

# **DOING A REPORT**

Each semester, you will probably be asked by at least one instructor to read a book or an article and to write a paper recording your response to the material. In these reports or reaction papers, your instructor will most likely expect you to do two things: *summarize the material* and *detail your reaction to it*. The following pages explain both parts of the report.

## **PART 1 OF A REPORT: A SUMMARY OF THE WORK**

To develop the first part of a report, do the following:

1. Identify the author and title of the work and include in parentheses the publisher and publication date. An example follows. With magazines, give the date of publication.
2. Write an informative summary of the material. Condense the content of the work by highlighting its main points and key supporting points. (See pages 203-206 for a complete discussion of summarizing techniques.) Use direct quotations from the work to illustrate important ideas.

Do not discuss in great detail any single aspect of the work and neglect to mention other equally important points. Summarize the material so that the reader gets a general sense of all key aspects of the original work. Also, keep the summary objective and factual. Do not include in the first part of the paper your personal reaction to the work; your subjective impression will form the basis of the second part of the paper.

## **PART 2 OF A REPORT: YOUR REACTION TO THE WORK**

To develop the second part of a report, do the following:

1. Focus on any or all of the questions that follow. (Check with your instructors to see if they want you to emphasize specific points.)
  - A. How is the assigned work related to ideas and concerns discussed in the course for which you are preparing the paper? For example, what points made in the course textbook, class discussions, or lectures are treated more fully in the work?
  - B. How is the work related to problems in our present-day world?
  - C. How is the material related to your life, experiences, feelings, and ideas? For instance, what emotions did the work arouse in you? Did it change your perspective in any way?
2. Evaluate the merit of the work: the importance of its points; its accuracy, completeness, and organization; and so on. You should also indicate here whether or not you would recommend the work to others, and why.

## **POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN WRITING A REPORT**

Here are some important matters to consider as you prepare the report.

1. Apply the four basic standards of effective writing (unity, support, coherence, and clear,

error-free sentences) when writing the reports.

- A. Make sure each major paragraph presents and then develops a single main point. For example, in the model report on the next page, a paragraph summarizes the book, and the three paragraphs that follow detail three separate reactions that the student writer had to the book. The student then closes the report with a short concluding paragraph.
  - B. Support any general points or attitudes you express with specific reasons and details. Statements such as “I agreed with many ideas in this article” or “I found the book very interesting” are meaningless without specific evidence that shows why you feel as you do. Look at the model report closely to see the way the main point or topic sentence of each paragraph is developed by specific supporting evidence.
  - C. Organize the material in the paper. Follow the basic *plan of organization* already described: an introduction, a summary of one or more paragraphs, a reaction of two or more paragraphs, and a conclusion. Also, use *transitions* to help connect the different parts of the paper.
  - D. Proofread the paper carefully for errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and word use.
2. Document quotations from all works by placing the page number in parentheses after the quoted material. Look at the example in the first paragraph of the model report. You may use quotations in the summary and reaction parts of the paper, but do not overrely on them. Use them only to emphasize key ideas.

## A MODEL REPORT

Here is a report written by a student in an introductory sociology course. Look at the paper closely to see how it follows the guidelines for report writing described in this chapter.

### **A Report on I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**

Introductory Paragraph      In I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), Maya Angelou tells the story of her earliest years. Ms. Angelou, a dancer, poet, and television producer as well as a writer, has continued her life story in three more volumes of autobiography. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is the start of Maya Angelou’s story; in this book, she writes with crystal clarity about the pains and joys of being black in America.

PART 1:      I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings covers Maya Angelou’s life from age  
SUMMARY three to age sixteen. We first meet her as a gawky little girl in a white lady’s cut-  
Topic down lavender silk dress. She had forgotten the poem she had memorized for the  
sentence for Easter service, and all she can do is rush out of the church. At this point, Maya is  
summary living in Stamps, Arkansas, with her grandmother and uncle. The town is

paragraph heavily segregated: “People in Stamps used to say that the whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn’t buy vanilla ice cream” (40). Yet Maya has some good things in her life: her adored older brother Bailey, her success in school, and her pride in her grandmother’s quiet strength and importance in the black community. There is laughter, too, as when the preacher is interrupted in midsermon by an overly enthusiastic woman shouting, “Preach it, I say preach it!” The woman, in a frenzied rush of excitement, hits the preacher with her purse, making his false teeth fly out of his mouth and land at Maya’s feet. Shortly after this incident, Maya and her brother are taken by her father to live in California with their mother. Here, at age eight, she is raped by her mother’s boyfriend, who is mysteriously murdered after receiving only a suspended sentence for his crime. Maya returns, silent and withdrawn, to Stamps, where the gloom is broken when a friend of her mother introduces her to the magic of great books. Later, at age thirteen, Maya returns to California. She learns how to dance. She runs away after a violent family fight and lives for a month in a junkyard. She becomes the first black female to get a job on the San Francisco streetcars. She graduates from high school eight months pregnant. And she survives.

PART 2: I was impressed with the vividness of Maya Angelou’s writing style. For REACTION example, she describes the lazy dullness of her life in Stamps: “Weekdays Topic revolved in a sameness wheel. They turned into themselves so steadily and sentence for inevitably that each seemed to be the original of yesterday’s rough draft” (93). first reaction She also know how to bring a scene to life, as when she describes her eighth-paragraph grade graduation. For months, Maya has been looking forward to this event, knowing she will be honored for her academic successes. She is even happy with her appearance: her hair has become pretty, and her yellow dress is a miracle of hand-sewing. But the ceremony is spoiled when the speaker—a white man—implies that the only success available to blacks is in athletics. Maya remembers “The man’s dead words full like bricks around the auditorium and too many settled in my belly. . . . The proud graduating class of 1940 had dropped their heads” (152). Later, Maya uses a crystal-clear image to describe her father’s mistress sewing: “She worked the thread through the flowered cloth as if she were sewing the torn ends of her life together” (208). With such vivid details and figures of speech. Maya Angelou recreates her life for her readers.

Topic ——— I also reacted strongly to the descriptions of injustices suffered by blacks  
sentence two generations ago. I was as horrified as the seven-year-old Maya when some  
for second “powhitetrash” girls torment her dignified grandmother, calling her “Annie” and  
reaction minicking her mannerisms. In another incident, Mrs. Cullinan, Maya’s white  
paragraph employer, decides that Marguerite (Maya’s real name) is too difficult to  
pronounce and so renames her Mary. This loss of her name—a “hellish horror”  
(91) to Maya—is another humiliation suffered at white hands, and Maya leaves  
Mrs. Cullinan’s employ soon afterward. Later, Maya encounters overt  
discrimination when a white dentist tells her grandmother, “Annie, my policy is  
I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s” (160)—and only  
slightly less obvious prejudice when the streetcar company refuses to accept her  
application for a streetcar conductor’s job. We see Maya over and over as the  
victim of a white society.

Topic ——— Although I was saddened to read about the injustices, I rejoiced in Maya’s  
sentence triumphs. Maya is thrilled when she hears the radio broadcast of Joe Louis’s  
for third victory over Primo Carnera: “A Black boy. Some Black mother’s son. He was  
reaction the strongest man in the world” (114). She weeps with pride when the class  
paragraph valedictorian leads her and her fellow eighth-graders in singing the Negro  
National Anthem. And there are personal victories, too. One of these comes after  
her father has gotten drunk in a small Mexican town. Though she has never  
driven before, she manages to get her father into the car and drives fifty miles  
through the night as he lies intoxicated in the back seat. Finally, she rejoices in  
the birth of her son: “He was beautiful and mine. Totally mine. No one had  
bought him for me” (245)). Maya shows us, through these examples, that she is  
proud of her race—and of herself.

Concluding ——— I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a remarkable book. Maya could  
paragraph have been just another casualty of race prejudice. Yet by using her intelligence,  
sensitivity, and determination, she succeeds in spite of the odds against her. And  
by writing with such power, she makes us share her defeats and joys. She also  
teaches us a vital lesson: with strength and persistence, we can all escape our  
cages—and sing our songs.