CHAPTER

5

Questioning a Text

A good question is never answered. It is not a bolt to be tightened into place but a seed to be planted and to bear more seed toward the hope of greening the landscape of idea.

—John Ciardi

Whereas the previous chapter focused on listening to a text *with the grain* in order to understand it as fully as possible, in this chapter we focus on questioning a text, which involves reading it analytically and skeptically, *against the grain*. If you think of listening to a text as the author's turn in a conversation, then you might think of questioning the text as your opportunity to respond to the text by interrogating it, raising points of agreement and disagreement, thinking critically about its argument and methods, and then talking back.

What It Means to Question a Text

Learning to question a text is central to your academic success in college. Your professors will ask you to engage with texts in ways that you may not be used to. They expect you to do more than just "bank" the knowledge you glean from reading; they expect you to use this knowledge to do various kinds of intellectual work—to offer your own interpretations or evaluations, to launch a

research project of your own, to synthesize the ideas among readings and draw independent conclusions.

However, questioning does not necessarily mean just fault-finding, and it certainly doesn't mean dismissing an author's ideas wholesale. Rather, it entails carefully interrogating a text's claims and evidence and its subtle forms of persuasion so that you can make sound judgments and offer thoughtful responses. Your job in critiquing a text is to be "critical." However, the term *critical* means "characterized by careful and exact evaluation and judgment," not simply by "disagreement" or "harsh judgment." In questioning a text, you bring your critical faculties as well as your experience, knowledge, and opinion to bear on it, but you do so in a way that treats the author's ideas fairly and makes judgments that can be supported by textual evidence.

This chapter offers you a repertoire of useful strategies to help you question a text and explore your responses to it. At the end of the chapter, we show you an analytical paper that student writer Jenny (whose work you followed in Chapter 4) wrote in response to an assignment calling for a rhetorical analysis of Larissa MacFarquhar's article, "Who Cares If Johnny Can't Read?" In that paper, Jenny uses the questioning strategies described in this chapter to analyze MacFarquhar's argument and methods. Our purpose is to demonstrate how such strategies can enable you to write critical analyses valued by college professors.

Strategies for Questioning a Text

The five questioning strategies in this section offer powerful ways to question a text's argument, assumptions, and methods by examining a writer's credibility, appeals to reason, strategies for engaging readers, and language as well as the text's ideology. The first three strategies examine an author's use of the three classical rhetorical appeals identified by Aristotle: *ethos* (the persuasive power of the author's credibility or character); *logos* (the persuasive power of the author's reasons, evidence, and logic); and *pathos* (the persuasive power of the author's appeal to the interests, emotions, and imagination of the audience). Although these three appeals interconnect and sometimes overlap—for example, a writer may use a touching anecdote both to establish credibility as an empathic person and to play on the reader's emotions—we introduce them separately in order to emphasize their distinct functions as means of persuasion. The last two questioning strategies that we present focus on language and ideology. Though not persuasive appeals themselves, language and ideology are the materials with which appeals are made. They merit separate treatment because they can reveal additional ways that texts attempt to influence readers.

EXAMINING A WRITER'S CREDIBILITY

To change readers' minds about something, writers must make themselves credible by creating an image of themselves that will gain their readers' confidence. In most cases, writers want to project themselves as knowledgeable, fair-minded, and trustworthy. To examine a writer's credibility, ask yourself, "Do I find this author believable and trustworthy? Why or why not?" Experienced readers always try to find out as much as possible about an author's background, interests, political leanings, and general worldview. Sometimes they have independent knowledge of the writer, either because the writer is well known or because the reading has a headnote or footnote describing the writer's credentials. Often, though, readers must discern the writer's personality and views from the text itself by examining content, tone, word choice, figurative language, organization, and other cues that help create an image of the writer in the reader's mind. Explicit questions to ask might include these: Does this writer seem knowledgeable? What does the writer like and dislike? What are this writer's biases and values? What seems to be the writer's mood? (Is he or she angry? Questioning? Meditative? Upset? Jovial?) What is the writer's approach to the topic? (Formal or informal? Logical or emotional? Scientific or personal?) What would it be like to spend time in this writer's company?

• *For Writing and Discussion*

ON YOUR OWN

1. To help you consider an author's image and credibility, try these activities the next time you are assigned a reading. Describe in words your image of this author as a person (or draw a sketch of this person). Then try to figure out what cues in the text produced this image for you. Finally, consider how this image of the writer leads you to ask more questions about the text. You might ask, for example, Why is this writer angry? Why does this writer use emotionally laden anecdotes rather than statistics to support his or her case? What is this writer afraid of?
2. Try these activities with Larissa MacFarquhar's article on page 65. What kind of an image does she create for herself in this text? How would you describe her in words or portray her in a drawing? Take a few minutes to find and jot down the cues in the text that create this image for you.

WITH YOUR CLASSMATES

Compare your impressions of MacFarquhar with those of your classmates. Do any contradictory traits come up? That is, do some people in the group interpret the textual cues differently? Some people, for example, might see a comment as "forthright" and "frank" while others might see it as "rude." What aspects of her character (as represented in the text) do you as a group agree on? What aspects do you disagree about?

EXAMINING A WRITER'S APPEALS TO REASON

Perhaps the most direct way that writers try to persuade readers is through logic or reason. To convince readers that their perspective is reasonable, skilled writers work to anticipate what their intended readers already believe and then

use those beliefs as a bridge to the writer's way of thinking. They support their claims through a combination of reasons and evidence.

For example, imagine a writer arguing for stricter gun control laws. This writer wants to root his argument in a belief or value that he and his readers already share, so he focuses on concerns for the safety of schoolchildren. The line of reasoning might go something like this: Because the ready availability of guns makes children no longer safe at school, we must pass strict gun control laws to limit access to guns. Of course, readers may or may not go along with this argument. Some readers, although they share the writer's concern for the safety of schoolchildren, might disagree at several points with the writer's logic: Is the availability of guns the main cause of gun violence at schools or are there other more compelling causes? Will stricter gun control laws really limit the availability of guns? If this same writer wished to use evidence to strengthen this argument, he might use statistics showing a correlation between the rise in the availability of guns and the rise in gun violence in schools. Here, the writer would be operating on the assumption that readers believe in facts and can be persuaded by these statistics that increased gun violence in schools is linked to the availability of firearms.

Experienced readers are alert to the logical strategies used by authors, and they have learned not to take what may appear as a "reasonable" argument at face value. In other words, they have learned to question or test this reasoning before assenting to the position the author wants them to take. To examine a writer's reasoning, think about two questions: (1) What perspective or position does the writer want me to take toward the topic? and (2) Do the writer's claims, reasons, and evidence convince me to take this perspective or position? Answering these questions requires you to examine the argument carefully. In Chapter 13, "Taking a Stand," we discuss the four elements of an argument—claims, reasons, evidence, and assumptions—in relation to the specific case of texts whose main purpose is persuasion. Here we briefly explain these four key elements as they generally apply to writers' use of reasoning for a range of rhetorical purposes.

Claims

The key points that a writer wants readers to accept are referred to as *claims*. For example, Anthony Weston's main claim in the passage on page 55 is this: "Ethical problems are seldom 'puzzles,' allowing specific and conclusive 'solutions.'" Or take another example. Early in her essay on page 65, MacFarquhar claims that "None of this [a series of beliefs about reading] is true." Once you have identified various claims in a text, then you can raise questions about them, especially about their wording and scope. Is the meaning of key words in the claim clear? Can particular words be interpreted in more than one way? Is the claim overstated? For example, one might ask of Weston's claim, "Aren't there some ethical problems that really *are* puzzles that have conclusive solutions?" Similarly, one could ask of MacFarquhar, "Are none of these beliefs true in any sense?"

Reasons

Reasons are subclaims that writers use to support a main claim. A reason can usually be linked to a claim with the subordinate conjunction "because." Consider

claim with reason: "We must pass gun control laws that limit access to guns [claim] because doing so will make children safer at school [reason]." This argument has initial appeal because it ties into the audience's belief that it is good to make children safe at school, but as we have discussed earlier, the causal links in the argument are open to question. To take another example, Weston offers readers the following reasons for accepting his approach to ethical problems:

> It is better to treat ethical issues as multifaceted problems rather than as puzzles with correct answers [claim]
>
> - because doing so allows more options for action in the present and change in the future
> - because doing so will allow for more inventiveness and experimentation
> - because doing so can make problems seem more manageable.

Certainly action, change, creativity, and manageability will be valued by many readers when it comes to solving difficult problems. However, without further proof or evidence, how do we know that Weston's approach will result in these positive outcomes? Moreover, some readers might not consider these outcomes positive at all: They might distrust such flexibility and prefer more precise moral guidelines.

As these examples illustrate, once you've identified the reasons that the author offers for various claims, then you can proceed to examine the adequacy of these reasons. Do they really support the claim? Do they tie into values, assumptions, and beliefs that the audience shares?

Evidence

The facts, examples, statistics, personal experience, and expert testimony that an author offers to support his or her view of the topic are referred to as *evidence*. To examine the author's use of evidence, consider whether the evidence is reliable, timely, and adequate to make the case. Or ask whether there is more than one way the evidence can be interpreted. When MacFarquhar argues that none of the "truisms" many people believe about reading are true, she relies heavily on evidence. She offers facts, statistics, expert testimony, example, and so forth throughout the essay mainly to refute positions with which she disagrees. Readers skeptical of MacFarquhar's argument might question her interpretations of some facts and statistics: Couldn't people just be saying that they are reading a book because they're embarrassed to admit they're not? Couldn't people have learned the name of the author of *Huckleberry Finn* from television and not from reading? Similarly, in our gun control example, skeptics could question whether the statistical correlation between rising availability of guns and rising gun violence in schools is in fact a causal relationship. The fact that A and B happened at the same time does not mean that A caused B.

Assumptions

In an argument, the often unstated values or beliefs that the writer expects read-

an argument by casting doubt on those assumptions. For example, when Weston argues that many issues don't have single right answers, he assumes the audience will value the flexibility of his approach. But many readers may fear that Weston's approach will lead to cultural relativism and the loss of absolute moral values. Similarly, part of the gun control argument is based on an assumption that gun control legislation will in fact limit the availability of guns. You can question this assumption by pointing to the existence of black markets.

EXAMINING A WRITER'S STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING READERS

The third of the classical rhetorical appeals is to an audience's interests and emotions—the process of engaging readers. How does a writer hook and keep your interest? How does a writer make you care about the subject? How does a writer tweak your emotions or connect an argument with ideas or beliefs that you value?

Rhetoricians have identified four basic ways that writers engage readers at an emotional or imaginative level: by urging the reader (1) to identify with the writer, (2) to identify with the topic or issue, (3) to identify with a certain group of fellow readers, or (4) to identify with certain interests, values, beliefs, and emotions. Let's look at each in turn.

In the first approach, writers wanting readers to identify with them might use an informal conversational tone to make a reader feel like the writer's buddy. Writers wanting to inspire respect and admiration might adopt a formal scholarly tone, choose intellectual words, or avoid "I" altogether by using the passive voice—"it was discovered that. . . ." In the second approach, writers wanting readers to identify with the topic or issue might explain the importance of the issue or try to engage readers' emotions. In urging community action against homelessness, for example, an author might present a wrenching anecdote about a homeless child. Other methods might be the use of vivid details, striking facts, emotion-laden terms and examples, or analogies that explain the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. In the third approach, writers try to get readers to identify with a certain in-group of people—fellow environmentalists or feminists or Republicans or even fellow intellectuals. Some writers seek to engage readers by creating a role for the reader to play in the text. For example, Weston invites readers to think of themselves as serious and intelligent, interested in tough ethical issues. In the fourth approach, writers appeal to readers' interests by getting them to identify with certain values and beliefs. For example, a politician arguing for changes in the way social security is funded might appeal to voters' desires to invest in high-yield stocks. If workers could pay lower social security taxes, they could invest the difference in the stock market. If you are aware of how these appeals work, you will be able to distance yourself from the argument in order to examine it more critically.

• *For Writing and Discussion*

Consider all of the ways in which Larissa MacFarquhar tries to engage readers of her text. What kinds of relationships does she establish with her readers? How does she try to make you care about her topic? How does she try to engage and keep your interest? What interests and values does she assume her audience shares? Do you consider yourself part of her intended audience? Why or why not?

EXAMINING A WRITER'S LANGUAGE

Besides looking at a text's classical appeals, you can question a text by paying careful attention to its language and style. Diction (which includes tone, word choice, and level of formality), figurative language, sentence structure and length, and even punctuation are all techniques through which a writer tries to influence readers' view of a subject. Consider, for example, the connotation of words. It makes a difference whether a writer calls a person "decisive" rather than "bossy," or an act "bold" rather than "rash." Words like "decisive" and "rash" are not facts; rather they present the writer's interpretation of a phenomenon. You can question a text by recognizing how the writer makes interpretive words seem like facts.

At times, you might overlook features of the writer's language because they seem natural rather than chosen. You probably seldom stop to think about the significance of, say, the use of italics or a series of short sentences or a particular metaphor. Readers rarely ask what's gained or lost by a writer saying something one way rather than another—for example, calling clear-cut logging in the Northwest a "rape" rather than a "timber extraction process."

Take, for example, the first paragraph of the passage from Weston's *Toward Better Problems* (p. 55). He uses a form of the negative three times, the first time placing *not* in italics. Through this typographical cue as well as repetition, he emphasizes the distinction between what he is suggesting and the usual proposals of practical ethicists. If he were speaking this line, his tone of voice would emphasize the word "not." Or consider the last two sentences in the first paragraph of MacFarquhar's essay: "Once, the story goes—in the 1950s, say—we read much more than we do now, and read the good stuff, the classics. Now, we don't care about reading anymore, we're barely literate, and television and computers are rendering books obsolete." Try reading those sentences aloud, paying particular attention to the punctuation. It's hard to say them out loud in anything but a mock serious, singsong, sarcastic tone of voice. Her tone tells us that these are not her own sentiments but rather sentiments she is ascribing to others. To signal her distance from and disdain for these views, she makes the claims sound vague and baseless ("once . . . in the 1950s, say"), exaggerated ("we're barely literate"), and trite (classics are "the good stuff"). By contrast, the voice in the next paragraph is very businesslike—the sentences are short and clipped; the information is presented in listlike fashion. We know it is this voice we are supposed to listen to. Through language that creates particular tones of voice, MacFarquhar tries to get readers to think about the subject—commonplace beliefs about reading—in the same way she does.

Experienced readers have developed antennae for recognizing these subtle uses of language to manipulate responses. One way to develop this sensitivity

you were examining paragraph 9 of MacFarquhar's essay, you might note her striking comparison of reading romance novels to drinking beer and getting a massage. What effect does she achieve through these specific comparisons? What would be different if she'd compared reading romances to going dancing or floating down a river?

• *For Writing and Discussion*

BACKGROUND

What follows below is the introduction to an article by freelance writer Bruce Barcott entitled "Blow-Up," which appeared in the February 1999 issue of *Outside,* a magazine described by its editors as "driven by the search for innovative ways to connect people to the world outdoors." After you have read the introduction, consider the following questions: What do you think is the author's persuasive intention in the whole article? How does the use of language in this introduction help contribute to the author's persuasive intentions? Pay attention to word choice, tone, sentence patterns, punctuation, figurative language, levels of diction, and other language features.

ON YOUR OWN

Write out your own analysis of the use of language in this passage.

WITH YOUR CLASSMATES

Share your analyses. See if you can reach consensus on the ways that this writer uses language for persuasive intent.

Introduction to "Blow-Up"

1 By God we built some dams!

2 We backed up the Kennebec in Maine and the Neuse in North Carolina and a hundred creeks and streams that once ran free but don't anymore. We stopped the Colorado with the Hoover, high as 35 houses, and because it pleased us we kept damming and diverting the Colorado until the river no longer reached the sea. We dammed our way out of the Great Depression with the Columbia's Grand Coulee, a dam so immense you had to borrow another fellow's mind because yours alone wasn't big enough to wrap around it. The Coulee concrete was not even hardened by the time we finished building a bigger one still, cleaving the Missouri with Fort Peck Dam, a structure second only to the Great Wall of China, a jaw-dropper so outsized they put it on the cover of the first issue of *Life,* and wasn't that a hell of a thing? We turned the Tennessee, the Colorado, the Columbia, and the Snake from continental arteries into still bathtubs. We dammed the Clearwater, the Boise, the Santiam, the Deschutes, the Skagit, the Willamette, and the McKenzie. We dammed the North Platte and the North Yuba, the South Platte and the South Yuba. We dammed the Blue, the Green, and the White as well. We dammed Basher Kill and Schuylkill; we dammed Salt River and we dammed Sugar Creek. We dammed Crystal River and Muddy Creek, the Little River and the Rio Grande. We dammed the Minnewawa and the Minnesota, and we dammed the Kalamazoo. We dammed the Swift and we dammed the Dead.

3 One day we looked up and saw 75,000 dams impounding more than half a million miles of river. We looked down and saw rivers scrubbed free of salmon and sturgeon and shad. Cold rivers ran warm, warm rivers ran cold, and fertile muddy banks turned barren.

4 And that's when we stopped talking about dams as instruments of holy progress and started talking about blowing them out of the water.

EXAMINING A TEXT'S IDEOLOGY

Another approach to questioning a text is to identify its *ideology,* a more technical term for the word *worldview,* which we introduced in the epigraph to Chapter 2. An ideology is a belief system—a coherent set of values and concepts through which we interpret the world. We sometimes think that ideology applies only to other people's worldviews, perhaps those of zealots blinded by a certain rigid set of beliefs. In fact, the term *ideology* applies to all of us. Each of us has our own beliefs, values, and particular ways of looking at the world. Our perspectives are inevitably shaped by family background, religion, personal experience, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. Moreover, it is true, each of us is to some extent "blinded" by our worldviews, by our way of seeing. For instance, middle-class persons in the United States, by and large, share a variety of common beliefs: "Hard work leads to success." "Owning your own home is an important good." "Punctuality, cleanliness, and respect for the privacy of others are important values." "All persons are created equal." If we are among the privileged in this country, we literally may not be able to see existing inequities and barriers to success faced by less privileged Americans.

If we are to become astute readers, we must look for signals that reveal the ideology informing a text. One way to begin doing so is to look for patterns of opposites or contrasts in a text (sometimes called binaries) and see which of the opposing terms the writer values more. We generally understand things through contrast with their opposites. We would have no concept of the term *masculine,* for example, without the contrasting term *feminine.* To understand light, we have to understand dark (or heavy). Our concept of liberal depends on its contrast with conservative. We could list hundreds of these opposites or binaries: civilized is that which is not primitive; free is that which is not enslaved; abnormal is that which is not normal; people of color are those who are not Caucasian. When these binaries occur as patterns in a text, one term is generally valued above the other. When you examine the pattern of those values, you begin to uncover the text's ideology. Sometimes the opposite or devalued terms are only implied, not even appearing in the text. Their absence helps mark the text's ideology.

Words, Concepts, and Ideas Valued by This Text	Words, Concepts, and Ideas Not Valued by This Text
2nd Amendment: the right to keep and bear arms	Bureaucratic bungling that will result in infringements on the right to keep and bear arms
Reliance on individual self to oppose an assailant	Reliance on police to oppose an assailant; administration of waiting periods would drain police resources
Conservatives	Liberals
Limited government	Active government
Examples of well-known shootings where waiting period would have been irrelevant—no statistical evidence of effectiveness	Examples of mentally ill persons with guns harming or killing people
Examples of criminals thwarted by individual citizens with guns	Examples of children killed by accidental shootings (excluded from text)
Hard time for hard crime, victim's rights	Plea bargaining, lax enforcement of existing gun control laws

FIGURE 5.1 Binary Patterns in Anti-Waiting Period Article

For example, suppose you are reading an article that opposes a proposed five-day waiting period for the purchase of handguns. If you make a list of valued words, concepts, or ideas and then match them against their nonvalued opposites, you might produce the two-column pattern shown in Figure 5.1. Lists such as these can help you clarify a text's ideology—in this case, conservative, individualistic, and supportive of the rights of individuals against the state.

Sometimes it is not immediately evident which terms are valued by a text and which ones are devalued. In such cases you can often identify a major contrast or binary in the text—for example, loggers versus tree huggers, school vouchers versus neighborhood schools, old ways versus new ways, scientific medicine versus alternative medicine. You can then determine which of the

Valued Terms and Ideas	Less Valued Terms and Ideas
New problems	New solutions to old problems
Complexity	Simplicity
Problems based on large and often vague regions of tension	Puzzles with correct answers
Problem solving as process	Episodic problem solving
Integrative values	Isolated values

FIGURE 5.2 Binary Patterns in Weston Excerpt

opposed terms is more valued. Once you can identify the main controlling binary, you can often line up other opposites or contrasts in the appropriate columns.

If you were to make a chart of the binaries in the excerpt from Weston's *Toward Better Problems* in Chapter 4 (p. 55) for example, it might look something like the pattern shown in Figure 5.2. If you were to use these oppositions to draw conclusions about the ideology informing Weston's text, you might say something like the following: "Weston's text seems informed by liberal values because he wants people to approach ethical problems such as abortion from many perspectives. He opposes the idea that there are black-and-white solutions to controversial ethical problems and that there are absolute principles or moral truths that can guide us in solving these problems."

• *For Writing and Discussion*

ON YOUR OWN

Return to the introduction to "Blow-Up" (p. 76). Make a two-column list of the binaries you find in that passage. Put the words, concepts, or ideas that the author values in the left column; place the opposing words, concepts, or ideas that the author doesn't value in the right column. (Remember, the nonvalued terms may only be implied and not actually appear in the text.) Then write a short analysis of the author's ideology, following the models we provided based on the anti-waiting period argument and Weston's text.

WITH YOUR CLASSMATES

Share your list of binaries and your analysis of Barcott's ideology. Try to reach consensus on both.

Exploring Your Responses to a Text

The previous section has explained five questioning strategies based on examining the details of a text. In this section we explain a different approach to interrogating a text, one that asks you simply to explore you own reactions to something you've read. This approach encourages you to record on paper your first gut reactions to a text and then, after reflection, your more sustained and considered responses. We describe in this section three easy-to-use strategies for helping you explore and articulate your own reaction to a text: (1) before/after reflections, (2) the believing and doubting game, and (3) interviewing the author.

BEFORE/AFTER REFLECTIONS

To consider how much a text has influenced your thinking, try writing out some before and after reflections by freewriting your responses to the following statements:

1. What effect is this text trying to have on me? What kind of change does the writer hope to make in my view of the subject?

Here is how Jenny answered this question after she first read Larissa MacFarquhar's article:

MacFarquhar wants me to reject certain commonplaces about reading—that Americans don't read much any more, for example—and to question other common assumptions such as the assumption that reading is always a more worthwhile activity than watching TV or that reading the classics is better than reading romance fiction.

2. Before reading this text, I believed this about the topic: _____. But after reading the text, my view has changed in these ways: _____.
3. Although the text has persuaded me that _____, I still have the following doubts: _____.
4. The most significant questions this text raises for me are these: _____.
5. The most important insights I have gotten from reading this text are these: _____.

• *For Writing and Discussion*

We gave you an example of Jenny's before/after reflection responding to the question "What kind of change does the writer hope to make in my view of the subject?" Based on your own reading of the MacFarquhar article, write out your own before/after reflections for Exercises 2 through 5. Share your responses with classmates.

THE BELIEVING AND DOUBTING GAME

Playing the believing and doubting game with a text is a powerful strategy both for recording your reaction to a text and for stimulating further thinking. Developed by writing theorist Peter Elbow, the believing and doubting game will stretch your thinking in surprising ways. You begin the game by freewriting all the reasons why you believe the writer's argument. Then you freewrite all the reasons why you doubt the same argument. In the "believe" portion, you try to look at the world through the text's perspective, adopting its ideology, actively supporting its ideas and values. You search your mind for any life experiences or memories of reading and research that help you sympathize with and support the author's point of view or ideas. If you find the author's ideas upsetting, dangerous, or threatening, the believing game may challenge—even disturb—you. It takes courage to try to believe views that you feel are dead wrong or contrary to your most deeply held beliefs. Nevertheless, to be a strong rhetorical reader, you need to look at the world through perspectives different from your own.

According to Elbow, the believing game helps you grow intellectually by letting you take in new and challenging ideas. In contrast, the doubting game helps you solidify your present identity by protecting you from outside ideas. Like an antiballistic missile, the doubting game lets you shoot down ideas that you don't like. The "doubt" portion of this game thus reverses the believing process. Here you try to think of all of the problems, limitations, or weaknesses in the author's argument. You brainstorm for personal experiences or memories from reading and research that refute or call into question the author's view. (Of course, the doubting game can be threatening if you already agree with the author's views. In such a case, doubting causes you to take a stand against your own beliefs.)

In the following example, student writer Jenny plays the believing and doubting game with MacFarquhar's article. Note how this exercise promotes critical thinking that goes beyond just expressing her subjective opinions. The results of playing the believing and doubting game are nearly always a bit surprising.

Jenny's Believing-Doubting Game Freewrite

Believe

It's easy for me to believe what MacFarquhar has to say about how Americans are not reading less than they used to but actually more, especially

books like romance fiction. I used to read every Sweet Valley High book I could get my hands on. As a kid, I also loved the Judy Blume books. It irritates me when people think that the only reading that counts is Shakespeare or something. I've learned a lot about life from reading Judy Blume's books. For example, Hey, God, It's Me Margaret is about a girl whose parents get divorced just like mine did. It really meant a lot to me to read about a character who had some of the same experiences and feelings I had. If reading is not about helping you get through life, then what is it about? Like MacFarquhar says, book clubs are a big thing nowadays and that proves that reading is as popular as ever. I heard that a professor here offered a literature course called "Oprah's Books," and so many students enrolled that they had to open up another section of the course. My next door neighbor and her middle-school-aged daughter even belong to a mother/daughter book club. MacFarquhar also presents a lot of facts about reading that are hard to argue with. Also, it has always irked me that people think you are an idiot if you like to watch a lot of TV. I think many shows today are as good as many books. Even though some people call it just "fluff," I love Friends and try not to miss it. Plus, I know that many educated adults (including some of my profs!) watch shows like the West Wing and NYPD Blue even though some people call them nighttime soap operas. I agree with MacFarquhar that TV and video games are not destroying people's love of reading and that Americans are reading more than ever!

Doubt

It's harder for me to doubt what MacFarquhar is saying because I generally agree with everything she has to say. I suppose some people might call into question her statistics. How reliable are the responses people give to Gallup polls? MacFarquhar seems to think facts and statistics absolutely prove that people read a lot—but can't facts and statistics be manipulated? I know a lot of my teachers feel that students' reading abilities and knowledge of the classics are not what they were in the past. I must admit that I did get a lot out of the "classics" that I have had to read in high school and college even though I wouldn't have read them on my own. I particularly remember reading Heart of Darkness in high school, and just recently reading The Great Gatsby. Recently, I was watching a television report on the famine in Africa, and the news report quoted a line from The Heart of Darkness—"The horror

of it all"—and it really made me feel good that I knew what the reporter was referring to. I also guess I can see why people are concerned that television and video games are replacing reading. My younger brother is just addicted to video games, and he never reads. I know, even for myself, sometimes I sit down to watch just one favorite program and end up watching the next show even though I'm not that interested in it and it isn't even that good. So I realize that TV can be addictive and a lot of it does feel more passive than reading.

INTERVIEWING THE AUTHOR

Another strategy for exploring your reactions to a text is to imagine interviewing the author and brainstorm the questions you might ask. This strategy urges you to identify the text's hot spots for you. These might be places where you want the author to clarify something, expand on something, or respond to your own objections or counterviews. Here are some questions Jenny developed to ask MacFarquhar.

Jenny's Interview Questions

Are Gallup polls really conclusive evidence that more Americans are reading? Couldn't people just be saying that they are reading a book out of embarrassment? You offer convincing evidence that the books that are the most popular in contemporary America are genre fiction and self-help books, but what do you think of this? Do you think it's a loss or problem that not many Americans read the classics? You seem to think that watching TV can be as valuable as reading. Why do you think that? What would you say to the accusation that you spend most of your time attacking others' positions without really offering your own opinions?

Exploring Your Responses to a Text

In Chapter 4, we looked at the summary and rhetorical précis of Larissa MacFarquhar's "Who Cares If Johnny Can't Read" written by Jenny, the first-year writing student whose work we have been following. We now present the paper Jenny wrote about MacFarquhar's essay in response to the assignment below. We have annotated Jenny's paper to highlight the questioning strategies that she uses to analyze the article as well as the rhetorical writing strategies she uses to support her analysis.

JENNY'S ASSIGNMENT TO EXAMINE RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Write an essay of approximately 500 to 600 words in which you examine a key rhetorical strategy (or several related ones) used by Larissa MacFarquhar to engage readers with her point of view regarding reading and its value. Your purpose is to offer your readers a new perspective on how the text works rhetorically, a perspective gleaned from your analysis of the text. Your essay should include the following: a brief summary that sets a context for the reader, a reason to be concerned about what the author says and how she says it, a thesis or conclusion that you've drawn from your analysis, and textual evidence that develops and supports your thesis.

JENNY'S PAPER

Who Cares If the Value of Books Is Overstated?

1 As a future elementary school teacher, interested particularly in language arts, I am always interested in stories about electronic books and the supposed decline in reading due to television and the Internet. Therefore, I was curious to see what Larissa MacFarquhar had to say about the subject in her essay, "Who Cares If Johnny Can't Read," published in the online magazine Slate in 1997. As the attention-getting title of her essay suggests, MacFarquhar's essay calls into question some common assumptions regarding reading, specifically that reading books is important for everyone and that reading books is better and more intellectually challenging than watching TV or surfing the Internet. But what is her opinion about the importance of reading? A one-line subtitle suggests that she doesn't think reading is very important: "The value of books is overstated." However, a close examination of MacFarquhar's essay reveals that she focuses more on disproving the ideas of others than she does on stating her own position clearly and supporting it convincingly.

States topic's relevance to her.

Offers one-sentence summary of LM article.

Identifies what appears to be LM's main claim.

States thesis.

2 Perhaps an editor at Slate, not MacFarquhar, wrote this subtitle, but in any case, its bold claim made me expect an explanation of what she meant, proof that it is true, and discussion of why we should care if it is true. The more I tried to understand the connection between this claim and

Notes audience expectations set up by LM's subtitle.

the ideas in the essay, the more confused I became until I realized what she was doing. For much of the essay, she is actually trying to prove that Americans do value books and to refute those who believe they don't. It is not until towards the end of the essay that she gets around to explaining the kind of valuing of books that she thinks is overstated.

3 MacFarquhar begins her essay by disputing those who claim that "we don't care about reading anymore." If judged by book sales and people's reading habits, Americans actually value books more than they used to, according to MacFarquhar. She says Americans bought over 2 billion books in 1992 and that a 1992 survey "found that the average adult American reads 11.2 books a year" (par. 3).* She goes on to say that currently there are more than 250,000 reading groups. This kind of valuing is proven by facts and statistics and is not, according to MacFarquhar, even open to dispute. Now, of course, some people might question the faith she puts in statistics. Perhaps people lied to the survey takers about how many books they read in a year. But for MacFarquhar, the fact that Americans do still care about books is a closed case.

Notes LM's use of facts and statistics.

Questions LM's faith in facts and statistics.

4 MacFarquhar offers further evidence that Americans still care about reading and books by comparing people's past love of reading with the current devotion of many readers, particularly readers of romance fiction. She quotes Irving Howe, who remembers the excitement about books that he witnessed as a child in Russia: "How can I describe to you . . . the excitement we shared when we would discuss Dostoyevsky?" (par. 4). According to MacFarquhar, people still feel this same excitement; it's just that they feel it for different sorts of books: "People still write like that about books. Of course, most aren't reading Dostoyevsky. The authors who attract thousands and thousands of readers who read everything they write and send letters to them begging

Identifies LM's use of comparison to refute idea that people no longer love to read.

Summarizes LM's point about change in readers' tastes.

*As in her summary in the previous chapter, Jenny's in-text citations refer to the paragraph numbers on the reprint of "Who Cares If Johnny Can't Read?" at the end of Chapter 4 (p. 65). The original online publication does not include either page or paragraph numbers.

Observes that LM belittles both past and current book lovers.

for more seem to be the authors of genre fictions—romances, science fiction, and mysteries" (par. 5). Although she is openly sarcastic about what Howe has to say, calling his ideas "fossils of a bygone age," and she seems to make fun of the romance readers who sent their favorite romance writer, Debbie Macomber, baby blankets and a homemade Christmas stocking for her granddaughter, the fact that they and others love and value books can't be overstated. Her own statistics show that it's a matter of fact, proven by romance book sale statistics and reader testimony.

5 Toward the end of the essay, MacFarquhar finally gets around to discussing the kind of valuing that she thinks is overstated. Those who claim that reading in and of itself offers unique intellectual and cultural benefits are the ones who she believes overvalue reading. In explaining the fears of many that television and computers will make books obsolete, MacFarquhar writes, "books have acquired a reputation for education and even moral worthiness" (par. 3). To illustrate this particular view of books, she offers two examples. First, she refers to Sven Birkerts's The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age, published in 1994, as "a classic example of this genre" (par. 12). Second, she quotes at length Time critic Robert Hughes, who describes reading as a "collaborative act, in which your imagination goes halfway to meet the author's" (par. 12). He argues that reading is "far better for the imagination" than television (par. 12). Referring to these claims about the value of books as "sentimental" and "mysterious," she challenges Hughes's contention that books stimulate the imagination by citing her own experience: "I cannot remember ever visualizing a book's characters, but . . . perhaps I'm in the minority" (par. 13). Her own experience is actually the only evidence she offers to disprove Hughes's claims in favor of reading. While she claims that people like Hughes and Birkerts offer no proof for their claims, the same could be said of her.

Identifies LM's main claim.

Identifies examples that LM uses to back up claim.

Criticizes LM's reliance on personal experience.

In conclusion, MacFarquhar spends the majority of her essay contradicting the mistaken idea that Americans don't value books and does not get to what appears to be her main claim until toward the end of the essay. Even at this point, she offers little in the way of proof that these claims are "overstated." So, while it is clear that MacFarquhar cares about what she considers some people's overstatements about the benefits of reading, it is not clear that others share her view or that we, as readers, should care about whether the value of books is overstated.

6 Concludes that LM's argument is insufficiently developed and unconvincing.

Work Cited

MacFarquhar, Larissa. "Who Cares If Johnny Can't Read?" Slate 16 Apr. 1997. Rpt. in Reading Rhetorically. Ed. John C. Bean, Virginia A. Chappell, and Alice M. Gillam. New York: Longman, 2002. 65–67.

• *For Writing and Discussion*

ON YOUR OWN

In your reading log, write a response to Jenny's paper. How does her reading of MacFarquhar compare with yours? What issues or ideas does she leave out? Is hers a fair criticism of the essay? Does she back up her analysis with adequate and convincing evidence? If you had been given the same assignment, what rhetorical aspects of the text would you have written about?

WITH YOUR CLASSMATES

Share your responses with classmates. Working as a whole class or in small groups, list some additional ideas or insights that Jenny might have incorporated into her paper.

Summary

This chapter has explained strategies for questioning a text, which involves carefully interrogating a text's argument and methods in order to critique it and join its conversation. We presented questioning strategies for examining (1) the writer's credibility, (2) the argument's reasoning and logic, (3) the writer's

appeals to the audience's interests and emotions, (4) the text's language, and (5) the text's ideology. We then explained three easy-to-use methods for exploring your own reactions to a text: writing out before/after responses, playing the believing and doubting game, and imagining an interview with the author. Finally we presented Jenny's rhetorical analysis of MacFarquhar's article. This essay showed how the questioning strategies described in this chapter can help you write a college-level analysis of a text.

PART

The Rhetorical Reader as Writer