

“Coming to Terms”: Critical Summaries of Readings

College writing often is an “argument” in which you share knowledge you have gained from inquiring into a subject. These arguments are based upon—to a large degree—the knowledge you have gained from reading. Reading critically. One tool to assist you in this read/write process is to create critical summaries of your readings called “Coming to Terms.” These pieces are essentially short summaries, and they follow ideas presented by Joseph Harris in his 2006 book *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*.

Harris in his introduction to *Rewriting* favors understanding writing, and particularly the intellectual inquiry at the heart of academic writing, as a “practice.” That is, he seeks to uncover the things academic writers do as they work with texts: “by looking here at academic writing as a social practice, as a set of strategies that intellectuals put to use in working with texts, I hope to describe some of its key moves with a useful specificity” (3). “Rewriting” is the broad term he uses for the practices writers engage in as they work with the thinking of other writers. It isn’t a simple copying of their words or ideas; instead, it is taking and using the ideas of others for your own purposes. “Coming to Terms” is the first move in this larger project describing the practice of “rewriting.”

“Texts don’t simply reveal their meanings to us; we need to *make* sense of them” (15).

“There is no such thing as a completely accurate and objective summary” (15).

How to Write Your Own “Coming to Terms”

The practice of “coming to terms” involves three “moves.” These moves include:

Defining the project of the writer

In this section, you ask two questions:

What is the writer trying *to do* in this text?

What is his or her *project*? What the writer’s intent, purpose, motive, objective?

The idea here is that we understand what someone is saying (and meaning) often best when we see where they are speaking from and what they are attempting to do.

Noting Keywords and Passages

In this section, you summarize the main ideas of the piece.

What does the writer *say*?

Assessing Uses and Limits

Harris makes clear this maneuver is not about argument as in a “pro or con” critique of the piece. Rather than being about taking sides, Harris stresses that academic writing is about the possibilities and limits of various perspective and positions. This last moves is about uncovering these perspectives, possibilities, and limits. The questions to answer then in this last move are:

How is this text useful or not? What does this text do or see well? What does it stumble over or ignore? What are the possibilities as well the limits of its ideas?

What do I think of what the writer says and does in this piece?

Seek to keep your summaries in the range of 100-400 words (length may depend upon the length of the original text).

Example Coming to Terms

Coming to terms with "Whistling in the Dark" by Merrill J. Davies (31-35). *What is College-Level Writing?*

Defining the Project

Mr. Davies is a high school teacher in Rome, Georgia who has questioned his own teaching practices because he did not have a clear understanding of what college teachers expect a student to be able to do. He suggests teacher education programs and regular dialog between secondary and higher education teachers.

Noting Keywords and Passages: General Summary of the Article

After conflicting feedback from former students, Mr. Davies admits that he has not clearly understood what and how he should teach high school students about writing. He then shares four tenets which he has held to through the years. First, a student should have a handle on basic mechanics: spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Then he should "be able to use analytical skills in written responses to literary texts as well as the media." A third skill should be the ability to develop specific ideas with appropriate supporting details. The final tenet is organization with "adequate transitions" which will aid the reader in following the train of thought.

Besides these four ideas Mr. Davies offers insight he has gleaned through his years of teaching by noting that emphasizes change, and the secondary English teacher needs to be aware of current trends. His example is a change from stressing mechanics to developing voice. He has noticed that "there seems to be more of a balance in form and content than there used to be."

Mr. Davies suggests that colleges offer training for secondary teachers specifically on writing expectations and also that both levels find ways of meaningful communication.

Assessing Limits and Uses of the Article

Concurring with Mr. Davies' analogy of "whistling in the dark" is why we are here this week. We fear that we do not fully understand the expectations our students will face. His four tenets seem to be solid, foundational practices for writing that should serve a student well as he moves from secondary to higher level education, and probably most of us use the same or similar standards in our teaching of writing. Yet we also wonder if these will carry our students forward.

Adapted Example for a passage from Hamlet (1st soliloque Act I, scene ii, lns. 129-159)

Defining the Project (What is Hamlet doing in this speech?)

Hamlet seeks to vent his displeasure and dismay at the current situation in Elsinore.

Noting Keywords and Passages (What Hamlet is saying in this speech?)

Hamlet opens his soliloque hating life, and quickly turns to focus on how things have changed for the worse in his home. He calls Elsinore an "unweeded garden" where "things rank and gross in nature possess it merely" (136-137). He remembers how it used to be, especially how his mother loved his father. He rages that she remarried so quickly (within a month). He exclaims in disgust, "Oh God! a beast that wants discourse of reason,/Would have mourned longer" (150-151). All these bad changes, he thinks, can only lead to worse in the future. He ends resigned that he can do nothing about the situation.

Assess Limits and Uses of the Article (What I think of the passage)

I'm struck by two things. First, what a difficult situation Hamlet is in. His world has been turned upside down and he seems to be grieving the loss of what had been his normal life. Secondly, I'm struck by the contradiction between the passion and vehemence with which he expresses himself and the ending passive resignation that he can't do anything. This suppressed passion and emotion can't be good. Perhaps we get an indication of the volatile and contradictory nature of his character here?