Teaching the Essays

Chicana Artists: Exploring Neapantla, el Lugar de la Frontera

Gloria Anzaldúa

That Anzaldúa has written a bilingual text should come as no surprise to instructors familiar with her work. It will be a surprise to your students, however. Non-Spanish speakers will have some initial difficulty with the essay. You can help them to see their disorientation as productive by showing them how their bewilderment enables them to experience a version of *neapantla,* “that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or gender position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity” (50).

Some students also have difficulty with Anzaldúa’s angry tone toward mainstream U.S. culture. I ask students to find a provocative passage and to create a dialogue between Anzaldúa and someone who they imagine might disagree with her. The dialogue can help students articulate both her argument and their response to it. Challenging them to complicate her perspective allows them to express their opinion while forcing them to respect the text.

One of the most interesting aspects of Anzaldúa’s essay is the way she transposes italicization at the end of her text: she italicizes the English words and not the Spanish. I like for students to notice this on their own; once one student points it out, I ask the class to write about the significance of italicizing the English words. After the students have written about the italic shift, I ask them whether the change is disorienting and if it is also artistic.

I like to ask students to write in class about the dichotomy Anzaldúa sets up between insiders and outsiders at the “Aztec: The World of Moctezuma” exhibition at Denver Museum of Natural History. I ask my students why Anzaldúa feels that she is an insider even though she admits that she, too, is “a gaping consumer” (48). Can insiders only be Hispanic, mestiza, and Indian? A good essay assignment that builds on the short in-class writing asks students to compare Anzaldúa’s sense of herself as an insider with the students’ impressions of Jane Tompkins’s status (insider or outsider) in her essay, “At the Buffalo Bill Museum, June 1988” (496). Students could consider whether or not Tompkins sees herself as an insider or outsider and whether or not she has a sense of security that Anzaldúa lacks as a Chicana artist.

Another complication of status is Anzaldúa’s self-identification as a lesbian. I have found that most students do not pick up on it. When they do make the connection, many of my students have told me that the essay becomes clearer for them.

The concept of border art and the border artist can be a useful framework for helping students make connections to other essays in *Making Sense.* In what ways, for instance, can someone like Mary Kingsley in Julie English Early’s essay, “The Spectacle of Science and Self: Mary Kingsley” (156–175) be understood as a type of border artist? Or, how do Anzaldúa’s descriptions of border art compare with Jeanette Winterson’s descriptions of art in “Imagination and Reality” (593).

You might ask students to discuss Anzaldúa’s essay as a written version of what she calls autohistoria (53). The question of autohistoria blends well with Haunani-Kay Trask’s discussion of what counts as history and historical evidence in “From a Native
Daughter” (524). Students can explore the concept of autohistoria by analyzing one or more of the museum exhibits that Anzaldúa describes in her essay. Or, they can write essays that compare Anzaldúa’s interpretations of museum exhibits with Jane Tompkins’s interpretations of museum exhibits in the Buffalo Bill Museum.

Key terms: *border art, border artists, nepantla, hybridism, counter-art, autohistoria*
The Changing View of Man in the Portrait

John Berger

Although he makes his case in the context of portrait painting, Berger’s argument that changes in human identity result from cultural, historical, and technological shifts is similar to arguments made by Warren Susman, Gloria Anzaldúa, Christopher Lasch, and others. His argument can be problematized using Sherry Turkle, compared to Scott DeVeaux (appling the idea of progress in the transition from portrait painting to photographs is an interesting task), or extended by Scott McCloud. When I want to maintain a focus on the visual, I pair Berger with Susan Sontag’s “In Plato’s Cave,” which presents a much darker view of photography and its effects.

I find Berger’s essay extremely useful as a way to teach the use of claims, evidence, and argument. If I use it at the beginning of the semester, I have students open up the essay by finding photographed and painted portraits that support or challenge his argument. We examine the places where Berger uses evidence to try to persuade his readers to follow his train of thought and ideally to agree with his claims, and the places where he simply asserts those claims (some of them gigantic) without supplying evidence. By midsemester, when I am often emphasizing thesis development and argument in the students’ work, Berger’s use of transitions is also worth study. An examination of the first line of each paragraph shows his efforts to assert a logical progression of thought, to build and develop his argument point by point. His thesis emerges from a simple but interesting question—Why has portrait painting become outdated?—yet the answer to that question gets better, richer, and more productive as the essay moves along.

The drawback to using Berger, as with any of the historical pieces (Susman for instance) is that students have a hard time challenging his argument on the basis of counter evidence that they don’t have. They can also find this piece so smooth and cohesive that it seems to offer little room for elaboration or refutation. For that reason, I prefer to use Berger at midsemester, when students have several other essays at hand from which to choose their tools of analysis. The essay also makes a good lead-in to individualized research projects for students who are interested in photography or art history and would like to gather additional data on a related subject. A sample research project might consider to what extent modernist painter Alice Neele’s portraits undermine Berger’s initial premise that portrait painting has become outdated.

Key Term: identity
The Owl Has Flown

Sven Birkerts

_The Owl Has Flown_ is an excellent piece for helping students recognize that they can use others’ arguments without necessarily agreeing with them. That is, students will often find that they accept Birkerts’s premise that life in the present day has gotten faster and that intensive reading is less common, but they will often dispute Birkerts’s claim that there is therefore less wisdom to be found today. Students will often see Birkerts as something of a curmudgeon who makes a very pessimistic argument. Birkerts is, of course, not merely lamenting the passing of wisdom (even if his title and quite a few passages lean this way); he is also excited about the possibilities of technology for making everyone’s life richer and, potentially, wiser. But this attempt at synthesis ends abruptly, and, except for a few hints, it is up to the reader to imagine how such a synthesis might be accomplished. In other words, Birkerts’ piece leaves readers with some questions to think about.

In responding to Birkerts, students should realize that they cannot merely agree or disagree. They must instead begin to think about what it means to engage with Birkerts. If they agree with his statement that “how we receive information bears vitally on the ways we experience and interpret reality,” they will need to explain how they see this connection working in the world around them. Because they will usually think that Birkerts’s solution (reading and art) is inadequate or outdated, you can ask them to write about what other avenues are available for the acquisition of wisdom. I have found that some students will even question the value of wisdom itself as a goal.

Turkle’s piece offers a contrasting look at some of the same issues. Turkle seems to suggest that the proliferation of options in our culture allows for a new kind of thinking that is, in fact, quite intensive and rewarding. Asking students to examine the two pieces together can generate a very heated debate.

**Key terms:** intensive and extensive reading, access, proliferation, vertical and horizontal thinking, deep time, wisdom
The Birth of a National Icon: Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*

*Wanda M. Corn*

Wanda M. Corn’s piece is one of the most disciplinary pieces in *Making Sense* because it gives us a window into the world of art history. Corn presents a series of questions about Grant Wood’s famous painting and then proceeds to investigate them, one by one. Though scholarly in every way—Corn carefully documents claims, cites sources, and provides photographs to support her assertions—the piece retains an intriguing quality that allows Corn’s search for answers to feel almost like a detective story. Just what *is* behind this curiously ubiquitous painting? Since most students are familiar with *American Gothic*, Corn’s detailed examination and interpretation raises eyebrows by revealing untold nuances of this seemingly easy piece of art. In short, Corn introduces students to close reading, a skill for unpacking meaning that is crucial for their growth as writers. While they won’t be able to mimic Corn’s investigation (because they are not professional researchers), they can see it as an example of how to communicate an idea to a reader. Corn has a reading of the painting that she gradually reveals through example, suggestion, and commentary. She is, throughout, constructing a plausible argument based on careful observation.

Corn’s piece connects well to the modernization theme of *Making Sense* in its suggestion that Grant Wood was depicting a time and place that was passing away. Corn argues that Wood’s painting is neither sentimental heroism nor satire, but an examination of the contrast between the old Midwest and the modern America of the 1930s. This historical contrast is evident in several other pieces in *Making Sense*; Berger, Birkerts, DeVeaux, Ewen, Lasch, Solnit, Susman, and Tompkins all use historical narrative to say something about the modern world.

Corn eventually comes to the conclusion that Wood has provided, in *American Gothic*, a “collective self-portrait of Americans in general.” This is an arresting statement that can provide fuel for many different kinds of assignments. You might ask students to consider this idea in the context of Ellison’s description of the little man or Berger’s comments about portraiture.

Take advantage of the art in *Making Sense* by having group work or free writing that focuses on specific images. Many students are more comfortable with their own visual literacy, so an assignment that asks them to find something in *American Gothic* that Corn has not discussed may provide sparks for debate. You might also ask them to find another national icon and compare it to *American Gothic*.

One reservation I have about Corn’s piece is her heavy reliance on an empiricist methodology. Corn places such emphasis on objective data such as facts, letters, and photos to present evidence that she runs the risk of appearing too certain of her position. Corn’s tendency toward the last word contrasts greatly with the open-endedness and ambiguity found in pieces by Berger, McCloud, Winterson, and Sontag. There is a fascinating writing assignment embedded in this contrast.

**Key Terms:** convention, satire, Victorian, modern, ancestor, America’s self-image, national icon
Progress and the Bean

Scott DeVeaux

Scott DeVeaux’s contribution to *Making Sense* comes from his remarkable study of midcentury jazz music, *The Birth of Bebop*. In that book, DeVeaux argues against a simple great man theory of jazz, suggesting instead that the innovations of jazz are the product of a complex social network of musicians working together to foster experiment and change. DeVeaux very consciously applies Thomas Kuhn’s concept of the paradigm to the music business, forcing us to consider the affinities of musicians and scientists. The primary example of this confluence of practices is the tenor saxophone great, Coleman Hawkins, who asks why musicians should not be expected to progress in the same fashion that scientists do.

We like the way this piece demands a reconsideration of the easy division between arts and sciences and leads to writing assignments that challenge these sometimes needlessly rigid distinctions. Students will usually be quick to identify themselves as either a right-brained, creative type or a task-oriented, efficient thinker. DeVeaux’s use of Hawkins can help to complicate these facile divisions—to demonstrate that scientific experiment is in many ways a creative act and that artistic progress depends on careful study of the “science” of art.

DeVeaux’s piece can contribute to any sequence that focuses on innovation, development, or change. You could pose his complex definition of progress against or with arguments about technological change in the Diamond, Turkle, or Gould essays, or you could see DeVeaux in the context of aesthetic examples such as those shown in Berger, Corn, or McCloud. But maybe the best assignments would come out of using DeVeaux’s essay in dialogue with other pieces that share his readiness to complicate boundaries. Sontag’s inquiry into the nature of photographs, Rybczynski’s puzzling over designing a dream house, and even Willis’s deconstruction of the science of Disney World’s magic all provide striking examples of the art/science conundrum.

**Key terms:** innovation, progress, paradigm
Necessity’s Mother

Jared Diamond

Diamond’s essay is the source for the cover art of *Making Sense*, and for this reason it may make sense to start the semester with this reading. The essay can be used both to help students see the many ways in which knowledge is constructed and used by individuals and society and to demonstrate for them how an author can engage in a conversation with other thinkers.

You might prepare students for the reading by asking them to examine one or more of the web sites devoted to the mystery of the Phaistos disk. In class, assign small groups the task of hypothesizing what the disk might say and why it matters. The point here is to help them see that the disk is evidence and that historians and others are attempting to construct a theory to account for it. I would then draw an analogy to students’ own process of constructing meaning from textual evidence. After reading the first section of the essay in class, I ask students to list the various theories proposed and to compare them to the ones they discovered on the Internet. This comparison of theories provides an opportunity to discuss the question of relativism. Is every theory as good as the next? Does it matter which one is correct? How will we ever know?

Another prereading activity involves asking students to list inventions and inventors and then asking them to use their examples as a means of defining the terms. Revisiting these lists and definitions after reading the essay can lead to some interesting discussions on how their own knowledge is constructed by their schooling. Why do teachers at different grade levels provide different explanations of history or technology? What makes Diamond’s essay more convincing than any of the explanations they previously learned? Combined, these activities lead directly into a rhetorical analysis of the essay and an opportunity to discuss the rhetorical concept of invention.

Diamond’s essay works well with Turkle’s "Triumph of Tinkering" and Toumey’s “Conjuring of Science” to challenge the commonsense view of science as the product of rational thought and art as the product of imagination.

**Key terms:** invention, tinkering, ideology
Seeing

Annie Dillard

Annie Dillard’s “Seeing” is a difficult piece for many readers. The essay is so consciously crafted, some might even say overwritten, that it is easy to skate along its surface focusing only on sound. And yet, Dillard’s essay rewards an intensive reading. It yokes art and science, calls attention to the ways in which seeing is a synonym for making sense, and invites readers to integrate knowledge gleaned from experience, education, reading, and conversation with others. By holding the mirror up to nature and showing us nature, the mirror, and the mirror holder, Dillard forces us to see language. “Seeing” is an excellent piece for showing students how to analyze an observation, an example, or a quotation by looking at it from a variety of angles. It also works as a wonderful literalization of a text.

Dillard’s difficulty presents an important learning opportunity. If students can learn to work through their frustration with this essay, they can learn to read successfully at the college level. This is an essay that must be read more than once. Invite students to read the essay one time through without taking notes or worrying over particular meanings or potential interpretations. Ask them to experience the essay, and then to describe that experience with a tactile image. Thinking of the essay as an object—a prism or a many-faceted crystal, an Escher drawing or “Where’s Waldo?” cartoon, etc.—may help them to feel less intimidated by Dillard’s diction and references. It may also help them to understand that essays have a purpose, that they invite the reader to do something. A rhetorical analysis at this point would be particularly appropriate, if only to make the point that readers who do not fit the description of the primary audience may still find something of value in the essay.

“Seeing” can easily be broken into sections for serial reading assignments, or for group work, or simply to shorten it. It works well with Percy’s “Loss of the Creature,” McGraw’s “Bad Eyes,” and Tompkins’s “At the Buffalo Bill Museum” in which she cannot understand or “see” the Plains Indian exhibit because she does not know its language.

Key terms: seeing and all of its scientific, literary, and spiritual variants; artificial obvious; optical illusion
The Spectacle of Science and Self: Mary Kingsley

*Julie English Early*

Early’s essay is particularly useful as a model for close reading. In addition to supplying biographical and historical context, Early devotes the bulk of the essay to analyzing Kingsley’s style and self-presentation using quoted evidence from *Travels in West Africa* to support and develop her interpretation. Particularly since this collection includes a sample of Kingsley’s own writing (159), students can see the interpretive process at work in a form that is somewhat translatable to a college paper. For that reason, I like to introduce the Early essay near the beginning of the semester, preferably paired with an essay that has more portable conceptual terms. For example, this essay works well with Emily Martin et al’s “Scientific Literacy” because the well-defined concepts of local knowledge and scientific literacy provide a conceptual frame that can be applied to Kingsley’s work. Kingsley’s life work and approach to nature also offer a revealing comparison to Annie Dillard’s approach to nature writing, and students can adapt Early’s analysis of Kingsley’s self-presentation to create an effective analysis of Dillard’s public performance as a writer.

Students seem to have more trouble separating out Early as the author of this essay and applying the lessons learned from her analysis of Kingsley’s narrative style to Early’s own self-presentation as a stylist. In fact, students in my developmental composition classes will frequently blur the distinction between Kingsley’s work as the primary text and Early’s work as the secondary analysis by attributing Kingsley’s words to Early and vice versa. Focusing students on Early’s copious endnotes can help to address this problem because they help to foreground Early’s choices as a biographer and analyst; each of the endnotes reveals a decision she made about what material to keep in her central narrative about Kingsley and what material to relegate to the peripheral standing at the end of the paper. As a group exercise, I ask students to analyze why each endnote was not directly included in the text, which helps to focus their attention directly on Early as the interpreter of this life.

In addition to the formal issues raised by endnoting, Early’s essay is useful for grounding a discussion of audience. The complex analysis of Kingsley’s understanding of the general public, her strategies as a writer for reaching that public, her relationship as a woman to the scientific community, and the resulting balance she created between scientific data and travel writing all supply fascinating data from which students can draw larger conclusions about the active role of audience in determining other aspects of an essay. A parody exercise, in which students broadly mimic Kingsley’s style while composing their own observations of a particular natural or social phenomena, can help to focus their attention on audience and enhance their understanding of the extent to which description and exposition also involve self-presentation.

**Key Terms:** public/private, self-presentation, narrative style
The Little Man at Chehaw Station

Ralph Ellison

Since Ellison’s essay is one of the longer selections in the reader, I sometimes assign the reading in sections: for example, pages 178 to 188 up to the paragraph beginning “Words that evoke . . .,” is enough to give students Ellison’s extended analysis of the little man and some of the implications of that figure for American identity. Another strategy is to use written assignments that encourage students to begin by latching onto particular examples or sections of the essay that intrigue them. For the first class discussion of the essay, I might ask students to bring in a list of all the different things that the little man at Chehaw Station seems to stand for, all the meanings that Ellison builds into that image. Then I have them work in small groups to unpack two of these possible meanings and present them to the class. Alternatively (for a weaker class), or as a follow-up, I identify particular sections or examples from the essay—the Miss Harrison example, the Great Gatsby example, the melting pot example, or the Volkswagen bus example—and have student groups take responsibility for that particular section of the essay, which they then teach to the class.

Since the rewards of the essay may manifest themselves more as students use it and return to it, I allow them some time to piece together Ellison’s argument and encourage them not to worry about mastering the essay as a whole the first few times through. I also get them working with parts of the essay in relation to other essays as soon as possible. For this reason, Ellison works well as the second or third essay in a semester’s line-up, when students have time to make use of the piece by returning to it, yet have gained enough confidence as readers to know that they can tackle college-level reading. Using Anzaldúa’s ideas about multiple identities, students might focus on Ellison’s reaction to the melting pot metaphor for their initial reading and theorize about alternatives to that metaphor generated by the two readings. Then, they might return to Ellison later in the semester using Lasch’s terms to analyze the function of a democracy, or Susman’s concepts to explore the idea of a uniquely American character or identity.

I like to use Ellison to help students think about audience. Although students are sometimes all too aware of their literal audience, the evaluating teacher, and can learn to extend that sense of audience to include and even emphasize their classroom colleagues, Ellison’s essay can help with the more difficult task of what audience can mean as a rhetorical figure, how one might establish a sense of audience, and how that might affect how and what one writes. Ellison’s careful description of his painful learning process involving the little man provides a rare, extended look at the artist-audience relationship. It can work well with Sommers’s essay, which helps students to transfer some of Ellison’s large-scale discussion of an American audience to the particular audiences established in classroom contexts, and with Mellix’s piece in which she analyzes the identities she constructs as a writer in relation to particular audiences.

Key Terms: the little man, antagonistic cooperation
The Marriage between Art and Commerce

Stuart Ewen

Ewen’s discussion of the evolution of the style industry in the twentieth century is grounded in Marxist and psychoanalytic theory that may require some explication for students. Many of them will have heard some of the language before, although it is unlikely they will be aware of its connections to theory. The most obvious approach to teaching this essay is to introduce students to the concepts in the essay by asking them to decode advertisements and product packaging as examples of consumer engineering. A variant of this approach is to begin outside the text by asking students to define style, using whatever context they choose. Persistent questioning about the components of these styles and their origins can help them to see their own participation in consumer culture. Showing them their own understanding of the semiotics that define these styles enables them to understand how signs operate in culture generally and in consumer culture specifically.

Another approach to teaching Ewen is to treat it as an object that has been designed to appeal to a particular market. The surface of Ewen’s text can then become itself a subject for discussion. Before providing a gloss of the terms, I ask students to read the text once through without stopping to look up words or ponder over meanings. In class, we talk about their frustration, segue into a discussion of audience, and end up examining Ewen’s writing style and what it may be designed to achieve.

Once they understand that I don’t expect them to know the meanings of all the terms used in the article, they begin to relax and we proceed to an analysis of the essay’s packaging. We look at its placement in the book, examine the book’s cover and title, discuss the book’s audience and purpose, and begin to construct a context for our own use of Ewen’s product. We look at the title of Ewen’s article and discuss our associations with its three key terms. Students then break into groups and construct a list of words or phrases they see as difficult. As a class, we then use the three title terms as categories for organizing the difficult vocabulary of the text. The category of psychoanalysis must then be added to account for the remaining difficult words and phrases. As a class, we attach definitions to as many terms as we can and then identify which of the remaining terms are essential to our understanding of the text. Student groups are assigned to these essential terms and given the task of defining them both in general and in the context of the essay. If there is still time in class, I give them dictionaries or allow them to use the Internet, if not they must bring the definitions to the next class for presentation. After this word work, I ask students to reread the text and to compare the experience to their first reading. Continuing the approach of seeing the text as a package, we proceed to discuss how it makes them feel to read it when they are closer to being members of its target market.

Ewen works well with Geertz’s “Common Sense as a Cultural System” and Winterson’s “Imagination and Reality.”

Key terms: style, consumer culture, image, desire, unconscious, industrial design, consumer engineering
The Motive for Metaphor

Northrop Frye

Frye’s conversational tone—what he calls “the classroom style” (216)—in “The Motive for Metaphor” offers teachers significant opportunities to discuss questions of persona and audience. Students usually notice right away that Frye uses the first person throughout the essay. For students taught never to use the personal pronoun in their expository writing, this is a major transgression. Frye’s essay provides a good occasion for discussing such rules. Where do such rules come from? Can the students find such rules in a rule book? If there is such a rule, then why is Frye breaking the rule? What does his use of "I" help him do as a writer?

If you do not want to start with Frye’s use of the pronoun “I,” then you could begin by asking the students to work in groups to summarize Frye’s descriptions of the arts and the sciences. What are their relationships to inner and outer worlds according to Frye? Where is Frye’s explanation clearest, and where is his explanation muddiest? It is also a good idea to ask students to summarize Frye’s discussion of the three levels of the mind. Ask students to try to come up with their own examples of each level as well as examples or qualifications that complicate Frye’s explanations of each level.

Frye presents many ideas that will resonate with ideas in other essays in Making Sense. Here are two examples. First, Frye says that science “evolves and improves” whereas arts such as literature do not “evolve or improve or progress” (220, 221). Students might compare Frye’s claims about improvements in science with Thomas Kuhn’s “The Historical Structure of Scientific Discovery” (303–313), or his claims that literature does not progress with Scott DeVeaux’s discussion of blues great, Coleman Hawkins, in “Progress and the Bean” (103). Together, the essays by Frye, DeVeaux, and Kuhn provide students with a great opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the arts and sciences.

Second, teachers might ask students to explore the issue of environment and home that Frye raises on pages 217–222 in terms of Lewontin’s discussion of environment in “Science as Social Action” (326–338) or in terms of Rybczynski’s discussion of a home in “Designs for Escape” (426). The connections are less explicit than the links between art and science in DeVeaux and Kuhn; however, asking students to think about Frye and Lewontin or Frye and Rybczynski or all three challenges them to write exploratory essays, where they discuss not only common ground but also gaps. Articulating the tensions between essays can help them better appreciate how critical thinking can reveal both the implicit and the explicit assumptions that construct knowledge in the arts and sciences.

Students can explore competing ideas in the arts and sciences in other ways, of course. Asking students to speculate on Frye’s question—“Is it possible that literature, especially poetry, is something that a scientific civilization like ours will eventually outgrow?” (221)—can lead to productive journal entries and in-class writing. Asking students to write for 20 minutes in class about Wallace Steven’s poem, “The Motive for Metaphor” and then to work in groups to discuss their speculations is a useful classroom exercise. Stevens’s poetry is not easy; its difficulty, of course, foregrounds the distinctions that Frye sets up between the languages of the sciences and the languages or styles of the arts. Not surprisingly, Stevens’s poetry will generate a variety of responses ranging from enthusiasm to bewilderment. If students find the poetry too alienating, Frye’s question can also be asked of songs and music. Is music something that “a scientific civilization like ours will eventually outgrow”?

Key Terms: metaphor, utilitarian, arts, sciences
Common Sense as a Cultural System

Clifford Geertz

“Common Sense as a Cultural System” is an excerpt from a slightly longer essay of the same title in Geertz’s *Local Knowledge*. The complete essay begins with a discussion of a quotation from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* in which Wittgenstein discusses similarities between a city and language. We did not include the first six paragraphs of the essay because of the high degree of abstraction. We also deleted section IV of the essay, which consists of four paragraphs that refer back to the Wittgenstein quotation. Some instructors may want to look at Geertz’s essay as it appears in *Local Knowledge* to see if they would like to reinstate these sections.

Geertz’s essay is not easy reading; however, students will find his discussion of common sense engaging. Indeed, students often like to champion common sense as opposed to book smarts. By pointing out how common sense is culturally constructed, Geertz forces students to rethink their assumptions of its natural superiority.

A good way to begin the essay is with a prereading in-class exercise: before assigning the essay, ask students to write their own definition of common sense and to describe at least one example or one person that illustrates their definition. After the students read the essay for homework, you can put them into groups to discuss how Geertz both corroborates and complicates their definitions and examples of common sense.

Another good way to begin discussing the essay is to ask students to summarize the “problems for common sense” that intersexuality poses (232). Why does Geertz use this example? What point or points is he trying to make? What is Geertz’s attitude toward stereotypical American reactions to intersexuality? What is his reaction to Navaho and Pokot reactions to intersexuality?

You can also begin discussing the essay by asking students to identify what they see as Geertz’s main line of argument in the essay. Many students will be greatly challenged by this assignment. Completing it, however, will enable them to identify the structure of argument in most other texts.

Geertz’s language is worth careful attention. He uses the word, “anomalies,” in his discussion of witchcraft and the Zande (231). You might want to ask students to compare his usage with Kuhn’s discussion of anomaly in “The Historical Structure of Scientific Discovery.” You might ask students to write about whether or not Kuhn’s three-stage structure of discovery is a useful model for Geertz’s own method of making sense of common sense. Or you might ask students to explore whether or not common sense has or should have a place in Kuhn’s explanation of scientific discovery.

Asking students to write about Geertz’s discussion of common sense and Sven Birkerts’s discussion of wisdom in “The Owl Has Flown” (72–77) can also produce rich student writing. Students can explore the way or ways in which common sense elicits, in Birkerts’s terms, vertical depth and not just horizontal understanding. Many students want to criticize Birkerts for linking wisdom to reading by noting the wisdom in common sense. Asking students to put their own notions of common sense into dialogue with Geertz’s discussion of common sense can allow students to enrich their own understanding.

Some instructors may also want to ask students to examine Geertz’s essay as an example of the rhetorical mode of definition. Scott McCloud’s “Setting the Record Straight” is a good example of the mode of definition (359–380). So, asking the students to compare Geertz’s method of definition with McCloud’s method in his comic strip can be instructive. I ask students to discuss which writer seems to display or exemplify common sense or the most common sense and why.

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Key Terms: cultural system, anthropology, intersexuality, hermaphroditism, anomaly
The Smoking Gun of Eugenics

Stephen Jay Gould

“The Smoking Gun of Eugenics” begins quite humorously, but the essay’s concluding sentence—“Bad and biased arguments can have serious, even deadly, consequences”—underscores that much is at stake in the ways that genetic explanations are used. To make his point, Gould discusses two mistakes made by Sir Ronald Aylmer Fisher, “the Babe Ruth of statistics and evolutionary theory” (246). Fisher’s first mistake is a defense of cigarette smoking; his second is a defense of eugenics.

You might begin by asking students to summarize Gould’s account of Fisher’s arguments about smoking and about eugenics. Once students have their summaries, they can work in groups to map out the logical relationship Gould identifies between Fisher’s arguments about smoking and eugenics. Such group work helps students to see how Gould analyzes Fisher’s reasoning by closely reading his explicit and implicit assumptions. Although Fisher’s arguments are often logical, Gould disagrees with his conclusions. You might ask students to consider the persuasiveness of Fisher’s logic. Without Gould’s analysis, would they see the problems with Fisher’s argument? Introducing the concepts correlation and causality at this point will help them to understand how an audience can be persuaded by a false argument.

When I teach Gould’s essay, I discuss the importance of close reading and ask my students to find evidence of how Gould uses close reading to build his case against Fisher. Gould does a great job of using quotations from Fisher as empirical evidence. What I particularly appreciate is that Gould does not simply quote Fisher; he will follow up quotations by pulling out key words and phrases to support his interpretation. One lesson here is that Gould does not simply assume that the meanings of the quotations that he uses from Fisher are self-evident. He pulls out key words and phrases because he wants to show his readers what is significant about the quotations that he uses. Stressing this technique can help students develop clearer and more substantive analyses of texts.

Sometimes students respond to Gould by saying that he is picking on Fisher or by saying that academics always want to criticize everything. Asking students to consider their criticisms in the context of Gould’s statement that “We don’t like to admit flaws in our saints” (251) can yield some interesting discussions about persons and personas. It also provides students with a point of departure for writing about why we are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge shortcomings in people we admire. Some students will criticize Gould for being mean-spirited; others will leave Gould’s text behind as they explore the topic in terms of personal experience or wide-ranging analysis of famous people.

From teaching Gould’s essay, I have found that students are particularly interested in the topic of eugenics even though most have never heard the word before. Many of my students have seen films that focus on eugenics such as Gattaca (1997). Students are interested in issues such as upward mobility based on genetic enhancement or social systems organized by genetic hierarchies, and they are often unfamiliar with the history of government-mandated sterilization programs. Gould’s discussion of eugenics lends itself to fascinating library and Internet projects in a class with a research component. Students can find a great deal of information about eugenics and/or other genetic research such as the Human Genome Project. Students will also find that Kaku’s discussion of the topic in his essay “Second Thoughts: The Genetics of a Brave New World?” (279–300) supplements Gould’s discussion of eugenics and genetic hypotheses.

Finally, I have found it helpful to discuss how the shape and method of Gould’s essay work together to produce what each student sees as Gould’s main point. I ask students to
map the structure of Gould’s essay, to consider how he begins and ends, how he presents evidence, how he makes his case that Fisher’s mistakes are more serious than they have typically been regarded, and how he weaves the arts and sciences together in his essay. In blending the arts into the sciences, of course, Gould creates his signature style, a style that speaks clearly across the disciplines.

Key Terms: causality, correlation, eugenics
Landscape, Drama, and Dissensus:  
The Rhetorical Education of Red Lodge, Montana

Zita Ingham

Ingham’s piece isn’t easy, and on a first glance it may even seem out of place in this reader because of its long, involved detailing of a very specific case. But Ingham’s narrative of the townspeople of Red Lodge, Montana, imagining the future of their town is, of course, a classic example of the power of rhetoric as an instrument for making sense of a complex problem. Specifically, the Red Lodge problem becomes clearer when it is framed in rhetorical terms. Rather than resorting to the simplistic (and violent) power struggles that made the Old West famous, the people of Red Lodge use language to help them negotiate complexity. As Ingham puts it,

... this is not the Old West. Discussion, argument, legal actions, and decrees replace shoot-outs. Finding a better way to live and to manage environmental issues such as land use rests on language, on the use of language to discover, initiate, persuade, understand, anger, conciliate: on rhetoric. (260)

A passage like this one can serve as the keynote for the entire semester.

I prefer to use Ingham’s piece as a second or third reading of the semester because it can solidify and clarify the work from the initial paper or papers. If a sequence has begun with an assignment showing how an idea or concept can have an impact on a situation (and most writing assignments do, in fact, do this), Ingham’s example can supply specifics for a second excursion into this paper topic. After writing a first paper on Percy’s idea of “symbolic complexes,” students might write a second paper identifying the “symbolic complexes” functioning in Red Lodge and how might they be developed or changed.

Tompkins’s “At the Buffalo Bill Museum” also contrasts Old West attitudes with those of the present day. Together, the Tompkins and Ingham essays can help students consider the impact of western stories on our present imagination of the West and begin to ask what’s being preserved today of that culture and why. It’s important that students consider Ingham’s decision to include components from the genre of the western in her otherwise straightforward argument.

Key terms: community dialogue, rhetorical health, deferred consensus, emotional appeal, ethical appeal, dissensus
Second Thoughts: The Genetics of a Brave New World?

Michio Kaku

Students find Kaku’s essay exciting because of its emphasis on how biotechnology is already affecting the present and on how it may affect the future. Research through the Human Genome Project will continue to be in the news for some time to come, and Kaku’s essay is a good jumping off point for research projects in a writing class. In teaching the essay I have invariably found that students engage with issues such as Kaku’s exploration of misuses of biotechnology for warfare, the ethics of cloning, and the pros and cons of germ-line gene manipulations.

Students enjoy debating some of the problems with trying to regulate research on the genome. According to Kaku,

There is no viable way to completely stop the progress of science—but we must find a way to carefully control the excesses of technology. Certain aspects of genetics research may need to be banned entirely. But the best overall policy is to air the risks and potentials of genetic research in public, and democratically pass laws which will shape the direction of the technology toward alleviating sickness and pain. (297)

Kaku argues for an ethical approach to the “progress of science” by emphasizing the importance and necessity of democratic decision making with respect to biotechnology. His argument here echoes his argument on page 281—“In a democracy, only informed debate by an educated citizenry can make the mature decisions about a technology so powerful that we can dream of controlling life itself”—and is reinforced on page 298—“Ultimately, society must make democratic decisions on whether or not to restrict certain kinds of technology. . . . In a democracy, what is decisive is informed debate by an enlightened electorate.”

You may find it useful to pair Kaku’s emphasis on democracy and debate with Lasch’s pessimistic view of democracy and debate in “The Lost Art of Argument.” You can ask your students if Kaku is being too simplistic or, perhaps, too idealistic in his calls for an enlightened electorate. In a generally apathetic culture how do we energize the electorate? How do we produce an educated citizenry if a majority of the electorate does not want to support education through tax increases? How can ordinary citizens make sense of such highly technical information as the science of biotechnology? Any of these questions paired with Kaku’s explorations of the potential perils of the biomolecular revolution can spark the kind of debate that Lasch says is all but extinct in the information age.

You may also find it useful to engage the class in mapping out the pros and cons of a particular section of Kaku’s essay such as the “You Can’t Recall a Crop” section. You can then ask the students to identify the critics and the defenders of the biotech revolution and to evaluate Kaku’s presentation of their arguments. Does he tend to favor one side over the other? Does he create the kind of debate that helps his readers to become educated citizens?

Key terms: eugenics, Human Genome Project, Brave New World, germ-line therapy
The Historical Structure of Scientific Discovery

Thomas Kuhn

“The Historical Structure of Scientific Discovery” is a very instructive essay for students because it provides them with a critical framework for mapping interpretive strategies in other essays in Making Sense. Students will also recognize the key Kuhn term anomaly in other essays in Making Sense and in many of their other classes. Geertz talks about anomalies in “Common Sense as a Cultural System” (227–242), and DeVeaux explicitly cites Kuhn and his model of the paradigm shift in his discussion of Coleman Hawkins’s attitude toward musical progress in “Progress and the Bean” (103–112). Students can also compare Kuhn’s analysis of discovery with Diamond’s analysis of invention in “Necessity’s Mother” (115–136), and they can discuss Percy’s “The Loss of the Creature” (409–422) in Kuhnian terms.

I assign this essay early in the semester to give students critical vocabulary such as anomaly and structure and to help them see that ideas such as discovery and progress are not linear and teleological. I like to ask students to come up with their own examples of paradigm shifts. Typically, students will produce a rich array of examples including the Copernican revolution, the “discovery” of the New World, and Darwinian evolution. I try to get students to think about the fact that historically people have believed wholeheartedly in ideas that have subsequently been disproved and to recognize that one or more of the ideas that we hold today may, similarly, be proven to be a mistake.

Kuhn’s essay has its own three-part structure. In the first part, he explains why he is going to complicate the then-standard view that “discovering something has usually seemed to be a unitary event, one which, like seeing something, happens to an individual at a specific time and place” (303). This standard view or paradigm lacks “internal structure” (303), and Kuhn’s aim is to shift the paradigm by throwing into relief the “structure of scientific discovery” (303). Kuhn’s point that discovery is a complex process has had a profound impact in the arts and sciences.

In part two, Kuhn demonstrates the inappropriateness of that stereotypical image of discovery by discussing the complex histories of the discoveries of oxygen, Uranus, and X-rays. Kuhn demonstrates that we cannot really pinpoint with certainty which single person made which discovery and when. As Kuhn asserts, “we need a new vocabulary and new concepts for analyzing events like the discovery of oxygen” (306).

In part three, Kuhn presents the “new vocabulary and new concepts” through his explanation of a three-stage structure of discovery: prehistory, i.e., the recognition of anomaly; internal history, i.e., the revision of hypotheses and recalibration of instruments necessary to “make the anomaly lawlike” (309); and, post history, i.e., the aftermath of discovery that can revise previous standards and understandings, resulting in a profound revision of understanding that we have come to understand in Kuhnian terms as a paradigm shift (309).

The idea of the transformation of vision that Kuhn identifies as a feature of shifts in paradigm is amenable to the process approach to teaching composition. Drafting, peer review, reflection, and revision work together as a process leading students to enrich their understanding of particular topics by complicating initial approaches. Kuhn’s essay can serve as a framework for writing assignments that ask students to analyze their own writing process. Such self-reflection can help students to articulate in new ways what they do when they write and what they see their peers do when they write the same assignment.

In other assignments, I ask students to look for ways to complicate Kuhn’s three-stage model of discovery. I ask them, for example, to come up with their own arguments about
potential shortcomings in Kuhn’s argument, i.e., is it too mechanistic or too rigid? If it helps us to see “X,” could Kuhn’s argument also prevent us from seeing something else?

**Key terms:** anomaly, structure, lawlike
The Lost Art of Argument

Christopher Lasch

Lasch’s fire-and-brimstone essay can inject energy into just about any sequence, but it is also an excellent place to start the semester. Not truly out of any discipline, the piece unpacks some of the key issues and topics of Making Sense—history, technology, science, argument, and objectivity among others. Lasch laments what he sees as the disappearance of truly engaged and spirited public debate in the information age. According to Lasch, in our society information is posed as objective, scientific, and verifiable, therefore precluding debate. If this is true, asks Lasch, how do we promote active inquiry without creating chaos or incessant unrest? Does the information overload of our technological society foster passivity? Why is information never enough? How do responsible people achieve knowledge?

Students will quickly respond to Lasch’s frustration and alarm even if it takes them longer to fully understand his position or the detailed history he presents. Having them respond in a similarly partisan fashion (whether agreeing or disagreeing with Lasch) allows them to display the conviction Lasch says is missing in today’s discourse, and it also enacts the so-called “lost art of argument.” Later assignments can introduce complications and/or problems with Lasch’s model, but this first assignment can be used as an illustration of argument in its most direct form. Can your students come up with contemporary examples that support or challenge Lasch’s claims?

I am especially drawn to Lasch’s critique of objectivity. First-year students so often find it difficult to write because they are looking for the right response or they feel they don’t know enough to contribute an idea. Lasch can become an ally, of sorts, through his careful examination of the ways in which the ideals of clarity can silence discussion and debate. His privileging of the art of argument is posed as the antidote to the formalized science of objective writing (such as today’s news writing). Lasch can be used all semester long as an advocate of messy first drafts and the democratic values of dispute, uncertainty, and contradiction. The free writing exercise used in many classrooms is itself analogous to the spontaneous, unrehearsed speech that Lasch privileges.

Lasch’s history is tricky and, in places, surprising. Students may have difficulty seeing that Lasch actually prefers the partisan, impassioned writing of the nineteenth-century newspapers—that he sees professionalism and efficiency as code words for authoritarianism. I find it useful to have students do some independent work in researching old newspaper articles and comparing them with today’s. It is easily done, and looking at specific examples helps illustrate the shift in style that is so significant to Lasch.

There are inexhaustible connections between this essay and the other selections in Making Sense. You could pair it with other essays concerned with the fate of democracy, such as those by Ellison, Kaku, Solnit, or Willis. Or you could find a more specific role for Lasch. You might, for example, use Anzaldúa or Tompkins (or both) to set up a first paper about how museums present their subjects and then use Lasch for a second assignment that asks whether museums present arguments or objective materials.

Key terms: information age, debate, information, argument, opinion, professionalism, science, objectivity, public, publicity
“Science as Social Action” begins as a critique of “a particular ideological bias of modern biology” (326). Lewontin identifies this ideological bias as reductionism, the “belief that the world is broken up into tiny bits and pieces, each of which has its own properties and which combine together to make larger things” (326). Lewontin traces reductionism to the atomistic ideologies of “the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century” (326). The problem with reductionism, he says, is that it fosters deterministic arguments that both internal and external forces beyond our control govern our lives. Lewontin challenges this view that humans lack agency and are, therefore, “at the mercy of both internal and external worlds” (327).

To teach the essay, begin by asking students to summarize some of the key ideas Lewontin discusses: reductionism, environment, ideological bias, and social action. It is also a good idea to ask students to summarize Lewontin’s extended discussion about “organisms and environment” (328). Students can approach this exercise in summary by explaining in their own words Lewontin’s claim that “organisms define their own environment” (329).

Students will likely have some trouble with Lewontin’s level of abstraction. One way to help students get a handle on Lewontin’s argument is to ask them to imagine that they are writing a letter to the editor of their local paper in response to Lewontin’s call for a paradigm shift from an adaptationist view of life to a constructionist view (330). Working back through the essay, students will build up their understanding of Lewontin’s position. Some will agree with him; others will disagree, and the letter to the editor format can help them develop and articulate a more complex understanding of the issue that Lewontin addresses.

Students often do research papers on environmental issues in composition classes that have a research paper component. Lewontin’s criticisms of some aspects of the environmental movement can prove useful. Lewontin seeks to complicate what is for some an environmentalist mantra that “human beings alone are disturbing and destroying” the world (332). Students may also find interesting links between Lewontin’s discussion of environmentalists and a technocratic elite (336) and Michio Kaku’s discussion of the regulating innovation in the biomolecular revolution in “Second Thoughts: The Genetics of a Brave New World?” (279–300). You might also pair Lewontin’s essay with an environmentalist text from a group such as Earth First!

Lewontin emphasizes the social aspect of science, and many instructors will want their students to write about his arguments concerning genes and social action. The following quotation can be a catalyst for student writing on this topic:

Our DNA is a powerful influence on our anatomies and physiologies. In particular, it makes possible the complex brain that characterizes human beings. But having made that brain possible, the genes have made possible human nature, a social nature whose limitations and possible shapes we do not know except insofar as we know what human consciousness has already made possible. (338).

You might first ask students to respond to the quotation in a journal and then, later, address it again in an essay assignment that takes a position on Lewontin’s view. An alternative approach would be to put the Lewontin quotation into dialogue with the ideas of one or more advocates of reductionism.

**Key terms:** reductionism, social action, ideological bias
Scientific Literacy,  
What It Is, Why It’s Important,  
and Why Scientists Think We Don’t Have It:  
The Case of Immunology and the Immune System

Emily Martin, Bjorn Claeson, Wendy Richardson,  
Mónica Schoch-Spana, and Karen-Sue Taussig

Martin et al.’s piece begins with a careful definition of scientific literacy and then proceeds to extend and challenge that definition. It’s important, I think, to keep this revision of terms in mind. Using verbal comments about the immune system as their source of information, Martin et al. want to get at the variety of ways that literacy can be defined. Here is a great place to remind students that college-level writing doesn’t rest on dictionary definitions but, rather, demands that the writer articulate his or her own sense of meaning, that he or she illustrate and defend key terms.

In this case, Martin et al. use social anthropological research to show that scientific literacy is not always demonstrated by the use of scientific terms. Each of us is, to some extent, literate about how our bodies work, but we draw on our own experience, our own familiar language, to articulate this knowledge. As the four stories that comprise the bulk of the piece demonstrate, reciting strict biological data or information is not the only way to describe the functioning of the immune system.

The framing discussion (and especially the final two pages of the piece) provides a needed point of reference for students as they take on this piece. I will sometimes have them read and prepare a short written response to the claims made in this final section so that they do not feel lost when we turn our attention to the stories which are, in fact, what make this piece valuable and memorable.

You will likely find it most useful to look at the structure of the piece, dividing it into sections for class discussion. I like to assign each story to a separate group and have the groups represent and assess the stories. But the stories work best when compared and contrasted, so I often move from small groups focused on one story into larger groups focused on two or more. The most animated responses will come once the class becomes comfortable seeing the differences between Bill (story 3) and Mara (story 4).

Selections in Making Sense from Toumey, Early, and Gould share a similar focus on the relationship between official scientific authority and the layman’s experience of science. Lewontin and Tuan (and, to a lesser extent, Rybczynski) are also investigating the concept of boundaries, the ways we imagine our impact on the world around us (and its impact on us). Dillard, too, finds that understanding (vision) is replete with extra-scientific materials.

But sequences that use Martin et al. needn’t be scientific in emphasis. In an important way, Martin et al.’s piece is about the process of writing or, rather, the ways that our control over our language can impact our lives, and it can therefore be linked to any of the Making Sense selections that look at language, such as Winterson’s essay, which shares a similar fascination with metaphor. Other connections include the acceptance of the varieties of experience that are common to a democratic society. Ellison, Lasch, and Turkle all look closely at the consequences of difference and variety.

Key terms: scientific literacy, local knowledge, metaphor, boundaries
Setting the Record Straight

Scott McCloud

In spite of the unconventional medium, McCloud’s essay functions in many ways as a classic key term essay that, like Percy’s essay or Martin et al.’s work on scientific literacy, focuses on defining a central concept or concepts and using examples to explain, extend, and test that definition. In fact, McCloud’s essay exemplifies a key term essay in its purest form because the piece is primarily about developing a working definition for comics through historical examples (pre-Columbian manuscripts, Egyptian hieroglyphics) and opposing examples (the animated film, the cartoon). In this sense, McCloud defines comics by explaining what they are but also by addressing stereotypes and misconceptions about what they are not—a classic definitional strategy that can be applied to the key terms from other essays. For example, having students explore what is not meant by “sovereignty” or “the creature” by deriving examples that do not fit Percy’s definitions of those terms can be a useful application of McCloud’s technique.

Because the comic-strip medium of the McCloud essay helps to defamiliarize the standard essay form, I like to introduce this piece later in the semester when students have a sense of academic essay conventions. At that point, exercises such as studying McCloud’s use of transitions (which follow the conventions of academic discourse—e.g., the use of “yet,” “thus,” therefore,” etc.—and help to mark his efforts to present this subject matter in a scholarly way) can help students to see how those conventions function in this slightly different form. Similarly, the exercise on finding and making a case for the paragraph breaks in McCloud’s essay has the dual function of teaching students how to follow the moves in an argument and helping them to think about paragraphing strategies. Having students study the rhetorical effects of the images themselves not only helps them to think about the distinctions of this medium, it also helps them to think in comparative and contrastive ways about how non–image-driven essays function.

McCloud’s essay also provides a great opportunity to discuss methods of argumentation. He uses an extended definition of “comics” to support his argument for taking comics seriously, and he uses historical examples as evidence that this is a medium worth studying. McCloud’s discussion of the relationship between form and content, used to support his contention that this medium is capable of handling serious content, can serve as a model for form/content discussions in other essays. The sequence in which the McCloud character debates with an audience is particularly useful for demonstrating counter argument as a key to development. The essay also becomes a great discussion ground for thinking about the different kinds of pleasure we derive from different kinds of texts. An obvious question for students is how would our pleasure and/or our understanding of the argument change if the visual component were omitted.

Finally, because McCloud’s central term is so well developed, it becomes an effective grid against which to test examples of comics and other kinds of sequential artwork collected by students. In this sense, the essay becomes a good springboard for more individualized student projects. In preparation for question 6, I have students collect a substantial range of comics, photographic sequences, and other media that help to test McCloud’s definition. If the results on that paper are promising, I encourage students to further develop their topics into research projects that take part in the great debate that McCloud proposes at the end of the essay (380).

Key terms: comics, form and content, sequential art
Bad Eyes

Erin McGraw

“Bad Eyes” is a personal narrative rather than an argument. It can be used to help students produce their own personal essays or to demonstrate the ways that personal events and observations can foster a reflective mode that is important for writing. My own preference is to break down the distinctions between the personal essay and the academic essay and to focus instead on the advantages that can come from at least occasional use of the informal, engaging voice of essays like this one. Narrative, dialogue, and reflective musings are not appropriate to all kinds of writing, of course, but the variety and possibilities of these modes can open up the writing of sometime-reticent students.

Students will have no trouble reading McGraw’s story, but they may have questions about the value or relevance of the piece. Here, then, is another opportunity to remind students that writing is always an act of communication. Challenge them to come up with ways they can learn from the vicarious experience of acute myopia that McGraw provides. What might she be trying to say about her experience? How might her example translate into lessons for her readers? You might ask students to produce a brief essay modeled on McGraw’s but using an experience or situation that is unique to them. Can they make that experience or situation valuable to a reader of their work? What is required to make this happen?

Vision, the topic of McGraw’s piece, is, in the broadest sense, the topic of many of the essays in Making Sense. McGraw admits from her very first line that “the subject [of vision] veers almost uncontrollably toward metaphor.” At one point, despite her promise to “take it literally,” she alludes directly to the omnipresence of this metaphor: “I couldn’t make sense of the ruin [of my marriage], or understand why it had happened. I couldn’t see” (390). In this movement toward metaphor, McGraw subtly illustrates just why personal narrative is compelling: the vicarious experience of reading is, in essence, metaphorical because it asks us to compare two unlike things, our world and the writer’s world, and to find parallels. McGraw’s bad eyes actually stand in for anyone who refuses to (or cannot) see.

You might ask students to choose a moment in the text that initiates a change in McGraw’s life (her sister’s warning that she must take precautions, her biology teacher’s curt analysis of her limitations, her examination of the neighbor’s blue house, or her therapist’s advice to pay attention are some examples) and write about the consequences of this moment. How does McGraw narrow down a lifetime of experience into a few pages of text?

Dillard’s piece has a less personal (but no less effective) examination of blindness and perception, and Percy’s key examples all center on the limitations our minds put on what we can see. Both essays provide fruitful comparisons with McGraw’s.

Key terms: metaphor, vision, myopia, sight
From the Outside, In

Barbara Mellix

“From the Outside, In,” Mellix’s narrative of her own experiences as a student learning to speak and write in the language of the school and the university, is a wonderful essay to begin the semester with. It provides a perfect opportunity to introduce the rhetorical terms—audience, argument, purpose, and persona—and to show how Mellix uses these concepts (if not these specific terms) to analyze her own speech and writing. She presents a variety of situations in which her desire to fit in with an audience different from and frequently more powerful than herself determines her choice of language. By comparing written language and its variant audiences with the “code-switching” characterizing her conversations with city relatives and her subsequent discussions of these conversations with her family, Mellix shows the connection between language and identity, between language and power. The proper English of the city relatives clearly makes Mellix’s family feel uncomfortable and inferior, while her family’s own black vernacular enables them to invert the situation and reassert their identity as a family with shared values.

It may be difficult for students to see the same kind of code-switching operating in the examples of her prose that Mellix presents for analysis. An extended discussion of the differences in tone, diction, and style may be needed. Also at issue is the difference between grammatically correct, error-free prose written from “outside” and the same prose animated by a sense of the self it embodies. This is a worthwhile point to make early and often both to your students and to your colleagues from other disciplines who frequently define good writing as an error-free surface.

Mellix’s distinction between pleasing herself and pleasing her teacher also provides a great opportunity to discuss your own expectations as a teacher and to work through how a writer might go about pleasing both her teacher and herself.

Similar issues of education and language choice arise in the four narratives analyzed by Martin et al. in “Scientific Literacy.” The scientists who lament the low level of scientific literacy are defining that literacy in terms of a particular language; what the narratives show is that often literacy is demonstrated by the switch from a distanced, formal language into one that is both more personal and more metaphorical. Julie English Early’s discussion of Mary Kingsley’s choice of a popular rather than a scientific mode of presentation can also be useful analyzed as an example of both code-switching and literacy.

Key terms: code-switching, doubleness
For Authors, Fragile Ideas Need Loving Every Day

Walter Mosley

Mosley’s short article, “For Authors, Fragile Ideas Need Loving Every Day,” is a great piece to use early in the semester if you are using journals in your course or if you just want to help students demystify writing as an art form. Many students believe that writing should be creative and that their voice is stifled by the format of first-year composition courses. Mosley is an excellent corrective to this attitude, showing that even professional writers understand writing as a process of drafting and revising.

Mosley’s essay can also be used to introduce or augment one the major themes of Making Sense, the never-ending competition between dreams and reality, the struggle of individual perception with and against convention and common sense. When Mosley writes, “Reality fights against your dreams, it tries to deny creation and change” (407), he joins Clifford Geertz, Jeanette Winterson, Yi-Fu Tuan, and many other Making Sense contributors in observing the frailty of innovation and the persistence of imagination.

The brevity of Mosley’s piece allows it to be read aloud in class, an activity that provides a collective auditory experience that often fosters a more direct, hands-on response. Students who feel lost or overwhelmed by longer readings may find in Mosley an opportunity to speak and write with more precision and more confidence. Subsequent assignments should be designed to extend and develop these moments of clarity by pairing Mosley with texts that provide a greater conceptual framework or an example that takes the discussion beyond the topic of creative writing.

Key terms: dreams, create, muse, necessity, reality, art
The Loss of the Creature

Walker Percy

I like to use the Percy essay fairly early in the semester, often as the first assigned reading, because it is reasonably engaging and accessible, yet it resists an easy “here’s his main point” summary. It is also particularly useful for teaching definition and directed summary, two skills I like to start work on early in the semester.

Percy’s key terms, the dialectic of sightseeing, symbolic complex, loss of sovereignty, experience package, cannot be defined using Webster’s. Instead, students learn to develop definitions for those terms by working from the context, from the explanations and examples provided by the essay. However, instead of focusing students immediately on the terms themselves, I often start off by asking them to work through Percy’s examples, both individually and in groups, to derive extended definitions of the key terms. This idea of using the examples, the stories a writer tells, the evidence he or she provides, to get at the main concepts seems to be a useful strategy for struggling readers in any case. Some of my students have difficulty distinguishing an example from a concept, so depending on the class, it might help to generate a list of Percy’s examples in class.

Once students have a handle on Percy’s key terms and have begun to develop working definitions for them, they are ready to write a rough draft in which they apply those key terms to examples from the essay and from their own experiences. Percy’s conceptual terms, once defined in context, are extremely portable; students can apply them analytically to almost any other reading in the collection, to their own experiences, and to outside research. A first assignment can demonstrate that portability by asking students to analyze an advertisement they have chosen.

One frustrating aspect of Percy’s essay can be his privileging of the always-unavailable authenticity of experience. Students can feel trapped or annoyed that their own experiences of Disneyland or the Grand Canyon are seemingly being dismissed as inevitably prepackaged. The combination of Percy with someone like Susan Willis can make them feel pushed into denying the relevance of that experience, so although those two essays seem to dovetail well, it can actually work better to sequence Percy with someone like Annie Dillard, who is so able to capture the authentic encounter with nature, with Witold Rybczynski, whose developing definition of rusticity allows for individual perception to convey authenticity, or with Jane Tompkins, who is trying to find a new way to experience Buffalo Bill. Any essay that gives students a way to challenge some of Percy’s claims or go beyond them can be useful. Percy is one of those great common denominator essays, though, in the sense that students can probably pair him with just about anyone.

Key terms: the dialectic of sightseeing, symbolic complex, loss of sovereignty, recovery, experience package, expert, planner, consumer, specimen
Designs for Escape

Witold Rybczynski

Rybczynski’s piece is briefer and more conversational than many of the pieces in Making Sense, and it can therefore serve as either a less daunting opening piece or as a breather placed between two longer pieces. “Designs for Escape” isn’t simple, however, and the narrative at its center gives it great flexibility for the composition classroom. Rybczynski is an expert, a professor of architecture, and so we might expect a more formal argument, but “Designs,” instead, shows Rybczynski caught between his role as expert and his role as friend. In advising his friends on their new house (or, as the case may be, listening to their plans), Rybczynski sees the component of psychology (or is it taste?) that operates in the decisions one makes in building a house. His friends Danièle and Luc have an idea about getting away from city life that informs their decisions, and Rybczynski, who has some different ideas, turns his attention to the imaginings that we have about comfort, rusticity, and urbanity when we dream of contentment. In turning his mind in this direction, Rybczynski reminds readers that the word design means much more to architects than the somewhat clinical aspects of planning and blueprinting. Architecture, from this angle, is indeed an art, an aesthetic activity.

You could have students extend this brief foray into architectural theory by asking them to find an image of (or plan for) a building or structure that, to them, suggests escape. Can they use Rybczynski’s comments to help them explain their example? While Rybczynski’s privileged circumstances can be off-putting to some students and instructors (Danièle and Luc are building a second house), just about everybody will admit to imagining a dream house or an ideal setting for their lives. I think it is best, then, to have students extend the imaginative parts of this piece by doing their own imagining (or at least looking for a cultural reference to “getting away from it all”). Having them then examine their imaginings in a more analytical mode can foster some wonderful dialectical interplay between the artist and the expert within them.

Any of the pieces in Making Sense that draw on imagination (and there are a lot of them) can be productively connected to “Designs for Escape.” Yi-Fu Tuan’s piece, for example, resembles Rybczynski’s in many ways but adds much more history and example (at the expense of personal narrative). For a more directed assignment, you could ask students to examine Susan Willis’s account of Disney World as a kind of collective getaway.

Key terms: design, aesthetic, escape, getting away from it all, fantasy
Aerobic Sisyphus and the Suburbanized Psyche

Rebecca Solnit

Rebecca Solnit makes some strong claims about a number of things that she connects to “an ancient and profound relationship between body, world, and imagination” (435). She discusses suburban space, something she refers to as disembodiment, walking, and physical exercise machines. Specifically, Solnit’s piece makes a series of links between things that we don’t normally connect and, in doing so, marks out a suggestive argument about how even our most routine and seemingly ordinary activities can reveal significant parts of our ideological makeup. In essence, Solnit introduces students to the practice of theorizing our everyday experience.

Solnit’s statement, “I do not mean to denigrate the users of gyms . . . only to remark on their [the gyms’] strangeness” (446) is a key to understanding her authorial stance. When I teach this piece, I find it useful to de-emphasize Solnit’s sometimes pointed criticism and to withhold judgment by drawing students’ attention to this line. I ask them to “remark on the strangeness” of the things they see around them. Because, broadly speaking, all academic writing is nothing more than remarking on strangeness, asking students to engage in a similar process of observation can help them to become comfortable with the role of analyst.

I have found this exercise most useful when I focus on technological innovations such as airplane travel, cell phones, debit cards, distance learning, working out of the home, websites, and even eyeglasses. In papers that consider the strangeness of these developments, students are asked to recognize and explore the ways that these once new technologies became accepted. How did these modifications of time and space create subtle (and perhaps unexpected) changes in the thinking and living of the people in the culture? What are the consequences of technological development?

Solnit essentially makes a political argument against a suburbanized psyche, a state of mind that she argues increasingly values private ownership of property and neglects public spaces. In asking students to write about public spaces that have been important to them, I encourage them to define public and to suggest possible ways to expand public life or public culture. But I also welcome arguments that defend privacy and private space.

Solnit’s piece connects well with Susan Willis’s argument that the private state of Disney World curtails free play or movement, and certainly Walker Percy’s paean to sovereignty shares a similar spirit (as does Jeanette Winterson attack on money culture). But it’s not always best to rely on an easy consensus. Essays such as those by Michio Kaku and Zita Ingham can present obstacles to glib pronouncements against capitalism by demonstrating the complexity of the relationship between private and public when a community (or, in Kaku’s case, a global culture) acts to define and limit possibilities.

Key terms: privatization, disembodiment, urbanity, prosthetic, space, aerobic sisyphus
I Stand Here Writing

Nancy Sommers

This essay can be particularly useful in encouraging students to understand and practice synthesis, to combine often diverse readings into a meaningful whole. Students sometimes struggle with the idea that they are creating meaningful relationships between readings through comparison and contrast or by applying the critical terms from one essay to the examples of another essay. When asked to connect, they sometimes look for the one correct link that may be hidden there, or they arbitrarily splice decontextualized fragments from two or three essays into nonfunctioning relations. Because Sommers blithely gathers and combines materials from so many sources, including her own experiences and those of her family, readings (Henry James, Emerson), and student papers, this essay can free students to try some creative synthesis of their own.

On the balance side, if students use Sommers as a model, they may produce some fairly random-seeming relationships and essays in which various examples are strung together within a personal narrative structure. Because of this, I emphasize logical structure in the reading assignments for this essay. For instance, I will ask student groups to list three of Sommers’s examples, explain the point Sommers is making in each of those examples, and then analyze how each of those examples relates to the others. In a follow-up exercise, I ask students to diagram Sommers’s main argument and show how each point in the essay links to that argument. I also like to use Sommers later in the semester, so that students already have some experience structuring, building context, and following through on their connections to make a point. At that point, students also have a broader field of assigned readings through which to form relationships. Because this essay is fairly short and accessible, it can be a break from or a way to return to a longer, more difficult essay.

I think Sommers works well with Barbara Mellix because the seeming similarity of these two essays in content—two writers discussing the evolution of identity in relation to academia—soon gives way to some fascinating contrasts in their approaches and assumptions about audience and culture. Sequenced with Walker Percy’s piece, these two essays can produce good analyses of education and the learning process. (Here, I have students use Percy’s terms to analyze Sommers in comparison to Mellix.) Sommers’s concept of writing as “the radical loss of certainty” can also be used to analyze Jane Tompkins’s structural process in “At the Buffalo Bill Museum” compared to Walter Mosley’s description of the writing process.

Key terms: radical loss of certainty
The Sontag essay appears to be on the long, dense, and allusive side, and for that reason it can seem too difficult to assign to struggling first-year students. However, it is actually a tremendous essay for first-year students because it helps to teach the strategy that one can understand and make use of part of an essay without necessarily coming to grips with the whole. I like to teach Sontag early enough in the semester so that students have a chance to return to this essay in a later paper; it is often in the return to Sontag rather than in the initial reading that they begin to understand and work with the piece as a whole.

For the initial assignments, I encourage students to jump into a piece of the essay, to tackle one of Sontag’s claims, and to test it using actual photographs. By making sense of parts of the essay on their own and in groups, students can gradually piece together its larger intent. Sontag’s essay provides great material for this kind of approach because she makes such strong claims: “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like power” (463). I often ask students initially just to list some of those claims: for example, I might ask them to work in pairs to list five ways in which photographs function according to Sontag. Then we look at actual photographs to see which functions are indicated in different kinds of images, compositions, and photo groupings. For this exercise, in addition to the photographs included in the anthology, I often bring additional photograph books to class, and I encourage students to bring in groupings of photographs, including family or vacation photos. In the computer lab we can also access the wealth of images available on the Internet, including the Library of Congress’s American Memory project <http://memory.loc.gov/amhome.html> and free access to photograph archives provided by many of the major museums (not to mention the photo groupings posted on individual web pages). Considering the changes in technology since Sontag wrote this essay in 1977, we can also use this opportunity to discuss new functions that have emerged for photography and add them to the list.

This process is liberating in several ways. First, it can be extremely beneficial for writers new to college work, who are used to reading to find the one right answer or to gather data for a test, rather than reading to find a jumping-off point for their own ideas. Second, it allows for some variety and range of interests in the papers, so that students do not feel that they are being tracked into a cookie-cutter style of paper production. The analysis of Sontag using photographs they have collected helps to remind students that they too have an interpretive task that involves a certain amount of creativity and artistry. For this reason, Sontag can work well as the basis for the second or third paper as a more open-ended follow-up to the earlier, more directed assignments. However, one of the difficulties with using Sontag in this way is that students lose a sense of context; they begin to throw her claims in piece-meal without analyzing how any one claim connects to another. This can encourage a kind of interpretive relativism—any reading is okay because it represents someone’s perspective. I try to counter this by having students test their photographic examples against the evidence that Sontag provides, by asking them to demonstrate using the evidence how and why a particular photograph supports or contradicts Sontag’s claims. An initial sequence of Sontag paired with an essay with a clearer conceptual focus, like the essays by Walker Percy, John Berger, or Sherry Turkle, can also help to balance this effect because students will have an easier time grounding the key terms from the familiar essay in the context of the writer’s overall argument. I also allow students a little leeway on the first efforts with Sontag and emphasize working with context and argument when we return to the essay.
later in the semester. If their initial experience of working with her is playful and open-ended, they seem to welcome the return and learn from it.

**Key terms:** evidence, democratize, power, aggression, tourism, voyeurism, nonintervention, nostalgia, art, ways of seeing
“Personality” and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture

Warren I. Susman

“‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture” examines the development of consciousness of the self by looking at the shift from the culture of character in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the culture of personality that Susman argues rules today. Because Susman’s essay is historical, some students will find it dry and even, perhaps, boring. It might be best to establish an in-class dialogue on character and personality before moving on to Susman’s thesis. Defining these words in students’ terms and generating examples and comparisons will create a context for Susman’s analysis.

Susman’s essay can be usefully amplified by pairing it with popular culture texts or with literary texts. For example, you might pair Susman’s essay with the F. Scott Fitzgerald short story, “Babylon Revisited,” in which 1930s forlorn protagonist Charlie Wales wishes to return to the past when one put one’s trust in character. Students who have read Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby in high school may also see in the novel’s eponymous hero an example of the culture of personality. Students will undoubtedly have other examples to illustrate the culture of character and the culture of personality.

Susman’s historical references and his use of abstractions such as “the development of consciousness” or “vision of the self” will present some initial problems for student readers. As with many of the longer readings in Making Sense, students need to be warned not to give in to frustration when they fail to understand every reference. I use Susman and other difficult essays as an opportunity to argue for recursive reading. To support that idea, I ask students to make notes in their journals about what they didn’t understand on first reading and then to read the text a second time and revisit their notes to see their own progress in understanding.

You can also use journal writing to help students engage with Susman’s discussions of consumerism or to speculate on whether or not the following quotation is still applicable: “We live now constantly in a crowd; how can we distinguish ourselves from others in that crowd?” (485). It is also a good idea to ask students to find information about some of the people and historical events Susman references. For example, asking students to use the Internet or library to identify Freud, Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, and Wilhelm Reich can help them to make sense of Susman’s last paragraph.

In terms of essay assignments, you might ask students to write about the relationship they see between audience and the kinds of evidence that Susman uses to construct his argument. I ask the students to identify the audience that they see Susman writing for and then discuss how his essay would change if he were instead writing for the students.

Susman’s text also lends itself to research papers. Students can extend and complicate Susman’s exploration of the “nature of cultural development” (491) by searching for definitions of their contemporary culture. Is it something new? Is it still a culture of personality? Is it a culture of character? How is their culture different from the predominant culture Susman sees at the writing of his essay? Such questions can generate exciting papers for students.

Key terms: cultural development, consciousness, the self, culture of character, culture of personality, performing self
At the Buffalo Bill Museum, June 1988

Jane Tompkins

“At the Buffalo Bill Museum, June 1988” is a good essay to pair with Gloria Anzaldúa’s “Chicana Artists: Exploring Nepantla, el Lugar de la Frontera” because both texts focus on each author’s experience at a museum. Whereas Anzaldúa’s tone will strike many students as being confrontational, Tompkins’s tone is much less polemical. Both essays allow students to explore cultures and to complicate, perhaps, their notions of civilization.

It is useful to talk to students about how Tompkins’s essay is an example of metacriticism. In a parallel to reader–response criticism, Tompkins reflects on her own responses to what she sees in the museum. The visual images in the text allow students to compare their own interpretations to those of Tompkins. Students can look for opportunities to complicate Tompkins’s interpretations of paintings by Frederic Remington by finding other artwork by Remington either on the Internet or in their library. As Tompkins suggests, many of Remington’s paintings or sketches assert a kind of narrative of the West. Students with a flair for story telling might suggest ways to read this new example. The discussion or writing that follows can then be compared to (or filtered through) Tompkins’s approach. The metacriticism will likely be more visible now.

Some readers find Tompkins’s discussion of her experience in the Plains Indian Museum deeply problematic. According to Tompkins, the Museum “was a terrible letdown” (504) compared to the Buffalo Bill Museum, which she describes as “a wonderful array of textures, colors, shapes, sizes, forms” (501). Tompkins says that in the Plains Indian Museum the “objects on display, most of them behind glass, seemed paltry and insignificant. They lacked visual presence. The bits of leather and sticks of wood triggered no fantasies in me” (504). Many readers may be upset with Tompkins’s characterization of her interpretation of Plains Indian artifacts. Tompkins’s problem, she says, is that she could not identify with the exhibits; in her own words, “these artifacts, lifeless and shrunk, spoke to me of nothing I could understand” (505). In other words, the Plains Indian Museum did not make sense to Tompkins. Asking students to find the Plains Indian web site or similar sites can enable them to compare their own reactions to Indian artifacts to Tompkins’s reaction. Such a comparison can be the basis for a lively essay.

Another fruitful approach to writing about Tompkins’s essay is to compare her experience in the Plains Indian Museum to Walker Percy’s discussion of salvaging experience, wresting it from what he calls packaging and preformed symbolic complexes. Students might write about how Percy would likely advise Tompkins to view artifacts in the Buffalo Bill Museum and the Plains Indian Museum.

Asking students to outline Tompkins’s essay is a good exercise, because her text moves in many different directions. Particularly, students will likely grapple with the last third of her essay, with questions Tompkins raises such as “Must we throw out all the wonderful qualities that Cody had, the spirit of hope and emulation that he aroused in millions of people, because of the terrible judgment history has passed on the epoch of which he was part?” (512). Thinking and writing about such a question can also be a prelude to research topics that explore Buffalo Bill, Remington, iconography of the West, and the image of Native Americans in popular culture.

Key terms: museums, the West, history, Frederic Remington, secular messiah, genocide
Science in an Old Testament Style

Christopher P. Toumey

Christopher Toumey’s piece comes from the introduction to his book, *Conjuring Science*. The selection in *Making Sense* reads like an introduction and is one of the most easily digested pieces in the book. It can therefore play a couple of roles in a composition class. The first such role would be as a starter, a short reading assignment that asks to be amplified by class discussion and short writing assignments. Because Toumey relies on some bold examples and a few suggestive comments, it can be useful to have students generate their own examples of the phenomena he describes or to look more carefully at his argument, focusing on the implications and the consequences of the position he sketches out. In either case, students should be encouraged to test Toumey’s claims by exploring how well they work in contexts beyond those set up by him.

A second role the text can have is to complicate a previous assignment or discussion that the class has had on another *Making Sense* selection, particularly one that concerns scientific or technological practices. For example, Toumey can open up the parts of Stephen Jay Gould’s essay that seem stubbornly fixed into black-and-white ethical sides. How does the tobacco industry, in this example, use science to quell public opposition or doubt about their products? Are scientists themselves sometimes seduced by the supposed authority of their discipline? You will probably want to establish what Toumey means by Old Testament style before asking these questions. With discussion or brief writing assignments, you may find the connection Toumey makes between religion and science to be a strong point of entry for students. Many will find this an unexpected connection and one that, therefore, requires commentary.

Toumey’s provocative idea of conjuring science suggests that science is invoked by nonscientists as an authoritative discourse that cannot be challenged. This abdication of the responsibility of critical inquiry represents a threat to democracy. If you have students look at issues of authority, they can find Toumey applicable to any of the *Making Sense* selections that question assumptions. Walker Percy’s experts come to mind, as do Haunani-Kay Trask’s historians. Clifford Geertz’s critique of common sense reminds us that there are traditions of inherited but unquestioned assumptions in every culture. Even Scott McCloud’s defense of comics shares with Toumey a hope that people will question the received wisdom of their society.

**Key terms:** plenary, Old Testament style, conjuring, authority, objectivity
From a Native Daughter

Haunani-Kay Trask

Trask’s essay examines the question of who has the necessary understanding and authority to write the history of Hawai’i. Trask begins her first paragraph with a friendly greeting in English and Hawai’ian, but she quickly makes a provocative statement in her second paragraph: “I have lived all my life under the power of the United States. My native country, Hawai’i, is owned by the United States” (524). My experience has been that students know next to nothing about Hawai’ian history or about how the state became one of the United States. When I assign the essay, I also assign short Internet/library research projects for my students. I ask them to find out when Hawaii became a state and to find out a few facts about Hawai’i before it became a state. I ask the students to compare what they have learned through their initial research with what Trask presents about Hawai’i in her essay.

One issue worth exploring is the paradigm shift with respect to historical evidence that Trask says is necessary for Westerners to begin to be able to have an accurate understanding of Hawai’ian history. I ask my students to write in class about what they think Trask means when she says that she could only know Hawai’ian history by putting away history books. After the students write about the prompt, we discuss what counts as historical evidence: documents, eye-witness accounts, videotape and film, photographs, narratives, etc. Why do some historians see songs and stories passed down orally as suspect evidence? How can Trask reject the so-called facts of traditional Western scholarship?

Trask’s use of English and Hawai’ian does not present interpretive problems in the same way as Gloria Anzaldúa’s use of Spanish and English in “Chicana Artists: Exploring Nepantla, el Lugar de la Frontera” (47–56), but I have had good luck asking students to write papers that compare Trask’s and Anzaldúa’s use of bilingual texts. Many students come to see both texts as essays that explore how to make sense of misunderstandings. Both texts are interpretations of interpretation, and students may make sense of Trask’s position by seeing her through some of Anzaldúa’s key terms such as nepantla, which Anzaldúa describes as a liminal space. Students can also make connections between both essays by working from Trask’s contention that historians can only make sense of Hawai’ian history if they learn the Hawai’ian language, just as an American historian specializing in the history of France would have to learn French. Both Trask and Anzaldúa emphasize ways that a person’s identity is bound up in his or her main language. An interesting paper could also focus on this question of language by comparing Trask and/or Anzaldúa with Barbara Mellich’s essay, “From Outside, In” (394–403).

Instructors can also productively approach Trask’s essay by discussing the division she describes between her private, familial orientation towards Hawai’ian history, and her public, educational orientation that taught her a very different outlook on her heritage. While her parents would celebrate the past through stories about ancestors, her Catholic and Protestant teachers denigrated Hawai’ians as pagans and savages. Exploring this dichotomy helps students to think about how history often comes to us as a stitching together of assumptions about people and events. Assignments that tend toward this direction might contribute to a sequence focused on how convention is broken or changed. Scott DeVeaux, Julie English Early, and Scott McCloud all depict individuals (Coleman Hawkins, Mary Kingsley, and McCloud himself) who resist the conventional wisdom and critique the orthodoxy of the authorities. Walker Percy and Sherry Turkle, in very different ways, celebrate the contrarian spirit and the will to see things without relying on experts and histories.
Key terms: oral history, colonialism, genealogy, imperialism
Earth: Nature and Culture

Yi-Fu Tuan

Yi-Fu Tuan's piece begins with a fascinating definition of culture as a means for escaping our lives. For Tuan, humans distinguish themselves from animals by their inability to accept life as they know it. This escapist tendency, however, isn’t as bad as it sounds. Actually, Tuan finds much to recommend in humans’ unceasing attempts to escape their realities. As a geographer, Tuan’s interest is, generally, with the migration patterns of people, but he quickly broadens his investigation to include all forms of migration, even daydreams and fantasies. For Tuan, change is inevitable, and escapism is, in part, a method for imagining the future.

It’s easy for students to become lost in the folds of Tuan’s argument, and they can have trouble with his big picture because of the many subtle shifts in focus throughout. In order to lessen this confusion, I usually take some control over the reading assignment, asking them to read only a part of the complete piece per class period and to focus on specific passages or key questions that we’ve outlined before. With some preparation and guidance from you, students will become more comfortable with Tuan, and the benefits of the piece will really begin to emerge.

Some of these benefits include realizing that all writing needn’t have crystal clear argument and airtight evidence. Tuan’s piece is more of a musing than an interrogation, and his relaxed style makes its points in an assortment of ways including paradox and, occasionally, humor. While I wouldn’t begin the semester with Tuan, his example could be a blessing to students who, late in the semester, are feeling that their writing is becoming too linear or obvious or mechanical.

Tuan links well with Rybczynski’s examination of escape and Willis’s treatment of escape and fantasy at Disney World, but there are some less obvious connections that will work as well. You might, for example, read McCloud’s defense of comics and consider the use we make of culture as a kind of escape. Diamond, too, can be framed by Tuan’s terms because both writers see desire for control as a key part of human motivation. What is technology but an escape into dreamed-of convenience? You could also look more closely at what Tuan says about nature. His contention that nature is really just another part of culture works well with Lewontin’s insistence that humans do not exist outside of nature.

Key terms: escape, nature, culture, nostalgia, middle landscapes
The Triumph of Tinkering

*Sherry Turkle*

Sherry Turkle’s piece works with any sequence that addresses technology, innovation, or personal style. Her excitement about the emerging creativity of technoculture acts as a useful antidote to pieces that emphasize the problems or dangers of technological development (such as those by Birkerts, Lasch, or Kaku). Specifically, Turkle introduces and praises the practice of bricolage, suggesting that computers have enabled a concrete manipulation of information, data, and images that fosters creativity, innovation, and personal involvement. I especially like her connecting of computers and musical instruments: “In the emerging culture of simulation, the computer is still a tool but less like a hammer and more like a harpsichord” (563).

In the course of our work with Turkle, I will ask students to focus on the way that she makes her case. With some gentle prompting, students will see that Turkle primarily makes her appeal based on anecdotes and stories before progressing to more official or scholarly sources. That is, Turkle begins by telling about her own experience and the experiences of people she knows. She then turns to reputable sources such as Claude Levi-Strauss and Jean Piaget to place her work in the context of other published work. But she does not fully agree with these sources; instead she suggests that both scholars (notably men) back down from the full implications of their discoveries. Turkle’s final sources—Carol Gilligan and Evelyn Fox Keller—provide her with theories of gendered behavior that suggest just why these older, male sources may be limited. In her use of these sources, Turkle shows that a writer must have a flexible relationship to the material she is discussing and must be willing to explore the consequences of the arguments she cites. The final section of the piece ties up the various parts and delivers the clearest distillation of Turkle’s idea. The logic of the argument can be followed in student papers as well. I will often ask them to proceed from a specific example that they have experienced or are familiar with to an analysis of a source that can be related to this example. The resulting use of sources (often *Making Sense* pieces) can give them practice using framing ideas.

Turkle’s range of sources—an anthropologist, two psychologists, and a historian of science, among others—points to the wide applicability of the piece. While in some sense this is a piece about computers, in another sense computers are only an example of a much larger cultural phenomenon. I have had students write about music, cooking, basketball, and medicine as places where tinkering is a productive way of operating.

**Key terms:** bricolage, tinkering, soft mastery, structured approach, contextual reasoning, simulation
The Ethnic Scarring of American Whiteness

Patricia J. Williams

In “The Ethnic Scarring of American Whiteness,” Patricia Williams examines issues that often polarize people in the United States: the benefits versus the costs of assimilation, questions about class attitudes, identity politics, criticisms about the privileged positions of white males, stereotyping poor whites, and the consubstantiality of poor whites and many African-Americans. There are so many issues that students can explore through writing about Williams’s essay. Students need, however, to work carefully through her use of abstractions. I suggest that you ask your students to work in groups to discuss and make sense of her use of the term jeremiad and the levels of complexity in her use of the term whiteness. Like many of the essays in Making Sense, “The Ethnic Scarring of Whiteness” employs language that may pose some problems for some students: e.g., voyeuristic condescension (573) and identity politics (569). I encourage my students to identify words or phrases that they are unsure of, to look them up in a dictionary, and to ask about them in class. Students increase their understanding of the richness of Williams’s essay as they reread it, as they talk about it together in class, and as they write about it.

In addition to the words that students may not recognize, there are some references to people and events that they may not know much about, such as Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding. Asking students to use newspaper accounts and Internet sources to piece together the Kerrigan-Harding Olympic saga is a good research exercise and an opportunity to work on analyzing the objectivity of sources.

The research aspect of Williams’s essay can be expanded by asking students to search for other examples of how different media perpetuate the class-bias that Williams identifies. Such research can help students analyze why it might make sense, as Williams suggests, that lower-class whites can be decoded as socially black (574). Such provocative analysis may make some students uncomfortable, but I remind my students that knowledge is not something that is only supposed to make them feel good.

First generation college students are likely to have a variety of reactions to Williams’s essays. Some will agree with her that the costs of assimilation are often too high; others will want to argue that college should be a profound experience, one that necessarily changes you in fundamental ways. Ask students to write in journals or in class about Williams’s discussion of her neighbor in Boston who went to college. Do they know anyone like the neighbor Williams describes? Do they agree with Williams’s censure of the neighbor, or do they feel sympathy for the young woman?

Sequencing Williams’s essay with Nancy Sommers’s “I Stand Here Writing” can be quite productive. Ask students to examine how immigrant experience is explored in each text. Or, from a different angle, ask students to identify what each writer is trying to make sense of and then to compare their methods. Both Sommers and Williams use personal experience to construct their arguments. Students might explore the benefits of such approaches. What does each writer gain?

You could take quite a different tack by asking students to read Williams’s essay alongside Richard C. Lewontin’s “Science as Social Action” (326–338). At first glance, the essays seem quite disparate. Students will undoubtedly be puzzled by the pairing. Not to worry. Ask students to explore relationships between class and social action. In such an assignment students might link some aspects of Lewontin’s discussion of environment and Williams’s discussion of media representations of working-class environments in her essay. In what ways has or might ethnic scarring undercut social action? Is science divorced from the issues of ethnicity and class that interest Williams?
Students can also approach Williams’s essay by examining her interpretations as an effort to salvage the creature, to borrow a metaphor from Percy’s “The Loss of the Creature.” In other words, Williams’s discussion of how she started to “listen much more closely for the ways in which poor whites are depicted in insulting and dehumanizing ways by mainstream media” (573) suggests that she made a conscious effort to try to think outside of the box—she rejected what Percy calls preformed symbolic complexes and, instead, sought to make sense of an issue from an alternative perspective. Thinking about Williams’s focus on poor whites in terms of some of Percy’s key ideas has the added benefit of enabling students also to think about Percy’s arguments in terms of class. Does a perspective that emphasizes class allow students to identify limitations in Percy’s approach? Is there a connection between the Percy’s creature and the poor whites and immigrants that interest Williams?

**Key terms:** identity politics, jeremiad, romanticized racism, voyeuristic condescension, process of marking
Disney World: Public Use/Private State

Susan Willis

Willis’s essay offers a great example of the use of key terms to construct an argument. An exercise asking students to list all the experiences that the essay associates with free and imaginative spontaneity or play as opposed to all the experiences associated with programmed or commodified amusement will help them to unpack the essential moves of the essay. These oppositional terms are also highly portable; having students work with definitions and apply these terms to examples from other essays or from their own experiences (as question 6 and 8 suggest, for instance) can be very productive. Examples drawn from students’ own experiences can also help them to counter Willis’s claims, to disagree or provide alternate explanations of the phenomena she describes. This can provide a welcome sense of relief to students who sometimes feel pushed toward adopting Willis’s anti consumerist attitude. Willis’s analysis of Disney’s construction of the family and of the negative consumer, as well as its dread of behind-the-scenes exposure, offers useful models of cultural critique that can be applied to advertisements and other commodified amusements.

Although Willis’s analysis of Disney World is, in this sense, a perfect fit with an essay like Walker Percy’s “The Loss of the Creature,” the combination may emphasize too strongly the pose of radical skepticism that is the final goal of this kind of critique. A better pairing might be with Sherry Turkle’s “The Triumph of Tinkering,” which allows students to complicate the dichotomy between programmed amusement and free play that Willis sets up. Rebecca Solnit’s work on walking and suburbanized landscapes or Witold Rybczynski’s understanding of imagination and architecture also provide ways for students to examine Disney World’s constructed landscapes in two alternative contexts. However, Willis’s essay can also be effectively paired with other scholarly critiques. Sequencing this essay with Christopher Lasch or Jeannette Winterson might allow students to examine the effects of commodification and the loss of public debate in complex and productive ways. In turn, Willis’s discussion of the commodification of memory through photography offers a great comparison to Sontag’s work on the effects of photography. Her well-defined terms make this an extremely flexible essay, which can be used as the first reading of a semester or in a later sequence.

Key terms: free play vs. commodified amusement, spontaneity vs. programming, family
Imagination and Reality

Jeanette Winterson

Winterson’s piece is truly an essay—a literary, ruminative piece of writing intended to collapse and defy received ideas. Like other classic essays collected in those Best Essays books or published in literary journals, Winterson’s selection finds imaginative, creative links between seemingly unrelated topics and reveals hidden webs of meaning in unexpected corners. Indeed, the style of Winterson’s inquiry—her flexing of the imaginative muscle of language—reinforces the content of her piece by demonstrating her basic lesson that we must use our imagination lest we surrender it. “Imagination and Reality” is an idiosyncratic tour de force and a spirited example of the essay as a form of creative nonfiction.

I love the energy and force of Winterson’s writing, and students usually react strongly to her pleas for action. But Winterson’s sometimes glib pronouncements don’t always add up to a comprehensive argument. One of the first tasks for a class reading Winterson is to find ways to define, explain, and apply Winterson’s message. There will usually be some dispute over just what she means. Some students, too, will recognize her romantic streak and, depending on their own world view, will see her as either unrealistic or, conversely, visionary. This debate is, of course, the heart of the piece as Winterson draws us into the classic dispute over what is real: does reality consist of the visible, tangible, everyday world around us (the so-called real world) or is reality what exists beyond and in spite of the artificial and mundane trappings of our lives?

Yi-Fu Tuan’s piece actually develops this idea in some detail, and several of the escape pieces in Making Sense—Willis or Rybczynski, for two—offer a variety of scenarios and test cases for Winterson’s message. There are also many pieces that feature creativity in a more general way—DeVeaux, Ellison, Frye, McCloud, and Turkle among others. You might, for example, ask how well Winterson’s idea of the imaginative mind giber with Ellison’s account in "The Little Man of Chehaw Station." Like Winterson, Walter Mosley is a novelist who fears the insinuation of reality into his work. Does he share the same conclusions as Winterson?

Other successful sequences have linked Winterson to arguments about technological innovation and development. In this context, Diamond, Kuhn, and Turkle are all, like Winterson, looking at the arts of change. Even Troumey’s examination of how portrayals of science can sway public opinion depends on a juxtaposition of imagination and reality.

Because of its highly unorthodox style, "Imagination and Reality" may not be every teacher’s idea of the model essay, but it surely presents a site for a discussion of convention. And it doesn’t hurt to have students thinking about what writing traditionally called creative writing has in common with their own papers.

Key terms: imagination, reality, real, money culture