

# Public Literacy

**Second Edition**

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*For Don and Willa,*  
*my most vital public interests*

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# INTRODUCTION

As the writing teacher Peter Elbow once said, “life is long and college is short.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this book is to assist you in doing the kind of writing you are likely to do throughout your life, beyond school and work: public writing.

Public writing can be a way of practicing good citizenship and personal initiative. It can raise awareness about important issues and establish interpersonal relationships. Although it deals with ideas, it concerns itself primarily with action getting things done in the world.

For centuries, learning to use language for public audiences and purposes was central to all levels of schooling. Over the years, though, we have come to value other kinds of writing, and these new priorities have displaced public writing, moving it to the margins of the curriculum under the assumption that it’s too controversial or “political” for the classroom and the notion that all writing is essentially the same. This simply isn’t true. The need for thoughtful public discourse is as important now as it ever was, but for many people, learning how to engage in it requires a shift in thinking about the purposes and possibilities of writing—new skills and new habits of paying attention.

As a means of fostering these new habits, this book introduces you to a simple but important tool that can help you to recognize and record opportunities to participate in public literacy. This tool is a writer’s notebook, and we will make use of it in exercises throughout this book. A writer’s notebook is more than just a diary that you use to chronicle the events in your life. Rather, it’s a place to collect bits and pieces of information—newspaper clippings, interesting graffiti, gossip, quotations—that may eventually lead to larger writing projects.

The point of a writer’s notebook is to help you to become more curious about the world around you and more aware of the myriad opportunities for writing that exist everywhere. Keeping a writer’s notebook is a way of being ready to write at any time and never being at a loss for something to write about. Although your teacher might want to look at your writer’s notebook from time to time (perhaps to read over your exercises), the notebook is mainly for your use. Therefore, you should use it to record what *you* think is interesting and important, even if it seems silly or insignificant at first.

What you use for your writer's notebook is completely up to you. You can purchase a cloth-bound book with an attractive cover if you like, but a spiral notebook, a sketchbook, a tablet, or just an old folder with paper in it will do just fine. The important thing isn't what your notebook looks like but how you use it. It should be convenient enough to carry around with you in a purse or book bag so that when the inspiration for writing hits or the right opportunity strikes, you'll be ready.

Although you will probably be using this guide as a required textbook for school, you can make your public literacy efforts more meaningful if you see them as advancing your life goals as well as your academic goals. This book will introduce you to a wide variety of people—including many students—whose lives have been improved and enriched by public writing. Hopefully, their efforts will persuade you that public writing can be a means of changing the world for the better, one word at a time.

## Notes

1. Elbow, Peter. "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues." *College English* 53 (1991): 135–55.

# CHAPTER I

## ***What is Public Literacy?***

To think about “public literacy” is to plunge into a series of questions that have preoccupied readers, writers, thinkers, and citizens for centuries: How should we define “literacy”? Who, what, and where is “the public”? What does it mean to be literate “in public,” or to be a “literate member of the public”? How does “public literacy” differ from other kinds of literacy?

There are many ways to think about these questions, and this guide will not offer definitive answers. Instead, its goals are to help you to become more sophisticated about what public literacy is so that you can be more effective at writing for public audiences and public purposes. As we work toward these goals, we will use several special terms:

*Public sphere* refers to geographical, textual, or technological sites and forums that are accessible to people (usually at no expense), invite their participation, and provide opportunities for that participation. Examples include sidewalks, public libraries, city council meetings, and the Internet.

*Public discourse* describes oral, written, and visual utterances that appear in a public sphere. Examples include community radio broadcasts, web pages, political debates, and advertising.

*Public literacy* designates written language, including written language that is read aloud, that appears in a public sphere and deals with issues of concern to a group of people. Bumper stickers, newspapers, tax forms, and petitions are all examples of public literacy.

## **Defining Public Literacy: Five Dilemmas**

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### **I. The Public and the Civic**

In recent years, we’ve heard a lot about the supposed “deterioration” of public discourse or the “shrinking” of the public sphere. Public debate has been characterized as

“the politics of personal destruction,” and walls have been erected around whole communities. Critics point out that voter turnout is at an all-time low, and more and more of us are declining to get involved in everything from Boy Scouts to bowling leagues.<sup>1</sup>

While you might agree with this assessment, the fact of the matter is that public discourse is flourishing, thanks in part to mass media outlets like cable television and the World Wide Web. Still, it’s hard to argue that tabloid newspapers and Internet pornography are just as good for democracy as neighborliness and informed public debate—which is why it’s important to distinguish between *public* discourse and *civic* discourse.

Public discourse has been equated with civic discourse since the Greeks conceptualized a public sphere more than 2500 years ago. Back then, few people knew how to write, so issues were debated, legal decisions were made, and events and people were celebrated or condemned visually (through art and architecture) and orally, through music and rhetoric—a discipline which encompassed philosophy, literature, politics, oratory, and linguistics. The public sphere was literally a place, or rather several places, including markets, theaters, courts, and shrines. Because all citizens were expected to participate in public debate and decision making—and because their livelihoods and status within the community often depended on their effectiveness as speakers—they regularly consulted professional rhetoric teachers. The instructor who assigned this textbook is likely a modern version of those ancient teachers of rhetoric.

During the classical period, rhetoric was practically synonymous with public discourse. Even those texts that were written down—and that we might now enjoy privately or study in solitude, such as poetry or philosophy—were performed orally and discussed with others. Likewise, public discourse was practically synonymous with civic discourse: speech and writing that assisted in the workings of the government. In ancient Greek states like Athens, sports and the arts were enjoyed as entertainment, but like law and education, they were also considered vital to the development and circulation of a national culture and thus served an important civic function as well.

These attitudes continued for centuries and were integral to the development of educational curricula. Although many of us now believe that the primary purpose of a college education is to prepare students to be successful professionals, this wasn’t always the case. Until recently, college served as a “training ground” for active citizens and community leaders; rhetoric, literature, philosophy, and other disciplines were studied principally for their applications to public affairs. American universities forged connections to the public life of their communities in a variety of ways. At Harvard University in the eighteenth century, for example, this objective was formalized through such practices as “sitting solstices”: oral examinations in which students’ performances were evaluated not by their teachers but by fellow citizens.<sup>2</sup> In the early decades of the twentieth century, college writing students were trained as “professional communicators” whose job was to research important issues and events in order to inform citizens—particularly those with little education—of the best means of judging and acting on them.<sup>3</sup>



Because of their long association, many people still perceive public and civic discourse to be the same thing—that is, they believe that all discourse that happens “in public” and purports to engage with “public” issues contributes to civil society. Many factors have ruptured this connection, however, including the complexity and diversity of American culture and the changing role of higher education.

## **2. One Public or Many?**

The population of ancient Athens was relatively small (fewer than 10,000 people), and “citizens” were a pretty homogeneous group: free, white, educated, middle class men. Because they shared similar cultural backgrounds, it was reasonable to assume that participants in the public sphere generally held the same beliefs and values, even if they sometimes disagreed.

This notion of a unified public sphere where everyone shares the same fundamental values has prevailed for centuries and was a central component of eighteenth-century politics and philosophy. It was during this time that the United States formed an independent government and began to develop its own civic values, one of which was that anyone could have access to civic life, including public discourse, if he were smart enough, reasonable enough, and eloquent enough. Conversely, lack of reason and eloquence were presumed to be the only things preventing participation in public discourse—a myth that has been used to justify the exclusion of women, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and the poor from such activities.

The turn-of-the-millennium American public is a much different setting, and yet our ideas about public discourse have been slow to change. To lament the “decline” of public discourse is to suggest that the public sphere continues to be that stable, unified place the Greeks imagined, but that no one is taking advantage of it. In fact, public spheres have never really been stable and unified. The difference now is that we can no longer assume that there is a “general public” where people share the same basic values, religious beliefs, ethnic culture, or even language. Rather, we have many diverse publics. Sometimes these publics overlap or find common ground, but often they come into conflict.

Despite their diversity, publics are more than simply scattered individuals. Members of a public sphere might not know each other personally, but they are aware of themselves as part of a larger organism and often claim a strong group identity. For example, members of the “voting public” don’t know all other voters, but they’re aware that there *are* other voters and that, among other things, those voters are at least 18 years old.

Even if it is no longer possible to take for granted that all Americans share the same beliefs, values, and cultural backgrounds, it is still possible for most of us to participate in and influence public discourse. Doing so, however, requires that we recognize multiple publics with diverse interests, and that we make an effort to understand the perspectives of these other publics as well as their literacy practices.

### 3. The Proliferation of Publishing Outlets

Plato, a philosopher from the fifth century BCE, believed that writing would make us lazy and forgetful, a fate which would weaken our ties to each other and, in turn, our commitment to democratic government. There might be some truth to this ancient theory; in fact, some people have made similar claims about the more recent technology of computers. But Plato also cautioned us that writing had the potential to democratize the public sphere, which we now recognize as one of the greatest benefits of writing.

The ability to read, write, and participate in public life hasn't always been democratic in the way we understand that concept today. Indeed, these were once considered privileges reserved for the wealthy, since books, paper, and writing utensils were expensive and few people could afford to attend school. But several phenomena have changed this situation. One is public schooling, which has made literacy education available to a wide variety of people, including non-citizens. Another is the Civil Rights movement, which has empowered non-elite members of our society to take a more active role in local and national affairs—for example, by using newspapers, political campaigns, and websites to inform each other publicly about issues that concern them.

Because the residents of the United States are so diverse, we are interested in and concerned about a broad spectrum of issues. And because so many of us are able to read and write, we have demanded—and created—a variety of forums for reporting and debating these issues, that is, a variety of spheres in which to *publish*, or make available to a public, our ideas. Sometimes these efforts are designed to “speak to” people who already share our perspectives (as with newsletters sent to supporters of a charitable organization). Other times they are designed to reach out to other groups and encourage mutual tolerance, understanding, and cooperation (as with ethnic festivals and some letters to the editor published in newspapers).

The mass media—specifically, advertising and journalism—are important and pervasive sources of public discourse in the United States, in part because our constitution guarantees freedom of the press and in part because we have a capitalist economy. In general, though, participation in these forms of public discourse is limited to trained professionals, not members of the lay public. This textbook is primarily concerned with forms of public literacy that non-professionals and non-experts can effectively participate in and so will not emphasize journalism and advertising.

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#### Exercise

Over the next few days, carry your writer's notebook around your campus, neighborhood, or city. Write down as many different *public spheres* as you can find: places or forums in which people publish opinions, ideas, and information. These may include newspapers, television channels, newsletters, bulletin boards, community centers, websites, and local events; you should be able to identify many more. As you record your observations, think about

how and why these public spheres differ in format and location, as well as the kinds of interests, concerns, or populations they represent.

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#### 4. The Public Interest

Because there are now so many places to publish our ideas, it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine who profits from public discourse. Let's take as an example a recent series of multimedia public service announcements (PSAs) sponsored by an organization called "truth," whose mission is to expose the business practices of tobacco companies and the health risks of smoking. One of the PSAs features the truth squad sticking little signs into piles of dog waste. Fashioned out of paper and drinking straws, these signs creatively call attention to the fact that tobacco companies add ammonia to cigarettes.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, many people would agree that reducing tobacco addiction among young people is indeed a matter of *public interest*—of relevance or concern to a broad cross-section of people—whether for ethical, medical, or other reasons. But when we consider that truth is funded by the American Legacy Foundation, an organization established by tobacco companies in 1998 as part of a major lawsuit settlement, it's also possible to question the group's motives. Is the tobacco industry sponsoring the truth campaign because they are genuinely concerned about teen smoking or because they might benefit from *publicity*—public attention—for their in-your-face PSAs? How much "truth" are they telling and how much are they leaving out?

To be fair, truth has *publicized*—brought to public attention—many unsavory facts about the tobacco industry, tobacco marketing, and tobacco use. But the point is that it's not always easy to distinguish personal interest from public interest. Is an organization called "Americans for Hope, Growth, and Opportunity" really concerned with promoting economic security for all Americans, as its name suggests, or is it mainly concerned with preserving tax breaks for a small group of wealthy individuals? Do politicians really care about improving their constituents' quality of life, or are they simply seeking fame or personal gain? In other words, who benefits from public discourse?

This question is trickier than it might initially appear. Sometimes, of course, private interests are clearly at odds with public interests. For example, if a politician introduced legislation written in such a way that it would *only* benefit him or one of his associates, this would represent an obvious conflict of interest.

Often, however, self interests are compatible with public interests. On a typical college campus, for instance, you are likely to see flyers selling everything from French tutoring sessions to surf boards and seeking everything from a roommate to a ride home. While these flyers are self-interested in that they are designed to benefit individual people, they also serve the public interest by contributing to the sense that the campus

is a community whose members can appeal to each other for assistance and mutual support—financial, social, and intellectual.

Another difficulty in determining public interest is the fact that *public* is often defined as the opposite of *private*. This distinction is misleading. Domestic violence was regarded as a private matter in the United States until fairly recently because it usually occurred in family residences (some Americans still consider it private, as do members of many cultures throughout the world). Consequently, it was not deemed appropriate or necessary to make laws or devote public resources to preventing domestic violence, punishing its perpetrators, or assisting its victims. Eventually it became clear that issues deemed “private” have a disproportionate effect on women and children, many of whom spend more time at home. In the 1960s, feminists coined the phrase “the personal is political” to draw attention to the fact that things that happen “in private” often have public significance.

The inverse of this phenomenon is also true; that is, private information can be more public than we realize. Some personal information—including births and deaths, home addresses and phone numbers, and court decisions—is regarded as so important to the public interest that it is published in newspapers and community directories without anyone’s formal permission. Most Americans understand and accept this practice. However, many people are surprised to learn that their credit ratings, e-mail addresses, and spending habits can also be published and even sold. Sometimes the privacy of this information can be maintained only when consumers submit written requests. While this may be disturbing, the fact is that most people volunteer this information without a second thought—for example, when we wish to access certain websites or when the cashier at our favorite store asks for our zip code.

## 5. Public Domain

Although it sounds like a synonym for public sphere, in actuality public domain refers to who “owns” knowledge, information, ideas, art, and natural resources: the public or private individuals? In other words, when is information freely usable by all and when is it necessary to give credit, obtain permission, or pay a fee in order to use it? Answers to these questions have always been complex, requiring an understanding of arcane patent and copyright laws, licensing agreements, and so on. In recent years, however, technological advancements have made the issues even more difficult to sort through. The Internet music-sharing site Napster stepped right into the middle of these legal, ethical, and intellectual dilemmas when it began making music available for downloading on the World Wide Web in 2000.

At issue is what constitutes *intellectual property*. Legally, it can be virtually anything that a person creates, including ideas, songs, scientific formulas, and inventions. Most of us want to reap the benefits of our original productions—financial or otherwise—which means that we want to own and control our intellectual property (and which is why so many musicians oppose Internet sites like Napster).

The public domain is a space where intellectual property protection does not apply. Sometimes, information and creative works fall into the public domain after a certain amount of time (e.g., when a patent expires). And some people believe so strongly that access to information and art encourages intellectual and democratic discernment that they voluntarily contribute their intellectual property to the public domain. In doing so, they may waive their copyrights, encourage people to share their work with others (as with “shareware” software, for example), and even grant permission for others to use their work without acknowledgment.<sup>5</sup>

These people are the exceptions, however. Most information that is accessible via a public sphere, including the Internet, is *not* part of the public domain. Therefore, it must be as meticulously documented in your research as a book or article you found at the library. Unfortunately, it’s not uncommon to find materials on the Web that are obviously “fishy” (e.g., term papers for sale); it’s also not uncommon to find materials with crucial information missing (e.g., the publication date). Still, unless the author grants you explicit written permission to use his work without acknowledgment, it is your responsibility as a writer to thoroughly and accurately document every source you use. *Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism*; this is one of the most serious ethical breaches a writer can make, and the consequences are equally serious. If you’re not sure how to document electronic (or other) source materials, ask your teacher to recommend an appropriate handbook.

Just because information is legitimately part of the public domain does not mean that it is easily accessible. The federal government, in particular, has historically been reluctant to disclose documents that might reveal its employees (including elected officials) to be unethical or incompetent. In 1966, however, Congress passed the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which created procedures whereby any member of the public may obtain records of any federal agency. Of course, government officials are still resisting the FOIA, often claiming that requested information is exempted. Such efforts to shrink the public sphere remind us yet again why public writing—filing an FOIA request, for instance—remains so vital to the interests of a democracy.

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## Exercise

Several organizations provide detailed information on how the FOIA works, what it does and does not cover, and how to file a request. One is the American Civil Liberties Union, whose website (<http://www.aclu.org/library/foia.html>) offers extensive advice, including sample letters and appeal procedures. Another, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press ([http://www.rcfp.org/foi\\_letr.html](http://www.rcfp.org/foi_letr.html)), even furnishes a fill-in-the-blank form to assist you in composing your letter (it also staffs a 24-hour hotline for FOIA-related questions).

Visit the website for the ACLU or the RCFP and file an FOIA request—either for a legitimate purpose such as a research project or just for the experience.

(Keep in mind that you might have to pay photocopying and postage expenses.) Does the CIA have a file on you? Find out courtesy of the FOIA.

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### **CASE IN POINT: CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

In 2001, President George W. Bush established a task force to draft a national energy policy. Headed by Vice President Dick Cheney, himself a former oil company executive, the final report of the Energy Task Force recommended increased domestic energy production, deregulation of energy markets, and tax breaks for industries such as gas and coal without comparable incentives for energy conservation and the development of renewable energy technologies such as wind and solar power. Perhaps most controversially, the report advocated drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as a way for the United States to reduce its dependency on foreign oil.

Concerns about these proposals intensified when news reports alleged that members of the Task Force had met privately with energy industry lobbyists and campaign contributors to discuss and even write the energy policy. In response to these charges, the General Accounting Office (GAO)—the nonpartisan investigative arm of Congress—requested that Vice President Cheney submit documents related to the Task Force's operations and staff. The Vice President refused, arguing that such a request represented an unconstitutional interference in the functioning of the executive branch of the federal government. In 2002, under threat of legal action, the Department of Energy provided the requested documents to the GAO, but information was deleted from some pages and other pages were missing altogether.

While most citizens and residents of the United States are confident that their government works in the public interest, many believe that the Energy Task Force report exposed a serious conflict of interest. In other words, they believe that although Mr. Cheney acted within his authority as an elected public official charged with establishing a national policy agenda, his recommendations benefited a small number of his associates at the expense of most American taxpayers. What do you think?

Alone or in small groups, do some research on this controversy. The following Internet sites provide useful information from a variety of perspectives that purport to represent the public interest, including the White House itself. Read the relevant sections of these sites and follow any links that seem interesting. (Since some of the sites represent "clearinghouses," with links to related sites and news items, you may notice some overlap.)

*Reports by the Center for Public Integrity (search "cheney energy task force"):*

<http://www.publicintegrity.org/dtaweb/home.asp>

*Documents collected by the Environmental Media Service:*

[http://www.ems.org/energy\\_policy/cheney\\_energy\\_task\\_force.html](http://www.ems.org/energy_policy/cheney_energy_task_force.html)

*Documents from the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform, including GAO reports and correspondence:*

[http://www.house.gov/reform/min/inves\\_energy/index.htm](http://www.house.gov/reform/min/inves_energy/index.htm)

*Statements by the White House:*

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/energy/>

*Department of Energy documents released to the GAO and obtained by other groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council:*

<http://www.nrdc.org/air/energy/taskforce/tfinx.asp>

As you do your research, think about the following questions:

- How do the goals of the various organizations or institutions affect the ways in which they understand the concept of “public interest”? (Many organizations publish a mission statement, usually on their website’s home page; if you can’t find one, try to infer a group’s goals from the content of its website.) Having explored their sites, are you convinced that all of these organizations or institutions do, in their own ways, represent the public interest? Why or why not?
- What different forms of writing have been used to discuss and publicize this issue? Why do you think writers have chosen to use so many genres to make sense of and publicize the same information?

If the recommended sites are no longer active, use a database like EBSCOhost or Lexis-Nexis to find some newspaper and magazine articles that deal with the controversy. Or, if you prefer, use the same strategies to investigate a different issue altogether. Since it’s not uncommon for politicians to be accused of conflicts of interest, you will probably have many issues to choose from.

## SO WHAT?

With all this complexity and confusion over what counts as a public issue, you might be wondering why it matters whether something can be defined as “public.” There are several reasons, including helping you to:

- set priorities about what problems or issues are most important to you and thus which ones to devote your energy and attention to;
- determine how decisions are made and thus what problems or issues you can effectively influence through writing;
- identify like-minded people who might join you in building coalitions and support you in your efforts to write for public audiences and purposes; and

- discover or create opportunities to participate in public discourse at school or your workplace.

Of course, the most important decision is whether or not to participate in public discourse in the first place. As the saying goes, “If you stand for nothing you’ll fall for anything.” In other words, if you don’t make an effort to understand and form opinions about public issues, then you’re at the mercy of the people who *are* willing to make that effort—people who may not have the public’s interests at heart.

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### Exercise

In your notebook, take a few minutes to generate a list of issues that interest or concern you personally. These may include social or political causes that matter a lot to you, or simply problems or events that are on your mind. Then, in small groups, discuss ways in which your interests and concerns might have public significance. You might want to generate a list of organizations whose agendas are consistent with your interests (if you know of any) or public spheres where you could “publish” your concerns.

Once you’ve identified ways in which your interests are also public interests, you can begin to focus your attention on discussions of those issues, keeping an eye and ear out for opportunities to contribute to them as you read the newspaper, walk to school, talk with friends, and so on. There might be meetings, public lectures, fund-raisers, or other events or projects related to your interests that you could participate in—or better yet, whose efforts you could assist by contributing your writing skills and rhetorical knowledge.

Tracy Nazarchyk is a first-generation college student from Charlotte, North Carolina. Tracy is studying English with the goal of teaching or working with community literacy programs; since her grandfather died of cancer last year, she has a special interest in hospice care, and is curious about the uses of writing among elderly and critically ill populations. Tracy is currently employed as a restaurant hostess and also has concerns about the working conditions there. Her sole experience with public literacy involved writing to a cereal company to complain about a change in her favorite breakfast food.

### Tracy’s list:

Will my car make it past 90,000 miles?

Why is the water evaporating out of my fish tank?

I had \$150 and just paid \$60 in bills.

Hurricane season starts next month.

Will my insurance cover hospital tests on Monday?



I worry if people recycle the Domino's flyers and how it is an invasion of my privacy to put them on the door because we have signs that say NO SOLICITING.

I worry about all the new buildings on campus where there used to be grass and trees (and community development too).

pesticides on vegetables in the grocery store

We are not very handicap accessible at work.

traffic: too many people run red lights and speed

The local newspaper lists "bride of . . ." exclusively in its wedding announcements.

On TV the latest Survivor "winner" described herself as a Christian and then related her deceitful, manipulative, fraud-against-her-fellow-human-beings tactics to "win."

I know a woman my age diagnosed with cancer.

Not all of the items on Tracy's list have public significance—the mysterious problem with her fish tank, for example. But many of her personal concerns—such as health care, food safety, and disability rights—are issues that lots of people care about. Other issues, such as the large amount of her paycheck going toward bills, could be seen as part of broader conversations about taxes or the minimum wage.

When Tracy shared her list with a small group of classmates, one of them told her about a local food co-op that sells organic produce and publishes a newsletter written by and for members. Another mentioned that the campus Environmental Concerns Organization (ECO) might share her anxieties about the environmental impact of new buildings on campus.

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Sometimes it can be hard for one person to make a difference in big public issues, but these suggestions illustrate how we can assist each other in finding strength in numbers. As Margaret Mead once put it, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever does."

## Notes

1. Putnam, Robert D. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1995): 65–78.

2. Halloran, S. Michael, "Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum: The Decline of Public Discourse." (*PRE/TEXT* 3.3 [1982]: 245–69).

3. Adams, Katherine H. *Progressive Politics and the Training of America's Persuaders*. Mahway, NJ: LEA, 1999.

4. *Truth*. July 2002 <<http://www.thetruth.com>>.

5. *Center for the Public Domain*. July 2002. <<http://www.centerforthepublicdomain.org>>.