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The Elements of Composition Series

The Elements of Composition Series
And, finally, that it can lead to and sustain the wide and deep investigation of reading required for a final paper.

- Explain to your partner what you found difficult in the text you were reading, and why. Your partner should play back to you what he or she hears you say. If there is mismatch between what is being said and being understood, you should consider how to revise, reframe, and/or clarify the issue.
- Once your partner is satisfied with this initial phase, you can move to the next level of abstraction, the phase in which you begin to articulate the relationship between your difficulty and a possible rule or strategy of interpretation.
- In the next phase, you should assess, in consultation with your partner, whether or not your difficulty can sustain further investigation. Can it become a "project of reading" rich enough to sustain the writing of a research paper, argumentative essay, expository essay? If so, what could that be? Produce an outline, a set of connected questions (if so...then) that might guide your investigation.
- Make your work public in the classroom. Present your project to the class for critique and advice.

It is our hope that repeated practice with this exercise will make it possible for you to internalize the kinds of reflexive moves it maps out for you. You will also notice that you can do this exercise on paper, playing the partner role in your mind.

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Introducing Difficulty

The difficulty of difficulty is not that it is difficult, but that we do not face difficulty soon enough.

—Hazard Adams, "The Difficulty of Difficulty"

Hazard Adams is right. In most educational contexts, learners are not taught to face difficulties soon enough, or at all. One reason may be that the role of difficulties in the learning process is not fully understood; another, that the function of difficulties as elements of understanding is not fully taken advantage of.

In this first chapter, we introduce you to the theoretical understanding about difficulty that guides the work of this book. Since we know that the idea of difficulty, especially as a scaffolding for understanding, may take some getting used to, we offer you several definitions and consider their theoretical and practical implications. We foreshadow the kind of work we do throughout with student writing, along with the kind of reading, writing, and reflecting we will ask you to perform (with considerable guidance from your teachers and the students whose work is featured here).

What Do We Mean by Difficulty?

Based on our work on difficulty with our students, we know that the idea of difficulty as an element of understanding is a challenging one. So
we begin with a definition of “difficulty” provided in the most comprehensive dictionary in our language, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (available from your college library in book form or on-line):

**Difficulty.** 1. The quality, fact, or condition of being difficult; the character of an action that requires labour and effort; hardness to be accomplished; the opposite of “ease” or “facility.” . . . c. The quality of being hard to understand; perplexing character, obscurity. 2. with a and pl. A particular instance of this quality; that which is difficult. a. A thing hard to do or overcome; a hindrance to action. b. Something hard to understand; a perplexing or obscure point or question.

As this definition suggests, “difficulty” is “the quality of being hard to understand.” Thus, when we say to you, “Please identify your reading difficulties,” we are actually asking you to take notice of what you believe is “hard to understand” in a text. It might be “hard to understand” for different reasons—because it is perplexing, obscure, mysterious, remote, strange, unfamiliar, uncomfortable, disconnected, meaningless, confusing, ridiculous, contradictory, hypocritical, inconsistent (these are terms our students have used). In other words, we urge you to take notice of whatever slows down or brings to a halt the physical activity of reading, leaving you mystified, wondering why, what, how.

Another point worth noting in the OED definition is that, although it positions “difficulty” in opposition to “ease” and “facility” as something that might require “labor” and “effort,” it does not suggest that difficulties are beyond the reach of someone’s understanding. A difficulty may be an obstacle, but it is not an unmoving impediment. As one of our students, Kim Woomer, commented: “I looked up the word ‘difficulty’ in the dictionary. The dictionary stated that a difficulty was an ‘obstacle,’ which was not what I expected to see. Obstacles are something that may get in one’s way, but in no way can they put a complete stop to a process.”

Finally, in the complete OED definition of “difficulty” appears one particular quotation, attributed to J. South, and dating to 1716, that we find especially relevant: “They mistake difficulties for impossibilities.” That is what we want to promote, an engagement with difficulties that prevents them from bringing to a halt—from making impossible—the challenging work of reading, writing, and thinking.

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### Why Difficulty Merits Attention

Let us pose two questions that are likely on your mind: Why should difficulty be valued over ease? Why should readers appreciate complexity over simplicity? The questions are reasonable enough, since we are living in a culture (a culture that has not changed much in this respect for several hundred years) in which “ease” is considered a sign of sophistication, intelligence, and talent. Popular belief holds that a genuinely talented artist just sits down and does it, making beautiful canvases and poems appear, seemingly without effort. Tennis players who, at the peak of their form, hit a serve and return a volley (seemingly) effortlessly, are often called “natural,” as if they did not have to work to reach that level.

And when it comes to the classroom, the good student is supposed to be one who has no difficulty learning quickly, doing work rapidly, and comprehending everything.

It is not that these stories are inaccurate. But they are deceptive because they fail to acknowledge the difficulties the artist, the athlete, and the student had to face, engage, and work through for them to reach the stage of being able to do things in ways that seem effortless and natural. Nobody, not even a genius, knows without having learned to know.

But, you might ask, “What is the payoff of working with difficulty?” The answer to that question may seem paradoxical. Readers who engage, rather than avoid, a text’s difficulties can deepen their understanding of what they read and how they read. If they move away from those difficulties, or opt for somebody solving them for them, chances are that they will never know the causes of those difficulties, and the means to control them. And insofar as reading involves thinking—thinking the thoughts of another, inhabiting somebody else’s mind, temporarily adopting somebody else’s argument—learning to read in ways that nurture this flexibility of mind can be good preparation for encountering and working through difficult life situations. But, and we want to be clear about this, the process of acquiring this understanding and transferring it to other contexts is not automatic, nor is it simply the result of good will. This is one of the points that come clearly across in the excerpt by Kim Woomer on the next page. Woomer is writing about the difficulty of thinking about difficulty:
Chapter I/Introducing Difficulty

I believe the word “difficulty” is very deceiving when one thinks about its meaning. I had always assumed that when one had difficulty with something it means that something is impossible, basically because the task is too complicated for that particular person.

When I first came into this class I discovered that the main portion of writing assignments was to focus on our personal difficulties with individual poems. The first couple of assignments were comprehensible because we would describe our problem and the professor would help us solve it. Then we were asked to locate difficulties as before, but now we were also asked to solve them.

I was extremely confused as to how we could answer our own questions... [That's when Kim consults the dictionary and discovers that a difficulty is an obstacle.] This made me realize that the difficulties I have in understanding poetry can be overcome with some extra work. Through this extra work I personally have discovered certain strategies that help me overcome my obstacles.

As Woomer tells us, by reframing her understanding of difficulty and by doing extra work, she made an important discovery: There are strategies she can use to work through her difficulties on her own. But how did she get there? She got there when she learned to ask of the difficulty she had described the kind of questions that her teacher had asked in the margins of previous Difficulty Papers. Truth to tell, the teacher had not solved those earlier difficulties for her; she had asked questions of them, and reframed them in such a way that enabled Woomer to solve them through strategies she thought of by herself.

Notice also, that although Woomer’s Difficulty Paper was produced in response to her reading of a text, what she says about difficulty—her analysis, her hypotheses, her formulations of how to come to terms with it—could be produced in response to any other difficult task. We would say that the payoff for confronting difficulty could not be more powerfully expressed.

What About the “Easy” Text?

Is it ever possible for a “difficult” text to disguise itself as an “easy” one? Can an “easy” text actually be a “difficult” one? Yes, there are many texts that may at first appear simple to read and understand, texts that may trick readers into thinking they are “easy” when they really are not. Take, for example, a book by Lynda Barry, entitled One Hundred Demons. It looks like a comic book, and what could be more simple than that? If you look at one page, you may notice that it consists of words and illustrations, that a title is introduced, that an image is presented of a woman drawing, surrounded by pictures that are evidently creations of her imagination. (You might remember reading as a child Harold and the Purple Crayon?)

When one of us recently taught Barry’s book in a first-year writing course, the class discussion did not get very far, at least not at first. Perhaps because they had been introduced to comic books as children (Barry’s variation, the graphic novel, is actually quite sophisticated), students were unable to say much initially. Everything seemed too obvious. In their first papers, students did little more than summarize the book’s many stories.

But when they were asked to complicate these first accounts by reading against the grain, they paid attention to clues they had initially read over. And the result was a highly perceptive analysis. Commenting on the impact of one image on him, and using his understanding of that image as an interpretive clue, one student wrote: “The demon is rising out of the water. That must suggest that Barry is dealing with material that was buried and is just starting to surface”; “That bird by her shoulder? Maybe it suggests that she’s writing about her ‘burdens’”; “I thought that an autobiography just told a story about a life. This life seems much more complicated than I thought. There’s this strange overlay of the present and the past, and something about suppressed desires, if that is what that picture of a heart means.” In their next paper, many students acknowledged and then moved beyond their first reactions: “While some readers may view One Hundred Demons as a simple comic book, it is actually a story about the complex relationships between past and present identity”; “While One Hundred Demons seems to be just a story about a woman’s adolescence, it helps us understand why writing is a therapeutic activity”; “By writing One Hundred Demons, Lynda Barry provides a system for confronting forgotten memories.”

As students put their difficulties in writing, as they write them out, they give themselves a chance to acknowledge the complexity of reading, which, if not captured through writing, would easily slide away. As
teachers, we have noticed that as students engage the complexities of their reading, the writing that records that engagement also increases in complexity. This is one of the many ways in which the acts of reading and writing complement and interact with each other.

Another genre of writing that may at first seem easy to read—if not always easy to understand—is that of the textbook. The textbook is one of those books that students expect to read just to extract a wealth of useful information about the subject, a set of directions on how to execute specific activities that are foundational to a discipline (how to speak another language, how to do an algorithm or a lab test, how to interpret literature). The look of textbooks is deceiving. Clean. Arranged into accessible sections. It suggests that learning is orderly and manageable. Maybe. But think about the decisions that had to be made to arrange information in a particular way. Think about what had to be presented first, rather than later. Think about the argument, the central assumptions that shaped the textbook as a physical object. The body of knowledge a textbook presents is usually the end product of substantial prior inquiry, a “journey to knowledge” that remains hidden from readers. To read a textbook for all that is not visible but is part of its conception becomes, then, a difficult task.

What Do We Mean by “Reading”? 

In this book, the term “reading” refers to intellectual work, not the mere mechanical act of scanning a written page. Other words for this kind of reading are active reading, analytical reading, and interpretation.

To clarify what we mean by the work of reading, let us use another word: transaction. Think about the nature of transaction, how a transaction is something that occurs between living beings, how getting and keeping a transaction going is determined by its participants. It is possible to think of reading in these terms, as a transaction between reader and text, where both play a role in the construction of meaning, where both are understood as participants in a process that must be initiated and negotiated.

But, then, what are we saying about “text”? The words we just used seem to turn texts into human beings, when they obviously are not. But texts also do not emerge by themselves from primal ooze. They are written by human beings, and they convey their human origins in the device of voice. In the essays you write, that voice is the self you are attempting to capture, or project, or imagine. In lyric poetry, that voice may be the author’s persona (literally, a term that means “mask”) or that of the author herself. In narrative, it can be the voice of the characters or that of the narrator who unfolds the scene. In drama, it is the multiple voices of characters in dialogue.

Whoever or whatever that voice is, it cannot be directly contacted. In being written, it has been silenced. But, paradoxically, in being written it has also been preserved. And it is the responsibility of readers (or, in the case of performance, the actors) to bring it back to life. This is literally the creative aspect of reading.

To hear this voice, readers must look for places in the text where it has left traces. When they think they have identified such traces, they need to ask of them, “Might this be what it is and what it meant? Why has this been said? To what end?” Once readers start asking such questions, they are hooked, they are engaged. However, once a text hooks its readers, it is still those readers’ responsibility to keep the conversation going by continually checking the conclusions and inferences they make about the text against what the text itself seems to be saying. Clues they look for are the particular words used, sentence constructions, paragraph arrangements, epigraphs, or quotations, and in some cases, footnotes. Their responsibility is to act on their own behalf and on behalf on that human being conveyed through voice, which makes the hearing referred to above a complicated business.

There is no right way to initiate this process and keep it going, no rule of thumb. To try to decide whether it is the text or a reader that initiates the process is, from a transactional point of view, a moot point. Suffice it to say that the first words a reader chooses to focus on, which are not necessarily the first words he or she looks at, may initiate the process of understanding. They provide the point of entry into a conversation that for somebody else might begin (and end) differently. While a reader can begin almost anywhere, a rich understanding of a text often begins not with what is transparently clear, but with what is perceived (at least at first) as difficult. So, when you encounter moments in a text that seem strange, unanticipated, unpredictable, surprising, or counterintuitive—that is a promising place to begin. Trust that response. Consider your uncertainty as a signal for work to be done.

Our students have often asked us where these difficulties are actually located. Do they reside in the text or the reader? (As we said earlier,
texts can be perceived to be inert and silent until a responsive reader re-activates the life their authors imagined for them.) We usually answer that difficulties can be thought to exist in both. That is, just as a text’s meaning derives from, originates in, a transaction, so do its difficulties. And different readers do indeed name and take note of different difficulties, because these readers possess different personal and academic backgrounds, different repertoires, that make them notice as “unfamiliar” different features of a text. It also occurs, however, that communities of readers (what the literary theorist, Stanley Fish, calls interpretive communities) learn to read in similar ways, to value certain textual elements and to disregard others.

How This Book Is Organized

This book consists of seven chapters. Each chapter follows the same format.

- It begins with examples of students’ difficulties and with selected aspects of a particular kind of text. This may be a text of a certain length (long or short); a text to which you may bring few or many expectations (as is the case with Shakespeare’s plays); or a text representing certain aspects of a type of discourse (prose, for example) or a literary genre (such as poetry).
- It examines the learning potential of these difficulties, much as Locke proposed in our opening epigraph, by demonstrating how student readers are able to remember a prior and analogous occasion, identify a strategy, and reapply it.
- It concludes with two sections. The first is Taking Stock, which consists of questions, excerpts, and exercises designed to help you reflect on what you have read and learned. The second is Retrospective, which reviews the chapter’s main ideas.

Each chapter also undertakes a particular kind of intellectual work (the kind of work commonly done in English Studies, and other fields as well), consisting of the following (recursive) stages:

- Initiating the reading process
- Articulating moments of difficulty
- Suggesting how these moments are produced by a body of cultural assumptions about difficulty and understanding, and their place in the development of learning
- Demonstrating the advantages of reflecting on these moments for both students and teachers
- Showing possible connections between students’ definitions of difficulty and their assumptions about literature or understanding
- Providing ways to record in writing these moments of difficulty, so they can become visible and release their possibilities

Three Tools of Teaching and Learning

This chapter concludes with three tools that have played a critical role in the development of this project by serving as the stimulus for powerful writing by our students. The first two are the Difficulty Paper (conceived by Mariolina Salvatori and adapted by others) and The Triple-Entry Notebook. The third is Reflective Questioning.

The Difficulty Paper

The assignment for this paper reads as follows. In other chapters of the book, we will present different versions of it.

You can expect to write regularly in this course. In preparation for class discussion and writing assignments, you will write short (1/2 to 1 page) “difficulty papers”: these are papers in which you identify and begin to hypothesize the reasons for any possible difficulty you might be experiencing as you read a _______ (a poem, play, essay). Each week, you will write a difficulty paper on one or more of the assigned texts. Each week, I will select one or two of them as unusual or representative examples of the readings you produce. I will photocopy, distribute, and use them to ground our discussions. My goal, in doing so, is to move all of us from judging a difficulty as a reader’s inability to understand a text to discerning in that difficulty a reader’s incipient awareness of the particular “demands” imposed by the language/structure/style/content of a text.
As the phrase in italics states, this assignment is propedeutic because it helps students prepare for class discussion and writing assignments. Responses to this paper are not graded because this work is considered exploratory. The Difficulty Paper can serve at least three purposes:

- It can help students begin to reflect on how they read, and why, and on the kind of understanding their ways of reading can produce.
- It can help students shape a position from which to speak in class and to engage the thoughts of others.
- It can help students to foreground, to begin to analyze, and to assess the intricate moves they must make as readers who transact and negotiate with a text.

It is a difficult assignment. Interestingly, it is the students who think of themselves as poor, unimaginative readers who view the assignment and its instructions as a validation of the difficulties they experience as they read, and who most insightfully, and readily, turn their moments of difficulty into moments of understanding. But those who think of reading as a relatively uncomplicated process of reception, or a tricky but easily mastered hunt for answers, may think the assignment is trying to peg them at a remedial level to which they do not belong. Some argue that it is not possible to identify, name, and describe a difficulty while experiencing it. If it is difficult, they say, how can we describe it? Others suggest that once it is identified, named, and described, it ceases to be a difficulty. So, what is the use of doing the work the assignment asks of them? And occasionally there are students, usually students who think of themselves as seldom or never having difficulties, and certainly not with reading, who claim that as hard as they try they cannot think of any difficulty they had reading the assigned text.

Over the years, we have learned to mine all of these responses. One of the productive moves such responses have taught us to make has been to enlist the collaboration of students who deny having difficulties in helping those classmates who admit experiencing difficulties while reading a text. In their role as “teachers,” these students are asked not to provide answers or interpretations, but rather to give a detailed description of the mental moves that might have enabled them to come up with those answers, to construct those interpretations. After a few tries, they admit to finding this practice difficult, since they have seldom or never before been asked to reflect on their own thinking. Thus, they begin to see the complexity of what seemed easy at first and to turn their difficulty into a source of understanding. And real, exciting, collective inquiry begins.

### The Triple-Entry Notebook

The Triple-Entry Notebook is a variation of the Double-Entry Notebook, a strategy divulged by a noted theorist of composition, Ann E. Berthoff. Berthoff borrowed and adapted this strategy from the field of science. The strategy allows for identification and isolation of data that are subsequently gathered, grouped, and reflected upon. The Triple-Entry Notebook adds one more stage: the stage in which a reader, having recorded and reflected on what she noticed, tries to come to a conclusion about what the two stages have made possible, and move beyond them. This third stage could be a moment of resolution and self-instruction: “The difficulty I encountered was due to a set of inappropriate expectations; hence, when reading a text of this kind, I might have to remind myself that . . .” Or it could be the theorization of a difficulty that his or her educational assumptions or personal proclivities generate when reading a text of a particular kind. Or it could be the recognition of a particular strategy, or convention, used by a writer to work within and against the limits imposed by a genre; in other words, the recognition of an intentional production of difficulty to create understanding.

The addition of a third phase to Berthoff’s Double-Entry Notebook is our attempt to reproduce the three phases of understanding that, according to German philosopher (hermeneuticist) Hans-Georg Gadamer, reading can produce. Gadamer names them erkennen (to know, to notice something), which the exercise places in the first column; wiederkennen (literally, to know again, to reflect on what one knows or has noticed) in the second column; and herauskennen (to apply, to extend to another context, to raise to another level of abstraction (meta-cognition) what one has learned by reflecting on what and how one knows) in the third column. In the third column, students often produce instances of what educational theorists call deep learning, a learning produced through reflexivity and which produces more learning when it is generalized or allied to a new context.
We will provide an example of a Triple-Entry Notebook on the poem “The Business,” by the contemporary poet Robert Creeley.

**The Business**

To be in love is like going outside to see what kind of day it is. Do not mistake me. If you love her how prove she loves also, except that it occurs, a remote chance on which you stake yourself? But barter for the Indian was a means of sustenance.

There are records.

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**Triple-Entry Notebook: “The Business”**

*Nick Jacobs*

**Impressions**

The theme seems to be suggested in the first line of the poem. “To be in love.”

The final thought changes from the original theme, not pursuing the same path as it once did.

*Lines are broken (sentences), affecting the meaning of the poem. “If you love” ending the line without specifics.*

**Questions**

How should we utilize the convention of this title?

How should I treat the function of the final line?

“Except that (what) occurs?”

What correlation can be drawn between love and bartering?

Is the final line an extension of the title?

**Resolutions**

a. Forget about the title for a minute.

b. Forget about the convention of the title.

c. Consider the poem an opposite of the title.

(Bachelard)—the theme of this poem is a house, each new thought is in a different room.

Final line seems to tie everything together.

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**Impressions**

Barter is necessary for life. Love is necessary for life. Love is always a mystery.

The line form of the poem seems to function as the punctuation, enabling the poem to be read with a certain rhythm.

**Questions**

How can the rhythm of this piece be determined? Is that determined strictly by using the form of the poem, or can other methods be used?

Does the final section mean that barter was a way of sustenance for the Indians, just as love is a way of sustenance for the white man?

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**Reflective Questioning**

Throughout this book you will encounter questions interspersed throughout the text. For example, before or after we present a piece of student writing, we might ask questions such as the following, in reference to Nick Jacobs’ work:

- What do you think the Triple-Entry Notebook strategy makes visible?
- What does it allow Nick Jacobs to accomplish?
- If the three categories Jacobs has devised do not work for you, which other three categories would you want? Name them.
- What does Jacobs know about poetry that leads him to ask the questions he does?
- What do you make of the last question in the second column?
- How does it follow from the work that precedes and surrounds it?

These questions are not meant to be prompts for writing assignments, although your teacher may want to employ them in that way. We do encourage you to respond to these questions in the form of a journal or class notes, and also use them as topics for class or group conversation. Do not feel obligated to answer every question, or to respond to the questions in a particular order. It may often be the case that the questions you find most difficult or confusing will
be those that generate the most interesting material. Consider these questions as opportunities to make visible the understanding you already possess and to reflect on the kind of work you are learning or need to learn to do.

**Taking Stock**

Before we move to the next chapter, we invite you to undertake the following tasks:

- Make an inventory of new terms, concepts, and ideas (we will ask you to do this several times throughout the book).
- Design a Triple-Entry Notebook and transcribe terms from your inventory that you think will sustain prolonged inquiry.
- Write a profile of yourself as a reader, writer, and thinker. A useful format might be what is called a literacy narrative, a chronology of your experiences with language and your efforts to learn to read and write. What were the first books you read, or were read to you? What was your response? When did you learn to read in school? How did you learn? What kinds of books did you like or dislike to read? When did you learn to write? How? Can you recall any special method of learning? What came easily to you? What was difficult, and why? How would you now characterize yourself as reader/writer/thinker, or some combination of the three? Try to include as many specific scenes of learning as you can.
- Make a list of things you know how to do as a reader: moves that get fruitful results, as well as concepts, strategies, and ideas you have learned as you have worked through this section of the book.

**Retrospective**

The first chapter—our introduction—aims at preparing you for the work you will do in the following chapters by touching upon issues of definition, format, and practice. It defines difficulty as a moment of confusion that derails the reading process. It places difficulty in opposition with ease, suggesting that most students have been taught to prefer the latter over the former, and also explaining how certain kinds of texts present a false impression of ease that a careful reading can help to displace. This chapter also introduces you to the nature and format of this book, and provides a rationale for the careful attention it pays throughout to student writing as serious intellectual work. Since reading is a major emphasis of this entire book, it offers a theory of reading (and also of understanding) adapted from Hans-Georg Gadamer. It presents three Tools of Learning. And it surveys some of the reactions students typically have to the study of difficulty.

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**The Difficulty of Poetry**

I came to college dreading the thought of reading another poem. I do not like it when it takes me more than three readings to get the main idea of a poem ... When a poem does not appear to have a point, or to serve a purpose, I am upset ... But I like when a poem challenges me enough to make me consider changing a belief that I hold. I like a poem that makes me think.

It's not that I don't like poetry. It's just that it doesn't make sense to me. I have been told over and over again that everyone gets something different from reading the same poem, that even if I don't understand it, I really do. Just in a different way. But it just seems like I'm missing the main point that the poet is trying to put across.

Poetry was not popular among students and teachers at my high school. The students at my high school do not like poetry for some of the same reasons that I do not like poetry ... I was not taught how to read poetry, the different forms of poetry, or how to analyze poetry. I do not know if the meaning I get from the poem is the right one.

As our three epigraphs acknowledge (they lack attribution because they are compiled responses), poetry is a particularly difficult genre for many students to read. You may not know where to begin or what