

Chapter One: Beginnings

Here you are reading the first sentence of the first chapter of a book called *Writing With Power*.

Why?

If you've already read the introduction to this book, you know that the two questions almost everyone needs to have answered quickly if they are going to keep reading a text are, "What is the about?" and "Why should I care?" In the busy world we live in, if a piece of writing doesn't grab our attention and give us reasons to stay interested in it, most of us will move on to something else eventually. Reading takes a lot of time and energy, and if we don't feel like we're getting out what we're being asked to put into it, why bother?

So if you've already read this first part of this book and have turned to this chapter, chances are you really want to learn more about writing. Something about the title, the style, maybe even the art on the front cover or some of the quotes on the back of the book—has piqued your curiosity enough to keep at it. You're reading because you *want* to be reading, and so the job of the text now is to keep you motivated and interested.

If this chapter has been assigned to you in a college class, then chances are the answer to the question, "Why are you reading this?" also seems pretty obvious: because your teacher told you this was the book to buy, and assigned these pages. As a student, this is an experience you've probably had many other times in your life. After all, buying textbooks, going to class, completing homework assignments, taking notes, preparing for tests—this just all seems part of the drill of what being a student is about. Reading the first chapter of a required book is no big deal. It's something you're *supposed* to do.

In school—and in many other areas of life, too—we often read things because we're required to do so. Someone else makes a decision that this or that text is going to be useful, interesting, or important, and because this person is in charge, writes the syllabus, has the power to place orders at the campus bookstore, you now have this book in your hands.

But let's face it, that's probably not your only motivation for reading. You could buy the book and not read it. You could bring it to class with you and whenever your teacher pointed out something that seemed like it was going to be important, just flip to the indicated pages and start skimming. You could *not* buy the book and just *pretend* to have left it at home or in your car whenever someone asked about it.

No, the truth is, if you are actively reading this sentence right now, it's because you are hoping to get something out of the experience. Whether you've opened to this chapter eager to get started or have put off doing so as long as humanly possible—there's a part of you that's hoping it won't suck. You want it to be okay. You trust that it's going to be useful and interesting—and the moment a text seems to violate that trust, you're going to start losing interest in it.

This might seem like a strange way to begin a book about writing, discussing the factors that influence how people feel about reading. But if you think about it, the two activities are intimately connected. Effective writers think carefully about what their readers want and need, the feelings and attitudes they are likely to bring with them to the experience, and subsequently, the best ways to present information in order to get the kind of responses they want. Similarly,

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good readers are usually people willing to take the time to understand where a writer is coming from, what a text is trying to accomplish, and to give writer and text the benefit of the doubt – at least for a while.

Again, whether your answer to the question, “Why are you reading this?” is *Because I want to or have to*, underlying both is some desire, a need, a motivation—and one of the keys to creating a successful text is to try to address the needs and desires of readers as quickly as possible so that you can begin to shape them.

The rest of this chapter is going to explore why people read and write in a bit more detail, where most of our ideas about reading and writing come from, and some strategies that can help you become more successful at doing both. We will also look at the power of reading and writing—not just in the sense of what makes reading and writing effective, but how reading and writing are used to gain, maintain, and negotiate power. For the simple truth of the matter is this: people who know how to communicate effectively—who can use words, images, music, and other forms of media to shape the ideas and feelings of others—are far more likely to be successful than those who can’t. This is one of the reasons why courses in writing and speaking have been required in American colleges for over a century and a half, and why the study of rhetoric has a tradition in the west going back 2,500 years! It’s understood that if you hope to have some control over your future and to have an impact on what is happening around you, being able to write persuasively and engagingly is going to be key.

Before we get to any of that, though, it’s probably important that we establish a couple of other key premises of this book.

The Power of Why

This chapter began with the question, “Why?” which is really just another way of asking, “What is the cause of this? Where did it come from? How did we get here?” After all, the most natural way to answer any why-question is to begin with the word “Be-cause”, which shows that *causes* (the factors that influence and shape what has come before, or the things that follow as a result of something) are often key to understanding situations as they are right now.

“Why were you late?”

“Because my car wouldn’t start.”

“Why are you going to school?”

“Because I want a good job.”

“Why should you get a promotion?”

“Because I work hard and will accomplish great things if given the chance.”

Little kids—who are naturally curious about the world, where things come from, and how they fit into it all—are masters of asking the question, “Why?” Indeed, if you’ve spent much time with young people, you know that their questions can lead to some pretty amazing places (and can often be really hard to answer).

“Why is the sky blue?”

“Where do chairs come from?”

“What is the dog dreaming about?”

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Humans are naturally curious animals, and especially when we're young, asking questions and trying to figure out answers to stuff we don't know or understand is really important.

Try this: come up with an answer to one of the three questions just posed. It doesn't have to be right, or even that good—just something reasonable. Got something? Now pose yourself what has to be the all-time favorite follow-up question of kids worldwide:

“But why?”

Now try to answer that one, too. And when you think you've got that second answer down, ask yourself again, “But why?”

This might seem a little silly to you, and as adults, most of us grow tired pretty quickly of the endless stream of why-questions little kids sometimes ask (especially when they seem more interested in asking the question than really considering the answer we've given them). But there are two points really worth recognizing here. The first is the power of “Why?” as a tool for trying to identify and understand what something really is, how we should really feel about it, and what an appropriate response should be.

In the introduction to this book I mentioned that many people claim that they hate to write, and that when asked why, usually say something about not being very good at it. When you push them further by asking why they think this the case, most respond by saying they think they have bad grammar, or have always been poor at spelling or punctuation. Pressed further still about how they came to believe this, most eventually tell some story about getting bad grades in school or being told by teachers that they weren't good at English.

In trying to understand the reasons why some people claim to hate writing, we quickly discover that many of their feelings have little to do with whether or not they actually enjoy using words to communicate and interact with other people. On the contrary, many of the same people who say they hate writing often admit that they like writing stories, or poems, or emails to family and friends—what they really mean is that they were made to feel stupid or marginalized about some aspect of writing by a particular person in a particular context, usually a teacher in a class when they were young. So now we're faced with this issue: should someone who reads and writes and even enjoys doing so in many situations consider themselves “a bad writer” because they scored low on grammar quizzes or spelling tests when they were younger? Flipping this around a bit, what do grammar and spelling have to do with writing anyhow, and is it possible to be an effective communicator even if you don't follow all of the “rules” all the time? What is a “rule” in writing anyway, who makes these rules, and when, why and how are they important? When can they be ignored? When should they be actively broken?

While we will explore many of these questions later in this chapter and throughout the rest of this book, the point of this example is to show how asking, “Why?” can be one of the most powerful ways of engaging and trying to understand something. Indeed, often things that we take for granted—that appear settled and clear—can actually appear quite different when we explore them from new angles: and being willing and ask “Why?” in an open-minded and open-hearted way is a crucial step in this process. One simple question often has the power to profoundly change the way people think, act, and feel.

But for exactly this reason, the question “Why?” can also seem threatening or even dangerous to some people, and in these circumstances, asking it can cause a lot of trouble. This is the second sense in which we can speak of the power of why. Indeed, all of us have probably experienced

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moments in our lives when someone said or did something that we really didn't understand, or a situation that just didn't seem to add up to us for some reason, and we wanted to ask why but refrained from doing so because we knew it would only cause problems. In some cases asking "Why" can feel like a real risk, both for the person asking the question and for the person being asked. In fact, for a lot of people, having a position of power and authority means *not* having to explain yourself to others, of being in a position where one's decisions and actions are literally *beyond question*.

Let's face it, any of us can be made to feel insecure when our ideas, beliefs or actions are questioned. Maybe we aren't entirely sure ourselves what our own motives are. Maybe we've been asking ourselves the same question for years and haven't really found a good answer yet. Maybe we've just always been told this is the way things should be, and asking a question like "why" introduces too many complications that we don't have the time or energy to deal with. And sadly, for many people whose positions and authority seem to depend on being right about things, the question "why" can feel like an attack—as if their knowledge, experience, or expertise were somehow being doubted.

It's difficult to say why this is the case—of why some people see questions as a threat to their power, prestige or authority—but it's often true. In the real world, then, part of the power of why is knowing when, where and how to ask questions in ways that will be productive and constructive, that will help you get more of what you want and need. And knowing that questions can cause some people to feel insecure or uncomfortable isn't a reason not to ask them, either! But it does mean that you may need to be strategic about when, where, and how to ask some people some questions—and as we already said, there may be times when asking some questions might simply not be worth the trouble.

Reading: "The Function of Education" from <u>Think On These Things</u> by J. Krishnamurti.
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Definitions and Perspective

In addition to *Why?*, one of the most common questions people ask when they encounter anything new is *What?* Indeed, these two questions are intimately related, and seem pretty fundamental to how the human brain works.

Imagine a new friend of yours invites you over to her house, and after showing you around for a bit, asks if you'd like to try some *natto*. If you've never heard of *natto* before, your first question is probably going to be, "What is it?"

"*Natto* is fermented bean curd. It's Japanese."

If you don't know what fermented bean curd is, this answer is probably going to raise a lot more questions, including, "What do you do with *that*?"

"You eat it!"

If you're not the adventurous type, you're probably going to ask your friend a lot more questions before being willing to try it!

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“What does it taste like?”
“Do you eat it by itself or with other things?”
“How is it made?”

Of course, to really get to know what *natto* is, eventually you’re just going to have to experience it for yourself. And in the process, you are probably going to formulate all kinds of additional statements about it:

“This is slimy!”
“It smells old and musty!”
“It’s a mouthful of salty glue!”
“This stuff is disgusting!”

Natto has a very strong smell and distinctive flavor, and many people (including a whole lot of Japanese) really don’t like it. But some people do, and if you asked them why, they’d be able to give you a whole list of reasons. *Natto* is very good for you. It is filled with proteins and beneficial enzymes and nutrients. Some people think it tastes great, especially for breakfast and served over rice.

There are three very important things to recognize in this example, the first being that whenever we try to answer the question *What?*, we’re really trying to formulate a definition of something, to establish the facts of a thing or situation. Indeed, *to define* literally means to try to make something clear, distinct, definite; and the question *What?* is one of the most basic ways humans have of trying to do this.

What is it?
It is *natto*?
What is *natto*?
Natto is a kind of food from Japan made out of soybeans.

But equally important is to see that even at this most basic level of definition, there can be real differences in the way people perceive and interpret “facts.” That is, people don’t always share the same points of view or perspective on things.

[WE ARE GOING TO NEED SOME DRAWINGS HERE. THE BEST WAY I HAVE OF EXPLAINING PERSPECTIVE IS TO PHYSICALLY SHOW THAT SITUATIONS CAN LOOK QUITE DIFFERENT DEPENDING ON WHERE ONE IS SITTING IN RELATION TO SOMEONE ELSE.]

Consider this: two friends look out at a farm being bulldozed to make room for a new housing development. To one, this is progress; for the other, just another sick example of people disregarding the past to make a quick buck.

Three students sit in the same lecture hall. To the woman in the third row, Philosophy 101 is the most interesting class she’s ever taken. To the guy in the tenth, it seems like the midterm is going to be hard. To the student in back, the professor is a joke.

Some find cities noisy and dirty; others, exciting and vibrant. Baseball is “America’s Pastime” to many people; other people think it’s as boring as watching paint dry. To you, the perfect meal might be a steak and a baked potato; to your uncle, “Meat is murder.”

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In each of these situations, can we really say with certainty that one point of view is absolutely right and another absolutely wrong? Certainly based on our own values, experiences, and beliefs, we may be inclined to agree with one perspective and disagree with another. But the fact of the matter is, there are many different ways to read and interpret almost any situation or event. And because human beings don't seem to have the ability to see every fact from every possible perspective simultaneously, many of the things we take for granted are probably not as certain as we'd like to think.

If you point to a door and ask someone, "What is this?" most people will probably say, "It's a door." But someone might say, "A piece of wood." Another might say, "\$53 at the hardware store." Some people look at doors and see them as opportunities; others associate doors with confinement and a loss of freedom. To a particle physicist, a door might be 90% empty space; to a Hindu mystic, it might not even exist at all! To an architect, a door might be a necessary detail; to an artist, it might be the most beautiful thing in the world.

Again, even in situations where most people seem to generally agree on things, below the surface, there may be significant difference in the way the so-called "facts" are understood and interpreted. In the words of the old (some would say "cheesy", others "classic") Paul Simon song: "One man's ceiling is another man's floor."

Which leads to another important thing to recognize about the question *What?*: some of the biggest social and political disagreements of our time actually revolve around how to define things.

"What is life?"

"What is torture?"

"What is freedom?"

"What is equality?"

Indeed, because so much of what we understand, think, and ultimately do in most situations depends on what we perceive to be the facts, the question "What is it?" can be incredibly important. And the ability to shape, influence, or even change how people look at what might appear at first to be something small or insignificant can sometimes add up to something extremely powerful.

Which leads us to another important concept that will shape much of the advice throughout the rest of this book; namely, the idea that "timing is everything."

Kairos: Seizing The Moment

In sports, the difference between winning and losing often depends on a split-second decision—of recognizing an opportunity to make a play and acting on it. In the stock market, the difference between financial success and ruin is usually determined by knowing when to buy and when to sell. The difference between a good joke and a stupid one is often not the subject but the delivery: of knowing how to set up and tell the punch line with just the right sort of emphasis.

So many things in life are a matter of not just knowing what to do or how to do them, but of when.

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- The difference between raw meat and the perfect burger?
- The difference between getting a raise and being laid off?
- The difference between a box office flop and a cult-classic?
- The difference between the perfect wise-crack and making an ass of yourself?
- The difference between catching the bus and walking home?

Indeed, the idea that “timing is everything” is so fundamental to our understanding of how people interact with one another and the world that one of the expressions that best captures the spirit of the concept is actually thousands of years old: *kairos*, which the ancient Greeks understood as “the opportune moment,” or the ability to read a given situation so well that one can act in ways perfectly in keeping with what is expected or required. *Kairos* is also often translated as “timeliness,” or doing that which is perfectly adapted to the circumstances, time, context, or moment.

While many people think of reading and writing primarily as tools for conveying information, as we’ll discuss shortly, one of the big assumptions of this book is that writing and speaking are also always forms of social interaction. We never read, write, speak, listen, or watch in a vacuum—we do so in contexts that are motivated by needs, wants, hopes and expectations. When we read, we bring our own experiences and expectations to bear on what is being said, and our reactions sometimes have as much to do with what we are already feeling and thinking than what is actually on the page. Similarly, writing never just happens out of the blue and on its own—even the writing we do for ourselves in private, say, in a journal or blog, involves our thoughts, feelings and reactions to things that other people have said, thought, or done; to things that we have seen and experienced.

So the idea of *kairos* is really important because it gives us a way of thinking and talking about one of the most crucial factors that influence whether something we read or write is going to be successful: how appropriate (and attentive) it is to the moment.

Your friend calls you all upset because he just broke up with his girlfriend and you say, “I really could use a haircut.” This may very well be true, and it might be the thing that’s been on your mind all morning, but let’s face it, it’s a pretty lame response! Unless of course there’s a moment in the conversation where you can tell that your friend just really needs to be distracted from what’s going on, and you sense that this change in topic might lighten his mood – then, it might be the absolutely perfect thing to say.

The place where you work has fired several people over the last few weeks due to budget cuts, and your boss shows up one day all excited, wanting to tell you about the new top-of-the-line computers she just got. This just might be the stupidest move an employer could make, and you might well be tempted to tell her exactly this! Of course, if the new system ends up being so efficient that it actually saves enough money to hire some people back, then you’d probably be really happy that things happened as they did (and that you kept your mouth shut!).

When is it better to speak up or to keep silent? What is the best thing to say in a given situation? When is it appropriate to try to change someone’s mind about something, and how?

Again, the answer to each of these questions—and many others we will consider in subsequent chapters—is rooted in a consideration of *kairos*, the idea that everything has a time and place; and the sooner you can begin actively thinking about issues of timing and appropriateness, the more successful you’ll be in a whole range of activities, including writing.

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Rhetoric: The Power of Persuasion

The term *kairos* might be new to you, but the idea that success often depends on “seeing an opening and going for it” probably isn’t. Similarly, the word *rhetoric* might strike some as strange or unfamiliar at first, but the idea behind it is also very common. Simply put, rhetoric is the ability to persuade people; to use words, images, gestures and other forms of expression to influence how people around us think, feel, act, or react.

If you’ve ever stressed about how to say something in an email or paper because you didn’t want to be misunderstood, or to somehow offend someone accidentally—you were engaging in rhetoric. If you’ve ever tried to convince a friend or a family member to do something they were reluctant to do—that was rhetoric. If you’ve ever disagreed with a teacher, or your boss, or someone with power, and tried to change their minds about something, or at least see things from your point of view—that was rhetoric, too.

The fact is, in almost any situation where people have differing ideas, feelings, goals, or beliefs about something, rhetoric usually plays a role. And whenever we stop to consider how someone is going to react to an idea or statement, and we modify what we say or do in order to try to get the best reaction we can, we are engaging one of the oldest human practices that we know of: the art of persuasion.

For some people, the word *persuasion* has negative associations. They see a phrase like, “the art of persuasion” and immediately picture an argument or fight; two people with conflicting views who stand up and verbally wail on each other! In a sense this is true—the first people to actively study and teach rhetoric were the Sophists of Ancient Greece, and their students were almost always ambitious young men hoping to gain fame and fortune by learning to argue legal and political cases. The term rhetoric actually comes from the Greek word *rhetôr*, or speaker, and the first rhetor-icians were literally people wanting to become skilled at debating. In a society where nearly every important decision was made collectively through public deliberation, learning to speak effectively, to move a crowd, was not only key to one’s personal success, but was seen as a fundamental part of being a good citizen. For the Greeks, if you could not be called on to explain and defend the interests of your family, your business, your neighbors, your friends, or your town in front of an assembly, what good were you?

In the 2,500 years since rhetoric first emerged as a subject of study, the idea that persuasion is all about verbal argument has changed. We now use the term to refer to almost any situation in which one person attempts to influence or shape the feelings, beliefs, ideas or actions of another, in public as well as private settings. And the study of rhetoric has grown to include not only speaking and writing, but forms of non-verbal communication as well, such as the use of images, sounds, gestures, colors, and other kinds of expression. In fact, it is now quite common to hear people talk about the rhetoric of movies, the rhetoric of poetry, the rhetoric of fashion, the rhetoric of science, the rhetoric of music, the rhetoric of advertising, etc. In each of these cases, the term rhetoric does not mean “argument” in the sense of a fight or conflict; but rather, how these forms of communication work to influence how people think, feel, and behave.

Another negative reaction people often have to the idea of *rhetoric* or *persuasion* is that it sounds manipulative. To some people, the facts in any situation should simply speak for themselves, and any attempt to package or present these facts in a particular light or to get a certain response seems, well, sleazy and dishonest at best, and downright immoral at worst.

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And the truth of the matter is that rhetoric *can* be used in dishonest and manipulative ways, to make other people believe things that simply aren't real or true. History is full of examples of people who have used rhetoric to swindle, manipulate, and trick others into doing truly terrible things, usually through deception, distortion, and lies. But there's a big difference between trying to convince people to do things you *know* aren't right, and trying to persuade people to share your beliefs and ideas. Just as there's a big difference between actively lying to someone—of pretending something is true when you know that it isn't—and trying to represent yourself as well as you can.

Consider the rhetoric of dating for a moment.

Most people getting ready to go out on a first date spend some time (and often money!) making themselves look as good as they can. Most people think not only about what to wear, but where to go, and even what sorts of things to talk about and how to act once they get there. As the saying goes, "You never get a second chance to make a good first impression," which explains why most of us tend to get a little nervous when we're going out with someone for the first time—we want things to go well, and this often means being attentive to what the other person seems to be thinking and feeling, picking up on "the signals", and responding to the situation appropriately as it unfolds. If we really like the person, we try to say smart things, to be funny and interesting, and to seem as engaged and engaging as we can.

Most of the decisions we make on dates (from our shoes to what we reveal about ourselves in conversation, and how) are influenced to a large degree by who we are going out with, our sense of the kind of person they are, and how they're likely to respond given the circumstances. A lot also depends, as we said before, on our sense of timing.

Do we hold hands now? Should I tell this story? What will happen if I ask about the last person they went out with?

As a very intense kind of social interaction, first dates are incredibly rhetorical!

Very few people would say that getting a haircut, buying a new shirt, or cleaning out your car to go on a date were forms of lying. Nor would anyone say being thoughtful about what you reveal about yourself, when, and how were necessarily manipulative. What's more, one of the most exciting things about going on a date is that it gives us a chance to explore and try out different aspects of ourselves. Different people bring out different things in us, and while maybe you've never been salsa dancing, or gone rollerblading in the park, or been to an art gallery on a Tuesday night before, does trying new things like this for the sake of going out with someone mean that you aren't being true to yourself?

Of course not.

So under what circumstances could we legitimately accuse someone of being deceitful or manipulative on a date? If someone went out and bought a bunch of new clothes they would never normally wear, and took us out to places they pretended to like but secretly hated, and avoided answering our questions and instead made up a bunch of lies about themselves because they thought that's what we wanted to hear, we would be right in calling them a cheater or scammer. If someone intends to deceive us, to make us believe something that isn't true, then they're lying to us. And someone who lies may be very persuasive for a while, but it isn't rhetoric itself which is doing the lying, but the person *using* rhetoric.

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In the end, it all comes down to your intentions—what you hope to accomplish through what you do and say; the results you seek to achieve. If your goal is to be dishonest, then rhetoric can make you more successful at being dishonest. If your goal is to save the world (or to simply get a second date with someone!) then rhetoric can help with that, too!

Intention, Audience, Context, and Media

While we will explore various rhetorical concepts throughout the rest of this book, the most important thing to keep in mind now is that while the word *rhetoric* might seem new and unfamiliar, the ideas behind it are things you probably know and use all the time at some level. In fact, in its most basic form, rhetoric simply says that in order to communicate successfully, the things we do or say should be shaped by considering four factors:

- 1) what we hope to accomplish through communicating (our *intentions*);
- 2) who we are speaking or writing to (our *audience*);
- 3) the circumstances which gives rise to the communication (the *context*); and
- 4) the means by which we're communicating (the *medium*).

You already know this.

The things you say when you're first interviewing for a job are usually different than what you put in the letter announcing you're quitting! People usually don't act and speak the same way when they're hanging out with family or friends as they do when they're talking to their teachers or a boss. We generally don't have the same kinds of conversations on the phone at 11 p.m. that we do in an office building at ten in the morning.

What's more, these four factors have an enormous influence on each other. What we want to accomplish when speaking or writing obviously depends on the situation and who's involved. Who we try to talk to or write to depends entirely on what we want to see happen, and the circumstances. The time and place where we communicate usually depend on our goals and the people we're interacting with. The means or methods we use depend on who we're trying to reach, the time of day, and what we hope to achieve.

Try this: think about all the things going on in your life this week, and spend a few minutes writing to a friend or loved one about how busy you've been. Don't worry too much about getting all the details right, just put yourself in the moment and try to relate all that you've got going on to someone you care about. But don't simply make a list. Try to write in complete sentences and at least one full paragraph.

Got something?

Read over what you wrote. Now, start writing again about all the stuff you've got going on in your life this week, but this time, pretend that you are writing to a teacher, or your boss, or to someone in a position of authority. Try to write for five minutes and see what you can come up with, and again, write in complete sentences and aim for at least one full paragraph.

Now re-read both things you wrote. Are they the same?

Most people when they do this exercise end up with two very different texts. The first one tends to be more casual, taking the form of a personal letter or what ends up sounding like an email.

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Often the purpose that seems to emerge in writing this first text is to get some kind of sympathy; to vent about how hectic things are; to try to get someone to relate to what we are experiencing and feeling. In contrast, almost always the second text ends up sounding more formal, and often seems to take the form of an apology or excuse, with the writer attempting to explain or justify why something hasn't happened, or asking for more time because he or she has been busy with so many other things. This second text tends to be more factual sounding, the first far more descriptive and emotional.

Why did this happen?

Because whether we realize it or not, we use rhetoric all the time! The things that we say—the claims we make and how we express ourselves—are heavily shaped by who we are writing to, what we hope to accomplish by writing, and the circumstances that give rise to the communication in the first place! And a change in any one of these factors usually has a profound effect on how we understand and approach the others.

Again, humans are rhetorical creatures by nature. We simply can't help ourselves! But equally true is that while all of each of us has at least some grasp on an intuitive level of how to be persuasive, rhetoric is actually something that can be studied systematically. Indeed, like anything else that people seem to be able to do pick up naturally, but that can be improved upon through practice and training (running, playing a musical instrument, cooking, etc.), the more we study and practice various rhetorical moves, the more persuasive and effective at communicating we can become.

How Did We Get Here?

And so we return to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, “Why are you reading this book?”

As has been suggested, when we ask a question like *Why?*, we're really hoping to get at the causes of something, the underlying factors that give rise to and shape a situation or event. When we ask *Why?* we're not only hoping to understand the origins of a thing, what its purpose might be and where it comes from, but also how it might be useful or important to us. And what follows because of it.

[TIMELINE/BOXED TEXT OF KEY RHETORICIANS HERE]

For thousands of years the formal study of rhetoric has been viewed as fundamental to the success of anyone hoping to achieve a better life. As has already been pointed out, the first teachers we know of in the western world, the Sophists of Greece, wandered from city to city giving lectures on rhetoric to anyone desiring to make a name for himself (and who could afford the hefty cost of a lesson!). In Ancient Rome, the sons and daughters of prominent families were often tutored in rhetoric in preparation for positions of power and influence. In medieval universities, rhetoric was considered integral to a liberal arts education, forming part of what was called the “trivium”— a course of study including logic and grammar that sought nothing less than to release the power of language. With the rise of printing during the Renaissance, the study of rhetoric became even more widespread, and for the first time, hundreds of how-to books on writing and speaking began to be marketed to mass audiences. By the eighteenth century, the study of rhetoric had become central to the curriculum of most schools and colleges, and several of the most influential thinkers in the American colonies (including John Witherspoon, one of the original signers of the

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Declaration of Independence and founder of Princeton University) were avid scholars and teachers of rhetoric.

In our own time, learning to speak and write persuasively is still so highly prized that classes in rhetoric and composition are among the few courses required of nearly every college student in America. Indeed, of the 3.5 million students each year who enroll in college or university for the first time, the overwhelming majority will take at least one course focused on some aspect of rhetoric. So while you may have never heard the term *rhetoric* used in quite the same way as described in this chapter before, in reading this book, you are in a sense engaging in something that has a very long and noble tradition. The fact is, if you were to look closely at any group of highly accomplished people throughout history—in the arts, politics, the sciences, education, business, industry—you are likely find that rhetoric played a significant role in their success.

What makes the approach to rhetoric offered in this book different from many others, however, is that everything we will discuss in coming chapters will be based on two assumptions: 1) that writing is primarily a form of social interaction; and 2) that in most groups, power is wielded and maintained by those who have the authority to set the agenda, to make the rules, to define the mission, goals, and values that others should follow—and this often happens through writing as well. In fact, this is what the term *social rhetoric* is meant to imply: both that writing is social in the sense that it never really happens separate from humans living in groups and communities; but also that the power of rhetoric—the ability to persuade others—is rooted and shaped by how people within such communities and groups already interact. In other words, becoming a more effective communicator requires not only learning how be persuasive on an individual level (one person writing or speaking to another); but also learning how to engage and negotiate the structures of power and authority that govern and shape what constitutes “acceptable” behavior and thought in these groups.

Reading and Writing

While we’ll discuss this idea of *social rhetoric* in more detail when we look at “Discourse and Communities” in the next chapter, it may be useful in closing to spend some time exploring the ways in which reading and writing can really said to be social, especially considering that they’re both activities a majority of us seem to do alone. In fact, most people find it really difficult to read or write when other people are around. So how can they be considered forms of social interaction?

What is reading? What is writing?

These might seem like silly questions to ask, in part because they seem so elementary and obvious. Interestingly enough, though, while most of us spend many of our earliest years in school learning to read and write, and countless years after practicing reading and writing nearly everyday, how often have you ever really stopped to consider this question before? When someone asks, “What are you doing?” and you respond, “Oh, I’m reading this book,” or “I’m writing to someone,” what exactly do you mean when you say this? Indeed, considering that both reading and writing are not automatic or natural things (unlike learning to walk, or to speak, people have to go through extensive training over many years to be able to be able to do either well), it’s actually a little strange how little time people spend thinking about them in a serious or methodical way.

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Obviously reading and writing are activities. They both involve information on some level. We might call them forms of communication, ways of learning, of exchanging ideas and expressing feelings. But while these are all true, this isn't very precise. There are lots of other activities that could also be considered forms of communication, that involve learning, the expression of ideas and feelings. Dancing, acting, painting, music – these all fit this description, too, and while each of these other kinds of performances are to some extent *rhetorical* (and often involve reading and writing on some peripheral level as well), we wouldn't call them *forms of writing* exactly.

As has already been suggested, writing and reading can take a long time to learn how to do well, and for this reason, are commonly referred to as skills. But the term “skill” is pretty vague, and like “activity”, is used to refer to a huge range of things. Another problem with thinking about reading and writing simply as skills is that it suggests they can ultimately be mastered. People tend to think of skills as something you either have or you don't, and that once you acquire skill in something, you're done.

But reading and writing aren't really like that. Sure, on some basic level we can say that someone can or can't read or write, and at the pure level of skills, this means not being able to recognize letters or characters on a page, or how to form letters, or to hold a pencil or pen, use a keyboard, etc. Most children today master these basics by the age six or seven (some much earlier than that), but we wouldn't then say they had become master readers or writers. Some of the most experienced readers and writers in the world, men and women who have spent their lives reading hundreds of books and writing thousands upon thousands of pages, probably wouldn't consider themselves to be master readers or writers, either! Reading and writing are things that you can get better at doing with time, but that you never really perfect.

Many people think of reading and writing as tools, instruments used to accomplish some particular end. And it's true, reading and writing are human creations that emerged at particular historical moments. While archaeologists and anthropologists don't all agree on what constitutes the first forms of writing, there is general consensus that some of the earliest examples of “proto-writing” date from about 9,000 years ago in the form of rocks and shells inscribed with symbols, often representing various goods and commodities. Indeed, these first “counting stones” were probably used to record transactions and tabulate wealth, as humans moved from purely hunter-gatherer societies to ones based on agriculture and trade. And scholars generally accept that the first fully formed writing systems similar to those in use today—Sumerian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Chinese logographs—developed during the Bronze Age about 3-4,000 years ago. Once again, some of the earliest examples of these types of writing are records of goods stored and amounts owed.

[VISUAL AID HERE SHOWING DIFFERENT KINDS OF WRITING/SCRIPTS]

Thus, it could be said that reading and writing emerged like many other human inventions, as a practical way to do things that hadn't been done before. Want to move a heavy boulder from one place to another? Throw this rope over that tree branch and pull! Tired of walking down to the river every time you get thirsty? Put water into this clay pot and put a lid on it! Need to remember how many bushels of wheat your neighbor owes you for the baskets you gave him last spring? Make a mark on five rocks and put them outside your door.

In this view, the primary value of reading and writing as tools is that they enable people to create and preserve lasting records. Unlike verbal agreements (which can easily be disputed later on), or trying to rely solely on memory (which is often faulty, and can fade over time), reading and writing seem to give us a more permanent means not merely of establishing what we think is the

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case about something, but of communicating this understanding to others long after the fact, and at great distances.

While thinking about reading and writing as tools designed to perform particular tasks is helpful and undoubtedly true on some basic level (and already suggests the degree to which both reading and writing have always been closely tied to human interaction), to think of them merely as instruments, as mostly a means to a desired outcome or pre-determined end seems overly simplistic. Indeed, if reading and writing are to be considered tools, they are clearly very complicated ones, with lots of pieces and moving parts. They are also tools that often seem to work in ways we don't expect them to, and at other times, to fail utterly. What's more, because one of the most powerful ways humans have of discovering and processing information is through language itself, writing isn't simply a way of expressing something we already know. Often we only come to understand what we really think or feel about something through the process of trying to put it into words; and sometimes, the things we believed were most certain and true actually seem to change once we see them take shape in language.

Because of this, many people believe reading and writing are best understood not as objects or instruments but as processes, as involving a series of steps, stages, or actions that ultimately bring about a set of results. In fact, most dictionaries define writing in a similar way, as a process by which letters, symbols, or words get formed and then engraved, carved, or in some other way incised or imparted onto a surface. What's interesting about a definition like this is the degree to which it suggests that writing has many different steps and parts, and subsequently, many places where things can change or develop unexpectedly. Indeed, if we were to combine this dictionary definition with everything else we've been discussing, we end up with something like this:

Writing is the process by which thoughts, feelings and experiences get articulated into letters, symbols, or words, and engraved, carved, or in some way incised or imparted onto a surface in order to be read by someone later on.

Working through this definition from the other direction, we might then say:

Reading is the process by which letters, symbols, or words that have been engraved, carved, or in some way incised or imparted onto a surface by someone get interpreted or translated into meaning.

There are lots of other ways that reading and writing can be understood beyond these definitions, but there are several useful things about them. First, these definitions give us a way to think about reading and writing as distinct from other types of expression. Reading and writing involve marks placed on surfaces, but unlike painting, the marks form letters, symbols or words, and are created through a particular process (*engraving, carving, incising, etc.*)

Similarly, these definitions capture something unique about reading and writing that make them different from other forms of communication. Unlike speech, which fades the moment someone is finished uttering something, writing has a material dimension that is meant to last. We write things down so that they may be read again later, by someone else (even if that someone is a ourselves at some point in the future.) We also write things down because they are important to us, things we want to remember or share, and ultimately, the success of writing depends not simply on how well the words we use seems to capture what we were hoping to express, but in how effective they are in conveying this meaning to someone else.

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These definitions also convey that reading and writing are complex, involving many elements and steps. Writing requires first that someone have something they actually want to express, a thought, a feeling, an experience that they feel is important enough to put down. Second, writing requires that these thoughts, feelings or experiences be articulated and described in language, using words, characters, letters, symbols, etc. If we have something we think we want to say, but cannot find the words to express it, then we really cannot write it down. The writer must also then physically make some marks, inscribing or imparting them in some way on a surface. So there's a whole mechanical/technical dimension to writing that has to be taken into account, involving a range of tools and techniques (ink, paper, computers, word processing applications, etc.). This surface or text has to in some way be preserved, and if someone else is to read it, to be transmitted.

And then to actually read something complicates this process even further. A reader has to be familiar with the techniques used in the process of creating a piece of writing (at least on some basic level) to begin to make sense of it. That is, reading an email requires knowing how to do certain things, like open files and scroll through screens, that are different than the process of reading a street sign, or a chapter of a book. A reader also has to be able to make out the marks that have been imparted, so again, a piece of writing has to be preserved and transmitted in such a way that the words, characters, letters, symbols, etc. can be experienced according to how they were written. (A computer virus can render an email completely garbled; a printer with low toner can make a paper almost impossible to understand; mold, soot and water have nearly destroyed the written knowledge of entire civilizations.)

A reader has to know something about the language the writer is using as well. Someone could compose the most beautiful love poem that's ever been written in the history of the world, but if it's written in Spanish or Farsi or Korean, and a reader doesn't know these languages, then most if not all the intended meaning will be lost! And even when a reader and writer seem to share the same language, there can be subtle differences in the ways each understands how words, characters, letters, or symbols are used, or what they mean. The sentence, "She's cold" can mean completely different things, depending on where, when and how it's being used. The city of Paris, France was often described by writers and tourist in the Nineteenth Century as "Gay Paris" or "Gay Paree" – but most people reading that phrase today would understand it in very different ways.

Which leads to perhaps the most significant thing about these definitions of reading and writing, and what make them so useful; they begin to suggest the degree to which both reading and writing are rooted in and shaped by the culture, beliefs, practices, and assumptions of the people who do them. Indeed, reading and writing are forms of social interaction precisely because they are intensely cultural; at nearly level and stage of both processes, they reflect the customs, values and attitudes of the societies in which they take place.

In some parts of the world, like Japan and China, it is considered normal to read and write up to down across the page in columns, from right to left—which seems completely strange to how it is done in the U.S. or Europe. When novels first began to appear in the Eighteenth Century, many people considered them extremely dangerous art forms, especially for young women, who were considered very impressionable. Today, fiction written and marketed almost exclusively to teenage girls is among the most popular (and profitable) of all writing produced each year, and covers a range of topics and themes that once would have probably been considered unacceptable or completely taboo. If you grew up in a house full of books, and all your family and friends spent a lot of time reading and writing, then you are probably going to value and think about

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these activities a lot differently than you would if you were raised in an environment where there were few books or opportunities to read and write.

In the next chapter we will examine the social aspects of reading and writing more closely, but again, what's important to recognize here is that even though reading and writing are things that many of us seem to do by ourselves, in isolation, they represent two of the most intensely cultural and value-laden activities that humans do. Indeed, this is very important to remember, because many people are under the mistaken impression that the reason reading and writing are sometimes difficult is that they simply never mastered a particular set of skills. That is, most people believe that if something is challenging, this probably means that they aren't very good at it. But the truth is, what makes reading and writing challenging for everyone is that they so often require us to engage and negotiate a whole range of expectations, beliefs, values, conventions, and associations that we are only dimly aware of. One of the basic assumptions of this book, then, is that by making some of these expectations, beliefs, and conventions more obvious, reading and writing can not only become more effective and interesting, but more rewarding.