

### The First Reading

On first reading an essay, you don't want to bog down over every troublesome particular. Mairs's "Disability" is written for an educated audience, and that means the author may use a few large words when they seem necessary. If you meet any words that look intimidating, take them in your stride. When, in reading a rich essay, you run into an unfamiliar word or name, see if you can figure it out from its surroundings. If a word stops you cold and you feel lost, circle it in pencil; you can always look it up later. (In a little while we'll come back to the helpful habit of reading with a pencil. Indeed, some readers feel more confident with pencil in hand from the start.)

The first time you read an essay, size up the forest; later, you can squint at the acorns all you like. Glimpse the essay in its entirety. When you start to read "Disability," don't even think about dissecting it. Just see what Mairs has to say.

## NANCY MAIRS

A self-described “radical feminist, pacifist, and cripple,” NANCY MAIRS aims to “speak the ‘unspeakable.’” Her poetry, memoirs, and essays deal with many sensitive subjects, including her struggles with the debilitating disease of multiple sclerosis. Born in Long Beach, California, in 1943, Mairs grew up in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. She received a BA from Wheaton College in Massachusetts (1964) and an MFA in creative writing (1975) and a PhD in English literature (1984) from the University of Arizona. While working on her advanced degrees, Mairs taught high school and college writing courses. Her second book of poetry, *In All the Rooms of the Yellow House* (1984), received a Western States Arts Foundation book award. Her essays are published in *Plaintext* (1986), *Remembering the Bone-House* (1988), *Carnal Acts* (1990), *Ordinary Time* (1993), *Waist High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled* (1996), and *A Troubled Guest* (2001). She is currently working on a book that explores how religious principles can inform social and political debates.

### *Disability*

As a writer afflicted with multiple sclerosis, Nancy Mairs is in a unique position to examine how the culture responds to people with disabilities. In this essay from *Carnal Acts*, she examines the media’s depiction of disability and argues with her usual unsentimental candor that the media must treat disability as normal. The essay was first published in 1987 in the *New York Times*. To what extent is Mairs’s critique of the media still valid today?

For months now I’ve been consciously searching for representation of myself in the media, especially television. I know I’d recognize this self because of certain distinctive, though not unique, features: I am a forty-three-year-old woman crippled with multiple sclerosis; although I can still totter short distances with the aid of a brace and a cane, more and more of the time I ride in a wheelchair. Because of these appliances and my peculiar gait, I’m easy to spot even in a crowd. So when I tell you I haven’t noticed any women like me on television, you can believe me.

Actually, last summer I did see a woman with multiple sclerosis portrayed on one of those medical dramas that offer an illness-of-the-week like the daily special at your local diner. In fact, that was the whole point of the show: that this poor young woman had MS. She was terribly upset (understandably, I assure you) by the diagnosis, and her response was to plan a trip to Kenya while she was still physically capable of making it, against the advice of the young, fit, handsome doctor who had fallen in love with her. And she almost did it. At least, she got as far as a taxi to the airport, hotly pursued by the doctor. But

at the last she succumbed to his blandishments and fled the taxi into his manly protective embrace. No escape to Kenya for this cripple.

Capitulation into the arms of a man who uses his medical powers to strip one of even the urge toward independence is hardly the sort of representation I had in mind. But even if the situation had been sensitively handled, according to the woman her right to her own adventures, it wouldn't have been what I'm looking for. Such a television show, as well as films like *Duet for One* and *Children of a Lesser God*, in taking disability as its major premise, excludes the complexities that round out a character and make her whole. It's not about a woman who happens to be physically disabled; it's about physical disability as the determining factor of a woman's existence.

Take it from me, physical disability looms pretty large in one's life. But it doesn't devour one wholly. I'm not, for instance, Ms. MS, a walking, talking embodiment of a chronic incurable degenerative disease. In most ways I'm just like every other woman of my age, nationality, and socioeconomic background. I menstruate, so I have to buy tampons. I worry about smoker's breath, so I buy mouthwash. I smear my wrinkling skin with lotions. I put bleach in the washer so my family's undies won't be dingy. I drive a car, talk on the telephone, get runs in my pantyhose, eat pizza. In most ways, that is, I'm the advertisers' dream: Ms. Great American Consumer. And yet the advertisers, who determine nowadays who will get represented publicly and who will not, deny the existence of me and my kind absolutely.

I once asked a local advertiser why he didn't include disabled people in his spots. His response seemed direct enough: "We don't want to give people the idea that our product is just for the handicapped." But tell me truly now: If you saw me pouring out puppy biscuits, would you think these kibbles were only for the puppies of the cripples? If you saw my blind niece ordering a Coke, would you switch to Pepsi lest you be struck sightless? No, I think the advertiser's excuse masked a deeper and more anxious rationale: To depict disabled people in the ordinary activities of daily life is to admit that there is something ordinary about disability itself, that it may enter anybody's life. If it is effaced completely, or at least isolated as a separate "problem," so that it remains at a safe distance from other human issues, then the viewer won't feel threatened by her or his own physical vulnerability.

This kind of effacement or isolation has painful, even dangerous consequences, however. For the disabled person, these include self-degradation and a subtle kind of self-alienation not unlike that experienced by other minorities. Socialized human beings love to conform, to study others and then mold themselves to the contours of those whose images, for good reasons or bad, they come to love. Imagine a life in which feasible others—others you can hope to be like—don't exist. At the least you might conclude that there is

something queer about you, something ugly or foolish or shameful. In the extreme, you might feel as though you don't exist, in any meaningful social sense, at all. Everyone else is "there," sucking breath mints and splashing cologne and swigging wine coolers. You're "not there." And if not there, nowhere.

But this denial of disability imperils even you who are able-bodied, and not just by shrinking your insight into the physically and emotionally complex world you live in. Some disabled people call you TAPs, or Temporarily Abled Persons. The fact is that ours is the only minority you can join involuntarily, without warning, at any time. And if you live long enough, as you're increasingly likely to do, you may well join it. The transition will probably be difficult from a physical point of view no matter what. But it will be a good bit easier psychologically if you are accustomed to seeing disability as a normal characteristic, one that complicates but does not ruin human existence. Achieving this integration, for disabled and able-bodied people alike, requires that we insert disability daily into our field of vision: quietly, naturally, in the small and common scenes of our ordinary lives.



## Writing While Reading

In giving an essay a going-over, many readers find a pencil in hand as good as a currycomb for a horse's mane. The pencil (or pen or computer keyboard) concentrates the attention wonderfully, and, as often happens with writing, it can lead you to unexpected questions and connections. (Some readers favor markers that roll pink or yellow ink over a word or line, making the eye jump to that spot, but you can't use a highlighter to note *why* a word or an idea is important.) You can annotate your own books, underlining essential ideas, scoring key passages with vertical lines, writing questions in the margins about difficult words or concepts, venting feelings ("Bull!" "Yes!" "Says who?"). Here, as an example, are the jottings of one student, Rosie Anaya, on a paragraph of Mairs's essay:

This kind of effacement<sup>?</sup> or isolation has painful, even dangerous consequences, however. For the disabled person, these include self-degradation and a subtle kind of self-alienation not unlike that experienced by other minorities. Socialized human beings love to conform, to study others and then mold themselves to the contours of those whose images, for good reasons or bad, they come to love. Imagine a life in which feasible others—others you can hope to be like—don't exist. At the least you might conclude that there is something queer about you, something ugly or foolish or shameful. In the extreme, you might feel as though you don't exist, in any meaningful social sense, at all. Everyone else is "there," sucking breath mints and splashing cologne and swigging wine coolers. You're "not there." And if not there, nowhere.

*IMPORTANT*

*Why "self"?*

*True? What about individuality?*

*✓ emotions*

*examples are insignificant, but that's the point*

If a book is borrowed, you can accomplish the same thing by making notes on a separate sheet of paper or on your computer.

Whether you own the book or not, you'll need separate notes for responses that are lengthier and more substantial than the margins can contain, such as the informal responses, summaries, detailed analyses, and evaluations discussed below. For such notes, you may find a JOURNAL handy. It can be a repository of your ideas, a comfortable place to record meandering or direct thoughts about what you read. You may be surprised to find that the more you write in an unstructured way, the more you'll have to say when it's time to write a structured essay. (For more on journals, see p. 35.)

Writing while reading helps you behold the very spine of an essay, as if in an X-ray view, so that you, as much as any expert, can judge its curves and connections. You'll develop an opinion about what you read, and you'll want to express it. While reading this way, you're being a writer. Your pencil

tracks or keystrokes will jog your memory, too, when you review for a test, when you take part in class discussion, or when you want to write about what you've read.

## Summarizing

It's usually good practice, especially with more difficult essays, to SUMMARIZE the content in writing to be sure you understand it or, as often happens, to come to understand it. (We're suggesting that you write summaries for yourself, but the technique is also useful when you discuss other people's works in your writing, as shown on p. 54.) In summarizing a work of writing, you digest, *in your own words*, what the author says: You take the essence of the author's meaning, without the supporting evidence and other details that make that gist convincing or interesting. When you are practicing reading and the work is short (the case with the reading you do in this book), you may want to make this a two-step procedure: First write a summary sentence for every paragraph or related group of paragraphs; then summarize those sentences in two or three others that capture the heart of the author's meaning.

Here is a two-step summary of "Disability." (The numbers in parentheses refer to paragraph numbers in the essay.) First, the longer version:

(1) Mairs searches the media in vain for depictions of women like herself with disabilities. (2) One TV movie showed a woman recently diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, but she chose dependence over independence. (3) Such shows oversimplify people with disabilities by making disability central to their lives. (4) People with disabilities live lives and consume goods like everyone else, but the media ignore them. (5) Showing disability as ordinary would remind nondisabled viewers that they are vulnerable. (6) The media's exclusion of others like themselves deprives people with disabilities of role models and makes them feel undesirable or invisible. (7) Nondisabled viewers lose an understanding that could enrich them and would help them adjust to disability of their own.

Now the short summary:

Mairs believes that the media, by failing to depict disability as ordinary, both marginalize viewers with disabilities and impair the outlook and coping skills of the "temporarily abled."

## Thinking Critically

Summarizing will start you toward understanding the author's meaning, but it won't take you as far as you're capable of going, or as far as you'll need

to go in school or work or just to live well in our demanding Information Age. Passive, rote learning (such as memorizing the times tables in arithmetic) won't do. You require techniques for comprehending what you encounter. But more: You need tools for discovering the meaning and intentions of an essay or case study or business letter or political message. You need ways to discriminate between the trustworthy and the not so and to apply what's valid in your own work and life.

We're talking here about critical thinking—not “negative,” the common conception of *critical*, but “thorough, thoughtful, question asking, judgment forming.” When you approach something critically, you harness your faculties, your fund of knowledge, and your experiences to understand, appreciate, and evaluate the object. Using this book—guided by questions on meaning, writing strategy, and language—you'll read an essay and ask what the author's purpose and main idea are, how clear they are, and how well supported. You'll isolate which writing techniques the author has used to special advantage, what hits you as particularly fresh, clever, or wise—and what *doesn't* work, too. You'll discover exactly what the writer is saying, how he or she says it, and whether, in the end, it was worth saying. In class discussions and in writing, you'll tell others what you think and why.

Critical thinking is a process involving several overlapping operations: analysis, inference, synthesis, and evaluation.

### **Analysis**

Say you're listening to a new album by a band called Domix. Without thinking much about it, you isolate melodies, song lyrics, and instrumentals—in other words, you ANALYZE the album by separating it into its parts. Analysis is a way of thinking so basic to us that it has its own chapter (9) in this book. For reading in this book, you'll consciously analyze essays by looking at the author's main idea, support for the idea, special writing strategies, and other elements.

Analysis underlies many of the other methods of development discussed in this book, so that while you are analyzing a subject you might also (even unconsciously) begin classifying it, or comparing it with something else, or figuring out what caused it. For instance, you might compare Domix's new instrumentals with those on the band's earlier albums, or you might notice that the lyrics seem to be influenced by another band's. Similarly, in analyzing a poem you might compare several images of water, or in analyzing a journal article in psychology you might consider how the author's theories affect her interpretations of behavior.

### ***Inference***

Say that after listening to Domix's new album, you conclude that it reveals a preoccupation with traditional blues music and themes. Now you are using INFERENCE, drawing conclusions about a work based on your store of information and experience, your knowledge of the creator's background and biases, and your analysis. When you infer, you add to the work, making explicit what was only implicit.

In critical thinking, inference is especially important in discovering a writer's ASSUMPTIONS: opinions or beliefs, often unstated, that direct the writer's choices of ideas, support, writing strategies, and language. A writer who favors gun control may assume without saying so that some individual rights (such as the right to bear arms) may be infringed for the good of the community. A writer who opposes gun control may assume the opposite—that in this case the individual's right is superior to the community's.

### ***Synthesis***

What is Domix trying to accomplish with its new album? Is it different from the band's previous album in its understanding of the blues? Answering such questions leads you into SYNTHESIS, using your perspective to link elements into a whole or to link two or more wholes. During synthesis, you use your special aptitudes, interests, and training to reconstitute the work so that it now contains not just the original elements but also your sense of their underpinnings, relationships, and implications.

Synthesis is the core of much academic writing, as Chapter 3 shows. Sometimes you'll respond directly to a work, or you'll use it as a springboard to another subject. Sometimes you'll show how two or more works resemble each other or how they differ. Sometimes you'll draw on many works to answer a question. In all these cases, you'll be putting your critical reading to use for your own ideas.

### ***Evaluation***

Not all critical thinking involves EVALUATION, or judging the quality of the work. You'll probably form a judgment of Domix's new album (Is the band getting better or just standing still?), but often you (and your teachers) will be satisfied with a nonjudgmental reading of a work. ("Nonjudgmental" does not mean "uncritical": You will still be expected to analyze, infer, and synthesize.) When you *do* evaluate, you determine adequacy, significance, value. You



answer a question such as whether an essay moves you as it was intended to, or whether the author has proved a case, or whether the argument is even worthwhile.

### Analyzing “Disability”

The following comments on Nancy Mairs’s “Disability” show how a critical reading can work. The headings “Meaning” (below), “Writing Strategy” (p. 22), and “Language” (p. 24) correspond to those organizing the questions at the end of each essay.

#### **Meaning**

By *meaning*, we intend what the author’s words say literally, of course, but also what they imply and, more generally, what the author’s aims are.

**Thesis** Every essay has—or should have—a point, a main idea the writer wants to communicate for a purpose. Some writers come right out and sum up this idea in a sentence or two, a THESIS STATEMENT. Mairs, for instance, builds her thesis over the course of the essay and then states it in paragraph 7:

Achieving this integration [of seeing disability as normal], for disabled and able-bodied people alike, requires that we insert disability daily into our field of vision: quietly, naturally, in the small and common scenes of our ordinary lives.

Mairs holds a statement of her thesis for the end of her essay, but other authors state the thesis outright in the first or second paragraph, or they provide it in the middle, or they release it part by part, paragraph by paragraph. And some writers don’t state a thesis at all, although it remains in the background controlling the essay and can be inferred by a critical reader.

You may occasionally be confused by a writer’s point—“What is this about?”—and sometimes your confusion won’t yield to repeated careful readings. That’s when you’ll want to toss the work aside in exasperation, but you won’t always have the choice: A school or work assignment or just an urge to understand the writer’s problem may keep you at it. Then it’ll be up to you to figure out what the author is trying to say and why he or she fails—in essence, to clarify what’s unclear—by, say, digging for buried assumptions.

**Purpose** “No man but a blockhead,” declared Samuel Johnson, “ever wrote except for money.” Perhaps the eighteenth-century critic, journalist, and dictionary maker was remembering his own days as a literary drudge in London; but most people who write often do so for other reasons.

When you read an essay, you'll find it rewarding to ask, "What is this writer's PURPOSE?" By purpose, we mean the writer's apparent reason for writing: what he or she was trying to achieve with readers. A purpose is as essential to a good, pointed essay as a destination is to a trip. It affects every choice or decision the writer makes. (On vacation, of course, carefree people sometimes climb into a car without a thought and go happily rambling around. A writer may ramble like that in an early draft, with good results. But in a final draft such wandering will leave the reader pleading, "Let me out!")

In making a simple statement of a writer's purpose, we might say that the writer writes *to entertain* readers, or *to explain* something to them, or *to persuade* them. To state a purpose more fully, we might say that a writer writes not just to persuade but "to tell readers a story to illustrate the point that when you are being cheated it's a good idea to complain," or not just to entertain but "to tell a horror story to make chills shoot down readers' spines." If the essay is an argument meant to convince, a fuller statement of its writer's purpose might be "to win readers over to the writer's opinion that the school's honor code needs revision," or "to persuade readers to take action by writing their representatives and urging more federal spending for the rehabilitation of criminals."

"But," the skeptic might object, "how can I know a writer's purpose? I'm no mind reader, and even if I were, how could I tell what E. B. White was trying to do? He's dead and buried." And yet writers living and dead have revealed their purposes in their writing, just as visibly as a hiker leaves footprints.

What is Nancy Mairs's purpose in writing? If you want to be more exact, you can speak of her *main purpose* or *central purpose*, for "Disability" fulfills more than one. As a person with disabilities, Mairs clearly wants to explain her view of the media, and she is not averse to entertaining with amusing details and wry language. But Mairs's larger purpose seems to be persuading "you who are able-bodied" that by omitting or marginalizing people with disabilities, the media hurt the nondisabled as much as they do the disabled. She wants change.

We think Mairs supports her thesis well and achieves this purpose. We appreciate the twist she gives to the usual call for more representation of minorities in the media: Sure it will help the group depicted, she says, but no more than it helps the majority. If we are put off by the reminder that we may someday become disabled ourselves, that seems intentional on Mairs's part: Disability makes us uncomfortable because we are unfamiliar with it, and we shouldn't be.

Analyzing writers' purposes and their successes and failures makes you an alert and critical reader. Applied to your own writing, this analysis also gives

you a decided advantage, for when you write with a clear-cut purpose in mind, aware of your assumptions, you head toward a goal. Of course, sometimes you just can't know what you are going to say until you say it, to echo the English novelist E. M. Forster. In such a situation, your purpose emerges as you write. But the earlier and more exactly you define your purpose, the easier you'll find it to fulfill.

### **Writing Strategy**

To the extent that Nancy Mairs holds our interest, makes us think, and convinces us to accept her thesis, it pays to ask, "How does she succeed?" (When a writer bores or angers us, we ask why he or she fails.) Conscious writers make choices intended to get their audience on their side so that they can achieve their purpose. These choices are what we mean by STRATEGY in writing.

**Audience** Almost all writing is a *transaction* between a writer and an audience, maybe one reader, maybe millions. The success or failure of writing depends on the extent to which the writer achieves his or her purpose with the intended audience.

Mairs's original audience was the readers of the *New York Times*. She could assume educated readers with diverse interests. She could assume readers who, like the general population, are not themselves disabled or even familiar with disability, so she fills them in: "Take it from me, physical disability looms pretty large in one's life" (par. 4); "Imagine a life in which feasible others—others you can hope to be like—don't exist" (6). She could also assume readers who do not know her situation, so she takes pains to describe her disability (1) and her life (4).

For this thoughtful but somewhat blinkered audience, Mairs mixes a range of attitudes: plain talk ("I am a forty-three-year-old woman crippled with multiple sclerosis," par. 1), humor ("I put bleach in the washer so my family's undies won't be dingy," 4), and insistence ("...the advertisers, who determine nowadays who will get represented publicly and who will not, deny the existence of me and my kind absolutely," 4). The blend gives readers the facts they need, wins them over with common humanity and lightness, and conveys the gravity of the problem.

**Evidence** A crucial part of a writer's strategy—Mairs's, too—is how he or she supports ideas, making them concrete and convincing. For this EVIDENCE, the writer may use facts, examples, reasons, expert opinions—whatever best delivers the point.

This is one place the methods of development come in—the ways of finding and presenting evidence around which this book is organized. Overall, Mairs’s essay is an ARGUMENT, offering and defending an opinion. Within this context, Mairs uses several methods to develop her evidence:

- With COMPARISON AND CONTRAST Mairs shows the similarities and differences between herself and a woman in a TV drama (pars. 2–4), between herself and nondisabled people (1, 4, 5), and between the effects on the disabled and on the nondisabled of not showing disability as ordinary (6–7).
- With EXAMPLES Mairs illustrates dramas she dislikes (2–3), the products she buys (4), and the ads in which people with disabilities might appear (5).
- With DESCRIPTION Mairs shows the helplessness of the woman in the TV drama (2), the flavor of her own daily life (4), and the bad feelings experienced by people with disabilities (6).
- With CAUSE AND EFFECT Mairs explains why disability is “effaced” (or rubbed out) from the media (5), how that affects people with disabilities (6), and how treating disability as ordinary could help the nondisabled (7).

We have more to say about evidence when discussing argument in detail (see pp. 520–21, 527).

**Structure** Aside from considering an audience’s needs and attitudes and choosing the methods for developing ideas, probably no writing strategy is as crucial to success as finding an appropriate structure. Writing that we find interesting and clear and convincing almost always has UNITY (everything relates to the main idea) and COHERENCE (the relations between parts are clear). When we find an essay wanting, it may be because the writer got lost in digressions or couldn’t make the parts fit together.

Sometimes structure almost takes care of itself. In NARRATION, for instance, events usually follow a chronological sequence, as they occurred in time. But when neither subject nor method dictates a structure, then the writer must mold and arrange ideas to pique, hold, and direct our interest.

Nancy Mairs’s structure is complex for a short essay: She introduces herself and her complaint that the media do not show people with disabilities (par. 1); dismisses a TV movie and other films centering on disability that don’t satisfy her (2, 3); establishes her credentials as a consumer, someone advertisers *should* be appealing to (4); takes issue with an advertiser’s view and suggests her own (5); describes the negative effects of “effacement” on people with disabilities (6); and describes the positive effects that normalizing disability would have on presently nondisabled people (7).

As often occurs in arguments, Mairs's organization builds to her main idea, her thesis, which readers might find difficult to accept at the outset. For much of the essay, Mairs prepares us to accept her opinion by establishing her credentials as a disabled woman, a TV and film viewer, a normal consumer, and a humorous (not bitter), sensitive, thoughtful person.

Whether gradually unfolding the main idea or hitting us with it right away, and however the support is arranged, the decisions come out of the writer's purpose: What is the aim? What do I want readers to think or feel? What's the best way to achieve that? As you'll see in this book, there are as many options as there are writers.

### **Language**

To examine the element of language is often to go even more deeply into an essay and how it was made. Mairs, you'll notice, is a writer whose language is rich and varied. It isn't bookish. Many expressions from common speech lend her prose vigor and naturalness: "I can still totter" (par. 1), "the daily special at your local diner" (2), "Take it from me" (4), "sucking breath mints and splashing cologne and swigging wine coolers" (6). These and other expressions lighten the essay. At the same time, Mairs is serious about her argument, and she puts it in serious, firm words: "deny the existence of me and my kind absolutely" (4), "This kind of effacement or isolation has painful, even dangerous consequences" (6), "this denial of disability imperils even you who are able-bodied" (7).

Mairs's language not only animates and weights her meaning but also conveys her attitudes and elicits them from readers. It creates a **TONE**, the equivalent of tone of voice in speaking. Whether it's angry, sarcastic, or sad, joking or serious, tone carries almost as much information about a writer's purpose as the words themselves do. Mairs's tone, like her words, mixes lightness with gravity, humor with intensity. Sometimes she uses **IRONY**, saying one thing but meaning another, as in "If you saw my blind niece ordering a Coke, would you switch to Pepsi lest you be struck sightless?" (par. 5). She's blunt, too, revealing intimate details about her personal hygiene and her feelings. Honest and wry, she invites us to see the media's exclusion as ridiculous and then leads us to her discomfiting conclusion.

With everything you read, as with "Disability," it's instructive to study the writer's tone so that you are aware of whether and how it affects you. Pay particular attention to the **CONNOTATIONS** of words—their implied meanings, their associations. When one writer calls the homeless "society's downtrodden" and another calls them "human refuse," we know something of their atti-

tudes and can use that knowledge to analyze and evaluate what they say about homelessness. In Mairs's essay, the word with the strongest connotations may be "cripple" (pars. 2, 5) because it calls up old, insensitive attitudes toward people with disabilities. Mairs's use of the word reinforces her bluntness and her frankness about her own condition. But perhaps she's also suggesting that the old attitudes are still alive, still determining what we see in the media and what we ask to see.

One other use of language is worth noting in Mairs's essay and in many others in this book: FIGURES OF SPEECH, bits of colorful language not meant to be taken literally. In one instance, Mairs says that people "study others and then mold themselves to the contours of those whose images . . . they come to love" (par. 6). That image of molding to contours is a *metaphor*, stating that one thing (behavioral change) is another (physical change). Elsewhere Mairs uses *understatement* ("Take it from me, physical disability looms pretty large in one's life," 4) and *simile*, or stating that one thing is *like* another ("medical dramas that offer an illness-of-the-week like the daily special at your local diner," 2). All the figures give Mairs's essay flavor and force. (More examples of figures of speech can be found in Useful Terms, p. 691.)

Many questions in this book point to figures of speech, to oddities of tone, or to troublesome or unfamiliar words. We don't wish to swamp you in details or make you a slave to your dictionary; we only want to get you thinking about how meaning and effect begin at the most basic level, with the word. As a writer, you can have no traits more valuable to you than a fondness and respect for words and a yen to experiment with them.

## THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT VISUAL IMAGES

Does a particular billboard always catch your eye when you drive by it? Does a certain television commercial irritate you or make you smile? Do you look at the pictures in a magazine before you read the articles? If so, you're like everyone else in that you are subject to the visual representations coming at you continually, unbidden, from all around.

Much of the flood of visual information just washes over us, like noise to the eyes. Sometimes we do focus on an image or a whole sequence that interests us—maybe it tweaks our emotions or tells us something we want to know. But even then we aren't always thinking that an image, just as much as a sentence of words, was created by somebody for a reason. No matter what it is—Web advertisement, TV commercial, painting, music video, photograph,