

The University BOOK

An Anthology of Writings from The University of Arizona

Edited By:

Thomas P. Miller

Carol Nowotny-Young

Mark Williams

Kat McLellan

Christine Hamel

Heather Brussard

and Ellen L. Price, Art Editor

The University of Arizona

Thomas P. Miller, Director of Composition

Larry Evers, Head, Department of English



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Thomas P. Miller

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* 110–11

As a student, you will daily encounter discussions of topics ranging from advanced calculus to the problems in Bosnia. You will enter rooms where people are heatedly discussing complex ideas, often assuming that you understand everything that is said. You sometimes won't, but you will work to connect what you know with what you need to learn. As you do so, the discussion will begin to make more sense to you. You will hear it differently, for you will catch the "tenor of the argument." As you master the facts and the nuances of terms, you will learn to connect them with the claims that are being made to develop a sense of their significance. You will then be called to join the conversation, perhaps to ask a question or to offer an idea of your own. Outside the classroom as well, you will have the sort of experience that Burke describes. In your research, you will read scholarly books and articles, and you will work to make sense of their discussions of ideas, institutions and innovations. Authors will cite works that you have not read to support their claims, and you will have to backtrack to fill in the gaps in your understanding. When you have developed a sense of the debate, you will "put in your oar" and write.

Here at the university, you will have many such experiences as you move through your general education courses and on to your major area of study. You will learn to interpret and use complicated discussions that began before you arrived and continue after you leave. Unfortunately, you will rarely get the opportunity to step back from your encounters with all these scholarly conversations and think about how they come together for you. How do you make sense of all that you read and discuss here at the university?

The book that you are holding in your hands is meant to help you begin to learn how to read and write at the university. It provides you with opportunities to look at The University of Arizona as a community of writers at work. Articles by faculty from across this

university have been brought together to create interdisciplinary conversations on issues ranging from how we care for our bodies to how we know the universe. This anthology provides you with a chance to read and write about the work that is done by the professors who teach, write, and do research here at The University of Arizona. In your first-semester composition course, you will examine how these writers represent their research and create a context for the work they do. To help you make connections between what you read and what you write, you will also read *A Student's Guide to First-Year Composition*, which includes essays from students like yourself and advice from students and instructors from the Composition Program here at The University of Arizona. These readings can help you improve your writing if you consider not only what the writing is about but also how it is written. To assess how a text is written, you need to think about why it is written and where it comes from.

Our discussions of how to examine texts against their contexts will help you to think about what you are learning as you read and write in your other classes. To learn effectively, we have to keep the big picture in mind as we master the details of any particular issue or topic. Too often, we study information just to pass an exam or write a paper. Too rarely do we take the time to step back and ask ourselves how these ideas connect with what we learned in other classes and outside the classroom. Stepping back to consider the big picture is crucial to effective reading and writing, and to effective learning. As we read and write, we construct a sense of the context of the text: the conversations that the author is engaging in, the situation that prompted the author to respond in this way, and the audiences that he or she is addressing. If we do not create a context for a text, or for any isolated fact or phenomenon, it remains purposeless information without significance, soon to be forgotten. As you learn to read and write with an eye to the purposes that a text serves, you will learn to learn more effectively—more purposefully and more strategically. You will learn to explore situations and assumptions, and you will then be better able to respond in a purposeful fashion in your own writing.

The strategies that writers and readers use to analyze a text against its context are part of the art of *rhetoric*—the art of using language to accomplish a specific purpose on a particular occasion. Rhetoric is a practical art. It can help you to understand how to write for a specific purpose right now, here in this situation. Developing a clear sense of your audience will help you to accomplish your purpose when you write. You will also be much more effective at interpreting what you read if you consider the questions about audience and purpose that are discussed later in this introduction. As you read this book, you will develop a more concrete sense of the strategies used in academic writing because the writers included in this collection are all from right here at the university. Some of them write about the history and future of this region. Many write about the research they do here at the university. Some write for other scholars in their fields, but many address broader audiences. Because you know something about the contexts in which these authors write, you should find it easier to learn from how they write. As you examine how they work with writing, you will also be introduced to broader conversations about how knowledge is discovered, applied, taught and learned. These conversations should help you to develop contexts for what you will read and write at The University of Arizona.

Composing a Context for Reading and Writing at the University

As you will learn from reading this collection, writers do not simply react to contexts. They do not simply tell an audience what they think their readers want to hear. As they write, authors shape their contexts to suit their purposes. They may describe an idea, problem or experience without offering a definite conclusion in order to encourage their readers to reflect upon the complexities of the issues. A writer can accomplish a great deal just by getting readers to accept a certain perspective on an issue. Complex problems can be viewed from many points of view, and each perspective will offer insights and solutions that other vantage points do not. Reaching consensus on how to approach an issue can be a major step toward deciding what should be done about it.

For example, shortly after joining The University of Arizona in 1997, President Peter Likins circulated a piece he had entitled “Priorities.” While he had had decades of experience teaching and administering other universities, he was working to learn about the thousands of things that are going on here at this particular university. Like you, he was new to this place. He wrote “Priorities” as a “discussion paper” to invite faculty, staff and students to reflect upon the challenges and opportunities that the university faces. The essay circulated around campus, with many of us reading it on line. As you read it, think about these questions because they can help you to explore the contexts of the essay.

- What purposes does President Likins set for himself and for the university?
- How does he try to involve his readers in the process of reflecting on the university's priorities?
- What is his purpose in involving his readers in these ways?
- How does he use this process to establish a context for what he wants to accomplish?
- How are the purposes that he writes for different from and similar to the writing that you have encountered elsewhere in this university?
- How does President Likins' perspective on the university differ from yours?
- How do your purposes as a member of this community diverge or connect with those that he sets for the work that is done at this university?