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Rewriting

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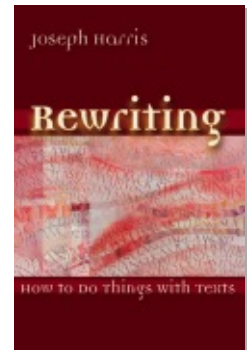
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forwarding

The painter's products stand before us as though they were still alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as if they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever.

—Plato, *Phaedrus*

The dead, thing-like text has potentials far outdistancing those of the simply spoken word.

—Walter Ong, “Writing Is a Technology
That Restructures Thought”

Academic writing is often described as a kind of conversation. You read a text, you talk about it, you put down some thoughts in response, others respond to your comments, and so on. Or as the poet, novelist, philosopher, and critic Kenneth Burke once put it:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion has begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone on before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense;

another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally's assistance. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

Others have drawn on this metaphor to imagine the various disciplines and professions as being, in effect, different sorts of conversations—each with its own rules of evidence and etiquette. In this view, to become a lawyer, a historian, a biologist, or a social worker, you need to learn to think and talk like a lawyer, a historian, a biologist, or a social worker. Learning a subject means acquiring a discourse, not just mastering a body of knowledge. As another teacher of academic writing, David Bartholomae, has argued:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.

This metaphor of writing as conversation has several strengths. It highlights the social aspects of intellectual work, the ways in which academic writing responds to the texts and ideas of others. It suggests that the goal of such writing is not to have the final word on a subject, to bring the discussion to a close, but to push it forward, to say something new, something that seems to

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Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 110–11.

David Bartholomae, "Inventing the University," in *When A Writer Can't Write*, ed. Mike Rose (New York: Guilford, 1985), 134.

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In this sense, the passage I've quoted fails to suggest the larger aim of Burke's writing, which was to theorize a "rhetoric of courtship," a discourse that strives for agreement rather than confrontation, identification rather than division. See Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

call for further talk and writing. And despite Burke's somewhat militaristic talk of allies and opponents, the metaphor also hints at the more civil tone of much academic work. A dialogue is not a debate. You don't win a conversation, you add to it, push it ahead, keep it going, "put your oar in," and maybe even sometimes redirect or divert the flow of talk. But you rarely win over a person you are speaking with by first refuting what she or he has just said. The arts of conversation are subtler than those of debate; they join our need to articulate the differences among us with our need to keep talking with one another.

But if academic writing is a conversation, then it is one of a curious and asymmetrical sort. For academics rarely write *to* the persons whose work they are writing *about*. If you are assigned in a class, for instance, to respond to a play by Shakespeare, you don't expect its author to write you back. Your writing is instead directed at other readers of the play. In quoting Shakespeare, then, you are less entering into conversation with him (whoever he may have been) than with fellow readers of his work (wherever they may now be). You are *recirculating* his writing, highlighting parts of his text for the consideration of others. And I'd argue that this is the case for most academic writing—that it does not reply to the texts it cites so much as *forward* passages and ideas from them.

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"When it has once been written down, every discourse rolls about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support."
Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 81 (275E).

Another way to put this might be to say that academic writing is almost always intended to persuade a *third* reader. One scholar will criticize the work of another less in the hope of having her rival recant than in persuading other readers to see the good sense of her (rather than his) views. Even an indignant author writing to protest a wrong-headed review of his latest book addresses his letter "To the Editor." If you *reply* to an email post you have received, you are engaging in a private correspondence. If you *forward*

that post (or part of it) to another set of readers, along with your comments on it, you have begun a more public exchange. In the email program I use, these two functions are illustrated by opposing arrows: reply (↩) sends your comments back to the sender; forward (➔) directs them outward to other readers. And these forwards can themselves be forwarded, to sometimes unexpected sites and publics—as anyone who has ever written an email post that seemed to take on a life of its own, found its way to unintended readers, can testify. The power of the Internet to make texts accessible comes with a cost, as you not only gain readers for a text but also lose control of its uses once you send it forward into the public sphere. (This was precisely the worry about writing voiced centuries ago by the philosopher Plato—that texts can become “fatherless,” detached from their authors and interpreted recklessly.) Much of academic discourse thus tends to proceed sideways, as writers take ideas and phrases from what they have read and reuse them in approaching a different set of issues and texts.

As I write this book, for instance, I am sitting in a small room, before a laptop computer, surrounded by books, papers, and magazines—all of which I am, in some metaphorical sense, “in conversation with” (in much the same way I am also in conversation with you, my imagined reader). But what I am actually *doing* is working with a set of materials—looking for books on my shelves and flipping through them, folding pages over or marking them with Post-its, retyping passages, filing and retrieving print-outs and photocopies, making notes in margins and on index cards, and, of course, composing, cutting, pasting, formatting, revising, and printing blocks of prose. I am, that is, for the most part, moving bits of text and paper around. I don’t want to lose the metaphor of conversation entirely—writing is in a very real way a process of trying to say something to somebody. But a text is also an artifact; it is not only something you say but something you *make*. And so, even when your goal in writing is to enter into a kind of conversation about a subject, to form your own response to what others have had to say about it, the question remains of how to construct or assemble that response.

As I use the term, a writer *forwards* a text by taking words, images, or ideas from it and putting them to use in new contexts. In forwarding a text, you test the strength of its insights and the range and flexibility of

its phrasings. You rewrite it through reusing some of its key concepts and phrasings. In this chapter, I will focus on rewriting in the spirit of the texts you are reading, of applying and extending their ideas and phrasings. And then, in the next chapter, I will look at more skeptical forms of rewriting, of bringing texts forward for criticism and counterstatement. But let me emphasize that this order is not in any way fixed—there is no need, that is, to always try to find something nice to say about a text before criticizing it. You might instead think of these two chapters as building on the moves I outlined in the previous chapter on coming to terms. In forwarding a text, you extend its *uses*; in countering a text, you note its *limits*. These two moves often double upon one another: In applying a text to new situations, that is, you are likely to also end up revising some of its key words and concepts, much as in countering the stance or phrasings of a text, you may well begin to see how some of its aims might be better realized.

Projects

Conversing in Writing

Find a listserv or blog whose topics interest you. Spend a few days following the exchanges on it. Note down those moments at which the members of the list or board really seem to be “conversing in writing” with each other, and also note points where they seem to be doing something else (forwarding, flaming, digressing, whatever). How useful is the metaphor of conversation in describing the exchanges you’ve observed? What does the metaphor distort or fail to describe?

In forwarding a text, you begin to shift the focus of your readers away from what its author has to say and toward your own project. Writers often describe themselves as drawing on or mining other texts for ideas and examples, but extracting such materials is only part of the job. You then need to shape them to your own purposes in writing. There are at least four ways of doing so:

- *Illustrating*: When you look to other texts for examples of a point you want to make.
- *Authorizing*: When you invoke the expertise or status of another writer to support your thinking.
- *Borrowing*: When you draw on terms or ideas from other writers to use in thinking through your subject.
- *Extending*: When you put your own spin on the terms or concepts that you take from other texts.

Illustrating provides you with material to think *about*: anecdotes, images, scenarios, data. Authorizing, borrowing, and extending are ways of finding things in other texts to think *with*: keywords, concepts, approaches, theories. I will discuss each of these four moves in more detail below. Remember, though, that when you forward an idea or passage from another text you need not simply to cite but to use it. If you look to another text for an example, you need to make it an example of what you have to say. If you take a term from another writer, you need to show what you take it to mean and how it contributes to what you are arguing.

Illustrating

Writing for school often starts with an assigned text: A teacher hands you a book or essay to read and tells you to write an essay about it. But this isn't always—or perhaps even usually—how intellectual work begins. The impetus for many projects lies instead not in a specific text but in a question or idea or issue that a writer wants to explore. (There are exceptions, of course: book reviews, studies of particular authors, etc.) Such work often begins with something closer to a hunch than a thesis. You might, for instance, notice how cell phones or email can sometimes seem to distance people from one another as much as connect them, or how some advertisements seem to promote not so much a product as an experience or sensibility. But to write about such questions, you need to find some texts that can help you focus your hunch, formulate the issue more precisely. You need some texts, that is, to use in thinking about your subject.

A few years ago, I was involved in editing a book of essays on the uses of popular culture in everyday life. In doing so, I was struck by how many

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Todd Gitlin, "We Build Excitement," in *Watching Television*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon, 1986); reprinted in Joseph Harris, Jay Rosen, and Gary Calpas, eds., *Media Journal: Reading and Writing about Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 378–80.

critics began their essays by recounting a particular scene or image from a movie, TV show, or advertisement. Here, for instance, is how Todd Gitlin starts his piece, "We Build Excitement":

An electronic throb comes across the screen. Through a blue-black, haze-shrouded night city wanders the solitary figure of a young

blond man. He is handsome in a blank way, expressionless, almost robotic. The city is deserted. In this science-fictional future, the man has left the present, society, the clutter of other people behind. Is he liberated? Troubled? The electronic pulse continues. Vapors hover in the street, catching the light. The man stalks through evacuated streets, seeking signs of life. Suddenly, he spins around as if startled by a sound. Overhead looms a billboard depicting—what posthistoric icon of the age? The new Dodge. The sight fills him with awe. The car slides off the billboard and out into the world. It has a life of its own; indeed, more life than his own. It pursues him, calls him, teases him; the car is the active agent. The two of them are alone in this vacated kingdom; he might be the last man in the world. Now he turns and goes after the Dodge, which gives him the slip. He follows it down a narrow street, but it's gone. And then, with the abruptness of a jump cut, he finds himself in the driver's seat. His blankness fades; it is a satisfied go-getter who now turns to us and grins. Instantly dystopia segues into utopia. Accepting the challenge of hypernew technology, the driver has earned his place in the proverbial fast lane. The car then accelerates at *Star Wars*—like warp velocity and takes off into ethereal hyperspace. "Dodge," says the closing logo after a breathless thirty seconds, "An American Revolution."

This is a remarkable passage. Beginning with the visual image of the "electronic throb . . . across the screen," Gitlin intrudes on our consciousness much as the Dodge commercial does: suddenly and assertively. His short sentences evoke a sense of speed and fragmentation in tandem with a set of neologisms (*haze-shrouded*, *posthistoric*, *hypernew*) that hint at the futuristic feel of the thirty-second spot he is describing. His prose thus

responds to one of the particular challenges of writing about nonprint media—which is the need to re-present the texts you discuss, to translate them into language that begins to evoke the experience of viewing or listening to them. You can't reproduce a television ad or a movie scene on the page in the way you can recopy the words of a print text. Quoting the lyrics of a song doesn't always get at how it feels to hear it performed, and describing the subject of a photograph or painting can only begin to suggest its total impact as an image. Even the ability to scan or embed audio and visual files into electronic documents fails to solve this problem completely—although it does make writing about such texts more rigorous and interesting—since in order to comment on an aspect of an image or performance you still need somehow to put it in words.

In some ways, the difficulty of quoting nonprint media highlights the central problem of dealing with the texts of others: You need somehow to make their work yours. Faced with the impossibility of rendering the whole of an image or performance in words, you can only instead point to what you see as its key moments or features. That is to say, in describing a movie or song or ad, you need to interpret as you describe, to re-present the text in a way that shows how it illustrates the point you want to argue. A few more paragraphs into his essay, for instance, Gitlin's motives in describing the advertisement for Dodge start to become clear:

Altogether this style of urgent and displaced velocity represented the most striking innovation in the automotive sales pitch of the mid-eighties. All the fancy-free varieties of the high-tech format bore the implication the car today is the carrier of adrenal energies, a sort of syringe on wheels. "We Build Excitement," in the words of Pontiac's slogan. The form of the commercial built a particular brand of excitement. In the case of the futuristic Dodge, the relentless flickering pace, the high-gloss platinum look, the glacially blue coloration, the dark ice haze, the metallic music innocent of wood and strings—all suggested something otherworldly and ungrounded. . . . The aggregate message was not about cars alone, but about the current incarnations of America's perennial dreams: freedom, power, technology.

Gitlin suggests that car ads do not sell simply cars but also an ideology that prizes independence to the point of isolation, that links technology to

a kind of cowboy masculinity. The aim of the Dodge ad is to make the viewer feel that Pontiac's cars are somehow more virile, edgy, and stylish than those of its competitors; Gitlin's aim is to connect this pitch to an American ethic that links violence to progress. And so many of his phrasings look two ways, toward both the advertisement and his reading of it. He describes the protagonist as both "handsome" and "robotic," "troubled" and "liberated," "awed" and yet, by the end of the spot, satisfied, grinning, "in the driver's seat." The streets are "evacuated" and yet, in an ethereal and blue-black way, alluring, vaporous, pulsing. And the car is the "active agent," teasing, pursuing, hypernew, transforming. In Gitlin's description, that is, the Dodge ad comes to reflect the "urgent and displaced velocity" of our culture.

What Gitlin has done is to give himself and his readers an example to use in thinking through some ideas about our common culture. The Dodge ad, that is, now serves a point that *he* is making. The aim of his writing is less to understand the commercial on its own terms than to use it as a way of getting at a larger issue in our culture. The text is not the object of his analysis so much as a tool for his thinking.

None of this is to suggest that you should be anything less than scrupulous in dealing with texts that you bring forward as illustrations in your writing. In formal academic writing, you need to cite nonprint media along with print texts—usually noting the site and date of a performance or broadcast, or when and how you accessed a website. Never work from memory alone. Always have copies of any texts you discuss at hand: not only books and magazines but videotapes, audiotapes, CDs, DVDs, MP3s, scripts, lyric sheets, printouts, Xeroxes, postcards, photographs, and so on.

Take notes on interviews and events. If you can, try to reproduce some part of the texts you discuss in your writing. (It is easy enough to scan images into a text or even simply to paste in photos or Xeroxes, and it is quickly becoming more practicable to insert audio and visual files into electronic documents.) Save all the texts you write about, especially any

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Most research handbooks now include guides to citing nonprint media. Janice R. Walker and Todd Taylor's *Columbia Guide to Online Style* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) is especially helpful in offering not only rules but working principles for documenting texts in various media.

that readers might have difficulties accessing on their own (web links get pulled down or changed, TV programs go off air, song lyrics can be unintelligible). The more confidence your readers have in your descriptions of such texts, the more they are also likely to credit your uses and interpretations of them.

Gitlin models a use of forwarding as a kind of opening move, a way into a subject. While this sort of move is not always made at the start of an essay or book, it does tend to mark hinge points in a text, moments where a writer is moving from one line of thought to another. Sometimes a writer may use a series of forwarded passages to stand for the key moves of a piece, to offer a kind of outline of it through images and examples. For instance, in the opening chapter of his book *On Literacy*, Robert Pattison defines literacy as involving not simply a mechanical mastery of the skills of reading and writing but also “a consciousness of the uses of languages.” The literate person, Pattison suggests, realizes that words never simply describe the world but rather always offer a particular view of it, and thus that we can use language to shape beliefs and events—for both good and ill. He then argues that this awareness of the power of words to influence action is

so fundamental that we may wonder if it is possible to be human without it. Three instances of this basic sort of illiteracy come to mind: the Wild Boy of Aveyron, Gracie Allen, and Homer’s Agamemnon.

Pattison then structures the rest of his chapter around these three examples of illiteracy. The Wild Boy, as portrayed in Francois Truffaut’s film, is someone who has grown up without ever learning to use language at all; the comedienne Gracie Allen, in her radio skits with Fred Burns, is a person who understands only the literal meaning of words, who never gets the joke or the pun; and Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek campaign against Troy in the *Iliad*, is a blustering bureaucrat who follows all the rules without question or criticism. While his argument is too involved to restate in detail, I think you can see how Pattison uses these examples to suggest the progress of his thought—moving from examples of individuals with no language to mistaken language

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Robert Pattison, *On Literacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 5–18.

to a competent but limited language. The Wild Boy, Gracie, and Agamemnon serve as markers of his ideas, steps in his argument, ways of thinking about his subject.

Authorizing

But texts are sources of terms and ideas as well as images and examples. A defining move of critical writing is the turn to another text for a key word or concept. Sometimes this occurs as a quick appeal to another writer as a voice of authority. For instance, in “Sex, Lies, and Advertising,” Gloria Steinem invokes the views of an industry expert to support her claim that advertisers often exert an undue influence on the editorial content of the articles in women’s magazines:

Do you think, as I once did, that advertisers make decisions based on solid research? Well, think again. “Broadly speaking,” says Joseph Smith of Octoby-Smith, Inc., a consumer research firm, “there is no persuasive evidence that the editorial context of an ad matters.

There is real wit to this brief citation, as Steinem in effect calls on her opponents in the advertising world to make her point for her. (Her essay was written to explain and defend the politically brave but economically risky decision of *Ms.* magazine to no longer accept advertising.) But Steinem’s appeal to authority here is essentially the same as that made in the “review of the literature” sections of many academic essays and books, where we are diligently told “what research shows” or “what critics have observed” or the like. This sort of move is often necessary to make, if only to prove that you’ve done your homework, but it seems to me, for the most part, to be a straightforward and routine form of intellectual housekeeping. The best advice I can offer, then, is to follow Steinem’s lead in making such appeals as succinct and pointed as you can. (Often they can be relegated to footnotes.)

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Gloria Steinem, “Sex, Lies, and Advertising,” *Ms.*, July–August 1990, 18–28; reprinted in Harris, Rosen, and Calpas, *Media Journal*, 436–55.

Borrowing

You can call on other texts not simply to support but to advance your

work as writer through *borrowing* a term or idea from another writer to use in thinking through your subject. For instance, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman argues that we have shifted from a print- to a television-based culture, and in doing so have also begun to privilege entertainment and diversion over analysis. To explain what he feels is the dominant role that TV plays in our lives, Postman both contrasts it to another technology and draws on the work of a quite different writer and thinker:

In the past few years, we have been learning that the computer is the technology of the future. We are told that our children will fail in school and be left behind in life if they are not “computer literate.” We are told that we cannot run our businesses, or compile our shopping lists, or keep our checkbooks tidy unless we own a computer. Perhaps some of this is true. But the most important fact about computers and what they mean to our lives is that we learn about all this from television. Television has achieved the status of a “meta-medium”—an instrument that directs not only our knowledge of the world but our knowledge of *ways of knowing* as well.

At the same time, television has achieved the status of “myth,” as Roland Barthes uses the word. He means by *myth* a way of understanding the world that is not problematic, that we are not fully conscious of, that seems, in a word, natural. A myth is a way of thinking so deeply embedded in our consciousness that it is invisible. That is now the way of television. We are no longer fascinated or perplexed by its machinery. We do not tell stories of its wonders. We do not confine our television sets to special rooms.

Of course, anything written about computers is likely to seem comically out of date in little more than a year or two, and certainly, writing in 1985, Postman was not in a position to guess at the impact that computers, email, and the web would soon exert on our culture. But his point that computers continue to intrigue and trouble us while the technology of television seems natural and invisible, a simple and given presence, is still worth considering. Postman

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Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking, 1985), 78–79.

Postman is drawing on the preface to a collection of essays by Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972).

argues for this contrast by suggesting that television now functions as a kind of *myth*, “as Roland Barthes uses the word.” That tag phrase is crucial to understanding what Postman is doing as a writer. Barthes was a French literary theorist who wrote from the 1950s through the 1970s and was one of the first serious critics of popular culture. But while he wrote occasionally on television, it was not one of his central interests. And, unlike Postman, Barthes wrote not only as a critic but as a fan of popular culture. What Postman takes from Barthes, then, is less an overall approach to looking at culture than a term and concept (“myth”) that he finds useful for his own purposes. He does not “apply” Barthes to an analysis of television so much as *borrow* the idea of myth from him to explain how TV has now become natural and familiar to us. And then, having given thanks where due, Postman can, in a sense, return the term to Barthes with its original meaning more or less intact.

This quick, tactical use of other texts is one of the key moves of intellectual writing. To draw on the idea of myth, Postman doesn’t need to come to terms with Barthes’s overall project as a writer. He simply has to be clear about where the concept comes from and what he wants to do with it. In citing Barthes, does Postman enter into conversation with him? Not in any meaningful sense, it seems to me. Rather, he borrows and reuses materials made available by Barthes—and which I have then myself put to use here yet again. Plato worried that writing would allow texts to “roll about . . . indiscriminately,” ungoverned by the aims of their authors and eventually falling into the hands of “those who have no business” with them. But the other side of this fear is the democratic hope that all of us can gain access to the materials of our culture and reshape them to our own purposes.

Extending

Indeed, I’d argue that writing tends to become more exciting as it moves outward—selecting, excerpting, commenting, and, sometimes, changing or inflecting the meanings of the texts it brings forward. Consider, for instance, another use of the work of Roland Barthes by a writer on television—in this case, David Marc in his book *Demographic Vistas*, an argument for the TV sitcom as a form of populist art:

“The virtue of [professional] wrestling,” Roland Barthes wrote in 1957, “is that it is the spectacle of excess.” The sitcom, in contrast, is a spectacle of subtleties, an incremental construction of substitute universes laid upon the foundation of a linear, didactic teletheater. Even the occasional insertion of the *mirabile* or supernatural underlines the genre’s broader commitment to naturalistic imitation. Presentational comedy, which shared the prime-time spotlight with the sitcom during the early years of TV, vacillates between the danger of excess and the safety of consensus. The comedy-variety genre has been the great showcase for presentational teleforms: stand-up comedy, impersonation, and the blackout sketch. It is similar to wrestling, in that it too strives for the spectacle of excess. The pre-electronic ancestors of the comedy-variety show can be found on the vaudeville and burlesque stages. . . . But the comedy-variety show does not go to the ultimate excesses of wrestling. Like the sitcom, it is framed by the proscenium arch and accepts the badge of artifice.

Unlike Postman, who calls on the concept of myth “as Roland Barthes uses the word,” Marc revises Barthes’s phrasing almost in the act of quoting it. “The spectacle of excess” was how Barthes explained the allure of professional wrestling, describing its matches as mock, exaggerated battles between good and evil that fans can at once laugh at and revel in. (While Barthes wrote about wrestling in the 1950s, his words still describe much of the appeal of the WWF today.) In forwarding the idea of a “spectacle of subtleties,” Marc puts his own spin on this celebration of the popular, arguing that the roots of the sitcom lie not in the excesses of burlesque or wrestling but in the nuances of domestic drama. To understand the sitcom, he suggests, you need a slightly different sense of spectacle. His aim is not to criticize Barthes’s phrasing (which describes wrestling perfectly well) but to add to its range of meanings. In thus *extending* the notion of spectacle, Marc can at once link his position to Barthes and push beyond him. He quotes with a difference, turning Barthes’s concept, in a move as

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David Marc, *Demographic Vistas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).

Marc cites here the famous lead essay of Barthes’s *Mythologies*, “The World of Wrestling,” 15–25.

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Marjorie Garber, "Our Genius Problem," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 2002, 67.

powerful as it is efficient, into one of his own.

If the stylistic signature of borrowing from another text is the note of acknowledgment ("in the words of *x*," "as *y* suggests," "as *z* uses the term"), then the characteristic marker of extending is the punning echo or substituted term—as shown, for instance, in Marc's rephrasing of the "spectacle of excess" as a "spectacle of subtleties." You can see the critic Marjorie Garber making both moves—acknowledgment and substitution—in the following passage from her essay "Our Genius Problem":

Joseph Addison's essay "On Genius," published in *The Spectator* in 1711, laid out the terrain of genius as we use the term today, to denote exceptional talent or someone who possesses it. According to Addison, there were two kinds of genius—natural and learned . . . In general terms this dichotomy—brilliant vs. industrious—still underlies our notion of genius today, but despite Thomas Edison's oft quoted adage, "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration," it's the inspiration that we dote on.

Garber takes pains here to point out that her key descriptive words for genius come from Addison ("natural and learned") and Edison ("inspiration and perspiration"), gracefully noting how one "laid out the terrain" and how the other gave us his "oft quoted adage." But to connect their phrasings to each other, Garber needs to come up with a new dichotomy of her own—"brilliant vs. industrious"—which she slides adeptly between long dashes in her last sentence. This opposition echoes the form of the writers she quotes, but shifts some of their terms—replacing "natural" and "inspiration" with her own "*brilliant*," and "learned" and "perspiration" with her "*industrious*." The result is a phrasing that draws on Addison and Edison, but that allows Garber to point out what now seems obvious: We expect our geniuses to be not simply dutiful and hardworking but brilliant. She does not simply restate but rewrites their familiar contrast in a way that lets her point out how one of its sides ("brilliant") tends to be favored over the other ("industrious"). Through forwarding Addison and Edison, she arrives at her own, separate position as a writer.

Projects

Defining Forwarding

Locate a text whose writer forwards the work of another intellectual or artist. See if the terms I have offered in this chapter are helpful in describing the uses the writer makes of this text. That is, does he forward the other text to *illustrate* a point he is making? Or does he cite it to *authorize* his claims? Or *borrow* or *extend* some of its ideas and phrasings? Or—and this is what would lend this project some real interest—do you see any points in the text where you would need a different term to name what the writer is doing? See if you can take the opportunity here, that is, to extend my vocabulary, to add to or revise the set of terms I have used to describe forwarding.

Some Complexities of Practice

In this chapter I've identified four types of forwarding: *illustrating*, *authorizing*, *borrowing*, and *extending*. A problem with offering advice about writing, though, is that while you can isolate certain moves that writers make, they rarely make those moves in isolation. In the course of an ambitious piece of writing, you are likely to forward the work of others in multiple and overlapping ways: to call on some texts as sources of authority, to draw on others for examples, to borrow ideas or extend phrasings from still others. And this does not even begin to consider the ways in which you will also probably need in the same piece to come to terms with or counter yet other texts. The thing to remember is that the strategies I describe in this book are just that: strategies, moves, ways of advancing your own project as a writer. In order to identify these strategies, I have chosen passages that show a writer making a certain move particularly well: Gitlin illustrating, Postman borrowing, Marc extending, and the like. But strong writers tend to use such moves in combination. In closing this chapter, then, I'd like to look briefly at a writer making use of several different strategies of forwarding all at once.

In *Fear of Falling*, the cultural critic Barbara Ehrenreich explores the anxious social and economic position of the professional middle class—teachers, writers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, administrators, and the like. Ehrenreich argues that because the members of this class realize that their position in society rests on their knowledge or expertise, they tend to be nervous about crediting the views of other, less-credentialed people.

We tend to think of the problem, if we think of it at all, as a simple *lack* on the part of the “lower” classes, most likely a simple lack of vocabulary. Stereotypes of verbally deprived workers come to mind: Archie Bunker with his malapropisms, Ed Norton braying numbly on *The Honeyymooners*. But usually it is the middle class that is speaking the strange language—something sociologist Alvin Gouldner called “critical discourse.” This is the language of the academy and also of bureaucracy; and, in his analysis, it defines the professional middle class as a “speech community.” It is distinguished, above all, by its impersonal and seemingly universal tone. Within critical discourse, Gouldner writes,

Persons and their social positions must not be visible in their speech. Speech becomes impersonal. Speakers hide behind their speech. Speech seems to be disembodied, de-contextualized and self-grounded.

Relative to the vernacular, critical discourse operates at a high level of abstraction, always seeking to absorb the particular into the general, the personal into the impersonal. This is its strength. But the rudely undemocratic consequence is that individual statements from “below” come to seem almost weightless, fragmentary, unprocessed. . . .

The way across the language barrier lies, first, through awareness of the middle-class assumptions that automatically denigrate “ordinary” styles of speech. In the longer term, we need a critique of critical discourse itself. Is there a way to “re-embody” the middle-class’s impersonal mode of discourse, so that it no longer serves to conceal the individual and variable speaker? For we may

Intertexts

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Harper, 1989), 258–59.

Ehrenreich quotes from Alvin Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the New Class* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 29.

need to find *ourselves* in the language of abstraction, if we are ever to find the “others” in the language of daily life.

This seems to me an example of intellectual writing at its finest. The key move that Ehrenreich makes is to borrow the notion of critical discourse from Gouldner in order to suggest that it is not the working class but the middle class that is “speaking the strange language”—to reinterpret what at first seemed a “lack” of articulateness as simply a difference in styles of speech. But she also brings forward two TV texts—*All in the Family* and *The Honeymooners*—as quick illustrations of this seeming inarticulateness, and she deftly establishes the authority of Gouldner as a sociologist whose comments about middle-class speech are based on something more than opinion. But what I find most impressive is how she extends Gouldner’s thinking through echoing and reworking his key terms. The problem with critical discourse, Ehrenreich suggests, is that it is not self-critical enough: “[W]e need a critique of critical discourse itself,” she argues. Speech that Gouldner describes as “disembodied” she urges us to “re-embod[y].” If middle-class “[s]peakers hide behind their speech,” she exhorts us to “find *ourselves* in” our language once again. Gouldner was trying to define the discourse of a particular middle-class community, what he called the “new class” of intellectuals. Ehrenreich wants us to recognize that community and its particular style of discourse so we can then push at its limits and constraints, to rethink the assumptions we bring to our attempts to listen to the speech of others. She brings pressure on Gouldner’s ideas about critical discourse at the same time she draws upon them. In doing so, she shows how you can offer readers a new way of thinking about a text through the ways you rewrite its central terms and concepts.



Extending another text can be risky work. There is always the chance that you’ll go too far, misappropriate the ideas or phrasings of another writer. Is a *spectacle of subtleties* really very much like a *spectacle of excess*, you might ask David Marc? Or do *learned* and *industrious* describe quite the same thing, you might ask Marjorie Garber? But I also think it is precisely the willingness to take such chances, to rewrite the terms and ideas of others, to

make them your own, that so often makes extending such a salient move in ambitious intellectual prose.

Still, I want to be careful not to denigrate the other forms of forwarding. Citing authorities, culling examples, borrowing concepts or phrasings—these are moves you need to be able to make with confidence and speed. I also want to note that throughout this chapter, I have deliberately focused on the local and tactical—on ways to make use of specific images, phrasings, and concepts from other texts. There are broader ways of working in the mode of another writer, of taking on not just an idea or a term but an approach or perspective, a sensibility or method. I will discuss these moves in chapter 4 on *taking an approach*.

Before doing so, though, I will turn in the next chapter to a more critical and skeptical form of rewriting in which you aim to *counter* the positions taken by other writers, to note the limits of their work. In closing here, then, let me point to a shift in tone or style between forwarding and countering. In forwarding words, ideas, or images from another text, your focus tends to be on where you are headed as a writer, on what you're doing with your materials. But to counter another text effectively your focus usually needs to stay longer on its claims and phrasings. In a peculiar way, then, the act of countering or criticizing a text often lends it a stature that forwarding does not. You can imagine, for instance, David Marc deciding he needed to explain more fully the problems with looking at popular culture as a “spectacle of excess.” But to do so he'd need to write a passage not on the sitcom and his ideas about it but on Roland Barthes. The work of countering a text tends to be slow and careful. The pace of forwarding is usually quicker, its touch lighter. Its aim is to take what is useful from a text and move on.

Projects

Forwarding Nonprint Texts

The next time you write an essay in which you discuss a nonprint text, try to find a way to incorporate that text as seamlessly as you can into your document. You might consider scanning images into the body of your text or embedding web links to audio or visual files in an electronic

document. Or, if you don't have access to a scanner or web technology, you can still cut and paste images (ads, postcards, photos, etc.) into the text you are composing. See if you can "wrap" your text around the image (as my prose wraps around the inserts in this book). Xeroxing a page can make the interface between image and text appear more seamless. In any case, do not simply append images or links to the end of your text. Your goal should be instead to make those texts part of your own document.

I offer this project as both a technical *and* intellectual challenge. For I think you will find that once you insert an image (or other media text) into the body of your writing, you will feel a need to comment on it in ways that you might not have had you simply paper-clipped it to the back of your essay. Indeed, if you want to take this project a step further, see if you can quote the same nonprint text a second time in your essay, but isolating a particular aspect or fragment of it—a section of an image, perhaps, or a line from a scene, or a riff from a song. Experiment if you can with re-presenting or reformatting the text—through changing its shape, color, volume, and so on. Try not simply to reproduce the text but to forward it, to use it to make a point of your own.
