On Reading as a Writer

In our writing classes, we have a couple of mantras about reading that we repeat throughout the semester:

- In order to learn how to write, you have to learn how to read as a writer.
- There's only one way to learn how to read well and that's by rereading.

These mantras are connected. To read as a writer means to pay close attention to the choices other writers make. This kind of reading requires attending to lots of things at once—what the writer says, how she organizes her ideas, what types of sources she works with, and how she addresses her readers. Such multifocal reading can only be accomplished by rereading. The first time reading through a challenging work, you might only be able to focus on what it says; after you know how the writer gets from point A to point B, you can attend more carefully to the choices the writer has made along the way. As your understanding of the entire piece comes together, you are in a much better position to assess what works and what doesn't and to explain the reasons for your assessments.

If you were in a psychology class and were assigned Rachel Aviv's "The Edge of Identity," your teacher would expect you to read the article as a psych student, which would entail being able to identify Aviv's thesis and to evaluate the evidence she provides to support her thesis. But if you were asked to read Aviv's article in one of our classes, we would ask you to read as a writer: we would want you to be able to discuss in detail how Aviv presents and develops her ideas. So instead of expecting you to mark Aviv's main points with a highlighter, we would want you to write in the margins (or in your reading notebook), making connections, puzzling over references, and thinking about how the details Aviv provides contribute to the overarching effect of her piece.

Aviv begins "The Edge of Identity" (in the Readings section at the end of this book) with a story about Hannah Upp, who went missing

one day in New York City and then, twenty days later, was found alive and floating in the water about two miles south of the Statue of Liberty with no memory of how she got there. Aviv reports that Upp was diagnosed with "dissociative fugue, a rare condition in which people lose access to their autobiographical memory and personal memory." As writers, we're interested in what Aviv does after opening with this harrowing story. Instead of telling her readers what happens next, she pauses Upp's narrative to provide a brief history of the "dissociative fugue" diagnosis. Sigmund Freud, the famous founder of psychoanalysis, tried his hand at making sense of this experience, "but the phenomenon did not fit easily into his sweeping theory of human behavior," Aviv writes. She notes, however, that the much lesser known psychologist Pierre Janet "developed the first formal theory of dissociation in 1889," and then she quotes Janet directly: "Personal unity, identity, and initiative are not primitive characteristics of psychological life. They are incomplete results acquired with difficulty after long work, and they remain very fragile."

That's an amazing statement from a figure few readers will have heard of, but you could easily miss its significance if you weren't paying careful attention to how Aviv is working as a writer. When you read as a writer, the move that Aviv makes here, shifting from storytelling to psychoanalytic theories about identity, calls out for further investigation. Everyone has heard of Freud, but who is Janet? How might Aviv have come upon his work? After all, she tells her readers that he and his work "fell into obscurity" once Freud's theories established their early dominance over the evolving field of psychology. If you copy and paste the two sentences of Janet's that Aviv quotes into your preferred search engine, you'll get one hit: Onno van der Hart's article, "Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, and Dissociation of the Personality: The First Codification of a Psychodynamic Depth Psychology," which appears in *The Dissociative Mind in Psychoanalysis: Understanding and Working with Trauma*, edited by Elizabeth Howell and Sheldon Itzkowitz.

What does this discovery tell us as readers who are interested in how writing works? That Aviv is likely to have read Hart's article as part of her own effort to make sense of Upp's disappearance. In other words, confronted with Upp's baffling behavior, Aviv began

to research possible explanations for it. She could have gone to an encyclopedia or a dictionary to get a definition of *dissociation*. She could have gone to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-5*) to learn the criteria for determining whether a patient has dissociative identity disorder (DID). Indeed, we'd hazard a guess that Aviv looked at all of these resources during her research, but citing one or more of them at the opening of her piece would have signaled that the very psychological state she wants to explore as a question is actually a settled matter. Think how different her article would be if it began: "Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines *dissociation* as . . ."

When you read as a writer, you attend to *how* the writer puts her essay together, piece by piece, word by word. Such attention makes it possible to see that a full understanding of what gets said necessarily involves considering the where, the how, the who, and the when of any given act of speaking or writing. In this instance, it matters that Aviv turns to Janet near the beginning of her piece because, in citing his work, she is indicating that she thinks his ideas deserve to be rescued from "obscurity." Upp may have been diagnosed by experts who are relying on definitions of the self and of identity that are called into question by the experience of dissociation. What if the self is not stable and constant? What if identity is not innate or inherent, but rather ever-evolving and fragmentary? What if the experience of the self as unitary conceals the fact that this unified state is "fragile"? Aviv raises all of these possibilities by citing Janet and noting that his psychological model fell into obscurity while Freud's triumphed.

Reading as a writer will change how you read. You'll start noticing what and how other writers read and how their reading shapes their writing. You'll be able to finish sentences like this one: "There's a connection between the way Aviv reads the story of Upp's disappearance and the way she reads the theories that seek to explain the experience of dissociation; that connection is . . ." We're always interested in exploring connections of this kind because they help us to see that there are always other choices we could make as writers—there are always other questions we could ask, other sources we could turn to, other turns of phrase available to sharpen our

insights and to move our thinking forward. When you read as a writer, your concern shifts in these ways from a focus on whether you agree with what you're reading to *what you can learn about writing itself from what you're reading.*

Practice Session One, Part One: Reading Rachel Aviv as a Writer

Habits: connecting, reflecting, working deliberately

Activities: analyzing, note taking, reading

You can use any serious text to practice reading as a writer. For this practice session, we'd like you to continue the work we've begun reading Rachel Aviv's "The Edge of Identity." Start by reading the article from beginning to end, marking key moments in Aviv's exploration of how to understand Upp's predicament. Next, read the article again, paying attention *as a writer* to how Aviv phrases and organizes her ideas, what types of sources she uses, how and where she presents major points, and how she addresses her readers. Take notes in the margins.

What's striking about how Aviv chose to approach her topic? What parts drew you in? Are there parts of the article that confuse you, or parts where you don't know enough about psychology or trauma to follow her argument? Were there any points or turns of phrase that impressed you, or sections you found yourself rereading with appreciation?

Having read Aviv's article as a writer, identify one of the significant choices Aviv made when she composed her article, and then spend at least thirty minutes writing about that choice. As you write, quote specific passages from Aviv's article to help your reader see what you find meaningful about *how* Aviv writes as well as *what* she writes.

Practice Session One, Part Two: Writing about Reading as a Writer

Habits: connecting, reflecting, working deliberately

Activities: writing

Now that you've reread Aviv's article, write an essay about how reading as a writer altered your understanding of her writing practice. It's likely that your close attention to her work enhanced your reading significantly. It's also likely that new questions or confusions arose. Again, as you write, quote specific passages from Aviv's work to show what you find meaningful about what Aviv has said and how she said it.

Practice Session Two, Part One: Choose Your Own Adventure

Habits: connecting, playing, working deliberately

Activities: choosing, note taking, reading

We claimed above that you can read any intentionally crafted work as a writer. You can put our claim to the test by choosing any of the other readings we've included in the Readings section at the end of this book and seeing if your understanding of the piece you've selected changes as your reading practice changes. Follow the steps we outline below.

Start by reading the piece you've selected from beginning to end, marking key moments. Next, read the piece again, paying attention *as a writer* to how the author phrases and organizes her ideas, what types of sources she uses, how and where she presents major points, and how she addresses her readers. Take notes in the margins.

What's striking about how the author of the piece you selected chose to approach her topic? What parts drew you in? Are there parts of the piece that confuse you, or parts where you don't know enough about one area of specialized knowledge to follow her argument? Were there any points or turns of phrase that impressed you, or sections you found yourself rereading with appreciation?

Having read as a writer the piece you selected, identify one of the significant choices the author made when she composed her piece, and then spend at least thirty minutes writing about that choice. As you write, quote specific passages from the piece you selected to help your reader see what you find meaningful about how the author writes as well as what she writes.

Practice Session Two, Part Two: Putting Reading as a Writer to the Test

Habits: connecting, reflecting, working deliberately

Activities: writing

Now that you've read as a writer the piece you've selected, write an essay about how reading as a writer altered your understanding of the author's writing practice. It's likely that your close attention to the writing enhanced your reading significantly. It's also likely that new questions or confusions arose. Again, as you write, quote specific passages from the piece to show what you find meaningful about what the author has said and how she has said it.