chapter **2**

From Reading to Writing

To move from reading to writing, you need to read actively, in a thoughtful spirit, and with an alert, inquiring mind. Reading actively means learning how to analyze what you read. You must be able to discover what is going on in an essay, to figure out the writer's reasons for shaping the essay in a particular way, to decide whether the result works well or poorly—and why. At first, such digging may seem odd, and for good reason. After all, we all know how to read. But do we know how to read *actively*?

Active reading is a skill that takes time to acquire. By becoming more familiar with different types of writing, you will sharpen your critical thinking skills and learn how good writers make decisions in their writing. After reading an essay, most people feel more confident talking about the content of the piece than about the writer's style. Content is more tangible than style, which always seems elusive. In large part, this discrepancy results from our schooling. Most of us have been taught to read for ideas. Not many of us, however, have been trained to read actively, to engage a writer and his or her writing, to ask why we like one piece of writing and not another. Similarly, most of us do not ask ourselves why one piece of writing is more convincing than another. When you learn to read actively, you begin to answer these important questions and come to appreciate the craftsmanship involved in writing. Active reading, then, is a skill you need if you are truly to engage and understand the content of a piece of writing as well as the craft that shapes the writer's ideas into a presentable form. Active reading will repay your efforts by helping you read more effectively and grow as a writer.

■ GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR READING

Active reading requires, first of all, that you commit time and effort. Second, try to take a positive interest in what you are reading, even if

the subject matter is not immediately appealing. Remember that you are not reading for content alone but also to understand a writer's methods—to see firsthand the kinds of choices writers make while they write.

To get the most out of your reading, follow the five steps of the reading process.

1. Prepare yourself to read the selection.
2. Read the selection.
3. Reread the selection.
4. Annotate the text with marginal notes.
5. Analyze the text with questions.

Step 1: Prepare Yourself to Read the Selection

Instead of diving right into any given selection in *Models for Writers* or any other book, there are a few things you can do that will prepare you to get the most out of what you will be reading. It's helpful, for example, to get a context for the reading: What's the essay about? What do you know about the writer's background and reputation? Where was the essay first published? Who was the intended audience for the essay? How much do you already know about the subject of the reading selection? We encourage you to review the materials that precede each selection in this book.

Each selection begins with a title, a headnote, and a writing prompt. From the *title,* you often discover the writer's position on an issue or attitude toward the topic. On occasion, the title provides clues about the intended audience and the writer's purpose in writing the piece. The *headnote* contains three essential elements: a *biographical note* about the author, *publication information,* and *rhetorical highlights* of the selection. In addition to information on the person's life and work, you'll find out something about his or her reputation and authority to write on the subject of the piece. The *publication information* tells you when the selection was published and in what book or magazine it appeared. This information gives you insights about the intended audience and the historical context. The *rhetorical highlights* direct your attention to one or more of the model features of the selection. Finally, the *writing prompt*, called "Reflecting on What You

Know," encourages you to collect your own thoughts and opinions about the topic or related subjects before you commence reading. This prompt makes it easy for you to keep a record of your own knowledge or thinking about a topic before you see what the writer has to offer in the essay.

To demonstrate how these context-building materials can work for you, carefully review the following materials that accompany Isaac Asimov's "Intelligence." The essay itself appears later in this chapter (pp. 49–51).

Title

Intelligence

Headnote

Isaac Asimov

1. Biographical note

Born in Russia, Isaac Asimov immigrated to the United States in 1923. His death in 1992 ended a long, prolific career as a science-fiction and nonfiction writer. Asimov was uniquely talented at making a diverse range of topics—from Shakespeare to atomic physics—comprehensible and entertaining to the general reader. Asimov earned three degrees at Columbia University and later taught biochemistry at Boston University. At the time of his death, he had published more than five hundred books. It's Been a Good Life, *published in 2002, was compiled from selections made from Asimov's three previous autobiographical volumes:* In Memory Yet Green *(1979),* In Joy Still Felt *(1980), and* I. Asimov: A Memoir *(1994). Edited by Janet Jeppson Asimov, the book also features "A Way of Thinking," Asimov's four hundredth essay for the* Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.

2. Publication information

In the following essay, which first appeared in Please Explain: The Myriad Mysteries of the Universe Revealed *(1973), Asimov, an intellectually gifted man, ponders the nature of intelligence. His academic brilliance, he concedes, would mean little*

or nothing if like-minded intellectuals had not established the standards for intelligence in our society. Notice how he uses personal experience and the example of his auto mechanic to develop his definition of intelligence.

3. Rhetorical highlights

Reflecting on What You Know

Writing prompt

Our society defines the academically gifted as intelligent, but perhaps *book smart* would be a better term. IQ tests don't take into account common sense or experience, attributes that the academically gifted sometimes lack outside of a scholarly setting. Who's the smartest person you know? Is he or she academically gifted or smart in some way that would not be readily recognized as a form of intelligence?

From these preliminary materials, what expectations do you have for the selection itself? And how does this knowledge equip you to engage the selection before you read it? Asimov's title suggests the question "What is intelligence?" You can reasonably infer that Asimov will discuss the nature of intelligence. His purpose clearly seems to be to explore the subject with his readers. The short biographical note reveals that Asimov, a scientist, teacher, and prolific author, is no longer living, that he enjoyed a reputation as a renaissance man, and that he wrote with an ease and understanding that make difficult subjects readily accessible to the general public. This background material suggests that in the essay you'll get a thoughtful, easy-to-comprehend discussion of intelligence. The publication information indicates that this essay first appeared in a 1973 book in which Asimov explains popular "mysteries of the universe." The rhetorical highlights advise you to pay particular attention to how Asimov uses the examples of himself and his auto mechanic to think about the meaning of intelligence. Finally, the journal prompt asks you to consider how society defines the term *intelligence,* first by identifying the smartest person in your life and then by thinking about whether that person is more academically gifted (book smart) or experientially

gifted (street smart). After reading the essay, you can compare your thoughts about the nature of intelligence with Asimov's.

Step 2: Read the Selection

Always read the selection at least twice, no matter how long it is. The first reading gives you a chance to get acquainted with the essay and to form your first impressions of it. With the first reading, you want to get an overall sense of what the writer is saying, keeping in mind the essay's title and the facts that you know about the writer from the essay's headnote. The essay will offer you information, ideas, and arguments—some you may have expected, some you may not have expected. As you read, you may find yourself modifying your sense of the writer's message and purpose. If there are any words that you do not recognize, circle them so that you can look them up later in a dictionary. Put question marks alongside any passages that are not immediately clear. You may, in fact, want to delay most of your annotating until a second reading so that your first reading can be fast and free.

Step 3: Reread the Selection

Your second reading should be quite different from the first. You will know what the essay is about, where it is going, and how it gets there. Now you can relate the parts of the essay more accurately to the whole. Use your second reading to test your first impressions against the words on the page, developing and deepening your sense of how the essay is written and how well. Because you now have a general understanding of the essay, you can pay special attention to the author's purpose and means of achieving that purpose. You can look for features of organization and style that you can learn from and adapt to your own work.

Step 4: Annotate the Text with Marginal Notes

When you annotate a text, you should do more than simply underline or highlight important points to remember. It is easy to underline so much that the notations become almost meaningless because you forget why you underlined the passages in the first place. Instead, as you

read, write down your thoughts in the margins or on a separate piece of paper. (See pp. 49–51 for Asimov's "Intelligence" with student annotations.) Mark the selection's main point when you find it stated directly. Look for the pattern or patterns of development the author uses to explore and support that point, and jot the information down. If you disagree with a statement or conclusion, object in the margin: "No!" If you feel skeptical, indicate that response: "Why?" or "Explain." If you are impressed by an argument or turn of phrase, compliment the writer: "Good point!" Place vertical lines or stars in the margin to indicate important points.

What to Annotate in a Text

- Memorable statements of important points
- Key terms or concepts
- Central issues or themes
- Examples that support a main point
- Unfamiliar words
- Questions you have about a point or passage
- Your responses to a specific point or passage

Jot down whatever marginal notes come to mind. Most readers combine brief responses written in the margins with underlining, circling, highlighting, stars, or question marks. Here are some suggestions of elements you may want to mark to help you record your responses as you read:

Remember that there are no hard-and-fast rules for which elements you should annotate. Choose a method of annotation that works best for you and that will make sense when you go back to recollect your thoughts and responses to the essay. When annotating a text, don't be timid. Mark up your book as much as you like, or jot down as many responses in your notebook as you think will be helpful. Don't let annotating become burdensome. A word or phrase is usually as good as a sentence. One helpful way to focus your annotations is to ask yourself questions as you read the selection a second time.

Step 5: Analyze the Text with Questions

Questions to Ask Yourself as You Read
1. What does the writer want to say? What is the writer's main point or thesis? 2. Why does the writer want to make this point? What is the writer's purpose? 3. What pattern or patterns of development does the writer use? 4. How does the writer's pattern of development suit his or her subject and purpose? 5. What, if anything, is noteworthy about the writer's use of this pattern? 6. How effective is the essay? Does the writer make his or her points clearly?

As you read the essay a second time, probe for a deeper understanding of and appreciation for what the writer has done. Focus your attention by asking yourself some basic questions about its content and its form. Here are some questions you may find useful:

Each essay in *Models for Writers* is followed by study questions that are similar to the ones suggested here but specific to the essay. These questions help you analyze both the content of the essay and the writer's craft. As you read the essay a second time, look for details that will support your answers to these questions, and then answer the questions as fully as you can.

An Example: Annotating Isaac Asimov's "Intelligence"

Asks question central to the essay and relates army experience

Notice how one of our students, guided by the six preceding questions, recorded her responses to Asimov's text with marginal notes.

> What is intelligence, anyway? When I was in the army I received a kind of aptitude test that soldiers took and, against a norm of 100, scored 160. No one at the base had ever seen a figure like that, and for

two hours they made a big fuss over me. (It didn't mean anything. The next day I was still a buck private with KP as my highest duty.)

Questions the meaning of high test scores. What do I think they mean?

All my life I've been registering scores like that, so that I have the complacent feeling that I'm highly intelligent, and I expect other people to think so, too. Actually, though, don't such scores simply mean that I am very good at answering the type of academic questions that are considered worthy of answers by the people who make up the intelligence tests—people with intellectual bents similar to mine?

Auto repair example. Any relationship between test scores and ability to fix cars?

For instance, I had an auto-repair man once, who, on these intelligence tests, could not possibly have scored more than 80, by my estimate. I always took it for granted that I was far more intelligent than he was. Yet, when anything went wrong with my car I hastened to him with it, watched him anxiously as he explored its vitals, and listened to his pronouncements as though they were divine oracles—and he always fixed my car.

Well, then, suppose my auto-repair man devised questions for an intelligence test. Or suppose a carpenter did, or a farmer, or, indeed, almost anyone but an academician. By every one of those tests, I'd prove myself a moron. And I'd *be* a moron, too. In a world where I could not use my academic training and my verbal talents but had to do something intricate or hard, working with my hands, I would do poorly. My intelligence, then, is not absolute but is a function of the society I live in and of the fact that a small subsection of that society has managed to foist itself on the rest as an arbiter of such matters.

Sees intelligence as function of roles in society. Good point!

Mechanic's joke about "deaf-and-dumb carpenter."

Consider my auto-repair man, again. He had a habit of telling me jokes whenever he saw me. One time he raised his head from under the automobile hood to say, "Doc, a deaf-and-dumb guy went into a hardware store to ask for some nails. He put two fingers together on the counter and made hammering motions with the other hand. The clerk brought him a hammer. He shook his head and pointed to the two fingers he was hammering. The clerk brought him nails. He picked out the sizes he wanted, and left. Well doc, the next guy who came in was a blind man.

Traps Asimov with question about blind customer.

What point did mechanic have?

He wanted scissors. How do you suppose he asked for them?"

Indulgently, I lifted my right hand and made scissoring motions with my first two fingers. Whereupon my auto-repair man laughed raucously and said, "Why you dumb jerk, he used his *voice* and asked for them." Then he said, smugly, "I've been trying that on all my customers today." "Did you catch many?" I asked. "Quite a few," he said, "but I knew for sure I'd catch *you*." "Why is that?" I asked. "Because you're so goddamned educated, doc, I *knew* you couldn't be very smart."

And I have an uneasy feeling he had something there.

Brings up question, "Are all educated people smart?" Not in my experience!

Practice: Reading and Annotating Rachel Carson's "Fable for Tomorrow"

Before you read the following essay, think about its title, the biographical and rhetorical information in the headnote, and the writing prompt. Make some marginal notes of your expectations for the essay, and write out a response to the prompt. Then, as you read the essay itself for the first time, try not to stop; take it all in as if in one breath. The second time, however, pause to annotate key points in the text, using the marginal fill-in lines provided alongside each paragraph. As you read, remember the six basic questions mentioned earlier:

1. What does Carson want to say? What is her main point or thesis?
2. Why does she want to make this point? What is her purpose?
3. What pattern or patterns of development does Carson use?
4. How does Carson's pattern of development suit her subject and purpose?
5. What, if anything, is noteworthy about Carson's use of this pattern?
6. How effective is Carson's essay? Does Carson make her points clearly?