

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Other Words*, an anthology of contemporary nonfiction prose in English. Collected here are 32 essays by some of the most talented writers of our time, culled from some of the best journals, magazines, books, and websites available, and treating some of the most important issues we face, both as individuals and as a society.

Although this book should appeal to all kinds of readers, it was designed primarily for students in college writing courses, especially first-year students. If that's you, we think you'll find here an instant companion for the start of your new life; a guide to help you join new conversations, confront new challenges, and try on new selves; a partner in this new phase of your education. You've embarked on a difficult, exciting journey, and we're proud to accompany you – at least for part of the way!

Some of the writing collected here may strike you, at first, as difficult or strange. A few of the pieces will seem almost unbearably sad or intense. Others you'll find sweet, informative, funny. Some you will immediately love; some you will feel more conflicted about; many will only grow on you over time. But all of them, we believe, are *alive*, each in its own way; and all will reward your attention. Each is the product of writerly skills that come from years of practice and hard work, from the deep and difficult effort of trying to represent a world, or worlds, in language; and each is also the product of what might be called “public desire,” the longing to share one's experiences and concerns with strangers. *Reading* these essays will require work as well, but we think the effort will be worthwhile. In most cases, we think, it won't feel like effort at all.

The essays were also chosen because they can give you interesting things to think and talk about as you start this new phase of your life; because they can model for you new ways of using language that you can emulate in your own writing; and because they can provoke you to respond in writing about your own ideas and experiences. They can also help build community in your classroom by centering discussion among you and your peers; and, since students in other classes will likely be reading and talking about the same essays, we think they can help build community on your campus more generally.

Perhaps above all, we believe that reading these essays will broaden and enrich your life by giving you new words, new ideas, and new lives to think, talk, and write about. That's what's behind our title, *Other Words*, which we mean to suggest several things at once: the different perspectives represented by these diverse authors (*others' words*); the multiple ways manifest here to talk about the “same” phenomena (*in other words . . .*); and the wholly different kinds of experience opened up by these very different pieces (each one another *world* entire).

The subtitle is multi-voiced too: this is *a writer's reader*; but then again, so are you.

On writing

If we have initially positioned you here as a *reader*, it's your development as a *writer* that this anthology really aims for; it's *your* texts that it's designed to support, and *your* writing skills that it's meant to practice. And that's as it should be, given the kind of course you're in and the nature of literacy in our time. Writing today is more complex, and more consequential, than ever. It's also more self-sponsored, more collaborative, more mediated, more malleable – in short, more *complicated* – even as it's also, in many ways, more fun. Writing has become *the* intellectual skill of our society.

Some observers even claim that we are witnessing, for the first time in history, the rise of a mass *writing* public, something qualitatively different from the mass *reading* publics of the past. From adolescence on, nearly everyone in our society now “texts,” and does so almost constantly. There are now more occasions to write, more media to write with, more audiences to write for, more styles and venues to write in, more topics to write about, more opportunities to reflect on writing, than ever before. And it’s not just our personal lives that are increasingly written: our economic, political, professional, and cultural worlds are now largely structured around written texts which ordinary people produce as well as consume. It is not too much of a stretch to say that the ability to make and circulate textual meaning (increasingly multi-authored, multi-media, and multi-lingual) is now one of the hallmarks of human *being*.

Unfortunately, we still often learn (both in school and out) that writing is simple, secondary, and subsequent; that it is little more than the deployment of graphic signs (one set, singular and fixed, per “language”) for the purpose of visually representing one’s thoughts and feelings; and that it is a basic skill that is, or should be, acquired once and for all early in one’s education. From this point of view, writing is a rule-governed process, the results of which can be readily assessed by stable, determinate, formal criteria.

We know instinctively, of course, that this is untrue – or, at the very least, partial. Writing is enormously complex even for fluent writers – perhaps especially for fluent writers! It turns out that it is related to speech and thought but not reducible to them, that it has its own independent powers and pitfalls, and that it is a radically plastic phenomenon, capable of being used in a nearly infinite number of ways and situations for an almost impossibly wide range of purposes.

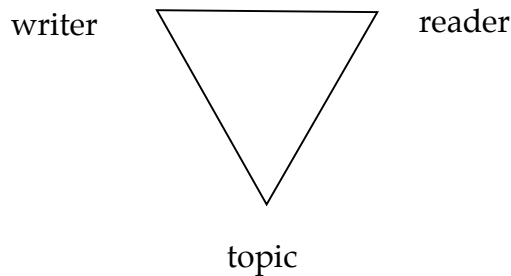
Think, for example, about the many kinds of writing *you* do every day, how different each is from the other, what complex factors are involved in that activity, and yet how useful, even pleasurable, it all is for you. Today, you may well have written a to-do list; a text message; a comment on a blog; an email or instant message; a wall post on Facebook; an e-vite for a party. Yesterday, or last year, you were likely writing personal statements for college applications, movie reviews for your school newspaper, poems for people you liked or loved, résumés and cover letters for jobs you wanted, song lyrics for your band, driving directions to your house, labels for your scrapbook, thank you notes to relatives, entries in your journal or diary. And then there’s all the writing you do for school: from lecture notes to lab reports, research papers to essay exams, summaries and analyses to weekly response papers.

Now think about the wide range of purposes you accomplish with these texts, which you use to greet, to share, to respond, to request, to remind, to purchase, to collect, to sell, to impose, to plan, to analyze, to judge, to bind, to loose, to record, to fix, to complain, to report, to advertise, to plead, to honor, to propose, to apply, to recommend, to apologize, to promise, to borrow, to decline, to accept, to wonder, to dream, to flirt, to argue, to show off, to seduce, to demur, to grieve, to part. The list could go on indefinitely.

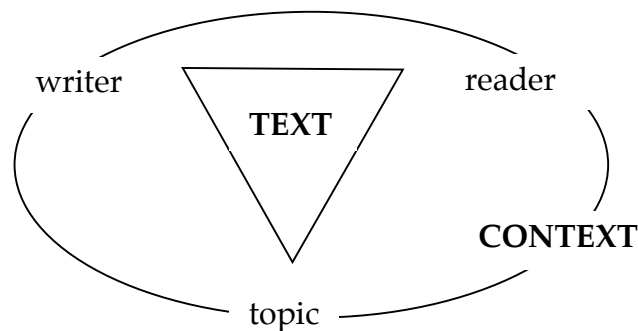
Finally, think about how you learned to accomplish through writing all these purposes: not by memorizing rules but by practicing the activity itself, in concrete situations, with other people, through trial and error, by observation and imitation, with feedback and response. The success of such writing was not measured by how few red marks you got from a teacher but by the extent to which you met your goals. It was successful if it was meaningful, effective, rewarding.

The fact is that in our society, ordinary people write all the time, using different resources and media to communicate with different audiences, in different languages and genres, for different reasons and goals. They know, instinctively, that writing is useful, that it's a way to make meaning for self and others, that it connects us to family, friends, acquaintances, and even self; but that it also allows us to converse with strangers, near and far, long gone and not yet born. They know that writing is multiple and contingent, dependent in each case on the writer's purposes, the expectations and needs of his or her audience, and the topics, problems, and subject matters they all (theoretically) share. In fact, each intersection of writer, reader, and topic is unique. An email message to a professor asking about tomorrow's homework assignment; a letter sent to an employer regarding a summer internship; an online profile posted to a social networking site – each of these texts asks you to represent yourself, your readers, and your topic in different ways; and the choices you make in those diverse situations can have important consequences for you and your world.

The drawing below, a version of what is often called “the rhetorical triangle,” is a common way to represent the key factors involved in writing.



The triangle is a useful reminder that writing is always ultimately about *people* (who occupy two of its three corners!), their purposes, expectations, and needs, as well as their joint situation in a world of (presumably) shared problems, histories, objects. If we add **TEXT** and **CONTEXT**, the device can help us see that writing is also extraordinarily complex, always dependent on the linguistic, discursive, and rhetorical resources available to participants and the situations in which they find themselves and which writing, in part, helps to bring about. Learning to write well is learning to make good choices given all these factors and variables.



The good news is that you're already familiar with most of this, you're already accomplished as a writer in many situations, you already produce different kinds of texts to achieve different purposes in your life. As Dr. Benjamin Spock used to tell new mothers in *Baby and Child Care*: "Relax. You know more than you think you do."

But if you're already fluent in some kinds of writing, you're embarking now on a journey in which text-making is about to become much more complex and its stakes, much higher: you'll now be writing to pursue such challenging purposes as knowledge creation, career advancement, organizational change, community development, and personal transformation. You'll be using writing for intellectual inquiry, social justice, and artistic discovery – to name just some of the more demanding purposes that writers pursue in college and beyond. And this will require you to stretch your rhetorical muscles in new ways. Even more daunting, you'll find yourself in a society that needs you to be extraordinarily *flexible* as a writer, to switch back and forth among *multiple* literacies, to write with and for very different kinds of audiences with sometimes conflicting expectations and needs, to write in a variety of genres, styles, dialects, and even languages. You'll need to write not just for friends and family but for clients and consumers, employers and employees, regulators and lawyers, fellow citizens and government officials, your neighbors and people far away, the knowledgeable and the less so, the powerful and the oppressed.

School, if it sometimes misrepresents what writing is and how people acquire skill in it, can be a good site for practicing these hard kinds of writing. Courses like first year composition and advanced writing in the disciplines or majors can embed literacy development in supportive communities of readers, writers, and thinkers with specific purposes to pursue and moves to practice. And if writing in general is infinitely particular, there are commonalities across these complex literate activities that school can isolate and exercise: it can protect less experienced writers as they learn to take on increasingly sophisticated challenges, providing them with low-risk opportunities to experiment, fail, and, thus, improve. More specifically, writing classes can develop in young writers the habits, skills, and attitudes needed to meet the demands of difficult rhetorical situations by providing them with 1) authentic invitations to write, motivations and exigencies that can exploit their desire to express themselves, discover new things, and communicate with others; 2) sufficient time to write, especially to generate ideas – ideas which may eventually be discarded or changed beyond recognition – as well as time to draft, revise, and edit language itself; 3) ample resources for writing: models, phrases, ideas, and materials to work with and learn from, including relevant writing tools and sources of information; 4) response and feedback from critical but helpful readers who can push writers to re-see and revise their work; and, finally, 5) opportunities to circulate writing, to see the effects of one's words on others and how meaningful, useful, even pleasurable, such "public" writing can be.

So, ironically, in introducing these texts meant above all to be *read*, we want to remind you how important your own *writing* is in learning to write. We want to encourage you to seek out communities and contexts in which you can develop your writing voices, practice your writing moves, and find readers for your written texts. That's why it's so important in college to take classes that make space and time every day for writing; that provide peer readers who listen but also interrogate, who make suggestions but also honor your ownership of your ideas and style; and that publish your writing, making *it*, not the texts of professional writers, the center of the course. Many of the writers collected in this volume benefited from such scaffolding in school. We think you will, too.

On reading

If the central activity of the college writing class is *writing*, and the central text the *students'* own texts, why then use a reader of previously published essays by professional writers? why is the writing class a place not just to practice writing but also *reading*? why, for that matter, do most fluent writers *read* constantly, widely, and actively? does *reading* help people somehow *write*? and does *writing* make them somehow different kinds of *readers*?

Writers read for many reasons and benefit in many different ways from what and how they read. Imagine, for instance, that you're driving down the highway: it's hard not to read the signs along the way: road markers, travel advisories, commercial advertisements. We pass texts at 65 miles per hour, and, incredibly, we process them – a kind of accidental reading that is a common feature of a text-rich society like ours. Or imagine that you're walking to class, and there's an announcement written in chalk on the sidewalk outside your residence hall; there's a banner hanging above the entrance to the school's main administrative building; there's a sign taped to the door of one of your classroom buildings. You read those things whether you want to or not. And such reading affects you and, no doubt, your writing, too.

But sometimes reading is more personal: you get an invitation to read something from someone you know (an email in your inbox, a text message on your cell phone, a folded note taped to your door). This kind of reading requires a little more work on your part than just glancing up at a sign as it passes by; but you don't have to go out seeking such texts either – they come to you. You read them, in fact, mainly out of fellow-feeling, gratitude, love or desire for the person trying to contact you. Writers often read, in other words, because someone they know has asked them to, has asked them, implicitly or explicitly, to respond to their words. If the personal, hand-written letter sent through the mail has largely disappeared from our society, it has been replaced by multiple other forms of interpersonal textual connection, many of them digital. How many friends or family members have you written to today? How many messages have you received?

Sometimes, of course, we read more deliberately – not just as part of our daily dialogue with friends and family but as part of more substantial intellectual, creative, professional, political, and spiritual projects. In such cases, we actively seek out texts, usually from authors we don't even know – because we need information or advice, because we want to learn something, because we desire the pleasure that can only be had by immersing ourselves in someone else's prose. We buy a magazine, go to a website, click on a PDF, check out a book, browse the internet, broadcast a query, order a document. We read, that is, out of curiosity, need, desire. And this reading is often quite impersonal in the sense that we typically don't know the author at all. We read the text because of what's *in* it. It's only later that we reflect on the fact that the text was written *by* someone *for* a particular purpose *in* a particular situation.

The academic life is at its heart a search for texts that can help us answer questions, solve problems, advance our understanding, satisfy our longings. Sometimes in that search for texts (for knowledge, information, theory, data, opinion, advice, instruction, pleasure) we find just what we're looking for. More often than not, the journey is circuitous, unpredictable, unfinished – and more exciting precisely for that reason.

Unfortunately, some reading in school doesn't allow for or exploit the freedom or excitement just described. Sometimes students read because they're told to. In writing classes like the one you're enrolled in, you were likely *assigned* to read essays in this book. Hopefully, your teacher, your classmates, your own intellectual curiosity will carry you some way in motivating you to do that reading and keep an open mind about it. Maybe your teacher's enthusiasm for a particular essay will be contagious, or a classmate you admire will tell you how interesting the piece is, or the title will capture your fancy. But if you're skeptical of the reasons to read these essays, the uses to which you can put them, here are a few things to consider.

First, reading other people's texts, not just those of your peers but those of experienced, accomplished, published writers, can give you things to talk about in your own writing: ideas, issues, problems, opinions, facts, and experiences that you can use in your own work, starting points to develop content for your own essays. Think about the issues treated in this book: friendship, gender, education, the environment . . . Granted, this class isn't *about* those things; it's a *writing* class, after all, one centered on YOUR ideas and experiences, as those are developed in your OWN thinking and writing. Still, reading can help you see what problems, themes, issues, and controversies are interesting and relevant to others. *Their* hopes, desires, experiences, opinions, and questions can propel you to think and write about similar or related topics. As you're reading these essays, then, we hope you'll occasionally say to yourself: "Oh, you mean I can write about *that*?" Or, "I just thought of something *I'd* like to write about!"

Second, reading these texts can give you rhetorical models to emulate, ways of representing your own ideas, opinions, and experiences, patterns of language or discourse that you might use in your own work. Think about the many different styles of writing collected here. Some of these essays are funny; others serious. Some are short, some long. Some are "plain," others more inventive. Some are written in the first person, some in the second or third. Some deal with the past, others with the present or future. If any of these "ways with words" appeal to you, we encourage you to actively emulate them. Your teacher will talk with you about respecting the intellectual property of others; but we all learn a lot about writing from reading other writers, noticing what they do with language, and being inspired by them to try new things.

Third, reading these essays can provoke *direct* responses from you about the texts themselves. In other words, you might use these pieces, literally, as conversation partners, interacting with them in myriad ways. Perhaps the most common form of writing in the academy, in fact, is writing *about* other texts: summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, analyzing, synthesizing, criticizing, and evaluating others' words. Such moves can be difficult, especially when the "original" text is difficult; but they are very important in higher education for good reason. One of the best ways to create and test knowledge, after all, is to build on the work of others. So we hope that you'll take up the implicit invitations of these authors and respond directly to their texts.

Finally, since at least some of these essays will be assigned to your whole class, reading them can help build community in your classroom, can give you and your classmates something to share, "common" texts that can help you build relationships with your peers, even if those relationships are primarily intellectual in nature. Such relationships are especially valuable early in college and on large campuses where you don't know many people at first.

Those are all good reasons, we think, for using a book like this in a writing class. But there's another reason why we collected these essays for you – because we think

you'll like them! Anthologies like this one, designed mainly for the classroom, sometimes fail to mention that reading can be *pleasurable*; that it can be enjoyable to lose oneself in another person's words, his or her representation of experience; that it can be satisfying to be carried along by a capable guide on a journey into another world, another life – to realize that you're seeing new things and thinking new thoughts. Reading, in other words, can be its own reward. In fact, *we* were drawn to these essays primarily because we liked them, because, apart from all the other motivations listed above, we found them to be illuminating, memorable, compelling. We felt like the hour or two we spent with each one made our lives different, better, richer.

Reading, after all, is first and foremost an experience. It takes place over time, requires (and rewards) concentration, and leaves you feeling as if you've lost track of yourself and the mundane concerns of your daily life, that you now inhabit someone else's world, that you're dwelling in their sentences and paragraphs and following along as they travel from idea to idea. It's a strange experience, one that is sometimes described as communicating with others while remaining alone, participating in dialogue while being quiet. In this sense, "losing track of yourself" may not be quite the right metaphor, at least not for nonfiction prose. In the best essays, readers *do* feel carried along by the stream of another's words; but, as Maryanne Wolf recently put it in her book *Proust and the Squid*, the secret at the heart of fluent reading is that the human brain can *both* process someone else's written words *and* entertain its own related thoughts at the same time. The combination of another person's ideas and your own, interacting in quiet and solitude, can be enormously powerful.

And here's the point we want to make: the activity just described can feed back into your own writing in an especially poignant way because to appreciate the reading experience that another writer has given *you* can leave you wanting to do the same for *others*. We *write* sometimes, in other words, because we *read*: because we want to pay forward the gift of that experience to other people.

On difficulty

If we encourage you, then, to approach reading these essays as an *experience*, and to give yourself up to its pleasures, that doesn't mean that the texts collected here will be light and easy for you. In fact, we think you'll find most of them quite challenging. Part of the reason for that is genre. Many of these pieces are nonfiction essays of the occasional sort, a kind of writing that you may not be very familiar with or practiced in. You've no doubt read lots of *stories* in your life. And you've also probably read lots of *textbooks* – a kind of nonfiction that tends to be mostly explanatory, synthetic, factual. You've also likely read lots of other kinds of expository and argumentative prose – instructions, opinions, reviews – to say nothing of the many informal and practical genres that we discussed earlier (email, résumés, etc.). But some of you may be less familiar with the *essay*, at least its non-school variety, which shares some characteristics with these other genres but has its own particular qualities as well. Like a story, an essay usually asks that you read from beginning to end, that you experience the text as a journey, an unfolding. But its characters and plot, if it has any, will be quite different from those of narrative. Like much expository and argumentative prose, on the other hand, an essay is usually "truthful," or at least tries to represent the world or some slice of it as it "really" is. But essays aren't usually something you can skim or reduce to a point. Neither story nor report, the essay is difficult to categorize, though that may be one reason it's so full of possibilities!

In addition, there is difficulty here in both form and content: many of these pieces are long, dense, complex. Some deal with painful topics. Some are written in a voice that may, at first, be off-putting to you. The pieces are also quite different from one another – in fact, we purposefully tried to include here a multiplicity of writers, styles, and subject matters. If after really working hard with one piece, you finally come to appreciate its style and substance, be careful: the next piece may force you to start all over again, as if you’re entering a whole *other* world!

Here’s some advice as you begin reading, based on our own experience with these essays and our own background as readers and writers.

Give yourself time to read these pieces. As we’ve tried to indicate, this isn’t a textbook that you can skim; and the “chapters” aren’t research reports from which you can extract thesis statements, or “op-ed” pieces that make their point early and can then be reduced to that claim. They’re *essays* – many are long – most are challenging in one way or another – and all are meant to make you think, to stretch your mind, to reward your effort. You need time to do all that well.

Find a quiet place to read. If you’re enrolled in a writing course, there’s likely a community of readers and writers behind your work. That community is, we hope, lively and talkative, and you should know how important such sociality is to writing development. But reading these essays requires concentration. Now, everybody is different – some people can read while listening to music or watching television or carrying on a conversation with a friend. But you might want to try reading these pieces in a quiet place. We know that quiet is sometimes hard to find in college, especially if you’re living in a residence hall. But it’s hard for us to imagine really appreciating these essays without to some extent losing oneself in them.

Come with an open mind. Try to approach each essay as you would want someone to approach your own writing: willing to experience it on the writer’s terms. We call this playing “the believing game,” making one’s first pass over an essay a sympathetic one. Let the essay take its course and follow it. Assume that the author is someone you’d want to listen to and his or her essay, something you’re likely to learn from. Only then, after first believing, can you play “the doubting game,” in which you engage the essay in a more questioning, even critical, spirit.

Re-read and annotate. Most of these essays will require (and reward) a second (or third) read. It’s often only in that subsequent reading that many of us begin to think more actively about and with the piece at hand, often annotating the text while we read. Sometimes annotation is just putting a little penciled dot by a passage you really like or a question mark by one you don’t understand. Sometimes you dog-ear a page where there’s something that really inspired you. Sometimes annotations are more prominent: you highlight key phrases in colored ink or write notes in the margin. The key thing is to pay attention to what interests, inspires, puzzles, or provokes you.

Engage the text. Now, once you’ve re-read the piece and annotated key passages, start thinking more purposively about what you’ve read and how you might interact or engage with it substantively. Summarize the essay, or some part of it, in your mind. Reflect on what impressed or surprised you about it. Ask questions of it. Talk back to it. Try to figure out how it works. Discuss it with your roommate. Listen to what your classmates say about it. Debate it. Argue with it. Translate it. Apply it. Then re-read it, and think about it some more!

On writing again

Perhaps the most powerful kind of engagement you can have with these texts, of course, is to *write* about them. And that brings us back to where we started: with a society of text-makers and the increasingly central, increasingly diverse, activity of writing, which allows us to create and communicate meaning in so many ways for so many purposes. We hope this book of *readings* will help you build on the text-making skills you already have, adding to your repertoire new ways of *writing* that can help you inquire into yourself, interact with texts, add to conversations, and reflect productively on all of that.

And here's our last bit of advice for you. Have fun with the essays in this book! Be inspired by them, learn from them, argue with them, tell your friends about them! Carry this book around with you. Keep it by your bed. Slip it into your suitcase when you go home for the holidays. Return to it in the future, long after the semester in which it was required is over. Above all, read! Write! Enjoy!