

Jumpstart Essay—Coming to Terms

Reading—texts, images, events, others, claims—has perhaps never been so critical, and so challenging, as at this historical moment.

Yet all too often we merely consume texts and images. We don't take the time to read deeply and widely, to connect the proverbial dots, to analyze evidence and lines of argument, to locate a text in its complex rhetorical and historical context, to be affected and to understand how and why, to develop responses, and to talk back in some way.

In this book we call this kind of critical, engaged, analytical reading an *encounter*—reading not just as comprehension, but as understanding, as securing and expanding a sense of self and world, as imagination unloosed.

--Himley and Fitzimmons, "Introduction," *CE* 8th ed.

Much of the work of academic writing is predicated on strong reading skills, specifically the ability to understand and make meaningful connections to what you read, as well as the ability to put what you read to good use as you develop your own analyses and arguments. As Himley & Fitzsimmons suggest, the kind of reading expected of you in the university is equivalent to an "encounter"—a moment that changes the way you think about a subject and about yourself, that complicates your assumptions and inspires you to respond.

But a genuine encounter with a text rarely results without some effort and application; that is, it rarely occurs in the absence of concrete approaches and practices. In "Coming to Terms," Joe Harris argues for a particular way of engaging with readings, an approach that not only results in deeper comprehension of the content of the piece, but that inspires greater appreciation for what the writer is *doing* (or at least attempting to do). He also argues that "coming to terms" with texts directly impacts our abilities to write in an academic milieu with greater confidence and success. So in this first essay for WRT 105, I would like you to apply the strategies outlined by Harris to **one** of the following four inquiry-specific assigned readings. You will write an essay that demonstrates a rich, nuanced understanding of the reading (its project and its uses and limits) *and* that demonstrates the development of your thinking in relation to the reading.

- Robert Hass's "A Story About the Body"
- Laura Hershey's "From Poster Child to Protester"
- Ashley Judd's *Daily Beast* editorial
- Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"

Deeply understanding your selected reading is a starting point for the essay and a necessary step for further thinking; it is particularly important, however, for you to demonstrate in the essay *why* the ideas, the claims, and the concepts in the reading matter to you as you come to grips with the inquiry into Re-imagining the Normal. That is your "project" (to use Harris's own term) in this essay: not just to summarize the reading, "but to say something about the perspective from

which you are reading it” (Harris). This essay, after all, is as much about you—your perspectives, understandings, curiosities, questions, noticings—as it is about the reading.¹

The essay should include...

- **an explicit claim** to focus your essay, in which you articulate an insight specific to the reading that gets at what the reading is doing and why it matters;
- **close work with the text**, in which you present the writer’s project, assess the text’s uses and limits, and select key passages to explore more deeply or use as evidence for your insight.

Your ideas and *your* thinking should make up at least 50% of this essay. As you prepare to develop a claim and pre-write toward the essay, you might use the following as invention prompts (that is, tools for thinking and not steps for composing):

- What perspectives are you encountering in the reading that are new, surprising, or unsettling?
- What do you understand about the contexts—social, cultural, political—that have given rise to the reading? That is, what conditions inspired the writer to write?
- Which of your beliefs or assumptions now need adjusting or updating? In other words, how does the reading inspire you to think about its particular issues or the unit inquiry in more complex ways?
- In what ways does the reading leave you with questions or concerns, trigger a desire for something more?

It is likely that in the course of talking and writing about the shared readings, you will see meaningful connections across them. You have the *option* to make a connection(s) between two of the readings as a way of enriching your understanding of the writers’ ideas and perspectives. However, I would still like you to choose *one* reading as your primary object of study.

The Nitty Gritty

The essay should be a minimum of four pages, 12-point font, double-spaced. The essay and reflection are due on **Tuesday, September 18**. Please use proper MLA citation and compose an appropriate title for your essay.

¹ Harris repeatedly asks us to be “generous” to the writers we engage with, to be sure to “give them their due.” You may fundamentally disagree with the reading you choose, but it’s still important to be responsible and respectful to the text. The quickest way to lose *your* reader’s good will is to be dismissive or unnecessarily argumentative.