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Journals and Reflective Writing

AIMS OF THE CHAPTER

Reflective writing helps you make personal sense out of the rich, complex, and confusing information you are learning, ideas you are confronting, and people you are meeting. As the term implies, this writing is like a mirror, giving you an opportunity to look at your developing self. This personal connection increases your motivation, purpose, and involvement by helping you define what you want to learn and say. This chapter encourages you to explore both traditional forms of reflective writing and the new opportunities opened up by electronic communication.

KEY POINTS

1. Reflective writing is an opportunity to sort through learning and experience.
2. Journals provide space for examining your readings and thoughts in great detail, following through on your observations in whichever way strikes you as appropriate. When used as part of a course, journals help teachers respond to your ideas.
3. Electronic mail, bulletin boards, and discussion groups allow you to explore your interests and engage in informal communication with other students in the class, the instructor, and other people who share your interests on campus and throughout the world.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- What people, ideas, courses, readings, or other experiences have made you think new thoughts or wonder about new ideas? When and where do you think about these new experiences?
- What experiences have you had writing a journal? In what ways was the journal useful? In what ways did it seem forced or unnatural? What

kinds of entries might best help you develop your feelings and thoughts about your reading and learning?

- Have you ever used the Internet? What subjects might you like to explore in Internet discussion groups or World Wide Web information sources?

A Rich and Confusing Environment

College is a new environment. You are probably surrounded by a wider variety of classmates than you experienced in high school — students of different ethnicities and nationalities; students of different economic and social backgrounds; students from more regions of the state, country, and the world; students of more interests and accomplishments; older students returning to school after varied experiences; and upperclassmen and graduate students with developed knowledge and commitments. Your professors will often be deeply involved in their areas of specialization, in ideas they have pursued over time with their colleagues, and in projects that apply their learning to improving various aspects of life. The readings you have been assigned in your courses will introduce you to new subjects and to deeper levels of understanding of subjects with which you are already familiar. The books and journals in the library and the bookstores provide opportunities to pursue ideas and learning on your own in directions not limited by the curriculum.

You also get to see special accomplishments and skills up close — the sociology professor's ability to analyze how people relate to each other, the literature professor's ability to find the right expression, the philosopher's ability to cut to the heart of an argument, the architect's ability to conceive of a graceful and useful building, the government professor's involvement in state policy making. Many of your classmates may also have abilities, skills, and knowledge you may admire — from the computer programming whiz to the wrestling champion to the classmate who is just so witty. Seeing these accomplishments may open your eyes to new goals and lead you to reassess exactly where your best talents lie.

How do you make sense of all you come in contact with and set some directions for yourself? Some questions will sort themselves out spontaneously as you become involved in a heated discussion or suddenly want to do extra reading for a course that fascinates you. Some instructors may encourage you to think about your reaction to what you are learning through discussion questions and informal assignments. They may be available for you to talk with outside of class, during office hours, or even over coffee. Informal talk with your friends and classmates also helps you sort through all the new ideas and experiences you are confronting.

Using Writing for Reflection

Writing can also be used to think through the meaning of experiences. One traditional method is to keep a journal where you consider the most puzzling, intriguing, or outrageous ideas you come across each day. E-mail discussion groups are another, newer way to try out ideas and write reflectively. Almost all colleges now have electronic mail capabilities that students can access from some terminals on campus once they establish an e-mail account. On some colleges access is extremely easy from anywhere on campus, and all students are preassigned e-mail accounts. Once you are on e-mail, you can find discussion groups on many topics. Some of these are local to your campus, and others go worldwide.

Journal Writing

The journal, even when it is assigned as part of coursework, allows you to step outside the usual channels of class communication to reflect on ideas in a comfortable way. It creates a personal space for you to pursue thoughts and connections, develop critical perspectives on your readings and lectures, make plans, and evaluate your goals with respect to projects, courses, and the overall college experience.

Teachers assign journals as part of their classes to encourage several sorts of reflection. They may want you to:

- Think about the ideas and information of the course and find what is relevant to you
- See how the teachings of the course may be applied to your experiences — such as how organizational theory explains what is going on in your part-time job or how information from your zoology class helps you identify insects in the fields beyond the edge of campus.
- Criticize the divergent viewpoints presented in the course
- Indicate what you find most interesting or most difficult in the course materials, so that in class they can speak to the needs, interests, and thinking of you and your classmates

Journals are assigned in many kinds of courses. Although the journal provides an alternative to usual classroom communications, instructors often relate journal assignments to other classroom communications, as in a reading journal, a planning journal, or a personal connections journal. In a philosophy course, for example, a journal to develop arguments about questions raised in class provides an informal opportunity to practice the kind of philosophic language that is being developed in the course and that you will have to produce on exams and in papers. Because journals provide an informal space to explore ideas and reactions, you can use them to discover and develop ideas that you may want to develop in more formal papers. Thus journals are one of the key tools of invention, as described on page 75.



Invention

Invention is the art of finding what you want to say or write in any circumstance. Invention is particularly necessary in college writing, where your assignments often offer a wide range of possibilities that you have to narrow to a single issue. For this you need a well-chosen paper topic.

A successful paper topic balances several competing considerations. First, it must be original and creative enough to hold your teacher's interest and set it apart from other students' papers. At the same time, it must show that you are familiar with the subject matter, and it must stick to the limits set by the assignment. It must be complex enough to show substantial thought yet not so complex that it cannot be covered in the assigned length. Finally, it must interest you. The more important the subject is to you, the more you will be committed to writing a strong paper.

Finding a good idea is not always easy, but journal writing helps. Journal writing is one of the best tools for invention, for it allows you to turn thoughts over in your mind as you work through a course. When you are given a specific assignment, you can then look back in your journal for clues about topics that interested you that might fit the assignment. You can also use the journal to test possible ideas for the assignment and see, in a low-risk setting, where they might lead.

Another way to explore a topic area is to "brainstorm," or to follow loose, unstructured chains of association until you see connections you did not see at first. For example, if you were given the assignment to write a paper on an important issue in elementary education today, you might begin listing everything that came to mind when you thought of the word *school*, things such as *teachers*, *blackboard*, *school buses*, *textbooks*, and *school lunch*. The last term, *school lunch*, might produce another chain of associations like the following: *high prices*, *free lunch programs*, *students who need support*. This might lead to a question that indeed raises a major issue for the future of education: Will the learning abilities of students from poor

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families be hurt when child support and school support programs are cut back, and won't that impairment of learning help keep the students in poverty?

The primary purpose of a brainstorming session, whether alone or with others, is to produce a large quantity of ideas — most of which will never be used in a final paper. Many ideas that don't seem appropriate at first should still be put down because you can never know which ideas will trigger associations that might ultimately be very productive. A ridiculous-sounding notion may well be a dead end, but it might also be the starting point of a good paper topic.

Three Students' Reading Journals

Here are three examples of journal entries written for an introductory philosophy course, all based on a single passage by Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher who lived in the sixth century B.C. In the first journal entry the student considers the meaning of the text by examining the meaning of difficult phrases and sentences. In the second the student thinks about the single philosophic concept of opposites. The last entry is more personal and open-ended. Although all three take on different tasks, in each the student develops a fuller understanding of the passage and how it relates to his or her own thinking.

Here is the passage by Lao Tzu.

The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, yet this is only the ugly; the whole world recognizes the good as the good, yet this is only the bad.

Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;
The difficult and the easy complement each other;
The long and the short off-set each other;
The high and the low incline towards each other;
Note and sound harmonize with each other;
Before and after follow each other.

Therefore the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words.

The myriad creatures rise from it yet it claims no authority;
It gives them life yet claims no possession;
It benefits them yet exacts no gratitude;
It accomplishes its task yet lays claim to no merit.
It is because it lays claim to no merit
That its merit never deserts it.

Lao Tzu, founder of the Chinese religion of Taoism, was author of the *Tao Te Ching*.

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Journal Entry 1 (Finding the Meaning of the Text)

This passage seems like a poem built on contradictions and paradoxes. The problem in understanding this passage seems to be to see how these contradictions and opposites can make sense. Lao Tzu begins this passage by stating that what is seen as beautiful is really ugly and that what is recognized as good is really "only the bad." While these statements seem confusing at first, his use of the phrase "the whole world recognizes . . ." before both good and beautiful suggests that the world does not recognize true beauty or true goodness. Most people, he seems to say, do not have a correct idea of either morality or beauty, so we should not trust their opinions or perceptions.

Later, the author lists a series of opposites such as "something and nothing," "difficult and easy," "long

and short," and "high and low." In very poetic fashion, he states that each of these contradictory terms is somehow involved in the other: "something and nothing produce each other," "the long and the short off-set each other," and so on. These paradoxes make us think about how supposedly opposite things are actually similar. Long and short are both about length, and actually they help define each other, for without knowing what is long, how could you know what is short?

Finally, Lao Tzu writes about a "deed that consists in taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words." This mysterious deed is something that gives life to "the myriad of creatures" yet "claims no authority"—something that "accomplishes its task" yet it "claims no merit." These final statements appear illogical because what kind of deed is not done and what teaching has no words? It seems that this kind of mysterious deed is something he is recommending to us. But it is also a puzzle as to what we should do. How can we follow his recommendation if we don't take action?

The three major parts of this passage contain three different kinds of statements that illustrate the principles of Taoism that we have been studying in class. The first part of the poem suggests that the majority of people don't perceive reality correctly, the second suggests that things we consider opposite are actually connected (like Yin and Yang), and the third suggests that we need to find a way of acting which does not try to control situations, that blends into its surroundings. All of these points go along with the philosophy of Lao Tzu and illustrate some of the important principles at the heart of his teachings.

Journal Entry 2 (Philosophical Interpretation)

The assigned reading by Lao Tzu touches on a number of the philosophical questions we have been studying this term. One of the most important subjects he treats is the nature of opposition. By including a series of opposite terms—such as something/nothing, difficult/easy, long/short, and high/low—and asking us to consider the way they are connected to each other, Lao Tzu forces us to reexamine our conception of what it means to be an "opposite." For Lao Tzu, opposites are not things that are unrelated, as they are for most of us, but things

that are closely related to and cannot exist without each other.

As an example of this principle, we can look at the opposition between "cold" and "hot." We generally consider these terms to be opposites, but, in reality, they can only have meaning in reference to each other. Something that is cold is something that is not hot, and vice versa. If we were to remove either of these concepts from our society, we would also have to remove the other, since, if nobody had any idea of what it meant to be hot, they could not possibly understand what it means to be cold, since coldness is really nothing more than the absence of heat.

Maybe what Lao Tzu is trying to get across in this passage is that, if we want to experience things in life that we consider "good," we must also be willing to experience things that we consider "bad," since all of the concepts that make up this opposition depend on each other. Many people think it would be nice to live in a world without cold, darkness, ugliness, falsehood, and evil. However, what Lao Tzu says to these people is that, without these things, there could never be any warmth, light, beauty, truth, or goodness.

On the other hand, it may be that he thinks we are too concerned with either side of the opposites. Maybe it doesn't matter so much whether something is hot or cold or if it is beautiful or ugly, because each are alike, as he says. This would certainly fit with his ideas about not taking action and not using words. That is, we shouldn't try to make things one thing or another, but just take them as they are.

Journal Entry 3 (Personal Response)

I found this passage by Lao Tzu to be very confusing. All of his talk about something being nothing and long being short seemed like a lot of philosophic mumbo-jumbo. The last part of the poem, about something that "gives people life yet claims no possession" and "benefits them yet exacts no gratitude" was even more confusing, since it was difficult to understand what this "It" was. I had to read the whole passage three or four times before I started to understand it at all, and I'm still not sure that I have it right.

But, after I read it over and over again, I started to see a few of the things that he seemed to be saying. In the first half of the poem especially, I think that Lao Tzu wants us to see that words like "difficult" and "easy," or "high" and "low" aren't always opposites. In fact, they are words that can refer to the very same thing depending on who is speaking. For example, I am very good at English and not very good at math, so what is easy to me (like writing a paper) may be very difficult for someone else, and what is difficult for me (like balancing a checkbook) may be a snap for them. This difference does not mean that either one of us is right in our perceptions of what is hard or easy, just that our perceptions are different.

I can think of lots of times when I have used a word in a way that seemed clear, only to find out that the person I was talking to understood something very different. A lot of times, this kind of misunderstanding leads to arguments because one person wants to prove that their idea is the right one. I think that one of the most important things that Lao Tzu teaches us is that perceptions can be different without anyone being right or wrong.

Thinking About Student Writing



1. What purpose does each student have in writing the journal entry? How do the purposes differ? Do the purposes in any way overlap or converge?
2. In each of the three journals, which terms or phrases do each of the students find most puzzling? Which do they find most revealing? How do the three students focus attention differently?
3. What interpretation or conclusion does each student come to? Are these conclusions similar or consistent? How do they differ? In what way do the differences in conclusion arise from different purposes, different focuses of attention, and different ways of thinking about the passage from Lao Tzu?

In each journal entry, the personal reflection was framed by the reading assignment and the journal writing assignment. Within that assigned frame, students pursued their own ways of thinking about the ideas. As they saw what they wrote, they could recognize issues that concerned and puzzled

them, which they might want to follow up on, and how and whether their interest in philosophy was developing.

The teacher, reading the journals later, responded by using student examples in class to create more engaging discussions, by moving the class discussion toward issues and concerns expressed by students, by suggesting readings the students might find relevant, and by returning personal comments to the journals. The journal changed the general dynamic of the class.

The journal also provides a place for you to test out ideas that you might use in later, more formal assignments. If the instructor reads and comments on your journal, you can use the feedback to focus and develop your ideas further. You can even use the journal to ask the instructor to clarify the assignment or respond to your ideas.

Guidelines for Journals

In assigning journals, teachers usually discuss their expectations and may provide examples from previous classes. Beyond the formal or informal guidelines your teachers establish, consider the following general suggestions for using journals:

1. *Write as though talking to yourself or a close friend.* The more you find the level of language that is closest to the way you think personally, the more you will be able to make the connection between what you are learning and those ideas and experiences that are closest to you.
2. *Dare to be original — Dare to be stupid — Dare to get involved.* Don't censor what you are thinking ahead of time. A direction that at first looks and feels either outrageous or silly may turn into something quite focused, respectable, and strong as you work through your ideas.
3. *Don't be afraid to argue.* If your ideas begin with a negative reaction to what you read, express that negative thought. The criticism may become more focused, fully developed, and forceful as you work through what you think. You may find that your first negative reaction is only an initial resistance that you overcome as you think through the reading, or that it is leading to an important idea in itself. In any case, since this is a personal journal, a candid expression of dislike will not immediately require you to get involved in a major public debate. Moreover, in the academic world argument and disagreement are not necessarily insults or rudeness; they can be ways of cooperating in making ideas better and advancing knowledge.
4. *Make connections to other ideas, personal experiences, other courses, and readings.* Specific examples and more general ideas can help illuminate each other. As you see how one idea or experience relates to another, you start to expand your understanding of both things. Through comparisons you can start to see more details in both and distinctions between the two. You can find general patterns or conceptual links. You may start seeing how

even more ideas and experiences may be connected to create a broader vision of the subject.

5. *Try new ways of saying things.* Find ways to discuss what you are reading, experiencing, or thinking that differ from your previous ways of writing. You will then see events in different perspectives and make more connections among ideas. A useful approach is to put material in different frames, as in describing a historical event in legal terms. Or you could describe the feelings of a character using a sentimental, emotional vocabulary that the character uses, but which is totally alien to you. There are many other interesting ways of saying things. You can make lists of political strategies described in different campaigns in different parts of the textbook, or draw diagrams showing how two species of plants might have similar leaf structure. Varied kinds of representations may help tap more deeply into your way of thinking and may provide novel ways for you to expand your thoughts.

6. *Keep your pen moving.* Since a journal is not a formal public presentation, you don't need to worry if everything makes sense or is stated well. Keep on writing, even if you feel you have little to say. As your pen moves, one word may lead to another, one thought may touch off a deeper or more interesting one. Don't let temporary breaks or distractions break your mental link with the ideas unfolding on the journal page. Trust the process of writing.

7. *Follow through on your thoughts and keep extending them.* It is easy once you have an interesting idea to step back, admire it, and say that's enough for today. But an idea identified in a few sentences or a paragraph may be the opening to something much bigger and broader, so stopping after your first statement will not take you as far as you may be able to go. Find ways to continue with the thought. Perhaps you might explain each part in greater detail, find an instance where the idea would apply, or locate a good example of it. You could compare it to some alternate point of view. You can ask where the idea specifically links up with the things you have been reading. If you find yourself stuck on how to expand your idea, make up an appropriate question and then try to answer it.

8. *Read back in the journal, reflecting on what you have thought and how you are using the journal.* This reflection will lead you to explore your thoughts in greater depth, see patterns, locate areas of interest you want to explore, remember your best ideas, and use your journal even more effectively. You may then want to make a new entry commenting on what you found.

9. *Make writing the journal a regular habit.* If you set a time every day for writing journals, you will get better at it. Thoughts will come. You will also come to pay attention to the stray relevant thoughts that occur in the course of the day, as you say to yourself, "I have to remember that for when I write my journal tonight."

You may, of course, keep a journal even when none is assigned. Since it is time-consuming to keep up with a journal every day in every course, you

might want to keep a single journal, writing about whichever course or experience each day is most on your mind. Or you may choose to keep journals for those one or two courses in which you are most involved. By articulating your ideas and being able to look them over on paper, you will be able to take them farther. Moreover, you will have more developed things to say in class, and you may want to speak to the teacher after class about some thought you are developing in your journals. Teachers generally respond positively to any student interested enough in their course to keep a journal.

Another approach is to target a single course in which you are having difficulty getting involved. By keeping a journal, you may start to find a way to become more interested. You may figure out just why you don't find much in the course or have trouble with it. Then you can use this knowledge to address and, perhaps, resolve the problem.



NEWS FROM THE FIELD

Richard Rodriguez's Reading Journal

In his autobiography *Hunger for Memory*, Richard Rodriguez describes his early attempts at reading and writing about the great classics of literature. Though he did not know it at the time, young Rodriguez was using many of the strategies of the reading journal in his early childhood education. Even though his early approaches to reading later seemed to him a bit naive, his reading notebooks gave him the chance to express and develop his thoughts about his reading. As he started to sense that there was more to reading than he was able to express, looking back on his early journals helped focus his dissatisfaction and drive him on to find more mature ways of understanding. After all, only by recognizing that there was something more to his reading than he was able to say could he challenge himself to deeper views.

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From Richard Rodriguez. *The Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (New York, Bantam, 1982) 62.

Assignments

JOURNALS FOR YOUR SELF, JOURNALS FOR YOUR COURSES

1. For two weeks keep a daily journal about the interesting, admirable, or odd things you come across in college. You may comment on people, ideas that occur to you, ideas and information from assigned books, comments from teachers or classmates, or anything else that attracts your attention.
2. Select one of your courses in which you do a substantial amount of reading. For two weeks keep a journal in which you respond to ideas and information you come across in that reading. Try to connect the reading material with ideas, concerns, or experiences you have had outside the course.
3. The following passages all reflect on the role of reading and learning in people's lives. Use them to prompt your own thoughts about your own experience. Write a journal entry on one of the following passages about learning and literacy.



A. From Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* (New York: Free Press, 1989). Mike Rose, a noted teacher of writing, describes his own uninspiring experience as a student in an unchallenging situation.

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B. From *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Penguin, 1968). Malcolm X describes how he got his real education through reading when he was in prison for armed robbery.

My alma mater was books, a good library. Every time I catch a plane, I have with me a book that I want to read — and that's a lot of books these days. If I weren't out here every day battling the white man, I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity — because you can hardly mention anything I'm not curious about. I don't think anybody ever got more out of going to prison than I did. In fact, prison enabled me to study far more intensively than I would have if my life had gone differently and I had attended some college. I imagine that one of the biggest troubles with colleges is that there are too many distractions, too much panty-raiding, fraternities, and boola-boola and all of that. Where else but in prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day? (275)

C. From Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). Alan Bloom complains that students today are harmed by not being exposed to the great thinkers. As a result they are left to get their ideas from popular entertainment.

Lack of education simply results in students' seeking for enlightenment wherever it is readily available, without being able to distinguish between the sublime and trash, insight and propaganda. For the most part students turn to the movies, ready prey to interested moralisms such as the depictions of Gandhi or Thomas Moore — largely designed to further passing political movements and appeal to simplistic needs for greatness — or insinuating flattery of their secret aspirations and vices, giving them a sense of significance. *Kramer vs Kramer* [a 1978 movie starring Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep] may be up-to-date about divorces and sex roles, but anyone who does not have *Anna Karenina* or *The Red and the Black* [classic nineteenth-century novels, by Leo Tolstoy and Stendhal, respectively] as part of his viewing equipment cannot sense what might be lacking, or the difference between an honest presentation and an excuse in consciousness-raising, trashy sentimentality, and elevated sentiment.

D. From Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard discusses how information and knowledge have become part of the economic system of production.

It is widely accepted that knowledge has become the principal force of production over the last few decades; this has already had a noticeable effect on the composition of the work force of the most highly developed countries and constitutes the major bottleneck for the developing countries. In the postindustrial and postmodern age, science will maintain and no doubt strengthen its preeminence in the arsenal of productive capacities of the nation-states. Indeed, this situation is one of the reasons leading to the conclusion that the gap between developed and developing countries will grow even wider in the future.

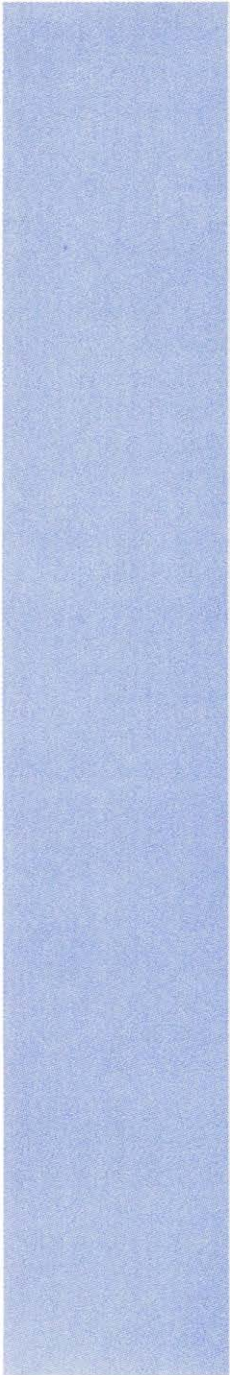
But this aspect of the problem should not be allowed to overshadow the other, which is complementary to it. Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major — perhaps the major — stake in the worldwide competition for power. It is conceivable that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information, just as they once battled in the past for control over territory, and afterwards for control of access to and exploitation of raw materials and cheap labor. A new field is opened for industrial and commercial strategies on the one hand, and political and military strategies on the other. (4–5)

E. From Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). The novelist Zora Neale Hurston describes some of the reading that moved her deeply when she was a child.

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Writer Zora Neale Hurston's (1891–1960) best-known works are her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

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Electronic Discussion Groups

Computer networks have brought new possibilities of personal communication. Individuals and people sharing a special interest can now communicate locally and internationally. For teachers designing courses, these networks allow greater access to more materials, give students more chances for interaction, and allow students to develop individualized interests and knowledge. At the present, electronic communication has been used in education to supplement traditional channels of communication, but over time more and more discussions, lectures, readings, and projects are likely to be mediated through electronic means. These trends are already well under way.

A basic kind of electronic communication is electronic mail (e-mail) — simply a message sent from one computer terminal to another over some network or telephone line. The message can flow from one office to the next, from a computer laboratory to a professor's office, from your home computer via modem to a central university computer (where other classmates can log on), or from your computer to an international network of people interested in similar subjects. It is a kind of electronic phone message but with certain advantages. You don't have to wait until it is convenient for the other person to be at the other end of the line — you can send the message whenever you want, and the other person can read and respond whenever he or she wants. You can also send the message to several people or a whole group on an electronic list simultaneously. Further, in many systems you can send long documents as well as short messages, so that, for example, in the middle of writing your paper, you can e-mail a question to your teacher and attach a rough draft of the relevant section; the teacher, when he or she next checks e-mail, can then get back to you with a quick response to help you with revision.

Within the context of courses, e-mail can facilitate communication between teacher and student and among students. Increasingly teachers provide students with their e-mail addresses and sometimes hand out e-mail directories for the entire class. On the most basic level, this access lets you ask teachers questions about the assignments or ideas you have. Similarly, e-mail allows you to contact classmates between classes to ask questions, coordinate projects, set up meetings, share notes, and even collaborate in writing assigned group reports.

Since details of local computer systems vary and are developing rapidly, this chapter offers no specific directions. Moreover, because interfaces are getting simpler and more user-friendly, soon most systems will probably be almost self-explanatory. Generally, however, once you log on, a simple command will show which messages are waiting for you to read and another simple command will allow you to reply or write a new message. Once you are in a message-writing mode, you are presented with a memo format, where you fill in the e-mail address you want the message sent to, the addresses of anyone who should receive a copy, and a topic headline. Then, in the appropriate space, you type in your message. Depending on the system,

you may be limited in the length of the message and on the format you must follow. Moreover, the simplicity and means of editing your message will depend on the system you are working with, although these are getting easier to use every day.

E-mail can be sent out to individuals at their individual addresses or to groups whose addresses are gathered in group addresses known as *lists*. *List-serves* are the central computers through which all the mail to a list is routed. On most mailing systems you can also make your own group-mailing list by creating what is known as a *group alias*; then whenever you send mail to the group alias it will go to all the individuals who are part of it. Through slightly different procedures messages also can be posted to *electronic bulletin boards* and *newsgroups*, which anyone can then access and read at a later time.

Local Area Networks and Class Discussions

Electronic communication offers new ways to carry on class discussions as well, and teachers are increasingly using them in courses. Local area networks (LANs) allow communication among a limited number of terminals, and electronic classrooms are increasingly hooked up in LANs. Through LANs teachers can supervise individual work from a central location or can make an individual student's work available on all students' terminals or on a central display screen for general discussion. These procedures are particularly useful in writing classes.

Networks also allow messages to be displayed on all terminals, making it possible for all students sitting at their separate terminals to talk with each other. The teacher may begin an electronic discussion by presenting a question to consider, posing a problem to be solved by the class, or posting on the network a text to be discussed by the class. Students then post their comments, responding to questions or to the comments of other students as the discussion unfolds, just as in an ordinary discussion.

Such electronic discussion has proven to be extremely involving for students. All students can respond simultaneously without worrying about waiting until being called on or interrupting each other, and all can develop extended answers that are thought through, without the pressure of holding the floor in a classroom. Moreover, because all students can examine each other's comments at length, look back on them, and write in response to any comment instead of just the most recent things said, comments can be more directed from one student to another. In this manner students can develop their own thinking and responses in a less intimidating setting, and at the same time gain large amounts of feedback and become part of an involved discussion. At the end of class students can obtain a transcript of the day's session in either electronic or paper form. These archival transcripts may be useful as starting points for more formal essays on the subjects discussed.

Because such electronic discussions frequently create their own dynamics, with little need for direct and constant teacher intervention, teachers can

take a less central role, and students in responding to each other are not under constant pressure of evaluation and communicating with the teacher. Teachers sometimes decrease the pressure further by allowing the students to use pseudonyms so that no one knows who is the source of any comment.

To create opportunities for further communication in group projects, teachers can set up specific structures for interaction using special software. For example, small electronic discussion groups can be set up for work teams. In these teams each student is expected to comment on the drafts of the other students' papers, and the other students are then to revise in light of students' comments. Software programs such as *Storyspace*, *Commonspace*, *Commentary*, and *Engineer's Notebook* allow students to attach messages to each other's messages or to comment on a shared text.

Electronic Links

Messages may be distributed through various kinds of networks. A LAN links up all the computers and terminals within a single classroom, building, or business or college. These local networks may then be hooked into a large international network known as the *Internet*, which links up universities, businesses, governments, and private users around the world. In recent years it has grown explosively and no doubt will continue to change rapidly.

Electronic mail (or e-mail), one of the main uses of the Internet, allows you to keep in contact with friends and people of similar interests both on campus and throughout the world. Electronic discussion groups are an especially good way to explore your interests, articulate your own thoughts, come in contact with other people's thoughts on these subjects, and get others' responses to your own thoughts. These discussion groups, which are organized in listserve, newsgroup, and bulletin board formats, cover a wide range of topics, from environmental concerns and political action to science fiction fan clubs and guitar-playing technique. The World Wide Web, which we will discuss as an informational source in Chapters 7 and 11, is also becoming a site for personal expression and interaction, especially as individuals create home-pages, which present an identity for others to visit and offer links to other pages that the individual finds interesting.

Whereas the Internet provides many opportunities for out-of-class exploration, some teachers may encourage you to log on to specific subject-related bulletin boards, discussion groups, and listserves. Discussion groups allow anyone who logs on to initiate comments or questions or to follow up on previous comments, as long as they remain relevant to the topic and format defined for that board or network. Often there will be specific *Netiquettes* (or network etiquettes) defined for participation (see page 92).



Brief Guide to Netiquette

Although most of the traffic on the Internet is unregulated and unmonitored, members of the electronic community have developed a set of informal rules, or network etiquette, collectively referred to as “netiquette,” to govern private and public correspondence on the Internet. Most netiquette conventions are simply the rules of polite conversation moved into the electronic community; however, there are a number of rules that are unique to the e-mail networks, and first-time users often violate the rules of netiquette innocently when they begin posting to newsgroups or discussion lists. A naive electronic mistake will usually be tolerated by more experienced users; however, flagrant and repeated violations of netiquette, when reported to local systems administrators, can jeopardize a computer user’s Internet privileges. Below are some of the most common netiquette conventions.

1. Always remember that the people you are responding to are human beings and that electronic communications usually can’t convey your precise intentions. Be sensitive to the fact that what to you may seem like a reasonable, dispassionate objection may be taken as a personal attack, while, on the other hand, posted messages (known as *posts*) that you consider hostile and sarcastic are probably not intended to be so. Also, avoid writing in ALL CAPS except for special emphasis; this is generally seen as the Internet version of shouting.
2. Keep posts and messages short and to the point, and avoid posting unnecessarily. Most readers of the newsgroup have a limited amount of time to devote to electronic networking, and many home users must pay a fee for every message they receive. Also avoid having extended private conversations on public bulletin boards, posting messages that do not fit with the focus of the newsgroup, and quoting large blocks of a previous post in a response.
3. Never forward private correspondence to a newsgroup or to another individual without permission of the author; this is considered extremely bad netiquette. At the same time, remember that it is easy for someone else to forward your e-mail if he or she wants to. Anything you write to anyone could potentially be read by hundreds of thousands of people within minutes of your posting it. So it is a good idea not to say anything on e-mail — especially in a public forum — that you would not want generally attributed to you.
4. Always sign your posts, and never try to remove your name or address from your header. Don’t post to newsgroups anonymously or use anonymous mail to threaten or harass others. Anonymous postings and letters are considered extremely rude, and could very possibly cause you to lose your e-mail privileges.

5. Do not use newsgroups to post unauthorized commercial announcements. A number of USENET groups are specifically designed to advertise certain items for sale. Use these when appropriate, but do not use other groups or mailing lists to advertise products or services for sale. Occasionally, the Internet has been used to forward illegal chain letters or advance pyramid schemes. Such actions are almost always dealt with severely by newsgroup moderators and systems administrators.

The Reflective and Reflected Self

As you find ways to state and develop your thoughts in relation to what you are learning in college, your sense of who you are in college, why you are there, and what you are gaining from your various studies will grow. Reflecting on your situation, learning, and interests will focus your concerns, consolidate your knowledge, and direct your energies. Moreover, you can look back on what you say to gain a conscious awareness of where you are going.

Even further, you get the stimulus of responses, challenges, and questions — all of which give you more to think about and respond to. Since others' challenges and questions are responses to what you have shared, their comments are as relevant to you as they can be. In seeing how others respond to your thinking, you come to understand how your thoughts are reflected through other people's perceptions and minds. In seeing how you are reflected through the people around you, you can gain an even deeper insight into where you are and how you are coming into being in that place.



After exploring the local and Internet resources available to you, identify several bulletin boards, newsgroups, or listserves that speak to your interests. Log on to two or three of them and follow them for several days. Find out if they have a FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) List, and read through it if they have one. After you get a sense of the discussions, post a comment on one of them.