Rewriting

Joseph Harris

Published by Utah State University Press
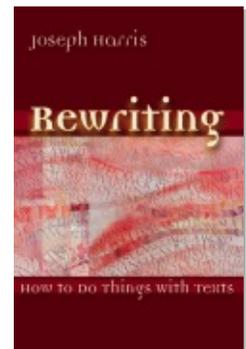
➨ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9248

3

Countering

Palin: Oh look, this isn't an argument.

Cleese: Yes it is.

Palin: No it isn't. It's just contradiction.

Cleese: No it isn't.

Palin: It is!

Cleese: It is not.

Palin: Look, you just contradicted me.

Cleese: I did not.

Palin: Oh you did!

Cleese: No, no, no.

Palin: You did just then.

Cleese: Nonsense!

Palin: Oh, this is futile!

Cleese: No it isn't.

Palin: I came here for a good argument.

Cleese: No you didn't; you came here for an argument.

Palin: An argument isn't just contradiction.

Cleese: It can be.

*Palin: No it can't. An argument is a connected series of statements
    intended to establish a proposition.*

Cleese: No it isn't.

Palin: Yes it is! It's not just contradiction.

*Cleese: Look, if I argue with you, I must take up a contrary posi-
    tion.*

Palin: Yes, but that's not just saying, "No it isn't."

Cleese: Yes it is!

Palin: No it isn't! Argument is an intellectual process. Contradiction is just the automatic gainsaying of any statement the other person makes.

(short pause)

Cleese: No it isn't.

—Monty Python, "Argument Clinic"

Always, no sometimes, think it's me
But you know I know when it's a dream
I think I know I mean a "Yes" but it's all wrong
That is I think I disagree.

—John Lennon and Paul McCartney,
"Strawberry Fields Forever"

I recall writing an essay in graduate school in which I did everything I could to rebut the views of a certain scholar. I was determined to prove my opponent wrong, and I seized upon every gap, contradiction, or misstep that I could find in his text in order to do so. After reading my essay, my professor evidently agreed that I had won the imaginary debate I had set up, since he made no effort to find fault with my argument or examples. But rather than congratulating me, as I had expected and hoped, he asked instead: "Why are you spending so much time discussing the work of somebody you seem to think isn't very bright?"

I often think back to that moment when I find myself locked in argument with a text that I am trying to write about. The question I've learned to ask myself at such times is: What do I hope will result from pursuing this disagreement? If the answer is simply that I think I can prove that the text I am reading has certain shortcomings or limits, then I try to set aside the temptation to argue. All texts have their moments of blindness. Simply to note them is to do little. But if I can use certain problems in a text as a springboard to get at something I couldn't otherwise say, to develop a line of thinking of my own, then I try to note those problems in a way that allows me to quickly move on to my own counterproposals or ideas.

Or, to put this another way, the aim of academic writing should not be simply to prove how smart you are but to add to what can be said about a subject. To do so, you may sometimes need to identify the weaknesses or limits of other writings, but that shouldn't be the sole point of your writing. Critique needs to lead to alternatives. Correcting the ideas of another writer may seem an intuitive way of rewriting their work—you identify what they've gotten wrong and then you show them how to get it right—but the sort of countering I want to talk about in this chapter differs from such verbal swordplay. As I use the term, to *counter* is not to nullify but to suggest a different way of thinking. Its defining phrases are *On the other hand . . .* and *Yes, but . . .* (In contrast, the defining phrase of forwarding is *Yes, and . . .*) Countering looks at other views and texts not as wrong but as *partial*—in the sense of being both interested and incomplete. In countering you bring a different set of interests to bear upon a subject, look to notice what others have not. Your aim is not to refute what has been said before, to bring the discussion to an end, but to respond to prior views in ways that move the conversation in new directions.

Projects

The Tone of Countering

Find two texts that counter the work of other writers but that strike you as doing so with differing degrees of civility. That is, see if you can locate one text whose writer articulates her or his differences with other intellectuals clearly but with a sense of restraint or good humor, and another whose writer seems more overly antagonistic toward the work he is responding to. Try to point to specific moments or moves in the two texts that help account for their differences in tone.

This is not to suggest that academic writers disagree with one another in especially muted or polite ways. On the contrary, they often state their differences in quite clear and forceful terms. But what distinguishes the practice of countering is that it pushes beyond mere disagreement. Popular

debates tend to begin with their conclusions. That is, a speaker is identified from the start as holding a specific, already formulated position—as being for or against capital punishment or tax cuts or gay marriage or whatever—and then everything she or he goes on to say is understood as either defending that position or attacking the opposing view. But the aim of countering is to open up new lines of inquiry. The questions to ask of a writer countering another text thus have less to do with decorum than use. If all you really want to do is to show how someone else is wrong, then it doesn't much matter how politely you phrase your criticisms. But if it is clear that your own writing in some real sense depends upon the text you are countering, that your own position has evolved in response to its ideas and phrasings, then your readers (if not always the author of the text you are discussing) are more likely to see your criticisms of it as fair and useful.

Since the aim of countering is to develop a new line of thinking in response to the limits of other texts, it almost always involves a close attention to the specifics of their structure and phrasing. In countering the work of another writer, then, you usually need first to come to terms with his or her project, to offer a sense of its aims and strengths. To identify what a text fails to do, you need to be clear about what it achieves—or at least what it attempts. Otherwise your criticisms will seem flippant or unearned. But even the most civil of criticisms can sting. There is an unavoidable adversarial edge to countering, as you seek less to connect your views with those of the texts you are reading than to separate them. Forwarding aligns; countering individuates. I see three main ways of creating this sort of critical distance:

- *Arguing the other side:* Showing the usefulness of a term or idea that a writer has criticized or noting problems with one that she or he has argued for.
- *Uncovering values:* Surfacing a word or concept for analysis that a text has left undefined or unexamined.
- *Dissenting:* Identifying a shared line of thought on an issue in order to note its limits.

All three of these moves can be easier to make with force than grace. It is hard to differ in a pleasing or civil way. The only real way to do so, it seems to me, is to show as clearly as you can how noting the limits of a text has

led you to a new line of work or inquiry. In that sense, the key moment in a counterstatement is when it stops, when a writer turns from the text he is reading in order to offer a proposal of his own. Let me turn to a number of examples of how writers can set up such points of divergence, of new lines of thought emerging from old ones.

Arguing the Other Side

In his celebrated series of essays on *Ways of Seeing,* John Berger shows how we can look at oil paintings in ways that focus not only on their artistic form or technique but also on the content of their images—that is, on the people and things that these paintings represent. Berger argues that an exclusive attention to form obscures much of what paintings can tell us about how people lived in the past, not only in terms of their material surroundings but also their social relationships—how they wished to be seen by others and how others actually viewed them. This view puts him at odds with many art historians and critics. For instance, in discussing how women are portrayed in oil paintings, Berger takes on the work of Kenneth Clark, a distinguished writer on the history of art.

> We can now begin to see the difference between nakedness and nudity in the European tradition. In his book on *The Nude* Kenneth Clark maintains that to be naked is simply to be without clothes, whereas the nude is a form of art. According to him, the nude is not the starting point of a way of a painting, but a way of seeing which the painting achieves. To some degree, this is true—although the way of seeing "a nude" is not necessarily confined to art: there are also nude photographs, nude poses, nude gestures. What is true is that the nude is always conventionalized—and the authority for its conventions derives from a certain tradition of art.
>
> What do these conventions mean? What does a nude signify? It is not sufficient to answer these questions merely in terms of the art-form, for it is quite clear that the nude also relates to lived sexuality.

To be naked is to be oneself.

To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display.

To be naked is to be without disguise.

To be on display is to have the surfaces of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.

Projects

Reading Visual Culture

Read through the essays in *Ways of Seeing* with the aim of better understanding how Berger makes use of visual texts in his writing. How useful are the terms I offer in this book in accounting for how he cites, describes, and comments on the images in his book? How might you draw on his work to revise and expand the vocabulary of rewriting that I propose here?

I need to note that in simply quoting Berger's prose here I am slighting one of the most remarkable aspects of *Ways of Seeing*, which is his interspersing of images throughout his text not simply to illustrate but to advance his thinking. (In this instance the first paragraph I've quoted is framed, top and bottom, by images of Eastern erotica and by softcore photos of nude models from a men's magazine.) But my interest here centers on how Berger inverts Clark's distinction between the naked and the nude. He begins by rehearsing what Clark has to say about their differences: "to be naked is simply to be without clothes, whereas the nude is a form of art." He then grudgingly admits that there is something to this distinction, at least in the sense that the nude is always a conventionalized way of seeing. But he then quickly raises some points that Clark doesn't consider—that the conventions of the nude are not confined to the higher realms of art but are also part of the

vernacular of erotica, of "nude photographs, nude poses, nude gestures," and, more important, that nakedness and nudity refer not just to painting but to the lived experiences of individuals. And in life rather than art, Berger argues, nakedness has a value that nudity does not. To be naked is to be at home in your own skin; to be nude is to pose for the gaze of another.

Berger thus offers here an unusually clear illustration of *arguing the other side*—attaching a positive value to something another writer denigrates or a negative value to what another writer applauds. In this case, Kenneth Clark sees the nude as an artistic achievement and nakedness as merely banal, while for Berger nakedness represents authentic sexuality and the nude its conventionalized packaging. The values attached to the two terms are flipped. But note how Berger suggests that Clark is not so much wrong as incomplete, unaware of the full implications of the distinction he is making. He agrees with Clark that the nude is a conventionalized form of seeing, but he also counters that what may sometimes be good for art is not always good for living. His critique thus does not simply cancel out what Clark as to say but rather adds to the ways we can think about the ways bodies are represented in art.

Uncovering Values

In a way, Clark does Berger a favor in so clearly opposing the naked and the nude—since Berger is then able to use Clark's own terms of analysis in countering his work. He simply needs to flip the terms of a distinction that Clark has already made for him. But you will often find that you need to *uncover* a term of value that a text has obscured or repressed before you can question it. For instance, in her book on the masculine ethos of cyberculture, *Cracking the Gender Code,* Melanie Stewart Millar looks at the image of the digital generation offered by the cover of *Wired* magazine.

> **Intertexts**
>
> Melanie Stewart Millar, *Cracking the Gender Code: Who Rules the Wired World?* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 1998), 114–15.
>
> Millar refers to Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines* (New York: St. Martin's 1993).

It is useful to once again compare *Wired* with a more familiar and ubiquitous magazine genre, the women's fashion magazine.

According to Ellen McCracken's useful study of the genre, the cover model on a so-called women's magazine represents a "window to the future self," a symbol of what the reader can achieve by consuming the magazine's content. The cover of *Wired* magazine serves an analogous function as both the window to the individual reader's future and to a more generalized future world. The cover does more than simply catch the eye of the casual passerby. *Wired*'s cover graphic, which most often depicts a celebrity of the digital generation, challenges the (presumed) male reader to emulate the achievements of the cover "model," who is almost always a white male. Just as the cover model of *Cosmopolitan* comes to signify the "Cosmo girl," and all the values endorsed by the magazine, so the figure on *Wired* magazine represents elite members of the digital generation. And, like the model on the cover of a fashion magazine, the image on *Wired*'s cover plays on the vulnerabilities of its intended readers in order to draw them in. Female readers of fashion magazines find themselves drawn to the unrealistic, fantastic images of the current feminine ideal and the attendant promises of happiness and regeneration; so the digital generation sees on the cover of *Wired* magazine a graphic representation of all that they (apparently) want to be. While the fashion magazine promises to replace anxiety and emptiness with the adulation that cosmetic beauty provides, *Wired* promises to replace a sense of lack of control or fear of emasculation with a reinvigorated form of masculine privilege in a digital world.

Projects

Extending Millar

In countering *Wired,* Millar borrows an idea from Ellen McCracken's *Decoding Women's Magazines*—that of the magazine cover as a "window to the future self." Locate a copy of McCracken's book to see how she develops this approach. What are the strengths of this mode of reading? What are its limits? Are there things that the covers of popular magazines do besides present an idealized image of themselves to their readers? That is, how might you extend or counter Millar's and McCracken's view of how magazine covers seduce prospective readers?

Millar plays here with a distinction found not so much *in* the text of *Wired* as *around* it. It is as if she is reading *Wired* not in isolation but as it sits on a newsstand or supermarket rack, next to magazines whose covers feature, in one sense, the very same thing, the cover model as future self, and in another sense, something quite different: *women.* In showing how the "Wired man" is similar in many ways to the "Cosmo girl," she raises questions about why, in each case, the self of the future seems governed by stereotypes of the present. She uncovers a male/female binary underlying the cover images of *Wired* that associates technical progress with masculine sexuality. Unlike Berger, she does not argue for the devalued term in this binary; there is no case made here for the "Wired girl." Her aim is rather to call into question *Wired*'s implicit (and perhaps unconscious) linking of technology, power, and sexuality.

Millar's stance toward *Wired* is more unremittingly hostile than Berger's toward Clark. But while she is critical of the sexual politics of *Wired,* she acknowledges the power of its response to the "sense of lack of control or fear of emasculation" felt by its readers. She reads the cover of *Wired* as a sign of a larger problem in our culture in which technology is offered as an easy solution to anxieties whose actual sources are personal and political. In that sense she uses her critique of *Wired* to begin to develop new ways of thinking about the appeals and perils of digital culture.

Projects

Countering and Agonism

Perhaps the clearest place to see intellectual work at its most adversarial or antagonistic is in the "Letters to the Editor" or the "Comments and Response" sections of magazines and journals, since this is a site where writers often directly confront each other over the meaning or intent of their work—correcting inaccuracies, protesting misinterpretations, arguing politics, contesting reviews and uses of their writing.

Find an exchange between two writers in a "Letters" or "Response" section. (You will probably also want to look up

the book, article, or review that prompted their interchange of views.) Read their letters in light of what I have said here about countering the work of others. To what degree do you see them employing the moves—reversing and uncovering terms of value, disputing consensus positions—that I discuss here? In what ways does their exchange or argument draw on different strategies and modes of response? What do you find interesting about their exchange? What, if anything, do you find troubling?

Our texts always say more than we mean. As writers we participate in the discourses of our culture in ways we can never fully control, and may not always be aware of. Rather, the values and attitudes of our society are often insinuated in the very metaphors and turns of phrase, examples and images, stories and characters, that we are given to work with in writing. And so while I doubt that the designers of *Wired* consciously intended to reinforce the masculine ethos of our culture, any more than the creators of the Dodge ad that Todd Gitlin talks about did, or than Sigmund Freud did in developing his theories of psychoanalysis—this doesn't mean that you can't look for signs of how their texts were (in part) shaped by the gendered attitudes of that culture. This is a frequent move in countering, the *uncovering* of values that, without being stated openly, undergird a text and influence what it says.

Such values are sometimes stated outright, at other times repressed, and at still others only hazily conceived. They often turn out to be connected to deep cultural beliefs about gender, race, sexuality, social class, and religion. But countering is not an exercise in political correctness; it is a move to examine what a text (or set of texts) leaves unmarked or unquestioned, to highlight the unseen. Noticing what is absent, what a certain text or approach fails to consider, is not an easy task, but it is a key move in writing criticism. One way of uncovering the values that drive a text is to ask what it appears *not* to find interesting. And so, for instance, John Berger reclaims the value of nakedness, which for Kenneth Clark seemed merely the mundane raw material of the nude; Carol Gilligan explores what Freud simply

left unstudied as the "dark continent" of women's psychological development; and Melanie Stewart Millar reveals the "Cosmo girl" as the anxious alter ego of the "Wired man." Each critic illustrates how learning to notice what a text leaves unasked, or takes for granted, can offer you a powerful way of not only countering but also building upon its ideas.

Dissenting

As you will have noticed by this point, countering draws on many of the skills involved in coming to terms with texts that I discussed in chapter 1. You need to be able to represent the project of another writer, to identify key words and concepts from his text, to suggest its possible uses and strengths—so you can then pivot and show what the text leaves undone or how its terms might serve a different set of aims and interests. This move is made even more complex when your aim is to counter not just the work of a single writer but to dissent from a view shared by a number of thinkers. In such cases you need first to show that a certain consensus exists, so you can then define your position against it. Like a fruit cart on the set of a chase scene in a movie, you build it in order to knock it over.

One quick way of defining a shared approach to an issue is to list some of the key words in its vocabulary or to catalogue some of its central concepts. Recall, for instance, how Marjorie Garber deftly assembled shared definitions for "genius" from seemingly disparate authors. But while such an approach works well when you are trying to identify a loose *cluster* of concerns, you are likely to find at other times that you need to counter something more like a shared *line* of thought. What you need to do in such cases is to show how this line proceeds from one point to the next, to restate the key moves or logic of the argument in your own words—and then to offer examples of writers making these same moves. You are then in a position to counter the line of thinking you have defined.

There is a kind of template for many academic essays in which a writer says something like this: *Until now, writers on this subject have disagreed on points* a, b, *and* c. *However, underlying this disagreement, there is a consensus of views on point* d. *In this essay, I will show why point* d *is wrong.* Such a countering of an accepted position, of the common ground on which other disagreements rest, is shown brilliantly by the philosopher and critic

Alexander Nehamas in his essay "Serious Watching." In this piece Nehamas takes on the view held by many academics and intellectuals (like Neil Postman) that television is somehow an inferior medium to print. Here is how Nehamas sets up his argument:

> The common criticisms of television, though they are united in their disdain for the medium, come from various directions and have differing points. Wayne Booth, for example, expresses a relatively traditional preference for primarily linguistic over mainly visual works:
>
>> The video arts tell us precisely what we should see, but their resources are thin and cumbersome for stimulating our moral and philosophical range.
>
> A related criticism is made by John Cawelti, whose celebrated study of the arts of popular culture, particularly of formulaic literature, has led him to conclude that
>
>> formulaic works necessarily stress intense and immediate kinds of excitement and gratification as opposed to the more complete and ambiguous analyses of character and motivation that characterize mimetic literature.
>
> He also considers that a "major characteristic of formulaic literature is the dominant influence of the goals of escape and entertainment." The contrast here is one between the straightforward, action-oriented, and entertaining popular works which by and large belong to popular culture—works which include the products of television—and the ambiguous, innovative, psychologically motivated and edifying works of high art.
>
> Finally, Catherine Belsey, who has approached the study of literature from a Marxist point of view, following the work of Louis Althusser, draws a contrast between "classic realism, still the dominant popular mode in literature, film, and television" which is characterized by "illusionism, narrative which leads to closure, and a hierarchy of texts which establishes the 'truth' of the story" with what she calls "the interrogative text.". . . It would be easy to cite many other similar passages, but the main themes of the attack against television, to which those other passages would provide only variations, are all sounded by these three authors: (1) given its formulaic nature, television drama is simple and action-oriented; it makes few demands of its audience and offers them quick and shallow gratification; (2) given its visual,

nonlinguistic character, it is unsuited for providing psychological and philosophical depth; and (3) given its realist tendencies, it fails to make its own fictional nature one of its themes. . . . These reasons are taken to show that television does not deserve serious critical attention—or that, if it does, it should only be criticized on ideological grounds.

And yet there are reasons to be suspicious of this view, which can all be based on a serious look, for example, at *St. Elsewhere*—a television drama that appears straightforward, action-oriented, and realistic.

Nehamas then goes on to offer a close reading of the 1980s series *St. Elsewhere,* a program that blended the conventions of realistic drama and ironic farce in ways that many viewers found alternately moving and hilarious. Nehamas argues that such programs demonstrate that television can well repay "serious watching," that psychological depth and artistic innovation are not solely the properties of the medium of print. What interests me here, though, is how hard Nehamas works to show that he is not arguing against a straw man, but that there is in fact a widespread "disdain" toward TV shared by most intellectuals.

Nehamas's argument is unusually complex and involved—in large part because he is dealing with not one but several writers. In grouping and responding to the critics of TV, Nehamas makes a number of moves that are worth noting and imitating. First, he offers a diverse set of figures who endorse a negative view of TV—citing a traditional humanist, a writer on popular culture, and a Marxist critic (all of whom he is careful to identify as such). These are not the sorts of thinkers whom you might expect to agree on many issues, and so when Nehamas can show each of them expressing the same attitude of impatience with

> ### Intertexts
>
> Alexander Nehamas, "Serious Watching," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89 (Winter 1990); reprinted in Joseph Harris, Jay Rosen, and Gary Calpas, eds., *Media Journal: Reading and Writing about Popular Culture,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 320–36.
>
> In the interest of concision, I have edited the passages Nehamas quotes, along with some of his own prose. The critics he cites are:
>
> Wayne Booth, "The Company We Keep: Self-Making in Imaginative Art," *Daedalus* 111 (Fall 1982).
>
> John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
>
> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Verso, 1980).

the seemingly formulaic nature of TV, then his claim that this is a common view seems reasonable. (And while there is of course no magic number of examples needed to prove such a case, three seems just enough to quickly suggest a trend.) Second, Nehamas quotes from these critics in a way that allows him to associate the stance he is describing with a series of key opposing terms: Television is thin, formulaic, escapist, illusionist; high art is philosophical, complex, interrogative. He is then able to echo these terms and values in his own summary of the antitelevision position (in the next-to-last paragraph). Finally, this groundwork allows him, much like Berger, to argue the other side, to use the words of Booth, Cawelti, Belsey, et al. in pointing out the problems of their position. You can see the beginnings of this reversal in the last paragraph I've quoted, in which Nehamas tells us that he will now turn to look seriously at a television text that "*appears* straightforward, action-oriented, and realistic" (my emphasis). It will probably not surprise you to learn that he reads *St. Elsewhere* instead as complex, absorbed in the intricacies of character, and reflective about its status as a fiction—as possessing, that is, all of the qualities of art as Booth, Cawelti, and Belsey define it. I say this not to suggest that the rest of his essay is routine but to point out how powerfully Nehamas's own position evolves in response to theirs. In rereading *St. Elsewhere,* Nehamas rewrites their stance on the boundaries between art and popular entertainment.

Civility

I have struggled in this chapter to define countering as a practice that differs from the sort of argument whose goal is simply to vanquish your opponent. I've suggested that coming to terms with another text is a necessary prelude to countering it, and have tried to show how the aim of countering should not be simply to note the gaps or limits of another text but to use that critique to develop a position of your own. And I have identified three tactics for doing so: *arguing the other side, uncovering values,* and *dissenting.* But even if you keep your focus as a writer less on the problems of a text than on the work you want to do with it, you still can't counter without disagreeing. There is a necessary agonism—a staking out of positions and differences—to much intellectual work. But behind texts and ideas lie people, and you want to be able to disagree about points of view without alienating the

persons who hold them. I'd like to conclude this chapter, then, with some thoughts on the art of honest yet civil disagreement.

- *Focus on positions more than phrasings:* You need to attend to a writer's particular use of words in order to precisely note and counter the limits of his or her work. However, an unremitting focus on the wording of a text can often seem more hostile than scrupulous. The novelist Mary McCarthy is said to have remarked of her political and intellectual rival Lillian Hellman, "Every word she writes is a lie, including *and* and *the*." The comment tells us far more about McCarthy than Hellman. You don't want to seem preoccupied with niceties of phrasing, with refuting every step or move made by a writer, as though nothing she might ever do could possibly please you. Your job is not to correct the infelicities of a text but to respond to and rework the position it puts forward. If you describe that position as mean-spirited or flimsy, as riddled with unfortunate phrasings and lying *ands* and *thes,* you are also likely to raise questions about your own motives in responding to it (as I learned back in grad school). But if you represent that position as a serious one, then your response is likely to seem the same as well. And so, in countering another writer, restate her or his project in clear and generous terms, quote just enough of her or his text to set up your response to it, and then move as quickly as you can from its language to your own.

- *Don't guess at intent:* It's tempting to imagine that people who disagree with you do so for sinister reasons. Maybe the guys at *Wired* did really just want, in the end, to be cooler than the jocks, to invent a new and improved form of machismo.

Intertexts

McCarthy's notorious comment was made on the PBS *Dick Cavett Show* on October 18, 1979. Her words precipitated an almost total collapse in civil discourse, as Hellman responded with a suit for libel that came to a close only with her death a few years later. Cavett recounts the whole sad incident in "Lillian, Mary, and Me," in the December 16, 2002, issue of the *New Yorker.*

Or maybe the critics of TV really are just a bunch of snobs who refuse to like anything that ordinary people enjoy. Or maybe not. We'll never know, and in any case, it doesn't much matter. If the new image of manhood now has as much to do with technical prowess as muscle, then jokes about cyber-geeks miss the mark. If television really is incapable of conveying psychological nuance, then the snobs are right. In countering you need to respond to the position taken, not to the person taking it. Assume that other writers say what they have to say not out of an overweening desire for status or power, or because their thinking has been molded by their profession or class or gender, but because they genuinely find certain ideas compelling and useful. And then explain why you don't. Notice, for instance, how John Berger says very little about Kenneth Clark himself, but rather restates the distinction he draws between the naked and the nude, points out what that contrast accomplishes, and then turns it on its head, arguing for the value of nakedness. He offers a critique without picking a fight. This isn't to say that all aspects of the personal can be removed from intellectual disagreement. But what most often sparks anger is the questioning not of ideas but of motives.

- *Be careful with modifiers:* Don't use adjectives and adverbs to do your dirty work, to hint at a negative attitude toward a text or writer that you are reluctant to state more openly. What may seem throwaway terms can subtly but powerfully color an account of another writer's work: *clearly, simply, wholly, indeed, in fact, quite,* and so on. If it is *quite clear,* for instance, that there is a problem with a certain point of view, then it can seem as if it must have taken a willful obtuseness for other writers to have missed it. Be cautious, too, with terms of faint praise. I once read a response to an essay I had written that at various points described my work as "well-intentioned," "sincere," "reasonable," and "earnest" (although also, of course, completely mistaken; these are all terms invariably followed by a *but*). Now it's one thing to be called wrong, but being cast as a well-meaning but bumbling do-gooder struck me as an unkind—even if

unintended—cut. Neither was it flattering to realize that the writer had evidently felt it necessary to assure readers that my approach in fact was not conniving, insincere, unreasonable, and duplicitous. The point is that small modifiers can play large roles in how your work gets read. You want the force of what you have to say to reside in your nouns and verbs, not in your descriptors. State both the strengths and limits of other positions as plainly as you can; in most cases, you will simply want to say that there are problems with a certain view, not that it is either "clearly mistaken" or "sincere but misguided."

- *Stress what you bring to the discussion:* The point of countering is to push knowledge forward. In the end, the readers of your text want to know what *you* have to tell them about the subject or issue at hand. I've suggested in this chapter that there are three steps to countering: coming to terms with another point of view, noting its limits, and constructing your own position in response. The emphasis of your writing should fall on that third step. An essay needs to be something more than simply a critique of the work of someone else. You need to have a point of your own to make, and you need to give yourself space to make it. While I don't want to reduce the notion of emphasis to a simple counting of lines or paragraphs, there's almost surely something wrong, for instance, with a six-page essay that consists of five pages of critique and only one of new thinking. The most civil way to counter another writer is to show how your response to her work opens up new forms of talk about her (and your) subject.

Some readers of this book have argued that the view I offer here of countering is idealized—that the goal of much academic writing really is to demonstrate a mastery over your materials and your rivals, to stake out a position and to defend it against attack. And, certainly, there is plenty of evidence for such a view. For instance, in *You Just Don't Understand,* her study of differing conversational styles, Deborah Tannen suggests that it is the pleasure that intellectuals take in the exchange of opposing views, in the give-and-take of

open debate, that most distinguishes (and sometimes isolates) them from the rest of the culture. And in *Clueless in Academe*, itself an engaging brief for the life of the mind, Gerald Graff suggests that how to engage in a good argument is precisely what many university students (whose writing he feels is more likely to suffer from blandness than conten-

Intertexts

Gerald Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Morrow, 1990).

tiousness) most need to learn. And I perhaps ought to acknowledge that I have not often been faulted myself for a reluctance to say what I think. But to admit that academic writing can often be adversarial is not to say that such writing is always *at its best* adversarial. I'm all for energetic and sharp prose that clarifies where a writer stands. But the sort of academic argument I most admire doesn't look all that much like argument in the familiar sense—since it aims less to offer reasons *behind* competing positions than to suggest what such differences might point *toward.* And so, for instance, in the passage I quote above, the point that Alexander Nehamas makes is not simply that he disagrees with the academic critics of television. Rather, he uses his differences with those writers to set up his own more appreciative reading of *St. Elsewhere* and popular culture. The critics of TV remain present in his prose even as he moves past them. That's the sort of intellectual work I'm trying to teach toward (and that I imagine Tannen and Graff teach as well). In arguing for civility, then, I'm not pressing for a mere politeness, but for a style of countering that doesn't stop at disagreement but instead pushes on for something more—that rewrites the work of others in order to say something new.

Projects

Skepticism and Civility

Go back through an essay you are currently working on and reread those passages where you deal with other texts. Make some notes regarding the stance or attitude you take toward their authors' work:

- What *use* do you make of the texts you cite? (You can either draw on the terms of this book or to invent your own.) How do these texts contribute to your own line of thinking? What phrases in your writing mark out this use?
- How would you describe your *attitude* toward the texts and writers you deal with? Angry? Superior? Respectful? Generous? Doubtful? Admiring? Noncommittal? What particular words or phrasings in your text suggest this stance? Ask yourself if your prose conveys the attitude toward these other texts and writers that you want it to.

Use your notes to consider how you might change or refine your use of other texts in your essay. The point here is to think about how you want to approach these texts on both *intellectual* and *stylistic* levels. There is no formula for how to do so. You can counter work that you respect and draw insights from texts that you find problematic. You can seem too aggressive, but you can also seem too dutiful. It's up to you to decide both what uses you want to make of other writers and how you want to be seen as approaching them.