
The Writer's Presence
A Pool of Readings

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Using the writing process, answer questions 1 and 2

1. Barry makes a number of broad claims in this essay. How does he support—or fail to support—each of these claims? How specific or general is he in the explanations he offers? How does his approach affect your willingness to accept his explanations?
2. Comment on the role humor plays in Barry's essay. How would you read and understand the essay differently if Barry had simply explained each of his points in a straightforward manner? With which if any, of Barry's more exaggerated or improbable statements did you find yourself agreeing? Explain why.
3. CONNECTIONS: In both this essay and Barbara Ehrenreich's "Will Women Still Need Men?" (page 598), the authors use humorous generalizations to explain the points they are making. Find examples of this approach in both essays. Consider, specifically, how each writer justifies the generalizations that he or she makes. Are the two authors essentially using the same technique, or do their approaches differ? Explain.

Michael Berube

ANALYZE DON'T SUMMARIZE

MICHAEL BERUBE, born in New York City in 1961, is Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of literature and Director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Pennsylvania State University, where he teaches literature and cultural studies or, as he calls it, "dangerous studies" for the controversy such studies engender. "I would be selling students short if my classes did not reflect some of my beliefs about literary theory, or feminism, or postmodernism, or multiculturalism, since I have spent my entire adult life studying such things," he told a reporter in 2006. Known for sparring with conservative critics of academia, Berube has become a noted advocate of "liberal" liberal education, a defender of the humanities, and "the professor the right loves to hate." His books include *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon* (1992);

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Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics (1994); and *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies* (1998). His 1996 book dealing with his son born with Down syndrome, *Life as We Know It: A Father, a Family, and an Exceptional Child* (1996), was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. His most recent works are *What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts? Classroom Politics and "Bias" in Higher Education* (2006), *Rhetorical Occasions: Essays on Humans and the Humanities* (2006), and *The Left at War (Cultural Front)* (2009). He has written articles for many publications, including *Harper's*, the *New Yorker*, *Dissent*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Village Voice*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Nation*, as well as numerous scholarly journals such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, where his essay, "Analyze, Don't Summarize," appeared in 2004.

THE FIRST TIME a student asked me about my "grading system," I was nonplused- and a bit intimidated. It was an innocent question, but I heard it as a challenge: I was a 25-year-old graduate student teaching my first section in an English-literature class at the University of Virginia, and I really didn't know *what* my grading system was. Nor did I feel comfortable saying, "Well, it's like Justice Stewart's definition of pornography, really-I simply know an A paper when I see one."

I fumbled my way through a reply, but I was unsettled enough by the exchange to seek the advice of the professor in charge of the course (and roughly a dozen teaching assistants). He went on a sublime rant that I've never forgotten, though I'm sure I've embellished it over the years. "These students come in here," he fumed, "with the idea that you have to explain yourself. 'You gave me a B-plus,' they say. 'What did you take points off for?' I tell them, 'Your paper was not born with an A. Your paper was born with a 'nothing,' and I made up my mind about it as I read it. That's what the marginalia are-they're the record of my responses to your arguments,'"

Today I've incorporated versions of that rant into my own teaching handouts: I try to explain the differences among superior, mediocre, and failing papers, and I tell students that my skills as a reader have been honed by my many experiences with professional editors, who attend carefully to paragraph transitions, dangling modifiers, and inaccurate citations. But I've never been able to give my students a visceral idea of what goes through my head as I read their work-until now.

Like many sports fans, I've grown a bit tired of ESPN's 25th-anniversary hyper-self-awareness of itself as a sports medium. While it's great to see the network poke fun at its early years, when its anchors wore dorky sport coats and weren't always sure when they were on the air, it's really quite tedious to be reminded of how sports-television hype helped hype TV sports.

The show *Around the Horn* has come to epitomize the general decline to me. Another half-hour program with which it's paired, *Pardon the Interruption*, gives us two volatile, opinionated sportscasters disagreeing with each other in rapid-fire fashion, with but a handful of seconds devoted to each topic. *Around the Horn* takes that format and makes a game show of

it, offering us sportswriters competing for whose commentary will "win" by the end of the show.

I still play an organized sport-ice hockey- and as an amateur (and aged) player, I have to say that sports talk shows like this make me wonder whether some people don't see sports as simply an opportunity for endless metacommentary . . . and, of course, as gainful employment for an entire entourage of chattering parasites. In all that noise, I think, where are the games themselves?

Imagine my surprise, then, when I watched *Around the Horn* one afternoon and realized that here, at last, was my grading system in practice.

The idea behind *Around the Horn* is simple. There are a host and four contestants, each of whom speaks briefly on a series of up-to-the-moment sports topics. Points are awarded for smart-or merely plausible- remarks, and points are deducted for obviously foolish or factually inaccurate ones. There's a mute button involved, too, and players get eliminated as the show progresses (but those aspects of the game, so far as I can tell, have no counterpart in the world of paper-grading). And-of course, for this is the point of all such sports metacommentary- the viewers at home get to disagree with and complain about the commentary, as well as the officiating.

My standard undergraduate survey-course guides for paper-writing tell students things like this: "Assume a hypothetical readership composed of people who have already read the book. That means you shouldn't say, 'In class, we discussed the importance of the clam chowder in Chapter Five.' But more important, it means *you don't have to summarize the novel*. We're your readers, and we've read the book. However, we haven't read it in quite the way *you're* reading it. We haven't focused on the same scenes and passages you're bringing to our attention, and we haven't yet seen how your argument might make sense of the book for us."

But not all of my students see the point. Every semester I'm approached by some who don't quite understand why they're being asked to make an *argument* out of literary criticism. Why shouldn't they simply record their impressions of the works before them? When I tell them that an observation is not a thesis, and that their thesis isn't sufficiently specific or useful if they can't imagine anyone plausibly disagreeing with it, they ask me why they can't simply explain *what happens in the novel*.

But in what world, exactly, would such an enterprise count as analysis? Not in any world I know- not even in the ephemeral pop-culture world of sports metacommentary. Can you imagine someone showing up on *Around the Horn* and saying to host Tony Reali, "Well, Tony, let me point out that last night, the Red Sox swept the Tigers and crept to within three games of the Yankees."

"And?"

"And nothing. I'm just pointing out that the Sox won, 3-1, on a four-hitter by Schilling, while the Yanks blew another late-inning lead."

No one does that, because no one in the sports world confuses summaries with analyses.

I also tell students that an essay of 2,000 words doesn't give them all that much space to get going. 15

"You've only got a few pages to make that argument of yours. You don't need a grand introductory paragraph that begins, 'Mark Twain is one of Earth's greatest writers.' It's far better to start by giving us some idea of what you'll be arguing and why. If you like, you can even begin by pointing us to a particularly important passage that will serve as the springboard for your larger discussion: 'Not long after the second scaffold scene in *The Scarlet Letter*, when Arthur Oimmesdale joins hands with Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl, Nathaniel Hawthorne asks us to reconsider the meaning of the scarlet A on Hester's breast.'"

On *Around the Horn*, commentators have to make their points in 15 seconds, well, Uch, as people who know me can testify, just happens to be roughly the amount of time it takes me to utter 2,000 words. So here, too, the analogy holds up.

Seriously, the sports-talk analogy is useful simply as a handy way of distinguishing between summary and analysis—and, more important, as an illustration of what happens in my grading process when a student paper cites textual evidence so compelling and unusual that it makes me go back and reread the passage in question (good!), suggests that a novel's conclusion fails to resolve the questions and tensions raised by the rest of the narrative (interesting!—possibly good, depending on the novel we're talking about), or makes claims that are directly contradicted by the literary text itself (bad! the mute button for you!).

So in a sense, I do "take off" points as I go—but then I add them back on as well, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, as I weigh the claims my students advance and the means by which they advance them.

The rules for literary analysis are the same rules in play for any kind of analysis: mastery of the material. Cogency of supporting evidence. Ability to imagine and rebut salient counterarguments. Extra points for wit and style, points off for mind-numbing clichés, and permanent suspension for borrowing someone else's argument without proper attribution. 20

And yet, every year, I'm left with a handful of students who tell me that if *that's* what I want, I should simply assign topics to each student. "Not a chance," I reply. "Most of the mental labor of your paper takes place when you try to figure out just what you want to argue and why." As books like Thomas McLaughlin's *Street Smarts and Critical Theory* and Gerald Graff's *Clueless in Academe* have argued (with wit and style), students seem to understand this principle perfectly well when it comes to music, sports, and popular culture. It's our job to show them how it might apply to the study of literature.

My students, too, are often suspicious of what they regard as an idiosyncratic and a subjective enterprise that varies from English professor to English professor. But I can tell them there's really nothing mysterious about its mechanics. In fact, if they want to watch it in action, they can tune in to ESPN any weekday afternoon. 5 p.m. Eastern. D

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Using the writing process, answer questions 1, 2 and 3. The highlighted lines

1. Berube creates an analogy between grading student essays and watching sports commentary on ESPN. Outline the points of similarity between an instructor's responding to student writing and a television commentator's comments about sports. Which aspects of this analogy do you find most-and least-convincing? What aspects of this analogy, if any, has Berube omitted? Summarize the distinctions Berube draws between "analysis" and "summary." What is the significance of Berube's point that "an observation is not a thesis" (paragraph 10)?
2. In paragraph 21, Berube notes, "As books like Thomas McLaughlin's *Street Smarts and Critical Theory* and Gerald Graff's *Clueless in Academe* have argued (with wit and style), students seem to understand this principle perfectly well when it comes to music, sports, and popular culture." Explain the extent to which you agree-or disagree-with Berube's assertion here. What evidence can you point to in support of-or-to argue against-the spirit and substance of Berube's claim?
3. As you reread Berube's essay, what specific words and phrases do you think most accurately and effectively characterize his tone toward grading student essays? toward television commentators on sports? What do you notice about Berube's choice of adjectives and verbs? What are his attitudes toward what he calls "marginalia" (paragraph 2)? What do you understand him to mean when he talks about "sports as simply an opportunity for endless metacommentary" (paragraph 6)? Comment on the effectiveness of Berube's use of "entourage" in the phrase "an entire entourage of chattering parasites" (paragraph 6). Examine carefully Berube's "rules for literary analysis" in paragraph 20. Apply these criteria to the strengths and weaknesses of his essay. Which of these rules does his essay most-and least effectively illustrate? Be as specific as possible in your response.
4. CONNECTIONS: In his essay "Politics and the English Language" (page 515), George Orwell observes: "Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble" (paragraph 2). Orwell proceeds to list-and then to illustrate and analyze-six rules for writing good prose. Compare and contrast Orwell's and Berube's rules of writing. Based on these rules, which writer practices his craft more effectively? Explain why, and support your response with detailed analyses of each writer's prose.