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Instructor's Example

Entrance Essay

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### The Lost Art of Reading

It's my birthday, and I needed a new driver's license, so I went to the DMV. Though I was born and raised in Michigan, I don't say "Secretary of State," and instead use the shorter moniker, a reduction of "Department of Motor Vehicles," that I picked up while living in "cool cities" like Santa Monica, California and Boston, Massachusetts, home of the late great orator, Senator Ted Kennedy. Name dropping aside, I encountered what I have come to expect: a long line and a sea of waiting patrons most of whom waited without reading.

As a community college English teacher as well as a writer, I am disturbed by the lack of reading I see around me, both in and out of the classroom. In the classroom, a majority of students claim to be nonreaders. The top reasons for nonreading are that students hold a negative attitude toward reading, or say they are too busy to maintain the habit. Many high school graduates in our state have come to rely on successful nonreading techniques like skimming and surfing Cliff Notes to get through school. These methods of avoidance are successful, at least in the short-run, because instructors have not demanded more in exchange for As and Bs.

Outside of formal education, anecdotally speaking, in the waiting rooms of our state that I've been watching since moving back Labor Day Weekend, 2001, right before 9/11, overwhelmingly Michiganders don't read. Yet as Rochelle Riley has reminded in her *Free Press* column, most recently in "Knowledge, over jobs, needed for growth," regular reading is key to success in an information age.

A couple of years ago, I racked up a spate of thoughtless driving violations, which caused me to visit the same local city hall numerous times. While I checked out my new ENG 1520, Composition II textbook, *Writing in the Works*, and waited for my turn in front of a judge and eventually to pay the clerk, I couldn't help but notice the lack of readers around me. Every visit, I was surrounded by a lobby full of about, oh, I'd guess a hundred people. I thought with concern: Who is going to do all the thinking necessary to build jobs and repair this state? What would potential employers think of all this intellectual idleness? *What information age?* Is this same rate of nonreading happening in city halls near Harvard and Stanford?

I didn't leave my calculations up to guess work this past week. Inside the government portal, I pulled number 07; the counter read somewhere in the 60s. Thanks to more mindful driving habits and, perhaps, my purposeful avoidance of a certain old ring suburb, my driving record is once again clear. The state eventually gave me another license, but first I had to wait my turn. Over the course of a good hour, the number of adult patrons held steady at roughly sixty. But the results of my survey were troubling. Scant few Michiganders who moved through a Secretary of State's office one rainy August afternoon read anything at all while they waited. This particular office is located north of the old ring suburb, both geographically and economically, yet less than ten percent of citizens read at any given time.

One woman, white, 20s, vigorously read *Peace is a River*, a coming of age novel that has Amazon.com readers raving. A woman of color, 20s, worked on *New York Times* Sudoku puzzles. Another woman closer to middle age held on her lap but did not open Agatha Christy's *Murder on the Orient Express*. Between studies of the crowd, I checked out the new edition of my ENG 1510, Composition I textbook, *Remix*. In it, I read an essay about the community of Barbie doll freaks, Shari Caudron's "Befriending Barbie." Quite surprised by the turn of events

therein, I was brought to visible tears. Two or three, but the guy next to me noticed. Of course, I had been circling the place and staring at people, so I don't blame him.

For a while, that was it. Only a few others joined our reading circle: a woman in her late fifties sat flipping *Good Housekeeping* without stopping to read; a man about the same age taste-tested a textbook trying to look smart; another woman, younger and exhausted, fell asleep with some sort of workbook held closed to her chest. I couldn't make out what kind in either case. It was unclear to me whether one mother should earn points or not. For a short while, she ignored her son's attempts at a conversation while she sat engrossed in a book, the title of which I couldn't figure out, though I ranged close by and stared almost rudely. Under my gaze, she stopped reading, turned her attention to her child, and meanwhile hid the title with her arm, onto me consciously or otherwise.

One final unknowing participant, while chatting with a woman who may have been his wife, may have been scanning the weekend events' section of this newspaper, given the look of the newsprint, but that was it. Not one patron sat with any other reading material. At any given time, over the course of a traditional work day hour, fifty-five of sixty adults sat there and vegetated, as the Michigan tourism campaign looped across a couple of television monitors, and the numbers called slowly inched along. No one sat behind a newspaper spread open, masthead proudly displaying choice of reading material instead of a face. In the era of Facebook, the public newspaper reader is an image from the past, as reading is becoming a lost art.

Works Cited

Riley, Rochelle. "Knowledge, Not Jobs, Needed for Growth." *The Detroit Free Press*. 28 Aug. 2009. Web. 30. Aug. 2009.