Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts[1]
A User's Guide

◼ Introduction

Rewriting addresses a problem that many young writers face: How can I draw upon and respond to the work of others in a generous, assertive, and interesting way, and represent myself with a measure of authority and intellectual interest? What repertoire of strategies can I draw upon in order to refer to, quote from, summarize, and paraphrase the work of others? How do I control the sources and not have them control me? In high school, students typically have been told something about paraphrase and summary, and they have often practiced bringing others' terms, phrases, and passages into their own texts. But the techniques for doing so are often limited in two ways. First, students are taught to incorporate the terms, phrases, and passages they find in others' texts seamlessly into the syntax of their own prose, yielding a sentence like this:

> **Original**
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> Starting in childhood, we learn terms for phenomena and participate in cultural systems of naming and defining **because "making sense depends significantly on forming appropriate and useful categories and making proper assignments to them" (Lakoff 180).** Categories aren't so much invented, but rather inherited.

In terms of citation, there's nothing incorrect about this act of joinery, whereby one text (the writer's) slips almost undetected into another's (Lakoff's). Its problem is one of *use*, or, in this case, the writer's abdication of responsibility to direct readers to her application of Lakoff's prose, which leads us to a second limit in how writers new to the academy tend to treat sources in their papers. Young writers tend to treat the words of others as authoritative and true simply by dint of being published. So, other writers are used to "seal the deal" and to "speak the truth." The passage above conveys the sense that Lakoff's remark is, on its face, a fine explanation of categorizing: In rhetorical terms this is called a *warrant of authority*, since the passage rests on the problematic assumption that whatever Lakoff says is best. Consider this revision:

> **Revised**
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> Starting in childhood, we learn terms for phenomena and participate in cultural systems of naming and defining. In her work on this powerful tendency, linguist Robin Lakoff goes so far as to say that **"making sense depends significantly on forming appropriate and useful categories and making proper adjustments to them" (180).** But must categories be appropriate in order to be useful? We might consider the ways in which some categories are both *in*appropriate and *useful*. Think, for example, of the power of metaphor, derived in part from the inappropriate assignment of words to things. Though metaphors aren't typically used for categorization per se, some of them embrace a categorical function. Take for example. . .

Here, the writer has framed Lakoff's remark in a way that bespeaks her attitude toward Lakoff's words. In the revision, Lakoff remains important to the writer's work, but she does not commandeer it. Readers understand this to be an "interested" reading of Lakoff, not a critique or correction of her idea, but rather an *extension* of the thought (in the original source, Lakoff mentions nothing about metaphor). Readers aren't asked to dismiss Lakoff, and the writer delicately invites them to a new line of thinking ("We might consider the ways…"). *Rewriting* shows writers how to make such moves, and discusses the rhetorical and ethical advantages of doing so. As Joseph Harris summarizes his goal: "My aim in this book is to help you make interesting use of the texts you read in the essays you write. How do you respond t6o the work of others in a way that is both generous and assertive? How do you make their words and thoughts part of what *you* want to say?" (1).

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[1] Harris, Joseph. *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2006. Print.

◼ Chapter 1: Coming to Terms

Coming to terms involves a writer expressing her understanding of another writer's project. Coming to terms can occupy a portion of an essay or an entire essay. The move is employed in literature reviews, in bibliographic essays, in prefaces, in research papers—anywhere that a writer wishes to fairly and exactly represent another's work in synthetic form. Summary statements radically reduce the original source to its gist (condensing the original by at least 50% or more). Paraphrases run comparable in length to a finding or idea expressed in the original source, translating that finding or idea into the writer's new language. (If a paraphrase contains traces of the original text, it becomes *patchwriting*, which academics deem an inappropriate and incorrect way to represent another's work). Harris defines *coming to terms* in this way:

> In coming to terms, you need both to give a text its due and show what uses you want to make of it. You are not simply re-presenting a text but incorporating it into your own project as a writer. You thus need not only to explain what you think it means but to say something about the perspective from which you are reading it. In coming to terms with the work of others, then, you also say a good deal about who you are as a writer, about your own interests and values. (15)

Clearly, coming to terms is a difficult task since you a writer must strike a balance between what another writer has said and what she wishes to say about that writer's work. A source text needs to be put in conversation with the writer's own needs, intellectual commitments, and curiosity. Harris reminds us that "Such work involves a dialectic between paraphrase and quotation. One the one hand, to make strong use of another writer, you need to be able to restate what she or he has to say in your own terms, to offer your own paraphrase of his project. On the other hand, you also need to attend closely to the specific features of the texts you deal with, to note and respect their key moves and phrasings" (15). Harris delineates three moves inherent in coming to terms:

- **Define the *project* of the writer in your own terms.**
  What issues drive this essay?
  What ideas does it explore?
  What lines of inquiry does it develop?
  What is the writer trying *to do* in this text?
  What is the writer trying to *accomplish* by saying what he/she does?

  Aims: What is the writer trying to achieve? What position does he or she want to argue? What issues or problems does he or she explore?

  Methods: How does a writer relate examples to ideas? How does he or she connect one claim to the next, build a sense of continuity and flow? What theories or hypotheses informed the analysis? What professional or disciplinary perspectives were brought to bear?

  Materials: Where does the writer go for examples and evidence? What texts are cited and discussed? What experiences or events are described? What experiments were undertaken and what components did they involve?

- **Noting Keywords, Passages, and Data**
  What aspects of this text stand out for me as a reader?
  Which terms or passages strike me in some way as interesting, troubling, ambiguous, or suggestive?
  Which terms, phrases, passages, or data displays represent *flashpoints* in the texts, moments given a special intensity or importance?

- **Assess the Uses and Limits of an Approach**
  How do I weigh alternative options to the interpretation, analysis, or argument getting made?
  What other conclusions might be reached?
  What alternative claims might reasonable people fashion?
  What does this text do or see well?
  What does it stumble over, occlude, or elide?
  What does this text seem to offer as a compelling way of looking at an issue, but what does it also bracket out of sight?

Chapter 2: Forwarding

When a writer *forwards* a text, she takes images, data, and ideas from an original source and puts them to new use in the context of her own work. As Harris puts this, when you forward you extend and enhance the use of an idea (or image or datum), "you begin to shift the focus of your readers away from what its author has to say and toward your own project" (38). But forwarding involves more than simply "plopping" the words, images, or data of others into your own writing (like the original passage offered in the Introduction). You need clearly to shape them to your own needs. Harris offers four ways to do this:

- **Illustrating:** When you look to other texts for examples of a point you want to make.
- **Authorizing:** When you invoke the expertise or status of another writer to support your thinking.
- **Borrowing:** When you draw on terms or ideas from other writers to use in thinking through your subject.
- **Extending:** When you put your own spin on the terms or concepts that you take from other texts.

Illustrating
If we think of academic writing as craftsmanship, we bring to mind both skill and authorship since the work that our students produce is evaluated both through technical lenses and through the perspective of a student writer's individual production, the text "marked" as her own within a trajectory of other assignments she has composed. This sense of technical skill and authorship is echoed by Richard Sennett, who, speaking about brick-making, reminds us that each brick carries a certain presence: "Maker's stamps on metal, wood, and clay evince a second category of material consciousness. The producer leaves a personal trace of his or her presence on the object—the maker's mark" (130). As productions, bricks and essays may seem far apart, but if we consider both simply as material manifestations of *craft*, then the analogy is not so exotic.

Authorizing
Discussions of craft have often been relegated to manuals, how-to books, and other instructional discourses. But the quality of craftsmanship—the social distinction involving respect for human making—has been addressed by scholars interested in materiality as a form of embodied practice. Most recently, Richard Sennett has devoted a book-length analysis to the subject, which, he reminds us, has been trivialized and neglected as a low-order interest: "At different moments in Western history practical activity has been demeaned, divorced from supposedly higher pursuits. Technical skill has been removed from imagination, pride in one's work treated as a luxury" (21). In other words, the world of work, of labor, of the purportedly mundane act of making, has frequently been considered beneath aesthetic and psychic scrutiny. Artisanship isn't interested in the messiness of the toolbox.

Borrowing
Mid-twentieth-century sociologist C. Wright Mills pushes the boundary of social distinctions, preferring muscular terms like *laborer* or *worker* over more refined and "softer" words like *craftsperson* or *artisan*: "The laborer with a sense of craft becomes engaged in the work in and for itself; the satisfactions of working are their own reward; the details of daily labor are connected in the worker's mind to the end product; skill develops within the work process; work is connected to the freedom to experiment" (220). What might happen if we think of student writing as *texts produced by laborers*, bringing physicality, mentality, and materiality together into a single practice? Our new construct honors expenditures of temporal, physical, and intellectual energies while it highlights the production process as *work*.

Extending

The teaching of writing is a difficult and complicated enterprise since it involves, essentially, writing about writing, the use of language (descriptive, illustrative, explanatory in nature) to direct others to use language. Some teachers (channeling the rhetoric teachers of ancient Rome) use the technique of *imitatio* whereby students are asked to model their prose on a master example of writing. But even this technique, it could be argued, uses language to direct students to produce other language. Richard Sennett wonders about the limits of language to catalyze craft: "Craftwork establishes a realm of skill and knowledge perhaps beyond human verbal capacities to explain it; it taxes the powers of the most professional writer to describe precisely how to tie a slipknot. . . .Here is a, perhaps *the*, fundamental human limit: language is not an adequate 'mirror-tool' for the physical movements of the human body" (95). But perhaps this very limit might be seen as an advantage in teaching writing skills. Imagine a super-teacher of writing who has found the perfect language with which to describe each and every aspect of composing, or envision a teacher of somewhat less superiority who delivers instructions that students follow to the letter so as to produce good prose. What is the nature of such a student-teacher relationship? Who is the student who simply executes commands?

■ Chapter 3: Countering

Countering is perhaps the most familiar of *Rewriting*'s various writerly moves since it is connected to disagreeing, calling into question, critiquing, and rebutting, which we witness in public disagreement and in arguments outside intellectual work. We see pro-con, crossfire-style debate on television and on the Senate floor. But Harris recommends (and with good reason) that we understand intellectual criticality as a less agonistic set of practices. "To *counter* is not to nullify, but to suggest a different way of thinking. Countering looks at other views and texts not as wrong but as *partial*—in the sense of being both interested and incomplete. In countering, you bring a different set of interests to bear upon a subject, look to notice what others have not. Your aim is not so much to refute, but to respond to prior views in ways that move the conversation in new directions" (56). This doesn't mean that as a writer you are expected to be disengaged or disinterested. Quite the opposite.

But scholars aren't hotheads so much as they are boundary-pushers and scrupulous detectives. To move knowledge forward, they must stay on their toes, reading others' work and addressing others' findings with an attitude of friendly skepticism. They don't attack head-on so much as they approach gingerly, stealthily, knowing that the knowledge-production game has rules of engagement that call for principled restraint in the face of reasonable commitments to questioning. Just so, as Harris points out "even the most civil of criticisms can sting. There is an unavoidable adversarial edge to countering, as you seek less to connect your views with those of the texts you are reading than to separate them" (57). Harris recommends three strategies for gaining critical distance:

> **Arguing the other side:** Showing the usefulness of a term or idea that another writer has criticized or noting problems with one that she or he has argued for.
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> **Uncovering values:** Surfacing a word or concept for analysis that a text has left undefined or unexamined.
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> **Dissenting:** Identifying a shared line of thought on an issue in order to note its limits.

Importantly, Harris insists that the aim of academic writing should not be simply to prove how smart you are but to add to what can be said about a subject. To do so, you may sometimes need to identify the limits of other writings, but that shouldn't be the sole point of your writing. Critique needs to lead to alternatives. "[T]he key moment in a counterstatement is when it stops, when a writer turns from the text he is reading in order to offer a proposal of his own" (58). This makes countering a productive rather than a counter-productive (or destructive) affair.

Arguing the other side
This strategy allows you simultaneously to show the limits of concept (or term) and to offer a revised concept (or term) in its place. For instance, say you discover that a writer offers a concept about dating behavior: "Dating in America is best understood as a social practice." You see that the writer depends on the idea of the *social* in order to make her point. Upon reflection, however, you determine that American dating isn't so much a *social* practice as it is a *cultural* one, since dating behaviors vary across cultural groups within American society. Seeing dating as a cultural phenomenon allows you to make distinctions about the practice that would be unavailable using a social perspective. You can use your new term (and its associated concept) both to call into the question the source text's concept and to offer a corrective that yields tangible benefits. Your critique is therefore constructive in spirit rather than merely combative. This technique often requires the exercise of subtlety to discern nuances of meaning (i.e., Is *schooling* the same as *education*? Is a *journalist* more than a *reporter*? Is *fact* the same as *data*? When is *punishment* not *discipline*?).

Uncovering values
We discover the limits of a particular argument when we sense that it has left something unsaid (an unstated assumption, an implied opposition, or an unarticulated set of values). What's unsaid seems to swirl around the source writer's work, but is not made a visible part of its project. Perhaps you find that the argument rests on assumed cultural attitudes and ideologies that you feel might profitably be brought from the shadows or subtext into the open. Once you articulate these, you may be able to shed new light on the scope or limits of the argument or analysis under consideration. Or, the unsaid may be a term or element that you feel deserves to be recognized, but has so far remained hidden from readers' view. If, for instance, you encounter an argument that details the successes of contemporary American democracy only through interviews with politicians, you might ask: "But where is the populace in this account?" The working assumption may be that politicians represent the voices of citizens, but you wonder about the rightness of this assumption, and envision how the argument could be improved by including popular voices as well.

Dissenting
Sometimes, a shared line of thinking about a subject evolves to become a tradition of inquiry. After reading a number of writers on a subject, you may discover that although they disagree on certain points, they all seem tacitly to agree on some other aspect of the issue that you feel deserves to be questioned. Say you read a number of policy analysts, each weighing in on the merits (or problems) of recent smoking regulations. Though they disagree on how public smoking prohibitions should be legislated and enacted, you discover that all of them assume smoking to be a form of addictive behavior (though none of them directly come out and say so). However, you see things differently. From your perspective, unless and until smoking is understood as a *social activity*, anti-smoking prohibitions will likely be violated. You would have the means to counter the consensus if you can argue for the ways in which a sociological model enhances our understanding of smoking behaviors in ways that a psychological model cannot.

▪ Chapter 4: Taking an Approach

Sometimes you will be asked to apply another writer's approach, theory, or method to a new case at hand. Your task as a writer, then, is to work "in the shoes" of a scholar "with the aim not so much of testing those ideas but of proving their validity" (Harris 74). This technique has the advantage of your becoming intimately familiar with the operations of a particular method; by trying on another's approach you imitate the intellectual operations of a method as you craft an analysis such a method has sponsored.

But such applications have the disadvantage of maintaining a master-apprentice relationship since the application can serve the interests of another thinker, but make little room for your own insights about the material under scrutiny. Unlike mere "application," *taking an approach* makes use of another writer's theory, method, or perspective in order to locate its limits and test its generalizability. To quote Harris, "*working* in the mode of another involves. . .pushing beyond that influence" (79). Harris offers three strategies for positioning one's own work in relation to others who have influenced one's thinking:

- **Acknowledging influences:** Noting those writers whose work has in some way provided a model for your own.

- **Turning an approach on itself:** Asking the same questions of a writer that he or she asks of others.

- **Reflexivity:** Noting and reflecting on the key choices you have made (concerning method, values, language) in constructing your text.

Acknowledging influences
You may look to these aspects of another writer's work that has been influential for your own project:

- **Defining concerns**
  What kinds of problems does this writer typically take on?
  What sorts of questions does she or he ask?
  What types of texts or materials tend to attract his or her attention?
  What drives the writer's work, what interests or values seem most at stake?

- **Characteristic methods**
  How does the writer go about answering the problems posed or the questions asked?
  Does he or she interview or observe others?
  Survey previous research?
  Look at historical contexts?
  Analyze the language of texts?
  Reflect on his or her own experience?

- **Style**
  What sort of person do you sense behind the writing?
  Are there particular qualities that you admire?
  A sense of wit or humor?
  A generosity in dealing with the work of others?
  A willingness to take unpopular stands?

As Harris sees it, when a writer acknowledges influences, she does so not so much to pay homage to another's smart ideas and approaches, but rather to launch her own project as a writer. In this way, the essay looks less like an encomium and more like a conversation between two persons interested in some of the same ideas and issues.

Notice that the techniques outlined above could well be supplemented by discerning another writer's *aims, methods,* and *materials*, aspects of a text included in the earlier discussion of "Forwarding." Taken together, descriptions of *defining concerns, characteristic methods*, *style, aims,* and *materials* may be useful in summarizing another writer's work. Often, this sort of descriptive analysis is the most useful way to locate some aspect of the work that you want to engage with, take issue with, or otherwise respond to.

Turning an approach on itself

This is perhaps the most difficult of Harris' techniques, since it requires a keen awareness of both the strengths and limits of another writer's (or group of writers') theory, method, or approach. Essentially, a writer turns another writer's approach on itself when she asks "a writer the same questions that she or he asks about others" (Harris 83). Another writer's method or theory becomes the main subject of your paper. The subtlety of this technique is perhaps best illustrated using Harris' example, taken from Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*, a history of an American philosophical movement called pragmatism. Here, he is commenting on the four major practitioners of pragmatism, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, C.S. Pierce, and John Dewey:

> If we strain out the differences, personal and philosophical, they had with one another, we can say that these four thinkers had in common was not a group of ideas, but a single idea—an idea about ideas. They all believed that ideas are not "out there" waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals but by groups of individuals—that ideas are social. they believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and their environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptablity.
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> The belief that ideas should never become ideologies—either justifying the status quo, or dictating some transcendent imperative for renouncing it—was the essence of what they taught. In many ways this was a liberating attitude, and it accounts for the popularity that Holmes, James, and Dewey (Pierce is a special case) enjoyed in their lifetimes, and for the effect that they had on a whole generation of judges, teachers, journalists, philosophers, psychologists, social scientists, law professors, and even poets. They taught a kind of skepticism that helped people cope with life in a heterogeneous, industrialized, mass-market society; a society in which older bonds of custom and community seemed to have become attenuated, and to have been replaced by more impersonal networks of obligation and authority. But skepticism is also one of the qualities that make societies like that work. It is what permits the continual state of upheaval that capitalism thrives on. . . .
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> This book is an effort to write about these ideas in their own spirit—that is, to try to see ideas as always soaked through by the personal and social situations in which we find them. Holmes, James, Pierce, and Dewey were philosophers, and their work is part of the history of abstract thought. Its philosophical merits were contested in its own time, and they are contested today. This book is not a work of philosophical argument, though; it is a work of historical interpretation. It describes a change in American life by looking at a change in its intellectual assumptions.

[margin labels: **coming to terms**, **countering**, **taking an approach**]

Reflexivity

Yet another nuanced technique, reflexivity refers less to how you make use of the work of others in constructing your text, and more to an awareness of how you choose to name and define phenomena and ideas you're writing about, and how explicitly you reflect on the assumptions and intellectual experiences that inform your approach. If, for instance, you were writing a paper about what happened on the streets of Los Angeles following the 1992 acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King after his arrest for speeding, you might reflect on language choices in this way:

> Though the events on the streets of South Central Los Angeles, which resulted in 43 deaths, are now formally known as the "L.A. Riots," I prefer to use the term "L.A. Rebellion" in reference to that same event. *Riot* suggests spontaneity, but also a lack of reasoning, an action without purpose. *Rebellion*, on the other hand, suggests action motivated by principle, and delivers a sense of responsiveness—and perhaps even rightnesss—to the event. I understand that my renaming is historically inaccurate, but the revised term speaks directly to my understanding of social action.