

# 4

## Synthesizing Sources Entering the Conversation

We all draw on the ideas of others as we develop our own positions, regardless of the topic. Whether you are explaining your opinion about an issue specific to your community (such as whether to allow skateboarding in public parks), or you are developing a position on a national or global issue (such as whether to change immigration policies), you should know as much as possible about the topic. Rather than make a quick response that reflects an opinion based only on what you already know, you must research and read sources — what others have written. Then you can develop your own *informed* opinion, a measured response that considers multiple perspectives and possibilities. We call this process **synthesis**, which involves considering various viewpoints in order to create a new and more informed viewpoint.

Think of it this way: You show up at a party. There are a dozen different conversations going on. You approach one group of people who are having a heated debate. You'll need to listen for a while to understand what the specific topic is, what has already been said, who is taking what side, and what they're not saying. Then, by either expanding on what others are saying, challenging what others are saying, or filling in a gap in their understanding, you will begin to enter this conversation and make your own contribution. And that's what synthesis is all about: entering the conversation that society is having about a topic. You enter the conversation by carefully reading and understanding the perspectives and ideas surrounding an issue, examining your own ideas on the matter, and then synthesizing these views into a more informed position than the one you began with.

When you're learning about a subject, look for reliable sources. Be aware of the **bias** that a source brings to the topic. Consider the speaker: What does he or she believe in? How might the speaker's position provide personal gain? Don't look for a pro-and-con debate that represents only polarized views; look for a range of viewpoints. This might sound like a lot to keep in mind, but don't worry, you work with sources all the time. When you decide to buy a new cell phone, you gather information by exploring different sources. You might consult *Consumer Reports* and other technology magazines. You'd compare prices and technical specs. You'd

ask your friends for their opinions and experiences, and you might go to a computer store and talk with the experts. You might read reviews online or use forums as a quick source for many opinions. But you might not talk to your grandfather, who may be new to cell phones himself, nor would you get all of your information from a salesperson, who likely works on commission. The final result of your inquiry is a purchase, not an essay, but you just synthesized a range of sources in order to make the argument to yourself that the phone you chose is the best fit for you.

#### • ACTIVITY •

Write a brief paragraph about a time that you used multiple sources to help make a decision. You can choose something as simple as a decision about which movie to see or which shoes to purchase or as serious as which colleges to apply to. Discuss how each source contributed to your decision and how you decided which ones were more or less influential. You may consult written sources as well as more informal ones such as conversations.

## Using Sources to Inform an Argument

As we discussed in Chapter 3, many different types of evidence can serve to support an argument. But it is important to remember that your sources should enhance, not replace, your argument. You may worry that the ideas of others are so persuasive that you have nothing new to say. Or you may think that the more sources you cite, the more impressed your reader (especially your teacher) will be. But as you develop your skills in writing synthesis essays, you will find that the sources inform your own ideas and demonstrate your understanding of opposing views. What *you* have to say is the main event; *your* position is central.

In the following example, Laura Hillenbrand, author of *Seabiscuit*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about a champion racehorse who beat the odds, maintains her own voice throughout even when she uses the work of experts to help make a point. (She identifies them in a section at the end of the book.) But whether she is quoting directly or paraphrasing, she never gets lost in the sources or allows them to overwhelm her ideas.

### from *Seabiscuit*

LAURA HILLENBRAND

To pilot a racehorse is to ride a half-ton catapult. It is without question one of the most formidable feats in sport. The extraordinary athleticism of the jockey is unparalleled: A study of the elements of athleticism conducted by Los Angeles exercise physiologists and physicians found that of all major sports competitors, jockeys may be, pound for pound, the best overall athletes. They have to be. To begin with, there are the

demands on balance, coordination, and reflex. A horse's body is a constantly shifting topography, with a bobbing head and neck and roiling muscle over the shoulders, back, and rump. On a running horse, a jockey does not sit in the saddle, he crouches over it, leaning all of his weight on his toes, which rest on the thin metal bases of stirrups dangling about a foot from the horse's topline. When a horse is in full stride, the only parts of the jockey that are in continuous contact with the animal are the insides of the feet and ankles—everything else is balanced in midair. In other words, jockeys squat on the pitching backs of their mounts, a task much like perching on the grille of a car while it speeds down a twisting, potholed freeway in traffic. The stance is, in the words of University of North Carolina researchers, "a situation of dynamic imbalance and ballistic opportunity." The center of balance is so narrow that if jockeys shift only slightly rearward, they will flip right off the back. If they tip more than a few inches forward, a fall is almost inevitable. A thoroughbred's neck, while broad from top to bottom, is surprisingly narrow in width, like the body of a fish. Pitching up and down as the horse runs, it offers little for the jockey to grab to avoid plunging to the ground and under the horse's hooves.

*Jockey* (video), Tel-Air Productions, 1980.

A. E. Waller et al., "Jockey Injuries in the United States," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 2000; vol. 283, no. 10.

Rather than citing her sources within the text, Hillenbrand includes the information about the sources she cites at the end of her book. The first item is a videotape about the study by Los Angeles exercise physiologists and physicians; the second is an article in a medical journal. Both acknowledge that she turned to authorities—sources—to deepen and supplement her own knowledge about the mechanics and physics of how a racehorse and a jockey move as one entity.

### • ACTIVITY •

In the following passage from *A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*, Gerald L. Early discusses the complex character of Jackie Robinson, the first black athlete to play in major league baseball. What is the purpose of the sources Early chooses to include? How do they enhance or detract from his own voice? What is the purpose of each of the notes documenting the sources?

#### from *A Level Playing Field*

GERALD L. EARLY

But 1949 was also Robinson's year of liberation. According to Branch Rickey, known as the Mahatma by sportswriters, the Dodgers executive who signed Robinson and who pushed for integration: "For three years [that was the

agreement] this boy was to turn the other cheek. He did, day after day, until he had no other to turn. They were both beat off. There were slight slip-ups on occasion in that first year in Montreal."<sup>1</sup>

Robinson had agreed to ignore all slights, insults, and abuses that he endured on the playing field during his first three years as a professional ballplayer in the white leagues. This generated, naturally, a certain public sympathy, as Robinson did, indeed, endure much abuse, and he did not have a natural or an easy camaraderie with most of his white teammates. He became almost a perfect Gandhi-like figure of sacrifice and forbearance, and he created the paradigm for how integration was to proceed in the United States in the 1950s and early 1960s—the Noble Negro who, through his nobility, a mystical product of his American heritage of suffering but enduring devotion to the foundational principles of American life, legitimates white institutions as he integrates them. As the *New York Times* put it in 1950, “The going wasn’t easy. Jackie Robinson met open or covert hostility with the spirit of a gallant gentleman. He kept his temper, he kept his poise and he played good baseball. Now he has won his battle. No fan threatens to riot, no player threatens to go on strike when Jackie Robinson, or any one of several Negroes, takes the field.”<sup>2</sup> This is the Robinson that is always remembered when his career is reexamined today. He is almost always sentimentalized.

But it must be remembered that Robinson played major league baseball with the Dodgers for ten years, only two of which were under this agreement. (The agreement also included the year in Montreal.) So for most of his career as a big league ballplayer, Robinson did not act in any sort of self-sacrificing non-violent way. He was a tough, almost chip-on-the-shoulder player, a particularly aggressive athlete who usually took umbrage at the least slight or unfairness he felt on the field. He understood that high-performance sports were about intimidation, and he was not about to be intimidated.<sup>3</sup>

1. Branch Rickey, with Robert Riger, *The American Diamond: A Documentary of the Game of Baseball* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), p. 46.

2. “Jackie Robinson’s New Honor,” *New York Times*, December 8, 1950.

3. “In 1950, and the years to come, Jack battled with umpires over matters not simply of judgment but of ethics, in his growing belief that the umpires, all white, were abusing their power in order to put him in his place.” See Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, p. 229; see also Jackie Robinson, “Now I Know Why They Boo Me!” *Look*, January 25, 1955, pp. 22–28.

## Using Sources to Appeal to an Audience

If you were writing an in-class essay, would you take the time to put together a bibliography? Of course not. But you would prepare a bibliography for a formal research paper because that writing has a different purpose and the audience has different expectations. A writer must analyze the rhetorical situation in order to

determine what is appropriate, even when it comes to sources and documentation. (See the rhetorical triangle, p. 4.)

Now let's consider a topic and examine how sources were used and identified for three different audiences. The following excerpts are from three pieces about indirect speech by the linguist and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker.

The first example is from an article in *Time* magazine written for a general audience of readers interested primarily in understanding the basics of Pinker's ideas. (The rest of this article appears on pp. 745–8.)

### from *Words Don't Mean What They Mean*

Why don't people just say what they mean? The reason is that conversational partners are not modems downloading information into each other's brains. People are very, very touchy about their relationships. Whenever you speak to someone, you are presuming the two of you have a certain degree of familiarity—which your words might alter. So every sentence has to do two things at once: convey a message and continue to negotiate that relationship.

The clearest example is ordinary politeness. When you are at a dinner party and want the salt, you don't blurt out, "Gimme the salt." Rather, you use what linguists call a whimperative, as in "Do you think you could pass the salt?" or "If you could pass the salt, that would be awesome."

Taken literally, these sentences are inane. The second is an overstatement, and the answer to the first is obvious. Fortunately, the hearer assumes that the speaker is rational and listens between the lines. Yes, your point is to request the salt, but you're doing it in such a way that first takes care to establish what linguists call "felicity conditions," or the prerequisites to making a sensible request. The underlying rationale is that the hearer not be given a command but simply be asked or advised about one of the necessary conditions for passing the salt. Your goal is to have your need satisfied without treating the listener as a flunky who can be bossed around at will.

Note that there are no formal sources cited. The technical terms that are introduced—*whimperative* and *felicity conditions*—are more playful than technical, and Pinker makes no attempt to cite the academic origin of these terms or the other ideas in this article. He does not go into the research that led to these conclusions. His goal in this brief article for the general reader is to inform and keep moving.

The audience for Pinker's book *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* is interested in exploring his subject more deeply, and his use and citation of sources becomes correspondingly more extensive and formal.

### from *The Stuff of Thought*

The double message conveyed with an implicature is nowhere put to greater use than in the commonest kind of indirect speech of all, politeness. Politeness in linguistics does not refer to social etiquette, like eating your peas without using your knife,

but to the countless adjustments that speakers make to avoid the equally countless ways that their listeners might be put off. People are very, very touchy, and speakers go to great lengths not to step on their toes. In their magisterial work *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*, the anthropologists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson . . . extended Grice's theory by showing how people all over the world use politeness to lubricate their social interactions.<sup>1</sup>

Politeness Theory begins with Erving Goffman's observation that when people interact they constantly worry about maintaining a nebulous yet vital commodity called "face" (from the idiom "to save face").<sup>2</sup> Goffman defined face as a positive social value that a person claims for himself. Brown and Levinson divide it into positive face, the desire to be approved (specifically, that other people want for you what you want for yourself), and negative face, the desire to be unimpeded or autonomous. The terminology, though clumsy, points to a fundamental duality in social life, which has been discovered in many guises and goes by many names: solidarity and status, connection and autonomy, communion and agency, intimacy and power, communal sharing and authority ranking.<sup>3</sup>

1. Brown & Levinson, 1987b. See also Brown, 1987; Brown & Gilman, 1972; Fraser, 1990; Green, 1996; Holtgraves, 2002.

2. Goffman, 1967.

3. Fiske, 1992; Fiske, 2004; Haslam, 2004; Holtgraves, 2002.

While this is not a scientific study, it is also not a brief and breezy article in a magazine with a very wide readership. The audience of a book of this sort has some interest in this topic—they have chosen to read a whole book on linguistics and cognition—and because of that, Pinker feels comfortable not just summarizing the latest thinking in the field, but introducing terminology common to research in linguistics and tracing the origins of concepts back to their academic origins. He also formally (and fully) cites his sources using extensive endnotes that appear at the back of the book.

Finally, take a look at this selection from a scholarly article by Pinker in the academic journal *Intercultural Pragmatics*.

### **from *The Evolutionary Social Psychology of Off-Record Indirect Speech Acts***

The double message conveyed with an implicature is nowhere put to greater use than in the commonest kind of indirect speech, politeness. In their seminal work *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*, Brown and Levinson (1987b) extended Grice's theory by showing how people in many (perhaps all) cultures use politeness to lubricate their social interactions.

Politeness Theory begins with Goffman's (1967) observation that when people interact they constantly worry about maintaining a commodity called "face" (from the idiom "to save face"). Goffman defined face as a positive social value that a person claims for himself. Brown and Levinson divide it into positive face, the desire

to be approved (specifically, that other people want for you what you want for yourself), and negative face, the desire to be unimpeded or autonomous. The terminology points to a fundamental duality in social life which goes by many names: solidarity and status, connection and autonomy, communion and agency, intimacy and power, communal sharing and authority ranking (Fiske 1992, 2004; Haslam 2004; Holtgraves 2002). Later we will see how these wants come from two of the three major social relations in human life.

Brown and Levinson argue that Grice's Cooperative Principle applies to the maintenance of face as well as to the communication of data. Conversationalists work together, each trying to maintain his own face and the face of his partner. The challenge is that most kinds of speech pose at least some threat to the face of the hearer. The mere act of initiating a conversation imposes a demand on the hearer's time and attention. Issuing an imperative challenges her status and autonomy. Making a request puts her in the position where she might have to refuse, earning her a reputation as stingy or selfish. Telling something to someone implies that she was ignorant of the fact in the first place. And then there are criticisms, boasts, interruptions, outbursts, the telling of bad news, and the broaching of divisive topics, all of which can injure the hearer's face directly.

At the same time, people have to get on with the business of life, and in doing so they have to convey requests and news and complaints. The solution is to make amends with politeness: the speaker sugarcoats his utterances with niceties that reaffirm his concern for the hearer or that acknowledge her autonomy. Brown and Levinson call the stratagems positive and negative politeness, though better terms are sympathy and deference.

### References

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- Grice, Herbert P. 1975. Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax & Semantics* Vol. 3: Speech acts. New York: Academic Press.
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- Holtgraves, Tom M. 2002. *Language as social action*. Mahwah: Erlbaum Associates.

Notice that for this academic audience of researchers and scholars who bring a good deal of prior knowledge to the text, Pinker chooses other scholarly works as his

sources and documents them thoroughly in a style that gives those sources more emphasis. Rather than just putting the citations at the back of the book, he embeds the source names throughout for direct reference and then includes a detailed Works Cited list at the end of the article. Many readers, likely familiar with these sources, will find Pinker's text more authoritative because he has included them.

As you can see, the type of evidence and the way it is documented depends on audience and situation. But what does all of this have to do with the writing you will be doing? The texts we have examined in this chapter were written by journalists, professors, and scholars; the sources they use and the ways they document them are appropriate for their audiences. In school, you have probably written essays for which you were required to use outside sources, sources that were assigned to you, or sources that were part of your classroom readings. Keep in mind that your goal in a synthesis essay is the same as that of professional writers: to use sources to support and illustrate your own ideas and to establish your credibility as a reasonable and informed writer. Whether your teacher wants you to make informal in-text citations or use formal in-text parenthetical documentation and an end-of-paper Works Cited list, as prescribed by the Modern Language Association (MLA), you must document sources to give credit where credit is due.

#### • ACTIVITY •

To set themselves apart, columnists for print and online publications establish a viewpoint and style. The types of sources they use and the way they use them are part of that style. Using three columns by one writer, analyze the columnist's audience by examining the type of sources he or she uses. You might consider a political commentator, a sportswriter, a movie or music reviewer, or a columnist in a local publication.



## Conversation

### Mandatory Community Service

In this section, we will walk you through the process of writing a synthesis essay: understanding the task, analyzing a series of readings, and writing an argument using them.

Here is your prompt:

Using the following documents on community service requirements in high schools, write an essay explaining whether you believe that high schools in general—or your specific school or district—should make community service mandatory. Incorporate references to or quotations from a minimum of three of these sources in your essay.

Before reading the texts, think about how the sources will help you complete the assignment. As we've discussed, sources can illustrate or support your own ideas. If you think that community service requirements are worthwhile, then you can look to your sources to help you make that point. But it's important not to reject texts that disagree with your position or are not directly relevant to it. In fact, you might use a text that presents an opinion in opposition to yours as a counterargument, and then concede and refute it. Most important, keep an open mind while you read the sources so your thesis shows that you understand the complexity of the subject of community service.

#### Sources

1. Neil Howe and William Strauss, from *Millennials Rising*
2. The Dalton School, *Community Service Mission Statement*
3. *Detroit News*, *Volunteering Opens Teen's Eyes to Nursing*
4. Dennis Chaptman, *Study: "Resume Padding" Prevalent in College-Bound Students Who Volunteer*
5. Arthur Stukas, Mark Snyder, and E. Gil Clary, from *The Effects of "Mandatory Volunteerism" on Intentions to Volunteer*
6. Mark Hugo Lopez, from *Youth Attitudes toward Civic Education and Community Service Requirements*

#### 1. from *Millennials Rising*

NEIL HOWE AND WILLIAM STRAUSS

The following excerpt from a 2000 book by two social historians tries to define the characteristics of Americans who are coming of age in a new millennium.

The definition of “community service” has morphed from one generation to the next, dating back to World War II. For the Silent Generation [the generation that came of age in the 1940s], community deed-doing was channeled by the Selective Service law, which pushed young males toward socially acceptable deferments such as teaching, science, or even marriage. For leading-edge Boomers, the term “community service” often meant cleaning hospital bedpans to avoid Vietnam—or for the more radically minded, spurring oppressed neighborhoods to vent their grievances against the “establishment.” When the draft ended, in 1973, first-wave Boomers had eliminated mandatory civic duty for their later cohorts and the generation to follow. Growing up in the era of the Volunteer Army, Gen Xers developed their own ethic of volunteerism, de-emphasizing great crusades in favor of simple acts of charity to help needy people. For teenagers, “community service” came to mean punishment for drunk drivers and Breakfast Club miscreants.

By the Millennial era [people born between 1982 and 2002], the notion of volunteering gave way to a more compulsory “service learning,” which is now often required for graduation from middle or high school. Bolstered by Acts of Congress in 1990 and 1993, which created the Learn and Serve America program, the integration of community service with academic study has spread to schools everywhere. From 1984 to 1999, the share of high schools offering any kind of community service program grew from 17 to 83 percent, and the share with “service learning” grew from 9 to 46 percent. Two-thirds of all public schools at all grade levels now have students engaged in community work, often . . . as part of the curriculum.

A new Millennial service ethic is emerging, built around notions of collegial (rather than individual) action, support for (rather than resistance against) civic institutions, and the tangible doing of good deeds. Surveys show that five of every six Millennials believe their generation has the greatest duty to improve the environment—and that, far more than older people, Millennials would impose extra civic duties on themselves, including taxes to achieve results.

## 2. *Community Service Mission Statement*

### THE DALTON SCHOOL

The following mission statement is from a small private school in Manhattan.

Community Service is something that needs to be done. Community Service situates our moral center; it teaches us through experience—about the relationship between empathy and responsibility, about what it takes to be part of a community, in essence, about being human. Inherent in the notion of Community Service are the feelings of optimism and empowerment: we are optimistic that the world can change for the better and when empowered to effect that change, we as

individuals can make a difference. There are no more important lessons that we can learn and teach.

### **For Survival**

We are members of many communities: family, school, neighborhood, city, country, religion, and ethnic group. It is from these communities that we gain our sustenance. We must each play a role in contributing to our communities so that these communities can continue to survive and prosper. Benevolent action is essential to the survival and prosperity of any community. We must engage in Community Service because it needs to be done and because we need our communities to survive.

### **For a Moral Center**

Community Service is vital to the healthy community. A community that takes without giving back, that is indifferent to the needs of its fellow members, that is only concerned with individual measures of success, is a weak, unsound community. The strength of a community can be found in its moral center; the ability to articulate and act upon a defined moral center will fortify a community. The moral center of a community, that place where we can find the values of empathy, compassion, and caring, is the basis for civic responsibility and the success of that community.

### **For Personal Enrichment**

Doing Community Service is empowering. When an individual goes out in the world and interacts with other people in the spirit of bettering, that individual makes a contribution and will feel a sense of accomplishment.

We are reminded all too often of the cynicism, indifference, and isolation that exists in our society. Community Service, the taking of physical action, reminds us of our connection and ability to connect. It is important to study the great actions of others, but participating in Community Service enables the individual to learn for himself and to teach herself.

### **For the Institutional Community**

Our school is a place of learning; we need to integrate the ideals of Community Service into our academic curriculum. Because Community Service embodies experiential learning, locating a moral center, community health, because it is about empowerment and making the world a better place, because these issues are at the core of being, we need to do it. The desire to act comes from a pride, caring, and respect for a community. Community Service must be harnessed to foster a sense of community in a school, a neighborhood, and beyond.

### 3. *Volunteering Opens Teen's Eyes to Nursing*

The following human interest story appeared in the *Detroit News* in 2008.

If you asked 13-year-olds to make a list of their favorite after-school activities, visiting with the elderly probably wouldn't be a top choice. But it would be for John Prueter, son of Keith and Barbara Prueter of Essexville, who says he'd spend time with older generations every day if he could.

"All the older people are nice people," he said. "They like to see young people come visit in these homes." Prueter, a seventh-grader at Cramer Junior High School, spends much of his after-school time at the Alterra Sterling House, an assisted-living home in Hampton Township.

Prueter got into volunteering with the elderly almost two years ago when his great-grandmother, Mable Post, suffered a stroke. Always close to her, Prueter visited her regularly when she was in the hospital. After 100 days, she was transferred to Alterra, where she still lives. Now, instead of coming just to visit a relative, he comes to volunteer and visit with everyone. He is the youngest of Alterra's regular volunteers and one of the most frequent visitors.

Prueter spends his time there helping with activities such as cooking and gardening, playing games with residents and just chatting with them. He speaks to the residents on a level that makes them feel good, said Pam O'Laughlin, executive director for Alterra's Bay City campus. "He has a unique ability to communicate with these folks," she said. "He's not timid. They look forward to him coming." Prueter sometimes takes the residents small gifts, such as cake on a birthday, and often calls them when he cannot come in.

He's willing to help Alterra's staff with any activities, O'Laughlin said. For example, he helped residents make cheesecakes for Easter. He helps with gardening and crafts, and calls the bingo games each Sunday. He also helps with mail delivery, assists nurses and helps residents get ready for special trips or concerts.

Virginia Ball, an 85-year-old resident, says Prueter visits with her regularly when he stops in. He runs and answers her phone when he hears it ringing down the hall and helps out with other tasks. "He'll offer to fold laundry," she said. But if there is nothing to do to help, Prueter will just sit in her room and chat. "He seems to enjoy talking to older people," Ball said.

His service at Alterra earned him an outstanding youth volunteer award from Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 6950. Prueter wants to be in the marching band when he moves up to Garber High School. But he says he doesn't plan on letting practice get in the way of his visits to Alterra. Even after high school, Prueter hopes to continue working with the elderly by studying nursing. He says he became interested in the field because of his volunteer work.

His dream job, he says, is working where he volunteers now.

#### 4. Study: “Resume Padding” Prevalent in College-Bound Students Who Volunteer

DENNIS CHAPTMAN

The following article appeared in 2006 in the *University of Wisconsin–Madison News*, a newsletter published by the university’s communication office.

Although the rates of volunteerism among high schoolers appear to be healthy, a study by a UW–Madison researcher suggests that “resume-padding”—not simple altruism—may be the driving force.

Lewis Friedland, a professor of journalism and mass communication, says his research in Madison-area high schools “calls into question some of the vibrancy apparent in the high rate of youth volunteerism.”

“The near universality of this college resume padding really surprised me,” Friedland says.

The high schoolers Friedland, along with sociology doctoral candidate Shauna Morimoto and other students, interviewed held an overwhelming belief that volunteering would be a key to college admission.

“Resume padding is a symptom of the extraordinary pressure put on young people to achieve a college education, and the very explicit understanding that a college education is a means to a decent life in the middle class,” the study found. 5

Many young people said that their motive in becoming involved was to make a stronger case to please college admissions officers—regardless of whether they were applying to an Ivy League school, a state university or a technical college.

But Friedland notes that, despite the widespread beliefs of college-bound students, service criteria usually only come into play in truly selective schools, those with an admissions rate of 50 percent or less.

Friedland says that civic activities are part of the expectation of high-achievers in high school, while others recognize their more precarious position. They see that college is within reach, but only if they perform enough of the “right” activities outside of the classroom.

“Young people have a lot of different motivations, some altruistic, some genuinely religious, some genuinely civic. But they rarely appeared in a pure form,” Friedland says. . . .

One implication of the study, which has yet to be proven, is that when civic engagement and volunteerism are used to achieve a short-term goal, the long-term effect of that activity may decline, Friedland says. 10

“We are faced with a generation of young people coming up in a different world,” he says. “Their attachments are more fleeting and there is a lack of attachment that seems to pervade.”

### 5. from *The Effects of “Mandatory Volunteerism” on Intentions to Volunteer*

ARTHUR STUKAS, MARK SNYDER, AND E. GIL CLARY

The following is from an article that appeared in 1999 in the professional journal *Psychological Science*.

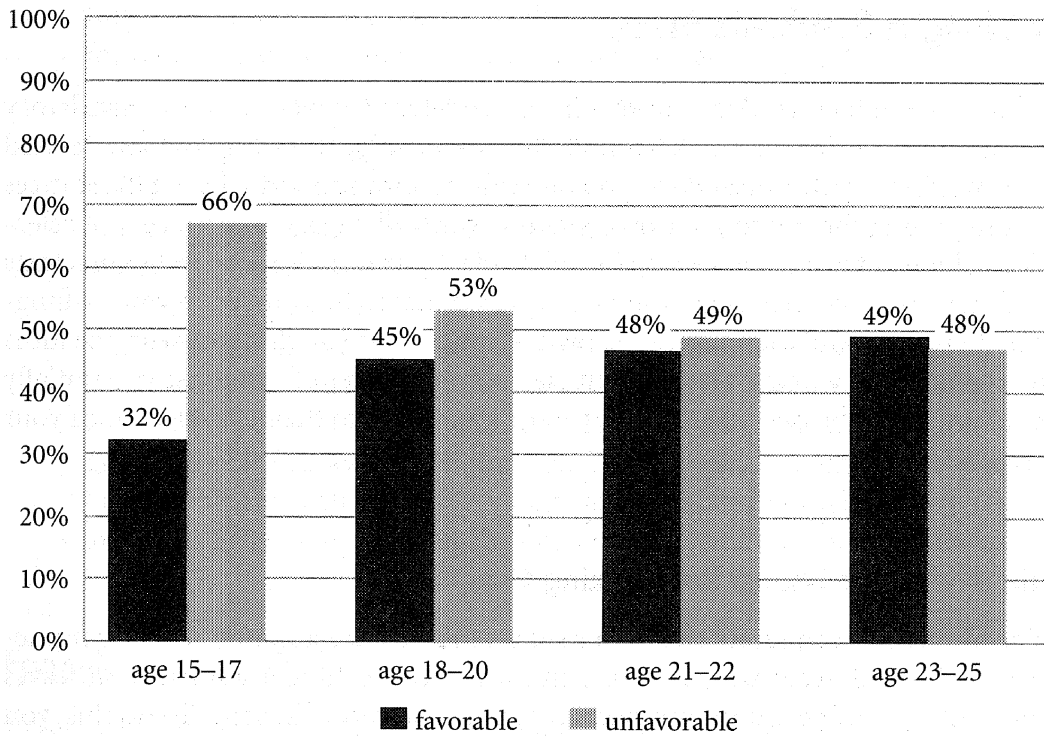
Two studies suggest that community service requirements can have negative effects on students’ intentions to volunteer freely in the future but only when students feel that they aren’t ready to volunteer or that the requirement is too controlling. Students who are ready to volunteer should be less influenced by requirements to serve.

Students who were not “ready” to volunteer were less affected by the free choice condition—that is, researchers were able to persuade them to volunteer while making sure that they still felt that it was their free choice and they were more likely to want to volunteer in the future than “not ready” students who had been required. Students were just as likely to want to continue volunteering after being required as after having a free choice to volunteer. To avoid the negative effects of mandatory volunteer programs on students’ motivation, institutions should design these programs to contain an element of free choice and to offer programs that allow students to choose the type of volunteer activity they will engage in or allow them to combine personal interests and skills with their service requirements. Researchers found that students who initially did not want to volunteer found that they actually enjoyed helping others if requirements were applied gently and with their input and involvement in the process.

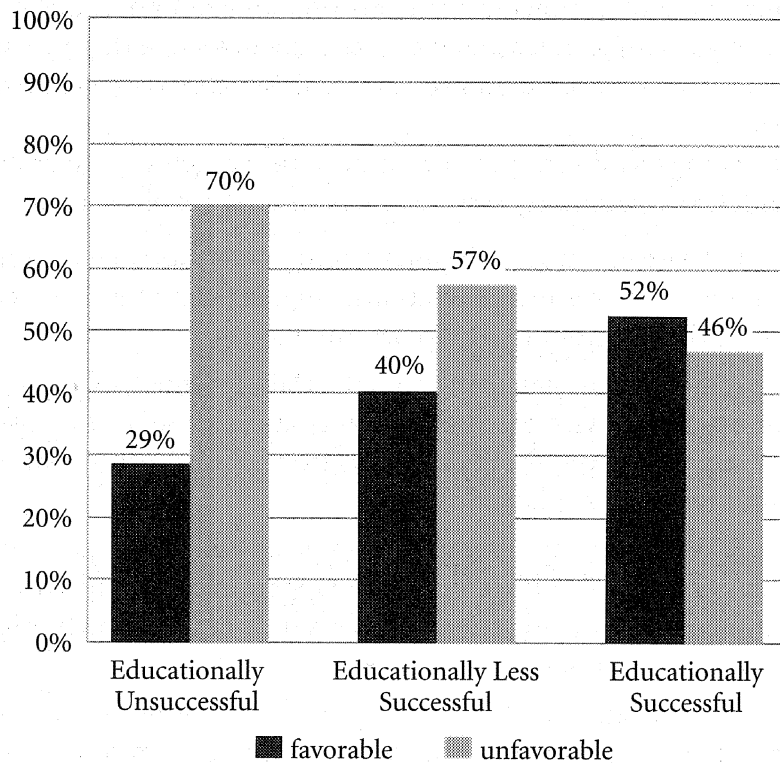
### 6. from *Youth Attitudes toward Civic Education and Community Service Requirements*

MARK HUGO LOPEZ

The following graphs are from an academic study conducted in 2002 by the the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.



**Graph 1** Attitudes toward Requiring Community Service for a High School Diploma, by Age. SOURCE: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, 2002.



**Graph 2** Attitudes toward Requiring Community Service for a High School Diploma, by Level of Educational Success. SOURCE: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, 2002.

## Writing a Synthesis Essay

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Now that you have read the sources in this chapter's Conversation on mandatory community service, let's walk through the process of synthesizing the sources and then writing a synthesis essay. As you move from reading and analyzing the sources to integrating them into your own writing, you will engage in a process of selection. This is often a complex step in which, ideally, you explore the individual texts and start to see connections among them. Essential to this process is your willingness to understand each text on its own terms, even if you disagree with the ideas or position; in fact, texts that present viewpoints different from those you initially hold are often the ones that become most important to the development of your argument.

### Identifying the Issues: Recognizing Complexity

The fact is, you can rarely change a reader's mind, at least not radically or immediately. Instead, what you want to aim for is a compelling argument that leaves the reader thinking, questioning, considering, and reconsidering. To do this, you have to acknowledge that the issue at hand is a complex one with no easy solutions and a variety of valid perspectives on the matter. You want to present a reasonable idea in a voice that is logical, sincere, and informed. To write a qualified argument, you must anticipate objections to your position and recognize and respect the complexities of your topic. A reasonable voice recognizes that there are more than two sides to an issue—more than pro–con, which is the written equivalent of a shouting match.

Careful reading has already revealed some of the complexities surrounding the issue of mandatory community service in schools. Let's explore a few.

- Source 1, the excerpt from *Millennials Rising*, describes what community service has meant for various generations, ranging from Selective Service in the early twentieth century to service learning today.
- Source 2, the mission statement from the Dalton School, offers an argument for community service based on morality and a sense of responsibility to a community. However, the statement is from a small private school. Might this limit its wider application?
- Source 3, "Volunteering Opens Teen's Eyes to Nursing," is quite positive and possibly persuasive if you are writing in support of community service. However, it focuses on the experience of a seventh-grader, which might not be relevant to high schools.
- Source 4, on resume padding, is a good counterexample to Source 3. It reports on the cynical attitude of students who perform community service specifically to bolster their college applications. Would nationwide manda-



tory community service eliminate this issue? Would it make it more difficult for truly altruistic students to distinguish themselves?

- Source 5, on mandatory volunteerism, reports that requiring community service may discourage future involvement, making it less likely that volunteering will become a lifelong habit. Does this finding ring true for you?
- Source 6, the graphs from Mark Hugo Lopez’s study, raise further questions about required community service. Graph 1 shows that support for requiring such service is weakest among those currently in school and is evenly split among those over the age of twenty-one. Does this finding suggest that community service is “good medicine” for high school students, who will eventually appreciate the experience? Graph 2 shows that young people with greater levels of education (“Educationally Successful,” signifying completion of a BA or some college work, as opposed to only a high school education) are more likely to support a community service requirement in high schools.

### Formulating Your Position

Before you formulate your position, it might be helpful to take stock of the issues. In analyzing the texts on community service, the following issues emerge:

- Does requiring community service devalue it?
- Does requiring it discourage future participation?
- Does the positive experience that most volunteers have offset their initial reluctance to participate?
- How does the structure of the community service program affect its perceived value? Is it part of academic study? Are there choices?
- How would making community service mandatory affect the fact that many students volunteer for selfish reasons, namely, padding their resumes for college?
- What values about community and education underlie a service requirement?
- Does requiring volunteer work go beyond the jurisdiction of schools? If it’s not done during school hours, are the requirements violating students’ rights? After all, mandatory community service is a punishment for minor criminals.
- What influence does socioeconomic status play in such a requirement? For example, if students need to earn money in their free time, can required community service programs be designed to accommodate them?
- How does a school system determine how many hours of service to require?

These questions—and others you might have—illustrate the complexity of the issue and ensure that you do not develop an argument that is one-sided or polarized

between yes and no. Instead, you are now prepared to write a documented essay that reflects the complexities surrounding the topic.

With these questions and issues in mind, you can begin to formulate a thesis, or claim, that captures your position on the topic. Consider the following working thesis statements:

- Community service can be extremely valuable in the development of both character and academics, but the negative effects of forcing students to participate by making it a graduation requirement more than offset the benefits.
- Though students may not recognize the value of community service until later in life, high schools should require community service to instill a sense of civic responsibility and encourage a lifelong habit of helping others.
- High schools should encourage students to participate in community service and reward those who do so without making participation mandatory for graduation.
- Required community service programs are beneficial to both the individuals who participate and the communities being served, as long as students have some choice in the type of service they engage in.

Although you might want to tailor one of these working thesis statements to use in your essay, each one suggests a clear focus while acknowledging the complexities of the issue.

#### • ACTIVITY •

Of the thesis statements above, select one you *disagree with*. Then, using the readings in the Conversation on mandatory community service, find three pieces of evidence supporting that thesis.

### Framing Quotations

When writing with sources, it's important not to simply summarize or paraphrase the sources. You need to use the sources to strengthen your own argument. One easy way to make sure the sources are working for you is to include a sentence or two of explanation or commentary with each quote. You might use a lead-in sentence, so your readers know what to look for, as is demonstrated below:

Even without a service learning requirement, today's youth have shown that they are enthusiastic about serving the community. Howe and Strauss indicate that five out of six Millennials "believe their generation has the greatest duty to improve the environment" and would accept additional "civic duties" to bring about needed change.

Alternatively, you might follow a quote with a sentence or two of commentary to remind readers of your point and how the quote reinforces it, as you see here:

The Dalton School, a small private high school, phrases it hopefully in the mission statement, which speaks of “empowering” students and “situating our moral center.” It continues on to argue (rather ominously) that “we must engage in community service because . . . we need our communities to survive.” The strong goals stated in this argument are certainly attractive, but their loftiness seems far removed from what a student might practically aim to achieve. In this regard, the Dalton School’s teaching goals are admirable but impractical because they seem to forget the individual student.

And, of course, be careful not to represent ideas or words as your own if they are not: give credit where it is due!

### Integrating Quotations

When using multiple sources in your writing, it becomes even more important to incorporate the quotations in a way that is both clear and interesting. You want the transition from your own voice to others’ words and ideas to be smooth and natural sounding. The most effective way to accomplish this is to integrate the quotations into your own sentences. This may be a bit challenging, but the benefit is seamless prose. When you integrate quotations in this way, the reader can follow your ideas and see the sources in the context of your argument. Be sure that the result is a grammatically correct and syntactically fluent sentence, like this one:

Howe and Strauss indicate that five out of six Millennials “believe their generation has the greatest duty to improve the environment” and would accept additional “civic duties” to bring about needed change.

#### • ACTIVITY •

Below you will find a paragraph written using the mission statement from the Dalton School as a source. Read the paragraph, and then revise it in order to make more effective use of the source.

Proponents of mandatory service learning programs often argue that whether a student chooses for himself or not, the spirit of service is important for students to learn and for schools to teach. The Dalton School, a small private high school, opens its mission statement by asserting, “Community Service is something that needs to be done.” The argument is that this experience “teaches us through experience—about the relationship between empathy and responsibility, about what it takes to be part of a community, in essence, about being human.” The strong goals of the Dalton School’s program are attractive because they emphasize the importance of having each individual “play a role in contributing to our communities so that these communities can continue to survive and prosper.” The contribution this experience makes to academic growth is not the only emphasis, though it is important: “Our school is a place of learning; we

need to integrate the ideals of Community Service into our academic curriculum." The heart of the Dalton School's program is, however, what they term the "moral center" that "will fortify a community." This is more than merely service; it is "that place where we can find the values of empathy, compassion, and caring" and "is the basis for civic responsibility and the success of that community."

## Citing Sources

Since you will be quoting from several works, you have to keep track of your sources for your reader. In timed situations, you'll probably include only the source number or the author's name in parentheses after the quote or paraphrase, like this:

Modern Americans will recognize the term "service learning," a phrase made familiar by the two-thirds of public schools that have integrated community service into the educational curriculum (Howe and Strauss).

You need to cite paraphrases as well, not just direct quotes. Anytime you are using someone else's ideas, you must give them credit.

Another, more elegant, option is to mention the author and title of the work in the sentence introducing or including the quote:

Howe and Strauss indicate that five out of six Millennials "believe their generation has the greatest duty to improve the environment" and would accept additional "civic duties" to bring about needed change.

If you are writing a more formal research paper, you will likely need to follow MLA documentation procedures, including a Works Cited page. Ask your teacher if you are unclear about what is required for an assignment. Guidelines for MLA documentation appear in the back of this book.

As you go through the readings and other texts in the following chapters, you will join conversations on a range of topics, reflecting on and integrating the ideas of others from different times and places into your own thinking and writing. Each chapter includes a Conversation in which you will practice this skill with a series of texts (including visuals) related to the chapter's theme. You should also be aware of the conversations going on around you all the time. How do people call on sources to reinforce their positions? And how do people enter an ongoing conversation and move it forward?

## A Sample Synthesis Essay

Following is a brief synthesis essay about community service that incorporates the sources we have discussed. Note how the viewpoint expressed in the thesis statement remains central, with sources supplementing and supporting that view.

Discussion of the evolution of the terms—from “service learning” to “volunteering”—leads up to the thesis.

Topic Sentence #1 focuses on the author’s first point and makes an assertion that will be supported by sources.

A second source brings up another dimension to the assertion in Topic Sentence #1.

The writer provides several sentences of discussion of the source being cited.

Americans today will recognize the term “service learning,” a phrase made familiar by the two-thirds of public schools that have integrated community service into the educational curriculum (Howe and Strauss). However, according to Neil Howe and William Strauss’s book *Millennials Rising*, the term only came into our vocabulary with the newest, or “Millennial,” generation of Americans. In the past, people simply “volunteered.” Creating a new policy to enforce an age-old practice seems superfluous, and studies show that it actually discourages high school students from performing public service. Because mandating public service is unnecessary and can have a negative effect on students’ attitudes, schools should encourage students to participate in community service without making it mandatory for graduation.

Thesis statement indicates the main argument about making public service mandatory.

Even without a service learning requirement, today’s youth have shown that they are enthusiastic about serving the community. Howe and Strauss indicate that five out of six Millennials “believe their generation has the greatest duty to improve the environment” and would accept additional “civic duties” to bring about needed change. Indeed, students are investing themselves in service activities for reasons other than to fulfill a school requirement.

Quotation from one source supports the point made in the topic sentence.

A *Detroit News* article introduces us to thirteen-year-old John Prueter, for example, who began volunteering at an assisted-living home when his great-grandmother became a resident there. Prueter had “always [been] close to” his great-grandmother, and this genuine, personal investment in his work, the article tells us, was what made the experience meaningful for him. Prueter’s example demonstrates that the most beneficial service experiences—for the individual and the community—are those that students can and do choose for themselves.

Topic Sentence #2 raises a second point—that is, the negative consequences of “making public service compulsory.”

It has also been shown that making public service compulsory can extinguish the natural spirit of volunteerism. According to two studies published in the journal *Psychological Science*, harsh requirements mandating community service “can have negative effects on students’ intentions to volunteer freely in the future.” The

same studies also found that students were more likely to volunteer in the future if they began volunteering out of “free choice.” Furthermore, the sense that service learning is “required” not only to graduate high school but to get into a good college has driven many students to volunteer out of self-interest rather than altruism. “Many young people said that their motive in becoming involved was to make a stronger case to please college admissions officers,”

reported an article in the *University of Wisconsin–Madison News*. High schools should not support this distorted mind-set by explicitly requiring public service; rather, they should allow authentic enthusiasm and encourage service projects of the students' own choosing.

Second source supporting the topic sentence. The writer integrates quotations into her own sentences.

Topic Sentence #3 raises a counterargument.

Proponents of mandatory service learning programs may argue that whether a student chooses it for himself or not, the spirit of service is important to learn and to teach. The Dalton School, a small private high school, phrases it hopefully in the mission statement, which speaks of “empowering” students and “situating our moral center.” It continues on to argue (rather ominously) that “we must engage in community service because . . . we need our communities to survive.” The strong goals stated in this argument are certainly attractive, but their loftiness seems far removed from

The opening clause is a concession to the counterargument.

The last two sentences refute the counterargument.

what a student might practically aim to achieve. In this regard, the Dalton School's teaching goals are admirable but impractical because they seem to forget the individual student. And as Prueter's case demonstrates, individual interest and personal investment are essential for service experiences to truly last.

On both sides of the debate, we should agree that the ultimate goal of “service learning” is precisely that — teaching an experience that will last. Even the Dalton School admits to the reality of school as a stop along the way to what happens when “an individual goes out in the world.” The issue thus concerns not just how to get students started volunteering, but how to maintain that desire to serve. At thirteen, John Prueter already knows that “his dream job . . . is working where he volunteers now.” His story, along with the data supporting “free choice” in service projects, proves that the surest way to have students volunteer in the future is to allow them experiences that are personally valuable. Those experiences will come not from any heavy-handed school requirement, but from support and, most important, the freedom of choice.

The conclusion opens with common ground.

The writer returns to one of her sources to emphasize the importance of choice in community service activities.

The concluding paragraph answers the “so what?” question. The writer goes beyond simple repetition of the thesis. Note that the writer returns to the terminology — “service learning” — from the opening paragraph.

## Culminating Conversation

### The Dumbest Generation?

Students today live and learn in a world with vastly more complex technology than that of previous generations. Many people see this new technology as a way to expand and distribute knowledge. They call it the information age. Others lament

the constant distractions that accompany this onslaught of information. But, of course, there is a long tradition of critics bemoaning the harmful effects of technological change on younger generations. In his best-selling book *The Dumbest Generation*, social critic and professor Mark Bauerlein claims that—as his book’s title suggests—those under age thirty constitute the “dumbest” generation in modern history. In his explanation of why he wrote the book, Bauerlein says, “I’ve noticed in the last ten years that students are no less intelligent, no less ambitious, but there are two big differences: Reading habits have slipped, along with general knowledge. You can quote me on this: You guys don’t know anything.”

Carefully read the following eight sources, including the introductory information for each source. Then synthesize information from at least three of the sources, and incorporate it into a coherent, well-developed essay that evaluates the claim that those under age thirty are “the dumbest generation.”

Make sure that your own argument is central; use the sources to illustrate and support your reasoning. Avoid merely summarizing the sources. Indicate clearly which sources you are drawing from, whether through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. You may cite the sources as Source 1, Source 2, and so on, or by putting the author’s name in parentheses.

### Sources

1. Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation*
2. Sharon Begley, *The Dumbest Generation? Don’t Be Dumb*
3. Mizuko Ito et al., *Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project*
4. Nicholas Carr, *Is Google Making Us Stupid?*
5. R. Smith Simpson, *Are We Getting Our Share of the Best?*
6. Steven Johnson, *Your Brain on Video Games*
7. Clive Thompson, *The New Literacy*
8. Roz Chast, *Shelved* (cartoon)

## 1. *The Dumbest Generation*

MARK BAUERLEIN

The following is excerpted from a 2008 book about the effects of digital media on young people by Mark Bauerlein, an English professor and researcher at Emory University.

This is the paradox of the Dumbest Generation. For the young American, life has never been so yielding, goods so plentiful, schooling so accessible, diversion so easy, and liberties so copious. The material gains are clear, and each year the traits of worldliness and autonomy seem to trickle down into ever-younger age groups. But it’s a shallow advent. As the survey research shows, knowledge and skills haven’t

kept pace, and the intellectual habits that complement them are slipping. The advantages of twenty-first century teen life keep expanding, the eighties and nineties economy and the digital revolution providing miraculously quick and effortless contact with information, wares, amusements, and friends. The mind should profit alongside the youthful ego, the thirst for knowledge satisfied as much as the craving for fun and status. But the enlightenment hasn't happened. Young Americans have much more access and education than their parents did, but in the 2007 Pew survey on "What Americans Know: 1989–2007," 56 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds possessed low knowledge levels, while only 22 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds did. In other words, the advantages don't show up in intellectual outcomes. The mental equipment of the young falls short of their media, money, e-gadgets, and career plans. The 18-year-old may have a Visa card, cell phone, MySpace page, part-time job, PlayStation 2, and an admissions letter from State U., but ask this wired and on-the-go high school senior a few intellectual questions and the façade of in-the-know-ness crumbles.

## 2. *The Dumbest Generation? Don't Be Dumb*

SHARON BEGLEY

The following is excerpted from an article by science columnist Sharon Begley that appeared in *Newsweek* in May 2010.

A more fundamental problem is what Bauerlein has in mind by "dumbest." If it means "holding the least knowledge," then he has a case. Gen Y cares less about knowing information than knowing where to find information. . . . And it is a travesty that employers are spending \$1.3 billion a year to teach basic writing skills, as a 2003 survey of managers found. But if dumb means lacking such fundamental cognitive capacities as the ability to think critically and logically, to analyze an argument, to learn and remember, to see analogies, to distinguish fact from opinion . . . well, here Bauerlein is on shakier ground.

First, IQ scores in every country that measures them, including the United States, have been rising since the 1930s. Since the tests measure not knowledge but pure thinking capacity—what cognitive scientists call fluid intelligence, in that it can be applied to problems in any domain—then Gen Y's ignorance of facts (or of facts that older people think are important) reflects not dumbness but choice. And who's to say they are dumb because fewer of them than of their grandparents' generation care who wrote the oratorio "Messiah" (which 35 percent of college seniors knew in 2002, compared with 56 percent in 1955)? Similarly, we suspect that the decline in the percentage of college freshmen who say it's important to keep up with political affairs, from 60 percent in 1966 to 36 percent in 2005, reflects at least in part the fact that in 1966 politics determined whether you



were going to get drafted and shipped to Vietnam. The apathy of 2005 is more a reflection of the world outside Gen-Yers' heads than inside, and one that we bet has changed tack with the historic candidacy of Barack Obama. Alienation is not dumbness.

Bauerlein is not the first scholar to pin the blame for a younger generation's intellectual shortcomings on new technology (television, anyone?), in this case indicting "the digital age." But there is no empirical evidence that being immersed in instant messaging, texting, iPods, videogames and all things online impairs thinking ability. "The jury is still out on whether these technologies are positive or negative" for cognition, says Ken Kosik of the University of California, Santa Barbara, codirector of the Neuroscience Research Institute there. "But they're definitely changing how people's brains process information." In fact, basic principles of neuroscience offer reasons to be optimistic. "We are gradually changing from a nation of callused hands to a nation of agile brains," says cognitive scientist Marcel Just of Carnegie Mellon University. "Insofar as new information technology exercises our minds and provides more information, it has to be improving thinking ability."

### 3. *Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project*

MIZUKO ITO ET AL.

The following is excerpted from a 2008 study of the effects of digital media on young people.

In both friendship-driven and interest-driven online activity, youth create and navigate new forms of expression and rules for social behavior. In the process, young people acquire various forms of technical and media literacy by exploring new interests, tinkering, and "messing around" with new forms of media. They may start with a Google search or "lurk" in chat rooms to learn more about their burgeoning interest. Through trial and error, youth add new media skills to their repertoire, such as how to create a video or customize games or their MySpace page. Teens then share their creations and receive feedback from others online. By its immediacy and breadth of information, the digital world lowers barriers to self-directed learning.

Others "geek out" and dive into a topic or talent. Contrary to popular images, geeking out is highly social and engaged, although usually not driven primarily by local friendships. Youth turn instead to specialized knowledge groups of both teens and adults from around the country or world, with the goal of improving their craft and gaining reputation among expert peers. What makes these groups unique is that while adults participate, they are not automatically the resident experts

by virtue of their age. Geeking out in many respects erases the traditional markers of status and authority.

New media allow for a degree of freedom and autonomy for youth that is less apparent in a classroom setting. Youth respect one another's authority online, and they are often more motivated to learn from peers than from adults. Their efforts are also largely self-directed, and the outcome emerges through exploration, in contrast to classroom learning that is oriented toward set, predefined goals.

#### 4. *Is Google Making Us Stupid?*

NICHOLAS CARR

The following is from an article in the summer 2008 issue of the *Atlantic*, a national magazine.

Over the past few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going—so far as I can tell—but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I'm reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.

I think I know what's going on. For more than a decade now, I've been spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing and sometimes adding to the great databases of the Internet. The Web has been a godsend to me as a writer. Research that once required days in the stacks or periodical rooms of libraries can now be done in minutes. A few Google searches, some quick clicks on hyperlinks, and I've got the telltale fact or pithy quote I was after. Even when I'm not working, I'm as likely as not to be foraging in the Web's info-thickets reading and writing e-mails, scanning headlines and blog posts, watching videos and listening to podcasts, or just tripping from link to link to link. (Unlike footnotes, to which they're sometimes likened, hyperlinks don't merely point to related works; they propel you toward them.)

For me, as for others, the Net is becoming a universal medium, the conduit for most of the information that flows through my eyes and ears and into my mind. The advantages of having immediate access to such an incredibly rich store of information are many, and they've been widely described and duly applauded. "The perfect recall of silicon memory," *Wired's* Clive Thompson has written, "can be an enormous boon to thinking." But that boon comes at a price. As the media

theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s, media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.

## 5. *Are We Getting Our Share of the Best?*

R. SMITH SIMPSON

The following is excerpted from a 1962 article in the U.S. government's *Foreign Service Journal*.

My initial surprise was to find among the candidates an abysmal ignorance of so elementary a subject as the geography of the United States. Few could even place accurately the principal rivers: one with so descriptive a name as the Ohio was not infrequently identified as being "somewhere west of the Mississippi." Few could name the principal seaports, and, of course, any requirement demanding such detailed familiarity with this country as identifying the states comprising the "wheat belt" or the "corn belt" was completely beyond the average candidate's depth.

As to elementary economics and social data, most could only guess at the population, labor force, and gross national product of their country. Many did not know what constituted "gross national product." They had no clear idea as to the principal products of their country, nor as to its exports and imports. They could name a few of each, but had no notion of their relative importance and had given no thought to the role of imports in the American economy.

As with elementary geographic and economic aspects of the United States, so with historical, sociological, and cultural. Americans abroad are asked a great many questions about their country. How did the United States acquire the Panama Canal? What is its status now? Who started our war with Spain (or Mexico) and what came out of it? When did our labor movement start and where does it stand now? How does a Jimmy Hoffa get control of a powerful union? What were some of the reform movements in American history? What became of them?

A good half of our candidates could answer such questions with only the thinnest recital of facts; many could not discuss them at all. Some could not recall ever having heard of the Populist movement; few knew its connection with Woodrow Wilson's "New Freedom." Asked if he knew anything about the Progressive movement, one candidate replied, "Oh, yes, that was LaFollette's movement." To the question, "Where did LaFollette come from?" he could only reply vaguely, "Somewhere out West."

## 6. *Your Brain on Video Games*

STEVEN JOHNSON

The following is excerpted from an article in the July 2005 issue of *Discover*, a popular science magazine.

To understand why games might be good for the mind, begin by shedding the cliché that they are about improving hand-eye coordination and firing virtual weapons. The majority of video games on the best-seller list contain no more bloodshed than a game of Risk. The most popular games are not simply difficult in the sense of challenging manual dexterity; they challenge *mental* dexterity as well. The best-selling game of all time, *The Sims*, involves almost no hand-eye coordination or quick reflexes. One manages a household of characters, each endowed with distinct drives and personality traits, each cycling through an endless series of short-term needs (companionship, say, or food), each enmeshed in a network of relationships with other characters. Playing the game is a nonstop balancing act: sending one character off to work, cleaning the kitchen with another, searching through the classifieds for work with another. Even a violent game like *Grand Theft Auto* involves networks of characters that the player must navigate and master, picking up clues and detecting patterns. The text walk-through for *Grand Theft Auto III*—a document that describes all the variables involved in playing the game through to the finish—is 53,000 words long, the length of a short novel. But despite the complexity of these environments, most gamers eschew reading manuals or walk-throughs altogether, preferring to feel their way through the game space. . . .

Among all popular media today, video games are unique in their reliance on the regime of competence principle. Movies or television shows don't start out with simple dialogue or narrative structures and steadily build in complexity depending on the aptitude of individual viewers. Books don't pause midchapter to confirm that their readers' vocabularies have progressed enough to move on to more complicated words. By contrast, the training structure of video games dates back to the very origins of the medium; even Pong got more challenging as a player's skills improved. Moreover, only a fraction of today's games involve explicit violence, and sexual content is a rarity. But the regime of competence is everywhere.

## 7. *The New Literacy*

CLIVE THOMPSON

The following is excerpted from the August 2009 issue of *Wired*, a popular technology magazine.

As the school year begins, be ready to hear pundits fretting once again about how kids today can't write—and technology is to blame. Facebook encourages narcissistic blabbering, video and PowerPoint have replaced carefully crafted essays, and texting has dehydrated language into “bleak, bald, sad shorthand” (as University College of London English professor John Sutherland has moaned). An age of illiteracy is at hand, right?

Andrea Lunsford isn't so sure. Lunsford is a professor of writing and rhetoric at Stanford University, where she has organized a mammoth project called the Stanford Study of Writing to scrutinize college students' prose. From 2001 to 2006, she collected 14,672 student writing samples—everything from in-class assignments, formal essays, and journal entries to emails, blog posts, and chat sessions. Her conclusions are stirring.

“I think we're in the midst of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven't seen since Greek civilization,” she says. For Lunsford, technology isn't killing our ability to write. It's reviving it—and pushing our literacy in bold new directions.

The first thing she found is that young people today write far more than any generation before them. That's because so much socializing takes place online, and it almost always involves text. Of all the writing that the Stanford students did, a stunning 38 percent of it took place out of the classroom—life writing, as Lunsford calls it. Those Twitter updates and lists of 25 things about yourself add up.

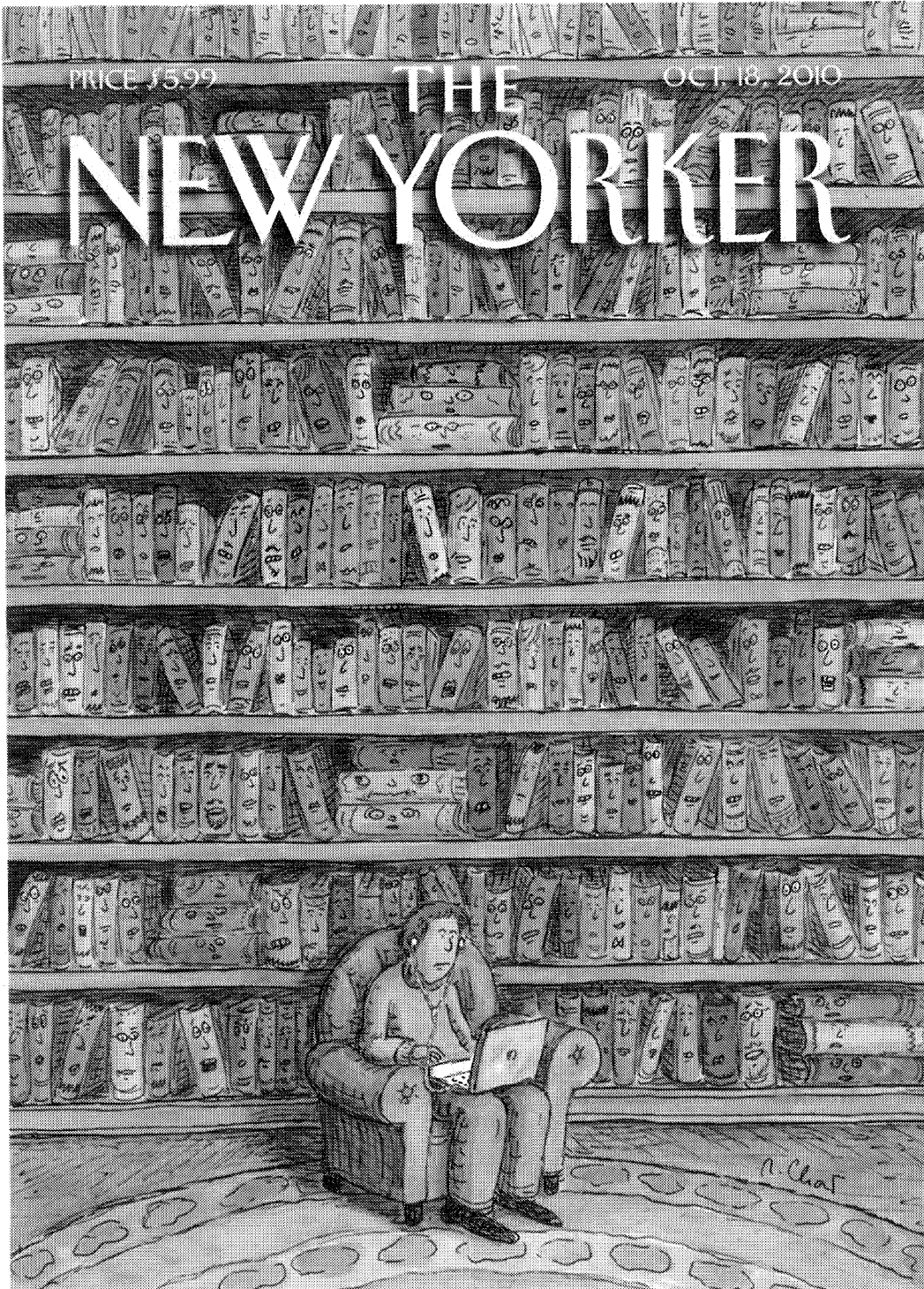
It's almost hard to remember how big a paradigm shift this is. Before the Internet came along, most Americans never wrote anything, ever, that wasn't a school assignment. Unless they got a job that required producing text (like in law, advertising, or media), they'd leave school and virtually never construct a paragraph again.

But is this explosion of prose good, on a technical level? Yes. Lunsford's team found that the students were remarkably adept at what rhetoricians call *kairos*—assessing their audience and adapting their tone and technique to best get their point across. The modern world of online writing, particularly in chat and on discussion threads, is conversational and public, which makes it closer to the Greek tradition of argument than the asynchronous letter and essay writing of 50 years ago.

## 8. *Shelved*

ROZ CHAST

The following cartoon appeared on the cover of the *New Yorker* in October 2010.



(See insert for color version.)