

Tenth Edition

A SHORT GUIDE
TO WRITING ABOUT

Literature



SYLVAN
BARNET

WILLIAM E.
CAIN

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Preface

We have been pleased to learn that *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, which seeks to help students write analytically about fiction, poetry, drama, and film, has been used in a wide range of literature courses. It is perhaps most suitable for courses that combine intensive work in composition with an introduction to literature; introductory courses in general literature, or in a major literary genre; and required courses—in research, writing, or both—designed for English majors. Instructors have also found it appropriate for courses taken during the first year of graduate school in which skills in literary analysis, effective writing, and library and electronic research are given special attention.

For the tenth edition we have of course revised the chapter dealing with print and electronic research. But we have also revised (and in some cases shortened) the other chapters, in order to convey to students as clearly and concisely as we can the essential skills they need. In accordance with the principle that writing is rewriting, we revised each other's pages (easy) and our own (more difficult). Instructors who have used earlier editions may not notice most of these revisions—we hope the writing is seamless—but some of the word changes are fairly conspicuous:

- Epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter, offering memorable comments on the topic
- Additional checklists, for instance on Reviewing a Revised Draft, and Avoiding Plagiarism
- Increased emphasis on critical thinking
- Rules for Writers, interspersed throughout the book, emphasizing major principles of writing
- Additional literary works—poems by Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay, and a fable by Aesop
- Updated lists of suggested references.

Even as we revised *A Short Guide*, we preserved much that our colleagues and our students have told us is valuable, such as:

- Examples of preliminary notes, drafts, and revisions of drafts

- Lists of questions that one can ask oneself about a given literary work
- Checklists that one can use as a way of evaluating a draft.

In short, we have retained the original aim, which was and is to help students write about literature. Why does anyone write about literature? In order to increase one's understanding and enjoyment of literature. Listen to Ralph Waldo Emerson on the connection between reading and writing:

The best of all ways to make one's reading valuable is to write about it.

To this comment we can append one by Ernest Gaines:

The six Golden Rules of writing: Read, read, read, and Write, write, write.

Why? Because, as John Updike says,

You always find things you didn't know you were going to say, and that is the adventure of writing.

We have quoted heady words, but we believe they are true. We will now return to earth, however, and survey the contents of *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, 10th Edition.

Part 1 (five chapters emphasizing the close connection between reading and writing) assumes that we can't write well unless we can read well. If nothing else, we must be able to read *our own* prose thoughtfully. Reading, after all, is a way of getting ideas for writing. These early chapters emphasize the importance in the writing process of such activities as annotating a text, brainstorming, keeping a journal, and (especially) asking oneself questions in order to generate ideas. (Although these activities are often called "pre-writing," they are in fact part of the process of writing.) Explication and analysis are discussed and illustrated with examples.

Part 2 (four chapters on thinking critically about literature) looks at some definitions of literature; considers the relationships among interpretation, meaning, and evaluation; gives advice about writing persuasive arguments; and then offers a survey of some of the chief critical approaches.

Part 3 (four chapters on writing about fiction, drama, and poetry) introduces the reader to the elements of each genre, but looks back to Part 1 and provides some drafts and essays by students on representative works. In accordance with the assumption in Part 1 that asking questions is an invaluable way of getting ideas, each chapter on writing about

a genre concludes with a checklist of questions that readers may ask themselves as they read, reread, and think about a work. The essays by students are accompanied either by marginal annotations or by analytic overviews printed at the end of the essays.

Part 4 contains two chapters. The first of these, "**Style and Format**," is a short and direct approach to the elements of clear writing. It treats such matters as denotation, connotation, subordination, and paragraphing. The latter part of the chapter, devoted to manuscript form, is concerned chiefly with mechanical matters, ranging from the form of the title of an essay to advice on how to introduce quotations. The second chapter in this section, "**Writing a Research Paper**," includes material on discovering a topic and thesis, on finding materials, on using the MLA system of documentation, and on working with electronic resources.

Three appendices conclude the book: Appendix A includes **two stories** ("Araby" and "A Worn Path") that are the subjects of student essays, printed in the book; Appendix B offers detailed **information on print and electronic resources**; and Appendix C provides a **glossary of literary terms**.

We hope that the preceding remarks adequately describe the scope of the book, but some further words must be added. Samuel Johnson said:

There is not so poor a book in the world that would not be a prodigious effort were it wrought out entirely by a single mind, without the air of previous investigators.

We cannot name all of the previous investigators who have helped shape our ideas about literature, and about teaching and writing, but we want to acknowledge our indebtedness to Morton Berman, William Burto, and Marcia Stubbs, who never tire of improving our pages; and (at Longman) to Ruth Halikman, Natalie Hart, Lynn Huddon, Susan Kunchandy, and Brandon Hight for their advice and their care. No authors could wish for more watchful eyes (and more tactful corrections) than those of Katy Faria at Pre-Press Company, Inc., and copyeditor Katherine Snead. For her help with permissions, we are grateful to Marcy Lunetta. One of us, William E. Cain, would like to thank his wife Barbara, and his daughters, Julia and Isabel, for their love and support.

We are grateful for the comments of the following reviewers: Ann Bomberger, Allegheny College; G. Burnis Cooper, University of Alaska, Fairbanks; Ashan Hampton, Morehouse College; James J. Harcharik, Rock Valley College; Jason Peters, Augustana College; Cara Potter,

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SYLVAN BARNET
WILLIAM E. CAIN

Letter to Students

We hope that you already enjoy reading literature and that *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* will help you enjoy it even more. But as you begin your course this semester with our book, we want to say a little more about why we wrote it, how we believe it can help you, and in what ways we think it can deepen and enrich your pleasure in studying literature.

Throughout the process of writing and rewriting *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, we saw ourselves as teachers, offering the kinds of suggestions and strategies that, over many years, we have offered to our students.

As you can tell from a glance at the Contents, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* includes practical advice about reading and responding to literature and writing analytical papers, advice that comes directly from our experience not only as readers and writers but also as teachers. This experience derives from classrooms, from conferences with students, and from assignments we have given, read, responded to, and graded. We have learned from our experiences and have done our best to give you the tools that will help you make yourself a more perceptive reader and a more careful, cogent writer.

Speaking of making and remaking, we are reminded of a short poem by William Butler Yeats, who was a persistent reviser of his work. (You can find a poem by Yeats on page 239.)

The friends that have it I do wrong
Whenever I remake a song,
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake.

Like Yeats, you will develop throughout your life: you will find you have new things to say, and you may even come to find that the tools you acquired in college—and that suited you for a while—are not fully adequate to the new self that you have become. We can't claim to equip you for the rest of your life—though some of these works of literature surely will remain in your mind for years—but we do claim that, with your

instructor, we are helping you develop skills that are important for your mental progress. We have in mind skills useful not merely in the course in which you are now enrolled, or other literature courses, or even courses in the humanities in general that you may take. We go further. We think that these skills in reading and writing are important for your development as an educated adult. Becoming an alert reader and an effective writer should be among the central goals of your education, and they are goals that *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* is designed to help you reach.

The skills we stress in *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* will enable you to gain confidence as a reader of literary works so that you will increase your understanding of what literature offers. You need not enjoy all authors equally. You'll have your favorites—and also some authors whom you do not much like. There's nothing wrong with that; reading literature is very much a personal encounter. But at the same time, the skills we highlight in *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* can help you know and explain why one author means much to you and another does not. In this respect, reading and studying literature is more than personal; as we share our responses and try to express them effectively in writing, the work that we perform becomes cooperative and communal, a type of cultural conversation among fellow students, teachers, and friends.

As you proceed through *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* and gain further experience as a reader and writer, you will start to see features of poems, stories, and plays that you had not noticed before, or that you had noticed but not really understood, or that you had understood but not, so to speak, fully experienced. You may even find yourself enjoying an author you thought you disliked and would never be able to understand. The study of literature calls for concentration, commitment, and discipline. It's work—sometimes hard, challenging work. But it is rewarding work, and we believe that it will lead you to find literature more engaging and more pleasurable.

We hope that *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* will have this effect for you. Feel free to contact us with your comments and suggestions. We are eager to know what in this book has served you well, and what we might do better. You can write to us in care of Literature Editor, Longman Publishers, 1185 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10036.

SYLVAN BARNET
WILLIAM E. CAIN

PART I

Jumping In

WHAT IS LITERATURE, AND WHY WRITE ABOUT IT?

The storyteller's own experience of people and of things—not only what he has passed through himself, but even something that the has only heard about—has moved the writer to an emotion so passionate that he can no longer keep it shut up in his heart. Again and again something in his own life or in the life around him seems so important that he cannot bear to let it pass into oblivion. There must never come a time, he feels, when people do not know about this.

—Lady Murasaki

Literary criticism [is] . . . a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book he is criticizing.

—D. H. Lawrence

The words we quote at the top of this page come from *The Tale of Genji*, a Japanese novel written more than a thousand years ago, but we do not know any brief comment that better describes literature: Literature is the presentation (or, perhaps better, the representation) of experiences that people must know about. We will talk first about literature, Lady Murasaki's topic as presented in a speech by Prince Genji, and later we will talk about writing about literature—criticism—which is D. H. Lawrence's topic.

The experience set forth in a literary work may be real or invented, and the (re)presentation may be as short as a line or two or as long as a three-volume novel; the only requirement is that the author sets it forth memorably, making it worth reading for itself, even if it is not true. In *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* we cannot reprint as an example a novel or a play—not even a one-act play—but we will in a moment reprint a story that takes up less than a page. First, however, let us offer what must be one of the shortest stories in the world, a fable by Aesop,

who is said to have lived in the sixth century BCE. The entire story, about an encounter between a female fox and a female lion, consists of only a title and two lines:

THE VIXEN AND THE LIONESS

A vixen sneered at a lioness because she never bore more than one cub.

Only one," the lioness replied, "but a lion."

Obviously this story never really happened—it is fiction, something made up—but it holds the attention and it stays in the mind. It offers us a situation with a **conflict** (the mere confrontation of a fox and a lion brings together the ignoble and the noble) and a **resolution** (something memorable must come out of such a confrontation, and the something ought to be decisive and thus satisfying to the reader). There is no setting (we are not told that "One day in June a vixen, walking at the edge of a jungle, met a lioness"), but none is needed.

What there *is*—set forth very briefly—is **characterization**. The fox's baseness is effectively communicated through the verb "sneered" and through her taunt, and the lioness's nobility is even more effectively communicated through the brevity and decisiveness of her reply. This reply at first seems to agree with the fox ("Only one") and then, after a suspenseful delay provided by the words "the lioness replied," the reply is tersely and powerfully completed ("but a lion"), placing the matter in an entirely new and utterly satisfying light.

We hope you agree that this story is more potent—more memorable, more real, we might say, even though no one believes that foxes and lions converse—than the mere moral: "Small-minded people confuse quantity with quality." And we hope you agree that our comment on the story—our observation that the meeting immediately produces a conflict, and that the lioness's reply is artfully delivered (apparent agreement, and then a powerful reversal)—makes sense. Aesop's story is a tiny example of literature (what Lady Murasaki was talking about); our comment is a tiny example of literary criticism (what D. H. Lawrence was talking about when he spoke of "a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book"), an example of one sort of writing about literature, an activity that you will be engaging in.

In a moment we will reprint another very short work of literature, but first let us set the stage by quoting the poet W. H. Auden, who said that "When we read a book, it is as if we were with a person." Even when

we read Aesop's tiny fable about the vixen and the lioness, we feel we are in the presence of someone who has something worth telling us, partly because he has invented this confrontation, and he has given the lioness's reply in such an artful form. But we especially feel we are with another person when we read a lyric poem. Here is an example by Emily Dickinson (1839–86).

I'M NOBODY! WHO ARE YOU?

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—too?
Then there's a pair of us
Don't tell! they'd banish us—you know!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell your name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

Let's consider the sort of person we hear in "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (Read it aloud, to see if you agree. In fact, you should test each of our assertions by reading the poem aloud.) The voice in the first line is rather like that of a child playing a game with a friend. In the second and third lines the speaker sees the reader as a fellow spirit ("Are you—Nobody—too?") and invites the reader to join her ("Then there's a pair of us!") in forming a sort of conspiracy of silence against outsiders ("Don't tell!"). In "they'd banish us," however, we hear a word that a child would not be likely to use, and we probably feel that the speaker is a shy but (with the right companion) playful adult, who here is speaking to an intimate friend. And since we hear this voice—we are reading the poem—we become the friend. Because "banish" is a word that brings to mind images of a king's court, the speaker almost comically inflates and thereby makes fun of the "they" who are opposed to "us."

In the second stanza, or we might better say in the space between the two stanzas, the speaker puts aside the childlike manner. In "How dreary," the first words of the second stanza, we hear a sophisticated voice, one might even say a world-weary voice, or a voice with perhaps more than a touch of condescension. But since by now we are paired with the speaker in a conspiracy against outsiders, we enjoy the contrast that the speaker makes between the Nobodies and the Somebodies. Who are

these Somebodies, these people who would imperiously “banish” the speaker and the friend? What are the Somebodies like?

How dreary—to be—Somebody!

How public—like a Frog—

To tell your name—the livelong June—

To an admiring Bog!

The last two lines do at least two things: They amusingly explain to the speaker’s new friend (the reader) in what way a Somebody is public (it proclaims its presence all day). The lines also indicate the absurdity of the Somebody-Frog’s behavior (the audience is “an admiring Bog”). By the end of the poem we are quite convinced that it is better to be a Nobody (like Dickinson’s speaker, and the reader?) than a Somebody (a loudmouth, like a croaking frog).

We have now looked at two very short works of literature, works that in our view *are* literature because they set forth aspects of human life in memorable language. By way of contrast, consider these lines:

Thirty days hath September,

April, June, and November,

All the rest have thirty-one

Excepting February alone,

Which has twenty-eight in fine,

Till leap year gives it twenty-nine.

These lines are memorable too, and they give information, but it is only information about the calendar, not about life. It tells us facts—it is immensely useful—but it *only* tells us facts; it does not *show* or *present* human experience. Probably most instructors characterize this sort of thing as *verse* rather than as poetry, or if it is poetry it is poetry of a low sort.

WHY WE WRITE ABOUT LITERATURE

Aesop’s fable and Dickinson’s poem get us to yet another point that we want to make about literature: We do *not* claim that literature makes a reader wiser or better, but we do claim that it opens a reader’s eyes to points of view, to states of feeling, that we might not have been aware of. Consider again the words of Lady Murasaki, who said that the author reports experiences that seem “so important that he cannot bear to let it

pass into oblivion,” experiences so pressing that “there must never come a time, he feels, when people do not know about this.” And consider again Auden’s comment that when we read a book (or even a single poem) “it is as if we were with a person.” When we read a work of literature we hear a report, and although the author usually does not try to tell us how we should behave, the report extends our awareness about a range of behavior. Anyone who has read “I’m Nobody! Who are you?”—or at least anyone who has read it carefully enough to write an essay about it—will occasionally wonder if he or she is, in some encounter, behaving like a “Somebody,” a somebody croaking “to an admiring Bog!”

Later chapters in this book will go into detail about writing about various forms of literature—fiction, drama, and poetry—but we want to end this chapter with a few words about *why* we write about literature, and then with an overview of the writing process. We write about literature in order to clarify and to account for our responses to works that interest or excite or frustrate us. In putting words on paper we have to take a second and a third look at what is in front of us and at what is within us. Writing is a way of finding, a way of learning: It is an opportunity and a form of critical thinking.

The last word is never said about complex thoughts and feelings—and works of literature as well as our responses to them embody complex thoughts and feelings. Still, when we write about literature we hope to make at least a little progress in the difficult but rewarding job of talking about our responses. When we write we learn; we also hope to interest our reader by communicating our responses to material that is worth talking about.

But to respond usefully—helpfully—to anything and then to communicate responses, we must have

- some understanding of the thing, and
- some skill at converting responses into words.

This book tries to help you deepen your understanding of literature—what literature does and the ways in which it does it—and the book also tries to help you convert your responses into words that will let your reader share your perceptions, your enthusiasms, and even your doubts. This sharing is, in effect, teaching. You may think that you are writing for the teacher, but this is a misconception; when you write, *you* are the teacher. An essay on literature is an attempt to help your reader to see the work as you see it.

THE WRITING PROCESS

Later chapters give fairly extensive advice concerning particular assignments (for instance, writing a comparison, or writing a review of a play), but here, for the moment, is a brief overview. No process works for all writers—indeed, most writers use different processes for different kinds of assignments—but the following advice may help you get started.

1. Consider the writing situation:

Is the specific topic assigned, or do you choose your own? If the choice is yours, choose a work you like—but allow plenty of time, because you may find, once you get to work, that you want to change your topic.

How long will the essay be? (Allow an appropriate amount of time.)

What kinds of sources are you expected to use? (Only your own insights, supplemented by conversations with friends, and perhaps familiarity with your textbooks? Some research?

Substantial research?) Again, allow the appropriate amount of time.

Who is the audience? Classmates? The general public, e.g., readers of *Time* magazine? Awareness of the audience will help you to determine the amount of detail you need to provide. (More about the audience in a moment, under items 5 and 7.)

When is the essay due? (Allow time to type, proofread, and check any sources.)

2. **Get at least a few ideas before you write a first draft.** You can immediately generate some ideas by thinking about the impact the work makes on you—*why* does it please or displease or even anger you? Did some words puzzle you? Look them up, and think about why the writer may have used unusual words. You may also get some starting ideas by thinking about relevant assertions you heard in classroom discussions, for instance, concerning literature and truth, or symbolism, or the depiction of women, or the use of dialect. (In your final version, be sure to give credit for any ideas that you borrow.) Jot down whatever comes to mind—key phrases will do—and you probably will find that these jottings engender further ideas.

3. **Rearrange these jottings into a scratch outline, i.e., a tentative plan for a draft.** A list of a few phrases indicating the topics you plan to address (for instance, “historical context”), and the sequence, will

help you to get going. Such an outline will probably indicate that the first paragraph will name the writers or the works of literature and will specify the general approach or scope of the paper. Additional jottings, in sequence, indicate the gist of what each paragraph may be concerned with.

4. **Start writing, without worrying about correctness.** Yes, you have been putting down words, but these activities are what composition instructors call “pre-writing.” Now you are in a position to really write. If you have made an outline, begin by following it, but remember, the outline is a helpful guide to get you going, not a road map that must be followed. Write freely, get your ideas down on paper or up on the screen. At this stage, you are still wrestling with ideas, trying things out, clarifying things for yourself, engaging in a search-and-discovery operation.

These pages are not a first draft; rather they are what teachers of writing call a “zero draft,” so don’t worry about mechanical matters such as spelling and punctuation and stylistic elegance. Such things will be important when you revise and edit, but at the moment you are trying to find out what your ideas are, and how much sense they make. Don’t be afraid to set forth your hunches. As E. M. Forster put it, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” Write in a spirit of confidence, and if you are using a computer, be sure to save your material.

Later, of course, you will reread with a critical (skeptical) mind what you have said—you will want to make sure that assertions are supported by evidence—but for now, follow your instincts.

5. **Reread and revise the material,** preferably after an interval of a few hours or even a day.

You are now prepared to write a serious draft. Your tentative or working thesis has now evolved into a point that you have confidence in. *Do not try to revise by merely reading the computer’s monitor.* You need to see the essay as your reader will see it, on paper. Only a hard copy will let you see if a paragraph is much too long, or if quotations are too long and too frequent. Revise the hard copy with a pen or pencil, and then keyboard your revisions into the computer.

Revisions will be of two sorts, *global* (large scale, such as reorganization) and *local* (the substitution of a precise word for an imprecise one, or a spelling correction). Generally speaking, try to begin by making the necessary global revisions—you may, for instance, decide that introductory background material is or is not needed, or that background material should be distributed throughout the essay rather than given all at once at the start, or that additional evidence is needed to support some assertion, or that some material in your final paragraph ought to appear

earlier—but of course if you spot a spelling error, or realize that a particular word is not the best word, there is no harm in pausing to make such a correction when you first see the need.

Now is the time to keep asking yourself, “What will my audience—my readers—make of this word, this sentence, this paragraph? Does this word need to be defined? Do I offer adequate support for this generalization? Is my point clear, and is it expressed effectively?” Put yourself in your reader’s shoes; ask yourself if readers will be aware of where they are going. You are inventing a skeptical reader, who in fact will be your helpful collaborator.

6. **Reread and revise the draft again**, asking yourself what your reader will make out of each sentence.

Read your prose carefully, and try to hear it in the mind’s ear. You might even read the draft aloud to yourself, or to a friend. Writing an essay is not the same thing as having a conversation, of course, but you’ll want to write the essay in a voice that is natural to you.

7. **Make certain that the mechanics are according to specifications.** Here you are acting not so much as an author but as an editor. It is appropriate for an author, in the heat of drafting material, to be indifferent to mechanical details, but it is appropriate for an editor to be cool, detached, finicky—in short, for the editor to tell the author to come down to earth and to package the essay correctly.

Margins, spacing, page numbering, and labeling of illustrations should follow the instructor’s requirements. Documentation should be according to Joseph Gibaldi’s *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th ed. (2003).

8. **If possible, get a classmate or a friend to read your essay and to make suggestions.** This representative of your audience should not, of course, rewrite the essay for you, but he or she can call your attention to paragraphs that need development, to unclear organization, to unconvincing arguments, to awkward sentences, and even to errors in punctuation and spelling.

9. **Consider the reader’s suggestions, and revise where you think necessary.** If your reader finds some terms obscure, or an argument unsubstantiated, you will almost surely want to revise, clarifying the terms and providing evidence for the argument. As before, in the process of revising, try to imagine yourself as your hypothetical reader.

10. **Print out a copy of the revised draft, read it, and revise again**—and again—as needed.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

You are not knocking off an assignment; you are writing an *essay*, engaging in a process that, first, will teach you and, second, will ultimately engage the interest of your readers and will teach them.

✓ A Checklist of Basic Matters

- ☐ Is my title engaging?
- ☐ Does the introduction provide essential information (artist, work, topic, or approach of the essay)?
- ☐ Does the paper have a thesis, a point?
- ☐ Do I support my argument with sufficient persuasive detail?
- ☐ Have I kept the needs of my audience in mind—for instance, have I defined unfamiliar terms?
- ☐ Is the paper organized, and is the organization clear to the reader?
- ☐ Have I set forth my views effectively and yet not talked too much about myself?
- ☐ Does the essay fulfill the assignment (length, scope)?

grows. Not that the ripening of figs had the least thing to do with it, but that is the way Maman-Nainaine was.

It seemed to Babette a very long time to wait; for the leaves upon the trees were tender yet, and the figs were like little hard, green marbles.

But warm rains came along and plenty of strong sunshine, and though Maman-Nainaine was as patient as the statue of la Madone, and Babette as restless as a humming-bird, the first thing they both knew it was hot summertime. Every day Babette danced out to where the fig-trees were in a long line against the fence. She walked slowly beneath them, carefully peering between the gnarled, spreading branches. But each time she came disconsolate away again. What she saw there finally was something that made her sing and dance the whole long day.

When Maman-Nainaine sat down in her stately way to breakfast, the following morning, her muslin cap standing like an aureole about her white, placid face, Babette approached. She bore a dainty porcelain platter, which she set down before her godmother. It contained a dozen purple figs, fringed around with their rich, green leaves.

"Ah," said Maman-Nainaine arching her eyebrows, "how early the figs have ripened this year!"

"Oh," said Babette, "I think they have ripened very late."

"Babette," continued Maman-Nainaine, as she peeled the very plumpest figs with her pointed silver fruit-knife, "you will carry my love to them all down on Bayou-Lafourche. And tell your Tante Frosine I shall look for her at Toussaint—when the chrysanthemums are in bloom."

THE ACT OF READING

If we had been Chopin's contemporaries, we might have read this sketch in *Vogue* in 1893 or in an early collection of her works, *A Night in Acadie* (1897). But we are not Chopin's original readers, and, because we live more than a century later, we inevitably read "Ripe Figs" in a somewhat different way.

This difference gets us to an important point about writing and reading. A writer writes, sets forth his or her meaning, and attempts to guide the reader's responses, as we all do when we write a letter home saying that we are thinking of dropping a course or asking for news or money. To this extent, the writer creates the written work and puts a meaning in it.

2

THE WRITER AS READER: READING AND RESPONDING

INTERVIEWER: *Did you know as a child you wanted to be a writer?*

TONI MORRISON: *No. I wanted to be a reader.*

Learning to write is in large measure learning to read. The text you must read most carefully is the one you write, an essay you will ask someone else to read. It may start as a jotting in the margin of a book you are reading or as a brief note in a journal, and it will go through several drafts before it becomes an essay.

To produce something that another person will find worth reading, you yourself must read each draft with care, trying to imagine the effect your words are likely to have on your reader. In writing about literature, you will apply some of the same critical skills to your reading; that is, you will examine your responses to what you are reading and will try to account for them.

Let's begin by looking at a very short story by Kate Chopin (1851–1904). (The name is pronounced in the French way, something like "show pan.") Kate O'Flaherty, born into a prosperous family in St. Louis, in 1870 married Oscar Chopin, a French-Creole businessman from Louisiana. They lived in New Orleans, where they had six children. Oscar died of malaria in 1882, and in 1884 Kate returned to St. Louis, where, living with her mother and children, she began to write fiction.

Kate Chopin

RIPE FIGS

Maman-Nainaine said that when the figs were ripe Babette might go to visit her cousins down on the Bayou-Lafourche where the sugar cane

As readers, we can and should make an effort to understand what the author seems to be getting at; that is, we should make an effort to understand the words in their context. Perhaps we shouldn't look up every word we don't know, at least on the first reading, but if certain unfamiliar words are repeated and thus seem especially important, we will probably want to look them up.

It happens that in "Ripe Figs" three French words are used: *maman*, *madone*, and *tante*. *Maman* is "Mother," and *Tante*, in "Tante Frosine," is simple enough: It means "Aunt Frosine." Fortunately, the words are not crucial, and the context probably makes clear that Frosine is an adult, which is all that we really need to know about her. *Madone* is more interesting. It means "madonna," which is Italian for "my lady" or "madam," and which is commonly used to refer to Mary, the mother of Jesus. (You may know Raphael's painting *The Alba Madonna* or Dürer's *The Madonna and Child*.) It is unlikely that Chopin is saying that Maman-Nainaine is Mary: Good writers are rarely as heavy-handed as that. But the reference is there for a reason: Chopin wants us to notice it, and, no doubt, to see how it is connected later to the word *aureole*, which is the radiant light around the head or body of a sacred figure in a work of art.

The point is this: The writer is pitching, and she expects readers to catch. A reader who does not know—or who does not look up—the meanings of these words, or who does not know that chrysanthemums bloom in the late summer or early autumn, for instance, will miss part of Chopin's meaning.

Although writers tell us a good deal, they do not tell us everything. We know that Maman-Nainaine is Babette's godmother, but we don't know exactly how old Maman-Nainaine and Babette are. Further, Chopin tells us nothing of Babette's parents. It rather *sounds* as though Babette and her godmother live alone, but readers may differ. One reader may argue that Babette's parents must be dead or ill; another may say that the status of her parents is irrelevant and that what counts is that Babette is supervised by only one person, a mature woman.

In short, a text includes **indeterminacies** (passages that careful readers agree are open to various interpretations) and **gaps** (things left unsaid in the story, such as why a godmother rather than a mother takes care of Babette). As we work our way through a text, we keep reevaluating what we have read, pulling the details together to make sense of them in a process called **consistency building**.

Whatever the gaps, careful readers are able to draw many reasonable inferences about Maman-Nainaine. We can list some of them:

She is older than Babette.

She has a "stately way," and she is "patient as the statue of la Madone."

She has an odd way (is it exasperating or engaging or a little of each?) of connecting actions with the seasons.

Given this last point, she seems to act slowly, to be very patient. She apparently is used to being obeyed.

You may at this point want to go back and reread "Ripe Figs" to see what else you can say about Maman-Nainaine. And now, what of Babette?

She is young.

She is active and impatient ("restless as a humming-bird").

She is obedient.

And at this point too you may want to add to the list.

READING WITH A PEN IN HAND

Perhaps the best way to read attentively is to mark the text, underlining or highlighting passages that seem especially interesting, and to jot notes or queries in the margins. Here is the work once more, this time with the marks that a student added after a second reading.

Kate Chopin

RIPE FIGS

Maman-Nainaine said that when the figs were ripe Babette might go to visit her cousins down on the Bayou-Lafourche where the sugar cane grows. Not that the ripening of figs had the least thing to do with it, but that is the way Maman-Nainaine was.

It seemed to Babette a very long time to wait; for the leaves upon the trees were tender yet, and the figs were like little hard green marbles.

But warm rains came along and plenty of strong sunshine, and though Maman-Nainaine was as patient as the statue of la Madone, and Babette as restless as a humming-bird, the first thing they both knew it was hot summertime. Every day Babette danced out to where the fig-trees

odd

contrast
between
M-N and
B

figs in a fancy dish. I feel I can see these people, I almost know them. And I'd like to see Aunt Frosine in the fall, in chrysanthemum time. She's probably a mature woman, like M-N, with lots of dignity.

Here is another student's first response to "Ripe Figs."

This is a very short story. I didn't know stories were this short, but I like it because you can get it all quickly and it's no trouble to reread it carefully. The shortness, though, leaves a lot of gaps for the reader to fill in. So much is not said. Your imagination is put to work.

But I can see Maman-N sitting at her table—pleasantly powerful—no one you would want to argue with. She's formal and distant—and definitely has quirks. She wants to postpone Babette's trip, but we don't know why. And you can sense B's frustration. But maybe she's teaching her that something really good is worth waiting for and that anticipation is as much fun as the trip. Maybe I can develop this idea.

Another thing, I can tell they are not poor—from two things.

The pointed silver fruit knife and the porcelain platter, and the fact that Maman sits down to breakfast in a "stately" way. They are the leisure class. But I don't know enough about life on the bayous to go into this. Their life is different from mine; no one I know has that kind of peaceful rural life.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

Suppose you are beginning the process of writing about "Ripe Figs" for someone else, not for yourself. The first question to ask yourself is:

For whom am I writing? In other words, Who is my audience?

were in a long line against the fence. She walked slowly beneath them, carefully peering between the gnarled, spreading branches. But each time she came disconsolate away again. What she saw there finally was something that made her sing and dance the whole long day.

When Maman-Nainaine said down in her stately way to breakfast the following morning, her muslin cap standing like an aureole about her white, placid face, Babette approached. She bore a dainty porcelain platter, which she set down before her godmother. It contained a dozen purple figs, fringed around with their rich, green leaves.

"Ah," said Maman-Nainaine arching her eyebrows, time passes—fast for M-N—late.
"Oh," said Babette, "I think they have ripened very slowly for B."

"Babette," continued Maman-Nainaine as she peeled is M-N the very plumpest figs with her pointed silver fruit-knife, herself like entrusted—"you will carry my love to them all down on Bayou-Lafourche. And tell your Tante Frosine I shall look for her at Toussaint—when the chrysanthemums are in bloom."

opens with figs; ends with chrys. (autumn)
fulfillment? Equivalent to figs ripening

RECORDING YOUR FIRST RESPONSES

After you annotate your text, another useful way of getting at meanings is to write down your initial responses to the story, jotting down your impressions as they come to you in any order—almost as though you are talking to yourself. Because no one else is going to read your notes, you can be entirely free and at ease. You can write in sentences or not; it's up to you. Write whatever comes into your mind, whatever the story triggers in your own imagination, whatever rings true or reminds you of your own experiences.

Here is the response of the student who annotated the text.

I like the way the "green marbles" turn into "purple figs." And I like the way Babette and M-N are sort of opposite. B sings and dances and is restless. On the other hand, M-N is "patient" and like a statue and she sits "in a stately way." A young girl and a mature woman. But, come to think of it, B can also be dignified—she serves M-N the

Of course, you probably are writing because an instructor has asked you to do so, but you still must imagine an audience. Your instructor may tell you, for instance, to write for your classmates or for the readers of the college newspaper. If you are writing for people who are familiar with some of Chopin's work, you will not have to say much about the author. If you are writing for an audience that perhaps has never heard of Chopin, you may want to include a brief biographical note of the sort given in this book. If you are writing for an audience that (you have reason to believe) has read several works by Chopin, you may want to make some comparisons, explaining how "Ripe Figs" resembles or differs from Chopin's other work.

In a sense, the audience is your collaborator; it helps you decide what you will say. You are helped also by your sense of *purpose*: If your aim is to introduce readers to Chopin, you will make certain points; if your aim is to tell people what you think "Ripe Figs" says about human relationships or about time, you will say some different things; if your aim is to have a little fun and to entertain an audience that is familiar with "Ripe Figs," you may write a parody (a humorous imitation).

A WRITING ASSIGNMENT ON "RIPE FIGS"

The Assignment

Let's assume that you are trying to describe "Ripe Figs" to someone who has not read it. You probably will briefly summarize the action, such as it is, will mention where it takes place and who the characters are (including their relationship), and what, if anything, happens to them. Beyond that, you will probably try to explain as honestly as you can what makes "Ripe Figs" appealing or interesting or trifling or boring or whatever.

Here is an essay that a student, Antonia Tenori, wrote for this assignment.

A Sample Essay

Images of Ripening in Kate Chopin's "Ripe Figs"

Very little happens in Kate Chopin's one-page story, "Ripe Figs." Maman-Nainaine tells her granddaughter Babette that she may "visit her cousins down on the Bayou-Lafourche" "when the figs were

ripe"; the figs ripen, and Babette is given permission to go. So little happens in "Ripe Figs" that the story at first appears merely to be a character sketch that illustrates, through Babette and her grandmother, the contrast between youth and age. But by means of the natural imagery of the tale, Chopin suggests more than this: she asks her readers to see the relationship of human time to nature's seasons, and she suggests that, try as we may to push the process of maturity, growth, or "ripening," happens in its own time.

The story clearly contrasts the impatience of youth with the patience and dignity that come with age. Babette, whose name suggests she is still a "little baby," is "restless as a humming-bird." Each day when she eagerly goes to see if the figs have ripened, she doesn't simply walk but she dances. By contrast, Maman-Nainaine has a "stately way," she is "patient as the statue of la Madone," and there is an "aureole"—"radiance"—"about her white, placid face." The brief dialogue near the end of the story also emphasizes the difference between the two characters. When the figs finally ripen, Maman-Nainaine is surprised (she arches her eyebrows), and she exclaims, "how early the figs have ripened this year!" Babette replies, "I think they have ripened very late."

Chopin is not simply remarking here that time passes slowly for young people and quickly for old people. She suggests that nature moves at its own pace regardless of human wishes. Babette, young and "tender" as the fig leaves, can't wait to "ripen." Her visit to Bayou-Lafourche is not a mere pleasure trip, but represents her coming into her own season of maturity. Babette's desire to rush this process is tempered by a condition that her godmother sets: Babette must wait until the figs ripen, since everything comes in its

• In the second paragraph, Antonia supports her thesis by providing brief quotations. These quotations are not padding; rather, they are evidence supporting her assertion that Chopin “contrasts the impatience of youth with the patience and dignity that comes with age.”

• In the third paragraph, Antonia develops her thesis (“Chopin is not simply . . . She is . . .”).

• The final paragraph begins with a helpful transition (“Chopin *further* suggests”), offers additional evidence, and ends with a new idea (about the reader’s response to the story) that takes the discussion a step further. The essay avoids the deadliest kind of conclusion, a mere summary of the essay (“Thus we have seen,” or some such words). Antonia’s effective final sentence nicely draws the reader into the essay. (Effective final sentences are hard to write, but we give advice about them on page 70.)

Antonia Tenori wrote this paper for an assignment early in the semester, and it’s worth noting that students were told to write “a page or two (about 250–500 words).” If

- the first question to ask is “To whom am I writing?”
- then the second question to ask is, “What is the length of the assignment?”

The answer to this second question will provide two sorts of guidance: It will give you some sense of how much time you should devote to preparing the paper—obviously an instructor expects you to spend more time on a ten-page paper than on a one-page paper—and, second, it will give you a sense of how much detail you can include.

For a short paper—say, one or two pages—you will need to make your main point with a special kind of directness; you will not have space for lots of details, but just for those that support the main point.

For a longer paper, three to five pages, or one that is longer still, you can examine the characters, setting, and central themes in greater depth, and you can focus on more details in the text to strengthen your analysis.

CRITICAL THINKING AND THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

Sometimes we may feel that analyzing a literary work takes away from the pleasure that it offers. But that’s not really the case. Through our analysis of a short story by Kate Chopin, for example, we can understand more clearly why we have enjoyed it. Close and careful study helps us to get “inside” the story: We are trying to find out how it works and to

own season. Maman-Nainaine recognizes the patterns of the natural world, the rhythms of life. By asking Babette to await the ripening, the young girl is asked to pay attention to the patterns as well.

Chopin further suggests that if we pay attention and wait with patience, the fruits of our own growth will be sweet, plump, and beautiful, like the “dozen purple figs, fringed around with their rich, green leaves,” that Babette finally offers her godmother. Chopin uses natural imagery effectively, interweaving the young girl’s growth with the rhythms of the seasons. In this way, the reader is connected with both processes in an intimate and inviting way.

The Student’s Analysis Analyzed

• The title of the essay is informative; it clearly indicates the focus of the analysis. Notice, too, that it is much more interesting than “An Analysis of a Story” or “An Analysis of Kate Chopin’s ‘Ripe Figs’” or “Ripe Figs: A Study” or “An Analysis of Imagery.” In your own essays, construct titles that inform and interest.

• The first sentence names the author and title. Strictly speaking, this information is redundant (it appears in the title), but it is customary to give the author’s full name and the title of the work early in the essay, and it is essential to give such information if it is not in the title.

• The second sentence offers enough plot summary to enable the reader to follow the discussion. But notice that the essay as a whole is much more than a summary of the plot. Summary here is offered early, merely to make the analysis intelligible. The opening paragraph presents one view (the view that Antonia believes is inadequate); then, after a transitional “but,” offers a second view and presents a thesis—the point that Antonia will argue. Perhaps the most common error students make in writing about literature is to confuse a summary of the plot with a thoughtful analysis of the work. A little plot telling is acceptable, to remind your reader of what happens, but normally your essay will be devoted to setting forth a thesis about a work, and supporting the thesis with evidence. Your readers do not want to know what happens in the work; they want to know what you make out of the work—how you interpret it, or why you like or dislike it.

learn what—in its style, structure, characterization, and exploration of theme—makes it interesting. As we do so, the story becomes even more interesting.

In this way, the analysis of literature is a special form of critical thinking. We are thinking critically about Chopin's story, and, furthermore, we are thinking carefully and critically about our *own* thinking—about the nature of our response to the literary work. We focus on specific details and put into words our general responses. Then we test these responses once again against the evidence of the text itself. The process continues, until we are satisfied that we have given the work a sensitive and full interpretation.

Of course part of our activity as critical thinkers is to ask ourselves: Is my interpretation of this story as perceptive and as full as I can make it? What have I taken account of? Is there anything that I may have overlooked, or that I need to reconsider? Is there another way, another point of view, according to which this literary work might be examined and understood? (Chapters 6 and 7 will go into detail about "meaning" and "interpretation.")

Reading literature on our own gives pleasure and stimulates our minds. Then, when we study literature in the classroom or in a writing assignment, usually we find not that our pleasure diminishes, but, rather, that it increases: We gain insight into how something that is well-made operates, how it is put together. Our appreciation of the work is deepened, and our thinking is made sharper, and more complex. For more about critical thinking, see Chapter 3.

3

THE READER AS WRITER: DRAFTING AND WRITING

I love being a writer. What I can't stand is the paperwork.

—Peter de Vries

All there is to writing is having ideas. To learn to write is to learn to have ideas.

—Robert Frost

A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.

—Thomas Mann

PRE-WRITING: GETTING IDEAS

How does one "learn to have ideas"? Among the methods are the following: reading with a pen or pencil in hand so that (as we have already seen) one can annotate the text; keeping a journal in which one jots down reflections about one's reading; and talking with others about the reading. Let's take another look at the first method, annotating.

Annotating a Text

In reading, if you own the book do not hesitate to mark it up, indicating (by highlighting or underlining, or by marginal notes) what puzzles you, what pleases or interests you, and what displeases or bores you. Later you'll want to think further about these responses, asking yourself if, on rereading, you still feel this way, and if not, why not, but these first responses will get you started.