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Chapter 2 Writing about Reading

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.

Free-write 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 probe 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


I first realized I was not the only writer who had a restraining critic who lived inside me and sopped 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.

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 yet become the essence of an experience, the guide of future activity. In the mind of a creative mind, it is the intellect that turns the raw materials into actualities, the intellect that brings the raw materials to life. The intellect is the master of the mind, the mind is the slave of the intellect. This is why the intellect is so important. If the intellect is not active, if it is passive, then the mind is passive. The intellect is the master of the mind, the mind is the slave of the intellect. This is why the intellect is so important. If the intellect is not active, if it is passive, then the mind is passive.
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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. Feel him. 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 daemon, 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 paw for him, and he replied instantly with a cancel that has kept me from truly despising him.

"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 recedes 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 GailGodwin'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.

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 Hansord