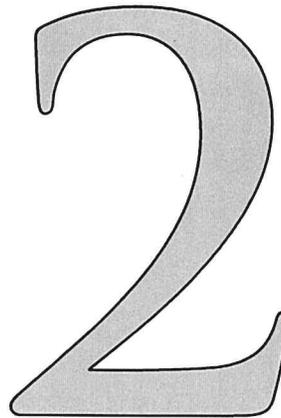


Forming a Perspective on the Subject



2.1 Discovering and Honoring Your Passions and Values

After reading a work carefully, annotating it, and reacting to it, the next step is to determine how it fits into your perspective on the world. For example, how do you *feel* about Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address? Do you appreciate Lincoln's assertion that in order to honor what these dead sacrificed, we should work hard to keep our democratic nation together? Or does it irritate you that in reminding his audience that in this nation, "all men were created equal," Lincoln neglects to acknowledge the terrible wrongs done to Native Americans as the nation was formed? Did you tend to focus less on the theme of the speech and more on Lincoln's rhetorical strategy and poetic language? Forming your own conclusions about a literary work, or a topic of any kind, is the first step to shaping an argument and, ultimately, making a case for your perspective through a persuasive essay.

To practice the process of forming a perspective on a topic, consider Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz," at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172103>. In an initial reading of the poem, you may have already noticed that some elements of "My Papa's Waltz" seem to suggest that the father is abusive toward his son, while to the contrary, other lines imply that the son wants to continue this waltz. Seeking the "truth" of this poem, readers often debate over which interpretation is being developed by Roethke. After careful analysis of this text, first-year composition student Marion Velis decided that in spite of the poem's seemingly violent undertones, it is the son's *love* for his father that leaves the strongest impression. What follows is the essay she produced to develop this argument.

Marion Velis
English 1102

Clinging to Love: Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz"

At first glance, Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz" may seem like a poem about a boy's fear of his controlling, abusive, alcoholic father. But the poem goes much deeper than that. Roethke uses specific rhythm, word choice, and a controlling metaphor to give the poem a reminiscent tone that looks back on the father in love.

One of the most noticeable elements of the poem is its waltz rhythm. Each line in the poem is made up of three iambs, which create the six-count beat of a waltz. When Roethke combines this rhythm with specific words, the reader gets a spinning sensation. This is clearly shown in the first stanza of the poem, when Roethke writes, "The whiskey on your breath / Could make a small boy dizzy; / But I hung on like death: / Such waltzing was not easy" (1-4). Roethke uses this waltzing rhythm in conjunction with his description of a drinking father to convey the spinning, drunk feeling generated by this dance. When the poet says, "We romped until the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf" (5-6), the reader can imagine the father spinning in his drunkenness and making a mess of the house. The speaker's mother seems ashamed in lines 7-8, where the poet writes, "My mother's countenance / Could not unfrown itself." The boy, on the other hand, says, "But I hung on like death" (3), as if he wanted to continue to love his father, despite his obvious flaws.

This is why the speaker's point of view is important. Whether the speaker is supposed to be Roethke or not is not relevant. What is important is that Roethke chose to speak here as a man looking back on his childhood. This perspective suggests an innocence about the "small boy" (2) as if he couldn't fully understand what was going on, but now that he is a man, he can look back objectively. Yet, still, Roethke portrays the same love towards the father.

This lovingness towards the speaker's father is conveyed through the controlling metaphor in the poem,

along with specific diction. The poet compares the young boy's life with his father to a waltz and uses that comparison to lighten the image of his father. When Roethke writes that the boy's father "waltzed [him] off to bed / Still clinging to [his] shirt" (15-6), the reader sees the playfulness between father and son, like that implied by the playful rhythm of the poem. The reader also sees that in spite of "steps" the father "missed" (11) that caused the father's belt buckle to "scrape" the boy's ear (12), the boy "hung on like death" (3), "clinging" (16) to his father with an unconditional love. The diction used here is both disconcerting and urgent. One doesn't usually get "scraped" when dancing—even the sound of this word creates a disturbing tone. But words like "missed," "scraped," and "death" are offset by words like "hung on" and "clinging." In the portrayal of this dance, the speaker reveals a yearning toward his father, rough though he was, and the time they spent together.

The message of unconditional, eternal love is a repeated theme throughout the poem. Roethke uses each element of the poem to deliver that message, and when the poem is looked at as a whole, it forwards that theme in a marvelous way.

Instructions for effective writing usually emphasize clarity of purpose, sound logic, convincing evidence, effective structure, and impressive style, all crucial elements certainly. Yet, it is difficult to compose a truly persuasive argument if you, yourself, do not *care about the subject*. As you can see from Marion's essay, powerful writing can arise from a writer's desire to share her passion about the topic. So, what if you are given an assignment you are *not* initially interested in? You may not feel that poetry is your "thing." Or maybe you feel like a "fish out of water" when required to write about history or business. However, for the best results, I strongly encourage you to find an angle of the topic that connects with what you care about.

For example, when art major Wesley Hardesty was assigned to write a paper about an aspect of World War I, he found himself struggling to get interested in the topic. For the first essay of the course, his professor had required a literary analysis paper over Ernest Hemingway's novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. With some difficulty, Wesley had completed that assignment, supporting his interpretation of the novel with key passages of the text as

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evidence. For Essay 2, however, which required students to research an aspect of the novel's World War I context and formulate an argument on that topic, Wesley was having trouble choosing a specific area of focus. He procrastinated on the research, because each time he sat down at his computer to search for books and articles, his thoughts would wander and he would become bored. He could not seem to pinpoint any aspect of World War I on which he would be motivated to take a position and build an argument.

Finally, he met with his professor and told her about his difficulty deciding on a topic for his paper. During their conversation, she asked about his major, his future career plans, and what he liked to do in his spare time. In response to her last question, he answered that he enjoyed playing video games with his friends. She asked if he ever played *Call of Duty*. Soon, they were discussing whether the *Call of Duty* games authentically recreate the experience of fighting as a soldier, the trauma of which Hemingway explores in *The Sun Also Rises*. They agreed that even though the *Call of Duty* games focus on World War II rather than World War I, this topic might be a fruitful one for Wesley's research essay.

When Wesley got back to his dorm room and tried, once again, researching for the paper, he found that this time, he was much more engaged in the task. Later, when he reviewed his notes on the games themselves, as well as the psychology and history articles he had gathered on the subject, he concluded that although the games do simulate actual warfare in a number of ways, they cannot reproduce the same fear, uncertainty, and trauma that many soldiers experience during real wars. Below is the product of Wesley's research and writing:

Wesley Hardesty
Composition II

Call of Duty: Short of Reality

Video games are often made to represent historical war time events in a stronger sense than any other form of media. They immerse you as a participant in past historical events, but how well and in depth do they recreate the actual historical event to make it your reality? A generation of military gamers who spend hours and hours playing *Call of Duty* think they understand and know modern warfare, but do they really? Soldiers who have actually served in a time of war might beg to differ. Just as

there is evidence that shows there are some similarities in gaming and the real life combat that took place in World War II, there is also evidence to show that what takes place in a video game such as *Call of Duty* can be quite different from what takes place in an actual combat mission during a time of war. There are many bases for comparison and contrast between actual war and *Call of Duty*, such as the attitudes and feelings of a real soldier versus that of a gamer during times of combat, the skill level and training of an actual soldier versus that of a gamer, and the actual real time combat events taking place during battle and that of a mission's story line in the game *Call of Duty*.

Just as the attitude of a real soldier can be quite different from the attitude of a gamer during a combat mission, it can also be quite similar. Most "video games combine the moral and narrative associations of the war with the physical activity of shooting, creating a sense of mastery and control" (Allison 183), all of which strongly affects the attitude of the player. After viewing many combat videos captured on helmet mounted cameras of actual soldiers during a time of war—showing things like bombings, firefights, and airstrikes—Luke Plunkett argues that a soldier's attitudes and emotional reactions to these things are "not too different to what you might hear over a headset on Xbox Live" during a *Call of Duty* online match. The reactions and emotional outbursts to such events are quite similar. In my own experience and observations as a gamer, the outbursts consist of a mix of excitement, fear, and adrenaline. They also involve a great deal of screaming and yelling in addition to desperate calls for help. The soldier is calling to his fellow squad members for help or back up, where a gamer is usually calling for another gamer for back up. The level of excitement is much the same, as most gamers become fully immersed in the game.

However, in many of these videos the soldiers are also wounded and in distress. This is where the attitudes are quite different. In a game of *Call of Duty*, if the gamer is injured there is always another life and the game moves on. There are never the calls of desperation and

absolute panic that are seen and heard in helmet-cam videos of actual soldiers. The *Call of Duty* video game tends to glorify war and the gamer cannot possibly relate to or comprehend the consequences of real violence or death in the way that the soldier experiences it in real life combat. No game or video can possibly be as realistic as actual life events. Rejack says that “clicks of a mouse or movements of a joystick do not provide a pathway to historical identification through the body in the way that running across the battlefield might” (413). In addition, soldiers who are deployed overseas during a time of war are fully engrossed in a lifestyle of combat and fear. They live every day not knowing whether or not they will make it home to their family or loved ones. *Call of Duty* is just a form of entertainment. Although many spend hours and hours engrossed in the game and fully immersed in the virtual combat, they can never actually comprehend what it is like to live in the situations that a soldier is living in daily. The gamer can choose to simply turn the game off.

Further, the skills needed to participate in actual combat compared to the skills needed to participate in an online match of *Call of Duty* strongly differ, though there are similarities. A “combination of tactical elements and intense battle scenes is one reason why the game has proved to be so popular” (Rejack 414). During World War I and World War II, men were drafted into war and were sent into combat with hardly any training or experience, so many entered war with the skill level of a player new to *Call of Duty*. In the video game world “users are invited to take part in history from their living rooms, replicating the museum from a video game console” (Hess 341). Thus, today’s gamers might be under the illusion that they could easily take on the same warfare challenges in real life with the same success that they enjoy playing *Call of Duty*. However, in contrast, soldiers now have to go through intense physical, mental, weapon, and strategy training just to survive out in the field. The military provides cutting-edge training throughout a soldier’s military career—they do not just stop at boot camp. Currently the military requires advanced training for their

assigned occupational fields. The military uses advanced modeling and simulations to provide very realistic training situations. Today's soldiers participate in realistic combat role-playing exercises that include real weapons, special effects and explosions to recreate physical combat settings before they are deployed. Our military is highly skilled before they are allowed to be deployed for combat. A gamer simply learns to press a few buttons on a handset or controller and he is prepared for virtual battle.

While the storylines and the combat scenarios that *Call of Duty* uses follow many actual events that took place in World War II, there are major gaps in these narratives, as well. The *Call of Duty* game series includes numerous games that specifically deal with the events of this particular war. In each game, the "intersection between the gameplay narrative and the historical narrative is underscored through mission objectives" (Hess 345). There are four games in the *Call of Duty* series that deal with World War II. These games include *Call of Duty*, *Call of Duty 2*, *Call of Duty 3* and *Call of Duty: World at War*. In each of these games, the player plays out numerous missions through an avatar-soldier of each United States alliance. *Call of Duty*, *Call of Duty 2* and *Call of Duty 3* all focus on the European conflict in which the gamer goes to combat with the Germans. *Call of Duty 2* focuses only on the North African Campaign, including Italy and Sicily. *Call of Duty: World at War* focuses on the United States Marine Corp fighting the Japanese in the Pacific, as well as the Red Army in the Eastern Region. In most cases "the digital interface of a video game mirrors the interface on dozens of computerized instruments and weapons currently being used by the American military" (Allison 191), which makes the games seem very realistic. However, although all of the games in this series are modeled after actual World War II conflicts or missions and follow history quite closely, games must allow for the individual experience of the gamer, while offering a likely chance of success for the player. As a result, *Call of Duty* does not attempt to play out the experiences of soldiers who actually fought

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in the war. In the games there are numerous objects to take cover behind to avoid being shot—in an actual war, these shielding objects are not always available. Also, in actual war, most of the time you do not see who you are shooting at or who is shooting at you. You rarely get close enough to shoot accurately. Real war is not like a video game where the enemy just pops up into your view. In comparison, the terrain may be the same and the mission may be the same, but the video game lacks the sensory perception of actually being there. In the game you do not experience the same smells, sights or feelings of actually being there. You can never feel your heart rate getting above 120 beats per minute while you lose control over your motor skills and cannot even reload your weapon. You cannot possibly understand or feel what it would be like to carry over 100 pounds of gear up a mountain during firefight with an enemy in temperatures above 100 degrees. As a gamer you get a glimpse into what war might be like, but your experience cannot substantially compare to actually being there in a real life battle as a soldier.

The *Call of Duty* video game series continues to make billions of dollars a year and keeps the developers at the top of their industry. Although gamers all over the world wait on pins and needles for the next game release, gamers should be fully aware that it is just a form of entertainment. Even though these video games are often made to represent historical events in a stronger sense than any other form of media, the gaming experience still lacks much compared to actual historical events. While somewhat accurate and realistic in comparison to modern war and the actual events of the World Wars, there is still an extreme contrast between playing the game and actually taking part as a real soldier at war.

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To return to this chapter’s emphasis on *forming a perspective on your topic*, Wesley determined, and supported with research and personal observations, that *Call of Duty* falls short of reproducing the full combat experience. Rather than attempting to base his thesis about soldiers’ experience only on objective data, he interpreted the findings of his research at least partially by considering his own passion for and experience with video games. Why is his thesis important and valuable to his audience? He implies that it is important because although in contemporary American culture, gamers want the most authentic experience possible, the authenticity of games like *Call of Duty* worries some people. Could it cause psychological damage as war can? Could it persuade young gamers toward joining the military by providing an experience that seems both authentic and pleasurable? Because Wesley considered his passions as well as his *values* in approaching this essay, the essay connected with concerns his readers might share with him and was thus more effective than it might have been if he had just “jumped through the hoops” of the assignment.

Your composition professor might have important reasons for not allowing the same flexibility for paper topics that Wesley’s professor did. Perhaps, as his instructor did in her Essay 1 assignment, your professor will insist that you engage in literary textual analysis in order to meet certain course outcomes, like *understanding how literary strategy can be used for rhetorical purposes* and *demonstrating the ability to use text as evidence to support an argument*. Regardless of the boundaries of your assignment, you are encouraged to find an angle that inspires you to real passion about your subject.

Forming a Perspective on the Subject

To recap this section's key ideas:

1. When forming a perspective on a text or other topic, do not ignore your own passions or values. Both Marion and Wesley drew on these aspects of themselves to produce provocative essays.
2. Be sure that your perspective (which will determine your argument) is supported by the evidence. If not, consider how your position needs to be adjusted in light of the evidence. What if Wesley's research had revealed that video games can indeed reproduce the full effect of war? How would his argument need to be revised? How might he respond personally to the knowledge that the video game experience is authentic after all? How might that knowledge be useful or significant to his audience?

2.2 Critical Perspectives

Forming your perspective on a poem, story, or play might be easier if you understand some of the approaches commonly taken toward interpreting literature's meaning. Literary studies have been around long enough that likeminded readers and scholars have gravitated toward basic common positions as they engage in dialogue with each other. As a result, there are a number of widely-recognized critical approaches to literature, from formalists (who focus on how an author employs strategies and devices for a particular effect) to psychoanalytical critics (who explore texts to better understand humans' psychological structure and their typical responses to particular experiences). As you consider a poem or story, you might choose one of these approaches as the general lens through which to examine that work. What follows is a list of some of the most common **critical perspectives**. Consider them and make a note of any that strikes you as particularly interesting. You may find that one or several of these reflect your own way of looking at the world.

Biographical Criticism:

This approach examines the life and attitudes of an author as the key to understanding the writer's work. You should probably avoid heavy dependence on this approach, however, as you write essays for this class. Commonly used in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it has now been largely discounted as a reliable way to understand the meaning of a text.

Formalism (also referred to as “New Criticism”):

Rising to prominence in the 1920s, this approach considers a literary work as an entity separate from its author and its historical context. The formalist explores a poem as a mechanic would explore an engine. The mechanic would assume that the engine’s parts and function can be studied without any understanding of the maker’s life and/or the history of the period in which the engine exists. Similarly, to assess a poem’s impact and understand its meaning, a scholar might “take it apart,” considering its separate elements—the form, line length, rhythm, rhyme scheme, figurative language, and diction—and how those pieces make up the effect of and shape the meaning of the whole.

Psychoanalytical Criticism:

Based on the theories of Freud and others, this approach examines a text for signs and symbols of the subconscious processes, both of the characters and of humans in general. Revelatory symbols in a work might include water (the womb or the subconscious), a phallus (patriarchal power or sexual desire), a vessel such as a vase or pitcher (the vagina or sexual desire), and dark passageways (the feared subconscious where we store our unacceptable impulses and desires, and in which we are afraid we might get lost from the ordered, visible world).

Archetypal Criticism:

Springing from psychoanalytical criticism, this approach focuses on common figures and story-lines that reveal patterns in human behavior and psychology. Well-known archetypal characters are the hero, the scapegoat, the Earth mother, the temptress, the mentor, and the devil figure. Some common archetypal storylines are the journey, the quest, the fall, and death and rebirth. Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, key figures in the development of this approach, found that in the many stories they collected from cultures all over the world, these figures and storylines emerged over and over again. Their conclusion was that these figures and storylines are etched into the human psyche (or subconscious), and as we recreate them in our stories, our audiences recognize them as symbolic of their own experience.

Feminist Criticism:

Using this approach, one examines a literary work for insight into why and how women are subjected to oppression and, sometimes, how they subvert the forces that oppress them.

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Gender Theory:

Expanding on feminist criticism, gender studies explore literature for increased understanding of socially defined gender identity and behavior and its impact on the individual and on society. It includes study of sexual orientation and how non-heterosexual identities are treated by mainstream ideology, a dynamic sometimes reflected in, sometimes critiqued by, literary works.

Marxist Criticism:

This approach to literature examines how class and economic forces shape human dynamics. It is important to note that Marxist criticism is not a promotion of socialist government, but rather a close study of how invisible economic forces underpin, and often undermine, authentic human relationships.

Historical Criticism:

This approach seeks to illuminate a text's original meaning by uncovering details of the text's historical context.

New Historicism:

Modifying the historical approach described above, the new historicist assumes that material factors interact with each other, thus while this approach seeks to understand a text through its cultural context, it also attempts to discover through the literary work insight into intellectual history. For example, a new historicist might consider Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as a product shaped not only by Douglass's experience as a U.S. slave, but also by Douglass's challenge of finding a publisher (most of whom were white), and by his primarily Christian readership. These factors, according to the new historicist, would interact to shape the text and its meanings.

In finding a perspective that interests you, consider these common ways of approaching literary study and interpretation and how those approaches might intersect with your own passions and values. Scholarly study should be objective, in that academic arguments should be supported by credible and substantial evidence, but scholarly argument is valuable when it aids us in better understanding our world and realizing our goals as humans, communities, and societies. Connecting to these objectives as a writer will help you find your reason for writing and the most effective rhetorical methods for reaching your goals.