PREFACE

Written argument, which logically explains and defends a controversial idea, seems to be disappearing as a form of discourse. Here I offer a manifesto for the protection, for the nurturance, of this endangered species. Why? Because argument deserves to survive and flourish. It should be taught more rigorously in schools, in colleges and universities. It should enter the public conversation, informing and being informed by ordinary human feelings and actions. An essential part of a complex web of culture, argument shares an environment with analysis, evaluation, understanding, knowledge. Yet it's too often shackled and bound by the immuring vocabulary of Greek words, life-sentenced to the dustiness of classrooms, relegated to the aerie-like confines of the Ivory Tower or cinderblock facsimiles thereof: the mad-discipline in the attic—or on the very edge of campus, anyway!

This manifesto calls not so much for revolution, as for evolution, or at least reform: a reenvisioning of what writers and scholars, producers of ideas and creators of new knowledge, ought to be doing and ought to be teaching others. It also calls for you, the writer, to do something perhaps a little different from what you've previously been taught.

"Argument" and "imagination" are not typically (or at least not traditionally) conjoined, but doing so infuses written argument with value. You need not only to imagine an audience but to imagine what kinds of questions that audience might raise. You also need to imagine what does not at present exist: a response that truly emerges from within yourself, and that would therefore be different from anything else yet written or thought, as different as each individual is from every other. And further, if such a process takes place, you will acknowledge and take into account the viewpoints of others. This process, I'm arguing here, will advance knowledge as it pro-

motes your own understanding; in addition, it's a process that values and validates the individual as he or she emerges within a context of a larger, projected audience—the group to which that individual speaks, and whose influence constrains, limits, and at the same time engenders the very creativity of the solitary mind.

The organizing idea behind this volume is not just the argument but the "imaginative argument." Look up "imaginative argument" in a search engine—all of the hits use the term as if it were an absolute, a summum bonum. And yet how rarely is imagination taught in conjunction with argument! I want to stress that writers always have choices about how to say things, about what to say, about when to say what. Unlike social situations, which call for very quick thinking and occasional blurting out of the wrong thing or suppression of the right response—you know, until twenty minutes later, when it's too late—writing is something that you can think about, revise, recast, or expeditiously handle with the "delete" key. I am trying to suggest in the following pages that you as a writer should attempt to form not just an argument about an issue, a text, a situation, but an *imaginative* argument—one that (perhaps) has not been offered many times before, one that (perhaps) involves a new use of language or ideas, one that (perhaps) employs a novel range or mix of source materials. Or something else—really, who knows what?—it's imaginative, unforeseeable. And you are not doing this just to be weird and ornery; rather, you are trying to see the issue in a new way—a way that will be interesting, partly because it's unexpected, but at the same time graspable and credible because it is offered in a formal, serious, logically structured manner.

Here's how I would characterize the status quo: you, the proverbial student in the chair, do not want to write argument. You do not want to risk statements that could be attacked, refuted, made mockery of—or even assertions that you hold so strongly they provide a point of vulnerability. And your timidity is not a surface timidity: it goes as deeply into your mind as it does into your educational past. You've been schooled to tread the paper path of least resistance; to repeat ideas that you've been indoctrinated with; to parrot even the language of authorities you supposedly value; to rarely attack a problem from a fresh, vital vantage point, or even look at it through a personal, quirky, inventively eccentric optic.

But I want you to do more than just sit there. A lot more. One of your most important intellectual endeavors should be figuring out what you genuinely feel and think about something. Don't just try to anticipate what others might want you to think—or even what people you respect and admire might themselves think or want you to think. Determine your own angle, your own true beliefs. This takes some ingenuity. It is not easy to say what you think or feel about complex issues. If it were, they wouldn't be complex issues. In a way, writing argument consists in looking at evidence that supports both what attracts you about something and what you might find confusing, repulsive, elusive; it consists in trying to figure out, as you sort through contradictory evidence, what it is that matters—not just to you, but to an audience as interested, as invested, as you are.

Against me stands a long and still flourishing tradition of repeating the already-established and oft-reiterated. Indeed, much of our educational system envisions the dispensing of such truth—"facts"—as its primary goal. Charles Dickens's famous pedagogue from *Hard Times*, Thomas Gradgrind, embodies this teaching philosophy:

> "Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else." (1)

Surely Dickens exaggerates for humorous effect. But now 150 years later, many people still believe in a Gradgrindian educational philosophy. Recently, when I was team-teaching a course on political theory, I was asked to lecture about writing. I basically presented (in vastly compressed form) what follows in this volume you are now holding. I explained how it was necessary to have not just an argument but an imaginative argument; how my auditors needed to form their own ideas and make their own judgments; how they needed to see the texts as being ones that spoke to them as those texts spoke from a remote past; how each generation, indeed, each individual, must come to terms with those texts and must argue why those terms matter to an audience. The professor in charge of the course, who had been looking uncomfortable for the entire eight minutes I was speaking, stood up quickly at the bell. She said, "Yes, yes, that's all true. But we also want to make sure that in your papers it's clear that you GOT IT, that you've

understood the texts." What she wanted was, in a word, belief—and catechistic proof thereof.

I know that many institutions within our culture strongly resist change, do not encourage Doubting Thomas figures, and demand, instead, just this kind of belief. Seventeenth-century Irish poet John Denham wrote a couplet characterizing this position—the exact opposite to my own—and in the mid–nineteenth century, the grammarian Goold Brown quotes Denham with approbation:

> Those who have dealt most in philological controversy have well illustrated the couplet of Denham:
>
> The Tree of Knowledge, blasted by disputes
> Produces sapless leaves in stead of fruits. (iii)

For Denham, as for Brown, the facts of knowledge are inviolate—only damaged by debate, undermined, rendered lifeless or sterile by "gainsayers." He suggests here (and elsewhere in the 1668 poem "The Progress of Learning" Brown quotes from) that controversy weakens any understanding of divine creation, fatally blights "The Tree of Knowledge." Disputatiousness "blasts" away its beauty and wonder. Instead of having something we can hold on to, eat from, benefit from, we have a ravaged tree, on its way toward death. In short, Denham and Brown make a plea for the value of knowledge unencumbered by debate and controversy.

This quasi-Gradgrindian conception of knowledge not only informs the philosophy of many teachers today (who want to make sure that you've "GOT IT") but generally appeals to authority figures because it allows them to claim an unimpeachable authority. I'd argue that when authority figures take this position, you probably have good reason to distrust them, whether they be teachers or writers, the media or the Supreme Court, your favorite Web site or the president. To squelch chat limits freedom of thought, limits freedom. Goold Brown evidently wanted just that kind of unimpeachable authority, writing for an audience that he felt needed to know the precepts—the "facts"—of English grammar, rather than all the anxiety-provoking controversies surrounding those precepts (probably my political theorist colleague felt the same about her role in our class).

By contrast, I expect a little more than "facts." The genre of argument demands more than just evidence that you as students "GOT IT"—as in *fact*, the facts themselves often need to be argued for, or are under some dispute, and the "it" (of "got it")—a notoriously slippery entity—eludes, gambols, dances away at the touch of an eyebeam or the utterance of a single remark. "It" must be captured, coaxed, looked at from many angles, and possibly unmasked. In short, I argue here that the truth consists not so much of an "it," or of "facts," as of propositions that need to be defended and proven to be—provisionally, within a certain sociohistorical context—true.

While this is not the place to enter the debate about the relative nature of truth, it seems to me profoundly essential to question and think about how truths are arrived at. Lewis Carroll contends, in a memorable exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, that the powerful make the truth; they can make words mean whatever they want them to mean:

> "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
>
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all." (274)

I know this might at first appear sinister, but I see it in a positive way. The power that Humpty alludes to can reside within you as the writer: you are master. You can persuade others of your position, even though you do not have billions of dollars, or enormous influence in the media, or a job in the White House's West Wing. You can establish a truth via arguing for it.

Establishing a truth involves negotiating its terms; it involves other minds, other subjectivities. Is there a truth "out there" that you can "discover"? Maybe, maybe not. As Wallace Stevens writes, "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the." But just because there might be no eternal truth—or if there is, it's ever-elusive—this doesn't mean we all live in solipsistic, subjective, closed-off universes, either, worlds where we just make up whatever we want. Indeed, while our subjectivities are rarely congruent, they surprisingly often overlap, intersect, or asymptotically approach each other. Your

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An Introduction to the Writing of Essays

So much writing surrounds us that the textual environment has emerged as a complex and supremely detailed subuniverse. We as readers inhabit it as we take it in. All over the place—on billboards, bottle caps, cereal boxes, the Internet; in magazines, newspapers, books—the written word proliferates. Yet the writing of short essays, "themes," or "term papers" seems to be an activity confined to students. Poor, beleaguered students. Louis Menand, an essayist and literary historian, claims that term-paper composition is "one of those skills in life that people are obliged to master in order to be excused from ever practicing them again" (92). One naturally wonders what other skills Menand has in mind, but his point stands. Outside the college classroom, there is little direct use for writing of the kind done therein. The short, exploratory, focused, argumentative essay has only one secure home: academia.

But that's OK. I argue that the academic argument, the subject of this text, forms the central and most important kind of nonfiction writing that you should master, even if you don't get a chance to use it after graduating from college. It's important not only because it draws on elements of all the other forms of nonfiction writing and hence will allow you to move to any of those forms relatively easily. It also replicates the method by which ideas are created. It teaches you to think.

That's my belief, anyway. Mastering the type of writing I outline here will help not just students who want to become professional writers or professors but also those of you who work in any position that requires honest, sustained appraisal or scrutiny of issues, ideas, people, texts, or situations. It's a kind of writing that replicates the kind of thought needed to uncover, as much as possible, The Truth. Such essays look not only for *confirmatory* evidence (that is, evidence to support a given position) but for *disconfirmatory* evidence as well,

and they end up using both kinds of evidence to develop their ideas. They aim not merely to persuade but to give as fair and honest and complete an analysis as possible. For it is only such a fair and honest analysis, only such a careful appraisal of alternative and competing positions, only such a scrupulous but dispassionate scrutiny, that will serve the highest goal: the advancement of knowledge.

While this kind of essay attempts to advance human knowledge, writing it will also help you increase and clarify your own thoughts and insights, even about things that you thought you were already quite sure of. Sometimes, for example, you will have feelings and insights about an issue or a book or a film, but won't exactly know what they are—what they stem from, on what assumptions they might be based, or how they might connect with those of others. But writing the argumentative essay requires both that you articulate thoughts about an issue or text, and that you organize your inchoate feelings and insights into a form accessible to others and yourself. Moreover, writing this kind of essay allows you to understand argumentation, a form of discourse that will be useful in any situation that requires analysis.

But let's first take a look at more immediately recognizable and familiar kinds of writing. It seems to me that there are at least three discrete and historically established types of nonfiction writing, all of which differ from the kind of essay I describe here. The first might be called "essay as literature." Some universities offer a "creative nonfiction" course, in which you write personal essays or opinion pieces—these might resemble essays from magazines such as *Harper's* or the *Atlantic*, or from journals such as the *American Scholar*, *Creative Nonfiction*, or *Raritan*. This literary genre of nonfiction, sometimes called "belles lettres," forms part of our Literary Tradition. It might include the works of Montaigne, Samuel Johnson, Addison and Steele, Margaret Fuller, Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Matthew Arnold, Annie Dillard, and many others. The essay as work of art—the essay as creative work—memoirs, autobiographies, and other kinds of "creative nonfiction" might fall under this rubric. Courses examining (and requiring) such writing are often offered by English departments or in creative writing programs.

Other university courses are widely available (often called "Technical Writing") on the second major type of nonfiction writing, namely, "informative writing," a type of writing used in industry. Such writing intends primarily to convey information, not necessarily in a literary or artful manner, and often of relatively trivial or quotidian varieties—instruction manuals for our gadgets and appliances, software documentation so that we know how to use computer programs, statutes, warning labels, that sort of thing. Such writing also includes some reportage—journalism. It is also the language of much business writing, such as memos, reports, announcements. Hence writing courses are often taught in schools of journalism or in business departments.

And finally, the third main category of nonfiction has as its primary goal persuasion: this writing attempts to make you do something, take a particular position, vote for a candidate or issue, buy a particular car or drug or deodorant. Such writing appears in political speeches, legal cases, and advertising: it will use any tactic imaginable—whether logic, or blatant appeals to guilt or emotion, or even threats of various kinds—to persuade its audience. Writing of this kind often forms the subject for courses in mass communication or media studies departments.

I hasten to add that these categories are by no means as clearly separated or nonoverlapping as I've made them out. Much informative writing seeks to persuade. Journalism can be "artful" and literary. Belletristic writing is often informative, as are some political speeches or even advertisements. But the general categories hold up, I think—even if we look at the kind of writing available on the Internet, which no doubt makes up a sizable moiety of what Americans read today.

Though all of these differ from each other, they do share some similarities as well. For example, writers in all these subgenres work with a certain audience—and its expectations—clearly in mind. They all rely on a series of conventions that writers must respect—what kind of format to use, what level of formality, what tone to adopt, what kinds of syntax, language, and vocabulary to employ. They all have a readily apparent organizational structure, which should be more or less clear from the outset.

Where does the "academic argument" fit in here? I would suggest that it hovers somewhere in the middle, drawing on common aspects of nonfiction writing—it is attentive to audience, conventions,

tone, language, organization. But it also shares some specialized qualities with each of these three subgenres. The academic argument pays considerable attention to the way things are stated—it aims not necessarily to "be" art but to state its points in a creative manner, a manner that has the artist's or craftsperson's sensitivity to form, precision, image. It also must convey some information, some facts; it roots itself in the actual. Finally, the academic argument aims to persuade, but not to persuade at any cost—it strives to convince through the use of logical argumentation, giving as fair, honest, and complete an analysis as possible.

In fact, the essays that I require in classes must do more than just impress, convey information, or persuade. They try to uncover the truth of a situation and try to convince—in an artful way—a specific audience of this truth. Not surprisingly the staple of "scholarship," this kind of writing resembles what professors—in many various disciplines—must themselves do.

What is their writing like? While an academic argument does express its author's opinion, this opinion is more than "just an opinion," a knee-jerk response, or an unexplored prejudice. Rather, academic argument offers a point of view buttressed by evidence. It provides an educated, considered, and reasoned opinion—an opinion not just offered or asserted but argued for.

Professors argue their point of view, seeking to persuade, but they additionally examine other scholars' works and situate their writing within what might be called the "dialectical discourse"—in opposition to some works and in partial agreement with others. They convey information, drawing on considerable secondary resource material. Such writing tends to be "formal," and it almost always appeals primarily to specialized audiences, such as those for *New Literary History* (literary theorists), *Paeduma* (scholars studying medieval works), *Urology* (medical doctors who specialize in urology), or *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* (psychologists, philosophers, neurologists).

These "presumptive audiences" consist of other specialists in the field, and scholars can take for granted that those audiences will all be dwelling within what Carl Becker calls the same "climate of opinion": their frames of reference will be similar, and they will share at least some notion of the value and scope of the subject matter. They will be interested in the argument.

The argument essay contains five key components:

1. It contains a formal statement of an argumentative position (a **thesis**), something that answers a vitally important **question** in an unexpected, insightful way.
2. It develops and draws **support** for its position from external sources ("facts," "evidence," "warrants," "examples") of various kinds.
3. Its **organization** or **structure**, internally consistent and intuitive, logically and progressively shows—without using fallacious argument—both the content and complexity of its main idea and how that main idea can be supported.
4. It seeks out, examines, and answers reasonable ideas that oppose it, that would attempt to refute its thesis, or subpoints, i.e.,"**con arguments**" or counterarguments.
5. Its **conclusion** amplifies and enhances the thesis—is an idea that can be proposed now that the paper has explained and explored the thesis. The conclusion shows a change in the thesis—a "ΔT" (see chapter 5).

Throughout, I want to stress that the very writing of the essay itself—the process of writing—has just as much value as the finished product. And while that finished product may well form the basis for a published article or essay, the thought, the writing, the doing, the slaving-away-at-the-keyboard effort that the finished essay required emerges as the more valuable result. Ultimately, too, you need to realize that this effort of writing a paper is even more rewarding and meaningful than the grade or than what the professor has to say about the finished product. In a variation on the old saw "The spoils is the game, not the victory," I want to offer "Writing finds its rewards in the I'm-writing, not the I've-written." Now getting you to believe this—that will be the difficult part.

THE ARGUMENT ESSAY DEFINED

In a way it is unfortunate that we need to use the term "argument" to describe a kind of writing, for "argument" most typically means a

heated dispute, an altercation, a verbal fight. Actual fights may indeed follow the verbal fight of an "argument" too—an argument is a serious, emotional, and confrontational experience. It's worse than a spat, more angry than a discussion, more heated than a mere debate.

But forget all that. None, or little, of it really applies here. Instead, here (and in other textbooks about argumentation), "argument" refers to a kind of discourse, an organized verbal attempt to persuade an audience through the use of logic and reason. Obviously there are other ways to persuade people—ranging from torture and coercion, on one hand, to cajolery, satire, burlesque, or advertisement, on the other. But logical argument—if you will permit a value judgment—is the most civilized, the most high-minded mode. It's the mode suggested here, anyway, and logical argument has its own system of rules and prohibitions, its own structure, and its own ontology, much of which I will attempt to delineate in the following pages.

Written argument may take many forms. For example, a description might strive to show a new way of looking at something, such as a poem, a system of government, or a tax loophole; a classification would place something in a large, organizational matrix or system; an evaluation makes a judgment about something based on comparison of that thing with a stipulated ideal type; a proposal might suggest a future course of action or a present problem that needs to be addressed; a comparison-contrast might compare two different things, issues, ideas, or texts in an effort to illuminate something about one or both of them; a cause-effect paper might show how a situation or state of affairs could lead to or cause another; a definition might argue for a new way of characterizing something. In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle gives twenty-eight valid "topics" for argument, but these can for the most part be distilled into the seven modes I have suggested above.

These modes—description, classification, evaluation, proposal, comparison-contrast, cause-effect, and definition—give you the structure or subgenre of your whole paper, but they don't tell you in any detail what you actually have to do. Basically, working within these modes, your paper needs to *explain something.* Usually a paper will attempt to explain something relatively difficult—something in need of explanation—but sometimes the simplest things only *seem* simple. On closer inspection, they reveal themselves as not quite so simple and hence really do need to be explained.

Let me be more specific and offer some strategies that you might use when you attempt to explain. While these strategies are not mutually exclusive—indeed, many overlap—I nonetheless offer them as examples of what an argumentative paper can usefully do by way of explaining. Your paper can do one or more of the following:

1. *Interpret.* An interpreter usually renders one language into another, and in some sense that is what an interpretation paper does as well. It argues meaning or elucidation of something difficult and perhaps obscure. It translates one version of English into a more accessible version. You might focus on some aspect of language, in such an analysis, or you might look at what various "key words" mean. This involves more than merely defining them—indeed, you might conceive of what special meanings the words have in the context of the work. For example, when the philosopher John Rawls writes about "the veil of ignorance," you need to know what kinds of things he has in mind with respect to creating a fair system of organizing a society. You also need to know dictionary definitions of words. On one exam I took, I was given a poem, "The Chambered Nautilus," and asked to explicate it. My task was made far easier by the fact that I for some reason knew the nautilus to be a type of seashell. Make sure that you look at all aspects of a work, including the title! For example, the short poem "Little children you all may go / But the one you are hiding will fly" makes some sense on its own, but its title, "Song of Primitive Man Chipping Out an Arrowhead," gives it a different meaning altogether. When Marshall McLuhan chose his famous book title, *The Medium Is the Massage*, what did he mean?
2. *Uncover assumptions.* Often there are assumptions that need to be unpacked or unmasked. Whether an essay examines a speech, a paleontological theory, a novel, or a yacht, there are underlying assumptions and elements inherent in the makeup of each of these genres (speech,

theory, novel, yacht), as well individual variations from novel to novel, or yacht to yacht, for example. This kind of paper would argue not just that certain underlying assumptions exist, but that they function in some interesting, elaborate, or perhaps sinister way. Sometimes an author's words themselves embody preexisting theoretical commitments. In fact, even the author might not know these implicit assumptions or they are so deeply rooted in the psyche that all of us might be unaware of them. But looking for these is often a useful, even sobering task.

3. *Reveal significant patterns.* A paper might argue both for the existence of patterns of some kind (giving examples to support its assertions) and for the idea that such patterns are meaningful, important ones. These patterns can be linguistic (repetition of certain words, sentence structures, or images), thematic, generic, or even stylistic. You might, for instance, discover some pattern that could explain how a building works—say, the use of curves or of the number six in the Chrysler Building. Or you could find something interesting about word-pattern in a novel. For example, Martin Amis, while reading *Crash* by J. G. Ballard, notes that the author uses certain keywords many times: "perverse" sixteen times, "geometry" twenty-one times, "stylized" twenty-six times. These curious repetitions seem to suggest something about the author's sensibility, as does the fact that, for example, in Ben Franklin's autobiography, the word "ingenious," or some variation thereof, appears more than thirty times.

   But pattern finding need not be limited to word counting. Georg Simmel points out that in Shakespeare's plays the minor characters tend to be killed by outside forces, while the major characters seem to die as a result of internal problems. An interesting pattern—what does it mean? You might ask yourself, too, whether there is a pattern evident in the way that the author handles certain kinds of characters or situations. Is there a pattern of action that seems to predominate with reference to the way a plot unfolds? Does it remind you of other patterns of action? Sometimes such a paper can compare the patterns of the subject with overarching pattern-generating schemes, such as those provided by history, sociology, psychoanalysis, feminism, myth.

4. *Reveal pattern breaks.* This kind of paper would have to incorporate elements of (3) above, but it takes the revelation of patterns a step further, showing how the apparent patterns are not always followed and are either purposely or inadvertently violated. It might then speculate why the patterns break down.
5. *Recontextualize.* Such a paper shows how, when looked at in another context—one provided by current events, other works, a new idea or explanatory scheme—a work, idea, or artifact takes on a wholly new meaning. Simply, it views the work—poem, story, whatever—as part of a larger structure. For example, all movies, novels, poems, plays, or books about terrorism must be seen in a new light since the events of September 11, 2001. On a less political note, you might look at a painting or sculpture, for example, in light of its initial reception, or in light of what was going on in the artist's life (or the life of his/her social class, or the life of the artist's nation) at the time it appeared.
6. *Generalize.* Such a paper argues that the system, text, artifact, or thing under scrutiny represents a larger, more expansive universal. For example, the new security measures at airports represent how we as citizens have lost the War on Terror. The proliferation of prescription drug commercials on television suggests a larger reliance on drug use as a way of life. Fiction can be generalized this way too: a story might be about a woman, but this story could perhaps be explained as being about the plight of every woman—or every person. A story about looking for a parking space might be seen as being about something as general as the nature of quests. A story about a boy's disappointment with his visit to a mall Santa Claus might be seen as a story about growing up and coming to terms with the alloyed quality of anticipated pleasure. Another way to think about this would be to see certain elements of a piece of writing

of a situation as being metaphorical, as representing something else. (The extreme version of such a tactic is the allegorization of experience that many cultures adopt. And allegory is "one story that is really another, very different story," to use Henry James's definition. Almost all of *Aesop's Fables* are allegories, for example.)

7. *Argue for effect.* This paper might argue for how something has an impact on a reader, viewer, participant. It tries to show how the elements of whatever is under analysis have a direct (or not-so-direct) connection to the way people respond to that subject.
8. *Extrapolate.* A paper might take the argument of an essay or the general "message" of a work and show its silliness, ridiculousness, or nonsensicality by extending it to its logical next or last step. Your paper would demonstrate and explain the work's weakness, shallowness, or incoherence. (Usually people employ this strategy, "reductio ad absurdum," to attack other arguments or philosophical propositions.)

Overall, you need to remember, though, that whatever strategy you employ—and some things seem to be more amenable to certain strategies than others—your paper needs to argue for something not obvious, not taken for granted, not superficial, not readily conceded. You want to reveal something that you have in some genuine sense *discovered.* Your paper will prove why what you have discovered has resonance and importance. At the same time you don't want to "explain away" the text or subject matter: your essay will not replace or supplant what it is that you are writing about. Remember that if you feel that you've explained everything, then probably something is wrong with the angle you have taken. As the critic and writer Murray Sperber often warns, avoid creating a critical machine that grinds to hamburger everything in its path!

Keep in Mind That . . .

Your own writing is not intended to be a reiteration of the class's or the instructor's ideas. Rather, the papers being written here should be an elaboration, an extension, and an expression of your own ideas. Your own voice—your own insights—should predominate. It is, however, necessary to understand and build on the ideas of the texts, class, and instructor; to ignore these or to present them as your own (or as silly and jejune) would be a mistake. But overall, most instructors appreciate creativity and originality of insight rather than mere recasting or parroting of previously expressed ideas. External sources, too, should not usurp or displace your own voice in the course of an essay; rather, they should be used to bolster, to contextualize, to delineate, and to sharpen your own position. This of course may vary from class to class—probably some classes do require both acceptance and reiteration of the ideas of the instructor and texts: they want you to demonstrate that you "got it," to quote my erstwhile colleague. Yet finally it's up to you to figure out to what extent you are expected to be entirely original and to what extent you just need to demonstrate that you have understood and can reproduce the various concepts (reading materials, ideas from lectures) in a class.