

CRITICAL READING

Whatever career you enter, much of the reading you will do — for business, not for pleasure — will probably be hasty. You'll glance at words here and there, find essential facts, catch the drift of an argument. By skimming, you'll be able to tear thorough screens full of e-mail or quickly locate the useful parts of a long report. But other reading that you do for work, most that you do in college, and all that you do in this book call for closer attention. You may be trying to understand a new company policy, seeking the truth in a campaign ad, researching a complicated historical treaty, or (in using this book) looking for pointers to sharpen your reading and writing skills.

Such reading, like writing itself, demands effort. Unlike the casual reading you might do to pass the time or entertain yourself, CRITICAL READING involves looking beneath the surface of a work, whether written or visual, seeking to understand the creator's intentions, the strategies for achieving them, and their worthiness. This book offers dozens of selections that reward critical reading and can teach you how to write better yourself. To learn from a selection, plan to spend an hour or two in its company. Seek out some quiet place — a library, a study cubicle, your room. Switch off the iPod and the phone. The fewer the distractions, the easier your task will be and the more you'll enjoy it.

How do you read critically? Exactly how, that is, do you see beneath the surface of a work, master its complexities, gauge its intentions and techniques, judge its value? To find out, we'll model critical-thinking processes that you can apply to the selections in this book, taking a close look at a sample essay, Nancy Mairs's "Disability" (p. 12), and at a photograph (p. 24).

READING CLOSELY

Previewing

Critical reading starts before you read the first word of a piece of writing. You take stock of what's before you, locating clues to the work's content and the writer's biases. Whenever you approach a written work, make a point of assessing these features:

- **The title.** Often the title will tell you the writer's subject, as with Anna Quindlen's "Homeless" or Dan Ariely's "Why We Lie." Sometimes the title immediately states the **THESIS**, the main point the writer will make: "I Want a Wife." Some titles spell out the method a writer proposes to follow: "Neat People vs. Sloppy People." The **tone** of the title may also reveal the writer's attitude toward the material, as "The Plot against People" or "Live Free and Starve" does.
- **The author.** Whatever you know or can learn about a writer — background, special training, previous works, outlook, or ideology — can often help you predict something about the work before you read a word of it. Is the writer a political conservative or a liberal? a feminist? an athlete? an internationally renowned philosopher? a popular comedian? By knowing something about the background or beliefs of a writer, you may guess beforehand a little of what he or she will say.
- **The genre.** Identifying the type, or **GENRE**, of a written work can tell you much about the writer's intentions and the content, format, and strategies to expect. Genres vary widely; they include critical analyses, business reports, works of literature, humor pieces, researched essays, arguments, and lab reports — among many others. The conventions of a genre influence a writer's choices and shape readers' expectations. For instance, you can assume that a scholarly article will take a serious, academic tone, lay out its arguments carefully, provide substantial evidence, and cite other published works. If you encountered the same approach in a personal narrative about a life-changing event, however, you'd be surprised.
- **Where the work was published.** Clearly, it matters to a writer's credibility whether an article called "Creatures of the Dark Oceans" appears in

Scientific American, a magazine for scientists and interested nonscientists, or in a popular supermarket tabloid that is full of eye-popping sensationalism. But no less important, examining where a work appears can tell you about the intended **AUDIENCE**, the readers for whom the writer was writing.

- **When the work was published.** Knowing in what year a work appeared may give you another key to understanding it. A 2014 article on ocean creatures will contain statements of fact more recent and more reliable than an essay printed in 1700 — although the older essay might contain valuable information, too.

To help provide such prereading knowledge, this book supplies biographical information about the writers and tells you something about the sources and original contexts of the selections, in notes just before each essay. (Such a set of notes precedes "Disability" on page 12.)

Writing While Reading

On first reading an essay, you want to focus on what the author has to say. Don't bog down in every troublesome particular: If you meet any words or concepts that you don't know, take them in your stride; you can always circle them and look them up later. The first time you read, get a feel for the gist of the essay; later, you will examine the details and strategies that make it work.

In giving an essay a second or third going-over, many readers find a pencil (or pen or keyboard) indispensable. A pencil in hand concentrates the attention wonderfully, and, as often happens with writing, it can lead you to unexpected questions and connections. (Some readers favor markers that roll pink or yellow ink over a word or line, making the eye jump to that spot, but you can't use a highlighter to note *why* a word or an idea is important.) You can annotate your own printed material in several ways:

- **Underline essential ideas.**
- **Score key passages** with checkmarks or vertical lines.
- **Write questions** in the margins about difficult words or concepts.
- **Note associations** with other works you've read, seen, or heard.
- **Vent your feelings** ("Bull!" "Yes!" "Says who?").

If you can't annotate what you're reading — because it's borrowed or it appears on a screen — make your notes on a separate sheet of paper or in an electronic bookmark or file.

Writing while reading helps you behold the very spine of an essay, so that you, as much as any expert, can judge its curves and connections. You'll develop an opinion about what you read, and you'll want to express it. While reading this way, you're being a writer. Your pencil marks or keystrokes will jog your memory, too, when you review for a test, take part in class discussion, or write about what you've read.

To show what a reader's annotations on an essay might look like, we give you Nancy Mairs's "Disability" with a student's marginal notes, written over the course of several readings. The same student, Rosie Anaya, wrote two essays spurred by the ideas she found in reading Mairs's work; they appear on pages 53 and 84.

NANCY MAIRS

A self-described "radical feminist, pacifist, and cripple," Nancy Mairs aims to "speak the 'unspeakable.'" Her poetry, memoirs, and essays deal with many sensitive subjects, including her struggles with multiple sclerosis. Born in Long Beach, California, in 1943, Mairs grew up in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. She received a BA from Wheaton College in Massachusetts and an MFA in creative writing and a PhD in English literature from the University of Arizona. While working on her advanced degrees, Mairs taught high school and college writing courses. Her second book of poetry, *In All the Rooms of the Yellow House* (1984), received a Western States Arts Foundation book award. Mairs's essays are collected in *Plaintext* (1986), *Remembering the Bone-House* (1988), *Carnal Acts* (1990), *Ordinary Time* (1993), *Waist High in the World: A Life among the Nondisabled* (1996), and *A Troubled Guest* (2001). In 2008 she received the Arizona Literary Treasure Award. In addition to working as a writer, Mairs is a public speaker and a research associate with the Southwest Institute for Research on Women.

Disability

As a writer afflicted with multiple sclerosis, Nancy Mairs is in a unique position to examine how the culture responds to people with disabilities. In this essay from *Carnal Acts*, she examines the media's depiction of disability and argues with her usual unsentimental candor that the media must treat disability as normal. The essay was first published in 1987 in the *New York Times*. To what extent is Mairs's critique of the media still valid today?

Mairs / Disability

For months now I've been consciously searching for representation of myself in the media, especially television. I know I'd recognize this self because of certain distinctive, though not unique, features: I am a forty-three-year-old woman with multiple sclerosis; although I can still totter short distances with the aid of a brace and a cane, more and more of the time I ride in a wheelchair. Because of these appliances and my peculiar gait, I'm easy to spot even in a crowd. So when I tell you I haven't noticed any women like me on television, you can believe me.

Actually, last summer I did see a woman with multiple sclerosis portrayed on one of those medical dramas that offer an illness-of-the-week like the daily special at your local diner. In fact, that was the whole point of the show: that this poor young woman had MS. She was terribly upset (understandably, I assure you) by the diagnosis, and her response was to plan a trip to Kenya while she was still physically capable of making it, against the advice of the young, fit, handsome doctor who had fallen in love with her. And she almost did it. At least, she got as far as a taxi to the airport, hotly pursued by the doctor. But at the last she succumbed to his blandishments and fled the taxi into his manly protective embrace. No escape to Kenya for this cripple.

Capitulation into the arms of a man who uses his medical powers to strip one of even the urge toward independence is hardly the sort of representation I had in mind. But even if the situation had been sensitively handled, according to the woman her right to her own adventures, it wouldn't have been what I'm looking for. Such a television show, as well as films like *Duet for One* and *Children of a Lesser God*, in taking disability as its major premise, excludes the complexities that round out a character and make her whole. It's not about a woman who happens to be physically disabled; it's about physical disability as the determining factor of a woman's existence.

Take it from me, physical disability looms pretty large in one's life. But it doesn't devour one wholly. I'm not, for instance, Ms. MS, a walking, talking embodiment of a chronic incurable degenerative disease. In most ways I'm just like every other woman of my age, nationality, and socioeconomic background. I menstruate, so I have to buy tampons. I worry about smoker's breath, so I buy mouthwash. I smear my wrinkling skin with lotions. I put bleach in the washer so my family's undies won't

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be dingy. I drive a car, talk on the telephone, get runs in my pantyhose, eat pizza. In most ways, that is, I'm the advertisers' dream: Ms. Great American Consumer. And yet the advertisers, who determine nowadays who will get represented publicly and who will not, deny the existence of me and my kind absolutely.

I once asked a local advertiser why he didn't include disabled people in his spots. His response seemed direct enough: "We don't want to give people the idea that our product is just for the handicapped." But tell me truly now: If you saw me pouring out puppy biscuits, would you think these kibbles were only for the puppies of the cripples? If you saw my blind niece ordering a Coke, would you switch to Pepsi lest you be struck sightless? No, I think the advertiser's excuse masked a deeper and more anxious rationale: To depict disabled people in the ordinary activities of daily life is to admit that there is something ordinary about disability itself, that it may enter anybody's life. If it is effaced completely, or at least isolated as a separate "problem," so that it remains at a safe distance from other human issues, then the viewer won't feel threatened by her or his own physical vulnerability.

This kind of effacement or isolation has painful, even dangerous consequences, however. For the disabled person, these include self-degradation and a subtle kind of self-alienation not unlike that experienced by other minorities. Socialized human beings love to conform, to study others and then mold themselves to the contours of those whose images, for good reasons or bad, they come to love. Imagine a life in which feasible others — others you can hope to be like — don't exist. At the least you might conclude that there is something queer about you, something ugly or foolish or shameful. In the extreme, you might feel as though you don't exist, in any meaningful social sense, at all. Everyone else is "there," sucking breath mints and splashing cologne and swigging wine coolers. You're "not there." And if not there, nowhere.

But this denial of disability imperils even you who are able-bodied, and not just by shrinking your insight into the physically and emotionally complex world you live in. Some disabled people call you TAPs, or Temporarily Aabled Persons. The fact is that ours is the only minority you can join involuntarily, without warning, at any time. And if you live long enough, as you're

Ads don't show disability either—still true?

Hahl Snarky.
emotions

✓ *scary thought*

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IMPORTANT
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What about individuality?

emotions

Problem affects people without disabilities too—interesting point.
✓

increasingly likely to do, you may well join it. The transition will probably be difficult from a physical point of view no matter what. But it will be a good bit easier psychologically if you are accustomed to seeing disability as a normal characteristic, one that complicates but does not ruin human existence. Achieving this integration, for disabled and able-bodied people alike, requires that we insert disability daily into our field of vision: quietly, naturally, in the small and common scenes of our ordinary lives.

main idea

DEVELOPING AN UNDERSTANDING

Apart from your specific notes about a text, you'll also need a place to work out your comprehension using the summaries, critical-thinking strategies, and detailed analyses discussed below and on the following pages. Such responses, you may find a JOURNAL handy. It can be a repository of ideas, a comfortable place to record thoughts about what you read. You be surprised to find that the more you write in an unstructured way, the more you'll have to say when it's time to write a structured essay. (For more on journals, see p. 30.)

Summarizing

It's usually good practice, especially with more difficult essays, to summarize the content in writing to be sure you understand it or, as often happens, to come to understand it. (We're suggesting that you write summaries yourself, but the technique is also useful when you discuss other people's work in your writing, as shown on pp. 61–62.) In summarizing a work of writing you digest, in your own words, what the author says: You take the essence of the author's meaning, without the supporting evidence and other details that make that gist convincing or interesting. If the work is short, you may want to make this a two-step procedure: First write a summary sentence for each paragraph or related group of paragraphs; then summarize those sentences into two or three others that capture the heart of the author's meaning.

Here is a two-step summary of "Disability." (The numbers in parentheses refer to paragraph numbers in the essay.) First, the longer version:

- (1) Mairs searches the media in vain for depictions of women like herself with disabilities. (2) One TV movie showed a woman recently diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, but she chose dependence over independence.

- (3) Such shows oversimplify people with disabilities by making disability central to their lives. (4) People with disabilities live lives and consume goods like everyone else, but the media ignore them. (5) Showing disability as ordinary would remind nondisabled viewers that they are vulnerable. (6) The media's exclusion of others like themselves deprives people with disabilities of role models and makes them feel undesirable or invisible. (7) Nondisabled viewers lose an understanding that could enrich them and would help them adjust to disability of their own.

Now the short summary:

Mairs believes that the media, by failing to depict disability as ordinary, both marginalize viewers with disabilities and impair the outlook and coping skills of the "Temporarily Abled."

Thinking Critically

Summarizing will start you toward understanding the author's meaning, but it is just a first step. You need tools for discovering the meaning and intentions of an essay or case study or business letter or political message. You need ways to discriminate between the trustworthy and the not so and to apply what's valid in your own work and life.

We're talking here about critical thinking — not "negative," the common conception of *critical*, but "thorough, thoughtful, inquisitive, judgment forming." When you approach something critically, you harness your faculties, your fund of knowledge, and your experiences to understand, appreciate, and evaluate the object. Critical thinking is a process involving several overlapping operations: analysis, inference, synthesis, and evaluation.

- **Analysis.** A way of thinking so essential that it has its own chapter (Chapter 9) in this book, ANALYSIS separates an item into its parts. Say you're listening to a new song by a band you like: Without thinking much about it, you isolate melodies, lyrics, and instrumentals. Critical readers analyze essays more consciously, by looking at the author's main idea, support for that idea, special writing strategies, and other elements. To show you how the beginnings of such an analysis might look, we examine these elements in "Disability" later in this chapter.
- **Inference.** Next you draw conclusions about a work based on your store of information and experience, your knowledge of the creator's background and biases, and your analysis. Say that after listening to the new song, you conclude that it reveals the band's recent preoccupation with Caribbean soca music. Now you are using INFERENCE. When you infer, you add

to the work, making explicit what was only implicit. Inference is especially important in discovering a writer's ASSUMPTIONS: opinions or beliefs often unstated, that direct the writer's ideas, supporting evidence, writing strategies, and language choices. (A writer who favors gun control, for instance, may assume without saying so that an individual's rights are being infringed for the good of the community. A writer who opposes gun control may assume the opposite, that an individual's right is superior to the community's good.)

- **Synthesis.** During SYNTHESIS, you use your special aptitudes, interests, and training to reconstitute a work so that it now contains not just the original elements but also your sense of their underpinnings, relationships, and implications. What is the band trying to accomplish with its new sound? Has the musical style changed? Answering such questions leads you to link elements into a whole or to link two or more wholes. Synthesis is the core of much academic writing, as Chapter 3 shows. Sometimes you'll respond directly to a work, or you'll use it as a springboard to another subject. Sometimes you'll show how two or more works resemble each other or how they differ. Sometimes you'll draw on many works to answer a question. In all these cases, you'll put your reading to use to support your own ideas.
- **Evaluation.** When you EVALUATE, you determine the adequacy, significance, or value of a work: Is the band getting better or just standing still? In evaluating an essay you answer a question such as whether you are moved as the author intended, whether the author has proved a case or whether the argument is even worthwhile. Not all critical thinking involves evaluation, however; often you (and your teachers) will be satisfied with analyzing, inferring, and synthesizing ideas without judging text's overall merit.

CHECKLIST FOR CRITICAL READING

- ✓ **Analyze.** Examine the elements of the work, such as thesis, purpose and audience, genre, evidence, structure, and language.
- ✓ **Infer.** Interpret the underlying meanings of the elements and the ASSUMPTIONS and intentions of the author.
- ✓ **Synthesize.** Form an idea about how the elements function together to produce a whole and to deliver a message.
- ✓ **Evaluate.** Judge the quality, significance, or value of the work.

Using this book, you'll learn to think critically about an essay by considering what the author's purpose and main idea are, how clear they are, and how well supported. You'll isolate which writing techniques the author has used to special advantage, what hits you as particularly fresh, clever, or wise — and what *doesn't* work, too. You'll discover exactly what the writer is saying, how he or she says it, and whether, in the end, it was worth saying. In class discussions and in writing, you'll tell others what you think and why.

ANALYZING AN ESSAY

To help you in your critical reading, questions after every selection in this book direct your attention to specific elements of the writer's work. Here we introduce the types of questions — on meaning, writing strategy, and language — and show how they might be applied to Nancy Mairs's "Disability" (p. 12).

Meaning

By *meaning*, we intend what the author's words say literally, of course, but also what they imply and, more generally, what the author's aims are. When reading an essay, look especially for the **THESES** and try to determine the author's **PURPOSE** for writing.

- **Thesis.** Every essay has — or should have — a point, a main idea the writer wants to communicate. Many writers come right out and sum up this idea in a sentence or two, a **THESES STATEMENT**. They may provide it in the first or second paragraph, give it somewhere in the middle of the essay, or hold it for the end. Mairs, for instance, develops her thesis over the course of the essay and then states it in paragraph 7:

Achieving this integration [of seeing disability as normal], for disabled and able-bodied people alike, requires that we insert disability daily into our field of vision: quietly, naturally, in the small and common scenes of our ordinary lives.

Sometimes a writer will not state his or her thesis outright at all, although it remains in the background controlling the work and can be inferred by a critical reader. If you find yourself confused about a writer's point — "What is this about?" — it will be up to you to figure out what the author is trying to say, to clarify what's unclear.

- **Purpose.** By *purpose*, we mean the writer's apparent reason for writing: what he or she was trying to achieve with readers. In making a simple

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYZING AN ESSAY

MEANING

- ✓ **What is the thesis**, or main point? Where is it stated?
- ✓ **What is the writer's purpose?**

WRITING STRATEGY

- ✓ **Who is the intended audience?** What assumptions does the writer make about readers' knowledge, perspectives, and interests?
- ✓ **How are supporting details structured?** What methods does the writer use to organize ideas? How does the writer achieve unity and coherence?
- ✓ **What evidence does the writer provide** to support the main idea? Is it sufficient and compelling?

LANGUAGE

- ✓ **What is the overall tone of the essay?** Is it appropriate, given the writer's purpose and audience?
- ✓ **How effective are the writer's words?** Are their meanings clear? What connotations do they hold?
- ✓ **Does the writer use any figures of speech**, such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, personification, or irony? How well do they lend meaning and vibrancy to the writer's thoughts?

statement of a writer's purpose, we might say that the writer writes to *entertain* readers, or to *explain* something to them, or to *persuade* them. To state a purpose more fully, we might say that a writer writes not just to persuade but "to motivate readers to write lawmakers and urge more federal spending for the rehabilitation of criminals." In the case of "Disability," it seems that Mairs's purpose is twofold: to explain her view of the media and to convince readers that lack of representation hurts people without disabilities as much as it does people with disabilities.

Writing Strategy

Almost all writing is a *transaction* between a writer and an audience, maybe one reader, maybe millions. To the extent that writers hold our interest, make us think, and convince us to accept a thesis, it pays to ask, "How do they succeed?" (When writers bore or anger us, we ask why they fail.) Conscious writer:

make choices intended to get readers on their side so that they can achieve their purpose. These choices are what we mean by **STRATEGY** in writing.

- **Audience.** We can tell much about a writer's intended audience from the context in which the piece was first published. And when we know something of the audience, we can better analyze the writer's decisions, from the choice of supporting details to the use of a particular tone. Mairs's original audience, for instance, was the readers of the *New York Times*, as the introduction to "Disability" on p. 12 informs us. She could assume educated readers with diverse interests who are not themselves disabled or even familiar with disability. So she fills them in, taking pains to describe her disability (par. 1) and her life (4). For her thoughtful but somewhat blinkered audience, Mairs mixes a blend of plain talk, humor, and insistence to give them the facts they need, win them over with common humanity, and convey the gravity of the problem.
- **Method.** A crucial part of a writer's strategy is how he or she develops ideas to achieve a particular purpose or purposes. As Chapters 4–13 of this book illustrate, a writer may draw on one or more familiar methods of development to make those ideas concrete and convincing. Mairs, for instance, uses **COMPARISON AND CONTRAST** to show similarities and differences between herself and nondisabled people (pars. 1, 4, 5). She offers **EXAMPLES** of dramas she dislikes (2–3), of products she buys (4), and of ads in which people with disabilities might appear (5). With **DESCRIPTION** she shows the flavor of her life (4) and the feelings she has experienced (6). And with **CAUSE AND EFFECT** she explains why disability is ignored by the media (5) to show how that affects both people with disabilities (6) and those without (7). Overall, she uses these methods to build an **ARGUMENT**, asserting and defending an opinion.
- **Evidence.** Typically, each method of development benefits from — and lends itself to — different kinds of support. For this **EVIDENCE**, the writer may use facts, reasons, expert opinions — whatever best delivers the point. (We have more to say about the uses of evidence in the introductions to Chapters 4–13.) Mairs draws on several types of evidence to develop her claims, including personal experiences and emotions (pars. 1, 4, 5), details to support her generalizations (2, 4, 5), and the opinion of an advertiser (5).
- **Structure.** A writer must mold and arrange ideas to pique, hold, and direct readers' interest. Writing that we find interesting and clear and convincing almost always has **UNITY** (everything relates to the main idea) and

COHERENCE (the relations between parts are clear). When we find an essay wanting, it may be because the writer got lost in digressions or could not make the parts fit together. In "Disability," Mairs first introduces herself and establishes her complaint about the media (pars. 1–5). Then she explains and argues the negative effects of "effacement" on people with disabilities (6) and the positive effects that normalizing disability would have on people who are not presently disabled (7). As often occurs in arguments, Mairs's organization builds to her main idea, her thesis, which readers might find difficult to accept at the outset.

Language

To examine the element of language is often to go even more deeply into an essay and how it was made. A writer's tone, voice, and choice of words in particular not only express meaning but also convey the writer's attitudes and elicit those attitudes from readers.

- **Tone.** The **tone** of writing is the equivalent of tone of voice in speaking. Whether it's angry, sarcastic, or sad, joking or serious, tone carries almost as much information about a writer's purpose as the words themselves do. Mairs's tone mixes lightness with gravity, humor with intensity. Sometimes she uses **irony**, saying one thing but meaning another, as in "I saw my blind niece ordering a Coke, would you switch to Pepsi lest you be struck sightless?" (par. 5). She's blunt, too, revealing intimate detail about her life. Honest and wry, Mairs invites us to see the media's exclusion as ridiculous and then leads us to her uncomfortable conclusion.
- **Word choice.** Tone comes in part from **dictation**, a writer's choices regarding words and sentence structures — academic, chatty, or otherwise. Mairs is a writer whose dictation is rich and varied. Expressions from common speech, such as "what I'm looking for" (par. 3), lend her prose vigor and naturalness. At the same time, Mairs is serious about her argument so she puts it in serious, firm words, such as "this denial of disability imperils even you who are able-bodied" (7). In everything you read, pay attention also to the **connotations** of words — their implied meanings and associations. Such subtle nuances can have a profound effect on both the writer's meaning and the readers' understanding of it. In "Disability," the word with the strongest connotations may be "cripple" (2, 5) because it calls up insensitivity: By using this word, Mairs stresses her frankness but also suggests that negative attitudes determine what images the media present.

- **Imagery.** One other use of language is worth noting: those concrete words and phrases that convey concepts by appealing to readers' senses. Such **IMAGES** might be straightforward, as in Mairs's portrayal of herself as someone who "can still totter short distances with the aid of a brace and a cane" (par. 1). But often writers use **FIGURES OF SPEECH**, bits of colorful language that capture meaning or attitude better than literal words can. For instance, Mairs says that people "study others and then mold themselves to the contours of those whose images . . . they come to love" (6). That figure of speech is a *metaphor*, stating that one thing (behavioral change) is another (physical change). Elsewhere Mairs uses *simile*, stating that one thing is *like* another ("an illness-of-the-week like the daily special at your local diner," 2), and *understatement* ("physical disability looms pretty large in one's life," 4). More examples of figures of speech appear in *Useful Terms*, p. 663.

Many questions in this book point to figures of speech, to oddities of tone, to particulars of diction, or to troublesome or unfamiliar words. As a writer, you can have no traits more valuable to you than a fondness and respect for words and a yen to experiment with them.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT VISUAL IMAGES

Like everyone else, you are subject to visual representations coming at you continually, unbidden, from all around. Much of the flood of visual information just washes over us. We aren't always thinking that an image, just as much as a sentence, was created by somebody for a reason. No matter what it is — Web advertisement, infographic, painting, music video, photograph, cartoon — a visual image originated with a creator or creators who had a purpose, an intention for how the image should look and how viewers should respond to it.

In their purposefulness, then, visual images are not much different from written texts, and they are no less open to critical thinking that will uncover their meanings and effects. To a great extent, the method for critically "reading" visuals parallels the one for essays outlined on pages 10–12 and 15–18. In short, as the checklist on the facing page indicates, you should start with an overview of the image and then analyze its elements, make inferences, synthesize, and evaluate.

As you do when reading written works, always write while examining a visual image or images. Jotting down responses, questions, and other notes will not only help you remember what you were thinking but also jog further thoughts into being.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYZING AN IMAGE

THE BIG PICTURE

- ✓ **What is the source of the work?**
- ✓ **What does the work show overall?** What appears to be happening?
- ✓ **Why was the work created** — for instance, to educate, to sell, to shock, to entertain?

ANALYSIS

- ✓ **Which elements of the image stand out?** What is distinctive about each one?
- ✓ **What does the composition of the image emphasize?** What is pushed to the background or the sides?
- ✓ **If words accompany the work, what do they say?** How are they sized and placed in relation to the visual elements?

INFERENCE

- ✓ **What do the elements of the work say about the creator's intentions and assumptions?** What does the creator seem to think about the subject? What does he or she seem to assume about viewers' backgrounds, needs, interests, and values?
- ✓ **How do any written or spoken words interact with the visual components?**

SYNTHESIS

- ✓ **What general appeal does the work make to viewers?** For instance, does it emphasize logical argument, emotion, or the creator's or subject's worthiness?
- ✓ **What feelings, memories, moods, or ideas does the work summon from viewers' own store of experiences?** Why, given the purpose of the work, would its creator try to establish these associations?

EVALUATION

- ✓ **Does the work seem to fulfill its creator's intentions?** Does it do what the creator wanted?
- ✓ **How does the work affect you?** Does it move you? amuse you? bore you? offend you?
- ✓ **Was the work worth creating?**

To show the critical method in action, we'll look closely at a photograph by Robin Nelson on the next page.