roles within a text, event, place, or culture. It also attempts to establish within the academy and the culture a place for women writers who have been neglected. Accordingly, a feminist critic
might consider the publishing history of *The Awakening*, examining reasons for its long absence from the canon. Another common strategy in feminist theory is to examine how texts perpetuate patriarchal attitudes and male-dominated power structures. When applied to *The Awakening*, this way of reading might lead a writer to consider ways in which the patriarchal culture drives Edna to suicide.

Marxist criticism: Marxist criticism invites the reader to view a text in economic terms, focusing on the issues of privilege and power. It encourages the reader to see a text against the backdrop of a larger drama, in which the working classes are oppressed by the privileged and the wealthy. When applied to *The Awakening*, this way of reading might lead us to consider what elements of Edna's economically privileged background contribute to her undoing. Or we might discuss ways in which Edna's dependence on her servants interferes with her discovery of a new, independent self.

Psycho-analytic criticism: Springing from the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, psycho-analytic criticism argues essentially that everyone is inherently neurotic. Accordingly, students working in this school of criticism try to understand a text in terms of a writer's or a character's neurosis. This way of reading *The Awakening* might lead one to argue that Edna's suicide is in fact the result of her own neurosis, and not the result of her position in a patriarchal or bourgeois culture.

New Historicism: New Historicism claims that no text can be understood without examining its historical situation, or context. Historical critics therefore examine the events and values that might have influenced the production of a text. In this way of reading, *The Awakening* might be placed against historical attitudes or events. The writer might want to investigate how Edna's Creole environment promotes or serves as an

obstacle to her self-discovery. Or she might want to investigate property laws and how they treated (or mis-treated) women at that time.

Deconstruction: In this way of reading, critics deconstruct -- or take apart -- the internal structure of a text by looking for its contradictions. Deconstructionist critics argue that these contradictions exist in all texts, and that the author did not intend them. By pointing to the lack of coherence in a text, and by undermining the idea of an author's intention, deconstructionists argue against the possibility of a text having any single meaning. While reading *The Awakening*, a deconstructionist might look at the language that Edna uses to explain herself, noting that this language both justifies and lies about her experience. A deconstructionist would delight in how Edna's language reveals even as it conceals, illustrating an Edna who is painfully aware and yet perilously unaware of her situation.

Reader-Response: Reader-response critics are interested in readers and in the process of reading. In this school of criticism, meaning is not created by the writer alone. Rather, readers are active and important participants in the meaning-making process. They *complete* meaning. Reader-response critics argue that a text is full of gaps and that these gaps work on a reader, forcing her to make connections, fill in spaces, and so on. A reader-response critic reading *The Awakening* might examine the text for gaps and then catalogue the challenges these gaps make to the reader as she struggles to make meaning.

Informal Strategies for Invention

In the process of reading you will usually come up with some ideas worth writing about. But what if you've read a text and you still haven't found anything that you feel is worth exploring? Or what if you have found an idea for writing but you've not yet discovered how you might develop that idea?

In either of these situations you might want to take the time to try one of the following strategies for invention:

Brainstorming

Brainstorming as an invention practice is useful because it is a quick and efficient way of laying out what you know about a subject. By brainstorming you might also see what you DON'T know about a topic, which might move you to read and think further.

Let's say that you were being asked in an education or a composition class to brainstorm on the topic of brainstorming. You might make a list like the one we offer here:

Brainstorming:
- is informal and quick
- can be general or specific
- associative or focused
- lists or paragraphs

- gets you unstuck
- ?? limitations ??

- As you can see from the list here, brainstorming is an informal strategy for invention, one in which you jot down, as quickly as you can, notes concerning your topic.

- The notes can be general or specific; it depends on how far along you are in the writing process.

- The notes can be wide-ranging and associative, or they can be focused upon a specific problem.

- The notes can be as simple as lists of single words, or as elaborate as short, unpolished paragraphs that briefly explore an idea.

- You can also stop at any point in the writing process to brainstorm, especially when you feel that you are stuck or that you have to fill in some gaps in your argument.

- As to the matter of the limitations of brainstorming: you'll note that the above list pointed to a question that the writer felt curious about. Clearly he hasn't thought about what the limitations of brainstorming are -- but he has raised the question. At this point, he might make another list in which he brainstorms about the limitations of brainstorming. In this he may well find that he has an interesting idea for a paper.

In short, when you brainstorm, you freely explore your topic, without the pressure of structure, grammar, or style. In the process, ideas for an essay (or a paragraph, or even a footnote) evolve.

Freewriting

Freewriting is similar to brainstorming in that it is a quick and informal way to develop an idea. But while brainstorming most often involves making a list of ideas, freewriting requires that you try to elaborate upon these ideas by writing about them, without paying attention to syntax or grammar. In this way freewriting can get you "unstuck" when coming up with ideas is difficult.

Here is an example.

...Freewriting. what is freewriting? maybe it is just letting yourself go writing whatever comes to your head. it's a little different from brainstorming, at least it seems different to me, but how. well, brainstorming for me is coming up with ideas and making associations, when I brainstorm I usually list my ideas and then try to come see how they connect I usually draw arrows and circles and by the time I am done I have a kind of chart that tells me where I'm going. but when I freewrite it's different because I just let the language unwind and I tend to think in more or less complete sentences but I don't worry about grammar or style or if I'm making transitions between my ideas. what I do

instead is just to let my thoughts unfurl like a flag and flap around in the breeze. and even if I don't come up with anything all that interesting freewriting loosens me up and lets me see that I can write, all I have to do is push buttons, and pushing buttons is a lot more fun than just sitting and staring at a blank screen....

Discovery Draft

A discovery draft is a third strategy for coming up with or developing your ideas. A discovery draft is similar to freewriting in that you can write freely, ignoring the structure and the development of your ideas for the time being. You can also forget about matters of syntax and style.

But writing a discovery draft is different from freewriting in that a discovery draft makes a conscious attempt to focus on and to develop an idea or cluster of ideas. In other words, a discovery draft is like freewriting with an agenda. Because you have an agenda, discovery drafts tend to be more structured than freewritings. They also tend to be written more or less coherently, in complete sentences.

Think of writing a discovery draft as writing a letter to an imaginary friend about your history (or economics or government) paper. You might first summarize for your friend's benefit the texts you've read and the problems they've presented. You might then raise questions about the texts. You might challenge the writers on certain points. You might note contradictions. You might point out a certain part of the argument that you found compelling. You might address and then work out any confusion that you have about your topic. In writing the discovery draft you might have an "ah-ha!" moment, in which you see something that you hadn't seen before. And you break off in mid-sentence to explore it.

In a sense, the "ah-ha!" moment is the point of the discovery draft. When writing the discovery draft, your thoughts are focused on your topic. You are giving language to your questions and observations. In this process the mind almost always stumbles across something new -- makes a discovery. And with this discovery, a paper is often launched.

Formal Strategies for Invention

Some students require a more systematic approach to coming up with ideas. Every writer over time will develop her own system of invention. If you haven't found one yet, here are a few that have withstood the test of time.

Five W's and an H

Journalism has provided us with perhaps the simplest and most familiar way of coming up with a topic: simply ask questions like Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? Answering these questions initially doesn't seem very hard -- at least, until one gets to the why and how. Then it gets tricky.

Let's use this method to try to generate ideas about Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a book often encountered in English 5. Maybe when reading *Heart of Darkness* you observed that Conrad's narrative style is sometimes confusing, difficult to follow. You understand, however, that Conrad is a master of the sentence, and you begin to think that perhaps his narrative style in this book is confusing for a reason. You have your observation. Now begin your interrogation.

When in the book did you find yourself confused by the style? *What* was happening in those moments? *Who* is acting in those moments when you find yourself confused? *Where* is the action taking place? And *how* does Conrad manage to confuse you? Is there some common game that he plays with sentence structure and grammar? Is he using pronouns too loosely, for example? Or is he embedding clauses one within the other, so that in order to find the meaning you have to lift one clause out of the other, like a series of nesting dolls? Most important, *why* is Conrad going to all of this trouble? And *why* do you think this observation is worth making?

These are tough questions. But it's precisely when you have difficulty answering a "why" that a real paper is beginning. When the answer comes too easily, you are on familiar ground. You're probably not saying anything interesting. Cultivate a taste for confusion. Then cultivate a strategy for clearing confusion up. It's only when you ask a question that initially confuses you that real thinking and real writing begin.

Tagmemics

Tagmemics is a system that allows you to look at a single object from three different perspectives. The hope is that one of these perspectives (or even all three) can help you to determine a subject for writing. Tagmemics involves seeing your topic:

1. As a particle (as a thing in itself)
2. As a wave (as a thing changing over time)
3. As part of a field (as a thing in its context)

Let's say that you want to write a paper on Malcolm X's role in the civil rights movement. If you use tagmemics as a system of invention, you will begin by looking at Malcolm X as a thing in himself. In other words, what are the characteristics of Malcolm X as a man? The characteristics of his philosophy?

You next might consider Malcolm X in terms of how his role in the civil rights movement changed over time. Certainly Malcolm X experienced a radical shift in his beliefs about civil rights; you might explore this shift and the consequences both for Malcolm X and for the movement as a whole. You might also consider how history has viewed Malcolm X over time. You might have discovered in your reading that there exists today some division of opinion as to whether or not Malcolm X ought to be considered a civil rights leader. What forces have contributed to this dispute, and how has the nature of the dispute changed over time?

Finally, consider Malcolm X as a thing in context. Relate him to his culture, to his moment in time. Look for the causes that produced Malcolm X, as well as the effect he had on his own historical period. Or compare or contrast him with other civil rights figures to see what special contribution he made to the movement and its history. You might even connect Malcolm X with unlikely events and figures in order to provide a wide context for his work and his life.

There are infinite questions to ask here. The point is that tagmemics can ask questions which encourage focused answers -- the kind of answers that help you to write thoughtful, interesting, and well-conceived essays.

Aristotle's Topoi

As one of the fathers of rhetoric, Aristotle worked to formalize a system for coming up with, organizing, and expressing ideas. We are concerned here with what Aristotle called the topoi -- that is, a system of specific strategies for invention. Think of the topoias as a series of questions that you might ask of a text -- questions that might lead you to interesting paper topics. The topoi are especially helpful when you are asked to explore a topic that seems very broad to you -- for example, the topic of alcoholism.

1) Use Definition

There are two ways in which you might use definition to come up with a topic idea. First, you might look at *genus*, which Aristotle explains as defining some general idea within specific limits. Example: define alcoholism, perhaps with the intent of showing how many people are in fact alcoholics even though they believe themselves to be social drinkers.

The second way to use definition is by thinking in terms of *division*. In other words, try to think of your subject in terms of its parts, classes, and so on. Example: consider types of alcoholics, stages of alcoholism, etc.

2) Use Comparison

There are three ways in which you might make comparisons as a way of generating ideas. The first of these ways is to look for *similarities* -- to define the ways in which two things or subjects are the same. Example: You might want to consider the similarities between alcoholism and anorexia nervosa, between alcoholics and gamblers, etc.

You might also compare by observing *difference*. Example: Note the differences between attitudes toward alcoholics today and fifty years ago; differences between attitudes from culture to culture; etc.

Finally, you might compare by looking at *degree*. In other words, you might consider how something is better or worse than something else. Example: It is better to be an alcoholic here than in the Soviet Union; it is better to drink than not to drink; and so on.

3) Explore Relationship

Aristotle determined four ways in which we can explore relationships as a way of coming up with ideas for writing. The first of these ways is to consider the *cause* of your subject, or its *effects*. For example, you might research the causes of alcoholism, or its effects on the family.

You might also take a look at a subject's *antecedent* and *consequences*. In other words, you might ask the question of your subject: "If this, then what?" Example: If alcohol is known to damage unborn babies, then mothers who drink ought to be considered criminally negligent.

You might also examine *contraries*, or make an argument by proving its opposite. For example, if you want to say that peace is good, you say that war is bad. Considering the topic of alcoholism, you might argue that because sobriety is bad for a person, drinking is good for a person.

Finally, you might look for *contradictions*, *incompatible statements*, or *controversy*. Example: Some doctors feel that alcoholism is a disease, influenced by genetic factors; others believe it stems from a psychological inadequacy, a weakness of will.

4) Examine Circumstance

There are two ways that you might examine circumstances in order to come up with an idea for a paper. The first is to consider the possible and the impossible. Sometimes you can construct an interesting argument by considering what is possible and what is not. Example: Is it possible to be a recovering alcoholic?

Another strategy is to consider the past, or to look to the future. For example, What is the probability of becoming a recovering alcoholic? What have the trends in alcohol consumption been in the past, and what can we expect in the future? Etc.

5) Rely on Testimony

The opinions of others can be a source for your paper. Look to authorities, testimonials, statistics, maxims, laws and precedents. Example: Do the laws regarding alcohol make sense, given the statistics that tell us that alcohol is a killer?

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