

ACTIVITY 2.7 *Writer's Notebook*

Practicing Paraphrase

Using the advice and the example paraphrase above, write a paraphrase of another passage. More help with writing paraphrase is available in Chapter 18; see pages 365–67. For a passage to paraphrase, you might look at the alternative reading you may have already previewed and annotated, or you may use the passage below, from Codrescu's essay. You will need to go back to see where the passage fits into the text so that you can write a good paraphrase that clarifies what point in time Codrescu refers to here:

At this point, the ersatz tomatoes and the faux chicken did not appear all that important. An imponderable had made its appearance, a bracing, heady feeling of liberty. ■

Finding the Writer's Moves in a Text

One way of seeing the big picture of any text you are reading is to go behind the scenes and think about how the text was constructed. **What moves did the writer make in creating it?** Groups of paragraphs often work together to perform a function, such as providing an introduction, background information, an opposing view, or an illustration.

Recognizing these universally available moves and distinguishing them from their specific content is a way to analyze any text. A good strategy is to make a descriptive outline showing the major subdivisions. For each subdivision of the reading, a descriptive outline answers two questions:

- What is the move or function of this section? In other words, what is it doing?
- What is the main point or content of this section? In other words, what is it saying?

Writing a descriptive outline requires two skills: analyzing the function of each section and paraphrasing the most important point or points in each section. Following is an example showing the subdivisions of this short reading by Codrescu.

Subdivisions of "Notes of an Alien Son: Immigration Paradoxes"

Paragraphs 1–2

Does: Gives an example of one problem, or paradox.

Says: When Andrei Codrescu's mother emigrated from Romania, she found a better life materially, but she had to accept the loss of her home, friends, and family—her supportive social and cultural environment.

Paragraphs 3–4

Does: Gives an example of another problem, or paradox.

Says: American products turned out to be cheaply made junk that did not last. They had been more powerful as dream than as reality. Realizing their dreams were built on false expectations is an even greater loss for the immigrants than leaving home and family.

- **What do I know about the topic? What opinions do I have about it?** From the title, you might infer that the author is an immigrant, the son of immigrants. Skimming it, you notice that he is describing his mother's difficulties in adjusting to life in America. What do you know about some of the problems people have when coming to the United States from other cultures? What opinions do you have about American customs and culture and why adjusting to it is sometimes difficult?
- **Who wrote this text? When and where was it published?** The author is Andrei Codrescu, a well-known writer of essays, novels, and poetry. He is the MacCurdy Distinguished Professor of English at Louisiana State University and a regular columnist on National Public Radio. Codrescu was born in Romania and lived there with his family while the country was under communist rule, which ended in a revolution in 1989. The family left in 1966 when Codrescu was twenty. This essay was published originally in 1994 in *The Nation* magazine.
- **Who is the audience for this text?** Readers of *The Nation* are the well-educated public, people concerned with political and social issues. This essay has been reprinted in numerous anthologies or collections of essays on the immigrant experience.
- **What special features does the text contain that might aid comprehension?** This is a brief text, without a need for subheadings. However, a closer look reveals that Codrescu uses signal words, like *first* and *second*, to clue the reader to the moves he makes in writing the essay. He speaks of "one" paradox, the two stages of his mother's sense of loss, and the two things she learned. He also uses chronological signal words, such as *at this point*, to help readers see the evolving process of her understanding.

READING 2.1

Notes of an Alien Son: Immigration Paradoxes

ANDREI CODRESCU

My mother, ever a practical woman, started investing in furniture when she came to America. Not just any furniture. Sears furniture. Furniture that she kept the plastic on for fifteen years before she had to conclude, sadly, that Sears wasn't such a great investment. In Romania, she would have been the richest woman on the block.

Which brings us to at least one paradox of immigration. Most people come here because they are sick of being poor. They want to eat and they want to show something for their industry. But soon enough it becomes evident to them that these things aren't

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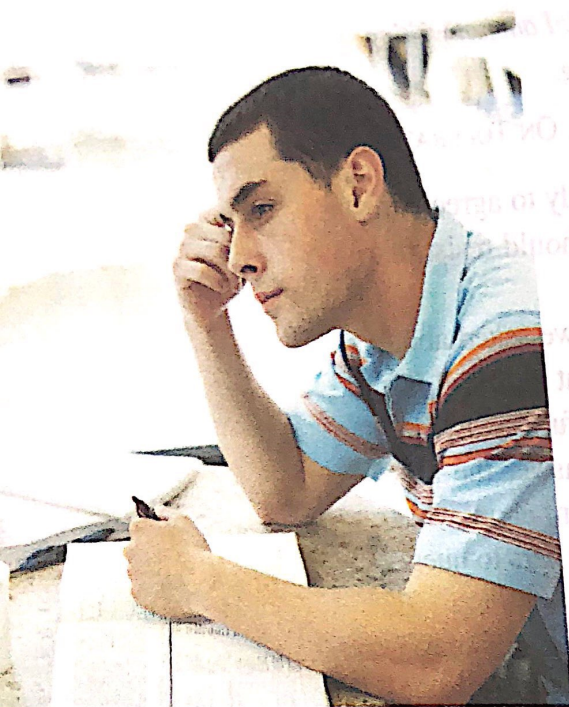
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variables in any writing situation: the author and his or her purpose for writing, the audience to whom the text is addressed, and the decisions the author makes in constructing the text to suit purpose and audience. Chapter 3, *Writing and the Art of Questioning*, explains rhetorical situation in more detail. (See Figure 3.1 on page 33.) Questions to ask include:

- **What is this text about?** From the title, what can you infer about the *topic* and the author's *angle*, or point of view, on the topic? Skim the subheadings if the text has them; if not, look at the opening of each paragraph. Skim the introduction and the conclusion. Based on your preview, try to predict what questions this text will answer. Make a list of questions about the topic that you expect to find answered in the reading. Looking for answers to these questions will make your reading more purposeful.
- **What do I already know about the topic? What opinions do I have about it?** Before reading, take a moment to recall what you may already know about the topic of the text. Refreshing your memory about relevant facts and issues readies you for thinking about what the text will offer. Reflect as well on your own bias, if you have one, and what the origins of that bias might be.
- **Who wrote this text? When and where was it published?** What can you find out about the author or authors? Biographical details about an author (such as date of birth and level of education) and the author's political or philosophical positions and other writings offer many clues for comprehending the text. The Internet is a good resource for this step.
- **Who is the audience for this text?** The author had a readership in mind while composing. Your comprehension will be better if you consider who this readership was and why the author wrote to those readers. How do you match or differ from the intended readers?
- **What special features does the text contain that might aid comprehension?** Aspects of layout and visual presentation such as photographs and other images, charts or graphs, boxes or sidebars, and subheadings can all aid understanding. Subheadings are especially helpful when sampling a text to predict what it will say.
- **Epigraphs** (from the Greek, meaning "to write on" or inscribe) are another common feature. Epigraphs are usually *brief quotations from some other text, set above and apart, followed by the author's name and sometimes the title of the source*. They set up the theme of a reading. Take a moment to look up the source and author of an epigraph; this information will help you draw inferences about the relevance of the passage.

We will work with a reading titled "Notes of an Alien Son: Immigration Paradoxes" to illustrate the stages of critical reading. Skim the reading on pages 17–19. Then look at our answers below to the questions for previewing a text.

- **What is this text about?** Skimming Codrescu's essay through to the end, we see that he is describing his mother's experience as a Romanian immigrant. It will show the contradictions between her expectations for a better life in America and what she actually found—and why immigrating might have been a "good deal after all."



When you think critically and respond thoughtfully, you take part in the conversation—a key goal of education.

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yourself, you are much better prepared to do so because you thought critically about what Walzer said. Indeed, *the very ability to say something of your own depends on asking questions*. Otherwise you can do little more than repeat what someone else has said.

4. You claim power by asking and pursuing questions. Usually people defer to authority figures like Walzer and let him ask the questions. Asking one yourself can help you claim authority. All it takes is finding a good question, being willing to ask it, and then pursuing it wherever it leads.
5. You take part in the conversation—a key goal of education—by thinking and responding thoughtfully. When you ask a question, you show that you are listening carefully enough to think of a question worth asking.

In sum, from practicing the art of questioning you gain the ability to think critically, to determine what you really think, to challenge what “everybody knows,” and to decide for yourself what is really true and why. We invite you to turn the world upside down. Instead of being satisfied with obvious answers, learn to value questions. For only when you pose questions, especially those that challenge the obvious answers, can real thinking begin.

THE ART OF QUESTIONING

Common Critical Thinking Questions

In this chapter we have seen the value of asking four critical thinking questions:

1. What do I really think?
2. What does that word mean?
3. Is that statement accurate?
4. Is that statement true?

There are many more such questions. Indeed, *any question that helps you explore what you or someone else has said is a good question*. Here are a few more commonly asked critical thinking questions.

5. What does “x” assume?

Almost every statement is based on assumptions. Asking questions can help us determine whether we should accept or challenge assumptions. For example, consider this statement: “Jane is smart; her IQ is 130.” It assumes that the tests purporting to measure intelligence are reliable. Because the reliability of these tests is frequently disputed, we can challenge this assumption.

6. What does “x” imply?

Asking questions about what follows from a statement can help us determine whether we should accept it. For example, if someone says, “Internet privacy should be protected no matter what,” then you can ask, “Are you willing to give up free Internet access to protect your privacy?” “Are you willing to protect the privacy of terrorists?” You can ask these questions because the statement implies them.

7. Is "x" a good analogy?

Frequently statements are based on analogies or comparisons. The claim that animals have rights, for example, is based on an analogy, a comparison with people's rights, such as the right to vote or the right to a trial by jury. Obviously animals do not have the *same* rights as human beings, so what rights should they have and why?

8. How many kinds of "x" can we distinguish?

Often a single word or concept has many meanings. Love can mean the feelings of a parent for a child or a lover for the beloved. The biblical command to "love thy neighbor as thyself" has nothing to do with emotions. Here *love* means treating others with courtesy and respect. Many concepts are like "love"; they are used to refer to numerous situations or behaviors. We often need to distinguish among the meanings of a word.

9. What is a good example of "x"?

Thinking of concrete examples can often help us understand and think critically about abstract ideas. For example, *peaceful coexistence* may initially seem a wonderful thing. However, when we think about a concrete example of peaceful coexistence, such as Britain and France peacefully coexisting with Nazi Germany in the 1930s, we realize that it may come at a high price.

10. What are the likely consequences of "x"?

With any proposal for action, we should consider what is likely to happen. If someone says, "We should withdraw our troops from Afghanistan as soon as we can," we should ask questions like the following: "If we pull out, will Afghanistan again fall under Taliban control?" "Will the Taliban allow al-Qaeda to reestablish a base of operations there?" "What will happen to women and girls there?"

READING 1.1

Apparently Facts No Longer Mean What They Once Did

LEONARD PITTS

I got an e-mail the other day that depressed me.

It concerned a piece I recently did that mentioned

Henry Johnson, who was awarded the French Croix de Guerre in World War I for singlehandedly fighting off a company of Germans (some accounts say there were 14, some say almost 30; the ones I find most authoritative say there were about two dozen) who threatened to overrun his post. Johnson managed this despite the fact that he was only 5 foot 4 inches tall and 130 pounds, despite the fact that his gun had jammed, despite the fact that he was wounded 21 times.

Leonard Pitts is a journalist and novelist who won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for news commentary. In this op-ed piece he calls forceful attention to our highly politicized world where even verified facts carry no weight for too many people when the facts don't align with preexisting prejudices.

Annotating helps you preserve your thoughts as you read. This is essential to reading critically.

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THE ART OF QUESTIONING

Some Questions for Annotations

How should you annotate? Here are some questions your annotations might answer:

- **What words do I not know?** You can look them up now and write the definition in an annotation or circle them and look them up later. Why is it important not just to skip them? In the short run, the more you skip, the less you comprehend. In the long run, looking up the words will help build your vocabulary and enable you to infer the meaning of words in future readings, allowing you more time to engage with the ideas as you read.
- **What are the main points as opposed to subordinate passages?** Mark the main ideas in the margin so you can easily find them later. Use brackets to show which paragraphs go together to develop each main idea.
- **What words signal turns in the author's train of thought?** Words like *however* and *but* show that the author will contradict something just stated. Expressions like *for example* suggest that the author will elaborate on an idea. Circle or underline these words, and note how the author's train of thought shifts.
- **Where does the author introduce viewpoints other than his or her own?** Authors often introduce other people who agree or disagree with their ideas. They may present others' viewpoints as direct quotations but often use paraphrases.

- **How well am I connecting with this reading?** If you find some parts of a text difficult to comprehend, put a question mark in the margin to tell yourself what you need to return to later. If you can connect any prior knowledge, observation, or personal opinion to something in the text, note it in the margin.

We have reprinted the first two paragraphs of the reading by Codrescu to demonstrate the kinds of annotations a critical reader could make.

My mother, ever a practical woman, started investing in furniture when she came to America. Not just any furniture. Sears furniture. Furniture that she kept the plastic on for fifteen years before she had to conclude, sadly, that Sears wasn't such a great investment. In Romania, she would have been the richest woman on the block.

In other words, cheap furniture. Tone is humorous, ironic.

Signals the first major point.

Here is the point, the paradox: They have plenty but they are still poor.

Shifts to the neighbors' point of view.

Which brings us to at least one paradox of immigration. Most people come here because they are sick of being poor. They want to eat and they want to show something for their industry. But soon enough it becomes evident to them that these things aren't enough. They have eaten and they are full, but they have eaten alone and there was no one with whom to make toasts and sing songs. They have new furniture with plastic on it but the neighbors aren't coming over to ooh and aah. If American neighbors or less recent immigrants do come over, they smile condescendingly at the poor taste and the pathetic greed. And so, the greenhorns find themselves poor once more: This time they are lacking something more elusive than salami and furniture. They are bereft of a social and cultural milieu.

An inexperienced person.

Hard to find.

ACTIVITY 2.3 Collaborative Activity

Comparing Annotations

Write annotations to the remainder of Codrescu's essay. In small groups, compare your annotations. Did you agree on the main points? Did you have similar questions about any part of the reading? ■