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Observing Women: Using Annie Leibovitz to Teach Thinking and Writing

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Good writing makes a key point and supports it with detailed evidence. In its rubric for students' five-paragraph timed essays, the Illinois state board of education refers to this feature as "Support/Elaboration," or "the degree to which the main point is explained by specific details and reasons" ([Illinois State Board of Education, 2002](#)). At its essence, support and elaboration is about students' ability to think critically as they reason and summon evidence to make an argument. There is a solid history of research summarizing the link between thinking critically and writing well, mostly coming from the work of George Hillocks ([Hillocks, 1979, 1986, 1987](#); [Johannessen, 1994, 2001](#); [Smith & Hillocks, 1989](#)). So how do we get students to do it?

One tried-and-true method that I've used in both high school and college classrooms is a "generalization and support" exercise derived from Hillocks' work on inquiry and writing. I put students in groups and give them a photograph, or put a slide on the overhead for the class. This year in my college classroom I've been using portraits from [Annie Leibovitz's Women](#) (1999), simply because I find them beautiful in both craft and subject. I ask students to look at a

photograph very carefully for about five minutes, taking notes on what they observe about it. Then I draw two columns on the board, one labeled "generalization" and one labeled "support." I ask students to tell me what they think they know about the woman based on her photograph, and to put that in the "generalization" column. Then I ask them "What makes you think that?" and ask them to support that generalization with observable details from the photograph. For example, a photo labeled "Raymonda Davis, soldier, basic training, Fort Jackson, South Carolina" (pp. 12-13) shows a young woman of color dressed in camouflage, a gun across her lap. Her expression is serious. One can just see "U.S. Arm---" in the folds of her clothing. "She's a soldier," says my class most obviously, supporting their generalization with details about Ms. Davis' uniform and equipment. "She's not happy," says another, which prompts a discussion about whether Ms. Davis' unsmiling facial expression indicates unhappiness or perhaps confidence or fatigue. This in turn leads to second-order thinking about what expressions mean and about what is observable and easily agreed upon versus what must be interpreted. Depending upon time and inclination, one can expand the discussion to compare other photos with this one, collecting generalizations to see if there are any conclusions we can draw about the role of women overall. Or one can talk about the utility versus danger of judging on appearance -- what do we really know about Ms. Davis? Can we anything about her based on a snapshot of one moment time?

Besides a relatively engaging activity, what we have at end of the activity are students who have more practice relying upon evidence to support a statement, so that their next writing assignment which can be as simple as tell me what you can about women based on the photographs looked at today" -- is more than likely to be supported by the kind of details that make strong arguments and strong writing.

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