# Contemporary Issues and Decisions

## Reading, Writing, and Thinking in Today's World

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# Contents

# Preface

## AN OVERVIEW

Contemporary America has become incredibly complex and, as such, has created many situations that older generations have not been exposed to in decades past and that require young adults to consider how they must respond. Our lives in post-September 11 America have been shaped differently, and terrorism in the United States has become a common word to everyone. Consequently, issues such as imminent war or attacks on America, dealing with terrorists, as well as supporting our country have become almost daily topics of conversation at some level. Despite these problems, Americans continue to take time to relax and escape the tension and stress created by international politics and affairs.

*Contemporary Issues and Decisions* is a textbook that does not ignore those serious concerns that students are surrounded by, but it does not dwell on them either. Although there is an article that questions whether women should be required to register for the draft, "Uncle Sam and Aunt Samantha," by Anna Quindlen; one that points out the greatness of America, "What's Great about This Country," by Andy Warhol; and one that describes the impact of September 11 on today's youth, "Young in a Year of Fear," by Anna Quindlen, the text is not all doom and gloom. *Contemporary Issues and Decisions* also presents articles that are light-hearted: "Tools," by Anne Perrin; "Conquering Car Clutter," by Harriet Schechter; "The Power of Cool," by Jack Solomon; and "The Extendable Fork," by Calvin Trillin. Then there are two articles that discuss the past while reminding readers about today's world and also adding to themes covered in other articles. In "War Memories," interviewees who survived World War II recall special moments during that historical event, and in "Chief Seattle's Speech Reported by Dr. Henry Smith," Chief Seattle reminds contemporary readers about the

importance of the environment. The remainder of the articles vary in themes, and the authors and photographers represent a variety of cultures; however, this text is not organized thematically.

The content is divided into two parts: **The Reading–Writing Connection** and **Writing the Essay.** In Part One (Chapters 1–11), I lay down the foundation for writing the different patterns of development as well as what the audience can expect while reading the modes. I provide sample paragraphs and, in some cases, sample essays that include not only the pattern being discussed but also other patterns to develop the essay further. Chapter 11, Reading and Writing about Visual Literacy, extends the concept of reading and allows students to incorporate multiple patterns of development into their writing and to use high-level thinking skills to analyze the photographs and ads they "read."

In Part Two, I give instruction on how to write the informative essay (Chapter 12) and the persuasive and argumentative essay (Chapter 13). Much of the rhetorical information is covered in Chapter 10, Writing Persuasion and Argument, which also provide paragraph and essay models. Chapter 13 extends the discussion to explain how to write a fully developed essay.

## PEDAGOGY

*Contemporary Issues and Decisions,* like its predecessor, *Hands Across Borders,* (2002) is founded on several premises. The first is that good writers are good readers; therefore, I begin Chapters 2–10 with a section on what readers can expect when they know they will be reading a particular mode or pattern of development. If writers are made aware of what their audience is expecting and have to analyze sample texts themselves, they should be able to transfer that knowledge into the writing aspect of that chapter. Although it may seem as though there is repetition when moving into the writing section of each chapter, the approach is the key to making the instruction different. In the reading section, the approach is for *readers,* whereas the writing section uses an approach for *writers.* To help students in both the reading and writing of each pattern or approach I have included questions that (1) focus on what readers should expect from the article, (2) require deeper reading, and (3) are about the structure and style of each article; I have also provided prompts that offer topics for writing assignments based on the topic of the article. By providing three or four articles in each section, students have an opportunity to read material that is developed primarily in one pattern of development and that also includes other patterns. They can then write a paragraph or extended assignment using each article as a model.

Another premise is that writing is a skill; therefore, the instructional material begins with the construction of the basic elements of composition, provides models, gives students opportunities to practice each element, and progresses to increasingly more complex assignments. The current philosophy concerning composition is to move away from teaching students to write in a particular mode or pattern of development because it "freezes" students into that mode and because "real" writing incorporates different patterns rather than a single approach. I completely agree; however, this text is constructed in a way that requires students to be familiar with many modes so that they will know how to write them and incorporate them into their writing. Many college and university students I have taught are unfamiliar with the patterns and when asked to discuss them reply with comments such as, "I have never heard of that before," or "My other teachers never taught me about that." Even when shown the pattern in sample writings, they realize that they cannot recognize it as a way to develop their ideas without first being taught. By making them aware of the pattern, the instructor will help the student writer begin to practice using a variety of development strategies in their papers. With a little direction, student writers will also become cognizant of how the modes work in published writings.

I also base my instructional material on Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Learning, from *Taxomy of Educational Objectives: Cognitive Domain* (1956) beginning with knowledge-level instruction and moving up the hierarchy of skills until students can analyze and evaluate their own writing as well as peer writing. It is similar to learning any skill. For example, Lance Armstrong, the seven-time winner of the Tour de France bicycle race, would not have started bicycle racing by entering that highly competitive race for experienced riders. He had to learn the skill, techniques, and timing; he had to practice and train in other areas of fitness and agility, and he had to begin with other races until he worked his way to the top of his sport. Another sport that requires learning basics is basketball. Whether we are talking about men's or women's basketball, players must learn to shoot a free throw. The old cliché that many games are won or lost at the line is absolutely true. Regardless of the fancy footwork, the impressive shots, or the number of slam-dunks that players may exhibit, if they can't sink a free throw in a crucial moment, their lack of basic skills loses the game. The approach *Contemporary Issues and Decisions* takes is similar: Students learn the basics, practice them, analyze how others use them in their works, incorporate them into their own writing, and determine their success through peer evaluations. Through revision, students continue to practice until they have mastered a particular weakness. As I point out to students, learning a skill is behavior modification—to show that they have learned, they must improve the way they write.

A third premise this text assumes is that in learning to write, students should learn a formalized structure and write a thesis-driven essay. This is another traditional concept some instructors reject, believing that we are placing "artificial" impositions upon a student's writing. This text definitely leans toward a traditional construction of formal writing that is usually required in exit writing proficiency exams, which are administered in some institutions before a student can move from a developmental course into an academic one and before a student can graduate. To offset the feeling of being stifled by structure, students are given various opportunities for prewriting activities that encourage them to generate ideas and reader-response entries, which are generally written informally unless the instructor specifies otherwise. There are also various questions and writing assignments at the end of each section and each chapter that allow for formal and informal writing.

The final premise is that students should not only have to think about what they have to read and write, but they should also have to reflect on their understanding and their progress. At the end of each chapter, I have provided time for reflection about how students see growth and/or change in their writing. If they can see growth taking place, then they are analyzing their own work and abilities. They have several questions to answer to help them analyze their own work, and the questions are the same for each kind of writing pattern they learned to write.

The instructional material is user-friendly; however, a couple of points need to be made about pronoun usage here: (1) When I am writing generally about student problems or giving a general explanation, I use the third person. However, when I am giving directions or instructions, I address students directly in the second person; and (2) I try to escape the cumbersome "he or she" and the vague "they/them" and avoid gender bias by alternating between masculine and feminine pronouns.

Another way I have made the reading student-friendly is to incorporate the use of boxes that summarize lengthy material in a concise point-by-point system. This system is especially evident in the opening chapter on learning styles. Although students use a variety of cognitive strategies and styles, I have described one of the easier and more popular ways to determine how students learn so that users of this book might acquire some insight into their strengths and weaknesses. I have also included a chapter on how to "read" photographs and advertisements. Students will have an opportunity to write about black and white pictures collected in one chapter instead of interspersed throughout the text. The chapter comes at the end of Part One so that they can practice various rhetorical modes when reading and writing about the pictures. Finally, students can use the glossary for composition terms.

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Writing a book might be a lonely project for some writers; however, I must admit that for me it is not. I cannot begin to thank the number of students who have unknowingly helped me in this endeavor. Students who have cried in my office over papers that have troubled them, over topics that have distressed them, and over issues unrelated to the writing of papers have influenced many of the pointers I have given and ideas I have offered. My own writing professors will probably find some of their techniques or ideas modified to fit the needs of this book. Colleagues, especially Dr. Irene Clark and Dr. Pat Murray, current and former directors of the Writing Program at California State University, Northridge, have unknowingly contributed their wisdom and experience to much of what I believe about writing and teaching writing. They are intellectual mentors whose words I recalled while I was writing. Another mentor, friend, and former professor will always be an inspiration to me: Dr. Terrell Dixon. I sincerely thank him for trusting me with his texts, preparing me for the adventures I have had creating my own texts, teaching me about publishing, and allowing me to become his friend and colleague.

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I hope that *Contemporary Issues and Decisions: Reading, Writing, and Thinking in Today's World* will take some of the mystery out of writing for many of our students. It is written primarily with the student reader/writer in mind and with the instructor as a partner in the teaching of writing. I am open to constructive criticism, so if you have any suggestions, recommendations for new or other articles that have worked well for you, or any general comments, please feel free to write to me or e-mail me, and I will respond, for I, too, love to write. To borrow Anne Perrin's favorite expression, break a pencil.

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