Reading, Reasoning, and Writing

The casebook that you are holding in your hands is not just a textbook but an introduction to complex and timely issues that call for a careful and scholarly response. The readings in this book encourage you to practice the skills of reading, reasoning, and writing in relation to real issues, because, as you will discover, a good essay is good partly because it answers a real question. What makes a question real, in this sense, is that it has competing answers—people can reasonably disagree about these answers. By providing varying perspectives on a single topic, the readings in this casebook give you the opportunity to identify and explore many real, debatable questions.

A successful argumentative essay gives a clear answer to the question being considered, is informed by careful reading and supported by strong reasoning, and acknowledges other perspectives on the issue. To explain more clearly how to write such an essay in response to the readings in this collection, let's look briefly at (1) how to read for the purpose of writing, (2) how to reason in writing, and (3) how to write. As you will see, although we can separate reading, reasoning, and writing for the purpose of clarifying how to do them successfully, they are all part of the same process, and they overlap one another in many important ways.

How to Read

People read in many different ways and for many reasons, but reading for the purpose of answering controversial questions in a scholarly essay is a specific kind of reading. It is a process made up of interesting and lively tensions that lead to increased knowledge and understanding. The tension between reading sympathetically and reading critically leads all the other tensions in importance. It is essential for you to learn to do both. The purpose of reading sympathetically is to comprehend what you are reading on its own terms and not simply from your own point of view. It is always important to understand the text on its own terms as much as possible before going on to criticize its standpoint. Sympathetic understanding and criticism often interact in lots of interesting ways, but sympathetic reading has a practical priority. To read sympathetically, practice what is called the principle of charity: (1) Assume that the writer is writing clearly and intelligibly and well and that if you give the language careful consideration you will get the point and that the point will be well worth the effort. (2) Give the arguments the strongest possible credit. Assume that the arguments are good ones and that if you interpret and reconstruct them in the right way they will be powerful and convincing. (3) Provisionally, imagine holding the writer's standpoint and beliefs as your own. What would it be like to see and think and reason and feel from that perspective? One way to promote this kind of reading is to imagine— provisionally—that the writer is your superior in every quality of heart and mind. Then you will read with the greatest alertness to what is valuable in the text.

Sympathetic reading lives in tension with its close partner, critical reading. Instead of privileging the text or the author, critical reading privileges the reader as the agent of understanding and in a way puts the reader in a position of superiority. As a critical reader, you question the text. You might ask what the text really means, and you might question whether the text's meaning is clear—even though you have in your sympathetic reading assumed that it is clear and have tried to make it as clear as possible. You might also ask whether a writer's arguments really are all that strong and whether there aren't stronger arguments for a different position. You might ask whether the assumptions of fact and value the writer makes really are legitimate. You might ask whether a writer has represented competing points of view fairly. As a critical reader, you might even wonder whether a writer is being sincere. When you read critically, you no longer experience the text simply as the writer's wise and good invitation to understand things in the best way. Instead, you experience the text as made up of claims, questionable claims that have to be examined. Questions allow claims to appear as claims, whereas without questions they may appear simply as invitations to take a particular perspective or even as unquestionable facts or values. Questioning opens up the possibility of a reasoned inquiry into the legitimacy of the claims being made. Sympathetic reading helps to open you to the intelligence of other people, and critical reading helps you to evaluate that intelligence for yourself. Both kinds of reading are necessary for learning—and for writing successful scholarly essays.

Another important tension in the act of reading is the tension between the meaning of the writing in the original situation in which it was written and read and the situation in which you, here and now, read for yourself. For example, Charles Darwin's writing on natural selection from On the Origin of Species was published in 1859 in London. That was about 150 years ago in a different place, and Darwin and all his original readers are long dead. Since then, Darwin's writing has been read and interpreted and applied and developed in
many different ways. The historical and religious and scientific situation in which you think about natural selection would have been inconceivable for Darwin. You would read his writing with different questions, different approaches, different assumptions, because you inhabit a different social reality. Yet a complete reading of Darwin requires—to some degree—an attempt to understand the writing in its original context and in light of the culture of its time. Of course, this is very difficult since even in its own time *Origin* was understood differently by different people, and the judgments about it varied greatly. Still, in scholarly work, some attempt should be made to place the text in its original situation. This is at times absolutely necessary in order to understand the meaning of certain words and phrases, as well as references to historical events and institutions and practices. Today, evolutionary biologists would not likely use all of the analogies and metaphors Darwin used. And yet it is an open question whether Darwinian evolutionary theory can do without its analogies. For the purposes of writing in an informed way about Darwin, it is necessary to place the work to some degree in its original context, and this is true of all writing about works from other times and places. This collection will give you brief introductions to the readings that should give you the necessary context. In some cases, you will seek more on your own. In some cases, your teacher will provide more. But unless you are writing as a historian, this historical research will probably not dominate your reading and writing.

For in addition to the historically specific and historically confined aspects of Darwin's *Origin*, the book also offers arguments and evidence that are still meaningful and convincing for most scientists today. When people reaffirm Darwin's *Origin* today, the ideas and arguments often change a little to fit contemporary science, but then this is the fate of the life of any idea, and this ability to adapt to new circumstances is often taken to be an important strength of an idea or argument. This renewed life of an idea is granted by the reading that we do here and now, for ourselves, in our own time and place and situation. As you read the writings in this collection critically, you will be evaluating them and using them—or not using them—in a new context and for new purposes. In adapting them to a new situation, you will be transforming them, changing them, at least subtly. To be responsible both to the original context and to the new situation is one of the marvelous tensions of reading.

There is no formula for reading critically while staying in the full experience of the tensions of reading. However, in *The Shape of Reason* (28–29), John Gage gives you a number of helpful questions that can guide you through a process of critical reading and help you to judge the value and applicability of the writing you encounter. You can always start with these questions, and then judge how useful they are for your writing project: (1) What is the writer's purpose? (2) What question does the writing answer? (3) Why does the writer think this question is important? (4) How persuasive am I? (5) What are the writer's reasons? (6) Where does the reasoning stop? (7) Are the reasons adequate? (8) What responsibility does the writer take for the verifiability of information? (9) What has the writer done to put me in a receptive frame of mind? (10) What am I going to do about it? (Assent? Disagree? Something else?) As Gage says, this is not intended as a checklist but as a guide to thinking for yourself about the stance you will take toward what you read.

On this practical level, it is important to keep in mind the purposes of reading for writing scholarly essays about controversies. There are many such purposes—to learn about a subject, to discover the many standpoints that can be taken on an issue and the arguments in support of them, to find out why the issue is an important one, and many more. However, as a writer you will always have some very specific central purposes. One is to discover and formulate a question at issue that you will attempt to answer in an essay. So, as you read, you should keep a focus on the questions, "What question does the writer answer?" and "What are the writer's reasons in support of the answer?" Along with these you should also keep asking, "What important questions are left unasked or not answered adequately?" For in the end, you must discover a question and an answer of your own—a question that you care about. It should also be one about which people can disagree, and one to which they would like to find a satisfying answer. Another central purpose of reading is to learn how to clarify and argue for your own thesis, your answer to the question on which your essay is focused. For to build the strongest case, you will have to respond to some of the strongest arguments for the positions that compete with yours, the ones you encounter in your reading. You can clarify your own position by comparing and contrasting it with the alternatives, and you can support your position by showing the incompleteness or inadequacy of arguments for competing positions. Reading is a primary way to discover these competing positions and the arguments for them. So, along with discovering the positions of others, keep asking yourself these questions as you read: How does my position differ from this one and how is it similar? In what respects do I agree and in what respects do I not? Which reasons seem convincing and which seem less so or not at all? This will all be useful to you as you write.

Finally, write as you read. In a sympathetic, charitable reading of Darwin's *Origin*, for instance, you may discover the key to one of his arguments, and grasp its strength and its limits very clearly. If this happens, write it down! Such experiences are not easily won, and they are not available to us at just any time. Besides, writing
your responses down helps to clarify and develop them even further. Writing is a rich and focused and productive way of reading. If you discover an interesting relation between an argument made in an earlier historic moment and an argument made in a contemporary context—write it down! When you figure out an author's purpose, write it down! When you find a writer addressing more than one main question, write them down! When you spot the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments you come across, write them down! When an interesting question flares in your mind, write it down! As you think of arguments for your emerging position, write them down! The more notes you have, the easier it will be to remember what you have learned and to come to recognize what you really think about the issues. Reading not only helps you to understand other people's ideas, it also helps you to refine and even change your own.

How to Reason

Reading is already a kind of reasoning, and so is writing, but it’s helpful to think of reasoning in itself in a simplified way. The core of reasoning is understanding, creating, and evaluating arguments. One meaning of the word argument is argument in the sense of a fight, as in “Did you hear that couple across the street arguing again last night?” or “Your father is in a bad mood; try not to get into an argument with him.” Or, “They had honestly intended to get to the bottom of the problem, but all they ended up doing was arguing again.” This is a common sense of the word argument, one that we’re all familiar with. In this sense, we try to stay out of arguments, and when they occur it is a misfortune.

However, the argumentation you study and practice here in a university, in a course on written reasoning, is very different from this. Argument in this sense means argumentation as part of a process of inquiry or deliberation, connected with the two great projects of (1) scholarly research and inquiry that leads to knowledge, and (2) the use of knowledge and reason to make practical decisions, to decide on policies and courses of action. This reasoning seeks knowledge and understanding that will probably never admit of being absolutely certain. It addresses controversies about knowledge and action, and it tries to extend or deepen knowledge and understanding. This kind of argumentation has been studied and taught for a long time, and it has important connections with many other cultural tools that we could not do without.

Questions

The argumentation that we study and practice in the writing courses is a process of asking and answering questions, a process of inquiry. Every paper you write is grounded in a question and has the task of developing and answering that question. Since so much depends on the question, finding a good question is one of the most important parts of the reasoning process. But what makes a good question? There is no easy method for asking good questions. Questions develop out of knowledge of the subject matter, the discourse community involved, the individual’s interests, the time and place, and many other factors. Finding good questions depends on careful and active reading, on good discussions with other people interested in the subject, and on giving focused and sustained attention and thought to what one is studying. After all this preparation, sometimes a question comes suddenly, sometimes slowly, as part of a process. Asking a good question is a creative action that requires active involvement in the subject and in the discourse community.

How to find questions

Many people have proposed little thought-procedures that can help to generate questions that might need to be addressed. The investigator or journalist can always run through the five basic questions: Who? What? Where? When? How? Sometimes, this little exercise can help you to find an important question. Kenneth Burke has a more sophisticated version of this exercise that he has developed into a complicated system, but it is founded on five simple questions that must be addressed in any discussion of human motives for action: (1) Who is the real agent of the action? (2) What is the action? (3) What is the scene in which the action takes place? (4) What is the agency or instrument or means of action? (5) What is the purpose of the action? These questions become especially interesting when the apparent agent is not the real agent, the apparent action not the real action, and so on. These questions can be very useful in discovering significant issues, but they are only a few of the questions that can be asked.

One of the best and easiest ways to find a good question is to keep track of questions that come up while you are reading—and write them down! This is harder than it sounds because usually when we “take notes” on our reading, we write down only what we understand clearly, what we have no question about. Taking notes on our questions requires us to formulate carefully what it is we don’t understand, and this is not what we usually do. For example, when we are confused by a writer who seems to be contradicting himself, we often pass over it, hoping to get our footing somewhere later in our reading. However, to discover a contradiction, even if it is
only an apparent contradiction, is to discover a question: Is this writer really contradicting himself? Does this writer really believe two contradictory statements? It is very often the ideas that we do not understand clearly that are the best source of valuable questions. Another example would be those occasions when you find that you are disagreeing with or even contradicting yourself—or when you just cannot make up your mind about what you believe about something. Usually, we try to "fix" contradictions. Or when we cannot make up our minds about something, we think that we have nothing to say on the subject. However, those are the moments when we may very likely stumble upon a genuine question. Whenever there are arguments on different sides of an issue, it's a good sign that a real question is hiding there.

Another way to discover significant questions is to take notes during class discussions—and keep track of where people disagree with one another. Questions are a way of bringing conflicts to light so that they can be addressed reasonably. These conflicts might be simple intellectual conflicts with ourselves, or they might be explicit conflicts between people who disagree about something. So, if two students in class express conflicting views about a subject, then it is very likely that a good question can be formulated that expresses that conflict. Pay attention to class discussions in an active way. Take notes and try to capture the conflicts that come up in questions. Notice, too, where there is some halt in the discussion, where there are ideas that people do not yet understand clearly enough to be able to use well. Those moments of not-understanding can also be converted into questions that you might address in a paper.

Finally, notice what questions are being left out. If people have consistently focused on questions A, B, and C, but not D, then it's possible that D really needs to be addressed. For example, when Americans are asked about the morality of abortion, or whether it should be illegal, they are polarized—they have deep disagreements that cannot be resolved. However, when they are asked whether it is desirable or possible to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies, they often find enough common ground to reason with one another and to work together. Look past the usual questions, and perhaps you will find one hidden behind them.

How to know if a question is a good one

Once you have generated questions, how do you know which of the questions are good ones? Things actually become a little easier when it comes to evaluating the significance of questions. The questions we address through a process of written inquiry and deliberation have some specific characteristics. We evaluate our questions by—how else?—asking questions about them. For any question you come up with, you can always ask

1. Is this a question that needs asking? Do the people in this class disagree about the answer? Is it a question that has not occurred to them? Is it a question to which they do not have a good answer? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then it might be a good question, a question at issue. If everyone already agrees on the answer, then it doesn't need to be asked.

2. Do the people in this class care about this question? Is it a question on which they might want to come to an agreement? If they don't care already, then you will have some extra work to do in your essay. You will have to show them why the issue is significant. If you cannot do that successfully, then the question is not a good one for a paper in your class.

3. Does this question address an issue people are willing to be reasonable about—an issue on which they might change their minds? If there is no hope of change, no possible shift of perspective, then there is no reason to argue, nothing to be accomplished.

How to know what kind of question you are asking

People arguing in law courts and assemblies noticed long ago that it was important to discover exactly what was in question in order to develop effective arguments. After all, it is a waste of time to develop an argument that does not really address a central controversy. They thought of intellectual conflicts as places where some ordinary flow of activity stopped, and would remain stopped, until the controversy was addressed. To help analyze exactly what stopped things, they divided those stopping points into types, and developed procedures for asking questions that would identify the central question at issue, the question that expressed the conflict that stopped the ordinary flow of activity. The types of questions they discovered are often called stasis questions.

You can use your knowledge of these types of questions, these stasis questions, for two purposes. First, once you identify the type of question you are asking, you will know what type of answer will count as a legitimate one. You will know what kind of thesis your essay will have to support. Second, you can also use the stasis questions to help you discover the question you really want to answer. If you know the subject you want
to write about, but not what question you want to address, you can develop several questions that fit the types of the different eras, and this can help you discover what it is you really want to explore in your essay.

There are many versions of the status questions. In The Shape of Reason, John Gage describes six basic types of question. Let's think of them in terms of the case of Joseph Frederick who, in 2002, was suspended from school for holding up a banner across the street from his high school while the Olympic Torch was carried through the street. The banner was held by Frederick and several friends and read "BONG HITS 4 JESUS." The case was eventually taken to the Supreme Court, which ruled that a school may restrict speech that promotes illegal drug use without thereby violating the First Amendment.

Here are the six status questions.

1. Questions of fact. What are the facts in this case? What happened? Who did it? Does it exist? You can always raise questions about facts, and you can always ask whether it is the facts that are in dispute. Did Joseph Frederick hold up the banner at a certain time and place? Did it read "BONG HITS 4 JESUS"? It turns out that these facts are not in dispute in the case. However, a question that at first looks like a factual question—Did Frederick raise the banner while he was at school?—is not a factual question at all. The courts agreed on all the facts about the time and place that Frederick raised the sign, but they did not agree whether that counted as being at school. When you decide whether a question is about the facts, you at the same time begin to determine what kind of reasoning will be appropriate in an essay. If it turns out that the dispute is about facts, then you must decide the best way to determine the facts of the case. If it turns out not to be about facts, then the available ways to settle the dispute will be entirely different.

2. Questions of definition. Many controversies arise from disagreements about how to define central terms. For example, think of terms such as murder or lie or freedom of speech or bridge. Trying to define what "at school" means was one of the issues involved in Joseph Frederick's case. That issue cannot be resolved by simple facts; it requires a different kind of reasoning and argument, one that establishes a convincing definition.

3. Questions of interpretation. Here questions arise because something can mean several different things and so be interpreted differently by different people. Words that are understood as a friendly joke by one person can be taken as an insult by someone else. What does "BONG HITS 4 JESUS" mean? The Supreme Court conceded that the phrase was "cryptic," but it nevertheless ruled that it was reasonable to interpret it as promoting drug use. This issue goes beyond facts or the definitions of individual words to the meaning of Joseph Frederick's action as a whole.

4. Questions of value. These are of course common sources of conflict and disagreement: and controversy. Is something good or bad, better or worse? These questions can arise about means as well as about ends. One might ask whether Joseph Frederick's action was a good one or not. One might ask whether the principal who suspended him and confiscated his banner acted rightly or not. One might ask whether in difficult cases the Supreme Court should err on the side of protecting individual liberty or protecting the authority of officials. Essays that address questions of value face the challenging but important task of trying to find enough common ground to reason with readers even when there may be a lack of solid agreement on values or the way they apply to the case in question.

5. Questions of cause and effect, or consequence. Will something cause something else? Is something an effect of something else? People often disagree about such questions. Would finding in Joseph Frederick's favor lead to more illegal drug use among high school students or undermine the legitimate authority of high school principals? Answering these kinds of questions requires yet a different argumentative strategy, sometimes focusing on the probability of an outcome.

6. Questions of policy. This kind of question asks "What is to be done?" The reasoning demanded by this question is sometimes called deliberative. Is there something to be done in the face of this Supreme Court ruling? It is a practical question for judges who must decide future cases based on this precedent. Attorneys planning to take similar cases before the Court might also have to reason in a new way about the actions they will take. Individuals contemplating similar acts of expression will have to decide whether to go forward in the face of this decision. Much will be written about the best actions to take in the wake of this decision, and the reasoning will have to develop arguments that support the actions.

Exploring a subject or event in light of the different status questions can help you to discover exactly what you want to write about. And knowing what kind of question you are asking will help you to see more clearly what kind of argument you will have to develop and what its outcome will have to be.