Try This Exploring the Culture of Education

Option 1. An "ethnography" is a description of a culture or subculture, with particular emphasis on the rules or norms that define the culture. In two or three pages, describe the culture, social and academic, of your high school. Then, in one or two additional pages, describe as best you can the social and academic culture of college, based on your experience so far. Finally, write two or three paragraphs to compare the two cultures and draw conclusions: How are they similar? How are they different? And how did your expectations of the culture of college compare to your actual experience so far?

Option 2. Visit your college or university Web site and review some of the pages that describe its academic programs. What do these descriptions reveal about the culture of higher education in general and of your college in particular? What goals and expectations does your college have for its students? How might a student's work as a writer contribute to meeting these goals and expectations? In a two- to three-page essay, write up your conclusions.

The Values of the Academy

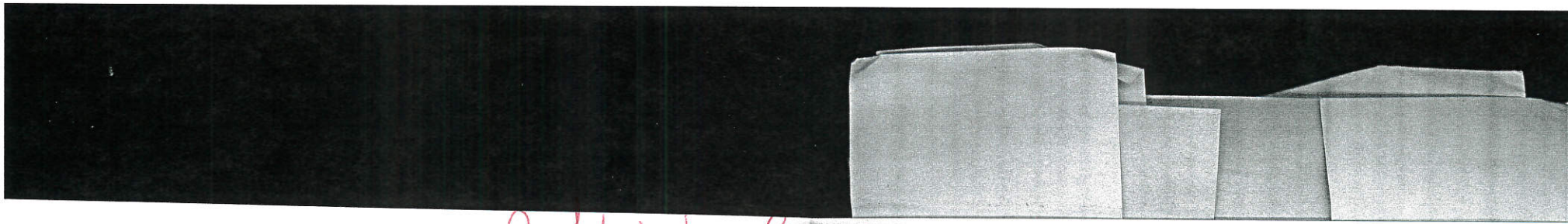
College is not simply a continuation of high school. As an institution of learning, college is different in kind. The function of a college or university in society is not only to educate but also to create new knowledge: to conduct research that advances our understanding of the world — both the natural world and the human world, both past and present — and to develop new technologies and methods that help to make the world better. Most large universities devote a sizable portion of their resources to research, aided by grants from governments, nonprofit foundations, and businesses. Colleges and universities (collectively known as "the academy") exist both to pass on knowledge and to advance it, and this mission shapes the expectations that professors bring to their students' writing.

The habits of mind and values that are necessary for good **research** and **scholarship** — for making discoveries and producing insights — are ones that professors aim to instill in their students; they include a willingness to question conventional wisdom, a capacity to imagine fresh hypotheses, the patience to gather information

and sift it with care, and the ability to reason strictly from data to a conclusion. You may have entered college with the idea that higher education will train you to work in your chosen profession and give you the credentials necessary to land a good job. It probably will, but much of what you'll be taught has little to do with job training. Many colleges require every student to take a certain number of liberal arts courses in order to acquire some familiarity with subjects such as literature, history, and philosophy — knowledge that all educated persons should possess, whatever their profession. But the purpose of a college education extends beyond even this kind of core learning (after all, you could acquire it through correspondence courses); more important, it seeks to impart certain skills and values: the ability to attend, to reason and to judge, to think for oneself and to think with others, to examine the basis of belief, to ask questions, to distinguish sound reasoning from flawed, to draw conclusions and communicate them persuasively. Though you are likely planning a career outside the academy — perhaps in business, communications, law, medicine, engineering, or social work — such skills and habits of mind will help you be a more thoughtful, insightful, and useful member of your profession, serving you well no matter where you work. Moreover, they will help you be a better citizen and a wiser leader.

College, then, does not expect you simply to take in more knowledge of the same kind that you acquired in high school. You will learn new things, of course, but you will be expected to take a different approach to your learning. In high school, knowledge tends to be treated as **fact**, as truth that reasonable people accept because the best authorities on the subject maintain that it is true. But in college, knowledge tends to be treated as **current belief**, as what reasonable people today believe because there are good reasons to believe it — even though new reasons might well come along that would force us to revise our views. As one writer put it, "What is treated in high school as eternal and unchangeable fact that human beings have discovered in their continual and relentless progress toward total knowledge will be treated in college as belief that may perhaps be well supported at the present but that could turn out to be wrong."[2] Why is this? The simple answer goes back to the university's role, which is not only to pass along knowledge but also to create it. Teacher-researchers at the college level are aware that if our knowledge is to

[2] Jack W. Meiland, *How to Get the Best Out of College* (New York: Mentor/New American Library, 1981), 14.



Pacsitt, Writing in Response

advance, we must constantly be willing to question the conventional wisdom. We must be willing to reexamine the evidence behind a claim rather than accepting it blindly. At the same time, knowledge can move forward only by building out from what we already know. So scholars strive to combine a healthy *respect* for existing knowledge with a healthy *skepticism* of it. The history of learning is a history of revision — of mastering knowledge in order to improve on it.

Professors consider their students to be members of the university — researchers and thinkers like themselves, if only at the beginning stage — so they expect students to demonstrate these intellectual skills and values in their writing and speaking. If this may seem a little daunting at first, it can also be tremendously exciting: you are being invited to enter into a genuine conversation about ideas, to reexamine everything you thought you knew, and to share your ideas with teachers who take them seriously enough to scrutinize them in the same way they would scrutinize the ideas of fellow scholars.

Academic Discourse

Unfortunately, professors who have been working in colleges or universities for many years — and since it takes five to ten years to complete a PhD, most have been — sometimes take their values and habits of mind for granted and may not always perceive the need to explain them fully or to describe their expectations for what an essay or a research paper should sound like or look like or do. (And even if they recognize this need, they may not find the space to explain it in an already packed syllabus.) Just as there is a certain **culture** that typically prevails in other American institutions such as churches or the military or high schools — social rituals, ways of speaking, unwritten rules of behavior, and so on — so there is a culture of higher learning. It is far from being uniform; just like other cultures, it varies by region, discipline, age group, and other factors. Nevertheless, its members share a certain common stock of ideas and assumptions, as well as certain ways of speaking and writing. As in any culture, members of the academy often take its ways for granted, forgetting or never realizing their differences from the outside world.

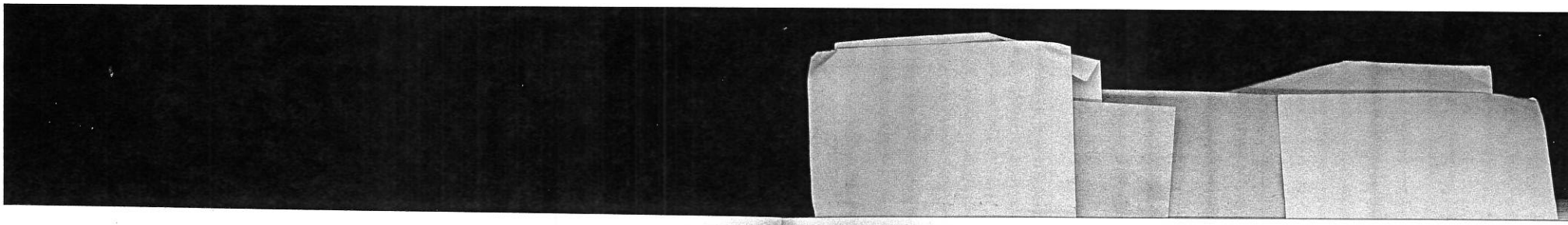
The conventional way of speaking and writing in the academy is often called **academic discourse**. Although each discipline has technical terms and concepts of its own, the term "academic discourse" refers to ways of speaking and writing that are found widely throughout the academy, a set of conventions that have grown up

over the years in order to facilitate scholarly work. You already know something about academic discourse because your high school teachers probably expected your writing to reflect at least some of its conventions. For example, academic discourse is typically more formal and precise than ordinary speech. When writing a lab report, you would not write, "I saw this ugly squishy thing through the microscope." More likely, you'd write something like, "The microscope revealed a formless, semiliquid object." Academic discourse is typically more exact and less subjectively impressionistic than casual conversation.

Academic literacy, or a familiarity with academic discourse that enables a person to understand it and speak it, distinguishes insiders from outsiders, members of the academic community from everyone else, just as any type of cultural literacy tends to do. Although you're not expected to become fluent in the discourse of higher education overnight, as a member of the academic community you will need to begin to speak the local language in order to communicate effectively. Some students are understandably reluctant to adopt this language, fearing they may sound stuffy or pretentious. Granted, some academic discourse certainly *is* stuffy and pretentious, but as we will see, it need not be. In essence, it reflects the "ethos" or culture of the academy, and while it is impossible to describe that culture fully in just a few sentences, two practices stand out so prominently that they are nearly definitive. First, academic discourse reflects the speaker's awareness of the work of other specialists who have already contributed to our understanding of the subject under discussion. Second, it reflects the need to proceed cautiously and to follow strict reasoning.

Scholars proceed cautiously because they know that reliable conclusions must be based on evidence and that the evidence is always incomplete. Jumping to unsupportable conclusions would be pointless. But this does not prevent scholars from drawing conclusions at all: over time, they build up reliable, well-tested theories, but such theories are rarely, if ever, the work of just one or two individuals. Thus, scholars avoid making excessively grand claims and tend to **qualify** their statements in words that show their claims are provisional, based on the limited data available so far.

Likewise, scholars carefully try to avoid errors in reasoning that would make their conclusions worthless. Since their arguments must stand up to careful scrutiny, scholars must reason strictly from the evidence, avoiding personal bias, overgeneralization, emotional appeal, careless use of language, self-contradiction, and other fallacies. Typically, articles and books by scholars are reviewed by other



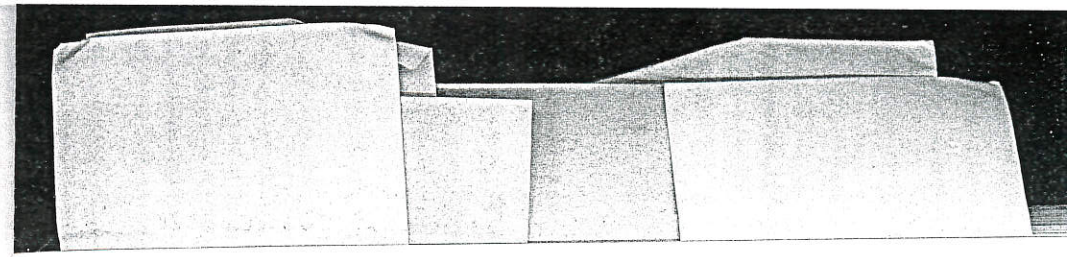
scholars in the same field before being published. If reviewers find errors or holes in an argument, the author may need to revise or start over.

Thus, academic discourse reflects a set of assumptions about how scholarly work proceeds, how knowledge gets made. We can readily see how scholarly writing embodies the values of the academy by examining a paragraph from Nicholas Carr's "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" (reprinted on p. 347). Although Carr is not a professional academic, his writing is scholarly in the sense that it embodies the values of the academy. His essay raises questions about our use of the Internet and how our electronic devices may be changing the ways we read and think. At the beginning of the essay he is concerned chiefly with his own experience of life with technology. But at a certain point he begins to consider whether the problem is widespread.

> Anecdotes alone don't prove much. And we still await the long-term neurological and psychological experiments that will provide a definitive picture of how Internet use affects cognition. But a recently published study of online research habits, conducted by scholars from University College London, suggests that we may well be in the midst of a sea change in the way we read and think. As part of the five-year research program, the scholars examined computer logs documenting the behavior of visitors to two popular research sites, one operated by the British Library and one by a UK educational consortium, that provide access to journal articles, e-books, and other sources of written information. They found that people using the sites exhibited "a form of skimming activity," hopping from one source to another and rarely returning to any source they'd already visited. They typically read no more than one or two pages of an article or book before they would "bounce" out to another site. Sometimes they'd save a long article, but there's no evidence that they ever went back and actually read it. The authors of the study report:
>
> > It is clear that users are not reading online in the traditional sense; indeed there are signs that new forms of "reading" are emerging as users "power browse" horizontally through titles, contents pages, and abstracts going for quick wins. It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense.
>
> Thanks to the ubiquity of text on the Internet, not to mention the popularity of text-messaging on cell phones, we may well be reading more today than we did in the 1970s or 1980s, when television was our medium of choice. But it's a different kind of reading, and behind it lies a different kind of thinking — perhaps even a new sense of the self. "We are not only *what* we read," says Maryanne Wolf, a developmental psychologist at Tufts University and the author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*. "We are *how* we read."

Carr proceeds with caution, acknowledging right at the beginning that more studies are needed, because only multiple, reliable studies that point to the same conclusions can give real confidence ("we still await the long-term neurological and psychological experiments that will provide a definitive picture"). No single study can "prove" anything, but he cites one recent study — a five-year project, involving two research institutions — whose size and scope give us good reason to take it seriously. In scholarly writing, the report on the study would normally be fully cited, but Carr provides enough information to make it easy to find (and it is hyperlinked in the online version of Carr's essay). (The article is "Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future" by Peter Williams and Ian Rowlands.)

Carr summarizes that report carefully, emphasizing key findings and quoting two sentences that pertain most closely to his concerns. He acknowledges an argument that might be raised by a skeptical reader: we may in fact be reading *more* today than in the past. But he remains cautious and tentative: he doesn't want to overstate his views; his purpose is not to win a debate or even to persuade us of some settled position, but rather to raise questions and concerns. He does claim, however, that the reading we're doing on our phones and computers — of texts, e-mails, and Web pages, chiefly — is a "different kind" of reading from reading books, and reading differently means thinking differently; perhaps it even shapes our "sense of self" differently. Carr draws on another scholar for support, the developmental psychologist Maryanne Wolf, and he includes the title of her book, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, so that readers can check it for themselves. So he's bringing together two scholarly sources to raise questions about a trend that cannot definitely be verified at this point but is nevertheless a real concern — not only because other people are very possibly experiencing similar brain changes themselves, but because these changes may be just the start of a larger, deeper shift in our way of being and our capacities, and we might fail even to notice this shift before it becomes irreversible.



Try This Thinking Critically about a Text

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at a paragraph from Nicholas Carr's "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" Now read the rest of Carr's essay (p. 347), and choose one of the following options.

Option 1. Identify at least two other passages that seem to you to embody the values of the academy, as described on pages 4–6. Carr is a journalist, and although he is writing for a general audience here rather than a strictly scholarly community, his writing exhibits some of the characteristics of academic discourse. Identify at least two or three passages or sentences that, in your view, reveal these characteristics. In your notes, explain what qualities each passage exhibits and how it does so. Be prepared to discuss your conclusions in class.

Option 2. Using one of the three sample writing assignments from this introduction (pp. 11–12) as a general guide, write an assignment for Carr's essay that requires students to engage in critical thinking. It might be a formal essay assignment or a short, informal homework or even an in-class activity. But it should ask students to analyze the text, not merely repeat what they learned from it.

suffice, and a rapid, last-minute writing process will no longer work. The remainder of this book offers some strategies for developing ideas about your reading and for expressing these ideas in essay form.

"Live the Questions"

In *Letters to a Young Poet* (1903), the celebrated Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes to an unnamed younger poet, offering guidance and advice as the youth embarks on a lifelong journey that will demand enormous dedication and hard work. Rilke tells him that he will need patience, that he should not expect to find quick, easy solutions for his doubts and questions. To obtain answers, he will need to "live the questions."

> I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love *the questions themselves* as if they were