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WRITING BEFORE READING

The following assignment, and similar assignments that precede reading selections throughout this book, are designed to help you explore ideas you already have about the author's themes and main points before you begin reading.

Freewrite about a time when you had difficulty completing a writing task. This task may have required you to write a personal letter, complete a project at work, or finish an assignment for a class. Describe the steps you took to overcome writer's block.

Reading and Summarizing

Read the following essay by Gail Godwin, entitled "The Watcher at the Gates." Use this essay to practice reading actively, and review the student's response to the text. The techniques for active reading on pages 12–13 show you how to preview for main ideas, and to read carefully and critically. Marginal notes, questions, and comments you make as you read are also useful in writing a response to Godwin's essay.

The Watcher at the Gates

Gail Godwin

Gail Godwin is the author of fifteen books, including several novels and a collection of short stories, Dream Children (1976). Her novel, A Mother and Two Daughters (1982) was a best-seller. Three of her most recent novels are The Good Husband (1994), Evensong (1999), and Evenings at Five (2003). Heart: A Personal Journey Through its Myths and Meanings (2001) is her latest work of nonfiction. The following article about writer's block was published in the New York Times Book Review on January 9, 1977.

- 1 I first realized I was not the only writer who had a restraining critic who lived inside me and sapped the juice from green inspirations when I was leafing through Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams" a few years ago. Ironically, it was my "inner critic" who had sent me to Freud. I was writing a novel, and my heroine was in the middle of a dream, and then I lost faith in my own invention and rushed to "an authority" to check whether she could have such a dream. In the chapter on dream interpretation, I came upon the following passage that has helped me free myself, in some measure, from my critic and has led to many pleasant and interesting exchanges with other writers.
- 2 Freud quotes Schiller¹, who is writing a letter to a friend. The friend complains of his lack of creative power. Schiller replies with an allegory. He says it

¹ Johann Friedrich von Schiller, eighteenth-century German poet, dramatist and philosopher (1759–1805).

is not good if the intellect examines too closely the ideas pouring in at the gates. "In isolation, an idea may be quite insignificant, and venturesome in the extreme, but it may acquire importance from an idea which follows it. . . . In the case of a creative mind, it seems to me, the intellect has withdrawn its watchers from the gates, and the ideas rush in pell-mell, and only then does it review and inspect the multitude. You are ashamed or afraid of the momentary and passing madness which is found in all real creators, the longer or shorter duration of which distinguishes the thinking artist from the dreamer . . . you reject too soon and discriminate too severely."

- 3 So that's what I had: a Watcher at the Gates. I decided to get to know him better. I discussed him with other writers, who told me some of the quirks and habits of their Watchers, each of whom was as individual as his host, and all of whom seemed passionately dedicated to one goal: rejecting too soon and discriminating too severely.
- 4 It is amazing the lengths a Watcher will go to keep you from pursuing the flow of your imagination. Watchers are notorious pencil sharpeners, ribbon changers, plant waterers, home repairers and abhorers of messy rooms or messy pages. They are compulsive looker-uppers. They are superstitious scaredy-cats. They cultivate self-important eccentricities they think are suitable for "writers." And they'd rather die (and kill your inspiration with them) than risk making a fool of themselves.
- 5 My Watcher has a wasteful penchant for 20-pound bond paper above and below the carbon of the first draft. "What's the good of writing out a whole page," he whispers begrudgingly, "if you just have to write it over again later? Get it perfect the first time!" My Watcher adores stopping in the middle of a morning's work to drive down to the library to check on the name of a flower or a World War II battle or a line of metaphysical poetry. "You can't possibly go on till you've got this right!" he admonishes. I go and get the car keys.
- 6 Other Watchers have informed their writers that:
- 7 "Whenever you get a really good sentence you should stop in the middle of it and go on tomorrow. Otherwise you might run dry."
- 8 "Don't try and continue with your book till your dental appointment is over. When you're worried about your teeth, you can't think about art."
- 9 Another Watcher makes his owner pin his finished pages to a clothesline and read them through binoculars "to see how they look from a distance." Countless other Watchers demand "bribes" for taking the day off: lethal doses of caffeine, alcoholic doses of Scotch or vodka or wine.
- 10 There are various ways to outsmart, pacify, or coexist with your Watcher. Here are some I have tried, or my writer friends have tried, with success:
- 11 Look for situations when he's likely to be off-guard. Write too fast for him in an unexpected place, at an unexpected time. (Virginia Woolf² captured the "diamonds in the dustheap" by writing at a "rapid haphazard gallop" in her

² English novelist and essayist (1882-1941). Woolf is best known for her discussion of women writers in the essay "A Room of One's Own."

diary.) Write when very tired. Write in purple ink on the back of a Master Charge statement. Write whatever comes into your mind while the kettle is boiling and make the steam whistle your deadline. (Deadlines are a great way to outdistance the Watcher.)

- 12 Disguise what you are writing. If your Watcher refuses to let you get on with your story or novel, write a "letter" instead, telling your "correspondent" what you are going to write in your story or next chapter. Dash off a "review" of your own unfinished opus. It will stand up like a bully to your Watcher the next time he throws obstacles in your path. If you write yourself a good one.
- 13 Get to know your Watcher. He's yours. Do a drawing of him (or her). Pin it to the wall of your study and turn it gently to the wall when necessary. Let your Watcher feel needed. Watchers are excellent critics after inspiration has been captured; they are dependable, sharp-eyed readers of things already set down. Keep your Watcher in shape and he'll have less time to keep you from shaping. If he's really ruining your whole working day, sit down, as Jung did with his personal demons, and write him a letter. On a very bad day I once wrote my Watcher a letter. "Dear Watcher," I wrote, "What is it you're so afraid I'll do?" Then I held his pen for him, and he replied instantly with a candor that has kept me from truly despising him.
- 14 "Fail," he wrote back.

RESPONDING TO THE READING

Summarizing ideas is an important part of understanding what you have read. But active reading also means *responding* in some way to what the writer has said. Your response may take the form of notes in the margin or journal entries. In either case, as you write your response, try imagining you are talking directly to the writer; this tactic will help you become more actively involved with what you read.

As you respond to the reading, record the initial satisfaction, surprise, anger, or sadness you felt as you were reading; you might question the author's ideas, assumptions, tone, or purpose. If the reading reminds you of experiences you have had that are similar to or different from the writer's, you can test the validity of the reading against your experience. The more you question and analyze a reading, the more supporting evidence you will have for your response paper.

FOR PRACTICE

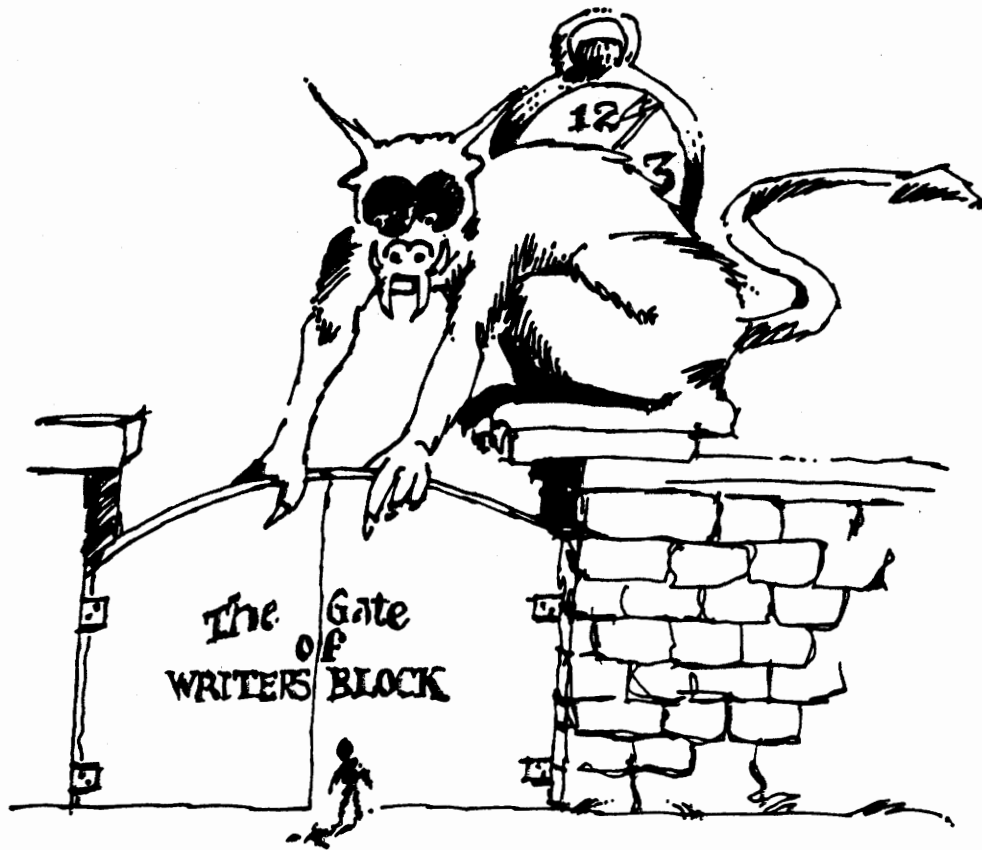
Exercise 2c. Write a journal entry in which you respond in some way to the ideas in Gail Godwin's "The Watcher at the Gates." You can record feelings, experiences, or questions you have in response to particular passages. Share your entries with classmates. Here is a sample response.

9/13

After reading Gail Godwin's "The Watcher at the Gates," I began to understand why it seems so difficult for me to commit my ideas to paper, why I find it hard to develop the ideas I get, and why I waste so much paper.

I too have a "watcher." A very egocentric one, at that. He always has to have it his way. He's a perfectionist and has the ability to influence things and people around me, creating every possible distraction. If I try to write outside, for instance, he calls for a car whose muffler has a hole in it. If I'm inside the house, he'll let in a fly to pester me until I give up. Of course, I have some control over his actions. When I put myself in a public place, I invite distractions. When I stay up late and listen to my old punk tapes, however, I can drive him off (as well as most of my family) and get some work done. In the end, writing is a tug-of-war.

— Christian Cinder



— Richard Hansard