
1

Coming to Terms

A few weeks ago my old friend Dick Lower sent me this huge pile of paper, saying that, as I am a voracious collector of curios and suchlike, perhaps I should have it. . . . How is a mere chronicler such as myself to transmute the lead of inaccuracy in these papers into the gold of truth?

—Iain Pears, *An Instance of the Fingerpost*

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

In his short story “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” Jorge Luis Borges tells of an obscure modern artist who decides to rewrite a passage from *Don Quixote*, the famous seventeenth-century novel by Miguel de Cervantes. What makes this goal interesting, and more than a little crazy, is that Menard doesn’t want simply to copy or transcribe the *Quixote* but instead “to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.” And to make matters even more difficult, he resolves to do so without referring back to the text of the *Quixote* or conducting any research on Cervantes.

To be a popular novelist of the seventeenth century in the twentieth seemed to Menard to be a diminution. Being, somehow, Cervantes,

and arriving thereby at the Quixote—that looked to Menard less challenging (and therefore less interesting) than continuing to be Pierre Menard and coming to the Quixote *through the experiences of Pierre Menard*.

Intertexts

Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), 88–95.

It’s an absurd project, to write as your own part of a book that has already been written by someone else, and one that the narrator of Borges’s story (who seems no less eccentric than Menard) admits was never completed. And yet, when the narrator rereads *Don Quixote* as though it were written not by Cervantes but by his friend, he finds that while the two versions are (of course) “verbally identical,” the one composed by Menard seems “almost infinitely richer”—since one is no longer reading a romantic novel from another time and place but a contemporary text written *as if* it were such a work. Why would someone write or read such an odd text? Well, as the narrator observes, “ambiguity is richness.”

Projects

Rereading Borges

Read “Pierre Menard” with the aim of assessing my use of it here. What aspects of this short fiction do I emphasize? What do I gloss over or omit? How might you add to or counter my reading of Borges?

There are few things harder to do than to explain a joke without seeming a bore, and I am aware that I have started this chapter by trying to do just that. “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” offers pleasures to its readers that no summary can replicate, as Borges subtly and affectionately mocks the wild ambitions of writers, the pretensions of critics, and the backstage politics of the literary world. And certainly it’s hard to take either Menard or his friend and biographer as seriously as they take themselves. But even still, I think that for all its ironies, Borges’s story also hints at a theory of reading—which

is that to understand a text you need, in a way, to rewrite it, to take the ideas and phrasings of its author and turn them into your own. Texts don't simply reveal their meanings to us; we need to *make* sense of them. Like Menard, each of us comes at what we read through our own experiences and concerns, and so each of us makes a slightly different sense of the texts we encounter. We all write our own *Quixote*—at least to some degree. There is no such thing as a completely accurate and objective summary, a view from nowhere. All readings are interested (including my own here of Borges).

But if you cannot be neutral as a reader, you can strive to be fair and self-reflective. This is why I find it helpful to think of the kind of rewriting in which you strive to represent the work of another, to translate the language and ideas of a text into words of your own, as a *coming to terms*—since, among other things, the phrase suggests a settling of accounts, a negotiation between reader and writer. In coming to terms you need both to give a text its due and to show what uses you want to make of it. You are not simply re-presenting a text but incorporating it into your own project as a writer. You thus need not only to explain what you think it means but to say something about the perspective from which you are reading it. In coming to terms with the work of others, then, you also say a good deal about who you are as a writer, about your own interests and values.

Of course, the idea of coming to *terms* also emphasizes that we are dealing here with words, with connecting your language to that of the texts you are reading. Such work involves a dialectic between paraphrase and quotation. On the one hand, to make strong use of the work of another writer, you need to be able to restate what she or he has to say in your own terms, to offer your own paraphrase of her or his project. On the other hand, you also need to attend closely to the specific features of the texts you deal with, to note and respect their key moves and phrasings—or you run the risk of turning every text you read into a version of what you already want to say.

In coming to terms with a text by another writer, then, it seems to me that you need to make three moves:

- Define the *project* of the writer in your own terms.
- Note *keywords* or passages in the text.
- Assess the *uses and limits* of this approach.

I will discuss these three moves in detail in the rest of this chapter. Before I do so, though, I need to say that simply because this is the first chapter doesn't mean that coming to terms with other texts is always the first thing you need to do as an academic writer. There are few things more tedious to read than an essay in which a writer spends so much time carefully summarizing and restating the work of others that, in the end, you're left unsure about what he or she actually wanted to bring to the conversation. Good writers thus often draw quickly on terms and ideas from other thinkers. In writing an academic essay, though, there is usually a set of texts and perspectives that you need to consider at some length so that you can define your own views in relation to them. Such work is not always done at the start of an essay or in some other, closely demarcated section of it, like a "literature review"; instead, you are likely to find that you need to slow down and think through the views and phrasings of others at various points in a piece you are writing. And although I will keep my examples here brief, you can't always expect to come to terms with a text or a writer in the space of a paragraph or two. Some views and texts you encounter will almost surely seem to call for a much more sustained analysis and response. But even if executing them may sometimes become more complex, I think that the three central moves that you need to make in coming to terms with a text—defining projects, noting keywords, assessing uses and limits—stay the same.

Defining the Project of a Writer

"Who's against shorthand? No one I know. Who wants to be shortchanged? No one I know." So said the New Jersey poet and doctor William Carlos Williams to another doctor and writer, the psychiatrist Robert Coles. Williams's remark appears in an essay by Coles, "Stories and Theories," in which he warns against the damage that can be done when complex views and experiences are reduced to easy labels. And yet, to respond to another text you *have* to summarize it, put its key phrasings and ideas in some kind of shorthand. So how do you do that without shortchanging it, too?

The usual advice is to restate the "main idea" or "thesis" of a text.

Intertexts

Robert Coles, "Stories and Theories," in *The Call of Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

Such advice imagines a piece of writing as something fixed or static, as an argument that a writer has “constructed” or a position that she has “defended”—and which can thus be condensed and reified into something like a “thesis statement.” But there are many writers who don’t so much argue for a single claim or position as *think through* a complex set of texts and problems. Their books and essays offer not sharply defined positions but ways of talking about a subject. The questions to ask of such work draw on metaphors of movement and growth: What issues drive this essay? What ideas does it explore? What lines of inquiry does it develop? To try to reduce this kind of open-ended text to a single main idea or claim would almost certainly be to shortchange it.

Instead the question to ask is: What is the writer trying *to do* in this text? What is his or her *project*? A *project* is usually something far more complex than a main idea, since it refers not to a single concept but to a plan of work, to a set of ideas and questions that a writer “throws forward” (Latin, *pro* + *jacere*). The idea of a project thus raises questions of intent. A project is something that a writer is working on—and that a text can only imperfectly realize. (Of course, any text you write will also hint at possibilities of meaning you had not considered, imply or suggest things you had not planned. A text always says both less and more than its writer intends.) To define the project of a writer is thus to push beyond his text, to hazard a view about not only what someone has said but also what he was trying to accomplish by saying it.

An example may help here. In her book *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan shows how mainstream theories of psychology stumble in helping us understand why women respond to moral conflicts in ways that often differ from men. Gilligan doesn’t suggest that previous generations of psychologists were wrong but rather that their views of the self were shaped and limited by their focus on the development of men. And so here, for instance, is how she approaches a seminal essay by Sigmund Freud:

In 1914, with his essay “On Narcissism,” Freud swallows his distaste at the thought of “abandoning observation for barren theoretical controversy” and extends his map of the psychological domain. Tracing the development of the capacity to love, which he equates with maturity and psychic health, he locates its origins in the contrast between love for the mother and love for the self. But in thus dividing the world between

narcissism and “object” relationships, he finds that while men’s development becomes clearer, women’s becomes increasingly opaque. The problem arises because the contrast between mother and self yields two different images of relationships. Relying on the imagery of men’s lives in charting the course of human growth, Freud is unable to trace in women the development of relationships, morality, or a clear sense of self. This difficulty of fitting the logic of his theory to women’s experience leads him in the end to set women apart, marking their relationships, like their sexual life, as “a ‘dark continent’ for psychology.”

Intertexts

Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 24.

Freud’s “On Narcissism” (1914) is reprinted in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 14, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961).

The first thing I’d note about this passage is its generosity. Gilligan is describing a view that she feels is deeply flawed, that indeed she is writing her book in an effort to correct, but her goal here seems to be to offer an account of Freud’s thinking that he might have himself agreed with. Even the problem with his theory that she points out is one that Freud himself recognized, as Gilligan makes clear by quoting his comment about women remaining a “dark continent” for psychology. This isn’t to say that her view of Freud is disinterested. Gilligan is trying to clear space in this passage for her own study of women’s moral growth through showing how his theories are grounded in the experiences of men alone. In giving Freud his due, she lends a sense of weight to her own response to his work.

Gilligan does not so much summarize “On Narcissism” as describe Freud’s aims and strategies in writing it. The subject or actor of nearly every one of her sentences is Freud—whom Gilligan pictures as “swallowing his distaste” about theory, “extending his map” of psychology, “tracing the development” of love, “locating its origins,” and so on. In doing so, she describes “On Narcissism” less as a structure supporting a single main idea than as a series of moves that Freud makes as a writer. One strength of this approach is stylistic: We tend to find it easier to follow prose that offers a narrative than prose that elaborates a set of abstract propositions—and

Gilligan here offers us a brief story of ideas with Freud at its center. More important, to describe his plan of work, Gilligan needs to say something about Freud's *aims*, *methods*, and *materials*. This allows her, in her brief account of his essay, both to honor his project and to begin to point to some of its problems—through representing what he was trying to do (trace the origins of love), how he did it (examining the child's relationship with his mother), and where his data or insights came from (the early experiences of male children).

You can ask much the same questions in defining the projects of other writers:

- *Aims*: What is a writer trying to achieve? What position does he or she want to argue? What issues or problems does he or she explore?
- *Methods*: How does a writer relate examples to ideas? How does he or she connect one claim to the next, build a sense of continuity and flow?
- *Materials*: Where does the writer go for examples and evidence? What texts are cited and discussed? What experiences or events are described?

And, to follow Gilligan's lead once again, you need to ask and answer these questions in a generous mode. To make effective use of the work of other writers, you have to show the force of their thinking, to suggest in your rewriting of their work *why* they said what they said in the particular ways they said it. And the best way to do that is to pay close attention to how their texts are worded.

Noting Keywords and Passages

One mark of a strong academic writer is the ability to move from the global to the local, from projects to phrasings, from talking about a text as a whole to noticing moments of particular interest in it. To come to terms with a complex text you need to be able to shift levels in this way, to ground how you define the project of a writer by citing key passages from his or her text. Such quotations may often be short and pointed. If you return to Gilligan's paragraph on Freud, for instance, you'll note that she quotes the

language of his essay at only three points, and each time quite briefly: once to show that Freud was concerned that in “On Narcissism” he was entering the realm of “theoretical controversy,” another time to note the key concept of “object” relations, and a final time to show that he was aware that his views had turned the experiences of women into a “dark continent.” (In each case, the words quoted are Freud’s.) While these touches are light, they are also crucial: Delete them, and one might ask, “But is that really what Freud said?” Keep them, and even if you disagree with her account of Freud, you still need to admit that Gilligan has noticed something about his text and project.

There is a subtle but important distinction to make here: You don’t quote from a text to explain what it means in some neutral or objective way. *You quote from a text to show what your perspective on it makes visible.* If we all read a text in the same way, there’d be little need for us to argue over the meaning of its specific lines or phrasings. But academic writing is based on the idea that we read texts differently. Intellectuals often discuss books and articles that their readers are familiar with, and sometimes may even know quite well. But the interest of an academic essay usually has less to do with its subject than with the approach of its writer. You don’t need to reexplain a text to somebody who has already read it. But you can offer a different way of reading that text, to point out how your perspective allows you to notice something new about it.

In deciding when to quote, then, the question to ask is not *What is the writer of this text trying to say?* but *What aspects of this text stand out for me as a reader?* Quote to illustrate your view of a text, to single out terms or passages that strike you in some way as interesting, troubling, ambiguous, or suggestive. Weak academic essays are often marked by an overreliance on quotation, as the words of the authors quoted begin to drown out those of the person writing about them. You don’t want the writers you quote to do your work for you. You want the focus of your readers instead to be on your ideas, to draw their attention not to the texts you’re quoting but to the work you’re doing *with* those texts. And so, when what you need to do is to restate what a certain writer is trying to do, to represent her or his project, try to paraphrase the work as quickly and accurately as you can. Save quotation for moments that advance your project, your view of the text.

Or let me put it this way: Summarize when what you have to say about a text is routine and quote when it is more contentious. Here, for instance, is I. F. Stone, in *The Trial of Socrates*, pointing to what he sees as a key difference between the worldviews of the ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato:

Plato was a theorist, Aristotle a scientific observer. Aristotle prized practical over theoretical knowledge in dealing with human affairs. Aristotle had a strong bias in favor of experience and common sense. In contrast, Plato in a famous passage of *The Republic* proposed to limit his study of “the dialectic”—and thus the future rulers of his utopia—to those who could “let go of the eyes and other senses and rise to the contemplation of *to on*”—“pure being” or “being itself.” This would no doubt be a contemplative joy to the mystic, but it hardly offers guidance to the statesman, forced to deal with tangled affairs and obdurate human nature.

Aristotle takes issue with Plato at the very beginning of his own masterwork on philosophy, the *Metaphysics*. It starts off by saying, “All men naturally desire knowledge. An indication of this is our esteem for the senses.” Without them, and especially sight, Aristotle asks, how can we know and act?

Plato and Aristotle both wrote many works, and their thought has been the focus of an uncountable number of commentaries over the past 2,500 years. (Alfred North Whitehead once remarked that European philosophy in large part “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”) So there is no way

that Stone (or anyone else) could possibly “prove” that Plato was a theorist and Aristotle an observer—at least not in terms quite so simple. But I don’t understand that to be his aim in this passage. Rather, I think that what Stone wants to show is that there is a *way of looking* at Plato and Aristotle that is both reasonably fair to their work and useful to his own project. (He goes on later in his book to link Plato’s bent for

Intertexts

I. F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), 13.

Stone quotes from the Loeb Classical Library editions of both Plato and Aristotle.

Whitehead’s remark has itself been quoted (and often misquoted) in hundreds of other texts. It first appeared in his *Process and Reality* (London: Macmillan, 1929), 39.

theory to the antidemocratic politics of his mentor, Socrates.) Stone makes the case for his approach through a pointed use of quotation, contrasting Plato's exhortation to "let go of the eyes and other senses" with Aristotle's "esteem for the senses." These sentences do not summarize the work of either philosopher. No sentence or two ever could. Rather, they illustrate Stone's particular view of the differences between Plato and Aristotle. They are salient moments from his perspective as a reader. They show him re-writing their work as part of his own project.

You'll have noticed that I say of Stone's approach that it seems "reasonably fair" to Plato and Aristotle. Those may seem waffle words, but I don't mean them as such. On the contrary, the question of what counts as a fair reading lies at the center of much academic argument. Several of Stone's critics felt that he failed to represent the work of Plato and Socrates very well, just as some of Gilligan's readers thought that she misunderstood Freud. Such disagreements are inevitable. The best you can do in interpreting a text is to try to show *why* you view a text in a certain way, both in terms of the values you bring to the text and the moments you notice in it. Your readers can then point to different values and different moments, and your ways of reading the text can then be contrasted and argued for, if not resolved.

You can see quotations as *flashpoints* in a text, moments given a special intensity, made to stand for key concepts or issues. A useful rule of thumb, then, is to quote only those phrases or passages that you want to do further work with or bring pressure upon—whose particular implications and resonances you want to analyze, elaborate, counter, revise, echo, or transform. Such pressure does not have to be skeptical; you can quote from a text in order to highlight the power of a particular way of phrasing an issue. For instance, here is Cornel West, philosopher and cultural critic, near the start of his book *Race Matters*:

The common denominator of these views of race is that each still sees black people as a "problem people," in the words of Dorothy I. Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women, rather than as fellow American citizens with problems. Her words echo the poignant "unasked question" of W. E. B. Du Bois, who, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), wrote:

They approach me in a half-hesitant way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town . . . Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

Nearly a century later, we confine discussions about race in America to the “problems” black people pose for whites rather than considering what this way of viewing black people reveals about us as a nation.

This paralyzing framework encourages liberals to relieve their guilty consciences by supporting public funds directed at “the problems”; but at the same time, reluctant to exercise principled criticism of black people, liberals deny them freedom to err. Similarly, conservatives blame the “problems” on black people themselves—and thereby render black social misery invisible or unworthy of public attention.

Making use of the words of Height, Du Bois, and others, West constructs a jazzlike progression that moves from “problem people” to “citizens with problems” to “how does it feel to be a problem?” to “the ‘problems’ black people pose” to “the problems” to “blame the ‘problems’ on black people themselves.” I especially admire the finesse with which he distinguishes between the “problems” that liberals see as besetting blacks and the “problems” that conservatives see blacks as causing. The net effect of these echoes-with-a-difference is to give the word *problem*, as it is used in discussions of race, a rich and disturbing complexity of meanings. West uses a series of quotations to pull the term out of general usage, as it were, and to grant it instead a particular history and meaning, to ask his readers to consider how race poses a specific and unusual sort of “problem” for us.

Intertexts

Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 2–3.

The Souls of Black Folk (1903) is reprinted in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). The passage quoted is found on p. 101. West does not provide a reference for the Height quotation.

Projects

Translating a Text into Your Own Terms

The next time you need to come to terms with a certain text in your writing, try approaching the task this way:

- Begin by restating the writer's project in your own words. Don't consult the text at this point; work instead from your memory and understanding of what its author was trying to do. Keep this summary to a paragraph or two.
- Return to the text to make a brief list of keywords used by its author.
- Then draw on both your summary and list of keywords to write an account of the text that makes use of both paraphrase and direct quotation.

The point here is to create an account of the text that does not simply rehearse what its author wrote but rather expresses your understanding of her project.

Quotation thus has two distinct uses in coming to terms with the work of another writer. On the one hand, it can serve as a *brake* on paraphrase. In quoting key passages from a text, you show respect for the specificity of its tone, ideas, and phrasings. You make it clear that you have not carelessly substituted its language with your own. On the other hand, quotation can *intensify* paraphrase. It allows you to scrutinize particular moments in a text—to suggest either the usefulness of a certain way of phrasing an issue (as West does with “problem”) or its limitations (as Gilligan does with Freud’s “dark continent”). I will return to this second use of quotation in the following chapters—since bringing pressure on a writer’s phrasings is a crucial aspect of forwarding, countering, or transforming her project. For now, though, I need to say a little more about *coming to terms* as a form of reckoning or negotiation.

Assessing Uses and Limits

We live in a culture prone to naming winners and losers, rights and wrongs. You're in or out, hot or not, on the bus or off it. But academics seldom write

in an all-or-nothing mode, trying to convince readers to take one side or the other of an argument. Instead their work assumes that any perspective on an issue (and there are often more than two) will have moments of both insight and blindness. A frame offers a view but also brackets something out. A point of view highlights certain aspects and obscures others. And so, in dealing with other writers, your aim should be less to prove them right or wrong, correct or mistaken, than to assess both the uses and limits of their work. That is to say, academic writing rarely involves a simple taking of sides, an attack on or defense of a fixed position, but rather centers on a weighing of options, a sorting through of possibilities.

In writing as an intellectual, then, you need to push beyond the sorts of binary oppositions (pro or con, good or evil, guilty or innocent) that frame most of the arguments found on editorial pages and TV talk shows. Intellectual writers usually work not with simple antitheses (either x or *not- x*) but with *positive opposing terms*—that is, with words and values that don't contradict each other yet still exist in some real and ongoing tension. For instance, I have suggested in this chapter that you need to deal with the work of others in ways that are both *generous* and *assertive*. These terms are not direct opposites, but neither are they congruent. Rather, they name different and competing values in writing that I believe you need to learn to negotiate. Or, for another example, you might look back at the piece on “Stories and Theories” by Robert Coles that I mentioned earlier. In that essay, Coles distinguishes between two kinds of discourse: *stories*, which we use in evoking the felt quality of events, and *theories*, which we use in analyzing their meanings. A story is not merely a bad version of a theory or vice versa. The two words describe distinct uses of language, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. They are positive opposing terms.

Academic writers often bring a cluster of texts and perspectives into this sort of positive opposition or tension. This is more complex and interesting work than simply taking sides in a debate, since it involves thinking through the potential uses of a number of positions rather than arguing for or against a fixed point of view. In coming to terms with a text, then, the key questions to ask have to do not with correctness but use. What does this text do or see well? What does it stumble over or occlude?

Here, for instance, is how John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, in their book on *The Social Life of Information*, approach the work of one of their colleagues:

Let us begin by taking a cue from MIT's Nicholas Negroponte. His handbook for the information age, *Being Digital*, encouraged everyone to think about the differences between atoms, a fundamental unit of matter, and bits, the fundamental unit of information. Here was a provocative and useful thought experiment in contrasts. Moreover, it can be useful to consider possible similarities between the two as well.

Consider, for example, the industrial revolution, the information revolution's role model. It was a period in which society learned how to process, sort, rearrange, recombine, and transport atoms in unprecedented fashion. Yet people didn't complain that they were drowning in atoms. They didn't worry about atom overload. Because, of course, while the world may be composed of atoms, people don't perceive it that way. They perceive it as buses and books and tables and chairs, buildings and coffee mugs, laptops and cell phones, and so forth. Similarly, while information may come to us in quadrillions of bits, we don't consider it that way. The information reflected in bits comes to us, for example, as stories, documents, diagrams, pictures, or narratives, as knowledge and meaning, and in communities, organizations, and institutions.

The strength of this passage hinges on that *moreover* near the end of the first paragraph. Brown and Duguid use this term to signal a complex stance toward Negroponte. They don't deny the suggestiveness of the contrast he draws between atoms and bits; in fact, they play with and elaborate upon it. But they also suggest that there is something that this contrast fails to make visible, or may even hide—something that has to do with the structures and contexts in which atoms and bits are always embedded. They thus neither simply endorse nor reject his perspective but point out its uses and limits. They “take a cue” from Negroponte, that is, not by simply restating his view of how

Intertexts

John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000), 15–16.

Brown and Duguid are discussing Nicholas Negroponte's *Being Digital* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

atoms and bits are different but by thinking more about their relationship and deciding that they can also be seen as similar. They come to terms with his work by showing both what he sees powerfully and what he fails to notice.

Indeed, you might use *moreover* as a catchword for much of the work of coming to terms with another text—in which you need not only to indicate what a writer does well but also to suggest what she or he has left undone. In arguing that academic writing needs to hold a number of competing views in tension, though, I don't mean to advocate tepid or bland prose. Rather, I am urging you to approach writing with an active mix of skepticism and generosity—both to look for gaps or difficulties in perspectives you admire and also to try to understand the strengths of those you don't. Form the habit of questioning your first responses: So, here's a text that seems to offer a compelling way of looking at an issue—what does it also bracket out of sight? Or, here's a text that seems curiously wrongheaded or obtuse—what might account for its seeming strangeness? what is its writer trying to accomplish? (If you really can't answer such questions, you're probably not dealing with a text that you can put to good use, since simply proving someone else wrong rarely advances your own thinking.) To forward the phrasings or ideas of other writers, you need to know what they can't do as well as what they can. And to counter the work of another, you need to recognize not just its limits but its strengths. I'll have more to say about those forms of rewriting in the next two chapters. My point here, though, is that to come to terms with a text, you need not only to restate its project but also to take its measure.

Projects

The Moves of Reviewing

Of the various moves I discuss in this book, coming to terms with a text is perhaps the only one that can often serve as the entire aim or purpose of certain kinds of writing—namely, of reviews, prefaces, cover or liner notes, blurbs and notices, annotated bibliographies, and the like. The whole point of such forms of writing is to describe and assess other texts.

In a consumer culture, such review texts are ubiquitous. You can find them in newspapers and magazines, on CD covers, book jackets, store posters, websites, and the like. Locate one and describe the moves its writer makes in presenting the text she or he is discussing. In what ways do these techniques align with or differ from the moves (for coming to terms with another text as *part* of a larger essay) that I have discussed here?

Quotation: Some Terms of Art

This is not a handbook but a text that tries to think through some ways of working as a writer with the words, images, and ideas of others. I will thus not review here the many and arcane rules for punctuating quotations and citing sources—which, to my point of view, have more to do with typing than writing and which, in any case, vary widely from one context to the other. The best advice I can offer you is to ask your teacher or editor what manual or style sheet you need to follow, buy a copy, and consult it carefully in preparing the final version of your work. There are plenty of details but few intellectual issues involved in compiling a list of references or works cited; it's the kind of thing you want to get right the first time. The same goes for citing sources and page numbers. Most academic disciplines now use some version of parenthetical or in-text citation rather than footnotes, in which you place key information about a text you've quoted (title, author, page number, etc.) in parentheses following the quotation. If a reader then wants to look up the text you've quoted, he or she can consult its fuller entry in your list of works cited. Exactly what information should go in these parentheses, in what order, with what sorts of punctuation, as well as where the parentheses themselves should be placed in your own sentence—the answers to such questions can once again vary widely from one context or discipline to the next. The only way to make sure you get it right is to learn what style sheet to use. After that, pretty much the only thing you need to do is to follow the format it lays out.

But how you actually go about incorporating other texts into your own prose can also say a good deal about the stance or attitude you want to take

Intertexts

Several academic disciplines publish their own guides to documenting sources. Among those most often used are:

Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook*, 8th ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 2016). (literature)

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009). (social sciences)

Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 8th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Often simply called *Turabian*, this manual offers a version of the format defined by the voluminous *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). (humanities)

Most good handbooks provide brief guides to the MLA, APA, and Chicago styles.

toward them and in ways that cannot be reduced to a simple matter of rules. There is, for instance, the question of how much you want to emphasize the *otherness* of the texts you quote, to what degree you want to make the difference between their language and yours visible on the page. The advice given by most writing manuals, it seems to me, urges you to downplay this sense of otherness, to quote in ways that work toward the illusion of a seamless text, incorporating the words of others as much as you can within your own sentences. On the other end of this spectrum is a text like the Vulgate Bible, which sets the words of Jesus in red type, separating them from the prose of the evangelists in a way that can be seen, literally, from across the room. My own sense, as I hope is suggested by the

look and feel of this book, is that you want to develop a flexible repertoire of forms of quotation, including:

- *Block quotes*: Setting or “blocking” off the text of another writer from your own. Most of the key examples in this book take this form. Block quotes are often indented from the main text and set in a different font and spacing. They are seldom framed with quotation marks. Block quotes tend to make the work of others highly visible in your writing. They are often used when you need to quote several lines from a work, but also, and more important, as a form of emphasis, as a way of saying that this is a text that you, as a writer, plan to return to and work more with.

- *In-text quotes*: Incorporating the words of another writer as part of your own text, while marking and framing your use of their work with quotation marks. In-text quotes are most often used to note and emphasize particular terms and phrasings, to add to and qualify paraphrase. They are usually brief, although you may sometimes want to quote a full sentence or two without giving it the weight of a block quote. The rules for punctuating in-text quotes are byzantine and contested, although the basic principle is simple enough: Punctuation creates distance. A quotation introduced by a colon or a comma, or one that stands on its own as a sentence, feels more separate from your words and thinking than one that is dropped into the flow of your own prose with little or no punctuation.
- *Scare quotes*: Putting quotation marks around a word to signal that it is not a term you would use yourself. Scare quotes are the visual marker of sarcasm. They often refer not to a specific moment in a text but to a more general usage of a term. Cornel West makes effective use of them in the passage I quoted previously, when he says, “This paralyzing framework encourages liberals to relieve their guilty consciences by supporting public funds directed at ‘the problems’ . . . Similarly, conservatives blame the ‘problems’ on black people themselves.” However, a little irony can go a long way. Often the best test is reading aloud. If you find yourself dropping your voice sententiously each time you reach a quoted term, consider limiting your use of scare quotes. Italics offer an alternative way of putting emphasis on a word without giving it a negative spin.
- *Epigraphs*: Setting a quotation at the head of a book, chapter, essay, or section of an essay. The term epigraph comes from the Greek, *epi* + *graphos*, “to write upon”; it thus refers literally to an inscription—as on a statue, gravestone, or building. Some of this meaning has carried over to its use in writing, as an epigraph is the one form of quotation that a writer is not expected to comment on. Rather, it is usually the epigraph that comments on the text that follows—that sets a tone or suggests a perspective,

sometimes quite obliquely. When done well, an epigraph can serve as a kind of poetic précis of a text, summing up its aim or scope—even if its full meaning does not always become clear until the piece has been read through and the epigraph considered a second time. Done less well, epigraphs can sometimes appear self-importantly literary, too erudite by half.

- *Allusions*: Leaving a brief quotation unmarked, in the expectation that readers will hear the echo of the other text in your own. The term derives from the Latin, *ad + ludere*, “to play with,” and suggests something more on the lines of a hint and a wink than a direct statement. Academic writing often routinely proceeds from direct quotation to a more mundane kind of allusion—as, for instance, when the work of a writer is introduced by means of a block quote, which is then followed by an analysis of key terms and passages that are quoted in text, and finally when those terms are used without quotation marks but still carrying a particular set of inflections and meanings. In *Race Matters*, for example, Cornel West follows the paragraph I’ve quoted with one that starts, “To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society.” By this point in his text, West has dropped the quotation marks from around *problem*, but his use of the term still clearly echoes those of Height, DuBois, and the “liberals” and “conservatives” that he has just cited. His prose alludes to a set of meanings that he no longer needs to quote.

Block quotes, in-text quotes, scare quotes, epigraphs, allusions—these are *terms of art*, words that the practitioners of a craft use to describe their work. In learning such terms, you acquire not simply a vocabulary but a sense of what distinctions matter in the practice of a craft. In this case the range of terms used to describe forms of quotation speaks to the key role that dealing with the work of others plays in academic writing. The value placed on representing other texts accurately is further shown by the set of practices that academics have developed to show when a writer has needed to alter

a quotation, however slightly—as with the use of ellipses (. . .) to mark a break in a quoted passage, of [brackets] to mark additions or changes made to a text, and of the notation (emphasis added) to indicate when terms in a passage have been italicized or otherwise highlighted. A strong use of the work of others is always grounded in a scrupulous care in citing their texts.



Coming to terms in some ways offers the clearest example of what I mean by *rewriting*. You come to terms with a text by translating its words and ideas into your own language, making them part of your own prose—not only re-presenting the work of another writer but also, at times, actually retyping it as you quote key terms and passages from a text. But I suspect that you will also find that in trying seriously to come to terms with another text, and especially in assessing its uses and limits, your focus as a writer soon shifts away from simply restating what that text has to say and toward the uses you can make of its concepts and phrases, or toward the gaps and problems you encounter in trying to do so. I will turn to such *forwarding* and *countering* moves in the next chapters.

Projects

Coming to Terms with Your Own Work-in-Progress

In chapter 5 I offer some ideas about how to apply the moves I discuss in this book to your own work as a writer. But you might also find it useful to begin to think now about how to come to terms with a piece while you are still in the process of drafting it.

The next time you complete the first full draft of a writing project, see if you can write a paragraph or two in which you describe your essay as it then stands. Don't think of yourself as writing a new introduction to your essay. Rather, imagine your task as coming to terms with your own work, representing your essay to someone who hasn't read it. In this brief piece, try to

- Define your aim in writing your draft.

- Comment on the present strengths and limits of your piece—those aspects or sections you’re pleased with and those you want to work more on.

Such reflective pieces can often be surprisingly hard to write. But that is why they are useful, since the difficulties you meet in trying to come to terms with a draft may point you toward work you need to do in revising it. You may find, for instance, in the early stages of a piece, that you’re not really sure yet what your aim in writing is—or that your aim is the fairly weak or uninteresting one of simply restating what some other writer has said. If so, you will then also know that you need to define your own project in writing more clearly. Or you might sense in the difficulties you have in mapping out an essay that there is something about your line of thinking that is not yet quite clear even to you—and thus that you need somehow to restructure your essay. Or you may realize that the texts you’re working with, or the passages you’re quoting from them, don’t really help you make the points that you want—and thus that you need to rethink the evidence for the position you want to take. In coming to terms with an early draft of a project, that is, you can begin to form a plan for revising it.
