CHAPTER 2

The Special Demands of Academic Reading

The process of reading is not just the interpretation of a text but the interpretation of another person's worldview as presented by a text.

—Doug Brent

In Chapter 1 you explored the role that reading has played in your life so far. In this chapter, the focus shifts to reading in college. Once you get immersed in the academic life—caught up in the challenge of doing your own questioning, critical thinking, analysis, and research—you’ll discover that academic reading has unique pleasures and demands. If you ask an experienced academic reader engaged in a research project why she reads, her answer may be something like this: “I’m investigating a problem, and much of my research requires extensive reading. As part of my investigation, I am doing a close analysis of several primary sources. Also I read to see what other researchers are saying about my problem and to position myself in that conversation.”

This may seem a curious answer—one that you won’t fully understand until you have had more experience writing papers requiring analysis or research. To help you appreciate this answer—and to see how it applies to you—consider that most college courses have two underlying goals. The first is for you to learn the body of information presented in the course—to master the course’s key concepts and ideas, to understand its theories, to see how the theories try to explain certain data and observations, to learn key definitions or formulas, and to
memorize important facts. Cognitive psychologists sometimes call this kind of learning conceptual knowledge—that is, knowledge of the course's subject matter. Transmitting conceptual knowledge is the primary aim of most college textbooks.

But a second goal of most college courses is for you to learn the discipline's characteristic ways of thinking about the world by applying your conceptual knowledge to new problems. What questions does the discipline ask? What are its methods of analysis or research? What counts as evidence? What are the discipline's shared or disputed assumptions? How do you write arguments in this discipline, and what makes them convincing (say in literature, sociology, engineering, or accounting)? Thus in addition to learning the basic concepts of a course, you need to learn how experts in the discipline pose problems and conduct inquiry.

Once you realize that each academic discipline is a contested field full of uncertainties, disagreements, and debate—rather than an inert body of knowledge—you will see why college professors want you to do their discipline rather than simply to study it. They want you not just to study history or chemistry or sociology, but to think like a historian or a chemist or a sociologist. Cognitive psychologists call this kind of learning procedural knowledge—the ability to apply conceptual knowledge to new problems using the discipline's characteristic methods of thinking. Teachers focus on procedural knowledge when they assign readings beyond the typical textbook—newspaper or magazine articles, scholarly articles, or primary sources such as historical documents or literary texts—and ask you to analyze these readings or use them in other discipline-specific ways. Procedural knowledge is also at the heart of most out-of-class writing assignments or essay exams, especially those that ask you to address challenging problems using disciplinary methods of analysis and argument.

If we return now to how our experienced researcher answered the question “Why do you read?” we see that she is immersed in doing her discipline. She has formulated a problem and is conducting research. She obviously sees reading as central to her work. But how does she read? What is she looking for? How does she know what to use and not use? What does she do when she analyzes an important source? What does she mean by positioning herself in a conversation? These are the kinds of questions we will address in this and subsequent chapters.

Reading as Conversation

Let's begin with the notion of reading as conversation. Writers talk to readers, who often talk back. Consider again our researcher mentioned in the previous section. If her investigation leads to new insights, she will write an article (if she is a professor) or a research paper (if she is an undergraduate). She will aim her writing at readers interested in the same problem, explaining the results of her research and trying to persuade readers to accept her argument and claims. She writes because she thinks she has produced something new or challenging or
otherwise useful to add to the conversation—something that is different from, or that extends or improves upon, the work of others who have investigated the same problem.

Whenever you write, therefore, it is helpful to think of yourself as conversing with readers who share your interest in the problem you are addressing. You are joining a conversation. Similarly, when you read, you have to understand not only the text you are reading but also the conversation that it joins. (One of the reasons that an assigned reading might seem difficult to you—say a journal article on urban violence in a sociology course—is that you are unfamiliar with the conversation it is part of.) To take a broad view, then, we can extend the metaphor of "conversation" to say that texts themselves are in a conversation with previously published texts. Each text acts in relationship to other texts. It asserts a claim on a reader's attention by invoking certain interests and understandings, reminding readers of what has been written about the subject before. For example, articles in scientific journals typically include a summary of important research already conducted on the problem (this section is called a literature review). Similarly, political commentators will summarize the views of others so that they can affirm, extend, or take issue with those views. Music, film, and book reviewers are likely to refer not just to the item under review but to the given artist's reputation, which, of course, was established not just by word of mouth but by other texts, texts with which the current reader may or may not be familiar.

The reasons any of us engage in conversation, oral or written, will vary widely according to the occasion and our individual needs. In general, we read because we want—perhaps need—to find out what others are saying about a given matter. Sometimes we may have purely personal reasons for reading, with no intention of extending the conversation further through writing of our own. Ultimately though, in school and workplace writing, we read so that we can make informed contributions to a conversation that is already in progress. Indeed, we are expected to join in.

Entering an oral conversation can sometimes be a simple process of responding to a question ("Have you seen the new film at the Ridgemoor?") But if a conversation is already well underway, finding an opening can sometimes be a complex process of getting people's attention and striking claim to authority on a subject. ("Um, you know, I've seen all of John Woo's films, and I think....") The challenge is even greater if the goal is to redirect the conversation or contradict the prevailing opinion. ("Yes, but, listen! The reading I've done for my cinematography class tells me that his action films are not as innovative as the ads claim.") When we take up writing as a way of entering the conversation, we don't have to worry about interrupting, but we do have to review the conversation for the reader by laying out introductory background.

To explore the similarities between your motives for joining a conversation and your motives for reading, consider how the influential rhetorician and philosopher Kenneth Burke uses conversation as a metaphor for reading and writing.
Imagine you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument, then you put in your oar. Someone answers your question or another comes to your defense, another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is inexcusable. The hour grows late, you must depart, and you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

**For Writing and Discussion**

The following exercise will help you explore the implications of Burke’s parlor metaphor for your own reading processes. Write your answers to the questions in a notebook, or as your teacher directs, so that you can compare your responses with those of your classmates.

**ON YOUR OWN**

1. In what ways does Burke’s parlor metaphor fit your experience?
   - Freewrite for a few minutes about an oral conversation in which you managed to assert your voice—or “put in your oar,” as Burke says—after listening for a while.

2. Then consider how the metaphor applies to your experience as a reader.
   - Freewrite for another few minutes about a time when reading helped you gather a sense of the general flow of ideas so that you could have something to say about a topic.

3. Not all the “parlor” we enter are filled with unfamiliar conversations. Sometimes, we engage in heated discussions on subjects that are very familiar to us. Make a list of one or more communities that you belong to so where you feel that you can quickly catch the drift of an in-progress oral conversation. What are some “hot topics” of conversation in these communities? For example, in summer 2000, when we were writing this chapter, a hot cultural topic was the lawsuit between Metallica and Napster over the “pirating” of music on the Internet. Most of our students—who were familiar with popular music—knew how to download songs, and understood the Internet pirating issue—could join this conversation immediately. Many faculty members, however, especially the older generation, didn’t have a clue. How much background information about the music industry, e-commerce, the electronic transfer of digital information, and the music-listening habits of rock and postrock culture would you have to provide to bring oldsters up to speed?

4. Now let’s reverse the situation. Have you ever listened to a conversation in which you were a baffled outsider rather than an insider? (Think of the plight of those oldsters suffering through a conversation about
Metallica versus Napster] Describe such an experience. How might that experience be an appropriate analogy for your frustration trying to read a book or article addressed to an insider audience rather than to someone with your background?

WITH YOUR CLASSMATES
Share your notebook entries with other members of your class. See if others have had experiences similar to yours. Help each other appreciate the concepts of insider and outsider audiences and of reading as joining a conversation.

Challenges Presented by Academic Reading

As we have seen, reading is at the center of the work you will do in almost every college course. Through reading you will learn the information and concepts that define the course (what we have called conceptual knowledge). Reading will also help you learn how each discipline explores the world—how it asks questions, constructs hypotheses, gathers and analyzes data, and makes arguments (what we have called procedural knowledge). Reading, in short, introduces you to the conversations you will join as a writer.

College-level reading, as we have already acknowledged, can be difficult and challenging. A textbook for a new course, for example, can be daunting because each new paragraph challenges you with new concepts, vocabulary, and dense information. Each new sentence seems just as important as the one before. With so much unfamiliar material, it is difficult to separate key concepts from supporting details, leaving you with the overwhelming feeling: “I’ve got to know all of this.”

When you switch from textbooks to scholarly articles and primary sources, your problems increase because you need to figure out the conversation the text is joining and focus simultaneously on both content and the author’s persuasive strategies. By observing different authors’ purposes and methods, you will begin to recognize the ways that claims are typically asserted and supported within a given discipline. You will learn what “counts” as evidence in a variety of fields. For example, historians value primary sources such as letters and diaries, government records, legal documents, and other manuscripts written during the times being investigated. Psychologists gather different kinds of research data such as observations of the learning behavior of pigeons, “think aloud” transcripts of the problem-solving processes of persons with certain kinds of brain damage, or statistics about the reduction of anxiety symptoms following different kinds of therapy. You will also discover how different disciplines use different genres—that is, particular styles and formats—for reporting and discussing research, such as experimental reports, book reviews, philosophical arguments, or literary analyses. Your accumulating knowledge about disciplinary discourses will in turn teach you new ways of thinking and writing.
The greatest challenge of your college reading may be the expectation that you do more than just understand what you have read. You will often be expected to write about your reading in a way that shows that you are "doing" the discipline. Reporting about what you have read will be just a beginning point. You will be asked to find meaning, not merely information, in books and articles. You will be asked to respond to that meaning—to explain it, to analyze it, to critique it, to compare it to alternative meanings that you or others create. To fulfill such assignments, you will need to analyze not just what texts say, but how they say it. We call reading with this double awareness reading rhetorically. By analyzing both the content and technique of a given text, a rhetorical reader critically considers the extent to which he or she will accept or challenge that text's apparent intentions.

Rhetorical Reading as an Academic Strategy

In most cases, a writer's goal is to change a reader's understanding of a topic in some way. Occasionally, the change might simply involve a stronger confirmation of what the reader thought beforehand. Sometimes the change might involve an increase in knowledge or in clarity of understanding an article explains how blue-nosed dolphins use whistling sounds to converse with each other; for you, this new knowledge increases your awe of sea mammals. Sometimes the change might radically reconstruct your whole view of a subject (an article convinces you to reverse your position on legalization of hard drugs). How much change occurs? The reader decides.

The concept of rhetorical reading recognizes an inevitable tension between writers' purposes for writing and readers' purposes for reading. By rhetorical we mean "related to an intended effect." Invoking the term rhetoric always draws attention to a writer's relationship to and intentions toward an audience. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the art of discovering the available means of persuasion in a given situation. In accordance with modern approaches to reading and writing, we use the term in a broader sense that includes not just direct persuasion but the entire range of aims and techniques that a writer/speaker might draw upon to influence readers/listeners and modify their understanding of a subject.

Writers want to change readers' perceptions and thinking, and their efforts to do so involve both direct and indirect means. Readers decide not only the extent to which they accept the ideas and information put forth in a text, but how they will act in response. They determine—sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately—whether the information they read is reliable, the ideas significant, the presentation convincing. Because writers try to persuade their intended audiences to adopt their perspective, they select and arrange evidence, choose examples, include or omit material, and select words and images to best support their perspective. As a rhetorical reader, you have to be aware of how a text is constructed to persuade its intended audience (and you may not be part of its intended audience at all). In short, no text tells the whole story. You have to be aware of the perspectives that the text makes invisible.
As an illustration, suppose you are researching the problem of the melting Arctic ice cap. You become interested in this problem when you read an online article explaining that scientists are divided on how to interpret recent data about the melting of polar ice, whether it is part of a natural cycle that will reverse itself or part of long-term, irreversible, global warming caused by humans. As you research this issue, you will need to realize how different writers, in trying to persuade their intended audiences toward their position on the issue, use rhetorical strategies that best support their own cases. You need to be wary. Some research may be biased by economic or political entanglements—for example, many people charge that global warming research funded by petroleum companies should be discounted. Some research may provide what seems like frightening data and yet draw only a few cautious conclusions. For example, an article in the July 2000 issue of the highly specialized journal Science reported that eleven cubic miles of ice are disappearing from the Greenland ice sheet annually, but left it up to the article’s intended audience of experts to ponder what kinds of conclusions to draw. However, when the findings of the Science article were reported in the popular press, many articles downplayed the scientists’ caution and highlighted imagined details of a world fifty years from now with no ice caps—an approach swaying readers to accept uncritically the assumption that the melting ice is an irreversible trend, presumably resulting from human-caused global warming. Once political commentators got hold of the Science article, they put a spin on it that reflected their own values and beliefs. Environmentalists used the melting ice cap data to support their case for international regulations to slow or eventually to reverse global warming. Pro-business writers in turn emphasized the original study’s cautious call for more research. A more balanced and neutral approach was demonstrated by a Chronicle of Higher Education article, also in July 2000, that was headlined, “The Great Melt: Is It Normal, or the Result of Global Warming? Scientists Are Having Difficulty Pinpointing the Causes of Glacial and Sea-Ice Decline.” This article provided a background overview for curious academic readers who accept the tentativeness of scientific findings and want to learn about the conflicting interpretations in this controversy. For student writer-researchers, such articles can be gold mines because they provide balanced explanations without attempting to draw the reader to a specific set of conclusions. Our point here is that your ability to recognize the persuasive strategies built into a text grants you considerable power in deciding how you will respond to an author’s views.

Questions That Rhetorical Readers Ask

In the language of the epigraph to this chapter, rhetorical readers have learned to recognize and interpret the worldview that a text sets forth. We will discuss worldview in more detail later, but for now consider “worldview” to mean a writer’s underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions. You probably already do this without much effort when you are reading material on familiar subjects. What you already knew about a close friend’s values makes it relatively easy to
recognize whether that friend’s e-mail is serious or teasing. Similarly, you can quickly tell whether a review of your favorite musician’s latest CD reflects your own musical values and assumptions. In academic settings, though, unfamiliar subject matter and contexts can make analyzing a writer’s underlying values and assumptions more problematic. With difficult new material, readers’ natural tendency is to concentrate on getting what information and meaning they can from a text without paying attention to its rhetorical strategies. Rhetorical readers, however, analyze rhetorical strategies as a way of understanding a writer’s purpose and worldview. This analysis involves five key questions about the how the text works:

1. What questions does the text address? (Why are these significant questions? What community cares about them?)
2. Who is the intended audience? (Am I part of this audience or an outsider?)
3. How does the author support his or her thesis with reasons and evidence? (Do I find this argument convincing? What views and counterarguments are omitted from the text? What counterevidence is ignored?)
4. How does the author hook the intended reader’s interest and keep the reader reading? (Do these appeals work for me?)
5. How does the author make himself or herself seem credible to the intended audience? (Is the author credible for me?)

Chapter 5 will show in detail how these questions about rhetorical features can reveal a writer’s basic values and assumptions. By critically considering these “how” questions, you will understand a text more fully and be ready to respond to it by considering these additional sets of questions:

6. Are this writer’s basic values, beliefs, and assumptions similar to or different from my own? (How does this writer’s worldview accord with mine?)
7. How do I respond to this text? (Will I go along with or challenge what this text is presenting? How has it changed my thinking?)
8. How do this author’s evident purposes for writing fit with my purposes for reading? (How will I be able to use what I have learned from the text?)

Writers’ Purposes Versus Readers’ Purposes

As you read various selections in this textbook, you will often be asked to consider the fit between your purposes and the writer’s purposes. This is an important question, one that is particularly pertinent when you are assigned research projects that require you to select sources from among what may be hundreds of possibilities. These potential sources will pose reading challenges different from those of your course textbooks because, like the articles on polar ice melt just referred to, they will be written for many different audiences and purposes. On any given topic, it’s likely your research will turn up books, scholarly
articles, popular magazine articles, news reports, and so forth written originally for readers with a range of different concerns—for experts and nonexperts, theorists and practitioners, policymakers and ordinary citizens. As a reader who is planning to write, you will need to determine what among all this material suits your needs and purposes.

What do we mean then when we refer to your purposes as a reader? To understand the answer to this question, consider our earlier explanation that you as a reader decide whether you will assent to a writer’s views, resist them, use them in a new context, or in some other manner respond to them in ways that the writer might not have envisioned. Suppose, for example, that you read an article forecasting a dangerous level of global warming. If you are a pro-business advocate who believes that the threat of global warming is an environmentalist scare tactic, your goal might be to figure out a way to refute the article. However, if you are undecided on the issue, you might examine the author’s argument carefully and compare it to other articles with somewhat different points of view. If you are already convinced that global warming is under way, you might read it without any skepticism whatever.

To fulfill your own purposes, you often have to overcome the difficulty of not being part of the text’s intended audience. For one thing, such texts often omit background information that you need. When you encounter such materials, you will have to skim carefully to decide whether to move on to something easier or to keep reading to see what you can learn. Eventually you will read enough material to be able to fill in the background—and thus begin to read with an expert’s understanding. Until you are thoroughly familiar with the conversation a text is joining, you may also have to overcome the difficulty of determining whether a text suppresses opposing perspectives. How can you tell whether a text is trying to give you the whole picture in a fair and reliable way or is simply another one-sided argument in a hotly contested debate? By learning to read rhetorically.

A Further Look at Writers’ Purposes

As a reader, then, you need to appreciate how your purpose for reading may or may not match the writer’s purpose for writing. We turn next to writers’ purposes—the aims writers typically set for themselves when they compose. This section will focus on a scheme developed by rhetoricians to categorize various kinds of writing on the basis of the writer’s aim or purpose. For rhetorical readers, this scheme is particularly powerful because it helps them understand the writer’s relationship to subject matter and audience. The scheme identifies a spectrum of eight purposes or aims: (1) expressing and reflecting, (2) inquiring and exploring, (3) informing and explaining, (4) analyzing and interpreting, (5) taking a stand, (6) evaluating and judging, (7) proposing solutions, and (8) seeking common ground. These categories of aims offer a valuable analytical framework for discussing authors’ purposes, especially when aims overlap or combine. The following brief overview of these aims, illustrated with examples from environmental issues, will help you understand the scheme.