

The New Humanities Reader

FIFTH EDITION

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Preface

This book is based on a single idea that might seem far from revolutionary: students starting college should write about nonfiction that thoughtfully explores the major issues of their time. Although the university is changing—some would say past all recognition—most people even now would accept the value of such reading for young adults in transit from their home communities to a larger and often confusing world. One claim universities have always made is that higher education has the power to impart a broader view: if not a magic key to the universe, then at least a few useful paradigms that can make events in the world more coherent. And now those paradigms circulate through the medium of nonfiction prose.

The prose argument—the essay—could be described as the genre of our time, enjoying the same pride of place held by poetry in the Renaissance or by novels in the nineteenth century. The essay enjoys this preeminence because in its form it communicates the ungrounded, exploratory character of thinking in the twenty-first century. The most complex, cutting-edge knowledge now—in physics, for example, or cognitive science—shares with blog posts and Twitter feeds an implicit sense of moving forward to something that has yet to be revealed. In an era when the past feels remote and we imagine knowledge to be infinite, the metaphor of connection has replaced the old search for origins and the hope of getting to the ultimate truth. It's possible to say that the Internet has taught us the value of connecting, but the Internet itself might represent only one expression of an essayistic logic at work in our culture well before 1990, the year Tim Berners-Lee completed his programming for the World Wide Web. A logic of connection had already become essential to survival in a world dominated by science and technology, and caught up in the first wave of globalization, when languages, philosophies, and forms of life collided in new ways. Connecting is what we have learned to do when we bump up against incompatibles, and where the alternative to reaching out is closing down on our options. Reaching out is better than closing down: this is the essay's deep logic.

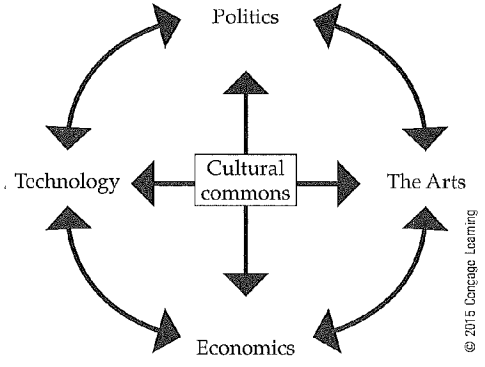
Small wonder, then, that nonfiction prose keeps turning up wherever thinking has gone beyond the boundaries of the already-known. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* went beyond a critique of inequality by insisting women have the power to create their own identities, independent of male projections and desires. *Silent Spring*, the book that first brought to public view the environmental crisis, qualifies as an extended essay too, and so does *An Inconvenient Truth*, which has directly or indirectly reached millions of people around the world. Whether we are readers of *Foreign Affairs*, *Harper's*, *Science*, or *JAMA*, we look to nonfiction prose when we need to navigate the complexities of politics, health, human relations, history, computer science, or engineering. Civic life in general and culture broadly speaking become legible for us only when they find their place in the sentences and paragraphs of arguments that might range from one computer screen to many hundreds of pages.

In a period we could call the "Age of Nonfiction," teaching prose that deals with contemporary issues should hardly seem like a revolutionary act—though, remarkably, it is for many reasons. First, we might find it shocking when we stop to think that throughout the whole span of their high school years, generations of young Americans never cast their eyes on nonfiction prose except in the form of textbooks—aimed for commercial reasons well below the reading level of the target audience. Convention and bureaucracy conspire to ensure that Holden Caulfield and Huck Finn dominate a space for inquiry which might be shared with world events, new technologies, and changes in a market system rigged to ensure that most young Americans start their adult lives hopelessly in debt. Needless to say, literary art has enormous value, but educators in the English speaking world have too often presupposed that discourse in a "philosophical" vein lies beyond the reach of ordinary minds, who can't get any thinking done without vivid imagery and lively narrative. The Common Core movement now promises to make a place for nonfiction in K-12, but the rise of the education industry, which threatens to take the "public" out of public schools, hardly inspires much confidence that students will read what they really need to know or be encouraged to think differently.

A second impediment to the teaching of contemporary nonfiction is a prejudice deeply ingrained in the culture of the humanities themselves. No one in the humanities needs to be argued into seeing the past as "another country"—distant, difficult to understand, essential to recover, and quite unlike the "now." But this belief takes for granted the obviousness and transparency of our present moment, although the present is actually at least as opaque and baffling as the past. Nothing is more mysterious to us—enigmatic, multifaceted, and potentially dangerous—than the period we are living through. Only in retrospect can events take on the apparent clarity we find in our history books, with well-defined periods, a cast of characters, and linear trajectories. Of all the "other countries" we will ever know, the present is the most "other" of them all, even if we have been trained to see it as unworthy of close attention. Naturally an understanding of the past is essential for an intelligent response to the here and now, but why have the humanities so willingly postponed an encounter with contemporary life? The question becomes still more troubling when we recognize how little freedom people

have for study and reflection once they graduate from college and their available energies get channeled into jobs and family. If an investigation of the here and now never happens in a course we teach, then it probably won't happen at all.

A third obstacle is specialization: the trepidation of nonspecialists when it comes to teaching materials outside their expertise, along with the resentment of specialists at the spectacle of dilettantes getting the details wrong. True, specialization has succeeded, as we can see from the financial power of the research university. But the rapid decay of public culture, which depends on broad-based general knowledge, tells a very different story. In the early modern world, books and ideas made democracy possible, but that achievement seems unlikely to survive in a world of hyperspecialists where ordinary people feel unqualified to voice their views about global climate change or women's rights because they lack appropriate credentials. Of course it's even worse when our fellow citizens feel entitled to sound off in the absence of any knowledge. This book is based on the belief that general knowledge is real and should be taught, especially in courses on writing. The different areas of knowledge in our time hang together coherently because they constellate around a shared but often invisible center that might be called the cultural commons:



Of course, future Web designers might read *Wired*; future business people might pore over *Business Week*; aspiring directors of museums are going to look over the pages of *ArtForum*. But as for reading outside one's future *métier*, that's a far less likely scenario, especially now, when the humanities have been pushed to the margins. The one place within the university—and perhaps within our whole culture—where connective thinking has the freedom to restore the sense of a coherent world might be English 101, the humble first-year writing class taken by most undergraduates. No matter how English 101 might look to faculty and students, it may be the one remaining course whose concern is nearly universal: not this or that specific knowledge but the way that meaning itself gets made and then communicated. And precisely because the explosive growth of knowledge has produced an explosive growth of ignorance, learning how to make meaning would appear to be more important than ever.

Yet even in English 101, change is impeded by the past's dead weight and by the idea that students starting college are incapable of wading through twenty

pages from *The Atlantic* or the *New York Times Magazine*. And this attitude persists even though tenth graders somehow find a way to cope with the challenges of Shakespeare's plays, and even though the students in English 101 might be doing physics that same term or reading Max Weber for some other class. This book imagines students differently—as prepared for complex material if they are supported by the proper scaffolding. It sees teachers too in a different light, as public intellectuals well qualified to introduce the world of living ideas, which is, after all, the only world that really matters.

What does exploring the world of ideas entail? How do we learn to do it? The same way we learn to do any activity—by practice. Not even the most careful study of the laws of physics can replace hours spent wobbling and falling as one tries to get the feel for how to ride a bike without training wheels. Similarly, no amount of outlining or rote work with the five paragraph essay can prepare students for the challenge of making connections between what they've read and what they know, think they know, or would like to know. To learn how to engage with complexity, writers need to practice bringing together ideas with realms of experience that the department-based model of higher education keeps separate. And that's where this reader comes in: we've designed it to help students spend the semester practicing connective thinking. The readings change from edition to edition, but the central goal of the reader remains the same: to practice connecting until it becomes clear what it means to use writing as a way of thinking new thoughts.

The Introduction, "Reading and Writing About the New Humanities," provides students with specific advice about how to read creatively, make synthetic links among the texts, and develop an argument. New sequenced assignments at the end of the book offer faculty and students questions they can use to forge connections between essays and then position their own emerging ideas in the conversation.

Nearly half of the readings are new to this edition. New readings from across the disciplines include excerpts from ten important books published in the last three years: Leslie Bell's *Hard to Get: Twenty-Something Women and the Paradox of Sexual Freedom*; Cathy Davidson's *Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science Will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century*; Barbara Fredrickson's *Love 2.0: How Our Supreme Emotion Affects Everything We Feel, Think, Do, and Become*; Karen Ho's *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*; Maggie Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*; Andrew Solomon's *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity*; Joseph Stiglitz's *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*; Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*; Ethan Watters's *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*; and Tim Wu's *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*. We also include Jonathan Lethem's "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," first published in *Harper's*, and Michael Moss's "The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food," which appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*.

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—Kurt Spellmeyer and Richard E. Miller

Reading and Writing About the New Humanities

This book probably differs from many you have encountered, at least those that you have encountered in school. Generally, the books taught in school tell students how or what to think, but ours has a different purpose. We wanted to put in your hands a book that would let you think for yourself, and do so while you read and write about some of the most important issues of our time. Environmental breakdown, rapid cultural change, the effects of electronic media on our ways of interacting—these are just a few of the issues we address.

The articles and essays collected here touch on subjects as diverse as the psychology of elephants and the practice of Tibetan meditation, but these subjects in and of themselves aren't the real point of the book. The real point is thinking, and we believe that thinking in our time needs to assume a new and more appropriate form. In the last 100 years our world has seen change more rapid and profound than it had witnessed in the previous thousand. From the media, we get daily reports on subjects our great-grandparents might have found absolutely incomprehensible: breakthroughs in nanotechnology; mergers of U.S. firms with partners overseas; the covert spread of weapons that could destroy humanity many times over; a new account of the universe in the first few seconds after the Big Bang; melting polar icecaps and rising seas; a growing gap between the poor and mega-rich, while the middle class slowly withers away. Such events are truly without precedent.

We need a new kind of thinking because we live in a world defined by possibilities, and possibilities go hand in hand with risk and unintended consequences. The globalized economy could lead to a future where poverty will become a distant memory, or the whole planet could be transformed into a sweatshop run by a One Percent indifferent to the suffering of ordinary people. The Web could produce a Renaissance of learning, or it could degrade all forms

of communication, ushering in a new Dark Age of vulgarity and mass ignorance. Cultures long divided by geography might greet one another with open arms, or we could see a clash of civilizations that would unleash the worst instincts of everyone. Unlike the problems from your textbooks in school, the questions arising from events in our time don't have answers hidden in the teacher's edition. The best educated, most experienced people still can't predict with certainty how the next century will turn out. And even expertise is not good enough because the questions we face now are more complex than people anywhere have ever faced before. Globalization, to take one good example, is not just the concern of economists, or historians, or anthropologists. Instead, it is an issue for all of them together—and for everybody else as well. The degradation of the biosphere is not exclusively the concern of environmental science, but also a matter for political theory, sociology, and economics. The complexity and open-endedness of the big problems of our time require us to work hard to devise new understandings of ourselves and of the world. One purpose of this book is to provide a forum for these understandings to emerge.

Perhaps it may seem strange that we would entertain such lofty goals in a course designed for undergraduates. Surely the experts are better equipped than students just beginning their careers at college or the university. But this assumption might be unjustified. While the forms of expertise available today clearly have enormous value, most of the current academic disciplines were created more than a century ago, and the divisions of knowledge on which they are based reflect the needs of a very different day. In 1900, gas-powered cars were a new technology, while airplanes and radios had yet to be invented. Scientists still wrestled with the structure of the atom. The British Empire dominated three-fourths of the globe, and "culture" meant the traditions of Western Europe's elite, never more than one-tenth of one percent of the population of that region. In a certain sense, the current generation of college students and teachers needs to reinvent the university itself, not by replacing one department with another, but by forging broad connections across areas of knowledge that still remain in relative isolation. Forging these connections is the "new way of thinking" that we had in mind when we created this book.

NEW HUMANITIES FOR NEW TIMES: THE SEARCH FOR COHERENCE

Probably some readers will be surprised by the absence of material from the traditional humanities: poems and plays, photographs of paintings and statues, excerpts from great works of philosophy such as Plato's *Republic* and Descartes's *Discourse on Method*. Clearly, no one should leave Aristotle, Shakespeare, or Toni Morrison unread. And anyone unfamiliar with Leonardo da Vinci, Frida Kahlo, Thelonious Monk, and Georgia O'Keeffe has missed a priceless opportunity. Yet this book grows out of our belief that the humanities today must reach further than in centuries past. Without consciously intending to, humanists might have

contributed to the decline of their own influence. One could even argue their devotion to the past led them to neglect the future. Humanists have often been quite willing to leave real-world concerns to other fields, devoting themselves primarily to passive contemplation, aesthetic pleasure, and the production of criticism few people ever read. Consequently, outside the university many people see the humanities as entertainment or pretentiousness while putting business and technology on a pedestal as the only real truth.

If the humanities are going to survive, they must be understood in a new way: not as a particular area of knowledge but as the human dimension of *all* knowledge. Robotics and artificial intelligence may lie outside the boundaries of the old humanities, but they enter the purview of the New Humanities when we stop to ponder, as Sherry Turkle does, the cultural consequences of technologies that seemed tremendously exciting at first but now appear to make us more like our machines. Once we define the humanities this way—as the human dimension of all knowledge—it may come as a surprise to observe that some of today's foremost humanists work in disciplines quite far removed from English, History, and Philosophy. Oliver Sacks, one of the writers in this collection, is a world-renowned neurologist whose case histories have helped reveal the brain's deeper mysteries while humanizing patients who suffer from mental illnesses, cranial injuries, and cognitive disorders. Karen Ho is an anthropologist whose subject is the growing presence of Wall Street firms on Ivy League campuses. Barbara Fredrickson is a psychologist who studies the physiology behind what she calls our "supreme emotion"—love—with results some critics have described as "amazing."

The New Humanities, as represented by this book, enlarge the arena of human concern in other ways as well. They invite us to take academic knowledge beyond the confines of the university. In a certain sense, this operation requires that we all become our own teachers: we have to find in our own lives—our problems, values, dreams, goals, and commitments—an organizing principle that cannot be found in the curriculum. The great, unspoken secret of higher education is that the curriculum has no center: specialization makes sure of that. Historians write primarily for historians; literary critics for other critics. As we shuttle back and forth between these specialized disciplines, the only coherence we will ever find is the coherence we construct for ourselves. Under these conditions, the New Humanities can teach us a different way of using knowledge, a way of thinking that connects many different fields of study.

Specialized learning in the disciplines typically deals with the "how," but it often leaves unanswered the "why." There has never been a course called "Life 101," and given the persistence of specialization, such a course will probably never exist. But something important will be missing if we leave the "why" questions unexplored. Should we continue to pursue a technological utopia? Does modern science mean the end of religion? Is social inequality an acceptable price to pay for economic growth? Any attempt to answer these questions requires specialized knowledge, yet knowledge alone is not enough. Because a cogent, well-informed case can be made on either side of almost every issue, the source of our ultimate commitments has to be found in our own lives. The

"why" questions shape these commitments because they address our most basic relations to other people and the world. In different ways, these questions ask us how we ourselves will choose to think and act. No expert can choose on our behalf, because no expert can live our lives for us or define what our experience should mean.

The coherence missing from the curriculum is not a quality of knowledge in itself. When it emerges, that coherence comes instead from our own creative activity. Again and again, we need to make connections that bridge the gaps between areas of knowledge, linking the formal learning we acquire to our personal experience. But even after we have created this coherence, it will still be incomplete because there is always something more to learn that remains unconnected. We might think of coherence, then, not as a goal we can finally reach but as an ideal worth pursuing throughout the course of our lives. Needless to say, cynicism and fragmentation are always options, too, and they require no special effort. One could easily live as though nothing and no one mattered, but in such a case, learning and living become exercises in futility. The New Humanities offer a better path.

KNOWLEDGE IN DEPTH AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORLD

As everybody understands, formal education has been carefully designed to keep the disciplines separate. In economics classes, we typically read economics; in history classes, we read history. This approach allows information to be conveyed in small, efficiently managed packages. We can divide, say, biology from chemistry, and then we can divide biology into vertebrate and invertebrate, and chemistry into organic and inorganic. We start with the general and move to the particular. Ideally, we learn in depth, with increasing mastery of details that become more and more refined. At the end of the semester, if everything goes well, we can distinguish between an ecosystem and a niche, a polymer and a plastic, a neo-Kantian and a neo-Hegelian. We can contrast Hawthorne's treatment of the outsider with Salinger's, or we can explain the debate about whether slavery or states' rights actually caused the Civil War.

Knowledge in depth is indispensable. But it can also produce a sense of disconnection, the impression that education is an empty ritual without real-world consequences beyond getting a grade or fulfilling a requirement. In the classroom, we learn to calculate sine and cosine without ever discovering how these calculations might be used and why they were invented. Searching for symbols in a poem or a short story becomes a mental exercise on par with doing a crossword puzzle. Instead of reflecting on why events have happened and how they get remembered and recorded, we refine our ability to recapitulate strings of dates and names. At its worst, learning in depth can produce a strange disconnect: the purpose of learning becomes learning itself, while activity in the real world seems increasingly remote. As students reach the final years of high school,

they may grasp vaguely that they should have read *Hamlet,* be able to identify *The Declaration of Independence,* and explain how photosynthesis has influenced the shape of leaves, but in response to an actual tragedy—an environmental disaster or a war—they might feel unqualified to speak and completely at a loss about what to do.

College-level learning can offer an escape from this predicament by giving students greater freedom to choose what they will study, and in many cases the subjects they choose are closely related to their real-world goals. But even with this newfound freedom, the problem of disconnection crops up in other ways. After years of hard work, a student who has mastered electrical engineering may still leave college poorly informed about the global economy in which most engineers now do their work. Students well versed in Renaissance drama or the history of World War I could understand the past quite well but find the events of their own time impossible to explain. For some people, this problem of disconnection may arise long before they graduate. The student who sets out to memorize facts from, say, a social psychology text might find that these facts grow increasingly stale. Easily memorized one day, they are quickly forgotten the next. The risk of knowledge in depth is that we lose our sense of the larger world and we forget that a field like psychology, for all its current sophistication, began with tentative and somewhat clumsy questions about how the mind might work. Ironically, the more we treat an area of knowledge as a reality in itself, the less we may be able to understand and use what we have supposedly learned.

There is another kind of knowledge we create when we ask ourselves how our learning applies to the world outside the classroom. This line of questioning is more complex than it might seem initially because the larger world is never simply waiting there for us. All knowledge starts with parts and fragments, even our knowledge of the private lives we know in most detail. To each of us, our private life may seem complete, just as a field like psychology can seem to explain everything once we are immersed in its methods and facts. But this sense of completeness is an illusion produced by the limits of our perspective. Beyond the reach of what we know here and now, nothing seems to matter. We begin to get a glimpse of the larger world only when we shift our focus from one reality to another: only then can we become aware of the holes in our prior certainties, and only then are we able to think in new and revealing ways. This movement from the known to the unknown is the essence of all learning; indeed, the most successful learners are generally those who have developed the highest tolerance for not knowing—those who continue to question and explore issues beyond their own areas of specialization, entertaining alternatives that others might find unimaginable.

Knowledge itself can be defined in many ways: as a quantity of information, as technical expertise, as cultivated taste, as a special kind of self-awareness. Various as these definitions might appear, they share an underlying commonality. Whatever form knowledge eventually takes, it always emerges from a process we might describe as **connecting**. The eighteenth-century English scientist Sir Isaac Newton, who first understood the relations between force, mass, and

acceleration, might have been inspired in his scientific work by his deeply held religious convictions about the rational perfection of God and His Creation. Many other notable thinkers have also found inspiration through connection. Roughly 200 years after Newton's discoveries sparked a scientific revolution, a young lawyer born in India, Mohandas K. Gandhi, drew on Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, written in support of abolitionists just before the Civil War, to launch a campaign of passive resistance against the racist government of South Africa. Two years before Gandhi spent his first term in jail as a political prisoner, a French artist and intellectual, Marcel Duchamp, shocked the art world with a painting—*Nude Descending a Staircase*—inspired by scientific photographs of athletes in motion. Whether we are talking about physics or political systems, epidemiology or art, knowledge by its very nature brings together disparate worlds of thought and action.

Creative Reading I: The Prospective View

The selections in this book are intended for creative reading. Our assumption is that the humanities should do more than preserve the past or let professors flaunt their brilliance. After all, studies have consistently shown that people retain little of what they are taught unless they put that knowledge to use. At its best, higher learning can offer beginners the chance to practice the same activities that more accomplished thinkers engage in: beyond receiving knowledge, beginners too should have a hand in its creation. The articles and book chapters collected here offer many occasions of that kind. It's true that the selections pose challenges—sometimes because they are long and complex, sometimes because they draw on specialized fields, and sometimes because they open up unusual perspectives. But those challenges are also opportunities: they ask the reader to become an active co-creator with the writer.

The phrase "creative reading" might sound strange. Almost every college and university has a program in creative writing, but creative reading programs don't exist. It's not hard to understand why: many people think of reading as nothing more than passively internalizing words on a page. Yet reading is always more complex than the common sense view would suggest. Like a conversation or dialogue, reading requires us to engage in an active back-and-forth that calls on our attentiveness, imagination, patience, and receptivity. Just as the participants in a conversation have to imagine what the other people think, what they expect to hear, and what they might say next, so readers need to see themselves as involved in a kind of dialogue, moving back and forth from textual details to a sense of the larger whole. And just as we can't know where a conversation is going until it's actually over, so reading transports us to a place we can never entirely predict.

When we try to understand a difficult text like the ones collected here, we won't get far by following along, word by word and detail by detail. As we read we also need to ask ourselves what the writer's larger point might be and how each small step contributes to the unfolding of the entire argument. When

Karen Armstrong starts "Homo religiosus" with a description of the way it feels to descend into the caverns of Lascaux, few of us might be able to foresee the direction her ideas will take. But we can begin with a **prospective view**, a guess at the argument that might lie ahead. Reading further we could be surprised to find that the cave paintings of Lascaux get left behind as we move from Stone Age shamanism to the rise of the world religions we are familiar with today. Actually, a dramatic shift like this—from cave paintings to theology—is quite typical of complex thought, and skillful readers are the ones who know how to keep revising their prospective views as they move ahead. Working with a complex text means continuing the dialogue until we reach an understanding that seems to include everything we've learned.

One way to test your understanding of a text after you have finished reading is to look for key words or ideas and ask how they fit with everything else. Here for example is a question we ask in the "Questions for Making Connections within the Reading" that follow the Armstrong selection:

> Re-read the chapter and carefully note the many differences between religion then and religion now. Next go back and look for the continuities. In spite of the differences, would you say that much of the Paleolithic legacy survives to this day? Can we conclude that religion has become more mature and sophisticated, or is it possible that we have lost touch with what religion actually represents?

A question like this is designed to find out how well you have managed to create a comprehensive understanding of the text. Unless you test your understanding in this way, you might assume that simply having read the words automatically confers a working knowledge when in reality what you really know might be quite limited. Each time you extend your prospective view by looking carefully at a text's details, you draw closer to the kind of mastery that accomplished readers can achieve.

Creative Reading II: Interpretation and the Retrospective View

The fact that reading goes on all the time should not lead us to overlook just how complicated it can get. The act of reading starts with nothing more than ink marks on a page, and those marks cannot tell us anything in and of themselves. But when you read with a prospective view, you are actually creating a text that exists only after you have done the work. The reader's job, however, does not end there. Even after reading with a prospective view has created a coherent text, the **meaning** of that text still remains unclear because what we call "meaning" actually depends on the connections we make within the text or between one text and another. Meaning is a product of interpretation, and interpretation demands from us another form of creative reading: the search for a **retrospective view**. If "prospective" means "looking forward," "retrospective" means "looking back." The most basic form of interpretation starts when we isolate one part of the text—even if it's only a sentence—and use it as a frame

or window through which we can take a second, retrospective look at the entire document.

Consider, for example, the first sentence of Jonathan Lethem's controversial essay, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism." That first sentence is not Lethem's at all. Instead, he identifies it as the work of the poet and Anglican preacher John Donne, writing in the seventeenth century: "All mankind is of one author, and is one volume." Everything that follows in Lethem's argument can be interpreted in the light of Donne's claim that mankind is indeed "one author," not many isolated individuals whose creations belong exclusively to them. Bob Dylan's "thefts" from popular movies, Shakespeare, and F. Scott Fitzgerald; episodes of *The Simpsons* that draw on *The Flintstones* and *The Honeymooners*; Walt Disney's earliest Mickey Mouse cartoon, which borrows from actor/director Buster Keaton's classic silent film *Steamboat Bill*—all of these examples can be used to support the truth of Donne's observation.

If we try to explain what Lethem meant by writing "The Ecstasy of Influence," we could simply say that he wanted to show that creative people often borrow from each other. But his examples push that insight much farther. Not only do creative people borrow, but they also appear to steal in ways that often seem to violate conventional morality. And yet, what if Donne is right and all of us are ultimately "one author"? Wouldn't that mean that we are free to use everybody's work as our own? If we reread Lethem's essay in the light of the Donne quotation, we might see the stories Lethem tells in a more positive fashion: less as examples of stealing and more as evidence of a generosity implicit in all human relations. If we really are all one author, then the work of every individual becomes a kind of gift to everybody else. Using Donne for our retrospective view, we might conclude that creativity always involves what universities condemn as plagiarism. Far from trying to stamp out intellectual dishonesty, we could see the persistence of "theft" as proof we are interconnected in a way that makes private property impossible when it comes to the life of the mind. Explicitly, Lethem ventures no such claim, but we could use the passage from Donne to maintain that plagiarism is a creative act when we use the words of others to say something new.

Creative Reading III: Connective Thinking and the Search for a Shared Horizon

The simplest form of interpretation links one part of the text to other parts—linking the Donne passage, for example, to Bob Dylan's lyrics. But what about connections to other texts? These connections are especially important because no one's world is entirely defined by the perspective or "horizon" of any single text alone. Indeed, there is far more to creativity than Lethem's essay can fully express, however complex and many-layered it might be. Because no one lives in a one-text world, the truths we learn from "The Ecstasy of Influence" cannot be confined to the pages of that essay. As soon as we read something in another

class, or we engage in conversations with our friends, all sorts of new connections will begin to compete for our attention. The different texts we encounter might come from worlds of experience far removed from ours, but once they have entered into our own lives, we need to bring them together in a way that creates a shared horizon, a greater, more inclusive coherence.

One great tragedy of formal education is that it often works against this shared horizon by promoting imitative thinking: we learn to reproduce information made and organized by someone else. Imitative thinking presupposes the sufficiency of knowledge in its present state, and it preserves the separateness of different texts and differing realities. But this separateness cannot be maintained except at the cost of a greater incoherence. Maybe the lecture in English today contradicted a point made yesterday in anthropology class. Or perhaps an article you are asked to read describes an aspect of the social world in a way that you consider incomplete, biased, or flatly incorrect. On occasions like these, when we come face-to-face with the limitations of knowledge, imitative thinking cannot help us. Instead we are obliged to think connectively—to think *across texts* rather than thinking only from inside them.

Connective thinking calls for another kind of interpretation. Instead of starting with one part of a text and using it as a window to review the rest, we can use it as a window to begin a retrospective reading of another writer's work. We might start again with the Donne passage Lethem quotes: "All mankind is of one author, and is one volume." Then, with this sentence, we could take a second look at Joseph Stiglitz's argument in "Rent Seeking and the Making of an Unequal Society." At first glance these two texts might appear as completely unrelated as any two could be. The first deals with uses that creative people make of work done by others, the second with the growth of inequality in the United States. And yet when we start to read retrospectively, a shared horizon can emerge. The easiest way to search for that horizon would be to find a passage from Stiglitz that makes a point central to his argument. One passage describes the failure of our current political system to redistribute the nation's wealth to benefit the whole society:

> We have a political system that gives inordinate power to those at the top, and they have used that power not only to limit the extent of redistribution but also to shape the rules of the game in their favor and to extract from the public large "gifts." Economists have a word for these activities: they call them rent seeking, getting income not as a reward [for] creating wealth but by grabbing a larger share of the wealth that would otherwise have been produced without their effort.... Those at the top have learned how to suck out money from the rest in ways the rest are hardly aware of.

Clearly, this passage has nothing to do with Bob Dylan's lyrics or *The Simpsons*. But it still says something important about our obligations to other human beings. Although Stiglitz never suggests, as Donne does, that everything we do belongs to everyone else, he still seems to argue that the good of each person

depends in some manner on the good of all. Lethem's argument for the "cultural commons" has no explicit parallel in Stiglitz's argument, yet Stiglitz's argument still implies that wealth belongs to the whole society, and that inequality is basically unjust because it overlooks this fact. Lethem never uses the word "redistribution," a key term in Stiglitz's analysis, yet "The Ecstasy of Influence" might be read as a call for the continuous redistribution of words, images, and ideas. If Stiglitz wants both a free market and a strong government to save working Americans from ruin, Lethem also argues for a "market" as well as a "gift economy."

These connections between Lethem and Stiglitz certainly do not exhaust the possibilities, and we will find many more connections by rereading other passages. Eventually, as we work through these new connections, we might begin to discover that a larger point has begun to emerge—such as the conclusion that free markets depend on high levels of equality. An overarching point like this one seldom arises right away. For a nerve-wracking interval, the individual connections might appear disjointed, even contradictory, but then, suddenly, a larger view may present itself—like the pattern in a Persian carpet we unroll a few inches at a time.

Of course some passages in Stiglitz might not connect in a fruitful way to Lethem. Initially, a connection might look promising, but then we could discover that it leads to a dead end. It's possible to spend many frustrating hours following connections that go nowhere. But this is precisely what thinking involves: forging new connections where none exist now. Imitation means letting others do that work and sitting back to admire the results; creativity means taking risks. Some of the risks we take will truly surprise us with their spectacular results, while others may prove quite disappointing. Both risk and failure, on occasion, are the price of creative reading—the price of discovery.

Some people are convinced that creativity cannot be taught at all, but we believe that it can be taught and learned by asking readers to make connections between texts that might appear unrelated at first glance. Many of the questions you will find in this book seem to push hard in that direction. One question, for example, asks you to work out the connections between Charles Siebert's report on the fate of elephants in Africa and Barbara Fredrickson's discussion of the complex biology that underlies our experience of love. Attempts by preservationists to rescue a species may seem worlds away from the science behind our intimate lives, but we are asking you to undertake what all creativity involves—venturing beyond the familiar.

Prospective Writing

Imitative thinking goes hand in hand with writing to tell—writing for the purpose of demonstrating a command of existing knowledge. In American schools, the classic example of writing to tell is the venerable book report. Like imitative thinking, writing to tell has its appropriate place. Connective thinking calls,

however, for a different approach that might be described as prospective writing. Just as you can read prospectively, looking for a larger coherence behind all the individual details, so you can write without knowing from the start where your ideas will lead. A good example of writing of this kind is "The Mind's Eye," by Oliver Sacks. Because Sacks is a neurologist, an Oxford-trained physician as well as a professor of medicine—we might have expected him to begin with some of the answers he has found in his four decades of research. Instead he sets out with a question that sounds startling in its simplicity: "to what extent are we ... shaped, predetermined, by our brains, and to what extent do we shape our own brains?" In attempting to think through this question, Sacks might have drawn on research by other specialists in fields like chemistry, genetics, and neuroanatomy. He might have taped electrodes to the heads of volunteers or studied their brains with an MRI machine. These are all certainly legitimate ways of responding to the question, but the sources Sacks prefers to use are the first person narratives written by people who have gone blind but then adapted to the loss of sight in a variety of creative ways.

Perhaps the question that Sacks poses—Do our brains shape us, or do we shape our brains?—has followed him from the earliest years of his career as a scientist. Or perhaps he framed the question only after reading the books mentioned in his essay. But no matter how his project began, what seems certain is that these accounts called into doubt much that Sacks had once assumed about the development of the brain. On the one hand, his training led him to suppose that the tasks assigned to the regions of the brain were unalterable after childhood. On the other hand, the accounts he read strongly suggested to him that our brains can rebuild themselves—that our brains are capable of major change throughout adult life. We cannot know exactly what inspired Sacks, but surely one powerful motive was the profound discontinuity between his old assumptions and the new evidence. Facing that discontinuity, Sacks was prepared to take a risk—to put his old assumptions to the test.

From time immemorial, teachers of English have told their students to begin the task of writing only when they clearly know what they intend to say. But these instructions have always expressed more fantasy than truth. Typically, a thesis or argument will remain fairly vague until we have done a great deal of prospective writing. Discontinuities lead us to the search for a shared horizon, and from this shared horizon new questions come. Then, provided we are willing to push far enough, a coherent thesis will begin to emerge, not all at once in a grand sweep but with one insight building on the next. At some point, these insights will cohere—the pattern in the carpet once again. Retrospectively we can recognize the direction of our thoughts, a direction writing itself has revealed. We write, stop, and assess where our writing has gone. Only then are we ready to revise, and to convey our discoveries to others in the form of a well-crafted presentation.

In order for an author like Sacks to become a source for our own writing, we need to start with a question that his work leaves unresolved, at least partially. If human brains are inherently as flexible as he suggests, then why do people generally seem so similar in their outlooks and behavior? Could it be that

education, not biology, has made us all the same? If in the future we abolish formal schooling, would our mental lives become much less uniform than they appear to be now? Of course, each of us is free to conclude that our basic human nature will never change regardless of alterations in our brains, and in that case we might choose to brush aside the implications of Sacks's ideas. But these ideas might nudge us to rethink a number of our presuppositions. If events are capable of changing our brains, then perhaps we are doing serious damage when we spend countless hours glued to glowing screens or tweeting about our last meal. Do we need, instead, to care for our mental health as thoughtfully as we care for our bodies through diet and exercise? While we explore questions like this one, we might also draw on Martha Stout's discussion of the way the brain responds to psychological trauma. Or we might make some fruitful connections to Robert Thurman's ideas about the pursuit of wisdom. Ultimately, through prospective writing, we start to develop a thesis of our own.

Developing a Thesis: From Prospective to Retrospective Writing

A thesis is not exactly an argument in the ordinary sense of the word. In everyday speech, the term *argument* suggests an adversarial stance: with great vehemence we might argue for, or against, online education of the kind that Cathy Davidson describes. "Making an argument" tends to mean deciding ahead of time what you think and then looking for "support" to back up your points. There is, however, another way. Instead of simply taking sides in an existing controversy, each of us can move beyond such debates, which are often hackneyed and overly simplistic, in order to say something genuinely new. To do so is to imagine ourselves in a different light, not as combatants but as engaged participants in a conversation. Even if we read a writer with distaste, what matters most are the questions raised, not the answers given. Precisely because the search for a thesis starts with some degree of uncertainty, it demands a willingness on our part to suspend judgment and pursue ideas wherever they might lead. Remember, however, that this pursuit does not require our complete assent or unwavering commitment. We can always entertain and explore ideas we will eventually reject.

The writing process closely parallels the process of reading. Once readers create an understanding of the text through prospective reading, they can go on to view it retrospectively in the search for meaning. Much the same holds true for writing in its different stages. We might consider the first few drafts to be essentially prospective. As we explore possible connections and see how they unfold, we will notice that the process has carried us in unforeseen directions, some highly productive and some cul-de-sacs. But a later stage in the process requires that we move from a preliminary draft, replete with loose ends and promising connections, to become the interpreter of the work we've done. Retrospective writing is interpretive because it tries to tease out the implicit meaning, which it develops further and refines. If the first drafts

are exploratory, the final draft is meant to present the writer's discoveries in a way that will conform to the reader's expectations. A thesis statement, logical organization, transitions, and well-structured paragraphs are all tools at our disposal for an effective public presentation.

Let's suppose we start writing with the idea that Fredrickson's "positivity resonance," the sense of rapport two people sometimes feel in each other's company, is an experience we can always trust. But when we turn to Michael Moss's account of the way the food industry has used psychological research to manipulate our behavior, our initial trust in resonance might begin to seem less persuasive than it did. And then we face a question we may not have foreseen, one that Fredrickson never entertains: when does resonance cross the line into something like addiction? Instead of treating this change in our position as a failure or a lapse, we should appreciate its value as a genuine discovery, which we could achieve only after a great deal of hard work. When revising we should not try to conceal the evidence of such a redirection in our thinking. By trying to erase the steps that led us to confusion, we can fail to show our audience the great discovery we have actually made. The strongest writing doesn't simply argue a point but also leads the reader through a thinking process.

The genre most familiar to students starting college is the "five paragraph essay" they learn to compose throughout their high school years. The first paragraph should present the main idea. Three body paragraphs should elaborate, and the final paragraph should sum up the main idea yet again. This format was designed to give beginners some control over a process that can become overwhelming with its sheer complexity. But this virtue is also the greatest defect of the five paragraph model. None of the selections in *The New Humanities Reader* look remotely like the kind of essay students write while they are in high school. Not only do most of the selections connect with many areas of knowledge at once, but they also offer thinking far more layered and nuanced than the high school format could allow. Instead of pounding home a single idea, they guide the reader through a journey of the mind that typically has many twists and turns, that takes two steps forward and one step back, that entertains alternative possibilities and, at times, answers criticisms. Instead of suppressing complexity, the writers here embrace it as the source of a deeper understanding. In your own writing you can learn to do the same.

THE SPIRIT OF THE NEW HUMANITIES

Because we can learn from everything, no one should fear making mistakes. We should never forget that the greatest thinkers of every age have often been refuted later, whereas ordinary people have sometimes lived more wisely than they were given credit for. Not so long ago, the best-educated Europeans believed that all celestial bodies beyond the moon were eternal and changeless.

Scholars taught that matter in every form could be reduced to the basic elements of earth, air, fire, and water. Medical experts sternly warned against the perils of regular bathing and eating whole grains. In sexual reproduction, men were supposed to contribute the blueprint, while women provided the raw material. One could spend a lifetime enumerating the follies that have passed for knowledge. And when we pause to consider such a checkered history, we might decide that education is itself a folly.

But maybe not. Instead of expecting knowledge to be true once and for all, we might try to see it as pragmatic and provisional, always subject to revision given further evidence or new circumstances. In our society today, the sciences may offer the best example of this experimentalist attitude, but some philosophers and artists of every generation have also refused the twin consolations of dogmatism and disillusionment. In the years ahead, our society will face many challenges—environmental, social, cultural, economic and political—that are sure to seem overwhelming. Given the high level of uncertainty that has become a constant feature of our lives, people may be drawn to ideologies that promise truths exempt from all revision and insulated from the challenges of diversity. If this book does nothing else, we hope that it will offer an alternative more compatible with the values espoused by the readings we have chosen: trust in the world and trust in ourselves.

QUESTIONS FOR READING

1. "Reading and Writing About the New Humanities" makes this claim on the very first page: "We need a new kind of thinking because we live in a world defined by possibilities, and possibilities go hand in hand with risk and unintended consequences." How do "possibilities" define the life of our times, and what role does "possibility" play in these detailed accounts of reading and writing? As you reread each section, ask yourself about the place of possibility in teaching and learning. How does an approach that stresses possibility differ from one that privileges strict rules, fixed methods, and pre-ordained answers?
2. Reading and writing are often taught as highly predictable activities. Supposedly, when we read, we follow word by word until we have transferred the writer's thoughts from his or her mind to ours. When we write, we should have a clear argument that we ought to outline before we compose. But "Reading and Writing About the New Humanities" takes a different view. It represents reading and writing as complex activities. Readers are not passive receivers, after all, but actively help to create what they read. And writing is a process of discovery that can lead to insights we seldom have when we first sit down to write. Not only are reading and writing more complex than many people assume but both involve moments of real uncertainty. Using this introduction as your guide, consider the role that uncertainty plays in the acts of reading and writing. Should we try to avoid uncertainty, or is the experience somehow liberating? What is the relation between uncertainty and the learning process?
3. When people write, they often have in mind what is called an "implied reader." The implied reader for the Harry Potter books might be someone who likes fantasy, mystery, and adventure. The implied reader for the *Financial Times* is probably an investor. Using specific evidence from "Reading and Writing About the New Humanities," create a detailed portrait of the implied reader of this book. Does this implied reader coincide with the normal image of "the student"? Does it coincide with what we ordinarily think of as a "consumer," "an informed citizen," an "individualist"? Feel free to choose the term that best describes the implied reader of this book, and then explain how you have reached that conclusion.

QUESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. The term *creative writing* seldom gets applied to the prose that students are required to grind out for their high school essays on *Great Expectations* or for term papers about the Civil War. *Creative writing* is usually reserved for the poems, plays, and fiction students read and sometimes write outside of class, far from the judgments of teachers and the pressure to get good grades. This way of thinking is not inaccurate. It reflects a cultural commonplace: the humanities supposedly provide a time-out for the freedom of imagination, while the other disciplines deal with difficult real-world concerns. The problem with this way of thinking is that it implicitly assumes creative writing cannot be factual or conceptually dense. And it assumes that writing about the real world has to be a boring, empty routine. In what ways does "Reading and Writing About the New Humanities" reject the conventional division between the creative and the real world? In what ways does it challenge the idea that creativity is spontaneous, subjective, and disconnected from realities?
2. We invite you to use this introduction to frame the first essay you read in the course. Whichever selection your instructor assigns, write an essay that explores moments where you see the essay's author engaged in creative reading and/or connective thinking. Are there other kinds of reading and thinking evident in the selected essay, kinds deserving of other adjectives? How do you know when creative reading has occurred? Is the evidence there on the page or is it in the eye of the beholder?
3. We make much of the limits of the five-paragraph essay in our introduction. It's a pretty easy target, actually, and none of the essays collected here fit that mold. Consider the organization of the first essay you've been assigned. How is its organization connected to the meaning of the piece? Which organizational decision would you say is the most important one made by the author?