Rikki Lewis is a graduate of Lincoln-Way High School, where she was involved in French Club. Rikki's major at NIU is accountancy, and she is a member of the Honors Program.
Two Viewpoints on Literacy

Rikki Lewis

Literacy is an important quality sought by people everywhere and commented on by many. Two authors who have contributed to the public discourse on literacy include Malcolm X and Norman Mailer. In the autobiographical essay entitled “Prison Studies,” Malcolm X provides an informative narration detailing his own personal experience in attaining literacy. Norman Mailer, in “One Idea,” also provides an informative essay, but he aims to persuade in addition to informing his audience. Both men essentially state that in the pursuit of knowledge, a person will be more successful if he or she has the opportunity and ability to concentrate.

Malcolm X shares his journey to literacy, undertaken while he was incarcerated in the Norfolk Prison Colony. When he entered the institution, he possessed only a rudimentary knowledge of how to read. While in the prison system, Malcolm X educated himself. He conveys his experiences through the employment of the rhetorical strategies of narration and process. He details his experiences in prison with a step-by-step analysis of how he attained literacy. He says he began this endeavor with the travail of copying the dictionary word-for-word, complete with punctuation. He utilizes description and memoria in his recitation of the definition of aardvark, from the very first dictionary page he copied. Once he had expanded his vocabulary by transcribing the dictionary in its entirety, Malcolm X was able to read books with far greater comprehension, and he did so avidly. He took advantage of nearly every minute available to devour books with great concentration. “You couldn’t have gotten me out of books with a wedge,” Malcolm X states, regarding his intense attentiveness to literature (76). This sentence exemplifies the rhetorical strategy of pathos by evoking emotion in the reader. He went on to state that prison gave him a unique opportunity to concentrate on his studies, saying he worked at it “sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day” (77). Malcolm X also
utilizes comparison as a rhetorical technique, comparing his prison studies to college studies with excellent imagery. He contends that in prison he was able to study far more intensely than if he had gone to college where “there are too many distractions, too much panty-raiding, fraternities, and boola-boola and all of that” (77). According to Malcolm X, prison provided him with a unique opportunity to improve his literacy through education devoid of unnecessary distractions.

In comparison, Norman Mailer writes in “One Idea” about how television has affected literacy. He states that upon the advent of television, people hoped that television would aid literacy. He says that, originally, television consisted of uninterrupted narratives and was beneficial to the development of concentration in children. However, he claims that once commercials were added to children’s programming, television viewing became a detriment to the development of concentration, thereby detracting from literacy.

Mailer conveys his point through the use several rhetorical strategies. He utilizes analogy in comparing the development of concentration skills to that of weight-lifting to develop muscle mass. Conversely, he states that the psychic strength of concentration “can go soft much in the manner that body muscle … can be allowed to go slack” (95). Mailer also uses descriptive imagery in his essay, describing commercials as “a kaleidoscope of toys, food, dolls, clowns, new colors” (96). He appeals to the readers’ sense of logic, or logos, through his use of statistics. For example, he states that “each of the four major networks now offers 52 minutes of commercials in the three hours from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. every day” (96). He feels this constant deluge of advertising prevents children from ever getting really absorbed into what they are viewing. Furthermore, he says this lack of “exercise” in concentration has prevented children from developing important skills, which they need to attain their full potential in education.

In their essays, the authors each highlight the importance of focus and concentration in the quest for education. Norman Mailer’s selection on literacy differs from that of Malcolm X in that in addition to informing his audience about the state of literacy, he also intends to persuade society. Mailer wants society to address the issue of television commercials and the adverse effect that they are having on the power of our children to concentrate and to learn. Malcolm X is obviously not recommending that others earn their education in prison
rather than in a university; his purpose is to share his own personal experiences. By sharing these experiences, he exemplifies how much a person can learn and accomplish through exceptional focus and concentration.

**Instructor Clare Foland's comments:** Rikki's essay "Two Viewpoints on Literacy" is a successful and brief analysis of two authors' rhetorical styles. Uniquely, Rikki finds a common thread between two very different pieces, and she seamlessly integrates quotations that support her points. I believe that Rikki's clear, error-free writing style in this piece can be instructive for many beginning writers.