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READING

This collection of essays has one purpose: to help you become a better reader and writer. It combines examples of good writing with explanations of the writers' methods, questions to guide your reading, and ideas for your own writing. In doing so, it shows how you can adapt the processes and techniques of others as you learn to communicate clearly and effectively.

Writing well is not an inborn skill but an acquired one: you will become proficient only by writing and rewriting, experimenting with different strategies, listening to the responses of readers. How, then, can it help to read the work of other writers?

- *Reading introduces you to new information and ideas.* People routinely share facts, observations, discoveries, varieties of behavior, and ways of thinking in writing. Reading what others have to say lets you learn about subjects and perspectives that would otherwise remain unknown to you, gives you knowledge worth exploring further, and can spark ideas for your own writing.
- *Reading gives you insights on your own experience.* Many of the essays collected here demonstrate that personal experience is a rich and powerful source of material for writing. But the knowledge gained from reading can help pinpoint just what is remarkable in your own experience. Such insight not only reveals subjects for writing but also improves your ability to communicate with others whose experiences naturally differ from your own.
- *Reading exposes you to a broad range of strategies and styles.* Just seeing how widely these vary—as much as the writers themselves—should assure you that there is no fixed standard of writing. It should also encourage you to find your own strategies and style. At the same time, you will see that writers do make choices to suit their subjects, their purposes, and especially their readers. Writing is rarely easy, even for

the pros; but the more options you have to choose from, the more likely you are to succeed at it.

- *Reading makes you sensitive to the role of audience in writing.* As you become skilled at reading the work of other writers critically, discovering intentions and analyzing choices, you will see how a writer's decisions affect you as audience. Training yourself to read attentively and critically is a first step to becoming a more objective reader of your own writing.

Reading Attentively

This chapter offers strategies for making the most of your reading—in this book and elsewhere. These strategies are reinforced in Chapters 5–14, each of which offers opportunities for careful reading with two paragraphs, one student essay, and two professional essays. Each chapter also introduces a method of developing a piece of writing:

narration	process analysis
description	comparison and contrast
example	definition
division or analysis	cause-and-effect analysis
classification	argument and persuasion

These methods correspond to basic and familiar patterns of thought and expression, common in our daily musings and conversations as well as in writing for all sorts of purposes and audiences: blogs, social-networking sites, and online discussion boards; college papers, lab reports, and examinations; business memos and reports; letters to the editors of newspapers; articles in popular magazines.

As writers we draw on the methods, often without thinking about it, to give order to our ideas and even to find ideas. For instance, a writer narrates, or tells, a story of her experiences to understand and convey the feeling of living her life. As readers, in turn, we have expectations for these familiar methods. When we read a narrative of someone's experiences, for example, we expect enough details to understand what happened, we anticipate that events will be told primarily in the order they occurred, and we want the story to have a point—a reason for its being told and for our bothering to read it.

Building an awareness of such expectations can sharpen your skills as a critical reader and as a writer. A full chapter on each method explains

how it works, shows it in action in annotated paragraphs, and gives advice for using it to develop your own essays. The essays in each chapter provide clear examples that you can analyze and learn from (with the help of specific questions) and can refer to while writing (with the help of specific writing suggestions).

To make your reading more interesting and also to stimulate your writing, the sample paragraphs and essays in Chapters 5–14 all focus on a common subject, such as travel, popular culture, or diversity. You'll see how flexible the methods are when they help five writers produce five unique pieces on the same theme. You'll also find a springboard for producing your own unique pieces, whether you take up some of the book's writing suggestions or jump off with your own topics.

Reading Critically

Much of the reading we do every day is superficial: we skim a newsfeed, magazine, or Web site, noting headings and scanning visuals to get the gist of the content before settling on what catches our interest. But such skimming is not really reading, for it neither involves us deeply in the subject nor engages us in interaction with the writer.

To get the most out of reading, we must invest something of ourselves in the process, applying our own ideas and emotions and paying attention not just to the subject matter but to the writer's interpretation of it. This kind of reading is critical because it looks beneath the surface of a piece of writing. (The common meaning of *critical* as “negative” doesn't apply here: critical reading may result in positive, negative, or even neutral reactions.)

Critical reading can be enormously rewarding, but it takes care and time. A good method for developing your own skill in critical reading is to prepare yourself beforehand and then read the work at least twice to uncover what it has to offer.

► Preparing

Preparing to read need involve no more than a few minutes as you form some ideas about the author, the work, and your likely response:

- *What is the author's background, what qualifications does he or she bring to the subject, and what approach is he or she likely to take?* The biographical information provided before each essay in this book should

help answer these questions; many periodicals, Web sites, and books include similar information on their authors.

- *What does the title convey about the subject and the author's attitude toward it?* Note, for instance, the quite different attitudes conveyed by these three titles on the same subject: "Safe Hunting," "In Touch with Ancient Spirits," and "Killing Animals for Fun and Profit."
- *What can you predict about your own response to the work?* What might you already know about the author's subject? Based on the title and other clues (such as headings or visuals), are you likely to agree or disagree with the author's views? *The Compact Reader* helps ready you for reading by providing a two-part feature before each selection. First, quotations from varied writers comment on the selection's general subject to give you a range of views. And second, a journal prompt encourages you to write about your thoughts on the subject before you see what the author has to say. By giving you a head start in considering the author's ideas and approach, writing *before* reading encourages you to read more actively and critically.

▶ Reading Actively

After developing some expectations about the piece of writing, read it through carefully to acquaint yourself with the subject, the author's reason for writing about it, and the way the author presents it. (Each essay in this book is short enough to be read in one sitting.) Try not to read passively, letting the words wash over you, but instead interact directly with the work to discover its meaning, the author's intentions, and your own responses.

One of the best aids to active reading is to make notes on separate sheets of paper or, preferably (if you own the book), on the pages themselves. As you practice making notes, you will probably develop a personal code meaningful only to you. As a start, however, try this system:

- *Underline, bracket, or check passages* that you find particularly effective or that seem especially important to the author's purpose.
- *Circle words* you don't understand so that you can look them up when you finish.
- *Put question marks in the margins* next to unclear passages.
- *Put down associations* that occur to you, such as examples from your own experience, disagreements with the author's assumptions, or connections to other works you've read.

When you have finished such an active reading, your annotations might look like those below. (The paragraph is from the end of the essay reprinted on pp. 9–11.)

I learned, once the world became larger than Sandra Walker and me and Worcester, Massachusetts, that we are born with few tools with which to build our little shacks of life, and we are born with even less knowledge of how to use those tools. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't had it in me to write those letters, those stories, to Sandra. I was able to crawl into December, and I woke up one day and knew, without a letter from Sandra, without anyone telling me so, that wherever in the universe Sandra Walker would end up I would not be there with her. I made peace with that, and I think I had a sense that I wasn't really eighteen anymore, but fast going on twenty.

True?

Why?

Like a toddler

So he grew up, but just a little bit?

To answer questions like those in the annotations above, plan to reread the essay at least once. Multiple readings increase your mastery of the material; more important, once you have a basic understanding of a writer's subject, a second and third reading will reveal details and raise questions that you might not have noticed on the first pass. Reading an essay several times also helps you uncover how the many parts of the work—for instance, the organization, the tone, the evidence—contribute to the author's purpose.

▶ Using a Reading Checklist

When rereading an essay, start by writing a one- or two-sentence summary of each paragraph and image—in your own words—to increase your mastery of the material (see p. 389). Then let the essay rest in your mind for at least an hour or two before approaching it again. On later readings, dig beneath the essay's surface by asking questions such as those in the checklist for critical reading on the next page. Note that the questions provided after each essay in this book offer more targeted versions of the ones presented here. Answering both the questions in the checklist

CHECKLIST FOR CRITICAL READING

- *Why did the author choose this subject?*
- *Who is the intended audience? What impression does the author wish to make on readers?*
- *What is the author's point? Can you find a direct statement of the thesis, or main idea, or is the thesis implied?*
- *What details does the author provide to support the thesis? Is the supporting evidence reliable? complete? convincing?*
- *How does the author organize ideas? What effect does that arrangement have on the overall impact of the work?*
- *What do language and tone reveal about the author's meaning, purpose, and attitude?*
- *How successful is the work as a whole, and why?*

and the questions for individual readings will ensure a thorough analysis of what you read.

Analyzing a Sample Essay

Critical reading—and the insights to be gained from it—can best be illustrated by examining an actual essay. The annotated passage on page 7 comes from “Shacks” by Edward P. Jones. The entire essay is reprinted here in the same format as other selections in this book, with quotations from other writers to get you thinking about the essay’s subject, a suggestion for exploring your attitudes further in your journal, a biographical note on the author, and an introductory note on the essay.

ON WRITING

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere.

—Joan Didion

—Anne Lamott

As you become proficient . . . your style will emerge, because you yourself will emerge, and when this happens you will find it increasingly easy to break through the barriers that separate you from other minds, other hearts—which is, of course, the purpose of writing, as well as its principal reward.

—William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White

JOURNAL RESPONSE Reflect on your experiences with writing—whether for school, for friends, or for your own purposes. Does writing come naturally to you, or do you struggle to express your thoughts? How so? What do you expect to gain from taking a writing class in college?

Edward P. Jones

Born in 1950, Edward P. Jones has been hailed as a major voice of Southern literature. Although his childhood in Washington, DC, was marked by poverty and instability, Jones showed an early love for reading and won a scholarship to the College of the Holy Cross. He completed a BA in 1972 and went through a brief period of homelessness before obtaining a clerical job with *Science* magazine and publishing his first short story in *Essence*—both in the same week. Jones went on to earn an MFA from the University of Virginia, and for eighteen years he edited tax newsletters during the day while writing fiction in his spare time. His tales of urban life—collected in *Lost in the City* (1992) and *All Aunt Hagar's Children* (2006)—have won popular and critical acclaim, and his novel *The Known World* (2003), about black slaveholders, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Now a professor of English at George Washington University, Jones has also taught at Princeton, the University of Maryland, and the University of Virginia. He lives in Arlington, Virginia.

Shacks

In this essay written for a special “Starting Out” issue of the *New Yorker* in 2011, Jones reflects on a life lesson he stumbled across in his first semester of college. By engaging in an eager yet futile effort to build a romance, Jones discovered a talent he hadn’t known he had.

In my first months as a college freshman, I cared more than anything about a young woman with whom I'd gone to high school—Sandra Walker, a thin, brown-skinned woman who might not have been pretty enough for the rest of the universe but was more than pretty enough for me. She was at college in Atlanta and I was in Worcester, Massachusetts. I had never kissed her, for she was true to someone else. I don't think I'd even so much as touched the back of her hand, but I cared for her, and the only way I knew how to express what I felt at that point in my life was to write letters, and write letters I did. Three and four and five a week I wrote. All of them were more than five pages long and many went to fifteen pages—so thick once they had been folded that I had to reinforce the envelopes with tape. I had always written legibly, but the fear was so great that Sandra Walker might not be able to decipher even one syllable I had written that I began printing everything, and to this day the only cursive writing I do is my signature.

Things like that get in the blood, and they become who you are. I never received a strongly positive response from Sandra, but the crumbs, the letters shaming with me only the minutiae of her life, were enough to keep me writing—September and October and November. There wasn't much beyond the crumbs. Imagining as best I could what a young woman at the front door of the rest of her life might want to hear from a young man, I put all the hope I had into each letter, using the limited language of an eighteen-year-old who knew books of mathematics but not much else. It is amazing the little shacks of life we can build when it seems that so much is at stake. Before it was all over, the letters—from what I can remember, for I have not seen any of them since the day I sent them off—became grand and fanciful creations about some marvelous future that Sandra Walker and I could have. It was a world of fiction, of course, a place conjured up in my imagination, because, as my mother could have told Sandra, I could barely take care of myself and would not have known what to do with, first, a girlfriend, and then a wife and all the children we were supposed to have.

But I was alone in the wilderness in Worcester, away from Washington, DC, my home, for the first time, and I needed some shack of life. I know now that had I been someone who knew only how to paint pictures, I would have done that. I would have made my case with painting after painting, wrapping them with care and sending them off to Atlanta. Or if I had known how to carve little figures in wood I would have carved Sandra and me and our happy future in oak or maple or whatever wood I could salvage in Worcester. Or I would have weighed poor Sandra down with volumes of poetry or tapes of songs with her name in every title.

I learned, once the world became larger than Sandra Walker and me and Worcester, Massachusetts, that we are born with few tools with which

to build our little shacks of life, and we are born with even less knowledge of how to use those tools. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't had it in me to write those letters, those stories, to Sandra. I was able to crawl into December, and I woke up one day and knew, without a letter from Sandra, without anyone telling me so, that wherever in the universe Sandra Walker would end up I would not be there with her. I made peace with that, and I think I had a sense that I wasn't really eighteen anymore, but fast going on twenty.

Even read quickly, Jones's essay would not be difficult to comprehend: the author draws on a story from his time as a college student to make a point about talent. In fact, a quick reading might give the impression that Jones produced the essay effortlessly, artlessly. But close, critical reading reveals a carefully conceived piece whose parts work both independently and together to achieve the author's purpose.

One way to uncover the underlying intentions and relations in a piece of writing is to answer a series of questions about the work. The following questions proceed from the general to the specific—from overall meaning through purpose and method to word choices—and they parallel the more specific questions located after the essays in this book. Here the questions come with possible answers for Jones's essay. (The paragraph numbers can help you locate the appropriate passages in "Shacks" as you follow the analysis.)

► Meaning

What is the main idea of the essay—the chief point the writer makes about the subject, to which all other ideas and details relate? What are the subordinate ideas that contribute to the main idea?

Jones states his main idea near the end of his essay: "[W]e are born with few tools with which to build our little shacks of life, and we are born with even less knowledge of how to use those tools" (paragraph 4). As we mature, he is saying, we discover our talents and desires and learn what to do with them. (Writers sometimes postpone stating their main idea, as Jones does here. Perhaps more often, they state it near the beginning of the essay. See p. 23.) Jones leads up to and supports his idea by narrating an episode from his own life—his obsessive writing of letters to a woman he longed for during his first semester of college (1–2)—and by contemplating other ways he might have approached her (3), to reach a larger truth. The story is developed with specific details from Jones's memory

(such as the bulk of the envelopes, 1), with descriptions of the raw talents he had (such as written expression, persistence, and imagination, 1–2), and with examples of the talents he lacked (such as taking care of a family, 2, or painting and carving, 3).

► Purpose and Audience

Why did the author write the essay? What did the author hope readers would gain from it? What did the author assume about the knowledge and interests of readers, and how are these assumptions reflected in the essay?

Jones seems to have written his essay for two interlocking reasons: to show, and thus explain, that we all feel an inherent need to do something constructive with our lives—to find our “shacks”—and to argue gently that individual talents must be identified and developed before they can be used to full advantage.

Jones assumes that his readers, like him, are people who have gone to college, people to whom the emotional turmoil of the first semester will feel familiar. He comments, for instance, on the doubts of “an eighteen-year-old who knew books of mathematics but not much else” (2), the reality that he “could barely take care of [him]self” (2), and the loneliness of being away from “home . . . for the first time” (3). But he also expresses hopes of being “at the front door of the rest of . . . life” (2) and reveals an imagination full of “grand and fanciful creations about some marvelous future” (2), taking pains to show (with some hint of embarrassment) the lengths to which he practiced his only skill—letter writing—to try to secure his desires.

At the same time, Jones seems to expect that readers of the *New Yorker*—with that magazine’s emphasis on culture and the arts—will be aware that he is now an established fiction writer and therefore will grasp that his youthful letters, the “stories” (3) he conjured and sent out, built the foundation for his future life. However, readers who do not recognize this point are still likely to understand and appreciate his main idea.

► Method and Structure

What method or methods does the author use to develop the main idea, and how do those methods serve the author’s subject and purpose? How does the organization serve the author’s subject and purpose?

As writers often do, Jones develops his main idea with a combination of the methods discussed in this book. His primary support for his idea consists of narration (Chapter 5)—a story about letter writing as a means of

romance. The narrative is developed with description (Chapter 6), especially of the letters Jones wrote (as in paragraphs 1–2), and with classification (Chapter 9) and examples (Chapter 7) of the forms of expression he might have tried if he had the talent (3). Jones relies on division or analysis (Chapter 8) to tease apart the elements of his messages to Sandra Walker, and he uses comparison and contrast (Chapter 11) to show the differences between his letters and her responses (2). In addition, he draws on definition (Chapter 12) to give meaning to the “shacks” metaphor that shapes the essay (title, 2–4). (See “Language,” below, for further discussion of Jones’s figures of speech.)

While using many methods to develop his idea, Jones keeps his organization fairly simple. He does not begin with a formal introduction or a statement of his idea but instead starts right off with his story, the inspiration for his idea. In the first paragraph he narrates and describes his efforts to connect with a former high school classmate by writing letters to her. Then, in paragraph 2, he explains why he persisted despite her unresponsiveness and suggests that those letters may have served an as-yet undisclosed purpose in his life. Still delaying a statement of his main idea, Jones contrasts his writing with other forms of communication, which he sees as talents different from his own (3). Finally, he relates his awakening to the truth of his situation and zeroes in on his main idea (4). Although he has withheld this idea until the end, we see that everything in the essay has been controlled by it and directed toward it.

► Language

How are the author’s main idea and purpose revealed at the level of sentences and words? How does the author use language to convey his or her attitudes toward the subject and to make meaning clear and vivid?

Perhaps Jones’s most striking use of language to express and support his idea is in his figures of speech, creative expressions that imply meanings beyond or different from their literal meanings (see p. 54). As is often the case, you may need to puzzle over some of his words before you can fully understand their meaning. This is particularly true of Jones’s central metaphor, “shacks of life” (title and paragraphs 2–4). A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two unlike things by saying one is the other: in this case, Jones equates physical shelters and the goals that people create to shape their existence. The connotations of the word “shack” add more layers of meaning: shacks are simple structures, often temporary or unstable, and they tend to be associated with people of limited means. Jones’s idea, it seems, is that a person doesn’t need much to build a life,

just enough “tools” (4)—a metaphor for skills or talents—to give it purpose.

The essay includes several other inventive figures of speech. In paragraph 2 alone Jones uses metaphors such as the behaviors “that get in the blood,” the “crumbs” offered by his female correspondent, and “the front door of the rest of her life”—separate from, but cleverly echoing, the “shacks” metaphor. Calling the small city of Worcester, Massachusetts, a “wilderness” (3) is hyperbole, or deliberate exaggeration, suggesting the author’s emotional isolation more than the physical reality of place (and again, echoing the “shacks” metaphor). And finally, the last paragraph depends on contrasting images of infancy (captured in the words “born” and “crawl”) and adulthood (not “eighteen anymore, but fast going on twenty”) to reinforce Jones’s admission that his maturation and understanding were incomplete.

Jones’s ideas gain additional impact with **parallelism**, the use of similar grammatical form for ideas of equal importance (see pp. 50–51). For instance, every sentence of paragraph 3 except the first uses the phrase “I would have,” building rhythm and stressing the young man’s desperate need to communicate. The balanced phrase “those letters, those stories” (4) clarifies that his missives were an early form of fiction writing. Similarly, the **repetition** of “we are born with” (4) emphasizes both the author’s lingering immaturity and his point that raw talents in their infancy must be nurtured in order to thrive.

These notes on Jones’s essay show how a reader can arrive at a deeper, more personal understanding of a piece of writing by attentive, thoughtful analysis. Guided by the questions at the end of each essay and by your own sense of what works and why, you’ll find similar lessons and pleasures in all of this book’s readings.

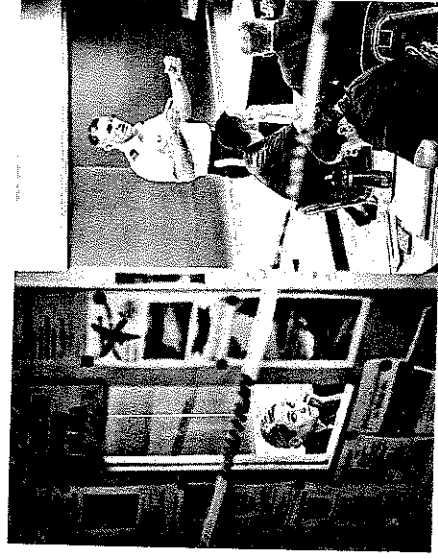
Reading Visuals

Much of what you read will have a visual component—a photograph, perhaps, or a drawing, chart, table, or graph. Sometimes these images stand alone, but often they contribute to the overall meaning and effect of a written work. Some essays in this book, in fact, include visuals: William Least Heat-Moon’s “Starrucca Viaduct” (p. 102) features a historic photograph of the author’s subject, Scott Adams’s “Funny Business” (p. 156) reprints a classic *Dilbert* comic strip, David Brooks’s “People Like Us” (p. 196) includes a political cartoon to illustrate a point, and Jessica Sayuri Boissy’s “One Cup at a Time” (p. 288) incorporates Japanese calligraphy.

Like written texts, visual texts are composed. That is, the people who create them do with images what writers do with words: they come to the task with a purpose, an audience, and a message to convey. You can and should, therefore, “read” visuals actively. Don’t simply glance over images or take them at face value. Examine them closely and with a critical eye.

Reading visuals critically draws on the same skills you use for reading written works closely. The checklist for critical reading on page 8 can get you started. Determining who created an image, why, and for whom will help you tease out details that you might have missed at first look. Examining each element of a visual composition—such as the placement and arrangement of objects, the focus, and the uses of color, light, and shadow—will give you a greater appreciation of its intent and overall effect. Notice what first captures your attention, where your eye is drawn, and how different parts of the image interact to create a dominant impression. Finally, if the visual accompanies written text, such as an essay or advertisement, ask yourself what it contributes to the writer’s meaning and purpose.

Consider, for example, one student’s notes on a photograph of a college classroom. The picture was taken by photographer Damon Winter and was included in “The Women of West Point,” a 2014 *New York Times Magazine* photo essay about female students at the elite military academy. The woman facing the camera is Brigade Commander Lindsey Danilack, the top cadet of her graduating class.



Window highlights her—but also keeps her isolated.

Staring right at us. She looks bored, or maybe annoyed.

Wall splits image in half—gender divide?

Teacher is in military uniform.

Male students have their backs to the camera.

Is that caution tape? Why?

Damon Winter/The New York Times/Redux

As Winter’s photograph demonstrates, visual images can pack many layers of meaning into a condensed space. Learning to unpack those layers is a skill worth cultivating.