

## On Unlearning

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When students enter our writing classes, they often bring with them a set of rules from high school that they use to define good writing. They know that every paragraph should start with a topic sentence that states the main point of the paragraph. And they know that all good essays have five sections or paragraphs: an introduction that states the essay's thesis; three descriptive body paragraphs, each of which discusses a different example that supports the essay's thesis; and a conclusion that restates what has been said in the previous sections. And finally, they are certain that no good essay ever uses the word *I*.

I—or rather we—suspect you know these rules well, since they've been repeated in writing classrooms for decades, with good grades going to those who follow them. But do they *really* produce good writing? Think about it: When was the last time you ran across a five-paragraph essay outside of school? Try looking for one in a news source, a magazine, a book, or even a collection of essays. You might find a modified version of one in an op-ed piece, but most of the writing you find will be organized quite differently. The five-paragraph essay, it turns out, is a very limited form, one best suited to the work of making simple claims and reporting or describing supporting evidence. (It's also easy to skim and easy to grade.)

In college classes, professors often expect students' writing to do a kind of work that is simply beyond the reach of the five-paragraph essay: contending with complexity. You may have had a professor who asked you to develop an argument by working with a handful of original sources, each with a competing point of view; or to support a new interpretation of a text not discussed in class; or to synthesize a semester's worth of lectures into a thoughtful reflection on a complex problem. When professors compose assignments like these, they assume you know how to use your writing to grapple with a genuine problem, puzzle, or question related to a course; they assume you've got something else in your quiver besides the formula for the five-paragraph theme.

So why don't we just give you a new set of rules, one that is capacious enough to provide directions for handling the range of writing tasks

college students confront—the response paper in introductory history, the seminar project in advanced economics, the seven-to-eight-page argument for a 300-level psychology or politics or anthropology class? As appealing as that solution is, it's not available to us, because there's not one set of rules for generating good writing that works within any single discipline, let alone across multiple disciplines. The reason for this is not that any judgment of writing quality is inevitably arbitrary, as is often supposed, but rather that writing quality is always a function of context. Thus, what makes for a good paper in a literature class doesn't always make for a good paper in a history class or an econ class, or perhaps even in another literature class taught by a different professor.

How, then, does anyone in any discipline learn how to write about complex challenges? The first step involves unlearning the rules that are at the core of the five-paragraph essay. Taking that first step may seem impossible. We can't unlearn how to walk or how to talk. These habits are so deeply ingrained that a catastrophe of some kind (either psychological or physical) is required to unseat them. And we can't unlearn how to ride a bike or how to swim; we may forget how to over time, but when we return to these activities after a long hiatus, our challenge is not to learn how to do them as if for the first time, but to remember what's involved in keeping the bicycle upright or our body afloat and moving through the water.

Writing is unlike these other activities because each act of writing is not a straightforward repetition of what you've done before. Writing something new requires that you make choices about why you're writing, whom you're writing for, what you think, and what you want your writing to accomplish. So when we say you should unlearn what you learned about writing in school, we mean that we want you to actively resist the idea that writing is governed by a set of universal rules that, if followed, will clearly communicate the writer's ideas to the reader. We can't tell you to forget what you've learned (that would have the same paradoxical effect as telling you not to think about an elephant); and we can't say you shouldn't have been taught the rules governing the five-paragraph essay because, within an educational system dominated by the industry of standardized testing, you must be able to demonstrate that you can produce writing that follows those rules. Rather, we are asking you to question the two assumptions behind the formula for the five-paragraph essay: first,

that the primary purpose of writing is to produce irrefutable arguments; and second, that the best writing is immediately understandable by all.

What do we propose in place of these assumptions? That you practice the habits of mind experienced writers exercise when they compose. Experienced writers tend to be curious and attentive. They choose to engage deeply with sources, ideas, people, and the world they live in. They are mentally flexible, self-reflective, and open to new ways of thinking, attributes that allow them to adapt to unfamiliar circumstances and problems. And they are persistent, resisting distraction and disappointment, accepting the fact that writing what hasn't been written before is hard work. When you commit yourself to practicing these habits—curiosity, attentiveness, openness, flexibility, reflectiveness, and persistence—you will also be committing yourself to making a habit of creativity, the practice of inventing novel and useful connections, compelling ideas, and thoughtful prose. As you delve into *Habits of the Creative Mind*, you'll see that we've designed the book to give you practice developing these habits. As you work your way through the book, you won't be working toward mastery of a formula for good writing; you'll be working on developing the habits of mind that increase your sensitivity to context and that allow you to use your writing to explore the unknown. You'll be practicing using your writing to show to others and yourself how your mind—not *any* mind, not *every* mind—works on a problem.

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## Practice Session One

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### Reflecting

When we tell students to unlearn the writing rules they learned in high school, they often ask for something—anything—to put in the place of those rules. We start our students on a path toward developing curious and creative habits of mind by telling them that their writing should show their minds at work on a problem. But what does that look like on the page?

Before you can answer that question for yourself, you need to know what kind of thinker you are. How does *your* mind work? What are your mental habits? How do you know? To answer these questions, pay attention over the course of a week to how you write and how you read.

Take notes every day on *everything* you read and write (not just in school or for school). Pay attention to all the times you process words: reading a page,

a sign, a cereal box, the screen of a phone or a computer; writing a note, a Facebook post, a text message, a school assignment, a journal entry. For each instance, take note of where and when you read or wrote. Was it quiet? Were you moving? Were you alone?

At the end of the week, consider the following questions and spend at least 30 minutes composing a reflective response about what you've observed. Is the way you read and write better described as a set of rules or as a set of habits? Whichever option you choose, explain why. If you were to teach someone to read and write *the way you do*, how would you do it? What standards would apply?

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## Practice Session Two

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### Reading

Select one of the readings included in this book and read it with an eye toward seeing the habits of the writer's mind at work on the page. Read the text through once and then review it, identifying evidence of the writer's habits of mind. Where do you see signs of curiosity, attentiveness, openness, flexibility, reflectiveness, persistence, and creativity?

Next, spend at least 30 minutes jotting down notes about the habits of mind on display in the reading you selected. What do the examples you've found tell you about how the writer thinks?

### Writing

The reading you chose to work with is obviously not a five-paragraph theme, and not just because it has far more than five paragraphs! Review the reading again and think about other ways the writer breaks what you thought were rules of writing. Then write an essay that considers why the writer made some surprising choices, writing in ways you thought were discouraged, or at least risky. What do these choices tell you about the writer's habits of mind?

### EXPLORE

Can curiosity and creativity be learned? Unlearned? Relearned? Francine Prose recalls learning to write—outside school—by becoming a close and careful reader. In two TED videos, Ken Robinson laments the value placed on standardization and conformity in schools in the United States and United

Kingdom and asks us to reimagine schools as environments that cultivate curiosity and creativity.

Prose, Francine. "Close Reading: Learning to Write by Learning to Read." *Atlantic*. 1 Aug. 2006. Web.

Robinson, Ken. "How Schools Kill Creativity." TED. Feb. 2006. Web.

———. "How to Escape Education's Death Valley." TED. April 2013. Web.

## On Confronting the Unknown

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In his book *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, Laurence Gonzales recounts the story of seventeen-year-old Julianne Koepcke who was seated next to her mother on a flight with ninety other passengers when the plane was struck by lightning, causing it to go into a nosedive. The next thing Koepcke recalled was being outside the plane, still strapped into her seat, hurtling earthward towards the canopy of the Peruvian jungle.

What would you think if you were in her place at that moment? What strikes Gonzales is Koepcke's recollection of her thoughts as she fell. Her mind was not filled with shrieking terror, or a hastily pulled together prayer, or feelings of regret. No, Koepcke remembered "thinking that the jungle trees below looked just like cauliflowers." She was moving into her new reality. She passed out while still falling, and when she regained consciousness sometime later, she was on the ground, still strapped into her chair. Her collarbone was broken. There was no sign of anyone else. She decided that the planes and helicopters she could hear flying above would never be able to see her because of the thickness of the tree canopy so she began to walk out of the jungle.

Central to Gonzales's thesis about resiliency is that those who survive a life-threatening crisis see the future as unmapped. Thus Koepcke, falling two miles upside down through a storm, didn't think the obvious thought—that her future was already clearly mapped out. Instead, she was struck by the appearance of the Peruvian forest from above. And when she came to later, having crashed through the canopy, she didn't think—or didn't only think—the obvious thought about what lay ahead for a seventeen-year-old girl without her glasses, walking alone in a jungle, barefoot, slapping the ground with her one remaining shoe to frighten off the snakes that she couldn't see well enough to avoid. She walked for eleven days while she was, as Gonzales described it, "being literally eaten alive by leeches and strange tropical insects." On the eleventh day, Koepcke found a hut and collapsed inside. The next day, as chance would have it, three hunters came by, discovered her, and got her to a doctor.

Gonzales is interested in this question: Why did Koepcke survive this crash, while "the other survivors took the same eleven days to sit down and die"? Gonzales identifies a number of reasons, besides blind luck, for Koepcke's survival. First, rather than follow rules, she improvised. Second, although she was afraid, as the other survivors surely were, she used that fear as a resource for action. And third, while many better-equipped travelers have succumbed to much lesser challenges, Koepcke had "an inner resource, a state of mind" that allowed her to make do with what the moment offered.

As Gonzales pursues his research further, he finds other traits that resilient people share in common: they use fear to focus their thoughts; they find humor in their predicaments; they remain positive. The list goes on, but the item that most interests us is Gonzales's admonition that to survive a crisis, one must "see the beauty" in the new situation:

Survivors are attuned to the wonder of the world. The appreciation of beauty, the feeling of awe, opens the senses. When you see something beautiful, your pupils actually dilate. This appreciation not only relieves stress and creates strong motivation, but it allows you to take in new information more effectively.

After we read this, it was hard not to ask: If it's possible for someone to be attuned to the wonder of the world when confronted by a situation that is *life threatening*, could writers in far less dire circumstances cultivate this attunement as a habit of mind?

Here's why this connection suggested itself to us: from our years teaching writing, we know how terrifying and humbling the confrontation with the blank screen and the flashing cursor can be—for beginning writers and experienced writers alike. This confrontation is not life threatening, of course, but it can nevertheless trigger fears: Do I have anything worth saying? Can I make myself understood? Will the struggle with the blank screen be worth it in the end? These questions arise because the act of writing, when used as a technology for thinking new thoughts, takes us to the edge of our own well-marked path and points to the uncharted realms beyond.

Ultimately, each time a writer sits down to write, he or she chooses just how far to venture into that unknown territory. To our way of thinking, the writing prompt, properly conceived, is an invitation to embark into unmapped worlds, to improvise, to find unexpected beauty in the challenges that arise. We know from experience, though, that learning to approach writing this way takes practice, and that without such practice, the writing produced in response to a prompt tends to reject whatever is unfamiliar and huddle around whatever is obvious and easiest to defend.

We have designed the prompts in this book to help you use your writing to bring you to the edge of your understanding, to a place where you encounter what is unknown to you. The more you practice using your writing in this way, the further you will be able to take your explorations; you'll find yourself moving from writing about what is unknown to you to what is more generally unknown, and then to what is unknowable. Making this journey again and again is the essence of the examined life; the writing you do along the way tracks your ongoing encounter with the complexity of human experience. The more you do it, the more you know; and the more you know, the more connections you can make as you work through your next encounter with what is unknown to you. You'll never make it to absolute knowledge, but the more you practice, the more comfortable you'll be with saying, "I don't know, but I'm sure I can figure it out."

Or so we say.

We can pose our position as a challenge: Can you make your writing trigger an inner journey that is akin to falling from a plane over the Amazon, with everything that seemed solid and certain just moments ago suddenly giving way, question leading to question, until you land on the fundamental question, "What do I know with certainty?"

We all can count on being faced with challenges of comparable magnitude over the course of our lives—the death of a loved one; the experience of aging, disease, separation, and suffering; a crisis in faith; a betrayal of trust. Writing, properly practiced, is one way to cultivate the habits of mind found in those who are resilient in moments of crisis: openness, optimism, calm, humor, and delight in beauty.

## On Looking and Looking Again

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“Pay attention!”

Walk the hallways of any elementary school, and it won’t be long before you hear this exasperated command. Over time, all students learn that what their teachers mean when they say “pay attention” is “sit still and be quiet.” The teachers know, of course, that there’s more to paying attention than being quiet, but what that “more” turns out to be is something that can’t be ordered into existence by the voice of another. So students learn early on how to get their bodies to behave in class, but getting their minds to behave is another matter.

The paradox at the beginning of the process of paying attention seems irresolvable: How does mental focus emerge out of chaos, the attentive mind out of distraction? How does anyone ever learn the inner work of paying attention?

Our answer is: by practice.

But what kind of practice? How does one practice a state of mind?

The poet William Blake offers some guidance on how to think about this paradox in the opening stanza of his poem “Auguries of Innocence”:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour

On a first reading, Blake’s stanza seems to offer a straightforward proposition about how to trigger a state of deep attentiveness: if you want X (to see the world in a grain of sand), then do Y (hold infinity in the palm of your hand). But if this is what it takes to pay attention, attentiveness of the kind Blake describes seems an impossibility, for how is one supposed to go about grabbing hold of infinity or experiencing “eternity in an hour”?

Perhaps we’ve misread the stanza. Perhaps Blake is making a statement both about what paying attention involves and what it makes

possible: "To see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower [is to] hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour." Read this way, Blake's verse is saying that, if you can learn to "see a world in a grain of sand" or "a heaven in a wild flower," you can gain access to realms beyond what you know and even beyond the limits of thought—you can reach the infinite and the eternal.

From Blake's poem we could conclude that the practice of writing poetry has trained Blake's mind to focus on the particular (a grain of sand, a wildflower) until it leads to something much bigger (a world, a heaven) and onward to realms beyond measure (infinity, eternity). More generally, we can say that Blake shows us that the attentive mind generates insights, connections, and beautiful objects and moves by inference, analogy, and metaphor.

Does this mean that, instead of commanding a distracted student to "pay attention" teachers should try saying, "sit still and be a poet"?

That command wouldn't work any better than the command to pay attention, of course: first, even the best poet can't be a poet on command; and second, poetry is only one possible result of paying attention.

Better by far, we think, to say, "Practice looking and looking again."

A teacher we greatly admire, Ann Berthoff, developed an exercise that we've adapted here to help you experience the kind of seeing Blake describes. To get her students to resee the natural world, Berthoff would bring to class all manner of organic objects—a starfish, the husk of a cactus, dried reeds, a pressed flower—and then have each student take one of the objects home to study for a week.

For our version of this exercise, you'll need to select your own organic object—anything from the natural world will do. You should choose something that you can hold in your hand and that you can put somewhere out of harm's way for a week.

We ask that, for seven straight days, you spend at least 10 minutes recording your *observations* of the object you've selected.

Here's an example of what a day's entry might look like, written by Erik on day five:

Clearly the plant is dehydrated and dying, and yet, besides my dismembering it of its limbs, it still has the same form

and design as it did when I first took it home. The colors of the leaves have noticeably changed, but nothing else has visibly changed as far as I can tell. Of course, the way I'm seeing this object has changed since the first day I laid my eyes upon it.

There are definitely patterns that are quite unmistakable in and on this plant. For instance, the mini-stems that connect the buds to the stem that connects back to the entire organism: there are seven of these mini-stems, and they are all about of equal length. That is interesting. If it is sunlight the buds seek, I would think that maybe one of the mini-branches would push itself considerably farther out so as to receive more energy for its own survival. But, naturally, these buds are probably not competing for energy but rather are working together for the survival and health of the entire plant.

I cannot help but draw a connection to a human body here. You can find multi facets and numerous parts and functions of parts within a single limb of a body. In fact, you can find it in one single human cell. . . . I'm reminded of a quote from Aldous Huxley [who was quoting from William Blake]: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it truly is, infinite." A person is not just a person with a name, a height and a weight, and a social status; each person is also composed of electricity, of a billion cells that perform who knows how many functions.

My plant here, at first glance, is just a little piece of a shrub. But if you really look at it, there is a lot going on here that makes this plant what it is. Can the physical world ever be described as infinite? Do we really actually know, in an empirical sense, of anything that is infinite? Why do we have a "word" describing something that we have never experienced? Is that evidence or a suggestion from our subconscious mind, our inner spirit, our unseen self, that there is such a thing as infinity? Is there infinity present in my little piece of shrub? I don't know, but I'm willing to bet that as

more powerful microscopes are developed, there will surely be more we will be able to “see” in the physical universe around us, and this will further lend credence to the idea that, yes, with a necessary perspective, it may be possible to hold infinity in the palm of your hand. You won’t know it unless you have eyes to see it, or take the time to meditate on it, and even then . . . infinity is a tough thing to swallow and ascribe to what we can perceive with our five senses. But it’s not impossible.

Focusing on the plant stem, Erik makes connections to the human body, to a quote he’s read in Aldous Huxley, and then back to the Blake poem we used in our writing prompt. Looking closely allows Erik to see beyond the plant back into his own mind. Thinking about how the plant is organized becomes, in this instance, a way to think about how all minds organize perceptions.

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## Practice Session

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### Writing

Choose an organic object from the natural world, something that you can hold in your hand and that you can keep out of harm’s way for a week. Then, over seven consecutive days, write for at least 10 minutes each day about what you see.

Describe how your object is put together.

What questions does your object pose?

What does it point to?

Where did it come from?

What is it a part of?

You are free to move your object, to alter it, or to interact with it in any way that furthers your effort to understand how it is put together. You can also read and do research if questions come to mind. Your goal is to see how your object is organized within itself and how it is implicitly connected with other natural objects.

Write every day.

Ponder what your observations and explorations tell you about the object.

Write even if you're stuck.

If you try to sketch your object, does that help you see aspects you would otherwise miss? What if you photograph it?

Write even if you think you've said all there is to say about your object.

There's only one rule: don't anthropomorphize your object. Don't give it a human name. Don't invent a dialogue between yourself and your object. We've found that this approach only serves to obliterate the object—it displaces the act of looking and looking again.

### Reflecting

After you've completed your seven days of writing, reread what you've written with the following questions in mind: At the end of all your looking, how would you describe the organization of your organic object? Based on what you've written, how would you describe your own way of looking? What did you see right away? What did it take you a while to see? What kinds of questions did you ask automatically? What kinds of questions emerged late in the process?

Write an essay that reflects on what this exercise of looking and looking again has helped you to recognize about seeing in general and about paying attention in particular.

### EXPLORE

Looking, learning, and rethinking can turn the ordinary into something extraordinary. Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, and Michael Pollan each look at familiar objects or places until they become strange and surprising. Carson lingers by a sea cave that appears only at the year's lowest tide. Dillard looks for hidden treasures in the natural world: monarch pupae, flying squirrels, the streak of green light that bursts from the sun at the moment of sunset. And Pollan explores an orchard with 2,500 varieties of apple trees, including an ancient species from Kazakhstan that may be the origin of all apples.

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**H**ow do you develop a habit? Through practice. But what is practice? When you're a kid practicing handwriting, you learn through repetition. You copy the letters of the alphabet over and over, mastering the block shapes first before moving on to cursive. With both types of writing, you practice certain physical gestures so that you can faithfully reproduce the conventional shape of each letter. This practice requires hand-eye coordination, fine motor control in your dominant hand, and symbol recognition. Once you've practiced these activities enough, you can reproduce all the letters of the alphabet quickly, without conscious thought. Then, in a very limited sense, you know how to write.

What do you practice if you want to become a writer? Aspiring writers are often given two pieces of well-intentioned advice: "write what you know" and "write every day." While we can quibble with this kind of advice, we'd rather have you think about what habits you should be developing through practice (that is, through writing every day). What does it mean to look at the world the way a writer does? What does it mean to read like a writer? What does it mean to ask questions like a writer? In posing these questions, we encourage you to see writing as a way of being curious about the world and your place in it.

## On Seeing as a Writer

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The very reason I write is so that I might not sleepwalk through my entire life.

—ZADIE SMITH, “FAIL BETTER”

Learning how to draw, as we discussed earlier (pp. 35–40), means learning how to see without naming; this allows the visual, spatial, and synthesizing ways of thinking to guide the hand on the page. Quieting the verbal train of thought allows you to see like an artist, but what if you want to put what you see into words? How do you learn to see as a writer does?

Young children can be intensely observant and curious. They learn about the world by paying attention and asking lots of questions. Once we become adults, many of us stop observing so acutely and constantly—in part because so much of the previously mysterious world is now familiar to us. We go on mental autopilot during routine experiences. We see what we expect to see. And we keep our surprise and wonder in check because both take up time we don’t think we have to spare.

To see as a writer does, you need to practice asking questions about what you see. So instead of quieting the verbal activity in your mind, in this process you are training yourself to question the information your eyes are reporting to you. This questioning serves two purposes: it makes you conscious of your own perspective, and it also makes clear that other perspectives are possible. And this, ultimately, is part of what seeing as a writer involves—noticing clashes, subtle tensions, or unexpected connections between differing perspectives.

What do we mean by this? Here’s an example of such a conflict, which comes from the opening of an essay by Annie Stiver, a student in one of our creative nonfiction classes:

Recently, while standing in line for a ticket at the New Brunswick train station, I witnessed a mother nudge her young son, who, after barely noticing his mother’s prod, continued to look steadily at a man sitting half-asleep on a bench in the corner of the station. After her eyes dropped

and brows narrowed on her son, she clasped his shoulder and bent down to tell him that he is "not supposed to stare at bums." The boy turned his head forward at his mother's instruction, yet as I watched him I noticed his eyes were straining towards the right side of the room where this man was. Eventually, when it was his mother's turn at the ticket machine, the boy immediately turned his head to stare full-on at the man in tattered clothing on the train station bench. I figured that the boy was an infrequent visitor to New Brunswick.

This situation got me thinking about the rate at which children are encouraged not to stare even as they are curiously struck by novel experiences and when confronted with the unexpected. How did it come to be that we are taught not to stare?

A common response is that it's simply not polite to stare. But in those moments of heightened curiosity when we are told to keep our eyes from wandering on another's "business," we are, aside from being polite, affecting our own development and behavior as we repress our individual curiosities and questions about others. What happens when we stare? I would argue that staring goes beyond seeing the "other." Rather, when we stare, we are meant to think about ourselves. Watching the boy staring at the man in the station, I remembered the familiar feeling of when I was his age during unfamiliar and curious encounters with the unknown and unexpected. We're not staring because we want to know that our way of life is more comfortable and reassuring (we can consider this impolite), but sometimes we stare because we feel instinctively that our way of life is not quite right. When this happens, we want to ask, "Why aren't more of us staring?"

This is a great start to a thoughtful essay. Rereading this passage and thinking about the choices the student made as a writer, we see that she began with close, careful observation of the scene in the train station—a mother scolds her young son for staring at a homeless person. The

writer had many choices about what perspective to take on this scene, and she chose to pay attention to the tension between what the mother says—that her son is not supposed to stare—and what he does—look again and again. In so doing, the writer stages for her readers an encounter between one perspective (staring is impolite) and another (staring is evidence of curiosity). Rather than arguing that one perspective or the other is the correct one to have on the situation, the writer responds to this common experience of a parent scolding a child with a question that the scene has raised for her:

“How did it come to be that we are taught not to stare?”

The writer pushes past the obvious answer, that it's impolite. There's something more going on here than bad behavior: the child wants to stare. The writer asks another question:

“What happens when we stare?”

Again, the writer rejects the commonplace answer. Staring that involves judgment of others is rude, she concedes, but curious children may be staring for another reason. “I would argue,” she writes, “that staring goes beyond seeing the ‘other.’ Rather, when we stare, we are meant to think about ourselves. . . . Sometimes we stare because we feel instinctively that our way of life is not quite right.” And this line of reasoning leads the writer to the question that drives the rest of her essay:

“Why aren't more of us staring?”

As writing teachers, we look at this student's sequence of observations, interpretations, and questions, and we see the habits of a creative mind at work.

She began with close observation.

She asked lots of questions—and not just questions about the facts (that is, questions starting with the words *what*, *where*, or *who*), but also questions about cause and significance (questions starting with *how* or *why*).

She recognized a key concept—in this case, staring—and shifted her frame of reference to focus on what's going on when a child stares.

She shifted her perspective away from the straightforward and obvious to think from a different point of view. In this case, she thought about why the child continued to look after having been told not to.

Remembering her own childhood, she realized that a child may stare because her or his usual way of thinking has been unsettled. Staring—or merely looking thoughtfully—can lead to reflection about oneself and one's relationship to others.

This isn't a formula for seeing like a writer; rather, it shows that seeing like a writer means developing the habit of choosing—from what to focus on, to the terms of the description, to the connections made, to the other perspectives entertained. To see as a writer, one doesn't begin by choosing a topic or a theme, both of which are inert, but rather by practicing questioning what one sees, which is a never-ending activity.

Now we'd like you to practice looking from different perspectives at places and the people who inhabit them, with the goal of opening up new and compelling questions about what you see.

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## Practice Session One

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### Reflecting (on Public Space)

Begin by selecting a familiar, common space in your community or on your campus, somewhere you've been dozens if not hundreds of times. Visit at a time of day when it's likely to be busy. Observe the space for at least 20 minutes. Take notes on what you see. Notice who uses the space and how they move through it. Move around, exploring different perspectives.

After you've spent 20 or more minutes observing, spend at least 15 minutes writing down questions that your observations have raised for you. How does the space signal that it's public? Is it welcoming and beautiful, or ramshackle and dirty? Is it used by a wide variety of people or by a more homogeneous group? How does the space itself shape the experiences of the people who use it? How does it encourage or enhance some activities and limit others? These questions are just to get you started; they should trigger other questions that are directly related to your observations.

Write a reflective essay that develops out of your observations and a few of your most compelling questions about the place you observed.

### Reflecting (on Private Space)

Next, we'd like you to do a similar exercise with a more private place, one that's inside, known or used by few people, and rich in visual detail. (Avoid choosing your own room or any other place that's overly familiar; it's hard to see such places in new ways.) Spend at least 20 minutes observing and taking notes and photographs. Then spend another 15 minutes pondering your experience in the space and writing down questions that your observations have raised. Start with the basics: How does the place signal that it's private? What activities does the space encourage, and what activities does it discourage? Is it possible to have a perspective on this place that is uniquely your own?

Write a reflective essay that develops out of your observations and a few of the most interesting questions you asked about the place you observed. Your goal is to compose a piece that gives your readers a new way to see and understand this private space.

### Reflecting (on Natural Space)

Repeat this exercise in a natural, uninhabited, and unlandscaped space. Once again, observe and take notes for at least 20 minutes. Then spend 15 minutes or more developing questions that are grounded in your particular perspective. Coming up with questions about a natural space may be hard at first, but that too is worth pondering. After you've gathered your notes and questions, write another reflective essay that develops out of one or more of your most interesting questions and shows your reader how to see and think about this place in a new way.

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## Practice Session Two

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### Reading

In "On Seeing as a Writer," we examine how one of our students started to see as a writer. And we find our evidence in the words she chose to explain her experience in the train station. Select a passage from any of the readings we've included in this book. (This exercise can be done with a reading you've already