

## EXPLORING

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ur first history lessons in school are often about “the explorers.” Christopher Columbus discovered America; Vasco da Gama discovered the overseas route from Europe to India; Marco Polo opened trade routes in Asia. These captivating stories involve adventure, courage, bravery, and derring-do. There are skirmishes, riches beyond imagining, kings and queens—all sorts of things to fire the imaginations of the young.

Later on, we learn that these stories have been simplified and that exploration itself is rarely the process of moving peacefully through unoccupied, unclaimed territories. Some find the revision of these earlier stories to be upsetting and somehow wrong. But we believe that those who practice being curious with their writing are learning how to explore both the worlds beyond and the worlds within the self. This isn’t exploration as represented in fairytales and childhood stories of questing heroes. It’s the messier, more disorienting, more complicated work that making sense of human experience and human history demands.

The first essay in this section likens exploration in the Internet age to Alice’s trip “down the rabbit hole” and invites you to use your search engines to practice chasing ideas, thoughts, and questions wherever they may lead. In the second essay, we suggest that there is an activity called “creative reading” that parallels creative writing, and in the third essay, we show you how the process of understanding others (as opposed to conquering them) requires acts of imagination, informed by research. Why would anyone want to engage in explorations of these kinds? We close this section with a meditation on the mystery of motivation.

## On Going down the Rabbit Hole

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“Down the rabbit hole”: it’s a strange phrase, isn’t it? If you’ve heard it before, it’s possible that the first thing it calls to mind is the scene in *The Matrix* where Morpheus offers Neo two pills: “You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.” In the inside-out world of *The Matrix*, reality is an illusion and what seems illusory—that time can be slowed down, that bullets can be dodged, that gravity only applies intermittently—is actually possible in a deeper reality.

Morpheus (the name Ovid gives the god of dreams in his long poem *Metamorphoses*) refers to “Wonderland” and “the rabbit hole” on the assumption that Neo—and those watching the film—will make the connection to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. In that story, a young girl named Alice is sitting on a riverbank, bored with how the day is going, when a rabbit carrying a pocket watch rushes past her. Alice follows the rabbit, who disappears down a rabbit hole. She sticks her head in and begins to fall down the hole, and what follows is a series of adventures that has captivated generations of readers for nearly 150 years.

Think of all that happens to Alice in the few pages that make up the first chapter of her *Adventures*: when she finally hits bottom (when she sees how deep the rabbit hole goes), the rabbit is just turning a corner in another long tunnel, so she gives chase. When she turns the same corner, Alice finds herself in a long hallway with doors on each side, all of them locked. Then she discovers a key that opens a very small door, which leads to a beautiful garden on the other side. Because she is too big to fit through the door, Alice keeps exploring the hallway. She finds a bottle with a note that says DRINK ME. Alice complies, and suddenly she’s “shutting up like a telescope” until she’s only ten inches tall. She wants to go into the garden but can no longer reach the key to open the small door, and so she begins to cry. She looks down, discovers another small door, opens it, and finds a small cake with the words EAT ME

written on top in currants. Which Alice does, of course, leading to this statement at the beginning of the second chapter:

“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English); “now I’m opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!” (for when she looked down at her feet they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off).

Why is this idea, which is at the heart of both *The Matrix* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, so appealing? Why do we take such pleasure in imagining that there’s the world we experience every day and that, just beyond this everyday world (or just beneath it, assuming rabbit holes go down), there’s another world where the laws of the everyday world no longer apply? One explanation for this fantasy’s appeal is that the other extraordinary world is action packed: once the rules that govern the ordinary are suspended, anything can happen—rabbits can talk; bodies can bend out of the way of approaching bullets; a boy with a scar on his forehead can fight off the forces of evil. But this isn’t really an explanation so much as it is a description masquerading as an explanation. Why are we drawn to the extraordinary?

Ellen Dissanayake has spent nearly five decades exploring the allure of the extraordinary. Working in evolutionary aesthetics, a field she helped to invent, Dissanayake has concluded that humans are hardwired to seek out the extraordinary; it is, she says, in our nature to do so. In making her argument, Dissanayake sets out to establish that the desire to “make special” or to “artify” (she uses both terms interchangeably) serves a number of evolutionary purposes central to the survival of the species—the most significant being that acting on this desire provides concrete responses to anxiety and uncertainty. Over time, certain ways of making special become ritualized: the wedding ceremony or the walk across the graduation stage, for example, or the gift of flowers to someone who is sick. What we find appealing about Dissanayake’s thesis is the implication that art is not the set of static images you find on a wall at a museum. Rather, it is a way of doing or making; it’s the practice of making special, which can



manifest at anytime—at the feast for a visiting dignitary or over coffee between friends.

Is there an art to doing research? We think so. Most handbooks will send you out to do your research with a plan, an outline, or a map of some kind. The idea behind all this preplanning is to protect you from getting lost while mucking about in the endless thicket of information that's out there. That seems sensible if you think of research only as the process of predicting and then confirming results. That is, when this approach to research is followed, it's no accident that the end results are unsurprising; the whole point of this approach to doing research is that there will be no surprises!

We invite you to envision the research process not as a voyage out onto already mapped territory but as a trip down the rabbit hole. We want you to set for yourself the goal of generating research that is extraordinary—research that proceeds by “making special,” by “artifying.” We want your research to lead you to write something that rewards repeated acts of attention, which, after all, is just another way of defining *extraordinary*.

What does artful, special, or extraordinary research look like? Obviously, there's no formula. But we'd like to offer an example of what it can look like with an excerpt from an e-mail we received from Chris Osifchin a former student who wrote to us a year after graduating.

I've been really getting into Richard Linklater lately, after watching *Dazed and Confused* (my favorite movie of all time) for about the thirtieth time. I watched his movie *Slacker* and also part of *Waking Life*, and what was interesting to me was the portrayal of nothing as everything and how it is displayed in a much more explicit manner than *Dazed*.

I then saw a tweet from an awesome Website, Open Culture, directing Tweeters to the films and works of Susan Sontag. Never heard of her. Isn't it funny how connections come about? As I read more about her, and more of her pieces, I began to make a connection between Linklater's work and Sontag. The first piece of Sontag's work that I read was “Against Interpretation.” I found it fascinating, and also



true to a point. The best art does not try to mean anything, it just [lies] there in the glory and awe of its creation. . . .

Next, I read a NYT review of Sontag's first novel, *The Benefactor*, and was struck by how similar it seemed to *Waking Life*. The review even says "Hippolyte also dreams numerous repetitious dreams, ponders them endlessly, and keeps encountering Frau Anders, like a guilty conscience. The intent is to present waking life as if it were a dream. And, to present dreams as concrete as daily living." This is precisely what *Waking Life* is portraying. I think the depiction of dreams as reality and reality as dreams or any combination of those is not "without motive or feeling" as the reviewer says, but rather allows you to view things from a less interpretive point of view, as Sontag might [argue for].

Now, after reading this review, I decided to see if Linklater was influenced by Sontag. I literally searched on Google "Richard Linklater influenced by Susan Sontag." Interestingly enough, and why I decided to send this email to you, Sontag mentions Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* in an article on the Abu Ghraib torture incident, "Regarding the Torture of Others." In it, Sontag mentions the increasing brutality of American culture and the increasing acceptance of violence. Not only did this make me think of [*The Ballad of Abu Ghraib*] and reading it in your class, but it also made me think of a specific moment in *Waking Life* [here he provides the link to the YouTube clip of the moment he references]. "Man wants chaos. In fact, he's gotta have it. Depression, strife, riots murder. All this dread. We're irresistibly drawn to that almost orgiastic state created out of death and destruction. It's in all of us. We revel in it!" It seems to me that this connects very well to Abu Ghraib as a whole, not just the immediate actions of the guards. Sontag's observation that "Secrets of private life that, formerly, you would have given nearly anything to conceal, you now clamor to be invited on a television show to reveal," collides at the intersection of American fantasies played out on TV screens all the time and the real world. It's an

interesting comment on American society as a whole—who would have thought that reality TV would come back to bite America in a *war*? And with the extension of reality TV that is now, what I can't think to call anything but the “reality Web” (i.e., social media/networks), it is becoming more prevalent than ever. Sontag puts it better than I have—“What is illustrated by these photographs is as much the culture of shamelessness as the reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality.”

For our former student, the world of ideas, like the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*, is endlessly surprising and extraordinary. He begins by writing about rewatching Richard Linklater's movie *Dazed and Confused*, and then before he knows it, he's off on an entirely self-motivated search through film, philosophy, war, and media in search of artists and thinkers who can help him better understand our “culture of shamelessness” and “unapologetic brutality.” With genuine curiosity and some practice doing research, you can transform the world of ideas, as Chris did, into an astounding place in which nearly every turn inspires a new connection and thinking itself becomes both art and play.

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## Practice Session

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### Researching

Type the words *Ellen Dissanayake* into the Google search engine. Press return.

Everyone who does this at the same time will get the same results. We can call this “ordinary research.” If you click on the Wikipedia entry for Dissanayake, you'll find yourself on a page that provides a thumbnail sketch of the author and her work. Again, in gaining this foothold on Dissanayake's work, you'll be doing what any ordinary researcher starting out would do.

It's what you do next that matters. Choose one of Dissanayake's works that you find online and read it.

Your next task is to make your research into this researcher of the extraordinary extraordinary. (We composed that last sentence with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in mind.) Set aside at least an hour for exploratory research. Begin by choosing a phrase, a quotation, a reference, or a footnote from the

Dissanayake work you read and doing another Google search. Read two or more of the recommended links. Then choose a phrase, a quotation, a reference, or a footnote from the second set of works and do another Google search. Repeat. Repeat. And repeat again, until you've burrowed down to an insight or a question that you yourself find extraordinary.

### Reflecting

We call the process outlined above, where you move from one linked source to the next, "drilling down." Spend at least 30 minutes reflecting on this process. As you drilled down in your research, beginning with your first search about Dissanayake and ending with an extraordinary insight or question, how did you distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary moments of discovery? What choices yielded genuine surprises? Begin a list of useful strategies to include in your repertoire as a curious researcher, a list you can add to as you continue to practice drilling down.

### Researching

Write an essay about your research into the extraordinary that presents a special or artful idea, insight, or question. Don't write a schoolish "report" about your research. Instead, make something special with your words; write something that rewards repeated acts of attention.

### Writing

We challenged you to write about your research into the extraordinary in a way that rewards repeated acts of attention—just as Lewis Carroll did in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and as the writers and directors Lana and Andy Wachowski did in *The Matrix*. Now spend at least 30 minutes writing and thinking about what makes *The Matrix* or *Alice's Adventures* or another work of literature, film, or art worth returning to again and again. What did you do in your own essay to reward repeated acts of attention?

## EXPLORE

A rabbit hole can open up anywhere. Tim Cahill's efforts to make sense of conflicting accounts of the Jonestown Massacre lead him into the mind of a madman. Sarah Stillman's research into the war on drugs reveals the deadly



consequences of police reliance on young drug informants. David Foster Wallace, dispatched to cover a lobster festival, finds himself on an existential journey to make sense of the joys of eating creatures who have been boiled alive.

Cahill, Tim. "In the Valley of the Shadow of Death: Guyana after the Jonestown Massacre." *Rolling Stone*. 25 Jan. 1979. Web.

Stillman, Sarah. "The Throwaways." *New Yorker*. 3 Sept. 2012. Web.

Wallace, David Foster. "Consider the Lobster." *Gourmet*. August 2004. Web.

## On Creative Reading

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Once you've learned to read, it's easy to lose sight of just what a complicated business reading actually is. You see the letters *c-a-t*, and without effort you know that together they refer to the furry, whiskered, four-legged purring thing curled before the fire. To accomplish this seemingly simple act of translation, you have had to learn a sign system (the alphabet), a host of rules governing the combination of the signs in the given system (for example, there are vowels and consonants, and they can be put together only in certain ways), and the connection between the signifier (the word that results from the orderly combination of sounds) and the signified (the object, idea, or sensation out there in the world).

Even at this most rudimentary stage, there's an inescapable arbitrariness at the heart of the reading process: Why does *c-a-t* and not some other series of letters signify that furry thing? Why *that* sound for *that* creature? And beyond the arbitrariness of the sign system, there's an even deeper mystery: How does the child watching the parent's finger point to the letters on the page ever make the leap to that moment when the sound, the letters, and the image in the picture book suddenly connect, and meaning gets made?

Solving the mystery of how and why humans developed this ability to work with sign systems is a job for evolutionary neuroscientists, and their answer, when it comes, will apply to humans in general. We're interested in a more personal issue: Once the process of reading has been routinized and internalized, why is it that different people reading the same material reach different conclusions? Or to put this another way, why is there ambiguity? Why is there misunderstanding? What happens in the movement from decoding the characters on the page or screen to creating an interpretation of what those characters, considered in context, might mean that causes one reader's mind to go in one direction and another reader's mind to go in a different direction?

The mystery of the individual response is made clear as soon as class discussion begins. Where'd *that* idea come from? How'd the teacher get *that* out of *those* words? And because students can't see inside the teacher's mind, they often conclude that the connections the teacher

is making are arbitrary and, beyond that, that anything other than the reporting of facts is “just a matter of opinion.” For many students, the mystery of how teachers—and experts, in general—read is never solved. For these students, the experience of higher-order literacy, where reading and writing become ways to create new ideas, remains out of reach.

Social bookmarking, a gift from the Internet, gives us a way to make visible for others some of the previously invisible workings of the creative reader’s mind. Below we walk you through an example of how using social media worked in one of our classes, and then we give you some exercises to get you on your way. Although there are any number of bookmarking tools out there for you to try, we use Diigo because it allows our students to annotate the Web pages they share with the class. They can highlight passages they want to draw attention to or pose inline questions. And just like that, two previously invisible aspects of the reading process—what people read and how they respond to what they’ve read—become visible and available for others to consider.

So what does *creative* reading look like in practice?

Our example comes from a creative nonfiction course we taught in which the students read *On Photography*, a collection of essays by Susan Sontag that was originally published in 1977 and that remains a touchstone in discussions of how the free circulation of images changes societal norms. We were halfway through the second essay in the collection, “America, Seen through Photographs, Darkly,” and had reached the point where Sontag considers the work of Diane Arbus, who presented her subjects, whether they were at the margins of society or at its center, in ways that were strange and disturbing.

Sontag’s criticism of Arbus is damning: Sontag argues that Arbus used her camera to depict all of her subjects as “inhabitants of a single village . . . the idiot village [of] America.” Here the class encountered a problem that runs throughout Sontag’s *On Photography*: there are no photographs. For readers who already know the history of American photography, this isn’t a problem; they can just call to mind some of Arbus’s most famous images and judge for themselves whether or not Sontag’s assessment is fair. But for readers who don’t know Arbus’s work, the only option is to treat Sontag’s assessment as a fact.

Sontag’s readers in the 1970s who wanted to know more about Arbus’s work would not have had an easy time of it, but today any reader



with access to the Internet can check out Arbus's images and assess the validity of Sontag's judgment. Without exerting any more effort than it takes to type "Diane Arbus" into a search engine, our students found the images Sontag refers to in her piece and more: Arbus's shots of circus freaks; the off-balance, bedecked socialites; the nudists; the giant man towering over his miniature parents; and of course, the twin girls.

Once she'd seen the pictures, our student Alice asked: "Well, how did people at the time react? We know Sontag didn't like Arbus's work, but did they?"

As so often happens in our classes, we didn't know the answer to the question our student had posed. (And in this instance, even if we had known, we wouldn't have said so.) Alice asked a good question—both because finding out the answer would end up requiring some creativity on her part and because wondering about how others see what you're seeing always serves to highlight the fact that meaning is both a public and a private matter. So we said, "That's a Diigo moment," which is shorthand in our classes for, "See what you can find out and post the results to our class's social bookmarking group."

Back in her room, Alice set off to answer her own question. She entered some search terms, cast about a bit, and then settled on a path that took her to *Athanor*, a journal published by Florida State University's Department of Art History, and an article by Laureen Trainer entitled "The Missing Photographs: An Examination of Diane Arbus's Images of Transvestites and Homosexuals from 1957 to 1965." Alice posted a link to the piece on Diigo and then highlighted a passage that struck her:

However, the reaction to her images was intense anger, an emotional response prompted by the cultural war against sexual "deviants." Yuben Yee, the photo librarian at the MoMA, recalls having to come early every morning to wipe the spit off of Arbus's portraits. He recalls that, "People were uncomfortable—threatened—looking at Diane's stuff." Even within the art world, Arbus was thought to be photographing subject matter that was ahead of her time. As Andy Warhol, who had seen some of Arbus's portraits, commented, "drag queens weren't even accepted in freak circles until 1967." Arbus's images were not only disturbing

to her audience on an aesthetic level, but her unabashed and unapologetic views of transvestites touched a deeper nerve in the people who viewed them.

Beneath this quote, Alice wrote about the difference between a time when people spat on images of transvestites in the Museum of Modern Art and her own experience looking at the images a half century later.

How did people respond to Arbus's work at the time? Alice made her way of answering this question visible to the rest of the class. She also found something that was new to her teachers, new to the class, and new to her; in so doing, she gave us a glimpse of what was going on in her mind while she was reading. Yes, it is true that she had just uncovered a piece of information. Yes, it is true that she had not yet done anything with this information. But meaningful engagement with information can happen only *after* one has had the experience of posing an open, exploratory question.

Alice kept looking—it's a requirement in our courses. The next source she posted to Diigo would likely raise the hackles of many teachers: Wikipedia! It's an outrage!

Well, actually, it isn't. If we grant that students are going to use Wikipedia (and SparkNotes and YouTube and, and, and), we can focus on how to use these sources productively rather than insist on unenforceable prohibitions.

So, Wikipedia: Is there a beneficial way to use an encyclopedia? How could the answer to that question be anything other than *yes*?

Alice posted the link to Wikipedia's Arbus entry as well as excerpts from the section of that entry that specifically concern the reception of Arbus's work. She deleted material that was not of interest to her; separated past reactions from more contemporary responses; added an inline comment that directly connected the Wikipedia entry to Sontag's argument; reordered the information so as to place the introductory material in this section of the Wikipedia entry at the end of her own citation; and eliminated entirely a passage where it is observed that "Sontag's essay itself has been criticized as 'an exercise in aesthetic insensibility' and 'exemplary for its shallowness'" (italics added).

All of this editorial activity gives us a much richer sense of what Alice did while she was reading. Alice amassed many examples of how



the subjects of Arbus's images responded to being photographed; how anonymous viewers at MoMA responded when the photographs were first displayed; and how critics—those who were Arbus's contemporaries and those who came after her—responded to the photographs. Then she concluded her entry with the news that Arbus had photographed Sontag and her son.

Who was this last bit of information news to? Alice. The other students in the course. Her teachers. And given that Sontag herself does not reveal this fact anywhere in *On Photography*, it's safe to say that it would also be news to most, if not all, of Sontag's readers, past and present.

Alice posted this fact to Diigo without comment. She thought she was done.

But the practice of creative reading is never done. In this case there was a question hanging in the air, waiting to be asked. And because the social bookmarking tool made what Alice was reading and how she was reading it visible to the members of the group and to her teachers, it became possible for us to pose the question that could keep the reading process going for Alice: What does the picture Arbus took of Sontag look like?

This question was posed in public for all the other students to see on the Diigo site, just below Alice's entry. And soon enough, Alice posted a link to the image. True, it was only a small, low-resolution image, but it was a start. Or rather, it was a continuation, an extension of a process that started with Alice asking, "How did others see Arbus?" and eventually led to her discovering an image of Sontag and her son looking back at the photographer Sontag describes as "not a poet delving into her entrails to relate her own pain but a photographer venturing out into the world to *collect* images that are painful."

This is one version of what happens when the purpose of reading shifts from the acquisition of information to the exploration of an open-ended question: reading begets more reading, one passage leads to another, and the original text is read and reread in a series of changing contexts, its meaning expanding and contracting depending on the use to which the reader puts it. This is the essence of higher-order reading. Some explorations will be more fruitful than others, and some more valuable for the individual than for a larger community of readers, but the movement from answers to questions, from information to ideas, remains the same.



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## Practice Session One

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### Reflecting

The example of creative reading we've described leads from a question about an essay to an image not included in or referenced in the original essay. We first want you to find a reproduction online of Diane Arbus's photograph of Susan Sontag. What light do you think Arbus's photograph of Sontag and her son sheds on Sontag's assessment of Arbus's work in "America, Seen through Photographs, Darkly"? Spend at least 20 minutes figuring out a thoughtful, compelling answer to this question. For the purposes of this exercise, work only with what we've provided. *Don't* seek out the rest of Sontag's essay or more information about Arbus. What does the photograph alone tell you?

### Researching

As we've said, the work of creative reading is never done. What information can you find online about the image of Sontag and her son? About *their* relationship? About Sontag's fuller argument in "America, Seen through Photographs, Darkly"? About her argument in *On Photography*? Spend at least an hour researching and reading, keeping careful notes on your discoveries.

### Writing

Now you're ready to work on an extended essay about how to read Arbus's images creatively. Continue the research Alice began about how viewers have responded to Arbus's photographs in the forty years since Sontag's judgment, gathering information about one or more lines of response to the photographs. Then make an argument for how you think an Arbus photograph ought to be read. (Note: This series of exercises can be profitably executed using any visual artist.)

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## Practice Session Two

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### Researching

Open your own Diigo account. Once a day for a week, we'd like you to bookmark and annotate a page you've visited on the Web. The Diigo tool allows for highlighting, but in our experience most highlighting is done in place of actual reading. We want you to mark those places in your reading where a question of any *kind* is raised for you. An unfamiliar word, data that seems

not to compute, an interpretation that doesn't make sense, an odd sentence structure—wherever your reading is stopped, take note of it. At the end of a week, you'll have a profile of your own reading practice.

### Reflecting

Now that you have made a version of your own reading practice visible for you to consider, what do you see? Set aside at least 30 minutes to write down answers to these questions: What does your profile reveal about what kind of a reader you are? What habits do you practice currently? Are there instances when your experience of reading was more pleasurable than it was at other times? More productive? More useful? Was your practice of reading markedly different during any of these phases, or was the outcome entirely dependent on what you were reading at the time?

### Writing

Using your research and reflections on your reading practices, compose a portrait of yourself as a reader. Where are you now as a reader? Where would you like to be? What specific steps do you need to take to become a lifelong creative reader? Write an essay that analyzes the most important events in your experience as a reader up to the present moment.

## EXPLORE

Two of our suggested readings invite you to continue the creative reading of work by Susan Sontag and Diane Arbus: journalist Franklin Foer considers Sontag's critical success alongside her changing relationship to photography, while art critic Peter Schjeldahl's brief remembrance of Arbus seeks to provide a reparative reading of her work. In our third suggested reading, Nathan Chandler uses creative reading to learn about and describe the inner workings of Anonymous—a group of highly skilled hackers who are committed to remaining unknown and unfindable.

Chandler, Nathan. "How Anonymous Works." *Howstuffworks.com*. Web.

Foer, Franklin. "Susan Superstar: How Susan Sontag Became Seduced by Her Own Persona." *Nymag.com*. 14 January 2005. Web.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Looking Back: Diane Arbus at the Met." *Newyorker.com*. 21 March 2005. Web.

## On Imagining Others

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We've all heard the proverb "Before you judge someone, walk a mile in that person's shoes." This saying is so well known because it captures the experience we've all had of making a snap judgment that then turns out to be wrong. Understanding another person's motives requires more than just trusting your intuition, and it involves more than just reviewing the evidence about that person reported to you by your own eyes and ears. It also requires an act of imagination that gives you a glimpse of what it is like to experience life as that person does.

But is the imagination really powerful enough or trustworthy enough to approximate the experience of walking a mile in another person's shoes? In our view (that is, as seen through our eyes, when walking in our shoes), the more you practice using your imagination to gain a sense of how others see the world, the better your approximations will become. We're aware that this sense, which is by definition an *approximate* understanding, is not the same thing as *complete* knowledge. Indeed, the very act of trying to produce writing that fully renders the experience of another person can lead to a deeper appreciation for how much of anyone else's experience remains out of reach of your imagination.

One of the most ambitious efforts to imagine the lives of others is the photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand's 7 billion Others project, which seeks to promote understanding of "what separates and what unites" the world's more than seven billion people. Prior to launching the 7 billion Others project (which began as the 6 billion Others project), Arthus-Bertrand was most famous for the aerial photographs he took for his book *Earth from Above*. From up in the sky, he says, "the Earth looks like an immense area to be shared." But back on the ground, all the local impediments to sharing the earth come back into focus—problems produced by geography, culture, language, religion, wealth, health, and opportunity. To counter this immediate sense of an unshareable world, Arthus-Bertrand offers spectacular image after spectacular image in *Earth from Above* of the world's rich natural resources and of the vibrant productivity of its peoples.



Confronted with the problem of how we might better understand each other, in 2003 Arthus-Bertrand and his coworkers began filming thousands of interviews in eighty-four different countries and posting these videos on their Web site. Every interview subject responded to the same list of questions (forty-five in all) about experiences, beliefs, and hopes, a list that included these conversational prompts:

What did you learn from your parents?

What would you like to hand on to your children?

What was the most difficult ordeal you have had to face in your life?

What do you think is the meaning of life?

Have you ever wanted to leave your country? Why?

Have you seen nature change since your childhood?

What does love mean to you?

What is your greatest fear?

What do you think happens after death?

What did you dream about when you were a child?

Comparing the subjects' answers to these questions to our own answers reveals both what we have in common with others and what remains puzzling and mysterious about the thoughts and lives of others.

The 7 billion Others project provides us with raw material for imagining the lives of others around the globe and across the country. But one can also find the compelling mystery of otherness across the street or across the kitchen table. Imagine, for instance, how different it might be to see the world from the perspective of a parent, sibling, grandparent, or friend, or how you would perceive the world from a wheelchair, or if you couldn't see at all. (You can even find the mystery of otherness within yourself, but that's a paradox we'll consider at another time.)

In the preface to his book *What the Dog Saw*, Malcolm Gladwell captures the sense of otherness within one's own home in a vignette from his childhood. As a young boy, Gladwell would slip into his father's study and marvel at the graph paper covered with rows of penciled

numbers strewn across his father's desk. Gladwell knew his father was a mathematician, but what did that mean, really? He writes,

I would sit on the edge of his chair and look at each page with puzzlement and wonder. It seemed miraculous, first of all, that he got paid for what seemed, at the time, like gibberish. But more important, I couldn't get over the fact that someone whom I loved so dearly did something every day, inside his own head, that I could not begin to understand.

If Gladwell could "not begin to understand" what was going on in his father's mind, why did he persist in wondering about the symbols scrawled on graph paper? He persisted, he explains, because "curiosity about the interior life of other people's day-to-day work is one of the most fundamental of human impulses." Early in life, Gladwell discovered the rewards of confronting the unknown in everyday life, and he held onto his curiosity long after childhood, convinced "that everyone and everything has a story to tell." His curiosity about others' thoughts became the foundation of his career as a writer.

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## Practice Session One

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### Reflecting

Go to the 7 billion Others Web site and explore all that it makes available. Set aside at least 30 minutes to watch a few of the testimonials. Listen to how people from all over the world respond to questions about love, fear, family, and more. Then select one film on a specific topic ("After death," "Family," "Meaning of life," and so on), and watch it in its entirety.

After viewing the film, spend at least 30 minutes reflecting on what you saw and heard. Begin by reflecting on the responses of the people interviewed in the video. Then consider your own response to the topic you chose. At which points did you feel the strongest affinity with the people being interviewed? Which responses struck you as being most surprising? Does the 7 billion Others project show that there are seven billion perspectives?

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## Practice Session Two

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### Researching

Imagining the lives of others begins with curiosity, openness, and a commitment to listening attentively. One way to practice those habits of mind is to conduct an interview in which you listen closely and carefully to what the person being interviewed has to say. (When you conduct an interview, you should either take notes or get the interviewee's permission to record the interview.)

Option 1: Find a friend or an acquaintance—someone around your age who has a different perspective on the world than you do—and invite that person to talk with you for 30 minutes or more about one or two of the topics that most interest you from the 7 billion Others project, such as “What did you learn from your parents?” or “What do you think is the meaning of life?” Invite stories. Listen for places where your interviewee's beliefs or thoughts are different from your own, and ask questions to expand your understanding of those differences.

Option 2: Find a friend or an acquaintance who is at least twenty years older than you are, and invite that person to talk for 30 minutes or more about childhood and growing up. What was everyday life like when he or she was your age? What are the most dramatic changes that this person has observed in his or her lifetime? What does she or he miss about the past? What changes have been most welcome? Listen for places where your subject's experiences are radically different from your own, and ask questions to expand your understanding of those differences.

### Writing

After your interview, review your notes or your recording and write an essay about what it would take for you to see the world as your interview subject does. What else would you need to know about this person that you don't know from your conversation and your previous interactions? How would you know whether you had succeeded in approximating their worldview? At what point do you have to shift from what you know to what you imagine to be the case?

## EXPLORE

When we imagine the experience of another person, we might focus on what it would be like to have that person's thoughts, talents, or background. With



our suggested readings, we invite you to consider what it would be like either to inhabit another person's body or to be intimate friends with someone who is both enormously talented and self-destructive. Nora Ephron describes life without a plunging cleavage. Lucy Grealy describes life after half of her lower jaw was removed, at age nine, due to cancer. And Ann Patchett describes the challenges involved in being Grealy's close friend.

Ephron, Nora. "A Few Words about Breasts." *Esquire*. May 1972. Web.

Grealy, Lucy. "Mirrorings." *Harper's Magazine*. Feb. 1993. Web.

Patchett, Ann. "The Face of Pain." *New York Magazine*. 1 July 2003. Web.

## On Motivation

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Why write?

When posting on social media, the writer's motivation is clear: to connect with friends, or to say something others will "like." As in other kinds of "unsponsored writing," such as keeping a diary or maintaining a personal blog, the central activity is giving voice to the self. This can be pleasurable; it can teach you about yourself; it can relieve stress. While there are plenty of people who never feel the desire to engage in unsponsored writing, there's not much mystery as to why some do.

What *is* mysterious is why anyone, outside of a school assignment, voluntarily writes about anything other than the self, its interests, its desires, its travails, and so on. Why write a searching analysis of a social problem, for instance, or a book-length study of voting behaviors, or a biography of someone long dead and wholly unrelated to the writer? Why do something that requires so much time and mental energy, and for which the odds of getting published or having your work read are so low?

When cast in these terms, the motivation to write voluntarily about something other than the self does seem mysterious. But perhaps these are not the best terms for understanding how the motivation to write emerges. So let's move from the hypothetical to the particular and consider the story of how the historian Jill Lepore set out to write a book about Benjamin Franklin and ended up writing one about Jane Franklin, his virtually unknown sister. It's obvious why a historian might want to write about Ben Franklin. He's a major figure in American history; he was an inventor, an ambassador, an educator, and a philosopher; he was one of the most famous people of his time, and he interacted with others in all walks of life. If you're a scholar of American history, writing about him sounds fun.

In "The Prodigal Daughter," Lepore describes settling into reading Franklin's papers and finding herself drawn instead to the sixty-three-year-long correspondence Ben Franklin had with his younger sister Jane. Lepore discovered that Ben Franklin wrote more letters to Jane than to anyone else. "No two people in their family were more alike," Lepore

came to realize, even though “their lives could hardly have been more different.” Jane Franklin was nearly illiterate, and the few writing lessons her brother gave her ended after he left home when she was only eleven. Aside from letters to family and friends, the only writing she did was to record the dates of major events in a small, handmade book she called her “Book of Ages,” which Lepore describes as “four sheets of foolscap between two covers to make a little book of sixteen pages.” Turn the pages of this homemade book and you’ll move through a list of dates and events: Jane’s birth; her marriage at age fifteen; the birth of her first child, and that child’s death less than a year later; the births of eleven more children and the deaths, during her lifetime, of all but one of those children.

In contrast to her brother’s life, Jane Franklin’s life seemed too spare and uneventful to warrant general attention. And yet when Lepore told her mother what she had learned about Ben Franklin’s forgotten sister, her mother said, “Write a book about her!” Lepore thought her mother was joking. How could she write a book about a phantom? Who would want to read about her? It seemed like an impossible task, but when her mother’s health began to fail, Lepore returned her attention to Jane Franklin’s letters “to write the only book [her] mother ever wanted [her] to write.”

Although her personal motivation for writing a book about Jane Franklin couldn’t have been stronger, Lepore floundered. She tried to write a double biography that placed Jane Franklin’s life story next to her brother’s, but she abandoned this approach after drafting 250 pages, having found that the juxtaposition only magnified the sadness and sameness of Jane’s life. Without a more compelling reason to write than pleasing her mother, Lepore put the project aside. We would say that, at this stage, Lepore had a private motive but not a public one. Her private motive was powerful enough to get her writing, but it didn’t provide her with a way to present Jane Franklin’s monotonous life as a puzzle, problem, or question that others might find meaningful.

Perhaps the problem was that the questions raised by Jane Franklin’s life didn’t merit a book-length study. Maybe what was interesting about her life could be stated much more briefly. In “Poor Jane’s Almanac,” a short opinion piece Lepore published in the *New York Times*, she described Jane Franklin’s “Book of Ages” and the political arguments Jane had with her brother after her child-rearing days were done. By



highlighting Jane's two modes of writing—the catalog of her losses and her letters to her brother—Lepore found a way to show her readers why they should be interested in her life. Jane Franklin's biography in itself isn't compelling; what is so interesting is what her life's story reveals about the connections between gender, poverty, education, and access to contraception. "Especially for women," Lepore writes, "escaping poverty has always depended on the opportunity for an education and the ability to control the size of their families," neither of which Jane had.

Lepore was stunned by the flood of letters she received in response to the *New York Times* piece. In an interview ("Out Loud: Jane Franklin's Untold American Story"), she described letters from readers about how their mothers, like Jane Franklin, swam against the "undertow of motherhood" to steal the time required to read and learn and engage with the wider world. Taken together, the mass of personal letters helped Lepore see why trying to fit Jane Franklin's life into the form of a biography hadn't worked. Lepore's readers hadn't written to her because they were moved by Jane Franklin's singular, unique life; rather, they wrote because they saw in Jane Franklin a version of their own mothers. At last, Lepore had a public motive for writing at length about Jane Franklin's life: she would use her story to show how poverty, motherhood, and limited education diminished the lives of women in the eighteenth century and rendered achievement outside the home impossible. And that's exactly what she did in *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin*, which was nominated for a National Book Award in 2013.

We began with the question "Why write?" and have ended with a discussion of audience. How did we get here? By following the story of Jill Lepore's struggle to find a satisfying way to write about Jane Franklin's life, we've seen that the movement from a private to a public motive to write involves a shift in the imagined audience for one's writing. For personal reasons, Lepore set out to write a book about Jane Franklin with her own mother as the imagined audience; when Lepore imagined a larger audience of sympathetic readers, she realized she had to reconceive the project. It would still be about Jane Franklin, but Franklin's life story would become a case study of the challenges women in general faced in eighteenth-century America.

Given that virtually all of the writing students do in school is in response to an assignment of one kind or another, and further, that those

assignments come with an external motivator (the grading system) and an intended audience (the teacher), it's highly unlikely that you have had an experience like Lepore's while writing in school. Even so, with the assignments in *Habits of the Creative Mind*, we want you to practice imagining that the audience for your work is composed neither exclusively of your friends nor solely of those who are paid to read your work, but rather of sympathetic readers interested in seeing how your mind works on a problem. As you practice imagining a different audience for your work, you will find yourself confronting the writer's central challenge: How do I make what interests me of interest to others?

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## Practice Session One

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### Reading

For this exercise read Jill Lepore's "The Last Amazon: Wonder Woman Returns," which is included in this volume, or any of her other writing that is available on the Web. After you've finished reading the piece, spend at least 30 minutes considering Lepore's public motive for writing it. What is the compelling problem, question, puzzle, contradiction, or ambiguity she is exploring? At what point in the reading does she make her central project clear? What does she do to make her project compelling to her audience?

### Writing

Public and intellectual motives are often expressed as questions, or as statements that use a complicating or qualifying word such as *but*, *however*, or *or*. For example, Lepore's motive in *Book of Ages* can be expressed by this statement: Jane Franklin's life appears to be unexceptional, *but* her life provides a valuable example of how poverty, lack of education, and motherhood severely limited what women in the eighteenth-century United States could achieve.

We'd like you to spend at least 20 minutes reviewing the Lepore article you selected and defining the public motive of the article as clearly as you can in just one sentence. Experiment with restating the motive in a sentence that uses *but*, *or*, *however*, or some other complicating word. How does the statement you composed help to clarify Lepore's project for you?

## Practice Session Two

### Researching

We invite you to practice the motivating move that Lepore employs regularly. Specifically, we want you to use details about particular people or historical events to open up larger questions about cultural or social issues, such as motherhood, fatherhood, national identity, education, poverty, or economic opportunity.

To begin, write up a familiar anecdote from your family history. Then follow Lepore's example and consider how you could use the story to shed light on an interesting cultural or social problem, puzzle, or mystery that is bigger than your particular family. In other words, define a public motive for writing by using your family anecdote to rethink a larger issue or idea. Before you try to make a compelling connection, spend at least one hour doing research about the cultural or social issue that interests you.

After you've done sufficient research and feel ready to connect personal experience and public ideas, compose an essay that links your family history to the larger issue you've researched.

### EXPLORE

Jill Lepore, whose work is the foundation for our discussion of how the motive to write evolves over time, explains in a recorded interview why she chose to write about Jane Franklin. George Orwell's discussion of motive differs from ours because it focuses instead on how writers are driven by ego, beauty, a desire for knowledge, and political purpose. Oliver Sacks further complicates explanations for motive because of what is now known about how malleable memory is; when memories change over time, motives for past actions can't be recalled with certainty.

Lepore, Jill. Interview by Sasha Weiss and Judith Thurman. "Out Loud: Jane Franklin's Untold American Story." Podcast audio. *New Yorker*. 30 June 2013. Web.

Orwell, George. "Why I Write." *Gangrel* 4 (Summer 1946). Web.

Sacks, Oliver. "Speak, Memory." *New York Review of Books*. 21 Feb. 2013. Web.



## Curiosity at Work: Donovan Hohn Follows the Toys

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Donovan Hohn was teaching high school English in New York when a student's paper inspired him to pursue his own open-ended research assignment. Hohn had asked his students to practice the "archaeology of the ordinary" by picking an artifact, researching its history, and writing up what they found. One student, who chose to write about his lucky rubber duck, came across a report from 1992 about twenty-eight thousand bath toys that fell off a container ship in the Pacific Ocean. A few years later, the report continued, beachcombers in Alaska began to notice the toys floating ashore—a plastic duck here, another there, arriving year after year. Hohn couldn't get this story out of his head. He started asking questions: Why had some of the toys ended up in Alaska? Where were the rest of the toys? Why didn't they all end up in the same place? He decided to look for answers.

"At the outset," Hohn writes in his book *Moby-Duck*, "I figured I'd interview a few oceanographers, talk to a few beachcombers, read up on ocean currents and Arctic geography, and then write an account of the incredible journey of the bath toys lost at sea." He thought he'd be able to do this work without leaving his desk. But Hohn didn't manage to stay seated for long. He discovered that questions

can be like ocean currents. Wade in a little too far and they can carry you away. Follow one line of inquiry and it will lead you to another, and another. Spot a yellow duck dropped atop the seaweed at the tide line, ask yourself where it came from, and the next thing you know you're way out at sea, no land in sight, dog-paddling around in mysteries four miles deep. You're wondering when and why yellow ducks became icons of childhood. You want to know what it's like inside the toy factories of Guangdong. You're marveling at the scale of humanity's impact on this terraqueous globe and at the oceanic magnitude of your own ignorance.

In pursuit of answers to his growing list of questions, Hohn crossed the Northwest Passage in an icebreaker. He sailed on a catamaran to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a huge expanse of plastic soup—broken-down bits of bottles, toys, and packaging of all kinds—drawn together by ocean currents. He rode out a terrifying winter storm on the outer decks of a cargo ship in the middle of the Pacific, with “shipping containers stacked six-high overhead, . . . strain[ing] against their lashings, creaking and groaning and cataracting with every roll.” He sped on a ferry up China’s Pearl River Delta to a factory where he saw bath toys being made. He learned how to say “thank you” in Inuktitut and Cantonese.

In the end, Hohn wrote a book about many things: consumer demand for inexpensive goods, the toxins in the Chinese factories where the ducks are made and in the ocean where the toys degrade, and prospects for change. His curiosity took him all the way from an absurd image of a flotilla of plastic ducks to questions about the most pressing environmental concerns the world faces today.

## CONNECTING

On the Three Most Important Words in the English Language 100

On Writing by Formula 108

On Working with the Words of Others 119

Argument at Work: Michelle Alexander and the  
Power of Analogy 130

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“**C**onnect the dots”: this phrase used to appear atop the pages of activity books designed to help young children practice counting while they worked on improving their fine motor skills. A child, crayon in hand, would draw a line from numbered dot to numbered dot, and at the end of the process, if the child had followed the dots in order, then voilà, there was a picture. If not, there was a mess.

No one would argue that connecting the dots is creative. The child has simply followed the directions to uncover a design. But once we move from children connecting dots to students using their own writing to connect ideas discussed in what they've been reading, we enter a realm where creativity becomes possible. Any two ideas can be connected; any claim can be made; any argument can be put forward. Under such chaotic conditions, how does one make connections that matter?

The essays in this section will help you to resist writing formulas that pre-organize your encounters with the infinite range of connections to be made. To encourage you to practice using your writing to develop new habits for engaging with and exploring what is unknown to you, we want you to think of writing itself as the act of making connections. Writers make connections with the language they use, with the questions they choose to ask, and with the sources they choose to interview. As you experiment with making connections in each of these areas, you will be engaging directly in the creative act of making meaning: the dots you connect will be your own, and the image that results will be of your own design.