Teaching Writing, Teaching Media

A Curriculum by **Peter Elbow**

In Collaboration with the
Media Education Foundation

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Writing About Media

Introduction for Teachers:

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What You'll Find in this Whole Curriculum: How Things are Organized and How to Use the Materials

For many years, the Media Education Foundation (MEF) has put out videos and DVDs to help people understand the social impact of mass media on our culture. MEF is especially committed to helping young people critically analyze sitcoms, sports broadcasts, advertisements, news programs, and other media products. Where commercial media tend to lead young people into being passive viewers and consumers, MEF helps them become more savvy about the way media have affected them all their lives and continue to influence them in powerful ways.

Now MEF has invited me to use a selection of short clips from their longer DVDs about the media in order to create materials for teaching writing and helping teach media studies. What you'll find here is a collection of writing assignments and clips from MEF DVDs — and lots of suggestions and tools for using them. The MEF media clips are ideal for creating an *experiential* or *workshop* approach to intellectual work, an approach that foregrounds active participation rather than passive listening and tends to create deeper learning.

I've written and assembled these materials for a spectrum of different teachers. At one extreme are teachers who want to use MEF clips to help teach writing; at the other extreme are teachers who want to use writing to help teach media studies. More concretely, I imagine three main sorts of teachers:

- Teachers of writing might use these materials to build a full-semester writing course — either in college or high school.
- Teachers of communications, cultural studies, or a comparable discipline might use these materials to create a *writing intensive course* in one of those disciplines. These materials will help students write better and learn more deeply the disciplinary content.
- Teachers of all sorts might use a few of these materials if they want to *supplement* a course they are already teaching with some MEF clips and some writing about the media — perhaps even for as little as two to five weeks. (For example, in a sociology or political science course, teachers might use MEF clips on race and class and use them as a springboard for a bit more writing.)

Because these kinds of teaching are so different, I haven't created a single "course" or single sequence of activities. Instead, I have clumped together all the assignments and writing tasks in one section and all the media clips together in another section — and created other sections for various teaching materials. In effect, I'm presenting a cafeteria line or buffet or smorgasbord jammed full of too many dishes — not a well-planned menu for a single dinner. My goal has been to create flexibility so that different teachers with different needs and approaches can find the materials they want for their own situation (choosing the dishes they want for the meal they are designing). For I know that different teachers will not only be teaching different kinds of courses;

they will also have different teaching styles, they'll have different class sizes and other institutional constraints, and they'll be teaching students of different ages, levels and degree of preparation.

So you'll see that I've clumped together all the writing assignments; then all my various suggestions for teaching; then descriptions of MEF clips and prompts to go with them; and finally some handouts you can photocopy for students. But for teachers who would like suggestions for course sequences, I have provided one for each of three kinds of teachers I mentioned.

In these materials, I have not held back from writing in the somewhat informal style that I prefer — nor from describing bluntly my own approach to teaching writing. Some people consider my prose style and teaching approach too idiosyncratic or personal. In my mind, they both grow out of my desire to build safety and trust — which seem to me to foster learning. One of my assumptions is that all students are smart and linguistically sophisticated. But I recognize that some students have lived through circumstances that have shut them down to one degree or another — so that they act as though they are genuinely stupid or linguistically dense. I am confident, however, I have provided here some useful materials and insights even for teachers who use a different approach and have different assumptions.

Is the Focus on Writing or Media?

Various teachers will create various courses out of these materials, but I think of them all as being about *both* writing and the media.

Writing. If you bill your course as a writing course, that focus will go without saying. But if, instead, your course is billed as a course on media or a course in communication studies, I trust that all the materials here will convince you that your students will learn more about your topic if you get them to do lots of writing. Writing need not cloud a focus on the media, and if the writing is primarily "low stakes" writing, it won't add much time or work to your job. Many media courses are also now being listed as "writing intensive." This means they are more explicitly about both media and writing: teachers use writing to help deepen learning but also to teach students about the kinds of writing that are used in this field.

Media. But inevitably, any course using these materials will be about much more than writing. Yes, media, of course, but I've clumped the MEF media clips into thematic units so the course can focus on four large topics that transcend issues of media: *consumerism*; *gender and sexuality*; *race and class*; *media and politics*. This way, students will develop important insights into these large issues themselves — not just "the media." Note also that it doesn't actually make sense to contrast *writing* and *the media*. Writing itself is one of our most powerful and pervasive media. Lots of useful insights will emerge from discussions that compare the "old" medium of writing and the newer electronic media. For instance, what do the new media foster that "old writing" finds difficult — *and* what does writing foster that the electronic media find difficult?

Finally, there's a larger topic that these materials inevitably address: a topic that transcends

even the four large topics I've just listed. This is the perennial issue that humans have wrestled with since the beginning of time: freedom vs. determinism; agency vs. control. The issue has been framed in various ways:

- **A cultural frame**. To what extent can media giants and corporations (and other powerful institutions) control us — control the actions and feelings and desires that we experience as "our own"? Or if they don't exert direct control over us, to what extent do they shape the *culture* we live in — and in this mediated way shape our feelings, desires, and ultimately our actions?
- **A philosophical, psychological, and even scientific frame**. Are our acts determined by the laws of physics and chemistry, or do we have some kind of nonphysical "mental" mind that makes its own independent or autonomous decisions about what our bodies will do?
- Throughout the centuries this has been seen through **a religious frame**. Does God know and determine what we do, or does God give humans complete free will?

If we can help students confront this larger issue of agency and cultural/media control, they can come away with some deep insights that will affect not just how they experience their lives in front of a screen but also how they experience *everything* in their lives. I cannot help wanting my students to be more likely to work for a better world, and toward this end, I believe it's important to help them explore this deepest of all questions. And yet what could be more helpful in getting students to wrestle with deep philosophical, religious, and political questions — naturally and even playfully — than examining specific clips from sitcoms, advertisements, and movies, along with analyses and arguments given by various prominent scholars and critics?

Writing as a High Stakes Activity and a Low Stakes Activity

The distinction between writing as high stakes and low stakes is the main conceptual lens that shapes the treatment of writing here. I will use this distinction in very practical ways, but first let me say a word of theory. This high/low stakes lens gives us powerful insights into the nature of writing and culture.

Most people experience *writing* as a high stakes activity and *speaking* as a low stakes activity. After all, people speak most often in informal settings where they feel they can be casual — often working out what they want to say as they are engaged in saying it. When people write, however, they usually feel a pressure to "get it right" — because they are "putting it down in black and white." (Many people feel that email is an ephemeral low stakes activity like speaking — a feeling that can get them into big trouble. Email doesn't disappear like speech.)

These feelings are actually an accident of how our culture frames most of our writing and

speaking. Writing is learned in school, and school writing goes to someone with authority who will give an evaluative judgment. The essential underlying message is often, "Is this alright?" — rather than the essential underlying message of most human discourse: "Here's something on my mind that I'd like to tell you." Even when teachers are very busy, they try at least to circle a few errors and perhaps give an informal grade. Also, most decent jobs require writing — and the words usually matter: workplace writing is seldom a low stakes activity.

No wonder people so often associate writing with pressure and anxiety. For us teachers too, writing assignments usually bring pressure since we feel we have to evaluate them, give feedback, and count them toward the final grade. And most teachers find it hard to grade writing. We know the evaluation of writing is highly subjective; and we know that a multidimensional performance like writing cannot be fairly represented by a *one-dimensional* grade.

Email and text-messaging are changing this situation. It's no longer true — as it was for so many years — that most students have never written except in school. Yet many people don't feel that email is "real writing" because they are so deeply imbued with the assumption that writing is a high stakes activity associated with careful judgment — and that speaking is a low stakes, casual use of language.

But these assumptions are local and a matter of culture. Some other cultures treat speaking and writing differently. "[In Polynesia], Tuvaluan participants in conversation rarely express affect towards one another or concerning themselves. In contrast, writers of personal letters in Tuvaluan often express intimate feelings and display affect towards the recipient" (Biber, Douglas. *Variation across speech and writing*. Cambridge UP, 1988, p 205).

Because our *cultural assumptions* about writing are so deep, they can blind us to some *material realities* about speaking and writing — some realities that Tuvaluan people seem particularly sensitive to. In fact, speech is an indelible, irreversible performance because spoken words, once uttered, cannot be changed or "deleted." This makes speech more dangerous than writing. When the judge says "strike that from the record" — he can delete written words, but he can never strike the spoken words from the jury's ears and memories. Our most trusted loved ones and friends forget many of the good things we say, but the truly bad or hurtful things we say are never forgotten. Most long-term relationships are stories of people surviving words both parties cannot forget and wish they could.

In fact, *writing* is often better than speaking for the low stakes use of language. We don't have to show our written words to anyone unless or until we are satisfied. We can use writing to explore perplexing, difficult, or dangerous taboo issues — without risk. The wonderful thing about writing, then, is that it's ideal for both high stakes and low stakes uses of language.

High stakes: If we want to get some language or thinking really good because a lot is riding on it, writing is ideal. We can jot, explore, write draft after draft, walk away and forget it, come back later, get feedback, revise — more feedback and more revising — and finally edit it for sur-

face features to get it just the way we want it.

Low stakes: If we want to explore some ideas we're not sure of — and especially ideas that might get us in trouble or that people might disapprove of — writing is also ideal. We can put down our thoughts and feelings — carelessly or carefully — keep it private — even rip it up or delete the file. (The FBI *can* recover deleted files — but not if we write them on a disk and destroy the disk.)

Therefore we need to help students learn how to use writing in both ways. And as teachers, we need high stakes writing because (among other reasons) we can't give fair final grades unless we ask students to demonstrate their learning on paper through essays and essay exams. This writing will be high stakes writing because we use it to help determine a grade. If we just give short-answer or multiple-choice tests, students can *seem* to know things when, in fact, they don't really understand them.

However, our experience of assigning high stakes writing will be much better if we get this high stakes writing to float on a sea of low stakes writing. When teachers ask only for high stakes writing — as so many do — students often clench and write far worse than they are capable of, and, as a result, they look more stupid and illiterate than they are. Also, low stakes writing is ideal for helping students explore new and complicated or threatening ideas: it helps them experiment, explore their feelings, and figure things out.

We can assign lots of low stakes writing because it asks so little work from us. Some of it we merely read and check off, some of it we glance at, and some we needn't read at all. Yet the use of low stakes writing doesn't just help learning; it's also a big help in preventing plagiarism on high stakes pieces. It helps us make it clear to students that we know their written voices and styles; and we can insist that all high stakes pieces result from a process of exploratory writing, messy drafts, and revision — and that all of it be turned in with final drafts. In this situation, students find it almost impossible to pass off someone else's writing as their own.

A varied diet of *audiences* and *responses* is just as important as the varied diet between high and low stakes writing.

- Audience: students need some writing that's entirely private, some writing that goes to peers, and some that goes to the teacher.
- Response: they need some writing to be shared for no response (just communicating what's in mind); and some writing that gets a nonevaluative response (e.g., "Here's what I hear you saying"); and some writing that gets an evaluative response that tries to point out strengths and weaknesses.

A balanced diet is key.

Someone teaching a course that's not a writing course — and who has lots of students in the class and not much help from teaching assistants — might choose mostly low stakes and middle stakes assignments and use only enough high stakes writing to test how well students have learned the concepts. Such teachers would be assigning mostly "writing to learn" because they don't have the resources to handle much high stakes writing.

Teachers of writing and those who have more favorable teaching conditions will surely assign more middle and high stakes writing. But one of the best ways to improve high stakes writing is to have plenty of low stakes writing too. With lots of low stakes writing, students are more warmed up and skilled when it comes to high stakes pieces. It's a matter of adjusting the proportions to one's own needs. (See the short piece in **Suggestions for Teaching**, "Uses and Benefits of Freewriting and Low Stakes Writing." page 46)

Planning a Course:
Sample Sequences for Different Contexts

In This Section:

Introduction to This Section

Because I'm trying to provide materials for diverse courses and teachers, I have created the unusual format that you'll find in *Teaching Writing, Teaching Media*: a cafeteria line or buffet or smorgasbord of teaching materials that are not organized into a course outline. But in order to help teachers imagine more concretely how they might shape some of these materials into a coherent course (build a healthy dinner with a selection from the buffet), I include in this section three sequences or skeleton course outlines.

It might help to set down the two extreme positions that readers of *Teaching Writing, Teaching Media* might take:

- *I'm teaching writing and I don't give a damn about media and these media clips. I'm only using them because they help students get involved in writing.*
- *I'm teaching the media and I don't give a damn about writing. I'm only using writing because it helps students think better and learn more about the media.*

I completely respect both positions. Of course I'm interested in writing, but I love to show teachers how to use writing in completely pragmatic, self-interested ways for the sake of improving learning. I don't care if they don't care about writing because I know that these practices will help students with writing nevertheless. And I also don't care if writing teachers don't care about the media and use the clips only in pragmatic, self-interested ways for the sake of writing. I know these practices will help students think in more sophisticated ways about the media.

Of course, most teachers reading these words will not take such extreme positions. More likely are these three kinds of teachers:

- Teachers of full semester writing courses (early college or late high school) who are interested in the media.
- Teachers of full semester courses in media studies, communication, cultural studies, and comparable disciplines who want to make it a more *writing intensive* course.
- Teachers who want to insert a two-to five-week unit into an existing course in almost any discipline — a unit that emphasizes some mix of media and writing.

I'm not trying to persuade teachers that the sequences I describe below will be right for them in their particular circumstances. Mine are just illustrative models. The more I teach, the more I keep feeling that no plan is ever ideal.

But first, a few reflections on the slippery art of planning.

Reflections on Planning

The Dialectic Between Low Stakes and High Stakes Assignments

For almost any course, it's helpful to assign a mixture of low, medium, and high stakes writing. Most of all, high stakes writing *needs* low stakes writing so students get a chance to warm up and gain confidence in their writing and their ability to find lots of ideas — *before* they have to write something where the stakes are high. Low stakes writing doesn't in itself need high stakes writing; people can write casually and loosely till the cows come home and many people find it useful to do so. But if we want students to work at producing good writing, we need some high stakes assignments. And even if we don't care about their writing (caring only about how much they learn), we cannot reliably decide whether they have learned what we are teaching unless we ask them to demonstrate their understanding in writing. Since we're using that writing to help grade them, it automatically becomes a high stakes performance. (Multiple choice and short answer tests are *not* a reliable measure of their understanding. Of course we could test their learning with long individual conferences, but this takes too much time in most situations.)

My premise is that there should always be an ongoing diet of low stakes writing no matter what your teaching context. It takes very little teaching time and maximizes learning. (See "The Uses and Benefits of Freewriting and Low Stakes Writing" in **Suggestions for Teaching**, page 46) I suggest at least ten minutes of low stakes writing in every class — or certainly every week. All this low stakes writing will help them get more out of the clips you'll be viewing and the small group and full class discussions you'll be having. And when we send students home to write high stakes essays without having primed the pump to give them lots of interesting ideas, they are far too likely to give in to timid anxiety and write dull essays full of play-it-safe generalities from a distant, uninvested point of view.

When I first started using freewriting and low stakes writing, I thought maybe it was just helpful in the early stages of a course, and that we could "mature" to "more serious" writing. But I've discovered that some of the best effects of low stakes writing comes in the later stages of the course. Freewriting is not just for untrained or anxious writers; it yields its best fruits as we become better writers. And some students choke towards the end of course when high stakes writing is due if they don't get the cognitive and rhetorical lubrication of low stakes writing.

The *mix* or proportions of high, medium, and low stakes writing will depend on your teaching circumstances. If you are teaching a fourteen-week full-semester writing course, or even a media course with a big emphasis on writing, you'll obviously have a good number of high stakes assignments — say three to five essays that go through the full process of drafting, feedback, revising, and copy editing. I'll make some concrete suggestions in a few moments for such teachers.

But if the course is not primarily about writing, you'll probably want fewer high stakes assignments to go with your low and medium stakes assignments. Low and medium stakes writing

functions as "writing to learn." Also, your mix will vary depending on the number of students in the class and your overall teaching load. If you are overwhelmed with too many students and no help, you can use plenty of low stakes writing and just a couple of pieces of medium stakes writing that don't take much of your responding time — and you will be doing your students a favor.

There's an important underlying principle here: students learn a great deal from writing, while they learn surprisingly little from our feedback. There's some research on teacher feedback and what students take away from it, and it's not a pretty picture. We tend to write our responses quickly — often when we are tired. Students read our responses through a lens formed by all the past teacher feedback on their writing — and this often means a lens of anxiety and defensiveness. Research shows that they often don't understand what we intended to say. So whether it's a writing class or not, I say something like this to students — trying to be as frank as I can:

> *I'm going to assign more writing than I can read. Yet I will insist that you do it — and I'll lower your grade if you don't. You might think this is peculiar, but I know from experience that all this low stakes writing — you have to do it and think about it but not agonize or polish — will vastly help you learn what I'm teaching. It will help you understand the media we are studying and help you be a better writer — and also help you learn to write in a more comfortable, productive, and satisfying way.*

Teachers of very large classes can even require and collect a *draft* of a high stakes essay — due four or five days before the final due date — and be completely honest about the fact that they cannot read it. They are using their teacher authority to forcibly prevent students from starting an important paper the night before it's due. After students have written and turned in this draft, they are free not to revise it for the final due date. But when they live with even a good draft for four or five days, few can resist revising it and making it better.

And even if the course is large, and your feedback has to be minimal, it's helpful to have *at least* two or three medium stakes think pieces. They require little teacher time — or even none. The poor alternative is just *one* high stakes piece. It will doubtless come at the end, and such "terminal papers" produce less learning for more work. Students don't have a chance to apply what they learned from the writing. Look into having two *very short* high stakes pieces and two or three medium stakes pieces. (I'll try to suggest ways to save time in the **Suggestions for Teaching** section.)

Sequence of Activities for a High Stakes Essay: Exploratory Writing, Drafting, Sharing, Responding, Revising, Editing, Publication

Think of this as a mini-essay on serious revising.

When students have to write a high stakes essay, they often go into a "formal," "artificial" mentality and tiptoe away from everyday language and thinking. We can understand why they do this: the language and thinking needed for good expository or academic essays feels different from everyday discourse. But all too often, students end up with *wooden* language and thinking that can make them look less insightful and articulate than they actually are.

After all, students get the most practice and develop the most cognitive and linguistic skill with the thinking and language they use most. Good academic writing requires more care than everyday conversation, but we can help them keep the best of what's there — and *improve* it and add to it in order to meet the standards for careful academic work.

In the light of this premise, here is the sequence of activities I try to use with high stakes essays.

Exploratory writing. I try to start a high stakes assignment at least two weeks before the final due date so I have enough time for lots of low and medium stakes writing (sometimes responding to a clip) to get them going. These exploratory pieces may be casual, not-thought-through, even slangy, but they set a standard for clarity and directness that I want them to feel in their bones when they revise their final versions into more careful language. I often lead them in some of this low stakes writing even *before* they've seen an essay assignment sheet and start to enter that dangerous mental zone of *I am now trying to write an essay*.

Low stakes sharing. On at least two occasions, I ask them to gather quickly in pairs or small groups just to read one or more of these bits aloud to each other — not for feedback. This can take as little as five minutes. It's usually fun for them (when they get used to the process) just to *hear* each other's thinking and the language people have produced without struggle. If there's time, I sometimes invite them to spend a few moments discussing the ideas that come up, but they get a lot out of just reading with no discussion.

Drafting a "mid-process" draft. Then for homework, I ask them to create a genuine draft by drawing on this scattered writing. All the diverse, and even contradictory, elements in the prior low stakes writing help prevent students going home and producing a dull, flat draft that's "unified" around only one timid idea. I specifically invite them to draw on all that scattered in-class writing. I can say, "See, you've already got some starts on your assignment." But I'm hoping that all the low stakes writing will have some contradictions and cognitive dissonance that will force them to do some new thinking.

I'm asking for a good draft that requires hard thinking, but I emphasize that this is *not* trying to be the final draft. I invite something that's not yet completely neat and tidy — ideally something that's bursting at the seams a bit because of a few too many ideas. This richness leads to more productive feedback about which ideas are stronger and weaker — and then to more options for revising a coherent final draft.

Response. If this is a writing course, I always set up some kind of peer response in pairs or small groups. But peer response doesn't have to take up class time: it can be homework — and in fact, that route often leads to more thoughtful, considered feedback. But if this is the first high stakes piece, I'd emphasize mere reading aloud and minimal response. (Using peer response is complicated for both students and teachers. See more about it in **Suggestions for Teaching**, page 65) If the course isn't focused so much on writing, I don't see the need to spend so much time working at peer response. But sharing drafts by reading them aloud to each other is crucial: students learn an enormous amount this way, and it doesn't take much time. There are also a few very quick and simple kinds of response they can give (see **Suggestions for Teaching**, page 67). In any event, this is the draft they give me for my response. (See "Responding to Student Writing," **Suggestions for Teaching**, page 53).

Substantive revising. It's crucial to separate the task of *revising* from that of *editing*. Too many students think they have revised when they have merely smoothed out stylistic tangles or surface mistakes. I find it helpful and fun to startle them with the following directions for revising:

> *Do substantive revising. Work on thinking, organization, and clarity of sentences. You are trying to create the best possible essay. But don't worry yet about surface style or mistakes in grammar and spelling. We'll get to that in a separate, final editing step.*

It's gratifying to see that their grammar and spelling tend to get a lot better when they are just trying to improve the thinking, organization, and clarity.

The due date for this revised essay is the biggest crunch time for students. It's this work of genuine revising that is often hardest — and it certainly begets the most learning about good writing.

Surface editing or ***copy editing.*** I usually just *hold* the revised draft and wait to read and evaluate the edited "final final" edited version when it comes in at a slightly later due date. (I usually start a new essay before it comes in — since the copy editing task is not big.) I find that sometimes they can't resist making substantive improvements at this editing stage, even though their only task was to smooth out the style and remove mistakes. My standard for this editing is that there should be "virtually no mistakes" in grammar and spelling. (If I've already read and judged the "merely revised" essay, I just spend about 60 seconds on the edited version for spot checks on whether they did the job.)

I make it clear that they can get help with this final copy editing task. If this seems odd, let

me spell out what I think is a crucial principle about writing and literacy that I try to enact here. If I try to insist that they must get rid of "virtually all" grammar and spelling mistakes without any help, I create an impossible situation. Too many students simply cannot meet this standard — some of them conscientious students and good thinkers and writers. Faced with this bind, many teachers simply relax their editing standards and put up with final drafts full of mistakes — drafts that make the writer look very bad to most readers.

This problem has forced me to think more rigorously about my goals for teaching any college course: I want them to be able to function successfully with their writing in school and afterwards. But what does that mean for copy editing? The central thing here is a shift in what I require: not the impossible demand that all our students know enough about English grammar and conventions of usage to do it without help. I do a few ten to fifteen minute mini-workshops, for example on punctuation, but I can't teach all my students all the conventions of standard, edited written English in a college course. Instead, I make a more feasible and useful demand: learn how to get the help you need in order to end up with final versions that are "virtually" error free. Learn to manage this part of your writing process. I now simply make this a required part of my course — like attendance — for the three to five most important essays of the semester.

When I encourage them to get help, you might say I am condoning "cheating." But help in copy editing is not plagiarizing — unless you want to say that all published authors are guilty of plagiarism when the publishers provide copy editors. It makes me happy when students figure out how to get the help they need. This is feasible knowledge, and it is crucial for success in future courses and jobs. I present this as a hard-assed demand: they cannot pass the course unless they know how to end up with clean final drafts.

This approach to writing high stakes essays helps prevent plagiarism. It helps me know if students are really writing their own papers. I see lots of their low stakes writing so they know that I know their voice and style. They have to do their main piece of thinking for the mid-process draft — but that's not a polished or fully coherent piece — so it would be odd to plagiarize here. When they hand in their revised draft, they must hand in all their exploratory writing and earlier draft. And in their final process writing, I always ask them to talk about the changes they made in revising.

Publication. See **Suggestions for Teaching** (page 77) for thoughts about publishing student writing.

A Time-Saving Sequence for Working on High Stakes Essays

Here is an "overlapping" sequence that I've grown fond of because it's a way of getting students to do the basic thinking for *more* essays in less time. In a nutshell, I ask them to bring *two* essays to the stage of *mid-process draft* — but choose only one of them to revise and edit. Of course,

I want students to have the experience of revising and editing, but most of all I want them to have the experience of *writing as figuring out a cogent meaningful train of thought* — bringing coherence out of chaos. I'm always sad when teachers take too many weeks building and building and building one high stakes essay — trying to get it perfect — so that students don't get enough experience figuring out an idea from scratch and "getting it together." I think the greatest impediment to writing comes from students' fear that they can't come up with new thinking when they face the need for a new essay. This is not just fear of the blank page (which is cured by lots of freewriting). This is also the fear of "I can never think of a new idea of my own." In fact, everyone can learn to be fluent in having ideas, but they need practice.

So this is a matter of focused scheduling. Start one essay and carry it to the stage of mid-process draft. And this draft gets peer feedback and feedback from you. But in the meantime, start another draft and carry it to the same stage, also with feedback. Sometimes I just hold the first essay, wait for the second one, and read them both in one sitting. This gives me a particularly fruitful way to give response. Instead of too much emphasis on what doesn't work, I can emphasize why one mid-process essay is *stronger* than the other. For example:

> *Here's why essay B seems stronger than essay A. Look at these features in B. Here's why they work well. You've shown that you know how to get these strengths in your writing. Try to do more of it in future writing. And here are some suggestions for revising it.*

Which essay should they revise to completion? The choice is interesting. I sometimes advise them not to choose the stronger of the two. My highest goal is *not* to end up with the very best essay; my goal is to end up with the most thinking and the most learning. I tend to push for the most *interesting* and *promising* draft — and sometimes this is the weaker one. But though I feel free to advise on this choice, I give the student the final decision. I understand the hunger to push for achieving the greatest success.

This process of interlocking or overlapping two essays has made me realize something about teaching that originally surprised me (and tripped me up). I didn't realize that college teachers needed to be good at managing and juggling. Of course, it's not necessary if you just lecture or run a simple, whole-class discussion every day, but if I use writing and other workshops to help students experience ideas and not just hear them, I find I have to keep various balls in the air. Often I need to start a new sequence or process before the previous one is completely finished.

Some Thoughts on Getting a Course Started — Activities During the First Couple of Weeks

Initial work with MEF clips. I suggest starting with clips that have no professional, critical commentary. This will help students learn to look more closely at passages from the media and explore their reactions more accurately without being distracted by the interpretations of other commentators. At the start, they need this emphasis on the crucial discipline of careful observa-

tion and noticing — empiricism: noticing what is going on in front of us on the screen, *and* noticing what is going on inside us. Thoughts and feelings are subtle events that go by fast. It's not easy to notice them and find words for them. When we show clips with critical commentary, it can undermine these skills: students may see only what the commentary calls attention to, and they may react to the commentary in a way that distracts them from noticing and articulating their own original perceptions and reactions.

Initial work on writing. In the starting weeks, I'm not so interested in showing them the weaknesses in their writing; my first priority is to help them become comfortable and confident and productive as writers. Many of the weaknesses that turn up on early high stakes essays are weaknesses that disappear when there's enough low or middle stakes writing. Indeed, the simplest and most productive (and time-saving) way to start off any course (not just a writing course) is to demand *lots* of writing of low and low-to-medium stakes — and to make it clear that they won't get any response at all. They'll have to read some of it to classmates and hand you some of it (not all!) — but they'll get no response from classmates or from you. You'll be surprised at how much this improves their writing. There's an important and humbling principle here that is somewhat supported by research: it's clear that they learn from writing; it's not at all clear that they learn from our feedback.

The writing goal for the first couple of weeks is to show them they are capable of finding words and thoughts in writing with little struggle. This writing doesn't just lead to carelessness and mess, it also leads to lively writing in a strong voice and often to interesting ideas and creative thinking. Above all, they learn that they never run out of words and thoughts.

But even by the end of the first week, you can ask them to produce a *collage* out of the best bits of what they've written. This will ask for only minor cleaning up — not extensive revising — but it will symbolize that the course is also about polished, pleasing final products. These are for the pleasure of sharing with fellow students and with you — not for feedback. (See **Collage**, page 35)

You *could* ask for a high stakes essay by the end of the second or third week: the autobiographical essay on growing up in a media culture (see **Assignments**, page 41). If it comes in at the end of the second week, I'd suggest a more low-stress process of revising:

- lots of exploratory low stakes writing, of course;
- then an exploratory draft for sharing with peers that gets almost no feedback (perhaps it's shared with you, and you point mostly to what seems strongest and make a couple of practical large scale suggestions — no attention to style or correctness);
- then a final draft with no emphasis on copy editing.

Your response on the final version can also point mostly to strengths and maybe one main aspect to work on. And, even here, one can use a positive lens: *I think the thing that holds this essay back most is too much vague generalization. But look at that nicely specific passage I marked*

on p x. Do more of that; it's clear that you know how. You can take the same tack on, say, lack of examples, or hard-to-understand sentences.

If you wait till the third week for this autobiographical analysis, you can push harder for the kinds of careful revision activities I just described in the section on "high stakes essays."

The First Class

It's common to use much of the first class for lots of bureaucratic business: syllabus, requirements, and so on and so on. It's my belief that if we devote the first class to bureaucratic business, we send a message saying, "This course is about bureaucratic business." So instead, I like to use the first class for the *true* business of the course: writing and thinking about media. Not till the end of the first class hour do I hand out a written syllabus that spells out the main requirements of the course. I ask them to read it carefully and see what questions they have, because we'll have a short discussion of it in the second class.

I'm trying to fight two assumptions: that bureaucratic work takes priority; and that intellectual work consists only of lectures and whole-class discussions. So in the first class I set up workshop processes that emphasize intellectual activity rather than passivity: a couple of short freewrites; watching at least one short MEF clip; some discussion in small groups; and quick self-introductions in small groups. Here's a possible sequence:

- Show an MEF clip that somehow makes a good entree to the course. Before showing it, say something like: *Try to pay close attention to what you see — and also to what's happening in your mind as you watch — because I'm going to ask you to write immediately afterwards about what you noticed on-screen and inside yourself.* (Beware that this kind of warning can sometimes make people self-conscious in a way that inhibits concentration. This sometimes happens to me. Whether or not to give this kind of announcement in advance is one of the many perplexities about teaching that I can never resolve. The perplexities start in the first class and continue to the end.)
- 6-8 minutes of *private* freewriting on what they saw and how they reacted. It's important that you write too. Otherwise, they'll think that freewriting is "baby work" or "busy-work," rather than something useful for "grownups" and good writers.
- Discuss the clip and reactions in pairs or small groups. I usually say, *Your freewrites will probably give you lots to say, but please don't read them to your partner; they are private writing.*
- Perhaps a bit of discussion with the whole class. This could be a time for you to slide into a *quick* overview of the topic or goals of the course. But I keep it to five minutes or less. I tell them to read more in the syllabus.
- 6-8 minutes of *public* freewriting, introduced with words like these:

I'm asking now for another piece of low stakes writing, but I'm upping the stakes a bit — because this is public freewriting. Please write for six to eight minutes to introduce yourself to a few of your classmates and to me. I'll ask you to read it aloud in groups of two or three and then hand it to me at the end of class. I'll read it quickly just to get a quick incomplete glimpse of you. I'll make no comment or grade and keep no record — just read it and hand it back.

Because you are writing words that strangers will hear or see, feel free to pause now and then or scratch something out or find a better word. Don't write anything you don't want to share with me and three or four others. But I hope you can just write easily and comfortably — what you would say if the person next to you casually said, "Tell me a little about yourself." In fact, I suggest that you use speaking as the motor for your writing. Try "speaking words onto the page."

- Then get students back in small groups (same or different?) for sharing these self-introductions so people can get to know each other just a bit. Emphasize: *just read, no comment. Besides, you won't have much time.*

  It's important that you write your own self-introduction while they write theirs — and then read it aloud to the whole class.

- Finally, hand out the syllabus and ask them to read it carefully for homework. It can be helpful to ask them to write fifteen minutes of reactions and questions about the syllabus at home — to share with others during the next class and hand in. Ungraded writing — but required! You may give other homework.

At the end of the class, they will have gotten the message that the prime activity of the course is for students actively to figure out what they think — not passively listen to lectures or thoughts from others. (Students who want a course where they just sit there and listen can drop out — which is a benefit.) In addition, this approach tends to help students feel more comfortable sooner so it helps build some class safety and trust. The writing activities will convey to them that there'll be lots of reflective writing in the course. That could seem like "bad news" to some of them, but even this first class will go a long way towards teaching most of them that writing can be nonthreatening and interesting — and that they can always find words and thoughts. They'll begin to learn the crucial insight that the experience of writing differs greatly depending on audience and context.

Of course, there's one big problem with my lovely plan: you can't trust that you have your real class on that first day. Some students will not return for various reasons, and others will show up as new faces in the second, third, or fourth class. I've never figured out a good way to deal with this complication, but it won't help just to tread water for the first week. I try to keep up more of this kind of thing in the next few classes.

Sample Calendars or Sequences of Assignments for Three Major Kinds of Course

A Full Semester Course — Whether It's Focused on Writing or Media

What follows is a calendar for the main high stakes essays of such a course. I'm *not* spelling out what I assume, namely, that lots of freewriting and other low stakes writing will go on. I'd suggest, at least, a bit of it every class. And also some scattered medium stakes pieces, such as a collage or a think piece. I'm assuming a fourteen-week semester in this calendar, but I speak afterwards to variations for a shorter semester or a ten-week term.

- ***Weeks 1 and 2.*** Introductory unit, focusing on MEF clips without professional critical commentary. By the end of Week 1 or the start of Week 2, students create in pairs (or trios) a two- or three-page collage drawn from all the low stakes writing they've been doing. (See the treatment of collage in the **Assignments**, page 35.) No revising needed — just choosing, editing and arranging the bits they like. By the end of week 2, an autobiographical essay about the student's history with the media. ("Final final" edited version can come in during week 3. See the **Assignments** for this essay and the others here.)
- ***Weeks 3 and 4.*** Consumerism. By the end, students write a mid-process draft of an analytic essay — that is, a solid, worked-out train-of-thinking, but still a bit rough and open to substantial revision, even of ideas and major organization.
- ***Weeks 5 and 6.*** Gender and Sexuality — ending with a mid-process analytic essay (as above).
- ***Week 7.*** Students substantially revise and edit *one* of the two drafts.
- ***Weeks 8 and 9.*** Race and Class — ending with a mid-process draft of a persuasive, argumentative essay.
- ***Weeks 10 and 11.*** Media and Politics — ending with a mid-process draft of a persuasive, argumentative essay.
- ***Week 12.*** Students substantially revise and copy edit one of the two drafts.
- ***Week 13.*** Students *either* write a concluding retrospective "So What?" essay, or finish a course-long, slow-motion, individual research project. (As you'll see from the **Assignments** section, it's more ambitious to use the research project.)
- ***Week 14.*** Students produce a portfolio with an essay or letter of reflection about the writing.

A few notes about this calendar:

- My weakness is always to try to squeeze in too much, and I may have done that here.
- If you want to ease up, or if you have a slightly shorter semester, you can easily reduce

a two-week unit to one week — and even do that more than once. Two weeks is more than enough time for creating a solid-but-not-final draft. I chose two weeks not so much because it's necessary for producing a draft essay; I was also thinking about time to explore the topic in sufficient depth by using lots of low stakes writing. (Regardless, I'd do any time-squeezing reductions later in the semester — after students are more experienced.)

- If you have only a ten-week term, you could reduce all four of the two-week sequences to one week — but perhaps it's more prudent to leave out one of the topics entirely and/or leave out what I have in week 13.
- For most of the semester, I've suggested traditional essays of analysis and persuasion. My superego whispers "academic preparation." But it might make good sense to try a review or review essay or op-ed. In fact, in the sequences where two essays are each taken to mid-process draft and only one is developed, one of the mid-process drafts could be conceived as a traditional essay and the other as a review essay or op-ed. It wouldn't be unreasonable, then, to ask students to choose one of the two and develop it into an essay (or into a review). It's great practice for students to learn how to revise pieces of writing into a different genre.
- Note the overlapping principle where "final final" edited versions of high stakes essays can be handed in at some point in the week, after the essay is "finished" and they are working on something else.

But let me stress again that these assignments are just illustrative. I'm trying to give examples of what it might look like to create a coherent meal out of the long cafeteria line of materials here.

A Writing Intensive Course in Communications, Cultural Studies, or a Comparable Discipline

I suggest the same general approach as above: two initial weeks of clips on all topics (but ones without professional commentary), and then the two-week sections on each topic. But the amount of time devoted to writing would be less.

- Low stakes writing. I suggest just as much as above. This kind of writing requirement yields the best help with learning and the best help with writing skill. It takes the least time and expertise from you, and it generates the least anxiety in students.

But instead of the schedule I gave for high stakes essays in the writing course above, I suggest something like the following:

- ***Weeks 1 and 2.*** I'd keep something like the same schedule for an autobiographical essay (with a collage at the end of week 1 or the start of week 2). This is a fairly relaxed way to create a not-so-threatening but thoughtful essay of reflection about media and self.
- ***Weeks 3 and 4.*** A draft, and then a revision, of some medium stakes piece: an op-ed, an

advertisement, a voice-over for a show, a broadside or tiny pamphlet, or a short letter to the editor.

- ***Weeks 5 and 6.*** Same as for weeks 3 and 4 — using a different genre.
- ***Weeks 7 through 11***. The same sequence as I lay out above for weeks 8 through 12. This leads them in writing a high stakes essay or review essay.
- ***Weeks 12 through 14.*** Three weeks for the two valuable assignments that I squeezed into two weeks above.

A few notes on this calendar:

- This doesn't have to be as demanding for you and them as it might at first appear — especially if you have no training as a teacher of writing. I'd *de-emphasize* what takes the most time and causes the most trouble: peer response and feedback from you. I'd *emphasize* what leads to the most thinking and learning: doing the writing, sharing it out loud with peers, and handing pieces to you for your reading — sometimes for no response, sometimes for minimal response. You'll be pleasantly surprised at how useful and comfortable it is for them when they digest the experience of you reading things — maybe writing a quick thought in response — and that's all. It's as though they are writing a letter to you and you don't have to answer — or can give only a small thought in response.

- If you think this is too much writing, use *think pieces* for some of the weeks when I suggest other assignments above. Think pieces ask them to work out some genuine thinking on paper, but not necessarily to achieve a single, coherent train of thought. They keep students very up-to-date on the reading and other work. And they need take only a minimal response from you (see "Think Piece" in the section on **Assignments**, page XX).

A Two to Five Week Supplement on Media and Writing

What I suggest here might fit a wide range of disciplinary courses. In an economics course, teachers might use MEF clips on consumerism; in a political science or sociology course, teachers might use MEF clips on media and politics or race and class; in a psychology or literature course, teachers might use MEF clips on gender and sexuality. This would be a way of adding more attention to the media through the MEF clips — and a bit more attention to writing.

Here's a possible three-week sequence:

- Lots of low stakes writing throughout.
- ***Week 1.*** Students create a collage of observations and reflections drawn from all the low stakes writing. This could be solo work or a collaborative collage produced by groups of

two to four students. This will get a lot of ideas into the air.

- ***Week 2.*** Draft of a high stakes essay of analysis — or perhaps a review of a published essay in the field — or review essay about media products.

- ***Week 3.*** A substantial revision of this essay — and soon after, an edited "final final" version.

If you want to create a five-week supplemental unit, students could bring two essays to mid-process stage and then bring one to conclusion (as explained in the first calendar, above).

A Spectrum of Writing Assignments and Activities — with Suggestions for Using Them

In This Section:

Low Stakes Assignments

Freewriting

Freewriting is an artificial exercise, but many people learn to use the freewriting mode during serious writing projects — especially at the exploratory stages. Freewriting makes it possible to do nonstop, no-worry writing by removing most of the constraints of normal writing. Thus freewriting means:

- not showing our words to anyone, even the teacher or leader who suggests the exercise;
- not worrying about spelling, grammar, or mechanics;
- not feeling we have to stay on one topic — thus feeling free to jump or digress;
- not worrying about how good the writing is — even whether it makes sense or is understandable — even to oneself.

Thus freewriting is a peculiarly fruitful intersection of danger and safety. We can risk nonstop writing — writing more or less whatever comes to mind — by removing all normal difficulties or dangers of writing. (Some teachers prefer to use the terms "fast writing" or "quick writing" to avoid any theoretical tangles around the word "free.")

There is no such thing as freewriting well or badly. Freewriting does not have to be true stream-of-consciousness, flowing, disorganized, or unselfconscious. If something comes to mind that we don't want to write, it's fine to write about anything else — like the weather — but not stop. It's important to make it clear to students that they have freewritten *perfectly* so long as they haven't stopped writing. It's fine to write "Nothing" or "no" or "I have nothing to write" over and over. And "not stopping" doesn't mean rushing or tension.

Private writing is natural in many diaries and journals, but freewriting is not a natural activity. We seldom force ourselves to write without stopping — not worrying about the result. So I use my authority as teacher to get students to do this thing they wouldn't do on their own. In this way I help them harness *for writing* a core linguistic ability that almost all humans have in speaking: the ability — when we have the impulse to say something — simply to open our mouths and find words coming out without having to plan them in advance. To help students apply this ability to writing, I often say things like this when I ask for freewriting:

> *Start your fingers writing whatever words come to mind right now and just let the writing take over. Stand out of the way and see where it wants to go. Write what needs to be written.*

Regular freewriting helps train students not just to be braver and more comfortable with writing, but also to know that they never actually run out of words or things to say. The mind is never empty, even when it feels empty. Yes, freewriting often leads to messiness; it invites carelessness and even garbage. But it also helps us find good ideas and effective language. And it counter-

acts the pervasive feeling that in order to write we must pause and plan every word and sentence in advance. Of course pausing, planning, and careful choosing *are* necessary for any important writing, but these come later when we revise and edit.

After lots of experience with freewriting as an artificial exercise, people learn to move in and out of a kind of "freewriting mode" as we work on other writing tasks. In effect, we develop what I call a "freewriting muscle" or the ability sometimes to stop choosing and planning words with care, and instead invite unplanned language and thinking. This is useful not only during the early exploratory stages of writing — but also during later revising stages when we feel perplexed or stuck. A quick freewrite often releases a logjam. The freewriting muscle helps us produce not just more words, but more ideas and more lively and vivid language.

There are two variations on freewriting that result from reimposing two constraints:

- ***Focused freewriting.*** We try to stay on one topic. When we wander off, we pull ourselves back.
- ***Public freewriting.*** Write with the understanding that you'll share what you write. It's inevitable, therefore, to let yourself pause briefly now and then. Public freewriting is sometimes focused — especially when used to work on a particular issue — but sometimes it is an invitation to share one's more naked mind as you allow your thinking to digress or change focus.

Thus, focused freewriting can be private or public; public freewriting can be focused or unfocused.

I suggest using freewriting as a staple activity throughout an entire term. It is useful in various ways. For example:

- Right at the moment when class is scheduled to start. If there's a bell that rings, this can be a ritual start for freewriting — even though some students are straggling in. Usually there is wasted time here. It helps students bring to mind homework reading or lab work or previous lectures. And even if they ignore course material, and write only about an argument they just had or something that's bugging them or a baseball game, the freewriting serves to give them more attention for class business.
- At mid-class when things go dead, or after a question. Most students have more to say and are braver about saying it when they have had a chance to freewrite some of their thoughts about the question.
- At the end of class — to get them to think about what they learned. Sometimes I ask them to write it to me: *What was the main idea for you today? What was going on for you during today's class?* This helps them integrate and internalize the course material — and when we see it, we learn what's getting through and not getting through.

In asking for freewriting and other low stakes writing, it's important to be unambiguous

about whether writing is public or private. Many students have been burned and don't trust teachers on this score because they were told, "Oh this writing doesn't matter" and assumed it was private — and then the teacher collected it (For more about the uses and benefits of freewriting, see **Suggestions for Teaching**, page 46).

I want to emphasize that freewriting is not just something I use with students; it's central to my own writing process. When I have to write something serious and important, I start by doing lots of focused freewriting, where I pursue any ideas and hunches I have that pertain somehow to what I'm writing. I don't worry yet about whether they are the best ideas or what order to put them in. And when I'm doing preparatory reading for something I have to write, I usually take notes, but I often allow a "note" to lead to a freewritten idea, even a train of thought — and these spontaneous "note-meditations" are often very fruitful. I just follow the thought where it goes in a piece of sustained, focused freewriting. Often, I have no idea yet where this thought belongs in a draft — or even whether I'll use it. But if it feels fertile, I follow it. It doesn't take much effort.

I can summarize my own writing process as follows: I freewrite impulsively, and I revise compulsively.

Process Writing or "Movies of the Mind"

The term "process writing," when used in the context of science or engineering, usually means writing that tells someone how to do something. But I am using it here as it is often used in the writing community: a retrospective account of the thinking and feeling that went on during a process (thus "movies of the mind"). Regular process writing helps students learn to notice and find language for the thoughts and feelings that flit quickly through their minds — the crucial skill of phenomenological observation.

Two kinds of process writing will be particularly valuable here: movies of the mind while viewing a media event; and movies of the mind while writing something. Process writing can be slow and careful — indeed, many published essays are actually the story of how someone read or wrote a text or experienced a movie. But, in a course like this, I usually invite process writing to be quick and casual freewriting — sometimes private.

Thus, we will often ask students to do some quick process writing about the sequence of thoughts and feelings they had while watching an MEF media clip. This is an ideal activity before having a discussion. Students will have lots more to say after the process writing.

When I introduce process writing about a media clip or something similar, I say things like this:

> *What's going on in your feelings and thoughts right now — <u>after</u> watching the clip? What was going on in your feelings and thoughts <u>as</u> you were watching? Try to remember — think back — and tell the story of your feelings and thoughts — in sequence. For example, "At first I . . . , but then . . . , and then . . . and so on." Don't leave out thoughts and feelings that are not about the clip.*

Sometimes I use some of these more pointed questions:

> *What did you find most striking or memorable in the clip? What caught your attention most? Did you have any reactions or feelings that puzzle you? Can you tell anything about why you reacted as you did? — where some of your reactions came from? What experiences might have led to your reactions? In what way were your reactions like or unlike those you expect from family members, friends, teachers? To what extent do you think some of your reactions came from the culture around you — or from the media themselves?*

But it's also important to have students do process writing about how they wrote, e.g.:

> *Did you start with an outline? What sequence of drafts did you use?*

But also explores inner events:

> *How did you come to think of the idea(s) you used? How did your thinking change? Which parts or stages were most difficult or confusing for you and which were easier?"*

This kind of process writing helps students gradually become more aware of their writing process. They need this awareness in order to develop more flexibility and control *and choice* about how they get things written. Problems in writing often come from people having just a single gear that they always go into whenever they write anything.

Process writing is potentially easy: just write what was in your mind or what happened. But some students find it difficult — or an annoying request for "navel-gazing." Interestingly, some "good" students are not good at it, and some "not good" students are better. I find students benefit from practice and coaching. For a number of weeks, I always do process writing in class, and I ask for volunteers who are willing to read what they wrote. Then I can kibitz and coach: "What a great detail — so small but so telling." Or, "But wait. You're writing about what was on the screen; you're not telling about how you reacted." Or, "Look at how simply and directly she told that reaction." "But what happened next?" "Was this easy or hard?"

Cover Letter

I always ask for a short "cover letter" (or "process writing" or "writer's log") with any major assignment. I ask for responses to questions like these:

> *What do you see as your main points? Tell me the story of how you went about writing and what it was like for you in process. How did you get your ideas? What were some of the choices you made? Which parts went well or badly? Were there any surprises?*

Above all:

> *What questions do you have for me as reader?*

And for revisions, it's crucial to ask:

> *What changes did you make and why?*

When I read their cover letters, I have a much easier time writing my response. Often I can agree with much of what the students wrote — sometimes being more positive about the essay than they were. With the cover letter, my comment is not the *beginning* of a conversation about the writing; it's the *continuation* of a dialogue that the student began.

Media Journal

There are countless ways to use a journal. Sometimes I ask students to write two to four pages of journal writing per week outside of class — so they can monitor their thinking as they read or think about course content. But I'll use a bit of class time — especially in the first few weeks — to get them started in the process.

I tend to use journals very informally.

> *I'm asking you to keep a media journal. For the rest of the term, you should make a couple of entries every week about your encounters with the media and popular culture. For each entry, try to start with what you saw and how you immediately responded — but then see if you can reflect a bit further on what you just wrote. You will share this journal only with me, and I'm only going to glance at it as a way of requiring that you do it. I want it to be a free space for you.*

But many teachers get lots of benefit by reading quickly through journal entries (inviting students to staple together pages they want to keep private). Some teachers get students to share their journals in pairs.

Informal Letters or Messages to Classmates

Over the years, I've found more than a few students who find journal writing uncongenial: "It feels stupid and unreal to write to no one." So in recent years, I've often changed my assignment from journal writing to letter writing. I ask students to write a very informal page or two (2-4 screens) to a couple of classmates — or to post them to the whole class — or post them to a class site.

I treat these letters as a no-big-deal weekly requirement. If the entries go to the whole class, I tell people that it's fine to read just four or five letters. Occasionally I've created small groups for letter sharing. Students tend to be curious about the reactions of their classmates, and this sharing tends to help class discussion.

Medium Stakes Assignments

Think Piece

This is the name I give to a piece of writing that is exploratory yet is more carefully worked out than mere freewriting — *but* less worked out than an essay. I tell students to think of these pieces as long, thoughtful letters about a topic to an interested friend. Teachers often assign weekly think pieces about the reading or homework or the issues they want students to consider more carefully that week. These can be a simple, regular, matter-of-fact requirement — "no big deal" — but they can be enforced by making substantial credit depend on actually *doing* them all.

Think piece assignments can be open ("Write about what's interesting to you in this week's reading"). But they can also be used to specify a particular intellectual task for students to engage in as they do the reading (e.g., "Compare this concept from the reading to some experience from your lives," or "Write a short story that shows this concept in action," or "What was 'academic' and not 'academic' in that oral commentary?")

I find it important to stress that the audience for collages or think pieces (indeed for most public writing in the course) is not just me, the teacher, but also fellow students — so I get students to read these pieces to each other in pairs or small groups on the day they are due.

Teacher response. I make it clear from the beginning that I will read and respond with a very short, reflective comment on something that interested me, but that I will grade them only pass/fail — with a failing grade going only for perfunctory effort. In effect, I use grading simply to ensure that they do the writing with at least a decent investment.

Peer response. If I want to use as little time as possible, I just take 5-7 minutes at the start of class for students to read them out loud in pairs or in small groups — no discussion. Suddenly they know a great deal more about the reading or course content than they did when they walked in. And the repeated reading aloud helps their writing enormously. But I can increase learning by giving them 5-7 more minutes for talk. Remember, though, that think pieces are not trying to be polished essays, so the discussion should be about the ideas they've heard, not feedback on each other's writing.

Collage

In a course about the media, collage is a natural form. Most TV documentaries are really collages: they jump from one short segment to the next, often with no preparation or transition — treating abrupt jumps as simply natural to human experience — which they are. Students can get warmed up to the genre by analyzing the structure of a documentary — and also by creating a purely visual collage — using images online or by ripping images and words from magazines.

Written collages are one of my favorite forms of writing. Please see the **Handouts** section (in the Appendix) for my explanation to students of the nature of a collage and how to make one.

Medium Stakes Writing Assignments That Could Also Be High Stakes

Letter

By writing letters to different audiences, students learn a lot about writing. I like to invite them to make the same argument to audiences such as these: a friend, the editorial page of a newspaper, and someone in authority or an institution (such as a TV network or a company or an advertising agency). This helps them feel immediately, at a gut level, how audience affects argument and writing, and helps them become more aware of subtle issues like voice on the page.

Letters to the editor are great ways to teach *extreme* brevity: digging out one issue and nailing it briefly. Often it's only the short letters that get published. In the business world, too, there's a premium on brevity — whereas in academic settings, students are usually rewarded for length (which is sometimes not good for their writing habits). I like to push them to write a letter that they actually send to a paper (occasionally I require it). Dropping it in the mailbox with a stamp (or having them give it to you) often gives students a palpably different feel for the writing process.

Op-Ed

These are usually persuasive pieces, but they often use a fairly informal, colloquial style and voice. Often they start with a personal anecdote or observation. It's great to discuss a couple of examples before assigning one. The genre helps students feel written persuasion as something that real people do in the real world — not just a school exercise. And it's not so hard for skilled students to get one published if they don't try for the *New York Times*.

Pamphlet or Broadside

These open the door to lots of creativity and also the visual dimension.

Advertisement or Script for a Portion of a Show or Voice-Over for a Video or Photo Montage

Probably the most powerful way to study a genre is to try to write your own version. This will be very helpful for learning about the media you are studying. The key is to ask only for drafts. Take a playful approach, and undercut any assumption that they must be "fully professional." Note how assignments like this one open the door to parody and humor — which can unleash their creative instincts and teach a great deal. Such assignments also bring out verbal and creative skills in many students who do not shine at standard academic work.

Poem

There's a lot to be gained — for writing and thinking and class atmosphere — if you are willing to open this door. Again, the spirit of play is crucial. All writing goes better when students learn to engage the playful gear while trying to write anything — no matter how serious. (For more about poetry in serious academic courses in all disciplines, see *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* — which is available online at the WAC Clearinghouse <http://wac.colostate.edu\>. Vol 6.2 was a special issue on "Poetry Across the Disciplines. For non-intimidating ways to invite poetry, see my "Poetry as No Big Deal" in *Writing With Power*.)

Review or Review Essay

This category includes a huge range of kinds of writing. A *review*, more narrowly conceived, tends to focus on the piece itself (book, article, show, program, or film). A *review essay* invites the writer to develop a train of thought of her own as she bounces off what she is reviewing.

Often a review focuses purely on the content or ideas. But some reviews focus, somewhat or even entirely, on what might be called "rhetorical analysis": how the piece *works* or *functions* as writing or as a media product. This kind of task can give students a lot of understanding of writing or media. If they are reviewing an article in the field, we can ask them to describe how the writing works: what kind of language, voice, reasoning, argument, and evidence are used in this journal or book? How do these ingredients work on you as a reader? If you consider it typical, what does it tell you about writing in this discipline?

The same thing can be done on a TV program or ad series. What are the central ingredients and how do they function — and what do they tell you about this kind of product? Rhetorical analysis asks for very sophisticated thinking — meta-thinking — that will not be easy for all students. It is usually necessary to prepare the ground by doing some analysis all together in class and calling very explicit attention to the elements of the process. Also, this kind of work can benefit from being a collaborative essay, so students are not alone trying to develop this thinking.

Note how reviews are sometimes written to professionals in the same field, and sometimes are written to a larger audience of people not in the field — even to a general audience. We can help students increase their felt understanding of audience by making clear which kind of review it is. I've found that students sometimes don't understand highly academic concepts until they have to explain them to nonacademic readers.

Research Project

Organizationally, this is a somewhat complex assignment. It needs to be started fairly early in the term — perhaps right from the beginning. Ask students to choose some product of the me-

dia industry that particularly interests them that they want to look at and think about over time: a TV program, a certain advertising campaign, the coverage of a sport — whatever. And it doesn't have to be TV; it could be a video game, something from radio or print media, or some way that the media industry packages music.

They can make better choices of what to study if there's some freewriting and journal writing — and some discussion in small groups and in the whole class. The best ideas often emerge from a process of people bouncing their initial ideas off each other. Students should probably choose their focus by the end of the second week so they have the majority of the term to be watching, responding or journaling on paper. It works well as a collaborative assignment.

It's their job to keep monitoring it and writing journal entries or letters to a partner or small group about what they are noticing and for ongoing reflections and thoughts. But, in truth, we have to devote a bit of periodic class time to this kind of assignment — so that they don't just put it all off till the end. If they do some sharing and discussing of some of this writing with a partner or a small group, they can compare projects and thinking.

This can be a large high stakes project or something much less daunting, depending on your needs.

- As a high stakes piece, it would take up more of your time and attention: it might be substantial in length — however, I don't see much value in papers longer than ten pages. It might require some outside research, and they would get feedback from peers and from you on a draft.
- But if you are trying to get them to do as much writing as possible in a course (and this is always my goal), the research project can be modest. In this case, students will likely need to be jogged (required) over the course of the semester to keep chipping away at noticing and reflecting on paper. But then, at the end of the term, they can draft their conclusions in three to five pages, get some quick feedback from peers and you — and revise. There's no reason why this kind of extended study of a media product can't be written in fairly everyday language, like a magazine article, even though the word "research" has a way of bringing out formal, stilted, ineffective language from students.
- Even a collage essay is conceivable — where students can draw on the best passages from their low stakes writing all term — as long as it also has some fresh concluding thinking.

Whatever approach you take, the goal here is a dialectic: new, fresh thinking at the end that is applied to reflecting and thinking that have gone on over the previous weeks — so there's time for percolation and second thoughts. It's a piece of thinking and writing about something they've *lived with* for ten or more weeks.

Concluding Reflections

Conceptually, I see this as a contrast with (and perhaps an alternative to) the research project. But this assignment is much easier to manage. Both ask students to work out some "final conclusions" at or near the end of the semester — in this case about what they've been learning all semester. But for this essay, I don't push students to start early and keep journaling their observations and thoughts through the term — as with the research project. I like the idea of a reflective essay written as a fresh start at the end.

For this assignment, I try to convey a message something like this: *Okay, we're almost done; we've all worked hard; you've learned a lot. But, really: so what? What does it all mean? What does it add up to? For you?* Sometimes I even say something like this:

> *Pretend you are not writing for my eyes but for a friend or a trusted parent. Supposing they asked, "What did you really learn? What difference will this course actually make in how you see things or live your life?" By asking the question this way, I acknowledge that you might have done a fine job with all the work, but still, in all honesty, give a fairly negative answer: "Well, it was all very nice and interesting. Useful, probably, for other classes. But it didn't really make much of a difference for me." Or you could think of this as a letter to yourself. In any event, I hope you will give an honest answer, even if you think I might not like to hear it.*

Obviously, then, I see this essay as inherently informal: it's not trying for a perfect summary of what they should have learned; it's a set of reflections on what they did learn or how they were affected. Thus, if you find time short (as it always is), you can assign it when the clock has almost run out — perhaps even in the last few days. Either way, it helps a lot if they can bring in at least a very rough, freewritten draft to share in pairs or small groups before they revise for handing in. (Or take ten to fifteen minutes in class to write a scratch draft — which they can quickly share in pairs or threes.) But *I* don't see the draft. I make it clear that this writing is required — including the peer feedback and revising if I can make time for it — but I also like to startle them and say, *But this piece will not be graded*. I simply promise that I will read it and write a tiny letter of my thoughts in response — not "teacher feedback on the quality of writing." This helps them think more honestly, not just write more honestly.

Final Portfolio and Self-Reflective Essay

One of John Dewey's central principles is that experience itself doesn't lead to learning (else every old person would be wise). Experience leads to learning only if we reflect on it. This is the principle that explains why teachers of writing (and other subjects) have found portfolios so helpful for enhancing learning.

It's crucial to emphasize from the start that students should keep everything they write over the course of the term — even seemingly unimportant scraps of freewriting. For one thing, it's helpful for them to notice and be surprised at how much there is by the end. This creates what I sometimes call the "monster portfolio."

But then students need to create a selective portfolio at the end by choosing the best and most interesting pieces from their full portfolio. I always ask for a few selections from low stakes writing, from middle stakes writing, and of course some high stakes writing. I want a range of types. And I always ask for an "interesting failure."

The most important part of the portfolio is a reflective essay they write to introduce, explore, and explain the pieces they have chosen, and that talks about what they have learned from them. You can specify whether you want students to concentrate more on what they learned about writing or about the media — or both. This kind of retrospective, reflexive writing induces some "meta-thinking" that helps students articulate some insights.

I try to manage my time well enough so that students can share with a partner their selective portfolio and a rough draft of their reflective essay. Both parties write a quick letter in response to each other about what they noticed on a quick reading. This usually helps with the reflective essays. Please see the **Handouts** section (in the Appendix) for a version of one of the handouts that I've used.

High Stakes Assignments

An Autobiographical Essay of Inquiry: Growing Up in a Media Culture

This is a kind of literacy narrative. It asks students to explore their experiences with the media and speculate on the ways different media have influenced them.

It's important to "prime the pump" for this essay, especially if it's the first high stakes task you set them. That is, make sure that this essay can grow out of lots of non-high stakes activity: watching and discussing media clips, class discussion and small group discussion, and lots of low stakes writing — in class and at home. If you send students home to write an essay like this, without having primed the pump to give them lots of interesting ideas in mind and even on paper, too many will give in to timidity and write a dull essay using wooden approaches that they've sometimes been invited to use in high school, especially for high-stakes essay exams. Out-of-class journal writing is also good for helping students to reflect on their media history. Thus, when they are viewing various MEF clips, it's important to ask them to freewrite not just on their reactions to the clip but on their own memories and history with the media.

When students have to write a high stakes essay, they tend to go to a different section of their minds than where they process personal experience and low stakes exploratory writing. They may need to be reminded that there's lots of good material for this essay in those discussions, bull sessions, and freewrites. Sometimes they can cannibalize whole sections.

And it's my experience that personal essays can succeed well without some of the tight, logical structures that are often formulaic. ("In this essay, I will try to demonstrate that . . . ." "There are three reasons why . . . ." "Thus, I have tried to show that . . . .") If we think of essays as attempts to communicate with live human readers, we see how structural formulas can sabotage this dimension — even if they sometimes help clarify and simplify. Think of Montaigne, who invented the very genre, *essai*. He meant the word in its literal sense: *try*. In his essays, he tends to make an unashamed "try at" or "go at" some question or issue that perplexes him. He sometimes engages in a blatant ramble or digression. Yet his essays are among the most valued in our culture.

This initial autobiographical inquiry assignment is very much in the Montaigne tradition. What this means for organization or structure is tricky since students are so often told to use some set form (sometimes being shackled only to the five paragraph essay). I've tried to address this problem in an actual handout that you can copy and give to students. When an assignment is complex and high stakes, it helps for students to get it in writing. This is particularly true at the start of a semester — when they don't know us and have no reason to trust us. (See the **Handouts** section in the Appendix.) By the way, I'm not trying to impose on you my specific procedures and informal tone of voice. I'm assuming many teachers will use something completely different — and it's also fine to revise my document more to your liking.

Essay of Analysis

Many teachers think of argument or persuasion as the central form of discourse we should teach. Argument is important; in fact, there is a sense (but only a sense) in which the title of a current writing textbook is accurate: *Everything's An Argument*. But that's a seriously one-sided, even lopsided way to characterize good intellectual work in the academy and outside it.

I consider the genre of analysis even more central than argument to good academic, intellectual work. If we neglect analysis, we neglect something that is more basic or foundational to good thinking: the ability to look hard at the data (a text or a TV program or the data from research) and explore different ways of trying to make sense out of it. Of course, no one can pretend to pure objectivity, but it's still crucial to know the difference between extreme bias and a good faith effort to be true to the data. So yes, we need to teach persuasion or argument, but it makes better intellectual sense if it builds on prior good work in analysis.

There is an interesting tradition in the practice of law of preparing a legal memorandum before preparing the legal brief. The memorandum is an attempt to look as carefully as possible at all the facts of the case and the details of the relevant law — trying to see how the perfect judge would rule if s/he knew everything about the case and the law. This kind of disinterested memorandum helps a lawyer create an effective defense — even if the client is guilty. For our purposes, the goal is to help students develop a new and more analytic way of looking at something on TV, in the movies, or on the web. They need to notice and pay attention to their own feelings about what they are watching, but also to try to see past or around their reactions to look hard at all the data.

Skill in analysis is particularly valuable when it comes to the media and popular culture. For example, you might ask students to analyze a TV drama, a news program, or an advertisement (or an ad series); there are lots of possibilities.

I've put my suggestions for introducing the essay of analysis in the form of a handout that you can copy and give to students if you want. (Please see the **Handouts** section in the Appendix). I'm not trying to impose this version or tone of voice on you; feel free to create something completely different — or revise this. But when an assignment is complex and high stakes, I think students need to see it in writing.

Whether you provide the assignment for students right from the start, or first do some preparatory low stakes writing, it's the preparatory work that is crucial for good essays. It can be helpful, by the way, to show a couple of clips where commentators engage in analysis of the media. One can then invite students to discuss and evaluate how these commentators analyze by looking at both their thinking and their rhetoric and style and voice. Keep in mind, however, that these short clips tend to capture only a tiny piece of a fuller analysis. They may be making large hypotheses and not taking the time to give the extensive, empirical observation and hard looking that we want students to engage in for an essay of analysis.

After each clip, you can ask students to do some short freewrites addressing some of the questions in the assignment — and also discuss the clip in terms of those questions. This will give them good practice for their essays. In addition, here is a general set of questions that could be helpful for in-class freewrites and discussion:

- What comes to mind after watching this clip? How did the clip make you feel? What thoughts or ideas did it evoke?
- Summarize the analysis by the commentator. What does s/he look at or focus on most? Which parts are observations or data and which parts are hypothesis or conclusion?
- What is not included in the analysis — what else could have been included?
- What would you like to ask or tell the commentator?

It's worth calling students' attention, repeatedly, to how these freewrites and discussions can give them good material to mine for their first draft.

Essay of Persuasion or Argument

In teaching toward this persuasive essay, I use the same approach I described for analysis. Sometimes I provide the explicit assignment handout at the start; sometimes I delay it till they've done some low stakes writing that gets them into the persuasion or argument mode in a natural way. I'm trying to inoculate them from being infected by the dangerous mentality of, "Now I'm working on a big formal essay." It's great to have some discussions and freewrites about persuasion. That is, empirically, how have they actually succeeded in persuading someone of something — or at least made progress? And what approaches have actually had some success towards persuading them? Successful persuasion is rare. Many of the MEF clips provide argument about something in the media. It's useful to explore how these commentators go about arguing — and how successful they are. If you get students to look at arguments in MEF clips, or other examples of persuasive writing, here are some questions that will serve as prompts for freewrites and for discussion:

- Summarize the argument. Try to include as many of the key points as you can.
- Try to distinguish the *general* or abstract elements (main point and supporting reasons) from the more *specific* or concrete elements (evidence, examples, facts). How effective is each realm? How strong is the general reasoning, and how strong is the concrete support for that reasoning?
- Apart from argument and evidence, how persuasive is the style or voice or tone of the persuasion?
- What seems to be missing from the argument? What would an opponent say to argue back? And how might the commentator in the clip respond to those arguments?

- What is your response to the person making the argument, based on your analysis of the reasoning and evidence? Were you persuaded? Why or why not?

Please see the **Handouts** section (in the Appendix) for one that I use when teaching essays of persuasion or argument.

Suggestions for Teaching

In This Section:

Uses and Benefits of Freewriting and Low Stakes Writing

Ways to Use Freewriting In Class:

- 5-10 minutes of writing at the start of class to help students bring to mind homework, reading, lab work, or previous lectures or discussions.
- 5-10 minutes after posing a question for discussion or after a presentation or film clip or simply when things go dead. Low stakes writing for exploring reactions always makes it easier for students to talk up in a discussion.
- 5-10 minutes at the end of class or lecture to get them to think about what's been discussed.
- 5 minutes at the end of class to write to us about what they learned that day: what was the main idea for them? What was going on for them during that class? This helps them integrate what they've heard; and if we collect it, we learn what's getting through and what isn't.

If I have a new class or large class with students who might resist the idea of writing I don't collect, I start off collecting it for a few sessions. But I stress that I won't grade or comment, and will just check to make sure they used the writing to explore the topic. They soon discover that it's not a stupid waste of time to do low stakes exploratory writing. After a few sessions, I stop collecting it and let these pieces be entirely private — or just for sharing with others. (Sometimes I take a few minutes more for students to read these pieces aloud to a partner or small group — helping them learn from each other's thinking.)

When asking students to do low stakes writing in class, it's important for the teacher to write too. Otherwise, students see it as a babyish exercise for beginners rather than what it is: a process that adult professionals and academics find profitable. (If you devote ten minutes of every class to low stakes writing, and use it for a writing project of your own, you can get a *lot* of ground covered and keep your thinking percolating even through periods when you can't find three uninterrupted hours.)

Ways to Use Out of Class Freewriting and Other Low Stakes Writing

Many teachers require students to keep a journal of informal and probably personal reflections to readings and classes. The goal is to get students to connect what they are studying with the rest of their experience, thoughts, and feelings. Some teachers read journals; others treat them as private and just check that students are writing. It can be productive to get students to trade journals weekly with a peer — perhaps for a response, perhaps not. Some students have a hard time connecting with journal writing; they feel it's useless and artificial, especially if no one else reads it. Teachers sometimes ask, instead, for a weekly letter to a classmate or friend in which they reflect on the course material.

How Freewriting Helps Students Think and Write Better

- It helps students involve themselves more actively in the ideas and subject matter of the course. During a lecture or discussion, there are usually only a minority of minds in the room that are active. During low stakes writing, virtually all minds are actively processing the ideas of the course.
- It helps students become more adventuresome and questioning. When students write for a grade, they often play it safe — making large generalizations and running away from what they are not sure of. Freewriting increases the chance that they will explore perplexity — something they need not only for the sake of learning but for the sake of greater conceptual depth in their finished essays. It also increases the chances of cognitive movement: a mind engaged in working out a train of thought. This contrasts with static writing that merely records completed or past thinking.
- It helps students find their own language for the issues of the course: their own analogies and metaphors for academic concepts. Learning a discipline means learning its discourse, but it also means learning not to use that discourse. Students don't really know a field until they can write and talk about the material in their own lingo — in the informal, "home" or "personal" language that is saturated with their own experience.
- It helps improve students' high stakes writing. In their high stakes writing, they often struggle and produce tangled prose. Freewriting (despite carelessness and mistakes) usually fosters a livelier and clearer voice — writing as though it came from a person. I've almost never seen a piece of freewriting I couldn't easily understand, but I've seen lots of high stakes writing that students have worked very hard on — and found it impenetrable.
- It helps students learn to write with full attention to their thinking — something many of them never experienced in school writing. Much of their attention has gone to worries about mistakes in language, spelling, or wording.
- It helps students learn meta-cognitive thinking. There's a special application of low stakes writing to math and science courses — and to problem-solving in general: asking students to write the story of the steps their minds went through as they tried to solve a problem. It helps their thinking when students share these meta-cognitive stories.
- It helps students learn to talk to themselves. It's a prime mark of wise and educated persons to be able to pursue a train of thinking inside their own heads — with no one else to talk to. Private low stakes writing helps students learn this precious capacity.
- It helps students do better on high stakes essay tests. Teachers sometimes say, "We can't do low stakes freewriting because we have to concentrate on high stakes, timed writing exams." But freewriting can provide ideal preparation by allowing students to practice writing under exam conditions without the danger and risk. That is, after students are well practiced with regular private no-topic freewriting, we can set test-like topics

and gradually give them longer and longer sessions to match exam times. Practicing under these simulated exam conditions, they can learn to think on their feet and explore different ways of handling topics and organization. When they hit the real exams, they will be more comfortable and more confident.

How Freewriting and Low Stakes Writing Help Our Teaching

- Regular low stakes assignments get students to keep up with the assigned reading every week. When students put off the reading till exams or major papers, they learn less from discussions and lectures — and class is more likely to go dead.
- It helps us with our commenting on their papers. With frequent low stakes pieces, we don't have to grade or comment on any of their writing till they are already warmed up and fluent. And when we've already seen a number of their low stakes pieces, we don't have to panic when they turn in a high stakes essay that is tangled or impenetrable or looks brain damaged. We can just say, "Come on. I know you can write what you're trying to say here in a clear, lively voice. I've seen you do it."
- It gives us a better view of how students are understanding the course material and reacting to our teaching — indeed, how their minds are working. We can see interactions between their thinking and their feelings, and how course material relates to other realms of their life.
- And don't forget: freewriting and low stakes writing takes little of our time and expertise. We can require it, but not grade it. We can read it, but not comment on it. In many cases, we don't even need to read it. Yet we can get students to read each other's informal pieces — and (if we want) discuss them.

[Adapted from "High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing" by Peter Elbow. In *Assigning and Responding to Writing in the Disciplines*, edited by Mary Deane Sorcinelli and Peter Elbow, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.]

From Chaos to Coherence:

Two Ways of Helping Students Move from Disorganized Low Stakes Writing to an Organized High Stakes Essay

I'll put all my thoughts here into the form of a handout — in case you want to share these ideas with your students. But in my experience, the handout is not much good unless I demonstrate it once or twice in a workshop in class so students can experience the process, not just understand it conceptually.

I start the workshop by passing out a small clump of freewrites, more or less on the same topic. They could come from one person or be a selection of freewritten bits from many students' writing on one topic. Starting with those passages, I lead the class through either of the two processes described in the handout. (**Handouts** section in the Appendix.)

Using Discussion for Teaching

I've taught for forty years, and I still find discussions a great mystery — especially good discussions. Over and over, I've had results that many teachers complain of, for example: the awkward silence while my brilliant question lies dead on the floor; the desultory discussion where only a few students talk; the intermittent monologue that comes from me talking too much in order to avoid the silences.

I know some teachers are brilliant at sparking discussions, but I've had to come to terms with the fact that I'm not — and I know I'm not alone. In the last decade or two of my teaching, I've developed two ways to deal with my ineptitude: concrete techniques that I find helpful; and a conceptual frame of reference for thinking about discussions that doesn't make me look so bad — but which I also think has some validity.

I'll start with the conceptual frame of reference that helps justify folks like me. I've noticed that the profession of teaching — though it can breed bombastic arrogance — often breeds guilt. Class after class doesn't quite work the way we'd wished. A feeling of true success is almost impossible to come by. That world famous person keeps not walking into our office to tell us that they owe it all to our teaching. (I wonder if bombastic arrogance might not have a few roots in this problem of never feeling that we've truly succeeded.)

Discussion is only one way to teach a class, and other ways can work just as well. People sometimes feel they haven't actually taught a class unless they've "had discussion." If we let discussions monopolize our conception of small class teaching, and crowd out various powerful workshop activities, we will probably trap students into too many lukewarm, "forced" discussions. It's taken me a long time to realize that I'm not a bad teacher, even though I'm not good at staging discussions. Even lecturing can be a powerful form of teaching — though surely not if it crowds out other modes.

Some concrete suggestions.

(1) ***Workshop activities.*** I've learned to take discussion off center stage in my teaching and put workshop activities more at the center. I've learned never to try to start things off with a discussion: no more struggling to find the perfect question and trying to ask it in the perfect way — and usually failing. I've learned to let discussions follow from a workshop activity like low stakes writing, or small group work of various sorts (e.g., working on a task or question, sharing writing with each other just for sharing or else for a bit of feedback). I've learned to let discussion be a result instead of trying to make it a cause. It's fun to exaggerate my approach: "I'm never going to try to cause a discussion; I'll settle for not stopping one when it breaks out — which it sometimes does after workshop activities."

The very question that often falls flat as a discussion-launcher is usually fine as a prompt

for freewriting or low stakes writing. Then when students have written (if I don't send them immediately into small groups), I just ask, "Did anyone notice anything interesting they want to share?" But I only give this question about ten or fifteen seconds and make it clear that if no one says anything, I don't define this as a failure for me or for them. Just a chance to let something break out if it wants to — before going on to the next activity.

Discussion always goes better if people have done a bit of freewriting or other low stakes writing first. Here's what I think happens in people's heads. The teacher asks a question or proposes an issue to discuss and almost everyone actually does have a thought. But many or even most people (especially first year students) are reluctant to say that thought out loud because they fear it's wrong or stupid — or that they can't say it well. But when students have written — especially in the safety of private writing — they've put a thought on paper and have more trust that they can say it and more trust that it at least makes sense, even if it's not brilliant. Writing makes people braver. Of course, the MEF clips are usually vivid and experiential and serve to launch a good discussion. But discussions usually go better if we write a bit after the clip and then talk.

I use a lot of workshop activities because I so often fail at trying to lead a discussion. Even when I manage to get a "good discussion" going, I can't help noticing that there are usually a number of students who are not involved. I've found it pedagogically and even intellectually liberating when I realize that I can actually teach an entire 50 or 65 minute class with different workshop activities — especially different low stakes writing and different small group tasks — and not have a single moment of class-wide discussion. Every now and then, one breaks out.

(2) ***Calling on students by name.*** There's another problematic assumption about discussion that is widespread — at least in higher education: something is wrong unless students volunteer to speak by choice. Thus, most college teachers don't like to call on students by name. It feels artificial, "high schoolish," even punitive. (Notice "high school" as a derogatory adjective.) I've found it very helpful to resist this assumption head-on. I believe it can be deeply human, natural, and indeed humane to call on students by name — and helpful to our teaching. It frees students from the onus of volunteering.

We may not like to look at it this way, but any student who volunteers to answer a teacher's question is publicly choosing to help out the teacher — in a sense, even to *give in* to the teacher. After all, as teachers we desperately need that response. Especially if the silence has begun to puddle on the floor and we are sweating whether anyone will come to our rescue. If no one does, then we talk and things get boring and heavy. College students have had twelve years of practice reading teachers' needs. Giving in is particularly problematic if the course is required or if the students are young, first year students still somewhat enmeshed in an adolescent culture.

In fact, many students would usually *like* to answer our questions and join in a dialogue with us — or, better yet, a conversation with the whole group — but they don't dare. It may even be ungenerous of us not to take the onus off them.

Think of what good hosts do at a party: they "bring out" the shy people they've invited. We need to have the guts to be a good host and invite someone by name to join in and speak. It's unkind if we force them to be teacher-rescuers or teacher-pleasers if they want to join in the conversation. Besides, when a teacher doesn't ask a student by name, it often means that the teacher doesn't know the student's name — and the student can often feel it. (I don't want to talk to someone who doesn't even know my name.) What if we tried to look at a class as though it were a party? Let's pretend we've invited them, and we have to try directly to help some of them talk.

Think, too, about the full realm of human discourse — as it exists most naturally in the world rather than in school. It's entirely human and natural to direct questions to people by name — and actually a little odd to ask a question of no one in particular.

Of course, it's no accident that calling on people by name has a bad reputation. We're not hosts and we didn't invite them, and there's a long punitive tradition of teachers using questions as tests that publicly humiliate students. ("Now Harry, what image from nature serves as the phallic symbol in this poem?") The process of teachers calling on students by name has been poisoned by the long tradition of seeing if they know the correct factual answer or trying to get students to say the opinion the teacher has in mind.

But we can defang and indeed humanize the process of calling on students by name if we do it only under two conditions: we must ask the kind of question where we can be confident that the student has something to say in response; and we must be genuinely curious to learn the student's thinking or experience. This means "divergent" questions where there's not just one answer. This kind of question works particularly well if the question actually fits the student. ("Monique, you've been a strong defender of advertising. Can you find a way to defend even this one?")

Besides calling on students by name, there's another practice that I like just as much — even though it's widely disparaged as "artificial" or "mechanical": Asking an open-ended question (e.g., "What came up for you when you saw or wrote about that clip?"), and then asking that every student respond — just going around the room or asking for every third student or everyone in this quadrant of the room. The effectiveness comes from the mechanical artificiality itself. It opens a space. Sometimes there is a good long silence when it gets to someone who isn't sure what s/he wants to say. But I like this silence — rather than the painful silence that comes when I'd asked a question of no one-and-everyone-in-general — or the non-silence when only the talkative ones always jump in fast. During that silence, the person is saying, "Gosh, what do I think about that clip?" Students deserve to have some times when everyone waits and gives them time to make up their mind and say *something*. It can be brief and noncommittal. And of course I give them the option to say "I pass" — but even that is saying something — which is nontrivial for some supershy students. I love the silence that comes from students trying to decide whether to say something they know that most people will disagree with.

Responding To Student Writing

Students learn from extensive writing. They don't necessarily learn from our comments on their writing. Research has shown that students frequently misunderstand what we write. Their reading is often skewed by all their past reactions to teacher commenting and grading; our comments suffer from the fact that we often write in a hurry and don't revise. We would do well to use our limited time strategically and follow the dictum of our better paid fellow professionals: "At least do no harm."

The fact is, there is no right or best way to respond to student writing. The right or best comment is the one that will help this student on this topic on this draft at this point in the semester — given her character and experience. Our best chance of figuring out the best comment at any moment depends on knowing what was going on for the student as she was writing. (Was she struggling hard on this paper — or misunderstanding the assignment — or being lazy — or trying too hard to sound "intellectual"?)

Specific suggestions

- Ask for a short "cover letter" (or "process writing" or "writer's log") with any major assignment (See **Spectrum of Writing Tasks**, page 33).
- Be clear about the criteria central to this assignment — rather than just asking for "good writing" in general. Grids are one way to articulate criteria clearly. It can help to have examples of the kind of piece you want — but make sure there are two or three fairly different good models, so as not to imply that there's only one way to skin this cat. (See the section on grids in **Grading**, page 70)
- Read the whole piece before making any comments. Students can seldom benefit from criticism of more than two or three problems, and until we read through the paper, we cannot make a good decision about which problems to focus on. If we embark on a comment before we've read the whole paper, we are more likely to make the classic mistakes: wasting time on something that turns out to be a minor issue; making a brief comment that the student misunderstands; saying something that's actually wrong ("you don't understand x") when it becomes clear later on that the student does understand x; getting caught up in a little spasm of unhelpful irritation.

  During my first reading, I permit myself only infrequent and tiny comments (e.g., "I stumbled here"). I often make straight and wiggly lines in the margin to indicate where the writing seems strong or problematic to me. The straight lines function like little positive nods of the head that we make when we are listening to someone and we "get it" or like it. These marks serve as reminders to me later when I am getting ready to write my response. Even if I want to tell the student the story of my ongoing reactions as I was reading (giving "movies of my mind"), I can usually do this more clearly and helpfully by waiting till after I've read the whole piece.

- Use plain language. Comments about the writing are usually more effective when we use plain, everyday language instead of technical terms from English or rhetoric or grammar. How much better to say, "Your writing sounds distant and pompous to me in this passage" than to say, "Too many passive verbs here." How would you talk about a writing weakness to a nonacademic friend?
- Write comments on a separate sheet rather than in the margins. This helps us comment as readers about what works and doesn't and how the writing affects us — rather than falling into the trap of trying to be an editor *fixing* the text. Yes, sometimes we can say something short and useful in the margin, but most of us save time by writing comments on a computer — which means staying away from the margins.
- When we return papers to students, it can be useful sometimes to take five minutes right then and ask them to write a short note saying what they heard us saying in our comments — and reacting to it. This tells us when our comments are unclear or when students misinterpret our words or react unhelpfully. These are often fascinating short pieces of writing.
- One of the most useful kinds of response is often overlooked because it seems too simple: to describe the paper as we see it: "Here's what I see as your main point: . . . . Here's what I see as your subsidiary points: . . . . Here's what I see as your structure: . . . ." This helps students learn to see their own writing from the outside (a difficult skill), and it tells them what got through and what didn't.
- We can do more good with our limited time for commenting on their writing if we spend it on drafts instead of on final versions. So when we get the final version, we can read quickly and respond only with a grid (see **Grading**, page 70). Comments on drafts are positive suggestions for revising and actually help them learn to write better — rather than just negative points in an autopsy.

About criticism and encouragement

Suppose a draft is very disorganized, and organization is what you want the student to focus on in revising. You could say, in effect, "This draft suffers badly from lack of organization. You need to get it organized" — and then try to explain organization in thirty words or less. Or you could say something more like this: "This draft suffers badly from lack of organization. But look at your third paragraph and look at the sequence of two paragraphs that I've marked on the top of page two: they are nicely organized [and then say a word about the organization in those places]. You need to have lots of more of that kind of thing. But you've shown you know how to do it."

It's pretty useless to tell someone to do something she hasn't done and seems bad at. How much more useful to ask them to do more of something they've already done — even if only weakly and intermittently. Many academics associate praise with "sloppy, ineffectual encouragement" and

associate criticism with "tough-minded analysis" — but this approach shows a productive kind of encouragement and praise that requires more careful analysis than most criticism. Obviously, the same approach would work with almost any problem, e.g., lack of examples or vague fuzzy sentences.

A note on down-to-earth epistemology

When students don't read or heed our comments very well, we shouldn't necessarily assume carelessness or ineptness. It's often skepticism, if not downright scorn. They often understand — consciously or not — how untrustworthy our comments tend to be. They may not talk about epistemology, but they know that the alleged authorities to whom they write often contradict each other about what "good writing" looks like.

In the face of their skepticism, there is an important source of trustworthiness or epistemological validity we can call on. If we tell our actual reactions and frankly acknowledge their subjectivity, we can write comments that are in fact *true*. They may be true about only one reader, but they are true. Here are some examples: "I started out sympathetic to what you were saying, but in the third paragraph I began fighting you. I got irritated and started to disagree with the very point I accepted in the beginning." "For the whole first page, I was wondering what your opinion was about this volatile issue, and I couldn't tell. But it wasn't bothering me; it somehow drew me in. But now in this section, I'm frustrated by not quite understanding your point."

If we write comments that purport to be true in general, or true for other readers, we play God and often commit falsehoods. Here are some examples: "You have too many asides and anecdotes." "You should move this third paragraph to the beginning." Such statements will seldom hold true for all good readers. Excellent readers often disagree — and students have seen this. Even when we write "unclear," we are pointing to what some other good readers will find clear. Students often fight these impersonal "verdicts" — in part because they sense how questionable they are. If we win such disputes by resorting to institutional authority, this further undermines their shaky faith in our judgments. By telling them what actually happened to us in reading, we are paying them the intellectual respect of trying to avoid what's dubious.

If we are willing to say, "Unconvincing for me," instead of "Unconvincing," students are more likely to pause, listen, and think — instead of just resisting, or thoughtlessly giving in to authority. Besides, magisterial shorthand words like "Awkward" or "Unclear" are themselves often extremely unclear. It's interesting to try for more accurate formulations: "I stumbled here," or "I'm lost," or "This felt roundabout" or "I couldn't understand you." It costs a few more words, but there's a pedagogical leverage that comes from avoiding comments that mimic God.

Besides, when we give students our frankly acknowledged subjective reactions, we are treating them as writers: "Here are my reactions: you decide what to do about them." In this way, we

help them learn to treat us as actual readers instead of sources of impersonal verdicts. And interestingly enough, our subjective reactions are often surprisingly universal.

To sum up. Writing comments is a dubious and difficult enterprise. We are least likely to waste our time or cause harm if we limit ourselves to the following essential activities: get students to write a great deal; read what they write with good attention and respect; show them that we *understand* what they have written — even the parts that are unclear; respect them by telling how we are actually reacting (minus the irritation and anger that probably come more from our difficult working conditions than from their actual writing). What helps writers most is the experience of being heard and a chance for dialogue.

By the way, if your class is huge and it's truly impossible to comment on drafts, you can nevertheless require students to hand in drafts three to five days before final drafts are due. You can frankly acknowledge that you cannot look at them (except to see that they are genuine drafts), but insist that this is your way to give them at least a chance to revise.

The Role of Liking as We Respond to Student Writing

I was in a workshop and we were going around the circle with everyone telling a piece of good news about their writing in the last six months. It got to Wendy Bishop, a good poet (who has also written two good books about the teaching of writing), and she said, "In the last six months, I've learned to *like* everything I write." Our jaws dropped; scandalous. But I've been chewing on her words ever since, and they have led me to think about how people learn to write better.

The standard archetypal story goes like this:

> We pour a lot of work into writing something. Then we read it over and we're very disappointed. "This is terrible. I hate it. I've got to work on it and improve it." And we do, and it gets better — and this happens again and again, and before long we have become a wonderful writer.

But that's not how the story actually ends. It goes like this:

> Because this piece has disappointed us, we vow to work on it. But we don't. It's too discouraging. Then the next time we have the impulse to write, we're just a bit less likely to start.

Here's what I think is a truer story of how people learn to write better:

> We pour a lot of work into writing something. Then we read it over with great disappointment and say, "This terrible . . . . But I *like* it. Damn it, I'm going to work on it enough so that others will like it too." And this time we don't just put it in a drawer, we actually work hard on it. And we try it out on other people too — not just to get feedback and advice but to scour the land to find someone else who will like it too.

Notice the two hypotheses.

> ***First you improve the faults and then you like it.***
> ***First you like it and then you improve faults.***

The second story may sound odd when stated so baldly, but really it's common sense. Only if we like something will we get involved enough to work and struggle with it. Only if we like what we write will we write again and again by choice — which is the only way we get better.

This hypothesis explains how people get to be published. Conventional wisdom assumes a Darwinian model: poor writers are unread; then they get better; as a result, they get a wider audience; finally, they are published and eventually turn into Norman Mailer. But I see a more compli-

cated process. People who get better and get published really tend to be driven by how much they like their writing. Yes, they have a small audience at first — after all, they're not very good. But they try reader after reader until finally they can find a few people who like and appreciate what they write. I certainly did this. If a person doesn't like her writing enough to be pushy and hungry about finding a few others who also like it, she probably won't get better.

I'm not saying that improvement is always fueled by the lonely driven writer. Sometimes it is (and Norman Mailer is no joke). But, often enough, readers are the ones who initiate this process. That is, writers sometimes learn to like their writing by the grace of having a reader or two who likes it — even though it's not good. Having at least a few appreciative readers is probably indispensable to getting better.

When I apply this story to our situation as teachers, I come up with this interesting hypothesis: good writing teachers like student writing — and like students. I think I see this borne out. It's nothing but common sense. Teachers who hate student writing, and hate students, are grouchy all the time. How could we stand our work and do a decent job if we hated their writing? Good teachers see what is only potentially good. They get a kick out of mere possibility — and they encourage it. When I manage to do this, I teach well.

Thus, I've begun to notice a turning point in my courses — two or three weeks into the semester: "Am I going to like these folks, or is this going to be a battle or struggle against people who bother me?" When I like them everything seems to go better — and it seems to me they learn more by the end. When I don't, and we stay tangled up in struggle, we all suffer — and they seem to learn less.

So what am I saying? That we should like bad writing? How can we see all the weaknesses and criticize student writing if we just like it? But here's the interesting point: If I like someone's writing, it's easier to criticize it.

I first noticed this when I was trying to gather essays for the book on freewriting that Pat Belanoff and Sheryl Fontaine and I edited. I would read an essay someone had written, I would want it for the book, but I had some serious criticism. I'd get excited and write, "I really like this, and I hope we can use it in our book, but you've got to get rid of this and change that, and I was really mad at this other thing." It's not my normal style to criticize, but I began to notice that I was a much more critical and pushy reader when I liked something. It's even fun to criticize in those conditions.

It's the same with student writing. If I like a piece, I don't have to pussy foot around with my criticism. It's when I don't like their writing that I find myself trying to soften my criticism, trying to find something nice to say — and usually sounding fake, often unclear. I see the same thing with my own writing. If I like it, I can criticize it better. I have faith that there'll still be something good left after I train my full critical guns on it.

I am calling attention here to a common mistake in thinking. When people like something, they assume it's good; when they hate it, they assume it's bad. But it's helpful to uncouple the two domains and realize that it makes perfectly good sense to say, "This is terrible, but I like it." Or, "This is good, but I hate it." In short, I am not arguing here against criticizing or evaluating. I'm merely arguing for liking.

Let me sum up my clump of hypotheses so far:

- It's not improvement that leads to liking, but rather liking that leads to improvement.
- It's the mark of good writers to like their writing.
- Liking is not the same as evaluating. We can often criticize something better when we like it.
- We learn to like our writing when we have a respected reader who likes it.
- Therefore, it's the mark of good teachers to like students and their writing.

If these hypotheses are true, what follows from them? How can we be better at liking? It's pretty mysterious; and it usually feels as though we have no choice about liking — as though liking and not-liking just happen to us. But I've learned that I'm not so helpless about it. Here are some concrete activities that I have found fairly reliable at increasing my chances of liking my students' writing:

(a) I ask for lots of private writing and merely shared writing; that is, writing that I don't read at all, and writing that I read but don't comment on. This makes me more cheerful because it's so much easier. Students get better without me. Having to evaluate writing — especially bad writing — makes me more likely to hate it. This throws light on grading: it's hard to like something if we know we have to give it a D.

(b) I have students share lots of writing with each other — and after a while respond to each other. It's easier to like their writing when I don't feel that I'm the only reader and judge. And so it helps to build community in general: it takes pressure off me. Thus, I try to use peer groups not only for feedback, but for other activities too, such as collaborative writing, brainstorming, putting class magazines together, and working out other decisions.

(c) I increase the chances of my liking their writing when I get better at finding what is good — or potentially good — and learn to praise it. This is a skill. It requires a good eye, a good nose. We tend — especially in the academic world — to assume that a good eye or fine discrimination means criticizing. Academics are sometimes proud of their tendency to be bothered by what is bad. Thus, I find I am sometimes looked down on as dumb and undiscriminating: "He likes bad writing. He must have no taste, no discrimination." But I finally become angry rather than defensive. I insist that it's an act of discrimination to see what's good in bad writing. Maybe, in fact, this is the secret of the mystery of liking.

Put it this way. We tend to stereotype liking as a "soft" and sentimental activity. Mr. Rogers is the model. Fine. There's nothing wrong with softness and sentiment — and I came to love Mr.

Rogers when I had childen. But liking can also be hard-assed. Let me suggest B. F. Skinner to supplement Mr. Rogers. Skinner taught pigeons to play ping-pong. How did he do it? Not by moaning, "Pigeon standards are falling. The pigeons they send us these days are woefully underprepared. When I was a pigeon . . . ." He did it by a careful, disciplined method that involved close, analytic observation. He put pigeons on a ping-pong table with a ball, and every time a pigeon turned his head thirty degrees toward the ball, he gave a reward.

What would this approach require in the teaching of writing? It's very simple . . . but not easy. Imagine that we want to teach students an ability they badly lack. For example, how to organize their writing or how to make their sentences clearer. Skinner's insight is that we get nowhere in this task by just telling them how much they lack this skill: "It's disorganized. Organize it!" "It's unclear. Make it clear!" Imagine how much more helpful it would be if — instead of saying, "Do something you haven't done" — we said, "Do more of what you're doing here."

The central task, then, is to learn to read closely and carefully enough to show the student little bits of proto-organization or marginal clarity in what they've already written. We don't have to pretend the writing is wonderful. We could even say,

> *This is a terrible paper, and the worst part about it is the lack of organization. But I will teach you how to organize. Look here at this little organizational move you made in this sentence. Read it out loud, and try to feel how it pulls together this stuff here and distinguishes it from that stuff there. Try to remember what it felt like writing that sentence — creating that piece of organization. Do it some more.*

When academics criticize behaviorism as crude, it often means that they aren't willing to do the close, careful reading of student writing that is required. They'd rather give a cursory reading and turn up their nose and give a low grade and complain about falling standards. No one has undermined the main learning principle that derives from behaviorism: reward produces learning more effectively than punishment.

(d) I improve my chances of liking student writing when I take steps to get to know them a bit as people. I do this partly through the assignments I give. That is, I always ask them to write a letter or two to me and to each other (for example about their history with writing). I base at least a couple of assignments on their own experiences, memories, or histories. And I make sure some of the assignments are free choice pieces — which also helps me know them.

In addition, I make sure to have at least three conferences with each student each semester — the first one very early. I often call off some classes in order to keep conferences from being too onerous (insisting nevertheless that students meet with their partner or small group when class is called off). Some teachers have mini-conferences with students during class — while students are engaged in writing or peer group meetings.

Getting a glimpse of them as individual people is particularly helpful in cases where their writing is not just bad, but somehow offensive — perhaps violent or racist or homophobic or sexist — or frighteningly vacuous. When I know them just a bit, I can often see behind the awful attitude to the person and the life situation that spawned it — and not hate their writing so much.

(e) It's odd, but the more I let *myself* show, the easier it is to like them and their writing. I need to share some of my own writing — show some of my own feelings. I need to write the letter to them that they write to me — about my past experiences and what I want and don't want to happen in the course.

(f) It helps to work on my own writing — and work on learning to like it. Teachers who are most critical and sour about student writing are often having trouble with their own writing. They are bitter or unforgiving or hurting toward their own work. I think I've noticed that failed PhDs are often the most severe and difficult with students. When we are stuck or sour in our own writing, what helps us most is to find spaces free from evaluation such as those provided by freewriting and journal writing — and activities like reading out loud and finding a supportive reader or two. I would insist, then, that if only for the sake of our teaching, we need to learn to be charitable and to like our own writing.

A final word. I fear that this sermon about liking might seem an invitation to guilt. No. There is enough pressure on us as teachers that we don't need someone coming along and calling us inadequate if we don't like our students and their writing. That is, even though I think I am right to make this foray into the realm of feeling, I also acknowledge that it is dangerous — and paradoxical. It strikes me that we also need to have permission to hate the dirty bastards and their stupid writing.

After all, the conditions under which they go to school often bring out some awful behavior on their part, and the conditions under which we teach often make it hard for us to like them and their writing. Writing wasn't meant to be read in stacks of twenty-five, fifty, or seventy-five. And we are handicapped as teachers when students are in our classes against their will. (Thus high school teachers have the worst problem here, since their students tend to be the most resentful about school.)

Indeed, one of the best aids to liking students and their writing is to be somewhat charitable toward ourselves about the negative feelings that are inevitable with teaching. I used to disapprove of the sarcastic stories and hostile jokes teachers often make about their students: "teacher room talk." But now it strikes me that people who spend their lives teaching need an arena to let off this unhappy steam. It's certainly better to vent these feelings with our buddies than on the students themselves. The practical question, then, is this: How can we help this behavior function as a useful venting so that we can move past it and not be trapped in the resentment of students? The problem is when we tell these stories and jokes as a way of staying stuck in the feelings of hostility and hurt — year after year — as so many bitter teachers do.

In short, I'm not trying to invite guilt; I'm trying to invite hope. I'm trying to suggest that if we do a sophisticated analysis of the difference between liking and evaluating, we will see that it's possible (if not always easy) to like students and their writing — without having to give up our intelligence, sophistication, or judgment.

[Adapted from "Ranking, Evaluating, Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment." *College English* 55.2 (Jan 1994). Reprinted in *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Short Individual Conferences for Responding

I have come to make heavy use of ten or fifteen minute individual conferences in teaching first-year writing classes. I ask students simply to read aloud the draft or revision they have in hand. I give my response on the spot. I find this practice useful for a variety of reasons.

- They learn so much from reading their draft aloud to me. They hear problems that I don't need to point out. (By the way, the reading aloud process can sometimes flush out plagiarism when students are palpably unable to inhabit the language they are reading.)
- I can more easily zero in on what really needs my attention. Of course, I can't make as thorough and thoughtful a response when I *hear* the paper just once, and have to respond on the spot. But the advantages of presence make up for this. By hearing how they read, and the little asides they often make as they read, and perhaps by asking a few quick questions, I can get a better sense of what *really* needs attention. If I'd been sitting alone reading the draft and writing a comment, I might have been more thorough, but I might well have spent much of my time on something that isn't really going to help this student on this paper and as a writer. It takes practice — learning how to listen and then respond — but it's worth being bad at it for twenty or thirty conferences so as to learn. And I don't abandon the benefits of written responses composed alone at home. I tend to alternate between conference responding and written responses.
- Conferences improve the class atmosphere and increase my comfort with the class as a whole. When I'm teaching a room with twenty or twenty-five first-year students, I sometimes feel the class as a kind of "lump" of seventeen-year-olds. I feel them as resentful adolescents who don't want to give in to the class, to me, or to writing — especially the boys who seem as though they would rather die than show a scrap of feelings. When *I* was seventeen, I felt scared and excluded by my peers — so I sometimes actually feel intimidated by these reincarnations of the creatures who used to intimidate me. But when I sit down with them one-to-one, suddenly they are just seventeen-year-olds (which it turns out I am *not*) — and often sweet and human, or at least merely scared — and I usually have no trouble liking them. They get to be more comfortable with me too — I can let myself show more as human and become less of a mere "teacher figure" for them.

These conferences are not a big extra burden of time. I don't have to take the paper home, so this actually saves time — since it usually takes me longer than fifteen minutes at home to read and write a response. I usually restrict the chatting to just a minute at most — but even that much serves as an important human and social lubricant. (And occasionally, I discover an incipient, big problem in students' lives, and I can prevent a student from sliding unnoticed out of the course — and even out of school.)

When I was teaching just one first-year writing class a semester (because of other courses or administrative work), I would actually meet with half the class each week. But this makes more conferences than are absolutely necessary to get the job done. If I were teaching multiple first year writing courses, I would have conferences only on the weeks I'm responding to drafts or final versions — and I'd see half the class on the draft and the other half on the final version.

Peer Sharing and Responding in Writing Intensive Courses

These comments are aimed at teachers who are not so much trying to *teach* writing but rather trying to *use* writing in a discipline-focused course — trying to help students deepen their understanding of course material and give them more experience writing. I'm thinking particularly of teachers who've had no training in teaching writing and are jealous of taking any time away from course content.

For such teachers I want to emphasize the importance of peer *sharing* more than peer responding. Peer response can work well, but it is difficult and requires careful training — and it tends to take a lot of class time.

In the long run, I think that students, and the rest of us, learn more from the *presence of listeners* than from actual response or feedback from them. In fact, students get excellent feedback (proprioceptive feedback) by reading their drafts and final versions aloud to classmates who just listen rather than give feedback. When writers feel the presence of listeners, and experience how each of their sentences fits in the mouth and sounds in the ear, they can usually tell which sentences work and which ones are a problem. And when students read their whole essay aloud, they get an almost visceral feel for the organization and train of thinking — and they also tend to notice when that train goes off the rails.

But this process only works if students read their papers slowly and clearly — and with some investment. Yet, of course, many students are shy about reading their work aloud — some hate it. Many have been shamed around reading aloud. I find I often need to do a couple of five-minute training sessions with the whole class where I can charitably and playfully prod students to be braver and prouder in reading their words. And I sometimes wander around when they're in small groups and do some more prodding.

Reading aloud in pairs and small groups doesn't steal time from course content. When two to four students hear each other's drafts (and lots of low stakes writing too), they are hearing different understandings of the course content. And if you decide to give the groups a few more minutes for *discussion* after all members have read — discussion of the ideas, not feedback — students are doing the substantive intellectual work of the course. ("I don't see it the way you do. In my view . . . ." Or "But what does the author mean when he writes . . . .")

Sharing also helps build class community. Students get to know each other and each other's ways of thinking. They get to put nascent ideas out for others to hear, and not worry that listeners will try to shoot them down.

But one warning: when someone reads a piece aloud, they tend to feel awkward at not hearing any response, and listeners, too, often feel awkward at saying nothing. There's a helpful ritual

for dealing with this silence: I make a big deal of insisting that listeners must say "thank you." Then people can move more comfortably on to the next reader.

If you want to open the door to *some* peer response without using up too much class time, here are a couple of ideas. Ask listeners to give "sayback" or summarizing: "Here's what I hear as your main point; here are a couple of other things I hear you implying." Also, you can assign students to give responses to each other, but set it as homework so that no class time is required. This requires the writers to bring in two extra copies (besides the copy for you) so that two peers can take them home and write out some responses. (For feedback questions, see below.)

Peer Response In Writing Courses

If teaching writing is a high priority, then peer response is worth your time and effort. But time and effort are needed. You can't just break students up into pairs or groups and say, "Give each other responses." With the best will in the world, they'll probably try to give responses they remember getting from teachers — which often means a bad imitation of what might not have been very good in the first place. Students are most valuable to each other not as diagnosticians or advice givers but as a *responsive audience* — as readers who can tell how they reacted to the writing and can also share their own thoughts about the topic.

Telling your reactions doesn't sound hard, but actually it is (for all of us), and students need some training to help them learn to do it effectively — and, most of all, to learn that *it* is the task that needs doing.

In setting up peer response, there are a number of interesting choices to make — and no right answers:

Pairs or small groups. Pairs take less time and usually allow trust to build quicker. But the feedback is limited. Three can be a good number; four is obviously beneficial but takes more time. I've sometimes used groups of four for brief responses and then divided into pairs for fuller response and discussion.

Permanent or shifting groups. There are obvious advantages when people get to have responses from different people over time. Some teachers try to prevent friends from working together. But I call trust crucial for good responses, and I don't even mind close buddies working together. My goal is for students to make use of peer response when the course is over — and who are they most likely to call on but buddies? Again you can try for some of both by inviting stable pairs while getting them continually to join up with different pairs.

Reading out loud or sharing paper copies. I've stressed the value when students read their own words aloud. But if the paper is long or complex, listeners can't absorb and process it well. Even short papers need to be read aloud twice for the responses to be valuable. But when I used to tell students to read their papers twice, they couldn't stand it (I find it hard too) — but there's a nice solution. Each person reads once — moving around the group or pair. Then each person reads his or her paper a second time — this time for response. (People also learn from having someone else read their text aloud to hear how someone else's mouth negotiates their sentences — but I love the sense of ownership and control that comes from reading one's own text. Again, there's no reason why you can't set up some of both.)

Responding orally or on paper. Obviously, written responses can be a bit more thoughtful and careful. After the second reading, everyone can write a response for 3-4 minutes. But it's jol-

lier and more social if responses are spoken. Of course, there can be a bit of spoken response *after* everyone writes — or vice-versa.

Response in class or at home. There's more time at home for a careful (double) reading and thoughtful considered response. But I like the social process of face-to-face responding. There's more danger of home readings becoming "critiques" in the bad sense. Here's a good compromise: start with brief responding in class in pairs or groups; but then have each person take *one* paper home and write a fuller response.

Draft or final version. Responses to a draft will help us in revising. But, in addition, it's useful to get students into pairs or small groups on the day final drafts are due for a simple celebratory reading of what they are about to hand in. The goal is pleasure and hearing what others have written — but, of course, everyone also gets a lot of under-the-table proprioceptive learning about their own revision.

For more about peer response, see the final fifty pages or so of my (co-written) textbook, *A Community of Writers* (McGraw-Hill) — and the shorter revised version, *Being a Writer*. Those pages spell out forms of feedback much more fully, and they illustrate each kind of feedback with examples that respond to sample student texts. Those fifty pages are also sold separately as a short pamphlet for students, *Sharing and Responding*.

Training

On the first day you want students to give each other peer response, start off with a workshop of at least fifteen minutes to illustrate the kind of response you want them to give. You can use a sample paper from a present student or one from a previous class. The central thing is to explain the kind(s) of response you want them to use — then affirm when they are giving it, and intervene when they are not. (*No, no. Stop. You're making me feel very bad, I'm about to cry. You're not summarizing, you're criticizing. That's not what I asked for. What I need is for you to tell me simply what you hear me saying!*)

It's important in the workshop to make sure that students read the paper. Because it usually takes repeated coaching to urge, *Wait, wait. I can't understand you. You're reading too fast and you're mumbling. Go slow. And read it like you are proud of it — nice and clear.* This kind of reading is difficult for students (for all sorts of understandable reasons), but it completely sabotages the feedback process.

This workshop needs to be repeated a number of times in future classes — especially as you try to illustrate different kinds of response. (See below for possible kinds.)

This kind of workshop often leads naturally to differences of opinion between students

about the meanings of texts or reactions to texts. So it is the perfect occasion to illustrate what I see as the epistemological principle that underlies good responding to any text. In a nutshell, the principle boils down to two rules for non-argument. One, *writers* may not quarrel or disagree with what *readers* say they heard in the text — as long as it's framed as a reaction ("this is what happened in my mind as I was reading or listening"), not as a claim about the objective meaning of the text. Two, *readers* may not quarrel or disagree with what *the writer* says he or she intended to convey. In short, readers are the only valid authority over what is in their mind (how they reacted); writers are the only valid authority over what is in *their* mind (their intention). In the space between these two mental realms lies the text itself. The meaning that's *actually in the text* — in the words — is always up for grabs.

Argument about what's actually in the text can be interesting, but it's usually more useful to focus on what's inarguable: the reader's reactions and the writer's intentions. These can be laid out fairly quickly and without argument — and hearing them tends to put the writer in a powerful position for effective revising. Writers often learn most by discovering that they can state their intended meaning much more clearly after hearing reader reactions. They probably need to change their text; they sometimes realize they want to change their intended meaning.

What's nice about stressing the inarguable (and thus discouraging argument) is that it tends to help with trust and safety. Everyone is engaged in saying what the other cannot dispute — and so the only remaining option is *to listen*.

There's a copy of a handout I often use with students (and others) to help them in getting responses from peers in the **Handouts** section. (See "Helping Friends and Classmates Respond to Your Writing" in the Appendix.)

Grading: Do It Less, Do It Better

Most of us recognize the myriad problems with regular grades. They don't have a clear meaning (how good or bad is "B" or "79"?). They give students no feedback about *what* was good or bad — learned or not learned. Besides, a one-dimensional number (or letter) cannot validly represent the quality of a multidimensional performance, such as a piece of writing or a student's work over a semester, for some dimensions are almost inevitably stronger than others. And grades tend to undermine the teaching-and-learning climate because they lead so many students to work more for the sake of the grade than for learning — sometimes to resent their grade and resent us. This can lead to an adversarial climate where they feel us as the enemy rather than ally in the learning process. Finally grading is difficult. It makes many of us anxious because we know that true fairness is impossible.

Given these problems, let's not do any more grading than is needed for the sake of good teaching and for the sake of the registrar and readers of transcripts.

Do It Less

- ***Ungraded assignments.*** There's no law against *requiring* work, but not *grading* it. It actually makes good sense. (If you prefer, think of this as "binary grading": 100% for doing it; 0% for not doing it.) Here are three examples of ungraded assignments: Low-stakes writing; starting the semester with an ungraded week or two (lots of required work, all ungraded); practice tests and exercises.

- ***Portfolio grading.*** This reduces grading because you don't grade individual papers. A grade on an individual piece of work is much less trustworthy than a grade on a body of work. Portfolios invite the grade to reflect students' abilities at the end of the course — rather than being an average number that's pulled down by how bad they were before they learned what you were teaching. But portfolio grading is problematic if you keep students in the dark for the whole semester about their grade. It helps to have a midsemester mini-portfolio with a provisional grade. (Some teachers actually grade individual essays, but that defeats one of the main advantages of portfolios: saving the time and headache of assigning untrustworthy grades to individual pieces.)

- ***Minimal grading.*** Interestingly, it helps to use fewer levels of quality — that is, to settle for cruder differentiations. For example, instead of the twelve steps on the conventional scale from A to F, try *excellent, good, fair, fail* — or *1,2,3,4* — or *strong, satisfactory, weak* — or *pass/fail.*

Teachers are often nervous about using fewer gradations. For one thing, it's commonly assumed that we need the maximum number of levels on high stakes tasks to make students work hard. But this assumption confuses *stakes* and *levels.* When we want students to work harder, we can raise the *stakes.* When we raise the number of gradations and create more fine-grained dif-

ferentiations of quality, this just makes *us* work harder — and creates more occasions for argument and resentment. Teachers often assume that fewer levels means lower standards; for example, they associate *pass/fail* with a low bar for passing. But we can get students to work hard if we simply raise the bar high enough for *satisfactory* or *good* on a high stakes task — even for *pass*. And teachers sometimes fear that they cannot calculate a final grade with twelve gradations for the registrar if all the intermediate grades are cruder — but, in fact, there are many possible systems that are rational and easy to work out.

Students, too, sometimes resist the idea of fewer levels because they have an instinctive fear of losing the evaluative information that comes from fine distinctions. Yet most students know that the one-dimensional numbers of conventional grades are not fair or trustworthy. This confusion is an indication of how anxious and distressed people are about being evaluated — how difficult it is to think clearly in this area.

In short, minimal grading is easier, fairer, more accurate, and does less harm to the climate for teaching and learning.

Contract grading is my preferred way to deal with problems of grading. I'll treat it in a separate mini-essay after this one.

Do It Better

- ***Explicit Criteria.*** When we assign work, it helps to announce the criteria we'll use in judging it. This helps make our grading fairer by preventing us from being too swayed when one dimension is particularly good or awful. Sometimes, of course, as we are reading students' work, we are struck by an important criterion or two we didn't have the sense to tell them about. Next time we'll do better.

- ***Grids.*** Multiple *levels* of quality provide more "evaluative information," but it's untrustworthy and thus misleading information. With grids, we can add information that is trustworthy and truly useful information. They are quantitative, but they give substantive feedback about what was good or bad, learned or not learned. An example:

Weak	**Satisfactory**	**Strong**	
____	____	____	Genuine revision, substantive changes, not just editing
____	____	____	Ideas, insights, thinking
____	____	____	Balance of generalization and specifics and/or support
____	____	____	Organization, structure, guiding the reader
____	____	____	Language, sentences, wording
____	____	____	Mechanics: spelling, grammar, punctuation, proofreading
____	____	____	Overall

To write comments on a computer, I often create a grid as a mini-file, and then import it into each individual evaluation letter. I can add comments after particular criteria as needed:

- **Genuine Revision, Substantive Changes, Not Just Editing**: [no comment means satisfactory]
- **Ideas, Insights, Thinking:** *Strong. I liked the way you complicated things by exploring points that conflict with your main point.*
- **Organization, Structure, Guiding the Reader:** *Weak. I kept feeling confused about where you were going — though also sensing that my confusion came from your process of complicating your thinking. This confusion would be GOOD if it weren't a final draft.*
- **Language, Sentences, Wording:** [no comment means satisfactory]
- **Mechanics: Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation, Proofreading:** *Weak. Because of all the mistakes, this paper doesn't fulfill the contract and is not acceptable. I'll call it acceptable this first time IF you give me a fully cleaned up version by next class.*
- **Overall**: *Unsatisfactory for now.*

I often write an additional discursive comment at the end. Grids can be used for work other than writing. We just have to figure out the criteria that matter. Even on a math exam, it is possible to differentiate the different skills required by different questions (or parts of questions).

Student self-assessment. Students know more than we do about many aspects of what they have learned or not — certainly about how much work they did and about what kinds of learning processes they went through. And when students assess their own learning, they learn even more through the process. We can require it, and it takes no work from us. (See the example at the end of the **Handouts** section in the Appendix.)

Summing up. Regular grades are all number and no meaning. The number *2* has no meaning, in itself, other than "worse than 1 and better than 3." There is no connection with actual empirical qualities of work. Putting this visually, grades are nothing but vertical one-dimensional lines and have no horizontal dimension. The vertical represents levels of unspecified qualities; the horizontal represents actual features. Minimal grading gives us less of the vertical. Criteria and grids add the horizontal dimension of criteria.

(See also, "Ranking, Evaluating, Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment." *College English* 55.2 (Jan 1994): 187-206. Also three chapters on evaluation and assessment in *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. NY: Oxford UP, 2000.)

Contract Grading

This is a radically minimal form of grading, but it maximizes information and vastly improves the processes of learning and teaching. After experimenting with various forms of contract, I've come to prefer a kind of hybrid contract that focuses on the grade of B. I make a promise in writing that says something like this:

> *If you do the following activities, you are guaranteed a B for the course. These activities require effort and care, but anyone can do them. They have nothing to do with quality or judging. However, I've learned through experience that if you do all these things for fourteen weeks, your writing will get good enough so you deserve the B that I guaranteed. For grades higher than B, we are back to the game of judging quality: you must write papers I judge to be excellent or high honors (after all, B itself is an honors grade).*

Here is how I spell out my basic requirements for a B in a first year college writing course.

You must:

- attend class regularly — not missing more than a week's worth of classes;
- meet due dates and writing criteria for all major assignments;
- participate in all in-class exercises and activities;
- complete all informal, low stakes writing assignments (e.g. journal writing or discussion-board writing);
- give thoughtful peer feedback during class workshops and work faithfully with your group on other collaborative tasks (e.g., sharing papers, commenting on drafts, peer editing, on-line discussion boards, answering peer questions);
- sustain a decent level of effort and investment on each draft of all papers;
- make substantive revisions when the assignment is to revise: not just edit or touch up but extend or change the thinking or organization;
- copy edit all final revisions of main assignments until they conform to the conventions of edited, revised English;
- attend conferences with the teacher to discuss drafts;
- submit your mid-term and final portfolio;
- Perplexity. For every paper, you need to find some genuine question or perplexity. That is, don't just tell four obvious reasons why dishonesty is bad or why democracy is good. Root your paper in a felt question about honesty or democracy — a problem or an itch that bothers you;
- Movement of thinking. Having found a perplexity, use your paper to do some figuring-

out. Make some intellectual gears turn. Thus, your paper needs to move or go somewhere. It needs to have a progression of thinking;

Please don't let these last two criteria bother you. I am not asking that your essays always be perfectly tidy, well-organized, and unified. I care more that you think hard and work through the question than that you find a neat answer. It's okay if your essays have some loose ends, some signs of struggle — especially in early drafts. But this lack of unity or neatness needs to be a sign of effort, not lack of effort.

Why I like contract grading

Because the requirements for a B depend on largely non-subjective, yes/no decisions, and because all students know they are capable of fulfilling every requirement through diligence, the contract vastly reduces tension and argument around grades. Students have control over their grade (up to a B). Naturally, I can't pretend there is no subjectivity in criteria containing slippery words like "participation," "maintain effort," "substantive revisions," "perplexity" and "movement of thinking." But, in practice, these criteria *function* as nonarguable: (a) they are so much less arguable than normal grading differences between, say, B and C; and (b) I only blow my whistle when the "crime" is flagrant. Of course, "perplexity" and "movement of thinking" are especially fuzzy and perhaps it makes more sense to avoid them. But the main principle here is to demand behaviors that you believe will produce the most learning — and I think that people best increase their skill in writing if they get perplexity and movement of thinking in their essays. But I "enforce" gingerly. I get the most mileage out of simply *having* them on the contract and calling attention to them in my comments — often saying things like, "But is there really any movement of thinking in this essay?" — and almost never disqualifying someone on these grounds.

Contract grading does not do away with evaluation, even for the grade of B. It simply decouples evaluation from grading. That is, I continue to give lots of evaluative (and non-evaluative) feedback to students on their writing — as I used to do — but my evaluation has nothing to do with their grade (up to the level of B). Far from undermining evaluation, contracts make evaluation produce more learning. Conventional grading pretty much forces students to do what teachers suggest in their feedback. With the contract, students are forced to *think* about whether my feedback makes sense or not, for they don't have to go along with it (though the contract says they still have to do some kind of substantive revising).

Contracts let me put my effort into what I enjoy: figuring out which activities most reliably cause learning. They also let me ask directly for those qualities in writing that matter most to me (e.g., exploring perplexity). I can spend very little time doing what I hate and distrust: trying to *measure numerically the quality* of writing or learning.

I also think contracts help guard a bit against any danger of grade inflation. They make grades higher than B feel very special, and I keep noting that even *B* is an "honors" grade.

I prefer a contract that I know *every* student can satisfy and that pretty well precludes argument. But there's no law against using a contract with some criteria that not all students can achieve and that might invite more dispute. A contract for a B *might* insist on some of these features in final drafts: a unified main theme; adequate organization; coherent paragraphs; a mixture of generality and specificity. Even this kind of contract would improve the climate for learning and teaching in comparison with conventional grading.

Self Evaluation of Learning

Because regular grading and the contract grade, alike, tell so little about what students actually learned, I ask students at the end of the course to try to figure out what they *did* learn. I ask them to fill out a self evaluation with very short answers, and bring it to a short final conference (please see "Self Evaluation of Learning in this Course" within the **Handouts** section in the Appendix). As we go over it quickly, I tell them where I agree and disagree. Usually, I agree with most of their answers. If I had too many students, I would just ask them to turn it in. The main learning comes from actually filling it out.

Publishing Student Writing

I've found that publishing a "class magazine" at least three or four times a semester — one that contains every student's piece — is one of the best ways to improve student writing. Because of the heavy evaluative school context for so much writing that students have done, they often experience writing not as a human act of reaching out others to tell them what's on their mind. Rather, they often experience it as an attempt to say what they don't understand very well to someone they experience as an expert on the topic — and all for the sake of being graded as to how well they did.

Publishing these magazines is particularly easy in settings where students can post things to a website. This wasn't possible for most of my teaching years, so I asked students to single-space their pieces and make them fit back-to-back on one sheet of paper. This way, I could ask them to bring in ten or twenty copies at their own expense. I brought a heavy-duty stapler and a cover. (If your budget is strong, you can photocopy them, but that's more work. At UMass, there is a kind of student fee — like a lab fee — that covers the cost of these publications.)

We can link all kinds of interesting teaching activities to publication, but I am nervous about tangling up publication too much as part of a "lesson plan." To do so can obscure and undermine what I call the main thing: that writing is an act of speaking out to readers — not an act of being taught and tested.

Consider the simple but startling fact that most writing in the world gets no response at all. When people write books, stories, poems, newspaper articles, and memos, the words go out and that's pretty much it. If readers actually read the words, the writer is lucky. Some books get reviewed; most do not. Magazine articles and newspaper stories, virtually never. Friends may give you responses, but often they are nervous to do so. My experience as writer and teacher leads me to this conclusion: what writers need most to help them work on their writing and improve is not instruction or feedback but an audience.

Publication is ideal not only for careful essays but also for enjoyable medium stakes pieces like collages.

Publication speaks to the two skills most teachers find it hardest to teach: substantive revising and copy editing. Like most writing teachers, I teach, preach, hector, and cajole as well as I can about the benefits of revising and copy editing, but my efforts are remarkably ineffective compared to what happens naturally when students hold their own revised pieces of writing in their own hands and see the same piece in every other student's hand in a class magazine. When we are alone, it's enormously difficulty to see our own words as others will see them — even if we go over our own piece a number of times in the process of revising and copy editing. The simple but powerful fact of seeing our words published in the hands of others often helps us get a glimpse of how others might see. Publication often gives students the impetus to revise and copy edit.

Writing About Media

In This Section:

About This Section

This section provides a series of key summary points and writing prompts for use with the media clips featured on the accompanying DVD. The goal here is to help students reflect critically on media by writing about media, providing them with a place – and the space – to freely explore and record their reactions.

You will find writing prompts that accompany each of the four thematic sections of the DVD: Consumerism, Gender & Sexuality (including subsections on masculinity and femininity), Race & Class, and Media & Politics. You will also find a series of "key points" that summarize each of the longer MEF video clips contained on the DVD.

These prompts and summaries match up with the two types of clips we've assembled for each of these four thematic sections: short media clips without commentary and longer MEF clips with commentary.

For clarification: clips without commentary include media clips plucked straight from television and film (e.g. commercials, scenes from movies and TV, etc.), whereas MEF clips are excerpts from MEF videos that include expert commentary on these themes. Our rationale for structuring things this way is to encourage students to think and write freely about the media examples they're viewing before being asked to reflect on and write about the critical commentary they encounter in the MEF clips.

This way of using prompts is designed to facilitate critical thinking about media by freeing students to react to clips on multiple levels, from the personal to the analytical. A bit more explanation about the thinking that informs our use of prompts might therefore be helpful before moving onto the material itself.

About Clips and Prompts

When teachers ask students to look at a video clip, they often provide questions to try to get students to look closely and think seriously. The goal is to encourage richer responses and avoid ones that are merely superficial ("It was interesting"). And yet prompts sometimes backfire. Certainly, the traditional lists of questions that we've all seen printed in textbook anthologies after the readings can be wooden or deadening. They sometimes make students groan because they feel there's a right answer they are being asked to agree with. I've found that students are sometimes more engaged if we just say, "Explore your reactions."

The problems are multiple here. It's not just hard to write good questions. Even good questions can turn off students — especially a long shotgun list of questions strung together. Students can feel they are being "grilled." And most of all, what's good for one student will make another shut down.

Given the various trade-offs, my bias is for a kind of minimal or even generic prompting. My favorite prompt is an invitation to focus on three domains: *What do you notice in the clip (or text)? And what do you notice about how you react to it? And now what further reflections does this lead to?* I want students to think hard, but I see good thinking resting on a prior discipline: sitting quietly and trying to see: to notice. I take noticing to be a disciplined intellectual skill. Here is Norman Maclean from his novel, *A River Runs Through It*:

> All there is to thinking is seeing something noticeable, which makes you see something you weren't noticing, which makes you see something that isn't even visible.

So even though a minimal prompt may not get students to address certain issues we want them to address, my philosophy is to use the minimal response over and over again and say,

> *Good noticing is not easy. I'm going to invite you to do it a lot and you'll get better: noticing what's actually happening in the clip and noticing what's actually happening inside your head. You can get better and better at capturing those fleeting events on the screen and inside your head — and more thoughtful in reflecting on what you notice.*

As part of this process, I find it enormously helpful to have students share their noticings and reflections with others — sometimes on paper, sometimes just talking. I do this mostly in pairs or small groups to save time, but of course some of these reflections get shared in full class discussion. I think students improve quicker at noticing when they hear other people's noticings. ("Oh yeah, I sort of noticed that, but I didn't think to *really* notice it. Next time, I'll notice that I noticed it.")

But sometimes there are certain important things in the text or clip that we badly want them to notice — and which many of them will not notice. But for me, the key here is to admit my agenda more frankly — to tell them at least a bit about what I want them to notice — instead of half hiding my agenda behind a "neutral teacher question" (and being disappointed with them when they don't give me what I wanted). I can even frame my request as one of my own noticings:

> *This clip made me think about the relationship between political ads and the question of what social class I might feel I belong to [or "what attracts me to certain car commercials" — or whatever]. What do you think about this?*

It might sound as though I'm asking for more teacher talk and less student talk. No. I try to avoid lecturing. But a mere question often functions as a kind of hiding: "I'm not going to reveal myself, but I want you to reveal yourself." Students often stay a bit on guard. At least in lecturing, we mostly don't hide. I've gotten interested in the benefits of short tellings or even micro-lectures by the teacher. I reveal myself a bit, but keep it short and use it to invite response from the student.

In giving some form of this generic prompt over and over, I have an important phenomenological goal. I want to show them how to pay better attention to their own mental processes and to take them seriously.

It's not just that I want to help them improve as noticers; I want to convince them that they can follow and trust their own reacting and thinking. When they say, "I can't think of anything," that's never true; there's always stuff in their minds — always reactions. It's not that their perceptions will always be accurate nor their reactions always valid; but the more they pay attention, the more they'll move towards accuracy and validity. I want to counter the dangerous feeling many of them have that they can't do good hard thinking without a teacher's help.

Some Suggestions for Giving Prompts

As with all low stakes writing, it's important sometimes to specify this responding as private writing. Students can often be more frank and probing and exploratory if they know they don't have to show their writing to anyone else.

After they have written in response to some form of the generic prompt, I sometimes *extend* their writing a bit with some supplemental questions such as these:

- What caught your attention most?
- What's not in the clip? — that is, what do they leave out or not show?
- Did you have any reactions or feelings that puzzle you?
- Can you tell where some of your reactions came from? Do any of them remind you of reactions that your family or close friends would have? Or reactions of teachers or school or other people you are not so close to? Do you think any of them come from the influence of media sources themselves?
- What would someone else say about this clip? — A friend? A small child? Your mother?
- What are you not writing about?
- After doing this writing, do you notice that your reactions to the clip are changing at all?

I like to take some class time to hear a few of the written responses. Not just for discussion in general, but because I can give a bit more training. For example, I can press them to relate their reactions to specific details in the clips — as a way of stressing specificity and empirical observation.

They sometimes improve as noticers when they realize that perception and reaction are always events that take place in time. Events on the screen change — as do reactions. The most accurate noticing will always be a story — first this, then that — rather than a single blanket statement. It's easy to help them see this vividly by stopping a clip once or twice in the middle and asking

them each time to write for a moment about what they are noticing and how they are reacting at that particular moment.

Clips with and without commentary. I find it helpful to spend a week or two having them respond to clips from the media that have no commentary. (We've given a list of these below — where we list all clips.) Sometimes the opinions or arguments of commentators distract students from looking closely enough at the media events themselves — and also tempt them into large generalities.

But when you start using clips with commentaries, these will model for students the kind of critical reflection on media images that we are hoping to teach. And we can ask students to apply the same "noticing" skills to the commentaries themselves: to be careful to notice clearly what the authorities say and how they say it — not just react to what they say. Commentaries often consist of analysis and argument, and it's helpful to discuss them when asking students to write analysis and argument. But note that the commentaries are usually short and seldom build up an analysis or argument as slowly and carefully as we want students to do.

More specific prompts. With all my emphasis on generic prompts and the skill of noticing, I'm not arguing against the use of more specific prompts that are keyed to the content of the clips themselves. I'm indebted to MEF, and particularly to Jason Young, for the section that follows. You'll find extensive descriptions of all the clips and possible prompts for each one. (For a bare listing of the titles of all the clips, see the Extended Table of Contents.)

Remember, too, that it's possible to get a little of both approaches: invite students to write for a few moments to the more generic, "noticing" prompt, and then ask the more pointed specific question.

Clips

Consumerism | Clips Without Commentary

1. TV Clip: "30 Rock" (2:00)

Characters in this award-winning American sitcom mock product placement in television and film.

Possible Prompts:

> *How do you feel about product placement? Do you think it compromises the integrity of television and film?*
>
> *How about satirical uses of product placement? Can product placement be used ironically to mock the entire concept?*

2. Porsche Commercial (0:30)

A young boy rides his bike to the local Porsche dealership and asks the salesman for his business card.

Possible Prompts:

> *Do you think that this advertisement is in any way aimed at children? If so, how does that make you feel? Should children be marketed to directly by advertisers?*
>
> *If you don't think the ad is aimed at children, who is the ad for? Do you remember any commercials from your childhood? What were they?*

3. Film Clip: "Zoom" (0:40)

Tim Allen operates a flying saucer and orders dinner for his family at a Wendy's drive-thru in this 2006 family film.

Possible Prompts:

> *How do you feel about this movie using Wendy's as a plot point? Would the scene work as well if the filmmakers created their own fast food restaurant instead?*

4. Film Clip: "The Ten" (2:30)

Neighbors feud over CAT Scan machines in this satirical take on American consumerism and the biblical commandment, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods."

Possible Prompts:

> *In American society, we often associate personal growth with the accumulation of goods. How do you feel about this "visible lifestyle"? Why is it that we value things like cars, houses, and clothes so much?*
>
> *How does this "visible lifestyle" interact with the biblical commandment, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods"?*

Consumerism | MEF Clips

1. "The American Dream Machine" (7:05)

How commercial interests have led to the gradual disappearance of the working class, resulting in the near complete dominance of middle-class representations. *Class Dismissed* (2005)

Key Points:

- Although it is missing from other forms of public discourse, the working class has always had a place in entertainment TV.
- As television became increasingly commercial, the role of advertisers extended from sponsorship to areas of content creation such as scriptwriting and the hiring of talent.
- Advertising has redefined the meaning of the American Dream.
- On television, and increasingly in real life, owning certain products indicates that one belongs to a particular position in the socio-economic hierarchy — for instance, "high enough" in society to live the idealized suburban life.
- Television showed people how to become less ethnic and more American. But American was defined as white and middle class.
- Due to commercial pressures, working-class and immigrant families have gradually been disappearing from the TV screen.
- The early days of television coincided with the growth of suburbia. In both the culture of suburbia and the content of television, acquiring consumer products is equated with success and happiness.
- In America, individual choice has been framed as the most basic of all freedoms.
- Government programs, union organizing, and collective bargaining were central to improved standards of living in the post-War period. These improved standards led many to the impression that the working-class was vanishing, as they moved up in American society.
- During the Cold War period, unions, who worked for the rights of working people and a better standard of life, were seen as a threat by elite members of American society.
- It is hard for those who see themselves as middle-class to acknowledge their working-class identities, since being working class is seen as a failure.
- Of course, television alone cannot be blamed for the "disappearance" of the working class.It is the result of the larger cultural discourse in which class has been "dismissed," or, as Herman Gray says in the film, "class itself has taken a fairly strong beating."

Possible Prompts:

What does the American Dream mean to you? Do you think that television has influenced your definition of the American Dream?

What class do you consider yourself in? Middle class? Working class? Why?

2. "No Choice – Brand Bombing" (8:10)

How the public sphere is disappearing into the "theater of the brand," and corporate monopolies are dominating the retail sector. *No Logo* (2003)

Key Points:

- One of the chief casualties in the new branded world is choice: whether we like it or not, ads and brands are everywhere in our face, woven into the very fabric of popular culture and public space.
- This lack of choice is the realization of a marketing logic governed by the drive to crowd out and eliminate competition: for the giant brands to maintain market share and power, they must saturate space and the senses and eliminate choice.
- Virtually every aspect of our lives is now subject to aggressive marketing schemes as powerful corporations gobble up meaning, space, time, and every conceivable idea – including political ideas that would otherwise challenge this corporate hegemony – and spit them out as props to advance their brand stories.
- This colonization of public space poses a threat to the fundamental need in democracy for a protected common area outside of the market where people can relate to each other and exchange ideas and information as citizens rather than as consumers.
- Malls present a striking example not only of the disappearance of public, democratic space, but also of its replacement by the illusion of a public, democratic gathering space.
- The virtual town square atmosphere of malls, replete with virtual sidewalks and trees and fountains, belies the essentially tightly-controlled, private and anti-democratic nature of these places: malls are "free" spaces only to the extent that the exercise of free speech within their walls doesn't clash with the rules of buying and selling.
- There is nothing new in the idea that corporations, as private entities, censor inconvenient speech and information; what's new is the scale of this censoring power as giant companies like Wal-Mart exert greater and greater control across a widening expanse of culture and the economy.
- Wal-Mart's "family values" brand identity clashes with free speech not only when it decides to cover up magazines that work against its image; more importantly – because of its sheer size and market share – its aesthetic sensibility shapes the kinds of content that get produced in the first place.
- What we are seeing is a new form of "pre-emptive" corporate censorship: directly linked to the growing scale of these brand empires, the economic power of giant corporations works to shape economic conditions and determine choices before products are even made.

Possible Prompts:

Think about your own daily environment. Can you see examples of what Klein calls 'Brand Bombing'? How do you feel about this? Some people argue that you can just choose to turn the television off. Do you agree with that idea? Why or why not?

3. "Commercializing Children's Culture" (6:32)

How the stories Disney tells in its movies seem to be secondary to their being used as vehicles for the merchandising of videos, toys, clothing, video games, etc. *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (2001)

Key Points:

- One inescapable aspect of Disney films, regardless of each film's message, is that Disney films themselves have become a vehicle through which to sell countless other products to children. Dozens of products related to the films are marketed to kids – from action figures and dolls to cereals to backpacks.
- This hyper-commercialism, which connects many children's toys to narrow-plotted movies, affects the way children play. Playing with movie-related toys can often lead to a re-creation of the films in the child's mind, which can stunt imaginative growth or creative development.
- Corporate conglomeration makes this process impossible to escape. Disney films are not limited solely to the theaters. Since Disney owns television stations, they can air the film on their channels, they can sell the video or dvd in video stores, they can have articles written about the film in their magazines, they can sell toys in toy stores. Every outlet for communication can be turned into an advertisement.
- Taking this marketing a step further, often there are advertisements not just during commercial breaks but even within the program itself. Disney's *Hercules*, for example, includes a scene promoting products in the fictitious "Hercules Store" which sells Hercules action figures, Air-Hercules sneakers, and Hercules mugs. This is a dramatic step, making the separation between program content and advertisement indistinguishable.
- Former Disney CEO Michael Eisner wrote in an internal memo, "We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective." But since so many millions of children are watching their films, is there an obligation to be a teacher as well?

Possible Prompts:

Explore your feelings about the Walt Disney Corporation and other corporations in general. Should making money be their only objective?

4. "Advertising Invades the Classroom" (4:58)

How schools are the last frontier for marketers to target children with commercial messages. *Captive Audience* (2003)

Key Points:

- While public schools once operated solely on the basis of public investment and trust, more and more schools have had to turn to advertisers, marketing consultants, and fast-food businesses for funding.
- This change in public schools — which used to be commercial-free zones — has occurred as corporations have come to recognize the sheer potential of the youth market – a demographic of immense size and spending power, and fertile ground for turning kids into lifelong, brand-loyal consumers.
- What makes public schools especially attractive to corporate advertising is that students are essentially a captive audience, with no choice but to be there, and no power to zap an ad and make it go away.
- By targeting schools, corporations reduce young people to objects and consumers, the primary interest being sales and profit – not their health, education or well-being.
- The argument in favor of advertising in schools – that kids are targeted by ads everywhere, all the time, anyway – amounts to a rationalization: Lost is the sense that schools might have a responsibility to be the one place where kids might be educated to think critically and with healthy skepticism about those whose very mission is to reduce citizens to consumers and spectators.

Possible Prompts:

> *Should advertisers be allowed to market in schools? What about the argument that it is possible to create a healthy educational atmosphere in spite of advertisements?*

5. "Product Placement" (9:48)

The nature and effects of placement: the positioning of the product, its inclusion in dialogue, its use by actors; how it colonizes both space and time, lends commodities an aura of "cool" through satire, and increasingly drives film content. *Behind the Screens* (2002)

Key Points:

- Instead of films being financed solely by movie studios and investors, companies are paying hundreds of thousands of dollars to advertise their products in Hollywood films.
- This can occur in a couple different ways: a product can be in the background of a scene (a billboard or sign); dialogue can mention a product; a character can use the product in the film (Forrest Gump drinking a Coca-Cola – the logo facing the camera).
- When product placement occurs, a film becomes an advertisement, a commercial.

- After Columbia Pictures was bought by Coca-Cola in the 1980's, entire scenes were written into various films that were centered around Coca-Cola soft drinks.
- Even when product placement is satirized in a film like Wayne's World, the same outcome occurs: The product has been advertised.
- Product placement is unrealistic. Products are portrayed more like a TV commercial than real life.
- In some films, a product can even be the vehicle through which the main characters find happiness or are fulfilled. This is one of the main tenets of advertising – that products provide happiness.
- When advertising products becomes the focus of a film's producers, story, dialogue, and character development can suffer as a result.

Possible Prompts:

How do you react to product placement in film? How about commercial media in general? What do you think future generations will think about our present-day entertainment?

6. "Music Advertising & Marketing" (11:23)

The nature and consequences of media marketing "synergy." *Money For Nothing* (2002)

Key Points:

- Cross media marketing, or "synergy," is now standard practice, as big companies have bought up other kinds of companies that they can use to help sell products across markets.
- The result: many movies and television shows have become glorified music videos, (basically advertisements for music) and advertisements themselves have become advertisements for music – as seen in the new trend of using TV commercials to sell records and break new acts.
- What's new is that the standard relationship between music and marketing has been turned on its head: we have marketing first, then the music.

Possible Prompts:

How do you feel about synergy? Is it simply too much advertising or just good business?

What are your thoughts on pop music? How has your experience with it changed over your lifetime?

7. "Branding Drugs" (5:40)

How prescription drug commercials encourage an emotional connection between individuals and pharmaceutical products. *Big Bucks, Big Pharma* (2006)

Key Points:

- Direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising of prescription drugs uses the same techniques as advertising for other commodities: branding products by associating them with positive emotions and images of happy people living fulfilling lives. You rarely see patients suffering from ailments in these ads.
- The positive images, however, are often contradicted by the lists of unpleasant and/or dangerous side effects that the industry is legally required to report.
- The ads are effective in influencing patients. Doctors talk about patients who come in with lists of drugs that they've seen advertised. Sometimes they don't even know what the drug they want is actually meant to treat.
- This influence is especially important because of what is at stake in the advertising of medications: it is our health that it is potentially jeopardized. The positive images of happy, healthy people in drug advertising can be misleading in terms of the safety of the drugs themselves. Adverse drug reactions lead to 1.5 million hospitalizations and 100,000 deaths a year in the U.S. This is the 5th leading cause of death in America.
- Vioxx, for example, though prescribed for arthritis, was found to increase patients' risk of heart attack. In 2000, more money was spent on promoting Vioxx than was spent on promoting Budweiser or Pepsi.
- The pharmaceutical industry defends DTC advertising as educational, but skeptics say this is ridiculous. Thirty-second images of idyllic scenes do not serve an educational purpose. Furthermore, the companies that profit from selling more prescriptions cannot be counted on for objective educational information about the drugs they are trying to sell.

Possible Prompts:

Should drug companies be allowed to market drugs directly to consumers?

Have you ever had an emotional bond with a product? If so, what kind of product? Explore your relationship with it.

8. "The Visible Lifestyle" (9:29)

As possessions become the visible markers of wealth, more and more products get drawn into the consumption competition. *The Overspent American* (2003)

Key Points:

- One of the results of hyper-advertising has been a dramatic increase in consumption. A by-product is the desire to show off wealth and the acquisition of expensive commodities. A consumption competition has been created: people compete with their neighbors, co-workers, and friends about how much money they have and thereby what products they own or consume.

- In order for others to notice, these products must be visible.
- The three most visible areas of consumption: the car you drive, the house you live in, and the clothes you put on your body.
- One example is the Sports Utility Vehicle, or SUV. Few SUV owners go off-roading or need the increased amount of storage space but for the past 10 years or so, the SUV has, despite its low gas mileage, been trendy and sold very well.
- The size of houses has increased dramatically, more than doubling since the 1970's.
- Brands have become more important as well, a way to visibly show others which products you are able to consume. Products like sneakers, coffee cups, and even water have become branded.
- The price of a product has become closely linked to its brand: even if the difference between brands is minimal, one brand might be significantly higher priced than another.

Possible Prompts:

Do you wear clothing or sneakers with branded logos? How important are logos? Did branding affect how you or your family purchased a car?

How do you feel about bottled water? Do you buy it? Is it a waste of money?

Do you feel pressure to compete with your neighbors, co-workers and friends to keep up with this "visible lifestyle"?

Gender and Sexuality | Clips Without Commentary

Masculinity

1. Hummer Commercial (0:30)

A man buying tofu at a supermarket is insecure when another man buying meat "looks at him funny." He then buys a Hummer to "restore his manhood."

Possible Prompts:

> *How do you react to this commercial? To what extent is manhood defined by the food you eat and the car you drive? How does this commercial construct masculinity?*

2. Music Video: "Eat You Alive" (0:42)

In this music video by Limp Bizkit, lead singer Fred Durst kidnaps a woman he is obsessed with and forces her to watch as he both expresses his anger at her for rejecting his advances and demonstrates his ability to control her in line with his desires.

Possible Prompts:

> *What were your initial reactions to this music video? And succeeding reactions? Did you enjoy it? Were you distracted by the images?*
>
> *How does Fred Durst use his body to project power over the female character?*

3. Music Video: "Many Men" (0:12)

In this music video, rapper 50 Cent uses ultra-male posturing to assert his masculine status.

Possible Prompts:

> *How does 50 Cent use his body to project power? What went through your head while watching this short clip?*

4. WWE Wrestling Match (0:35)

Two male WWE performers stare each other down quite intimately before fighting.

Possible Prompts:

> *Explore your thoughts on professional wrestling. Did this clip make you laugh? Why? Are you upset that the clip ended before the fighting began?*

Femininity

5. Olay Commercial (0:29)

Facial cream is advertised to women as the best alternative to plastic surgery.

Possible Prompts:

> *How did this commercial make you feel? Did the woman in the commercial seem powerful and in control?*
>
> *What are your thoughts on plastic surgery? Why do you think women contemplate cosmetic surgery more than men?*

6. Music Video: "Dirty" (0:20)

In this music video, pop star Christina Aguilera breaks her innocent image with overt sexuality.

Possible Prompts:

> *What were you thinking while watching this short clip? Were you taken in by the images or put off?*
>
> *Do you remember Christina Aguilera before this video? If so, compare her image then to her image now. Why do you think it changed?*

7. Film Clip: "Summer Magic" (2:10)

Three young girls sing about femininity in this 1963 Disney musical.

Possible Prompts:

> *What do you think has changed about our understanding of femininity since 1963? What has stayed the same?*

8. Heineken Commercial (0:30)

Thin, beautiful women are always used in advertisements to sell products, but in this beer ad, a robot replaces the woman.

Possible Prompts:

> *How did this beer commercial make you feel? How is it similar to other alcohol advertisements you have seen? How is it different?*
>
> *Explore your reactions to alcohol advertising in general? If you drink, why do you drink the drinks you do?*
>
> *Why are there so many alcohol advertisements during sports games? How would this ad appeal to that audience?*

Gender and Sexuality | MEF Clips

Masculinity

1. "Hidden A-Gender" (6:05)

How media discourse hides the gendered nature of most violence. *Tough Guise* (1999)

Key Points:

- Violence needs to be seen as a gender issue, especially as an issue caught up in how we as a society think about masculinity and manhood.
- In the national conversation about violence, it's rarely referred to as a gender issue, although one gender, men, perpetrates approximately 90% of the violence.
- One of the ways dominance functions is that the dominant group avoids being examined. We focus always on the subordinated group – blacks or Latinos when we talk about race; gays when we talk about sexual orientation; women when we talk about gender. Unconscious or not, this focus helps the dominant group remain invisible and protects the status quo.
- This dynamic plays out in a number of ways when it comes to discussions of violence. One is the rampant use of the passive voice when we talk about crimes against women, which shifts our focus off of male perpetrators and onto female victims and survivors.
- Another example, also embedded in language, can be seen in the sort of linguistic neutering of violence found in newspaper headlines and stories all around the country – which again and again speak of "youth violence," and of "kids killing kids," not boys killing boys and boys killing girls.
- Few would argue with the common-sense idea that dealing with a problem requires, first of all, that you name it. If we don't frame violence as the overwhelmingly male, masculine phenomenon that it is, then subsequent discussions about the causes of violence are destined to ignore one of the key elements.
- A key indication that de-gendered discussions of violence serve to universalize or naturalize violence as a male thing: when girls commit violence, that's always the subject. When girls turn violent, the gendered nature of the crime is always part of the discussion. The same needs to be true with male violence. The bottom line is that violence has been gendered masculine.
- If we make explicit the overwhelmingly masculine character of most violence, we can still question the idea that males are biologically determined to be violent.
- Making masculinity visible is the first step to understanding how it operates in the culture and how definitions of manhood have been linked, often unconsciously, to dominance and control. Making masculinity a key part of the equation is therefore step one in dealing effectively with the problem of violence in our society.

Possible Prompts:

Why is it hard for many people to see violence as a gender issue? Should we discuss school shootings as 'boys killing kids' instead of 'kids killing kids'?

Explore your reactions to the role of biology and of culture in male violence.

2. "Upping the Ante" (4:29)

How media depictions of masculinity have grown increasingly violent and extreme. *Tough Guise* (1999)

Key Points:

- One way to understand the meaning and value of something in American society is to look at how it is represented in the media – and to understand that the media both reflect and produce these meanings and values.
- Images of men and masculinity have changed dramatically and in revealing ways over the past 50 years, particularly in terms of the size of men's bodies. And these changes tell us a story about what's going on in the culture.
- The representation of the ideal masculine body has grown considerably over time. The ideal has always been a fantasy, but now the fantasy is bigger. The increasing size of Superman, Batman, pro wrestlers, GI Joe and the characters of Star Wars is especially interesting and revealing given that representations of the ideal, fantasy female body have been shrinking in inverse proportion.
- It is telling that in an era when women have been challenging male power in business, the professions, education, and other areas of economic and social life, the images of women's bodies that have flooded the culture depict women as less threatening. They're literally taking up less symbolic space. At the same time, images of men have gotten bigger, stronger, more muscular, and more violent. It stands to reason that one of the ways that men have responded to women's challenges is by overcompensating and placing greater value on size, strength, and muscularity.
- The same pattern can be seen in the way gun imagery has changed over the last 50 years; from Humphrey Bogart and Sean Connery, to Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzeneggar, the guns – along with the masculine codes they represent – have become more and more imposing, violent, and menacing.
- Bottom line: There is nothing natural about images. They're made, and how they're made says something about those in the culture who make them and consume them. And the fact is, that in our culture, men have been the primary authors of our popular culture. When we look at changes in pop culture's images, we're also looking at the changing psyches of their creators and consumers.
- Still, the images of violent masculinity that pervade media represent more than the public

screening of the private and pathological fantasies of the individual males who dream them up. They are also windows into massive historical, structural shifts.

Possible Prompts:

This video was produced in 1999. How have images of masculinity changed since then? How have they stayed the same?

To what extent do these images perpetuate an understanding of gender roles in American society? Or is our understanding of gender programmed genetically?

3. "Making Men – Glamorizing Bullying" (8:58)

How professional wrestling reflects and shapes dominant ideas about gender, constructing a traditional, conservative definition of violent masculinity. *Wrestling With Manhood* (2002)

Key Points:

- Culture both reflects and shapes dominant ideas about gender, our sense of what it means to be a man or woman.
- Given that professional wrestling is a prominent part of the American pop-cultural landscape, we need to examine the stories it tells about gender, and we need to ask whether and how these stories might feed into and off of very specific ways of thinking about masculinity and femininity.
- Examined through the lens of gender, the obvious surface violence of professional wrestling comes into focus as highly gendered, with stories about violence always linked to stories about manhood.
- What professional wrestling offers its overwhelmingly young, male audience is a traditional, conservative definition of masculinity, a masculine ideal that equates physical strength, intimidation, violence and control of others with manhood.
- Professional wrestling, in other words, models a way to be a man, demanding that we ask what effect this modeling of behavior might have on boys and young men in the real world.
- Beyond simplistic notions of cause-and-effect, we need to examine how something watched so frequently by so many boys and young men might cultivate, legitimate and glamorize certain ideas about what it means to be a man, and therefore certain behaviors that conform to these ideas.
- Bullying is one of the most commonly glamorized behaviors in professional wrestling, even as it remains a severe and persistent problem in the real lives of young people.
- Whereas in the past bullies were seen as the bad guys, or "heels," of wrestling, today's wrestling glorifies bullying, with the biggest bullies achieving the greatest popularity and allegiance from fans.

- With this shift, and this new equation of manhood with bullying behavior, we now have a phenomenon in which kids identify with the bully, not the victim.

Possible Prompts:

To what extent does professional wrestling shape and reflect ideas about gender? Even among people who don't watch wrestling?

According to the WWE, what is a real man? What do you think a real man is?

4. "Bitch Niggaz" (9:06)

How men in hip-hop culture feminize other men to assert their own masculinity. *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes* (2006)

Key Points:

- In a lot of rap music, men refer to other men by demeaning feminized terms like "bitch." Calling a man a feminine name is the greatest insult that can be inflicted, and Hurt believes that this reflects the deep insecurity that many men have about their masculinity.
- Michael Eric Dyson points out that this is also a double assault. It is an attack on women, through the demeaning language, and also an attack on any type of masculinity that does not fit the stereotypical hyper-masculine image.
- This feminizing of men for purposes of insult does not happen just in hip-hip culture but throughout American culture itself, in media, interpersonal interactions, and even the world of politics.
- The use of feminizing terms for men calls into question both their manhood and their sexuality.
- Hurt tried to get a group of rappers to discuss homophobia in the hip-hop world, but they refused to even have the conversation. Busta Rhymes got up and walked out of the room.
- One gay rapper, Tim'm West, says that he finds the rampant homophobia in hip-hop ironic because so much of the imagery associated with rappers is also very homoerotic.
- There is a blurring between styles of masculinity that originated in prison culture with homoerotic displays of masculinity. They are both "thug" and homoerotic simultaneously.
- Hurt interviewed three cross-dressers who said that they get a lot of attention from men who on the surface appear to be hyper-masculine and "thuggish."
- There are a lot of rap lyrics that deal with sex between many men and one woman. Dyson argues that in these lyrics there is a type of erotic bonding between men that comes at the expense of any real connection to the woman involved.

Possible Prompts:

Do you believe that a man feminizing another man by calling him "bitch" or "sissy" reflects a deep insecurity that many men have about their own masculinity? Why or why not?

Why is it so hard for some people to confront issues of homophobia?

Do you see an element of homoeroticism in hip-hop? Why or why not?

5. "Masculinity & Control" (13:05)

How music videos tell a story about masculinity that equates manhood with power and domination. *Dreamworlds 3* (2007)

Key Points:

- Like other female artists, Janet Jackson is an example of a singer who did not become a superstar until she adopted a hyper-sexualized image.
- Jackson came under fire for her role in the notorious "wardrobe malfunction" incident during the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show. But what got lost in the ensuing media firestorm was the fact that Janet Jackson was only one half of the act. Media critics tended to ignore the role that Justin Timberlake played in this incident, barely commenting on the actual content of the song and the subject matter of the performance prior to the "malfunction." They ignored the fact that throughout the performance Timberlake played the role of a man bent on controlling a woman's body.
- In one of his most popular videos, Timberlake plays out the role of a male stalker who invades the home of his ex-girlfriend, Britney Spears, and watches her strip and shower. In this way, the video glamorizes real-life stalking and abuse, turning it into a form of entertainment.
- Many music videos tell a story about masculinity that equates manhood with power and domination. This story complements the story of femininity as passive and women as submissive.
- Women in music videos are shown gyrating in cages, tied up and writhing on beds, and being chased and captured by men. Men in music videos push, slap, and spank women. Men push women against walls, throw objects at them, and douse them in water and alcohol.
- Women in music videos never really say no to sex. They may resist at first, but usually they then become aroused, give in, and enjoy the assault: The message is that "no means yes."
- Men's violence against women is eroticized in many music videos.
- A prime example can be found in the video for "Eat You Alive" by Limp Bizkit. The band's lead singer, Fred Durst, ties a woman to a chair, sprays her with a hose, and screams violent threats and insults through a megaphone held inches from her face. Images

like this, and those found in many other music videos, normalize and glamorize sexual violence. We must ask what consequences they have for relationships between real men and women who grow up with these images.

- While women in music videos welcome and invite sexual pursuit from strangers and casual acquaintances, women in the real world find this threatening. Men often feel entitled to say anything they want to women in public spaces, or even to follow them, even though this might frighten and upset women, who for obvious reasons often don't find this kind of thing exciting or erotic.
- At the 2000 Puerto Rican Day Pride Parade in Central Park, women were doused with water, stripped, and sexually assaulted by groups of men. Images from home videos used by the police in subsequent investigations of these incidents bear a shocking resemblance to scenes that have played out in hundreds of music videos – but with one major difference: The women who are subjected to this treatment in music videos like it and become sexually aroused, while the women captured on tape in the real world are terrified and traumatized. They do not find the abuse erotic or exciting.
- A similar photograph was taken at the 2001 Mardi Gras Festival in Seattle when a mob of men surrounded a woman they stripped naked and sexually assaulted. We have to ask how these men, who look just like "normal" men, might have justified and rationalized their abusive, criminal behavior.
- The aggressive sexual objectification of women by men carries with it a deep contradiction. It simultaneously involves both desire and contempt for women. So even as some men claim to be attracted to women, they talk about them in the most degrading language imaginable—as "bitches," or as animals who need to be tamed. These men view sex as punishment directed toward women who "deserve it."
- A crucial point needs to be made, a distinction: The images and stories of music videos, and other forms of media culture, do not directly cause men to harm women. But they do dehumanize women and thus make it easier to inflict and justify abusive treatment. They contribute to an environment where men's violence against women is legitimized and the female victims of this violence are blamed for the brutality that men inflict on them. They encourage an attitude of callous disdain, while all the while implying that this is how women want to be treated — that women in fact desire harassment, stalking, and assault.
- Our fantasies matter because they are fodder for our values, beliefs, and attitudes. The heterosexual male fantasies of the Dreamworld are not just entertainment. They play an important and powerful role in shaping our attitudes and beliefs about gender and sexual relationships.
- In the real world, violence against women is neither entertaining nor erotic. But it is an all-too-normal part of our society: More than 1 million women are stalked by intimate partners every year. 1 in 5 college females will be the victim of rape or attempted rape. On college campuses, 90% of rape victims know their assailants. A sexual assault occurs every 2 ½ minutes in America. One in six women has been the victim of sexual assault.

Possible Prompts:

To what extent can mass media images foster real-life sexual violence? Is it possible for images to de-sensitize people to important issues? Why or why not?

How did the 2000 Puerto Rican Pride Parade footage make you feel? Do you see a connection between the images of that day and those in contemporary music videos?

6. "It's Only Entertainment" (5:28)

How professional wrestling normalizes brutal behavior and calls it entertainment. *Wrestling With Manhood* (2002)

Key Points:

- A common defense of WWE loyalists when faced with any sort of criticism is that "people should lighten up" because "it's only entertainment."
- If we agree with the common defense of wrestling as "simply entertainment," we then need to ask: What does it mean that we're entertained by men beating up women, by the humiliation and stereotyping of women and gay men?
- We need also to ask whether one effect of all this might be that when we see these things in the real world, we don't take them seriously.
- The defense of wrestling as simply fun and funny, and the related accusation that those who see deeper meaning in it have no sense of humor, similarly deflects attention away from how humor can serve both to normalize brutal behavior and shut down those who are concerned about it.
- Finally, the related embrace of wrestling as simply entertainment for those with a self-proclaimed rebellious sense of humor masks this fact: That true rebellion and independence would mean standing up to Vince McMahon's attempt to sell the deeply conservative WWE as somehow counter to traditional values.

Possible Prompts:

Write out some of the things you might like to say to the people in the clip — both the defenders and the critics of the WWE?

Femininity

7. "Media Pressures" (6:53)

How mass media constructions of femininity undermine girls' self-esteem. *Reviving Ophelia* (2002)

Key Points:

- The predominant portrayal of women that are considered beautiful in media emphasizes bodies that are very thin, unnatural looking and highly sexualized. This often leads to feelings of inadequacy in real women: "I'm not pretty enough, I'm not thin enough, my skin isn't clear enough."
- Over the last twenty years the average weight of models has decreased while the weight of women generally has increased. This adds to the divide, making the gap between models and other women even more disparate.
- This highlights the real correlation between young women's desire to be thin and the number of teenage girls who have become victims of eating disorders.
- There are a couple of disturbing trends in advertising campaigns: Adult women dressed in girls' clothing and girls dressed in sexy, adult clothing. This promotes a view of children in a sexualized way and also infantilizes women.
- Perfume ads hint at sadomasochism and typically use pictures of women who are vacant, expressing no intelligence or interest in the world. Many ads have begun using partial images of women's bodies, excluding the face. This further depicts women merely as objects.
- One way to discourage these problematic trends would be to write companies that have disturbing ads and express that you refuse to buy their product if they continue to run such advertisements.

Possible Prompts:

> *Explore your unfolding reactions to this clip. Have you experienced these types of pressures about looks or sex? If you have, how have you dealt with these pressures? Do you think media images influence your interpersonal relationships with friends, family, or romantic partners in any way? How?*

8. "Constructing Femininity" (8:51)

How music videos construct a version of female sexuality that is ravenous, indiscriminate, and sexually aggressive. *Dreamworlds 3* (2007)

Key Points:

- Our ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman are not natural; We are not born with them. They come from the culture that surrounds us.

- According to music videos, all that really matters about women is their sexuality.
- This version of female sexuality is defined in very particular ways. Women are depicted as ravenous: Always aroused, always desiring sex. As indiscriminate: They will have sex with any man who is around at any time and in any place — public restrooms, cars, swimming pools, and hot tubs. As sexually aggressive: They care only about having sex and will do anything to get it.
- Women in music videos tend to far outnumber men: The standard adolescent heterosexual male fantasy of multiple sex partners plays out repeatedly.
- Men, meanwhile, hold all the power because women need them so much. When men are not immediately available, women are shown using everyday objects to replace them. And when men are completely absent, the women fall apart, unable to cope until the man returns to provide them with purpose in their lives.
- Women in music videos participate in a restricted range of activities, all meant to titillate heterosexual male viewers: stripping, partying, dancing, sunbathing, swimming, washing cars in bikinis and wet t-shirts, mud wrestling, and showering. Water is frequently used as an erotic element, just as in standard heterosexual male fantasy images.
- The women in music videos are usually barely dressed and, when they do wear clothes, they tend to wear low-cut and skimpy tops, stockings, and lingerie.
- Women also appear in a limited number of roles, again drawn straight from standard heterosexual male fantasies: cheerleaders, airline stewardesses, hotel maids, naughty nurses, repressed librarians, lustful school teachers and schoolgirls, police women and dominatrixes, and strippers — the latter an especially common role for women in music videos.
- Women are often seen touching, fondling, and making love to other women, even as gay men are completely absent from music videos. This provides a clue to the source of the imagination behind the stories.

Possible Prompts:

> *Explore your unfolding reactions to this clip. Have you noticed these techniques before? Can you think of other stories being told about women in music video? Or is female sexuality the only story being told?*

9. "Out of Uniform" (9:51)

Despite unprecedented participation levels, female athletes continue to be under-represented in the media or framed in conventionally stereotypical roles. *Playing Unfair* (2002)

Key Points:

- Analysis of the major sports channels, and of sports coverage generally, reveals that

women's sports are severely under-represented despite the growth in women's college and professional sports programs, and rising participation of girls and young women in sports generally.

- In the coverage that is dedicated to women's sports, female athletes are far more likely to be depicted in sexualized terms, in hyper-feminized terms, and outside the range of their actual athletic accomplishments.
- This persistent tendency to sexualize, trivialize and marginalize physically strong, athletic women has the effect of undermining the power of female athletes, and works to contain the threat this power poses to traditional equations of manhood and masculinity with sport.
- These inherent biases in media coverage of women's sports reflect profound cultural anxieties about changing definitions of femininity and masculinity.

Possible Prompts:

When you think of sports, do you think of women's sports? When you think of basketball, do you think of both men and women's basketball?

Do you watch sports? Do you watch women's sports? Why or why not? Which women's sports are typically covered more than others? Why is this?

Why do you think there is a lack of coverage of women's sports on television?

10. "Follow the Leader" (1:47)

How media use teen celebrities to sell kids products, ideas, and values that reinforce both consumerism and regressive ideas about femininity. *What A Girl Wants* (2002)

Key Points:

- When young girls are asked what their dreams are and what they want to do with their lives, they reveal goals that are varied and ambitious. The media, however, present limited and narrow definitions of what it means to be a girl — definitions that tend to revolve around beauty, popularity, and sexuality.
- Teenage celebrities Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Jessica Simpson, Mandy Moore and others are viewed as role models by many young girls.
- The self-esteem of many young girls is contingent upon their ability to please boys.
- Companies use teen celebrities such as Jennifer Love Hewitt, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera to sell not only their products, but an attitude linked to specific and claustrophobic ideas about femininity.
- Much of the media content (movies, television, music and advertising) targeted at teenage audiences contains both explicit and subtle references to sex.

Possible Prompts:

When you were younger, what were your dreams? What did you want to be? Looking back, to what extent did people you admired on television influence any of your ideals? Why or why not?

11. "Femininity, Appearance & Slimness" (3:09)

How mass media images promote a femininity obsessed with body image and thinness. *Killing Us Softly 3* (2000)

Key Points:

- Because of the prevalence of advertising in our culture, the sheer amount of cultural space it occupies, it is crucial to examine and understand the stories advertising tells us about femininity and what it means to be a woman.
- In addition to products, advertising attempts to sell women the myth that they can, and should, achieve physical perfection to have value in our culture.
- As advertising pushes its objects, it turns women's bodies into objects, often dismembering them with excessive focus on just one part of the body to sell a product.
- Advertisers themselves acknowledge that they sell more than products, that the images in advertising are designed to affect the way we see our lives.
- Men and women inhabit very different worlds. Men's bodies are not routinely scrutinized, criticized and judged in the way that women's bodies are.
- There is a tremendous amount of contempt for women who don't measure up to the advertisers' ideal of beauty. This is particularly true for older women and women who are considered overweight.
- Media images of female beauty influence everyone. They influence how women feel about themselves, and they influence how men feel about the real women in their lives.

Possible Prompts:

Tell the story of your unfolding reactions to this clip. Why do you think men's bodies are not routinely scrutinized, criticized and judged in the same way that women's bodies are?

What is beautiful? What does the word mean to you? How is your interpretation different from the advertisers' ideal of beauty? How is it similar?

12. "Cutting Girls Down to Size" (4:02)

How mass media images trivialize the power of women. *Killing Us Softly 3* (2000)

Key Points:

- Little girls and teenagers are increasingly sexualized in advertisements. A growing number of ads are reminiscent of child pornography.
- The negative and distorted image of women in advertising affects not only how men feel about women, but also how men feel about anything labeled "feminine" in themselves.
- In general, human qualities are divided up, polarized, and labeled "masculine" and "feminine," with the "feminine" consistently devalued.
- Advertising is not solely to blame for rigid gender roles. However, there is no aspect of our culture that is as pervasive and persuasive as advertising.
- Changes in advertising will depend on an aware, active, educated public that thinks of itself primarily as citizens rather than as consumers.

Possible Prompts:

> *Besides advertising, where else do you see narrow depictions of women as passive beings? Can you think of any examples outside of media?*

Race and Class | Clips Without Commentary

1. Film Clip: "Click" (2:02)

Rob Schneider appears as an Arabian prince in this 2006 comedy starring Adam Sandler.

Possible Prompts:

> *How does this clip make you feel? Did you find it funny? Or stereotypical? Why or why not?*
>
> *How do you feel about Rob Schneider in the role of the Arab prince? Did you even know it was he? How do you feel about an American actor made up to look Arabic? Would you consider it a form of "blackface"?*

2. Film Clip: "The Birth of a Nation" (2:01)

This 1915 blockbuster spread fear and paranoia about black people with its mean-spirited stereotypes of black men as lazy, untrustworthy, oversexed and dangerous.

Possible Prompts:

> *Explore how this clip made you feel — at first and then in succeeding moments.*
>
> *The Birth of a Nation was produced in 1915. How have media images of black people changed since then? Can you think of any examples of how they are still similar?*
>
> *What are your thoughts about a racist film being remembered as a great American movie?*

3. TV Clip: "Cheers" (0:56)

Two working-class men mistake Senator John Kerry for somebody they saw on television.

Possible Prompts:

> *What stereotypes about the working class are being perpetuated in this clip? Can you think of any other examples? Do you think these images are realistic?*

4. Film Clip: "Do the Right Thing" (1:14)

In this provocative clip from director Spike Lee, characters spew out racial tirades directed at individuals of other racial groups.

Possible Prompts:

> *Explore your unfolding reactions to this clip. Did it make you uncomfortable? If you'd seen it before, was your reaction different this time around?*
>
> *Do you remember your first encounters with racist language? If so, write about them.*

5. TV Clip: "The Simpsons" (0:16)

Homer Simpson sets his house on fire while singing, "I am so smart."

Possible Prompts:

> *How is Homer Simpson similar to other working-class fathers on television shows? Compare and contrast him with a few others.*

6. Film Clip: "Oliver & Company" (1:31)

Cheech Marin does voice acting as a Chihuahua and attempts to steal a car in this 1988 Disney film.

Possible Prompts:

> *What were your initial thoughts regarding the Chihuahua? Did they change over the course of the clip? How about when he was attempting to steal the car?*
>
> *Can you think of any other Disney films with negative representations of minority groups? Can you think of any positive ones?*

Race and Class | MEF Clips

1. "Contesting Stereotypes" (2:37)

How the limited images of black men in the media affect perceptions of black men in the "real world." *Representation and the Media* (1997)

Key Points:

- Stereotyping is a way of fixing an identity on a group of people. This is a powerful way of circulating in the world a very limited view of who people can be and what they can do.
- Contesting stereotypes means increasing the diversity of images in the media, opening up new possibilities of identity.
- The most common strategy is to reverse a negative stereotype by creating a positive image or representation.

Possible Prompts:

> *What are your thoughts on the Cosby Show? Can positive images of a black family reverse a negative image? Or does it just perpetuate the idea that racism doesn't exist?*
>
> *What would your initial reaction be to a black family on the evening news? Do you see a dif-*

ference between the representation of black people on fictionalized television shows and on the evening news? What kinds of stories about black people are typically on the news?

2. "Indians, Hyenas & Chihuahuas" (20:10)

How representations of race and ethnicity in Disney films reinforce cultural stereotypes. *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (2001)

Key Points:

- Representations of race in Disney films often reproduce derogatory racial stereotypes.
- This is often unintentional, but the affect is the same regardless of intent.
- The very few Latino characters in Disney movies are almost solely represented as Chihuahuas – implied as dirty, ill-behaved dogs.
- Representations of blacks are also typically as animals. When asked, two young white girls who are interviewed cannot remember any black characters from Disney films. Examples include jive-talking crows in *Dumbo*, an orangutan in the *Jungle Book*, who wants to be like a human, singing "I want to walk like you, talk like you," and cruel, dim-witted hyenas in *The Lion King* (one of whom is voiced by Whoopi Goldberg).
- *Tarzan*, a Disney adaptation of a series of racist films from the 1930s, has no black (human) characters even though the film takes place in Africa.
- Other than *Mulan* there are virtually no portrayals of Asians in Disney films. One of the only examples is a pair of Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp*. Conforming to typical Asian stereotypes, they have slanted eyes, buck teeth and heavy accents and are portrayed as cunning, sinister, and manipulative.
- Disney showed significant improvement in the representation of Asian characters in *Mulan*, but there are still many inaccuracies and Asian stereotypes that permeate the film.
- A song from Disney's *Aladdin,* describing the film's Arabian setting includes the lyrics, "they cut off your ear if they don't like your face; it's barbaric, but hey, it's home."
- After months of protest from Arab-American organizations and a slew of bad publicity, Disney altered some of the more racist lyrics but kept "it's barbaric, but hey, it's home." An editorial in *The New York Times* about the issue was titled, "It's Racist, but Hey, It's Disney."
- Representations of Native Americans in Disney films such as *Peter Pan* lead many children to believe that all Native Americans do is dance around tapping their mouths, wear headdresses, live in teepees, and say "How."
- With the story of Pocahontas and John Smith, Disney portrays the differences between Native Americans and Pilgrims simply as two groups who struggled to understand

each other. This completely ignores the larger context of colonialism and the near extermination of Native Americans by Europeans.

- Because *Pocahontas* is based on historical figures, children who view the film often mistake the storyline to be fact, which masks the darker events in our history.

Possible Prompts:

How did you respond to the children's answers? Do you think their experiences with Disney movies often reflect the way they see the world?

Have you seen any of the movies talked about in this clip? If so, how does this critique change or not change your thoughts about them? Do you remember seeing them when you were much younger? Did you notice any of the issues discussed in this clip back then?

3. "Stories of Race" (3:24)

How television represents, or under-represents, people of color and shapes perceptions about the relative importance of dealing with racial problems. *The Electronic Storyteller* (2002)

Key Points:

- African American characters on dramatic or fictional television are healthier, wealthier, more successful and more middle class than other characters, in general; yet African Americans who appear in the news are twice as likely to appear in connection with crime, violence or drugs than other races.
- The fictional image of African Americans masks issues of black poverty, unemployment, root causes of despair in inner cities and gives the appearance that issues of racism have been resolved.
- Blacks and whites are typically shown separately, and people who view television heavily are more likely to support segregation.

Possible Prompts:

To what extent do you think racism has been resolved? Explore issues of poverty and unemployment in the way people think and talk about race.

4. "No Class" (8:45)

How those who do not achieve social mobility are portrayed as social deviants. And how criminal behavior is represented as a racial or cultural deficiency, not the result of a class and racial caste system. *Class Dismissed* (2005)

Key Points:

- While situation comedies portray the working class as comical, and not to be taken seriously, so-called reality shows, talk shows, and cop shows depict minorities and

working-class whites as deviant and threatening.

- These shows reinforce the notion that the absence of a father figure and parental guidance contribute to minority youth becoming dangerous people.
- Cop shows have an important ideological task — they provide justification for the ever-growing U.S. prison system.
- Contrary to the popular imagination, the majority of the poor in the United States are white.
- Images of poor white people are rare on television.
- Poor and working-class whites are usually depicted as outcasts or misfits, and are used for amusement, assigned labels like hillbilly or redneck.
- The Republican Party has co-opted "redneck pride" to brand itself as a friend of the working people, while its agenda has actually been detrimental to working-class interests.
- When middle-class people do anything regarded as deviant, it is framed as a personal, individual flaw, not a class characteristic.

Possible Prompts:

Explore your unfolding reactions. Do you believe that poverty and criminal behavior are linked to racial or cultural deficiency? Do you believe poor people are lazy and/or that criminals are born bad people? How does television reinforce these notions about social class and deviant or criminal behavior?

5. "Manhood in a Bottle" (16:02)

How corporations have commodified masculinity in hip-hop culture. *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes* (2006)

Key Points:

- Hurt talked with many aspiring rappers who said the reason their lyrics are filled with images of violence, drug dealing, and misogyny is because that is all the recording industry is interested in selling.
- The recording industry, dominated by a handful of huge corporations, serves as the gatekeeper for what sorts of images of black masculinity will be conveyed to the public.
- The recording industry makes huge profits by selling images of violent, materialistic, sexist black masculinity, and by turning the misery of black poverty into a commodity that benefits mostly white-owned corporations.
- In previous decades, when there were still many small, independent record labels, it was easier for more diverse and positive artists to obtain recording contracts and get their music out in front of the public.

- The former president of Def Jam Records told Hurt that the rise of so-called "gangsta" rap as the dominant sub-genre coincided with the takeover of independent labels by major corporations.
- At the same time, white consumers became the dominant market for rap, purchasing between 60 and 70% of mainstream releases.
- White fans of hip-hop interviewed by Hurt admitted that they know little about African American culture beyond what they hear and see in recordings and videos. They also admitted that the music they listen to tends to reinforce negative stereotypes of blacks as violent, sexually predatory, and obsessed with material goods.
- The rapper M-1 noted that white fans adopt rap music as a fashion statement — like baggy jeans or oversized sports jerseys.
- Hurt interviewed one white fan who said he feels a close emotional connection to rap music. He also said that rap began in the 1990s and he referred to blacks as "colored people."
- The stereotypes of black men commonly found in hip-hop actually have a long history in U.S. media. For example, the first full-length feature film, *The Birth of a Nation*, released by D.W. Griffith in 1915, glorified the Ku Klux Klan as defenders of white women against predatory and dangerous black men.
- When Hurt asked the president of BET (Black Entertainment Television) Music Video Programming how he feels about the stereotypes in rap videos, he walked away without even answering the question.
- Chuck D., of the political rap group Public Enemy, called BET "the cancer of black manhood in the world" because of their promotion of rigid stereotypes of greedy, violent, sexist black men.
- When Hurt asked the rap duo, The Clipse, whether their music reinforces stereotypes, they had no response and wouldn't even make eye contact with him.
- Chuck D., however, points out that individual rappers cannot be blamed for what is really a state of affairs brought on by the recording industry itself. Artists create what they know the industry will support. The industry supports music that glamorizes sexism and violence, not music that is political or includes positive or anti-corporate messages.
- Jadakiss admitted that he prospers from the promotion of black stereotypes but pointed out that he doesn't benefit nearly as much as the white executives who run the music industry.
- The music industry is controlled by mostly white-owned corporations, and it is therefore white businessmen who make the decisions about what rap music gets released and promoted.
- White executives are clearly not interested in music that critiques white power and the system that supports it.
- Hurt points out that glorification of violent and sexist masculinity does not occur just in

hip-hop but is a central part of all American culture, from sports to movies to advertising and beyond. Hurt says that, in this way, "hip-hop is pure Americana."

- Hyper-masculine popular culture shapes the conceptions of manhood held by millions of boys and men of all races and from all cultures. These ideals hurt both men and women.
- New visions of manhood are desperately needed, and Chuck D. insists that change can only come from men stepping up and challenging the status quo.

Possible Prompts:

Explore your reactions to this clip. Do you typically listen to hip-hop? Why or why not?

How are the media images in hip-hop music videos similar to the images in D.W. Griffith's film The Birth of a Nation? How are the images different?

What do you think of BET? Do you watch BET? Why or why not?

Do you think it is problematic that primarily white executives own the corporations producing hip-hop music? Why or why not?

6. "Narrow Vision – Race in Video Games" (5:03)

How the white world of video games uses racial stereotypes to show difference. *Game Over* (2002)

Key Points:

- Racial stereotyping is often even more extreme and disturbing in video games than in other forms of media.
- 8 of 10 top selling action genre video games featured white male characters.
- One of the few games with black characters is *Kingpin*. The black characters are all in a dirty, low income, dangerous, inner city urban ghetto. The black characters are violent criminals while the protagonist is white. This promotes some of the most basic derogatory racial stereotypes.

Possible Prompts:

Do you play video games? If so, do you play any games that you think could easily be critiqued in a video like this? What kinds of video games are they? What are the examples?

If you don't play video games, why don't you? Do the arguments in this video support why you choose not to play? Why or why not?

7. "Orientalism Today" (13:51)

How a repetitive arsenal of media representations of Arabs as threatening, violent, irrational and terroristic elides their actual diversity and humanity, while at the same time underwriting U.S. military interests and policy. *Edward Said: On Orientalism* (1998)

Key Points:

- Generalized and racist statements about Arab peoples are more tolerated in the United States than for any other group.
- Where this is most clear is the demonizing depiction of Arabs as Islamic terrorists on the news, television shows, and in film.
- With the focus so squarely on terrorism, the human side of the Islamic and Arab world is rarely to be found.
- In Hollywood films there are two trends: Arabs are seen as terrorists, and Muslim fanatics, while the American hero or heroine ends up killing a very large number of these Muslim terrorists.
- There are tremendous differences between Arab countries, between Saudi Arabia and Morocco or Indonesia, for instance, but in American media Arab countries are lumped together.
- Much of the Arab world is also increasingly secular, which is also left out of the popular discourse.
- Because most of the Arab countries are dictatorships that are in need of U.S. support, their governments aren't willing to engage in any real dialogue about these disturbing stereotypes, which allows them to continue virtually unchallenged.

Possible Prompts:

> *When you think of racism, do you think of racism against Arabs? Why or why not? Do you think you would have answered differently before September 11, 2001?*
>
> *To what extent do you think media images create racism against Arabs versus merely reflecting the cultural bias that's already present?*

8. "Getting Real" (10:50)

How Arab representation in Hollywood film does not reflect the realities of all Arab people. *Reel Bad Arabs* (2006)

Key Points:

- When Westerners think of Arabs and Muslims, the images that spring to mind are not likely to be those of real people, but misconceptions based on Hollywood and other cultural stereotypes.

- We tend not to recognize that, despite cultural differences, Arab people have much in common with people from around the globe.
- When we think of Arab women, we often don't realize that real progress in women's rights is occurring in much of the Arab world and that Arab women are involved in a wide range of careers and occupations. In many Arab countries, the majority of college students are women.
- When we think of Arab men, we often don't see them as loving fathers and providers.
- When we think of Arab teenagers, we often don't recognize that they have similar interests to those of teenagers around the globe.
- We often assume that religion dominates everything in Arabs' lives. It is true that Arab societies are deeply religious — just as the U.S. is a deeply religious nation. But there are also many secular pursuits in the Arab world just as there are in the U.S.
- Not everyone in the Arab world is a Muslim. There are twenty million Christians in Arab nations, and Muslims and Christians in this part of the world have lived in close, peaceful, contact for centuries.
- It is important to note that some filmmakers have recently begun to portray Arabs as real, complex, nuanced people. Representing Arabs as people who have human qualities, no better or worse than those of any other group of people, helps to erode the stereotypes of Arabs that have been prevalent for so long.
- One way to challenge stereotypes is through humor, and Muslim comedians, like Blacks and Jews before them, are using comedy to encourage people to examine their own prejudices and preconceptions.
- The film *Three Kings* (1999) is a good example of a movie that represents Arabs as complex people, not as evil caricatures.
- *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), a film about the crusades, was popular overseas but not in the U.S. When it was shown in Beirut, a scene that symbolized religious tolerance by depicting a Muslim treating a Christian icon with respect, elicited a standing ovation from both Christians and Muslims in the audience.
- Arab audiences are hungry for nuanced, respectful portrayals like those found in the films *Hideous Kinky* (1998) and *Syriana* (2005).
- *Paradise Now* (2005) humanizes Arabs by showing that they are flawed and diverse human beings who have conflicting and complex perspectives on political resistance and terrorism.
- Dr. Shaheen is optimistic about the future. He believes that young filmmakers will increasingly challenge the longstanding stereotypes of Arabs that have been so dominant in the cinema during the last century. He points to the progress that has been made in challenging demeaning stereotypes of other groups.
- Dr. Shaheen argues, in the end, that the key is that none of us can remain silent when

confronted by the vilification of any group of people. We must speak out and challenge all forms of hatred and intolerance.

Possible Prompts:

Do you believe Dr. Shaheen is correct to believe that the vilification of Arabs will diminish with time? Why or why not?

Try writing some notes for a scene showing positive depictions of Arab people. Be descriptive. Maybe write some dialogue, character descriptions, costume and set design, etc.

Media and Politics | Clips Without Commentary

1. TV Clip: "Studio 60" (4:16)

In this fictionalized account of what goes on behind the scenes of a late-night sketch comedy show, a producer interrupts a live feed to share his thoughts of the corporate entertainment industry.

Possible Prompts:

> *If you were in the control room with the crew, what role would you have been playing? The director who didn't want to cut the feed or the corporate executive who wanted it cut? Why?*
>
> *How did this clip make you feel? Did you agree with anything in the rant? Did you disagree with anything? Explain.*

2. News Clips: ABC News Montage (0:46)

In this montage from *Beyond Good & Evil* (2003), ABC News simplifies the conflict with Saddam Hussein as a battle of good vs. evil.

Possible Prompts:

> *Do you believe that America's response to terrorism can fairly be called a battle of good vs. evil? If not, how should it be described by the news media?*

3. Pentagon Briefing (1:18)

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld blows smoke and clouds reality about the Iraq conflict.

Possible Prompts:

> *What do you think Donald Rumsfeld is trying to say? Do you believe him? Why or why not?*
>
> *Do you believe this is the best way for a journalist to get news? If not, what better ways can you think of? Explain them.*

4. News Clip: CBS Coverage of "Shock & Awe" (2:53)

CBS covers the "Shock & Awe" campaign before the strikes against Iraq. Anchor Dan Rather reports, "The Pentagon agrees that this report contains no information that the Defense Department thinks could help the Iraqi military."

Possible Prompts:

> *How did this clip make you feel? Do you think CBS covered the material well? Why or why not?*

How valid are arguments for filtering the evening news through the Pentagon? What difference does it make whether journalists go along with filtering willingly — or resist it?

5. TV Clip: MSNBC News (0:19)

In this short clip, MSNBC markets its military perspective with former US generals and weapons inspectors.

Possible Prompts:

Explore your reactions to this clip and to MSNBC as a news source on the war.

Do you believe it's possible to have objective news coverage?

Media and Politics | MEF Clips

1. "What Happened to the News?" (11:15)

How cost cutting and the consolidation of news departments interferes with investigative journalism, resulting in news that is high on sensationalism and low on information. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (2003)

Key Points:

- Given that our media are themselves corporations, it should come as no surprise that journalistic autonomy and dissenting voices have virtually disappeared from mainstream news coverage.
- There is little to no business sense in encouraging the autonomy and independence of journalists given the corporate structure of media: It makes far more sense for owners and shareholders to hold their news divisions, like their television and film divisions, to a fierce accounting that demands profits over investing resources for controversial investigative work.
- The result of this corporate logic is that news programming has become as formulaic, watered down, and sensationalistic as entertainment programming – the point being to keep corporate stock prices high by keeping ratings high, slashing budgets and cutting costs.
- The journalism that has emerged from this new business model is as economically sound from a corporate perspective as it is bankrupt and impoverished from a democratic perspective.
- Easy stories — puff pieces, natural disasters, and celebrity news — have come to crowd out more complicated and in-depth stories that address issues that have the most bearing on citizens' lives.

- Likewise, the claims made by public officials are no longer challenged or checked for accuracy: "balanced" news means airing different opinions from official sources without any attempt to intervene and figure out who's telling the truth – if anyone.
- This regurgitation of the claims of those in power is precisely what one would expect from a system dominated by a handful of very wealthy corporations — and precisely the opposite of the kind of gutsy journalism that used to be expected and admired as fundamental to democracy.
- In terms of foreign policy coverage, it is simply illogical to expect these firms to foster journalism that is critical of the U.S. role in the world, and perfectly logical that we have ended up with "journalism" that reflects the interests of owners.
- In terms of the coverage we get of corporate power, it is similarly illogical to expect corporate media to finance the kind of healthy journalism that might provide real and sustained coverage of the endemic, structural corruption that has led to recent corporate scandals.
- This pro-corporate bias has also manifested itself in news coverage of free trade issues and policy. Given that their parent companies have a vested interest in status quo approaches to free trade, it should come as no surprise that news organizations like the *New York Times*, and TV networks, provide blatantly propagandistic coverage that distorts — when not completely eliminating – the rational voices of critique and protest.
- Such stories are considered business stories and relegated to the business pages, meaning that the sources will be business sources. The result is a conflict between the need of owners to make money — and the public need for a vibrant journalism.
- Given the understandable logic that informs this perversion of professional news journalism, it makes little sense to expect change unless the institutional nature of the industry changes.
- Key to envisioning such change, and to making it happen, is to understand first that the system as it stands now is not a natural or organic entity — that it's the product of continual policy decisions.
- Given that these policy decisions have been all but removed from the political arena of discussion, debate, and dissent, legislators are much more apt to respond to pressure from lobbyists who represent the corporations that dominate the media industry and the political system.
- The fact is that this behind-the-scenes lobbying actually points to the very real potential for change, because when these decisions are understood, when they reach the light of day, people across the political spectrum can see what's going on.
- When that happens, when people understand what corporations are doing with their airwaves – and what they're doing to undermine their democracy — everything changes. The power of corporate lobbyists decreases with the increasing power and potential of people to vote politicians out of office.

Possible Prompts:

> *Do you think it's all right for the news to be run as a for-profit business? What about arguments that it compromises the news?*

2. "Media Coverage" (8:20)

How media construct public opinion by feeding, and feeding off of, the artificial perception that public opinion is more moderate or conservative than it actually is. *Constructing Public Opinion* (2002)

Key Points:

- Mainstream media don't cover public opinion so much as they construct narratives about public opinion.
- When media cover polls, they tell a story about what public opinion is, shaping the very way we understand it in their choice of questions, what they exclude, their lack-of follow-up and specificity, and their reliance on mainstream political stereotypes and labels to tell a good story.
- Media coverage of public opinion does not recognize the gap between a public that tends to be more liberal than mainstream politicians, Republicans and Democrats alike.
- Media reports on public opinion exclude the possibility of left-wing approaches to economic issues, making the public appear more conservative than it actually is.
- The reasons for these exclusions, distortions and misrepresentations are systemic, caught up with the elite-oriented nature of reporting.
- Media have an "elite" orientation — a built-in bias toward the views of those in positions of power — because elites have the greatest access to media. In this way, politicians, who tend to have power, control, and money, set the media stage for what we talk about and how.
- Because politicians are more conservative than the public, their power and access alter and shape the media narrative in more conservative directions.
- Polling and the interpretation of poll results therefore tend to steer away from nuance and specific measures of ordinary people's views on issues, focusing instead on so-called "horse-race," candidate-centered polls.
- Candidate-centered polls and coverage reduce politics to image, steer people in one predetermined direction or the other, and in this way set up a narrow range of artificial choices while excluding alternative views about policy.
- At the same time that media coverage narrows the ideological spectrum on economic issues, it also creates the impression that real debate is happening by focusing on the differences between parties and candidates on civil libertarian and social issues like gay rights and abortion.

- The excessive coverage of differences on social issues, not similarities on economic issues, "masks the degree of elite consensus."

Possible Prompts:

Lewis suggests that media often misrepresent public opinion. Do you agree or disagree? If he is right, what might be some reasons for this?

What are some strategies that you could use to find out more about public opinion on a particular issue?

3. "The PR Industry" (2:37)

How the public relations industry influences public opinion, news information, and public policy on behalf of its clients. *Toxic Sludge is Good for You* (2002)

Key Points:

- The public relations industry employs over 200,000 people and collects millions of dollars every year from clients ranging from wealthy individuals and corporations to government agencies.
- Fleishman Hillard, Weber Shandwick Worldwide, Hill & Knowlton, Burson Marstellar and Citigate/Incepta lead the public relations industry in total revenues.
- Public relations firms go out of their way to keep their campaigns hidden from the public they seek to influence.
- The public relations industry is owned by the advertising industry, and its mission is to influence public opinion, news information, and public policy on behalf of its clients.
- The biggest PR clients include the tobacco industry, the chemical industry, the petroleum industry, the logging industry, the mining industry, and the drug industry.
- Big business has the connections, money, and time to insert their messages into the media, giving them a tremendous advantage in public opinion debates (over less connected and moneyed people and organizations).
- PR continuously integrates new technologies into its toolbox of strategies for swaying public opinion.
- Public relations isn't always problematic – press releases, press conferences, and other publicity serve to inform the public about things happening around them.
- The problem arises when public relations is allowed to remain hidden and unexamined in ways that benefit specific interests that themselves remain hidden.

Possible Prompts:

Explore your immediate reactions to the clip. What is his main point about media coverage of

public opinion? Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of his evidence. Did he convince you to accept his argument? Why or why not? Take another look at your immediate reaction. After summarizing and analyzing, is your response different than it was initially?

4. "American Media – Occupied Territory" (8:34)

How the Israeli government's public relations campaigns in the U.S. affect American news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Peace, Propaganda & the Promised Land* (2004)

Key Points:

- News, especially TV news, exerts a powerful influence on our perception of world events.
- The U.S. plays a central role in the Middle East conflict, and media coverage has become a component of this role.
- Israel is waging a two-pronged battle: one is a military battle against the Palestinians to occupy their land, the other is a fight to occupy and control American media coverage, to keep it pro-Israel.
- This public relations campaign began with the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.
- For the Israeli government, the problem was not the mass civilian casualties but the damage to Israel's image around the world.
- Israel set up the Hasbara project the next year, to ensure favorable coverage in the U.S. media.
- The PR machine is constantly in action, providing journalists with a flood of information, and the Palestinian press office is quite useless in contrast.
- The Israeli PR machine is one of the three "filters" that influence American news.
- The other two are the economic interests of media owners and the interests of the political elite.
- There are also several media "watchdog" groups that pressure journalists to keep on the side of Israel in all their reporting.
- One is more likely to find less biased reports in Israeli newspapers like Ha'aretz than in a major American paper.
- Fear of angering and isolating political powers keeps journalists compliant — and fear is a difficult thing to lose.

Possible Prompts:

What were you thinking during this clip?

Are you familiar with the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict? What has shaped your thoughts and feelings about this conflict?

5. "A Simple Story" (10:28)

How the rhetoric of good vs. evil creates unquestioning support for government policies.
Beyond Good & Evil (2003)

Key Points:

- According to Betty Burkes, of the Hague Appeal for Peace, the rhetoric of good and evil has been used to pump up support for U.S. policies and patriotic fervor ever since September 11, 2001, preparing the American people for the U.S. government to invade Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Brian Wright, a teacher at the Young Achiever Elementary School in Boston, MA, asked his second grade class, "what do you think an American is?" One response was: "Someone who's born in America, lives in America and is loyal to America." When Wright asked his class about the word loyal, another student responded: "It means if somebody says something bad, don't believe it because that's not true. America's very good."
- The problem with the good-versus-evil dichotomy is that it loses all of the historical background. For example, as Robert Jensen states, "Throughout the 1980s, the government of Saddam Hussein was supported by the United States in Iraq's war against Iran." The U.S. supplied Iraq with the weapons it used against its own citizens.
- The media plays a crucial role in perpetuating the dichotomy of good and evil. Nancy Carlsson-Paige, of Lesley University, says it "saturates all of the media for every age group, and it gets people to think that there is an evil 'other' out there that you have to exterminate." The 'other' is always depicted in some kind of dehumanized way. Often the faces are covered, the voices are distorted or they have foreign accents.
- The 'other' is not the white European, and often male, image of the 'good guy' that children are socialized into identifying with in the United States. In Hollywood movies, it's always the American person who's the central character. Oftentimes, the 'good guy' goes into another country and does something violent for goodness' sake. A good example of this is in *The Transporter*.

Possible Prompts:

Are there some acts that can be clearly defined as evil?

Why are people drawn to thinking about the world in terms of good and evil? Are there conditions or situations where you think in terms of good and evil? What alternatives are there to this type of thinking?

What is the "problem of patriotism" as referred to in the clip? Do you accept the notion that patriotism may be a problem?

6. "War Made Easy" (21:59)

How government deception and media spin have dragged the United States into one war after another from Vietnam to Iraq. *War Made Easy* (2007)

Key Points:

- Americans were subjected to a propaganda campaign from the Bush administration in setting the stage for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. President Bush and his staff made false claims that Saddam Hussein had "weapons of mass destruction" and that Hussein had ties to al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization responsible for the attacks on September 11, 2001. Over and over again, the American media echoed these claims. For example, William Schneider, a senior political analyst at CNN, said: "There are ties between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda…. Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda share the same goal…. Both of them want to see Americans dead."
- Reporting before the war was a hostage of "official sources." These sources were presented as the ones who should be consulted to understand the situation, but historically official sources have blown smoke and clouded reality, rather than clarify the situation. When asked by a reporter about the lack of evidence linking Baghdad to a number of terrorist organizations, Donald Rumsfeld responded: "There are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know."
- CNN's use of retired generals as supposedly independent experts reinforced a decidedly military mindset and legitimated the government's rush to war. On the air, a top CNN official named Eason Jordan boasted that he visited the Pentagon with a list of possible military commentators to hire and "got a big thumbs up on all of them." The news media acted on the same side and the same page as the Pentagon, which runs directly counter to the idea of an independent press.
- In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson falsely claimed that an attack on US gun ships by North Vietnamese forces in the Gulf of Tonkin gave him no choice but to escalate the war in Vietnam. This claim quickly became accepted as the absolute truth by the news media and opened the floodgates to the Vietnam War.
- A few decades later, President George W. Bush said that to an absolute certainty there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that intelligence sources told him that clearly, which was not at all the case. Secretary of State Colin Powell presented this disinformation to the United Nations Security Council as evidence to invade Iraq preemptively. The British press and other international news sources immediately raised questions about the accuracy of Powell's presentation. For example, the *Daily Mirror* printed: "where's the proof, Colin?" Yet the major US news media were virtually silent about the factual basis of Powell's claims and near unanimous in their praise. Even the purportedly antiwar *New York Times* called it "irrefutable and undeniable."

- One of the few mainstream media commentators who consistently challenged the official storyline coming out of Washington was MSNBC's Phil Donahue. Despite being the highest-rated program on MSNBC, Donahue's show was abruptly cancelled just three weeks before the start of the war. A memo that was leaked as the show was cancelled called Donahue "a difficult public face for NBC in a time of war" who "seems to delight in presenting guests who are anti-war, anti-Bush…"
- A very effective tactic is the news media's effort to conflate supporting the troops with supporting the president's policies. Before the war, Bill O'Reilly, host of the Fox News program The O'Reilly Factor, said: "Once the war against Saddam begins, we expect every American to support our military, and if they can't do that, to shut up."
- Norman Solomon argues that "if you're pro-war, you're objective. But if you're antiwar, you're biased." NBC fired journalist Peter Arnett because his reporting on the casualties of Iraqi civilians was believed to encourage antiwar protesters in America. Yet journalist Ted Koppel's war-anxious reporting went unnoticed: "I was trying to think of something that would be appropriate to say on an occasion like this, and as is often the case, the best you can come up with is something that Shakespeare wrote for Henry V: 'Wreak havoc and unleash the dogs of war.'"
- In the fall of 2001, CNN had a memo from their top news executive, Walter Isaacson, telling the anchors and the reporters it "seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan." Isaacson told them that if they showed images of people dying in Afghanistan, they had to remind the American viewers that it was in the context of 9/11 — even though more civilians were killed by the bombings in Afghanistan than died in the Twin Towers in New York.
- Free flows of information have been further blocked by a more general atmosphere of contempt for antiwar voices. For example, in a conversation with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, conservative commentator Jonah Goldberg said, "These people are essentially useless. They are reflexively opposed to war. It's a principled position, but it's the wrong position, and you can't take them seriously as a strategic voice."
- Mainstream journalists have rarely called attention in real time to the failure of the news media to provide necessary information and real debate about the upcoming war. They have repeatedly pointed to their own failures well after wars have been launched. For example, CNN's Christiane Amanpour said, " I'm sorry to say, but certainly television, and perhaps to an extent my station, was intimidated by the administration and its foot soldiers at Fox News." Also, on The Daily Show, CNN's Wolf Blitzer said, "We should have been more skeptical." But as Norman Solomon states, "that doesn't bring back any of the people who have died… When it comes to life and death, the truth comes out too late."

Possible Prompts:

What were you thinking during this clip? Do you remember your thoughts about invading Iraq before the war started? Explain them. How do you feel about the war now?

7. "Empire" (9:02)

How the United States is securing and solidifying American control in Iraq and other strategically important regions of the world. *Hijacking Catastrophe* (2004)

Key Points:

- To improve ties with Iraq, as an emissary to the Reagan Administration, Donald Rumsfeld met with Saddam Hussein in 1983 (as seen in the photo of the two shaking hands). At this point in his political career, Hussein was known for his brutality, but the U.S. government for the most part turned a blind eye to his atrocities. In 1988,Hussein gassed the Kurdish people in Halabja with little criticism from the United States. In 1991,when the first Gulf War had ended, the U.S. allowed Hussein to brutalize the Shia people after they staged an uprising that the U.S. had encouraged. As Robert Jensen argues: "The United States has consistently supported Saddam Hussein throughout the worst of his crimes when his policy was consistent with U.S. interests in the area. The minute that those interests changed then Saddam Hussein became the center of evil in the world."
- Karen Kwiatkowski explains: "What they're trying to do is have an Iraq that is a friend to us. Not an Iraq that is liberated, this is totally bogus, we never intended to liberate the Iraqi people. We intended to liberate Iraq from Saddam and have a footprint, a military footprint there. They've done that now. We have Kuwait, we have Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, we have a nice base in Qatar but it's a little too far south. And, what do we have, we have four bases in Iraq. Beautiful bases. We can hit Syria. We can hit Iran. We can keep tabs on Afghanistan. There are all kinds of things we can do from those bases."
- With its abundance of natural resources, the Gulf region, within the logic of global competition, is of great geopolitical importance. As Max Wolff emphasized, it is crucial to control the oil and gas if you want to have significant control over the global economy – such control gives the U.S. enormous strategic power in the world.
- The war in Afghanistan is also linked to the war over natural resources. As Vandana Shiva points out: "The oil pipeline [the Trans-Afghan Pipeline proposed in 1997] that was planned...the best security for that was an occupation of Afghanistan." Karen Kwiatkowski adds: "If you map the pipeline, proposed pipeline route across Afghanistan, and you look at our bases,[it] matches perfectly. Our bases are there to solve a problem that the Taliban could not solve. The Taliban couldn't provide security in that part of Afghanistan, well now that's where our bases are. So what does that have to do with Osama Bin Laden? It has nothing to do with Osama Bin Laden."
- U.S. military action and aggression fits neatly within the logic of the neoconservative agenda in which military force is used to push other countries around in order to gain access to their raw materials.
- The excuse for going into Afghanistan and Iraq has been the threat that they pose to the security of the United States. Robert Jensen concludes: "But in the end, neither one of those wars was really about those people or those regimes. It was about securing and

solidifying American control over these incredibly important regions of the world."

- While control of the region's oil and natural gas is important, Immanuel Wallerstein contends: "Their [the Bush Administration's] immediate goal is intimidation...Of course oil is important and of course we want control of oil, but oil isn't enough to explain a war on Iraq. "Tariq Ali adds: "The major reason to take Iraq was a display of imperial power; was to show both the Arab world...to show Europe and the Far Eastern block, China and the Koreans, who is master." Colonel Gerry Crowder, of the Air Combat Command, reinforces this idea in stating:"... to make it [an attack] so apparent and so overwhelming at the very outset of potential military operations that the adversary quickly realizes that there is no alternative here other than to fight and die or to give up." Donald Rumsfeld echoes this sentiment: "What will follow will not be a repeat of any other conflict. It will be of a force and scope and scale beyond what has been seen before."
- Planned for months, the resulting Pentagon "Shock & Awe" bombing campaign was finally underway. The idea was to blitz the capital with bombs to stun the Iraqis into a quick surrender.
- The origins of "Shock & Awe" can be found in a 1996 advisory report published by The National Defense University entitled *Shock & Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. Authored by Harlan Ullman of the Nation War College, the report puts forth the argument that the aim of modern warfare is not merely to achieve military victory, but also, by means of shear intimidation, to inflict a deep psychological injury, to scare and terrify potential rivals into submission. It is in effect the practical application of The Wolfowitz Doctrine of global domination through force.

Possible Prompts:

How did this clip make you feel? Do you think America is an empire? Why or not?

Should America do whatever it can to ensure energy resources? Even if that means invading other countries? Why or why not?

Appendix: Handouts for Students

In This Section:

The Collage

A "collage" in the original sense — as used by painters and other artists — is a picture produced not by painting or drawing but by gluing actual objects on the canvas: objects such as theater tickets, bits of colored paper or cardboard or metal. (*Kolla* means 'glue' in Greek.) A written collage consists of separate, disconnected bits of writing rather than one connected, continuous piece. Usually there are spaces or asterisks between the separate bits of writing.

A collage can serve as a quick and simple way to produce a finished piece. That is, you can just pick out the passages of draft writing you like best, do minimal revising or editing, and put them together in whatever order strikes you as intuitively interesting or fruitful.

In effect, a collage allows you simply *to skip* what are often the hardest parts of the writing process:

- revising weak passages (you just throw them away);
- figuring out your main point and getting the whole piece unified (the bits can all be merely related to a main point that you haven't yet figured out clearly);
- figuring out the best order (you settle for what seems fun or interesting);
- and making transitions between sections (there are none).

And yet the finished collage is often a remarkably satisfying and effective piece of writing. You'll find many written collages in the world — even if they are not called collages. A magazine or newspaper is a collage of articles. Some individual articles in newspapers or magazines are collages. Sometimes the writer separated the bits with a bit of space or even asterisks; often there are just paragraph breaks, and we don't much mind these periodic "gear changes." Feature stories, like "A Portrait of Lower Manhattan," lend themselves to collage form. TV documentaries are usually collages where we jump from one bit to the next. The collage form is lively and works well. Here are the directions for writing a collage:

- Look through all the pieces you have written about your topic so far.
- Choose the ones you like best.
- Spread these out around you so you can see them all, and then arrange them in what feels like a pleasing or compelling or interesting order.
- Feel free to make all these decisions by instinct or intuition.
- At this point, you may see that it's feasible and desirable to write one or two more bits. Perhaps you now see a good way to write something for an opening or closing piece. But collages don't really need "introductions" or "conclusions." It's a question of the best way to "jump in" and the best way to "close the door" at the end. Maybe you see your core idea better now and can write a paragraph of reflection on it.
- Next, revise it all — but in a minimal and purely "negative" way. That is, don't rewrite (unless there's some particular section you really want to rework). Just *leave out* words, phrases, sentences, or passages that don't work. Do some minimal rephrasing for clarity. Reading your words out loud is the best way to do all this.

- Instead of trying to make nice connections or transitions between your pieces, just leave spaces or put in asterisks.
- Copy edit your collage carefully, and type it to make it look its best. Most of us benefit from help with copy editing — whether from a classmate, family member, or roommate. You can return the favor by carefully proofreading something of theirs, since most of us have an easier time seeing mistakes or usage problems in someone else's writing than in our own.

A Variation: The Collaborative Collage

The collage form can help you ease your way into collaborative writing. You can combine cooperative work and solo work in a pleasing and interesting way by creating a collage out of passages written by several people. Each of the passages is solo work: you do not have to bend your ideas or writing style to fit anyone else's. The collaborative dimension comes in when the group has to decide collectively which pieces to choose and which order to put them in. A collaborative collage is often stronger and more interesting if it shows sharp contrasts between different people's ideas and points of view. It becomes a dialogue or conversation, not a monologue.

The collage is an ideal way to ask students to produce a finished and pleasing piece very early in the semester. At the end of the first or second week, students simply need to look through all the low stakes writing they've done — much of it private — and choose the passages they find most interesting (or potentially interesting if probed just a bit) that they are willing to share with you and others. They can do minor cleaning up, string them together in a pleasing but not-necessarily-logical sequence, and they have a final product that is usually very satisfying for others to read.

[For more about collage, see my co-authored textbook, *Being a Writer* (fuller edition, *A Community of Writers*.) See also "Collage: Your Cheatin' Art." *Writing On the Edge* 9.1 (Fall/winter 1998): 26-40. (Reprinted in *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.) Also "Using the Collage for Collaborative Writing." *Composition Studies* 27.1 (Spring 1999): 7-14.]

Final Portfolio & Essay or Letter of Reflection

Your task here is to look over *everything* you've written and pick out something like ten to twenty pages of it that you find interesting or notable. For the most part, you will probably choose your best writing, but don't forget to include somewhere these two elements:

- Some bits of journal writing or freewriting or other low stakes pieces that somehow seem interesting or important to you. If possible, a bit of written feedback on someone else's writing. Look and you'll find some.
- An essay or higher stakes piece that somehow didn't work well or even failed. Try to figure out why it didn't work — or why your efforts didn't pay off. Explain this in your cover letter or essay of reflection.

The most important part of the portfolio — because it will teach you the most — is an informal essay or letter of reflection on all this writing. The simplest way to describe the job is to say: *Write an introduction to your portfolio. What does your portfolio show that you have learned and not learned?* But that formulation is liable to trick you into writing dull generalizations that look at your writing from a distance. So think of the job this way: *Write an essay of reflections in which you figure out something interesting about <u>what</u> you have written and/or <u>how</u> you have written this semester.* It might help you to look at your writing through the lens of one or more of these *writing issues*:

- How did you go about finding things to say?
- What was your attitude toward writing — and what changes took place?
- What do you notice about the voice or different voices you used?
- How do you experience your audience or audiences in writing — or the different people you have written to?
- How do you deal with feedback — and how do you give it?
- Explore your revising process and copy editing.

One of these issues might serve as the germ or center of your essay because it was the most pertinent factor in how your writing went this semester. But it's not necessary to write a neatly unified essay with a single train of thought. In fact, there's nothing wrong with a somewhat collage-like set of separate reflections that are not so connected. And even if you do discover one main idea you want to develop, your essay needs to refer specifically to the pieces of writing that you include in your portfolio. Quote specific examples to illustrate what you are saying.

Here are some questions you can ask about specific pieces:

- What kind of writing is this and what were you trying to do — to the reader or to yourself?
- What's a strength or something that worked? And what does it show you about your writing?
- What's a weakness or something that didn't work? And what does it show you about your writing?

- What voice or what part of you is writing? And who do you feel as the most important or underlying audience?
- What struck you about the process of writing it, and what do you learn from this?
- What else strikes you about this piece of writing?

An Autobiographical Essay of Inquiry:
Growing Up in a Media Culture

In this essay, you are asked to explore your experiences with the media and explore some of the ways you think different media have influenced you. We will do some preparatory writing leading up to this essay — and you will get a chance to write a solid draft and get feedback on it before the final stage of substantive revising and copy editing. Here are some questions that might help you get going in your exploratory writing or rough drafting:

- What do you like to do for entertainment or fun? How much of it is media watching? What did you used to watch and listen to when you were younger, and what do you like to watch and listen to now? Explore the various media you have been involved with over the years (e.g., radio, music, TV, and video games).
- What role have media played in your life? Try to remember way back: it's those early experiences that often have the deepest influence on us. Did you have media heroes, heroines or idols when you were young? What stories and images and figures resonated most deeply for you or seemed to influence you most? How would you have been different if there had been no TV or radio or recorded music when you were growing up?
- How did your parents or others handle TV and other media? Did they try to shape your time with media? How did you react to their policies?
- To what extent have you tended to feel that the media were just "there" as part of "the world" — the air around us — versus feeling that these things were made by people and groups who were actively and consciously trying to influence you? No doubt your sense of this matter changed over time — and differed with different media. It's easy to feel how advertisements are trying to manipulate us. It's sometimes not so easy to notice how news programs and sitcoms and video games *function* to affect us — whether or not they were consciously designed to do so. What did you find yourself thinking or assuming to be the reasons or goals that people had for making and paying for things like news or sit-coms?
- How do you think media have shaped the kind of person you are?

An autobiographical essay is usually somewhat informal; it's inevitably personal and often contains a mixture of functions. That is, it has an essential core of *describing* and even *storytelling*: What happened? What was it like? But the point of this describing is to *speculate, think,* and *figure out:* How did media affect who you are and how you think and see things? And it may invite some insights about the nature of media. All essays are exercises in figuring something out. An autobiographical essay can be playful and personal, but it's also serious work.

Structure? There is no ideal structure for this kind of essay; you have lots of choice. Instead of thinking, "What's the *right structure*?" think "What's the best way to *get the job done*?" That is, how can I tell someone about how the media have influenced me and my life — and tell them in a way that's most interesting, that doesn't waste too much time or make them feel lost?

It might help to think about the two extremes in organization or structure. At one extreme

is the no-structure mess. Freewriting can sometimes lead to pure mess (though not always), and you often get a mess when you do fast exploratory writing and jump to whatever idea or experience comes next into your mind — instead of trying to "stay organized" as you generate material. Making this kind of a mess is a good way to get started and come up with a lot of material as fast as possible. At the other extreme is a set structure that's determined in advance — a structure like the five-paragraph essay or the conventional lab report.

You'll be looking for something between these extremes. It usually helps to concentrate on generating lots of material — letting it be messy — sifting through it to find the best parts — and then finally asking how this material "wants to be structured." A good autobiographical essay can be structured around *chronology* or structured around *a series of themes* where you jump around in time. And there are lots of other possibilities. Keep asking yourself, "How does this material want to be told?" and "How can I tell it so it's clear and interesting to someone I care about?" It also helps to realize that there's no right answer here.

There's nothing wrong with separate sub-sections labelled with sub-headlines (e.g. "Rules and How They Actually Worked"). These can help readers not feel lost. But if you do include separate sections, don't forget to ask yourself, "How can I help these separate parts somehow hang together and follow each other naturally to make a single essay?"

An Essay of Analysis

There are two basic intellectual tasks here:

- *Look hard and carefully at what's there*. Note the details, the structure, what's not there, the larger picture.
- *Try to make sense of it.* What's going on here? How does the whole thing work or function?

Here are some questions you might ask to help you get going in your exploratory writing or rough drafting.

- What are the most obvious elements and features in this ad or program? For example: spoken and written words, camera work, background sounds and music, colors, movements, rhythms, kinds of characters, kinds of language, acting skills, etc.
- How do these different elements affect you?
- Which elements are most obvious and least obvious? Do some non-obvious elements nevertheless have an important effect — and vice versa?
- How do various nonverbal elements convey *meaning*? And how do they affect *emotions* or *attitudes*?
- What's missing or not there in the ad or program? What's the effect of this absence? Is it an obvious or simple *lack* that weakens the ad or program? Or does the absence try to trick you into not thinking about what's not there — or about something else you ought to think about?
- In the case of an ad or news program, which elements are facts (or at least harder to doubt), and which are opinions (or more subject to debate)?
- Who do you think is it most trying to appeal to? What effect does it seem to be trying to have on them? How well do you think it will succeed at that goal? Its effect on others?
- What can we know about who created this program or ad and who paid for it? Whose interests might be served by it?
- Can you explore other ways of seeing and reacting to this program?
- How does this media product relate to other things in our culture?

We will do some preparatory writing leading up to this essay — and you will get a chance to write a good draft and get feedback on it before the final stage of substantive revising and copy editing.

About organizing this essay. There is no ideal or correct way to organize an essay of analysis. For your exploratory writing or a rough-rough draft, just make as many observations and hypotheses as you can. For your good draft, try to use this material to create an extended explanation of what you see and how it functions. It can help to think of your essay as a *story of thinking*. Think of yourself telling someone what you see and what you've figured out. Build something that will make sense to a reader.

But remember that this good draft is not your final version. It's okay if it has a bit too much in it and uses a provisional order — while you wait for feedback to help you revise and figure out a better organization. With feedback (and putting it aside for a few days), you might reshape your story or even change some of your hypotheses.

For an essay of analysis, organization and unity don't matter as much as hard looking and tough analytic thinking (creating interesting hypotheses). Indeed, a good analysis might, in fact, be conceptually split and say something like this:

> *From one point of view, here's how to explain the piece of media that I'm looking at: . . .*
> *But there's another valid way to explain what I'm looking at, and here it is: . . . .*

For the sake of organization, it can be helpful to use sub-headings to help readers see the different sections in your story of thinking.

An Essay of Persuasion or Argument

When writing to persuade readers, your obvious job is to find good arguments for your position. But there's another important job that is often harder: finding the best arguments *against* your position. You can't persuade intelligent readers unless you can speak to good arguments against you that will come into their minds.

You'll find it helpful to think a bit about how people actually do change their view or position on some important matter. It's rare. It's usually a gradual process that depends on seeds lying dormant for a while. (How do *you* change your beliefs?) Often the best you can hope for is to get them just to *understand* your view and see that it makes sense — even while not really changing their own position. If you can get readers actually to *entertain* or *experience* your position for just a short time, you have done something difficult and important.

In fact, readers will sometimes be a bit more flexible in their thinking if you somehow acknowledge that you are not necessarily asking them to fully adopt your point of view; you are trying to get them to see at least that your position makes sense and has some good support — i.e., that you are not crazy. In short, consider thinking of your task as trying to plant powerful seeds. How do you plant fertile seeds in the mind of someone who disagrees? Three strategies are very helpful:

- Don't irritate them or make them mad at you. It usually helps to respect their views. Don't imply that they must be stupid or bad to think what they think.
- Try to get them to see through your eyes. There are many ways of doing this, but they all depend on one essential inner act by you: your willingness to see through *their* eyes — "enemy eyes." You have to actually experience opposing points of view from the inside, not just analyze them from the outside. Try to enter their view — or better yet, find a friend who opposes your view and coax him or her to share what it's like seeing things his or her way. And then also coax them to give you feedback on how they react to your thinking.
- There's another simple strategy that helps: *be right!* Of course the world is full of situations with no clear right answer (especially issues that are widely argued), but if you can think hard and well enough to figure out the "best argument," then *reality* will help your persuasion to succeed (though maybe not for a year or two!). Note the odd-sounding distinction here: good *argument* versus a good *arguing.* Figure out the best argument — that is, the best position. If you can do that, then even if someone else can *argue* better than you can, your *argument* may gradually prevail. It will have the strongest roots in the facts and in good, humane values. You may find it helpful, therefore, to say to yourself, "My immediate task is to write something persuasive, but my deepest task is to figure out what's really true." Note, by the way, how this brings you back to the task of analysis.

There are two crucial ingredients for a good essay of argument or persuasion: the *general* and the *specific*. For the general, you need a clear position and reasoning that supports it. For the concrete, you need evidence, examples, facts. Most essays tend to suffer if they neglect either the general or the specific.

Organization or structure? The problem is a little less perplexing than in an essay of analysis. In a sense, an essay of persuasion or argument is made up of nothing but of a series of *points*: arguments or reasons or examples. So organization is "just" a matter of deciding what order to put your points in — how to line up your toy soldiers.

There are various traditional ways to organize an argument:

- Start by laying out all your soldiers in a row: that is, lay out your full position with all supporting reasons and examples — without treating objections. Then, from this position of strength, lay out the enemy soldiers — that is, consider the objections or opposing ideas.
- Start by laying out all the enemy soldiers: all the views that differ from yours. Then bring on your soldiers as you answer these views or try to show how your views make more sense.
- Put the toy soldiers into hand-to-hand individual combat. That is, treat your views or reasons individually, and each time consider the opposing idea. Or start each time with an opposing idea and answer it with your view.

One of these organizations may click for you. But often it's hard to work out something this tidy. What usually helps most is to postpone the decision about how to organize for a bit. Start by simply laying out one-sentence summaries of all the points or arguments or reasons in any old order — your points and opposing points. The goal is just to be able to *see* them more or less all at once. Then, instead of trying for some piece of pure logic or geometry, try to figure out how to tell a good *story of thinking.* In a good story of thinking, each point seems to follow from the one before — and a reader can sense the overall shape.

When you consider organization in these terms, it helps you make decisions like this: "How can I start out so that someone who disagrees (or who is uninterested) will keep reading? How can I get someone to *listen*?" And then you go on to the problem of how to keep it going coherently and with an overall shape. What's nice about the "story" notion of organization is that it tells you not to beat yourself over the head trying to find the one perfect or correct order: there are lots of ways to tell a story well. Good stories sometimes start at the beginning, sometimes at the end, sometimes in the middle.

This "story" approach to organization also leads to an essay that *moves*. Arguments are often more interesting and persuasive when the reader feels them *going somewhere* instead of sitting in a static position. After all, you are trying to get the reader to move too. Most readers are more willing to listen when they see you really engaging in thinking — even allowing some of your own perplexities to show. Some good arguments reveal that the writer changed his or her mind in the process of preparing and writing the essay. Readers often turn off when they get just a slam-bam list of pre-cooked arguments "for" or "against."

In short, there's no ideal organization or sequence that fits all arguments. You need to find what seems to fit yours. And again, as with your essay of analysis, it's crucial to write a good draft that's organized "for now." That is, it might have too much in it and use a provisional order — while you wait for feedback to help you revise and figure out what's really best for this essay.

From Chaos to Coherence:
Two Ways of Moving from Disorganized Low Stakes Writing to an Organized High Stakes Essay

Some people won't use freewriting and low stakes exploratory for serious high stakes essays because they get too discouraged by all the chaos. They look at their pile of carelessly written passages of thoughts and feelings in random order and say, "I can never turn these into a well-organized essay."

Here are two different methods for dealing with the generative chaos that freewriting often produces. The first one (using collage form) is quicker and easier; the second one (using the skeleton process) is more thorough and conceptually powerful.

(1) Using The Collage Form to Move from Chaos Towards Coherence

This is a fairly quick and painless process. It will help reassure you that there is actually good stuff in all this chaos by helping you see the core bits and clearing away all the distracting mess. It will also take you a big step *towards* coherence. And if you can settle for a collage rather than an essay, you can easily create an elegant and pleasing final product that most readers find effective.

Start by looking through your sprawling pile of exploratory writing, and simply mark the passages that feel most central and important. Just put these passages into a file in any order, and put spaces or asterisks between them (or cut them out with scissors). Read through them thoughtfully, and decide whether the next step is to make an essay or a collage.

A collage is simple and quick. You need to decide on an interesting, pleasing sequence for these pieces. Then do minor cleaning up of all the individual bits or "blips" in your collage. You might find that one of your passages summarizes your main idea clearly and precisely; if not, you can write one now. But it's perfectly appropriate for a collage merely to suggest or imply your main idea without stating it. Collages usually have a more intuitive or imaginative sequence of bits than in a regular essay — they usually take readers through a more imaginative and nonlinear journey. (Check out a different handout about how to make a collage.)

For an essay, you'll need to work out your thinking completely and create a connected, linear sequence of reasoning. Your clump of important passages doesn't give you that, but it can take you there. That is, if you read through them, there's a good chance that you will now see clearly what you want for your main idea — and see a useable sequence or organization. If the essay is at all complex, you'll need to create a genuine outline at this point. (See below for suggestions on how to create a more effective kind of outline by using germ sentences rather than single words or phrases.)

(2) Using the Skeleton Process for Building a Coherent, Well Organized Essay from Disorganized Exploratory Writing

I learned this process myself and found that it's helpful for others too. It harnesses a productive interaction between chaos and order. Putting it metaphorically, we start by looking for stray bones

lying around on the ground, and then we gradually build them into a strong, coherent skeleton. Putting it more literally, this process helps us create a certain kind of outline that works well for writing a good essay.

(1) Find important passages. Read slowly through the pieces of rough writing that pertain to the topic you are writing about. It's fine to take them in whatever random order you find them. Look for passages that feel important and simply mark them with a line alongside. They may be long or short passages. Many will feel important because they contain a *thought* or *idea* or *point* (big or small); but some will not be ideas or reasons, rather *examples* or *stories* that feel important.

(2) Create bones. For each important passage, create a tiny germ of a sentence summary — as brief and pithy as possible. Perhaps this passage will contain more than one idea or point — especially if the passage is longer. Summarize them all. If the important passage is not telling a thought but rather an *example* or illustrative story, summarize it too. But try to say what they are "about." For example, don't just say "The ad for Coca-Cola"; say, "The Coke implied good health." And your "summary" may have to spell out a point or idea that's not really clear in your rough writing — perhaps only implied.

The main thing is that if a passage of rough, fast writing *feels* important in some way for the topic you are writing about, force it to yield a germ sentence. You are creating the bones for a skeleton.

Make sure that you summarize them in *sentences* — not just in single words or phrases. Don't just write "salaries"; write "womens' salaries were lower." If you write nothing but "salaries," you can't see the logic of your thinking. The verb is crucial to help your thinking. Single words or short phrases are static and merely *point* to an implied concept or idea. But a little sentence *says* something and has conceptual or semantic energy that helps get you from one idea to the next. Most of all, sentences help you decide what order to put your ideas into. It's more work to create these little germ sentences, but the struggle helps us work out our thinking. They don't have to be long sentences; the shorter the better. Even if this particular "point" is nothing but an example or illustration, the sentence still helps.

There's no need to repeat the same idea or example if you come across it again — which often happens in freewriting.

This process will produce a long list of germ sentences. They'll be in a random order. Fine. For you've not yet tried to decide which is the main idea, which ones are supporting, and which are unimportant or even useless for this essay.

(3) Figure out a main idea. Now look through this long list of sentences or bones — in their messy, random order. First, mark or underline the ones that feel important or central. Then look through these marked ones and figure out your main idea. Maybe this process has made the main idea obvious to you already.

But maybe you still can't figure out what your main idea is. That happens to me a lot. Maybe all that exploratory writing and thinking have been taking you on a journey to an idea that you've

never had — and you *still* don't quite have it. Maybe there's a kind of felt but *absent* main idea that's been pulling you or driving you in your exploratory writing — something that could hold all this interesting material together. But it isn't there yet. That's a good sign. It means you are on your way to an interesting new piece of thinking.

But now you have to figure it out, this main idea, and try to write it in a crude, short germ sentence. But if it won't come easily — and this sometimes happens — that is, if you can feel the need for it but can't yet *say* it — then freewrite a bit more out of this feeling so you can work your way to it. (Notice, by the way, that if you had made an outline *before* doing the exploratory writing, you never would have come up with this interesting new idea you're now figuring out.)

(4) Build the skeleton. Figure out the right organization or sequence — that is, work out the "story of your thinking." This means creating an outline of sentences.

Teachers often advise students to begin by making an outline, but that's almost never worked for me. I can never make a useful outline till *after* I've done a lot of exploratory writing. And outlines don't become useful for me till I learn to build them out of *sentences*. A single word or phrase just *points* at a thought. A sentence forces you to *say* the thought.

So now that you've been able to state your main point, you can go through your disorganized list of germ sentences and pick the important ones and decide what order they should go in. Because you forced yourself to write your points in the form of sentences, you can now figure out how to arrange those sentences into an especially useful kind of outline — an outline made of sentences that will tell a kind of *story of thinking* that feels coherent and sensible.

It's helpful to realize that you are not trying to find the single, perfect piece of geometric logic. The goal is a good *story of thinking* where each point follows the previous one naturally and where the whole sequence has a felt shape — like a good story. Most good essays are more like stories of thinking than pieces of pure logic. There are lots of ways to tell a story well. Good stories (and essays) sometimes start at the beginning, sometimes at the end, sometimes in the middle.

As you arrange your sentences to tell a good story of thinking, you may find that there are some gaps — some ideas or points that are missing if you want to make the story of thinking hang together and be believable. If so, you'll have to write these missing sentences now. Often you need more examples and illustrations.

Concluding observation. I've been describing how to use the skeleton process early in the writing process to create a draft. But it can also be used late in the process to *revise* a draft essay that you've worked hard on and can't quite seem to get clear — or that somehow doesn't work with readers. In short, it's a method for clarifying thinking. Using it this way, it is, in effect, a form of self-response to a draft. It's also helpful when writing a collaborative essay, when you both have a lot of ideas and are trying to figure out how they go together.

Helping Friends & Classmates Respond to Your Writing

Try to stay in charge of the feedback process. If you hand over control to readers, you make yourself helpless. Decide what kind of feedback you need. And remember that readers need guidance for responding.

Here is a small but powerful arsenal of requests you can make of readers. Try them all out: they may surprise you. After practicing with them, you can decide what kind of feedback you need at any given time — depending on what you are working on and how it's going.

- **Don't respond**. *"Let me just read this to you without getting any response from you. I'm not interested in feedback right now, I just need to hear how it sounds. I'll make up my own mind."* Perhaps you feel fragile about the piece — or you are done with it and don't want to change anything.
- **Point**. *"Point to some specific things you liked — that worked for you — or that stick in your mind."*
- **Tell me what gets through to you.** *"Tell me what you hear. I need to know what's working. What do you hear as my main idea? What other ideas do you hear — implied or assumed or almost said or hovering around the edges wanting to get in? What do you hear me trying to do or accomplish — my purpose or goal? How would you describe my voice here — and my relation to the reader?"*
- **Reply to me**. "*Talk to me about **what** I've said — not **how** I've said it. Where do you agree and disagree with me? What are your ideas on this topic? What do you want to hear more about? Reply to my content; don't just play teacher and talk about my writing technique."*
- **Give me movies of your mind as you were reading**. *"Tell me what was actually going on in your head as you were reading — moment by moment."* Readers may need help at this. Try interrupting your reading now and then in mid-course and ask them, *"What thoughts and feelings and reactions are you having now?"* By the way, this is the most trustworthy feedback you can get. You can't trust readers' advice or evaluation (e.g., "This paragraph is weak and should be changed as follows"), but what you can trust are the facts about what was happening in their minds as they were listening or reading (e.g., "I was bored here." "I needed an example here.")
- **Tell me about specific features or dimensions or criteria**. Some examples. Clarity: *"Is my language clear?".* Persuasiveness: *"Did I persuade you? — or at least make you question your own position?"* Specificity: *"Were there enough examples for you?"* Voice: *"I'm trying to sound calm and confident, not upset: did I manage?"* Organization: *"Does my organization lead you along so you don't feel lost or off balance?"* Mechanics: *"Can you help me find mistakes in grammar and spelling?"*

Guide readers to give you the feedback you want. If you aren't sure what you want, then ask for movies of their mind. And, unless they are way off course, don't interrupt or quarrel with them. *They* get to be in charge of how they react — what's going on in their minds. *You* get to be in charge of what to decide about their reactions and what revisions — if any — you will make. If most readers

disagree with you about some point you're making, it may help to have a good argument with them to clarify your thinking. But it's also useful just to listen politely, not respond, and make up your own mind later.

If you want good, helpful feedback, treat readers well. A reader who can give you an honest and detailed account of how he or she is reacting to a piece of your writing is precious. People are often nervous about giving feedback, especially if they see problems in what you wrote. If you want more feedback than you're getting, don't blame them: *you* have to be forceful in convincing them that you really want it.

Here are a few additional forms of response that are slightly more complicated for readers:

- **Centers of gravity**. "*Please tell me which sections somehow seem important or resonant or generative*"
- **Sayback**. "*Don't try for some perfect summary of what I've written. Just 'talk your way' into what you hear me saying. 'It seems like you are kind of getting at . . . . But also I hear you emphasizing . . . . ' And say all this as though you are asking me a question — perhaps even in a questioning tone of voice ('Is this what you are trying to say?'). Your sayback should be an invitation for me to reply with my own statement of what I'm trying to get at*."
- **What is almost said?** "*What thoughts or themes are implied or hovering in the background? What do you want to hear more about*?"
- **Voice**. "*How much do you hear a voice in what I wrote — rather than hearing no voice at all? And insofar as you her a voice, what kind of voice do you hear? Timid, sarcastic, confident etc.? What kind of person does my writing sound like?*"
- **Metaphorical descriptions**. "*Please describe my writing as an animal — or as weather — or as clothing. Is it a rabbit, a lion, friendly dog? Is it foggy, stormy, sunny? Is it jeans, evening gown, running shorts?*"
- **Believing and doubting**. "*Try to believe or pretend you believe everything I've written. Pretend you are my ally. Having done so, what do you notice as good about what I've written? What does my writing help you see or understand? What other ideas or evidence can you give me to back up what I'm saying?*" Also: "*Try to doubt what I've written even if you love it — pretend that you think it's all wrong. Look for all the faults and weaknesses you can find.*"
- **Mixed bag or letter**. After readers are experienced in giving feedback and have a lot of options they can use, it can be useful to invite them to use whatever feedback they think makes most sense for this piece of writing. One nice method for getting thoughtful feedback is to ask them to write you a letter with the responses they feel are most useful.

Self Evaluation of Learning in this Course

Name: _____ Date: _____

Please answer these questions with "Yes," "Sort of," or "No"— but feel free to elaborate.

About your grade:

1. Did you meet contract terms for a B? (Check out the contract again.)

2. Did you have many drafts that could push you to a higher grade — assignments I told you were "excellent" or better than needed for the contract?

Here are the actual learning goals I had for you:

1. Are you able to enjoy and use writing?

a. To enjoy the process, to throw yourself into it, to take risks?

b. To use writing in your life, figure things out, make decisions, deal with feelings?

c. To use writing to help you learn material in other courses?

d. To enjoy sharing writing with others — and give and get responses?

2. "Invention": are you able to find lots of ideas and words?

3. Thinking, perplexity: are you able to dig to real questions in your essays? To get to what really matters? To push toward figuring something out — creating a movement of thinking?

4. Voice: can you make your writing sound comfortably like you — and get life and energy into your sentences?

5. Can you "show, not tell": find words that make people see what you see, feel what you feel?

6. Can you do genuine revising: rethink or "re-see" what you've written and try out new ideas, new structures, new voices? develop or explore further what you've already written?

7. Can you copy edit successfully and get rid of virtually all mistakes in grammar and mechanics?

8. Feedback: can you give good feedback to others — and perhaps more important, can you get them to give you the feedback you need?

9. How well did you come to understand the writing process and learning process?

10. How was your level of effort over the semester?

11. How much do you feel you improved over the semester?