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So Why Does Parallel Structure Matter? 295
Writing Analytically focuses on ways of using writing to discover and develop ideas. That is, the book treats writing as a tool of thought—a means of undertaking sustained acts of inquiry and reflection.

For some people, learning to write is associated less with thinking than with arranging words, sentences, and ideas in clear and appropriate form. The achievement of good writing does, of course, require attention to form, but writing is also a mental activity. Through writing we figure out what things mean (which is our definition of analysis). The act of writing allows us to discover and, importantly, to interrogate what we think and believe.

All the editions of Writing Analytically have evolved from what we learned while establishing and directing a cross-curricular writing program at a four-year liberal arts college (a program we began in 1989 and continue to direct). The clearest consensus we've found among faculty is on the kind of writing that they say they want from their students: not issue-based argument, not personal reflection (the "reaction" paper), not passive summary, but analysis, with its patient and methodical inquiry into the meaning of information. Yet most books of writing instruction devote only a chapter, if that, to analysis.

The main discovery we made when we first wrote this book was that none of the reading we'd done about thesis statements seemed to match either our own practice as writers and teachers or the practice of published writers. Textbooks about writing tend to present thesis statements as the finished products of an act of thinking—as inert statements that writers should match through their papers from beginning to end. In practice, the relationship between thesis and evidence is far more fluid and dynamic.

In most good writing, the thesis grows and changes in response to evidence, even in final drafts. In other words, the relationship between thesis and evidence is reciprocal: the thesis acts as a lens for focusing what we see in the evidence, but the evidence, in turn, creates pressure to refocus the lens. The root issue here is the writer's attitude toward evidence. The ability of writers to discover ideas and improve on them in revision depends largely on their ability to use evidence as a means of testing and developing ideas rather than just supporting them.

By the time we came to writing the third edition, we had begun to focus on observation skills. We recognized that students' lack of these skills is as much a problem as thought-strangling formats like five-paragraph form or a too-rigid notion of thesis. We began to understand that observation doesn't come naturally; it needs to be taught. The book advocates locating observation as a separate phase of thinking before the writer becomes committed to a thesis. Much weak writing is prematurely and too narrowly thesis driven precisely because people try to formulate the thesis before they have done much (or any) analyzing.
The solution to this problem sounds easy to accomplish, but it isn’t. As writers and thinkers, we all need to slow down— to dwell longer in the open-ended, exploratory, information-gathering stage. This requires specific tasks that will reduce the anxiety for answers, impede the reflex move to judgments, and encourage a more hands-on engagement with materials. Writing Analytically supplies these tasks for each phase of the writing and idea-generating process: making observations, inferring implications, and making the leap to possible conclusions.

WHAT’S NEW IN THIS EDITION

This edition of Writing Analytically marks the fourth time we’ve had the chance to revisit the book’s initial thinking on writing. The difficult but also exciting thing about repeatedly revising the same book is that the writer must keep learning how to see the logic of the book as a whole, even as new thinking rises from earlier thinking and threatens to displace it. We believe that we have now succeeded at what we couldn’t quite manage to do in the fourth edition—to integrate the early versions of the book, oriented largely toward thesis and evidence, with the later editions of the book, oriented toward observation and interpretation.

Here in brief (and in boldface) are the suggestions and criticisms to which the book responds:

• Put back the definition-of-analysis chapter containing the five analytical moves, which disappeared in the third edition. This edition starts with a revised version of the older chapter, now called Analysis: What It Is and What It Does.

• Make things easier to find! Make core ideas stand out more clearly. And so . . .

1. We have organized the book into four units to make the book’s arguments and advice clearer and more clearly incremental. These units are:
   I. The Analytical Frame of Mind: Introduction to Analytical Methods
   II. Writing the Analytical Essay
   III. Writing the Researched Paper
   IV. Grammar and Style

2. We have created separate chapters on matters that were not adequately pulled together and foregrounded in previous editions.
   • The book’s observational strategies, such as 10 on 1 and The Method, now appear prominently in a single chapter called A Toolkit of Analytical Methods (Chapter 3).
   • A revised chapter called Interpretation: What It Is, What It Isn’t, and How to Do It (Chapter 4) reunites materials on interpretation that were split up in the fourth edition.
   • The book’s advice on analyzing and producing arguments now appears in a single chapter called Analyzing Arguments (Chapter 5).

• A new chapter called Topics and Modes of Analysis (Chapter 6) adds explicit discussion of rhetorical analysis, acknowledging it as an ongoing topic of the book, and restores attention to ways of making the traditional rhetorical modes, such as comparison and contrast, more analytical.

• The book’s advice on organizing papers is now pulled together in a largely new chapter on organization called Structuring the Paper: Forms and Formats (Chapter 10), which also includes a new section on paragraphing. Readers will now know where to look for alternatives to five-paragraph form. The chapter invites readers to think of organization in terms of movement of mind at both the paper and paragraph levels.

• Get rid of the overstuffed first chapter and restore the unexpurgated version of counterproductive habits of mind as a separate chapter. Done. We recognize that in the fourth edition we attempted to do what all writers, not just our students, too often do—pack everything into the opening. The parts of this opening chapter have now been broken up and redistributed more logically. We have also reorganized and rewritten our chapter on counterproductive habits of mind, which now appears as Chapter 2. We continue to believe, as the chapter argues, that it is hard to develop new thinking skills without first becoming aware of what’s wrong with our customary modes of response.

• Put the book’s advice on reading with the chapters on researched writing. A pared-down chapter called Reading Analytically (Chapter 13) now opens the book’s unit on research-based writing. In this chapter, we make it clear that all of the book’s strategies can be applied to reading, but we now foreground some that are particular to writing about reading—such as using a reading as a lens—in this revised reading chapter.

• Make the book shorter and less repetitive. We have tried to prune every sentence—in fact, every clause, phrase, and word—wherein we had succumbed to the temptation to say something twice when once would do. We think we have made the book more readable in both clarity and tone and lighter to carry.

We continue to believe that the book’s schematic way of describing the analytical thought process will make students more confident thinkers, better able to contend with complexity and to move beyond the simplistic agree/disagree response and passive assembling of downloaded information. We have faith in the book’s various formulas and verbal prompts for their ability to spur more thoughtful writing and also for the role they can play in making the classroom a more genuinely engaging and collaborative space. When students and teachers can share the means of idea production, class discussion and writing become better connected, and students can more easily learn that good ideas don’t just happen—they’re made.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Writing Analytically is designed to be used in first-year writing courses or seminars, as well as in more advanced writing-intensive courses in a variety of subject areas.
Though the book's chapters form a logical sequence, each can also stand alone and be used in different sequences.

We assume that most professors will want to supply their own subject matter for students to write about. The book does, however, contain writing exercises throughout that can be applied to a wide range of materials—print and visual, text-based (reading), and experiential (writing from direct observation). In the text itself we suggest using newspapers, magazines, films, primary texts (both fiction and nonfiction), academic articles, textbooks, television, historical documents, places, advertising, photographs, political campaigns, and so on.

There is, by the way, an edition of this book that contains readings—Writing Analytically with Readings. It includes writing assignments that call on students to apply the skills in the original book to writing about the readings and to using the readings as lenses for analyzing other material.

The book's writing exercises take two forms: end-of-chapter assignments that could produce papers and informal writing exercises called "Try This" that are embedded inside the chapters near the particular skills they employ. Many of the Try This exercises could generate papers, but usually they are more limited in scope, asking readers to experiment with various kinds of data-gathering and analysis.

The book acknowledges that various academic disciplines differ in their expectations of student writing. Interspersed throughout the text are boxes labeled Voices from across the Curriculum. These were written for the book by professors in various disciplines who offer their disciplinary perspective on such matters as reasoning back to premises and determining what counts as evidence. Overall, however, the text concentrates on the many values and expectations that the disciplines share about writing.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

We have had the good fortune to interest others enough in our work to stimulate attack, much of it, we think, the result of misunderstanding. In an effort to clarify our own premises and origins, we offer the following disclosure of our influences and orientations.

The book is aligned with the thinking of Carl Rogers and others on the goal of making argument less combative, less inflected by a vocabulary of military strategizing that discourages negotiation among competing points of view and the evolution of new ideas from the pressure of one idea against another.

The book is also heavily influenced by the early proponents of the process movement in writing pedagogy. Books such as Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers and Ken Macrorie's Telling Writing were standard fare in graduate programs when we began to teach. We came of age, so to speak, accepting that writing instruction should focus on writers' process and not just on ways of shaping finished products. As is now generally recognized, the inherent romanticism and expressivist bias of the process approach to writing limited its usefulness for people who were interested in teaching students how to write for academic audiences. Despite the social scientific approach that researchers such as Janet Emig, James Britton, and Linda Flower (to name a few) brought to the understanding of students' writing process, the process approach to writing instruction suffered a decline in status as trends in college writing programs took other courses. (See, for example, the arguments of Patricia Bizzell, David Bartholomae, Charles Bazerman, and others, who reoriented compositionists toward discourse analysis and ethnographic research on the writing practices of other disciplines.)

We continue to believe that attention to process and attention to the stylistic and epistemological norms of writing in the disciplines can and should be brought into accord. We think, further, that a relatively straightforward and teachable set of strategies can go a long way toward achieving this goal. The process approach is not necessarily expressivist, at least not exclusively so. Analytical strategies with the power to enrich students' writing process can be taught, and they shed light on the otherwise mysterious-seeming nature of individuals' creativity as thinkers.

The book has drawn some interesting critiques, based on people's assumptions about our connection to particular theoretical orientations. One such critique comes from people who think the book invites students to think in a "New Critical" vacuum—that it is uncritically aligned with an unreformed, unself-conscious and old-fashioned New Critical mind-set. The midcentury interpretive movement known as the New Criticism has come to be misunderstood as rigidly materialist, deriving meaning only from the physical details that one can see on the page, on the screen, on the sidewalk, and so on. This is not the place to take up a comprehensive assessment of the ideas and impact of the New Criticism, but, as the best of the New Critics clearly knew, things always mean (as our book explicitly argues) in context. Interpretive contexts, which we discuss extensively in Chapter 4 and elsewhere, are determined by the thing being observed; but, in turn, they also determine what the observer sees. Ideas are always the products of assumptions about how best to situate observations in a frame of reference. Only when these interpretive frames, these ways of seeing and their ideological underpinnings, are made clear do the details begin to meanfully and plausibly "speak."

We are aware that the language of binary oppositions, patterns of repetition, and organizing contrasts suggests not just the methods of the New Critics but those of their immediate successors, structuralists. Without embarking here on an extended foray into the evolution of theory in the latter half of the twentieth century, we will just say that the value assumptions of both the New Criticism (with its faith in irony, tension, and ambiguity) and structuralism (with its search for universal structures of mind and culture) do not automatically accompany their methods. Any approach to thinking and writing that values complexity will subscribe to some extent to the necessity of recognizing tension and irony and paradox and ambiguity. As for finding universal structures of mind and culture, we haven't so grand a goal, but we do think that there is value in trying to state simply and clearly in nontechnical language some of the characteristic moves of mind that make some people better thinkers than others and better able to arrive at ideas.

Here are some other ways in which Writing Analytically might lend itself to misunderstandings. Its employment of verbal prompts like So what? and its recommendation of step-by-step procedures, such as the procedure for making a thesis evolve, should not be confused with prescriptive slot-filler formulae for writing. Our book does not prescribe a fill-in-the-blank grid for analyzing data, but it does try to
describe systematically what good thinkers do—as acts of mind—when they are confronted with data.

Our focus on words has also attracted critique. The theoretical orientation that has come to be called performance theory has emphasized the idea that words alone don’t adequately account for the meanings we make of them. Words exist—their interpretations exist—in how and why they are spoken in particular circumstances, genres, and traditions. Our view is that this essential emphasis on the significance of context does not diminish the importance of attending to words. The situation is rather like the one we addressed earlier in reference to the New Criticism. Words mean in particular contexts. It is reductive to assume that attention to language means that only words matter or that words matter in some context-less vacuum. The methods we define in Writing Analytically can be applied to nonverbal and verbal data.

Interestingly, we were aware of, but had not actually studied, the work of John Dewey as we evolved our thinking for this book. Looking more closely at his writing now, we are struck by the number of key terms and assumptions our thinking shares with his. In his book How We Think, Dewey speaks, for example, of “systematic reflection” as a goal. He was interested, as are we, in what goes on in the production of actual thinking, rather than “setting forth the results of thinking” after the fact, in the manner of formal logic. On this subject Dewey writes, “When you are only seeking the truth and of necessity seeking somewhat blindly, you are in a radically different position from the one you are in when you are already in possession of the truth” (revised edition 1933, 74–75).

Dewey thought, as do we, that habits of mind can be trained, but first people have to be made more conscious of them. This is what Writing Analytically tries to accomplish. It begins with some of the same premises that Dewey and others have offered:

- The importance of being able to dwell in and tolerate uncertainty
- The importance of curiosity and knowing how to cultivate it
- The importance of being conscious of language
- The importance of observation

Dewey also said that people cannot make themselves have ideas. This we believe is not true. People can make themselves have ideas, and it is possible to describe the processes through which individuals enable themselves to make interpretive leaps. It is also possible (and necessary) for people to learn how to differentiate ideas from other things that are often mistaken for ideas, such as clichés and opinions—products of the solidifying effect of habit (about which we have much to say in the book’s opening unit). Although the interpretive leaps from observation to idea can probably never be fully explained, we are not thus required to relegate the meaning-making process to the category of imponderable mystery.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen are Professors of English at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where they have co-directed a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program since 1987. They began teaching writing to college students in the 1970s—David at the University of Virginia and then at the College of William and Mary, and Jill at New York University and then at Hunter College (CUNY). Writing Analytically has grown out of their undergraduate teaching and the seminars on writing and writing instruction that they have offered to faculty at Muhlenberg and at other colleges and universities across the country.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our greatest debt in this edition of the book is to Kenny Marotta, who helped us rethink the book. Like all great teachers, he let us see more clearly the shape and implications of our own thinking. Those of you unaware of his gifts as a fiction writer are missing a rare pleasure. Major thanks also go to developmental editor extraordinary Mary Beth Walden for her tireless efforts on our behalf—her understanding of how we work; her ability to help us hide from distractions; her sound advice, patience, and good cheer. We are also very grateful to departing acquisitions editor Aron Keesbury for his frank talk and occasional flights of poetry.

We have over the years been fortunate to work with a range of talented and dedicated editors: Dickson Muslewwhite, who saw us through the third and fourth editions; Julie McBurney and John Meyers, who nurtured the book in its early days; and Michell Phifer and Karen R. Smith, who looked over our shoulders with acuity and wit. And we remain grateful to Karl Yambert, our original developmental editor, whose insight and patience first brought this book into being.

Christine Farris at Indiana University has been a great friend of the book since its early days; we heard her voice often in our heads as we revised this edition. She and her colleagues John Schilb and Ted Leehy gave us what every writer needs—a discerning audience. Similar thanks are due to Wendy Hesford and Eddie Singleton of Ohio State University, as well as their graduate students, whom we have had the pleasure of working with over the past few years. The book has enabled us to make many new friends just starting their college teaching careers in rhetoric and composition—Matthew Johnson and Matt Hollrah, to name two. Our friend Dean Ward at Calvin College has been a source of inspiration and good conversation on writing for many years. So have two other old friends, Richard Louth and Lin Spence, who offer the benefit of their long experience with the National Writing Project. And we always learn something about writing whenever we run into Mary Ann Cain and George Kalamaras, inspiring teachers and writers both. We have also benefited from stimulating conversations about writing with Chidsey Dickson.

Among our colleagues at Muhlenberg College, we are especially grateful to reference librarian Kelly Cannon for his section on library and Internet research in Chapter 16. For writing the Voices from across the Curriculum boxes that appear throughout the book, thanks to Karen Dearborn, Laura Edelman, Jack Gambino, James Marshall, Rich Niesenbaum, Fred Norling, Mark Sculotto, Alan Tjeeltveit, and Bruce Wightman. For their good counsel and their teaching materials, thanks to Anna Adams, Jim Bloom, Chris Borick, Ted Conner, Joseph Elliot, Barri Gold, Mary Lawlor, Jim Peck, Jeremy Teissere, and Alec Marsh, with whom we argue endlessly about writing. Carol Proctor in the English Department looks out for us. We also thank Muhlenberg
College, especially its provost, Marjorie Hass, for continuing to support our participation at national conferences.

We are indebted to our students at Muhlenberg College, who have shared their writing and their thinking about writing with us. Chief among these (of late) are Sarah Kersh, Robbie Saenz di Viteri, Laura Sutherland, Andrew Brown, Meghan Sweeney, Jen Epton, Jessica Skrocki, and Jake McNamara. Thanks also go to the following students who have allowed us to use their writing in our book (most recently): Jen Axe, Wendy Eichler, Theresa Leinker, and Kim Schmidt.

Finally, thanks to our spouses (Deborah and Mark) and our children (Lizzie, Lesley, and Sarah) for their love and support during the many hours that we sit immobile at our computers.

We would also like to thank the many colleagues who reviewed the book; we are grateful for their insight:

Diann Ainsworth, Weatherford College
Jeanette Adkins, Tarrant County College
Joan Anderson, California State University–San Marcos
Candace Barrington, Central Connecticut State University
Maria Bates, Pierce College
Karin Becker, Fort Lewis College
Laura Behling, Gustavus Adolphus College
Stephanie Bennett, Monmouth University
Tom Bowie, Regis University
Roland Eric Boys, Oxnard College
David Brantley, College of Southern Maryland
Jessica Brown, City College of San Francisco
Christine Bryant Cohen, University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign
Alexandria Casey, Graceland University
Anthony Cavaruzi, Adirondack Community College
Johnson Chen, Michigan State University
Jeff Cofer, Bellevue Community College
Helen Connell, Barry University
Cara Crandall, Emerson College
Rose Day, Central New Mexico Community College
Susan de Ghize, University of Denver
Virginia Dumont-Poston, Lander University
David Eggbrecht, Concordia University
Karen Feldman, University of California
Dan Ferguson, Amarillo College
Gina Franco, Knox College
Sue Frankson, College of DuPage
Anne Friedman, Borough of Manhattan Community College
Tessa Garcia, University of Texas–Pan American

Susan Garrett, Goucher College
Edward Geisweidt, University of Alabama
Nate Gordon, Kishwaukee College
Glenn Hutchinson, University of North Carolina–Charlotte
Habiba Ibrahim, University of Washington
Charlene Keeler, California State University–Fullerton
Douglas King, Gannon University
Constance Koepfinger, Duquesne University
Anne Langendorfer, The Ohio State University
Kim Long, Shippensburg University
Laine Lubar, Broome Community College
Phoenix Lundstrom, Kapi'olani Community College
Cynthia Martin, James Madison University
Andrea Mason, Pacific Lutheran University
Darin Merrill, Brigham Young University–Idaho
Sarah Newlands, Portland State University
Emmanuel Ngwag, Mississippi Valley State University
Leslie Norris, Rappahannock Community College
Ludwig Otto, Tarrant County College
Adrienne Peck, Modesto Junior College
Adrienne Redding, Andrews University
Julie Rivera, California State University–Long Beach
John Robinson, Diablo Valley College
Pam Rooney, Western Michigan University
Linda Rosekrans, The State University of New York–Cortland
Becky Rudd, Citrus College
Arthur Saltzman, Missouri Southern State University
Vicki Schwab, Manatee Community College
John Sullivan, Muhlenberg College
Eleanor Swanson, Regis University
Kimberly Thompson, Wittenberg University
Kathleen Walton, Southwestern Oregon Community College
James Ray Watkins, The Art Institute of Pittsburgh, Online; Colorado Technical University, Online; and The Center for Talented Youth, Johns Hopkins University
Lisa Weihman, West Virginia University
Robert Williams, Radford University
Nancy Wright, Syracuse University
Robbin Zeff, George Washington University
UNIT I

The Analytical Frame of Mind: Introduction to Analytical Methods

CHAPTER 1
Analysis: What It Is and What It Does

CHAPTER 2
Counterproductive Habits of Mind

CHAPTER 3
A Toolkit of Analytical Methods

CHAPTER 4
Interpretation: What It Is, What It Isn’t, and How to Do It

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CHAPTER 1

Analysis: What It Is and What It Does

FIRST PRINCIPLES

Writing takes place now in more forms than ever before. Words flash by on our computer and cell phone screens and speak to us from iPods. PowerPoint bulleted lists are replacing the classroom blackboard, and downloadable entries from Wikipedia and Google offer instant reading on almost any subject. Despite the often-heard claim that we now inhabit a visual age—that the age of print is passing—we are, in fact, surrounded by a virtual sea of electronically accessible print. What does all this mean for writers and writing?

If what is meant by writing is the form in which written text appears on page or screen, then presumably the study of writing would focus on the new forms of organization that characterize writing on the web. But what if we define writing as the act of recording our thoughts in search of understanding? In that case, the writing practices and mental habits that help us to think more clearly would be, as they have long been, at the center of what it means to learn to write.

This book is primarily about ways of using writing to discover and develop ideas. Its governing premise is that learning to write well means learning to use writing to think well. This does not mean that the book ignores such matters as sentence style, paragraphing, and organization, but that it treats these matters in the context of writing as a way of generating and shaping thinking.

Although it is true that authors of web pages and PowerPoint demonstrations display their finished products in forms unlike the traditional essay, people rarely arrive at their ideas in the form of PowerPoint lists and hypertext. Whatever form the thinking will finally take, first comes the stage of writing to understand—writing as a sustained act of reflection. Implicit throughout this book is an argument for the value of reflection in an age that seems increasingly to confuse sustained acts of thinking with information downloading and formatting.

ANALYSIS DEFINED

We have seized upon analysis as the book’s focus because it is the skill most commonly called for in college courses and beyond. The faculty with whom we work encourage analytical writing because it offers alternatives both to oversimplified thinking of
the like/dislike, agree/disagree variety and to the cut-and-paste compilation of sheer information. It is the kind of writing that helps people not only to retain and assimilate information, but to use information in the service of their own thinking about the world.

More than just a set of skills, analysis is a frame of mind, an attitude toward experience. It is a form of detective work that typically pursues something puzzling, something you are seeking to understand rather than something you are already sure you have the answers to. Analysis finds questions where there seemed not to be any, and it makes connections that might not have been evident at first.

Analyzing, however, is often the subject of attack. It is sometimes thought of as destructive—breaking things down into their component parts, or, to paraphrase a famous poet, murdering to dissect. Other detractors attack it as the rarefied province of intellectuals and scholars, beyond the reach of normal people. In fact, we all analyze all of the time, and we do so not simply to break things down but to construct our understandings of the world we inhabit.

If, for example, you find yourself being followed by a large dog, your first response, other than breaking into a cold sweat, will be to analyze the situation. What does being followed by a large dog mean for me, here, now? Does it mean the dog is vicious and about to attack? Does it mean the dog is curious and wants to play? Similarly, if you are losing a game of tennis, or you've just left a job interview, or you are looking at a painting of a woman with three noses, you will begin to analyze. How can I play differently to increase my chances of winning? Am I likely to get the job, and why (or why not)? Why did the artist give the woman three noses?

If we break things down as we analyze, we do so to search for meaningful patterns, or to uncover what we had not seen at first glance—or just to understand more closely how and why the separate parts work as they do.

As this book tries to show, analyzing is surprisingly formulaic. It consists of a fairly limited set of basic moves. People who think well have these moves at their disposal, whether they are aware of using them or not. Having good ideas is less a matter of luck than of practice, of learning how to make best use of the writing process. Sudden flashes of inspiration do, of course, occur; but those who write regularly know that inspirational moments can, in fact, be courted. The rest of this book offers you ways of courting and then realizing the full potential of your ideas.

Next we offer five basic “moves”—reliable ways of proceeding—for courting ideas analytically.

**THE FIVE ANALYTICAL MOVES**

Each of the five moves is developed in more detail in subsequent chapters; this is an overview. As we have suggested, most people already analyze all the time, but they often don't realize that this is what they're doing. A first step toward becoming a better analytical thinker and writer is to become more aware of your own thinking processes, building on skills you already possess, and eliminating habits that get in the way. Each of the following moves serves the primary purpose of analysis: to figure out what something means, why it is as it is and does what it does.

**Move 1: Suspend Judgment**

SUSPENDING JUDGMENT is a necessary precursor to thinking analytically because our tendency to judge everything shuts down our ability to see and to think. It takes considerable effort to break the habit of responding to everything with likes and dislikes, with agreeing and disagreeing. Just listen in on a few conversations to be reminded of how pervasive this phenomenon really is. Even when you try to suppress them, judgments tend to come.

Judgments usually say more about the person doing the judging than they do about the subject being judged. The determination that something is boring is especially revealing in this regard. Yet people typically roll their eyes and call things boring as if this assertion clearly said something about the thing they are reacting to but not about the mind of the beholder.

Consciously leading with the word _interesting_ (as in, “What I find most interesting about this is . . .”) tends to deflect the judgment response into a more exploratory state of mind, one that is motivated by curiosity and thus better able to steer clear of approval and disapproval. As a general rule, you should seek to understand the subject you are analyzing before deciding how you feel about it. (See the Judgment Reflex in Chapter 2, Counterproductive Habits of Mind, for more.)

**Move 2: Define Significant Parts and How They’re Related**

Whether you are analyzing an awkward social situation, an economic problem, a painting, a substance in a chemistry lab, or your chances of succeeding in a job interview, the process of analysis is the same:

- Divide the subject into its defining parts, its main elements or ingredients.
- Consider how these parts are related, both to each other and to the subject as a whole.

In the case of analyzing the large dog encountered earlier, you might notice that he's dragging a leash, has a ball in his mouth, and is wearing a bright red scarf. Having broken your larger subject into these defining parts, you would try to see the connections among them and determine what they mean, what they allow you to decide about the nature of the dog: apparently somebody's lost pet, playful, probably not hostile, unlikely to bite me.

Analysis of the painting of the woman with three noses, a subject more like the kind you might be asked to write about in a college course, would proceed in the same way. Your result—ideas about the nature of the painting—would be determined, as with the dog, not only by your noticing its various parts, but also by your familiarity with the subject. If you knew little about art history, scrutiny of the painting's parts would not tell you, for instance, that it is an example of the movement known as Cubism. Even without this context, however, you would still be able to draw some analytical conclusions—ideas about the meaning and nature of the subject. You might conclude, for example, that the artist is interested in perspective or in the way we see, as opposed to realistic depictions of the world.
Chapter 1 Analysis: What It Is and What It Does

One common denominator of all effective analytical writing is that it pays close attention to detail. We analyze because our global responses, to a play, for example, or to a speech or a social problem, are too general. If you comment on an entire football game, you'll find yourself saying things like "great game," which is a generic response, something you could say about almost anything. This "one-size-fits-all" kind of comment doesn't tell us very much except that you probably liked the game. To say more, you would necessarily become more analytical—shifting your attention to the significance of some important aspect of the game, such as "they won because the offensive line was giving the quarterback all day to find his receivers" or "they lost because they couldn't defend against the safety blitz."

This move from generalization to analysis, from the larger subject to its key components, is characteristic of good thinking. To understand a subject, we need to get past our first, generic, evaluative response to discover what the subject is "made of," the particulars that contribute most strongly to the character of the whole.

If all that analysis did, however, was to take subjects apart, leaving them broken and scattered, the activity would not be worth very much. The student who presents a draft of a paper to his or her professor with the words, "Go ahead, rip it apart," reveals a disabling misconception about analysis—that, like dissecting a frog in a biology lab, analysis takes the life out of its subjects. Clearly, analysis means more than breaking a subject into its parts. When you analyze a subject you ask not just "What is it made of?" but also "How do these parts help me to understand the meaning of the subject as a whole?"

Move 3: Make the Implicit Explicit

One definition of what analytical writing does is that it makes explicit (overly stated) what is implicit (suggested but not overtly stated), converting suggestions into direct statements. Some people fear that, like the emperor's new clothes, implications aren't really there, but are instead the phantasms of an overactive imagination. "Reading between the lines" is the common and telling phrase that expresses this anxiety. We will have more to say in Chapter 4 against the charge that analysis makes something out of nothing—the spaces between the lines—rather than out of what is there in black and white. Another version of this anxiety is implied by the term hidden meanings.

Implications are not hidden, but neither are they completely spelled out so that they can be simply extracted. The word implication comes from the Latin implicare, which means "to fold in." The word explicit is in opposition to the idea of implication. It means "folded out." This etymology of the words, implicit and explicit, suggests that meanings aren't actually hidden, but neither are they opened to full view. An act of mind is required to take what is folded in and fold it out for all to see.

The process of drawing out implications is also known as making inferences. Inference and implication are related but not synonymous terms, and the difference is essential to know. The term implication describes something suggested by the material itself; implications reside in the matter you are studying. The term inference describes your thinking process. In short, you infer what the subject implies.

Now, let's move on to an example that suggests not only how the process of making the implicit explicit works, but also how often we do it in our everyday lives. Imagine that you are driving down the highway and find yourself analyzing a billboard advertisement for a brand of beer. Such an analysis might begin with your noticing what the billboard photo contains, its various parts—six young, athletic, and scantily clad men and women drinking beer while pushing kayaks into a fast-running river. At this point, you have produced not an analysis but a summary—a description of what the photo contains. If, however, you go on to consider what the particulars of the photo imply, your summary would become analytical.

You might infer, for example, that the photo implies that beer is the beverage of fashionable, healthy, active people. Thus, the advertisement's meaning goes beyond its explicit contents. Your analysis would lead you to convert to direct statement meanings that are suggested but not overtly stated, such as the advertisement's goal of attacking common stereotypes about its product (that only lazy, overweight men drink beer). By making the implicit explicit (inferring what the ad implies) you can better understand the nature of your subject. (See Chapter 4 for more on implications versus hidden meanings.)

Try this 1.1: Making Inferences

Locate any magazine ad that you find interesting. Ask yourself, "What is this a picture of?" Use our hypothetical beer ad as a model for rendering the implicit explicit. Don't settle for just one answer. Keep answering the question in different ways, letting your answers grow in length as they identify and begin to interpret the significance of telling details. If you find yourself getting stuck, add to the question: "and why did the advertiser choose this particular image or set of images?"

Voices from Across the Curriculum

Science as a Process of Argument

I find it ironic that the discipline of science, which is so inherently analytical, is so difficult for students to think about analytically. Much of this comes from the prevailing view of society that science is somehow factual. Science students come to college to learn the facts. I think many find it comforting to think that everything they learn will be objective. None of the wishy-washy subjectivity that many perceive in other disciplines. There is no need to argue, synthesize, or even have a good idea. But this view is dead wrong.

Anyone who has ever done science knows that nothing could be further from the truth. Just like other academics, scientists spend endless hours patiently arguing over evidence that seems obscure or irrelevant to laypeople. There is rarely an absolute consensus. In reality, science is an endless process of argument, obtaining evidence, analyzing evidence, and reformulating arguments. To be sure, we all accept gravity as a "fact." To not do so would be intellectually bankrupt, because all reasonable people agree to the truth of gravity. But to Newton, gravity was an argument for which evidence needed to be produced, analyzed, and discussed. It's important to remember that a significant fraction of his intellectual contemporaries were not swayed by his argument. Equally important is that many great scientific ideas of today will eventually be significantly modified or shown to be wrong.

—Bruce Wightman, Professor of Biology
Move 4: Look for Patterns

We have been defining analysis as the understanding of parts in relation to each other and to a whole, as well as the understanding of the whole in terms of the relationships among its parts. But how do you know which parts to attend to? What makes some details in the material you are studying more worthy of your attention than others? Here are three principles for selecting significant parts of the whole:

1. Look for a pattern of repetition or resemblance. In virtually all subjects, repetition is a sign of emphasis. In a symphony, for example, certain patterns of notes repeat throughout, announcing themselves as major themes. In a legal document, such as a warranty, a reader quickly becomes aware of words that are part of a particular idea or pattern of thinking; for instance, disclaimers of accountability.

   The repetition may not be exact. In Shakespeare’s play King Lear, for example, references to seeing and eyes call attention to themselves through repetition. Let’s say you notice that these references often occur along with another strand of language having to do with the concept of proof. How might noticing this pattern lead to an idea? You might make a start by inferring from the pattern that the play is concerned with ways of knowing (proving) things—with seeing as opposed to other ways of knowing, such as faith or intuition.

2. Look for binary oppositions. Sometimes patterns of repetition that you begin to notice in a particular subject matter are significant because they are part of a contrast—a basic opposition—around which the subject matter is structured. A binary opposition is a pair of elements in which the two members of the pair are opposites; the word binary means “consisting of two.” Some examples of binary oppositions are: the two members of a pair are parents or children; the two members of a pair are friends or enemies; the two members of a pair are male or female; the two members of a pair are living or dead; the two members of a pair are alive or dead; the two members of a pair are consciousness and unconsciousness; the two members of a pair are binary and ternary.

   One advantage of detecting repetition is that it will lead you to discover binaries, which are central to locating issues and concerns. (For more on working with binary oppositions, see Chapters 3 and 5.)

3. Look for anomalies—things that seem unusual, seem not to fit. An anomaly (a = not, nom = name) is literally something that cannot be named, what the dictionary defines as deviation from the normal order. Along with looking for pattern, it is also fruitful to attend to anomalous details—those that seem not to fit the pattern. Anomalies help us to revise our stereotypical assumptions. A TV commercial, for example, advertises a baseball team by featuring its star reading a novel by Dostoyevsky in the dugout during a game. In this case, the anomaly, a baseball player who reads serious literature, is being used to subvert (question, unsettle) the stereotypical assumption that sports and intellectualism don’t belong together.

   Just as people tend to leap to evaluative judgments, they also tend to avoid information that challenges (by not conforming to) opinions they already hold. Screening out anything that would ruffle the pattern they’ve begun to see, they ignore the evidence that might lead them to a better theory. (For more on this process of using anomalous evidence to evolve an essay’s main idea, see Chapter 9, Making a Thesis Evolve.) Anomalies are important because noticing them often leads to new and better ideas. Most advances in scientific thought, for example, have arisen when a scientist observes some phenomenon that does not fit with a prevailing theory.

Move 5: Keep Reformulating Questions and Explanations

Analysis, like all forms of writing, requires a lot of experimenting. Because the purpose of analytical writing is to figure something out, you shouldn’t expect to know at the start of your writing process exactly where you are going, how all of your subject’s parts fit together, and what end. The key is to be patient and to know that there are procedures—in this case, questions—you can rely on to take you from uncertainty to understanding.

The following three groups of questions (organized according to the analytical moves they’re derived from) are typical of what goes on in an analytical writer’s head as he or she attempts to understand a subject. These questions work with almost anything that you want to think about. As you will see, the questions are geared toward helping you locate and try on explanations for the meaning of various patterns of details.

Which details seem significant? Why?
What does the detail mean?
What else might it mean?

(Moves: Define Significant Parts; Make the Implicit Explicit)

How do the details fit together? What do they have in common?
What does this pattern of details mean?
What else might this same pattern of details mean? How else could it be explained?

(Move: Look for Patterns)

What details don’t seem to fit? How might they be connected with other details to form a different pattern?
What does this new pattern mean? How might it cause me to read the meaning of individual details differently?

(Moves: Look for Anomalies and Keep Asking Questions)

The process of posing and answering such questions—the analytical process—is one of trial and error. Learning to write well is largely a matter of learning how to frame questions. One of the main things you acquire in the study of an academic discipline is knowledge of the kinds of questions that the discipline typically asks. For example, an economics professor and a sociology professor might observe the same phenomenon, such as a sharp decline in health benefits for the elderly, and analyze its causes and significance in different ways. The economist might consider how such
benefits are financed and how changes in government policy and the country’s population patterns might explain the declining supply of funds for the elderly. The sociologist might ask about attitudes toward the elderly and about the social structures that the elderly rely on for support.

**ANALYSIS AT WORK: A SAMPLE PAPER**

Examine the following excerpt from a draft of a paper about Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a collection of short mythological tales dating from ancient Rome. We have included annotations in blue to suggest how a writer’s ideas evolve as he or she looks for pattern, contrast, and anomaly, constantly remaining open to reformulation.

The draft actually begins with two loosely connected observations: that males dominate females, and that many characters in the stories lose the ability to speak and thus become submissive and dominated. In the excerpt, the writer begins to connect these two observations and speculate about what this connection means.

There are many other examples in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* that show the dominance of man over woman through speech control. In the Daphne and Apollo story, Daphne becomes a tree to escape Apollo, but her ability to speak is destroyed. Likewise, in the Syrinx and Pan story, Syrinx becomes a marsh reed, also a life form that cannot talk, although Pan can make it talk by playing it. [The writer establishes a pattern of similar detail.] Pygmalion and Galatea is a story in which the male creates his rendition of the perfect female. The female does not speak once; she is completely silent. Also, Galatea is referred to as “she” and never given a real name. This lack of a name renders her identity more silent. [Here the writer begins to link the contrasts of speech/silence with the absence/presence of identity.]

Ocyrhoe is a female character who could tell the future but who was transformed into a mare so that she could not speak. One may explain this transformation by saying it was an attempt by the gods to keep the future unknown. [Notice how the writer’s thinking expands as he sustains her investigation of the overall pattern of men silencing women: here she tests her theory by adding another variable—prophecy.] However, there is a male character, Friesias, who is also a seer of the future and is allowed to speak of his foreknowledge, thereby becoming a famous figure. (Interestingly, Friesias during his lifetime has experienced being both a male and a female.) [Notice how the Ocyrhoe example has spawned a contrast based on gender in the Tiresias example. The pairing of the two examples demonstrates that the ability to tell the future is not the sole cause of silencing because male characters who can do it are not silenced—though the writer pauses to note that Tiresias is not entirely male.] Finally, in the story of Mercury and Herse, Herse’s sister, Aglauros, tries to prevent Mercury from marrying Herse. Mercury turns her into a statue; the male directly silences the female’s speech.

The woman silences the man in only two stories studied. [Here the writer searches out an anomaly—women silencing men—that grows in the rest of the paragraph into an organizing contrast.] In the first, “The Death of Orpheus,” the women make use of “clamorous shouting, Phrygian flutes with curving horns, tambourines, the beating of breasts, and Bacchic howlings” (246) to drown out the male’s songs, dominating his speech in terms of volume. In this way, the quality of power within speech is demonstrated: “for the first time, his words had no effect, and he failed to move them [the women] in any way by his voice” (247).

Next the women kill him, thereby rendering him silent. However, the male soon regains his temporarily destroyed power of expression: “the lyre uttered a plaintive melody and the lifeless tongue made a piteous murmur” (247). Even after death Orpheus is able to communicate. The women were not able to destroy his power completely, yet they were able to severely reduce his power of speech and expression. [The writer learns, among other things, that men are harder to silence: Orpheus’s lyre continues to sing after his death.]

The second story in which a woman silences a man is the story of Actaeon, in which the male sees Diana naked, and she transforms him into a stag so that he cannot speak of it: “he tried to say ‘Aias!’ but no words came” (79). This loss of speech leads to Actaeon’s inability to inform his own hunting team of his true identity; his loss of speech leads ultimately to his death. [This example reinforces the pattern that the writer had begun to notice in the Orpheus example.]

In some ways these four paragraphs of draft exemplify a writer in the process of discovering a workable idea. They begin with a list of similar examples, briefly noted. As the examples accumulate, the writer begins to make connections and formulate trial explanations. We have not included enough of this excerpt to get to the tentative thesis the draft is working toward, although that thesis is already beginning to emerge.

What we want to emphasize here is the writer’s willingness to accumulate data and to locate it in various patterns of similarity and contrast.

**Try this 1.2: Applying the Five Analytical Moves to a Speech**

Speeches provide rich examples for analysis, and they are easily accessible on the Internet. We especially recommend a site called American Rhetoric (You can Google it for the URL). Locate any speech and then locate its patterns of repetition and contrast. On the basis of your results, formulate a few conclusions about the speech’s point of view and its way of presenting it. Try to get beyond the obvious and the general—what does applying the moves cause you to notice that you might not have noticed before?

**DISTINGUISHING ANALYSIS FROM ARGUMENT, SUMMARY, AND EXPRESSIVE WRITING**

How does analysis differ from other kinds of thinking and writing? A common way of answering this question is to think of communication as having three possible centers of emphasis—the writer, the subject, and the audience. Communication, of course, involves all three of these components, but some kinds of writing concentrate more on one than on the others. Autobiographical writing, for example, such as diaries or memoirs or stories about personal experience, centers on the writer and his or her desire for self-expression. Argument, in which the writer takes a stand on an issue, advocating or arguing against a policy or attitude, is reader-centered; its goal is to bring about a change in its readers’ actions and beliefs. Analytical writing is more concerned with arriving at an understanding of a subject than it is with either self-expression or changing readers’ views. (See Figure 1.1.)

These three categories of writing are not mutually exclusive. So, for example, expressive (writer-centered) writing is also analytical in its attempts to define and explain a writer’s feelings, reactions, and experiences. And analysis is a form
of self-expression since it inevitably reflects the ways a writer's experiences have taught him or her to think about the world. But even though expressive writing and analysis necessarily overlap, they also differ significantly in both method and aim. In expressive writing, your primary subject is your self, with other subjects serving as means of evoking greater self-understanding. In analytical writing, your reasoning may derive from your personal experience, but it is your reasoning and not you or your experiences that matter. Analysis asks not just "What do I think?" but "How good is my thinking? How well does it fit the subject I am trying to explain?"

In its emphasis on logic and the dispassionate scrutiny of ideas ("What do I think about what I think?"), analysis is a close cousin of argument. But analysis and argument are not the same. Analytical writers are more concerned with persuading themselves, with discovering what they believe about a subject, than they are with persuading others. And, while the writer of an argument often goes into the writing process with some certainty about the position he or she wishes to support, the writer of an analysis is more likely to begin with the details of a subject he or she wishes to better understand.

Accordingly, argument and analysis often differ in the kind of thesis statements they formulate. The thesis of an argument is usually some kind of should statement: readers should or shouldn't vote for bans on smoking in public buildings, or they should or shouldn't believe that gays can function effectively in the military. The thesis of an analysis is usually a tentative answer to a what, how, or why question; it seeks to explain why people watch professional wrestling, or what a rising number of sexual harassment cases might mean, or how certain features of government health care policy are designed to allay the fears of the middle class. The writer of an analysis is less concerned with convincing readers toapprove or disapprove of professional wrestling, or legal intervention into the sexual politics of the workplace, or government control of health care than with discovering how each of these complex subjects might be defined and explained. As should be obvious, though, the best arguments are built upon careful analysis: the better you understand a subject, the more likely you will be to find valid positions to argue about it.

Applying the Five Analytical Moves: The Example of Whistler’s Mother

Summary differs from analysis because the aim of summary is to recount, in effect, to reproduce someone else's ideas. But summary and analysis are also clearly related and usually operate together. Summary is important to analysis because you can't analyze a subject without laying out its significant parts for your reader. Similarly, analysis is important to summary because summarizing is more than just copying someone else's words. To write an accurate summary you have to ask analytical questions, such as:

- Which of the ideas in the reading are most significant? Why?
- How do these ideas fit together? What are the key passages in the reading mean?

Like an analysis, an effective summary doesn't assume that the subject matter can speak for itself: the writer needs to play an active role. A good summary provides perspective on the subject as a whole by explaining, as an analysis does, the meaning and function of each of that subject's parts. Moreover, like an analysis, a good summary does not aim to approve or disapprove of its subject; the goal, in both kinds of writing, is to understand rather than to evaluate. (For more on summary, see Chapters 6 and 13.)

So summary, like analysis, is a tool of understanding and not just a mechanical task. But a summary stops short of analysis because summary typically makes much smaller interpretive leaps. A summary of the painting popularly known as Whistler's Mother, for example, would tell readers what the painting includes, which details are the most prominent, and even what the overall effect of the painting seems to be. A summary might say that the painting possesses a certain serenity and that it is somewhat spare, almost austere. This kind of language still falls into the category of focused description, which is what a summary is.

An analysis would include more of the writer's interpretive thinking. It might tell us, for instance, that the painter's choice to portray her subject in profile contributes to our sense of her separateness from us and of her nonconfrontational passivity. We look at her, but she does not look back at us. Her black dress and the fitted lace cap that obscures her hair are not only emblems of her effacement, shrouds disguising her identity like her expressionless face, but also the tools of her self-containment and thus of her power to remain aloof from prying eyes. What is the attraction of this painting (this being one of the questions that an analysis might ask)? What might draw a viewer to the sight of this austere, drably attired woman, sitting alone in the center of a mostly blank space? Perhaps it is the very starkness of the painting, and the mystery of self-sufficiency at its center, that attracts us. (See Figure 1.2.)

Observations of the sort just offered go beyond describing what the painting contains and enter into the writer’s ideas about what its details imply, what the painting invites us to make of it and by what means. Notice in our analysis of the painting how intertwined the description (summary) is with the analysis. Laying out the data is key to any kind of analysis, not simply because it keeps the analysis accurate but also
ANALYSIS AND PERSONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Although observations like those offered in the Interpretive Leaps column in Figure 1.3 go beyond simple description, they stay with the task of explaining the painting, rather than moving to private associations that the painting might prompt, such as effusions about old age, or rocking chairs, or the character and situation of the writer's own mother. Such associations could well be valuable unto themselves as a means of prompting a searching piece of expressive writing. They might also help a writer to interpret some feature of the painting that he or she was working to understand. But the writer would not be free to use pieces of his or her personal history as conclusions about what the painting communicates, unless these conclusions could also be reasonably inferred from the painting itself.

Analysis is a creative activity, a fairly open form of inquiry, but its imaginative scope is governed by logic. The hypothetical analysis we have offered is not the only reading of the painting that a viewer might make because the same pattern of details might lead to different conclusions. But a viewer would not be free to conclude anything he or she wished, such as that the woman is mourning the death of a son.

### Data

- Subject in profile, not looking at us
- Folded hands, fitted lace cap, contained hair, expressionless face
- Patterned curtain and picture versus still figure and blank wall; slightly frilled lace cuffs and ties on cap versus plain black dress
- Slightly slouched body position and presence of support for feet

### Method of Analysis

- Make implicit explicit (speculate about what the detail might suggest)
- Locate pattern of same or similar detail; make what is implicit in pattern of details explicit
- Locate organizing contrast; make what is implicit in the contrast explicit
- Anomalies; make what is implicit in the anomalies explicit

### Interpretive Leaps

- Figure strikes us as separate, nonconfrontational, passive
- Authority and containment of the figure made more pronounced by slight contrast with busier, more lively, and more ornate elements and little picture showing world outside
- These details destabilize the serenity of the figure, adding some tension to the picture in the form of slightly uneasy posture and figure's need for support; she looks too long, drooped in on her own spine

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**FIGURE 1.2**

because, crucially, it is in the act of carefully describing a subject that analytical writers often have their best ideas.

You may not agree with the terms by which we have summarized the painting, and thus you may not agree with such conclusions as "the mystery of self-sufficiency." Nor is it necessary that you agree because there is no single, right answer to what the painting means. The absence of a single right answer does not, however, mean that all possible interpretations are equal and equally convincing to readers. The writer who can offer a careful description of a subject's key features is likely to arrive at conclusions about possible meanings that others would share.

Here are two general rules to be drawn from this discussion of analysis and summary:

1. Describe with care. The words you choose to summarize your data will contain the germs of your ideas about what the subject means.
2. In moving from summary to analysis, scrutinize the language you have chosen, asking, "Why did I choose this word?" and "What ideas are implicit in the language I have used?"

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**FIGURE 1.3**
Summary and Analysis of Whistler's Mother Diagram
or is patiently waiting to die. Such conclusions would be unfounded speculations because the black dress is not sufficient to support them. Analysis often operates in areas in which there is no one right answer, but like summary and argument, it requires the writer to reason from evidence.

A few rules are worth highlighting here:

1. The range of associations for explaining a given detail or word must be governed by context.
2. It's fine to use your personal reactions as a way into exploring what a subject means, but take care not to make an interpretive leap stretch farther than the actual details will support.
3. Because the tendency to transfer meanings from your own life onto a subject can lead you to ignore the details of the subject itself, you need always to be asking yourself: "What other explanations might plausibly account for this same pattern of detail?"

As we began this chapter by saying, analysis is a form of detective work. It can surprise us with ideas that our experiences produce once we take the time to listen to ourselves thinking. But analysis is also a discipline; it has rules that govern how we proceed and that enable others to judge the validity of our ideas. A good analytical thinker needs to be the attentive Dr. Watson to his or her own Sherlock Holmes. That is what the remainder of this book teaches you to do.

ASSIGNMENT: Analyze a Portrait or Other Visual Image

Locate any portrait, preferably a good reproduction from an art book or magazine, one that shows detail clearly. Then do a version of what we've done with Whistler's Mother in the preceding columns.

Your goal is to produce an analysis of the portrait with the steps we included in analyzing Whistler's Mother: First, summarize the portrait, describing accurately its significant details. Do not go beyond a recounting of what the portrait includes; avoid interpreting what these details suggest.

Then use the various methods offered in this chapter to analyze the data. What repetitions (patterns of same or similar detail) do you see? What organizing contrasts suggest themselves? In light of these patterns of similarity and difference, what anomalies do you then begin to detect? Move from the data to interpretive conclusions.

This process will produce a set of interpretive leaps, which you may then try to assemble into a more coherent claim of some sort—about what the portrait "says."

CHAPTER 2

Counterproductive Habits of Mind

ANALYSIS, we have been suggesting, is a frame of mind, a set of habits for observing and making sense of the world. There is also, it is fair to say, an anti-analytical frame of mind with its own set of habits. These shut down perception and arrest potential ideas at the cliché stage. This chapter attempts to unearth these anti-analytical habits. Then the next chapter offers some systematic ways of improving your observational skills.

The meaning of observation is not self-evident. If you had five friends over and asked them to write down one observation about the room you were all sitting in, it's a sure bet that many of the responses would be generalized judgments—"it's comfortable"; "it's a pigsty." And why? Because the habits of mind that come readily to most of us tend to shut down the observation stage so that we literally notice and remember less. We go for the quick impression and dismiss the rest.

Having ideas is dependent on allowing ourselves to notice things in a subject that we wish to better understand rather than glossing things over with a quick and too easy understanding. The problem with convincing ourselves that we have the answers is that we are thus prevented from seeing the questions, which are usually much more interesting than the temporary stopping points we have elected as answers.

The nineteenth-century poet, Emily Dickinson, writes that "Perception of an object/Costs precise the object's loss." When we leap prematurely to our perceptions about a thing, we place a filter between ourselves and the object, shrinking the amount and kinds of information that can get through to our minds and our senses. The point of the Dickinson poem is a paradox—that the ideas we arrive at actually deprive us of material with which to have more ideas. So we have to be careful about leaping to conclusions, about the ease with which we move to generalization, because if we are not careful, such moves will lead to a form of mental blindness—loss of the object.

FEAR OF UNCERTAINTY

Most of us learn early in life to pretend that we understand things even when we don't. Rather than ask questions and risk looking foolish, we nod our heads. Soon, we even come to believe that we understand things when really we don't, or not nearly as well as we think we do. This understandable but problematic human trait means that to
become better thinkers, most of us have to cultivate a more positive attitude toward not knowing. Prepare to be surprised at how difficult this can be.

Start by trying to accept that uncertainty—even its more extreme version, confusion—is a productive state of mind, a precondition to having ideas. The poet John Keats coined a memorable phrase for this willed tolerance of uncertainty. He called it negative capability.

I had not had a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.

—Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 1817

The key phrases here are "capable of being in uncertainties" and "without any irritable reaching." Keats is not saying that facts and reason are unnecessary and therefore can be safely ignored. But he does praise the kind of person who can remain calm (rather than becoming irritable) in a state of uncertainty. He is endorsing a way of being that can stay open to possibilities longer than most of us are comfortable with. Negative capability is an essential habit of mind for productive analytical thinking.

PREJUDGING

Too often inexperienced writers are pressured by well-meaning teachers and textbooks to arrive at a thesis statement—a single sentence formulation of the governing claim that a paper will support—before they have observed enough and reflected enough to find one worth using. These writers end up clinging to the first idea that they think might serve as a thesis, with the result that they stop looking at anything in their evidence except what they want and expect to see. Writers who leap prematurely to thesis statements typically find themselves proving the obvious—some too general and superficial idea—and worse, they miss opportunities for the better paper that is lurking in the more complicated evidence being screened out by the desire to make the thesis "work."

Unit II of this book, Writing the Analytical Essay, will have much to say about finding and using thesis statements. But this unit (especially Chapter 3, A Toolkit of Analytical Methods) first focuses attention on the kinds of thinking and writing you'll need to engage in before you can successfully make the move to thesis-driven writing. In this discovery phase, you will need to slow down the drive to conclusions to see more in your evidence.

Tell yourself that you don't understand, even if you think that you do. You'll know that you are surmounting the fear of uncertainty when the meaning of your evidence starts to seem less rather than more clear to you, and perhaps even strange. You will begin to see details that you hadn't seen before and a range of competing meanings where you had thought there was only one.

BLINDED BY HABIT

Some people, especially the very young, are good at noticing things. They see things that the rest of us don't see or have ceased to notice. But why is this? Is it just that people become duller as they get older? The poet William Wordsworth thought the problem was not age but habit. That is, as we organize our lives so that we can function more efficiently, we condition ourselves to see in more predictable ways and to tune out things that are not immediately relevant to our daily needs.

You can test this theory by considering what you did and did not notice this morning on the way to work or class or wherever you regularly go. Following a routine for moving through the day can be done with minimal engagement of either the brain or the senses. Our minds are often, as we say, "somewhere else." As we walk along, our eyes wander a few feet in front of our shoes or blankly in the direction of our destination. Moving along the roadway in cars, we periodically realize that miles have gone by while we were driving on automatic pilot, attending barely at all to the road or the car or the landscape. Arguably, even when we try to focus on something that we want to consider, the habit of not really attending to things stays with us.

The deadening effect of habit on seeing and thinking has long been a peculiarity of artists as well as philosophers and psychologists. Some people have even defined the aim of art as "defamiliarization." "The essential purpose of art," writes the novelist David Lodge, "is to overcome the deadening effects of habit by representing familiar things in unfamiliar ways." The man who coined the term defamiliarization, Victor Shklovsky, wrote, "Defamiliarization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war... And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life" (David Lodge, The Art of Fiction. New York: Penguin, 1992, p. 53).

Growing up we all become increasingly desensitized to the world around us; we tend to forget the specific things that get us to feel and think in particular ways. Instead we respond to our experience with a limited range of generalizations, and more often than not, these are shared generalizations—that is, clichés.

A lot of what passes for thinking is merely reacting; right/wrong, good/bad, loved/hated it, couldn't relate to it, boring. Responses like these are habits, reflexes of the mind. And they are surprisingly tough habits to break. As an experiment, ask someone for a description of a place, a movie, a new CD, and see what you get. Too often it will be a diatribe. Offer a counterargument and be told, huffily, "I'm entitled to my opinion." Why is this so?

We live in a culture of inattention and cliché. It is a world in which we are perpetually assaulted with mind-numbing claims (Arby's offers "a baked potato so good you'll never want anyone else's"). flip opinions ("The Republicans/Democrats are idiots") and easy answers ("Be yourself"; "Provide job training for the unemployed, and we can do away with homelessness"). We're awash in such stuff.

That's one reason for the prominence of the buzz phrase "thinking outside the box"—which appears to mean getting beyond outworn ways of thinking about things. But more than that, the phrase assumes that most of the time most of us are trapped inside the box—inside a set of prepackaged answers (clichés) and like/dislike responses. This is not a new phenomenon, of course—250 years ago
the philosopher David Hume, writing about perception, asserted that our lives are spent in "dogmatic slumbers," so ensnared in conventional notions of just about everything that we don’t really see.

We turn now to three of the most stubbornly counterproductive habits of mind: the judgment reflex, generalizing, and overpersonalizing.

THE JUDGMENT REFLEX

It would be impossible to overstate the mind-numbing effect that the judgment reflex has on thinking. Why? Consider what we do when we judge something and what we ask others to do when we offer them our judgments. Ugly, realistic, pretty, wonderful, unfair, crazy: notice how the problem with such words is a version of the problem with all generalizations—lack of information. What have you actually told someone else if you say that something is ugly, or boring, or realistic?

In its most primitive form—most automatic and least thoughtful—judging is like an on/off switch. When the switch is thrown in one direction or the other—good/bad, right/wrong, positive/negative—the resulting judgment predetermines and overrides any subsequent thinking we might do. Rather than thinking about what X is or how X operates, we lock ourselves prematurely into proving that we were right to think that X should be banned or supported.

The psychologist Carl Rogers has written at length on the problem of the judgment reflex. He claims that our habitual tendency as humans—virtually a programmed response—is to evaluate everything and to do so very quickly. Walking out of a movie, for example, most people will immediately voice their approval or disapproval, usually in either/or terms: I liked it or didn’t like it; it was right/wrong, good/bad, interesting/boring. The other people in the conversation will then offer their own evaluation and their judgments of the others’ judgments: “I think that it was a good movie and that you are wrong to think it was bad,” and so on. Like the knee jerking in response to the physician’s hammer, such reflex judgments are made without conscious thought (the source of the pejorative term “knee-jerk thinking”). They close off thinking with likes and dislikes and instant categories.

This is not to say that all judging should be avoided. Obviously our thinking on many occasions must be applied to decision-making: whether we should or shouldn’t vote for a particular candidate, should or shouldn’t eat French fries, should or shouldn’t support a ban on cigarette advertising. Ultimately, in other words, analytical thinking does need to arrive at a point of view—which is a form of judgment—but analytical conclusions are usually not phrased in terms of like/dislike or good/bad. They disclose what a person has come to understand about X rather than how he or she rules on the worth of X.

In some ways, the rest of this book consists of a set of methods for blocking the judgment reflex in favor of more thoughtful responses. For now, here are two moves to make in order to short circuit the judgment reflex and begin replacing it with a more thoughtful, patient, and curious habit of mind. First, try the cure that Carl Rogers recommended to negotiators in industry and government. Do not assert an agreement or disagreement with another person’s position until you can repeat that position in a way the other person would accept as fair and accurate. This is surprisingly hard to do because we are usually so busy calling up judgments of our own that we barely hear what the other person is saying.

Second, try eliminating the word "should" from your vocabulary for a while. Judgments take the form of should statements. We should pass the law. We should not consider putting such foolish restrictions into law. The analytical habit of mind is characterized by the words why, how, and what. Analysis asks: What is the aim of the new law? Why do laws of this sort tend to get passed in some parts of the country rather than others? How does this law compare with its predecessor?

You might also try eliminating evaluative adjectives—that is, offer judgments with no data. “Green” is a descriptive, concrete adjective. It offers something we can experience. “Beautiful” is an evaluative adjective. It offers only judgment. (See Figure 2.1.)

Try this 2.1: Distinguishing Evaluative from Nonevaluative Words

The dividing line between judgmental and nonjudgmental words is often more difficult to discern in practice than you might assume. Categorize each of the terms in the following list as judgmental or nonjudgmental, and be prepared to explain your reasoning: monstrous, delicate, authoritative, strong, muscular, automatic, vibrant, tedious, pungent, unrealistic, flexible, tart, pleasing, clever, slow.

Try this 2.2: Experiment with Adjectives and Adverbs

Write a paragraph of description—on anything that comes to mind—for example, without using any evaluative adjectives or adverbs. Alternatively, analyze and categorize the adjectives and adverbs in a piece of your own recent writing.

GENERALIZING

What it all boils down to is... What this adds up to is... The gist of her speech was... Generalizing is not always a bad habit. Reducing complex events, theories, books, or speeches to a reasonably accurate summarizing statement requires practice and skill. We generalize from our experience because this is one way of arriving at ideas.
Chapter 2 Counterproductive Habits of Mind

The problem with generalizing is that it removes the mind—usually much too quickly—from the data that produced the generalization in the first place.

People tend to remember their reactions and impressions. The dinner was dull. The music was exciting. But they forget the specific, concrete causes of these impressions (if they ever fully noticed them). As a result, people deprive themselves of material to think with—the data that might allow them to reconsider their initial impressions or share them with others.

Generalizations are just as much a problem for readers and listeners as they are for writers. Consider for a moment what you are actually asking others to do when you offer them a generalization such as “His stories are very depressing.” Unless the recipient of this observation asks a question—such as “Why do you think so?”—he or she is being required to take your word for it: the stories are depressing because you say so.

What happens instead if you offer a few details that caused you to think as you do? Clearly, you are on firmer ground. Your listener might think that the details you cite are actually not depressing or that this is not the most interesting or useful way to think about the stories. He or she might offer a different generalization, a different reading of the data, but at least conversation has become possible.

Vagueness and generality are major blocks to learning because, as habits of mind, they allow you to dismiss virtually everything you’ve read and heard except the general idea you’ve arrived at. Often the generalizations that come to mind are so broad that they tell us nothing. To say, for example, that a poem is about love or death or birth, or that the economy of a particular emerging nation is inefficient, accomplishes very little, since the generalizations could fit almost any poem or economy. In other words, your generalizations are often sites where you stopped thinking prematurely, not the “answers” you’ve thought they were.

The simplest antidote to the problem of generalizing is to train yourself to be more self-conscious about where your generalizations come from. Remember to trace your general impressions back to the details that caused them. This tracing of attitudes back to their concrete causes is the most basic—and most necessary—move in the analytical habit of mind.

Here’s another strategy for bringing your thinking down from high levels of generality. Think of the words you use as steps on an abstraction ladder. The more general and vague the word, the higher its level of abstraction. Mammal, for example, is higher on the abstraction ladder than cow.

You’ll find that it takes some practice to learn to distinguish between abstract words and concrete ones. A concrete word appeals to the senses. Abstract words are not available to our senses of touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell. Submarine is a concrete word. It conjures up a mental image, something we can physically experience. Peace-keeping force is an abstract phrase. It conjures up a concept, but in an abstract and general way. We know what people are talking about when they say there is a plan to send submarines to a troubled area. We can’t be so sure what is up when people start talking about peace-keeping forces.

You might try using “Level 3 Generality” as a convenient tag phrase reminding you to steer clear of the higher reaches of abstract generalization, some so high up the ladder from the concrete stuff that produced them that there is barely enough air to sustain the thought. Why Level 3 instead of Level 2? There aren’t just two categories, abstract and concrete; the categories are the ends of a continuum, a sliding scale. And too often when writers try to concretize their generalizations, the results are still too general: they change animal to mammal, but they need cow or, better, black angus

Try this 2.3: Locating Words on the Abstraction Ladder
Find a word above (more abstract) and a word below (more concrete) for each of the following words: society, food, train, taxes, school, government, cooking oil, organism, story, magazine.

Try this 2.4: Distinguishing Abstract from Concrete Words
Make a list of the first ten words that come to mind and then arrange them from most concrete to most abstract. Then repeat the exercise by choosing key words from a page of something you have written recently.

OVERPERSONALIZING (NATURALIZING OUR ASSUMPTIONS)

In one sense all writing is personal: you are the one putting words on the page, and inevitably you see things from your point of view. Even if you were to summarize what someone else had written, aiming for maximum impersonality, you would be making the decisions about what to include and exclude. Most effective analytical prose has a strong personal element—the writer’s stake in the subject matter. As readers, we want the sense that a writer is engaged with the material and cares about sharing it.

But in another sense, no writing is strictly personal. As contemporary cultural theorists are fond of pointing out, the “I” is not a wholly autonomous free agent who

VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Habits of Mind
Readers should not conclude that the “Counterproductive Habits of Mind” presented in this chapter are confined to writing. Psychologists who study the way we process information have established important links between the way we think and the way we feel. Some psychologists, such as Aaron Beck, have identified common “errors in thinking” that parallel the habits of mind discussed in this chapter. Beck and others have shown that falling prey to habits of mind is associated with a variety of negative outcomes. For instance, a tendency to engage in either/or thinking, overgeneralization, and personalization has been linked to higher levels of anger, anxiety, and depression. Failure to attend to these errors in thinking steps off reflection and analysis. As a result, the person becomes more likely to “react” rather than think, which may prolong and exacerbate the negative emotions.

—Mark Sciolto, Professor of Psychology
writes from a unique point of view. Rather, the "I" is always shaped by forces outside the self—social, cultural, educational, historical, etc. The extreme version of this position allows little space for what we like to think of as "individuality": the self is a site through which dominant cultural ways of understanding the world (ideologies) circulate. From this perspective we are like actors who don't know that we're acting, reciting various cultural scripts that we don't realize are scripts.

This is, of course, an overstated position. A person who believes that civil rights for all is an essential human right is not necessarily a victim of cultural brainwashing. The grounds of his or her belief, shaped by participation in a larger community of belief (ethnic, religious, family tradition, etc.) is, however, not merely personal.

But it's a mistake for a person to assume that because he or she experienced or believes X, everyone else does too. Rather than open-mindedly exploring what a subject might mean, the overpersonalizer tends to use a limited range of culturally conditioned likes and dislikes to close the subject down. Overpersonalizing substitutes merely reacting for thinking.

It is surprisingly difficult to break the habit of treating our points of view as self-evidently true—not just for us but for everyone. What is "common sense" for one person, and so not even in need of explaining, can be quite uncommon and not so obviously sensible to someone else. More often than not, common sense is a phrase that really means "what seems obvious to me and therefore should be obvious to you." This is a habit of mind called "naturalizing your assumptions." The word naturalize in this context means you are representing—and seeing—your own assumptions as natural, as simply the way things are (and ought to be).

Overpersonalizers tend to make personal experiences and prejudices an unquestioned standard of value. Your own disastrous experience with a health maintenance organization (HMO) may predispose you to dismiss a plan for nationalized health care, but your writing needs to examine in detail the holes in the plan, not simply evoke the three hours you lingered in some doctor's waiting room. Paying too much attention to how a subject makes you feel or fits your previous experience of life can seduce you away from analyzing how the subject itself operates.

This is not to say that there is no learning or thinking value in telling our experiences: narratives can be used analytically. Storytelling has the virtue of offering concrete experience—not just the conclusions the experience may have led to. Personal narratives can take us back to the source of our convictions. The problem comes when "relating" to someone's story becomes a habitual substitute for thinking through the ideas and attitudes that the story suggests.

The problem with the personal is perhaps most clear when viewed as half of a particularly vicious set of binary oppositions that might be schematized thus:

subjective vs. objective
personal expression vs. impersonal analysis
passionately engaged vs. detached, impassively neutral
genuinely felt vs. heartless

Like most vicious binaries, the personal/impersonal, heart/head binary overstates the case and obscures the considerable overlap of the two sides.

The antidote to the overpersonalizing habit of mind is, as with most habits you want to break, to become more self-conscious about it. Ask yourself, "Is this what I really believe?" Of course, some personal responses can provide valuable beginnings for constructive thinking, provided that, as with generalizing, you get in the habit of tracing your own responses back to their causes. If you find an aspect of your subject irritating or funny or disappointing, locate exact details that evoked your emotional response, and begin to analyze those details.

Try this 2.5: Tracing Impressions Back to Causes

One of Ernest Hemingway's principal rules for writing was to trace impressions back to causes. He once wrote to an apprentice writer, "Find what gave you the emotion; what the action was that gave you the excitement. Then write it down, making it clear so the reader will see it too and have the same feeling you had." You can try this exercise anywhere. Wait for an impression to hit, and then record the stimuli—the concrete details that produced your response—as accurately as you can.

Try this 2.6: Looking for Naturalized Assumptions

Start listening to the things people say in everyday conversation. Read some newspaper editorials with your morning coffee (a pretty disturbing way to start the day in most cases). Watch for examples of people naturalizing their assumptions. You will find examples of this everywhere. Also, try paraphrasing the common complaint "I couldn't relate to it." What does being able to "relate" to something consist of? What problems would follow from accepting this idea as a standard of value?

OPINIONS (VERSUS IDEAS)

Perhaps no single word causes more problems in the relation between students and teachers, and for people in general, than the word opinion. Consider for a moment the often-heard claim "I'm entitled to my opinion." This claim is worth exploring. What is an opinion? How is it (or isn't it) different from a belief or an idea? If I say that I am entitled to my opinion, what am I asking you to do or not do?

Many of the opinions people fight about are actually clichés, pieces of much-repeated conventional wisdom. For example, "People are entitled to say what they want. That's just my opinion." But, of course, this assertion isn't a private and personal revelation. It is an exaggerated and overstated version of one of the items in the U.S. Bill of Rights, guaranteeing freedom of speech. Much public thinking has gone on about this private conviction, and it has thus been carefully qualified. A person can't, for example, say publicly whatever he or she pleases about other people if what he or she says is false and damages the reputation of another person—at least not without threat of legal action.

Our opinions are learned. They are products of our culture and our upbringing—not personal possessions. It is okay to have opinions, but dangerous to give too many of them protected-species status, walling them off into a reserve, not to be touched by reasoning or evidence.
Some things, of course, we have to take on faith. Religious convictions, for example, are more than opinions, though they operate in a similar way: we believe where we can’t always prove. But even our most sacred convictions are not really harmed by thinking. The world’s religions are constantly engaged in interpreting and reinterpreting what religious texts mean, what various traditional practices mean, and how they may or may not be adapted to the attitudes and practices of the world as it is today.

WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE AN IDEA
Thinking, as opposed to reporting or reacting, should lead you to ideas. But what does it mean to have an idea? This question lies at the heart of this book. It’s one thing to acquire knowledge, but you also need to learn how to produce knowledge, to think for yourself. The problem is that people are daunted when asked to arrive at ideas. They dream up ingenious ways to avoid the task, or they get paralyzed with anxiety.

What is an idea? Must an idea be something that is entirely “original”? Must it revamped the way you understand yourself or your stance toward the world?

Such expectations are unreasonably grand. Clearly, a writer in the early stages of learning about a subject can’t be expected to arrive at an idea so original that, like a Ph.D. thesis, it revises complex concepts in a discipline. Nor should you count as ideas

**VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM**

Ideas versus Opinions

Writers need to be aware of the distinction between an argument that seeks support from evidence and mere opinions and assertions. Many students taking political science courses often come with the assumption that in politics one opinion is as good as another. (Tocqueville thought this to be a peculiarly democratic disease.) From this perspective any position a political science professor may take on controversial issues is simply his or her opinion to be accepted or rejected by students according to their own beliefs/prejudices. The key task, therefore, is not so much substituting knowledge for opinions, but rather substituting well-constructed arguments for unexamined opinions.

What is an argument, and how might it be distinguished from opinions? Several things need to be stressed: (1) The thesis should be linked to evidence drawn from relevant sources: polling data, interviews, historical material, and so forth. (2) The thesis should make as explicit as possible its own ideological assumptions. (3) A thesis, in contrast to mere statement of opinion, is committed to making an argument, which means that it presupposes a willingness to engage with others. To the extent that writers operate on the assumption that everything is an opinion, they have no reason to construct arguments; they are locked into an opinion.

—Jack Gambino, Professor of Political Science

only those that lead to some kind of life-altering discovery. Ideas are usually much smaller in scope, much less grand, than people seem to expect them to be.

It is easiest to understand what ideas are by considering what ideas do and where they can be found. Here is a partial list:

- An idea answers a question; it explains something that needs to be explained or provides a way out of a difficulty that other people have had in understanding something.
- An idea usually starts with an observation that is puzzling, with something you want to figure out rather than something you think you already understand.
- An idea may be the discovery of a question where there seemed not to be one.
- An idea may make explicit and explore the meaning of something implicit—an unstated assumption upon which an argument rests or a logical consequence of a given position.
- An idea may connect elements of a subject and explain the significance of that connection.
- An idea often accounts for some dissonance—that is, something that seems to not fit together.
- An idea provides direction; it helps you see what to do next.

Most strong analytical ideas launch you in a process of resolving problems and bringing competing positions into some kind of alignment. They locate you where there is something to negotiate, where you are required not just to list answers but also to ask questions, make choices, and engage in reasoning about the significance of your evidence.

Some would argue that ideas are discipline-specific, that what counts as an idea in Psychology differs from what counts as an idea in History or Philosophy or Business. And surely the context does affect the way that ideas are shaped and expressed. This book operates on the premise, however, that ideas across the curriculum share common elements. All of the items in the list just given, for example, seem to us to be common to ideas and to idea-making in virtually any context. (See Figure 2.2.)

**HAVING IDEAS**

(Doing something with the material)

**VERSUS**

**RELATING**

(Personal experience matters, but . . .)

**REPORTING**

(Information matters, but . . .)

**FIGURE 2.2**

Having Ideas. Ideas occupy a middle ground between the extremes of sheer personal response and faceless reportage of information.
RULES OF THUMB FOR HANDLING COMPLEXITY

This chapter has been about blocking habits of mind that allow you to evade a more complex way of approaching your writing. Almost all writers feel uncomfortable when encountering complexity. But discomfort need not lead to avoidance or to verbal paralysis. The following rules of thumb can help you to respond to the complexities of the subjects that you write about rather than oversimplifying or evading them.

1. **Reduce scope.** Whenever possible, reduce drastically the range of your inquiry. Resist the temptation to try to include too much information. Even when an assignment calls for broader coverage of a subject, you will usually do best by covering the ground up front and then analyzing one or two key points in greater depth.

   For example, if you were asked to write on Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, you would obviously have to open with some general observations, such as what it was and why it arose. But if you tried to stay on this general level throughout, your paper would have little direction or focus. You could achieve a focus, though, by moving quickly from the general to some much smaller and more specific part of the subject, such as attacks on the New Deal. You would then be able to limit the enormous range of possible evidence to a few representative figures, such as Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and Alf Landon. Once you began to compare the terms and legitimacy of their opposition to the New Deal, you would be much more likely to manage a complex analysis of the subject than if you had remained at the level of broad generalization.

2. **Study the wording of topics for unstated questions.** Nearly all formulations of a topic contain a number of questions that emerge when you ponder the wording. Framing these questions overtly is often the first step to having an idea. Take a topic question such as "is feminism good for Judaism?" It seems to invite you simply to argue yes or no, but it actually requires you to set up and answer a number of implied questions. For example, what does "good for Judaism" mean—that which allows the religion to evolve? That which conserves its tradition? The same kinds of questions might be asked of the term feminism. And what of the possibility that feminism has no significant effect whatsoever?

   As this example illustrates, even an apparently limited and straightforward question presses writers to make choices about how to engage it. So don't leap from the topic question to your plan of attack too quickly. One of the best tricks of the trade lies in smoking out the unstated assumptions implied by the wording of the topic, and addressing them. (See Chapter 5, Analyzing Arguments, for more on uncovering assumptions.)

3. **Suspect your first responses.** If you settle for these, the result is likely to be superficial and overly general. A better strategy is to examine your first responses for ways in which they might be inaccurate, and then develop the implications of these overstatements (or errors) into a new formulation. In many cases, writers go through this process of proposing and rejecting ideas ten times or more before they arrive at an angle or approach that will sustain an essay.

   A first response is okay for a start, as long as you don't stop there. So, for example, most of us would agree, at first glance, that no one should be denied health care, or that a given film or novel that concludes with a marriage is a happy ending, or that the American government should not pass trade laws that might cause Americans to lose their jobs. On closer inspection, however, each of these responses begins to reveal its limitations. Given that there is a limited amount of money available, should everyone, regardless of age or physical condition, be accorded every medical treatment that might prolong life? And might not a novel or film that concludes in marriage signal that the society depicted offers too few options, or more cynically, that the author is feeding the audience an inimplausible fantasy to blanket over problems raised earlier in the work? And couldn't trade laws resulting in short-term loss of jobs ultimately produce more jobs and a healthier economy?

   As these examples suggest, first responses—usually pieces of conventional wisdom—can blind you to rival explanations. Try not to decide on an answer to questions you've given—or those of your own making—too quickly.

4. **Begin with questions, not answers.** Whether you are focusing on an assigned topic or devising one of your own, you are usually better off to begin with something that you don't understand very well and want to understand better. Begin by asking what kinds of questions the material poses. So, for example, if you are convinced that Robinson Crusoe changes throughout Defoe's novel and you write a paper cataloging those changes, you essentially are composing a selective plot summary. If, by contrast, you wonder why Crusoe wallows himself within a fortress after he discovers a footprint in the sand, you will be more likely to interpret the significance of events than just to report them.

5. **Write all of the time about what you are studying.** Doing so is probably the single best preparation for developing your own interest in a subject and for finding interesting approaches to it. Don't wait to start writing until you think you have an idea you can organize a paper around. By writing informally—as a matter of routine—about what you are studying, you can acquire the habits of mind necessary to having and developing ideas. Similarly, by reading as often and as attentively as you can, and writing spontaneously about what you read, you will accustom yourself to being a less passive consumer of ideas and information, and will have more ideas and information available to think with and about. (See Freewriting in Chapter 3, A Toolkit of Analytical Methods, for more.)

6. **Accept that interest is a product of writing—not a prerequisite.** The best way to get interested is to expect to become interested. Writing gives you the opportunity to cultivate your curiosity by thinking exploratively. Rather than approaching topics in a mechanical way, or putting them off to the last possible moment and doing the assignment grudgingly, try giving yourself and the topic the benefit of the doubt. If you can suspend judgment and start writing, you will often find yourself uncovering interests where you had not seen them before.

7. **Use the "backburner."** In restaurants, the backburner is the place that chefs leave their sauces and soup stocks to simmer while they are actively engaged in other, more immediately pressing and faster operations on the frontburners.
Think of your brain as having a backburner—a place where you can set and temporarily forget (though not entirely) some piece of thinking that you are working on. A good way to use the backburner is to read through and take some notes on something you are writing about—or perhaps a recent draft of something you are having trouble finishing—just before you go to sleep at night. Writers who do this often wake up to find whole outlines, whole strings of useful words already formed in their heads. Keep a notebook by your bed and record these early-morning thoughts. If you do this over a period of days (which assumes, of course, that you will need to start your writing projects well in advance of deadlines), you will be surprised at how much thinking you can do when you didn’t know you were doing it. The backburner keeps working during the day as well—periodically insisting that the frontburner, your more conscious self, listen to what it has to say. Pretty soon, ideas start popping up all over the place.

In the context of this discussion, we’ll end these rules of thumb with the following anecdote. The wife of the writer and cartoonist, James Thurber, reportedly was asked about her husband’s behavior at dinner parties wherein he occasionally went blank and seemed to be staring off into space. “Oh, don’t worry about that,” she said. “He’s all right. He’s just writing.”

ASSIGNMENT: Observation Practice

Among the habits of mind that this chapter recommends, one of the most useful (and potentially entertaining) is to trace impressions, reactions, sudden thoughts, moods, etc., back to their probable causes. Practice this skill for a week, recording at least one impression a day in some detail (that is, what you both thought and felt). Then determine at least three concrete causes of your response. That is, go after specific sensory details. For class purposes, pick one or two of your journal writings and revise them to a form that could be shared with other members of the class.

Interesting subjects for such writing might include your response to first-year student orientation, some other feature of the beginning of the school year, or your response to selected places on campus. What impact do certain places have on you? Why?

CHAPTER 3

A Toolkit of Analytical Methods

Once I begin the act of writing, it all falls away—the view from the window, the tools, the talismans, even the snoring cat—and I am unconscious of myself and my surroundings while I fuse language with idea, make a specific image visible or audible through the discovery of the right words . . . One’s capricious inner critics are silenced for a time, and, as a result, what is produced is a little bit different from anything I had planned. There is always a surprise, a revelation. During the act of writing I have told myself something that I didn’t know I knew.

—Gail Godwin, “How I Write” (Boston: The Writer, October 1987)

In a recent (and fascinating) bestseller entitled Blink, Malcolm Gladwell offers an exploration into intuitive knowing. Gladwell ultimately argues that there is a big difference between experts who make decisions in the blink of an eye and relative novices (people outside their area of expertise) who do so. He finds that although both novices and experts can make intuitive decisions based on rapid assessment of key details (a process he calls thin slicing), the accuracy and quality of these decisions is incomparably better in thinkers who have trained their habits of perception.

This chapter offers a set of procedures—tools—for training your habits of perception, especially those habits that allow you to see significant detail. The tools are presented as formulas that you can apply to anything you wish to better understand. We have deliberately given each of the tools a name and memorable steps so that they are easy to invoke consciously in place of the semi-conscious glide into such habits as overgeneralizing and the judgment reflex. (See Chapter 2, Counterproductive Habits of Mind, for more.)

Most of the items in the Toolkit share the trait of encouraging defamiliarization. In the last chapter we spoke of the necessity of defamiliarizing—of finding ways to see things that the veneer of familiarity would otherwise render invisible. This involves recognizing that the apparently self-evident meanings of things seem “natural” and “given” only because we have been conditioned to see them this way.

Most of us assume, for example, that the media is a site of public knowledge and awareness. But look what happens to that idea when defamiliarized by Jonathan Franzen in a recent essay ("Imperial Bedroom"): 