1 Becoming a Better Reader

Voices and Values consists of this introductory chapter, a brief chapter on writing, and forty high-interest essays, followed by a unit on the research paper. This introduction will describe the format of the forty essays. It will then explain how understanding the concept of *point and support* can make you a better reader and writer. Finally, it will offer specific strategies for effective reading of the essays. The chapter that follows, "Becoming a Better Writer," will then present in a nutshell what you need to know to write effectively.

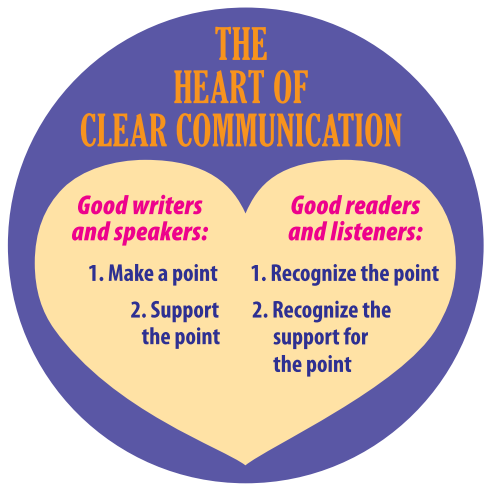
Format of the Forty Reading Selections

Each of the forty essays in *Voices and Values* contains the following:

- A *Preview* that presents helpful background information and arouses your interest in the selection.
- A *Words to Watch* section that gives the definitions of some of the words in the selection.
- An activity called *First Impressions* that asks you to write for ten minutes about the selection you have just finished reading.
- A *Vocabulary Check* that helps you learn words in a research-proven way: by seeing how they are actually used in the selection.
- A *Reading Check* that helps you practice and develop important reading skills: recognizing main ideas and the central point, identifying key supporting details, making inferences, and being aware of the writer's craft.
- *Discussion Questions* to help you deepen your understanding of the reading.
- *Two Paragraph Assignments* and *two Essay Assignments*—giving you a choice of topics for writing practice. As a general rule, you will be given both a paragraph and an essay assignment that involve a first-person "I" point of view, in which you are asked to provide evidence from your own personal experience. You will also be given a paragraph and an essay assignment that involve an objective point of view, in which you will be asked to provide evidence from research or your own general knowledge.

Point and Support

The most important principle in this book is that effective writing has two basic parts: (1) a **point** and (2) **support** for that point. The point states what the author thinks, and the support helps you, the reader, understand why the author holds this opinion. By keeping this principle in mind, you can become a better reader *and* writer. When you read, remember that an author's purpose is to make a point and support it with reasons, examples, and other details. When you write, remember that to communicate effectively, you should follow the same basic plan: make a point and support it.



Suppose you are reading a magazine article about flexible working hours. As you read, ask yourself the questions, "What is the author's point?" and "What is the support for the point?" Doing so, you may quickly see that the author's point is that flexible working hours are a good idea. You may then note that the article gives three supporting reasons. Flexible working hours would lead to fewer traffic jams, better use of building space, and more opportunities for parents to work. By asking and answering these two questions, you have found the central meaning of the article. *This strategy can be applied to almost anything you read.*

You should follow the same principle when you write. Let's say you're writing a paper about watching a sports event on television as opposed to going to the game itself. Ask yourself, "What point do I want to make about this topic?" Suppose you decide to argue that watching on TV is better than going to the game. You would then need to think of convincing reasons to support your point. You might explain that the game is cheaper if watched at home; that it's more comfortable to watch it at home without traffic, a noisy crowd, or hard seats; and that it's a more informative experience at home with the advantage of good camera coverage and helpful commentators. By consciously focusing on the point you want to make and on the support you need to give, you can help yourself write a solid, well-reasoned paper.

Reading Strategies

All too often, students have trouble understanding what they read. A familiar complaint is, "I read it, but I didn't understand it." This section explains five strategies that can make you a better reader. You will have many opportunities to apply them in this book. In fact, you will find it helpful to use them for *all* your reading.

Strategy 1: Learn to Read Actively.

One key to improved reading is getting actively involved in each stage of the reading process. Here are some ways to do so.

1 **Preview the selection.** In other words, look over what you will read—quickly but alertly—before you start to read it. Follow these steps:

   a **Make the title into a question.** For example, before reading a short selection titled "TV Commercials and Children," you might ask the question "How do TV commercials affect children?" or "Why are TV commercials directed at children?" Searching for the answer to your question will give you a reason for reading.

   On the lines below, try out this tip by writing two questions based on "He Was First," the title of one of the selections in this book.

   _____

   _____

   Are the questions you wrote on the lines above something like "Who was first?" or "What did he do to be first?" or "How difficult was it to be first?" If so, you've got the idea. Asking basic questions can make you a more active reader.

   b **Read through the first several paragraphs and the last several paragraphs.** They may give you a quick sense of the main idea of the selection.

   c **Look at the first sentence in some of the paragraphs.** You won't get a complete picture of the selection by reading only these sentences, but you will get some idea of the selection's overall organization.

2 **Read the selection straight through for pleasure.** Don't get bogged down; instead, try to understand as much as you can this first time through.

3 **Use any special features the book provides.** In this book, a *Preview* introduces you to each essay. Also, *Words to Watch* defines the difficult words in the selection in the order in which they appear. All these words are then marked in the selection with a small circle (°). Finally, the three *First Impressions* questions after each selection prompt you to jot down some quick reactions

to the selection and its relationship to your own life. Knowing that you'll be writing down your first impressions each time should help you focus your attention when you read the selections in this book. And once you get in the habit of writing about your first impressions, you'll be surprised by how many ideas you have.

4 **Reread the selection, marking key information with a pen or pencil.** Marking material will keep your mind alert and show you what to come back to later. Here are some suggestions on how and what to mark:

a Underline the ideas that seem important.

b Write *Ex* in the margin to set off important examples.

c Put question marks beside any material you don't understand.

d Number any major series of ideas.

Following each selection in this book is a set of questions that help you practice important reading skills. As you strengthen these skills enough to make them habits, your reading ability is sure to improve. Here are the skills:

- Understanding vocabulary in context
- Recognizing the central point and main ideas
- Identifying key supporting details
- Making inferences
- Being aware of the writer's craft

Each skill is itself a "strategy" that can make you a better reader. These skills are explained on the pages that follow.

Strategy 2: Understand Vocabulary in Context.

Building a good vocabulary is essential to becoming a better reader and writer. In fact, people who build strong vocabularies are more likely to be successful in school and in their careers. Yet few of us have the time or desire to open the dictionary every time we meet an unfamiliar word. Luckily, there is another way to learn new words: we can guess their meanings with the help of surrounding words (called **context**).

- Sometimes, the context will contain a **synonym**—a word that means **the same as** the unfamiliar word:

  > Nick … felt betrayed and abandoned by friends, and he *declined* into self-pity. Nick might have sunk all the way to rock bottom if it had not been for Kristen.

  The synonym *sunk* suggests that *declined* means "fell."

- Sometimes, the context will contain an **antonym**—a word that means **the opposite of** the unfamiliar word:

  > While there are *myriad* regulations to protect people who work in noisy environments, there are relatively few governing repeated exposure to noise outside the workplace . . .

  The antonym *few* indicates that *myriad* means "many."

- Or the context might include one or more **examples** of the unfamiliar word:

  > Two of Nick's favorite *pastimes* had been cycling and playing basketball . . .

  The examples—*cycling* and *playing basketball*—suggest that *pastimes* means "enjoyable activities."

- But most of the time, you'll need to look at the entire sentence. For example, see if you can figure out the meaning of the word *fluctuate* from its context in this sentence:

  > Desert temperatures can *fluctuate* by as much as fifty degrees between daytime and nighttime.

  With the help of the entire sentence, you can guess that *fluctuate* means "vary."

To help you practice this strategy, following each selection in this book are several vocabulary items. These items will help you learn words by looking at their contexts.

Strategy 3: Look for Point and Support in What You Read.

As you learned from the section titled "Point and Support," a well-written selection has two basic parts: (1) a point and (2) support for that point. The essays in this book are always accompanied by point and support questions:

1 **Recognizing the Central Point and Main Ideas.** The *central point* refers to the point of an entire essay; *main ideas* refer to the points of individual paragraphs. If a central point is not expressed directly in a selection, you can often figure it out by considering the supporting details.

2 **Identifying Key Supporting Details.** The support for central points and main ideas may be in the form of reasons, examples, details, facts, quotations, or personal experiences. Noting these details will help you determine the point an author is making in an essay.

Look, for example, at the following paragraph:

TV Commercials and Children

Television commercials aimed at young children—the kind shown during Saturday morning cartoon shows, for example—should be banned. For one thing, such commercials often promote junk food. They encourage little children to crave sugary snacks and breakfast cereals made of tiny chocolate doughnuts or cookie nuggets. In addition, these commercials urge children to be greedy. At the same time parents are teaching their children to share what they have with others, TV commercials make them want more expensive toys and other products for themselves. The worst thing about these ads, however, is that they take advantage of children who have not yet learned what advertising is or how it works. If a beloved cartoon character tells a child that a cereal or a toy is great, the child believes it. Children can't see how advertisers trick them into wanting a product or how ads make toys or games look better than they really are. Aiming ads at little children is unfair.

Can you find the main idea and the three key supporting details in this paragraph? Answer the questions below, and then read the explanations that follow them.

_____ 1. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of "TV Commercials and Children"?

A. All television commercials should be banned.
B. TV commercials aimed at young children should be banned.
C. Commercials make young children want to eat junk food.
D. Advertisers do not care what children eat.

In this paragraph, the main idea is *B,* "TV commercials aimed at young children should be banned." Answer *A* is *too broad*—it refers to all television commercials, not just those aimed at youngsters. Answer *C* is *too narrow*—it is actually one of the supporting details for the main idea. Answer *D* may or may not be true, but it is not what the whole paragraph is about. Only answer *B* states the main idea of the paragraph.

2. On the lines below, write the three key supporting details for the main idea. (Ask yourself, "What specific reasons does the author give for why TV ads are harmful to children?")

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

If you wrote answers similar to "They promote junk food," "They encourage greed," and "They take advantage of children," you are correct.

Strategy 4: Make Inferences.

Inferences are the reasonable guesses we make based on the facts presented. For example, if a crowd of people is smiling and talking after leaving a movie, we would probably assume that the movie is an enjoyable one. And if rolled-up newspapers accumulate on a neighbor's porch over a holiday weekend, we could conclude that the family is away on a brief vacation. Or if trucks that usually race along the highway are suddenly observing the speed limit, we could infer that a police radar trap is nearby. We make the same kinds of judgments when we draw conclusions about what we read. In this book, you'll be answering several inference questions each time you read a selection. Look again at the paragraph on "TV Commercials and Children" (page 8) and answer the following question. Then read the explanation that follows it.

__T__ TRUE OR FALSE? We can infer from the paragraph that young children think that ads tell the truth.

You can find the answer to this question near the end of the paragraph, when the writer explains that young children haven't learned what advertising is. The paragraph goes on to state that if a cartoon character praises a cereal or toy, the child believes that character. Therefore, the author is suggesting that young children believe everything they see on TV—including ads. The inference is true.

Strategy 5: Be Aware of the Writer's Craft.

"Writer's craft" refers to techniques an author uses to communicate ideas. Being aware of these strategies will increase your understanding of what you read as well as improve your own writing. In this book, questions on the writer's craft cover the following:

1 **Introductions and Conclusions.** What does an author do to interest you in reading what he or she has written? Four common kinds of introductions include (1) an entertaining story (sometimes called an *anecdote*), (2) one or more questions, (3) an idea that is the opposite of what will be written about, or (4) a broad statement that narrows down to the central point. Examples of all four introductions are on pages 16–18. Conclusions may include a summary and perhaps a final thought or two.

2 **Type of Support.** How has the author supported his or her central point? As already mentioned, common methods of support include reasons, examples, details, facts, quotations, and personal experiences.

3 **Patterns of Organization.** How have the supporting details been arranged? Authors often use a *time order*—telling the parts of a story in the order that they happened. Common word signals (also called *transitions*) that mark time order are *first, then, before, as, after, next,* and *last*.

An equally popular pattern of organization is a *listing order*—providing a series of reasons, examples, or details. Common word signals or transitions that mark listing order are *first of all, another, in addition, also,* and *finally.*

Another pattern of organization is *comparison-contrast*—showing how two things are alike or (more often) different. Typical transitions for this pattern are *like, just as, similarly, but, however, in contrast,* and *on the other hand.*

A final pattern worth noting is *cause-effect*—explaining the reasons why something happened or the results of something. Typical transitions for this pattern are *because, therefore, effect, consequently,* and *as a result.*

4 **Tone.** Just as a speaker's tone of voice reveals how he or she feels, a writer's tone also communicates feelings. You should be able to tell how an author feels about his or her subject by looking at the wording of the selection. It will often indicate whether a selection's tone is humorous or serious, angry or friendly, formal or informal, self-pitying or sarcastic, encouraging or discouraging, or simply objective (factual).

5 **Purpose.** Decide what type of writing you are reading. Is it intended to inform (give people information), to entertain (give people pleasure), or to persuade (change people's minds about an issue)? Or does it have a combination of these purposes?

6 **Audience.** Decide for what kind of reader the selection was probably written. Was it meant for the general reader (anyone)? Or was the author writing for a smaller audience, such as major-league baseball players, a group of fellow researchers, or parents of high-school students?

7 **Titles.** Most authors choose their titles very carefully. Many times, a title clearly describes the topic of the essay, and sometimes it is the shortest possible summary of the central point of an essay. Look closely at titles for excellent clues about authors' ideas and their attitudes toward their topics.

Final Thoughts about Reading the Essays

Read each selection first to enjoy whatever it may have to say about human nature and life today. Then reread the selection and work on the activities with the intention of learning as much as you can.

To help you learn, answers to the questions on the first selection, "The Blind Vet," appear at the bottom of the last page of questions. Read these answers *after* you have worked through the activities. Be sure you understand why each answer

is correct. This information will help prepare you to do well on the remaining selections, for which answers are not given.

Finally, remember that learning is, in the end, up to you. If you have the intention of gaining as much as you can from this book, then *Voices and Values* will offer you a great deal. As you learn to consistently apply the questions "What is the point?" and "What is the support for that point?" you will acquire a powerful learning and reasoning tool—a tool that can make you a skilled and independent learner for the rest of your life. Just as important, you will find that reading the essays will not only improve your mind but also touch your heart. The essays will help you connect with others and realize that all people have the same shared humanity. Someone once wrote, "We read in order to know that we are not alone." We become less isolated as we share the common experiences, emotions, and thoughts that make us human.