

CLASSICAL TECHNIQUES AND CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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Recognizing Situation and Strategy

“I like your paper; it’s really good.”

This is a comment we’ve heard thousands of times over the years in our classrooms as we’ve observed peer-group feedback sessions, where students distribute copies of their drafts and read their papers aloud to the group. Unfortunately, we sometimes hear another statement added to it: “I don’t want to read mine now. It stinks.”

If that sounds like something you’ve ever said or thought about your own writing, then this chapter will help to turn your dissatisfaction into confidence. And even if you’re already a confident writer who generally receives positive comments about your drafts, you’ll gain an enhanced understanding of what makes your writing have an impact on readers. Long ago, early teachers of **rhetoric** had their students begin their educations in the rhetorical arts by analyzing—and then imitating—speeches that were particularly moving and memorable. By memorizing a speech and imitating its oration, those students learned styles of message delivery for specific occasions, such as funerals, legal appeals, and political causes.

Defining Rhetoric

Rhetoric: the art of effective communication. The study of rhetoric examines all elements that are necessary to make communication persuasive to a reader or listener.

Although imitation was criticized in the twentieth century by a few composition theorists who claimed that imitating someone else’s writing inspired no originality or creativity, our experience as both teachers and writers has shown how imitation is an important—even crucial—stepping stone on the way to composing confident, well-crafted, and fully

original writing. For this reason, we begin this text as those early rhetoricians began their instruction—with a twenty-first century version of the same imitation process learned by those students long ago, but applied to writing.

To begin, think of a good piece of writing as something that can be read and followed almost like a set of blueprints in construction, or a schematic in electronics. Blueprints and schematics are basically forms to be followed: here's where the roof ties in with the outer wall; here's where the yellow wire connects to the circuit board. With sample writings, in addition to looking for the areas where authors have placed their papers' various features, you can also take note of the deliberately chosen ways—or *strategies*—in which the authors place those features. In determining the best strategies, writers are being rhetorical, and by studying the structure of a model closely, you can gain a new approach to and understanding of the many intricate features of writing and rhetoric.

For example, if the sample paper's statement of central focus (often referred to as a *thesis* in composition) appears in the beginning of the third paragraph, following two paragraphs of introduction to the general subject matter, then you realize that the thesis can appear in the same place if your own paper also requires a longer introduction. Many writers go through extreme contortions to pack both an introduction to a paper's subject matter and the paper's specific thesis into one brief opening paragraph. This may have met the writing requirements of earlier grades, but it usually presents a problem for readers of more mature papers, who expect to see issues developed much more fully. And meeting readers' expectations is a key aspect of good writing.

But writers also need to examine the structure of the paper carefully. What *kind* of introduction is in the model? Does it tell a personal story? Does it ask questions? Does it set out a case study—a short description of something that happened to a particular group in a particular place? Whatever that introduction does as its main strategy is what you can do in setting up your own main focus or thesis.

Using Imitation to Recognize Situation and Strategy: What Stephen King Can Tell Us

One writer whose choices and strategies have been extremely successful is Stephen King, the famous author of dozens of best-selling novels. Because King has been interviewed thousands of times about his characters, plots, settings, and techniques for frightening readers, when we had an opportunity to speak with him we used the time to discuss writing in general. Early in the conversation, the topic turned to the overall quality of the writing appearing in published fiction, a subject that in turn led to a discussion of imitation writing.

King: If you look at American pop-cult fiction, you see a lot of people who are just all over the map as far as their diction goes. But when you look at British pop-cult fiction, the diction is perfect—because all of those [writers] had Latin in school. In

Latin, you learn where everything goes, what everything means, and how to build a sentence. It's like teaching a mason how to build a perfect wall: here's where the bricks go, here's where the mortar goes. So once you learn those basics, you can do anything you want to do.

CTCA: We're reminded of an article you wrote for the *Writer's Handbook*, about a basketball game you reviewed back in high school. You'd already polished your syntax and diction, but then someone got you to trim the extra fat from your sentences.

King: Exactly. He was an editor at the local weekly paper. It was a sidebar piece about a basketball game where a guy had broken a record, and the editor clipped off all of my purple prose. He just said, "This is junk"—and he was right. It's like when a guy comes up to you and says, "Hey, you've got a ping under the hood of your literary car, so let's take up the hood and fix it."

CTCA: Our own writing styles have been influenced by reading people like you and a variety of other major authors, and at times the effect is that, after reading a novel by a particular writer, the next thing we write sounds just like that. Does this ever happen to you?

King: Sure. It's something that happens to a lot of writers, and I'm one of them. I'm like milk in the refrigerator; I take the flavor of whatever I'm next to.

CTCA: Several composition teachers and theorists promote the use of close imitation as a way for students to enhance their writing abilities. We've assigned it to our students, and while not everyone can stay as close to the original structure as expected, they come up with some really fine ideas.

King: It's like learning haiku. The form is so iron-clad: syllable for syllable, line for line. It's like pouring gelatin into a rabbit mold, isn't it? You're always going to get a rabbit. Of course, the main artist is the one who made the mold, but as an exercise for writers, that kind of imitation is great.

Studying the Structure, Getting a Sense

In the 1800s, a young slave named Frederick Douglass, who would go on to be remembered as one of the greatest orators of his century, taught himself to read and write through a number of ingenious ways. One of those ways, involving considerable risk to Douglass's safety, is described in his *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*:

... My little Master Thomas had gone to school and learned how to write, and had written over a number of copy-books. These had been brought home and shown to some of our near neighbors, and then laid aside. My mistress used to go to class meeting at the Wilk Street meeting house every Monday afternoon and leave me to take care of the house. When left thus, I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas's copy-book, copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write.

In doing this, Douglass was performing the most basic form of imitation—paying careful attention to forms provided by someone else and crafting his own skills and knowledge while imitating those forms.

More recently, on the ABC television show *Whose Line Is It, Anyway?*, a recurring musical segment asked the show’s regular performers to sing about a random topic announced by the audience. The songs were improvised on the spot, making them enough of a challenge for the performers already, but then the show’s host, Drew Carey, added that the song should be sung in a particular *style* (country, Broadway musical, and hip-hop were favorites). The performers, all comedians, were not trained singers and had never specialized in any of these styles, yet they knew instantly what kind of rhythm, vocabulary, and vocal inflections to employ for the assigned skits because they had heard musicians singing in these styles. The *Whose Line* regulars were imitating what they’d heard.

As a college student you have more than just words and sounds to use as models; you have whole ideas that can come to you by looking carefully at the style and content of other writers’ texts. Here, for instance, is a letter we received from a music magazine’s billing department regarding a subscription that was still two months from expiring:

Dear Subscriber,

That’s right, it’s serious, and we’re down to the wire here. We made a deal. You haven’t come through on your end yet.

You won’t feel good about stiffing us, will you? It’s not something your friends will think you’re cool for, is it?

No, indeed. Those days are over. Integrity is in now. Ripping off is tacky. So you’re forcing us to say:

IF WE DON’T RECEIVE YOUR PAYMENT, WE WILL BE FORCED TO SUSPEND YOUR SUBSCRIPTION. NO MORE COPIES UNTIL YOU PAY.

Sincerely,

C. T. Rogers, Billing Manager

P.S. Bruce Springsteen pays *his* bills.

P.P.S. Needless to say, if you have already sent in payment, please disregard this letter and accept our thanks.

As we read the letter, we noticed several things: its very short sentences; its attempt to sound “cool” and unbusinesslike with phrasing like “down to the wire,” “come through,” “stiffing us,” and “ripping off”; and its use of a second postscript to prevent causing any offense. But because that postscript came so late in the letter—*after* we had already been accused of “stiffing” and “ripping off” the magazine—it was not effective. We were already offended, and so we composed a response using the same overall tone, style, and structure of the letter to which we were replying:

Dear Mr/s. Rogers,

Nice try. You thought your letter would be effective, and it was. But not in the way you thought.

Stiff you? Never. Our current subscription is good for two more months, and we saw no need to rush payment for an extension that hadn't begun yet.

Indeed, money's tight these days. Paying for something too far in advance is silly. So you've forced us to respond:

WHEN YOU SEND SARCASTIC LETTERS TO SUBSCRIBERS, YOU MAKE THEM ANGRY. OUR FIRST REACTION WAS TO TELL YOU TO CANCEL THE SUBSCRIPTION, BUT WE'D ALREADY SENT A CHECK TO YOU FIVE DAYS EARLIER. SO DUMP THE WISE-GUY APPROACH. IT DOESN'T WORK.

Sincerely,

Your Loyal Subscribers

P.S. We pay our bills, too. Just like Bruce Springsteen.

P.P.S. Of course, if you've already sent an apology, please disregard this letter and accept our forgiveness.

When you perform an imitation exercise such as the one above, you engage in a process that one composition teacher, Cheryl Glenn, has described as “becom[ing] increasingly sophisticated . . . some of the steps in the process are identical to those stressed in writing classes: attending to the rhetorical situation, following conventions, building a persuasive argument.” Adapting to a model text's structure and ideas can strongly influence the creative process as well, as shown in this comparison of the following passages:

Original: The only way to know if you're experiencing true love or not is to test for it. Will a woman who “loves” her new hair style weep in agony if it gets undone in the rain? Will a man who “loves” cigars sob uncontrollably if his cigar goes out and won't re-light? Will my parents cry if the band goes on strike in the middle of a waltz? Maybe. They really love to dance.

Student Imitation 1: The best way to find out if you have a real friendship is to answer these questions: Is your friend never around when you need him? Does he tell others your personal and private thoughts? Does your friend keep making jokes about you even when he knows that they hurt you?

Student Imitation 2: Courage is personal. Will the world come to a stop if I can't find the courage to jump out of the barn loft into the hay? No. But will I feel better and stronger if I do? Yes. So it comes to this: Jump and take a chance on getting hurt, or stay put and never know what flying feels like.

Let's take a moment to examine the key similarities between the original passage and the two imitations. (Note the terms in italics here; they're your keys to success when you perform your own analysis.) *Structurally*, all of the passages rely on the use of questions—although each author has chosen to use those questions in a different way. *Visually*, each of the three passages is roughly the same length and contains a similar word count. *Thematically*, each of the passages tries to define an abstract term—love, friendship, courage—through concrete examples. And *stylistically*, each of the passages takes on a warm, personal tone that engages the reader through the use of *I* or *you*.

LOOKING CRITICALLY What are the differing effects of the ways in which each of the three writers above has used questions to define what love, friendship, and courage are—and are not?

Student Writing: Imitation

When asked to comment about the role imitation can play in their overall writing process, our students have offered the following reactions. Notice how the emphasis is on the *thinking* aspect of the larger composing process, rather than on the mechanics of writing itself:

- While doing this imitation, I noticed several things about the writing. It employs a lot of descriptive words, and the sentences are often very complex. Sometimes one adjective relates to many different things in the sentence, so I had to be really careful about the words I chose.
- It makes you think more about how to structure your sentences.
- Writing this way was like stepping out of my skin and into another writer's. I was really impressed by what I'd written, and all I had to do was imitate the form. But don't get me wrong—I had to do some intense thinking for this assignment!
- I had to use my imagination to create a different setting for the story I wanted to tell. Looking at the original author's style helped me to see where I could write in a more vivid and precise way for my readers.
- I wrote sentences I never even knew existed. I've never written such elaborate idea connections before, or used so many descriptive words. And this is the first time I've ever used dashes to emphasize an idea. Now I finally know how they work!

Having seen earlier how a brief paragraph can be imitated, take a look now at a full-length work attributed* to Chief Seattle, a nineteenth-century Suquamish (Duwamish) Indian. Following the reading are comments offered by students who have used this text as the basis for imitation writing.

Chief Seattle's Letter to President Pierce, 1855

We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes

*The authenticity of Seattle's letter has been questioned. See "Thus Spoke Chief Seattle: The Story of An Undocumented Speech" by Jerry L. Clark in *Prologue* magazine, U.S. National Archives & Records Administration, Spring 1985, Vol. 18, No. 1.

in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his father's graves, and his children's birthright is forgotten. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red man. But perhaps it is because the red man is a savage and does not understand.

There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the leaves of spring or the rustle of insects' wings. But perhaps because I am a savage and do not understand, the clatter only seems to insult the ears. The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond, the smell of the wind itself cleansed by a midday rain, or scented with the *piñon* pine. The air is precious to the red man. For all things share the same breath—the beasts, the trees, the man. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the stench.

What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth.

It matters little where we pass the rest of our days; they are not many. A few more hours, a few more winters, and none of the children of the great tribes that once lived on this earth, or that roamed in small bands in the woods, will be left to mourn the graves of a people once as powerful and hopeful as yours.

- 5 The whites, too, shall pass—perhaps sooner than other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste. When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the secret corners of the forest heavy with the scent of many men, and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking [telegraph] wires, where is the thicket? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is it to say goodbye to the swift and the hunt, the end of living and the beginning of survival? We might understand if we knew what it was that the white man dreams, what he describes to his children on the long winter nights, what visions he burns into their minds, so they will wish for tomorrow. But we are savages. The white man's dreams are hidden from us.

Students who have imitated Chief Seattle's letter have offered a variety of responses to the assignment. Through their responses, you'll notice that imitation not only offers you the same choices provided by any writing assignment, but it also goes further by providing inspiration and direction that can sometimes be slower to appear in a typical writing situation.

- This writer's sentences were much shorter than ones I typically use, but he was clear and specific in his word choice. To get this paper done, I typed out the original article, triple-spaced it, and wrote my imitation between the lines. This helped me to stay close to the original author's sentence structure. Before doing

this assignment I thought I could only write in one style, but I noticed that the form of the original text was very good and different from mine as I imitated it.

- Imitation—I didn't like the sound of that word! I liked writing in my own, self-important way. At least that's how I felt when the assignment began, but then I was surprised when the imitation took a path all its own! The original article had a sorrowful feel to it; an Indian was pleading for his land. As I wrote, I seemed to be pleading for more understanding through my narration of my actions. What happened is that by imitating Chief Seattle, I discovered something about myself. It's nice to realize that I don't have to be limited in my writing by self-imposed restrictions!
- The way Chief Seattle wrote about white men reminded me of the way I'd heard a friend talk about her boyfriend, the way I'm sure every woman has felt toward a man at least once in her life. As I wrote my paper, instead of humbling myself, like Seattle did, I turned it around and made the woman better than the man.
- At first I was torn between imitating the original author's style and trying to incorporate my own ideas. But Chief Seattle's letter stirred feelings in me, and I wanted to write an imitation that would show my empathy for the Indians and serve as a sign of rebellion. So I chose to write about how it feels to be disabled. I didn't want to write a depressing piece, though, so I tried to write about living with hope and how that hope can help to make disabled people like me feel whole.
- I found Seattle's style very emotional and effective. Every person in my workshop group who chose to imitate Seattle had the same feeling from reading it. It gave a sad, depressing feeling, so I ran with that. Then I happened to watch an episode of Oprah Winfrey's show that dealt with obesity, so being overweight became the theme of my paper when I wrote my imitation.

From her perception of the original text's feeling and her stroke of good luck in finding more inspiration for a topic from Oprah Winfrey, this last student's imitation turned out to be a powerful statement on the superficiality that can plague modern culture. Here is the text of her imitation:

Hidden (An Imitation of Chief Seattle)

by Phyllis

I know that plastic surgery will not change my insecurities. One blemish on the outside is the same as one on the inside, and I am the same as anyone who comes with an imperfection so I cover my appearance whenever I can. My body is not my pride, but my embarrassment, and all of my best qualities are hidden. One glimpse of myself in the mirror crushes every

hope I had. And this in turn reinforces my low self-esteem and lack of optimism.

I am never content in my body or mind. I have no strength to stand up for myself and show what I feel inside. Because of my weak self-image and deep pessimism, fighting to stand out just makes me feel more weak. The beautiful have lovely soft skin and their clothes wrap around their bodies perfectly, whether a shapely red dress that a size-two woman wears or a trimly tailored suit that a man models. Their appearance is crucial for their mental health. But I share that same problem—my body, its image, its style. Like a teenaged girl suffering from an eating disorder, I am obsessed with my appearance.

What's the problem if a person carries a little more weight? If everyone were a little larger, no one would feel unattractive, because how would we criticize someone else when we look the same? The insults we heap on others affect all of us eventually.

If it's not dangerous, then it doesn't matter how much extra weight we carry; weight is only a number. A little less dessert, a little more exercise, and the pounds will gradually wear away. But that will not mend my suffering heart, nor ease the pain I feel as I walk among thinner people, for it can only change my *outside*—which is only a cover for my true beauty and personality.

The thin, too, will die—maybe even sooner than I will. Continue to discriminate against others, and their children will not learn to respect others either. When every large person's self-image is poor, all of the insults grow stronger, the weak and unattractive are shunned even more, and our view of the future is bleeding with scornful sores, then where is the love? Dead. Where is the kindness? Dead. And what happens when people hurt one another because of appearance? The end of connection and the beginning of cruelty. I might feel differently if I ever knew what it felt like to be thin, what it feels like to be popular, so that I too could feel pride. But I am overweight. My true beauty and personality remain hidden inside.

Of course, not everyone enjoys or appreciates imitation writing as much as these students have, and possibilities for topics, tone, and other writing strategies can sometimes elude even the most determined writer. Even so, notice how one student was able to use her frustration over a topic that *wouldn't* fit the form to arrive at a unique topic that *did* fit perfectly:

This is officially the toughest assignment I've ever had! I racked my brain for days and I wasn't writing what I wanted to say. What I originally wanted to write would not fit into the form that I was trying to imitate. Finally I got so frustrated that I turned this letter from a sad Indian to President Pierce into an angry student writing about teachers who oppress students with assignments like this one.



TECHNIQUES FOR WRITERS I-a

Imitating the Classics

The following are excerpts of the writing of five well-known authors. Choose one excerpt to imitate, substituting different subject matter. In your imitation, strive to reproduce the feel of the author's writing—his or her way with language. The names of the authors and titles of their works follow the excerpts.

1. He was systematic, but to say he thought and acted like a machine would be to misunderstand the nature of his thought. It was not like pistons and wheels and gears all moving at once, massive and coordinated. The image of a laser beam comes to mind instead; a single pencil of light of such terrific energy in such extreme concentration it can be shot at the moon and its reflection seen back on earth. Phaedrus did not try to use his brilliance for general illumination. He sought one specific distant target and aimed for it and hit it. And that was all. General illumination of that target he hit now seems to be left for me.
2. Anything that happens after this party breaks up is nothing. Everything is now. It's like war. Everyone is handsome, shining just thinking about other people's blood. As though the red wash flying from veins not theirs is facial makeup patented for its glow. Inspiring. Glamorous. Afterward there will be some chatter and recapitulation of what went on; nothing though like the action itself and the beat that pumps the heart. In war or at a party everyone is wily, intriguing; goals are set and altered; alliances rearranged. Partners and rivals devastated; new pairings triumphant. The knockout possibilities knock Dorcas out because here—with grown-ups and as in war—people play for keeps.
3. My nerves vibrated to those low-spoken words as they had never vibrated to thunder—my blood felt their subtle violence as it had

never felt frost or fire; but I was collected, and in no danger of swooning. I looked at Mr. Rochester; I made him look at me. His whole face was colourless rock; his eye was both spark and flint. He disavowed nothing; he seemed as if he would defy all things. Without speaking, without smiling, without seeming to recognize in me a human being, he only twined my waist with his arm and riveted me to his side.

4. “What should we drink?” the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

“It’s pretty hot,” the man said.

“Let’s drink beer.”

“Dos cervezas,” the man said into the curtain.

“Big ones?” a woman asked from the doorway.

“Yes. Two big ones.”

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

5. No doubt I grew *very* pale;—but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was a *low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*. I gasped for breath—and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly—more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations, but the noise steadily increased. Why *would* they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observation of the men—but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! What *could* I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—*louder!* And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they *knew!*—they were making a mockery of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think. But any thing was better than this agony! Any thing was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!—and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!—

1. Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*
2. Toni Morrison, *Jazz*
3. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*
4. Ernest Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants”
5. Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”

Student Writing: Using the Nuts and Bolts of Close Imitation

Now that you have a good understanding of what imitation is, it's time to dig deeper into the actual process of imitating a piece of writing. Have a careful look at the following full-length essay by one student, Jehlen, and the imitation of that essay that follows it by another student, Matt. Try to absorb not only the writing style of Jehlen's original, but also the feeling of sadness and emptiness it conveys in describing a dying neighborhood. Then notice how Matt's imitation of the piece manages to convert this feeling into one of excitement and action while describing a concert.

Student Essay: *Silence*

by Jehlen

On the gravel shore of the canal, at the far end of a vacant lot on the southwest side of town where a cement factory once stood, a ten year old boy sits smoking a Kool and fishing for steelheads with his dog. The sun beats down mercilessly from a cloudless sky, its heat that much more intense since there is only the faintest whisper of a cooling breeze. The boy wipes his sweating brow with the back of his hand as his dog moves a few yards away to climb down the riverbank and drink from the stagnant canal.

"No, pooch," the boy warns, "that stuff's bad. Come away."

But the animal pays no attention.

"Get sick and die then," the boy says, shrugging. "Stupid dog."

A few hundred yards behind them, across Lincoln Avenue, the giant holding pools of the city's wastewater treatment plant offer their contents to be baked by the afternoon sun, and the overwhelming stench that results rises only so high before being trapped by the still air and held in nauseating limbo above this decaying area.

Once a thriving ethnic community made up primarily of Polish and Hungarian immigrants, filled with taverns and corner groceries to serve the thousands of workers from several

different factories originally in its midst, this now mostly African-American and Hispanic neighborhood is dying a slow, painful death following the closure of the Darley Street Assembly plant—the only remaining area industry—last December.

Already, the railroad sidings behind the deserted manufacturing facility have become overgrown with weeds. On the front steps of a badly-leaning frame house across the tracks, an elderly man sits with a battered guitar on his lap, looking out at the broken factory windows and mumbling the lyrics of an obscure blues song in a low, sandpapery voice.

“How you doing, Charlie?” a neighbor woman asks in passing.

The man nods his head in acknowledgment, but his song goes on uninterrupted. It is Saturday afternoon, and at a time when this street was for so many years busy with factory workers heading toward the Springtown Inn on Wayford or the 747 Lounge on Darley, there is now only silence. It is so quiet that the man’s singing is audible almost two blocks from his house, blocked out only once when a rusty pickup truck clatters past.

Around the corner from the old man’s street, the steel-reinforced display window of Taczek’s Market offers a glimpse of owner Joe Taczek sitting on a stool behind the meat counter, patiently waiting for a customer to come through the door. With any luck, he will make three or four sales before the day is through.

Across from the little store, a teenaged boy sits in a tattered lawn chair on the front lawn of his house, holding a hand-lettered sign that reads “CAR WASH \$1.99.” At his feet are a green garden hose, neatly coiled, and a cigar box filled with pennies for change. But both remain unused because there is no passing traffic to take advantage of his offer.

Two doors down from the boy’s house is a red brick church building, the words *Assemblies de Dios* stenciled in black across its peeling wooden doors. All of the stained-glass windows, including what must have been a magnificent round one in the bell tower, have been smashed by vandals. The roof is bare of shingles in several spots, exposing the rotting ceiling beams, which moved the city to condemn the building in February.

On the corner opposite the church, a gang of teenaged boys, all of them wearing identical red sweatbands around their foreheads, gathers in front of an abandoned Salvation Army store. One of them takes a can of red Rust-Oleum spray paint from his back pocket and quickly scrawls the words "Almighty Scratch—Die Proud" in foot-high letters across one of the boarded-up windows.

"This lets them Johnny Trash boys know we're still around," the artist says, stepping back to assess his work.

"Never shoulda come over from the suburbs in the first place," one of his friends agrees, gesturing toward the neighboring city less than a mile away. The boys exchange high fives and the group moves on.

Across the street, the young fisherman on the canal leading to the offending suburb gathers his cigarettes and fishing gear and heads for home, his dog following close at his heels. They have caught nothing.

An aging white Pontiac cruises past the boy as he prepares to cross the street, its windows down and radio blaring. For just a moment the street is filled with the pounding bass and wailing guitar of a popular rock song, but then the car is gone just as quickly as it appeared and the neighborhood is quiet once again.

But this is not the peaceful silence of suburbia, where children ride tricycles in their driveways and neighbors exchange small talk across back fences. This is the silence of businesses abandoned by their customers and of churches abandoned by their parishioners. This is a silence brought on by deserted factories and empty houses, and by the locked doors and drawn curtains of those who cannot leave. It is a silence as audible as the music from a solitary passing automobile, as thick as the rancid air that clings like a shroud to the neighborhood rooftops.

This is the silence of dying.

* * *

Student Imitation: *Good Living*

by Matt

On the sticky floor of the Grand Theater, in the middle of town where student life has thrived for decades, a young man stands absorbing the atmosphere and waiting for the band. The

spotlights shine brightly from the beams above, their glare intense because they are the only lights on. The young man stands on his tiptoes, his calves stretched, and the band walks onto the stage a few rows away to play its songs and entertain the crowd.

"All right, yeah!" the young man yells. "You guys are great! Let's go!"

But the band checks its sound equipment instead.

"Come on, start the show!" the young man yells urgently. "That's why I'm here!"

A few blocks away, across the main street, several dozen people sit in an outdoor cafe drinking espresso royale, and the overwhelming aroma of coffee beans wafts down the street to draw even more people to this part of the city.

Once just a sleepy little college town made up of mostly student residents, with not much to offer as far as entertainment for those students, this city is now a bustling place with industries that have thrived and prospered year after year, helped along by an international food company that has made its central office here.

Every year, new buildings go up at the company's headquarters. At the door of a posh clothing store in a mall not far from the site, a woman stands with a huge shopping bag in her hand, looking across the street into other store windows and wondering how much more she can spend on frivolous but fun things.

"May I help you, ma'am?" a shopkeeper asks her.

The woman shakes her head in answer, and her shopping goes on uninterrupted.

It is a Saturday afternoon, and at a time when the streets so many years ago were empty of shoppers to buy things at Urban Outfitters or The Buckle, now there is only commotion. The street is so busy that the woman's daydreaming is short-lived, her thoughts broken when someone bumps into her.

Around the corner from where she stands, the plate glass display window of Dunham's offers a glimpse of a salesperson frantically trying to help in the shoe department, hurrying from one customer to another. If things ever slow down he will get to take his lunch break.

Across from the store, a middle-aged man stands behind his gleaming chrome hot dog cart at the main intersection, holding an umbrella that protects him from the sun. In front of him is a line of hungry customers, all waiting patiently, and the shadow cast by the big umbrella. The shadow seems to droop at the edges, maybe because the sun's heat seems almost heavy.

Two doors down from the hot dog cart is a brand new storefront, the words "Hot Topic" hanging on a neon sign in the front window. All of the store's decorations, including a very expensive smoked-glass window, are spotlessly clean. The ceiling, instead of the usual white tile, is open to the rafters, exposing the black-painted rafters over the store set to open next week.

On the opposite corner, a group of college students, all of them carrying backpacks, gathers in front of a store selling new and used books. One of the students picks up a tattered book sitting on a table in front of the store and reads the title—*I'm Okay, You're Okay*—with great glee to his companions.

"Good to know we're all in good shape," the reader says, stepping back to judge the reaction of the others.

"We were never in bad shape to start with," one of his friends says, lifting the thumb of one hand in a gesture of contentment. He and the others exchange smiles and the group moves on.

Across the street, the young man in the theater emerges into the sunlight and walks to his apartment while talking to some friends, his girlfriend at his side. They have all enjoyed the afternoon concert.

A shiny red Volkswagen Beetle zooms past them as they prepare to cross the street. The car's sunroof is open and its CD player blasting. For a few seconds the street fills with the mellow voice and uptempo beat of a Snoop Dogg song, and although the car is gone just as quickly as it appeared, the street remains noisy.

But this is not the hedonistic sight that some would expect from a college town where students used to smoke marijuana openly on the street and noisy protests took place on the campus lawns. This is a scene of bustling downtown activity and new businesses

growing. This is a scene of happy and contented people, and its background music is provided by the loud radios and CD players of cars driving by. It is a day as clean as that passing red car, as sweet as the aroma of that coffee brewing down the street.

It is a good day to be alive.

As part of this assignment, students were asked to re-read their imitations and then comment on them, and here is what Matt wrote about his:

I found that in imitating the “Silence” piece I was forced to vary my word choice, just as the original author does. Also, I hardly ever use adjectives and adverbs in my writing, and using them so heavily made me realize that my writing must seem awfully plain. It was really strange to put together a seven-line, one-sentence paragraph; normally, I would cut that passage up into three or four sentences—and of course leave out the descriptive language. I know that most people enjoy reading things that pack lots of description and emotion, and I’m glad that this imitation let me write something that at least comes close to doing that.

Another member of Matt’s critique group, Michelle, offered a similar reaction to her own imitation:

I’ve been writing in the same basic style for as long as I can remember. There aren’t any words to describe my writing style—it just sort of exists. This assignment was a great challenge for me, and a challenge worth accepting. Granted, it took me a long time to complete the paper, but it was time well spent. When reading the completed draft of what I’d written, I felt a great sense of accomplishment. I’ve written something in a style of writing I like a lot, and in time, with more practice, I’d like to adopt some of that style as my own.

Looking Closely: A Line-By-Line Conversion of *Silence* to *A Quiet Athlete*

Before you try your own hand at imitation, it will be helpful to spend a few minutes seeing how all of the writers whose work you’ve seen so far approached the task. As we’ve stressed so far, essentially you want to absorb the overall tone, style, and structure of the text you choose to imitate, and at this point we’ll look most closely at the latter feature, *structure*.

While some students are fortunate to have had a comprehensive introduction to the parts of speech in earlier grades, and they may even have been asked to complete “syntax trees” as part of a linguistics-based English course, most often these things are left to more advanced, college-level courses. Even so, it’s possible to determine what’s going on in a sentence without being able to name the specific

grammatical components of that sentence, and this will be our approach here. (An analysis of the grammatical components of the first part of “Silence” appears in Appendix 3.)

In the text titled “Silence” that you read earlier, you saw how *description* played a significant role in the original writer’s approach to the topic of a dying neighborhood. Indeed, the opening sentence alone provides readers with a great deal of description:

On the gravel shore of the canal, at the far end of a vacant lot on the southwest side of town where a cement factory once stood, a ten year old boy sits smoking a Kool and fishing for steelheads with his dog.

Thus the opening sentence breaks down into seven parts:

- | | | |
|---|--|---------------------|
| 1 | On the gravel shore of the canal, | (location) |
| 2 | at the far end of a vacant lot | (specific location) |
| 3 | on the southwest side of town | (general location) |
| 4 | where a cement factory once stood, | (previous location) |
| 5 | a ten year old boy | (person) |
| 6 | sits smoking a Kool | (first action) |
| 7 | and fishing for steelheads with his dog. | (second action) |

For our imitation, as Matt did earlier, we’ll use Jehlen’s description of an *empty* setting to write about a pre-game NBA team warm-up at a downtown arena. Bright lights, thousands of fans streaming through the gates, and the din of endless excited conversations become the setting for a description of a young athlete eagerly talking with his admirers. In this case, you’ll notice that our imitation is fairly loose, using *some* of the original text’s parts but not all of them:

On the gravel shore of the canal, (location)

On the polished wooden floor of The Palace,

at the far end of a vacant lot on the southwest side of town (specific location)

on the outskirts of Auburn Hills

where a cement factory once stood, (previous location)

where once were mostly farms and fields,

a ten-year-old boy (person)

the newest member of the team

sits smoking a Kool (first action)

stands holding a basketball

and fishing for steelheads with his dog. (second action)

and signing autographs for his fans.

With the opening sentence completed, our description of the scene has begun nicely and the rest of the setting awaits description. Looking closely at the original text again, we resume the scene:

The sun

The sound of rock music

beats down mercilessly

blares into the arena loudly

from a cloudless sky,

from the overhead speakers,

its heat that much more intense

its beat even more pounding

since there is only the faintest whisper of a cooling breeze.

because the arena is only half-filled with tonight's crowd.

The boy wipes his sweating brow with the back of his hand

The rookie spins the basketball on the finger of his right hand,

as his dog moves a few yards away

and his young fans move even closer

to climb down the riverbank and drink from the stagnant canal.

to watch and commit this fancy move to memory.

Let's step back now to see what we've written so far as a full paragraph, going a couple of lines further into the imitation by adding some dialog in the process:

On the gravel shore of the canal, at the far end of a vacant lot on the southwest side of town where a cement factory once stood, a ten year old boy sits smoking a Kool and fishing for steelheads with his dog. The sun beats down mercilessly from a cloudless sky, its heat that much more intense since there is only the faintest whisper of a cooling breeze. The boy wipes his sweating brow with the back of his hand as his dog

moves a few yards away to climb down the riverbank and drink from the stagnant canal.

“No, pooch,” the boy warns, “that stuff’s bad. Come away.”

But the animal pays no attention.

“Get sick and die then,” the boy says, shrugging. “Stupid dog.”

On the polished wooden floor of The Palace, on the outskirts of Auburn Hills where once were mostly farms and fields, the newest member of the team stands holding a basketball and signing autographs for his fans. The sound of rock music blares loudly into the arena from the overhead speakers, its beat even more incessant since the place is only half-filled with tonight’s crowd. The rookie spins the basketball on the finger of his right hand, and his young fans move even closer to watch and commit the fancy move to memory.

“It’s easy,” the rookie says. “Just give it a good spin. Nothing to it.”

The kids look at him like he’s God.

“I hope you all cheer real loud tonight,” the athlete says, smiling. “We need the win.”

When you imitate a model text, you’ll find yourself paying a great deal more attention than usual to aspects of writing such as word choice and arrangement, punctuation, and paragraph structure, all of which go far in creating a rewarding reading experience for your **audience**.

Defining Rhetoric

Audience: any reader(s) of written text; any listener(s) of speech.

Determining what kinds of readers constitute your audience and choosing an appropriate tone and style for your message to them is vital for creating a message that succeeds rhetorically; therefore, the next chapter focuses on developing your awareness of audience and your options in responding to that awareness.

TECHNIQUES FOR WRITERS I-b

Close Imitation

Option A

Write your own close imitation of the excerpt of “Silence” on pp. 21–22, following the example of the student imitation presented on those pages.

Option B

Write a close imitation of a selection in the Point/Counterpoint readings in Chapter 2, letting the style influence your writing. With your imitation,

include a one-page description of the challenges and successes you encountered during the writing process.

Option C

Study the structure and style of a reading you've enjoyed and write a one-page informal analysis of the methods the author used to create a compelling text.

Option D

Look through the pages of a novel, story, or essay (including newspaper/magazine columns) by a writer whose style you appreciate until you find a passage of reasonable length to imitate. Photocopy the passage to turn in with your imitation, the topic of which can be influenced by, or independent of, the original piece's content.