Week Six: Making the Best Use of the Assigned Readings

Introduction: Showing why you think what you think

What is it that makes one piece of writing compelling and another piece bland and unmemorable? When you are reading and you feel yourself being persuaded to think differently, what is it that the writer done to get you to reconsider your initial response? One of the persistent myths about writing instruction is that there is general agreement about what makes writing persuasive. The truth, though, is that different readers find different kinds of writing persuasive: some readers are moved by stories, others by statistics and charts, other by extended examples.

Because we recognize the many different ways that writing can be persuasive, we don't think it makes any sense to try to convince you that there's only one way to write well. (Indeed, you will have noticed by now that the writers included in *The New Humanities Reader* write in very different ways and draw on very different kinds of evidence in making their arguments.) What we hope, rather, is that you'll think about using your writing to explore and explain why you think what you think. Or, to put this another way, we recommend that you use your writing to show not only *what* your position is, but also *what evidence* has led you to hold your position. And the only way for you to do this is to make sure your writing presents the evidence that has led you to see your own position as reasonable.

One place writers turn for such evidence is personal experience: in the NHR, for example, Jon Krakauer draws on his memories of climbing mountains as a young man to make sense of what drew Chris McCandless to head off into the wilds of Alaska; Annie Dillard refers to a conversation she had with her daughter to provide an example of how one might visualize a human disaster. While personal experience is undoubtedly a very powerful source of evidence for all writers (we all, in one way or another, check to see whether or not our ideas "feel right" or "fit" with our own experiences), in this tutorial we are going to focus on the one kind of evidence that all readers of the NHR share: the assigned readings.

How can you use what you've read as evidence in your own writing? That's what we want to focus on in this tutorial: developing many ways to *use* what you've read in your writing.

How to use the readings: "Looking for support" versus "Complicating your ideas"

By this point in your education, you've surely been told many times by your writing teachers that it is important to "refer to the text" and to "cite your sources" in your essays. But, why should you do this? When the answer to this question isn't clearly stated, the requirement that you "cite the text" can seem nothing more than a mechanism for determining whether or not you've done the reading. That's one way to use the readings: to prove you've done your homework. We think there are better ways to fill your time, though.

So, if not just to prove that you've done your homework, why should you cite the assigned readings? We believe that reading and writing are valuable insofar as they help you to better understand your own thoughts and your own ways of thinking.

Thus, we ask that you think of your essays as a place to show what you can do with what you've read.

While this may seem a tall order, since you may feel that you don't have clearly formulated thoughts on many of the topics discussed in The New Humanities Reader and thus don't know how "to use" the assigned readings, all you have to do to get started is just pay attention to what you marked--and what you didn't mark--during your first time through the assigned reading.

As you made notes in the margins and underlined passages, what use were you imagining you might make of the passages you marked? Below are two ways of using the texts that we would like for you to consider incorporating into your writing.

1. Supporting new thought

> Identifying passages where you agree or disagree with statements made in the assigned readings is a good place *to begin* thinking about what you will write you own essay on. This is, however, where many students *end* their thinking about what they will write, with the result that an untold number of essays are produced that are organized in the following way:
>
> I think X
> The passage I've cited is about X or shows that the author agrees with me.
> Therefore, X is a reasonable position.
>
> Student essays that *only* use the assigned readings for support in this way never manage to do anything other than establish that the student writer agrees with something that was said in the assigned reading. While this may be good enough to get you to the passing level, it will never be good enough to bring you above this level.
>
> One way to check and see if you are doing more than drawing on the assigned readings for support of this kind is to ask yourself, after you've completed your draft, "Could I have had these thoughts without reading the assigned essay?" If the answer to this question is yes, then in all likelihood, you are only using the assigned readings to support a position you already hold. You have not, in others words, shown that you can use the readings to explore why you think what you think and why those thoughts matter. When you start writing in this way, you will find that your essays take on a different shape, one more like this:
>
> I thought X
> The passage I've cited caused me to re-think X.
> I now think Y or I now better understand the consequences of thinking X.

2. Extending, qualifying, or complicating your original thoughts on the assigned topic

> There's a fairly easy trick for finding passages in the assigned readings that will help you to extend, qualify, or complicate your original thoughts: after you finish reading the

assigned essay for the first time, go back and mark those sections of the essay that you had trouble following.

The passages you mark may introduce a new term or concept with which you are unfamiliar.

Or the passages may discuss subject areas that are foreign to you.

Or the passages may make an argument that seems strange or unreasonable to you.

Your writing will begin to change when you bring these sorts of passages into your essays. Citing passages of this kind will give you an opportunity to make sense of what is unfamiliar in the assigned readings. Or, to put this another way, working with passages of this kind will give you an opportunity to use your writing as a tool for learning.

You might try citing at least two passages from the assigned readings that seem *to contradict* the argument you are making in your essay. This may seem like strange advice to give, but we've found that following this practice actually serves to improve student writing. Your writing will improve because, instead of omitting or ignoring those passages in the assigned readings that complicate your own position, you will be confronting them head on. And this, in turn, will help you to address the question of why it matters that you think about the issue under discussion in one way rather than another.

Summary

All the writing that you are asked to do in college seeks, in one way or another, prompts you to make use of what you've read and what you've heard. For this reason, you want to develop a number of different ways to *use* the passages you cite in your writing: you want to demonstrate that you can use what you've read to complicate, extend, and challenge your own thoughts. There are two quick ways to test and see if you've done that in the writing you are about to hand in. Ask yourself the following two questions:

- Could I have made this argument without referring to the assigned readings?
- Have I only cited passages that agree with my position?

Your goal is to produce essays where the answer to each of these questions is clearly no.