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Rewriting

Joseph Harris

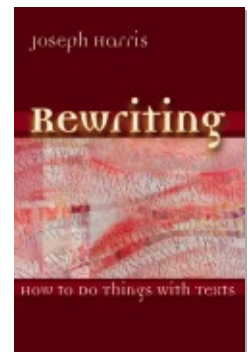
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Introduction

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A text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation.

—Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”

My aim in this book is to help you make interesting use of the texts you read in the essays you write. How do you respond to the work of others in a way that is both generous and assertive?

How do you make their words and thoughts part of what *you* want to say? In the academy you will often be asked to situate your thoughts about a text or an issue in relation to what others have written about it. Indeed, I’d argue that this interplay of ideas defines academic writing—that whatever else they may do, intellectuals almost always write *in response* to the work of others.

Intertexts

As Jonathan Culler writes: “Literary works are not to be considered autonomous entities, ‘organic wholes,’ but as intertextual constructs: sequences which have meaning in relation to other texts which they take up, cite, parody, refute, or generally transform.” *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 38.

(Literary theorists call this aspect of writing *intertextuality*.) But to respond is to do more than to recite or ventriloquize; we expect a respondent to add something to what is being talked about. The question for an academic writer, then, is how to come up with this something else, to add to what has already been said.

My advice here is to imagine yourself as *rewriting*—as drawing from, commenting on, adding to—the work of others. Almost all academic essays and books contain within them the visible traces of other texts—in the form of notes, quotations, citations, charts, figures, illustrations, and the like. This book is about the writing that needs to go on around these traces, about what you need to do to make the work of others an integral part of your own thinking and writing. This kind of work often gets talked about in ways—avoiding plagiarism, documenting sources, citing authorities, acknowledging influences—that make it seem a dreary and legalistic concern. But for me this misses the real excitement of intellectual writing—which is the chance to engage with and rewrite the work of other thinkers. The job of an intellectual is to push at and question what has been said before, to rethink and reinterpret the texts he or she is dealing with. More than anything else, then, I hope in this book to encourage you to take a stance toward the work of others that, while generous and fair, is also playful, questioning, and assertive.

This has led some readers to ask why I've chosen a term like *rewriting* to describe this sort of active and critical stance. And, certainly, I hope it's clear that the kind of rewriting I value has nothing to do with simply copying or reciting the work of others. Quite the contrary. My goal is to show you some ways of *using* their texts for your purposes. The reason I call this *rewriting* is to point to a generative paradox of academic work: Like all writers, intellectuals need to say something new and say it well. But unlike many other writers, what intellectuals have to say is bound up inextricably with the books we are reading, the movies we are watching, the music we are listening to, and the ideas of the people we are talking with. Our creativity thus has its roots in the work of others—in response, reuse, and rewriting.

Rewriting is also a usefully specific and concrete word; it refers not to a feeling or idea but to an action. In this book I approach rewriting as what the ethnographer Sylvia Scribner has called a *social practice*: the use of

certain tools (paper, pen, computer) in a well-defined context (the academy) to achieve a certain end or make a particular product (a critical essay). There are practices in all walks of life—ways of farming and gardening, of working with leather

or wood, of interviewing clients and counseling patients, of teaching and coaching, of designing and engineering, of setting up labs and conducting experiments. A practice describes how the members of a particular craft or trade get their work done. A problem with many books on writing, it seems to me, is that they fail to imagine their subject in meaningful terms as such a practice. Instead, they tend to alternate between offering advice that is specific but trivial—about proofreading or copyediting, for instance—and exhortations that are as earnest as they are vague. Or at least I have never felt sure that I knew what I was actually being asked to do when called upon to “think critically” or to “take risks” or to “approach revision as re-vision.” But by looking here at academic writing as a social practice, as a set of strategies that intellectuals put to use in working with texts, I hope to describe some of its key moves with a useful specificity.

Much of my thinking about writing hinges on this idea of a *move*. My subtitle alludes to one of the quirkiest and most intriguing books I have ever read, the philosopher J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*. In this book, actually the notes from a series of lectures, Austin argues that in thinking about language his fellow philosophers have long been overconcerned with decoding the precise meaning or truth value of various statements—a fixation that has blinded them from considering the routine yet complex ways in which people use words *to get things done*: to marry, to promise, to bet, to apologize, to persuade, to contract, and the like. Austin calls such uses of language *performatives* and suggests that it is often more useful to ask what a speaker is trying *to do* in saying something than what he or she means by it.

While I don’t try to apply Austin’s thinking here in any exact way, I do think of myself as working in his mode—as trying to show how to do things with texts, to shift our talk about writing away from the fixed and

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Sylvia Scribner, “The Practice of Literacy,” in *Mind and Social Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 190–205.

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J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

What I find of particular interest to my work here is a moment, near the very end of his lectures, when Austin offers a short list of what he calls “expositive” verbs—those that are used in “the expounding of views, the conducting of arguments, and the clarifying of usages and references”—in effect, beginning to outline his own set of “moves” for academic writing (see pp. 161–63).

static language of thesis and structure and toward a more dynamic vocabulary of action, gesture, and response. You *move* in tandem with or in response to others, as part of a game or dance or performance or conversation—sometimes toward a goal and sometimes just to keep the ball in play or the talk going, sometimes to win and sometimes to contribute to the work of a group. I hope in this book to describe intellectual writing as such a fluid and social activity and to offer you some strategies, some moves as a writer, for participating in it.

To do so, I draw on my experiences over the last twenty years as a writer and teacher of academic writing. And so, while this book is filled with examples of intellectuals at work with texts, they are examples that perhaps, in the end, tell as much about my own tastes, training, and values as anything else. That is to say, in this book I use my own ways of responding to and working with texts, my own habits of reading and writing, as representative of what other academics and intellectuals do. The drawback of such an approach, I suspect, is not that it is likely to be idiosyncratic but the reverse—that I may end up simply rehashing the common sense, the accepted practices, of a particular group of writers. But that is also, in a way, my goal: to show you some of the moves that academics routinely make with texts, to articulate part of “what goes without saying” about such work.

The Structure of This Book

Each of the chapters in this book centers on a particular rewriting move: *coming to terms*, *forwarding*, *countering*, *taking an approach*, and *revising*. But these five moves do not by any means compose a fixed sequence for writing a critical essay. On the contrary, I am sure that as you work on different pieces, you will find yourself using these moves in varying ways and

for shifting reasons—sometimes making several moves almost at once and other times focusing on a particular use of a text, sometimes making sustained use of a certain move and other times not employing it at all. I have ordered the chapters of this book, however, to suggest a kind of ethics of academic writing, a sense that intellectual work both starts and ends in acknowledging the strengths of other perspectives. And so I begin with what might be called the *generous* aspects of working with texts before turning to more *critical* forms of rewriting.

In chapter 1, I suggest some strategies for *coming to terms* with complex texts, for re-presenting the work of others in ways that are both fair to them and useful to your own aims in writing. In a sense, this is rewriting in its clearest form. For as soon as you begin to say what you think a text is “about” you are involved in rewriting it, in translating its language into your own. But how do you offer the gist of an ambitious, complex, and perhaps quite long text in the space of a few paragraphs or sentences? How do you select certain phrases or ideas for emphasis? When do you quote and when do you paraphrase? For while the point of academic writing is never merely to explain what someone else has said, to respond to others you need also to offer an accurate account of their work, one that respects its strengths as well as notes its limits. Effective use begins in generous understanding.

In chapter 2, I look more closely at such questions of use—specifically, at strategies for *forwarding* the projects of others. I borrow the term *forward* from the language of email because I think it describes better than *respond* what writers most often actually do with other texts. For outside of a few situations (teaching, editing, personal letters), readers seldom respond directly *to* a writer with comments on his or her text (“Dear Mr. Shakespeare . . .”). They are instead more likely to forward their thoughts *about* that text for a group of other readers—the teachers and students in a course, perhaps, or the readers of a journal or magazine or website—much as email users often resend posts that they think will interest certain friends and colleagues, usually with a set of carats (>) or a vertical line marking off the original text from their own comments. Anyone who has participated in a listserv knows how complicated and layered such posts can grow, as members insert remarks and delete passages before reforwarding a post back to the group, often resulting in a palimpsest of comments upon comments

upon comments upon an original post. While I don't want to push this analogy too far, I do want to hold onto the idea of academic writing as involving this sort of ongoing recirculation of texts. As I use the term, then, a writer *forwards* the views of another when he or she takes terms and concepts from one text and applies them to a reading of other texts or situations. The most important questions to ask a writer at such points often have less to do with the text being read than with the uses being made of it. In coming to terms with a text, your focus lies on understanding and representing its argument. In forwarding a text, you seek to extend the range and power of its ideas and phrasings. In this sense, the first two chapters sketch out ways of reading *with* an author, of rewriting as building upon the work of others.

Chapter 3 offers a mirror image of this emphasis, suggesting ways of reading *against* the grain of a text, of rewriting as a way of *countering* ideas and phrasings that strike you as somehow mistaken, troubling, or incomplete. I don't explore here the (limited) dynamics of pro-and-con debates, of writing whose aim is to simply to prove why someone else is foolish or wrong. For such work aims not at rewriting but erasure. Instead, I look at some of the ways you can develop what you have to say as a writer by thinking through the limits and problems of other views and texts. Such work involves more than shouting down an opponent or finding ways of discounting her or his arguments; an effective counterstatement must attend closely to the strengths of the position it is responding to, and thus in many ways depends on representing that position clearly and fairly in order to make full sense. The characteristic stance of the counterstatement is “*Yes, but . . .*”. This sort of rewriting—in which a writer aims less to refute or negate than to rethink or qualify—seems to me one of the key moves of intellectual discourse.

Projects

Identifying Writerly Moves

See if you can locate texts that offer examples of the first three rewriting moves that I describe here: *coming to terms*, *forwarding* and *countering*. (You may find a single text that offers examples of two or more of these moves.) Mark those

moments in the text where you see the writer making these moves, and be ready to talk about what you see him or her as doing.

You may also want to see if you can find instances of writers making moves with other texts that my terms *don't* seem to describe very well. What other terms might you offer in their place?

I then turn in chapter 4 to a form of rewriting that is at once generous and critical, in which you adopt, extend, and rework the driving questions and concerns of another writer. In *taking an approach*, you do not merely make use of a particular insight or concept from another writer (as in forwarding) but draw on his or her distinctive style or mode of working. This form of rewriting often involves applying a theory or method of analysis advanced by another writer to a new set of issues or texts. But you can also build on the insights of another writer, ask the sort of questions she might ask, draw on her characteristic uses of words and ideas, adapt her *style* of thought and writing to the demands of your own project—in ways that are at once more subtle and powerful. In this chapter I offer some strategies for working assertively in the mode of another writer, of taking an approach and making it your own.

Coming to terms, *forwarding*, *countering*, and *taking an approach* describe four ways of rewriting the work of others. In chapter 5 I suggest that you can also make use of these four moves in returning to and rewriting your *own* work-in-progress—a move that teachers of writing have for some time called *revising*. But while there has been much talk about the importance of revision, there has been little substantive advice on how to do it. Scholars like Peter Elbow and Donald Murray have offered excellent advice on drafting, on moving from nothing to something, getting words onto a page or screen. Others like Joseph Williams and Richard Lanham have written wonderful books on editing for style and clarity. But their focus has centered on reworking the form of sentences and paragraphs. Much less has been said about how to develop and revise a line of thinking over a series of *drafts*. That is what I try to offer in the last chapter of this book—an

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Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Heinle, 2003).

Joseph Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 7th ed. (New York: Longman, 2002).

Richard Lanham, *Revising Prose*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999).

approach to revising that asks you to question and rework your own writing much as you might do with the texts of others. How might you summarize your own draft, come to terms with what you have to say in it? How do you define your own project in relation to those of the texts you are discussing? At what moments in your text do you most clearly articulate your own line of thinking? How might you extend or forward this line? How might you

qualify or even counter it? In posing such questions, I hope to sketch a view of revising as a systematic practice, a consistent set of moves that you can apply to your own writing-in-progress.

As you will have noted by now, I have also interspersed two sorts of notes throughout my text. The boxes marked *Intertexts* refer you to the reading that underlies this book—both by providing bibliographic information about the texts I use as examples and by acknowledging those writers and colleagues who have helped me formulate my ideas about writing. The boxes marked *Projects* gesture toward some of the uses I imagine that you might make of this book, toward some possible ways of taking my approach and forwarding or countering it for your own purposes. What appears in these two sets of boxes would usually be found in the notes, appendices, or bibliographies of other books—that is, buried at the bottom of their pages or stuffed near their back covers. But since my aim here is to illustrate how academic writers reuse and respond to other texts, I thought it would be useful to make the interplay of texts that animates *this* book a visible part of its pages.

What you won't find in the *Projects* boxes are conventional essay assignments. That's because I hope that this book will be used in a course in which you are already involved in reading and writing responses to other texts—to academic books and articles, fiction, movies, essays, plays, and the like. My aim is not to replace that sort of work with this book but to help you do it. Indeed, it seems to me that much as a piece of writing always

needs to be about something, so, too, a writing *course* needs a subject, to be centered on some substantive issue or question—on the role of media in society, for instance, or the nature of work, or theories of schooling, or any of a thousand other complex and open issues that a group of writers can explore together. A book like this cannot provide such a subject or focus. Similarly, if a writing class is going to function as a class, this means that its members need to share and discuss the work that they are all doing as writers. Some readers have thus asked me why this book does not, until the last chapter on revising, include examples of student texts. My answer is that I hope that students using this book will look for such examples in the texts they are themselves writing. The kind of writing course that I teach brings three sets of texts to the table: (1) a group of readings that frame the subject—media, work, schooling, and so on—that we will look at together that semester; (2) the essays that students in the class draft and revise in response to those readings; and (3) other texts that discuss writing itself. This book is intended to fit into that third category.

I have more to say about such matters in the afterword on *teaching re-writing*. There I briefly describe some courses I have taught, both in composition and literature, that aim to help students imagine themselves as critics and intellectuals—that is, in which they are asked to read a wide range of texts, to connect what they read to their own interests and concerns, and to situate what they have to say in relation to the views of others. I describe the kinds of readings I like to work with and the types of writing projects I tend to assign. This afterword is addressed directly to teachers of academic writing—and so if I were a student in course using this book, it would be the first section I turned to. But it is really no more a teacher's guide than the rest of *Rewriting* is a textbook; there are no answers in the back, simply more ideas about writing and teaching.

Let me be as clear as I can about some other things that this book is *not*. It is not a guide to research; there are many such books already, and some very good ones, too. My concerns here begin at more or less the point when research ends: when you are faced with the question of what to say about a text that you have located or that you have been assigned to read. Neither do I have much to tell you about documenting sources or avoiding plagiarism; there are also plenty of handbooks that do that very well. And this is not a

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Wayne C. Booth, Gregory C. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams offer an excellent guide to *The Craft of Research*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

guide to the conventions that structure writing in the academic disciplines; indeed, the kind of writing that I talk about here is “academic” only in the sense that it tends to be taught in college. (If you are reading this, you are probably doing so for a course.) The sort of writing that

I am drawn to strives to be part of public life. It’s prose addressed not to academic specialists but to general readers—the sort of writing you find in *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic* and the *Nation*, or in *Rolling Stone* and *McSweeney’s* and *Salon*, as well as in independent weeklies, little magazines, student journals, some political and cultural blogs and websites, and the like. It’s what I will often call here *intellectual prose*—with the caveat that by *intellectual* I don’t mean wonkish or bohemian. I am interested in a kind of writing about texts and ideas, culture and politics, that while often associated with the academy, is not confined to it, that seeks instead to address a broader and more public set of issues and readers.

Projects

Coming to Terms with Rewriting

One way of coming to terms with a text is to make a list of its key terms and concepts and then to try to define them in your own words. (I will have more to say about such strategies in the first chapter.) As a way of articulating your own sense of what this book seems to be about, then, jot down at least four or five terms—*excluding* the titles of chapters—that strike you as important to my project here as a writer. Then see if you can write a paragraph in which you use those terms in describing the aims of this book (as best as you can now tell). You may want to return to this paragraph after you’ve finished reading this book—not so much to check your understanding of my work as to see if I have managed to achieve what I set out to do as writer.

Finally, I need say something about two other terms that are central to this book—one a specialized term and the other a word so familiar that some of its meanings have been dulled by use. The specialized term is *text*, by which I simply mean an artifact that holds meaning for some readers, viewers, or listeners. A book (or other piece of writing) is a text, but so are movies, plays, songs, paintings, sculptures, photographs, cartoons, videos, billboards, advertisements, web pages, and the like—as well as objects like buildings, cars, clothes, furniture, toys, games, and other gadgets when they have somehow acquired meaning for their users. But not everything is a text. Unlike actions, memories, or events, texts are objects that have been made and designed—*artifacts* that can in some way be shelved, filed, or stored and then retrieved and reexamined. That is what makes them so central to academic work. We may not agree on what a certain text means, but we can return to it and try to point to those specific aspects—lines, images, phrases, scenes—that lead us to interpret it differently. Someone else should always be able to check on how you have quoted a text.

The more commonplace but equally troublesome term is *interest*. I have often heard teachers remark that describing a piece of writing as “interesting” is to say very little about it, but I don’t think that this needs to be the case. The critic Raymond Williams has shown how over time the word *interest* has acquired several layers of meaning: Its first recorded uses, in the sixteenth century, appear in the realms of law and finance, as in the sense of “holding an interest” in a company or “earning interest” from an investment. But early on the word also gained a more political or partisan sense, as in the “interests of state,” “self-interest,” or “an interested party.” (The opposite of this meaning is “disinterested,” like a judge.) But *interest* did not gain its most current meaning, of attracting curiosity or attention, until the nineteenth century. (The opposite here is “uninteresting” or dull.) I find all three of these meanings useful in thinking about a piece of writing. That is, you can ask of an essay: (1) How does this writer add interest or value to what has been

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See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 171–73, as well as the usage notes for *interest* in the online *Oxford English Dictionary*.

said before? (2) What is her interest in this issue, what perspective is she speaking for? and (3) How is her style in writing of interest or note? And so when I say that my aim in this book is to help you make *interesting* use of the work of others, I use the term in all three senses. I hope, that is, to help you write with perspicacity and wit about texts and issues that matter to you.

Projects

The Job of an Introduction

The test of an effective intro, then, is straightforward: Does it offer readers a strong sense of your aim and plan as a writer? Note that this question implies nothing about the correct form of an introduction—about what should go into first paragraphs or where claims or theses should be placed—and that is because the key issue here isn't structure but *function*. The point of an intro is to tell readers what is at stake and what to expect in your writing. The question is thus not what the proper form of an intro is but if it gets that job done.

I encourage you to test this view against your own reading. Look closely at the beginning pages of a number of academic books or articles (including, perhaps, this one): Are there any opening moves that all of the writers make? If so, do they make these moves at similar moments or in similar ways? And what changes from piece to piece? What sorts of things do the writers do differently as each works to define a project and plan?
