Rethinking Your Writing

Rhetoric for Reflective Writers

E. Shelley Reid

RETHINKING YOUR WRITING

RHETORIC FOR REFLECTIVE WRITERS

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Contents

Acknowledgments

Drafting a big writing textbook during what is definitely an era of decline for big writing textbooks, revising it during a global pandemic, and finishing it during what—in part due to new generative artificial intelligence tools—is being hailed as possibly the end of the writing class era, is not for the faint of heart, and not a project that anyone completes unaided. I am thus grateful to literally a cast of thousands, some of whom I can call out here.

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RETHINKING YOUR WRITING

RHETORIC FOR REFLECTIVE WRITERS

Part One. Rethinking Your Writing: New Frameworks for Writers

Chapter 1. Reframing Your Story About Writing

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize key elements of your story about writing
- Explore threshold concepts that guide advanced writers
- Reflect to consider how both new and familiar ideas about writing can influence your practice as a writer

Stories are powerful forces, particularly the stories closest to home. Recent research demonstrates that the way we describe our world—how we organize events and emotions into stories—influences how we work, play, and interact with others. While we enjoy concrete privileges and face inescapable challenges, we have some control over how we respond: our stories or "mental models" about our world can directly affect our performance, helping us succeed or increasing our struggles. Experts now encourage many professionals, from sports players to actors, and from musicians to surgeons, to visualize their work and their likely successes before they even step onto a stage or into an operating room. Likewise, the way you think about writing can either support or limit you as you try to make progress.

1.1 What's Your Story?

You already have some powerful stories about writing that you tell yourself. Your writing stories may draw on your memories about a range of experiences and emotions:

- A particular piece of writing: a birthday card you made when you were a child, an assignment you completed for school, a text message you sent recently to a friend
- The writing you do each week for your job, for your journal, or for your community
- A strategy, technique, or trick you use that helps you write better
- How you feel when you write, or feel when you're done writing
- What other people have told you about how to write, or what they told you about how you write
- What you have accomplished—or what you dream you can accomplish—with your writing

My own writing story draws on some vivid moments of success and struggle: winning an award for a poem when I was 12 years old, earning a "C" on a high school paper because I didn't follow a teacher's exact rules, laughing to myself as I added bad puns into a travel column I wrote for the school newspaper that almost nobody read, puzzling over a college history professor's critique that my writing was "too graceful," getting direct-messaged by other students saying they enjoyed what I posted to a larger online group, crying on the phone with my mom over a graduate school project that I couldn't figure out how to organize, teaching my first class about writing while completely terrified but enjoying every minute of it, and publishing my first professional article in a tiny journal that doesn't exist anymore. At some of those points, I thought writing was pretty fun and I was pretty good at it; at other points, I thought writing was impossible and I should give up and go learn to herd sheep.

All those parts of my personal writing story affect me when I sit down to write: right now, I'm still smiling from remembering about my bad puns, but there's a small knot in my stomach about that whole "too graceful" comment. Even after many years, these stories are important to who I am as a writer. As I became a writing teacher and a writing researcher, I also learned new stories about writing that I have added to my mental model. Because I know what the research says, I understand more about that history professor's comment; I know more about why I felt so lost with that graduate school paper; and most days, I no longer think that I should look online for jobs that focus on sheep.

The process of recalling our experiences or stories and either accepting or modifying them generally requires *reflection*: the ability to step away from ourselves

a bit, examine what we think or do or feel, and evaluate whether those responses line up with our goals and resources. When we reflect, we gain insight and control; instead of letting our stories and memories unconsciously influence our writing, we deliberately create a mental model of writing that can help us succeed.

In order to become an advanced writer, you may find it helpful to examine your own stories about writing, learn more about what research says about writers and writing, and *reflect on* whether you want to modify your thinking. This chapter is designed to help you consider and reflect on some new stories, so that you can adopt a mental model of writing that best suits your needs and goals.

Explore 1.1

What's your writing story? Would you describe yourself as a "good writer" overall? as a good writer of a particular kind of writing? (Maybe your friends laugh at the snarky jokes you text them, or they think you provide helpful instructions when they're working with a new computer, recipe, or game.) Has your story changed from when you were a child, or from a few years ago? Do you think that some writing, or all writing, is difficult / satisfying / intriguing? What do you feel like when you start to write, finish writing, or share your writing?

1.2 What are Threshold Concepts About Writing?

No two writers have, or need to have, the same mental model of writing—just like no two stage performers or physical therapists use the same combination of techniques to do their jobs. But all professionals should strive to create and use a mental model that blends our own experiences with fundamental concepts of our field: ideas based on the best available research on how experts achieve success.

In this book we focus on nine key concepts, drawing on research in writing studies, that you should consider as you build a mental model to help you succeed as a writer.

- You can become a good writer and a better writer.
- Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts.
- There is no single definition of "good writer."
- Good writers frequently struggle and revise.
- Writing is a social rather than an individual act.
- Writing creates and integrates knowledge.
- Writing involves strategies more talent.
- There are many ways to solve a writing problem.
- Advanced writers study and reflect on their writing.
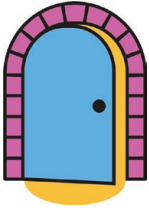
Scholars refer to crucial concepts like these as *threshold concepts*. They can function like a doorway: one that takes you to a new space but that isn't obvious or easy to enter (you might need a key, a password, or even a crowbar). Once you open a door and go across the threshold of the doorway, you can see much more of the house, garden, or video game world than you could before. Moreover, the open doorway can cast new light into the room or hallway you were in, and once you've seen the new space, you can't unsee it. Threshold concepts are present in many fields and professions: often you can recognize them as "aha!" moments where you find you understand the many ways a *limit* works in calculus, how *opportunity cost* affects a range of economic models, or the full implications of *personhood* for philosophers.

When you understand a threshold concept about writing, it may reinforce what you already knew, change the way you think about writing a little bit, raise questions about a significant experience or story, or even alter your whole mental model.

You shouldn't plan to change your whole story overnight. After all, questioning a long-held experience, practice, or belief, especially if it is rooted in strong emotions or recommendations by other experts, can be uncomfortable, and can initially slow down your progress as you evaluate new options. As you read the concepts in this chapter, you should acknowledge and discuss your disagreements or questions, but you should also give yourself room to consider that each concept *might* be true—and that it might be as true for you as for any other writer you know.

Of course, while you can't un-know a concept once you've seen it, you're still the author of your own story about writing. You have the choice about whether you want to incorporate a new element into your regular reflection about writing, or whether you want to focus on other aspects of your story. And finally, remember that stories are most powerful when we let them adapt and evolve: the mental model you construct for your writing class this month may change as you gain more experience, switch to other situations, or alter your goals. As long as you keep reflecting, your story about writing should help you continue to improve and succeed as an advanced writer.

1.3 Nine Threshold Concepts about Writers and Writing

You can become a good writer and a better writer

You already have many viable writing skills, and you are capable of becoming a better writer and a competent writer of many kinds of texts.

Yes, you. You are included even if you have always struggled with writing or if you dislike doing it; even if you're certain you were born as more of a math, arts, or

activities person; and even if someone who seemed knowledgeable has told you that you cannot write well and should do something else with your life.

You may not become the next Suzanne Collins, Langston Hughes, Stephen King, Sandra Cisneros, or National Science Foundation $10 million grant recipient based on your writing. But you can learn to understand the core features—and employ the most useful strategies—for any text you most want or need to create. And here, "any text" means *any kind* of writing: history term papers, limericks, documentary scripts, research reports, tweets, fan fiction, case notes, grant proposals, graphic novels, travel blogs, TikTok videos, memos, or book-length studies of postmodern architecture. Most writing is successful not because something magical happens, but because a writer chose and applied particular strategies specifically relevant to that kind of writing.

Here's the key to the whole concept: we become good writers because we improve via study, practice, feedback, and revision. You may know a few people who seem to have been born with the ability to complete complex math equations in their heads, pick up any song at the piano, or sink a basketball from mid-court. The rest of us, including many professional musicians and athletes, can do tasks like these only with practice and assistance. You probably won't become competent at any kind of writing quickly, and you may have to work harder at it than some of the people in your class. But with attention and persistence, you will improve—and learn how to keep improving over your lifetime.

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

In school, writing is often presented as a clearly defined *noun*, a definable object such as a chunk of rock sitting on a table or a 500-word essay about the causes of the American Civil War. However, advanced writers understand writing better as a *verb*: writing is a form of communicating in which writers are constantly anticipating and inciting responses from our readers, and adapting our moves as the context or goals change.

You may have studied writing as a series of rule-bound assignments: your task was to produce a text that met certain criteria for length or correctness, and so your mental model may contain a clear vision of what "good writing" always is. Outside school, though, writing is usually more about action: writers *perform* writing in order to create a *response* from one or more readers. An object can be all-or-nothing: you have it or you don't. An action is always evolving: each choice you make creates new responses and leads you to other choices. And an *interaction* is most dynamic of all, since one or more real people who are reading or viewing your text can make choices of their own. So the most viable answer to

"What is good writing?" is always "It depends."

If you aim always to *create a better written document*, then each time you write, you are practicing a skill with limited impact. If you aim to *improve your skills at responding to readers and contexts*, then you are always gaining strategies that you can use in many of your future actions as a writer.

There is no single definition of a "good writer"

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

If there is no single definition of "good writing," then there can't be a single definition of a "good writer." Instead, when a document accomplishes the writer's goals and satisfies the writer's primary audience—readers whose expectations and tastes are formed by the communities in which they reside—then it is good writing for that situation even if it might not succeed for other writers or readers. Indeed, as you probably already know, a single "good essay" can succeed in one context but fail in another context that requires a "good essay."

Most good writing will follow a recognizable *pattern* (or genre) with common features of success. But one pattern won't serve all of your writing needs—you probably shouldn't submit a poem when readers expect a résumé—and very little excellent writing follows a precise formula. You know that a "good job application letter" will have some predictable elements you can anticipate. But to be successful, you will need to adapt your document according to whether you write to ask a family friend for a babysitting job or apply to ask a Fortune 500 corporate human resources officer for an accounting job.

As a result, you cannot be a "good writer" or a "bad writer" based on one or two characteristics of writing. You cannot be a good writer *only* because you can write organized short essays about literature, or a bad writer *only* because you struggle to do this. You cannot be a good writer *only* because you make no spelling or verb tense errors, or a bad writer *only* because you make many. Every new writing task gives you an opportunity to redefine "good writing" and to become a better writer.

Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

There are many ways for a writing task to be difficult, but four are common:

- the writer and/or the audience care about getting it right;
- the subject matter is complicated or emotionally charged;

- the audience is particularly uninformed or resistant; and
- the task, audience, and/or context is unfamiliar.

So if you find yourself struggling, it is often a sign that you care, that you're writing about a complex idea, that you're sharing your ideas with readers who don't already understand them, and/or that you're learning to adapt to a new writing situation. The difficulty thus shows you're making good use of your time rather than working on something you don't care about, that is simple or boring, or that tells readers what they already know.

You may also find a writing task hard because of your disposition: you may have low confidence or difficulty managing your time. Yet these challenges are also common among writers, and you can learn to handle intimidating or work-intensive writing tasks just as you would handle challenges in juggling, analyzing statistical data, or reading a foreign language.

Finally, because writing often works as a recursive process wherein you learn and improve as you go, you (like most advanced writers) will nearly always need to revise after you complete an initial draft. (I've added this sentence to keep track, and changed it as this book evolved: what you are reading is from the *sixth* major revision that this section went through, whew!) Your inability to create a perfect document on the first try doesn't mean you should give up and go herd sheep for a living; it means you need to learn from your current failure so that you can improve the next time. The best news is that learning to be an advanced reviser can help you feel less pressure to be perfect in your first draft, which may actually make that draft easier to complete.

Explore 1.2

Think of a document (a thing) you wrote recently that took you some time. Now list 5-7 activities you were *doing* as a writer who was *writing* (a verb) that document. What composing, adapting, or revising actions were easiest or most natural for you? What actions were more difficult or made you feel stuck? Describe a strategy you could suggest to another writer—or a specific writing challenge you wish you had a good strategy for.

Learn

- To learn more about **audiences** and **contexts**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about **dispositions**, see Chapter 2, Practice Productive Habits of Mind, and Attend to Failure to Grow as a Writer.
- To learn more about **revising**, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.

Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

Although you might feel alone as you sit at your desk or computer drafting a document, you actually always write in the company of other readers and writers, past, present, and future. First, all the choices that writers make are influenced by the writers that came before us. These writers may have inspired you to try an approach in your writing, or they may make you cautious or anxious about a particular style of writing. Since the writers that inspire (or frustrate) you were in turn inspired or frustrated by writers that came before them, the community of past writers with whom we connect is vast and crosses many borders.

Second, the choices writers make are influenced by the people around us now. Just as your family has expectations for how people will interact at a holiday dinner, people in your community today have expectations about the values you should represent as a writer, the ideas that are relevant for you to consider as a writer, and the situations in which you will share your writing. Writers participate in local communities and broader cultures just as other artists, designers, politicians, and scientists do.

Third, the choices that writers make are influenced by our future readers, from the friend across the room waiting for your message once you press "Send" in a minute, to the on-site engineers who will need to follow your design specs next month, to your grandchild who may read your blog posts about water conservation when they grow up. Writers imagine and respond to the needs of future readers in order to have the most powerful impact.

It can be exciting to imagine writing within a vibrant community rather than feeling isolated on an individual island. It can also be discouraging: communities can have restrictions and arbitrary expectations that increase writers' difficulties. Racism and other forms of discrimination can permeate communities which then limit or punish writers who don't "fit the mold." (See "Good Writing Is Not Neutral" later in this chapter.) When you encounter restrictions, unexpected criticism, or bias as a writer, it might seem best just to adapt your approach so that you succeed by the expectations already in place—but you know that writers can *affect* audiences as well as *adapt* to them, and so you can consider whether you have the energy and resources to resist, to protest, or to recruit others to help change the community. And remember: No single community can define "good writing" or a "good writer" once and for all!

Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

You may have heard people recommend that you "write about what you know about." Writing from knowledge can increase your motivation as well as your accuracy, whether you're inviting friends to dinner at a new Salvadoran restaurant or explaining to colleagues how to use the accelerometer in your lab. Writers do sometimes just *report* on what we already know.

However, since the pace of change in our world and in your professional field has sped up in recent decades, you will need to be a lifelong learner, and so you will also need to be ready to write about things you don't yet know about. It's crucial that you learn the research skills to fill in gaps in your knowledge with credible and complete information, and also that you continue to hone your curiosity so that you don't miss out on exciting developments that may not immediately be obvious. Writers often *integrate* new ideas or information from alternate fields or perspectives with more common or established knowledge.

What you may not know is that the act of writing nearly always *creates new knowledge*. If you've ever finished working on an essay's conclusion or an exam answer and thought, "Huh, I didn't know that I knew that, or felt that strongly!" you have noticed this phenomenon. *Thinking* something, even when you think carefully, isn't the same as *writing it*. As your brain selects precise words and puts them in order, it creates new neural pathways and associations, and so a writer's sentence is often new even to the writer. This helps explain why even when you think you know something, writing about it can be difficult—but it also explains how writers can benefit from exercises like freewriting, mapping, or reflective writing both to get un-stuck and to actually create new knowledge.

Learn

- To learn more about **reflective practice**, see Chapter 4, Build a Reflective Writing Process.

Practice

- To practice **freewriting** or **mapping**, see Seven Generations.

  NOTE: These Practice features provide links to exercises in Chapters 23 through 29. If you are reading this book in print, you can find an alphabetical list of exercises at the end of the book. The list includes the section in which each exercise can be found.

Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

Although writing is an active state like running or cycling, the best writers don't "just do it!" the way a popular advertising campaign suggested. At least, they don't just do it perfectly the first time because they were born to be superstars. You can improve in your writing—as you would in your running—by practicing repeatedly, by adapting your goals and actions to each specific situation, and by learning to choose strategies that compensate for specific challenges.

You already have strategies that you've learned through years of practice: you have strategies for generating arguments and making sentences precise, for locating information and arranging ideas, for motivating yourself when you're tired and revising to improve your concluding paragraphs, for adding humor or style to your sentences. When a writing task is straightforward and matches your skills, you don't have to actively think about using these strategies, so it can feel as though you are writing "naturally."

When (not "if"!) writers get stuck, we need to stop and reflect so that we can deliberately choose other strategies, ones that might not feel "natural" at first. Even if you don't often feel stuck now, your writing tasks may become more complicated and more diverse, so you would need to try new approaches. (In a single week soon, you may be writing for your organic chemistry lab, your environmental history seminar, and your job as an event coordinator.) In addition to having specific strategies that you use for each setting, you should actively practice strategies that will serve you in multiple situations.

There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

The phrase "writer's block" is commonly used to describe the feeling of getting stuck as a writer, but it's not a very helpful concept for advanced writers. Imagine someone saying "I've got plumber's block" or "I've got nurse's block" or "I've got lawyer's block"! In these and most other professions, experts face problems, get stuck, explore their resources and constraints, and create a solution, just as you can do with your writing.

If you get stuck, it can help to start by define your type of problem, the way doctors ask patients to specify their symptoms. For instance, writers commonly face

- *rhetoric problems*, or challenges in establishing our goals and ascertaining

our readers' needs, and balancing them against each other,

- *knowledge and inquiry problems*, or challenges in determining what we know or need to learn, and how we communicate it to others,
- *steps-and-strategies problems*, or challenges in choosing how we move from one writing action to another and what approach we use, and
- *disposition problems*, or challenges in finding ways to manage our attitudes and habits of mind.

These categories overlap, since selecting reliable and relevant evidence about California wildfires (*knowledge problem*) will depend on whether you're writing to fourth-grade students or forestry experts (*rhetoric problem*). And you may have other names or categories of problems that appear in your own story about writing: deadline problems, long-paper problems, rambling problems, getting-started problems. The goal with naming a problem is not to get the name precisely right, but to make the problem more solvable: doesn't "deadline problem" seem much more concrete and ordinary a challenge than a mysterious "writer's block"?

Not only are there are many kinds of problems writers can face as we compose, but most problems have multiple solutions. If you have a deadline problem—too much to write in too short a time—you could adjust the writing (write less, write about an issue/angle that's not so difficult, lower your expectations for perfection) or adjust the time (skip your racquetball game, find someone to help supervise the children, request an extension). Likewise, if you have a getting-started problem, and your usual step of outlining isn't working, you could try freewriting, writing from the end backwards, or storyboarding with pictures and icons.

It might seem overwhelming to start listing all the problems and solutions writers have; writing scholar Ann Berthoff called this the "allatonceness" of practicing writing. But it can also be comforting: instead of thinking that there's one simple strategy everyone else knows that you can't seem to master, or feeling incompetent because a strategy you were successful with last year doesn't work with your current situation, you can just take a deep breath, name the problem, and *try some solution* that seems reasonable.

Advanced writers study and reflect on their writing

Writers study writing just as chemists study chemistry and musicians study music—and advanced writers use repeated reflective practices to understand our own work.

On a really good day when you are "in the flow" of writing, you might think that the key to becoming a good writer is to "just do it." You don't want anything to interrupt the flow, and you may resist looking back at what you've written afterwards or trying a strategy that feels uncertain. Still, you probably shouldn't stay in

the flow if it's not taking you to the right outcome: that would be like continuing to run westward because it's downhill and easier, when actually you need to head north in order to get home for dinner.

It's true that repeated practice helps writers improve, but advanced writers aim to practice only strategies that we can verify as successful, and we are always studying strategies that could be even more successful. Managers study successful businesses to understand key principles for improving the bottom line, and they examine their own shop's quarterly performance to see where they need to adjust their actions. Writers likewise study others' work: how other writers compose and revise, how different genres function in professional or community settings, and how readers respond to texts.

Writers also improve when we study—and write about—our own work as writers. Often this is called "reflective writing," since it serves as a mirror to let you see more about yourself, or "metacognitive writing," since it helps us think about our thinking and think about our learning. If you want to improve as a writer, you need to develop a consistent *reflective practice*. You may already have tried reflection at the end of a project, if you wrote or talked about what was difficult and what strategies you used. Reflection is also helpful in the middle of a writing project if you get stuck, the way a coach can call a "time out" in the middle of a game to help players find a new strategy to boost the team's score. Finally, reflection can be surprisingly useful at the beginning of a project, to help predict all of the variables and opportunities that are part of a writing project. As you gain practice in pausing to reflect and adapt your strategies, you'll find that this approach speeds your progress rather than holding you back.

1.4 Focus on Equity: "Good Writing" Is Not a Neutral Judgment

We might usefully consider a tenth principle, though it's not one we should try to sustain: Not all writers, and not all writing, have been or will be treated equitably in our schools, communities, and workplaces.

Throughout this book, you will find sections inviting you to "focus on equity": to examine how writing and writers have been and can be judged in ways that unfairly include and valorize some communities, perspectives, and people, and exclude or penalize others. Writing is both a tool of powerful people—many if not most of our laws, policies, histories, and plans are shared through written documents—and a practice that can allow all of us to be heard (think of the latest social media star who has risen to fame based on their communication skills). So it is crucial that writers pay attention to how writing tasks, writing assessments, and our stories about writing are being used to promote or limit access, inclusion, and equity.

Three of the principles offered earlier in this chapter are particularly helpful as we seek to understand how the definitions of "good writing" are not neutral, and as we look for opportunities to increase equitable access to success in written communication.

Writing is a social rather than an individual act.

When communities and their social structures deliberately provide access, writing and writers can be included equitably. However, when societies operate in systems of discrimination—as has been the case through the history of the US generally, and the history of US educational systems more specifically—writers feel the burden of inequitable and exclusive practices.

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts.

Ideally, when readers are open-minded, and when contexts are created specifically to encourage wide participation from writers who hail from diverse communities and experiences, all writers flourish. In such a case, all writers would be asked to adapt their writing in similar amounts and degrees. However, communities that hold power and set standards can build prejudice into their expectations and standards for "good writing." When that happens, writers who are more like the "in-group" don't have to adapt much at all, and writers who are from different backgrounds have to adapt a lot—even to the point of suppressing their views, silencing their home language, or compromising on their fundamental values.

There is no single definition of a good writer.

In an equitable world, all writers who connect with and affect the audiences they care the most about would be acknowledged as successful, whether they're writing reggaeton lyrics or journal articles about mRNA vaccines. However, the people who developed schools, governments, and high-status professions—in the US, these have historically been people who are White, male, straight, cisgender, Christian, able-bodied, neurotypical, and wealthy—have typically narrowed the definition of "good writer" to match their own preferences and thus limited or excluded millions of writers who are different from them.

Since you are an advanced writer who is interested in creating an accurate and empowering story about writing, you should be ready to ask questions about some key ways that social structures, readers' prejudices, and institutional rules and regulations can affect writers. For instance, writers might usefully ask questions about these and other aspects of writing:

- *Expectations that writers will use "correct grammar," or what is sometimes called Standard Edited American English*. It is important that writers use

language structures that enable people to communicate; if we always se-
lected random spellings or word orders, we would limit readers' ability
to comprehend our messages. And yet nearly all of us compose in and
comprehend multiple styles or languages, even if all we do is shift from
formal textbook sentences to the abbreviations, slang, and specialized
terms used in various social media communities. So we know we should
be skeptical about claims that only one style or grammatical structure is
always correct.

- *Expectations that common genres and structures for writing are universally
  valued and effective.* Genres of writing, like genres of music, are defined
  by the communities that use them—and by the communities that control
  how they are published and paid for—and so they are not neutral. If we
  can have lively discussions about what counts as "real country" music or
  "authentic rap," and about who has the power to decide those questions,
  we should be able to have fascinating conversations about what counts
  as an "essay," a "proposal," or a "research paper," and who is excluded or
  disempowered by those definitions.

- *Expectations that standardized, published criteria for evaluating writing
  are necessarily fair.* Generally it is better for people or communities that
  are evaluating writing to state their expectations and apply them consis-
  tently. However, it can be difficult to achieve a high level of transparency
  and consistency about what "good writing" is even when the designers
  of the criteria intend to be clear. Experts tend to have assumptions about
  high-quality writing that they don't know or forget how to describe. More-
  over, even thorough, public standards or rubrics can replicate a commu-
  nity's biases about writing and writers. Communities have a right to set
  criteria and judge performances, so you probably shouldn't invest your
  time challenging every grade you get in college as being inherently un-
  fair. But as an advanced writer you can ask specific questions about why
  one writing approach is deemed more effective than another, and you can
  suggest other criteria that could be used to identify successful writing in a
  particular field, context, or situation.

The multiple ways that "good writing" has been—and continues to be— inequi-
tably limited, restricted, and defined is a testament to exactly how powerful writ-
ing is. When we discourage, disallow, or destroy a particular kind of writing, we
limit whole cultures and communities; conversely, a writer or community who
discovers how to "go viral" and connect with their readers can have tremendous
influence. Writers can surely benefit from learning and practicing particular skills
that help us connect to specific audiences—but we need to balance accommodat-
ing those readers' stated needs with our work as advocates for flexible, inclusive
communities that value diverse approaches to "good writing."

Learn

- To learn more about **readers' expectations**, see <u>Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs</u>.
- To learn more about "**correctness**," see <u>Chapter 11, Editing in Context</u>.
- To learn more about **genres**, see <u>Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres</u>.

1.5 Your New Story About Writing

Since stories are so powerful, you want to be sure that the story you use today to guide how you think and work as a writer draws on the most relevant, most useful concepts you know. Because writers change, and what we write changes, and what we learn about writing changes, we are always updating our story. Certainly, the story you used five years ago or even last year may have worked well for you then, but it probably needs at least some new paint, and maybe even a full reframing. You may also find that you want to revise your story to make it more inclusive and equitable.

Your story doesn't have to account for every possible writing task or situation; instead, you want to focus on core values and common goals. You can compose your writing story in a few sentences, as a list or table of ideas and plans, or as couple of paragraphs or short video: whatever helps you communicate to yourself in a memorable, accessible way. An updated story could:

- Address the many kinds of writing you do in and beyond school: what does "writing" mean to you?
- Draw on beliefs and practices that have contributed strongly to your success in the past: what do you try to always do or think that helps you as you write?
- Include elements that reflect what researchers know about how writers work and learn, and connect those to your experiences.
- Consider "intangibles" that help form a context for writing, like your long-term goals, your attitudes and emotions, whether you have generally been included or excluded from common definitions of a "good writer," and/or your roles in your workplace or community.

You probably will need to tinker with your story in the coming weeks as you learn more, experiment more, and receive feedback. And a year or two from now, you'll be ready to write your *next* story about writing. But for now it's good just to have a working draft: a story you can tell yourself about writing, your work as a writer, and your pathways to success.

Explore 1.3

Draft an updated writing story—write at least three or four sentences or list 3-4 elements. Include beliefs, strategies, or habits that have helped you be a confident, successful writer in the past, or that help you generally be a successful student or community member. Then consider what you're learning: which of the threshold concepts listed in this section might you add to your story about writing? How can you use your story to foster inclusion and equity for diverse writers? What other aspects or elements of writing do you want to pay attention to in the upcoming months?

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Chapter 2. Adopting Productive Writers' Habits

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize how habits and dispositions affect writers
- Identify strategies for improving dispositions such as confidence, motivation, self-regulation, persistence, and openness
- Acknowledge and respond to structural advantages and disadvantages writers face
- Reflect to reframe "failure" as an opportunity for growth as a writer

  A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

  If you think it, you can achieve it.

Dress for the job you want to have.

Fake it 'til you make it.

Have you ever encouraged someone with one of these statements, or had someone encourage you? Like many aphorisms, they are overstated—you can't mend a broken bone just by thinking you can, and nobody wants their firefighter or pilot faking their way through a crisis—but they each point to a fact of human behavior that research has helped us demonstrate. Generally, scholars have shown that people who pay attention to their typical *actions* and *attitudes*, and develop productive habits they can rely on, increase their ability to improve in any field or situation. Writers stand to benefit significantly from forming good habits of mind: our intentions, attitudes, perspectives, and motivations strongly affect the ease or difficulty of writing and the quality of what we write, whether it's a lyric poem or a financial report.

2.1 Writers Rely on Habits of Mind

When we start to think about writing as a *verb*, a way that we interact with other people, then we understand that *learning about the rules of writing* is only a small part of our growth: each of us also needs to *learn how to think and act as a writer*. Writers make limited progress when we focus on creating a perfect document on the first try (mostly, we end up just feeling frustrated if it's not perfect). On the other hand, writers can experience significant growth when we

- reflect on the actions we take and the attitudes we have, to see which ones help us and which ones hold us back;
- identify and reframe attitudes that may be interfering with our goals as writers; and
- review our struggles and failures to learn from them how to improve and grow as writers.

That is, to succeed as a writer, you don't have to master everything at once. Instead, you should adopt some actions and intentions that writers often use, and practice them frequently enough that they start to become writing habits.

Several of the threshold concepts that writing scholars emphasize are relevant to our exploration here of habits of mind. Which of these concepts is already, or might become, part of your story about writing?

> ### 🚪 You can become a good writer and a better writer
>
> You already have many viable writing skills, and you are capable of becoming a better writer and a competent writer of many kinds of texts.

> ### 🚪 Writing involves strategies more than talent
>
> Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

> ### 🚪 Advanced writers study and reflect on their writing
>
> Writers study writing just as chemists study chemistry and musicians study music—and advanced writers use repeated reflective practices to understand our own work.

This focus on reflective practice and habit building may seem like a distraction when you have a chemistry lab due in six hours, a psychology group project to finish by the end of the week, or a quarterly report to finish for work this month. But instead of just "cranking out" a draft, you will benefit from spending some time developing productive habits. Your mental fitness as a writer will help with your writing tasks this week, with your writing challenges next week, and especially as you seek to become more flexible and confident as a writer overall.

In this chapter, we explore how writers address challenges in connecting with readers, by balancing the rhetorical demands placed on us by readers' expectations with our own goals and with the complexities of the issues we're writing about. These sections focus on how writers get our own practices in order, so that we have a strong internal foundation of writerly habits. Chapter 3, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process, follows up by exploring how writers engage in reflective practice to integrate our perceptions, habits, and actions.

2.2 Practice Productive Habits of Mind

Have you ever procrastinated on a writing project? If you're at all like me, you didn't just answer, "Yes!"; you answered "Yes" and felt a little bad about that answer, as if that signaled that you had a flaw in your character. Yet current researchers in psychology don't identify procrastination as an immutable flaw: instead, they see it as a situational disposition.

Dispositions involve the ways that we arrange our responses and practices as we complete particular tasks in specific situations—and anything that can be arranged can be rearranged. After all, you may have a pleasant personal disposition overall, but you can still find yourself on a particular Tuesday afternoon with an unmotivated disposition regarding a specific essay for your anthropology class. Moreover, writing scholars note that all writers face disposition problems, and so we all have to develop strategies to manage our emotions and attitudes related to writing just as carefully as we manage our sentences and sources. That is, we need to practice *better habits of mind*.

Identify and reframe disposition problems

Disposition problems are real problems, and they directly affect your writing: if you are unmotivated and you don't address that problem, you may invest less time, energy, and insight into your writing, and your final document will suffer from that loss. Fortunately, since disposition problems have more to do with your approach or attitude about a series of events than with your core personality, they can be solved.

You should know that studies of experts generally, and of expert writers specifically, have not found that they see their jobs as easy, or that they manage their time perfectly, or that they are certain from the start of impressing their readers. Experienced writers often face disposition problems: we get frustrated or disengaged, underestimate how much time a task will take, or worry about whether we have the ability to complete a writing project successfully.

However, such studies have identified attitudes and habits of mind that many experts cultivate, approaches that help them in their fields, and can help us as writers. The most successful writers deliberately reframe their attitudes to be more confident, motivated, self-regulating, persistent, and open. When writers cultivate more productive dispositions about writing, we can increase our insight and creativity, and have more time and brain power to spend solving other writing problems.

To improve your writerly habits of mind, you should watch for any disposition problems and learn some strategies for coping with those challenges. Disposition is related to the story you tell yourself about your writing, and that story is powerful: if you tell yourself a different story, you can actually re-arrange your relationship to your writing task and become a more successful writer.

This chapter focuses on five powerful dispositions for writers, though you may have others as part of your writing story:

- Confidence
- Motivation
- Self-regulation (this includes time management)
- Persistence
- Openness

As you consider how your dispositions affect your work as a writer, you should focus on three key habits you can practice to solve disposition problems:

- **Tap into hidden assets**. Often you can identify mental resources that are not immediately obvious: for instance, you can recall early successes with writing projects or seek a connection between a writing task and an issue that inspires or motivates you.

- **Tell yourself a positive story**. Friends who tell you to "Think positive!" or "Envision yourself succeeding!" have a really good point: research shows that when you tell yourself positive stories, you create mental space that can help you solve a disposition problem.
- **Behave as if you have solved the problem**. You may know this strategy as "Fake it 'til you make it": if you put on a suit and stride confidently into a job interview meeting, or you try to smile at some flowers or kittens even when you are feeling sad, you don't just fool other people, but you change your own mental state.

The more you get into a habit of recognizing your current disposition and reframing your story to improve your attitude, at least temporarily, the more you gain power as an advanced writer and spend less time feeling frustrated or stuck.

Explore 2.1

Think of a writing project you completed recently. Describe one or two *disposition problems* with that task that you faced and solved, or that you could have solved. How might you have changed your attitude or your behavior to cope with that problem (even) more successfully?

Strengthen your habits of confidence

Writers can work on building two kinds of confidence habits. In one approach, you can strengthen your backwards-looking confidence. As you recall your recent past, you can identify evidence that you have previously succeeded at a writing task like your current one, and so you can reasonably believe that you will succeed at this task now. This is a *hidden-assets strategy*: when you identify what relevant skills and accomplishments you already bring to a writing task, you can increase your confidence.

You can also increase your forward-looking confidence by taking an optimistic view that even if there are challenges, you can apply your problem-solving skills to come up with a reasonable solution. Stanford University researcher Carol Dweck calls this a *growth mindset*. Her research has demonstrated that people who have a fixed mindset (they believe that "I am just no good at writing," for instance) can learn to adopt a growth mindset ("anyone can get better at writing, including me"). This is a *positive-story strategy*: the more you tell yourself that *you can learn* what you need to succeed as a writer, the more you will learn, and the more confidence you will gain.

Direct your habits of motivation

It can seem as though motivation is all-or-nothing: you have it or you don't. But motivation is an attitude, and writers can develop habits of mind that direct our

thinking toward higher motivation. One motivating habit is to look beyond the current task for other *external* rewards. Maybe you don't feel particularly motivated to write about trade routes during the Ming Dynasty in China or last quarter's energy expenses, but you can remind yourself how you'll feel if you earn a good grade or receive some praise from your manager in the short term, or you can focus on longer-term successes in completing your major coursework or earning next year's salary bonus for high performance. This *positive-story strategy* can help writers gain energy and focus.

Writers build the strongest motivation habits, though, when we can connect to *internal* motivations: we look for opportunities to link a current project to an issue or event that already motivates us. You could start a habit of asking, "How might this connect to my interests or values?" and seeing what an online search brings up: you might find some surprising links between "Federalist papers *and social media*" or "traffic regulations *and dessert.*" Or perhaps you need to dig deeper for other *hidden assets*: maybe you are a person who values learning, community relationships, or efficient operations, and you can see how your work on this writing task enables you to act on those deeper values. If that doesn't work, you might have to *fake it* a bit: imagine what someone who *is* motivated by this task would feel and do, and see what happens when you take that approach.

Upgrade your habits of self-regulation

The phrase "time management" suggests that writers need to make changes to time itself, which feels daunting—but when you think of it as "*self*-management" or part of a larger category that psychologists call *self-regulation*, you can see how this is an arrangeable disposition. If you truly don't mind always running late, you might not need an upgrade—but be sure that you're sure, and not just buying into a myth about how stress makes us work better (research shows this is not generally true). Remember that human beings are adept at rationalizing our actions, even when those choices actually make us unhappy. And don't try to change the universe: you should focus just on upgrading your self-regulation approaches, not turning yourself overnight into a mythical being who never procrastinates.

A first key step is a *positive-story* step: you need to be honest with yourself about what you're avoiding and why, and then see if you can reframe that story toward a positive outcome. If you are avoiding something that seems difficult or painful, try to identify one aspect of it that might be relatively easy or interesting, or remind yourself of how you succeeded at it before. If you are feeling tempted by short-term pleasures (like another round of that video game or a tasty sandwich), tell yourself a vivid story of how good you'll feel if you can complete even a small piece of your current writing task and not have the whole thing hanging over your head. Try to focus on your *ultimate values and priorities*: What kind of person, student, or writer do you most want to be in the long run?

Writers develop self-regulating habits by making a plan to do a small task, monitoring our actions and feelings while working on it, and then adjusting our plan depending on how well the work went. You might want to use a journal, to-do app, or calendar to make your first plan and write your notes. If it feels strange to be doing your writing on a set schedule, a little at a time, rather than waiting for inspiration or panic to hit all at once, you may need to *fake it* for a while: follow a schedule for a week even when you don't believe that will help you, and check in at the end to see if anything felt helpful. Research shows that people who act deliberately to identify and manage how they use time are ultimately more successful writers and learners.

Reinforce your habits of persistence

In everyday discussions, persistence is often framed as a *fake-it* quality: even writers who are neither motivated nor confident can grit their teeth and do their work, like an exhausted marathon runner pushing through the twenty-sixth mile. Writers who are working on daily required tasks for their courses or workplaces talk about this kind of persistence a lot with friends and colleagues: "Yeah, I just have to get it done."

Yet writers also need to cultivate and reinforce our habits of persistence not just to complete a whole task, but to stay focused when we are struggling with a particular section or stage, and to stay optimistic when feedback from instructors or other readers indicates that we didn't meet our goals. Expert as well as novice writers need to make a habit of going forward even—perhaps especially—when the path is rough. In fact, researchers have shown that advanced writers actually spend *more* time planning, debating, agonizing, failing, rethinking, and revising during their writing process than novice writers do, and so we need powerful persistence. Just as video game players learn a little more each time their race car crashes or their character dies, writers learn from trying and failing and trying again. To increase your persistence as a writer, you may need to use a *positive-story strategy*, to convince yourself that "failing *and trying again*" signals your success persisting in a complicated or important writing task (rather than signaling that you were not meant to be a writer). The more you practice persisting, the stronger this habit will become.

Foster your habit of openness

The state of *openness*—along with its active cousins, *curiosity* and *creativity*—is a crucial habit of mind for anyone whose job it is to *create knowledge* the way writers do. Even when you're writing a summary or a report, you are still being a "creative writer": the facts you select, and the order and emphasis you give them, create a new experience for readers to share. Like motivation and self-regulation, openness and

curiosity don't just happen (or fail to happen): when writers direct ourselves to take an open, questioning stance, we increase our curiosity, expand our capacity to see new ideas and connections, and set the stage for creating knowledge.

While prior knowledge can increase your confidence as you write, your certainty can also get in the way of both understanding and motivation. Writers are more excited and more attentive when we are curious about an idea, a process, or a community, and so we can bring more accuracy, engagement, and insight to our writing. Curiosity can be supported with a *hidden-assets* approach: even if you are not innately curious about the history of US tax codes, you might tap into your more general curiosity about governmental powers, community justice, or last year's tax refund.

If you're not feeling very open or curious as you write, you can always *fake it* a bit: you know that curious people ask questions, and so you can imagine the questions that *someone* would have, and adopt them for your own. Writers also need to foster openness about our own writing, so that we can receive and learn from readers' feedback. Instead of following a first impulse to feel hurt or disgruntled that readers did not immediately gasp in amazement at your writing, you can tell yourself a *positive story* about how writers succeed through struggle, feedback, and revision, and let that story boost your curiosity (if not yet your complete agreement) regarding your readers' experiences.

Explore 2.2

Of these five habits of mind—confidence, motivation, self-regulation, persistence, and openness—which one comes most easily to you as you write? Which one seems most like a habit you could try to practice more deliberately this month? What steps could you try in a current or upcoming writing project that could help you tell a positive story, uncover hidden assets, or even just fake it a bit to help you develop your writerly mindset?

Practice

- To **explore your** dispositions, see Attitude Inventory or Values Freewrite.
- To strengthen your optimism, see Funny Story or Gaining a Growth Mindset.
- To manage an upcoming writing task, see Deluxe Project Scheduler or Learn-Write Timeline.
- To engage your **motivation and curiosity** as you start a project, see Problem Solver Parallels or Ten Ways to Choose a Topic.

  NOTE: These Practice features provide links to exercises in Chapters 23 through 29. If you are reading this book in print, you can find an alphabetical list of exercises at the end of the book. The list includes the section in which each exercise can be found.

Learn

- To learn more about **reflecting to predict** your challenges and opportunities, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process.
- To learn more about **revising from readers' feedback**, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.

2.3 Focus on Equity: Recognize and Respond to External Barriers

Despite all of our efforts to retrain our brains to be flexible and to develop productive habits, writers can still run into challenges that "habits of mind" cannot solve. These may be a result of personal limitations or resources; they may also be a result of more systemic discrimination. Not all writers have equal access to resources, knowledge, or fair judgment by others. However, when we identify these problems and decide how we want to respond to them, we can retain our sense of ownership and achievement as we work on becoming better writers—and we can think about how to increase equity for all writers.

Identify any position problems

While your *dispositions* are situational and manageable, there are some problems you may not be able to solve in the middle of a writing task. Your *positions* as a writer are often defined for you before you begin. More than just whether you are sitting at a desk or curled up on a sofa, your writing positions include:

- The amount of control and knowledge you already possess
- The amounts of time and other resources you have or can gain access to
- The institutional structures that influence the production and evaluation of your writing
- The cultural expectations and biases held by other people that affect your access to knowledge, resources, and approval

In your writing story, you might identify some specific position problems: elements of your housing, budget, family, school, or community situation that other people define and control. It's important to learn how to identify position problems that can affect your work, as a writer and in other areas of your life.

- You can summon up persistence and grit to address a tough project, but others around you may have been taught more information, coached in more skills, or given more tools than you have access to, so you start from a less advantaged position.

- You can often manage how you spend your time, but your family or work responsibilities may significantly limit your flexibility, and you may not currently have access to a more flexible job or additional child care, so you operate from a more constricted position.

- You can often talk yourself into a more confident approach, but others may repeatedly judge you based on your race, gender, language, or other aspect of your identity rather than only your performance, so you are positioned to have less access to a higher rating or evaluation.

You might not receive the grade or praise you'd hoped for if your position limited your access to resources—but when you recognize that in a particular case, other factors besides your skill and dedication were affecting the outcome, you can continue to practice productive habits of mind and action to use on the next project rather than deciding you're just "not a good writer." It can be useful as well to identify *advantages* that your position may provide. When you are new to a situation, you bring more openness and fewer limiting biases; the same job or family that draws on your time also bestows perspectives and support that other writers do not have; and the qualities that some people devalue you for may be crucial for how you connect with and inspire readers in and beyond your community.

Understand common position problems of writers in school

In recent decades, writing scholars have identified some position problems that many US students face as they learn, practice, and are evaluated on their writing in academic settings. For instance:

- Some writing scholars argue that when schools and governments judge students' overall writing abilities by grading a timed essay examination, they do not accurately measure all of students' important writing skills. A timed essay puts writers into a limited position in which they cannot demonstrate their ability to discover new angles, to revise an early draft, or to adapt their writing to new audiences or new genres.

- Other writing scholars point out, similarly, that school writing assignments can limit writers' positions by having them produce only academic essays rather than composing in other genres, or by having writers produce documents that meet "good writing" guidelines that are rooted in specific cultural assumptions (such as US cultures that value directness)—especially when modern professional and community-based communication includes a much wider variety of successful modalities.

- Finally, scholars note, requirements that students always produce writing that has zero errors according to Standard Edited Academic English may limit students' positions and lower their opportunities to learn and share as writers—after all, research shows that they can be successful

communicators using other styles of English, "correct" or "incorrect," in personal and professional writing outside of school.

Research into national trends shows that students from marginalized racial or cultural populations, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, students who are among the first in their families to attend college, and students from multilingual backgrounds are systematically rated as less successful writers than White, middle-class students who are part of the college-going cultures that helped define these narrow measurements—even when these diverse students have very strong skills in both mainstream and alternative ways of writing. Although it is important to be clear about the "standards" for writing in any situation, if a single "standard" repeatedly doesn't measure the full capability of all smart, hard-working writers, then we all need to investigate the standards and expand our understanding of what "good writing" is.

Respond to position problems

Facing an external constraint doesn't give you a free pass: you're not automatically exempt from completing an essay exam in your sociology course just because you know that it doesn't measure your full skill set. Nor does discovering an immovable limitation always mean you need to choose between quitting or failing. Depending on your resources—which may include your safety, status, and social networks as well as access to time or money—you might choose different responses in different situations.

- **Identify priorities and accept some consequences**. If you need or choose to prioritize your job or your family, that can be a reasonable decision even if it means that this week's writing project won't turn out as well as you know it would if you could make it your top priority (you're still a "good writer," after all!).

- **Seek assistance or allies**. Popular US culture valorizes individual superheroes who solve their own problems, but research shows that most successful people lean on others to survive and succeed. Especially while you are in school, it's smart to ask questions, take advantage of office hours or tutoring, and invite others to join your informal study group or group text, especially when you're facing position problems.

- **Adapt to a limitation temporarily**. People in low-power positions often have to follow the rules set by more powerful people, even when those rules are unfair or harmful. Writers have an advantage here, because we know that good writing always balances *some adaptation to readers' needs* with *some commitment to the writer's goals*: we can adapt to a strict report or exam format today, while knowing that we still have powerful messages to communicate in our own style or voice tomorrow.

- **Find or create alternate pathways**. Few position problems create a 100% barrier to all communication. When your position limits one part of your writing success, you can look for alternative audiences or publications to communicate your ideas. You can also watch for places where you can bend the rules or stretch the limits: maybe you can code-mesh by including some phrases from your home language to express your true experiences in a school essay, or propose an alternate topic or project focus that resonates more with your job or family priorities.

- **Challenge the status quo**. Alone or with your allies, you can question or even challenge a barrier once you spot it. Writers have an advantage here, too, because we constantly practice identifying our readers' misconceptions or resistance points and selecting evidence and arguments that may successfully challenge that resistance. When you can present a reasonable alternative that allows many people to benefit from more flexible or equitable positions, you help others as well as yourself.

Some of these responses may be unacceptable to you, and some may be unavailable in a particular situation. But writers are more successful when we choose our path and find successful stories to tell ourselves, so even choosing a somewhat-frustrating response over a truly terrible option will help you strengthen your writerly habits.

You should assess any position problems you have as you enter each writing project, so that you are prepared to choose your responses while continuing to improve as a writer. And while for now, you may not be able to change your position, you can take note of a special challenge and commit yourself to trying to change an assumption or policy in the future, so that you and others can gain more powerful positions as writers.

> ## Learn
>
> - Learn more about how **"good writing" is not a neutral judgment** in Chapter 1, Rethinking Your Writing.
> - Learn more about **code-meshing** and other adaptations to Standard Edited American English in Chapter 11, Editing in Context.

Acknowledge position advantages

As a mindful writer, finally, you should take time to become aware of any *position advantages* that you have. You may have received good grades on your writing in large part because of your talent and hard work, but you may also—like a bicycle rider with the wind at their back—have had opportunities, resources, and support that other writers did not have access to.

All writers have some position advantages. Because of who we are, where we live, and what responsibilities we carry, we have had more time, encouragement, access to resources, insider knowledge, or community respect than other writers who are just as intelligent and hardworking as we are. The more a writer's background or situation aligns with the background of powerful people—in the US, these have historically been people who are White, male, straight, cisgender, Christian, able-bodied, neurotypical, and wealthy—the more position advantages that writer will have. Your awareness of these advantages doesn't detract from your success, but it can let you ally with other writers to help ensure that everyone has equitable opportunities to succeed. Moreover, you help yourself when you are honest about your positions: since *there is no single definition of "good writer,"* you know better than to expect that success in one kind of writing means you will always be successful, so you will be more open to learning and growing beyond your current achievements.

2.4 Attend to Failures In Order to Grow as a Writer

Despite all of our mindful actions, new stories, and hidden assets, writers still fail—a lot! Of course, you might not have *seen* writers failing the way you've watched your favorite sports teams fail, or the way you've seen your business ventures or laboratory projects hit dead ends, because writers tend to work and thus fail in private. On the other hand, any time you have gotten frustrated trying to follow the directions to assemble a piece of furniture, or stopped watching a TV series because it just wasn't as good as you hoped, you have encountered a public writing failure.

To succeed as a writer, you will need to employ habits of mind and reflective practice concerning your struggles.

- Tell yourself a new story, by understanding that failure is a normal and necessary part of writing, just as it is for any complex task.
- Be honest and open about failure: Instead of covering up your challenges, develop strategies for acknowledging and growing from your own failures.
- Understand the role that fear can play in writing, and adopt affirmative counterpoints to limit that role.
- Build new habits and communities that accommodate failure: Get comfortable with sharing your failures in writing, and support other writers in growing through their failures.

Some or all of those actions may seem not just uncomfortable but hazardous: in most places in your life right now, failure is often hidden, unappreciated, misunderstood, and even discouraged or forbidden. In some cases, you may have seen that only complete success earns the top prize. Moreover, people in many US and

Western cultures take great satisfaction in ranking *everything*, from safe cities for families to flavors of chewing gum to internet memes about cats: Many "likes" is good, and few or no "likes" indicates a failure.

More specifically, we know that US school culture has focused students' attention on avoiding failure, and even avoiding all but a very specific kind of success: success on standardized tests with one right answer, or success using one right format for writing. To be a "good student" has come to mean always succeeding where people can see you, never letting on that something is difficult, and getting something right on the first try. If "good students" fail, we rarely see it. Why would anyone in their right mind want to fail *more*?

And yet: you probably also participate in groups or activities in which you expect to fail, and perhaps even enjoy it. Most video games—whether they involve card decks, rainbow candy, fast cars, mad birds, exploding creepers, or shrewd elves—are designed to have players fail dozens or hundreds of times before they succeed at a level, a task, or a quest. It may sound unusual to describe it this way, but ultimately in these games you are paying good money for the pleasure of failing again and again. (If you always succeeded, you'd probably quit and go looking for more challenging adventures, right?)

Likewise, if you play a sport or an instrument, if you throw pottery or record dance videos, if you write code or combine amino acids or create new salsa recipes, you know that practice and failure are crucial parts of the learning process. You spend a lot of time being wrong or only partly right before you finally succeed. Failure is *normal and necessary* during these learning and creating and discovery processes, all of which may take a long time.

For advanced writers, directly addressing one's failures is a key step toward success. You may initially find it strange to publicize and analyze your failures, to examine your fears, or to support other writers by sharing and even celebrating one another's failures. But writing is as complicated an endeavor as any sport, science experiment, role-playing game, or computer code, and so all writers fail. Moreover, a writing project can only be improved when another person reads it and points out weaknesses. In order to improve as a writer, then, you have to be willing to fail as best as you can in front of other people—and to help them fail well, too.

Explore 2.3

Think of something you failed at recently *by choice*. That is, you knew when you started that your first effort wouldn't be perfect, and yet you chose to try it anyway. Write a few sentences about it: What did failing feel like? Did you get better all at once, or in small steps? Did anyone else see you fail, and if so, what were their reactions? Would you do this again, even knowing what you know now?

Tell a new story: Failure is normal and necessary for growth as a writer

When you are working on a writing project, it may seem that failure is the state you most want to avoid. Failing at a video game is cheerful: it comes with bright colors and exciting music and no real-world penalty. But failing at writing can mean late nights and high anxiety about the consequences that come tomorrow. In writing as in video games, though, the only way to succeed 100% of the time is to stick with simple tasks on Level 1 and never make progress. Writers who fail are writers who grow.

It may help to remember the perspective of scientists like Thomas Edison. Although Edison didn't exactly say that he had failed "10,000 times," as is sometimes reported, he did tell an interviewer that he had to create thousands of entirely plausible (but wrong) theories about electricity before he found two that turned out to be useful. Indeed, researchers have since discovered that students like Edison who try out an idea, fail, and then learn how to improve their work often perform better overall than students who manage to get it right the first time. And it's not just scientists: you can run an internet search for "famous writing failures" or "famous authors rejected" to see which writers have had to suffer more than usual.

Changing a reader's mind requires writers to take risks: if the powerful writing you are working on were simple to do well, someone else would already have done it. So your goal is to become a writer who tries new approaches, fails during the process, and thus creates an opportunity for learning to write better.

Finally, you should remember that failures themselves can sometimes become or produce successes. Alexander Fleming's failure to follow his lab's rules and close up all the Petri dishes led to his first encounter with penicillin. Spencer Silver was known at 3-M Corporation as the guy who had completely failed to make a permanently adhesive tape, until a colleague named Art Fry suggested taking the failed tape and creating Post-It ® sticky notes. And Oprah Winfrey got demoted from an early TV job in Baltimore—but that was where she met her friend and partner Gayle King who helped her launch her successful TV empire. You may not discover a wonder-drug or completely reshape daytime television, but all innovation requires bending or breaking a previously established boundary—and so you have to learn to be good at failing, and willing to fail repeatedly, in order to learn to be successful at writing as at other parts of your life.

Don't just fail: Analyze your failures to enable growth

Biologist Alexander Fleming, media mogul Oprah Winfrey, and inventor Spencer Silver did not automatically and immediately benefit from failing. Fleming and other scientists ran studies on penicillin for over a decade before successfully

producing a form of the drug and a procedure to treat infections in humans. Winfrey spent months failing to write "objective" journalistic scripts, but used that experience to decide that she needed a job that let her build more personal connections. Silver needed an outside perspective from his colleague Fry to help see how his failure to create a permanent adhesive could be useful in other cases. Many kinds of professionals routinely examine failed efforts in order to gain useful knowledge: surgical teams review procedures, basketball teams watch game films, and management teams examine case studies of failed public relations efforts, all hoping to spot mistakes they can avoid and innovations they might capitalize on.

To make failure useful rather than just frustrating, you need to know more about it rather than moving past it as quickly as possible. After all, your goal is always to fail forward: not to fail at the same things again and again, but to fail in a way that helps you improve. Instead of ignoring a failure or seeking a quick fix, take time to reflect on your challenges and ask yourself "fail-forward" questions:

> **Why did you fail?** It's easy to skip this step, or to just shrug your shoulders ("Eh, I guess I wasn't paying attention"). Instead, hold an honest conversation with yourself, and give a specific answer: what was the biggest challenge, and what else might you have tried? Even if you're not sure exactly what led to the failure, identifying one or more possible causes gives you a way to improve.

> **What eventually helped you move toward success?** Sometimes success is even more difficult to track than failure: you just "got in the flow" or "knew what to do" somehow and the writing worked. Try to uncover whether the difficulty was less daunting than you expected, whether you had good resources or dispositions to draw on, or whether you used a particularly apt new strategy.

> **How can you apply what you've learned?** Instead of fixing one problem and dashing away, describe to yourself how the fix could work generally. A failure and remedy in one part of a document are likely to be connected to other parts as well. You might also be able to isolate one or two key skills or strategies to practice in future projects. So keep asking yourself how to transfer your new insights: What other sections of your document might also need a narrower focus or more supporting data? How could you improve your final project for music theory class using similar strategies?

You don't have to be relentlessly cheerful about your failures or pretend that a partial success is a grand-prize-winning experience; most failures are frustrating and don't result in the invention of a billion-dollar product. And of course, not all writing projects will give you opportunities to learn-by-failing. For instance, when your boss surprises you with a new project due tomorrow, you might not have enough time or

security to tinker with new strategies that could lead to the best possible report; likewise, when you have an essay exam at the end of your child psychology course, your grade for the semester may depend on the quality of your first-try answer. In situations like those, the consequences of failure can be part of a position problem that you can't just solve with a "new story," so you need to create the best possible document. But the more you can use your writing class to practice diagnosing, recovering from, and growing through your failures, the stronger a writer you'll become.

Take some control: Face fears and activate affirmations

Because communication is such a foundational human activity, writing can get tangled up in many of the fears and apprehensions that we encounter in our daily lives. What if we write the wrong thing, don't finish a task on time, have errors in our writing, get a low grade, or offend someone? We aren't usually physically at risk from an inadequately completed research paper, but we can face both emotional stress and real-world consequences, so fear is a normal reaction. That said, fear and anxiety inhibit critical thinking, openness, and persistence, all of which writers need, so writers need steps to lower our stress levels.

It can help to know *what* you are afraid of, just as it helps to identify any other problem you face as a writer. Are you concerned about meeting someone else's standards, or living up to your own goals? Are you remembering a specific past problem, considering a problem that you see happening now, or worrying about a possible danger in the future? Are you overwhelmed by "everything," or can you pinpoint a particular task or encounter that is generating anxiety? When you know more about your worries, you can try an alternate path or seek out feedback or assistance; you can also try a "new story" by telling yourself an affirmation.

Affirmations are optimistic statements about strengths, achievements, goals, values, and safety, and they can become a powerful part of your writing story. As with other problem-solving strategies in this book, the use of spoken, written, or even just consciously considered affirmations to improve performance is well-documented in research as a step to improve writing, learning, and performance in many professional fields. Affirmations are part of developing a growth mindset.

Whether we use them regularly through a practice of meditation or coaching, or situationally just at a point of need, affirmations can be a key strategy to counterbalance fear. Which of the affirmations below do you think might be helpful to you when you are most stressed about your writing?

- **Improvement:** I am continuing to improve as a writer.
- **Effort:** I am working hard enough on this project.
- **History:** I have succeeded on projects like this one before, and will do so again.

- **Growth:** I am here to learn; if I make mistakes, I can learn from them.
- **Strength:** I am proud of my strengths as a writer (or a student, or a person), such as _____.
- **Perspective:** I can take one step at a time and be successful.
- **Grace:** I will treat myself as kindly about this challenge as I would treat a peer or friend.
- **Values**: I am staying true to my core values of ____ and ____ as I work on this project.
- **Belonging**: I am in the right place for my goals, needs, and abilities at this time.
- **Vision:** I can imagine myself completing this task successfully.

You might know of or create other affirmations could you try. Remember that like any new story, affirmations may need some time and repetition to have their full effect.

Of course, affirmations won't get you or any of us out of a position problem: your narrow-minded boss is still your narrow-minded boss even when you're feeling confident, and your 10-minute meditation won't reduce racism or stop global warming. But it can help to think of these strategies as a "put your own mask on first" approach. Airline flight attendants instruct adult passengers that in case of an emergency, we should put our own oxygen mask on first before helping children or other family members, because if we lose consciousness, we can't help anyone. If you can reduce your own fearfulness and lessen your stress response, you will be not just a better writer but a better friend, colleague, parent, and activist supporting those around you and improving your community.

Team up: Build communities that support growth-through-failure

Psychologists find that learners who stick with a difficult task—who fail and keep trying—have stronger potential for success in an area than learners who are inclined to just give up if the challenge is too hard. Like other writerly habits, persisting through difficulty and using failures to help you grow takes practice, patience, and especially support. It's not a surprise that sports teams and laboratory teams have regular procedures for addressing failures: having a team to share the struggle with makes a huge difference.

Although the image of "the solitary writer" is a powerful one, writers who are learning need teams as much as, if not more than, any other learners. Sprinters can tell by the stopwatch if they've met their goal; programmers can run a program to see if their code produced the desired result. Writers can't even tell if we've succeeded with a basic sentence unless a reader who lives outside our head says "I get it!" Moreover, we improve our skills much faster when readers we

trust identify exactly where they stumbled or disconnected while reviewing our writing.

A writing class can be a great team, especially if you help the team build trust by sharing your struggles and encouraging others to share theirs. When you're surrounded by a community in which everyone's goal is to learn more about writing, you will have extra support as you experiment, fail, and revise: brainstorming wild ideas with your peers, sharing early drafts that explore unexpected arguments, and getting feedback on your project organization during low-risk activities or assignments before a major project comes due.

In addition to learning productive strategies for reviewing peers' drafts, you can help your classroom team, friends, or work colleagues adopt a writerly approach to acknowledging failures and using them to improve:

- Share your challenges as a writer with your peers, so that others know they don't suffer alone, and so that they can see how your success comes out of trying and failing and trying again, rather than as inspiration from some magical muse: "I had a really hard time staying focused on the main idea in this assignment; last night I cut out two whole paragraphs that didn't work!"

- Ask other writers in your community what challenges they face or risks they are taking with their writing, and encourage them to try complicated or unfamiliar tasks that will eventually increase their writing power: "I sympathize with your difficulty summarizing such a complex scenario; have you tried using an online-mind-map site to sort out all the key pieces?"

- Pay special attention to the new strategies your peers are working on, so you can praise them for trying and perhaps initially failing at these key tasks: "I think your argument goes too far right now, but it's great that you're exploring new options!"

- Keep an eye out for "failures" in other writers' work that could be turned into advantages: "I think your personal anecdote isn't working in the middle of this essay, but maybe you could use it to form a powerful introduction or conclusion."

- Thank your peers when they provide honest, specific criticism, so they know you appreciate their efforts to help you improve: "It's frustrating that I need to do even more research, but I appreciate you telling me you're not persuaded yet."

When you write in a community that acknowledges difficulty, empathizes with failure, and supports experimentation, it's easier to go beyond "Writing a good paper" into building habits that will help you succeed as a writer in many current and future situations.

2.5 Nurture Writerly Habits of Success

All this talk about struggle, problems, and failures may start to feel depressing—until you start to see how adopting small habits of mind and action helps to increase your confidence, decrease your "writer's block" episodes, and enable small but crucial successes. Your goal is certainly not to submit a failed project or to be the writer who always messes up. Instead, you want to struggle and then improve, like a pole vaulter or programmer or video game race car driver. When you develop a growth mindset and you adopt writers' habits you can steer yourself toward success, and you also increase your openness to feedback that will speed your journey.

If you're still uncertain that changing your habits, your stories, or your attitudes will help you as a writer, there's no better place than a writing course to try out these approaches and find what works for you. In a class, you can predict your resources and challenges much more consistently than in a workplace or community setting. Moreover, you are surrounded by a community that values your learning, and you can improve every day by watching how you and your peers learn from your challenges. The more regularly you tell yourself a productive story—"I tried, I failed, I improved, and I ended up as a better writer!"—the stronger your successful habits will be, and the more you'll be able to take risks, make mistakes, and eventually solve any problems you encounter as a writer.

Chapter 3. Responding to Readers' Needs

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify elements of the basic rhetorical situation of a writing task and recognize any "rhetoric problems" that can arise as you write

- Identify aspects of subject-matter knowledge that writers are responsible for and recognize "knowledge problems" as they arise when you write

- Analyze complex rhetorical situations by exploring the exigencies and stances that affect writers' work, the discourse communities they write for and within, and the genres used by those communities

"Good writing" is not a concrete object, like a chunk of rock sitting on a table or a collection of 500 words in sentences that have no errors: *Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts*. In other words, the work of writers is not to *compose sentences* but to *move readers*: if you have error-free sentences but readers aren't affected by what you have to say, then your writing doesn't succeed. Sometimes,

of course, we write to move or please ourselves only, and so we can judge our own success—but in most academic, professional, or community writing, readers' needs and reactions directly affect the planning and outcomes of a writing project.

Writing scholars refer to this strategic interaction between writers' goals and readers' needs as *rhetoric*. Although you are already an experienced rhetorician— someone who successfully persuades others to attend to, assist, or follow you— you can benefit from learning more about how writers affect readers and reflecting on your own rhetorical contexts and strategies.

Writers Move Readers

Writers have to do two contradictory things at once: set forth our own ideas, perspectives, and goals, and attend carefully to our readers' needs, desires, and abilities. Since none of us can read other people's minds to know for sure what our readers want, it can seem that good writing happens either by magic or luck: if you're inspired or you guess right, you move readers, and if not, you try again. But like detectives and scientists, writers can deduce a lot of information about readers without having special psychic powers.

You might find it helpful to compare writing-for-readers to a physics experiment. Isaac Newton's first law of motion describes *inertia*: a body at rest stays at rest, and a body in motion at a constant velocity continues in a straight line, unless acted on by an outside force. The new course of the object will depend on several variables, including its own mass and the strength of the force(s) acting on it. Likewise, your reader will continue in their current state of mind and understanding unless you act on them with well-directed force that is sufficient to move them to a new state. It's also useful to imagine that you need to take other forces into account: just as objects around us are affected by the predictable forces of gravity and friction, readers are affected by their context in ways writers can predict and account for. As with any physics experiment, writers need to account for as many variables as possible to identify the resources we need and actions we should take.

Because of this interactive relationship with readers, many of the questions writers have—from "Should I use a semi-colon?" and "Can I write using first-person pronouns?" to "Is this a good source to cite?" and "How much information do I need?"—have the same answer: "It depends." Rather than feeling discouraged by this situation, however, advanced writers step forward into the task and begin looking for signs or signals that help us choose appropriate strategies. For instance, when you notice that readers are skeptical (high inertia) and you understand that your need to convince them is great (significant course change), you may decide to write with a directive approach and several layers of evidence. When your goal is simple and your audience receptive (as in recommending a popular movie to a friend), you will not need as much support or intensity.

🚪 Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

🚪 Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers. In other words, writers consider the whole context of a writing task—the *rhetorical situation*—as we predict, plan, inquire, and compose.

🚪 Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

🚪 Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

Similarly, rather than guessing and hoping for the best, writers select strategies and approaches that best match the situation, seek feedback, and revise with our goals and our readers' needs in mind.

The rest of this section explores the variables that writers learn to consider as we seek more effective ways to move our readers.

3.1 Rhetorical Relations: Writers, Readers, and Messages

For well over two thousand years, experts have been using the term *rhetoric* to describe the dynamic structure of communication. (In daily talk, we may use "rhetoric" or "rhetorical" to describe insincere or ineffective communication, but scholars and advanced writers understand that rhetoric—or strategic communication—can also succeed very strongly.) You are already a rhetoric expert: you know that you should adapt your message to your audience and situation, and you already have strategies for doing so. Writers face a particular set of challenges in this area, though. Since we are writing to diverse and sometimes unknown audiences, we have to adapt by *anticipating* rather than *responding* to feedback from our readers. Writers thus need both reflective practice and advanced strategies for adapting our goals and our information to meet those readers' needs.

Identify and adapt to rhetorical situations

You already understand that it's often easier to communicate when you know who you're writing for—and that when your audience changes, your message has to change, sometimes drastically—because you have been making such adaptations all your life.

For instance, imagine that you did something impulsive yesterday with your computer and your credit card, and your monthly budget has gone from "workable" to "disaster zone": now you must seek help from someone else. If you describe this writing task vaguely as "Try to get some more money," you might find it hard to decide what to write first. It may feel like you have "writer's block." But if you analyze the rhetorical situation—the permutations of your goals and your audience members' needs—you can make some quick progress forward.

Consider what happens when you clearly identify your goal and your audience, such as "Write a message to ask my best friend if I can borrow some money for dinner." With this rhetorical situation in mind, you should have a very clear idea of what you can say, and what you should *not* say, to persuade your best friend to part with a little cash. What would you promise? What sad story would you tell? The words should come more easily now.

If your friend turned out to have no money to spare, and so you had to ask a relative, a family friend, or a bank loan officer for money, your message would change—but you could make quick adaptations. To some audiences you would tell long, involved stories about what really happened, to some you would emphasize the emotional distress of your current condition, and to some you would simply provide evidence of gainful employment or financial collateral. Knowing your goal can help you decide which audience you address and how; knowing your audience can help you adjust your goals and message.

Explore 3.1

Write two sentences in which you invite a friend to dinner, two sentences in which you invite your boss or a teacher to dinner, and two sentences in which you invite a movie star to dinner. Then comment on your rhetorical thinking: What changed from invitation to invitation? Did your thinking change, as you imagined a different kind of dinner—different goals—for each one? What words and phrases changed, and why? Which rhetorical situation would be easiest for you to adapt to, and which one would be harder?

Practice

- To practice more in-depth **analysis of your audience**, see Audence/Stakeholder Mapping.

- To practice **adapting to your audience's knowledge**, see <u>Expert/Novice Exploration</u>.

  NOTE: These Practice features provide links to exercises in Chapters 23 through 29. If you are reading this book in print, you can find an alphabetical list of exercises at the end of the book. The list includes the section in which each exercise can be found.

Adjust to secondary audiences and goals

Many writing tasks have an extra layer: they involve multiple goals and audiences. For instance, if you write a thank-you note to your grandmother, then your *primary audience* is your grandmother. But she may show or describe your note to someone else—her neighbors, her yoga group, your mother—and all those people become *secondary audiences*. If you know your note will be displayed on your grandmother's refrigerator or forwarded to your aunts, then you probably shouldn't use it as a place to add snarky remarks about your younger brother: you write for a primary audience, but you also need to think for a minute to be sure your message is adjusted for the needs of your secondary audiences. (If you haven't written a thank-you note recently, try to remember the last time someone shared your text message with someone else, without asking you first: that was a surprise secondary audience.)

You may also have multiple goals: in addition to expressing gratitude, your *primary goal*, you may also use your thank-you letter for a *secondary goal*: to maintain a supportive relationship, make your parents happy, or encourage future similar gifts. Sometimes these multiple goals are distinct from one another; sometimes, a map of your multiple goals or audiences will look more like a Venn diagram, with areas of overlapping interests, concerns, and resistances.

In a classroom situation your primary audience is often the teacher. Although your classmates may be a secondary audience, they won't be giving you a grade, and so on one level it makes sense to play it safe and write only "what the teacher wants" to achieve your goal of succeeding in class. Moreover, instead of having a personal goal you may be given a topic and told to write about it. However, even in this situation you would benefit from identifying a complex rhetorical situation that includes specific goals and audiences.

> First, when you imagine how to connect with a *very specific* primary audience (a person or small group or publication) you can take more straightforward steps toward solving a writing problem. Even if your imagined audience or *target audience* isn't really going to read your writing and help you achieve your imagined goal, you may find writing tasks easier when you set out deliberately

to identify and solve a rhetoric problem. You can likewise benefit from choosing a topic or angling your response in ways that connect to your specific goals.

Second, you won't be practicing on school writing forever. In order to prepare for solving dynamic writing problems, it helps to gain experience reflecting on your rhetorical situation and tailoring your performance to a "real" audience, and it helps to consider some exact secondary audiences or goals so that you can include ideas that will appeal to those readers as well.

Of course, like any prediction, your initial assessment of a rhetorical situation may be incomplete, misdirected, or skewed. As a result, you may find yourself feeling stuck while you're composing a document because your goals aren't as clear as you first thought, or you discover you have not fully mapped out what your readers know or need. Rather than deciding you have general "writer's block," you might instead consider if you are facing a *rhetoric problem* specifically; if so, you can step back, reassess your purposes and your readers' expectations, and try a new approach.

Writers can frequently get unstuck, gain energy, and find direction when we take the time to reflect on multiple aspects of a rhetorical situation and focus on larger communication goals.

3.2 Reflect on the Writer's Context: Exigency, Resources, and Stance

Writers don't just respond to readers' needs: we have our own goals, needs, and preferred approaches. For instance, we don't usually sit down at a computer and randomly begin typing: we write due to a need to complete some task (or avoid some consequence), and we operate in a context of constraints and resources. Who we are, what we want, and how much time and knowledge we have access to will all affect the relationship we build with our audience.

Reflect to predict your needs, constraints and resources

A key part of the writer's context is the need or *exigency*: what will you gain or avoid by writing? Exigency may be internally motivated or externally generated. You may not be personally excited about writing a proposal to buy updated software programs, but you recognize that your corporation needs to document this decision-making process. On the other hand, updating your resume to apply for your dream job may provide you with a very strong internal sense of exigence: you can vividly imagine how this writing task is necessary and beneficial.

It's also important to acknowledge that writers don't have unlimited powers to fulfill every need that readers have. As a writer, you can't provide information you don't have access to: if your supervisor hasn't told you what the budget is for new software, then you can't yet make a firm recommendation about which system to buy. Likewise, if you don't find out about your dream job until 24 hours before the application is due, then you might not have time to completely reorganize your resume so that the experiences most relevant to the new position are featured at the top of the first page. If, upon reflection, you decide that your motivation or exigency is intense, you might take extraordinary steps to complete your project, by texting your boss over the weekend or skipping rehearsal so you have more time to work on your application. In a more relaxed context, though, you might simply decide that your document will respond to some—even many—of readers' needs, but not all of them.

Reflect to adopt an appropriate stance

Your relationship to your readers—your *stance*—is also part of your context. Your overall stance depends on the knowledge, power, and urgency that both you and your readers bring to a rhetorical situation. For instance, as you reflect on your relationship to your readers, you might find yourself to be

- an expert conveying information to a novice
- a petitioner asking someone in power for a favor
- a co-worker recommending a new approach for a colleague to try
- an advocate demanding a policy change from a resistant organization, or
- a friend telling a story to elicit laughter from peers.

In each situation, you can identify where you stand in the relationship, and you can better predict where you want your readers to move or how you hope they will act. You can judge wether your or the reader has more power or knowledge and anticipate which of you feels the situation is urgent or not. If you imagine a dance company on a stage, you might have a vivid image of someone leading or following, of partners moving in sync, or of patterns that involve dancers moving away from and back toward one another. Writers who know their stance toward readers are like dancers who know their role on stage: they are able to decide more easily on their next move.

School assignments sometimes place writers in a relationship that doesn't make rhetorical sense: you are often a novice trying to explain something to an expert. The expert (your instructor) doesn't really need your explanation (even though he or she requested it), so there's no immediate exigency for communicating your knowledge, and you may feel uncomfortable pretending that you know more than your reader, so your stance is uncertain.

What your instructor may be hoping for, though, is that you can benefit from the situation by practicing advanced writing and thinking skills. In order to be

ready to transfer what you learn to your community or workplace writing, you can "try on" an exigency and stance the way you might try on an expensive suit or a costume for a play. If you take time to consider what *might* motivate someone to compose this document, who could benefit from its completion, and what the relationship between the writer and readers could be, you can adopt an exigency and a stance, and thus gain more insight into the rhetorical situation.

Explore 3.2

Consider a topic that you know a lot about. This might be from your field or job, from a hobby or activity, or from a familiar place, food, or person. Imagine that you are writing about that to a child, to a friend, to a work colleague, or to a state official. Write a sentence or two about your context: what could be the exigency that makes it necessary or beneficial for you to write to this person? What is your relationship to or stance with that person as you start to write? Now write another sentence or two: if you changed your sense of exigency, your resources, or your stance, how would that change affect your writing?

Learn

- To learn more about **choosing a topic** rhetorically, see Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project.
- To learn more about reflecting to engage with **dynamic writing problems**, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process.

3.3 Reflect on the Reader's Context: Discourse Communities, Genres, and Scenes

For simple writing tasks like a thank-you note or a youth-group meeting an-nouncement, it may be enough to imagine the needs of a single reader or a small group of readers whom you know personally. However, when you write to peo-ple you don't know, including your instructors in school, you will need to un-derstand more about the community and context that influence those readers' expectations.

Reflect to predict community expectations

You are probably already well aware of how the expectations of a community or a context can influence your behavior: you wouldn't usually wear stained blue jeans to a wedding, yell "Woo-hoo!" in the middle of a ballet performance, or try to sell a Mercedes SUV at a garage sale alongside used children's clothing. These are not individual decisions on your part, but decisions you make to comply with the expectations of a community that you wish to be accepted by.

Communities influence how we write, as well. Consider the communities you belong to, and how they already influence your language use. In which ones do you use slang or mix in some Spanish or Mandarin phrases? In which groups do you use specialized language, such as music terminology or online gaming abbreviations? In which groups do you trade friendly insults, share personal stories, or sit silent? Writers refer to these as *discourse communities*: communities that are defined in part by how their members communicate with one another.

A discourse community may have expectations concerning:

- The typical structures or **genres** that writers should use
- The typical conversations or **contexts** that writers should engage with
- The typical information or **evidence** that writers should include
- The typical language or **terminology** that writers should choose

Each of us belongs to multiple discourse communities, as do each of our readers: we are always adapting our words and concepts to try to find the best links for communication across these boundaries. Within a college or university, these communities are often called major fields or *disciplines*. Outside academia, we may write for civic communities, workplace communities or professional communities. From a writer's point of view, they are all discourse communities: they are defined in part by how their members communicate with one another.

Community contexts are challenging to determine in part because people inside a community are so used to thinking and writing in their own way that they don't always remember to tell newcomers what the expectations are. In order to reflect accurately on a rhetorical situation, advanced writers may need to do additional detective work to predict all the community expectations that will influence our writing.

Reflect to predict key elements of genres and scenes

Writers don't just beam information into readers' minds; writers structure information into accessible shapes and patterns that match the ways that readers are likely to encounter that information in a particular time and space. We can think of those shapes and patterns as *genres*, and the situations of readers as *scenes*.

You probably already think about genres as you encounter popular media: movies can be in horror or romance story structures, music can follow salsa patterns or sonata patterns, and teens might post videos that follow typical frameworks for unboxing or demonstrating a dance move. A genre is not a formula or a set of rules; it's more useful to think of it as a cluster of reader expectations that recurs so frequently—such as the thousands of videos produced each year where someone unboxes a product—that writers can start to predict most of the features, even as there is room for individual variations.

Genres—*what* readers review—come into being in part because of *how* readers read, based on their context. A reader's *scene* can include how much time they have for reading, how reading a document fits into their current priorities, and whether and how they plan to act on what they read. We have memos because busy office managers need a quick way to learn key information in the middle of a working day; we have poems because some readers like to puzzle over and savor how selected words and images convey new ideas; we have academic journal articles because researchers need careful documentation of how new knowledge is created. You wouldn't use a poem to inform your manager of what your team decided at their noon meeting, or send a 30-page journal article to explain how beautiful someone looks tonight: your genre choice should match the scene.

Consider the whole rhetorical context

When we put all of these pieces together, writers can see a multidimensional picture of "what readers want" and take action to respond to those expectations. For example, suppose that a psychologist, a historian, a biologist, and an engineer walk into a bar on a Wednesday afternoon, each with a similar basic writing problem to solve: "Write up a report."

The discourse communities they and their readers belong to will strongly influence the contexts of readers' expectations, as will the writers' goals and the readers' scenes. The full rhetorical context includes what questions the writers focus on, what evidence they collect as investigators, and what their final report genre looks like and emphasizes, even if nobody tells them those expectations specifically on that Wednesday.

> **The psychologist's context emphasizes people:** He sees a group that may contain depressives and alcoholics. He asks fifty people the same two questions and records their answers precisely in order. Since he anticipates a medium-depth reading scene, because his colleagues hope to catch nuances and complications but not spend all day searching for them, his report has four distinct sections: introduction, methods, results, and discussion. The results section uses a chart to identify the responses of the interviewees as part of his evidence. He cites twelve other studies using APA format; he concludes that at this site there is a link between mental illness and isolationist behavior, and he recommends that further studies need to be done.

> **The historian's context emphasizes people-and-events**: She sees a long trail of incidents, centered on the fourth-generation business owner. She spends an hour talking with one person and collects an old photo album; she also chats informally with three of the

bar's regulars, and their stories also become evidence. Her report is designed for a lengthy reading scene for scholars who need to see the whole picture. She begins with a story about World War II and includes photos and extended quotations from the bar owner. She concludes that family businesses are more linked to their communities than people often realize.

The biologist's context focuses on data about cellular organisms: She sees a possible disease source. She swabs the surfaces of glasses, plates, and counters, and records the temperature of the dishwasher and the refrigerator. She takes samples of beer, pretzels, and raw hamburger meat as evidence. Her report, designed for both a quick-read scene and a follow-up analysis scene, has six graphs with a few short paragraphs that she writes only after the lab tests are complete. She concludes that the pretzel bowls have contaminant levels (she identifies bacteria by their Latin names) that exceed safety standards, and recommends that a negative rating be filed with the city commission.

The engineer's context focuses on structure design: They see frameworks and materials. They visit the attic and basement to analyze joists and beams. Their report, which uses a format and similar language to ones they have written before, has several short sections that include diagrams and blueprint sections. For evidence, they include nearly as many numbers and charts as words. This approach matches a professional scene in which readers must review complex information quickly. They recommend that the owner not take out the east wall, but instead expand to the south through a non-load-bearing section of that wall.

All of these writers have written a "good report" based on the rhetorical contexts they inhabited. They all took the proper steps in their work and relied on persuasive evidence, though the historian (and her community) would have seen no value in bacteria counts and the biologist (and her community) would have seen no value in old photographs. The psychologist's community would be appalled if he recommended specific action based on a quick sample of only ten people, while the engineer's community might be surprised if they couldn't decide on a simple recommendation after one thorough visit.

Of course, generalizations about readers won't hold true for *all* readers in a community or scene, and even writers who carefully identify exigency and predict a typical set of reader expectations may not see the whole picture at first. As a result, you may still find yourself stuck while you are composing: misreading your readers' scenes can cause particular difficulty in completing introductory or concluding sections,

and feeling uncertain about your own exigency or stance can leave you stranded in the middle wondering what else you should write. These challenges can be trickier to name, but they are just more advanced *rhetoric problems*: if you can pause, ask yourself some clarifying questions about contexts, and try an alternate stance or approach, you should be able to put yourself back on track.

Writers succeed by attending carefully to the contexts that we and our readers belong to. Since discourse communities' expectations and scenes can be predicted or uncovered, we can choose the best strategies for meeting our readers' expectations.

Explore 3.3

List five or six personal, academic, and/or professional discourse communities you belong to. Choose one: describe three or four *communication expectations* that it has for members. (Note that speaking a whole other language, like Tagalog or Korean, doesn't usually define a discourse community—but you might speak one kind of Korean with friends and another with your grandparents.) Finally, imagine that *you* were asked to go to a bar (or restaurant, or shopping mall) as a member of this community, for a reason other than your own personal entertainment. What would you pay attention to, what information or ideas would you gather, and what kind of writing might you do afterward for another member of your discourse community?

Practice

- To practice adapting your writing **to new communities**, see Stance Switch.
- To practice adapting your writing **to new genres**, see Genre Switch.

Learn

- Learn more about **genres and disciplines** in Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres.
- Learn more about **editing sentences rhetorically** in Chapter 11, Editing in Context.

3.4 Focus on Equity: Critique Community Expectations

In general, the advice to "adapt your writing in ways that balance your own goals with the needs of the readers whom you want to move" is beneficial for writers. Moreover, when you understand that individual readers' expectations are in turn influenced by the larger communities to which they belong, you will be able to better predict and monitor your adaptations.

However, writers do not always have equal status with the readers we seek to move, and uneven power distribution may limit our ability to find a productive balance. Some power imbalances may be temporary: you will not always be a student who is hoping for a high grade or a new employee trying to make a good first impression. When you are facing a single or temporary rhetorical situation, you may decide that it will be pragmatic to concede to readers' demands or perhaps to explore some ways to bend the rules.

In other cases, the power imbalance may result from and reproduce systemic discrimination that individual writers cannot soon overcome or outlast. One of the advantages of becoming a more reflective writer is that you can better identify situations where readers' expectations are rooted in a narrow view of "good writing" that is based on cultural bias or "how things have always been done," rather than rooted in a reasonable demand based on the context or field. That is, some of a community's expectations may allow most insiders to succeed but make success unnecessarily difficult for others, which is particularly damaging if the expectations create barriers for writers who are not part of the dominant race, gender, or nationality.

Specifically, you should stay aware that discourse communities are not neutral or all-knowing. For instance, in the US, a community of predominantly White, middle-class, male academics have often defined "good writing" as:

- Using objective facts while eliminating any evidence of the writer's experience or perspective
- Following a thesis-based or closed-paragraph structure that states the writer's position unequivocally at the start
- Relying on argument strategies that "consider both sides" equally
- Producing sentences in Standard Edited American English that are error-free and use idioms and technical terms flawlessly

It's not difficult to see how writers from other communities, ones that value personal insight or use a different form of English, would be repeatedly at a disadvantage trying to meet these expectations. Yet you know that *there is no single definition of a "good writer,"* and that you can communicate successfully, even in professional or high-stakes situations, using writing that is personal or exploratory, that passionately represents a single perspective, or that uses an alternate variety or dialect of English, even writing that relies on slang, has errors, or deliberately misuses language.

Defining "good writing" narrowly in ways that exclude writers based on their identities or backgrounds hurts everyone. When you are repeatedly told as a writer that you always need to be the one to adapt—to compromise on your goals, voice, or message—you are likely to feel discouraged, produce less honest or powerful writing, and perhaps even stop trying to communicate. As a result, the community will also suffer: a discourse community that holds rigidly to an

unnecessary and exclusionary rule will miss out on the insights that new members can bring, on writing strategies that could help them reach a broader audience, and on updated approaches for solving complex problems.

Communities rarely describe their expectations or "rules" as unfair, unnecessary, or intolerant; instead, they emphasize how the rules are necessary for clear and effective communication. Certainly, all writers can agree that having some shared expectations with our readers is beneficial (after all, if every person invented their own spelling system, it would seriously slow down readers' comprehension!). Yet as an advanced writer, you can also take steps to examine and critique expectations when you suspect they are causing harm. You can start by asking questions like these:

> **Who is usually communicating?** If the discourse community itself is homogeneous, then members may not be able to see past their own assumptions, biases, and historical practices, even if they don't intend to exclude other perspectives. College instructors in the US who have always read "thesis-first" essays may not know that equally educated faculty in Germany, Brazil, or Japan find equal or even more value in less directly argumentative, more exploratory structures for documenting scholarship. These oversights are most harmful if the community is powerful and their expectations about communication are excluding people from groups that already have less social status or power.

> **How does the rule or expectation improve communication, limit harm, and/or support the work of community members?** A rule of "zero tolerance for errors" in a busy hospital setting is crucial when multiple nurses and doctors rely on a single chart, when similar-looking terms such as *intrathecal* and *intratracheal* indicate significantly different procedures, and when patients' health and even lives are at stake. A similar rule for a progress report shared with an internal management working group—where members know one another and the harm from some language variation will likely be small—may not bring as much communication benefit.

> **How does the rule or expectation limit participation?** An expectation to "provide *only* objective numerical evidence" may be fair in a setting like an advanced college biochemistry lab, when all participants have equal access to sources of evidence, when that evidence is plentiful, and when there is acknowledgment that there are multiple definitions of and complications in identifying "objective evidence." The same expectation made by a journal editor considering a story about industrial pollution in central Louisiana may exclude the perspectives of the residents who are most affected but who do not have equal resources or access to data compared to corporate scientists.

How could a more inclusive approach meet or expand communication standards? Discourse communities can change their expectations without "lowering their standards"—if the standards are truly about ensuring effective communication. When all members of a management team present their perspectives, even those who sometimes make unexpected subject-verb combinations because US English is their second or third language, then communication is improved over a situation where some members are afraid to chime in or are dismissed when they do. An "exploration-first" rather than thesis-first organizational structure may help first-generation college students articulate their questions more clearly, improving communication and learning. And an article featuring the personal experiences of several Black, working-class residents may help scientists design better research studies that could improve communication—and living conditions—in several small Oregon towns.

All advanced writers—those of us who are comfortably inside a powerful discourse community as well as those who are on the outside—are responsible for questioning whether a reader's or community's expectation is valid for improving communication, or if it may be flawed or biased. Like any unjust expectation, an exclusionary expectation may not be something we can immediately fix, or even one we feel we can safely protest. But as much as writers benefit from finding a productive balance between our goals and our readers' needs, we also benefit from striving to create more connection, and fewer barriers between writers and readers overall.

Learn

- To learn more about the **societal biases that limit equity** in communication, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.
- To learn more about how **genres are socially constructed**, see Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres.
- To learn more about **options for organizing paragraphs**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about the **limits of Standard Edited American English**, see Chapter 11, Editing in Context.

3.5 Messages in Context: Breadth, Depth, and Complexity

In working on a school assignment, it can be easy to think of knowledge and research as separate from your writing task. If that were the case, then it would make sense to learn all you can about alpine ecosystems before you start to write a report about how to preserve them. But knowledge is also rhetorical: what you

know about marmots and Steller's Jays doesn't change as you move from a room full of second-grade students to a room full of climate scientists, but the relevance, value, and effectiveness of what you know does change.

Reflect to identify what knowledge you should acquire and present

Communicating your knowledge in order to move a reader is a more complicated event than just listing a predictable number of relevant facts. The context of your writing task can determine what knowledge and comprehension you need, and in the act of writing you often create new knowledge as you go—so knowledge is rhetorical, and you should try to assess the knowledge elements of a writing task just as you assess the rhetorical elements. That is, questions about "how much" knowledge to present, and how to frame that information, need to be addressed *as part of your writing work*, not separately from it. Likewise, questions about how much research is needed and what kinds of sources will be useful are rooted in the rhetorical situation: some readers will be satisfied to have you present information you already know or mention an online article you recently read, while others will expect you to have detailed examples from credible advanced sources within a particular field of study.

Very often, the first questions students ask about a school writing project are knowledge questions: "What is it about?" and "How long does it have to be?" Although teachers can give exact answers for a school assignment, these are better understood as dynamic questions about how your readers' knowledge and their needs can intersect with your own knowledge and what you hope to communicate. So for advanced writing tasks, the answer again is "It depends." What does your audience want or need to know? How much do they need to know about it, and how much patience or time do they have to understand it? What will you need to learn to meet your readers' needs? In writing tasks both inside and outside school, writers must determine which facts to share with readers, in how much detail, based on what kind of research, and with what kind of approach.

Reflect to predict breadth and depth

It helps to begin thinking of a writing task not in terms of length ("how many words/pages/sources?") but in terms of the *breadth* and *depth* of the information you will provide. A global studies instructor who assigns a two-page essay about non-governmental organizations and a political science instructor who asks for a twenty-page essay on the same topic are giving you clues about the *breadth and depth* of knowledge that you are expected to communicate. However, you still have to decide exactly where to give broad coverage of multiple factors or in-depth detail about a few angles—and you will need to find the right balances, since providing more specific information about NGOs is likely to result in addressing fewer organizations overall.

Similarly, a supervisor who asks you for a report on your competitors' public-relations strategies may not specify a document length, so you will need to inquire further to determine the breadth or depth of information that will be of most use in this situation. If you don't already know what the other companies do, making some preliminary predictions about the breadth and depth of information your readers are expecting will be crucial in helping you estimate the amount and type of *research* you need to do, so that you don't invest more time than needed, or go off on a tangent tracking information that's not relevant.

Reflect to consider analysis needs

Having sufficient knowledge for a writing task often goes beyond knowing facts into analyzing how those facts come together. You should investigate whether readers mostly expect you to *summarize known facts* or whether you should also *give your own analysis or judgment*. When you give your own analysis, you explain causes and effects, draw connections and conclusions, and often identify priorities or make recommendations, adding your own informed interpretation to the existing facts.

If your project requires analysis or argumentation, that can also influence your research goals. You might need to review sources that describe other professional or expert recommendations, delve into details that address your local situation or an extended history of a problem, or inquire about the reasons readers might resist or oppose your arguments. The more accurately you can judge your own knowledge and goals, as well as your readers' needs or expectations, the stronger your analyses will be.

Reflect to identify and challenge assumptions

In presenting new knowledge, writers also need to establish credibility and viability—which requires writers to investigate our own and our readers' assumptions. For writers' ideas to be believable, we often say writers need to be "objective," but usually what we mean is that we expect that writers will be *fair*. Human beings are biased—we prefer some ideas or actions above others—but we can strive to limit how our beliefs affect our actions. Likewise, writers who are striving to be fair will reveal our own motivations and try not to let those motivations compromise our knowledge or unduly influence our analysis. For example, you might assume that your favorite baseball team is the best in the league, but you can still write fairly about how your team surpasses an opposing team if you stay aware of your assumptions and try to use similar criteria and reliable facts as you write about both teams. When you acknowledge and adapt to your assumptions, you can present your argument without readers thinking you are unfairly biased.

Similarly, for writers' ideas to be viable—so that readers will accept new ideas and be willing to change—writers may have to compensate for readers' assumptions.

For instance, if you work in a physical therapy clinic and you advise your surgical rehabilitation clients to perform exercises twice a day, your recommendation may not be viable unless you identify and respond to their assumptions that they have more important things to do than spend time on boring exercises. Anticipating and responding to readers' biases or resistance points is even more challenging for writers than checking our own assumptions, but it is as important as getting our facts straight. Sometimes writers even need to go beyond doing research to find information on a topic and begin inquiring about readers themselves so that we present knowledge productively.

Prepare to create new knowledge

Writers who are moving into analysis and challenging assumptions are actually creating new knowledge, aiming to arrange facts and ideas in such a way as to enlighten, persuade, or move a reader to a new way of thinking or action. Sometimes writers provide newly discovered evidence (data gathered from measurement or experiment), but more often we create new ideas by providing alternate views of current evidence:

- we *interpret* information by judging what terms or actions mean in a particular situation;
- we *analyze* information by identifying how parts of a situation interact, through causes or effects;
- we *synthesize* information by explaining how concepts from different situations connect to one another and reveal new opportunities; and
- we make **recommendations** by indicating a valuable or productive approach to a situation.

Of course, your early assessment of the depth of subject-matter knowledge you will need to share with readers or the responsibility you have to analyze or create knowledge may be inexact or mistaken; you may over- or underestimate what you know, what readers know, and how difficult it is to move readers to greater comprehension. As a result, you may find yourself feeling stuck while researching, composing, or revising a document: perhaps it takes you four pages to explain what you thought was a simple concept you could cover in a paragraph, or you are certain you explained a process thoroughly but your peer readers remain confused. In such a case, it helps to recognize that you're facing a *knowledge problem* that isn't (just) about whether you are smart enough to understand a concept, but instead is related to the complex task of using words to move readers who inhabit a different context. Look for ways to connect your subject-matter knowledge to the rhetorical context of your writing task, and identify productive revisions or alternate pathways you can adopt.

Making accurate predictions about the knowledge-work that a writing task involves requires writers to carefully assess the rhetorical situation. We must understand our own goals and knowledge, identify how much information readers have and need, make plans for inquiry about factors we're not familiar with, and use critical thinking to provide reasonable new alternatives for readers to consider.

Explore 3.4

Imagine that you are going to ask a student government committee to provide you with $1000 to improve the experiences of new students— either school-wide or within your program or dormitory. Write 4-5 sentences predicting how your knowledge of the issue will interact with the rest of the rhetorical situation. For instance, what project will you most want to propose, what key information will your readers need to know about that project, and how long a document do you believe will be necessary to provide that information? What information do you already know, and what questions will you address through inquiry or research, especially to support your goal of making new recommendations? What assumptions do you have about this project that you should be aware of so that you are better able to present your ideas in a clear, fair way, and what assumptions or resistances might your audience have that you will need to address?

Part Two. Composing as a Reflective Writer

Chapter 4. Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Manage your writing process through flexible, recursive stages
- Identify how complex writing tasks require writers to monitor multiple challenges and choices
- Use reflective practice throughout your project to improve your writing
- Apply a pattern of reflective practice to improve your insights about your own writing: define a challenge, *explore* options, *act* to implement a reasonable strategy, and *learn* from your experience

When someone asks you, "What's your writing process?," you probably have an answer that includes at least two or three steps you've practiced in school (such as outlining, drafting, and editing) and maybe a few steps that are part of your specific writing story, like "Find my flow" or "Drink a lot of coffee." When your process works for you, there's no need to mess with success.

As you encounter more challenging writing in school, in your workplace, or in your community, you may need to rethink your idea of a "writing process." Longer or more complicated projects may require you to go back and forth between familiar steps, to implement new steps, or even to turn your process upside down: in some genres and contexts, writers start by writing the conclusion or final results, and then work backward to the introduction.

Moreover, you know that even now, your writing process doesn't always work smoothly: like all writers, you *frequently struggle and revise*, and sometimes you may feel as though you are so stuck or confused that you have "writer's block." When you're stuck, you need to find strategies to step back from your process and choose another path, like a driver finding an alternate route to avoid a flooded road. This "stepping back" process is part of reflective practice, and is a crucial skill for advanced writers to know. When you keep a flexible attitude about the processes you use as a writer, and develop strategies for stepping back to define and explore your situation before trying a new approach, you can gain fluency, efficiency, and confidence even when faced with a complex or difficult writing task.

4.1 Build a Flexible Writing Process

You may have heard people talk about "the writing process" as if it were a single, smooth pathway toward success. Yet that's not universally true. Several threshold concepts can help us expand our idea of a single writing process:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

Advanced writers study and reflect on their writing

Writers study writing just as chemists study chemistry and musicians study music—and advanced writers use repeated reflective practices to understand our own work.

For instance, since *good writing adapts*, writing processes vary: one writer composing three different writing projects will likely choose a unique sequence of actions for each—as would three different writers each working on a similar project.

You may also have heard, or even stated yourself, that the best writing process is one that happens organically when a writer "just gets into the flow" and doesn't think too hard about it. However, we also know that *good writers revise* and that *advanced writers reflect on their writing*. That is, writers make plans, get stuck, try out new approaches, go back to an earlier step, receive feedback that helps us adapt, and restart our writing, often several times in a longer project—or even in a single paragraph! Advanced writers succeed not by "just doing it" but by stepping back frequently to reflect on our goals and needs: we identify multiple steps for our writing process, create a plan that fits our needs and context, and adapt that plan as we go forward.

Break a writing task into key steps

Like managers, chefs, and pole vaulters, writers succeed by combining multiple small actions into their larger projects. Managers don't just "manage well" in some vague way; they break down their work into smaller steps, find which ones they need to improve on, and work on those.

In a very simple model, writers set aside time for planning, composing, and revising, while remembering that we may need to use this approach *recursively*: that is, going back and forth between steps.

You probably already have some ideas about how to break these steps down even further. While tapping out a text to a friend doesn't require a complicated process, completing your organic chemistry lab report (or drafting your proposal for an ethnographic study of online communities of Minecraft players) will likely include more discrete steps, often repeated at several points during your work as a writer.

- **Set goals** and select a focus for your project so that you know where to go and what it will take to succeed.
- **Inquire** about your topic or issue so that you know exactly what to say.
- **Organize** your ideas for your document so that each section helps present ideas clearly to your reader.
- **Generate** the paragraphs, sentences, words, and visuals of your whole document.
- **Revise** your draft to improve your communication and fix errors.
- **Reflect** on your progress and your challenges to identify your most successful strategies.

For that quick text message, you might only need two steps, *compose* and *send*. For a semester-long senior project in sociology or film studies, you might need

even more steps, such as *propose, plan, design, collaborate, organize, generate, analyze data, review, edit,* or *present*.

The more steps we articulate, the easier it is to see how each writing process can be different. Some writers prefer to start by generating ideas, using a "freewrite" mode that helps them discover what they want to say—but some writers like to use that approach near the end of a project to explore a particularly complex idea or generate additional details. Some writers conduct initial research, then organize via an outline, and then realize they need to inquire again about one aspect more thoroughly. Often writers revise late in their process, but it can be equally valuable to revise early, such as when narrowing a research question to gain clearer focus.

Experiment with steps and structures

If you're feeling stuck about "what step to do next," remember that *any step is possible*, regardless of where you are in your writing process, even steps you've already taken. Instead of giving in to "writer's block" and heading to the fridge, advanced writers are more likely to succeed when we work on a different step, shift to a new gear, or experiment with a strategy even if it might not work. After all, if your options are "give up and feel like the writing is failing" or "try something else that might feel uncomfortable but might actually help," doesn't it make sense to at least give a new idea a try?

- **Work on a different step**. Suppose you originally decided that you would write your whole outline and then do your research, but you're stuck at Point C in your outline. Instead of getting frustrated, you can flip the script: take a 20-minute research trip to see if any of the titles that come up in your library's database give you better ideas about the structure of your document.

- **Shift to a new gear**. Imagine that you're working on a report that has a very clear four-part structure, but Part 2 isn't going smoothly, and Part 3 looks tough. Instead of staying stuck, you can step out of the project entirely for a few minutes: write about your ideas as if you were sending a few texts to a friend or writing a series of haiku poems, or take 5 minutes to dictate possible ideas into your phone.

- **Encourage your experimental side**. What if you are the kind of writer who *always* freewrites first, always starts with a title, or always finishes one section before starting another—but your favorite strategy is not working today? Instead of trying to force old strategies into new projects, give yourself permission to experiment, just for today: jot an outline on a sticky note, write "Add Title Here" at the top of the page and move on, or try writing just the first two sentences of each paragraph and then skipping forward.

Your alternative plan or experiment might not work—after all, most scientists will tell you that many if not most of their experiments fail—but writers like scientists learn as much from the failures as from successes. When you treat your writing process as experimental, you lower your stress level and give yourself opportunities to expand your repertoire of strategies that might possibly work.

Explore 4.1

Name two different writing projects that you are involved in this week. These could be informal tasks involving communicating with your friends or family, or longer tasks for your job or your classes. For each one, create a list of possible steps that fits the project: remember that your steps can be in any order, can be repeated, and can include steps that match your own writing story. Then write a sentence to explain the reasons your two lists are different from one another, and finish with a sentence about how you could change one process if needed: what alternate step can you imagine trying if you get stuck?

Practice

- To practice an **alternate first-step**, try an approach from Six Structures if you usually prefer freewriting, or try an approach from Seven Generations if you usually prefer a straightforward outline.

- To **take a break** from your writing while still making progress, try a mind-shift approach such as 3D Mind Map, Inner Three-Year-Old, or Values Freewrite.

   NOTE: These Practice features provide links to exercises in Chapters 23 through 29. If you are reading this book in print, you can find an alphabetical list of exercises at the end of the book. The list includes the section in which each exercise can be found.

Learn

- To learn more about **your writing story**, see Chapter 1, Reframing Your Story About Writing.

- To learn more about **how writers fail productively**, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.

4.2 Build a Reflective Writing Process

When we think of writing as a verb—a dynamic communication between writer and reader(s)—it's easier to understand how many choices and challenges writers face. Once writers are settled into the composing process, we still need to consider our own confidence or motivation as we address disposition problems; we

might have to investigate our audience's needs as we address rhetoric problems or deepen our research as we encounter knowledge problems. And because your writing story is unique, you might find other problems that you want to solve: lab-report problems, roommate distraction problems, culture-crossing problems, campaign strategy problems.

As if that weren't enough, a successful writer often has a lot of work to do even before the first word is typed, and that work continues for some time after the last revisions are completed. Experienced writers—like experienced mathematicians, baseball managers, and nurses—do a lot of analysis in our heads before we write, speak, or act. This blend of in-head decision-making and precise action is often called *reflective practice*: experts can assess a scene, diagnose a weak spot, invent a response, act, reassess, and alter their actions as needed almost without noticing any of those steps.

Reflection is a *metacognitive* skill: it helps you *think about your thinking*, as a rough definition of the word suggests, and also helps you *think about your learning* so that you can improve. While "reflection" can be used for relaxation or solitary introspection, reflective practice is an active sequence of observation, analysis, and action grounded in the situation around you. Reflective practitioners gather evidence about their current experience: What is going well? What is not going well? What are the likely causes of any difficulty? Then, when they have a reasonable hypothesis that explains the situation, they take deliberate action, deciding what to continue and what to change.

Identify common patterns of reflective practice

Writers benefit from learning key strategies for this reflective process of noticing, analyzing, and deciding how best to proceed in our writing tasks. Professionals often reflect without knowing that's what they're doing, but as you build your reflective practice skills, you will benefit from slowing down and using specific steps to hone your awareness and analytical skills.

Revise
Reflect to Improve

Plan
Reflect to Predict

Compose
Reflect to Problem-Solve

You may already have used reflective practice at the end of a writing project—or after a soccer tournament, a new product launch, or an opening night performance. Professionals often take time to look back on a completed effort and assess what worked and what didn't: they *reflect to improve*. But reflective practice isn't just for post-game review. Building on our earlier plan-compose-revise model, we can identify key points throughout a writing project where reflection increases writers' awareness, creates wider opportunities, helps us get unstuck, and lets us transfer what we've learned to the next project.

> Reflective practice begins with **prediction**: identifying the goals
> and variables of a situation, considering the challenges, and

anticipating the resources and strategies that will most likely contribute to a successful outcome.

Reflection also helps in the middle of a process, as writers **problem-solve** by defining a problem, exploring options, trying an alternate action, and assessing if the new approach worked.

Reflecting to **improve**—at the end of a section, draft, or complete project—is not just about assessing past challenges and successes, but also about deliberately defining or redefining your writing principles so that what you have learned will help you in your next step or project.

When you are working on a familiar writing task for familiar readers—scribbling a quick shopping list for a family member, for instance—you might not need to reflect much to decide how to proceed. You can just grab a scrap of paper and write. But when your writing task is more complicated, or the stakes are higher, or you're trying to learn a new strategy, you'll benefit from taking a little extra time for deliberate reflection at multiple stages of your work.

Finally, it's important to remember that you already reflect to predict, problem-solve, and improve in many areas of your life, and the results are usually positive. For instance, if you were trying to improve as an archer, you wouldn't just draw an arrow and shoot blindly, hoping it would work out. Your prediction might include how you aim, and how your aim takes into account the distance and size of the target, as well as your strength and bow capabilities.

Explore 4.2

Describe something you have some expertise in and yet are always trying to improve: this could be a professional task, a long-time hobby or sporting skill, a type of school assignment, a personal goal or project. First, set the stage in a sentence or so: what is the task or action, and what would improving at it look like? Then describe in a few sentences any ways that you use reflection throughout the process: What do you look over or predict before starting a new project, stage, session, or action, and what factors do you take into account? How do you step back to notice and redirect your efforts to problem-solve in the middle? What kinds of reflecting do you do after you act: which factors strongly affect your success or improvement, and how do you account for them in your recent effort?

As you draw the arrow back, you might notice the wind shifting, and adjust your aim to compensate. If you still didn't hit the target, after all that preparation, you wouldn't just shrug and assume the universe was against you. Instead, you'd consider exactly what went wrong: your reflection might include your judgment about whether you overestimated the power of your shot or underestimated the

strength of the wind, as well as your plan about what to do differently on your next shot. The same skills are useful in many settings, including writing.

Reflect to address "free-range" writing tasks

If you've mostly been succeeding as a writer without worrying about reflective practice, you might reasonably wonder why you should try it now; it may seem like a lot of work to add to your already busy life.

One answer has to do with the ways that your writing tasks are becoming more complex these days, and the ways in which you are being granted more responsibility and oversight. In many of your former classrooms, writing assignments were chosen, defined, and evaluated by someone other than the writer. An instructor probably told you the topic, length, goal, and structure of the writing task you must complete, and explained exactly what criteria you must meet by what date to be successful.

Outside of classrooms—even in tasks as straightforward as a quick social media post—you know that writers have much more freedom, and take on much more risk, as we select our own topics, structures, and evidence. We need to create and present our documents based on our best sense of what readers will enjoy or find satisfying, and then we wait for a few readers, or a thousand readers, who may have a wide range of expectations, to tell us if we made a successful connection.

Scholars often discuss the difference between a controlled task, like a straightforward classroom writing assignment, and an uncontrolled, "ill-structured," or "wicked" problem. In considering this difference, you might imagine the contrasts between encountering a few tame animals on a farm or in a children's petting zoo, and encountering wild animals out on the range in the US Great Plains, on the broad veldt in Zimbabwe, or in the deep rainforests of Brazil. A petting zoo can be both an enjoyable experience and a fantastic learning opportunity for people who have not worked with live animals before. But to move from petting a pony in a pen (a controlled task) to encountering a hungry leopard in a jungle (a free-range task), most of us would need new ways to identify challenges, prepare resources, and adapt to changing conditions.

Your school assignments and even your writing tasks at work may vary, from having a most of the structure tightly controlled by others to having most or all of the decisions left up to you as the author. You can start to recognize ill-structured, "free-range" problems—in writing tasks or in other areas of your life—by watching for key characteristics. For instance, most free-range problems:

- Are difficult to identify or classify
- Are interconnected with other problems and fields of study

- Require you to learn new information or strategies as you proceed
- Demand a combination of strategies or approaches
- Can have multiple positive outcomes from which to choose
- Often involve multiple failures before a workable solution is found/chosen

In order to solve a free-range problem successfully, you can't use a "just do it" approach. Instead, you need to identify all the relevant elements of each problem, and use a multi-step, reflective process to deliberately work your way through.

Integrate reflective practice into your writing process

While finishing assignments for school has helped you develop your abilities to plan, draft, and revise clearly structured tasks, your current and future writing work is likely to involve more choices and steps. It can be both exciting and stressful to hold more responsibility as a writer. Certainly it's exciting and motivating to be able to write about an issue or approach that fascinates you, or to work with a genre (such as song lyrics or video script) that you enjoy composing. To avoid feeling overwhelmed by that freedom, though, writers benefit from adding reflective practice to our writing process.
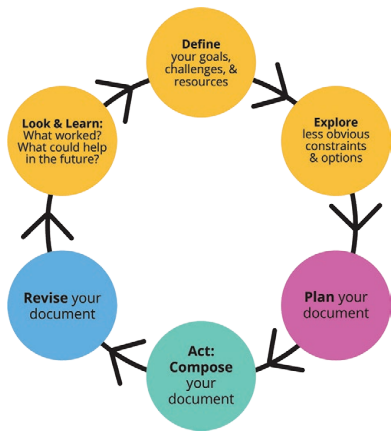
It might help to imagine the ways that teachers who have been creating writing assignments have been doing some of your reflective practice for you. That is, rather than asking *you* to predict what the key factors would be, adapt to unusual problems and make final decisions about what you had learned, they carried some of that workload themselves to help you focus on a skill you were learning, in much the same way that a zoo designer makes a safe place for people inexperienced with wildlife.

For instance, a child at a petting zoo starts with a very small set of choices as they make a plan (should I pet the pony or go visit the ducks?); then they take a brief action (pet the pony), and finally decide if the action was enjoyable enough to be worth repeating or if they should change it (next time, ducks!).

Similarly, a writer working in a controlled setting will develop a straightforward plan to write a five-paragraph response to an assignment to "argue your point about global warming," because that's what the instructor indicated; they will

complete a draft; and then they may review the essay for errors and make small corrections so that each paragraph has a topic sentence and the thesis sentence is in the right place. In this case, an instructor held the responsibility for the reflective practice in order to make a complicated task more straightforward. That is, the teacher defined the topic and approach; they chose a length, focus, and structure that they believed would be appropriate for their students given their current resources and knowledge; and after reviewing the essays they decided whether their students had learned the right skills or needed more practice before the next assignment.

However, most advanced writing—like most professional work—is more complex than writing a formulaic essay, and tasks often start without a classroom instructor to wrestle with the reflective analysis of all the variables. In the chart below, you can see how a biologist in the rainforest, an engineer reviewing business-park development blueprints, and a writer assigned to create an organization's newsletter all have to start at the top of the cycle outlined above and work through all the steps.

	Biologist	**Engineer**	**Writer**
Define the goals and challenges	What animal made that noise? Is it dangerous?	Is the building structure suitable for its predicted uses?	How do we reach out to members: print or online?
Explore constraints and resources	Do I have tools to fight, places to hide, or speed to run away?	Will alternatives cost too much? Do we have time for changes?	Do we know what stories interest members? Is our web design software up to date?
Develop a plan	Escape plan	Remediation plan	Storyboard plan noting authors, topics, and visuals
Act strategically	Move away	Redesign	Write and publish
Assess and revise	There's still a noise getting closer: move further away	The neighboring building needs to be redesigned, too: make a second plan	Only 20% of members read the newsletter: add more relevant content
Look, learn, and transfer	Consider finding a better hiding place next time	Consider having fewer buildings at higher quality for the next project	Consider hiring a new part-time researcher for the next issue
Define the next problem	Now it's raining	Now there's a new lot-size regulation	Now there's an increase in younger members who prefer videos

The reflective steps here are crucial: if you don't have a tour guide, a senior engineer, or a teacher to identify and adapt to all of the factors and variables for you, then you need to integrate that work into all of your own actions. You also need to look for ways to apply what you learn in one situation to improve your work in the next situation—or in another context entirely. Scholars talk about this as *transferring* your learning. You can transfer to a similar situation (the engineer working on another office building a few blocks away) or to a more distant situation (the newsletter writer composing a more formal annual summary statement for donors).

Thus rather than think of reflection as something that someone else does, or that happens only at one point in our work on a "free range" writing project, advanced writers seek to integrate reflective practice with our actions. This helps us improve not just at writing "what the teacher assigns," but at writing *everything*: lab reports this year, a resume next year, a story about your cousin's new restaurant for a local food blog the year after that. To become a writer who operates confidently in complex situations, and who improves this year and over a lifetime, you need to gain strategies for integrated reflective practice.

4.3 DEAL and Delve: Strategies for Reflective Practice

Reflective writing usually has a single audience member: you write for yourself. That doesn't mean that you can let yourself off the hook, though. To develop a *productive habit* of reflective practice, not just a new way to procrastinate on your writing task, you need to develop strategies that bring you insights rather than only stating obvious facts. If you haven't used metacognitive strategies much before, you may find it helpful to use a "DEAL and Delve" approach to help you learn about and improve your writing in ways that you find valuable.

DEAL with it: Define, explore, act, & learn

The moves of reflective practice can eventually become second nature, especially when a task is familiar. After all, a world-class saxophonist doesn't track whether he's exploring or acting in the middle of a jazz improvisation, and a skilled cardiologist doesn't pause in the middle of her surgical procedure to stare off into space while she decides what she's just learned. A bystander might think that these experts are bundles of pure action: notes pour into one room, while scalpels and clamps are deftly applied in the other. But what enables both professionals to adapt to changing circumstances (such as a low-energy audience or a weakened artery) is their constant switching between action and consideration, between practice and reflection.
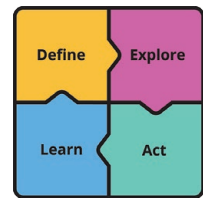
However, while you are developing your skills as a writer and a reflective practitioner of writing, you can benefit from engaging in some key moves deliberately, one at a time. Most guides to reflective practice acknowledge that the practitioner—in our case, a writer—needs to begin by stepping back and assessing the current situation as objectively as possible. What is happening, could happen, or might need to happen? Like any expert, writers benefit from having thorough data about the work we are doing or trying to do. Once the situation is more clearly mapped, the writer needs to consider a range of options, because the key point of reflective practice is to find non-obvious choices that can improve one's performance. (If the best way were obvious, you probably wouldn't need reflection!)

Then the writer can return to action—locating source material, typing away at a keyboard, or reorganizing an outline—by selecting a step or resource identified in the earlier surveys. Finally, the writer needs to check in metacognitively to think about the learning: what's the takeaway they can apply to this task and to future situations?

One way to think about these steps is through a DEAL framework:

- **D**efine the situation.
- **E**xplore the opportunities.
- **A**ct based on the choices you just made.
- **L**ook and **L**earn from your experience.

These steps will vary a bit across a writer's reflective practice, but the moves are consistent enough to comprise a recognizable, memorable pattern that can help you be deliberate about your reflections while you're learning.

Predict	Problem Solve	Improve
Define your rhetorical context - Writer's goals - Audience/community expectations - Genres, modalities, & styles	Define the problem - Rhetoric: Goals/ Expectations - Knowledge of subject - Writing steps/strategies - Dispositions - Other	Define what worked this time, and what did not
Explore other constraints - Subject knowledge - Writing strategy knowledge - Dispositions	Explore strategies that could help - Adapt a prior solution - Change the order or focus - Try a new strategy - Gain feedback or resources	Explore immediate revisions as well as connections to principles - What is "good writing" for this project, and how can you revise to bring your draft closer to this ideal? - What do good writers do for this kind of project, and generally? - What strategies do you have/ need for future projects?

Predict	Problem Solve	Improve
Act to acquire resources and implement strategies	Act: Try one alternate approach	Act: Revise your current project, and anticipate how you will adapt to future writing tasks
Learn what pathways are most productive for you as a writer • . . . based on past successes • . . . based on new circumstances	Learn whether the new strategy helped	Learn what principles and adaptations help you succeed as a writer

For specific examples of how to use these steps in a current or upcoming project, see the Guides in the next section.

Delve: What, how, why, & so

In addition to using the DEAL framework to remind yourself to move between consideration and action, you want to develop a habit of reflecting *as precisely as possible*. If you go to a doctor and define your situation as, "I don't feel well," it may take them a long time to figure out how to help you; if you tell a doctor, "My lower back hurts when I sit down but not when I'm standing," they will provide relevant treatment more quickly and accurately. Similarly, if you predict that a key factor in your project will be "doing extended research," you will have a harder time identifying beneficial resources than if you define that research specifically: "I need to go beyond finding general information about Brazilian property laws; for example, I would like to find current data about the daily life of citizens of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*."

You don't need to write hundreds of words to delve into your innermost experiences, if you can build a habit of moving directly into sentences that help reveal your precise situation or opportunities. You may find it helpful to nudge yourself toward more specific, in-depth reflection using a "what-how-why-so" sequence of questions; in addition, you can prompt yourself to add a "*because . . .*" phrase, a "*for example . . .*" or "*such as . . .*" phrase, or a "*therefore . . .*" phrase to your explanation.

In the example that follows, watch how the writer moves from a general description of a problem-solving reflection, to some more specific explorations of the precise challenges they face, to a specific action that could improve this particular document. In the end, this reflection only takes four sentences, but because the sentences move into *why* and *how*, and focus on specific issues, the writer finishes with more awareness and a clear plan, not just for this project but for other projects.

	Name it . . .	**. . . and be as specific as possible about challenges or opportunities**
What is or might be difficult now? What did you do previously? What do you plan to do?	*Writing a conclusion is hard . . .*	*. . . especially since this project requires me to explain a good solution to a complex business problem.*
How do you feel while doing it? How did you previously decide what to do? How else could you proceed with your writing?	*I always feel confused about what I should write at the end . . .*	*. . . for example, should I state a big new idea, or just repeat smaller ideas I've already discussed?*
Why is it difficult or easy now? Why did you choose this rather than another approach? Why do you want to improve on this?	*It's hard because I want to have a big impressive conclusion, but I'm also worried . . .*	*. . . because I'm new to this field and I don't feel qualified to propose a brand new solution.*
So what strategies, resources, or support might help you out? So what changes might help you solve (part of) the problem?	*I could aim for more of a middle ground . . .*	*. . . for example, by looking at some examples in business magazines of reasonable changes, or asking my instructor for sample proposals I could review.*

As you practice reflection and prediction, your early efforts might take you more than four sentences, and some sentences might take you a few minutes to write: after all, *thinking about how you write* and *thinking about how you can write better* is high-level brain work!

No single strategy will work for all reflective practice, any more than a single process works for all writers. For straightforward projects, being precise about "what" you're experiencing as a writer might be enough to help you move forward. In a more complex project, or when you are feeling particularly stuck or frustrated, you might reflect at more length, and you might lean more towards "how" and less toward "why," depending on your topic or goal. If you practice using some or all of this sequence, you can move more quickly to perceptions that will aid you in your current and future projects.

The more you focus your attention on what's complicated or difficult to articulate, rather than being satisfied with an initial or obvious answer, the deeper and more transferable your learning will be. With regular reflective practice, you will improve your awareness and increase the learning you gain from this metacognitive work.

4.4 Guides for Reflective Practice

The guides in this section can help you *practice reflecting*, so that you develop a stronger habit of *reflective practice*. They use the DEAL framework to help you practice specific moves: Define, Explore, Act, and Learn. Not all writers need to answer

all the questions: you may find some of them resonate with you more strongly than others overall, or some that connect directly to your experience with your current project. You may find it helpful to glance at some questions, to write short responses to others, and to delve more fully into one or two at each stage.

Predict your writing situation and challenges: Guiding questions

You can use some or all of the questions in this guide before you begin writing to predict your opportunities and challenges—or use these questions at any point in your writing process when you get stuck want to consider the overall situation of your project.

This guide is arranged in the DEAL structure. In order to increase the benefits of your reflections, you may wish to remind yourself to *delve* beyond your first general thoughts using a "what-why-how-so" approach.

1. Define your rhetorical context

a. What are your main purposes supposed to be in this writing task: What do you need to do or show for your readers? How do you know that's your goal?

b. Who are your primary and secondary audiences, and what do you know they need from you? What might make connecting with your readers easy (or challenging)?

c. What is/are the possible genre(s) of this writing task? What main expectations do readers have about this genre—and what benefits or restrictions does this genre give you?

d. What modality or writing style will best suit this project, given your goals and your readers' needs?

2. Explore writing strategies, opportunities, and constraints

a. What are the overall challenges of this task?

b. Given the rhetorical situation you outlined above, what are some strategies that can be particularly helpful?

i. Explaining a simple process is different from proposing a complex change: what strategies can help you in achieving your main purpose(s)?

ii. Persuading a knowledgeable, skeptical reader differs from persuading a trusting friend: what strategies might you select to help you connect?

iii. Identifying specific evidence about an experience you know well is different from locating and learning information about an issue you aren't familiar with: what strategies will help you write with authority and confidence?

       iv. Composing in a familiar genre, modality, or style is different from learning new structures as you compose: what strategies will help you meet your own and readers' expectations for this project?

  c. What one or two elements of this task seem easiest or most familiar to you? Why? Give an example of a factor or approach that might be similar to one you've successfully used before:

       i. *Acquiring and applying subject knowledge*: gathering information, determining your breadth/depth of information, providing good analysis, checking assumptions

       ii. *Using steps and strategies* productively: setting writing goals, generating material, organizing material, revising the document

       iii. *Managing your dispositions*: gaining confidence, finding motivation, allotting time and resources, being persistent and openminded

       iv. *Other* elements from your writing story or writing principles

  d. What one or two elements of this task seem most difficult or least familiar to you? Give an example of a factor or approach that might be new or complicated for you in this task:

       i. *Acquiring and applying subject knowledge*: gathering information, determining your breadth/depth of information, providing good analysis, checking assumptions

       ii. *Using steps and strategies* productively: setting writing goals, generating material, organizing material, revising the document

       iii. *Managing your dispositions*: gaining confidence, finding motivation, allotting time and resources, being persistent and openminded

       iv. *Other* elements from your writing story or writing principles

Explore 4.3

Use Question 1 to identify a few key aspects of your goal and audience. Then write at least two sentences responding to prompts from Question 2, to help predict the challenges that you predict will be important for you to keep in mind as you plan this project. If you are responding to a formal writing assignment, include at least one direct quotation from your writing assignment description or directions to explain more about the rhetorical context you are predicting.

Learn

- To refresh your understanding of a writing task's **rhetorical situation**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To **articulate possible difficulties** that accompany a rhetorical situation, refer to the chart in Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project.

3. Act to identify or acquire resources you may need

a. What internal resources—your previous experiences, successful writing projects, writing strategies or principles, or working habits—do you already have that you can use as you encounter challenges in this writing task?

b. What external resources— your relevant current knowledge, peer or professional community, or other information sources close to hand—do you already have that you can refer to as you encounter challenges in this writing task?

c. What internal resources—writing strategies, productive dispositions, or process steps—might you need to improve or adapt in order to succeed with this task? This is a good point to pay attention to challenges you have faced before as a writer, and plan to change your approach or tell yourself a positive story to improve your experience.

d. What external resources—model documents, audience information, data, analyses, expert perspectives, production tools, or reader feedback— might you need to acquire in order to succeed with this task? Which ones might be trickiest or take the most time to locate?

e. How will you manage your time constraints with this task? Which elements will take the most time to complete? Where in your schedule do you spot conflicts building up, or opportunities to complete steps in this task?

4. Look and learn

a. If you completed an "Improve" reflection for an earlier assignment, which of the principles or strategies you suggested then seem most important or appropriate to try to follow now?

b. If you have completed a writing task like this in the past, what did you learn from your successes/failures there that you can apply here?

c. If you have not completed a writing task quite like this one, how can you adapt something you've used before to these new circumstances?

d. At what point(s) do you usually get stuck or feel frustrated when you write, and what can you try this time that might help you out?

Explore 4.4

From Question 3, answer at least one of the "have resources" questions and one of the "need resources" questions to take the first steps in acting on your plan. Then review Question 4 and answer at least one of the "look and learn" questions. If you are responding to a formal writing assignment, include at least one direct quotation from your writing assignment description or directions to explain an opportunity or constraint you are predicting.

> ## Learn
>
> - To fully consider **your prior and current resources** for completing a writing project, see <u>Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project</u>.
> - To articulate ways to **use past failures** as well as past successes to guide your reflection, see <u>Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits</u>.

Solve problems as you compose: Guiding questions

You can use some or all of the questions in this guide during your composing process if you get stuck or have questions—or you can use these questions at any point in your writing process when you want to focus on identifying new strategies to solve a specific writing problem.

This guide is arranged in the DEAL structure. In order to increase the benefits of your reflections, you may wish to remind yourself to delve beyond your first general thoughts using a "what-why-how-so" approach.

1. Define the problem

Remember that writing problems overlap—a confidence problem that seems rooted in your dispositions can be related to a knowledge problem—so it doesn't matter much whether you give a "right answer" as long as the definition feels useful to you.

a. Is it a *rhetoric problem*? These problems have to do with determining your goal/focus/stance, meeting the audience's needs, writing in this genre, or choosing your presentation mode/style.

b. Is it a *knowledge problem*? These problems have to do with gathering subject-matter information, determining your breadth/depth of information, providing good analysis, or checking assumptions.

c. Is it a *steps or strategies problem*? These problems have to do with setting writing goals, mapping your writing process, generating material, organizing material, revising the document, or using a specific strategy like integrating sources, responding to a counterargument, or using complex sentence structures.

d. Is it a *disposition* problem? These problems have to do with gaining confidence, finding motivation, allotting time and resources, or being persistent and openminded.

e. Is it *another* problem? Consider elements from your writing story or writing principles to help you identify why you're feeling stuck.

2. Explore strategies that could help you

It has been said that "Acting the same way but expecting different results" is a sure way to set yourself up for failure. As you explore strategies for taking action, try to identify several possibilities, including some that you haven't tried before or don't generally use for this kind of writing problem.

a. What is a resource, strategy, or approach you've tried successfully before when faced with a similar problem?

b. What's a strategy suggested in this textbook, either in a chapter you recently read or in the guide to writing exercises, that could help you here?

c. Do you think you need document-level strategies (narrowing/broadening your focus, changing your emphasis, reorganizing your structure, connecting with your audience) or paragraph- or sentence-level strategies (clarifying arguments, strengthening evidence, using more appropriate or powerful language, adjusting to meet genre or design expectations)?

d. If you have received peer review comments, what responses identify points where you're succeeding, which you could replicate elsewhere in the document? What comments did you receive—and what comments did you give someone else—that help you identify a possible new approach?

3. Act: Experiment by trying **one** alternate approach

a. Give yourself at least 20-30 minutes of active writing (or other strategy) to fully explore the new approach (set a timer if it helps!): your brain needs time to shift from the prior state to your new way of thinking.

b. Keep a growth mindset as you use your new strategy: Remember that *writing involves strategies more than talent*, so give yourself encouragement for trying something new, rather than focusing too much on self-critique or word-level editing.

4. Look and Learn

a. Take a minute at the end of your experiment to identify at least one benefit that you *might have gained* in this current project from trying this strategy.

b. Stay open to the possibility that "success" may not look exactly as you imagined: you might be solving a problem you didn't initially identify, you might have improved your attitude even if the writing still feels challenging, or you may be making progress even if it's taking you a slightly different direction than you planned.

c. Identify other parts of this task where you might apply a similar solution.

d. Recognize how one of your writing principles or part of your writing story may be relevant to your experiment.

e. If you're still stuck, that's okay: Remember that struggling is normal, and that you can try another strategy, work on another section, or walk away and come back later with a fresh mind.

Explore 4.5

When you get stuck or frustrated during composing, begin by using Question 1 to step back and define the problem as specifically as you can: this may take you two or three sentences or more (using a "what-why-how-so" approach can be very helpful here). Before you decide on an action or solution, use one or two prompts from Question 2 to challenge yourself to explore at least two or three choices: something you've tried before, a strategy recommended by your instructor, or a writing exercise in this book. Remember to take a minute after you try your solution to reflect on an item from Question 4: what did you learn that is helpful, and what is still tricky to solve?

Practice

- To solve rhetoric problems by reconnecting to your purpose or understanding your audience's needs, see Audience Switch, Backtalk, Elevator Speech, or Magic Three Choices.
- To solve knowledge problems by digging past your initial beliefs, see Believing/Doubting, Mind the Gap, or Question Ladders.
- To solve steps or strategies problems by changing your typical process, see Add/Move/Change/Delete, Inside Out, Seven Generations, or Write it Worse.
- To solve disposition problems by **telling yourself a new story**, see Funny Story, Remix/Mashup, or Values Freewrite.

Learn

- To learn more about growth mindset, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.
- To learn more about assessing your own writing progress, see Chapter 9, Reviewing a Written Draft.

Improve as a writer and transfer your learning: Guiding questions

Use this reflection guide after you have composed most or all of your document. You can use these questions to improve the current project as well as to identify principles and strategies you can use in future writing projects. Or you can use these questions at any point in your writing process when you want to understand how this experience will help you improve generally as a writer.

This guide is arranged in the DEAL structure. In order to increase the benefits of your reflections, you may wish to remind yourself to delve beyond your first general thoughts using a "what-why-how-so" approach.

1. Define what worked and how you addressed challenges while writing

a. If you wrote a reflective prediction regarding this writing project, take a look back at what you wrote. What was the most accurate prediction you made about this writing task? What factor or challenge most surprised you?

b. While you were composing this document, what exact writing problem was most difficult for you, and how did you cope with it?

c. If you participated in peer review, what was one comment you received, one comment you gave another peer, and/or one approach you saw a peer use in their writing that will help you continue to improve as a writer?

d. What kinds of writing approaches—rhetoric, knowledge, steps and strategies, disposition, or other—do you feel you had the most success with this task, and which category was most challenging?

e. What was the most effective *new* strategy, principle, or resource that you used as you completed this project?

2. Explore principles that you can adopt, adapt, or reaffirm

a. If you've been working on your writing story, listing writing principles, or composing a writing theory, can you identify at least one of your fundamental writing strategies that served you well again here?

b. Would you say that you made the most improvement as a writer at the whole-project level (narrowing/broadening your focus, finding relevant secondary sources, organizing your points, connecting with your audience) or at the paragraph or sentence level (clarifying arguments, strengthening and integrating evidence, addressing assumptions or counterarguments, adapting to a genre/modality, using more appropriate or powerful language)?

c. Identify an upcoming writing task that is similar to this one: what's one approach, strategy, or resource that worked for you this time that you can transfer to the new task ("near transfer")?

d. Identify (or imagine) a writing task in a very different course, field, or context: what's one approach, strategy, or resource that worked for you this time that you could imagine using for that task ("far transfer")?

3. Anticipate future actions: Plan for your next writing task

a. Consider how you *planned* this project, how you *composed* your document, and how you *revised* your work. What's one strategy from each stage that you want to try to use again?

b. Consider how you managed your dispositions or habits of mind (building confidence, finding motivation, allotting time and resources, or being persistent and openminded) during this project: What's one approach or step that went well that you want to keep using, and what is a step you can try to foster even more productive habits in your next writing project?

c. If you had to adapt your current document to another audience, genre, or goal, what might you choose and how would your strategies or approaches need to change?

d. If you were giving advice to a less experienced writer about completing a task like this one, what would be your top 2-3 recommendations?

4. Look and learn: Update your writing principles

e. How has your experience with this writing task reaffirmed the value of one of your writing principles or theories? (Remember that you can consider a personal principle such as "I always try to find some creative examples," a threshold concept such as "Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts," or a more specific writing strategy, such as "Review other examples of this genre.")

f. How has this writing task prompted you to change or add to your writing principles or theories—what new approach or view seemed helpful, or what earlier approach didn't seem to work as well this time?

Explore 4.6

Answer at least two of the "define" questions and one question each from "explore," "anticipate," and "learn." Include direct quotations *from your own writing project* to help explain at least two of your answers.

Learn

- To learn more about **responding to peer review** comments, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.

- To learn more about building **your theory of writing**, see Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory.

4.5 Focus on Equity: Reclaim Agency Through Reflective Practice

Just as productive habits of mind cannot remove all writing challenges, reflective practice won't create more hours in the day, change your supervisor's unreasonable demands, or reduce racism or other discrimination that may be limiting your access to resources or approval. You or other writers around you may still

face inequitable access to important resources that support successful writing, as noted in <u>Chapter 1, Reframing Your Story About Writing</u>. If you are considering what action to take to address inequities directly, some of the steps listed in <u>Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits</u>, may be useful to you.

Reflective practice can be one of the tools you use, however, to succeed as a writer even in a community or profession that distributes resources unequally.

> **Reflecting to predict** can help you understand—or ask more precise questions about—what is expected of you. Research shows that experts in most fields have unarticulated assumptions about what "good writing" looks like: they may know it when they see it, but they don't always describe precisely what they're looking for. This lack of transparency can be a particularly heavy burden for students who are among the first in their families to go to college, students from different cultural or language backgrounds, and students who face racism or other systemic bias in schools or communities. (This is sometimes called an "invisible curriculum.") Using reflective practice as you start a writing project won't fix a completely unfair grading system, but it will help you identify unstated criteria and opportunities: the more you know about your readers' expectations, the goals you must accomplish, and the resources available to you, the more successful your writing will be. And if you share the results of your investigations, what you learn may increase other writers' success as well.

> **Reflecting to problem-solve** can help you build and maintain a growth mindset, which helps you continue to improve as a writer even if people around you believe in stereotypes that say you can't succeed. Every time you identify a challenge, select a new strategy, and make progress solving a problem rather than giving in to "writer's block," you prove to yourself that you have important ideas and powerful strategies for communicating them.

> **Reflecting to improve** can help you stay in touch with your core values, even when those values aren't shared by all of your readers or evaluators. Writing in a way that aligns with your principles and values will help your motivation, confidence, and persistence, which will in turn improve the final version of your project. You may also be better able to sort out productive feedback from background noise: if you are committed to providing thorough evidence or engaging with a peer audience, you can put more of your energy into improving based on suggestions in those areas, and worry less about comments critiquing your apostrophes or

> pronoun agreements. Finally, when you can describe your own
> path to improved writing, you can assist others in identifying ways
> to make their writing better, and thus help others gain access to
> confidence and resources.

You may also find yourself *reflecting toward community action*: An exclusionary practice might not directly affect you, but you may be able to serve as an ally to others by informing the community or the classroom about barriers, providing affirmative support to other writers, or even asking an instructor or supervisor for a change in policy.

Overall, your reflective practice will increase your agency: your ability to decide how, where, and when to invest your valuable time in improving your writing. Your new insights will also help you become the kind of leader who states expectations clearly, fosters others' growth, and creates opportunities for diverse writers improve and succeed.

4.6 Make Reflective Practice a Writing Habit

We've all been there: a writing project is due in a week, a day, or an hour, and we're stuck staring at a blank page or a blinking cursor. If you have been practicing reflection, though, there's no need to panic; you can step back, take a deep breath, and assess your situation. Asking the simple question, "So, what seems to be my situation here, and how could I address it?" can put you back in control. If you're at the beginning of a project, you have even more opportunities for success: asking "Do I have any challenges I should look out for, or any resources I can tap into?" can help you address issues head-on, rather than letting them pile up at the end of the project. And if you *must* finish a project at the last minute, you can still build in short breaks to reflect on your writing process.

A feeling of "writer's block"—which is just a dramatic name for "being stuck"—often hits when we succumb to the "allatonceness" of a writing project, to use writing scholar Ann Berthoff's term. When you instead use reflective practice to step back a minute, identify one piece of the situation, and consider your options, you can then choose a strategy to help you take action to keep your project moving forward. And the more you try to identify challenges, explore options, and solve problems when you're stuck, the better you'll become at predicting them before they occur, solving them when they do occur, and improving your writing so that the next task, while perhaps still tricky, won't seem so overwhelming. When reflective practice becomes a habit, all of your other habits and practices benefit as well, and you become a writer who can adapt to any task that the world of writing presents to you.

Chapter 5. Planning a Writing Project

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Determine how much agency you have to shape your writing project
- Choose an appropriate and viable topic or focus for a new writing project
- Identify resources you bring to a writing project and predict difficulties you may face
- Use a DEAL approach to create a plan for your writing project

If you were going to build a new house, visit a new city, or design a new online game, you would start by analyzing and planning. Before you picked up a hammer, jumped in the car, or wrote the first line of code, you would take time to identify key needs, resources, expectations, and constraints.

Writers can certainly start a project—particularly one that is already familiar—by just writing, such as brainstorming an early draft or sketching an outline of key points. Sometimes we gain energy and confidence by moving quickly from a blank page or screen to one that has some of our ideas already laid out.

Before going too far into drafting a project, though, it's useful to invest in more planning. As a reflective writer, especially

one who is working on a project that is new or will require substantial time invested, you will benefit from taking time early in the process to predict the options and set your priorities.

You might spend just a few minutes identifying how your goals align with any instructions you've been given, or you may decide to take time to reflect more extensively about the challenges, resources, and strategies that are most relevant to your project.

As you get started with a new writing task, it may help to keep several threshold concepts in mind:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

Each time you deliberately *reflect to predict* how your writing project will proceed, you gain more knowledge to improve the success of that project, and you improve your ability to transfer writing skills and knowledge to other important tasks you will encounter in the future.

5.1 Reflect to Predict Your Freedom of Choice

Before you take action as a writer, it helps to know where you have the agency to make your own choices, and where you need to meet specific expectations or constraints. In some school assignments, for instance, students receive a clear map of the whole writing task: what questions they should ask, what information they must present, where to locate that information, how they should organize and present ideas, and how they will know when the document is complete. This kind of writing is similar to assembling a piece of prefabricated furniture, running an obstacle course, or using a GPS system to plan a driving route: writers still need to pay attention and adapt, but we follow someone else's plan rather than navigate our own route.

In other situations, writers solve open-ended, "free-range" writing tasks. When we compose love poems or design the website for our new business, we stay aware of readers' needs, but we blaze the trail: we choose the starting and ending points, devise and revise the route, set the priorities for how much information and analysis to share, and decide how to solve challenges and problems we encounter along the way.

A lot of school and professional writing, however, happens in an active navigation zone, where writers are given a destination and some instruction, but also need to select elements of their own route toward successful communication. An instructor, supervisor, or official who requires a piece of writing can have very specific expectations in mind, and yet not always provide turn-by-turn instructions for how to succeed. In that middle zone, you may need to review the instructions carefully to understand the audience's exact needs, the expectations built into the genre, and the complexity of information and analysis in order to be successful; you may also need to examine models of similar documents and "reverse engineer" the strategies of successful communication in a particular genre or scenario.

Explore 5.1

In a few sentences, describe a writing task you encountered recently that was in an active navigation zone: you received some instructions, and you suspected there were some "right answers" or approaches, but you were not sure what exactly was expected. What were you most confident about, and what caused you the most confusion? How did you respond to the challenge, and how did you feel about your writing?

Learn

- To learn more about "free-range" writing tasks, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process.
- To learn more about adapting to your audience, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.

Decode and predict: Analyze formal instructions

Sometimes trying to figure out what is expected in a writing project—and where you have choice or agency—feels like a guessing game with no rules. However, as a reflective writer, you don't need to guess wildly about a project; instead, you can use reflective practice and rhetorical knowledge to carefully "decode" the instructions. That is, you can review what is stated, compare the instructions to key terms and writing principles, and look for clues about what is not directly indicated. Advanced writers can also

- identify the writing moves and scope indicated by the directions
- analyze the key features of any writing sample or similar document
- consider how the rhetorical context influences decisions about genre, modality, and style
- check the instructions against their own knowledge of successful writing strategies

Identify key writing moves

Figuring out what a document should be *about* doesn't usually take much effort, but deciding *how to engage* with that information often takes more reflection. One key prediction that writers benefit from regards how to balance the writing among four kinds of moves that are common in academic and professional writing:

- **Summarizing** known or obvious facts, similarities, processes, or events (this may also include *describing* or *narrating*)
- **Analyzing** the separate parts, moves, or principles that make up a performance, event, or theory (this may also include *classifying* or *comparing*)
- **Arguing** whether one approach, occasion, theory, event, or result is better or more appropriate than another, and supporting that judgment with reasons or evidence
- **Synthesizing** multiple ways of thinking in order to create a new perspective or solution: applying a theory to an example, linking dissimilar events to reveal a pattern, or extrapolating from a known case to a new situation (this may also include *exploring* or *reflecting*)

In this list, the amount of input from the writer increases at each step, from "summarizing" that does not require much original thinking to "synthesizing" that requires substantial insight. A writer who summarizes when they should be arguing (or vice versa) will miss the mark, just as your friend would cause you frustration if you asked for a lunchtime *recommendation* and they provided only a *list* of six nearby restaurants. As you decode the directions to a writing task, then, you should underline or highlight key action words and add your own comments to identify your contributions. Remember that while some simple documents focus on just one of those approaches, many advanced writing tasks require two or more of those purposes.

Here are some common terms to help you start. Note that *italicized terms* may indicate different moves depending on the task or field: for a biology lab, "*define* 'photosynthesis'" might mean summarizing the commonly accepted definition; for a psychology class, "*define* 'mental health'" might mean analyzing multiple components of a psychological state or even arguing about which elements are most important for understanding the concept.

Summarize	Analyze	Argue	Synthesize
Define	Account for	Assess	Apply
Describe	Analyze	Choose	*Argue*
Explain	*Compare/Contrast*	Claim	Cause
Identify	*Define*	Critique	*Compare/Contrast*
List	Develop	Defend	Connect
Review	*Discuss*	*Define*	Create
Report	Examine	*Discuss*	Integrate
Show	*Explain*	Evaluate	Propose
State	*Interpret*	*Interpret*	Relate
	Pros and cons	Judge	Speculate
	Show	*Pros and cons*	Synthesize
		Respond	
		Review	
		Suggest	
		Think	

Explore the focus and boundaries of a task

A second decision that writers make is about the scope of their document: what is crucial or most important to include, and how much depth or detail will be needed. You can use your decoding process to help you rationally predict some boundaries for your document based on clues in the instructions, so you don't leave out key information or get sidetracked by unrelated details.

- **Include all the necessary parts**. You should note words or phrases that identify separate parts or steps of an assignment. These may be number or ordering words (*three* reasons, a *second* step, *a couple* of examples), or they may be less precise phrases that require you to decide (*important* causes, *researched* sources). Remember that some parts might be assumed: a college essay should probably have an introduction, and a memo should probably have an action item, even if those steps aren't stated. Once you have a list, keep it nearby as you write so you don't forget a key element.

- **Leave out unnecessary information**. Determining what is "necessary" and "unnecessary" is not a simple choice in advanced writing: "How much is enough?" is a fundamental question all writers encounter. But you can look at directions and predict some plausible boundaries in advance: Do you need to discuss *all* causes or sub-topics, or can you focus on just a few? What phrases in the directions give you permission to limit your breadth or depth? Finally, remember that in most documents, you're selecting the *most relevant* or *most important* items to consider; these won't always be

the first items you think of, so you may have to revise your idea of "necessary" and "less necessary" as you work on the project.

- **Choose at least one place to go deep**. Most writing tasks are assigned in order to provide a way to record in-depth details and careful thinking; otherwise, we could just speak or text a few sentences to give someone an overview. You should note down at least one part of the task that you can predict will be important to the audience or will line up with an area you know well, and remind yourself to find extra examples, evidence, or analysis to help you show your advanced thinking. If the step-by-step instructions don't define an emphasis ("Analyzing a dance performance *depends on seeing how sound and choreography interact*"), consider issues or questions that have been part of recent conversations or inquiries in your local context.

- **Look for hidden opportunities to contribute insight**. Unless you are told directly not to include your own analysis or proposals—or you know that the genre, such as a budget report, is not a good place for improvisation—you might reasonably predict that as an advanced writer you will be expected to provide your suggestions, insights, and arguments. Often these moves are most appropriate in concluding sections of a document, and are indicated by words from the "Argue" and "Synthesize" categories above. Even if the directions don't specify this work, you might still give yourself permission to *evaluate, suggest, connect*, or *propose* as you compose your document, so you don't miss this opportunity.

- **Identify appropriate sources of information**. All writers research—but not all writing projects require systematic review of credible secondary sources. In some cases, you will receive direct instructions about using your own knowledge or selecting secondary sources; in others, you won't have specific direction but you can predict that in order to support an argument or insight for skeptical readers, you will benefit from learning more and crediting your external sources.

When you highlight the obvious elements to include, and decode the language of the instructions so you can predict some of the less-obvious factors to consider, you give yourself a strong navigation plan that helps you share your best thinking with your readers.

Explore 5.2

Choose one of the sample assignment prompts below to analyze: assume each is for a document about 500-1000 words long. Select at least three terms or phrases that help you predict the work of this assignment: one (or more) that helps identify the expected move(s); one that helps identify the scope; and one that indicates an expectation of critical thinking or insight by the writer. Briefly explain what you think word or phrase means the writer should do.

Sample A: "Select one of the topic ideas below, and discuss the idea of diversity in relation to that topic. Be sure to address several of the multiple identities to which we each belong, which may include race, religion, gender identity, sex, orientation, age, class/socioeconomic status, and ability/disability. You should have a thesis statement that gives your claim, and use at least five different sources to support your point."

Sample B: "Based on our class readings, analyze the complex effects of climate change on one aspect of life here in Oregon (such as agriculture, cities, recreation, public health, or wildlife). First, review the most common physical changes and their consequences; then explain at least two recent legal or political decisions that are relevant. Finally, explain how these forces (environmental, political, and cultural) connect to produce challenges and opportunities for conservation in our state."

Sample C: "Your lab report should have three sections. Your Introduction should state the purpose and procedure of the experiment. The Results and Discussion section should show all the data you collected, discuss any significant problems you encountered, and explain any uncertainties that remain. Be sure to include and discuss relevant calculations, graphs, and charts. Your Conclusion should evaluate your results: was there any disagreement between theory and experiment, and if so, what could you suggest to improve the experiment?"

Learn

- To learn more about **writing moves**, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves.
- To learn more about **"how much information is enough?**," see Chapter 15, Developing Projects That Explain.

Decode and predict: Analyze a model document

Some of the most important expectations you may need to decode in an assigned writing task are related to the genre of the document. Experts in a field may be so familiar with typical documents—essays, reports, reviews, and proposals—that they assume everyone knows how to write those documents well. But since writing patterns vary not just between different genres (a novel rarely rhymes) but within genres (not all poems rhyme, either), writers need to be able to locate and decode the key features of relevant, local documents. Does your document need a title and introduction? Should your document cite external sources? Will readers expect the use of field-specific language, or do they hope for straightforward, jargon-free sentences?

A formulaic direction such as "Write 500-800 words" is easy to spot, but genres are dynamic and evolving, so other characteristics may not be that obvious. If possible, you should try to locate a model document similar to the one you need

to write, and take some time to analyze its defining features. If you don't have access to a sample document from a previous assignment or event in your course or workplace, you can consider asking a friend or looking online. Your goal is not to replicate the model, simply substituting your words in here and there; indeed, one reason that instructors sometimes don't provide models is that they're concerned that writers will feel constrained to write a perfect copy rather than use their navigation skills to adapt to the important moves of the document. Instead, you should look for dominant patterns: What kind of information is included? Where is it located? How is it mostly presented?

If the genre or workplace setting is new to you, or if the document is high stakes, you may want to complete a full genre ethnography so that you gain a full understanding of what people in your field or situation expect the document to do. If you're in a more familiar situation, you might write yourself some notes about key features like those in the following list—or ask an instructor or co-worker to give you some advice:

- How is this document generally *organized*: what kinds of sections, order, or arrangements does it display? Are sections broken out or woven together?
- What information or approaches generally occur in *key sections* of the document: the beginning, the ending, the central points or examples?
- Are the *sentences* in this document long or short, with formal or informal language, featuring long descriptions or mostly basic facts?
- Is the document designed for slow, careful reading of *in-depth analysis*, or will readers likely skim it quickly for main ideas?
- What format or *design* is used—is there need for any special layout or visual communication?

When you increase your familiarity with the document genre as well as the specific assignment, you will be able to make better predictions about how to structure, support, and present your ideas.

Explore 5.3

Take a look at some writing assignment instructions you received recently, and use your knowledge of genre patterns and fundamental features to decode some key expectations. Begin by listing 1-2 fundamental questions that the instructions answer (or start to answer): "Since the instructions say ____, I know/predict that ____." Then list 2-3 features or approaches that are not directly addressed, and add a note: can you decode the likely expectation on your own, should you locate a model document, or will you need to ask for additional help?

Practice

- To practice analyzing a document for genre features, try <u>Genre Ethnography</u>
- To practice **comparing genres**, try <u>Genre Triple Log</u>.

  NOTE: These Practice features provide links to exercises in Chapters 23 through 29. If you are reading this book in print, you can find an alphabetical list of exercises at the end of the book. The list includes the section in which each exercise can be found.

Learn

- To learn more about **genres**, see <u>Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres</u>.
- To learn more about **designing** a document, see <u>Chapter 8, Designing Across Modalities</u>.
- To learn more about **organization patterns**, see <u>Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft</u>.

5.2 Reflect to Choose Your Topic or Focus

Although you may think of writing assignments as inseparable from the fraught question "What should I write about?" it turns out that "choosing a topic" *after* deciding that writing needs to happen is not a typical approach to writing in the world at large. It's true that occasionally, professional or creative writers truly have a blank page and a limitless choice: they could write about tacos, term limits, or Tehran's history, with equal joy and success. But mostly, writers outside of school almost never "choose topics" as an entirely separate stage of their writing process.

Most often, *topics choose writers.* That is, writers discover that we need to communicate something, and then we write what we actually need or feel compelled to say at that moment:

> u wont blv who i saw
> @the game it was
> marie cheering 4
> the OTHER team!!!!

> Dear Principal Brown,
>
> My child got punched again on the playground today and I need to know what the school is doing to solve this problem.

```
To:    A. Muhammed <amuham1@abcd-inc.com>

From:  D. Markovitch <dmarkov@abcd-inc.com>

Subject:    Project Report 1

This week our team met three of our four
benchmarks, as outlined below. We require
additional funding to complete the next
stage.
```

In each of these cases, the writer is moved by a combination of internal goals and external events, and responds with written communication. Writers might be motivated by a disconnect between what should have happened and what did happen (Marie's questionable sports loyalties); we might see an action or belief that needs correcting (a school's anti-bullying policies); we might need approval or resources to engage in important tasks (a project manager needing resources to support a team). Even novelists and lyricists often say that they woke up one morning thinking about a particular story that they *needed* or wanted to tell—they still benefit from reflecting and predicting about how best to craft that story, but the general topic is not a mystery.

Understand school writing topics

The school-based exercise in "choosing a topic" occurs because a particular kind of writer (a student) is required to demonstrate to a particular kind of reader (an instructor) that they have learned a way of thinking about a particular issue, problem, project, or idea. Indeed, writing is often the best way that students can practice and demonstrate a way of thinking, rather than just showing that they have memorized facts or guessed at some answers.

> A history instructor wants to know that students can *think like historians* in studying the conflicts in western Africa: they want to know that students understand how "history" is composed of multiple stories that have to be sorted and evaluated, contextualized and interpreted, compared and connected.

> An environmental science instructor wants to know that students can *think across disciplines* in assessing lead paint contamination in city houses: they want to know that students will pose hypotheses and examine physical evidence as biologists do, and that students will observe people and assess behavioral patterns as sociologists do.

When you are writing to demonstrate your learning, sometimes there is not much room to "choose a topic": there is only room to follow the directions, with

some minor adaptations in focus and scope, because teachers want all students to experience and represent a very specific kind of learning.

> **Women's studies**: Analyze the problem of gender in *Ourika* and *A Doll's House*. Be sure to consider other factors such as social class, historical setting, and family socialization.

> **Philosophy**: Explain and critically discuss St. Thomas Aquinas' "first cause" argument for the existence of God. Which elements of his argument are most successful at demonstrating the existence of God within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition?

> **Computer science**: Compare the advantages of web-based vs. device-based office productivity applications given the constraints of current popular portable devices (phones and tablets). Recommend a software development approach to a new application developer.

But in some school writing, instructors leave more room to "choose a topic." They hope that by giving you a little room to choose, they are bringing you closer to an outside-school situation in which a topic chooses you—and that as a result, you will find either an emotional or a professional connection to the writing task that will engage and motivate you. But you will only receive this benefit if you take time to reflect and predict how you can align your interests with the school assignment. It is worth your time to slow down and consider your options before you commit your resources, for two reasons.

> First, nearly all the other writing problems you encounter will stem from the foundation you set out at the beginning, just as a house grows from a stable or unstable base. If you choose and focus your initial topic well, you will have far fewer problems to solve later.

> Second, nearly all the writing problems you encounter will be easier to solve if you have some internal motivation connecting you to your writing project. If you choose and focus your initial topic well, you will have more energy to solve the problems that do arise later.

After you choose—or "choose"—a topic, you will still have to solve other problems related to the *moves* and *scope* of your writing project. But least you will be starting out your writing project on solid footing, and you can predict the rest of your writing project opportunities *as if* they were naturally occurring in a rhetorical ecosystem regarding a writing project that chose *you*.

Explore 5.4

Think back to some writing assignments recently where you got to "choose a topic." In a sentence or two, describe one success story: what topic did you choose, and how did you connect to that topic in ways that improved your writing? Then write a sentence or two about a less successful choice: what did you choose, what challenges did you run into as a writer, and looking back now, how do you think you might have made a better choice?

Learn

- To learn more about how **disciplines** affect writers, see <u>Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres</u>.
- To learn more about how **dispositions** like motivation and confidence affect writers, see <u>Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits</u>.

Practice with three sample assignments

To practice reflecting to choose a topic that aligns with your internal or external goals, consider the following three school assignments.

Sample Assignment 1: Communications

Choose a film or a fictional or biographical book that involves extensive interpersonal relationships. Briefly summarize recent research on communication styles in a particular type of relationship model we have studied (such as cross-cultural relationships), and then analyze how a character or set of characters in the film/book use successful or unsuccessful communication strategies as they negotiate that type of relationship. (3-5 pages)

Sample Assignment 2: Chemistry

Chemicals are often seen by the general public in a very negative light. "Contains no chemicals," for example, is a fairly common advertising statement meant to enhance a product's appeal.

Choose one specific area in which chemicals are implicated in a negative sense—the concerns about arsenic in rice, for instance. Analyze the problem with reference to the following questions: Is the problem real? If so, what are possible and practical solutions or alternatives? If not, what is the basis for the poor image of chemicals in this instance and how can that be overcome? Support any assertions of fact through appropriate citations to research in the field. (5-7 pages)

Sample Assignment 3: Composition

Identify a problem that currently affects your neighborhood or community and propose a reasonable solution or beneficial response to it. You should pay particular attention, as we have all semester, to the tension between individual rights/responsibilities and community rights/responsibilities: does the problem arise from too much or too little individual freedom? will the solution be best enacted through individual actions or through community endeavors such as policies or laws? Address any reasonable resistances to your proposed solution(s). Cite credible sources as needed. (6-9 pages)

Choose by assessing what the audience needs

In a typical school writing project, one primary audience is the instructor, and one of your primary goals is to meet their evaluation criteria. Even if "choose an appropriate topic" is not stated on the assignment sheet or the rubric, that criterion is implied in the assignment—and a well-chosen topic will help you solve other writing problems more easily.

In order to meet the expectations of your instructor audience, you should aim to choose a topic that is *right* for the assignment, that is *viable* given the constraints of the class, and that is at least a little *unexpected*, so that you can avoid bland ideas and demonstrate that you are learning to think in the advanced ways of your field or discipline.

Explore topics that are right for your instructor/class

Most assignment prompts give some direct guidelines and even some examples of "right" topics. Sample 2 above suggests the issue of the chemical arsenic occurring in rice (if you'd never heard of that, you can look it up), and Sample 1 suggests cross-cultural relationships, which might make you think of the science-fiction movie *Avatar* (with blue aliens on a distant planet) or a classic movie like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (featuring a cross-racial couple in the 1960s).

You will want to read the prompt carefully to be sure you have decoded the key steps. Sample 1 requires that you identify both a theory and a movie, for instance, so you need to think about both parts.

Your goal in this step is to generate a list of *several* possibilities that are all inside the boundaries of the assignment, for two reasons. First, having several *right* possibilities to start with will give you more to choose from as you try to avoid *poor* and *bland* topics. Second, you know that as you write, you learn: by the third or fourth item in your list, your brain is warming up to the task, and you are likely to come up with better *right* ideas than when you started. (Could you generate a list of 10 movies that focus on relationship conflicts?)

Identify several viable topic areas for the task

You will need to make a viable choice given the *constraints* of the assignment. Be realistic about your resources: if you need to use secondary sources about your topic—a movie, journal articles, interviews—be sure that these will be available to you. If the assignment calls for an analysis of a problem or argument, as in Samples 2 and 3, be sure that educated people are still disagreeing about it. And if you need to analyze a particular kind of scenario, as in Sample 1, be sure that it is present: perhaps *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* doesn't have enough examples that match current theories about cross-cultural communication.

Your choice also needs to be viable given the *goals* of the assignment. You need to demonstrate your *way of thinking* about a complex problem in this exact field. In response to the Sample 3 assignment, you could write a lot about why you think there needs to be more parking on campus, but if you cannot propose a reasonable solution for individuals or the community to take—one that doesn't require money growing on trees—you won't be demonstrating the kind of problem-solving analysis that the class has focused on. You might think back: where in the class so far have you seen puzzles, controversies, or conflicting principles that require specialized analysis? what elements of the current assignment are parallel to those past puzzles?

Your most viable topic for demonstrating the depth of your knowledge is often a topic where you cannot think of one single right answer. As you consider Sample 2 you might think, for instance, that most everyone agrees that DDT is a terribly harmful chemical, but you might find scientists who argue that DDT is still the most effective way to kill the mosquitos that transmit malaria, which kills more than half a million people every year. So DDT is not just a chemical with a negative image; it's a chemical with a *complicated* image, part negative, part positive.

Look for unexpected topic areas related to the course

Assuming your topic area is within boundaries, feasible given the constraints, and focused on a complex way of thinking, one last audience expectation to try to meet is to *avoid bland*, obvious topics. Your instructor does not expect you to be 100% unique and original. But the less obvious angle is nearly always more interesting for both writers and readers. If you choose to write about cross-cultural communication in a movie like *Avatar* that is obviously about the failure of cross-cultural communication between greedy colonists and nature-worshipping aliens, you won't have to work very hard to spot a few examples—and that may lead you restate ordinary ideas about communication rather than thinking like a communications expert.

Sometimes simply changing the angle of how you look at topic will help you see an unexpected line of inquiry—the way that looking through a microscope, or lying down with your camera and looking sideways, can help you see a familiar object in a new way. If you *narrow* your view in thinking about *Avatar*, for instance, you could follow only the female characters as you analyzed conversations across

cultures. If you look sideways, you could play with the meaning of "cross-cultural" and see that there are "military" and "explorer" cultures in both the human and the alien groups that you could use in your analysis.

If you scout for an even less conspicuous part of a topic, or a surprising combination, you might find additional options. What if you kept the same movie—*Avatar*—but analyzed it looking for examples of a different communication pattern, such as discussions between superiors and inferiors? When you go out on a limb or challenge your assumptions, you could stay with a familiar subject, and also give yourself the best chance to demonstrate your most powerful, complicated thinking.

Explore 5.5

Choose one of the sample assignments above, an assignment for another class, or an assignment you're working on now, then brainstorm options. List at least five chemicals, movies, local problems, or other topic areas, and score each one. For each criterion—right, viable, and unexpected based on a college instructor's expectations—indicate whether it is a strong fit (score = 3), an average fit (score = 2) or a low fit (score = 1). For instance, for Sample Assignment 2, you might score "ethanol" as Right=3 but Viable=1, because it has so many uses you can't do justice to it in a short assignment. When you're done, write a sentence explaining either the main problems with the *worst* topic you came up with, or the main benefits of the *best* topic you came up with, considering the audience's expectations.

Choose by finding a personal, professional, and/or intellectual connection

You will gain the most advantage from a "choose a topic" situation if you can link the assignment to a topic that has already chosen you. Occasionally, you will be lucky: you will be asked to write about "solving a neighborhood or community problem" just as you have joined a community group that is asking the city to create more soccer fields for youth teams to play on. Then you will be motivated and focused from the start and you can move on to solving other writing problems with attention and energy. Other times, you will not easily be able to think of (or connect to) a writing topic: there may not be a neighborhood problem that is small enough to write about but still interesting to you.

You may be tempted just to pick a topic at random, even though you know that that would be a poor investment of your time. If you choose too quickly, you could easily pick a topic that is *wrong* for you (it has no interest for or connection to you whatsoever), a topic that is *poor* for you (it is too big for you to learn about in the time allotted, or it is too small or too factual for you to contribute any significant analysis to), or a topic that is too *bland* for you (it is so obvious or so distant from your lived experience that you will have no new insights to offer about it).

In order to meet your goals as an engaged writer completing a school assignment, you should try to choose a topic that is *right* for you and what you are connected to, that is *viable* given how your brain works, and that is at least a little *unexpected*, so that you can gain motivation as you solve intriguing problems that have relevance to your personal, academic, or professional life.

Explore topics that are connected to your interests

"Six degrees of separation" is the name of a popular social network theory, a movie, and (as "Six degrees of Kevin Bacon") a party game from the 1990s. The popular theory is that any two people on the planet are connected, through their friends and friends-of-friends, by no more than six steps.

It's likely that the general topic area of your current class writing assignment is closer than you think to topics you are interested in. If you can identify a topic that is only five steps away, or perhaps only one or two steps, you will have found a topic that is "right" for you, and that will help you have a more engaged writing experience.

The instructor who assigned Sample 1 doesn't necessarily want you to choose a boring award-winning foreign film with dull people yammering on all the time (unless you love those kinds of films). They want you to think about how communication problems occur in the world you regularly live in, so if you watch cheerleading movies or download animations based on graphic novels or secretly love old Bugs Bunny cartoons, you could start by fishing around in your head near those connection points. Alternately, think about what kinds of communication problems really annoy you: cross-cultural problems may not bother you much, but cross-gender or cross-power problems may pose more frequent frustrations.

Finally, remember that you don't have to "fall in love" with your topic. Instead, you can look for a topic that connects to your academic or professional goals. Perhaps you can draw on issues or texts from other classes you are taking. Or consider your current (or hoped-for) workspace: if you take fifteen minutes to really look around your office or workspace, you could probably identify a communication problem, a possibly dangerous or disreputable chemical, or a nagging problem that your office community faces every day. You may not initially identify the most exciting, passion-creating topic— but because you will begin with a true connection, you may find that it becomes a good fit for you more quickly than you expect.

Identify viable topics by exploring specific instances

Writers outside school who are chosen by topics nearly always wish the topics were smaller and tamer. We know that writing a quick text message would be easier if this friend of ours didn't get annoyed so quickly and turn everything into a drama, or that writing a letter about our child being bullied would be faster if it had only happened one time, not four times this month. Narrow, focused issues are easier to handle, given limits to time and resources.

A school writer who is told to "choose a topic," on the other hand, may be tempted to choose ideas that are huge or seem profound. Perhaps a broad, general topic like "chemicals in air pollution" is the first thing that occurs to that student, or eases their concern that they won't have enough to say to fill six pages. But a narrower topic has the best chance of being fully connected to you and allowing you to show off your expertise. Only one or two percent of "traffic problems in the city" are *your* exact problems, but a narrower angle such as "lack of direct bus service covering west-side routes to the university" may connect you directly to street names you know, delays you are stuck in every Tuesday morning, and the stories your neighbors tell about being late for class.

Choose an unexpected topic by seeking out puzzles

A common piece of writing advice is, "Write about what you know about." That advice is sensible but incomplete. If we wrote about what we were completely certain about, we would all write encyclopedia entries, which would be very bland (or we would write political rants for television talk shows, which would be exciting but wouldn't demonstrate much learning). It might make better sense to tell writers, "Write about what you know *and are curious* about."

Your questions are important at the start because a large part of what motivates writers is not our interest ("this issue is about me") but our intrigue ("this issue is a *problem*"). We don't get excited about climbing mountains because they're *there*, but because they're there and they're a *problem*: they are difficult to climb. We play games because they pose problems; as soon as we solve all the problems, we stop playing the game. Even a hard day at work goes a lot faster when we are trying to solve an interesting problem.

This advice can seem counterintuitive for a school assignment: writers who feel unmotivated often look for topics with the fewest puzzles to solve, which seem like they will provide the easiest pathways to follow. But your brain is built to find satisfaction in inquiry and discovery. Instead of paving more parking lots, you can look for a new component, process, or combination of elements that hasn't been fully explored: is there a new car-sharing or bicycle-sharing company in your area that could solve transportation problems, or a way to use a new idea like social media to revive an old idea like carpooling? In order to stay connected to a "choose your topic" project, so that you can stay motivated and engaged, you should identify areas of uncertainty or difficulty, and move directly to them.

While you are writing in school (and in some workplaces), you may often have to go through the steps of "choosing a topic." To be the most engaged with and committed to your project, you should explore topics that are *right* for your audience and for you; topics that are *viable* given your resources, constraints, and interests; and especially topics that are *unexpected* and so give you room to think deeply and insightfully about a puzzle, so that readers will want to find out your new answers.

Remember that your goal is not to choose a topic that seems easy or simple—nor to choose one that seems profound or impressive—but to choose one that might in other circumstances *have chosen you*.

Explore 5.6

Think about a friend or relative whose life or personality is very different from yours. Then imagine that both of you are responding to the same writing assignment: either one of the samples above or another one you've recently received in school. Write a few sentences comparing possible topics that connect to each of you differently: "To select an *unexpected* movie, Demetrius would probably select something like _____, because he always is working on questions about _____, but I would connect better to a film like _____ because I usually am curious about _____."

5.3 Reflect to Identify Your Difficulties and Resources

In order to complete your writing task efficiently, you need to be able to accurately estimate what will be difficult, why it will be difficult, and how you will cope with those difficulties. For instance, it's not true that writing a short text message is always easy and writing a longer research-based argument essay is always hard. If you are texting a friend with sad or unwelcome news, you might agonize over every word choice; if you are writing an argument essay about a cause you have already researched extensively and believe strongly in, the writing might seem straightforward and even enjoyable.

Writing difficulty is affected by a range of factors: some are built into the project itself, while others depend on the expectations of the audience or the resources or dispositions of the writer. The same writing task can be easy one week and hard the next week, easier for one writer and harder for another. Likewise, writers bring multiple kinds of resources to a writing task: in some cases, a writer's prior knowledge of the subject or previous experiences composing similar documents will smooth the way, while in others, the writer's high confidence or motivation will be a determining factor.

When you can identify likely difficulties before you begin a writing task, you will be able to prepare to meet them; in some cases, you may be able to reframe the project to minimize them. And when you can identify your resources, you can leverage them strategically to improve your process and strengthen the final document.

Identify difficulties

Writing difficulty is rhetorical: it is affected by the writer's knowledge, goals, resources, dispositions, and experiences, as well as by the readers' knowledge,

needs, expectations, and situation. The chart below uses language about writing principles that may help you predict elements of a writing project that will raise or lower its difficulty.

As you review this chart thinking of your own project, consider each factor separately. The factors are related to one another, but each can provide a distinctive challenge in a writing project; it's not unusual for a writer to decide that several factors rank in the lower-difficulty range, but that one or two areas seem much more difficult and may by themselves affect the overall perception of difficulty. Moreover, since you are judging the difficulty for yourself as a writer, you don't need to agree with other people about what's hard or how hard it is. You don't even need to agree with this chart: if a factor is listed as "medium difficulty" but your experience helps you predict that it will not be much of a problem for you on this project, then rely on your own judgment.

You should also explore how other areas of your work as a writer produce higher or lower difficulty for you. You might consider your current workload or your past experience with similar projects; you might face a challenge specific to this project (working with a new video edizting tool, collaborating with other writers, or writing about an issue that raises strong personal emotional responses) or you might face a broader challenge such as systemic discrimination or a significant change in your home or work environment.

	Lower Difficulty	**Medium Difficulty**	**Higher Difficulty**
Writer's goal(s)	The writer's goal is simple and singular (summarize an easy text or describe one event).	The writer addresses a more complex goal (analyze causality) or engages several angles or perspectives.	The project has multiple goals (e.g., analyze and then argue) and/or engages with difficult or complicated issues across many perspectives.
Writer's knowledge	The writer is an expert on the topic and subtopics, knows all the details and has studied it well; the project addresses exact readers whom the writer knows well.	The writer has some knowledge of the topic at the level and in the ways that the readers will expect; the project addresses broader or less familiar audiences.	The writer is a newcomer to the topic and must learn both information and ways of thinking about it; the project addresses unknown and/or very diverse readers.
Writer's insight	The writer is only summarizing or describing accepted, uncontroversial information.	The writer provides some analysis or argumentation supported by reasons or evidence.	The writer creates new knowledge or perspectives through argument or synthesis, using evidence and addressing assumptions or multiple viewpoints.

	Lower Difficulty	Medium Difficulty	Higher Difficulty
Reader's knowledge and/or resistance	Readers are already very familiar with the topic and are inclined to believe and/or trust the writer.	Readers are generally interested in the topic but may not be inclined to learn or act (for or against) based on one reading.	Readers do not know, trust, and/or agree with the writer; they do not know the topic and/or they strongly resist the writer's purpose; the writer may be facing systemic discrimination.
Genre, design, and style	The genre is familiar and straightforward (e.g., basic essay or memo) and the expected diction and style match the writer's "natural" language.	The genre is less familiar and/or requires some design elements (layout or images); the expected diction and style require the writer to use some unfamiliar or specialized language.	The project requires a complex and/or unfamiliar genre or design elements (e.g., instructional video, grant proposal); the writer must skillfully employ highly specialized, unfamiliar, and/or precise diction.
Steps and strategies	The project has relatively few steps or complicating factors; it requires strategies familiar to the writer; much of the project work is within the writer's control.	The project requires the writer to learn a few new strategies or cope with some unfamiliar or tricky steps in completing the project; some elements are not within the writer's control.	The project has multiple steps, strategies, and/or external constraints that require the writer to perform in consistently unfamiliar or challenging working conditions.
Risk and time	The project is low priority or low-stakes, carries no risk for the writer, and/or can easily be completed within the available time.	The writer has a stake in the success of this project or faces uncomfortable consequences if it fails; the project will need some planning to be completed in the available time.	The writer strongly wants and/or needs this project to be successful; success requires careful scheduling and management to be completed in limited available time.
Writer's confidence and motivation	The writer is highly confident and strongly motivated about completing this project.	The writer is either confident or motivated about completing the project.	The writer significantly lacks confidence and/or motivation about this project.
Writer's agency	The writer finds a comfortable balance with the ability to make some decisions but also meet some reasonable expectations set by others.	The writer faces challenges with a project that asks for some hard decisions or requires meeting some tricky external expectations.	The writer is overwhelmed by too many complex decisions or is frustrated by the need to meet multiple and/or very precise external demands.

Explore 5.7

Use the chart in this section to assess some points of difficulty for your current writing project. List one or two factors from the chart that seem to be low or medium difficulty: why do these seem easier to you, right now, for this particular project? Then list at least one factor that seems more difficult, and explain why. Add one more sentence: does this project overall seem to be at a typical difficulty in your current writing work, or is it substantially more or less difficult than other writing you've been doing recently?

Identify resources

The point of identifying difficulties isn't to sap your confidence or make you decide just to write a basic description about Nevada's state insect, but the exact opposite: to give you opportunity to identify all of the strengths and resources you can apply toward the complex, intriguing project that resonates with your goals and principles as a writer.

Identify resources you already have: Even if these seem obvious or common, when you take time to list them you can improve your navigation of a writing project and build your confidence.

- Your knowledge of and/or interest in the topic or issue you are writing about
- Your prior experience writing about this issue, in a similar genre or style, and/or for a similar audience
- Your support community, which may include peers, an instructor or supervisor, librarians or technology advisers, or others who can provide information or encouragement
- Your dispositions, whether you are feeling intrinsically motivated or just ready to plan and persist, and whether you are feeling confident about your skills or just open to the possibilities about this project

Identify resources you can and should readily access: Instead of running into a problem halfway through your draft at 2:00 am, you can use your lower-stress, fully awake brain right now to predict resources that will help you write.

- Information from primary and secondary resources that will help you describe a problem precisely, explain key causes or effects, or support your recommendations to your readers
- Writing strategies that you think will help you generate sentences, (re)organize a draft, or address readers' resistances if you get stuck
- Information or feedback you can gather from people you know well—or

others in your larger community who may have relevant expertise—to help you draft and revise your document

- New stories you can tell yourself (such as "fake it 'til you make it" or "envision yourself succeeding") that will help you improve your confidence, motivation, or self-regulation and persistence when the project gets difficult

Identify some "stretch" resources: These are "wouldn't it be nice" resources, so that if you have a little extra time or happen to spot the exact right article in a database, you can be ready to take advantage of it. What if you could find out exactly how many people at your school use public transportation, or what the scriptwriter for *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* most wanted viewers to learn? They might be "just in case" resources that you don't *think* you'll need, but that might turn out to be useful, like a transcript of a recent city council meeting or the past year's water quality reports from the EPA. Don't keep your stretch resources hidden: these can be great questions to ask a librarian or a colleague who may have more access or strategies to help you learn what you want.

Completing these prediction exercises regarding your project's difficulties and your resources will help you now, but also help you in future writing projects:

- As you start future projects, you should become able to more accurately specify some difficulties you expect to encounter in a writing task, and develop a plan to respond to those challenges.

- As you engage in future writing projects, you should feel more confidence and control, because you will encounter fewer surprises, and you will be able to separate "what is difficult in this project" from "whether I am a good/bad writer overall."

- Over the long term, as you practice predicting difficulty, you will improve both at anticipating how writing can be challenging and developing strategies to help you meet those difficulties and solve writing problems, which will increase your confidence as a writer.

Because writers have to produce so many kinds of writing—in a single year of school, in our professional offices, in our communities—we need good strategies for adapting to new and unfamiliar writing tasks. In addition, we know that writing evolves: twenty years ago, there was no Twitter (or X), and twenty years from now, you may be writing in a genre or style that hasn't been invented yet. The more strategies you have for identifying the expectations, opportunities, and difficulties involved in a writing project, the better prepared you'll be to meet those new situations and write successfully in them.

Explore 5.8

Write yourself a short, confidence-boosting letter (4-5 sentences): "Dear Self, Here are some key resources you should use for this project." If you identified difficulties in a previous exercise, try to identify some resources that directly address those. You could also or instead address resources that come from your past experience, new strategies you have been learning, research you can conduct, or people you can consult with. Conclude with a sentence about your larger goals: what do you most want to learn or accomplish as you work on this writing task?

5.4 Make a Personal Writing Plan

Research shows that experts differ from novices not just in their skill at completing a task, but in their ability to quickly and accurately review a new situation and select the most effective response. Just as you'll have a faster drive across an unfamiliar city if you plan your route ahead of time so that you can avoid construction areas and typical traffic jams, you will experience more success, efficiency, and satisfaction with a writing project when you take time to reflect to predict about your agency, focus, challenges, and resources.

This process can eventually become second nature, but as you work to improve your skills at analyzing and predicting your best approach to a project, you will need to make a more conscious effort. A short writing project may need just a few quick reflective notes, while a longer or more complex project may benefit from several rounds of prediction.

DEAL with your project

You may find it helpful to use the DEAL approach to predicting your writing project.

- **Define** your rhetorical context: What are your goals, interests, and knowledge, and how do they interact with your readers' expectations and needs?

- **Explore** writing strategies, opportunities, and constraints: Use some of the exercises noted below, consult with peers or experts, or use your own "getting started" strategies to help you envision your best pathway through the project.

- **Act** to identify or acquire resources you might need: Like a scout whose motto is "always be prepared," you can use your planning time to remind yourself of resources you already have and begin gathering other resources you predict you will need.

- **Look and learn** about your prediction skills: Over time, you should notice that your predictions become more accurate, which should lower your stress level and improve your confidence as a writer.

Practice

- To practice **considering the moves and scope** of a project, try <u>Audience Profile</u>, <u>Six Structures</u>, <u>Stance Switch</u>, or <u>Subtopic Generator</u>.
- To practice **analyzing the genre** of a writing project, try <u>Genre Ethnography</u> or <u>Not-talk</u>.
- To practice **choosing a topic** that's right, viable, and unexpected, try
    - <u>Authority/Curiosity/Annoyance List</u>
    - <u>Cousin Topics</u>
    - <u>Date My Topic</u>
    - <u>Gray-area Finder</u>
    - <u>Magic Three Choices</u>
    - <u>Out on a Limb</u>
    - <u>Six Degrees</u>
    - <u>Ten Ways to Choose a Topic</u>
- To practice identifying difficulties and resources, try
    - <u>Attitude Inventory</u>
    - <u>Deluxe Project Scheduler</u>
    - <u>Learn-write Timeline</u>
    - <u>Problem-solver Parallels</u>
    - <u>Write the Problem</u>

Chapter 6. Reading as a Writer

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize rhetorical features of a reading task
- Identify reading strategies that match your goals and your text
- Reflect to select reading strategies to use before, during, and after you read
- Adapt your reading approaches to new situations

Almost nobody says "I have reader's block."

But lots of people say, "I just didn't understand that whole chapter." Or, "That writer was so confusing." Or maybe, "That was boring—nobody could relate to that." Sometimes people say, "I hate reading," or "Reading is what people in ＿＿ (some other field) do, so I don't worry about it much."

What readers often mean, though, is, "I had difficulty reading that text." And that's ok: having challenges reading particular texts doesn't mean that you lack intelligence or that you aren't ready for advanced study. All experts have to learn to identify and then solve particular problems so they can go on and do the other parts of the work they love; as a writer who reads, you can improve in both of these areas.

6.1 Reading as a Writer is Strategic and Rhetorical

Since reading is the necessary partner of writing, several of the threshold concepts about writing can inform our work as readers:

> ### 🚪 There is no single definition of a "good writer"
>
> Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

Just as there is no such thing as a "bad writer" for all writing everywhere, there is no such thing as a "bad reader." All readers are very capable at reading some texts, whether those are social media posts, graphic novels, or quarterly financial reports at your workplace. And all readers struggle to read some texts, especially texts that feature unfamiliar information or an unfamiliar structure or style.

> ### 🚪 You can become a good writer and a better writer
>
> You already have many viable writing skills, and you are capable of becoming a better writer and a competent writer of many kinds of texts.

Advanced writers also need advanced reading strategies: not only do we need to understand others' ideas as part of our own inquiry, but we need to be able to spot other writers' strategies so we can learn how to improve our own. Fortunately, everyone can become a better reader of one text, a better reader of a genre or type of text, and a better reader of new or unfamiliar texts, through awareness and practice.

🚪 Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

Although we don't talk about "learning to read" much after childhood, reading isn't a one-and-done skill; it's an ongoing lifetime challenge. For instance, reading a quarterly report is more difficult than reading a social media post, and requires different skills. So advanced readers are always learning, and that means we often struggle and we nearly always need to revise our reading strategies to match a new task.

🚪 Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

Reading—particularly the kind of rhetorical reading that writers and other professionals need to do—isn't an unconscious activity that anyone who knows the definitions of words does automatically. Advanced readers need strategies, opportunities for practice, and reflective awareness in order to fully succeed in their work.

Advanced reading: "Just do it" vs. "Identify, plan, and adapt"

Think back to the last time you sat down to complete a major reading assignment: perhaps last week, or yesterday, or even right now with this text. Did you take any time or steps before you started reading to help you adjust to the reading challenges you were about to encounter, or did you "just do it," opening to the first page and diving in?

If you "just dove in," why did that make sense as a strategy to you?

- **High confidence**: You had been reading school books and professional documents for decades, and you were pretty sure you'd know how to do it.
- **Low confidence**: You frequently get stuck while reading, and didn't think there was anything you could really do to help it, so you should just get it over with as quickly as possible.
- **High interest:** You were truly fascinated by the topic, genre, or author.
- **Low interest**: You didn't think that the topic was interesting or didn't think that this reading task was particularly important for your success.
- **Low time**: You had limited time, and you thought that the fastest way through was to just get started and push through it.

These are common responses to reading tasks, yet sometimes they can limit advanced readers' ability to complete individual tasks and improve as readers overall. Of course, if the "just do it" approach is working for you and making you

happy as a reader, then you might not need any other strategies (at least not yet). Before you decide that that's your situation, though, consider if you have recently thought about any of the challenges below while reading for school or work:

- I become tired or bored and lose my focus.
- I get to the middle and don't understand where the author is going with it.
- I get stuck trying to figure out unfamiliar words or concepts.
- I run out of time to complete the reading task.
- I don't always spot the "deeper meaning" that other readers do.
- I don't remember important parts of what I read a few days after reading.
- I can't connect what I'm reading to other texts or concepts in the class.
- I think I understand and remember what I read, but I end up giving incorrect answers in a discussion or on a test.

Lots of students and professionals share these ideas and experiences about reading, even advanced readers and writers. As with writing, we don't always talk about the fact that readers often struggle to work with a task and even fail to complete their reading work the first time through. Like writing, also, reading is not something you learn once as a child and then always do well. In order to become a better reader, you need to be able to acknowledge new challenges and direct some of your attention to creating better approaches.

Research on reading shows that readers—like writers—are more successful when we reflect to identify possible reading problems before we read, plan for and apply strategies as we read, and look for ways to adapt our thinking after we read. Instead of "just reading," advanced readers can use reflection to foster our success throughout our work with a text: before we begin reading, as we read, and after we read.

It takes time to get used to advanced strategies like the ones discussed here. It may feel artificial, because you are used to "just reading," and often you are successful at "just reading." And of course, you may not want to use an advanced approach for all texts; you may still want to use your "just do it" approach for easier texts like news sites, headphone instructions, horoscopes, celebrity blogs, and even some of your school textbooks if they don't pose reading difficulties.

Using reflective strategies as a reader will be crucial, however,

- when you need to understand a difficult, important, or unmotivating text,
- when you need to assess an argument or evaluate the credibility of data, or
- when you will need to convey an author's information to other readers accurately and concisely.

In these cases, you should find that the strategies in this section improve both your efficiency and satisfaction as a reader.

Explore 6.1

Write a brief profile of yourself as a reader. What do you most like to read (or least dislike), and why? What kind of reading makes you less interested or more frustrated? What helps make reading smooth for you, or makes it more difficult? Are there any differences between your reading-self outside of school and the way you read for school or work tasks?

Read conversationally and rhetorically

To improve as an advanced reader, you should practice reading some more complicated texts using conversational and rhetorical strategies.

Read conversationally. Instead of seeing the text as an unchanging thing on a page or screen from which you will retrieve information, you can imagine the text as representing the voice of another writer just like you, an ordinary human being who has chosen specific strategies to inform, engage, and persuade you and other readers.

If you were in a physical room—or a virtual real-time chat—with the writer, you might:

- Engage in the conversation with them: you would ask questions, challenge their claims, and make comments of your own.
- Evaluate each statement critically: you would avoid assuming that the writer's statements were correct or that they automatically gave you the whole story.
- Support a lively exchange of ideas with other readers: you would listen to others who were responding or contributing ideas, and you would encourage them to add details that they remember from their experiences or their learned knowledge.

In other words, your participation would help create the conversation: it would be a different conversation without you than it is with you there. The same is true for reading. The text on the page doesn't hold 100% of the meaning: since language is a complicated and uncertain way to communicate, each reader must bring some of our own knowledge and interpretation to the process. That is, like writers, readers create knowledge as we read, rather than only receiving it.

As an advanced reader, you should read conversationally: ask not just what the author has said but who else the author has been conversing with, and be ready to contribute your questions, concerns, connections, and experiences to the conversation as you read.

Read rhetorically. Advanced readers stay aware of our own goals or purposes in reading, and the author's goals or purposes in writing. Knowing your purpose will change your rhetorical strategy. For instance:

- If you are *reading to memorize facts*, you will retain more in your memory not by highlighting and rereading lists of key ideas, but by actively connecting those ideas to a familiar context (what do they remind you of?) and by challenging yourself to recall them in different circumstances (such as by writing summaries or creating a map).

- If you are *reading to understand a complicated argument*, you will improve by trying to predict its outcome from the start, without finishing the text: even if your prediction is wrong, your early engagement with the complicated idea helps your brain start to form a mental model.

Moreover, writers who are aware of our own composing strategies often start to notice what other writers do, the way that soccer players notice another player always feinting to the left or pianists notice whether another player's trill is even or uneven.

- If you are *reading like a writer* you try to become aware of how a document is framed, organized, and developed—how it meets the expectations of its genre or its discourse community—since your understanding of the writing patterns and strategies will help you spot key information and important arguments.

The more you know what you are trying to accomplish by reading, and what the writer was trying to accomplish while writing, the more you will know what to pay attention to and how to organize what you are learning. As an advanced writer, that is, you read rhetorically: you choose strategies for reading based on your own goals, and you ask not just what the author has written but how the author has constructed the document and what goals the author had.

Read in multiple stages. Finally, in order to read conversationally and rhetorically—which some people will call "reading actively" and some people will call "reading critically"—you will often need to read in stages, using a reading process just as you use a writing process. Advanced readers benefit from using different strategies for different steps of reading.

- By using **pre-reading strategies** for just a few minutes before you begin reading, you can identify the difficulties you might face, frame your own goals for reading, and predict key arguments or examples you need to understand.

- By using **active reading strategies** as you read—not just highlighting, but taking targeted notes that help you focus on the conversation and the rhetorical situation—you can stay engaged, identify the most useful or important information, and remember more of what you read.

- By using **post-reading strategies**, you can improve your comprehension and memory of the text, and prepare to think critically and integratively about what you read.

Initially, this staged approach may seem as though it takes more of your time than the way you read now. But if you have ever experienced any of the reading problems listed earlier in this chapter, you know that the "just do it" approach can both slow you down and leave you unsatisfied at the finish.

In some cases, a pre- or post-reading stage may take just a minute or two; in others it may take longer, but you'll always gain the advantage of being the advanced reader in control of what you are learning. These steps are important not because you are a poor reader, but because you are encountering more challenging reading tasks (without more time to spend reading them), and you need the insight and dependable recall that can only come from advanced reading.

As an advanced reader, you should read in stages: you plan for each stage, you choose the right approach for each stage, and you save your time and energy by reading according to your plan rather than reading in a distracted, confused, or partially informed manner.

Rethink reading: Five more advanced strategies

In addition to reading conversationally, rhetorically, and in stages, you should be aware of five additional approaches that advanced readers use. Which of these approaches do you already use, and which of them might you consider adopting?

Advanced readers often re-read strategically

Re-reading a document—whether in small parts or overall—is not a sign of failure. Just as advanced writers plan to revise an early draft, advanced readers often plan to re-read, especially:

- When a section of the document has **complicated** arguments or densely packed information
- When understanding a document is **crucial** to the reader's success in a course, assignment, or project
- When they will need to accurately **share** or comment on key arguments or information from a document
- When the information or writing style of a document is **unfamiliar**—as when a botanist reads a text about political principles are related to ecosystem conservation
- When they have **learned new** information or principles from other sources that will help them understand and contextualize the ideas in the document

Caveat: Advanced readers know that studies show that simply "reviewing" a document—glancing back over highlighted pages—doesn't help with understanding or memory, but active re-reading with a clear goal often brings much stronger comprehension.

Advanced readers don't always read every word in order

Skimming and skipping around in a document isn't cheating (or a sign of being a bad reader), as long as you focus on understanding the general context of a document. Advanced readers often read in a nonlinear style, especially:

- When a document is **long** and time is short: skimming high-impact sections of a document—such as the beginning and end, the abstract and results section, the subheaders and first lines of each section—helps readers develop a clear overview and decide how much (if any) in-depth reading they should do

- When understanding a whole document is of **lower importance**: during early stages of secondary research or a class project, readers often read selectively in order to decide whether a document is relevant, credible, and accessible

- When some terminology or examples are **unfamiliar**: skipping over a few words or paragraphs that are particularly difficult can help you stay focused, and often you will learn enough context from the rest of the article to understand the general idea

- When some or all of the document is **familiar**: a reader investigating family leave programs probably doesn't need to read every article's "history of family leave laws" section as closely as they read the first one

Caveat: Advanced readers know that "**Ctrl-F reading**"—using a "find" feature to just read every sentence that mentions *dogs* or *imperialism*—is not strategic or rhetorical, because it pulls items out of context and so the reader runs a high risk of misunderstanding and misrepresenting an author's key points. If you need to speed up your reading, you should make rhetorical choices that help you locate high quality writing, such as reading the very first paragraph and the final paragraph, or the first sentences of each key section, in order to understand an author's main contributions.

Advanced readers seek extra help

Not every document that you are assigned or choose to read was designed for you: authors are often writing for readers who have more experience, more knowledge, or more interest in a topic than you do. Advanced readers don't assume that a document contains everything they need to read it successfully—or that they should just give up if they get stuck. Instead, they:

- **Review** earlier readings or notes to help remember major theories, approaches, or events that are relevant to the current document

- **Search** online—often to a generalist source like Wikipedia, or via questions to a chatbot—to find a quick overview of basic information about

history, terminology, or perspectives that will help them understand what the current document is about

- **Look up** some key terms that are unfamiliar, or are used in unfamiliar ways, that keep appearing in a document

- **Ask an expert**, an instructor, or a supervisor what strategies they use, or recommend using, to read documents in their field successfully

- **Ask a friend** or imagine another reader in another situation in order to see how and why a document that seems impenetrable might be interesting or relevant to someone else

Caveat: Advanced readers who look online for help understanding a text or its concepts **know when to stop:** they use targeted strategies to answer one or two questions and then stop when they've learned some basics, rather than getting distracted by reading page after page on the internet.

Advanced readers vary their pace

Research shows that a reader's pace does not correlate with a reader's comprehension in any general way. Some readers, with some purposes, in some parts of some documents, will benefit from reading more slowly, and others won't. Advanced readers often:

- Use a **higher** speed when a document or topic is **familiar**, and a slower speed when a document or a section covers new knowledge or experiences

- Use a **higher** speed for a **first look** at a document, and a slower speed to reread some or all of it (or the other way around)

- Use a **slower** speed when a document or issue is **important**, fascinating, or highly relevant to an ongoing project

- Use a **slower** speed when considering the **arguments** or gray areas of a document, and a higher speed when looking for concrete facts or examples

Caveat: Advanced readers know that **speedy-and-passive** reading can quickly turn into a mindless "making eye contact with each page" in a way that wastes time rather than saving it. But reading quickly while making active annotations (see "Active Reading" below) will help readers engage their critical thinking and leave a clear trail to return to later.

Advanced readers keep learning

Reading, like writing, is a skill that we develop over a lifetime. Being stumped by a new text isn't a sign of being a bad reader who should just give up. Advanced readers use a growth mindset, knowing that all readers can and must learn new reading approaches, especially:

- When moving to a new **genre**: reading a legal brief, client report, or

research poster will require different approaches from reading essays, while reading original church records from 1780 will require different strategies from reading a history textbook

- When moving to a new **field**: reading in economics will require different strategies from reading in history, conflict analysis, or cybersecurity
- When moving to a new **level**: reading advanced research or reports in your major or profession will often require different strategies from reading books or documents designed for novices
- When moving to a new **purpose**: reading to decide how to design the methods of a physical therapy study will require a different process than reading to understand the results that other studies have reported

Developing new reading approaches takes time, and advanced readers know we will often struggle or fail—or at least feel awkward—during the transition, but we aim always to learn from our failures and be persistent.

Focus on equity: Read to identify inclusion and exclusion

Sometimes excluding readers is rhetorical. Since it's beneficial for writers to adapt our message to meet the needs of a particular audience, we frequently provide less guidance for, or even assume we will antagonize, other readers. Advanced readers frequently encounter texts that were designed for someone else: when that happens, we can identify this kind of topic- or purpose-based exclusion, and consider how our reading experiences is affected by whether we are part of an author's primary audience. For instance, the author of a history of Mexico might simplify their focus to reach an audience of children, or emphasize events in one region to catch the interest of tourists, or include detailed references to scholarly arguments to help create new knowledge for professional historians.

In some cases, readers will only feel inconvenienced: we can all access the basic ideas of a children's book, even if it's not very exciting for adult readers, and we can still make out most of the scholarly history, though we won't understand (or perhaps be interested in) some of the arcane details. An author can write specifically toward one audience without discrediting, denigrating, or suppressing the perspectives of others.

However, since good writing is not neutral, the texts we read may be participating in a more destructive kind of exclusion linked to systemic discrimination or racism. As an active reader, you will want to stay aware of whether an individual text you are reviewing is excluding or suppressing the story of readers like you—or any other group of readers—either directly or implicitly. A text doesn't have to directly insult a group of people to exclude or harm them: when an author ignores a relevant perspective, especially in a context

where that perspective has historically been repressed or denied, the author is participating in a damaging pattern of discrimination and exclusion. When you read, you should thus consider whether a text makes exclusionary moves, such as:

- Use of unsubstantiated generalizations to characterize a group of people, either positively ("All Asian Americans study hard") or negatively ("Women are not fit for combat roles")

- Assumptions that the experiences of one group of people can represent the experiences of everyone (an article about vaccine resistance that primarily focuses on White, able-bodied people—or perhaps doesn't mention race or ability status at all)

- Omission of the experiences or perspectives of one or more relevant groups of people (an article on parenting that only describes mothers, or a book on marriage that refers only to heterosexual relationships)

- Representations of current practices or individual achievements that ignore a larger context of discrimination, suppression, or racism (a report on Ghanian electoral practices that doesn't address the effects of European colonization)

You can also step back and apply similar questions to a whole collection of texts: Do the posters and brochures at a technology fair primarily feature images of men? Are all of the credible secondary sources you gathered in your first round of research for your project on new developments in sustainable agriculture written by White authors? Do all of the textbooks for a management course focus on US businesses?

Finally, you might also consider whether a text, rather than making identifiable exclusionary moves, simply fails to take steps to represent deliberately inclusive discourse: a text in any field that fails to acknowledge that racism and other forms of discrimination have influenced and continue to influence events and opportunities can be questioned about its accuracy and its inclusiveness.

As with most questions about rhetoric, there are situations that ask readers to make complex judgments. The boundary between "appropriately narrow focus" and "discriminatory exclusion" can be difficult to pin down. For instance, how might critical readers respond differently to a political campaign advertisement that directly addresses and shows examples only of the majority middle-class White residents of a district, compared to one that features and focuses specifically on the needs of Latinx residents? How might readers from a range of backgrounds respond to a research study that focused primarily on the experiences of Tagalog speakers within a university community, if the authors directly acknowledged that additional similar studies should be conducted regarding speakers of other languages? Advanced readers don't shy away from these kinds

of conversations: asking questions and challenging assumptions is a productive way to resist discrimination.

If you find yourself reading a text that excludes, denigrates, or generalizes about a group of people that you personally identify with, you may have several reactions. If the exclusionary practices are too hurtful, you may need to stop reading and look for alternate ways to move your learning forward. You may make this decision on your own, or share your concerns with others. In other cases, you may find that you gain agency and confidence by identifying the harmful approaches as you read and talking back to them in your notes or draft writing, or even decide that you want to bring the problems to the notice of your peers, your instructor, or the audience of your writing project.

An advanced reader also pays careful attention to how a text includes or excludes other groups of people. As a White reader who is practicing anti-racism, or a straight reader aiming to be an ally to LGBTQ people, for example, you can take up the responsibility to identify and question any text that participates in the exclusion or denigration of other groups of people.

Either way, your primary goal is to notice the exclusion and carefully consider its effects on you and on other readers. In addition, you can learn to appreciate the strategies authors take to be deliberately inclusive: when you read a text by an author who deliberately includes data or perspectives from multiple groups of people, you might note your admiration for their efforts.

Finally, since advanced readers help to construct meaning and knowledge as we read, we need to check whether our own reading practices contribute to exclusion rather than inclusion. Readers are shaped by our culture and assumptions, and so as we read we might unconsciously do one or more of the following:

- Imagine that all of the people mentioned in a text are White, male, Christian, or heterosexual unless the text specifically says otherwise
- More strongly respect or believe authors or experts who are from one particular background rather than from others
- Assume that only one set of values described in a text is admirable, such as the independence, profit-making, or efficiency valued by White or Western cultures, when other values (interdependence, generosity, or connection) may be equally worthy
- Discount an experience or argument that is presented in language other than Standard Edited American English

As you improve your skills at anti-exclusionary reading practices, you will strengthen your critical reading abilities overall—and learn more about how to be a focused and yet also more inclusive, compassionate writer with your own projects.

Explore 6.2

What's one advanced reading strategy described in this chapter that you already use, or that you could easily try out in your next reading assignment? How do you think it helps (or could help) you as a reader? What's one strategy that you haven't used or that seems less relevant to you as a reader (why)? If there is another reading strategy you have heard about or used, briefly describe it and explain how it supports advanced reading.

6.2 Before You Read: Predict Problems and Opportunities

You already know that you can write better when you reflect to predict what will be difficult or easy problems to solve. Likewise, you can preview a text to know which elements of it could be most difficult—and how you will respond to those difficulties.

While you may remember some of these preview-and-predict strategies from your early school years, they aren't just for beginners. Accurately anticipating difficulty is a feature of experts in all fields: expert climbers can efficiently size up a rocky cliff and plot a path; expert bakers can tell you at a glance whether a recipe will take them ten minutes or an hour; expert pre-school teachers can pick out the two children who will probably be crankiest by the end of the morning and need more attention.

Moreover, three research-based principles of learning connect to using a pre-reading strategy:

- Learning works best when you engage in it at several points across time, with different contexts or approaches, rather than all at once (the "cramming" model sometimes feels like it works, but studies show otherwise).

- You will learn more successfully when you learn with a "mental model" of a concept, topic, or text in your head than when you try to learn blindly: we all retain new knowledge better when we connect it to a system of previous knowledge.

- Identifying and attempting to solve a problem—even before you have all the information necessary—can drastically improve your ability to fully solve it later on, even if you fail or have an incomplete solution the first time out.

Practice

- Studies show that expert readers benefit from using one or more of these **pre-reading** strategies, described in the following pages:
  - Create a **mental framework** for better comprehension and memory.

> ## Practice (continued)
>
> - **Predict your speed** and mental approach to improve efficiency and engagement.
> - **Connect your experiences** and prior knowledge to improve motivation and memory.
> - **Predict the content** to improve attention and critical thinking.
> - **Identify your questions** to gain purpose and improve focus.
> - These strategies can take as little as five minutes for a straightforward reading project or as long as fifteen or twenty minutes for a long text. Whenever possible, you should write down what you think or discover, including notes you make directly on the text.

Create a mental framework for better comprehension and memory

When you read a mystery novel or watch a horror movie, you want to be surprised. On the other hand, when you read a difficult text, "spoilers" actually work to your advantage, so that you can see where you're going and how to get there most effectively. You can think of this as reading with a map; scholars often talk about this situation as having a schema or mental model. When a text matches your expectations—when it fits your model—rather than surprises or confuses you, you learn more from it.

Scan key features. Before you start to read, survey the text to discover its basic content, structure, arguments, and value. Remember that you are not reading the whole text, but using a calculated skimming process focused on the text's key features. In a typical academic or professional text-based document, these features might include:

- The title, author's name, and publication information
- The opening paragraph or abstract
- Any sub-titles or section headers—or the first sentence or two of any paragraph that seems suddenly to have switched topics
- Any charts, tables, pictures with captions, or graphs
- The final paragraph or two

In other genres, you might look for alternate features: skimming the headers and menus of a webpage, looking at the top and bottom of a poster where key information often resides, or checking over the charts or appendices of a report.

Write brief answers. Your goal is to be able to identify and write down several key "big picture" items, so that when you see the smaller details, you know how they fit. You could set a goal of writing answers to at least five of the following questions:

- What is the author's **main point**, clarification, or argument?
- What are some of the **sub-points or key examples** that the author discusses?
- Do you see any **alternative** ideas or counterarguments?
- Who do you think is the author's **primary audience**—does it include you? (Consider the author's terminology and examples: to whom are they accessible and relevant?)
- What do you know about the **genre** or style of this text that will help you understand where and how the author will present his/her ideas?
- What part(s) of the text seem most **familiar**, and what part(s) seem new or difficult?
- How will you most likely **connect** with or use this text in your assignments, courses, or workplace?

Finish with an adaptation plan sentence: "I might have difficulty with _____ as I read; if that happens, I could _____."

Your answers to the questions above will provide you with your basic map or schema of the text, and of your goals and challenges in reading it. That way, even if you don't quite understand an example or explanation, you can still make sense of it in light of the author's larger goals.

Predict your speed and mental approach to improve efficiency and engagement

Just there is no one kind of "good writing," there is no one kind of "good reading": readers adapt the process of "reading" to match each situation. You should never assume that the best way to read a text is to start at the beginning, read everything as fast as possible, and take notes on all the ideas. The more you can adapt your reading strategies to fit the situation, the more efficient, effective, and enjoyable your reading time will become.

Before you start to read, take five minutes to scan your text and check your own goals to decide on a reasonable speed, approach, and attitude to bring to this reading task.

Scan to predict your speed. You should scan your text and check your own goals to decide whether you should read more quickly, aiming to get "the general idea" of a text, or more slowly to engage thoughtfully with the arguments and nuances.

Read more quickly for general overview if:

- The text is about familiar topics and in a familiar genre.
- You are motivated, rested, and focused, so you will likely learn key ideas easily.

- The text is mostly unrelated to your overall purpose, and you are scanning for a few relevant points.

- The text is written for a much more specialized audience, and you are skimming to see if a few points seem comprehensible or useful.

- The text looks difficult or important, so you plan to read it a second time once you have a better sense of its structure and focus.

Read more slowly for arguments and data if:

- The topic or genre of the text is unfamiliar to you.

- The author of the text is arguing or analyzing complicated points in depth.

- You are unmotivated, tired, or feeling distracted, so that you need to work harder to learn key ideas.

- You need to be able to comprehend the issues in detail or explain them to someone else.

- The text is central to your goals or projects, and you will need to refer frequently to its ideas or information.

- The text is well matched to your ability level so that "one good reading" done thoughtfully and thoroughly will meet your needs.

Sometimes, a single text will need two speeds:

- Although it may seem odd, you might be most efficient with a complex or important text if you read it twice: once quickly to see what the structure and key ideas are, and once slowly to wrestle with the data and arguments.

- In a long text, you may need to adapt your reading speed as you go: you might identify a straightforward background section where you can read quickly, and a section full of data and arguments that you should read more slowly.

Scan to predict your intensity. You should also decide whether you need to read intensely without distractions, or if you can take some breaks or handle some background interference. Be cautious about granting yourself more distractions: despite what you may think about your ability to skim effectively and multitask while you read, research reveals that even advanced readers benefit from doing some reading in a focused, uninterrupted approach—especially reading that is challenging or important to us.

Perhaps having a little quiet music makes you comfortable which helps your motivation. However, you'll finish a complex reading task faster and with more accuracy if you plan your distractions—say, using a timer to give yourself a clean five-minute break every twenty-five minutes to take a walk (and check your

messages)—than if you shift your attention every time a buzzer or flashing notification goes off. You may need some time to get used to a "focus hard, relax hard" approach to reading, but it will pay off.

Scan to predict your mental approach. Reading without a clear purpose is a bit like going to MegaMart without a shopping list: it's easy to get overwhelmed and then to forget what you came for. Your goal is always to read actively, but depending on your purposes, you may use an intensive approach or a less formal approach to interacting with the text. Review the chart below and identify whether you should be leaning more toward intensive or informal engagement with the text.

Take shorter or more informal notes as you read if:

- You are reading primarily to find out basic facts.
- You will be able to refer back to this text later.
- You need to understand just the ideas in this one text.
- You need a "big picture" understanding of this issue or text right now.
- You mostly need to demonstrate that you are aware of key ideas discussed in this text.
- Your readers will not find the ideas in this text or about this issue challenging or controversial.

Take more intensive and thorough notes as you read if:

- You are reading to understand arguments, causes, connections, or implications.
- You need to commit this information to memory for use in an exam or daily job performance.
- You need to draw connections to other texts, to theories/concepts, or to "real life" issues.
- You need to understand the details, data, and/or complex analyses of the issue or text.
- You will be expected to evaluate, analyze, judge, or even improve upon the text's ideas.
- You will need to use ideas or examples in this text to persuade readers about a highly debatable argument or plan.

Write out your plan. You can draft your adaptive reading plan as a single sentence: "I think that because this text is [key feature or features] and my main goal in reading it is [goal], it is therefore [more/less] complex and [more/less] important to me than average, and I plan to read it with [high/low] speed, [some/no] distractions, and [extensive/informal] notetaking."

Connect your experiences and prior knowledge to improve motivation and memory

All learners retain new knowledge by connecting it to what we already know. The more vividly you can create a mental model that includes what you might encounter and learn from your upcoming reading, and links this topic to memories or concepts you are already familiar with, the more likely you will be to comprehend, engage with, and remember what you read.

When you write about connections like these before you read, you activate your prior memories to provide precise context to help you learn. You may also discover more reasons to be interested in and motivated to read the text, and you will energize your own voice, setting yourself up as a conversational partner with the author of the text.

Write your personal connections. Write for 3-5 minutes drawing specific connections to this text, looking for ways to note down exactly what information, situations, or questions you see as related:

- What are several things you already know about the topic the author is writing about, from your personal experiences?
- What do you already know about this text or issue based on other texts you have read, recently or in the past?
- What "cousin topics"—ideas related to this issue—do you know about and what is your opinion about those associated ideas?

Write your topic connections. If you know a little bit about the topic of the text and you want to stretch your brain, you can try a set of six connections called cubing:

- *Describe* the key features of the core topic.
- *Compare* the core topic to a situation or event you think it most resembles.
- *Associate* the topic with something a little different in your own life that it somehow reminds you of.
- *Analyze* it by explaining any of the parts, steps, pieces, or factors you know of.
- *Apply* the main concept: how might actual people you know be involved or affected?
- *Agree or disagree* with some element, or explain how it will or will not work in a given situation that you're familiar with.

If you get stuck on any of these connections, you can skip it and go to the next one.

Finish with an adaptation plan sentence: "I might have difficulty connecting with _____ as I read; if that happens, I could _____."

Predict the content to improve attention and critical thinking

Advanced readers don't just read what's in front of them; like top sports players, debaters, race car drivers, and jazz band members, we try to anticipate what will happen before it occurs. When you dive into the problem at the center of a text and attempt to solve it, you are using your highest critical thinking skills. Research shows that even if you guess wrong, you will learn more from trying and failing than if you had just started reading the text—and you will likely increase your engagement.

Your predictions will not only provide you with a possible map or schema of the text; they help you think like a writer who is part of the conversation. When your guesses match the author's moves, you'll know not just what they are saying but why. When the text differs from your predictions, you can gain awareness of another author's choices about organization, argument and evidence.

Skim for content clues. Quickly skim the title, first and last paragraphs, and any subheadings in your document. What did you learn about the author's main topics, arguments, or examples?

Write your content predictions. Then write to answer at least 4-5 of the questions below, predicting what the author might write about, and how.

- What core ideas, and what two or three other sub-issues, do you think this text will address?
- What genre is the author writing in, and what approaches or sections will he/she likely include?
- What questions will the author need to answer in order to satisfy readers?
- What kinds of evidence will he or she likely use to provide credible answers?
- What alternatives or counterarguments do you expect the author to address?
- What wild-and-crazy idea might this author come up with, or what might the author dig down and spend a whole lot of time giving incredibly specific details on?

Finish with an adaptation plan sentence: "I might have trouble understanding or connecting with information about _____ as I read; if that happens, I could _____."

Identify your questions to gain purpose and improve focus

Perhaps you believe you have no way to connect with or predict the content of a text, and your survey still leaves you confused. Or perhaps you have limited time and energy to spend reading, and you want to stay clearly focused on your goals. In either case, you can begin with your questions.

When you orient your brain toward questions related to this text, you turn your-self into the kind of reader the author was hoping for: someone who is ready to participate in a conversation about this issue. You raise your awareness of key issues—including complicated *how* and *why* arguments—so that you will stay focused and see them when they arise.

You can start your list with fact-based questions, and then move to questions about the author's judgments or analysis. You should try to list at least 4-6 questions, so that you get beyond obvious ideas and into more precise or challenging goals:

- What background information, past histories, or definitions do you need to know?
- What do you need to know about names and dates, amounts and sizes, durations and growth rates, or other statistics?
- What do you need to know about causes and effects, about the steps in-volved, about how one thing leads to another?
- What do you need to know about the best or worst factors, or about the most or least effective approaches?
- What do you need to know about solutions or actions to take?
- What do you need to know about alternatives, complications, or resisting arguments?
- What other questions do you have that could begin with "How does ____?" or "Why is ____?" or "But isn't it also true that ____?"

Finish with an adaptation plan sentence: "I might have difficulty with ____ as I read; if that happens, I could ____."

Explore 6.3

Pre-reading strategies don't have to take a lot of time. Set a timer for 10 minutes. Choose one of the "before" strategies listed in this chapter, and apply it to an upcoming reading assignment. If you finish early, add a note: how long did it take you? If the timer goes off before you finish, you can simply stop and add a note: "Stopped here after 10 minutes."

6.3 As You Read: Comprehend, Connect, Analyze, and Respond

You may already use one or two strategies while you read, such as highlighting text or writing notes in a document or on notecards. These are primarily sum-mary strategies, and they are often passive: you may briefly identify what the text says without analyzing, evaluating, questioning, or connecting with it.

In order to improve as an advanced reader, you need to create a plan that includes active strategies to help you read conversationally and rhetorically. You won't just make notes about core ideas, but you will also draw connections, analyze claims and evidence, predict links to your writing project, sketch out counterarguments or concerns, and thus stay engaged and focused in the reading process. The strategies below require you to go beyond highlighting to writing actual words while you read—sometimes in very short phrases, sometimes by pausing for a longer break—so that you:

- Increase your comprehension and memory of what you read
- Deepen your interpretive understanding
- Prepare to apply knowledge to your writing project
- Practice recalling ideas to strengthen your working memory
- Leave a record of key ideas to consult at a later time
- Stay focused and engaged so you save time
- Expand your own repertoire as a writer

When you are reading a printed text that you own, you should use a pen or pencil (not just a highlighter!) and write directly on the text: underlining and circling phrases for emphasis, writing comments in the margins as you go. If you do not own the text, you should still look for ways to write directly on it: you might make photocopies or use sticky notes to aid your note-taking. Alternately, you may be able to download, paste, photograph, or scan the text to create a document-based or PDF copy into which you can insert visual or audio notes using your computer, phone, or tablet.

Once you get used to it, actively writing on the text as you read can be:

- **Fast**, because your eyes and hands do not leave the page
- **Organized**, because your notes are always connected with the text itself, not lost on a shelf or buried in a file somewhere
- **Ethical**, because you will always be able to see which language is yours and which is the original author's wording
- **Conversational**, because you will gain the sense of "talking back" to the text in the time and space

As you read, you might also complete some exploratory or reflective writing separate from the text. But on-text notations are the quickest way to move your brain into active reading strategies. After reviewing some of the options below, you should set a goal to become comfortable with one or two active reading-and-annotating approaches, so that you can improve your engagement and efficacy as a reader. (Note: You can also use these strategies to review a written draft of a project that you or your peer has composed!)

Annotate to engage with and keep track of key ideas

To annotate a text as an advanced reader, you need to write actual words, using a pen, pencil, or keyboard, not simply a highlighter. All a highlighter can do is say "Hey!" or "I was here!" in a single mode: that's not a conversation, and it provides no analysis.

You can stay with just *reactions*, and still provide more variety and intelligence to your conversation. For instance, you can decide right now that your single underline means "I was here," your double underline means "I was here and I was impressed," and your wavy underline means "I was here and I was doubtful": without taking any more time than using a highlighter, you've already added analysis to your notation. (What might you mean by circling vs. boxing specific phrases?)

Or you can write out the word "Hey!" and begin to vary it. Again, without taking much more of your time, you could instead write one of the following reactions, each of which can reveal a different category of intelligent commentary:

> Ha.
>
> Heh.
>
> Hee.
>
> Hooboy!
>
> Hmm.
>
> Hmph.
>
> Huh?
>
> Whoa!

Now, instead of a pile of Hey!, you have a text full of notes that put you into at least a basic conversation with the author. You have to challenge yourself to decide whether you are thinking, "Hey, this is fascinating!" or "Hey, this is fishy."

You can add other reactions as well, in short phrases or abbreviations ("fab. arg." or "OMG TMI") that you'll understand.

In addition to your reactions, you can and should:

- **Ask quick questions**: these can be factual questions ("how cold was it?") as well as interpretive ones ("why weren't they prosecuted?").
- **Draw connections**: you can link what you see to your life ("just like my cousin") or to something else you have read or studied ("just like Romeo").
- **Agree or disagree** with what you read and note down why: "that makes sense because ___" or "that's too expensive due to ___."
- **Swiftly summarize** major points: even if you're not formally doing a "Snapshots" strategy, you can write a three- or four-word summary of a major point ("four reasons to save money for college") every few pages, especially in a long text, to keep yourself focused and provide an easy way to find those points if you need to review the text.
- **Map key arguments**: even if you're not formally doing an "Outline" strategy, you can try to identify moments where the author is addressing a new angle ("Big Point #2: Costs") so that you keep track of the rhetorical patterns and can find them again when you come back to the text.

Remember that you are trying to keep up an efficient reading speed rather than write extensive notes.

At first, annotating may slow you down somewhat as you start to pay attention not just to the text but to your own responses, questions, and theories. You will also need to take time to decide what to annotate: if you comment on everything, then nothing will stand out as important. So as you start, you might set a goal of reading two or three paragraphs, pausing, and then deciding what one or two comments you most want to make about them are.

Eventually, though, annotation will save you time: when you annotate, you stay engaged so your reading speed and comprehension improve; you involve your higher brain in a conversation, so your understanding and memory improve; and you leave a clear record of your thinking (not just your existence) that you can go back to and quickly apply to your next project.

Take snapshots to improve your memory and understanding

When you go on a trip, you might take snapshot pictures of the most important or impressive sights along the way. You can do the same thing as you read. Snapshots are a specific kind of annotation, in which you emphasize writing short summaries only: this is less conversational and more intensely information-focused than other annotation strategies.

To read in snapshot mode, you need to get into a rhythm—read, pause, comment—the way you might ride on a tour bus, listen to the guide, snap a picture, and then move on. After every couple of paragraphs, or every page or two of a longer document, you should stop and compose a short summary—no longer than five or six words, if possible. You might write, "Information about better camping spots," or "Doxtader vs. Armin on water rights," or "Why attack ads work." If you don't quite know what you've just been reading, that's ok: your snapshot can be blurry, such as "Something about differential pricing."

Try at first to write your snapshots *without looking back at the text*: this is a way of testing your comprehension. When you struggle to recall what you've just read, you actually help create the neural pathways to strengthen your memory. If you find that you truly don't remember the key points clearly enough to restate them, then you can look back—but take that as a sign that you may need to slow your reading speed and/or read in smaller chunks before taking another snapshot.

When you're reading a challenging text, you may find both that trying to simplify half a page of reading into a six-word summary is more difficult than you expect, and that the act of trying to do so helps you figure out what you understand and what you're stuck on. Not only will you have a better set of notes to refer back to, but you should reach the end of the text with a stronger memory of what you read, because you've already translated its key points into your own words.

Outline to map a text's arguments and evidence

In the same way that sports competitors analyze their opponents' strategies and moves, you can engage in a reading problem by focusing primarily on how the author is structuring his or her argument. Outlining as you read (a technique sometimes called "reverse outlining" since some people think of "true" outlining as a strategy that should only happen before a text gets written) is a specific kind of annotation in which you emphasize identifying the author's argument and evidence structure. You focus less on your response, but you become more prepared to respond by knowing how the author has set out the opening moves.

To read in outline mode, get into a rhythm of reading, pausing, commenting, and sometimes moving backward or forward to check, add to, or revise your other comments. Sometimes even very advanced readers can't tell whether what we've just read is a major argument or just another example until we've read further along.

When you read to outline, you may want to write notes when you see the following kinds of elements in a text:

- Overall statement of **argument or purpose** (sometimes presented as a thesis or research question)
- **Background** information or review of previous research

- Each main **sub-point**, sub-claim, step, or recommendation
- For each sub-point, a note about the key **evidence**: any separate extended example, collection of data points, or part of a narrative
- Any discussion of **alternative** views, opposing arguments, or outlying data
- Any **refutation** of or response to opposing arguments or outlying data
- Any elements that seem **unrelated** or off exploring a tangent
- The final **concluding** statements and reasons

Your notes do not need to follow the strict format of a formal outline, with A's and B's and 1's and 2's. Yet you should leave yourself enough information that you could create that kind of outline if you needed to. So you could write short comments such as, "Sub-point: Not all local food = organic," and "Sub-point: Not all local food = good farm techniques" and "Example: Fruit trees fail w/o pesticides." You might decide later that the author considered these as one overall issue, and go back and add a note: "Big-sub-point: Not all local food = good for environment."

Reading and outlining will probably take longer than reading straight through. However, if your goal is to understand the author's argument or to respond with an argument of your own, your investment will pay off. By sketching a map of how the author constructs their argument, you will understand both the content and the logic of the text better.

Talk back to engage with a controversial text

If you've ever asked a friend to talk to you so you can stay awake on a long drive, or you're the kind of person who sometimes yells at the television during an exciting match or annoying show, you understand some of the value of talking back. It can be energizing to get caught up in a conversation, even with an inanimate object. Conversing with a text as you read uses the same strategies as the other annotation modes discussed here, but focuses your attention on personal response and connection—especially critical response—rather than on mastering the content or structure of the text.

To read in talkback mode, you need to be ready to "hear" precise pieces of what the author has put on the page, and then "talk back" as specifically and energetically as possible. You might start by underlining and/or circling parts of sentences, to help you focus on the author's exact words: "I see this is what you say here." Pause a minute: what exactly do you think? What memory has surfaced? How confused, frustrated, or opposed are you, and why?

Then write a short note that helps you join this conversation:

- **Connect**: what exact ideas or images have the author's words sparked in your own mind?

- **Question**: what did the author leave out, or what other concerns do you have right now?
- **Resist**: what skeptical, curious, doubting, disagreeing, or contradictory responses have those words produced?
- **Personalize**: access your own brain by using first-person frames ("I think that . . ." or "This makes me feel . . ." or "One time I tried . . .").

Remember: you don't want to repeat or translate what the author said ("Here I think you mean X"); you don't want to spend all day going off on a rant; you don't want to write a generic comment that anyone else could write. Instead, you want to create a short comment that proves you—precisely you and nobody else—were there having a response to the author's ideas, arguments, evidence, structure, or style.

You don't always have to be doubtful or grumpy in your talkback; you can also note where you agree with or connect to the author's ideas. But when you take a more critical talkback attitude, playing the role of someone full of questions (or someone who yells "Get off my lawn!" to every passing kid), it sometimes helps keep the reading interesting and helps you remember what you learn.

Read critically to check everyone's assumptions

When instructors say they want you to analyze a text, dig for its "deeper meaning," or "read critically," often they mean you should address an author's logic or their argument backstory: the assumptions they hold that are not always stated but affect what they include, omit, or emphasize. Most authors are not trying to deceive readers, so you're not looking for a "hidden" meaning—but as a writer, you know that writers don't always reveal everything they think or assume. To explain more clearly why an author's reasoning is solid or flawed, you can:

- **Consider what's emphasized or overlooked**: is the author addressing a diverse range of people and situations, or have they left out a key perspective, consequence, or opportunity?
- **Identify oversimplification**: does the author adequately address complications and resistances, or do they present a quick scenario or solution that doesn't match a more intricate problem?
- **Call out biases**: if an author's stance or argument doesn't have strong reasoning, evidence, or consideration of alternatives, perhaps the author is caught up in a significant personal or professional bias.
- **Check for faulty logic**: in everyday communication, we are all susceptible to using generalizations or unsupported claims about causes or consequences, but you can hold writers to a high standard.

Beyond just "talking back" with your own questions or concerns, reading with an assumption-checking mindset means alternating between reading and thinking.

So after you read a few paragraphs or pages, pause a minute and ask a question about the author's focus, emphasis, or evidence. Then write a note about any pattern you want to investigate further: "This author is emphasizing ___ but they might be overlooking/assuming ____ ."

Read actively and closely to spot nuances

You have probably had lots of experience using a "close reading" approach to analyze poetry and fiction. You can use similar approaches—focusing on how individual word choices and language patterns contribute to the meaning of a text—when reading and writing about nonfiction texts.

Even for "ordinary" writing like textbooks, news reports, and scholarly studies, you can pay attention to specific words and phrases: these can help you:

- **Determine the target audience**. An author's diction—where do they use descriptive, technical, or antagonistic language?—can help you decide who they are writing to.

- **Identify the author's stance**. Individual words can convey more or less enthusiasm, openness, or certainty about their own or others' arguments.

- **Track main points and examples**. Transition words and phrases are crucial for distinguishing an author's argument from their examples, and help you follow counterarguments and refutations.

- **Select and explain direct quotations** from an author in your own writing. When you're limiting your quotation length to avoid interruption of your voice, you should pick phrases that give an author's distinct argument in vivid language, and perhaps even explain how a particular word you've quoted connects to your own point.

In close-reading mode, use your annotations to focus on specific words or phrases that help you focus on the author's best or most challenging ideas, or points that relate to or conflict with your current arguments. Don't just highlight or underline these words: use color-coding, short reactions, or brief questions or phrases to help you remember why *these words* had such an impact.

Explore 6.4

Choose one of the "as you read" strategies listed in this chapter, and apply it to *just the first three pages / 1000 words* of a reading assignment you are starting. You should aim to add at least 1-2 comments per page. Pause at the end of the third page and reflect: what effect do you think this strategy had on your *engagement* with the material, your *memory* of what you read, and/or the *speed* of your reading? Write a final note on this page about at least one of these factors: did it improve, stay the same, or get worse?

6.4 After You Read: Consolidate Your Understanding

Most readers are so glad to complete a difficult reading task that we set down the book, toss away the pages, or turn off the screen with a sigh and turn to the next task (or reach for our nearest device to check our messages and likes). Yet from a problem-solving perspective, that's like turning away just ten minutes' hike from the top of a mountain peak, or leaving a concert just before the band plays their best song.

If you get into the habit instead of taking just five or ten minutes to work on one more task right when you finish reading, you can capture the last of your reading momentum and turn it to your advantage. Depending on the strategy you choose, you can:

- Preserve what you already know
- Increase your comprehension and memory of the text
- Create a mental model of the issue you are studying
- And/or expand your awareness of the strategies the author is using so that you can improve your own writing.

Many students have gotten used to relying on a strategy of "take notes now, re-read and study those notes later (right before an exam or project)." However, research shows that readers remember and understand significantly more when we:

- First try recalling key information immediately after we finish reading
- Try recalling information without re-reading the text or notes
- Translate what we recall into our own words
- Check to make sure we have recalled accurately
- Repeat this recall-and-check process a few times

Instead of spending hours and hours a week or two later ineffectively scanning a bunch of highlighted pages that repetitively say "Hey! Hey! Hey!," you should take time right when you finish to consolidate what you know. Studies using brain imaging show that making a deliberate effort to recall information actually re-encodes the information from your short-term neurons to your long-term neurons: you physically rewire your own brain.

You can use your "after" strategies *immediately* after reading and/or as a *delayed* strategy after reading. Both of those approaches have advantages.

- When you employ an "after" strategy immediately after reading a text, you take advantage of the most complete, freshest understanding of it that you are likely to have. In addition, you capture the momentum of your current working time: you won't "forget" to come back and do this task.

- When you use an "after" strategy a few days later, using a delayed approach, you will need to struggle to recall what you have read because it isn't as fresh—which will cause you to imprint what you do recall much more firmly in your brain. In addition, you might be a little less tired or distracted when you return to the reading, and so you might think of connections that wouldn't have occurred to you before.

For best results—especially on a text that is particularly difficult or particularly important—you can do both a short "after" strategy immediately when you finish, and a delayed strategy a day later, for maximum understanding and remembering of an important text. Researchers show that readers who use these two strategies together do not need to re-read or review the text in any other way to improve recall: we do not have any additional memory gains from re-reading the text, from staring at all that highlighting, or from skimming all our notes. You might still choose to reread a text to improve your understanding of complex ideas, but not because you've forgotten what you read.

Remember that post-reading strategies involve three key approaches:

- **Recall** what you can without looking back at the text: The struggle to remember is crucial in alerting your brain that you want to remember.
- **Restate in writing** what you remember or value in your own words: Even if your version is incomplete or vaguely phrased, the writing keeps you honest and helps you create new knowledge for yourself. For further emphasis, consider reorganizing the document's ideas using your own priorities or categories.
- **Check your accuracy** after you write: You should take a few minutes to glance back at the text to be sure you didn't alter or omit a key element (it's good to guess first, but you don't want to leave with a false impression). When you correct your own answers, rather than just looking over what the original text said, you increase the likelihood that you will accurately remember and comprehend what you read.

Once you have consolidated your learning—and you've checked to make sure your consolidation is accurate—then your review and studying can focus on your consolidation notes and occasionally checking for a specific fact or quotation.

The strategies below save time and increase your intelligence and engagement. Even—or perhaps especially—if you are pressed for time, or if you are frustrated by the difficulty or dullness of the reading task, you should plan to do at least a few minutes' worth of consolidation using one of the strategies below before you set the text aside. As a frustrated reader, you really don't want to waste any momentum you might have on your side.

Finally, remember that when you are writing about what you read, you are moving back into the work of knowledge creation: your post-reading tasks turn your reading momentum into writing momentum that carries you back toward your major project.

Practice

- Advanced readers often use one of the following **post-reading** strategies to help consolidate understanding; see the following pages for more details:
  - **Five-sentence summary**: Understand, recall, and restate key arguments
  - **Ten questions**: Test your understanding and memory of complex ideas
  - **Difficulty detective**: Analyze complex ideas and deepen your thinking
  - **Concept map**: Visualize key concepts, connections, and applications
  - **DIY discussion questions**: Recall complexities and continue the conversation

NOTE: Most of the writing you do after you read will be in notes that are separate from the text itself. You will need to take some specific steps to be sure that you can benefit from this writing now and at a later point.

- **Identify your notes.** Include the author, title, and source or URL of the reading you're doing, as well as the date you're writing—and store them somewhere you can find them again.

- **Relax your style.** This is low-stakes, writing-to-learn writing. Try not to worry about being grammatically correct or getting the precise wording. Skip steps or change the order of steps if necessary to keep up a good pace so that you don't get frustrated.

- **Acknowledge someone else's words.** If you copy out any words or phrases directly from the text, vividly indicate to yourself that you have done this, and note the page number if that's relevant. Decide how you will make this distinction absolutely obvious to yourself so you don't commit a citation error: if simple quotation marks are not dramatic enough, you might also need boxes, underlines, asterisks, emojis, or another font type or color.

Five-sentence summary: Understand, recall, and restate key arguments

Recall: Summarizing a text—remembering its main points and putting them entirely in your own words—is a standard technique both for readers who want to remember information and writers who want to share it. A summary is not particularly conversational, since you need to avoid judging the text. In a summary, you should not indicate whether you believe an argument or example is

persuasive or accurate. But a summary is rhetorical, since in your very first step you seek to identify not just random facts, but the author's overall argument and structure.

Restate and Write: You can create your summary freeform, or use a list, plan, or format to help you. The guide below challenges you to select only the most important sub-points and evidence; in the process of writing such a summary, you must put together the whole text in your mind and try to see it from the author's point of view, as a series of strategic elements.

- Summary sentence 1 gives the main idea: State the author's overall goal, argument, or conclusion. Do not simply describe the topic or issue that the text was "about," but explain what the point was, what the author intended to change or emphasize by writing it. "Author X argues that _____."
- Sentences 2 and 3 give the structure: Describe the author's main sub-points, in the order they were presented.
- Sentence 4 identifies some of the support: Describe at least one key example the author uses to support his/her argument.
- Sentence 5 notes the larger conversation: Describe a counterargument the author notes and refutes, a secondary issue the author suggests is connected, a related conversation that the author connects this discussion to, or a larger implication that the author sees that makes the issue important to address.

You can always write a longer or shorter summary, or a summary that focuses on different aspects of the text: its key facts or data, its methodology, its connections to other texts you've read, its most interesting or controversial points, or its most relevant thematic issues.

Check for accuracy: When you've completed your summary, you should check back—or check with a peer or instructor—to make sure that it is as accurate as possible. Are you sure you stated the author's overall belief or position, rather than just the general topic or a minor idea? (Check the opening and closing sections of the text for confirmation.) Did you leave out anything important? Did you insert any judgments of your own ("this is a *great* point!") that you need to take out so that your summary is objective? Modify your summary if you need to.

Ten questions: Test your understanding and memory of complex ideas

A five-sentence summary may not go far enough in helping you comprehend the main information or core strategies used in the text you just read. Also, you may want to include your own judgments and analysis of how well a text is communicating with you as a reader. If so, you can challenge yourself to answer additional

questions about an important text, or get into a pattern of answering key questions about any text you review.

Recall: Choose one of the question sets below, a list of questions your instructor has given you, or a list of questions that you know will help you recall and organize key information about what you've just read. For each question, think back over the whole text, and try to identify a strong, specific answer. If you're not sure, go ahead and consider what answers might be possible: remember that trying and failing to recall is still an effective comprehension and memory strategy.

Restate and Write: List your answers to the questions, using as much exact detail as you can recall. You may need longer answers (a sentence or two) for some of the questions.

Content Questions: What It Says: Use these questions to boost information recall

1. What is the exact topic of this text? (If you can, try to include a "How ___" or "Why ___" or "The ways that ___" explanation rather than just a noun such as "voting rights" or "social media.")
2. What is the author's main argument, point, or key piece of information: how do they want to alter the reader's thinking or behavior?
3. What was one significant sub-point that the author made?
4. What data, example, or explanation did the text provide about that sub-point?
5. What was another significant sub-point that the author made?
6. What data, example, or explanation did the text provide about that second sub-point?
7. What information did the text include in order to address complications, alternatives, questions, or resistances?
8. What information, examples, or explanations surprised you or left you with questions? How so?
9. What connections did the text draw to other sources, conversations, experts, or issues?
10. What final conclusions, recommendations, or arguments did the author provide?

Strategy Questions: What It Does: Use these questions to improve analysis and gain a writer's perspective

1. What is the author's main argument, point, or key piece of information: is it a debatable claim or mostly just facts and description, and how does he/she want to alter the reader's thinking or behavior?
2. Where and how does the author present this argument: early in the text or later? Stated directly or leaving it for readers to discover by implication?

3. Who is in the author's main/target audience, and who is not? (Are you? What are two clues that help you decide?)

4. List two or three author sub-points in order, and explain why you think they are ordered that way—is the first one earlier in time, necessary as background for the others, easier to understand, or important for getting readers' attention?

5. Is the author supporting their claims mostly with personal analysis, factual observation, connections from outside sources? (Give an example if you can.)

6. What if any quantitative evidence (numerical data) does the author provide, and is it effective? (Give an example if you can.)

7. What if any qualitative evidence (stories, testimony, descriptions) does the author provide, and is it effective? (Give an example if you can.)

8. How does the author address complications, alternatives, questions, or resources—are they considered throughout the text or in just one section? Does the author provide convincing responses?

9. How well does the content of this text (arguments, evidence, analysis) engage and influence the author's primary readers? (Give an example if you can.)

10. How well do the author's genre or style choices (organization, diction, layout) engage and influence the author's primary readers? (Give an example if you can.)

Check your accuracy: Check back with the text and update your notes to make sure that your answers are as accurate as possible. Did you remember correctly what the key points of the text were? Did you leave out an example that you want to recall later? Is there an additional direct quotation that you want to add to show precisely what the author was doing? Adapt any answers that were incorrect or incomplete.

When you use a template or heuristic like these ten questions rather than just trying to recall a few facts on your own, you challenge your memory and reasoning to perform at a high level. When you use a pattern like this repeatedly, you can start to retrain your brain so that you automatically look for the important elements of a text as you read.

Difficulty detective: Analyze complex ideas and deepen your thinking

Researchers report that one way to identify experts is that they head directly toward difficult spots and seek out challenges in a field, subject, or task, while novices steer away from difficulties. Whatever you feel confident and interested in—a class in school, a kind of online game, a type of music or sport—you probably

enjoy it more when something is surprising, puzzling, or challenging rather than a typical everyday experience.

Even if you're not feeling very knowledgeable, you can act like an expert by heading back toward the most difficult part of what you've just read and diving right back in for a few minutes. The trick is not to try to understand this part of the reading perfectly, but to become a "difficulty detective": to try to figure out what makes it so hard.

Recall: Think back (or take a quick look) and choose at least one passage, sub-issue, or section of the text that you had trouble understanding, following, remembering, or believing. This could be just a paragraph or two, or it could be as much as a few pages. Perhaps the jargon was pretty dense, or perhaps the argument got tangled up, or perhaps it was just page seventeen and you were getting pretty tired of it all. Begin by defining what you will be investigating: "I had more difficulty than usual trying to understand, connect with, or remember the section where the author writes about _____."

Restate and Write: Then write for several minutes, without looking back at the text, focusing on the problem rather than the data. You should suggest your best theories about why this section was difficult for you to read, using approaches like those noted here:

- Identify the source of difficulty: do you think you had problems in comprehension, in interpretation, or in seeing a clear application of or connection to the text?

- Balance it out: if you think you understand some parts of the section better than others, say so.

- Recall exact factors: do you think your difficulties arose because of language or terminology, because of the structure of the text, because of the complexity or intensity of the ideas, and/or because of your lack of background knowledge about the main issues?

- Compare: what do you think made this section more difficult than other parts of the text, or more difficult than other texts you've read recently?

- Investigate yourself: is there anything in your own background that helps explain why it makes sense that you were not fully prepared to understand this passage?

- Problem-solve: if you were going to read a passage like this again, what might help you—in support from the author, or additional information or background from other sources—to solve reading problems in that situation?

Offer all of your theories, even if they seem unlikely or contradictory. You don't

have to understand everything you read to become a better reader: you are using this model to help you gain more control.

Check accuracy: Now that you have a name for the difficulties, take two minutes to glance back at the section. What other details can you add to show precisely what was difficult? What sentences or phrasings can you see now that might help you explain more about the difficulty of this text?

Sometimes this "move toward difficulty" approach allows you the opportunity to solve (part of) a problem, and sometimes it allows you to realize that you were facing a problem you weren't likely to solve—not because you're a bad reader, but because the gap between your knowledge and what the author expects their readers to know is too wide. Either way, you learn more about the text and gain confidence in your own abilities as an advanced reader.

Concept map: Visualize key concepts, connections, and applications

Sometimes you can understand a word-based text better when you shift to a diagram or map. If you have been outlining or taking snapshots of your text as you go along, you may already have a series of small notes that are ready to be assembled—literally—into a "bigger picture."

Recall, restate, and organize: Without looking back at the text, you can begin your sketch on a piece of paper, using circles and connecting lines, or use shapes and lines in a document on screen.

- **Map the core.** Start by naming and sketching the key point and at least two or three major concepts of the text you just read. If you'd like your map to include visual features such as hills and lakes, roads and houses, planets and moons, or even just different fonts and colors, add those elements. Make sure that you put ideas that are similar to one another close together on the page, and/or use roads or other connectors to show their relationships. You might also draw ideas that were more important to the author (or to you) as larger or more dominant than ideas that were less crucial.

- **Add details**. Sketch in some of the supporting examples, and perhaps add any alternatives or contrasting arguments that might need to be represented (perhaps these need to be located across a borderline) or confusing tangents (perhaps these are swampy areas). Is it clear on your map how a reader can identify major pathways or crucial patterns?

- **Provide context**. Think for a few minutes about the larger landscape in which this text/conversation occurs. What other texts have you read, and what other ideas or related subjects/issues can you think of, that you can place out on the borders, as odd trapezoids or neighboring towns, mountain ranges, or galaxies?

- **Add a guide**. Write two or three sentences as a "tourist guide" to the diagram or map: what features are most important to notice, and how should a reader navigate his or her way across the page?

Check for accuracy: Look back at the text, particularly key sections that present arguments or descriptions, and check to see if you have left out or mistaken any key ideas. You might also find a way to expand one of your answers as another viewpoint occurs to you.

By moving from the textual to the visual, you can access alternate learning strategies and create a memorable model of the information you have been processing. Sometimes it's easier to consolidate a set of complex pieces into an overview when "overview" becomes literally a view of the points in a spatial layout rather than merely a mental list or a chain of words.

DIY discussion questions: Recall complexities and continue the conversation

When you were a novice reader, someone else asked you all the questions about what you read, and you provided the answers to show you had "done the reading." Advanced readers show that they have done the reading by being able to ask interesting, provocative questions afterward, as if we were still in the room carrying on a spirited conversation.

Recall, restate, and write: Start a list of issues and complications that remain open, controversial, puzzling, and/or consequential. Without looking back at the text, begin writing questions that you would ask the author, people who agree with the author, or anyone who has read the text and is still thinking about what the author wrote. What else do you want to know? Try not to write "teacher-like" questions (such as "What is the most important theme of this essay?"); instead, you should write real questions that you don't know (but want!) the answer to. You may:

- Write questions that ask the author for more information about the issue
- Ask the author about his/her experiences or choices in writing this text
- Ask questions that begin with "How . . ." or "Why . . ."
- Ask questions that begin "What if . . . " or "Why isn't . . . "
- Inquire about alternate proposals or areas of study related to this issue
- Ask whether other readers you know or in other situations might have had reactions different from yours
- Ask bigger-picture questions that involve the author's overall argument, the larger implications, or connections to other texts or issues linked to your writing project

Check for accuracy: Look back at the text, particularly key sections that are related to your most challenging questions: did you leave out any key ideas? Can you see ways to expand or complicate your questions? Finish out your question list so that it addresses all crucial points.

When you finish your reading by writing questions, you gain the confidence of knowing not just what the author said but where the conversation overall is headed: you have the confidence of a full participant in the conversation, not just a recipient of information. Your questions help you consolidate information and to create a mental model of the issue.

Explore 6.5

Set a timer for 10 minutes. Choose one of the "after you read" strategies listed in this chapter, and use it to write about a reading task you recently completed. If you finish early, add a note: how long did it take you? If the timer goes off before you finish, you can simply stop and add a note: "Stopped here after 10 minutes."

6.5 Reflect to Adapt as a Reader

Researchers have discovered that the most advanced readers and writers share two common characteristics. They have a "growth mindset," a belief that they can continue to learn to become better at reading and writing, and they use reflection to adapt their reading strategies when they encounter challenges or new rhetorical situations.

Adapt while reading

In most cases you probably hope that you can read a text just once, and then rely on your memory, your notes, and some quick look-backs to gather any additional information you need. So if you start to get stuck during that one experience, you will want to make a change right then, while you still have a chance to make more productive, more efficient use of the rest of your time.

Before you reflect on your reading strategies for one text, you should give yourself enough time to see if they're working: complete your pre-reading strategies and read far enough into the text that you "have a feel" for both the style and the major points/themes of the text. But don't wait until the last page or two, after you have invested a lot of time in partially successful strategies and a lot of frustration.

If you've read a few pages and you're feeling "reader's block" coming on, stop and adjust.

Reading challenge	Possible adaptations
I'm not understanding the basic information	• Re-scan the beginning and end of the text to look for the author's goals • Read any headnotes, discussion questions, or assignment notes that may provide information • Take a quick break to search online for an encyclopedia entry or short article that explains some basic concepts in more accessible language • Slow your reading speed down for a while, and/or try a reading strategy like Snapshot or Outline after each section or few paragraphs
I'm not finding the author's main point or argument	• Re-scan the beginning and end of the text to look for the author's goals • Consider the genre or approach and look again: is this a genre in which arguments are stated later in the document? is the author using an indirect approach to narrating or analyzing in which the reader needs to interpret the argument? • Slow your reading pace, and/or try a reading strategy such as Snapshot to help you identify some key points that might add up to the main idea • Try a reading strategy like Predict or Outline to help you consider what might possibly be the key issues
I'm not seeing how/why this is relevant	• Read any headnotes, discussion questions, or assignment notes that may provide information • Take a minute to recall and write your main learning or writing goals: what might be one way they intersect with this text? • Consider your major or profession: how might learning this information or these reading skills help you later? • If you're not the target audience, consider who is: why might someone else find this text relevant?
I'm worried I don't have enough time to finish	• Recall your key reasons or questions (chosen or assigned) for reading this text, and list the top two priorities you can focus on • Re-scan the text and mark the portions you might be able to skim quickly vs. what should be read closely • Try a reading strategy such as Snapshot, which might speed up your reading without losing key information • If you will have use for this text later, remember that investing time in reading closely now will save you time later: try a reading strategy such as Talkback or Annotate to make sure you don't have to reread the whole text to get the main ideas

Reading challenge	Possible adaptations
I'm not staying motivated/focused as I read	- Take a minute to recall and write your main learning or writing goals, for this moment or overall: what might be one way they connect with this text? - Scan ahead to identify two key sections you think will be most valuable for meeting your goals, and start by reading those - Try another reading strategy that involves your own views more, such as Talk-Back or Question - Consider setting a timer for 15-20 minutes, and then planning a five-minute break before you return - Complete a(nother) pre-reading strategy to help leave a record of your current thinking, then take a complete break and come back another day
I'm not using (or not benefitting from) my reading or note-taking strategy	- Don't worry about getting your notes or annotations "right": your goal is to stay engaged with the text and build a reasonable comprehension of it - Try a reading strategy such as Predict or Snapshot, which might speed up your reading, or a strategy such as Annotate or Outline, which can increase your attention - Be patient: it can take time to become accustomed to a strategy and to get your bearings in a complex text

Long-term learning: Review and prepare for your next reading task

When you have completed one or several reading tasks, you should reflect to review your situation: are you satisfied with how you are solving reading problems for this project, in this course, during this semester, or at this job? Would you like to "raise your game" in some way to become a better reader—to save time, to gain more information, to feel less confused, to succeed with projects or exams, or to be able to construct better arguments in your own writing?

Just as reflective writers use what we learn from one project to improve how we approach the next project, reflective readers identify skills or strategies we could improve on, and make a plan to do a little better next time. It makes no sense to try to go from *completely frustrated* to *reading perfectly* in one step, though, so if you are setting a goal to improve as a reader, you might pick just one or two of the approaches below to work on in the upcoming weeks and months.

Strategy: I want to improve at . . .	Approaches: I will take an extra 10-15 minutes per reading to do one of the following . . .
Remembering important information from what I read	• Prepare for reading about a new topic or in a new field by getting help: reading short online articles about the background, terminology, or main participants addressed in what I will read • Prepare my brain for learning by using pre-reading strategies that connect my experiences to and predict the content of what I will read • Stay focused on key points as I read by using a snapshot or talk-back strategy • Test and focus my recall afterwards by posing and answering questions, such as the ones in Ten Questions or questions I create
Identifying the key arguments and alternate views that an author provides	• Prepare for reading by getting an initial overview using a strategy such as creating a framework or predicting the content of what I read • Actively watch for key points as I read using a strategy such as snapshots or outlining • Identify controversies by focusing my annotations or talkback comments on points where I or other readers might have disagreements or doubts • Test and strengthen my understanding after I read by summarizing or mapping a document's key points • Focus my attention on complex arguments by analyzing difficult points or asking complex questions after I read
Explaining another author's rhetorical strategies or reasoning (or lack thereof)	• Prepare to analyze an author's strategies by focusing my pre-reading strategy more on how a text works than what it says: I can try to predict or question an author's strategies, not just the content • Focus my annotations or my snapshots as I read on what the text does: makes an argument, provides qualitative or quantitative evidence, uses strong or weak reasoning • Take time after I read to answer questions about what the text did or to map the author's strategies
Integrating what I read more effectively into a course or project I'm working on	• Identify opportunities for connection by using a pre-reading strategy to identify my key questions or connect my interests to what I will read • Focus my annotations on my questions, arguments, or interests as I read • Use a strategy like talking back or making a concept map to connect my questions or arguments systematically to what I'm reading

Strategy: I want to improve at . . .	Approaches: I will take an extra 10-15 minutes per reading to do one of the following . . .
Managing my reading dispositions better with improved time management, persistence, and/or motivation	• Mentally prepare for how long or challenging my reading might be by using a pre-reading strategy that predicts my speed or predicts the content of what I will read • Plan a reading approach that perhaps doesn't review every section equally by using a pre-reading strategy such as creating a framework or identifying my key questions • Use an annotation strategy that includes honestly noting my own experiences, questions, or frustrations, and remembering that all readers struggle sometimes • Use both immediate and delayed post-reading strategies like five-sentence summary and concept map to ensure that I accurately recall (and have notes on) my reading, so I don't waste time with unnecessary review

Even as an advanced reader, working your way through difficult college or professional texts can feel as though you're learning to read in another language or for a whole new purpose. When you try a new reading technique, you might not be very graceful at it or comfortable with it the first time you try it, and you might not succeed or see progress immediately. You might even fail outright.

However, you should keep practicing to figure out how to become more skilled at that approach, seek feedback from a peer or instructor to help you measure your achievements, and adapt the strategies to suit your goals. When you start to see progress on one goal or gain confidence with one strategy, you can move to another one.

Explore 6.6

Once you have completed *any two* advanced reading strategies noted in this chapter for one of your reading tasks, write a few sentences reflecting on the advantages and/or disadvantages of using these approaches. Consider your engagement with the text, your comprehension of it, and your memory of key points: did any strategy help you improve in one of these areas? Add a final note: what's one strategy you might try on your own for an upcoming reading task in another class, workplace situation, or personal project?

Chapter 7. Generating and Organizing an Early Draft

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Adopt an early-drafter mindset and use a DEAL approach to lower stress and improve writing quality as you compose

- Identify your initial focus or thesis for a writing project
- Use open-ended and structured processes to generate writing for a new project
- Select and adapt organizational structures for a new project
- Apply writing strategies to improve the flow, cohesion, and impact of paragraphs in your project

A blank screen or piece of paper can be inspiring—or stressful. If you have already invested some time in reflecting to predict the goals and strategies as you started your writing project, you may be able to ease into composing with less of a blank-screen jolt, but you will still benefit from approaching this stage with a reflective and open mind. This is also a good point to review some threshold concepts about writing, so that your writing practice isn't limited by beliefs such as "Good writers have an easy time drafting" or "I need to follow Rule X or use Process Z or my writing will fail." Instead, consider whether any of the following research-based concepts will help you gain confidence and motivation:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

There is no single definition of a "good writer"

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

As with other events in your writing, generating and organizing an early draft is a rhetorical act: writers make decisions to serve our own purposes and to meet our readers' needs. There are no firm rules about what a writer should do first, and no universal signs that a writer is failing at the task. The steps that served you well in a previous writing task may work equally well in the current one—or they may not be a good match for today's writing. Writers make plans, act on those plans, feel satisfaction when the writing goes smoothly, and know that when we get stuck it's not "writer's block" but just a normal problem which we can reflect on, analyze, and respond to.

The sections that follow provide descriptions of strategies that advanced writers use as we compose and organize early drafts, but they are only guides to help you begin to think about your options. You need to choose and adapt strategies that suit your goals and your readers' needs.

7.1 Reflect to Problem-Solve: Adopt an Early-Drafter Mindset

Author Anne Lamott advises that all writers treat their first draft(s) as the "down draft," with a goal of simply getting some kind of writing down on the page or onto the screen, without worrying too much about the quality of it. Once you have a down draft, she writes, you can move to the "up draft," where you fix it up and improve your writing a little at a time. Lamott's approach matches the threshold concept that good writers frequently struggle and revise, and supports writers in having a growth mindset and confidence that writing gets better with reflective practice.

What is an early drafter?

Advanced writers benefit from becoming *early drafters*. An early drafter:

- Starts writing before they are fully ready to write
- Sets reasonable expectations for the quality of the first draft(s) of a project
- Uses first-draft writing to learn more about the project
- Disregards "rules" about writing such as "start at the beginning" or "make sure there's a verb in every sentence" if those rules create too much frustration
- Draws on a blend of generating strategies and organizing strategies
- Applies problem-solving reflection when they feel a little stuck, so they can keep moving forward
- Leaves time to reflect on and revise the document before calling it "finished"

Early drafters aren't just people who are biologically wired to get to work at 6:00 in the morning or wealthy yacht-owners who have plenty of time for writing, and we aren't endowed with anti-procrastination superpowers. Like most writers, early-drafters have to squeeze in our writing when we have time, and we're often writing at the "last minute."

The defining quality of early drafters is that our "last minute" is just a little earlier than one-and-done writers. Instead of thinking of drafting-and-revising as a luxury that we might do someday when we have time, we assume that any significant or important writing project requires a draft-and-revise process for us to succeed. Early drafters follow the research that shows that taking an early-draft approach:

- Lowers stress, and so makes the getting started with a writing project easier
- Allows time for reflection and problem-solving, lessening the experience of "writer's block" and creating opportunities to learn successful strategies
- Encourages experimentation and exploration, and so makes the final project more innovative or fulfilling
- Builds in more opportunity for reflection and rethinking, and so helps the writer improve both the current project and the skills needed for future projects

In a writing class or another course with a writing project, your instructor may structure deadlines that encourage you to experiment with an early-draft mindset. You should take advantage of these opportunities: your goal is not to slack off or intentionally write a poor draft, but to see what you can accomplish when you change your expectations from writing a "perfect" draft to writing an early draft and giving yourself time for experimentation and problem solving.

What is a problem-solving approach to drafting?

Although you can use the problem-solving strategies in this chapter to help you get unstuck when you're doing a one-and-done writing project, advanced writers often use a multiple-draft approach. When you know you will come back and polish a draft later, you can use your early draft(s) to experiment and reflect. Instead of trying to get the structure, content, and cohesion right all at once, early-drafters can select a starting strategy that best creates momentum, and use other approaches later to improve the document.

By taking a multiple-draft approach, you also lower stress and save time while you compose, especially because you can avoid "writer's block." Instead of staring at a blank page or blinking cursor while the clock keeps ticking, reflective writers can stop and DEAL with the challenge: define what's not working, explore

possible solutions, act right then to implement a new approach, and step back to learn from the experience.

Choose a starting strategy

You may be generally comfortable as a writer who outlines or lists the paragraphs you plan to write before you begin composing a document. Or you may prefer to write your ideas down quickly as they occur to you, and rearrange them later. Advanced writers can find both strategies useful.

> **Planning your organization first** can give you speed when you are working on a short or familiar document that you can easily envision. Planning your paragraphs ahead of time—what size, how many, and in what order—can also help you persevere with a long or unfamiliar project, anticipating the knowledge you will need to acquire in order to finish your writing.

> If you're taking an organize-first approach, you also need to be prepared to make significant changes as you revise, both during your writing and afterwards, because you will be smarter about the overall structure of your document, and how to signal your readers to help them follow your ideas, after you've actually written some of it.

> **Generating your ideas in sentences and paragraphs first** can be useful when you are working on an issue that you have strong opinions about, or on a question that you want to explore as you go without preconceptions. Writing quickly without worrying about the exact structure or order of your thinking can help you gain momentum on a topic that feels intimidating, or help you feel that you are connecting directly to readers.

> When you focus on ideas rather than structure first, you need to be ready to make significant changes as you revise: you may need to relocate or delete whole clusters of sentences in order to create deliberate patterns your readers can follow. You will also likely need to add signaling or cohesion sentences to guide your readers.

Sometimes writers combine the two strategies in a single project. One writer might sketch an outline of some parts of the text, and write through the rest; another might decide to generate the first few pages to get started and then create an outline of the key arguments that will follow. For instance, in writing this chapter I first created a list of my main points, and wrote out the paragraphs and sections for an early draft. As I revised, I kept going back and forth between adding to or revising paragraphs like this one, to dig into what I wanted to say, and reviewing my outline and headers, to create an arrangement pattern that you could follow. (Although much of my original structure

is intact, this paragraph has been moved to a slightly different location three times so far!)

Keep your momentum going as you DEAL with challenges

Since all writers struggle and revise, it makes sense to begin drafting your writing project by expecting that you will get stuck sometimes. Rather than assume that you're stuck simply because you're a poor writer or just accept that the document won't turn out very well, you can make a plan in advance about what to do when problems arise, and take difficult moments as opportunities to learn new strategies. The DEAL approach to problem-solving can be particularly helpful while writers are composing.

Define the problem. First, identify whether you are still making progress, even though it may be going more slowly than you hoped for, or whether you are feeling truly stuck and watching your confidence and momentum slip away. When you are stuck, it can help to give the problem a name. You might identify problems that have to do with specific aspects of your project:

- *Rhetorical situation*: these are challenges in knowing what you most want to say, or challenges in making sure that you are meeting your readers' expectations.
- *Subject knowledge*: these are challenges in comprehending the issue well enough that you can explain, analyze, and/or argue convincingly about it.
- *Writing steps or strategies*: these are challenges in deciding what to do next in composing your document (outline or generate? research or compose? stay on this subtopic or add another? go off on a rant or dig into the complications and details?).
- *Dispositions*: these are challenges with your attitude and emotions about this particular writing project, and the stories you tell yourself about your confidence, curiosity, motivation, and opportunities for success.

You may also have another name for your problem—maybe it's a team-project problem, a too-many-assignments problem, a writing-with-unfamiliar-jargon problem—or you may have multiple ways to identify it, since knowledge problems are often linked to rhetorical situation problems. There's no exact right definition, only a definition that lets you move to the next step as a writer (rather than just checking your messages again or looking to see what's in the refrigerator).

Explore strategies that you can practice. You might confidently tell yourself, "I can fix this by creating or changing my project outline, because that strategy usually helps me." You might also find it's useful, though, to consider a few more strategies, especially ones that match your definition of the problem, before you settle on an approach.

Practice

- To practice responding to **rhetorical situation problems**, see
  - Backtalk, Off on a Rant, or Elevator Speech if you're wrestling with what you most want to say.
  - Audience Profile, Believing/Doubting, or Expert/Novice if you're wrestling with how to meet readers' expectations.
- To practice responding to **subject-knowledge problems**, see
  - Question Ladders or Used to Think/Now I Think to consider what you know and need to know.
  - Assumption Inspection or Counterargument Generator to explore how to deepen your analysis of an issue.
  - An active-reading strategy such as Annotation or Snapshot to help you identify key issues as you read complex documents.
- To practice responding to **steps or strategies problems**, see
  - Seven Generations or Six Structures to try alternate ways to generate or organize a next section.
  - Subtopic Generator or Letter to Kermit to help you explore your next steps.
- To practice responding to **disposition problems**, see
  - Growth Mindset, Funny Story, or Values Freewrite to help you change to a positive frame of mind.
  - Deluxe Project Scheduler or Attitude Inventory to help you plan a route toward success.

By taking even a few minutes to explore two or more options, you give yourself more control and more chance for success, even if you eventually decide to go back to your familiar outline.

Act on what you decide. Instead of continuing to write the sentence or paragraph you were on when you got stuck, find a new page or open a new document, and commit 15-20 minutes to writing in a new approach (you can set a timer so you know you're not getting too far off track). Even if this writing doesn't directly end up improving your current project, it will keep you feeling productive and your brain will stay focused in a writing mode—and it doesn't take much longer than scrolling on your phone or making a sandwich.

Look and learn whether the strategy helped. You might gain enough momentum from your alternate strategy that you want to just keep writing along, which is fine. At some point, though, when you come to a place you can pause, you will want to take a few minutes to directly evaluate the strategy you chose. You could do something as simple as give the strategy a score from 1 (not helpful at all) to 5 (extremely

helpful), and write yourself a sentence explaining *what* the problem was and *why* you think the strategy worked or didn't work for you. Remember that your goal is to continue learning as a writer, so closing the DEAL process with this final stage helps you be ready to solve a writing problem the next time you get stuck.

Explore 7.1

In a few sentences, describe your current approach to drafting a writing project. When do you rely on writing just one version, and when do you create time to revise with a second or third draft? Do you generally prefer to begin a project by organizing structures or by generating sentences? What is most challenging for you as a writer, and what do you usually do if you get stuck writing?

7.2 Draft and Revise Your Thesis or Goal Statement

Writers don't always know our main ideas clearly during the first round of writing, since writing creates knowledge as well as reporting on it. So it doesn't always make sense to start by trying to write a perfect thesis sentence, or even to write any kind of thesis sentence.

Even so, writers gain direction and clarity from composing some kind of anchor: this might be a *working thesis* or a *draft introduction* or an *initial claim* or a *preliminary goal statement*. You should draft just enough of an idea to keep you on track, without agonizing over it so much that it holds you back from the rest of your work. (You could even put this statement in italics or another font color, to signal that you know it's a temporary placeholder.)

As you continue with your writing project, you should keep checking in on this statement: the "working thesis" should guide your inquiry, analysis, and writing, but your additional inquiry, analysis, and writing should also help you revise, refine, relocate, and even redirect your working thesis.

Your main point is as rhetorical as the rest of your project, so there is no one kind of thesis statement, focal sentence, or claim. As you compose and especially as you revise your working thesis, you can decide whether your document and your readers would benefit from:

- A more explicit or more implicit statement
- A more subject-oriented or more argument-oriented statement
- A simpler or more complex statement

These scales adjust and overlap: for a letter to the editor, you might prefer *very simple* and *fairly explicit*, while for a laboratory instruction manual you might focus on being *somewhat implicit* and *very subject-oriented*.

Make your thesis more explicit or more implicit

More direct or explicit statements are appropriate when readers will value speed and accuracy of communication over relationship-building, for readers who are already familiar with an issue, and for documents that have a distinct point of view. Explicit statements usually occur at an early, single point. The writer chooses precise, accessible language and provides straightforward indication of his or her goals for the document.

> John Peratrovich's education as an engineer and a lawyer prepared him to lead PCN Corporation, but his childhood experiences in Alaska are the main source of his drive and insight.

More implicit statements are appropriate when writers want to build a relationship with readers or expect readers to explore rather than decide about an issue. Implicit statements often accumulate throughout a document, becoming more evocative or emotionally charged toward the end. The writer uses vivid or highly suggestive language and takes time to build connections with readers at several points throughout the document.

> In some corner of John Peratrovich's mind, the sun never sets . . . Acknowledged by his professors as a capable engineer, Peratrovich is remembered best for leading his team using a cooperative approach he says he learned from his grandfather, who was active in his regional Alaska Native Corporation . . . As he enters the PCN boardroom each morning, John Peratrovich draws on his MIT education as well as the curiosity and commitment to teamwork that he gained from growing up in a tight-knit small town.

Make your thesis emphasize the subject or the argument

More subject- or concept-oriented statements are appropriate for reports, summaries, memos, narratives, or case observations. Even when these documents don't seem to have a "thesis," they still often benefit from having subject-oriented focal statements to assist readers in anticipating and organizing information. Subject-oriented statements emphasize the information provided in the document. The writer often chooses neutral but precise and descriptive language; usually indicates the complete scope of what the document will cover; and often specifies sub-topics or areas of emphasis to be discussed.

> As discussed in this article, any solution to yearly flooding on the Mississippi River will need to consider the interests of farmers, residents of towns alongside the river, barge traffic transporting raw materials and finished products up and down the river, and long-term environmental effects.

More argument-oriented statements are appropriate when writers believe readers need clear advice, recommendations, or changes in their lives. Argument-oriented statements present the writer's position on an issue in such a way that reasonable readers could disagree with it. The writer chooses language to emphasize the risk or value of a particular choice, interpretation, or policy, and often indicates one or more contrasting arguments or positions.

> In order to avoid the no-win choice between flooding cities (such as Cairo) and flooding hundreds of acres of farmland every time the Mississippi waters rise, the Army Corps of Engineers needs to systematically replace levees with wetlands along the upper Mississippi to allow more natural adaptation to variations in rainfall.

Make your thesis statement simpler or more complex

This adjustment has to do with how you interact with readers in framing your argument, not about whether you are thinking deep thoughts. Your *statement* can be simple even when your idea or argument is complex, or vice versa.

A simpler thesis statement can be used to indicate straightforward ideas, to engage busy or uninformed readers, or to conceal underlying complexity. The writer focuses the readers' attention precisely on the core idea, argument, or outcome; chooses accessible, often blunt language; and often defers consideration of alternatives or details until later in the document. A simple statement is not always easy to write; a writer may need several drafts to present the core ideas without overwhelming a reader.

> If universities want to continue to profit from collegiate sports, they should pay a salary to student athletes.

A more complex thesis statement can be used to make the reader directly aware of the layers of an idea or plan, to engage a diverse group of stakeholders, or to overtly acknowledge resistances or challenges that a reader may bring to an argument. The writer should provide sufficient background information to prepare the reader for the set of ideas; represent a logical sequence of problems, complicating factors, and/or consequences; and indicate a clear thought-pathway for readers to follow in their considerations. This work may require a sentence with several clauses, several sentences, or even several paragraphs in a longer document.

> Division 1 universities have long argued that funds raised from high-income sports like football and men's basketball primarily go to support students and student athletes from all sports via scholarships, especially for athletes in less lucrative sports like field hockey or wrestling. However, since budget analyses show that funds often go to fancy stadiums and high-paid coaches, and low graduation

rates show the burdens student-athletes face, the NCAA needs to step in and change the rules. Universities either need budget caps and stronger ethical regulations, or they need to pay college players salaries commensurate with their sport.

Not all documents need a "thesis statement"—but most documents have a goal for affecting readers, and authors should work to make that goal accessible to diverse readers. Depending on the situation, you might state your argument explicitly in a simple sentence at the end of an introductory paragraph or section, or suggest your main subject indirectly through several sentences or phrases woven into your document. When readers are confident that they know your main point, they will get into the flow of reading more easily.

Explore 7.2

How do you want to convey your main point in your working thesis? Choose at least two descriptors from the six listed in this section—explicit/implicit, subject/argument focused, simple/complex—and briefly explain why you prefer these approaches for your current project. If you have time, try composing a very early draft of such a statement that you can use to anchor your writing.

7.3 Write It Out: Generate Content in an Early Draft

What do you see in your mind when you think of someone who is writing? If you found yourself imagining someone smoothly adding lines and sentences to a piece of paper, or rapidly clicking a keyboard as letters appear and fill up a screen, you're not alone: these images of a writer "getting into the flow" and generating page after page of text are often represented in books, movies, and songs about successful writers. When you find yourself in that kind of flow state as a writer—when you can "just do it!"—it can be exhilarating.

Since all writers struggle and revise, though, you might need to adjust your mental models a bit: even writers who like to begin a draft in a freewriting or sentence-generating mode will compose at different speeds, with different aims, and with pauses to reflect or change our approach. Remember that writing isn't just "copying down what you already think" but involves thinking and generating new knowledge as well as adapting to your readers' needs, so going more slowly can be a sign of a successful writer, not a sign that you are ineffective.

Also, you should be aware that even if you believe you write better "under pressure" or "at the last minute," research shows that that's not usually true. Adrenaline may give you some temporary energy, but it's a fight-or-flight energy, not a complex-thinking energy. Meanwhile, stress increases your cognitive load—the amount of thinking that your brain has to do—so you will actually have less brain

power available to find words and create analyses. And writing at the *actual* last minute means that you are giving up the opportunity to review and revise your writing in ways that will create lasting improvements.

What last-minute writers say:

> I write well under pressure.

What last-minute writers usually *mean*:

> When it's the last minute, my fear of (or discomfort about) not completing this project finally overcomes my fear of (or discomfort about) writing, so I lower my standards and just write what I can.

Writing out of fear isn't a productive or sustainable approach. The good news is that you don't have to wait until you are stressed, exhausted, and fearful to use the underlying strategy: you can "lower my standards and just write what I can" *at any time*, especially when you know you will have time to revise. As you practice using some of the approaches described here, you will become more comfortable at sitting down and generating writing with low stress, even days or weeks before that last-minute adrenaline kicks in.

Generate by easing your expectations

One of the best parts of being an early drafter is knowing that since you have already planned time to revise, your first round of composing doesn't have to meet anyone's expectations for quality. In true "freewriting," you write for yourself rather than for any other reader, and the only rule is that you need to keep writing: it doesn't matter if you are correct, use the best vocabulary, stay precisely focused on your main issue, or create smoothly structured paragraphs. (If you get stuck thinking of something to say, you can write "I don't know what else to say" until you think of something!) This kind of open-ended composing takes advantage of the way that writing *creates thinking*: as you put some ideas into words on a page, you frequently discover that you have more ideas that you want to communicate.

Even in more directed composing, when you are aiming to explore a specific topic or issue, or create analyses and arguments, you can keep your standards relaxed. "Writing" can include many kinds of generation: you can make lists instead of sentences, use informal terms or a blend of your home languages, add doodles or images, insert meta-commentary ("Note to self: think more about long-term effects"), include personal or emotional reactions, or describe impossible solutions. In a world full of distractions, simply being able to generate writing for 15 or 20 minutes without stopping to think of a word, fix an error, look up a fact or quotation, or worry that you're drifting off topic can help you

gain momentum, build confidence, and identify crucial ideas that will contribute to your final project.

Practice

- To practice high-energy, **low-stakes writing**, see <u>Backtalk</u> , <u>Off on a Rant</u>, or <u>Seven Generations</u>.

Generate by deepening evidence and reasons

For a little more direction, you might allow one or two very basic reader expectations to filter into your composing, and look for ways to reach out toward those needs. You still don't want to raise complicated expectations about correctness or precision, but since you know that your reader can't read your mind, you can challenge yourself to dig deeper into the details, the causes and effects, and the roots of your arguments.

You might try some very general prompts that can help you provide more—or more interesting—details to help satisfy readers' curiosity. When you use sentence starters like these, you can sometimes provoke your brain into giving you more ideas, so that you build a fuller picture for your reader:

- For example, one time ___ years ago I/we/they . . .
- Another example of ___ is . . .
- There are four types of ___ that we should explore: . . .
- The two most important things about this point/statistic are . . .
- Three things that will surprise / amaze / irritate you about ___ are . . .
- One aspect of this that few people realize/notice is . . .

You might try some other exercises that can help you dig into big ideas and find the vivid details that can give readers a fuller picture of what's in your head. Since you know that readers may also be skeptical—they don't have to believe your argument just because you said so—you might challenge yourself to provide more reasons and explanations as you write your early draft.

Practice

- To practice **generating more details**, see <u>Explode a Moment</u> or <u>Inner Three-year-old</u>.
- To practice identifying more **areas of your topic** or issue, see <u>Subtopic Generator</u> or <u>Three Cubes</u>.
- To practice providing more complete explanations of your **reasoning**, see <u>Cause-Effect Map</u> or <u>Gray-Area Finder</u>.

Generate in conversation with other writers

What if you're conducting research and learning about an issue as you write: should you just make up statistics as you go ("Something like 35% of all US six-year-olds believe in Santa Claus"), or leave placeholders whenever you don't know something ("Add facts about kangaroos here")? You could do either of those if you wish: it's your early draft, and you can set the expectations! (Make sure you put your made-up facts in another font or color, though, so you catch them when you revise.)

But because writing creates knowledge, you might want to create knowledge that aligns with the information or arguments presented by other writers, so that you are getting the most advantage from your own reading and research. This doesn't mean you have to write a sentence, then stop and go read an article, and then come back and write another sentence. Instead, try using strategies that help you balance stating your own ideas with connecting to readers' positions or knowledge. Remember that your goal is to generate steady writing without worrying about the precise order or style of your sentences; in another draft, you can "fix up" your ideas and create smooth, focused paragraphs.

Practice

- To experiment with **general conversations**, see Backtalk, Counter-argument Generator, or Dialogue.
- To focus on more **specific exchanges** of ideas, see Scenarios or They Say + I Say.

Generate by switching gears

Sometimes writers feel intimidated by the structures or situations of a writing task. Maybe you're great at writing fiction, but stressed about writing academic arguments about South Korean economics; perhaps you love writing to your favorite cousin, but the minute you think of writing a report for your lieutenant or an important client, you freeze up. Or you might be completely ready to write your fourth main point, but you're stuck trying to write the first three. Sometimes, you're not even sure what's stopping you from writing.

It's okay to shift gears and try an alternate approach. Remember that there's no one successful process, especially in an early draft:

- You can write in any order, so if you know what you want to write for your fourth point, write that first and see what new thinking it helps you create
- You can write in any style or genre, so if changing your approach lowers your stress or raises your motivation, try that shift

- You don't even have to be writing on the topic of your exact project specifications to be making progress—any kind of *writing* is better than no writing at all!

In each of the alternative writing tasks suggested below, the main point is that *you're still writing*, and you're still writing about ideas that are important to you: you're not fussing with your phone or thinking about dinner or reviewing your performance in yesterday's swim meet. Writing leads to thinking which leads to more writing: soon you can move yourself back to your main project with confidence.

Explore 7.3

In order to generate writing using any of the strategies listed above, you need to be able to tune out your inner critic; otherwise, you'll just get started when some problem will cause you to stop. Sometimes your inner critic is based on things that real people have told you about your writing: it's not ___ enough, or it's too ___, or you don't understand ___. You may even hear these people's voices in your head, or recall a comment written on a document you composed. Sometimes your inner critic draws on your own ambitions or worries—or perhaps you just have a vague sense of foreboding about writing.

Write a few sentences about the criticisms or faults that you most worry about as you write, especially for a school or workplace task. Then finish with a sentence: Knowing what you do about how advanced writers work, what can you tell yourself as you compose that will help you silence, or at least turn down the volume on, these concerns?

Practice

- To write when you **don't know** what to write, see Believing/Doubting or Used to Think/Now I Think.
- To gain momentum by working with a **more familiar** or interesting rhetorical situation, see Audience Switch, Genre Switch, or Stance Switch.
- To loosen up and **silence your inner critic**, see Funny Story, Letter to Kermit, Values Freewrite, or Write the Problem.

7.4 Plan a Structure: Choose and Adapt Organizational Patterns

"It just doesn't flow."

You have probably said this about texts you were assigned to read or review, and you may have said it about your own writing. "Flow" is a vague term; like "writer's

block" it is commonly used but not very helpful in addressing the challenges writers face. Advanced writers who are aiming to create a smooth structure often start by distinguishing *organization* difficulties (like choosing and arranging bricks to form a sturdy wall) from *cohesion* difficulties (like spreading mortar among the pieces to help the pieces connect smoothly).

As you start writing, you may find it helpful to work on choosing your organizational pattern(s): what bricks will go where? Like all other elements of your writing, your organization is rhetorical: writers build structures to serve our own purposes and to meet the needs of specific readers. Therefore, despite what you might have learned or guessed, there are no firm rules about:

- What comes first or last in a document
- How long paragraphs should be
- Where you should use "thesis sentences" or "topic sentences"
- How to arrange the information in the middle of paragraphs
- How many paragraphs or sections you need
- What order your information or arguments should come in

However, writers can become more efficient—and connect better with readers—when we deliberately choose organizational patterns.

Choosing and repeating a pattern helps advanced writers quickly create a paragraph or section that resembles an earlier one. In addition, readers expend less energy and have increased comprehension when they can predict the rhythms and patterns of a document. The pattern(s) you choose may reflect the genre you are writing in, your goals as a writer, and your readers' needs.

Of course, you can vary your patterns once you have chosen them: patterns are not rules, and they are not "one size fits all." As you consider how best to connect with your audience, remember how variations to patterns—a key change in a song, a spicy dish in a buffet—often serve to intensify readers' experiences. Efficiency is one goal best served by a reliable pattern, but writers often also seek engagement, power, and precision, goals that might be best achieved through surprises and adaptations.

Use organizational patterns rhetorically

One reason that many of us struggle to get our writing to "flow" is that there isn't usually a single best approach. Take a "simple" organizational task like deciding how many paragraphs you should have, and how long your paragraphs should be. You might lean on previous patterns: perhaps you learned how to write a "five-paragraph essay," or were taught a rule that a paragraph needs to be eight sentences long.

But advanced writers know the number and length of paragraphs can be a lot more flexible—more like deciding how big a load of laundry can be before you put it in a washing machine. There are limits, of course: if all the paragraphs (or laundry loads) are too small, they can waste a reader's energy, keeping the brain machinery always starting and stopping. On the other hand, if all the paragraphs are too large, they overload a reader's brain and nothing gets processed the right way. So it helps to choose a paragraph size that matches readers' brains (busy managers may prefer smaller paragraphs than English professors do) and mostly stick to that as your pattern.

However, paragraphs are flexible structures of information. Is there ever reason for you to do one tiny laundry load, even if it might waste money or energy? Sure: maybe you've got an important event to attend Friday night and you just need to wash your best black shirt and pants quickly. Is there ever reason to do one slightly oversized load? Absolutely: perhaps there's only time for one load and you need *all* the t-shirts clean.

The same is true for paragraphs: sometimes, you have just one important thing to say, or you want to make a dramatic appeal, so you want a short paragraph—even a one-sentence paragraph. On the other hand, sometimes you have a complex explanation that you want your reader to work through all at once, so you stretch your paragraph a little longer than usual. The same principle holds true for the number and arrangement of paragraphs or sections: if you select a pattern appropriate for your goals and your readers' needs, and you don't vary that pattern too much, readers will still think your document "flows."

Consider linear and point-by-point patterns

As you plan a writing project, you can benefit from identifying a basic pattern that you want to use for the *order* of your information or arguments. Common order patterns—for individual paragraphs and for whole projects—often get grouped into **linear** and **point-by-point** strategies.

You can decide to follow a line through time (**chronological pattern**) or a line through space (**spatial pattern**) to help you solve paragraph problems.

Linear structures often work well for

- Narrating events
- Explaining a process or instructions
- Conveying a sense of progress or action
- Engaging less experienced readers

You can choose a **point-by-point pattern** to help you solve your paragraph problems. Some common point-based patterns include comparisons, category- or

classification-based structures, and reason + counterargument patterns.

Point-by-point patterns often work well for

- Analyzing a concept
- Comparing two ideas or objects
- Arguing about values, causes, or solutions
- Exploring counterarguments or alternatives
- Presenting ideas to expert readers

Adapt a linear pattern to focus on key elements

The play-by-play announcer of a basketball game and a steady panoramic video of a mountain valley provide entirely linear coverage of their subject matter. For writers, linear approaches are still rhetorical: you should let your paragraphs adapt to your goals and your readers' needs, rather than trying to cram what you see or remember into a predetermined format.

Identify clusters or core experiences: Just as photographers decide how to frame a scene and television producers decide where to break for a commercial, you will need to decide how to break up your line of communication into paragraphs that are easy for your readers to digest. Often, events and spaces blur together, so you may have to make some deliberate decisions about what the timeframe or space of each paragraph will be.

Vary the amount of detail: Whether you choose to write about your fourteenth birthday party or a construction site in downtown Reno, Nevada, you will not provide an equal amount of detail about all parts of the event or place. Instead, you will want to go into greater depth about moments of especially high emotion, surprising aspects or connections, or elements that help support your overall goal of moving your readers toward reflection or action.

Vary the linearity occasionally and carefully: You can create interest and emphasis by breaking the line now and then. The most common time break is a *flashback*: a memory of an event that occurred earlier, such as recalling your fifth birthday party while describing your fourteenth. You can also make a *spatial shift*. If you're discussing a new building in Reno from the ground up, you can shift from discussing the rain barrels on the ground floor to noting the special high-tech "green" rooftop that uses the collected water. You may need to increase your signaling—by including

sufficient transitional words and phrases, for instance—to pro-
vide cohesion when you are interrupting your chronological or
spatial line.

Adapt a point-by-point pattern to emphasize your priorities

When the topic or issue you're writing about has no obvious linear structure, you
will need to choose and implement a logical plan. Writers struggle with point-
based organization because it involves at least three major decisions: selecting
what's important to say, dividing the important material into *categories* or *sub-top-
ics*, and choosing the *order of points* overall in the document. As in sorting laun-
dry, there are no absolute right answers: sometimes you might sort clothes by col-
ors (if preventing the reds from seeping into the whites is important), and other
times you might sort by popularity (if having the right outfit to wear tomorrow to
church or a concert is important).

Plan goal-oriented paragraphs. To choose and reveal your point-by-point struc-
ture, you should plan not just for what each paragraph's topic is ("what it says")
but for its goal ("what it does"). In a college essay analyzing several key causes
of strengthened voting rights in Nigeria, your goal for each paragraph may be
quite similar: "*Analyze* the reasons X is a cause. *Analyze* the reasons Y is a cause."
In other documents, you may shift goals several times: a laboratory report may
move from "*state* the key hypothesis" to "*summarize* the steps taken" to "*analyze*
the results, expected and unexpected."

Select a plausible order. Once you've decided you want to write about four
influences on Nigerian voting rights, you need to consider how to order them.
Perhaps you spot a clear chronology, and you can address earlier efforts first;
more often, you will need to create your own point-by-point pathway. Writers
often consider arranging subtopics in order of familiarity or agreeableness to
readers, in order of importance to the author or reader, or in order of effec-
tiveness or impact on the situation: you can arrange any of these patterns in an
increasing order (low to high importance) or a decreasing order (high to low
familiarity).

Allow for uneven patterns. You may have been taught that an organized
paragraph or essay follows a balanced outline format, in which "You cannot
have an 'A' without a 'B'" and in which all your sections should be nearly equal
in size and emphasis. However, writing rhetorically usually brings more com-
plications. You may have more information on some aspect of your issue—or
you may know that readers want or need more persuading on one aspect. So
a "perfect" four-point pattern like the one on the left may not work as well
as the plan on the right, which is still *predictable* even though it has *varied
emphasis*.

<table>
<tr><td>

Completely even pattern

A. Sub-topic 1

   1. Supporting detail

   2. Supporting detail

   3. Supporting detail

B. Sub-topic 2

   1. Supporting detail

   2. Supporting detail

   3. Supporting detail

C. Sub-topic 3

   1. Supporting detail

   2. Supporting detail

   3. Supporting detail

D. Sub-topic 4

   1. Supporting detail

   2. Supporting detail

   3. Supporting detail

</td><td>

Pattern with some varied emphasis

A. Sub-topic 1, first part

   1. Supporting detail

   2. Supporting detail

   3. Supporting detail

B. Sub-topic 1, second part

   4. Supporting detail

   5. Supporting detail

C. Sub-topic 2

   1. Supporting detail

   2. Supporting detail

D. Sub-topic 3

   1. Supporting detail

   2. Supporting detail

   3. Supporting detail

E. Sub-topic 4

   1. Supporting detail, explained at length

</td></tr>
</table>

Consider a block pattern or a side-by-side pattern for comparing or arguing. When you have multiple details to share about two or more items, texts, concepts, or events, use clear patterns so that readers can follow your thinking. You can imagine two basic patterns for sharing information by considering how you could introduce four friends to your parents. In a block pattern, each friend would have their own block: you say everything about Chris, then everything about Ali, and so on. In a side-by-side pattern, you could state everyone's name, then go around again: in the same order say what each person's home town is, and then say each person's major.

<table>
<tr><td>

Block pattern: Description

Introduction
↓
Chris: Hometown, Major, Favorite Games
↓
Ali: Hometown, Major, Favorite Games
↓
Lu: Hometown, Major, Favorite TV Show
↓
Nila: Hometown, Major, Favorite Movie
↓
Conclusion

</td><td>

Side-by-side pattern: Description

Introduction
↓
Friends: Chris, Ali, Lu, Nila
↓
Majors: Chris's, Ali's, Lu's, Nila's
↓
Hometowns: Chris's, Ali's, Lu's, Nila's
↓
Favorites: Chris's, Ali's, Lu's, Nila's
↓
Conclusion

</td></tr>
</table>
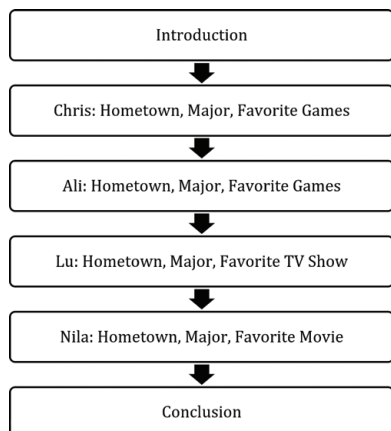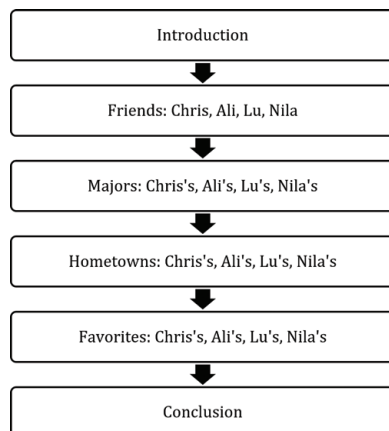
In some writing, the differences between these approaches are subtle: one emphasizes each person separately, while the other may emphasize what they have in common. When you're writing a comparative argument, however, your pattern may be more strategic: choosing a side-by-side pattern, for instance, will help you show readers some very precise distinctions between items that may seem similar on the surface.

Block pattern: Argument
(Useful if differences are easy to spot)

```
Introduction: Transformers vs. X-Men Movies
              ↓
Transformers: Acting & Characters
              ↓
Transformers: Plot and Faithfulness to Original
              ↓
Transformers: Special Effects
              ↓
X-Men: Acting & Characters
              ↓
X-Men: Plot and Faithfulness to Original
              ↓
X-Men: Special Effects
              ↓
Conclusion: X-Men > Transformers
```
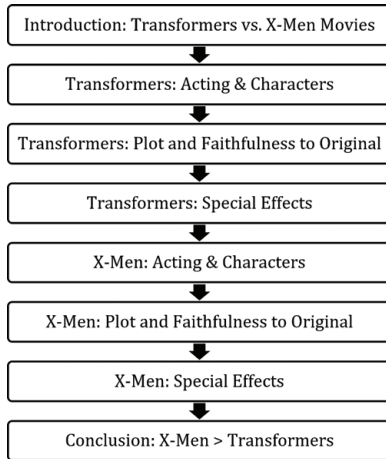
Side-by-side pattern: Argument (Useful if differences are harder to see)

```
Introduction: Transformers vs. X-Men Movies
              ↓
Acting & Characters: Transformers
              ↓
Acting & Characters: X-Men
              ↓
Plot and Faithfulness to Original: Transformers
              ↓
Plot and Faithfulness to Original: X-Men
              ↓
Special Effects: Transformers
              ↓
Special Effects: X-Men
              ↓
Conclusion: X-Men > Transformers
```
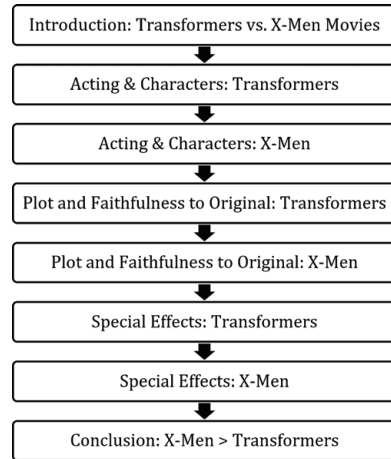
Likewise, when you are presenting arguments, counterarguments, and responses, the structure affects the impression on readers. Readers who are highly skeptical of your proposal may be frustrated if you put all of your supporting arguments first, but more engaged if you consider their counterarguments throughout your document in a side-by-side arrangement.

Block pattern with counter-arguments (Useful with readers who mostly accept your ideas)
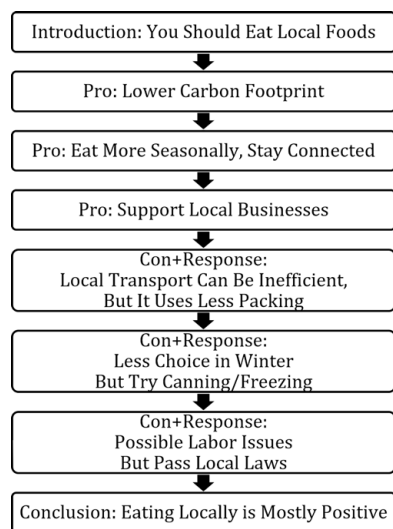
Side-by-side pattern with counter-arguments (Useful with readers who mostly resist your ideas)

Introduction: You Should Eat Local Foods
↓
Pro: Lower Carbon Footprint
↓
Pro: Eat More Seasonally, Stay Connected
↓
Pro: Support Local Businesses
↓
Con+Response: Local Transport Can Be Inefficient, But It Uses Less Packing
↓
Con+Response: Less Choice in Winter But Try Canning/Freezing
↓
Con+Response: Possible Labor Issues But Pass Local Laws
↓
Conclusion: Eating Locally is Mostly Positive

Introduction: You Should Eat Local Foods
↓
Pro: Lower Carbon Footprint
↓
Con+Response: Local Transport Can Be Inefficient, But It Uses Less Packing
↓
Pro: Eat More Seasonally, Stay Connected
↓
Con+Response: Less Choice in Winter But Try Canning/Freezing
↓
Pro: Support Local Businesses
↓
Con+Response: Possible Labor Issues But Pass Local Laws
↓
Conclusion: Eating Locally is Mostly Positive

The models in these diagrams are simplified to help you see how writers establish a rhythm that readers can begin to anticipate. Your goal as a paragraph writer and arranger is to help readers quickly perceive the clusters and connections within the information you are presenting—and yet to allow enough variation that you are truly communicating with readers in ways that meet your core goals, not simply arranging words neatly on the page.

Explore 7.4

To start a writing project by considering its structure, you can certainly use a common approach like an outline. But there are lots of variations of outlining, as well as other ways to plan for a document. Take a look at a couple of the structuring exercises below, and write yourself a few notes. What's one approach that you think might work for you as you start an upcoming writing project? What's an approach that you think probably wouldn't work for you? Add a sentence or two about the kinds of structure-based approaches that are most compatible with your goals and skills as a writer right now.

Practice

- To practice with **more linear structures**, see Cause-Effect Map or Six Structures.
- To practice with **less linear structures**, see 3D Mind Map, Map the Terrain, or Source Synthesis Grid.

Learn

- To learn more about specific **patterns of development** such as narration, exposition, classification, or argumentation, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves.
- To learn more about anticipating and addressing **counterarguments**, see Chapter 17, Developing Projects that Argue.

Consider closed-form and open-form paragraphs

In addition to selecting the order of information on a whole-document level, you can also choose a repeating pattern for the structure of your paragraphs. While your paragraphs can vary in size without confusing readers, you may want to make some initial decisions about whether you want them to more strictly lead readers through a topic or argument, or whether you prefer to have readers take a more exploratory route. As you read the examples that follow, try to pay attention to the differences between "closed form" and "open form" paragraph patterns.

1.Strictly closed-form paragraphs are common—and useful—in US academic and professional writing for several reasons. **2.**First, writing in colleges and workplaces is often argumentative in nature, and in US culture it is considered helpful for a writer to signal his or her point at the start of a paragraph or section. **3.**For example, when this paragraph started, you knew it was going to argue in favor of closed-form paragraphs, and you were prepared to hear the evidence. **4.**In addition, US academic audiences are often heterogeneous and reading at a fast pace. **5.**Writers who announce their goals clearly at the starts and finishes of paragraphs and sections help even diverse and sometimes inattentive readers stay focused. **6.**Moreover, when a writer opens and closes all paragraphs with sentences that mention the sub-point, those sentences help create smoother transitions between paragraphs, because the language and ideas are so similar at the connection points. **7.**Finally, writers of closed-form paragraphs often create a repeating pattern with many of their internal sentences. **8.**For instance, writers may try always to use a general claim or commentary sentence, like the previous one, and then follow it with a specific example sentence like this one. **9.**Of course, some closed-form paragraphs vary the

patterns or signals: they state their argument in the second sentence, for instance, or they omit a concluding sentence drawing the paragraph together. **10.**Yet even though not all paragraphs need to be as closed-form as this one is, you might be surprised at how successful you can be in using a closed-form paragraph structure in your classes or workplace writing.

The first sentence predicts the topic and arguable claim. (1)

Several sentences identify sub-points or reasons (2, 4, 7, 9); these are followed by exact examples or explanations. (3, 5, 6, 8, 9)

Several sentences begin with transitions that tell readers whether they are reading a sub-point (First, Moreover), an example (For instance) or a counterargument (Of course).

The last sentence reaffirms the opening claim. (10)

1.Some of the most memorable comments I have heard from student writers have to do with their frustration about revising to satisfy the organizational demands of their instructors. 2.A student from Japan once told me, "The way my teacher wants me to write is how we talk to toddlers in my country! Everything spelled out as if readers have no brains of their own!" 3.A student from a rural US high school grumbled, "I came to college to get away from the regulations of formulas and five-paragraph essays, to finally write in my own voice, and now my prof wants to put me right back in chains!" 4.Both of these students understand that writers and audiences might sometimes benefit from writing that holds together and keeps readers interested without a locked-down pattern. 5.Each person might feel more confident writing in a more **open style**, creating paragraphs that evolve toward a point rather than stating it and then hammering away at it, or writing paragraphs that ebb away at the end like a high tide shifting rather than giving a loud trumpet blast. 6.These writers might present evidence all at once; they might mention reasons without giving a first-second-third list. 7.Maybe a writer thinks they can trust their readers to be knowledgeable and careful enough to infer the point of the paragraph without clear guides. 8.Perhaps a writer is writing in a genre or situation in which readers *expect* to provide interpretation on their part—or the writer already established the core arguments earlier in a document, and now wants to ask readers to stretch their brains. 9.Whatever their reason, these writers may find they feel more assured in their writing when they adopt an open-paragraph style, like the student who told me, "Some days, I write to explore an idea and just invite readers to join me."

This paragraph begins with a description, not a claim. (1)

This paragraph provides additional vivid examples all together. (2, 3, 4)

The exact topic of this paragraph is most clearly noted in the middle. (5)

This paragraph finishes with more examples about the same topic. (6, 7, 8)

The final sentence echoes a main idea: more confident writing. (9)

Explore 7.5

Consider the two paragraphs above. In addition to the notes already added, identify 2-3 strategies that you see each paragraph using. You might explore how each paragraph's last sentence resembles or differ from the first sentence; how often key words such as "writer," "closed" and "paragraph" appear; how many different reasons or examples are included in each paragraph; and/or the order of points or examples. Which of these strategies worked best for you as a reader, and why?

Of course, if you have been paying attention, you've probably noticed that this textbook doesn't use either of those paragraph styles precisely. Does that mean there's a third choice? No, and yes.

A lot of this textbook is actually written in closed-form paragraphs, but the paragraphs are visually broken into smaller sections because in the genre of textbooks—as in the overall genre of instruction manuals—shorter paragraphs are expected in order to help busy readers like you. But if you look at the four paragraphs right here (starting with "Of course . . ."), they actually form one closed paragraph: main idea at the start, supporting reasons and counterarguments here in the middle bits, and concluding sentence at the end.

So one answer is "No": Writers need to choose whether we lean more toward a highly structured pattern, or whether we prefer to give our readers interesting ideas woven carefully together but not always directly argued or stated outright.

But the more important answer is "Yes": Writers are always adapting the way our paragraphs look on the page, changing the degree of directness we adopt, and varying the amount of structure we provide to assist their readers. Writers who create paragraphs rhetorically always adjust paragraphs to match the information we need to provide, the arguments we strive to convey, and the demands we anticipate from readers.

Revise honestly to improve organization

Even a writer who is following a carefully balanced outline can create a draft that has some structural flaws. Because writers read our own minds as well as what's on the page, and because we're used to our own thought patterns, we think our document "flows" even when other readers might be truly stumped. Organizational revisions are among the hardest to do, because they can require drastic actions like cutting, moving, or adding large chunks of text, right when writers are the most exhausted from composing. But these changes are often necessary.

Before you decide that your document is finished, check it for the six common organizational flaws below. You might begin by assuming that you have *at least one* of these problems to solve, since most of us do. (As I revised this chapter recently, I had to work a lot on the second, third, and sixth flaws!) To help see your document as readers do, you could try making a new outline, and then be as honest about what you see, and as empathetic as possible with your readers, as you identify areas for revision.

The ends don't match. Since writers learn as we write, sometimes we end up writing about ideas we hadn't planned to address when we wrote the introduction. That's fine for a draft, but readers like a document that is consistent. If you spot this flaw and you still like your beginning best, you need to cut or change some of your end; if you now like your ending best, you need to alter your early writing to bring it in line.

You're off on a tangent. A statistic about dogs may remind you of your beloved dachshund, but that doesn't mean that the three sentences you wrote about little Fido are appropriate for an argument about service dogs in the US Army. Our tangents aren't always so obvious, so it can help to challenge yourself to see your weakest links: if you *had* to cut one sentence per paragraph, or one paragraph in the document, which one would it be? Are you still sure your readers need it?

You're on a crooked path. Once you have a complete draft, it's easier to spot whether your initial order of ideas still makes sense. If you organized point-by-point from least important to most important ideas, but now you think the second idea is actually most important, it's time to move it. To spot an opportunity, try writing the key idea of each paragraph/section on a sticky note, and take a few minutes to try out all the possible arrangements: are you still sure your current path is the easiest to follow?

It's coming around again. If you set a paragraph pattern to alternate evenly between writing about Restaurant Alpha and Restaurant Beta in your review, readers will get into that rhythm. But sometimes a sentence about Alpha will crop up in a paragraph about Beta, or you'll write several paragraphs about Beta and then tuck in an extra point about Alpha, and readers will be confused: didn't we already see this before? To revise, try color coding each sentence with a different highlighter or font color per subtopic, to see how you might reorganize to address each issue once only.

It's a random "box of chocolates." While you *can* successfully use a one-sentence paragraph to emphasize a point, you won't usually want to limit your thinking on a subtopic to one or two sentences. When we compose rapidly, writers often toss several slightly related ideas into a paragraph, or write several very short paragraphs, giving the draft a random "box of chocolates" feel: just one tiny bite of each, when readers are hungry for more depth. To revise, you have several choices: *frame* and develop a paragraph with explanations of how all the parts relate; *expand* your discussion of one or more ideas into full paragraphs of their own; and/or *cut* ideas—like that pickle-flavored chocolate—that turn out to be less interesting than you once thought.

It's the paragraph that ate New York: Writers often underestimate how much readers know, or how much is needed to explain a subtopic. So we can end up writing one huge paragraph on one angle—even without a single tangent—that will completely overload readers' brains. If you spot a monster paragraph, you may have to re-sort it into two sections (like separating the really dirty white clothes from less dirty ones in the laundry room to make two smaller loads); if you're using more of a closed-structure approach, pay attention to how the new paragraphs start and finish.

Explore 7.6

Having a clear structure set up for a writing task makes some writers feel confident but makes some writers feel more constrained, and still other writers like structure but are frustrated when they have to create it themselves. Write a three-sentence letter to encourage yourself in this area: "Dear Me, I know that outlines and structures for writing usually make you/me/us feel ___. One strategy I just read about that I think can help is ___ because ___. And the next time you/I/we get stuck thinking about structures, I think you/I/we should remember that ___. Sincerely, Me."

7.5 Build Cohesion by Signaling Readers

In addition to selecting your *pattern* strategies, you can improve the "flow" of your document by adapting your *signal* strategies, or what sometimes get called cohesion strategies. When you're driving in a strange city, even when you have a map or good GPS, signals are crucial to help you feel that you are moving smoothly along the right route, like signs that indicate that the interstate exit is coming up on your right, or message boards that warn of slow traffic or detours ahead. Similarly, signals help readers feel that they are moving easily through your document.

Signals are rhetorical, too: writers adjust them depending on circumstances. In the US, our communication culture has evolved toward a *writer-responsible* culture: if the reader is feeling lost, we think the writer needs to improve their signals. This responsibility does not always seem fair, just as it doesn't always seem that it should be your fault if your rowdy three-year-old cousin runs off in the shopping mall despite your efforts to keep track of them. Yet every time you have sighed and said, "This article is too hard—I can't follow their arguments!" you have placed responsibility on the writer, much like your aunt putting her hands on her hips and asking you why security had to go looking for her child.

Thus in the majority of texts that you will compose for US professional and academic audiences, you will be expected to do extra work so that readers do not get lost—not because readers are lazy or ignorant, but because readers are often:

- **Diverse**: readers don't always share a writer's cultural background or intellectual assumptions, so writers often provide extra direction,
- **Impatient**: readers prefer to know what's going on very quickly when they encounter texts, so writers often make key ideas obvious,
- **Disputative**: readers like to test their own knowledge and opinions against new ideas being proposed, so writers often restate their conclusions,

Of course, readers in some situations prefer to be surprised or to take responsibility: we go to horror movies to be shocked, and we read poetry to think hard about our own perspectives. Yet even in horror movies, we get upset over too big a surprise (such as killing off a main character too early). Likewise, we hope a powerful poem will raise questions, but we also value vivid imagery that helps anchor our explorations. Remember, these expectations are culturally and rhetorically based, not absolute: if you are studying in a class with peers from diverse US backgrounds or other countries, or peers who have different workplace situations, you might ask them how readers' expectations differ for writing that they admire.

Cohesion can be important to consider even when you have planned your overall structure in a careful pattern. If you arrange your ideas in order but readers can't spot the pattern you've used, their confidence will drop and they might feel lost, especially in a long document or a complex analysis. When you are working on a familiar writing task, you might be able to build cohesion as you go, using strategies like the ones below. However, most writers need to address cohesion separately as part of our revision process, like city planners adding signs after the roads are paved.

Highlight the "Pink House": Use cohesion signals rhetorically

Consider a common signal like a thesis statement for an essay or a topic sentence for a paragraph. You may have learned that all essays have a single thesis sentence at the end of the first paragraph and a direct topic sentence at the start of each paragraph. There are some rhetorical benefits for this kind of signaling, especially when writing for diverse, impatient, disputative readers. You may find it helpful to imagine a "Pink House" scenario:

> You're driving down an interstate highway at sixty-five miles an hour with four friends from out of town, and you abruptly announce, "Hey, there's that amazing Pink House!" Suddenly there's a lot of whiplash-inducing head swiveling, and someone's elbow ends up in someone else's ribs, and one of your friends gets a glimpse but can't tell if it's pink or gray—and one misses it entirely and accuses you of making things up—and they all mostly blame you for their inability to see the cool Pink House.

A responsible guide could give a better signal: "Hey, heads-up, coming up on the right in about two miles, there's an amazing huge neon Pink House: watch for it!" Your friends would be ready, they'd know where to look and what to look for, and they'd most likely see what you wanted them to see.

Like a driver who is familiar with a road, a writer who is familiar with a concept or document might not realize how quickly readers speed through a text. Writers

need to imagine how important a "heads-up!" can be to direct readers' attention even to something that seems totally obvious. But your Pink House move doesn't always look the same:

- If you're traveling more slowly, or your friends are already the kind of people who look at houses, or you're in the sparsely populated open plains of eastern Colorado, you can give a **later or shorter signal**.

- If you need your friends to notice a particular architectural style detail, or you want them to give their analysis whether they think this Pink House is better than the Green House you pointed out earlier, you may need an **earlier or more extended signal**.

- If it doesn't really matter to you that your friends spot every object on this drive, you might content yourself with a **less obvious signal** such as, "This next neighborhood is pretty colorful," or even, "Do you all like the color pink?"

It's likely that your readers need more signals than you might first guess: as long as you don't end up with readers missing your point, choosing a signal strategy to match your situation can increase readers' sense of "flow."

Sing the chorus: Repeat main ideas and key words

Academic and professional readers in the US are not just impatient (and so they skim documents quickly): they also live in a culture that accustoms them to repetition of key messages, from traffic alerts on phones to repeated advertisements for tacos during televised sporting events. For these readers, a main ingredient of "flow" is repetition: when readers encounter and re-encounter key words and main arguments, they feel confident that the writer is "staying on topic" and are more able to see relationships between specific details and main points.

Of course, writers need to distinguish between ineffective repetition—that is, repeating examples or information as "filler" and thus boring the reader—and repetition that boosts our cohesion. To understand how repeating your key concepts will help your reader stay aware of your main line of thinking, you might consider how we respond to popular music. Take the US holiday song "Jingle Bells," for instance, or whatever popular song everybody is listening to this month: the next time you listen, count the number of times the chorus, or even simply the title phrase, comes up. Do we get bored by the repetition? Not usually. In fact, the chorus is often the only part of the song the listener learns and can sing along with. (Beyond a few phrases like "Dashing through the snow," almost nobody knows all the verses to "Jingle Bells" by heart; we just mumble along until the silly title phrase comes along and we can yell it out again with gusto.) Repeating the chorus helps bring the audience along from verse to verse: the audience thinks, "Aha, right, I *know* this!"

Since what you are communicating is probably more complex than "Winter is fun!" or "I will always love you," your readers will tolerate and even value repetition of your chorus. Sometimes you may need to repeat precise words or phrases; sometimes you will vary the phrasing a little (but not so much that readers forget to "sing along"). Effective repetition may look a little different as you switch audiences or genres, but the principle is similar: consider how to build a strong chorus in three documents with the same main point, "Electric buses will benefit the citizens of El Paso, Texas."

	Effective chorus repetition	Ineffective repetition
Academic essay about overall benefits, using closed paragraphs	• First and/or last sentences of each paragraph that repeat elements of the argument with a little variation: "One advantage of electric buses is cleaner air for El Paso." • Frequent use of synonyms for key terms (*locals*, *residents*, and *taxpayers* all remind readers of who benefits) and pronouns (*they* benefit from this change) as well as repeated key terms, especially ordinary or technical terms with few reasonable synonyms (*buses* will occur a lot).	• Two sentences mid-paragraph that say the same information: "The buses produce less smog. Therefore we will have lower amounts of smog." • Repeated terminology that is of secondary importance: a phrase like "urban heat island" will start to stick out if repeated. • Repeated sentence structure: "These buses are efficient. These buses are inexpensive. These buses are clean."
Memo to city council members recommending bus purchase	• Concluding sentences to paragraphs or sections repeat the goal, with some variation: "Buying new buses will thus save taxpayers' money." • Sub-headings use parallel structure: "Cleaner Local Air . . . Lower Lifetime Cost."	• Data repeated in different paragraphs: "Two-thirds of residents in our poll favored electric buses over diesel buses" and "Polls show 65% of voters recommend this switch."
Poster about new buses at city bus stops	• Repeated tag-line, such as "Bus of the Future" or "Better for El Paso." • Repeated font and/or color, such as a fresh-air blue, to build consistent positive emotion. • Repeated icon, such as a speedy swoosh or child figure, to remind readers of key benefits.	• Repeated reasons, even in different language: "Saves money! Lowers taxes! Cost-efficient!" • Repeated exact images: if readers have seen one bus photo, they may have seen enough.

Of course, however: Use transition words and phrases

Like other signals, transition words and phrases are rhetorical. Many readers want ideas to connect smoothly, but they can disagree about whether connectors like "First . . ., Second . . ., Third . . ." or "In conclusion . . .," provide helpful guidance or make a document's structure too obvious. In general, when readers have little knowledge, limited time, or high skepticism, they tend to prefer more directional signals from writers. So as advanced writers, we can make better judgments about using transition words and phrases during revision and editing, when we know more about our audience and about the tricky parts of our document.

Selecting transition words and phrases for your document is like giving directions to someone who has no map or GPS. These words can give readers extra confidence about their general progress (*In addition* says "keep going straight," and *For example* says slow down and look carefully), but they are particularly important when you are asking readers to change course. A common argument move—acknowledge a counterargument and then respond to it—has two U-turns that could disorient readers. Writers can help readers by framing the opposition with "*Of course*, some scholars object . . ." and the return to our own view with "*However*, more recent research shows . . ." In a complex document or a structure, you might use these transition words in the middles of paragraphs as well as at the beginnings and ends. In these cases, writers often repeat some common signals like *however* or *for example*: the phrases don't stick out to academic and professional readers, and they increase a sense of "flow."

> **NOTE:** Selecting the best transition word requires attention and exploration. The words have different style connotations: although *presently* and *next* have the same general function (indicating a move forward in time), *presently* has a more formal style, while *next* is blunter.
>
> Also, the **boldfaced** transitions below are subordinating or coordinating conjunctions. They must be used to connect two complete sentences: "Chris went to the store *after* the coach canceled practice," or "*After* the coach canceled practice, Chris went to the store." Other transition words may be added to your sentences in a variety of ways, usually set off with commas: "*However*, he was still hungry," and "He was, *however*, still hungry," and "He was still hungry, *however*" are equally correct. Check with a peer reader if you're uncertain about a phrase that best fits your sentence and your style.

Chronological transitions:

presently,	next,	from then on,	**before/after**
at length,	first,	by that time,	**since**
afterward,	soon,	subsequently,	**while/during**
meanwhile,	later,	earlier,	**when**
eventually,	now,	then	

Comparison transitions:

likewise,	similarly,	once again,
at the same time,	once more,	in like manner,
compared to X,	again,	in much the same way,

Continuation or addition transitions:

furthermore,	in fact,	as a matter of fact,	**____(,) and**
moreover,	then, too,	for that matter,	**____(,) or**
in addition,	again,	in the first place,	
as noted earlier,	also,	in other words,	
indeed,	lastly,	besides that,	

Evidence or example transitions:

for example,	frequently,	similarly,
for instance,	generally,	in order to X,
in particular,	in general,	to illustrate,
specifically,	usually,	that is,
in other words,	occasionally,	namely,

Contradiction transitions:

however,	even so,	conversely,	**although/[even] though**
nevertheless,	unlike X,	on the other hand,	**whereas**
on the contrary,	instead,	in spite of (despite) X,	**____(,) but**
in contrast,	still,	otherwise,	**____(,) yet**

Counterargument or concession transitions:

of course,	after all,	to be sure,
certainly,	doubtless,	indeed,
granted,	naturally,	no doubt

Cause-effect transitions:

therefore,	thus,	as a consequence,	**since**
consequently,	then,	for this reason,	**because**
on the whole,	due to X,	accordingly,	**____, so**
as a result,	finally,	subsequently,	**____, and so**

Conclusion transitions:

therefore,	in a word,	to summarize,
on the whole,	in short,	in conclusion,
to conclude,	in summary,	in brief,
all in all,	finally,	

Create known-new patterns with paragraphs and sentences

A fast way to disorient a reader is to present completely unfamiliar information with no preparation. You already know some strategies for presenting familiar ideas first: often you have introduced a document by outlining a general concept or presenting a personal story about a common experience in order to engage readers. That principle can apply to your document organization overall: your early paragraphs can either address angles or arguments your readers might already be familiar with or provide background that readers need to prepare for your claims and explanations. Writers who argue or recommend change sometimes take this a step further by using a pattern that acknowledges resistant readers' own counterarguments first, then presents our evidence or analysis in response.

You can also smooth readers' experience by moving from known to new ideas at the sentence level. Since sentence-level choices can slow writers down while composing, we often pay attention to these patterns during revision and editing. Consider how the following cluster of sentences in an essay about eating local food can be revised so that each sentence begins either with a previously known general concept or with a newly known idea—perhaps one that readers just learned from the previous sentence.

Early draft	Revised draft	Known-new strategy
Genetic diversity in crops is a goal to be supported. To create uniformly ripening peaches and tomatoes that can travel a thousand miles, today's high-tech agriculture focuses on just a few varieties of foods. Along with breeding diverse livestock, environmentally aware farmers on smaller farms grow a wider array of crops that they can sell in season to meet local demand.	1.By eating local food, we can help increase genetic diversity in agricultural crops. 2.Today's high-tech agriculture limits food diversity in order to create a few varieties of uniformly ripening peaches and tomatoes that can travel a thousand miles. 3.Small local farms can grow a wider array of crops and breed diverse livestock that they can sell in season to meet local demand.	**1.** Adds information to start with the essay's overall known topic, "eating local food," rather than a new topic, genetic diversity. **2.** Flips the order to start with "agriculture" as known from sentence 1, rather than leaping to uniformly ripening peaches. **3.** Rearranges to start with "local farms," which echoes known information from sentence 1 and provides an easy contrast to "a thousand miles" in sentence 2.

Add and adapt signals as you revise and edit

Much of your cohesion-signaling work will happen during revision. As writers who are reading our own minds, we tend not to include enough signposts as we first compose, since our logic is perfectly clear to us. As revisers, then, writers often need to take extra steps keep readers from getting lost in the giant shopping mall of our thinking. Also, since you will likely revise your working thesis or preliminary focus statement, you will need to update your signals to match. Checking on specific cohesion moves as you revise will also help you see if you really are working on one idea at a time: if it feels awkward to connect two sentences or paragraphs together with repeated terms or transition phrases, perhaps they don't belong next to one another. If possible, you can ask a peer tell you whether you're being "too clear"; if you're revising on your own, remember that it's often better to give US academic and professional readers a little extra help, even if it feels "too obvious," than to have them miss your point.

Explore 7.7

Cohesion strategies often get phrased as rules or instructions rather than options: an instructor will say "Writers should always ____" or a supervisor will say "Try to avoid _____ in your writing." Write a few sentences about a cohesion strategy discussed in this section (topic sentences, repetition, transition words, known-new) or another approach for making your writing "flow" that you learned about as a rule or expectation: where did you learn this? in what ways does it help or frustrate you as a writer? what scenario can you think of where it might be better rhetorically to use an alternative approach?

Learn

- To learn more about how **genres** influence our need for signs and signals, see Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres.
- To learn more about **revising** strategies, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.
- To learn more about strategies for **editing** rhetorically, see Chapter 11, Editing in Context

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7.6 Introduce and Conclude Your Early Draft

In US academic and professional writing, openings and closings perform crucial rhetorical tasks: they engage readers, emphasize vital information, and/or present an author's final arguments. Since these sections have to accomplish so much, they can be difficult to write—and since they are so difficult, often teachers and writers try to reduce the difficulty by devising rules and procedures for the

paragraphs. If you have been told that "Your introductory paragraph must begin with a 'hook' sentence" or that "Your concluding paragraph needs to re-state your thesis sentence," you have encountered one of these rules. But you also know that openings and closings are rhetorical and dynamic just like all paragraphs, so rules won't cover every situation. The more you know about the rhetorical functions and typical patterns of these sections, the smarter your writing decisions about them will be.

Think rhetorically about introductions

First impressions are vital, and so writing your introductory paragraphs or sections constitutes some of the most important and challenging rhetorical work of any project. These are the moments when you most need your readers to attend to your goals—and they are the moments at which your readers may be least likely to do so because their attention is elsewhere, or because they are confused by or even opposed to the issues you are writing about. This is high stakes work: if you are writing to someone besides an instructor or supervisor, readers might not even continue reading if your opening fails to make this connection.

Here's one rule-based description of how to write an introductory paragraph:

> Start off generally, perhaps with an anecdote, surprising fact, or question; provide two sentences of background information; and then narrow to your thesis sentence.

Like most rules about writing, this recommendation is useful in some circumstances, but won't apply to others. What if you're writing a travel blog that doesn't have a thesis, or an annual report that doesn't have room for stories? To turn rules into more adaptable, rhetorical introduction strategies, advanced writers can consider a few broader moves. Writers should also make a plan to revise any introductory material after the complete document is drafted rather than trying to get it right the first time.

Meet your readers and engage their attention

Although *you* are interested in and motivated by your topic, readers have their own busy lives, their own fields of knowledge, and their own priorities. When you are convinced you have something worthwhile to communicate, you will need to meet them where they are and persuade them to invest time in your project. Identifying where their interests and yours connect, or even overlap, is a key first step.

Occasionally, readers are similar to you and inclined to like your topic, so you don't need much effort to establish your connection. For instance, if you are a

computer programmer writing about a new software update on your Tech News blog, your very first words can be on a narrow issue in specialized language: "The current operating system build fixes the wi-fi issues, lessens the interface lag, and stabilizes system interaction with major applications." Your readers either follow your blog already or they have landed on your page by a search for this exact topic, and so they don't need you to start with a memorable anecdote.

However, if you are writing an article for an online magazine for teenagers about how to choose the best tablet computer, most of your readers will not be technical specialists, and most of them will be distracted. They will be scrolling up and down on their phone, worrying about an upcoming class or whether that cute student in the red shirt likes them. You need to reach out a little further into your readers' current lives, so you might start with statistics about how tablets are cheaper and faster than ever, or even a story about teenagers scrolling on their phones.

If your readers are not just distracted but skeptical—you're trying to persuade cautious parents that video games have beneficial qualities—you may need to use your opening words to identify common ground, rather than diving into your exact issue. You can look for the nearest space where you and your readers might have a shared interest, understanding, curiosity, or value, such as the benefits of practicing problem-solving skills from an early age.

To strengthen the connection, you can link with readers' self-interest, enjoyment, or curiosity. When you explain from the start how video games are being used to support neurodiverse students, astronauts, and new nurses, you may make your writing more relevant to the interests of your readers. When you tell a compelling or humorous story or provide a vivid description early in your document, you provide a satisfying emotional moment that readers may seek to extend by reading further. You should also remember how much people like puzzles. All of the writers of "clickbait" headlines online are counting on readers' appetite for surprises: "You'll Never Guess What 5 Animals Justin Bieber Wants To Adopt Next." When you suggest a puzzle, identify a problem, or provide a startling fact, you engage readers who want to find an answer.

Whichever engagement strategies you choose, your goal is to use some of your opening words to persuade busy, distracted, even resistant readers to invest some of their precious time with you and your document.

Align your reader with your main goals

You don't just have a topic as a writer; you have a goal, a way that you hope to move your readers' minds with your writing. Introduction writers do sometimes need to provide some general background to help readers identify key people, concepts, or events; sometimes readers need some information about the issue in order to see how it connects with them or why there's a puzzle. But writers also

have a perspective to convey. As soon as you've met and engaged your readers, then, you can begin tugging them in toward your way of thinking.

Your opening sentences should give readers a good sense of your specific angle and goal—even before you get to an outright thesis or statement of purpose. "Provide background" is a situational recommendation: if you're not writing about the entire American Civil War but only analyzing the military strategies of a single battle near the end of it, you don't have to summarize the whole war in your introduction section. It's more important that readers understand your goal of examining strategies and how they fail. After providing some context about the time and place of the specific battle, you could focus readers' attention on your angle, by describing why success was vital and indicating what factors affected the outcome.

Even if you mostly just want your readers to explore an issue with you, they should be able to perceive your exploratory goal—what elements are of most interest to you?—and your initial direction from your introductory moves.

Help your reader predict how to read your document

Readers who know what ideas and approaches they're about to encounter—like shoppers with a list—are often more efficient, more capable of learning, and more satisfied. You read a humorous narrative differently than you read a financial report that directly affects your business. Moreover, US academic and professional readers often prefer to know from the start what a text's main idea is going to be, especially if it's complex or posing a new argument, so that they can decide if the document is worth their time, and then read quickly and effectively.

Of course, you do not have to write a single thesis sentence or put that sentence at the very end of your first paragraph. It's true that US academic essay readers often look for a clear indication of your goals at some point in your opening paragraph or two, the way that you always look for your keys and ID card in the tray next to the door where you leave them each night. But just as you are capable of finding your keys if you left them on the kitchen table—or if you leave them in your backpack when you stay at a friend's house—readers can be satisfied with your academic essay if you vary this pattern, and in other genres they might even expect a different pattern. You might not have a thesis sentence at all, or you might use two or three sentences to convey your proposal.

Likewise, you do not always need to list three reasons that neatly line up into your five-paragraph essay. Yet you can assist your reader if you explain your thinking beyond the basics of "Sea turtles need to be protected." If you add a "because" or "therefore" clause, you show your upcoming reasoning ("Sea turtles need to be protected *because* they are crucial in sustaining shallow-water ecologies"). And if you think readers are less knowledgeable or less attentive, you can provide an even

more direct blueprint or "road map" statement (which may be, but doesn't need to be, as obvious as "In this essay I will discuss A, B, and C"). Readers who see an overview of your structure at the start are less likely to get lost in the middle.

Overall, your opening section should function the way a good movie preview or channel guide does. If you've ever watched a movie preview that turned out to be nothing like the movie, you were probably pretty frustrated: "That wasn't a romance, it was all war and explosions!" Your introduction helps set readers' expectations for your whole document, so the more you can use it to convey your goals, values, and approaches, the more readers will think your whole document "flows."

Write a temporary introduction

Unless you are writing a very simple document to very familiar readers, you probably will not know how best to meet, steer, and inform readers at the moment you begin composing. Writers who try to write a perfect introduction right at the start often get stuck; this is a common point of feeling "writer's block."

But this is also a solvable writing problem: many writers compose a "placeholder introduction" and plan to revise it later. It can be helpful to articulate your draft thesis and a few simple sentences about why your project will interest readers, to give yourself direction—and leave yourself a note to "revise later." This two-step process makes sense: after all, you wouldn't get up on stage and introduce a famous person before you'd read their biography, so why would you expect to write the final version of your introduction to your essay or report before you've even written it? Professional writers don't know any more than you do what their whole document will be at the start; they've just learned how to revise their introductions to make it look like they knew all along. Imagine how much easier it will be to write a thesis statement with a "because" once you have already written all of your reasons, or to provide a "blueprint" list of your main points once they're already drafted!

If you're stuck, of course, there's no rule that says you need to write any introduction first; just start writing what you already feel comfortable with, and come back to work on your opening later when your confidence and knowledge have increased.

Think rhetorically about concluding

Every writer or speaker knows that their final words are important, whether these are as dramatic as a deathbed confession or as simple as "I'll miss you so much!" in a text to a friend as you leave town. Like introductions, conclusions are high-stakes writing: they provide your last and best chance to ensure that you have moved readers to new thinking or actions. If someone reads your document but

doesn't change, all your efforts may seem for naught. Indeed, in academic and professional writing, the challenges of concluding can be so tricky that writers sometimes just stop without concluding, or go overboard by drawing large profound conclusions not supported by the rest of the document.

Some popular formulas for writing conclusions may be frustrating for writers as much as they help:

> Start by restating your thesis. Then restate your major sub-points, in the order you made them. Finally, write a "kicker" or broadening sentence that connects your issue to a much wider topic—particularly if it echoes the idea or scenario of your introduction.

In a timed essay exam or a blog post you're writing quickly for your friends, these steps might work. But what if your profile of a famous cricket player never had a single thesis sentence, or your senior project on wedding planning has a dozen sub-points that would take forever to restate? You'll gain more widely applicable strategies—and feel less stuck—if you consider some of the rhetorical approaches that advanced writers use, and prepare to revise your essay once you've articulated your final points.

Help your readers recall your key points

Unless you have a very short document or you're working in a genre that doesn't generally use conclusions (such as an office memo or website landing page), it makes sense to help your reader remember your major points. So you can use a sentence or a few sentences to review not just your topics, but your own angles, emphases, and or arguments. (By this point, readers should be familiar with your chorus, and they may feel proud to discover that they remember the key ideas along with you.)

Readers aren't entirely clueless, though, so if you only *restate* what you already said, you might bore or annoy them; they might still be thinking, "So, what?" While your conclusion is not a place to take up a whole new issue, it can *amplify* your earlier writing, bringing a fresh power to your ideas. This is where the idea of a conclusion "kicker" comes from. If you think of it as a kicker, though, you can be tempted to apply too much force: your single essay about Sigmund Freud's early theories won't reveal the secrets to all of psychology, and the light-rail system you've proposed isn't the only way to stave off climate change, poverty, or a post-petroleum economic crash. You might think of this move more as giving readers a gentle nudge between the shoulder blades: you want to provide just enough direction and motion to change readers' inertia, but not slam them into a wall.

Rather than reaching for a huge, life-changing proclamation, consider adopting at least one of the other three strategies below: synthesizing a whole vision, suggesting expansion, and/or giving direction.

Make your message whole and memorable

Once you have finally written all the parts of your document, you can finally step back and see how they all connect. Part of concluding is synthesizing ideas to show readers how the pieces form a whole new idea. From an overview perspective, you can help your readers see:

- A pattern of causes or effects: what events or choices lead to what main consequences?
- A consensus of experiences, data, or experts: what do most people agree?
- A trend, theme, or overall lesson learned: what do the pieces add up to?
- A new understanding: how do unexpected connections shed light on a complicated issue?

You might not even have had this overall idea in mind when you started to write; you might have learned it as you composed and revised. When you articulate a pattern of connection, readers will have an integrated, memorable takeaway point, rather than having to remember lots of small subpoints.

Expand your readers' vision

If you have so far engaged and convinced readers through the evidence, analysis, and explanations you have provided, then readers may be ready to make a mental move. But they need your help to imagine a next step: how can readers step to a new level of understanding or a clearer view of how to integrate your ideas into their lives? Remember you're nudging rather than kicking a reader: try to expand your reader's vision by just one or two steps.

- How might understanding the concept, theory, or scenario you discussed help readers encounter one related concept or one set of new data?
- How would the principles you articulated apply one level out: from your family to your community, from today to next week, from your city to your state, from one experiment or performance to a follow-up event?
- How are your analyses or solutions relevant to one less-expected part of your readers' lives: can artwork affect psychology, does energy conservation connect to brand loyalty, can adenovirus cancer treatments give insights about treating immune-system illness?

As your readers gain broader vision of a wider context from your document, they can imagine carrying your insights forward into one aspect of their daily thoughts and choices.

Direct readers to a new route

If you are arguing for a more specific proposal—if you want readers to change their priorities or behavior—then your conclusion provides one final opportunity

to overcome readers' inertia. Since actual change is hard, whether it's changing an opinion or changing an action, you can use your closing words both to indicate *what* readers can do and emphasize *why* they should be motivated to act.

Few readers will leap up after finishing your document ready to completely agree that villains like Shakespeare's Iago are just victims of circumstance who deserve our sympathy, to switch to a vegan diet forever, or to start learning R as their main computing language. Instead of only directing readers to a single change that might feel too overwhelming to undertake, you can provide some initial smaller steps or some less drastic views to adopt (or adopt *first*), so that readers can see a feasible pathway toward change.

The larger the change you call for, the more you will need to provide relevant, reasonable motivation. Not all readers will immediately respond to general calls to act morally or eat healthily; not all readers will believe that their action alone will prevent teen suicides or improve a company's efficiency. When you connect your recommendation to readers' values and realistic opportunities, you can explain both the need and the likely success of readers' changes.

For both of these moves, you need to imagine a full trajectory: where were readers when you met them, what values and challenges affect their willingness and ability to change, and what alterations would be plausible and satisfying kind do you want them to be going when they finish? As you find a balance between grand, inspiring gestures and smaller, achievable alterations, you help readers go forward on a sustainable new trajectory.

Revise backward from your conclusion

Conclusions can be as hard to write as introductions: working on this high-stakes, reader-focused section can cause even very experienced writers to feel stuck. One problem may be that you're expecting the final section of the document to do all your most powerful reasoning for you. You can't turn your reader 180 degrees all at once, so ideally your whole document should work to bring readers toward the insights you have achieved. Now that you know what you most want to share with readers, you're in a much better place to go back and plant some clues that will lead them to your big ideas.

- **Align your introduction**. When writers start a project, we don't know exactly how it will turn out, even if we plan carefully. The placeholder introduction you composed earlier might now seem too broad to help readers know what to aim for, and a draft thesis might be too tentative to start them thinking about the mental moves you really want them to make. Consider transplanting some of the arguments, ideas, and key phrases from your conclusion to your introduction to strengthen the focus and cohesion of your document—and take some pressure off your final sentences.

- **Strengthen your evidence**. If you want to be bold in your conclusion, you

need bold evidence or reasonings earlier in the document. You might need a second or third cycle of research to help find information you can add earlier in the document that will help readers accept your final proposals.

- **Conclude throughout the document**. If you're using a closed paragraph structure, the final sentence or two of each paragraph should push readers' thinking toward your conclusion; if you're using a more indirect or open structure, you might weave more key phrases or provocative suggestions into earlier paragraphs. When you drop enough hints, each paragraph or section will nudge readers toward the new thinking or action you envision.

Writing or revising those whole-document nudges will create a pattern of concluding and thus increase readers' sense that your document is organized and cohesive. These additions can also help you finalize and articulate your goals so that you can more directly communicate them to your readers in your final sentences—and seal the deal powerfully in those all-important "last words."

Explore 7.8

Which is harder for you as a writer: writing your introductory paragraph(s) or writing your concluding paragraph(s)? Are they both equally hard or easy, just in different ways? Why? How could you use one of the strategies discussed in this section to help you out with the start or finish of an upcoming writing task?

Practice

- To consider key elements of your introduction, see <u>Boil Down</u> or <u>Conclusion Transplant</u>.
- To consider key strategies for your conclusion, see <u>Elevator Speech</u> or <u>Out On a Limb</u>.

Chapter 8. Designing Across Modalities

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify ways that designing is a rhetorical act
- Reflect on your design choices throughout your composing process
- Explore strategies to design across modalities
- Address needs to design flexibly and ethically

You may not think of yourself as a designer, if most of what you write is quick texts to friends and double-spaced essays for school. After all, you're just putting words on a screen.

But even a decision *not to design* your document carefully is a design decision, and it's rhetorical: you submit essays to your epidemiology instructor that have a title, 500 words, one-inch margins, and no pictures because your goal is to provide information about the latest coronavirus and your audience values a document that focuses on your words. If you were sending a text on a similar subject to a friend, you'd be more likely to include a picture, a link to a news story about a recent virus outbreak, and/or some emojis to convey how bad you think the situation is.

Whenever you think—or avoid thinking—about the arrangement and presentation of your document, you are thinking about its design:

- How to arrange your words on the page or screen
- How to select and arrange any pictures, graphs, or diagrams to include along with your words
- How to use fonts, colors, shapes, and patterns to emphasize your message
- How to connect your writing instantly to other documents via hyperlinks
- Whether you want to use written words at all, when you could use spoken words combined with a slideshow, video enhanced by music or voice-over commentary, or a combination of live-action and animated visuals

8.1 All Writers Are Designers

Fifty years ago, most ordinary students and professionals didn't think much about design; after all, the production and sharing of documents happened mostly through specialized publishers, and those publishers hired specialists who could consider layout, illustrations, and conversion to other media. Today, almost everyone who is a writer is also a designer: we have options for arrangement and visual enhancement literally at our fingertips, and we share writing with friends and strangers all on our own, without any specialists.

Document design is rhetorical

You should pay attention to designing your messages, assignments, and professional documents because of your own goals, and because of your readers' expectations. The saying, "A picture is worth 1000 words" hints at the power that writers can have when we look beyond simple text to include visual (or musical, or gestural) elements. Not only do elements such as pictures, colors, and sounds affect readers' emotional responses to your ideas, but they can enhance the intellectual effect of your document as well: after all, words are powerful but slippery, and photographs, charts, recordings, and even raised eyebrows can provide more exact or more powerful information.

Since design is rhetorical, you may want to consider how several threshold concepts can guide your design decisions:

> ### 🚪 Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts
>
> Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

🚪 There is no single definition of a "good writer"

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

🚪 Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

🚪 There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

Design choices are often easier to spot than text-based choices, and the options evolve rapidly, so they provide some accessible opportunities to test the limits of a threshold concept. What counts as a "good" text, meme, or video for the media you follow today? How is that different from even a few years ago? Each time a new communication choice arises—for instance, the way that TikTok launched in 2017—we get to see how community preferences influence the definitions of what is "good," and how innovative composers push and alter those definitions.

You need to pay attention to design principles because your readers expect it. In the past 20 years, social communication has moved from basic blogs (text plus visuals) to infographics, interactive animations, and videos. Professional communication, too, has a higher bar: if everyone in your office *can* make a pie chart easily on their phone or tablet, then people begin to expect that everyone in your office *should* include relevant charts and diagrams, and you might be left behind if you don't.

> **Note about "documents":** This book often refers to what you compose, generally, as a "document"—even if you are planning a project that is primarily audio (like a podcast) or electronic (like a webpage or video). In most cases, your initial draft or planning notes will be on or in a text-based document, and those plans can serve as your foundation even as you switch modes or genres.

Explore 8.1

Make a list of 4-5 recent situations in which you communicated something important or engaging to other people—in school or out of school. For each one, also briefly describe anything you included beyond text: that could be pictures, charts, or colors; it could be audio or video, it might include human voices or faces. Finally, for one message, indicate a *design choice* you made (or could have made): where did you deliberately include more or less of some element, carefully arrange the pieces, or add emphasis (such as volume or color) to your message?

Document design is multimodal

Communication scholars generally identify five common *modes*:

- A linguistic or **textual** mode includes written or spoken words
- A **visual** mode includes pictures, graphs, colors, lines, and fonts
- A **spatial** mode includes the size and arrangement of words, shapes, lines, or images, as well as navigation elements in an online text
- An **audio** mode includes voice, music, sound effects, background noise, and even silence
- A **gestural** mode includes facial expressions, gestures, body language, and interactions

Even your 500-word essay for your epidemiology class is already multimodal, since it includes text in a particular font that is arranged visually and spatially on a page (those famous "one-inch margins"), even before you add a graph or revise it into an in-class presentation. Outside of school, the rest of your communication with your friends, in your community, and at your workplace is increasingly multimodal.

While many of these modes can involve technologies, you don't need a computer to compose multimodally: if you put pictures and text into a scrapbook, give a speech while you demonstrate how to clean a clarinet, or talk through your thinking while you solve a chemical equation on a whiteboard, you are combining modes to reach your audience.

Design throughout your composing process

What writers communicate is inseparable from *how* we communicate it, and so all of our decisions are influenced by our choices—or our avoidance of choices—about modalities.

- Modality is a **rhetorical** decision: writers will change both our content and our style depending on whether we have selected a document that has a strong visual or spatial modality. Similarly, readers (or watchers, or listeners) have strong preferences about what modes help them to learn, argue about, and enjoy new ideas, and writers need to adapt in order to connect with a chosen audience.
- Modality affects **subject-knowledge** decisions: even though an infographic focuses on information, it has much less analytical depth than even a short quarterly report, because writers need to emphasize visual and spatial modes. A protest poster is designed specifically to challenge assumptions, while a company home page has to present concepts that a wide range of clients will understand and agree with.

- Modality changes decisions about **steps and strategies**: writers who are composing a video blog will likely need some additional planning steps to address different layers (visuals, voice, music and text), while writers who are composing a poster or advertisement will need to organize spatially as well as sequentially to ensure cohesion.

- Modality connects fundamentally to **dispositions**: many writers find we are more motivated and persistent when we are composing using modes beyond text, since visual, audio, or spatial modes may be more familiar or intriguing. On the other hand, if you have not composed using video or audio editing tools, you may discover challenges to your confidence or time management.

Use reflective practice to make design decisions

Document design shouldn't be an afterthought—or reserved only for "special" documents in particular media. Since document design affects all angles of a writing project, you won't be very successful if you write all of your text and then decide that you want to squash it into an infographic or present it as a dialogue between two animated mice. Advanced writers should consider questions of document design throughout their drafting and revising processes—even if we are "just" writing an essay or drafting a brief presentation.

- **Consider design as you reflect to predict**. Writers should identify any design opportunities and evaluate resources during the planning stages of a project: will the writing benefit from visuals or other modalities, and does the writer have access to the resources needed to support the initial design plans?

- **Consider design as you reflect to problem-solve**. As writers draft a document, we might not take time to polish a design, but we can create placeholders or reminders about design elements that we have or plan to create. In this way, a draft might resemble a storyboard with notes about what visual or audio elements will eventually be included. Writers should also compose text that will meet approximate length, style, or integration needs relevant to the planned-for mode(s).

- **Consider design as you reflect to improve** your early drafts. Writers should adapt not just to fit the general rhetorical situation, but to integrate smoothly with any specific mode(s) or elements (layout, visual or audio components, color or animation) that are needed. Remember that revising can work both ways, adapting visuals or other features to the text, and also revising text to complement other modalities.

- **Consider design as you look ahead to future writing.** Writers should consider the impact of the current document's design and reflect on any

additional modalities, platforms, or design approaches that could enhance the original message or support the effectiveness of upcoming projects.

8.2 Design Across Modes and Genres

Decisions about modality underlie the success of any genre. Remember that a genre is not a *format* that is decided on once and for all, but a collection of expectations that readers and writers share, and that evolve over time and across different situations: not all quarterly reports or organization home pages are the same. A genre is always more than the sum of its modes: genres are defined by readers' expectations that influence the length, content, focus, rhetorical moves, and writing style as well as the mode(s) chosen by the writer.

But modes are crucial to defining genres. Often one significant part of what distinguishes print genres from one another is their use of different modes: poets often arrange their words spatially in lines rather than in the paragraphs that fiction writers use, and journalists use headline fonts and photographs to create a visual impact in news stories that is different from how professors write academic journal articles.

And writers who are composing in many contemporary genres—podcasts, social media videos, memes, protest posters, animations, webpages, online role-playing game plans, or advertisements—will often need to pay very close attention to the options and limits offered by the available modalities. Podcasters need to attend carefully to audio elements of their project, while game writers need to consider the interactions among visual, textual, and spatial modes. Especially since contemporary genres evolve so quickly, no textbook or handbook is likely to keep up with current practice: writers should take time to analyze recent examples critically before setting out to create their own.

Combine modes to expand, enhance, or reinforce your message

Although a picture may be "worth a thousand words," if those thousand words distract your readers rather than helping them focus on your information or arguments, you have not improved your document. There's no real advantage to putting a picture of a cute puppy into your document explaining how home mortgage rates work just to catch readers' attention, since readers may focus on the dog and ignore your math.

You also want to be cautious about combining modalities simply to *repeat* your message. If you give a spoken presentation about how climate change affects small island states and provide a slide deck to go along with it, but you only read the words that appear on the slides, you aren't taking the best advantage of the combined linguistic, audio, and visual modes. Even worse, the visual may be

undercutting the audio, since most people read a lot faster than they speak, and so your audience will know your point—and start to feel bored—before you finish reading your slide out loud.

In the best multimodal documents, elements from different modes work together to create a whole effect that is more engaging, information-rich, and/or persuasive than a document that relies primarily on one modality. As you start to combine modalities, then, aim for combinations that do one of the following:

- **Expand** your message: when you include an audio clip of a Bach sonata as background to your report on seventeenth-century German culture, you provide information that no amount of text, pictures, or arm-waving could convey. As long as the new information is relevant, you should always look first for ways that the new mode can contribute in ways that are not available otherwise.

- **Enhance** your message: when your presentation slides include pictures of how rising oceans have affected towns on Tuvalu and Grand Bahama, you provide information that strengthens your description of how their lives have changed. You *could* describe the changes in words, but the pictures give a lot of rich, relevant detail very quickly.

- **Reinforce** your message: writers often use graphs and charts to reinforce key points of their research, while speakers use tone of voice and eye contact to emphasize how vital an example is. Reinforcement is slightly different from repetition when the new modality provides an alternate way of accessing information: a chart provides a quick overview of sprinters' injury recovery rates to reinforce your extended explanation of researchers' conclusions about new approaches in physical therapy for Olympic athletes.

Explore 8.2

Consider a school assignment you completed recently that was primarily operating in a linguistic/textual mode, and write a quick description of your goals or interests in writing and your instructor's expectations of the document. Then consider how you could have expanded that document with at least two different modalities: what *exactly* could you have changed or added (not "a video," but "a video clip of a basketball playoff game") and how would each of those have reinforced, enhanced, or added to the original message?

Practice

- To practice **analyzing a visual document**, see Advertisement Analysis.
- To practice **analyzing a document** in any genre, see Genre Ethnography.

Learn

- To learn more about analyzing a **model document** in any modality, see Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project.
- To learn more about adapting **genres** across modalities, see Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres.
- To learn more about selecting **writing moves**, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves.
- To learn more about how your communication **style** adapts rhetorically, see Chapter 11, Editing in Context.

Don't let tools drive your writing decisions

Writers can be inspired by opportunities to compose in new modes with new tools. We may see a vivid photo-essay about women doctors in Nigeria, or chat with a friend who is using a new app to sync his new rock song to a visual light show, or land on a web page that uses an especially graceful navigation system, and then want to create something just like it.

Advanced writers need to temper that enthusiasm with caution: video does not make every writing situation better, and last year's light-show app may no longer be the best tool for your current project. Tools are not neutral:

- If you select a specific infographic generator without completing a careful investigation, you may find that its templates limit your organizational strategies and thus interfere with your communication.
- If you choose an app that helps you record your interviews with classmates or co-workers, you may discover that the app does not provide sufficient privacy protection of your interview videos.
- If you select a specific website design, you could discover that it doesn't show up well on tablets or support screen-readers for audience members with visual disabilities.

Moreover, your decisions about message, genre, and modality should be recursive and open to revision. You might decide early in a project about environmental justice that you want to emulate the popular genre of a "TED Talk." Then you will begin writing text, locating images for slides, and adding notes about how you want to speak and move during your presentation. At some point you will begin to re-evaluate your choices: you'll ask whether the arguments and examples you want to present still fit with the genre and modalities you selected—or is your document evolving toward something less performative and toward a more specific critique that would work better as an op-ed or a series of blog posts?

Tools and modalities should enhance your thinking and your connections to your audience; if they start limiting your goals or conflicting with your readers' or listeners' expectations, you should be willing to set them aside and make new choices.

Design using print and screen modes

The easiest modalities for most writers to step into are visual and spatial modalities, especially when composing for print or screen documents such as posters, blogs, social media, and webpages. After all, writers already use fonts and page layouts, so all writing already involves visual and spatial approaches. Moreover, since the start of the twenty-first century nearly all writers have embraced pictures and graphics as part of our daily reading and writing.

Attaching a picture to a text message or pasting a graph into an epidemiology report isn't necessarily *designing*, however. In the same way that writers work better when we have a mental model and some specific terminology, designers function better when we pay attention to precise aspects of visual and spatial modalities. You will make better choices in drafting and revising print- and screen-based documents when you consider the following concepts.

Foreground and background

When you look at a photograph—say, of a friend standing on a hiking trail with hills and trees behind them—the concept of foreground and background can seem obvious and natural rather than designed. Your friend, standing close to the photographer and clearly the subject of the photo, is in the foreground, and the trees are in the background. But foregrounding is a design choice: the photographer could have stood behind some trees and caught just a glimpse of the person, and so switched the trees from background to foreground—or crouched down and taken a photo of the person with only sky behind them.

In much the same way as you decide on a thesis or focal question for a writing project, you can select visuals—or arrange your own visual elements—to put some objects clearly in the foreground (stressing their importance) and others in the background. Background items are still present and meaningful; indeed, backgrounds can help designers create a mood, increase or decrease the tension of a document, or even make a subtle argument.

Emphasis and representation

A person or object placed in the foreground certainly gains emphasis—but designers have a wide range of visual cues to emphasize ideas. An object or word's size, font style or attribute (such as boldface or all-caps), color, or framing can add emphasis. The object or word's placement can add or subtract emphasis: items at the top or left-hand side of a page or screen often hold an emphatic, attention-grabbing spot.

A word or object can also gain an emotional emphasis: a surprising image (such as a drawing of a cow on a poster about star constellations) or an emotionally connotative image (such as a cute baby or puppy, or a picture of an emergency room) will call attention to itself more than other more neutral images.

What you *don't* include in your design can be as important as what you do include. If all of the people in your main photo are White or they all appear to be about the same age, readers from other backgrounds may feel excluded from your message. The same principle applies if your visuals are mostly showing a problem rather than a solution, or you provide illustrations of the first three steps of assembling a table but not the last two: readers may decide that your information is unbalanced even if your text is equitable.

Arrangement

Just as organizing your ideas into paragraphs helps readers follow your thinking, organizing elements spatially on a page or screen can either increase the coherence and flow of your document or interrupt it. As a designer, you should consider the following:

- **Placement**: readers in the US tend to start at the top and left of a page or screen, and then either follow an "F" pattern of reading across the top, then across (most of) the next line down, or follow a "Z" pattern of reading across the top, then skimming down to read across the bottom. Often designers will put vital information, vivid examples, or challenging arguments in a top-left position, and less important items further to the right and/or further down. Finally, some designers recommend following a "rule of thirds" to help guide viewers' attention: divide the page or screen into horizontal and vertical thirds, and place key elements at the intersection points of those lines rather than at the center or along one edge.

- **Alignment**: items that are aligned with one another vertically or horizontally appear to belong together, and so seem cohesive to a reader. Rather than scatter photos or words across a page, designers align images to the text they amplify and choose a few strong vertical or horizontal lines of alignment. Research shows that left-aligned, non-justified text (with an uneven right edge) enables the fastest reading, and center-aligned text slows readers the most.

- **Proximity**: items that are closer to one another appear to belong together, and so seem cohesive to a reader. This is one reason you may feel comfortable letting your word processor put an extra space between paragraphs: the additional white space visually reinforces the cohesion of the paragraph, just as large "empty" spaces on movie posters help readers quickly distinguish among the movie's title, its catch-phrase, and its starring actors. However, even small changes in space can cue readers to group items together or see them as separate.

Writers who are used to text-heavy documents are sometimes tempted to cram as many words as possible into a page or screen, but visual and spatial designers know how empty or near-empty spaces actually help a few words or images have more power than a large cluster of text.

Repetition and Contrast

While you are considering how to use space to group objects visually, don't forget about using other patterns to signal continuity or breaks. Any of the following items can be either deliberately repeated throughout a section or document, or selected to directly contrast with other items:

- Words or phrases
- Font type
- Font size
- Colors
- Shapes
- Logos, images, or symbols
- Line styles, thickness, or direction
- Background patterns
- Arrangements

To be most effective, repetition and contrast need to be *intentional*, *obvious* and *limited*. Since you are using these strategies to help readers organize their viewing experience, you want to repeat visual cues intentionally, precisely when you want ideas to connect. Thus you might use a red, all-capital-letter font to list the performance date of all three musical groups featured on your poster—and not use that same color+font combination anywhere else. To be obvious, don't try to contrast a square with a rectangle; contrast the square with a star and a triangle. Likewise, don't try to contrast 12-point type with 14-point type, or blue-gray with gray-blue: make your contrast more dramatic. Your repetitions should also be obvious: use the exact same cat photo rather than photos of six different cats, or repeat an exact shade of yellow.

In order to be obvious, both repetition and contrast need to be limited. If you pick 12 colors and repeat them all, your poster will just look like lots of random confetti; if you have eight different font sizes, readers will struggle to figure out which ones connect.

Visual and spatial designers often select one or two of these strategies as their primary tools for organizing their documents—yet good designers pay at least some attention to all four, so that a misstep in one area doesn't undermine our careful work with another feature.

Explore 8.3

Locate a print or screen advertisement (not a video) for a product you use frequently. Write four short notes to indicate one way that the advertisement uses each of the elements above: foreground/background, emphasis, arrangement, and repetition/contrast. Finish with a note: what design strategy most caught your eye first, and what design strategy most guided your attention as you reviewed the rest of the ad?

Learn

- To learn more about improving your **thesis or focus**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **organizational strategies**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.

Design using audio, video and gestural modes

Most of the approaches described for static print- and screen-based compositions apply to projects that move across time using audio, video, and/or gestural modes. Designers still want to consider what to emphasize or put in the foreground, and what to provide in terms of background. Likewise, when you cluster similar items together and provide visual space or silence in between clusters, you increase your project's coherence. Finally, when you balance repetition of key images or sounds with carefully selected contrasts, you help readers, listeners, and viewers stay engaged.

Although many current US college students have already created video or audio projects and shared them with friends, few of those projects were *designed*. In fact, we often praise recordings that capture the spontaneity of a moment. Yet the best audio and video projects aren't those that are accidentally captured with a mobile phone. Creating a spontaneous feel actually takes a lot of planning.

Rather than assuming that your podcast, video, animation, or oral presentation will naturally come together, you should set aside time for three kinds of additional planning, even after you have mostly identified your key information and drafted the overall organization of your project.

Plan in modal layers

While you can simply start talking to a group of peers or clients—or push one button to begin a recording—your presentation involves multiple layers of information across modalities. When you are designing for video or audio projects, you want to predict and control for all the information you collect and present, so that you don't end up with distracting, contradictory, or simply ineffective information.

Your project may involve some or all of the following layers:

- Background visuals
- Background audio from a recording site
- Background audio (such as music or sound effects) added later
- Lighting
- Camera angles
- A speaker's appearance and gestures
- A speaker's tone, speed, volume, and vocal timbre
- Slides, pictures, or other still images
- Animations or video clips
- Spoken or printed textual information
- Real-time interruptions from on-site elements (people, weather, noises)

It is not possible to monitor all of these at once during a performance or recording; good designers will take time to plan their strategies for key layers well in advance.

Plan for mock-ups and rehearsals

When you draft a document for print or screen, you can compose a whole draft and then revise most parts of it without much additional stress. After all, you can often change your introductory paragraph or image without having to re-do all the other pieces of the document. Unless you are an expert at editing video or audio tracks, however, redoing the first 30 seconds can be a daunting task—and if you're presenting live, you won't get a second chance.

Since a performance or recording has so many moving pieces, you'll save time if you begin with a plan that is not yet even at the level of a full early draft, but is instead a rough mock-up. You might create a chart or table that explains what's happening in different layers at key points of your project: as you present your introductory sentences, for example, what image, speed, background music, and/or gestures will best enhance your message? Alternatively, designers often use an approach called "storyboarding," in which they use a combination of sketches, text, and production notes to help visualize and plan snapshots of several key moments of a project. You might want to pause at this point and get some feedback from peers: it's a lot easier to revise a chart or a six-part storyboard sketch than it is to re-record a whole presentation.

Likewise, rather than completing a full project and then planning to revise if you need to, you should aim to rehearse everything and take notes on what to improve, especially if you will need to record or perform at a particular site, with other people, or within a specific time frame. Recording small bits and reviewing them is a lot more efficient than creating a whole production and discovering that the microphone doesn't pick up everyone's voice.

Leave time for timing

It can be challenging to add or delete content from a printed document, but it is often more difficult to adjust the length or timing of an audio, video, or performance project. Mock-ups and rehearsals can help you map out the overall length of your project, but you will likely need to have a plan and budget additional time if you want to coordinate how multiple layers of your project intersect. The more elements or layers you have, the more likely you'll need to plan for time to use audio or video editing software.

- **For an in-person presentation**, you may need nothing more than careful notes and good rehearsals to help you coordinate your voice tone and volume, your facial expression and gestures, and any slides or objects you need to share with your audience

- **For an audio recording,** you may need to practice your speaking tone and timing, and also align your voice with comments by any other speakers, or any music or other sound effects that you plan to include.

- **For a video recording**, you may simply record yourself presenting, and so rely on the coordination that is required for an in-person presentation. But if you are planning to integrate video clips or still images with your narration, or if you want to include background audio, you'll need additional time for editing and alignment. Remember, too, that if you're recording at a specific site, you might record some additional footage—from different angles, with different timing—to give yourself some options when you come back to put your whole project together.

Your presentation, audio recording, or video project doesn't need a lot of fancy graphics to impress your audience, and you don't always need expensive equipment to create a high-quality final product—but you will always benefit from completing several stages of planning before you get to your final performance or recording session.

Explore 8.4

Locate a print or screen advertisement (not a video) for a product you use frequently. Draw, print out, or open a document with a 3x2 table that covers most of a page: it will have six boxes that you can fill. Use this table to storyboard some ideas for converting this static advertisement to a video ad, with each box capturing about 5-10 seconds of an advertisement. Each box should include a phrase that should be spoken or viewed; a picture, stick figure sketch, or icon that indicates what viewers will see; and a note about any background music, images, colors, or sound effects that will also be present. Add a final note: which box seems like the quickest or most straightforward part of the ad to create, and which one would be most difficult or time-consuming?

Practice

- For more practice **analyzing genres and modes**, see Genre Ethnography or Genre Triple Log.
- For more practice **shifting among genres and modes**, see Genre Switch or Not-Talk.

8.3 Design for Diverse Users and Uses

When writers compose using primarily text, we tend to imagine our audience as *readers who are reading*. Books and essays seem to require people to sit in a quiet chair and absorb information. As advanced writers design multimodal texts in other genres, though, it may help to think of our audience as users, the way we commonly say that people *use* a map, *use* an app on their phone, *use* a company's website, or *use* a set of instructions.

You also know that outside of school, people are often doing multiple tasks while they encounter information or entertainment: they listen to a podcast while driving to work, scan social media while waiting for a dentist appointment, or search for online reviews as they glance at a menu. Finally, the *ways* people use a single document may vary widely: a few people will read the whole instruction manual or brochure front to back, but many more will scan it quickly when they need one particular piece of information.

Instead of imagining your instructor sitting at a desk with a red pen or online rubric, you may find it easier—and helpful—to imagine how many ways people will encounter, engage with, and *use* your multimodal document.

Design for multiple use cases

Designers often talk about *usability*—how easy or difficult it is to start and complete a task—and then about *use cases*, the wide range of ways that people will engage with a system, tool, or document in order to achieve their goals. This is just another way to talk about connecting with an *audience*, but this approach may help you vividly imagine how many people who cannot read your mind and don't have your same background or expectations will encounter your document.

As you plan your document, you might consider several elements of its use, including:

- The scene or location of use
- The user's activity before, during, and after use
- The amount of time a user will spend
- The user's assumptions, abilities, and goals

Suppose you are composing a flyer for a local political candidate. You might have volunteers who are handing out the flyer on campus or downtown, and you might mail the flyer to people's homes. In addition, some people who receive a flyer might be interested in the election already, and others not very interested.

If you were only designing for one use-case—a registered voter from your party who receives the flyer by mail—then you can make some straightforward decisions about presenting information in a way that informs your audience about the candidate. Since this reader is already interested and presumably has some time to look over their mail, you can include some longer stories or some specific descriptions of legislation the candidate supports. But if you plan to have the flyer handed out on campus, where your readers might oppose the candidate's views or simply not be interested enough to do more than glance over the flyer for 10 seconds as they stride toward the coffee shop, then you will also need some catchy headlines and visuals that connect to issues many voters care about; you'll also want to be sure that the candidate's name is easy to spot and remember, or the rest of the information will have no impact.

The more use-cases you can imagine and plan for, the more positive and widespread an effect your document will have.

Design for re-mediation across genres

It's not just audience members' needs that affect document design. As communication opportunities and modalities multiply, writers need to be able to adapt their messages to work in different genres and on different platforms. A contemporary political campaign, for example, has one basic message: elect this candidate because of their policies and goals. But you cannot just take a 500-word website statement of the candidate's transportation policy and send it out as a text message, a social media video, an answer at a political debate, and a T-shirt.

"Repurposing content" across different modes and genres sounds like a simple task that a technician could do, but it actually depends on an advanced writer reflecting on key goals and principles: addressing rhetorical questions about what the audience expects, considering subject-knowledge issues about how social media readers have different assumptions from website readers, drafting and revising the new content through a well-planned, step-by-step process, and managing disposition challenges such as allotting sufficient time and presenting a confident outlook.

And of course, repurposing requires strong design skills. Every time you change the modal blend or shift genres, you need to redesign the message to match the medium. Writers who can shift back and forth between genres and modalities will not only be increasingly in demand by organizations and corporations, but they will strengthen their overall problem-solving skills in ways that will benefit even their most straightforward all-text quarterly report.

8.4 Design Ethically

Advanced writers proceed ethically in many ways: we rely on credible sources and sufficient evidence rather than promoting rumors; allow research study participants (like interviewees and survey respondents) the opportunity for informed consent and privacy; acknowledge the words and information of other authors by citing our sources; and give our peers honest, constructive feedback when we review their drafts. As we expand the genres and modalities we compose for, writers need to continue to make ethical choices.

Design for accessibility

Often we think of "accessibility" as relevant only to people with physical disabilities. Certainly, part of being an ethical writer and designer is ensuring that your document is accessible to audience members who have visual or hearing disabilities. Your final project should thus:

- Provide captions or a transcript of any spoken words to support Deaf and hearing-impaired people
- Provide captions or brief descriptions of any image or graph to support blind or other visually-impaired people
- Create documents with text that can be accessed by a typical screen reader, to support blind or other visually-impaired people
- Avoid color combinations (such as red next to green) that people with colorblindness cannot distinguish

Beyond this level of accessibility, advanced writers should practice *universal design*: composing documents and other projects so that they can be accessed and understood by as many people as possible, regardless of their ability or disability, age, socioeconomic status, or location. Universal design is a natural extension of writers' concerns about connecting with and engaging an audience: just as you organize your document so that readers can follow your points easily, you want to design across modalities so that all readers can easily access your document and its ideas.

Thus in addition to considering audience members with sensory disabilities, you could consider:

- **Technology access**: can your document or performance be seen on multiple platforms, even by audience members who have older devices or low bandwidth?
- **Location access**: if your project is posted to a physical space or online site, do all audience members have access to that site?
- **Language or culture access**: does your document rely on terminology, local references, or expressions that only a small "in-group" would know, or

can non-experts and audience members from different language or cultural backgrounds understand all of your key ideas?

While some of the principles of universal design focus on the physical accessibility of objects and buildings, several of them apply to the ways that readers, watchers, and listeners access documents:

UD Principle	Design strategies to consider
Perceptible information: communicate information effectively, regardless of the user's sensory abilities	• Provide descriptive captions of images • Provide transcripts or captions of spoken words
Equitable use: provide the same or equivalent information to all users, and protect all users' privacy	• Provide captions/descriptions of information as needed • Ensure that documents/videos/websites are accessible via mobile devices as well as larger-screened devices • Check whether audience members need to provide private information to log into a site hosting your document
Flexibility in use: communicate in ways that allow audience members choice in how they read/watch	• Provide pictures or graphs alongside text so audience members can gain information in different ways • Ensure that audience members can access your project at their preferred time and at their preferred speed
Simple and intuitive use: provide information that is easy to understand for all audience members	• Don't overload a project with complex transitions or distracting visual or audio elements • Use document headers and subheadings to help audience members quickly locate key sections • Limit the use of technical terms or culturally specific idioms

Design to acknowledge sources

As discussed elsewhere in this book, writers acknowledge their sources for several reasons: We aim to:

- **Demonstrate credibility**: "I'm not just making this up; real experts support this."
- **Acknowledge others' work**: "Six researchers worked really hard to create this study, and I want you to know who they are."
- **Help readers follow up**: "If you want to find out about this in more depth, here's where you can go."

These principles hold true even as writers are working in new genres and modalities. Writers need to behave ethically with sourced material even as we make more complex decisions about what to acknowledge and how to acknowledge it.

What multimodal materials should be cited?

In your informal communications, you are part of a generation and a culture that frequently publishes and shares information without indicating its origins: you forward a video clip to a friend, re-post advice about brewing coffee, and transform a picture into a snarky meme, all without a long statement about the original author, publication site, and date.

In more formal projects, however, you need to build your credibility, help your readers track your information, and—wherever possible—ethically acknowledge that some other writer or artist put time and energy into creating original material. Thus, unless you snapped the photo, drew the tiger, composed the tune, or counted all the migrating birds represented in a chart, you should make a strong effort to determine who did. In addition to acknowledging the sources of your textual information, then, you need to be ready to identify the sources of any of these multimodal items:

- Photographs
- Drawings and clip art
- Graphs and charts
- Video clips of events or speeches
- Music, including background music
- Specialized sound effects
- Templates for slides, webpages, or infographics

Note about open access and Creative Commons materials: You may find a website that identifies its materials as free or open-access. Generally, as long as you are not using the materials—such as art, photos, music, fonts, or templates—for a profit-making item, you do not need to pay for or cite these sources (though doing so can still help your readers who want to build their own documents). You may also find some materials that have a Creative Commons license indicating whether you can use the material as-is, adapt it, or remix it, and whether you need to give full attribution to the original author.

If you cannot locate the original source—a meme has been circulating on the internet so long that nobody knows who started it—you should at least keep track of, and be ready to share where and when you accessed it. (But you might be surprised what a little detective work will reveal: many "anonymous" items turn out to have easily locatable authors.)

What do citations look like in multimodal projects?

Outside of higher education settings, almost nobody uses the extended system of citation you will use for your college writing, with both in-text and

end-of-document information. One reason for you to look carefully at other documents or projects in your chosen genre or modality is to find out what citation structure is possible and even preferred. Even if you find document examples that don't seem to acknowledge any sources, however, you should look for a way to acknowledge your source material so that you generate credibility, behave ethically to other information creators, and support your readers.

Here are four common multimodal source-acknowledgment strategies:

- **Journalistic in-text reference**: by inserting a brief phrase or two into the text you are writing or speaking, you can indicate your sources clearly enough that readers or listeners can see how credible your information is and even locate it themselves. News writers do this frequently: "According to the US Surgeon General's office, . . ." or "Joy Johnson's 2019 study indicated . . ."

- **Document hyperlink**: if you have composed an electronic document that uses sources or photos you located online, you can insert a hyperlink to take readers directly to the source: bloggers and social media writers use this approach frequently.

- **Fine print**: if you are producing a print or screen document, you can use very, very tiny type to indicate basic source information (creator and location or date of publication), either as you go or all at the end. Most readers will not be distracted by five-point sized type under a photograph acknowledging its author or publication, but readers who are curious will be able to get the information they need.

- **Closing statement**: if your document or project has multiple sections, you can consider using a final section or statement to acknowledge all of your sources at once, either through a formal listing like a bibliography or through a brief mention of authors and sites (think of how movies have credits at the end or how a brochure might list Additional Resources on the final page).

Learn

- To learn more about **identifying credible sources**, see Chapter 20, Middle Inquiry: Finding, Evaluating, and Integrating Information.
- To learn more about options for **citing sources**, see Chapter 22, Integrating and Acknowledging Sources.

Chapter 9. Reviewing a Written Draft

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify and adopt a reviewer's mindset
- Constructively review a peer's draft
- Honestly review your own writing
- Prepare for and benefit from a reviewer's feedback

Even if you agree with the concepts that "all writers struggle *and revise*" and "writing is a social act," you may not yet be committed to the idea that *advanced writing requires formal reviewing*. It can be easy to imagine that writers "draft" a text and then naturally shift to "revising" a text, ignoring the effort and intention that goes into the in-between step of reviewing. And writers often talk as if reviewing happens without much thought: "I had a peer look over my essay" or "I checked my draft and fixed it up." It may even seem that reviewing is a luxury: "If I get a chance, I'll have someone read it over" or "If I have time, I'll do some editing on the copy."

Yet for advanced writers, assessing or reviewing a draft is not a simplistic or casual task: it is the gateway toward the third reflective cycle of improving as a writer, and it is linked to several threshold concepts.

🚪 You can become a good writer and a better writer

You already have many viable writing skills, and you are capable of becoming a better writer and a competent writer of many kinds of texts.

🚪 Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

🚪 Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

🚪 Advanced writers study and reflect on their writing

Writers study writing just as chemists study chemistry and musicians study music—and advanced writers use repeated reflective practices to understand our own work.

The crucial step of reviewing is linked to the idea that writing is a communication act focused on affecting a reader, not just about producing error-free paragraphs. *Re-viewing* involves *seeing a document through a reader's eyes*, because only readers can judge whether a text is successful and a writer is improving.

Moreover, it's helpful to remind yourself that *reviewing always benefits the reviewer*. To start with, practicing the mindset and moves of reviewing will strengthen your ability to identify ways to improve your own writing as you finish a project. The beneficial effects of reviewing also spread throughout your work as a writer: when you have proficient reviewing skills, you will be able to trust that you can successfully revise your writing, and thus you will trust that you can relax and explore as you write your early draft, so you can bring confidence and creativity to your whole writing process. In addition, practicing the mindset and moves of reviewing on your own text and on peers' documents helps you stay aware of the social act of writing for another reader.

You will achieve the strongest benefits from this process when you separate reviewing from editing. Editors tend to focus on word- and sentence-level errors; in contrast, reviewers need to focus their attention on the bigger picture, to investigate whether the writer's work matches their purposes, meets their readers' needs, provides appropriate and sufficient information and analysis, and organizes key ideas to best support the overall message. Reviewers may comment that whole sections of a document need to be added, moved, changed, or cut entirely in order to strengthen the effects the writer can have on readers. Since reviewing focuses on large-scale changes, writers benefit most when we set time to review or be reviewed before we set time to edit and correct: this way, we don't work hard to fix a sentence only to decide later that we should cut that whole paragraph out.

Explore 9.1

Consider your most recent experiences receiving feedback on your writing, from peers or from an instructor. Describe at least one of the following as specifically as you can, and add a sentence or so to explain why you think the comment made you feel the way you did:

- A review or single comment that was confusing or upset you as a writer: why?
- A review or single comment that cheered you up as a writer: why?
- A review or single comment that helped you improve as a writer: why?

Add a sentence to finish up: How would you describe the kind of review feedback that you would most want to receive as a writer on a current project?

Learn

- To learn more about **completing a draft**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **revising a draft**, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.
- To learn more about **editing a draft**, see Chapter 11, Editing in Context.

9.1 Adopting a Reviewer's Mindset: Contextual, Honest, and Empathetic

Whether you're reviewing a peer's document or your own draft, you will find it helpful to step into a middle-distance space in which you are neither the author of the document (who is highly invested in representing a particular view or approach) nor an average, disinterested reader of the document (who may know nothing about the writer or the writer's situation). If you focus too strongly on the existing document, you won't be able to imagine how it could evolve and improve. But if you try to review without knowing what the expectations or purposes are, your suggestions may not be relevant to the writer's context.

As you prepare to review a text, retrain your brain to adopt these reviewing habits of mind: contextual awareness, detailed honesty, and empathy with readers and writers.

A good reviewer accounts for the context

As a reviewer you will need to consider the document in light of its intended rhetorical context: you should note what the author aims to accomplish; what the audience, discourse community, supervisor, and/or instructor expects from a text like this; and how your own knowledge or background affects your reading. Thus the more you know about the context of the draft and the criteria for judging it, the more accurate and helpful you will be to the author. Your goal is to diagnose where the text meets and does not meet the expectations of its author and readers (including yourself), to identify places that succeed, and to provide specific suggestions to the author about how to improve the next draft.

You may need additional information to help you review contextually, so you could:

- Seek out a statement from the author about their goals or concerns
- Inquire about or search for information on the intended audience and their current knowledge or needs
- Acquire an understanding of the genre or the assignment and the expectations that the writing project should meet

A good reviewer provides detailed honesty

As a reviewer of your own text or another writer's text, you can only be helpful if you are honest and thorough. (Think about how you appreciate it if a good friend tells you about the spinach caught in your front teeth or a shirt button that isn't fastened.) If you spot a problem but don't tell the author about it, or if

you respond positively but don't explain why, the author cannot learn from your feedback and the document won't improve.

A good reviewer provides more than a random gut reaction: a good reviewer knows and says *how* they are being honest. You might use your honesty as you give your personal responses, and reflect that in an "I-statement" focused on your perspective: "As someone who has never traveled to Hong Kong, I would like more description of the sights and sounds of the city." You might use your honesty as you give a context-aware response: "Thinking like a grant-committee member, I am impressed by the detailed and reasonable budget in your project proposal." Even if the author disagrees, you have provided an honest and detailed response so that the author can gauge how and why one real reader would view the document.

You may need specific strategies to help you review honestly:

- Pay attention to your reactions, and try to identify what part of the text caused them.
- Pay attention to your judgments, and try to identify which of your experiences or expectations influenced them.
- Use I-statements to help convey that you are providing one reader's viewpoint.

A good reviewer empathizes with writers and readers

As an advanced reviewer, you take up a stance between the author and the reader, and you will provide more helpful feedback when you can read the text from both of their perspectives. As someone who empathizes with the author, you can recall how difficult writing is, envision how much time and effort went into the current draft, and consider what kind of suggestions can be most helpful to the author. As someone who empathizes with the reader, you can imagine how frustrated someone can be if a text has incomplete or confusing information, how resistant someone can be if a text argues for a difficult belief or action, and how pleased someone can be when a text connects with his or her concerns.

You may employ specific responses to help you review empathetically:

- Describe problems as specific areas that simply need more development, rather than suggesting that an author wasn't intelligent or hard-working.
- Explain why some reasonable readers might need additional data or explanation, even if a section seems clear to the author.
- Use "For example" statements to provide exact suggestions to the author about improving so they can see a new way of connecting with readers.

Explore 9.2

Think about a time recently when you gave someone feedback on their work—whether it was a writing project, artistic or sports performance, their cooking or driving, or an on-the-job task. What did you find easiest or most rewarding about doing that review? What was most difficult or frustrating? Which of the strategies noted in this section—paying attention to the context and criteria, being honest and specific, empathizing with the reviewee or their audience/clients—do you think would require the most effort or practice for you to use during that kind of review?

9.2 Focus on Equity: Reviewing to Create Opportunities

Whether you are reviewing your own or someone else's draft, you have more power than you realize. Review is often the first point at which writers get an overall judgment of our work, and those first comments can have a significant effect on the direction of our document and our immediate and ongoing dispositions about our writing. In many cases, reviewing contextually, using a reviewer's empathetic mindset, and framing your comments as I-statements, among other strategies listed in this chapter can help you provide judgments that are constructive and relevant.

However, judgments about "good writing" are not neutral: we know that writers (and readers) operate within systems that provide inequitable resources and even actively exclude or discriminate against some kinds of writers. And so good reviewing isn't neutral, either: you will improve your reviewing when you stay alert to assumptions or expectations that lead toward exclusion. You and the writers you review will benefit when you deliberately focus on creating more opportunities for a writer's success rather than closing down opportunities.

Acknowledge possible reader biases

Once you agree that there is no single definition of a "good writer" or good writing, you are prepared to look skeptically at any assignment guidelines, grading rubrics, or descriptions of "best strategies" for a specific writing task or genre and ask whether those strategies are designed with diverse writers and readers in mind. You can also stay aware of your own expectations: these may be purely personal preferences (perhaps you dislike the word "moist" or you really enjoy taking an adversarial point of view), but as with an instructor's criteria on a grading rubric, your own expectations may be shaped by exclusionary cultural or institutional values that most of us take for granted.

As you read and evaluate someone else's writing, you may prefer or be told to value US academic and professional writing features such as:

- Sentence-level correctness focused on Standard Edited American English

- Hierarchical structure and organization (with direct thesis and topic sentences and/or closed-form paragraphs)
- Objective approaches with no personal examples, humor, or digressions
- Evidence and examples based only on research reports from a few authorized publications
- Argumentation that focuses on victory for one view rather than compromise among many

These may in fact be exactly the strategies that a writer needs to employ to succeed with their purpose and their audience. However, you may also want to keep in mind that these criteria are largely based on the long-established habits, preferences, and expectations of the White, upper-class, Christian, neurotypical men who established the country's universities and professional organizations, so they may rely on a view of "good writing" that is narrow or even exclusionary.

It's not always easy for readers to know for sure if an expectation or standard is reasonable and inclusive, or if it is built on shaky assumptions about how one kind of writing (or writer) is always better than other kinds. But it is always useful for reviewers to base their feedback in a specific context ("To reach the audience of school board members you identify, you should try ___") rather than stating that some kind of writing move is universally right or wrong.

If you're not sure of what you see, or you're not sure what the writer's options are, how can you respond? You may choose to use your review comment to make multiple options clear to the writer: "I think your use of a personal story here is effective for your intended audience, but you may want to remember that the assignment directions recommend limiting your evidence to published research." You may want to more directly advocate on behalf of the writer's approach: "I think your use of these sentence fragments gives your writing energy and authenticity, so I hope you'll keep them even if a few people complain about your 'grammar.'" Whenever you acknowledge that there are multiple ways for a writer to be successful, you are helping to value their perspective and increase their opportunities.

Help the writer create an inclusive document

Remember how the reviewer needs to empathize with *both* writers and readers? You can serve both goals by looking for ways that the writer can use their content and strategies to create a document that is inclusive of and accessible by diverse readers. As you read, you can pay attention to questions like these:

- **Who is included and represented?** Do the writer's sources, examples, analyses, and even word choices demonstrate diverse perspectives and treat them respectfully? Where might the writer revise to ensure that many different readers see their views acknowledged?

- **How are different perspectives represented?** Where could the writer replace an unproven generalization about people ("Gay men always know about fashion" or "People with ADHD don't succeed in high-pressure workplaces") with specific data or more nuanced claims—or perhaps delete the reference altogether?

- **What assumptions need checking?** If the writer assumes that all readers will be familiar with their reference to the Christian Bible or be physically able to climb several flights of stairs, what revisions can you suggest that will help the writer connect to readers who don't share their background?

In reviewing school and workplace writing, you're likely to find that directly discriminatory statements—especially those that argue that some groups of people don't deserve basic human rights and respect—are infrequent and fairly easy to point out: "This paragraph suggests that you believe that people with different religious beliefs from yours are less intelligent; how can you revise to be less critical of people who are different?" Even omissions can be noted with a brief and direct comment: "To more accurately write about 'parents' here you could research and include information about divorced, single, or gay parents' experiences."

Yet it's also common for a reviewer to find that it's difficult to tell whether a writer is unfairly and unproductively excluding some readers or making a deliberate and justifiable choice to frame an issue or respond to a rhetorical situation. After all, writers are allowed and often expected to make arguments, even arguments about groups of people, that can reasonably be debated and even directly provoke disagreement: "To promote national security and hemispheric stability, the US should increase immigration from its neighbors in Central and South America, even if that means decreasing immigration from more distant countries in Europe and Asia."

If you're not sure whether a writer is unfairly excluding readers or perspectives, how can you respond? You might find that strategies for honesty and empathy are particularly useful. You might be able to use your I-statements as a baseline: "I am worried that this example is based in generalizations about 'Central America' that unfairly lump everyone together." It's also useful to frame your comments to show you assume no ill-will by the writer: "You might not have had time to locate research written by people from outside the US, but having those perspectives will strengthen your credibility with readers."

Challenging discrimination and exclusion during the review process is everyone's responsibility; it's not just gay readers or Buddhist readers who should notice when a writer's document does not acknowledge their specific perspective. All writers benefit from support that enables us to be more inclusive, and all reviewers benefit from becoming careful readers who are focused on creating, rather than restricting, opportunities for others.

> **Learn**
>
> - To learn more about how **good writing is not a neutral judgment**, see Chapter 1, Reframing Your Story About Writing.
> - To learn more about **inclusive reading strategies**, see Chapter 6, Reading as a Writer.
> - To learn more about **closed-form paragraphs**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
> - To learn more about **the limitations of Standard American Edited English**, see Chapter 11, Editing in Context.

9.3 Reviewing a Peer's Draft: Eight Moves

In order to achieve a "middle distance" position that supports the writer and looks out for future readers, good reviewers set their intentions before they review and check in with key strategies as they review. If you are reviewing someone else's draft, choosing your strategies can help you give "constructive criticism": feedback that is honest and helpful to the writer, rather than overly critical or vaguely positive. If you are reviewing your own writing, remember that writers are predisposed to like what we have written and to overlook any flaws. So choosing your strategies in advance can help you avoid just deciding that everything is mostly fine already. (This may be why horror-fiction writer Stephen King dramatically advises writers-who-review-writing to "Kill your darlings," that is, be willing to modify or delete even sections you really like.) Reviewing intentionally helps you identify what's working or not working in a document more efficiently and effectively.

Prepare to review contextually

Before you begin, make a list of three or four major criteria that the readers or the writer in this exact rhetorical context expect the draft to meet, so that you can look especially carefully for how the writer meets those needs. If you don't know what these are, ask for help from the writer, the instructor, or an adviser, or do some research online. You can best focus your review by considering one factor at a time (such as "providing exact evidence"), and checking each sentence, paragraph, or section for that one feature before moving to the next section.

Critique the draft, not the person

As an empathizing writer yourself, you should assume that the person writing the draft is at least as smart, hard-working, engaged, and committed as you are, so that any problems in this draft have come about because the work is difficult, the nights are long, and even brilliant people make mistakes. Use I-Statements and

focus on the current text: try to frame any problem as a local, temporary issue ("I think paragraph four right now is mostly summary rather than analysis") rather than a personal failing ("You clearly didn't think about this much").

Be greedy

As someone who empathizes with the reader, you need to ask for what you and other readers need. Request the explanations, evidence, connections, reasoning, beauty, or motivation that you need in order to be fully engaged or moved by the document. Don't take the writer's word for something or settle for a vague description because you think you know what they probably mean. If you don't get it, it's not "just you"—or even if it is, you are an intelligent reader who deserves a full explanation. It's your job to ask; let the writer decide whether to answer your questions or not.

Practice praise

We are often trained to be specific in criticism but find that it's harder to explain our praise. You can learn to say what you enjoy or admire and why, in more than two or three words, so that writers know you see the heavy lifting they are doing: one good model is "I like the way you use [writing strategy] here, because _____." Specific praise helps writers replicate their best work elsewhere in their writing, and it helps you gain expertise from what other writers do well. Aim to praise several different kinds of work that a writer does throughout the draft, from structure to reasoning to word choice.

Write full sentences

"Good job!" and "I don't get it" may be honest reactions, but these brief comments will not help a writer improve their draft. Write sentences that include a "because" phrase to explain why you think something works or why you think it doesn't meet your needs or the usual standards for this genre. If you can, also write out a "For example" sentence to show what the writer could try instead.

Identify highs and lows

Even when you are not confident that you can make expert recommendations to a writer, you can identify places in the document that seem to you to be stronger and less strong at a particular approach: "Your most persuasive evidence comes in paragraph 2; I think the evidence in paragraph 4 is less persuasive because _____" or "You state your argument most clearly when you say _____; however, I don't see that argument so clearly when you say _____." Your judgments help the writer bring all of their writing up to the highest standard.

Provide exact suggestions

The hardest work of a reviewer comes in explaining yourself and your suggestions. Anyone can click a "Like" button and walk away; it's much harder work to dig around in your brain to say why a sentence affected you as it did or to suggest one or two alternatives, especially when you're not confident in your response. The secret good news is that every time you give a specific explanation or suggestion to another writer, you not only practice generosity, you practice solving writing challenges that you yourself might have some day.

Learn from the process

Often reviewers learn more from providing review comments than they do from receiving comments. It's easier to see someone else's writing problems than your own, and you can use your new confidence to increase awareness of your own achievements and challenges. Take time during or after your review to note what you saw another writer do well that you want to emulate, as well as to remind yourself of suggestions you made for another writer that you could try to implement yourself in some way.

> ### Explore 9.3
>
> List two of the strategies listed earlier in this section that you hope people who review your writing will use: why would they be helpful to you as a writer? Then list one of the strategies that you would like to improve at while you are reviewing other writers' work, and give a suggestion about one way you might "train your brain" to keep that approach in mind as you review.

9.4 Reviewing Your Own Draft: Eight More Moves

It can be difficult for writers to see our own achievements and flaws. When we look at our work, we read the document and we read our own minds, including every thought we've ever had about the subject, and we respond as ourselves, not as a reader with a different history, knowledge base, or value system. The steps below each help writers constructively review a document—not just "looking it over," but preparing to revise—by imagining an alternate response or approach.

Gain some literal distance

Find a way to step back from your draft. You might sleep on it, take a walk, or freewrite on something else. You might shift your perspective on the draft, or try thinking of yourself as another person while you read: your instructor, one of your friends or relatives, a character on TV. Or you can physically change the way

you read: read aloud, dramatically; read paragraph by paragraph in reverse order; read a print copy that you cover up (or a screen copy in a short window) so you can see only a line or two at a time.

Assess key components one at a time

Any project or document has a set of core elements or crucial criteria to fulfill: a typical academic essay has an introduction with a thesis, paragraphs with transitions, and a conclusion; a lab report may have separate sections for procedures and results as well as clearly designed graphs or tables. Instead of reading your document start to finish, break it apart and check each component to see that it meets expectations: do your paragraphs usually start or conclude with clarifying or argumentative statements? do your graphs each have informative captions that relate to the text? does your ending balance your beginning in focus, force, and style?

Be honest with yourself

Identify at least two or three major criteria or goals that were hardest for you in this writing task, and focus on improving those moves. Give each paragraph or section a comment: how well did you do on key criteria? what else do you need? Also, try to focus tightly on what you did write so that you don't get distracted by what you hoped you'd write. You could cover your current draft, write two sentences about the main point you hope it conveys, and then compare: does your draft actually state what you just wrote? Or ask yourself: Which part of this draft best matches your core goals when you started, and which part seems least connected?

Imagine a skeptical reader

Build a picture in your head of a single challenging reader in your target audience, someone who is very smart and very skeptical. If you say "blue," this reader will frown and say, "Blue? What version of blue? Why blue and not green? Do you have any data about blue? I read three articles about blue last week that disagree with your point. Does there have to be color at all?" This reader's favorite responses are "Why?" and "How so?" and "But on the other hand . . .." Get a picture of this reader in your head, and maybe even give them a name. Now put that reader in a chair right next to you, reading your essay with you: what would they say to your second paragraph?

Practice praise

When we look at our own writing, we don't often specifically identify what we think is best meeting the goals of the project: we waver between loving everything

and worrying that everything is awful. Learn to identify specific sentences or sections that you think are better than average in your draft and write yourself a note explaining why, in more than two or three words: is this your most vivid image? your strongest refutation of a counterargument? Even if you can only say, "This example doesn't stink as much as everything else," you have a stronger sense of achievements that you can build on.

Consider multiple alternatives

As you come upon a particularly sticky or problematic spot, don't rush to create a single solution. You know that a "lack of evidence" could be a knowledge problem that you could address with more research, or a rhetorical problem you could address by using more examples from your experience that your readers will respond to. Propose two or even three options, even if one of them seems outlandish or impossible that you could consider when you come back to revise. (Sometimes it's easier to propose three choices than to propose one, because there's no pressure to create the perfect revision right on the spot.)

Tell yourself why

You might find it convenient to combine reviewing and revising, to spot a problem and then immediately change the draft for the better. However, to gain the most learning from this process, you should at least pause and explain to yourself, in speech or writing, why you are making the change: "I'm adding more exact evidence rather than restating a vague assertion" or "I need to move a strong claim from my conclusion to my introduction now that I know what my point is." This reflective step helps you remember the strategy so you can use it again.

Be patient

Even expert writers don't usually identify and fix all of their writing problems in one review session. First, a one-time fix is nearly impossible: every time you change a document, the changes themselves are likely to create at least a few other areas that need adjusting. More importantly, reviewing and revising can be difficult and exhausting work. Do as much as you can in one pass, and try to allow yourself at least one more pass (hopefully not at three o'clock in the morning) of praises and suggestions about your writing.

Explore 9.4

Which of the self-review strategies described in this section—or any other approaches—have helped you carefully examine your own writing in the past? List at least two, and explain how they helped you see your own accomplishments and difficulties more clearly.

Practice

- To practice **gaining some distance** on your draft by writing in a new approach, see <u>Funny Story</u>, <u>Letter to Kermit</u>, <u>Values Freewrite</u>, or <u>Write the Problem</u>.
- To practice **changing perspectives** to help you look at your draft a new way, see <u>Audience Switch</u>, <u>Genre Switch</u>, or <u>Stance Switch</u>.
- To practice **considering alternatives**, see <u>Assumption Inspection</u> or <u>Magic Three Choices</u>.

9.5 Preparing for and Participating in Review: Six Practices

When you submit a multiple-choice exam for evaluation, there's no preparation or negotiation: an automated system can decide, impersonally, whether you selected the right answers. When you are seeking feedback on a writing project, whether from a peer, an instructor, or a supervisor, you are engaged in a rhetorical situation where there are multiple ways to succeed. How you prepare yourself and your reviewer—and your dispositions toward the review process and the feedback—can significantly improve your satisfaction and thus improve your writing.

Provide your best, most complete draft of the moment

Whether your peers are reviewing a single sentence for a thesis-sentence workshop or a complete draft of a major analytical essay, you should treat this as an opportunity to work to your maximum abilities. As an early drafter, you don't have to write a perfect document the first or second time out. However, to learn as much as possible from a review, you also don't want to throw something together randomly at the last minute. If you write a draft that is as good as you can make it at the time, then many suggestions from readers will be new ideas you hadn't considered, and you'll have more opportunity to learn from the review.

Explain your overall goals

Even if your peers are working on a very similar assignment, and even if your supervisor generally knows about your project, they may not know precisely who your target audience is and what their expectations are; what central idea, image, experience, or argument you're trying to convey; what writing strategies you're trying to employ; or what you're hoping to learn from this review. Whether you write a headnote at the top of your document or speak to your reader in advance, you can help set the stage: the more information you can provide to your readers about the context of your document, the more accurate and specific your readers' comments can be.

Ask for what you need

Every writer of a draft knows at least some of its weak points already. We don't always know how to describe them precisely, and we don't know how to fix them (if we did, they wouldn't be our weak points!), but we feel it in our guts: the intro feels flat, paragraph three doesn't quite fit, or we don't have enough hard data about the kittiwakes' migration habits. If you know what you need, say so: use a written note or a spoken request to ask your reader specifically to help you decide how to improve these sections. You can also ask readers to provide the type of feedback you prefer: would a praise-focused review help build your confidence right now, or are you in need of someone's skeptical eye to help spot possible weak spots in your arguments?

Describe what you already plan to improve

Every writer of a draft already has plans to improve it: one writer is already planning to interview their friend who creates smartphone apps, and another one realized late at night that they need to say more about the motivations of the main character in the novel they're analyzing. If you already have ideas how to improve your draft, say so: use a written headnote, a few margin comments, or a spoken explanation to inform your reader. That way, your reader can give you feedback on your specific plans rather than spending time advising you on problems you already know how to solve.

Take reader comments seriously but not always precisely

Any reviewer who says honestly "I don't understand this argument" or "I need more information about the ionosphere here" is absolutely right: they did not have a satisfactory experience reading your document. That doesn't mean that their comment tells you the one right pathway to success. As the author, you must decide if each comment is:

- **Accurate and precisely usable**: the reviewer has identified a problem and you see immediately that following their suggestion will improve your document. You can revise following the reviewer's lead.

- **Accurate and generally usable**: you might think of these as "smoke alarm" comments, since the reader has identified a problem but hasn't convinced you that this is where the fire is. You might look to see if there's another way to improve the reader's experience: perhaps your argument needs more background in an earlier section, or you need to remind readers of your earlier definitions of atmospheric conditions on Jupiter.

- **Accurate and not usable**: your reader might have been personally honest but might ask for information that your primary audience really doesn't

need. Before you decide to set aside this comment and keep your current sentences, though, check your assumptions: are you sure your primary audience is going to know what you mean, or should you take a cue from your reader and provide a little more detail?

Recognize what you gain

Participating in a review process always benefits you as a writer, whether or not your reader provides any accurate-and-usable suggestions. The moment you began writing a draft knowing that a live reader would review it, you wrote more as a person communicating with other real people, and so your writing got better. You then produced a draft that you will have the opportunity to revise. And if you review someone else's draft while a reviewer reads yours, you have the opportunity to see (and perhaps borrow some of) that writer's strategies, while at the same time you are practicing your writing strategies every time you comment. By the time you return to your own draft, you'll have some distance and perhaps some new approaches, and so you will be a better writer and problem solver, even if all your reviewer has done is draw smiley faces all over your draft.

Explore 9.5

Consider a writing project you're working on now, or a draft you created recently, and write a short "Dear Reader" note that you could post (or might have posted) at the top of it. In a few sentences, you might explain what you were aiming to accomplish in the project, what you are/were most concerned about or hoping for feedback on, and/or what kind(s) of revisions you already have/had plans to make. If you ask your reader questions, make them specific so that you get better answers: instead of asking "Does this essay make sense?" consider asking "How could I catch my audience's attention better at the start?" or "What additional information should I include on page four?"

Chapter 10. Revising From Feedback and Reflection

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Use a DEAL approach to engage in revision as a multifaceted, reflective process
- Incorporate feedback from other readers in balance with your own goals
- Explore strategies that help you re-see your writing and make significant improvements to a project
- Prepare to transfer what you've learned to your work on future writing projects

If you are a reflective writer whose goal is to improve not just a particular document but your skills and abilities as a writer, then you should also become a full-time reviser of writing. To avoid "writer's block," you will often write in an exploratory or experimental mode, and so you will need to be prepared to revise that writing for it to suit your final project. Moreover, to gain learning that transfers from one writing project to another, you need to take a reflective, rhetorical, holistic approach to revision.

10.1 Re-see Revision

As we know, research shows that revision isn't just for unsuccessful writers: All writers struggle and revise their writing. Revising can require different strategies for different writing tasks, from a quick glance at an email to a supervisor to be sure you are using the right tone and accurate data, to an extended reorganization of a capstone project for your degree program or an annual report for your organization. Indeed, if you sometimes find revising more difficult from composing, you're not imagining it, nor are you alone: revising requires different mental muscles, so many advanced writers find that we need to slow down and take revision a step at a time.

Revising is a kind of writing, and so it makes sense to consider how some key threshold concepts are relevant to revisers:

🚪 You can become a good writer and a better writer

You already have many viable writing skills, and you are capable of becoming a better writer and a competent writer of many kinds of texts.

🚪 There is no single definition of a "good writer"

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

🚪 Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

🚪 There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

Revising requires advanced thinking

Revising a complete or nearly complete draft is often more complicated than generating an initial draft, for three reasons.

First, revising is difficult because you must **negotiate prior constraints**. You might imagine a home designer who has a choice between adding a new dining room table to an empty house and adding the same table into a house that is fully furnished. When the house is already furnished, the designer will need to purchase a table that will fit in among all the other chairs, lamps, and couches; they

will also prefer a table that matches in size, color, and style to the furniture that is already chosen; finally, they may have to move some of the original furniture around or even take it out in order to make room.

Just as earlier decisions made about older furniture in a house constrain a designer's actions about the new dining room table, the early choices you made about your draft constrain the choices you make about revising it. Revisers have less room to move, so our problem-solving choices take more time and consideration.

Second, re-vision—literally, re-seeing your writing and imagining how it could be different—is difficult because it **requires new angles of thinking**. New angles are hard to create, because writers are so familiar with our original plans. Sometimes writers avoid new thinking: instead of revising, we quickly reread the original and, unless a random inspiration hits, we just edit, looking for single words or punctuation marks to fix. However, hoping for big change to come out of small efforts doesn't usually work, and it doesn't make much sense to edit a sentence to perfection only to discover you have to delete the whole paragraph it's in. Revisers have to deliberately seek out new ideas, and that takes brain power.

Finally, revision requires us to **confront weaknesses directly**. While nobody likes to admit failures, writers often know, deep down, where the shaky or off-topic parts of our projects are. When you are writing an early draft, you can work around these sticky spots or even ignore them. But when you revise, you need to face them honestly. Whole paragraphs might need to be deleted or rearranged; several paragraphs may need additional information; or a whole new point about the complexity of the situation may need to be added or restructured. Also, revisers know that just as the dining room decor should connect with the living room design, a change to one part of an essay usually necessitates changes to other parts.

As an advanced reviser, you have to head directly into the difficult spots, facing your writing challenges and reflecting on exact ways to respond to them, rather than dodging and hoping nobody will notice. By focusing on what you know is difficult for yourself as an advanced writer, you can use your revision process as an ongoing learning opportunity, and seek to improve the writing that most needs it. The best part about revising is that when you can trust yourself as a reviser, you lower the stress and frustration of writing your early draft.

Revising benefits from reflective practice

Using reflective practice as you revise helps increase your ownership and agency in regard to your writing: rather than only "fixing" parts of your writing that other people told you were broken, you can learn to improve your current document so that it matches your goals, addresses your exact rhetorical

context, and reflects your values. Reflection as a reviser is also crucial to developing a long view: reflection helps you identify principles and strategies that you can use in future writing projects. The more thorough your reflection as you revise, the better you will be able to reflect to predict the challenges and opportunities of your next writing project.

Whether you are working on current draft improvements or your long-term strategic planning, you can use the same DEAL structure. You should always start by defining what has been working well for you in the current project and what you see as key challenges: you may be aided by feedback from other writers, but you should strive to align any recommendations with the goals and principles that are important to you. As you revise a current draft, you can then explore multiple ways that you could improve your document, act by making significant changes rather than only small edits, and identify what you have learned from writing and revising this project.
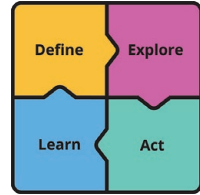
But don't stop there: To improve overall as a writer, you will want to take that project-based learning and look ahead: explore and predict how your new skills may be useful on future writing tasks, and actively plan for those tasks by adjusting (or reinforcing) your writing principles and your go-to strategies. The more you articulate your learning from your current project, the stronger a writer you will become overall.

Explore 10.1

Think back to a writing project recently where you completed significant revisions, and write 3-5 sentences to describe that revision situation.
How did external factors—the type of document you were composing, the expectations of an instructor or supervisor, the high- or low-stakes of the task— affect your decisions about revising? How did more internal factors, such as your confidence and motivation, your skills and preferences, your time and your goals as a writer, affect your revisions? Finish with a sentence about the outcome: Were you generally satisfied with your revisions, or do you wish that they had gone differently?

Learn

- To learn more about **drafting**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **reflecting**, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process.
- To learn more about **identifying your writing principles**, see Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory.

10.2 Evaluate Your Feedback and Plan Your Revisions

As the author of a draft, you always have insider knowledge about what you want to accomplish, what your resources are, and what your overall priorities are. In many cases, you also know more about your specific topic or issue than your reader (or some angles of it), even when your reader is an instructor, professor, or manager. You are the authority.

However, in most of the situations in which you are seeking or receiving feedback, your document's success is measured in large part or completely by the judgment of the audience. Just as your Aunt Margaret holds you responsible if your troublesome cousin runs away at the shopping mall and gets lost for an hour, readers in US academic and professional cultures hold a writer responsible for making all the ideas clear to them.

As you revise based on feedback, then, you have to balance your knowledge and abilities with the perceptions, requests, and even demands you receive from readers. Feedback from readers may occur along a continuum from not at all relevant to precisely what you needed: comments may be:

- Unclear, vague, or irrelevant
- Clear but not obviously accurate: you might not agree that there is a problem, that the problem is what the reader thinks, or that their solution will work with your purpose or audience
- Clear and accurate, but too difficult to implement given your abilities or resources
- Clear, accurate, and possible to implement in a modified way
- Clear, accurate, and possible to implement just as suggested
- Clear, accurate, and possible to implement even more broadly throughout the document than was suggested

You have to decide which comments fit which category, and thus how you will respond to each comment. Even a half-hearted reviewer can still give a few useful comments; even a really great reviewer will sometimes provide some unhelpful feedback. As the author, you are and remain the authority on your project, and you are charge of choosing which feedback will influence your revision process.

Finally, as you revise based on feedback, you need to reflect on the bigger picture: if you make a single change in response to one reader's comments, you need to check on how that change affects other parts of the project. Your reviewers won't always keep all those variables in mind, but you know your project well enough to choose your revisions both for how they improve the small facets and how they will help you build a stronger document overall, in light of your goals and your readers' needs.

Incorporate feedback from expert coaches

In the past when you have had an instructor provide feedback on your writing, you may have had a correction-based relationship: the instructor identified errors, and you assumed that your role was to take every single comment as direct information about how to change a specific word or sentence.

As you move into more advanced writing tasks, that relationship will most likely change (though it's always good to ask your instructor, supervisor, or reviewer what your responsibilities are). For instance, you may encounter experts who do not correct all of your errors, but who instead identify some general areas of writing problems, and who then expect you to assess that information, adapt it in light of your own understanding of the goals and needs of the project, and use it to continue revising multiple areas in your overall document.

When you respond to expert coaching on your writing, you should certainly try to follow any direct suggestions provided: "make this argument more specific" or "add more evidence from the text here." However, you are moving from being someone who *corrects small errors* to becoming someone who *improves as a writer overall*, so you will need to adopt broader strategies:

- **Identify a range of possible responses** to any suggestion, so that you can choose the one that best fits your context and goals: not only are there many ways to "make a thesis more specific," but perhaps the problem is not really in the thesis sentence but in the overall topic or question that needs narrowing down. Don't use someone else's suggestion, even an instructor's, unless you're sure it's the best fit for your essay.

- **Extrapolate from individual suggestions** to your overall project: if your reader has asked in one place for more specific evidence, you now have an indication of a reader for whom that criterion is vitally important. Where else in the draft might you increase your level of evidence support?

- **Extrapolate from individual praise** to your overall project: if your reader has praised an example, phrasing, or kind of analysis, try to describe to yourself what made that selection stand out, and look for places to repeat that success elsewhere in your draft.

- **Be ready to discuss alternatives:** in some cases—an instructor with very direct expectations, a report that must follow a very specific format— there is no option for variation. In many other situations, however, you may inquire and discover that a reader is open to alternative approaches to organizing your document, or that they are intrigued by your plan to include a fuller discussion of unexpected data.

In a school setting and in many workplace settings, expert reviewers are willing to answer your questions about their feedback; they're often willing to hear the

reasons you think you might try an approach different from the one they recommend, as long as you can support your explanation by describing how it solves your writing problems more directly and completely. The more you are willing to open a dialogue about writing and revising, the more quickly you can learn advanced strategies for succeeding in your classroom or workplace.

Explore 10.2

In a sentence or two, describe the best advice or feedback you ever received about your writing: what was your writing task, and what was the feedback? Give an example of how you used that feedback to improve your writing at the time. Then consider the bigger picture: how can that advice, or an adaptation of that advice, help in your writing today—for school, for work, and/ or for connecting with your friends or community?

Incorporate feedback from actual users

When your reader is actually a member of your target audience, then the feedback they give you might tell you precisely what some members of your audience will need from your document. Perhaps you have written a brochure for a child services organization and given a draft to the manager for that organization, or you have created a web page directed to incoming college students and asked three of your sister's high school friends to review it.

When the feedback is within the readers' area of expertise, the readers are fully representative of your audience, and the comments are clearly stated, you should strive to revise accordingly. If the high school friends tell you that your opening story about music concerts is "old style" and nobody listens to those bands any more, you should take their advice seriously and ask for suggestions. However, if they tell you that your statistics about college-level study skills are wrong, you might be more skeptical, because they have less expertise in that area. If the child services manager tells you their clients will like the information in the brochure you designed but that the pictures convey a "negative vibe," you should trust that feedback; if the manager can't exactly say what pictures they prefer, you might follow up by sharing some possible examples to help them articulate their goals.

As a corollary to this advice, you should learn to value any reader's input for what that reader is best equipped to tell you about your document—and to directly seek out or ask readers for what they can most help you revise. Your class peers will be more reliable at identifying writing challenges and concepts you have just been studying, and so you should value their comments on such matters, and your colleagues at work will be able to tell you whether people in a busy workplace can follow a set of instructions. Likewise, if you want to find out whether a non-specialist can understand your description of cell mitosis or wind shear, you need to find a non-specialist, such as your grandmother or your tennis partner.

Incorporate feedback from general readers

You have probably experienced some of the benefits and challenges of having a friend, class member, or officemate "just take a look" at your writing. While they can provide useful insights, you may also decide that their comments are too general or not relevant enough to be immediately helpful. Instead of concluding that these reviews are useless, though, you need to develop strategies for identifying how to take advantage of these readers' support.

It may help to think of how people respond to smoke alarms. A smoke alarm sounds to let you know that there is a serious problem somewhere in your building: in the most serious cases, a fire has started somewhere and smoke has drifted to the alarm, while in other cases, steam or other air qualities have triggered the alarm to sound. A fully functioning smoke alarm identifies but does not pinpoint a problem, since the alarm may sound in the hallway when the fire (or burned pan of rice) is in the kitchen.

A reader's feedback may function as a smoke alarm, particularly if the reader is a peer, friend, colleague, or layperson. Readers who are honest and thoughtful are often able to tell you that your document is not working to its full potential; *something* about your writing affects them negatively. However, they may be unable to pinpoint where the problem is, they may pinpoint one problem when the true source of the problem is elsewhere, or their problem sensors may be tuned too strictly or too gently given your context. These readers may provide "smoke alarm" comments in the following categories, and advanced writers will need to sort the comments out before beginning revisions.

Vague comments

Inexperienced or nonspecialist readers may provide comments such as "this doesn't flow" or "you should be more personal" or "too many quotations" that are imprecise. However, as a reflective writer you can work to interpret these comments to better define, explore, and act on any problems. The three comments above might refer to a lack of clarity in your goal statements or paragraph structure; to the low amount of supporting detail or a flatness to your tone and style; or to a problem with your analysis of the secondary source information that you included. You can try to imagine what was frustrating your reader, and locate at least one place in your draft where you can explore ways to strengthen your writing to satisfy their concerns while meeting your goals and the other rhetorical demands of your project.

Mistuned comments

Peer readers unfamiliar with the expectations of your genre, your target audience's background knowledge, or your goals may ask for you to make revisions

that seem inappropriate: "add more stories to your intro," or "explain what *deconstruction* means," or "don't spend so much time explaining multiple views." If readers are mistaken (memos and lab reports are not supposed to begin with stories), then you can ignore their feedback. However, to make sure the alarm won't go off again with another reader, you might wonder if you can make any small changes that would accommodate readers' needs: perhaps you could include a slightly more engaging "Subject" line in your memo or more vivid verbs in your abstract.

A common subset of these comments is the correction of sentence-level errors when you were hoping for more macro-level feedback from peers. If you are not yet ready to work on sentence-level editing, or if readers "correct" sentences and in doing so produce more errors, you should just read around this type of feedback. (And remember: Don't get tricked into editing when you're still in revising mode!)

Generalized praise

If you see specific praise—"This quotation persuades me to donate money because the statistic is so dramatic"—you know what the reader believes you have done right. If you see vague praise—"I get it!"—or if an instructor only makes a checkmark or smiley face in the margin, you may not know. Vague praise isn't always an alarm that signals a disaster, but it can also require interpretation and scrutiny. Sometimes readers praise you for making them happy, not for challenging them to think hard or for meeting the goals of the writing project, just as sometimes a smoke detector goes off when there's water boiling or the oven door opens.

When you see praise, your first job is to decide whether you are being praised for achieving your main goal. If you think you are, because the commentary is specific or because you trust the source (your instructor would not praise something unworthy!), then your next task is to decide for yourself what you were doing right, so that you can do more of that. Make your best guess and write yourself a note: "Keep using specific quotations" or "Keep adding more counterarguments" or "Keep incorporating more outlying data points."

If you think your reader is liking something more generally, then your task is to decide whether you can translate that praise to a useful category so that you can search for other places to repeat your strong writing ("I relate to this" may indicate the presence of highly specific detail or of accessible language), or whether your reader is admiring something as a novice reader that your target audience would not admire ("I relate to this" may indicate that you are telling stories that engage novices when your target audience of mechanical engineers expects you to be providing data-supported analysis).

Explore 10.3

As I was writing this textbook, I received comments from *dozens* of re-viewers. I admit that my first reaction to a reviewer's critique was often, "What? But that part is *perfect*! Why do they not recognize my genius?!" Then I took a deep breath and settled in to see how I could make my writing better.

Consider a recent a writing project of yours, and identify some feedback you received that you didn't quite agree with, at least at first. What writing task were you working on, and what did the feedback say? (If you don't have a copy to check, try to recall as specifically as possible what your goals were and what the comments were.) Then try a thought experiment: in a couple of sentences, explain how that reader's reaction, if not their exact comment, could help you revise your writing to more effectively reach your audience.

Incorporate feedback from reflection

If you must be your only reviewer or you are a major source of feedback for your own draft, you face some significant challenges. Writers tend to be either hy-percritical or highly complimentary of our own writing, neither of which pro-motes good revision. You should thus begin by learning reflective strategies for reviewing your own drafts so that you can see beyond your first (and second) impressions.

Once you have assessed your draft and provided yourself with both praises and suggestions, you will still need to take your own advice carefully. On the one hand, you are the authority on your topic or issue and on the work you have done so far, and you need to reassure yourself that you have the power and capability to complete these revisions. On the other hand, you are only human, and so if you are not vigilant, you may slip back into old habits that produce less powerful writing (another reason not to revise at two in the morning!). As you look at your self-praises and suggestions, then, take some steps to rearrange your brain and add a few more notes:

- **Recall what you have typically done** as a writer that helped you succeed, and typically done as a writer that was not helpful. If one of your past writing selves (maybe from six weeks ago, or last year) were to look at your draft and your revision suggestions, what would they say: are you about to make any of the same mistakes you've made before? is there something you always try that helps that you should try again?

- **Step into someone else's perspective** for a few minutes: what would a cur-rent or former teacher, boss, or friend say about your draft or your sug-gestions? What sorts of comments does that person often make that you can imagine them making here? What specifically has been asked for by a boss or instructor in this situation that relates to your plans for revision?

- **Become a critic of your critique**: which of your praises or suggestions sounds like you are just trying to let yourself off the hook too easily, either by telling yourself that you don't need to change or by telling yourself that the change would be too difficult? Are there any places where you over-looked or understated a change that needs to be more drastic or needs to happen more often?
- **Become a cheerleader for your revisions**: which of your praises could you strengthen, now that you remember how hard you worked on the early draft and how much you want to keep working on that strategy? Which revision suggestion sounds like something you really want to explore, ex-pand, or even take some risks with to see if you can break new ground and capture your readers' attention?

Even if you think you'll remember what you want to do, when you take the time to actually write these notes-to-self, then you benefit even more because you start the revision process before you start revising, and you retrain your brain to visu-alize the new draft rather than staying caught in the current one.

10.3 Complete Significant Revisions

Since revising is challenging, and since writers often feel we did about as well as we could in the current draft, we often have difficulty completing significant revisions. The draft looks "fine" to us, so we make a small change to a para-graph and hope that that will be enough to satisfy our readers—even though several readers wanted more details throughout the essay. Or we tinker with the thesis sentence and tell ourselves that that will suffice to create a stronger argument, even though we suspect that several paragraphs don't quite match the new thesis. Not only is it easy for writers to get attached to an early draft and hard for us to envision changes, but whether we have spent five days or just five hours working on a project, we sometimes just cannot imagine com-ing back to work on it even one more minute. However, reflective writers can employ deliberate, reflective strategies to help us overcome the challenges of revision, so we can improve our current project and gain additional perspec-tive on our writing overall.

Explore 10.4

Revisers often work in one or more of four modes: *add* new material, *move* material around, *change* material where it is, or *delete* material from your document. List these four from what you think is *easiest* for you to do as a reviser to what is *hardest* for you to do. Write 2-3 sentences explaining why you ordered your list that way, and give at least one example from a recent project to support your decision.

Treat revising as a new event

- Open a **new document** or fresh composing surface, and begin by composing a new outline or pasting into that space only the material you most want to keep from the previous document. (Sometimes this approach is easier than trying to move pieces around or draw arrows and circles in an old document.)

- Open and save a **new version of your document** under an experimental title—Project2TrialVersion3—to give yourself permission to "go out on a limb" with a new approach for an hour or two (or for a day or two), while the earlier version remains unharmed.

- Explore a **new line of inquiry**, either by expanding a tiny subtopic you barely mentioned before, responding to a reviewer's question that opens up a new angle, or taking off on a wild tangent for 20-30 minutes just to see if it turns up anything that could spark a reorientation or reinvigoration of your draft.

Treat revising as a creative event

- **Involve color or displays**: you can use highlighters (or a highlight feature on screen) to color-code the points and sub-points that organize your document, to help you see how you might better arrange them. You can also print and cut apart your draft so you can rearrange it on your desk— or you can photograph or screenshot each section, paste them into a new document or to a social network board, and drag the parts around to experiment with new ways to arrange them.

- **Try new voices or genres**: open a page or document where you can play with your approach to see what ideas that sparks: try writing part of your draft in another voice, in another format or genre, or to another audience. Or do all three: draw your main message as the start of a picture book for kindergarteners, write it as the opening scene of a documentary movie, or dictate parts of it into your phone as if you were telling a friend who lives far away or studies in a different field from yours. Even if you try something that is completely different from what you are supposed to be doing, you might be able to see the key elements from a useful perspective.

Treat revising as a deliberate event

- **Create a to-do list** and experiment with the order of tasks. For instance, you could write the most important or most difficult revision you need to do up at the start of your list, followed by the next most important,

followed by the next. (Alternately, you could arrange these revisions alphabetically.) Instead of going through your draft start to finish—editing a sentence here, moving a paragraph there—solve all of one problem and then move on to the next one on your list. If you get stuck, skip to the next problem (because sometimes fixing a different problem will help in an unforeseen way), but don't forget to come back!

- Set a **document goal** for yourself, even an extreme one: aim to add or cut 500 words; aim to take all your arguments one step further out on a limb; or aim to add one more piece of credible evidence to every paragraph.

- Set yourself a **personal learning goal**: aim to understand the statistics behind hedge fund trading so you can better explain your reasoning in paragraph four; aim to try three organizational structures to learn which one fits your project best; aim to try a more direct argumentation strategy than you usually use so that you better match the approach of the discourse community you're joining.

Treat revising as any other reflect-and-improve event

Identify any of your strengths and resources as a writer, generally and in this project, that you can draw on as you revise. The exercises below may provide you with some starting points, but you don't need to limit yourself. What other resources can you seek out?

Practice

- To practice revising while considering your **rhetorical situation**, see Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Boil Down, or Emperor for a Day.

- To practice revising by using **new perspectives**, see Audience Switch, Genre Switch, or Stance Switch.

- To practice revising while considering your **subject-matter knowledge**, see Assumption Inspection, Evidence Shopping List, or Gray-Area Finder.

- To practice revising while considering your **steps and strategies** (even when you typically think of some actions as "prewriting" rather than "revising"), see Seven Generations or Six Structures.

- To practice revising by **adding or deleting ideas**, see Add/Move/Change/Delete, Best and Better, Expand and Narrow, Explode a Moment, Inside Out, or Shrunken Draft.

- To practice revising while considering your **dispositions**, see Letter to Kermit, Six Degrees, or Values Freewrite.

Save editing for a separate step

Writing scholars sometimes refer to editing at the sentence and word level as addressing "lower order concerns," that should be addressed separately from significant revision work. Partly that is because while fixing errors and selecting precise language will make reading easier, those small changes generally won't improve the core thinking that gives your document its power. Even instructors who are quick to mark comma errors in red ink will likely say that good thinking with a few errors is preferable to sloppy thinking with zero errors. Also, these concerns are "lower" because they should be addressed last: there's not much sense fixing a semi-colon if you really need to delete the whole sentence or paragraph.

Finally, it's important to separate out editing so that you don't distract yourself from revising. Since revising requires a significant amount of reflection, honesty, and complex analysis of the rhetorical situation, it can feel like climbing a steep hill—while light editing can seem like an easy flat trail through the cool woods. As a result, you may find yourself changing a word here and there, shortening one sentence and lengthening another one, fixing your typos or formatting the caption of a graph as a way of procrastinating on the challenging work of revising. If this happens, you should gently nudge your brain back to the main task until most of your revisions are complete. Alternately, sometimes editing can be its own steep hill: if you struggle to meet your readers' expectations of "correct" writing, or if you have been told that because of your sentences you are "not a good writer," then you might expend a lot of time and emotional energy on small changes, without leaving enough brain power to work on key revisions.

When you're revising, focus on revising; gaining practice as a reviser will help you not just on your current document, but in all of your future writing projects.

> **Learn**
>
> - To learn more about **editing** after you revise, see Chapter 11, Editing in Context.
> - To learn more about **citing sources** after you revise, see Chapter 22, Integrating and Acknowledging Sources.

Look ahead to transfer what you've learned

The final step of the DEAL process for revising your project is "Look and learn": what happened in this project that you want to carry forward? You don't have to stop with a quick note about how "next time I'll procrastinate less"; you can take the opportunity to consider your core principles, key strategies, and likely goals so that you can improve your writing self as well as your current document.

If you are working on a writing theory, then your forward-looking reflections will be crucial steps in understanding what principles and strategies are most important to you. However, even if you are not formally studying your own writing, you will benefit from taking time to

identify strategies that were either very successful or approaches that didn't end up being productive—and to envision yourself using better strategies in a future setting.

To start, step back and **define** what you learned: not just what you decided about "how to get this task done by the deadline," but about writing and about yourself as a writer more generally. You might consider what you learned about adapting to a rhetorical situation, how you came to have better analysis or assumption-checking strategies to support your subject-knowledge, what kinds of steps and strategies were useful to you, or the ways you told yourself a new story to help cope with disposition problems.

You might also check back on any earlier reflective writing you did: How accurate were your predictions about the challenges and the resources needed for this project? What writing problems did you address successfully as you composed? What advice did you give yourself or your peers as you reviewed your document or theirs that might be applicable to other writing situations?

Next, **explore** the kinds of future writing you might do. You should consider tasks that are very similar—such as transferring writing knowledge from your first physics lab report to your second—as well as tasks that are much more distant in type or time. Besides lab reports, what other kinds of formal or informal writing will you be doing soon? If you imagine yourself a year from now, or five years from now, what might you be writing? Once you've listed a few "near transfer" and "far transfer" options like these, identify some approaches you think could be useful for each one.

Although you won't exactly **act** on your ideas yet, you need to prepare to act. Reflective writers finishing up a project may find that poet and novelist Maya Angelou's advice to media mogul Oprah Winfrey feels relevant: "You did [back then] what you knew how to do, and when you knew better, you did better." Yet knowing and doing are different things: if *thinking about improvement* were enough to ensure that improvement happened, every writer who ever said "I shouldn't have procrastinated on my project so long!" would magically start writing in plenty of time.

You may find it useful to set one or two "smart" goals for your next time writing. These are goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound.

- To be specific, measurable, and achievable, your goal needs to match your *writing* life. Instead of saying "I will never procrastinate again!" or "I need way more analysis than I first think," you can narrow down to a task you

can see yourself doing as a writer on a particular day: "When I get a writing assignment, I will spend 10 minutes making notes on the assignment directions about the key goals and challenges" or "In my future writing, I will include at least one 'because' or 'therefore' sentence in each main paragraph." Choose goals that you know you can accomplish as a writer.

- To be relevant and timebound, your goal needs to match your *actual* life. If you make a goal based on someone else's values or definitions, or if you make a goal that "someday" you may achieve, you will be less likely to complete that goal. Look for ways to articulate your goal so that it fits realistically with who you are: "*Because I am more confident when I know the rules*, when I receive *my very next* writing assignment, I will spend 10 minutes *that day* making notes about the key goals and challenges" or "*In my upcoming case study review*, I will include at least one 'because' or 'therefore' sentence in each main draft *so that I show how much I truly know about the issue.*"

Your goal in all of this work is to ensure that your **learning** as a writer doesn't fade away. We know that writers (and students and parents and professionals) suffer from cognitive overload and too many distractions, and so when we don't pay attention to some part of our life, sometimes it just slips away. When your goal is not simply to survive one writing task at a time, but to thrive as an advanced, reflective writer, these final steps are crucial. You revise your document, but then you should also revise your writing self, even just a little bit, so that the next time you encounter a writing task—in a class, on the job, or just in a dark alley some evening—you don't flinch and shrink away, but instead step forward and say "I've got a plan for what to do next."

Chapter 11. Editing in Context

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify ways that editing is a rhetorical act
- Explore strategies to edit for conventions (grammar and usage)
- Explore strategies to edit for style
- Reflect to identify and act on your own editing plan

If there is no such thing as one kind of good writing, then it follows that there is no such thing as one kind of "good sentence." You know that some kinds of good writing don't even use sentences: readers and writers of text messages, movie posters, and reggae lyrics often prefer ideas presented in short, vivid phrases. That doesn't mean that "anything goes" when it comes to sentences, though: advanced writers need to take care with our sentences, because they directly affect what readers understand and what they assume about our message.

Since editing is also a kind of writing, you may want to consider how your editing work connects to several threshold concepts.

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

There is no single definition of a "good writer"

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

Even though editing is the writing task that feels the most rule-bound, writers who edit are always participating in a dynamic, social, strategic set of tasks—and the most successful editors are the ones who balance the expectations of our readers with our own goals, opportunities, and values.

11.1 Good Sentences are Rhetorical and Evolving

Good sentences are rhetorical. Your sentences will be "good" when they match your goals, the expectations of your audience, and the genre and presentation modality you select. You might even use different kinds of sentences in different parts of your document, such as short sentences to catch readers' attention at the start and longer sentences to convey complex information in the middle. Advanced writers often face rhetorical challenges composing our sentences: we need to balance between writing sentences that feel comfortable, beautiful, or

powerful in our own minds or communities, and writing sentences that our readers will find familiar, accessible, or accurate. As with arguments and evidence, your choices about sentences will depend as much on your rhetorical decisions as on your knowledge of exact rules.

Good sentences are evolving. Just as genres evolve over time, sentences evolve two ways. First, readers' expectations about words and sentences evolve over time: you can see by looking at an original copy of the US Constitution that writers in the 1700s used different spelling and punctuation. Second, writers' use of sentences evolves within each document we compose: until we complete a whole document draft and understand exactly where we want to build speed, connection, or directness for readers, writers cannot make accurate decisions about our sentences.

Thus editing is not simply "correcting": editing requires rhetorical awareness and reflective practice. Because sentences, words, and style are important to conveying our meaning and connecting with readers, advanced writers should schedule time to review a complete or nearly complete draft while considering specific sentence-level choices and strategies within the context of our goals, audience expectations, and genre patterns.

11.2 Why—And When—All Writers Edit

Editing is not something that only "bad writers" do. Since writing has so many challenges—from predicting a rhetorical context and learning new information to incorporating secondary sources, organizing our thoughts, and designing our documents—all writers struggle with sentences as we compose, and so we need good editing skills. (I have edited the previous sentence—which is important because it states my thesis for this section—nine times as I composed and revised this chapter!)

Writers edit to cope with cognitive overload

Even writers who have high fluency in the language we are using to compose can struggle with sentences, in part due to cognitive overload. Like jugglers who can toss three balls but not four, writers can sometimes manage three separate tasks fairly well at one time—such as thinking about what readers need to know, planning powerful paragraphs, and integrating external sources—but perform less well at additional tasks like handling commas or selecting vivid verbs. Because writers can't do everything perfectly at once, we sometimes struggle with sentences:

- **Writers struggle to write acceptable sentences.** When advanced writers are working with complex analyses, writing in new genres or styles, or

writing in emotionally stressful situations, they can experience cognitive overload. That is, the writers focus so much on managing ideas, structures, and dispositions that they find it difficult to pay equal attention to all the grammar and usage expectations that readers have for our sentences. In addition to making simple errors, we may write sentences that are tedious to read or that state an argument too bluntly for some readers.

- **Writers struggle to write meaningful sentences.** Since writers create knowledge as we write, we discover or clarify our meaning as we go forward. The sentences in an early draft of a document thus often don't convey writers' most powerful or accurate messages, and writers may struggle with sentences that try to express the overall conclusions or complex results of a writing project. Language is slippery; writers who edit help ensure that crucial sentences articulate our complex ideas.

- **Writers struggle to write harmonious sentences.** Although individual sentences can convey some meaning, most documents represent knowledge through collections of sentences. In order to present a cohesive document using a consistent style, writers need to adjust some sentences to better fit with the surrounding text. (For example, this book was edited to ensure that whenever "writers" were mentioned, first-person pronouns were used so that you see that "we"—you as the readers and I as the author—are all writers together.)

That is, beyond fixing common errors, writers need to adapt sentences to our new knowledge and to the other sentences in a document. A short sentence will have more impact if the sentences around it are longer; a sentence that uses vivid verbs may not fit well into a paragraph of sentences that use more straightforward language to describe the methods of an experiment. Writers may even need to delete sentences that no longer fit the overall goals or approach of a document.

Writers edit separately to reduce stress and improve cohesion

In a short, familiar document for an audience you trust, you may be able to edit as you draft. However, for longer or more challenging writing tasks, it is not only difficult but sometimes impossible to get all the sentences right on the first try. Writers benefit two ways if we set a time to edit *after* a section or even a full draft is completed:

- **The first draft happens faster**: tinkering with sentences one at a time disrupts writers' thinking without producing consistent benefits; editing separately allows writers to compose with less interference.

- **The final draft is more cohesive**: a one-sentence view doesn't help writers judge how all sentences function together; editing separately helps writers create sentences that balance each other and present a consistent style.

When we know we have planned time to edit later, we can actually improve our results in other areas of our writing.

Writers keep an open mind about editing

Depending on your school and work experiences, you may be holding onto some assumptions about editing that reduce your ability to grow as a writer. Have you heard or told yourself any of these explanations? To improve as an editor, you may need to shift your mindset.

- **"I don't have time to proofread/edit."** Managing time is a disposition and thus a decision: if you believe that having powerful and accurate sentences will strongly improve your success, you can *make* time to edit carefully. The story you tell yourself about editing is important.

- **"My instructor doesn't care about my sentences**." Even if your instructor for chemistry or sociology hasn't stated that they value appropriate sentences, they most likely do have expectations about your writing—including expectations about sentences. Always inquire about what your readers value rather than assuming you know.

- **"All writing needs to be edited for Standard Edited American English correctness**." Even in academic and professional settings, some genres and situations carry fewer expectations about correctness than others: a job application may be carefully scrutinized for errors, but an emailed response to a colleague's question might even seem more congenial if presented in informal or even incorrect phrases.

- **"You have to know the rules before you can break them**." Most native-speaker writers learn to follow usage conventions by reading and hearing examples rather than studying rules for *pluperfect tense* or *noncount nouns*, so they bend and break unknown rules all the time. More importantly, *all* writers can *always* choose to use language in ways that connect with and engage readers, whether that usage follows or breaks a known convention.

- **"Editing is just about correct words and punctuation**." Even if your sentences have no errors, they can lack consistency, rhythm, or power to affect your readers. As writers edit, we think about the whole document: Is the level of formality or elaboration consistent? Do the verbs provide an appropriate level of accuracy and energy for the audience and goals? Do short sentences balance out long ones?

When writers keep an open mind about editing—it's not "just" for one kind of document or "just" focused on one kind of error—we can better adapt key editing skills to our current contexts and writing tasks.

Focus on equity: Stay skeptical about "correct English"

You may have heard or read research recently that addresses the ways that Standard Edited American English, or what most academic and professional readers think of as "correct English," can be used to unfairly punish or exclude writers from diverse backgrounds. Languages and language patterns by themselves aren't necessarily racist, homophobic, or sexist—and it makes sense for a discourse community to establish expectations for writing in order to help connect readers and writers. But when individuals, communities, or institutions focus on using *only one standard for correctness in English*, they can exclude, obstruct, or devalue another group of people based on their language background. These policies often reinforce social patterns which grant more power to people from one gender, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, ability, religion, or nationality—and those actions or policies, however they were intended, are discriminatory.

- **Excluding**: Sometimes words themselves exclude or erase people, the way that "fireman" erases women fire fighters. Sometimes a usage convention excludes people, such as the way the typical "correct" pronoun pattern in "Give a student the respect due to *him or her*" erases people who don't identify with either gender. Also, if a workplace won't hire anyone who has a language error on their job application, even for jobs that can be successfully performed without 100% written language correctness, that policy uses SEAE to unfairly exclude people—and often such policies disproportionately exclude people from minoritized groups.

- **Obstructing**: When institutions like schools or workplaces use "correct English" not just as one expectation among many but as a significant requirement for advancement or success, they create obstacles for people whose home communities use other language conventions and people with language processing disabilities. If it were true that SEAE was universal, or was always better than the alternative (the way that "Being kind" is nearly always a better way to act than the alternatives), this would not be discriminatory. However, since "good writing" includes many features, and since there are many other English convention patterns that are viable and powerful, a policy that bases grades, promotion, or other rewards strongly on SEAE can create unfair obstacles for writers who are learning English or whose communities use another version of English.

- **Devaluing**: At any point that a person or organization declares that "correct English" is inherently better than other language convention patterns, they imply and sometimes directly signal that any writers who do not always use these conventions are also less valued. "Correctness" is rhetorical: In some writing situations it is valuable, while in others it is unnecessary or even counterproductive. (If you received a text message that

"properly" used several semi-colons, you might roll your eyes.) Practices and policies based on a generalization that only one kind of language use is valued will unfairly discriminate against some writers, in ways that devalue them simply based on their words.

Of course, you may face policies that discriminate based on language use and have no option to challenge the policy. But you can always look for opportunities to raise questions about the value of "correct English," and stay alert for ways to use your own actions to reinforce the complex, rhetorical ways that writing succeeds with readers. (For one way of pushing back against the expectations of SEAE, see the notes about code-switching and code-meshing later in this chapter.)

Explore 11.1

What kind of editor are you, and what kind of editor would you like to become? Write 3-4 sentences in which you identify your current practices and explain any strategies you wish to develop further as you improve your editing. You might consider questions like the following: Do you usually enjoy tinkering with sentences and words, or do you prefer to just focus on your overall ideas? Are you generally confident or stressed-out when you work on your sentence- and word-level writing? Do you prefer to edit as you compose, or do you save time for editing at the end? What kinds of documents are you most likely to use specific time to edit, and what writing tasks do you generally just complete without paying much attention to sentences and words?

Learn

- To learn more about how **dispositions** affect a writer's work, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.
- To learn more about how **discourse communities** might create standards of correctness that are exclusive or discriminatory, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about how your **design and modality** may influence your editing, see Chapter 8, Designing Across Modalities.

11.3 Writers Edit to Meet Conventions

You may have been told, or believe, that your writing is good because you have "good grammar" or that it isn't good because you have "bad grammar." That kind of phrasing suggests that there is one kind of "good grammar" that everyone everywhere agrees on and can easily achieve. However, rhetorical sentences are more complicated than just "good grammar," and so advanced writers find it is helpful to use some more precise terms to guide our practice.

Understand sentence conventions for grammar, usage, and style

Writing scholars use the term "conventions" as a way to refer to many of the choices that writers make about our language and sentences. "Convention" comes from a word root meaning "to meet" or "to agree": in writing, language conventions arise when many people—especially many people with the power to tell other people what to do—agree on the language patterns they prefer to read.

- If you and your friends agree that exclamation points in text messages signal a cheerful attitude, then a message without exclamation points will seem sad or even angry, even if the actual words don't have a sad meaning.

- When the supervisors in your workplace agree that misspelled words or punctuation errors interfere with clients' ability to access accurate information, then they may dismiss a report with those errors as inadequate, even if the writer is highly qualified and the ideas are innovative.

- When epidemiology scholars agree that writers should use "carrier" to mean *an apparently healthy but infected person or animal* and "vehicle" to mean *an intermediary in disease transmission*, rather than the more common layperson meanings, then a report that misuses or avoids those terms will seem unprofessional, even if the author is a respected scholar.

Since conventions depend on agreement, they are rhetorical. Even Standard Edited American English (SEAE)—a group of conventions you may have learned as absolute rules for writing—is rhetorical and constantly evolving. It is rhetorical because people in power in the US, most often White native-speakers with advanced education, have agreed that they prefer these conventions. It is evolving in part because people from those and other communities continue to use language powerfully in other patterns that influence the "standard."

Since Standard Edited American English is addressed in so many college courses, it may be helpful to consider how SEAE conventions include some agreed-upon standards in several categories:

- **Grammar,** according to linguists and other specialists, has a narrow meaning: it designates how writers organize the basic building blocks of sentences, such as subjects, verbs, objects, descriptors, articles, and others. These grammatical expectations don't change much within a language: most English speakers across continents and centuries recognize the grammatical disorder and missing elements of sentences such as *They home their went* or *The brown dog child the bark*.

- **Usage** (which many people include as part of "grammar") is how writers select and organize sentence elements that go beyond basic grammar. Although large complicated books are written every year to explain these "rules," they truly are *expectations* that may change or evolve from one

time period, location, discourse community, or genre to another. Common usage categories include the following:

- ◦ **Agreement**: How writers match subjects to verbs (US English prefers "the choir *is*" while UK English prefers "the choir *are*"), verb tense to verb tense (using past or present tense consistently), subjects to adjectives ("*this dog* likes *these toys*") and subjects to pronouns. You are witnessing an agreement evolution whenever you see people match the plural pronoun *they* with a single subject—*Eli drove their car to their house*—to create gender-neutral writing.

- ◦ **Punctuation**: How writers use signals to group or separate words. Expectations about punctuation for sentence boundaries (using a period when a sentence ends) don't vary much, but expectations about punctuation used to group words within a sentence (e.g., commas, semi-colons, and dashes) can vary a lot. You are noticing a punctuation evolution if you can spot how apostrophes have disappeared from new naming protocols like URLs (*kimsgreatpies.com*) or if you've seen the phrase "red, white, and blue" written with both one comma and two commas.

- ◦ **Mechanics**: How writers use other written signals—such as capital letters, spaces, hyphens, italics, and accepted definitions and spelling—to transform spoken language into consistent written forms. You are participating in a mechanics evolution if you put one space rather than the previous convention of two spaces after a period when you type sentences.

- ◦ **Idiom**: How writers use figurative or abstract expressions, local references, or slang to convey meaning. Idioms vary and evolve frequently: since prepositions are often idiomatic, in different parts of the US, people can stand *on line* or stand *in line* when they're waiting for a train. You are participating in an idiom evolution if you find that it no longer makes sense to say that you "*hang up* the phone" when you end a voice call on your mobile, headset, tablet, or watch.

- **Style:** How writers choose a pattern of words, sentence structures, and emphasis to represent their own perspective or change the impact a document has on a reader: helping the reader speed up or slow down, focus on straightforward data or on complex emotional experiences. Although style can be highly personal, communities or genres often adopt a style as part of their conventions: documents written in SEAE typically include a formal, complex, correct style of words and sentences.

Finally, any time you write, remember that you can choose to challenge or break with conventions. Although you should always consider the consequences of making readers uncomfortable, you don't have to wait until you are powerful or famous to experiment with writing that bends or contradicts "the rules." If you

have a message to communicate that you think will be more powerful using different conventions, you should consider your readers and your goals, and then take time to explore your options.

Explore 11.2

Write down 3-4 "rules" you have learned about Standard Edited American English sentences; these can be anything from words you must or must not use, to strategies for building good sentences, to expectations for quoting and citing sources; they can be rules you nearly always follow or ones you struggle with. Then think of any *other* communication situation that has "rules," and write down 3-4 of those. You could consider the "rules" for writing sentences in another language, for writing lyrics to love songs, for "talking trash" with teammates or online gamers, for texting a romantic partner, for writing an email to your boss, or some other set of rules or conventions. Add a final note: what happens when someone bends or breaks one of those other rules?

Review 20 Common SEAE Errors

Writing scholars Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford (2008) reviewed and catalogued hundreds of college student essays in the early 2000s, looking for the errors that were marked most often by college instructors. This study provides a *rhetorical* look at errors, since it considers how a specific discourse community (college instructors) responded to a specific kind of writing task (formal college essays). When you are writing in this particular context, you may want to use their results to help you focus your editing on the errors that your readers are likely to find distracting.

The 20 most common errors Lunsford and Lunsford identified, in order of most marked to least marked, are the following:

1. **Wrong word**, such as "cousin words" (*concur* vs. *conclude*), inaccurate prepositions or idioms, incorrect terms, and typos or autocorrect errors.

2. **Missing comma after an introductory element** such as *When you write you should leave time to edit* (which needs a comma after "write").

3. **Incomplete or missing documentation of sources** according to the expectations of the field or genre.

4. **Vague pronoun reference** such as "this" in the sentences *Breana was bored on some days and happy on others. This limited her success.* (Did boredom, happiness, or *both* limit her success?)

5. **Spelling**, especially proper names, technical terms, and homonyms (*their* vs. *there*).

6. **Mechanical error with a quotation** such as forgetting a comma after the verb "writes" in *Lockett writes "I love Mama."*

7. **Unnecessary comma** such as between a subject and verb (*The blue birds, sang sweetly*) or after a conjunction (*The train was fast and, it was loud).*

8. **Unnecessary or missing capitalization**: Reserve capital letters for starts of sentences and proper nouns (*Jim studies biology in the Department of Biology).*

9. **Missing word**, often due to writing quickly and not editing carefully.

10. **Faulty sentence structure**, often due to an attempt to combine complex ideas (*From all their efforts created a winning project).*

11. **Missing comma with a nonrestrictive element**, often seen as a missing second comma to set off a descriptive phrase that's not strictly necessary to the meaning of a sentence. This sentence needs a comma after "dachshund": *Monisha's dog, a dachshund won the race.*

12. **Unnecessary shift in verb tense** such as shifts that occur in a complex thought or sentence identifying several steps: *Anderson and Porfirenko designed the robot and choose rechargeable batteries to power it (*"designed" is past tense and "choose" is present tense).

13. **Missing comma in a compound sentence**, often especially needed in longer sentences joined by a conjunction such as *and, but,* and *so.* Be sure to add a comma before the conjunction to avoid confusion: *Ala had planned to go to the store on the corner and then she would drive over to campus for her class but her car was stolen from the store parking lot.*

14. **Unnecessary or missing apostrophe**, which is easy to leave out of missing from possessives or to add incorrectly to plurals: *My favorite restaurant is called Mariyas Taco's.*

15. **Fused or run-on sentence** which occurs when two complete sentences are placed side by side; they should be separated or fixed with a conjunction, a colon, or a semicolon: *Tom calculated the rate of increase he also graphed his results.*

16. **Comma splices** occur when two complete sentences are joined by a comma instead of separated by a period or joined with a semicolon or conjunction: *Kelly and Mona designed a survey, they sent it to 100 people.*

17. **Lack of pronoun/antecedent agreement** is usually a problem in longer sentences; in short sentences it is usually obvious that

pronouns need to match the subject in number and gender: *Miller and Yoho presented her project to the class.*

18. **Poorly integrated quotation**: In addition to providing a signal phrase such as "Fede argues," edit so that a sentence with a quotation is grammatically correct, such as including only one verb: *Debasmita's experiment shows "demonstrates 85% compliance."*

19. **Missing or unnecessary hyphen**: Use hyphens to avoid confusion so that readers know if *Darlene's little used beach house* is just small and old or often vacant (little-used).

20. **Sentence fragments** often occur when writers add a final idea but don't join it to an earlier sentence: *Kreitzer and Schell's theory about structural bonds was intriguing. But not accurate.*

Improve your sentences with reflective practice

Most college-level writers are already capable communicators: when we are motivated and the communication task is straightforward, we can inform and persuade others. In spoken communication and informal writing—which adds up to most of our daily interactions—our listeners and readers will tolerate a wide range of usage patterns and accents, even if we step outside their expectations a bit. Because formal written communication leaves a more permanent trace, however, writers are often expected to meet readers' expectations exactly.
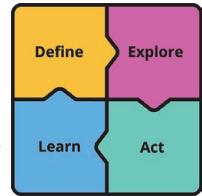
So where do errors come from? It's not that writers set out to create a document that has usage errors, any more than a baseball player plans to drop a fly ball during a game or a singer plans to belt out the wrong word during a concert. Identifying why and how you make errors can help you DEAL with them: Define common errors that you make, explore why you make them and strategies to improve your sentences, act to fix a specific problem, and learn how to more consistently use conventions your readers expect.

Sometimes writers make usage errors because we don't know what a usage convention is or how it works. You might have seen complex sentences using semi-colons and multiple commas, but not be aware of all of the guidelines for how to use these punctuation marks in Standard Edited American English. If you see that writers in your field or community often write sentences with complex punctuation, you may benefit from reading a guidebook or a writing center website to help you define what the SEAE conventions are, and explore some sample sentences in a worksheet or quiz.

> **NOTE:** One problem with guidebooks is that you have to know what a convention is—both its name and its function—to look up how to use

it. If you've never heard of a *nonrestrictive clause* and you have no idea that *semi-colons can be used as "supercommas" in a list that includes internal commas*, how would you even know you had a problem, much less know how to look them up in a guide? To define and practice a truly new usage in a way that applies to your own writing, you will often need guidance from your instructor.

More commonly, though, writers make errors even when we are aware of the "rules" or conventions. For example, most college-level writers understand that subjects and verbs should agree: we have learned that in SEAE, *Professor Rivera analyze the data* should be corrected to *Professor Rivera analyzes the data*. So what happens?

- Writers face a high cognitive load: we are wrestling with new concepts or struggling with more intense workloads (or our phone keep beeping while we write), and we lose track of which subject goes with which verb.

- Writers default to a more familiar approach: when our home language doesn't use the same agreement pattern as SEAE, it's hard and exhausting for writers to remember to switch 100% of the time.

- Writers experiment: we try a more difficult sentence structure while stretching to meet advanced readers' expectations. In the sentence Professor Rivera of Howard University, after a seven-year collaboration with a team of twenty other scientists, analyze the data, it may seem natural to write scientists analyze even though the noun that actually connects to the verb is Professor Rivera. Writers need to experiment to learn to write interesting sentences, but that means we will often fail and need to try again.

As you look at the list of 20 Most Common Errors in SEAE, probably several of them fit into the category of a "rule" you *mostly know* but sometimes *still make mistakes* about. When you know a convention but are struggling to apply it consistently, you probably don't need to check a guidebook or do exercises. In fact, research shows that you can learn more about writing sentences by practicing on your own writing than by studying worksheets (just like you learn better swimming techniques when you're in the pool rather than watching a video about swimming). In the cases above, you would benefit most from one or more of the following resources as you act:

- Better strategies for defining where you have made usage errors in your own writing
- More practice exploring ways to improve your own sentences
- More time spent editing to meet conventions

Explore 11.3

Think of three kinds of usage "rules" or conventions that you have recently made errors in. You might look the list of 20 Most Common Errors or at a recent writing assignment for ideas. For each one, check the chart below, and write a note: "I make errors with _____ [convention] mostly because _____ [reason]." (You can write your own reason if none of those listed below seem to fit exactly.) Also give yourself a recommendation: to improve, should you refer to a guidebook, practice spotting and fixing the errors more consistently in your writing, or give yourself more time to edit your own work carefully?

Error Reasons	Benefit of using a guide or worksheets to learn and practice the convention	Benefit of learning strategies to diagnose and fix a problem in a draft	Benefit of planning more time and strategies for editing a draft
I know the convention completely, but I get distracted or overloaded while writing	Little to none	Low	High
I know the convention well or partially, but I don't use it regularly in my speaking or writing	Low	Medium	High
I know the convention partially, and I get distracted or overloaded while writing	Medium	Medium	High
I know the convention partially, but I was trying a new variation in order to meet my goals or expectations	Medium	High	High
I have seen or heard the convention used, but don't fully understand it	High	High	High

Practice

- To practice diagnosing and improving sentence errors, see <u>Final Four Proofreading Moves</u>, <u>Power Sentences</u>, or <u>Sentence Doctor</u>.

Learn

- To learn more about how writers can **fail productively**, see <u>Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits</u>.
- To learn more about **reflective practice**, see <u>Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Practice</u>.

11.4 Writers Edit to Create an Appropriate and Consistent Style

Writers and readers talk frequently about a writer's "style" or "tone," often in ways that imply that it's a fixed but undefinable quality, as if writers are either born with style or have none. You may find it more helpful instead to think of style as a repeated pattern of sentences, words, and images that writers and readers agree on to help make communication more efficient, effective, and enjoyable—like the sentence-level version of a genre.

Your writing style is rhetorical, matching your goals and your readers' expectations. Part of your writing style is personal: you select words and create sentences that match your own goals as a writer. Part of your style depends on your audience: you will choose overall sentence-level patterns in part because they match what your readers in your discourse community or readers of the genre you are using expect. Like other writing patterns, an appropriate style is both stable enough to enable readers and writers to predict key elements, and flexible enough that writers can adapt it to different readers and situations.

You already know how to shift your fashion style as you move from a corporate job interview to a dance club, or from an afternoon at a sunny beach with friends to a holiday dinner at your grandparents' house. In these cases, you may keep a few elements of your personal style (a haircut, a favorite color, a pair of earrings or shoes) but you shift other elements to be appropriate for your goals and your audience. Likewise, you should choose elements of a writing style—formal or casual, concise or eloquent, energetic or objective—that match your goals as well as the expectations of the community you're writing for or the genre you're writing in.

As you compose and edit to adopt an appropriate style—or you make decisions about how to stretch the boundaries of what is "appropriate"—you might consider the following common elements.

Adjust the complexity of sentences and words

Writers use longer, more complex sentences to explore ideas in depth and show how those ideas are connected. Sentences also affect reading speed. Short sentences are faster by themselves. But if you use too many short sentences, readers stop and start a lot. This pattern eventually slows them down. Words affect speed and comprehension as well: writers who need to connect with readers who are inexperienced or unfamiliar with a topic often use simpler, more concrete words and examples, while writers who compose for advanced readers can use a pattern of more abstract words or concepts. For instance, consider the difference between describing a tree's *branches* and *leaves* to second-graders or explaining broader concepts of *photosynthesis* and *transpiration* to high school students.

Adjust the variety of sentence structures

Writers use repeated sentence structures to help readers get into a rhythm and know what to expect. (What sentence structures are repeated in this list of style components?) You can repeatedly start with a subject and verb, or you can often start with transitional phrases like "Additionally" or "However" to create a predictable, cohesive pattern. On the other hand, writers can vary sentence structures to catch readers' attention or change the energy level: a single short sentence, or a single transitional phrase, will stand out.

Adjust your active and passive verbs

No particular kind of word affects style more than verbs do. Writers can use energetic, active verbs such as *escape*, *celebrate*, or *establish* to emphasize how people decide, interact, and affect the world around them. Active verbs provide variety, engage readers, and indicate who is responsible. Writers also use more passive verbs like *is* and *are* to explain a steady state; these verbs create an evenhanded but not very exciting reading experience. (Consider the slight differences between "They *depart* tomorrow," "They *are* traveling this week," and "Their flight *is* tomorrow.") Passive verbs sometimes imply that events happened without any other person's involvement or responsibility, which is sometimes accurate ("It *was* raining") and sometimes not ("They *were* robbed"). You may encounter readers who assert that you should *always* or *never* use passive verbs, but you know that you should question rules like those and make your choices rhetorically: what verb pattern will serve your current project?

Adjust the formality of diction and tone

Writers frequently adapt the level of formality—sometimes called the *tone* or *register*—of phrases and sentences to connect with different readers. When you

write to friends or just need to check in with a team member for a quick question, you might use more slang, abbreviations, humor, idioms, or personal insights. When you write to your instructor or supervisor, or to someone you've never met, you will often use more objective descriptions, field-specific terminology, and straightforward, thorough explanations. In some fields, first- and second-person pronouns (I, we, you) give an informal impression, so writers prefer third-person references (he, she, they, it). Like most elements of an appropriate writing style, registers don't have absolute boundaries: writing that feels "casual" in one writing situation could be "professional" in another.

Adjust the elaboration of ideas and images

Writers can use a "just the facts" style or choose a sentence pattern that involves more elaboration. To increase your elaboration, you might select less-common terms that catch readers' attention ("enervated" instead of "tired"), use more metaphorical descriptions ("They felt like a puppy lost in a blizzard" instead of "They were scared"), and/or provide more specific details and examples ("The folder was full of tamale recipes, marriage certificates, and love letters" instead of "The folder included family papers"). Writers who elaborate often choose words or examples based on their connotations—the emotional connections and memories that readers have with words like "puppy" and "tamale"—rather than only their basic meaning. (Note that in most professional and public documents, a little elaboration can go a long way; you don't need a thesaurus for every sentence!)

Adjust your grammar and usage

Writers who compose documents for school assignments may think of "using correct writing" as a fundamental rule rather than a style choice. But you know that "correct grammar" is not expected in all of your writing: your friends will know which restaurant to meet you at even if your text message doesn't use complete sentences. You also know that correctness itself doesn't have a single definition: for instance, even college instructors disagree about comma usage and citation formats. Finally, correctness involves more than punctuation, and continues to evolve: words that your grandparents used frequently may now be commonly seen as biased or hurtful and thus incorrect, and you have probably seen examples recently of people using pronouns such as *they* or *ze* that would not have been seen as "correct" even a decade ago. As a writer, you will always need to choose the level and type of correctness that is appropriate for your readers.

Adjust elements of a multimodal style

Writers today need to consider how style includes more than words. Since the design, arrangement, sound, and visual components of a document are rhetorical,

you will need to consider all of the previous elements as you select pictures, graphs, fonts, layouts, music, and colors for your project. Movie posters may use simple fonts with very active photos; museum guidebooks may use repeated page layouts but more elaborate descriptions of the artwork; instruction manuals may use informal language but require clear, correct diagrams. Likewise, if your video travelogue has background music or voices, you will need to decide how much variety or elaboration you want to build into the soundtrack.

Adjust by code-switching and code-meshing

Just as you change clothing styles between workplace and leisure settings to match a "dress code," you change your writing conventions and styles as you change audiences and genres. All writers **code-switch** between using sentences that feature formal diction and or a particular set of conventions (such as in a school assignment), and using more informal, slangy, or abbreviated sentences or phrasings with our friends or family.

In addition, writers in the US may code-switch away from Standard Edited American English (SEAE) to a language or dialect that reflects other deeply rooted identities:

- Black writers may code-switch to using Ebonics or African American English.
- Writers from immigrant families or cultures may code-switch to dialects that blend English words and phrasings with words and phrasings from another language, such as Spanglish, Taglish, or Singlish.
- Writers from communities with a local language tradition, such as Appalachian, Cajun, or Pennsylvania-German English in the US, may code-switch to those dialects.

Indeed, writing scholars have argued that writers have a *right* to compose in languages or dialects other than SEAE—even in school and professional settings—and to have that writing valued for its rhetorical power and correctness.

In addition, language and culture researchers suggest that beyond code-switching—in which writers may still feel unfair pressure to use SEAE in all school assignments or professional documents—writers should consider the value of **code-meshing**, in which they help challenge or change expectations by blending different language conventions together. In order for conventions of correctness, style, and genre to evolve, some writers need to be pushing the boundaries and trying new approaches. Code-meshers can help readers see new possibilities for language use, in both formal and informal genres.

So the next time you write or see someone write, "He been talking to her about college," or "She and the other *mujeres* are working on the campaign," you might

consider whether the writer made an error—or whether you are experiencing a strong example of code-meshing that helps a writer connect to their heritage, reach their goals, relate to their audience, and perhaps even help to change the convention for future writers.

Explore 11.4

Consider how your writing style would change across two writing projects about immigration:

History 101 Class Analysis Essay: Your class has read several documents about immigration laws and patterns in the US in the early 1900s, and your instructor has assigned you to write a 1500-word essay referring to those documents and explaining how one national or local immigration policy affected both immigrants and current citizens.

Blog Post about Grandparents' Experience: Your friends are collecting stories for their blog about different immigration experiences in the twentieth century. Since they know you have an unusual background, they ask you to contribute an entry about how your grandparents came to the US.

In 3-4 sentences, describe how you would use a different style pattern for each project; you should refer to at least two of the style criteria listed in this section. Give at least one example of a sentence that you would write for one of the projects using the style choices you made.

Practice

- To practice **adjusting your sentence style**, see Diction Flexer, Expert/Novice Exploration, or Stance Switch.

Learn

- To learn more about creating appropriate **document design**, see Chapter 8, Designing Across Modalities.
- To learn more about appropriate style within different **genres**, see Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres.

11.5 Reflect and Plan to Increase Your Editing Success

Since writers read our own minds, we need to use deliberate strategies as we edit in order to see our document as it is, rather than as we imagine it to be. Just as you make a plan for the research, organization, or revision of your document, you should draw on strategies like the ones below to build an editing plan. Without a plan, you may be tempted to skip or skimp on editing and just "hope for the best"—or you may think you can just "look over" a document and see what needs fixing. When you edit with one goal at a time, rather than glancing at your whole

document, you can complete this final stage of your project with the attention and success your project deserves.

Know your goals: Reflect to predict a style as you plan your document

Although writers do most of our sentence-by-sentence editing after a document draft is complete, we can benefit from taking a few minutes at the start of a writing task to predict the larger pattern for the most appropriate style. Since style is a document-wide decision that affects most or all sentences, writers benefit from identifying key style elements right from the start, the way interior decorators will choose a color pattern for a whole house or office. If you decide at the start of a project that you want to use a pattern that includes complex sentences, formal terminology, and active verbs, you can aim all your writing in that general direction. Your goal is not to agonize over every sentence, but to increase the likelihood that many of your sentences will lean toward your preferred goal.

> **Tip:** Instead of "hoping for the best," pick one or two style features that are important to readers and/or challenging for you, and set some goals: write at least one complex sentence per page, use each of three new field-specific terms at least once; upgrade one verb per paragraph from "is/are/has/seems" to more active verbs: "expands/creates/rejects/disintegrates."

Know your own sentences: Edit for your common challenges or key goals

Over many years of feedback, writers come to know where our sentence challenges lie. You may know that you tend to write sentence fragments in your early drafts as bits of ideas occur to you; that you struggle to put the correct "a / an / the" articles into sentences because your home language doesn't use articles; or that you are working with new terminology in your field and sometimes get terms confused. (My readers tell me that my sentences are too long and winding, especially in my early drafts.)

> **Tip:** Instead of "looking over" your document, pick one challenge and scan for instances of that, and then pick another to focus on. You could check every short sentence to see if it is complete, look at each noun to see if it needs an article, or search for every instance of "hydrophilic/hydrophobic" to be sure you're using the right term. To edit for style, you could check each paragraph for a feature (does it have at least one vivid-verb sentence?) or use a "find" command to check how many sentences use contractions or use "I" or "you" pronouns.

Choose your battles: Edit carefully in high-impact zones

Writers don't usually need to perfect every sentence. Some of our sentences have more visibility or power than others, and those are the ones to focus on if editing time is limited. You know that beginnings and endings can leave lasting impressions; you also know that some sections of your document will be less familiar, more difficult, or more disagreeable to readers. And you know which of your arguments or examples is closest to your heart or most important to communicate to readers.

> **Tip:** Instead of "looking over" your document, focus your editing on one high-impact area at a time. For example, look extra carefully at the first or last few sentences of the document or of specific document sections—or check each quotation you include. You could also identify your thesis or argument statement, your most complex refutation, or your most important example, and edit those sentences for clarity, correctness, and appropriateness for your audience.

Clear your head: Proofread by taking a fresh approach

Proofreading is a final stage of editing: you can proofread a whole document or just a high-impact section. Once you have made all of your decisions about the style, tone, and level of correctness that are appropriate for your document, you will need to use a proofreader's eye to ensure that you can actually spot any small problem areas that remain. Since writers tend to see what we think we wrote, rather than what's actually on the page, we need specific strategies to help us slow down and focus on the actual words of the document. For instance, you could:

- Get physically involved by skimming a finger or stylus underneath each word as you read it.
- Read your draft out loud, slowly and dramatically, standing up if possible, from a hardcopy if possible so that you can quickly mark any section where you get tripped up or tangled while talking.
- Have a friend read out loud to you as you follow along on a second copy; mark anything you hear or any spot your friend gets tangled.
- Read in reverse: last sentence, next to last sentence, next-to-next-to-last sentence (or last paragraph and then the next-to-last paragraph), so that you don't get distracted by thinking ahead to the next point of the essay.
- Read just a few lines at a time: cover a hard copy with a sheet of paper so you can see just a few lines, or narrow the window on your computer screen (or increase the font size) so just a few lines are visible.

Pay yourself first and last: Design an editing plan

Although it makes sense to edit your writing during the later stages of your process, writers who use this strategy sometimes run out of time or energy, and so we decide to just turn in the document and "hope for the best." Motivation coaches often recommend a strategy of "pay yourself first": people should try to put part of each paycheck into their "Buy a new car" savings account right away, so they don't spend it on less important goals—or use the first part of the day for exercise, reading, or important projects, so they don't spend time on other tasks and end up skipping out on an important personal goal.

Writers can't start out by editing, but we can start by making an editing plan that we will commit to using later, identifying our goals and the time we need to accomplish them. An editing plan is just as important as a research plan or a document outline: after all, if you actually do know your readers' conventions for usage and style, but you don't take time to be sure you have applied them consistently, you might be undercutting much of the other work you've put into the document.

A key part of your editing plan is **time**. In your experience, "looking over" a five-page essay might only have taken you a minute or two per page—but you should know that at that speed you will not be able to have much effect on the power, cohesion, or accuracy of your writing. Writers need to be honest with ourselves about the time and effort needed to produce powerful sentences. If you are new to making an editing plan, you might start with the following guidelines:

- Planning for 3-5 minutes per page (300 words) is good for proofreading for small usage errors, or editing for just one kind of sentence strategy at a time (such as agreements or citations).
- Planning for 5-10 minutes per page is good for revising sentences to create more variety, use more active language, manage highly technical language and terminology, or create a consistent tone or voice.
- Planning for 10-15 minutes per page overall is good for working on multiple strategies (perhaps taking several separate passes through a document) or editing a document that requires a high level of correctness.

Like many writing tasks, your effective pace will increase when you are working with a fresh, unstressed brain on a familiar task; if you will be editing while tired, working on a high-stakes task, or trying out a new genre or style, you may need to slow down even more to achieve your goals. If you end up with less time for editing than you had hoped, you'll have better success focusing on a few key areas as noted earlier than you will if you try to fix everything very quickly.

Editing your writing project is not enough by itself to turn it into "good writing," but taking time for strategic editing will always improve the impact your project has on readers.

Explore 11.5

Consider a writing task that you are working on now, or that you know you will work on soon. Write an editing plan that identifies your editing goals and behaviors, drawing on some of the strategies noted in this chapter that match your needs. See the example plan below, and include at least three guidelines for your own plan.

	Personal editing strategy for Biology 102 Lab Report #4
Correctness: Does this task need high, medium, or low levels of correctness?	Medium: Avoid major text errors that could confuse readers
Style: Which style elements are most important?	No "I/you" in sentences; use technical terms from the lab guidelines
Basic strategies: What strategies are typically most helpful?	Check especially for errors I often make: apostrophe errors and inconsistent use of past-tense verbs
Special strategy: What does this course / genre / document most need?	Review the Conclusions section slowly so that all of the analysis is clearly stated; also, check a guide to find out when to use numerals and when to spell out numbers
Timing: When will editing happen and for how long? Be specific and reasonable!	Check key sections after the first draft is complete and the results are finalized: Block time next Tuesday after breakfast and before class. Allow 10 minutes per page = 30 minutes.

Chapter 12. Creating Your Writing Theory

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Explore connections between threshold concepts and your writing practices
- Articulate how specific strategies you have used as a writer connect to these concepts and practices
- Identify key principles that can guide your current and future writing
- Create and share your writing theory

In Chapter 1, you reviewed nine threshold concepts that writing scholars argue are common among advanced, reflective writers.

🚪 You can become a good writer and a better writer

You already have many viable writing skills, and you are capable of becoming a better writer and a competent writer of many kinds of texts.

🚪 Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

🚪 There is no single definition of a "good writer"

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

🚪 Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

🚪 Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

🚪 Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

🚪 Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

🚪 There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

🚪 Advanced writers study and reflect on their writing

Writers study writing just as chemists study chemistry and musicians study music—and advanced writers use repeated reflective practices to understand our own work.

You may or may not find that your own writing experiences and preferences align with one or more of these concepts, and you may have other principles and values that guide you as a writer. In this chapter, you will explore how one of those concepts—*advanced writers study and reflect on their writing*—can help you integrate all of these key approaches, values, and principles into a story that you can use to improve your writing overall: your writing theory.

While you may not become a writing scholar, you should still study your own writing: knowing about the challenges and successes of your own performance will help you gauge your best strategies as well as your readers' likely responses. Writers benefit from reflecting throughout our writing process: instead of succumbing to a vague sense of "writer's block," we can investigate our goals or our audience's needs as we consider the rhetorical situation, deepen our research or analysis as we explore our subject-knowledge, change the order of our tasks as we develop new steps and strategies, or consider our own confidence or curiosity as we address disposition problems. (You might have other problems you want to solve that are part of your current writing story: lab-report problems,

roommate distraction problems, culture-crossing problems, or campaign strategy problems.)

In addition to benefiting from ongoing reflective practice, writers also benefit from constructing a *working theory of writing*: a guide to the key beliefs, goals, and strategies that we can apply to multiple writing tasks, even ones we can't imagine right now. Scholars and professionals often rely on models or theories to help them predict how complex systems work: a CEO might rely on behavioral management theory; a physicist might rely on quantum field theory; and a graphic designer might rely on color theory.

To create a writing theory that helps you predict how your writing will go and adapt your writing knowledge to new situations, you will need a larger perspective than you can gain from reflecting on just one or two writing tasks. Your writing theory will be more useful when it aligns with your past experiences as well as your present experiences, connects with how other writers and readers interact, and accounts for the future writing you plan or hope to do. When you have a workable writing theory, you can quickly identify opportunities, challenges, strategies, and goals for any writing task you encounter, and draw on all of your prior successes to support your work.

12.1 Practice by Analyzing a Previous Writing Task

Your writing theory will be more accurate if you examine multiple data points in your writing life, including events from your past. Fortunately, you have been accumulating writing knowledge since you wrote your first thank you letter, your first poem, and your first text message, so you have lots of data to consult. Rather than guessing generally ("Sometimes I use outlines"), you can start to build your writing theory by analyzing an exact writing task you have already completed. When you carefully review the steps you actually took as a writer, you can understand more about your strengths, the challenges you encounter, and the principles you rely on as a writer.

Explore 12.1

Make a list of at least 15 different writing tasks you have completed recently, from common ones like text messages (to whom? about what?), applications, and school projects to less-usual tasks like recipes, lyrics, or role-playing-game plans. For three tasks, describe at least one strategy, challenge, or principle that you used or encountered while writing.

Examine one writing story: Choose and analyze a past task

To start working toward your writing theory, you may analyze any writing task you have completed that is *recent* and *memorable* enough that you can provide

details about how you composed it. You may choose a writing task from another (current or previous) class in school—but you may find that you gain more insight into your preferred writing strategies by choosing or a writing task from your workplace, community, or personal sphere. You should also choose a writing task that:

- Was challenging in some way for you, so that you can analyze how you respond to difficulty
- Had some substance or complication to it (if you choose a single 140-character post, you might have a hard time seeing a range of key writing principles in it)
- Will be at least a little different from tasks that people in your peer group will have worked on, especially if you're going to share your analyses with them later

All kinds of writing "count" here: researched or fictional writing, long projects or short-but-important memos, paper documents or social media posts, and all genres from lyrics to lesson plans, from scrapbooks to financial reports, and from private journals to public videos. If you can find a copy of the document, that's helpful but not necessary. Remember that your goal is to *analyze how* you wrote this document, to *describe your writing process or approach*, rather than to summarize what you actually said.

You can use the questions below to help structure your analysis. You should consider multiple aspects of the process, including what good writing is and what good writers do. In addition, you can identify practices by using your own definitions, beliefs, and goals to help explain your actions.

Analyze the writing task overall

- What is your document and when did you compose it? What did you know about its genre when you started?
- What did you know then about your audience(s) and their discourse community, workplace setting, or academic discipline?
- What were your purposes in composing this document?
- What did you expect from the start would be most difficult?

Analyze the main challenges

- Discuss two or three of the challenges you encountered considering the **rhetorical situation** of by this writing task (involving your goal and expectations about your audience, genre, evidence, or design) and how you worked on solving them.
- Discuss two or three of the challenges you encountered engaging with the **subject-knowledge** required to complete this project (including breadth/

depth choices, assumption-checking, and analysis/synthesis moves) and how you worked on solving them.

- Discuss two or three of the challenges with **steps and strategies** you encountered in this writing task (planning, inquiring, generating, organizing, and/or revising) and how you worked on solving them.

- Discuss two or three of the **disposition** challenges presented by this writing task (managing your confidence, motivation, time, persistence, and/or flexibility) and how you worked on solving them.

- Discuss any other problem you typically encounter, according to your writing story, and how you worked on solving it.

Analyze your own writing beliefs

- What did or do you think a good *writer* should do or be, overall or for this kind of task? Discuss two or three steps, and how you followed them when working on this writing task.

- What did or do you think good *writing* should do or be, overall or for this kind of task? Discuss two or three aspects, and whether you achieved them when working on this writing task.

- What other threshold concepts did you connect with or not connect with while you were working on this writing task?

Analyze the parallels with other writing tasks

- If you had this writing task to do again, how might you do it differently and/or better?

- How is this task similar to another kind of writing task (in or out of school) that you might do in the future, and how could you use similar strategies to successfully approach that task?

Explore 12.2

Answer several of the questions above, including at least one from each category, regarding a writing task you previously completed.

Learn

- To learn more about writers' **dispositions**, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.

- To learn more about **rhetorical contexts** and discourse communities, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.

- To learn more about identifying writing **difficulties**, see Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project.

Explore multiple stories: Compare your experience to other writers

The story of your past writing task is individual to you and based on your specific writing experiences; to build a broader mental model or a writing theory, however, you should be able to connect your experiences to those of other writers and readers. Moreover, reviewing other writers' stories can help you fine-tune your own, especially if you discover that some writing principles are common across different writers and different tasks.

Your most relevant source of alternate writing stories and models will come from peers who are also analyzing a past or present writing task, but you can also review public articles, videos, or blog posts by successful writers (you might try an online search for "advice to writers"). You might share your own task analysis by presenting on it or exchanging a draft with others during class, or by reviewing the analyses other peers posted online. As you consider other writers' task analyses, you should take some notes about what they wrote, what was easy or challenging for them, and what concepts they focused on.

You might find it helpful to use a table or chart to keep track of common or changing themes:

	Their main challenges	Their foundational writing principles	What was hardest / easiest for them?
Writer 1 + Task			
Writer 2 + Task			
Writer 3 + Task			

To assess these connections, you can write about several kinds of patterns:

- Did these writers experience common and/or different challenges regarding rhetorical situation, steps and strategies, subject-knowledge, and/or dispositions?
- Did they identify any similar new challenges or goals from their own writing stories?
- What similarities do you see in how these other writers identified principles or threshold concepts that seemed highly significant to them, or writing challenges that seemed most difficult to them?
- Where do their models most overlap and most differ from yours, and what might account for those connections or contrasts?
- Finally, look back at your own task analysis with fresh eyes: can you identify two or three changes or additions you can make, even if they weren't as evident in the writing task you just annotated?

Explore 12.3

Answer several of the questions above for at least two other writers; you may use a chart layout and/or write in paragraph style. Try using a "what-how-why-so" approach to deepen your reflection.

Learn

- To learn more about strategies for **reflective writing**, see <u>Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process</u>.

From story to theory: Identify enduring views and strategies

Not every idea you have about writing is an enduring principle or common goal that belongs in your overall writing theory. Some writing problems are limited to a single task or class, and some solutions worked in the past but might not work in future writing tasks. In order to build an enduring model, you need to focus on the factors that most powerfully influenced your choices as a writer.

As you look back at your notes about your past writing task and other writers' views, try to identify a few kinds of experiences or trends that could help you choose important principles or fundamental concepts:

- What are ideas that you have believed about writers or about writing for a long time, or challenges you face as a writer, that you still think of frequently when you're working on a writing project? (You might have your own language for these, or you might be using new terms or threshold concepts to describe ongoing experiences.)
- What are ideas that you used to think were universal (or challenges you thought couldn't be overcome), but that now you are starting to think might be more variable?
- What are ideas or challenges that you are just learning about that are beginning to seem important, even if you're not 100% sure about them?
- What are ideas, challenges, or strategies that surface in several other writers' stories that you believe are applicable to your ongoing work as a writer?

You should choose the concepts or actions that have seemed or currently seem most important to you as a writer: these can become the foundations for your theory of writing. You might identify four or five of these points; you might choose as many as nine or ten, at least for now.

Explore 12.4

Write a couple of sentences each to answer the questions above. Recall our "what-how-why-so" reflective writing strategy, and be as specific as possible in your writing. Try to write for an audience that includes yourself and your peers, and to explain how these concepts connect to one another to provide a good mental model for writing and for improving as a writer. You can also use illustrations, charts, or diagrams to help explain your model.

12.2 Develop Your Writing Theory

Your mental model of writing can operate like a digital map of your writing world. You can zoom in to recall or identify specific attributes, experiences, or strategies that can help you respond to a specific writing problem. Eventually, though, you will want to zoom out to see the big picture, to identify the major principles and patterns that help you succeed as an advanced writer, and to create your theory of writing. From this perspective, you can see how writing challenges exist in clusters or neighborhoods: some problems are more likely to reside in your knowledge or assumptions, while others are more likely to have their roots in your purposes, or in your dispositions. Instead of having to actively recall every house on a block or every bush on a hill, you can remember a few important zones or routes and a few strategies that work for you in each one.

A generic map of Everytown USA won't help you find the best local pizza, and a generic model of writing won't always help you compose the business plan, website, or menu for the restaurant you want to open next year. If your goal is not just to survive a single writing class but to improve—and continue improving—as an advanced writer for all your writing tasks, you need to create your own map. Your new writing theory will help you identify the challenges, select the strategies, and adapt to the new contexts that are most relevant to you as a writer.

Select your writing principles

Like a city planner or architect, your first step is to design the major features of your theory. In writing as in life, *principles* are foundational values and practices that we rely on across multiple situations. Some of your major principles about writing may draw on the threshold concepts presented in this book, but some should be adaptations or creations of your own.

Identify key principles

If you've already taken steps to model your past writing, or reflect on and predict your present writing, you can refer to some of the writing principles you generated in those projects. If you are just getting started, you might respond to one

or more of these questions, thinking specifically of how they apply to your own work as a writer:

- **What is successful *writing* (noun)?** What one or two elements or features of your own written products (essays, messages, websites) make them successful, even as you move among different situations and genres?

- **What is successful *writing* (verb)?** What one or two approaches do you take when you are writing which help make your process successful?

- **What is a successful writer?** Which one or two of your values, habits, actions, or attributes most contribute to your success as a writer?

- **How does successful writing evolve?** What one or two elements of your writing have improved recently, or might change or improve in the future as you move into new writing contexts?

For your writing theory, you will probably want at least three or four core principles to help you cover a range of writing tasks, and you probably won't be able to regularly remember more than seven or eight principles. As you start to articulate these key concepts, you might want to make a simple list. On the other hand, you might prefer to represent your principles using another approach:

- **Sketch a visual map**, make a collage, or design another representation of your principles, using color, size, location, and/or images to show the importance of and relationships among different factors.

- Organize your principles in an **outline, chart, or columns**, to represent different categories or stages of your work as a writer.

- Create a **dialogue or script** to explain your principles to another writer— perhaps an expert writer or perhaps a less-experienced writer.

Your principles form the foundation of your writing theory. They may evolve over time but remain central to your own work as an advanced writer. If a principle stops being relevant or crucial, then it's no longer a foundational principle, and so your theory might need adjusting.

Explore 12.5

Use any of the questions or structures above to identify at least 4-6 of your major writing principles.

Explain your principles

Your writing theory is your very own. If you build it but don't know how it actually works or what the terms mean, it's like owning a sophisticated phone but not understanding how to use any of its systems or applications. You need to be able to explain what your principles mean and how they work in your real life as a writer.

You can explain the principles you selected in many ways. The questions below may help you explain how each concept or principle functions, what your reasons are for choosing these principles, or your plans to use them to guide your writing. You can answer the same questions for each principle, or provide different information for separate principles.

- **Trace the ARC (Adopt, Revise, Create)**: Did you adopt this principle from something you were taught or read about? Did you revise someone else's principle to meet your needs? Or did you create this version of the principle based on your own experiences and values? Why did you make this choice?

- **Writing vs. Writing**: is this principle about writing-as-a-thing (a successful document) or about writing-as-a-verb (a successful approach or strategy) or both?

- **Expert vs. Novice**: what's one sentence you'd use to explain this principle to an advanced writer? How might you explain it to a novice or less experienced writer?

- **General vs. Contextual**: is this principle widely applicable to all the writing you'll do, or most relevant to particular contexts, audiences, goals, or genres? Does the principle apply to all of your writing steps, or mostly to one stage or approach you encounter as a writer?

- **Principles in Practice**: give an exact example from one of your own recent writing projects where you needed or relied on this principle. Can you quote a sentence or two that you wrote to show what happened, or describe the exact choice you made?

The best way to test your explanations, of course, is to ask for another writer's feedback: which principles do they understand? which do they have questions about? what principles might they suggest adding or modifying, based on their own writing experiences?

When you can explain your principles in your own words, and show how they connect to your own writing in real life, your mental model becomes more useful and adaptable.

> ## Explore 12.6
>
> Write a sentence or two to define or explain each of your principles: you might indicate where the principle comes from or give an example to show how and why it is important to you as an advanced writer.

Focus on equity: Balance adaptation and aspiration

If you struggle with writing—and particularly if you struggle because you face discrimination based on one or more aspects of your identity—you may be tempted

to create or continue operating with two writing theories: one that explains how you will cope with writing when you believe you have to match powerful people's expectations, and one that explains how you write, or how you would like to write, when you believe that your readers will judge you only based on the power of your writing. Or worse, you might decide to create only the first "fake" theory, and never get around to creating the second one that is true to who you are as a person and a writer.

Like keeping two sets of financial records, keeping up with two (or more) separate writing theories could be confusing, exhausting, and even counterproductive. When you have to invest energy simply in deciding which theory applies, you increase your cognitive load. If one of your theories is a false front, the writing that it guides will likely suffer because it is separated from your values, and your confidence and growth as a writer will be similarly eroded. Novelist and civil rights advocate W.E.B. DuBois discussed this kind of "double-consciousness" as a drain on the energies of Black Americans, and dreamed of a day when people could merge all their identities without losing or suppressing any parts of themselves.

To be sure, articulating your writing theory won't by itself dismantle systemic racism or other discrimination, or force readers to treat you with respect. But the goal of creating this theory is to strengthen your own writing (verb and noun). You can lower your cognitive load and increase connections to your core values when you create a theory that deliberately accounts for what you need to and are willing to *adapt* to in some circumstances, as well as what kinds of writing strategies or approaches you *aspire* to use as often as possible. Every time you claim agency, deciding up front how you will write and what will help you choose your strategies, you gain power as a writer and a person—and you model for others how to use that power for their own writing.

There are multiple places along a continuum from "always adapt whatever the consequences" to "always follow my aspirations whatever the consequences" where you might currently anchor your writing theory. For instance, you might distinguish among the content, structure, and/or words that you will be willing—or unwilling—to adapt as you write. You might identify a few very high stakes rhetorical situations in which you plan to adapt your writing, and also identify some other kinds or scenes of writing where you want to strive to represent and/or not suppress your personal, cultural, or linguistic identity. Or you could set out a growth plan, with a specific and realistic timeline, for how you will explore your writing opportunities so that more and more of your writing aligns with your core identity and values, and explain who you will enlist to assist and support you.

Finally, you might seek to compose your writing theory so that you foreground your role as a supporter of and ally to those writers around you who have been marginalized or whose voices and approaches to writing have been suppressed. There may be room in your theory to express your principles about checking your

own assumptions, about increasing the range of "good writing" that you are aware of and value, and/or about challenging "rules" and expectations around writing that may unfairly limit the opportunities of groups of writers. As you continue to seek and advocate for linguistic justice, gaining confidence and skill, your writing theory can evolve in this area just as it does in others.

A writing theory is not a place to resist all reader demands simply because they are difficult to meet; part of being a writer is adapting to the expectations of reasonable readers. However, identifying some reader demands as unreasonable— as unrelated to the constraints and opportunities of the rhetorical situation, or as ignorantly or maliciously suppressive of some writers' access to a rhetorical situation or other advantages of power and influence—is also part of being an advanced, reflective writer, so all writers benefit from considering inclusion and equity as part of our writing theory.

Complete your writing theory

A theory about how writing functions (for you) is more than a to-do list or a collection of random principles: it's a model you can use to explain how writing usually works and how an advanced writer like you usually succeeds. You may currently have a theory about why your favorite sports team or political candidate is winning (or losing), a theory about why some actors become famous and others don't, or a theory about how to succeed as a baker, a biker, or a broker. In each case, you base your theory on key facts and principles—but you tell your theory to others as a story. The same is true for writing: you want to create a theory of successful writers and writing that becomes a memorable and persuasive story.

You've had a theory of writing for years already: every time you chose one word over another you did so because you had reasons to believe that step would contribute to your success. You might not have articulated it to yourself very clearly, and you might have relied on an incomplete or one-size-fits-all theory. In order to improve as an advanced writer, your goal is to create an advanced theory that is:

- **Integrated**: It addresses several stages or aspects of writing as connected to one another
- **Dynamic**: It can adapt to multiple writing situations now and in the future
- **Productive**: It helps you get unstuck and solve writing problems that you encounter

By these standards, you can see that "I just can't write very well!" isn't a very useful theory of writing. It treats "writing" as a single, static event (as if you are equally terrible at every single step or genre of writing), and it tells a story of surrendering to writing challenges rather than reflecting on ways to solve them. Even a cheerful story, such as "Writing's easy: I just wait for inspiration and then

I write it all down!" is useful only until the first time you get stranded with no inspiration; then it stops being true or useful.

To create your theory of writing, you want to consider all the relevant facts and experiences:

- How you have succeeded in the past as a writer
- What steps or tasks most frustrate you when you're writing
- What you are learning right now about succeeding as a writer
- What factors seem most important to you as you define good writing (noun and verb)
- What—and how—you imagine your own writing in the future

When you have all your information, you're almost ready to write your theory. All that's missing is a rhetorical situation: a <u>purpose</u> and an <u>audience</u> for your writing theory. Think for a minute how your theory might change if you were writing to one or more of the following readers:

- Yourself right now
- Your past or future self
- A peer in your classroom
- Another classroom full of writers, perhaps very young writers or more experienced ones
- Writers in your community or at your workplace
- Subscribers to your blog, podcast, or video channel

And consider how you might change or adapt your writing theory if you were aiming for one or more of these purposes:

- To help a writer who is stuck right now in a project
- To encourage a writer who feels stuck in all writing projects
- To support a writer who is facing new or more challenging writing tasks
- To assist writers in a particular field, discipline, profession, or community
- To remind yourself of what you have been learning
- To persuade another writer to adopt some or all of your theory

A writing theory isn't just a collection of words to sit on a table: it's a guide for how a real person, a writer, can think and act. As your rhetorical situation changes, the information, explanations, connections, emphases, and/or presentation of your theory of writing might change, even if just by a little.

Finally, consider *how* you want to tell your story. Which of the genres below might best match the rhetorical situation in which you're imagining sharing your writing theory, and how would your presentation change from one to the next?

- An essay of several paragraphs
- A letter to yourself, a friend, or a colleague
- A diagram, infographic, or flowchart
- A narrated slide presentation
- A report with sections, lists, and graphs
- An animated or live video
- A sequence of posts to share on social media
- A script for a dialogue or dramatic scene
- A song, recipe, user's manual, annotated map, or collage

As you compose your writing theory, finally, remember that your goal is to get beyond a list to a story. Stories *make meaning* out of facts. To make your theory of writing *meaningful*, you need to include your principles, of course; you might want to think about what order to put them in (chronological? most-to-least important? oldest to newest-learned? separate categories?). You also need to explain and give very specific examples to show how you understand the principles, particularly examples that show how integrated or flexible your theory is. And you should provide some of your reasoning for why these principles are so important to you as a reflective, evolving writer: that helps provide the plot and motivation of your story.

Explore 12.7

Briefly describe a purpose, an audience, and an appropriate genre for your writing theory. Consider the principles or fundamental concepts you listed earlier, and write out two or three exact examples from your experience that can help make your story about one of those principles vivid. Finally, explain one or two reasons you have for including one of the principles you chose, to help readers see the plot or motivation of your story and draw connections among its parts.

12.3 Apply and Adapt Your Writing Theory to Transfer Your Learning

The point of creating your own theory about writing is not to frame it and put it on a wall (or file it away with your other school assignments): the goal is to use it to engage every day with writing tasks and to improve as a reflective writer. If your new mental model is integrated, dynamic, and productive, you should be able to apply it to a range of writing tasks and writing challenges. Yet just as you shouldn't rely on a mental model that some other writer gives you, you shouldn't rely too long on a personal theory of writing without updating it. At any point

that some or all of your model stops working for you, you should adjust it: provide different explanations, add or change some principles, or shift your emphasis to principles that best match your current writing situation.

When your model works, you should be able to successfully complete the main problem-solving tasks writers face: to predict and plan for writing problems even in a brand new task, to solve or work around writing problems as they occur, to transfer your understanding about writing from one situation to another, and to continue to improve as a writer long after you complete a major writing project or take your final writing course.

Explore 12.8

Describe the strangest, hardest, and/or weirdest writing task you can imagine coming your way in the next ten years. Pick a tough subject, an unfamiliar or resistant audience, and/or a new or complicated genre (maybe you can invent one that doesn't exist yet!). Given what you know about this task and yourself as a writer, list two or three challenges you can imagine that might push you toward "writer's block" or feeling stuck. Finally, explain how one or two parts of your theory of writing might help you get unstuck and succeed at this writing task.

Part Three. Exploring Common Writing Patterns

Chapter 13. Applying and Adapting Genres

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify the rhetorical and dynamic features in textual genres
- Predict and apply key features of different genres as you write
- Determine when and how to critique and/or revise a genre pattern

You're probably most familiar with genre patterns through your reading or movie-watching: you know that the features and patterns of a horror film (or novel) are different from those of a romance or an anime film. But these patterns are

not set in stone. For example, in recent years, some directors and critics have identified "bromance" as a new genre, creating a new genre space between a romance and a male buddy movie. Similarly, if you ever watched a movie that was advertised as a horror film and you were disappointed because it was well acted but not very scary, you may have decided that the film *was not a horror film* but some other genre.

You've just learned the crucial feature of genres: they are rhetorical and thus dynamic.

13.1 Genres Are Rhetorical and Dynamic

The not-scary-enough horror film example can help us understand how genres differ from formulas or recipes. If "horror film" were a precise formula, then a writer could always follow it and create a blockbuster sensation, the way a chemist can always combine two molecules of hydrogen with one molecule of oxygen at a particular temperature and pressure and create water. But genres are rhetorical: they require an author who has goals to interact with a reader who has needs and goals of their own, and that human context keeps everything in motion.

Genres—in film, dance, music, and art, as well as in writing—function based on mutual agreements between writers and audiences, in a dynamic social paradox:

- Audiences learn the features of a genre from writers, by reading or viewing dozens of compositions that are called "horror films" (or memos, or poems, or reggaeton songs).

  AND

- Writers modify genres based on audience feedback: as more audience members think horror films need to be scarier, writers and directors start to change the genre.

As a reflective writer, you understand several threshold concepts that support the idea that there is no one perfect stable form of any genre:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

🚪 Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

🚪 There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting tuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

But just because genres are in flux doesn't mean "anything goes." Reflective writers also recognize and make use of common genre patterns to help us predict what a particular audience will expect and value in a document. Just as you can make an educated guess about what to wear to your second cousin's engagement party based on the pattern of previous parties, you can predict that some styles or patterns of writing are more appropriate for one context, one teacher, or one friend than another. Identifying and practicing these patterns saves you time, because you don't have to consider every single choice. It also increases your chances for success, because readers are often comfortable with writing similar to what they have seen before.

When you learn to use genres as a reflective writer, you can accept the ways they are both stable and dynamic, both predictable and adaptable, and learn to use them in ways that improve your ability to communicate with a wide range of readers.

Explore 13.1

Consider a writing task that you need to complete soon, whether it's for school, work, or personal goals. Write 3-4 prediction sentences—not about details like word-count or topic, but about larger patterns. What can you predict about the patterns your readers will prefer for your focus, evidence, or approach? What can you predict about the document you will need to compose, considering its organization, components, or media? What about the style: if this writing task were a party, would you show up in jeans, a suit, or a tuxedo or gown?

13.2 Genres Are Contextual and Powerful

Since writing is a social act rather than a random collection of rules, you can predict that every genre you choose (or are asked) to follow will have deeper roots, related to the audience, context, and/or goals of your writing project. And because genres are social and rhetorical, they are changeable: when a writer's goals or a reader's needs change, good writing evolves to match that rhetorical situation. The more you know about the context of a genre, and the more flexible you are in using that writing pattern, the more power you will have as a reflective writer.

Genres reflect and influence social contexts

In the discourse community examples discussed elsewhere in this book, a psychologist, a historian, a biologist, and an engineer walk into a bar in order to write a report. Because each person comes from a different community of thinkers and writers—a community defined in part by the ways they communicate with each other—each is trained to see different kinds of problems and value different kinds of information, and each will thus rely on different genres. For example, the historian uses more narratives with quotations, and the engineer uses more reports with graphs. It seems obvious that their genres aren't random, but instead reflect their predictable *ways of thinking about the world*. Through years of "thinking like an engineer," for instance, one writer has come to value numerical representations of information, and they know that readers in their professional community will value those as well.

What may be less obvious is that the patterns they choose for their writing will in turn influence the deep thought patterns of their writers and audiences. Readers who encounter the bar as a series of stories about former bartenders will have quite a different response than readers who encounter the bar as a series of numbers about its physical structure. Over time, for instance, readers who learn about a corner bar—or a city like Sao Paulo, or a group like the US Marines— *only* through reading personal stories may start to believe that every person leads an exciting life filled with surprising events. Or readers may assume that there is no reason to attend to structural issues like accessibility for disabled customers or abstract issues such as employment trends when considering neighborhood bars. It's not just that narrative genres have different content: it's that the whole narrative genre pattern is designed to promote one way of thinking over another.

Genres evolve and are designed

The office memo, the five-paragraph essay, and the objective scientific report in which "beakers are filled with 5 ml of solution" (but no humans with names ever fill them) did not appear fully formed on someone's desk one day—nor did a secret committee labor for years to create their perfect formats. A set of situational needs and individual human responses combined, and continue to combine, to influence writing patterns.

The "five-paragraph essay" common in school settings is a great example to consider. As a thought experiment, we can theorize that many of its features might be **evolutionary** responses to common rhetorical expectations from US academic audiences. For instance:

- Readers in a heterogeneous, argument-based culture like the US might reasonably prefer a clear statement of purpose early in an essay.

- Readers from a skeptical, scientific-method-based community like a college or university might prefer multiple points of evidence to be presented.
- Readers from a Western/European culture may find that the number *three* has many cultural and even religious resonances and so patterns involving *three points* make them comfortable—even at a level beyond conscious awareness.

We can also imagine how some of the five-paragraph essay features might have been **designed**. Suppose an exhausted middle-school teacher with 32 squirmy students, frustrated after weeks of trying to explain that writing is rhetorical and needs to be adapted for each assignment, decided to simplify the situation: "Just put your thesis in the first paragraph, give at least two examples in each body paragraph, and complete an introduction, conclusion, and three body paragraphs before you turn that essay in." This description certainly describes one reasonable approach to writing an academic argument. The students may have been so relieved to have one thing in middle school finally seem definite and reliable that they followed the directions, and perhaps the teacher told another teacher down the hall, and voila, the five-paragraph essay began to emerge from the murky fog of Hamilton-King Middle School.

Do we know the true biography of the five-paragraph essay? No. But some combination of evolution and design is likely here, as it is for other genres such as memos, reports, and web pages. And when we think of a genre's origins as social and dynamic—not just an inflexible set of rules—we can better predict what features we should replicate and which might be open to change.

Genres are predictable and adaptable

Scholars in writing explain that written genres arise out of repeated rhetorical situations: readers in one situation request the same information or persuasion or entertainment, in about the same amount, with about the same level of complexity, again and again. So writers begin to predict those needs and provide—by evolution and/or design—the same pattern of writing for that situation. Readers eventually find a pattern of a document that they're pretty comfortable with (a scientific report with an Introduction-Methods-Results-and-Discussion structure, for instance), and writers become accustomed to producing it, and readers become even more comfortable with it, and it becomes an accepted genre, perhaps even with a name or nickname (try an online search for "IMRaD report" to see how common this genre is now).

Identifying and predicting genre patterns

Identifying a genre pattern and predicting its key features can be extremely useful, because that pattern involves so many elements of a document, from significant

decisions about length, media, and scope of evidence to smaller features such as arrangement, tone, and diction. Some familiar genres are stable enough to be highly predictable: One glance at a poem, a memo, or a science-fair poster can reveal many of the features that distinguish each of those documents from the others, and by your fourth or fifth science-fair poster in a middle-school gymnasium, you can probably deduce many of the key elements of that genre. That process of analyzing a number of texts in the genre—whether it's superhero comics, vegan cookbooks, or kinesiology journal articles—is the best way to begin to identify what the features are.

Writers who predict genre patterns efficiently can increase the speed and accuracy of their writing significantly, because a single choice (this genre rather than that one) can help them predict a number of goals at once, rather than solving smaller writing problems one at a time.

Adapting genre patterns

Writers gain speed and accuracy from working with predictable genres, but we also need some flexibility. You may have learned a number of academic or workplace genres by closely following a model or instructions that someone gave you. In that case, you've probably been trying to make your reports, memos, client notes, team assessments, or performance reviews all look as much like one another—as *formulaic*—as possible. While that approach can be efficient, it has probably also felt puzzling or stifling sometimes, the way writing a five-paragraph essay for a standardized test does. Fortunately, there are better ways to write with genre patterns.

Just as community writing patterns include genres and their features, genres need to be understood as rooted in communities: human, rhetorical relationships that are value-based and dynamic rather than formulaic. A genre such as a memo is a temporary agreement among writers and readers. Readers generally expect names, dates, and subject information to be listed at the top, and writers agree to most often place that information there. But the genre can change, by evolution and design:

- A group of readers—or writers—can argue that the writer's handwritten initials, department name, time of sending, and/or all "CC" individuals' names should also be included at the top to improve the communication, and if other members of the community agree to change their expectations, the genre can be redesigned to meet new expectations. (Note how a long-ago writing practice—typing memos on a typewriter with sheets of black carbon paper between multiple sheets of white paper to make exact copies—persists even though the genre has evolved, in the use of the "Carbon Copy" abbreviation.)

- A hurricane might shut down the office for three weeks, requiring all memos to be exchanged by email, and since email already includes header information, then readers and writers might stop expecting the body of the message to repeat that information, and the genre evolves to match the situation.

- An influential member of the community may make a point of using one-word "Subject" descriptors that somehow always convey the essence of the memo's content, and because many readers admire and strive to duplicate that style, the genre may stretch a bit to allow for a range of subject headers to match individual styles.

These examples suggest that as you identify genre *features*, you need to situate them within the *activities* and among the *readers* for a particular document in the genre, so that you become aware of underlying values that may influence the text-patterns of the genre. You should collect and closely observe individual documents, but like a detective investigating a crime scene, you should look for clues all around the document to help you find interlinking patterns.

Since genres have emerged from communities, writers know that we can often adapt even very stable genres to meet our goals, our readers' needs, or the context in which we write. It may sound contradictory that a *pattern* must always be *adjusted*, and it's true that if writers adjust a pattern too much, we can lose efficiency and even disappoint our audience (like the screenwriter who created a non-scary horror movie). It might help think of genres the way we think of musical scores, basketball offense diagrams, recipes for Phad Thai, or designer suits. An advanced director, coach, chef, or tailor is always going to adjust the pattern a little from one performance to the next because the variables of the situation demand change.

Genres involve obvious and nuanced patterns

Some genre patterns are easy to spot, especially those that involve the media, arrangement, and length of a document. You can probably distinguish a literature analysis essay from a memo or a movie advertisement with a single glance from across a crowded room. Because the differences are highly visible, writers may not wish to make many alterations to these patterns so that they don't alienate or confuse readers. (A romance movie poster with 1000 words of text and a "Works Cited" section won't entice many paying customers.)

Other genre features may be less obvious, such as those that involve the evidence, emphasis, and style of a document. A less-obvious feature may still be crucial, depending on the genre. The font of the text in a literature analysis essay may not matter much, but the font in a movie poster can be crucial: we

think of some fonts as romantic (with lots of swirls) and some fonts as exciting (with lots of straight, angled edges). Writers may not have much flexibility to change a genre feature, even a small one, if it strongly influences readers' comprehension or attitude.

You may find that some less-obvious features also give you the opportunity, or even the need, to adapt the genre. For instance, a writer working on two progress reports may use the same overall pattern: the reports may have the same number of paragraphs and charts, in about the same order, with similar language and conclusions. However, each report may need fine-tuning to meet audience needs. "Report A," detailing the early stages of a company's new medical device, might be a report for the committee that is overseeing the project to review and then file away, while "Report B" detailing the final product might be published in the "Research in Progress" section of a company's website for all to see. The second, more public report will need more background detail, credible evidence, and polished style, while the first in-house report can use a less formal style and include examples of difficulties and drawbacks that are important for the company to address during development.

Writers can identify stable genre features—those that most help readers recognize and engage with the document—to help with planning early in the writing process as we predict how to focus, prepare, and structure our document. More nuanced genre patterns may give writers opportunities to adapt and revise the document to reach our goals and affect specific readers.

Using a genre pattern isn't a foolproof strategy, and even experienced writers can guess wrong about whether readers will appreciate or dislike their innovations. (That not-scary-enough horror movie writer may be surprised and sad reading the movie reviews!) But with experience, you can become better at recognizing genre patterns and using them to predict the approaches you want to take as a writer.

Genres can enhance communication

For both readers and writers, recognizable patterns like genres give us the advantage of speed, and some additional help with accuracy. Memo writers, for instance, may know that in their office they should aim for about 200-250 words, that they are expected to begin with a "Summary" of the meeting, and that they must include a "Recommendations" section at the end, so they can streamline their planning process. Likewise, biologists who are writing lab reports for other biologists can anticipate much of the content and vocabulary: these writers and readers share many of the same patterns of questions and patterns of acceptable answers. Some writers find that patterns even help generate rich thinking: if you are writing for a genre where readers expect you to provide consideration

of alternatives or counterarguments, you may find that you increase your critical thinking and creative solutions.

Meanwhile, readers who spot a familiar pattern have less work to do to locate crucial concepts and information. Readers who can predict that a key argument will occur in the first paragraph or two of a document can scan for that argument and quickly orient themselves to the main idea. Generally, if writers and readers agree that a particular kind of information or argument will happen at a particular place in a pattern with a particular set of language markers (like the word "However" to introduce a counterargument), then despite all the differences in time, space, and culture that may separate them, communication grows a little easier.

Explore 13.2

Pick a kind of writing that you do regularly enough— messaging, online posts, your journal, lab reports, a monthly committee summary—that you are familiar with its typical patterns. Write a three-sentence biography (past, present, and future) of that writing pattern: Explain one feature or characteristic that you think evolved or was designed to meet the needs of readers and writers. Describe one feature that you frequently replicate because it makes writing (or reading) faster or easier. And suggest one modification that might be useful in the future, either to include more people or ideas, or to adapt to new contexts, technologies, or situations.

Learn

- To learn more about **discourse communities**, see Chapter 3: Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about how **modalities** contribute to a genre pattern, see Chapter 8, Designing Across Modalities.
- To learn more about how **writing styles** contribute to a genre pattern, see Chapter 11: Editing in Context.
- To learn more about how **advanced readers** use genres to help them engage with a text, see Chapter 6, Reading as a Writer.

Focus on equity: Genres can reinforce discrimination and injustice

Since genres are rooted in social interactions, they can also repeat and even magnify social problems. At a minor level, any kind of formulaic writing can cause or aggravate communication problems when the structure limits the message or creates unnecessary work for writers and readers. For example, since not every meeting results in a decent recommendation, if every post-meeting memo

must include a Recommendations section, a lot of unnecessary proposals may get made. Moreover, one writing pattern may not succeed in multiple situations. The five-paragraph essay pattern that can help seventh-graders organize their thoughts in a report about dolphins might be less helpful for college writers attempting to connect with scholarly audiences using in-depth research in psychology or kinesiology—and it will be much less useful for professionals designing a website that coordinates health care for county residents.

Genres can cause more than just inconvenience or wasted time, however. Any genre is designed and/or evolves to promote some kinds of reading, thinking, and information-sharing over others. Writers should always check to see if a genre is overlooking or excluding key perspectives—or if a whole genre is missing:

- A survey form—or a document like a passport or ID card—that asks people to identify themselves as either male or female serves to erase people who have nonbinary genders.

- A research study that requires reporting only of quantitative data about patients' responses to a drug may overlook the effects of patients' mood or family support structures.

- A timed-essay exam that requires error-free sentences, according to Standard Edited American English, limits the contributions of writers who come from other language backgrounds or who have language-processing disabilities.

- A college course on writing might focus entirely on strategies for reading and writing US academic essays, without acknowledging the power or prevalence of other genres, especially ones that are central to marginalized US groups or international communities (such as autobiography, sermons, music lyrics, social media hashtagging, manga, proverbs, and digital or multimodal compositions).

The restrictions may seem reasonable at first glance, or they may simply seem "obvious": of course a writing exam should require "good English," right? But advanced writers need to remember that since genres are embedded in a social context, it's always appropriate to ask whether the features are improving rather than impeding communication, and whether *everyone* in a community benefits from the current genre approach. We need to stay skeptical and to keep track of what is kept unwritten or unseen.

In extreme cases, genres can be deliberately designed to exclude some perspectives or even to limit resources and cause direct harm.

- Application forms that allow one to become a legal, certified voter in the US have a long history (and an enduring present) of appearing to be "neutral" while being deliberately designed to require categories of information to which some citizens—especially people who are Black, poor,

elderly, or with a recent immigration status—have limited or no access, specifically to exclude those people from exercising their right as voters.

- School dress code policies in the US are often explicitly designed to promote fairness and equity, yet they often implicitly or explicitly define "neutral" dress as what is familiar to White, Christian men; common checklists that focus attention on hairstyles, head-coverings, and precise neckline or hem heights can unjustly increase the punishments faced by Blacks; by Muslims, Jews, and Sikhs; and by female or transgender students.

There is always room to debate whether it is the *genre features*—such as the agreed-upon structure, the acceptable evidence or style, the typical questions or categories included (or omitted), the most common images or arrangement of text—or the specific *content* of a document that is causing exclusion or harm. Perhaps the genre is innocent, and the individual writer is bending the content it to harmful use. Perhaps the individual writer is also generally well intentioned, but the social system in which they are writing (such as a school district that is trying to avoid lawsuits from parents concerned about how students dress and interact) is severely flawed. But reflective writers know that when multiple writers repeat content in a pattern, they create a genre where that pattern comes to be expected; to limit harm, we need to look for ways to break up a racist or discriminatory genre pattern and to invite other writers to join us.

Since genres can limit communication or even extend systemic racism or discrimination, advanced writers need to be ready to critique or adapt patterns when necessary. You might begin by changing the way you work with a genre in your courses or your workplace (see more later in this chapter on *adapting* genres). You might take your critique public to help change the use of genres more generally: for instance, if your workplace is still using lengthy quarterly reports that restate data available elsewhere (and that few people read all the way through), you might recommend a shorter report pattern that could increase cross-unit communication. Likewise, you may be concerned about how standardized writing exams ignore many other kinds of writing that have equal or greater value, and so may obscure the talents of some writers. You may not be able to change your instructor's mind by yourself, but you can join with others in a national conversation about teaching and testing writing.

Of course, writers should always evaluate the options and consequences of adapting or critiquing a genre. Stepping away from audience expectations does not happen without consequence; the not-scary-enough horror film writer, for instance, may see the effects of audience uneasiness with the genre-bending film via their artistic reputation or their annual income. The risks and consequences are likely to be higher for writers from marginalized positions. As a writer you might decide that the consequences of nonconformity are worth the risk; you might decide to seek allies or middle-ground routes to strengthen your position;

or you might decide to temporarily work within the expectations of the genre while waiting for a better opportunity to critique it.

Meanwhile, White writers and others from more powerful positions can use genre awareness to enact a commitment to anti-racism and justice. You may advocate for a broader range of genres to be considered acceptable for accomplishing writers' goals and readers' needs in a classroom, a community organization, or a workplace. When you identify genre features in a project you're working on that may disadvantage or exclude other readers or writers without improving the opportunity for communication, you can modify the genre in your own writing and encourage others to value new approaches to successful writing. As a writer, you can continue to help redesign genres you commonly encounter, while as a reader, you can voice your interests in inclusive features to help genres evolve toward equity and justice.

Explore 13.3

Choose a genre that you think you know better than many others in your classroom, office, or community: this can be a school or professional genre like chemistry report or performance review, or it can be a genre you use or see more in your personal life like diary entry, travel-site review, telenovela, song lyrics, or social media video. escribe a couple of major genre elements: ones that many people know or that are must-haves in defining that genre. Then describe one or two less obvious features or tips for being successful that insiders know: do these always work the same way, or do the best writers vary or adapt them? Finally, consider how this genre includes or limits participants or perspectives. What's one way you could alter the media, structure, evidence, style, or language of a project you would compose in this genre so that it might be more inclusive?

Learn

- To learn more about how writers can decide whether to **accept or challenge** readers' discriminatory expectations, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.
- To learn more about the **limits of Standard Edited American English** as a measure of writing quality, see Chapter 11, Editing in Context.

13.3 Exploring Genres Within Disciplines

Genres are inseparable from communities: they arise from and continue to shape the community. When a community or group has strong interests in how its members communicate knowledge to one another, scholars may identify it as a discourse community, like the communities of historians or engineers described earlier. You may belong to several formal or informal groups that use

some specialized, insider language, which is one sign of a discourse community: think of your friends who follow sports or who knit, who breed dogs or record music, who follow geocache trails or read science fiction novels, and how they talk and write to one another.

In a school or professional situation, you also belong to one or more communities that are based in inquiry and action: a field, profession, or discipline. Understanding how your disciplinary community adopts and uses genres is crucial to communicating successfully with others in that group.

Writers belong to disciplines, professions, and civic communities

Advanced writers are likely to belong to one or more of three types of powerful discourse communities:

- An academic discourse community, often called a field or **discipline**, which is defined by the fields of knowledge that members inquire about, the questions they pursue, the evidence they value, and how they communicate this knowledge to one another

- A workplace discourse community or **profession**, which is defined by the knowledge and goals that members value, and how they communicate with one another and with their customers or clients

- A public or **civic** discourse community, which may be defined by location (people who live in one town) but is also defined by the need to gather and communicate knowledge to solve problems faced by the community in the long or short term

Although individual readers or sub-groups within a community will have distinct preferences, they will also share with the larger community an appreciation and sometimes even an expectation for some key genres of writing. However, members of a community don't always clearly communicate their preferences to outsiders or newcomers. As an advanced writer, you will benefit from developing your own skills at identifying these genre patterns—and the inquiry and reasoning patterns they correlate with—and using them appropriately in your own writing.

Discourse communities have shared values

A discipline, profession, or civic community is a large, multifaceted, often ambiguous entity with boundaries that can be difficult to determine. Yet even when the community members don't publish a *Guide to Writing in the Field of Wetlands Ecology*, they have distinct and predictable preferences about ideas and writing that result from their association with one another and their commitment to the values of the community. Just as you can identify your own stance as a writer, you

can identify some key community values to help you predict the community's preferred genres.

> What *ideas* do people in the community value? In academic communities in particular, genres are designed to help solve particular knowledge problems efficiently: people in humanities fields tend to focus their inquiry on performances or texts, those in social sciences fields analyze people or organizations, and those in science or technical fields study measurable objects, processes, or events. When you know what information your community values, you can direct your inquiry and your focus to meet those needs, and select genres and styles that best display that knowledge.

> What *evidence* do people in the community value? Writers are often asked to "show, not just tell" their ideas, to better inform and persuade readers. But the standards of evidence change based on a community's needs. The participants in your I♥Poodles social media group need pictures, while the veterinarians at the hospital where you're interning rely on exact numbers from blood tests. When you know what evidence your community values, you can predict what genres and genre features will help you to explain and argue your points more successfully.

> What *relationships* do people in the community value? A community group that needs to raise money or build coalitions may need to establish a wide range of connections (and will operate in a request mode), while a group that focuses on bringing information in to its membership base will have fewer outside connections (and will operate in an expertise mode). When you know who your community is trying to reach or persuade, you can adapt your genre and your style to meet those readers' needs.

> What *attitudes* do people in the community value? Although it is possible for a workplace to feel like "Casual Friday" every day but require all written communication to take place using precise, formal memos produced every Tuesday by noon, that scenario is unlikely. The community's attitudes about formality, innovation, diligence, efficiency or collaboration will also influence thinking and writing patterns. When you know whether your community values speed more than depth, or correctness more than innovation, you can match your document design and key sentences to their genre expectations.

As a reflective writer, you need to be able to step into a new situation and determine how to proceed. Even though writers often need to fail and then revise, we

are more effective when we thoughtfully predict readers' needs from the start. If you can locate a model document, you may be able to analyze it to see what readers expect. When you have participated in a field or workplace for a while, you may learn common patterns and understand what they involve: *literature review*, *methods section*, *stakeholder overview*, *talking points memo*, *quarterly data summary, FAQ page, artist's note*. When you don't have experience or a clear model, though, analyzing the community's shared values can help you assess what kinds of writing patterns will help you succeed as a writer.

Writers compose within and across disciplines

At many colleges and universities, students receive valuable instruction in writing for particular academic disciplines or fields. If you are part of such a program, you may learn strategies for identifying genres and typical strategies for large discipline clusters such as "social sciences," or you may take a class designed to focus your attention more specifically on "Research Methods and Writing for Biologists." Instructors and assignments in these classes should help you understand the core values of the community or communities you are studying and help you practice the writing patterns that emerge from those values.

As you gain proficiency in these disciplinary patterns, you can move from general to more specific and flexible understanding of writing "in a discipline":

- **Identify values**: writers adapt to the writing patterns of sub-disciplines. Within "biology," botanists and neurobiologists and paleontologists have different values about what ideas, evidence, and relationships are important, and their thinking and writing patterns will diverge from one another.

- **Integrate values**: writers who collaborate across disciplines—or work in a field that is already multidisciplinary such as ecology or cybersecurity—adapt and combine patterns. A team trying to lower the amount of lead in urban housing may comprise a chemist, an engineer, and a city planner. When members of that team begin to write grant proposals and reports, they will need to draw on patterns from multiple disciplinary backgrounds, and adapt those genres for multiple audiences.

- **Adjust values**: writers prepare for new writing patterns. As professionals move into the middle of the twenty-first century, experts predict that not only will they move from one job to another, but they will move into jobs that have not been invented yet. When your parents were born, nobody had the job of "social media manager." Next year, you may be writing for a new boss or in a new field; in twenty years, you may be writing holographic brain-feeds for an orbiting space station corporation. But the writing will still happen in genres—in patterns that writers predict and readers expect—and so you can benefit from enhancing your genre-awareness skills.

As an advanced writer, you remember that it's crucial to be thinking about *how you are learning* to use community patterns to solve writing problems, so that you can think about how you will learn to solve the *next* writing problem based on how well you solved the most recent one.

Explore 13.4

Consider two classes you are taking this year that belong to different fields or disciplines. List two or three differences you can see between the kinds of writing that you have done for those courses. While those differences might just be due to an individual instructor's personal preferences, they might follow a larger pattern. For each difference, suggest how a community value—about ideas, evidence, relationships, or attitudes—might explain the difference you see, and help you predict ways to succeed in future writing in that discipline.

Learn

- To learn more about **reflecting to predict** how genres function, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process.
- To learn more about using a **model document** to help identify genre features, see Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project.

13.4 Planning Writing With Genres

You will need both time and practice to improve how you analyze and adapt to genres rather than just following directions or using the same strategies you used last month. It may seem easier at first just to use a single approach or formula every time—or to just shrug your shoulders and hope for the best as you compose. But successful writing is neither entirely formulaic nor entirely random: by identifying community values, genre expectations, and appropriate style choices you will strengthen your ability to predict many of the writing patterns that your readers will prefer. When you can identify the typical approaches that writers use and readers expect, you can improve your efficiency as a writer (because you can make a few key decisions that affect your whole document) and increase your success as a writer (because your writing will match more readers' expectations).

In order to predict an appropriate pattern, you often need to go past your initial impressions or the assignment directions to consider the reasons, goals, and values that are connected to a writing task. The questions below—which address community and genre choices—will help you identify patterns that you can use as you draft your document and revise your writing.

Identify patterns of document conception and dissemination

- What are usually the **goals** of this document: to explain, analyze, argue, or create change?
- What is usually the **path** of this document: does it go to one reader or group only? does it get collaborated on, revised, filed, or forwarded? is it re-read or kept available for days or weeks?
- What **media** are being used most often to distribute this document: only print, or also audio/visual or online media?

Identify patterns among document readers

- Are readers of this document usually of higher, lower, or equal **status** to the writers?
- Do readers of this document usually have more, less, or equal **knowledge** of the subject matter compared to the writers? Do they expect to be treated as if they have that amount of knowledge?
- Are readers of this document usually more, less, or equally **invested** in the subject matter compared to the writers? Are they curious about or resistant to the writers' goals?
- Are readers of this document all from the same **background** with shared values and expectations, or do they come from multiple identities and points of view that need to be included?
- Do readers of this document usually spend a lot of **time** with it or relatively little time?

Identify patterns in focus and support

- What kinds of **ideas** or questions are most commonly addressed in this community? what issues or questions are underrepresented or absent?
- How much of this document do readers expect to **summarize** what previous documents have already presented, and how much needs to be new explanation, analysis, arguments, or recommendations?
- What kinds of **evidence** are most often presented in texts in this community, and where and in what forms are they presented?

Identify patterns in organization, design, and presentation

- What **genres** are most common in this community: reports and memos, essays and narratives, blogs and newsletters?

- What **frames** a particular document in a genre: what do readers usually expect to encounter at the start and/or at the end?

- What other structural or **organizational** expectations do readers usually have for documents in this genre? What sub-parts of this document can you identify?

- What language or **style** expectations do readers usually have for documents in this genre: formal or specialized language accessible mostly to insiders? general or vivid language designed to appeal to non-specialists or outsiders?

Identify opportunities for variance and/or critique

- How have documents or projects in this community **changed** over time? What innovations can you see in recent documents shared in the group?

- What features of common genres or projects most allow for **author voice or creative expression** to distinguish one document from another, or to encourage a new trend or subgroup?

- To what degree do **diverse participants** in this community have or need a powerful voice to ensure that the community can grow, connect, and move toward equity and justice?

Explore 13.5

Take a look at an assignment prompt or instructions for a writing task you have encountered recently, and write two, three-sentence genre predictions. Write the first prediction about "what readers want" from a genre you are fairly confident about, based on the instructions or your previous knowledge: be sure to include some information about at least three of the categories listed here. Write the second prediction about a genre that you don't know for sure, but that you can deduce a reasonable plan for based on what you know about the community values or the likely genre. For each category in a task, you might write a prediction like this one: "In this task/assignment of _____, for a genre of _____, I can predict that readers will expect a feature such as _____, because I read/know/deduce that _____."

Learn

- To learn more about **organizational patterns** that get used in many genres, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing as a Writer.
- To learn more about **patterns of development** that get used in many genres, such as summary, explanation, analysis, or argumentation, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves.
- To learn more about **sentence-level patterns** that get used in many genres, see Chapter 11, Editing in Context.

13.5 Adapting and Revising Genres as You Write

As you plan and write, you may find that you need to adapt a genre in order to better reach your readers—or you may need to critique and revise that genre in more substantial ways in order to communicate effectively. When you feel that your goals or your readers' needs are severely compromised by a writing pattern, you can decide whether your and your readers' expectations can best be met by modifying the current genre or deciding to move to a new one.

Follow or adapt a genre

In a school or work situation, you might feel that your power relationship by default prevents you from any alteration to an assigned genre, and in some cases you will be correct. Many instructors or managers want you to learn a conventional pattern well enough that you can reproduce it successfully by habit, without variation. If this seems too restrictive, remember that predictable patterns help readers as well as writers. So rather than get frustrated by having to "stick to the formula," keep thinking about how you are saving your readers time and energy by putting key information in a place and style they are used to—like putting the dishes away in the same cabinet or using simple sentences to talk to your two-year-old cousin.

However, you should never assume that you are prohibited from asking questions about what is expected or suggesting alternative strategies. Writers who are familiar with a genre may not have thought to describe everything they know about it when they assign it to you, just as you don't always describe all the details when you give directions on how to get to your house, so asking questions can help everyone fill in the missing pieces.

There are no rules about when writers have opportunities to modify a writing pattern. A pattern established by a national agency for submitting a grant proposal may seem absolutely necessary for you to follow when the stakes are high: any variation could put your proposal in the rejection pile. In other situations, though, you may have more leeway, especially if you pay attention to readers' key expectations. A "five-paragraph essay," despite its name, isn't mostly defined by having five paragraphs, but by providing an early, direct goal statement, using closed-form paragraphs, and providing specific evidence throughout. If you write six or seven body paragraphs that succinctly but thoroughly address issues you predicted in your introduction, and they link smoothly to one another, readers may hardly notice the extra portion—and they might even appreciate the additional evidence.

Two kinds of questions may serve you particularly well in deciding when to follow and when to adapt a writing pattern. You might ask your instructor, a co-worker, or a mentor in your community.

- Questions about **priorities** come in two parts: "Which of these guidelines/ expectations/features would you say are most important for success in this document?" and a follow-up, "If ____ is a little less important, is there any opportunity to write it differently?" Whether or not an instructor agrees that you may write parts of a document differently right now, learning about the priority of features will help you complete risk-benefit analyses in the future.

- **If-then** questions help you consider exact scenarios: "If I'm writing ____, then would it be ok to ____ this time?" Some assignments or workplace tasks may not have room for you to improvise—but if the assignment is designed to have you directly affect an audience in or beyond the classroom, your instructor or supervisor may recognize that writers can require additional flexibility in how they use writing patterns.

After some practice, you should be able to predict reasonable answers on your own, and grant yourself some freedom to adapt a writing pattern to serve your and your readers' needs.

Critique and revise a genre

In writing as in other endeavors, your odds of success as a genre-bender or genre-breaker increase significantly if you act with awareness of the risks and benefits. If you haven't studied the patterns in your community or for your genre, you might do the writing equivalent of showing up unwittingly on Casual Friday wearing a wool suit and freshly polished shoes, thereby sending a message that you don't really want to belong to the community.

But it's not always true that "you have to know the rules to break them"—you see examples every day of people who break rules they never knew existed, and some of them intuitively or luckily gain success through such unplanned innovation. And in some situations, the rules aren't the most important objective: you don't have to spend many Saturday afternoons watching six-year-olds play soccer to see how much sheer joy can be had from thirty minutes in which nearly as many rules and guidelines are broken as are kept.

Moreover, you know that genres *aren't rules*: they were designed and evolved within communities of people who were no smarter than you are, and the genre strategies may at this point exist as much through writers' and readers' habits and familiarity withe the genre as by any active valuing of the patterns and features. As a reflective writer, you are likely to encounter more and more instances in which you need to directly critique or change a writing pattern altogether. You may see that a genre is limiting the writers who have access to it, limiting the readers who engage with it, or limiting the messages and actions it is supposed to promote.

- A four-part report can be easy for everyone to agree upon out of habit, but if it is too long for an office filled with new workers who need quick instructions, or too short for an office that is taking on a complicated year-long project, then that genre is interfering with communication.

- A beautifully designed company homepage that becomes long scrolls of text when viewed on smartphones is no longer functioning as a successful genre.

- An adoption home study narrative that does not include an autobiography option, so that families in an increasingly diverse community can represent their beliefs in their own words, may use a genre that limits important cross-cultural understanding among families, social workers, and adoption agencies.

Because advanced writers know that genre patterns are built on agreements and expectations rather than rules, we can critique the ineffective or discriminatory approaches and then suggest changes that will match readers' expectations while adapting to their changing needs. You can improve the lives of writers and readers alike by proposing changes and demonstrating the benefits of a new, dynamic agreement about how documents will function in a repeated situation. Your attention to underlying values lets you become a genre creator rather than only a follower.

> Your 25-page sociology senior class team project is supposed to be written entirely in the advanced, technical language used by senior scholars in the field, using an IMRaD structure. This approach would help you support ongoing research in the field. But everyone on your team wants to move into public clinical practice, and you believe that you should use the first two pages for an overview of the results, written in language that nurses, counselors, and clients could understand, so that you gain practice explaining key ideas to a range of audiences. Since many social workers consult with non-specialist colleagues or clients, this modification aligns with core values in the field without compromising the goals of the main document.
>
> Your teacher colleagues write short pieces for your elementary school's online newsletter that generally features stories about individual students who win prizes, accomplish goals, or create fascinating projects, with photos of smiling students that convey the positive social atmosphere of the school. You've noticed that a number of your students' parents work in the local research and technology firms; since you predict that they might value more factual data, you submit a story that includes two colorful charts instead of photos. One chart shows improvement in reading scores, and one shows an increase in student satisfaction with their reading choices; you also

include a couple of quotations from students. Since one community goal is to convey students' success to their parents in terms they can understand, your modification aligns with that core value without abandoning the "personal touch" that photos bring.

The town clinic you work for is run by medical doctors and requires you to complete client intake reports and progress reports that focus on questions about physical health rather than mental health or family issues, a pattern that makes sense within a traditional medical community. However, it may not help clinic workers acquire enough information to align their work with best practices in integrated health care. At your monthly team meeting, you propose adding sections to every report that address clients' mental health and family status, in order to expand clinicians' thinking and build team cohesion. Since those improvements will better serve your clients, your changes align with your clinic's core values.

In each of these cases, a thinking-and-writing pattern had resisted change even when change might be useful. Your critique of the pattern and suggestion of a new one, linked to values that your colleagues, supervisors, and/or clients share, will help everyone become better writing problem solvers.

Explore 13.6

Imagine that you have been hired as the Media Coordinator for a small professional organization—perhaps this is a charity or community group that supports a goal you believe in, or perhaps it is a professional organization that provides information to specialists in your field. Because the organization hasn't hired a writing expert before, they are relying mostly on two writing patterns: a one-page casual letter that they send or email to members each month, and a 15-page formal operations report (with lots of charts) that they post in their online archives twice a year. Identify your (real or imagined) organization, and then, in 3-4 sentences, explain *why* one of these documents should be adapted or revised to improve communication, and suggest a few steps of *how* those changes could be done.

Practice

- To practice **predicting** the expectations for a genre, see Advertisement Analysis, Audience Profile, or Genre Ethnography.
- To practice **analyzing** the features of documents in a genre, see Genre Triple Log or Remix/Mashup.
- To practice **adapting** your writing to a genre, see Diction Flexer, Genre Switch, or Stance Switch.

Learn

- To learn more about **thesis or goal statements** that anchor documents in many genres, see <u>Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft</u>.
- To learn more about **locating evidence** that will be appropriate for your genre and your readers, see <u>Chapter 20, Middle Inquiry: Finding, Evaluating, and Working With Information</u>.

Chapter 14. Selecting and Combining Composing Moves

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize how writers use and combine different strategies to develop their ideas
- Explore composing moves to help you describe and explain
- Explore composing moves to help you analyze and argue
- Explore composing moves to help you explore and reflect

Dancers have names for many of the moves they make: ballet dancers do *plies* while bboys and bgirls do *windmills*. While an individual motion (one toe point, one leg lift) is important but often too small for viewers to see, each overall move is recognizable by the audience and has a different effect: some moves quiet the audience down, and others provide energy. Sports participants or gamers may call this kind of component a "play" and knitters may call it a "stitch": not the whole game or even a whole strategy, but a recognizable and plannable sequence of events. These moves are less precise than a formula for a math or science computation, but they serve the same purpose: they allow an expert to make one decision that solves a medium-sized piece of their current problem.

Writers have moves, too: recognizable sequences or approaches that help us make decisions about how we connect with and communicate to readers. Some of our moves are more factual and others are more persuasive; some moves in writing focus on getting the details exactly right and others help us explore possibilities. Several of our threshold concepts for writing help us understand why there are so many different moves:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

> ### 🚪 There is no single definition of a "good writer"
>
> Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

> ### 🚪 There are many ways to solve a writing problem
>
> Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

For the purposes of writing as you use this book, you can think of a *move* as a repeated pattern that is smaller than a genre or an overall purpose, but larger than a single choice about a paragraph, sentence, or design element. A single document like a film analysis essay or a proposal for change will probably require a combination of different moves: some repeated for consistency, some different from each other for additional range or power. By learning how writers use these moves and combine them to create powerful documents, you will become more flexible and successful at solving advanced writing problems.

14.1 Identifying and Combining Moves

The nine moves identified in this chapter are common across many kinds of writing in US academic and professional settings, though they're not the only moves writers make. (You may have writing moves of your own, combining words and sentences in a move that will "keep my parents calm" or "show my boss how the whole team contributed.") The more familiar you are with these common moves, and the better you understand how each one enables or limits communication with your audience, the more efficient and effective you will be in your writing.

Dancers, gamers, and knitters often practice one move at a time. Writers can also practice one move at a time to improve our skills, especially in school. After all, each of the nine moves explained here—sometimes called *modes of development*, sometimes called goals or purposes—combines a set of smaller decisions to create a particular effect on the audience, and writers need to develop strong skills with each move. Moreover, often we select one move as a foundation for our whole writing task: we say to ourselves, "Today's writing project will be mostly narrative [or mostly argumentative]."

To practice a move, you need to know its main characteristics. The move called *exposition* (explaining) requires evenhanded attention to key details, a logical organization, and an objective style, while the move called *narration* may emphasize some details more than others and strive for a more emotional or eloquent style. At their edges, the moves may blend into one another: you might come to think of *summary* as a very condensed kind of *exposition*, or of *reflection* as a very self-focused

exploration. But you will still probably move differently as a writer if you intend primarily to explain a whole situation rather than summarize its key elements.

In addition to identifying individual moves, you will benefit from reflecting on how you can practice them and then combine them to produce an overall document. Like dancers, writers usually combine different moves into each performance: while a particular move may be repeated several times, the best performances include at least a few different moves. So writers not only need to be able to perform a move; we need to decide which moves will work together to meet our readers' expectations and accomplish our overall goals. Adding a little *narrative* or some personal *reflection* into an *argument* for a new recycling center can increase readers' connection with our ideas, but if we get carried away with a long story, readers may get distracted from our overall goal. The more familiar you are with the advantages and limitations of each move, the more efficient and effective you will be at combining moves in your writing.

14.2 Narration

Narration is from the Latin-based word for storytelling; it comes from a word-root meaning "to know." As you narrate, you say what you know best: usually, something that happened to you, or that feels like it could have happened to you. Our oldest and most enduring communications with one another as human beings are narratives, whether true stories or more fantastical ones. Writers narrate scenes or stories specifically to form connections: often stories strengthen the bond between writers and readers, and stories help link separate facts and events together in a way that readers can identify with and remember. Just hearing the familiar start of a story can relax or engage you:

> Once upon a time . . .
>
> When in the course of human events . . .
>
> Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive . . .
>
> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . .
>
> A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away . . .
>
> You better not never tell nobody but God . . .
>
> Hey, you're not going to believe what happened to me yesterday . . .

Narration focuses on time

It's not a coincidence that so many of these introductions suggest a time signature: when you narrate, you explain something that you know that happened at a

particular time, an event or a series of connected events. A good story, like a good song, has a pace and structure to it: even a slow-paced song rises and falls, building in complexity and finishing smoothly. A good story also has a purpose to it, if not a point or a moral: within a particular context, a writer wishes a particular audience to have a memorable experience or find a particular connection.

Narration is characterized also by a carefully controlled sequencing of events. Often the sequence is strictly chronological, moving from beginning to end in a single flow. Moreover, the writer emphasizes some events or moments more than others, to help readers connect. A three-minute marriage proposal might take several pages to describe, while a few key moments out of semester of studying abroad in Kenya could be described in a paragraph or two. Writers provide more details at key moments to enhance the emotional experience of reading about the event, rather than simply summarizing each step equally.

Sometimes writers decide to disrupt chronological order using flashbacks or other interruptions to pique readers' interest, such as starting a narrative at or near its most dramatic moment. While a little chronological variety can add contrast and energy to your writing, the more complicated an organizational strategy you choose, the higher the risk you run that your readers may lose the pacing of the story.

Narration gives a distinct point of view

Narration is characterized by a distinct perspective or viewpoint: the reader sees events as they are perceived by a knowledgeable source. Often this viewpoint is first-person, using *I* and *we* pronouns, since this allows the writer to draw on well-known details and persuade the reader that the testimony is accurate and truthful. (While some instructors would argue that first-person pronouns are not allowed in formal or school writing, you should be learning to question whether this kind of rule applies to all writing situations.) Sometimes the viewpoint is third-person: you can tell a story that happened to your sister or your uncle. The further the viewpoint is from the writer, though, the less knowledge the writer has, and more the writing becomes generally descriptive rather than personally narrative.

Thus, narration is characterized by a high tolerance for stylistic flexibility or innovation. Readers expect that different people will narrate the same event using different details, sentences, and words, to show how each person's experience is unique. If you are writing a first-person narrative, your sentences may use a style that is casual, eloquent, and varied, so that readers get the feeling of being in the room with you and identify with your perspective. Even third-person narration often uses vivid descriptions and active verbs to emphasize key moments.

> **NOTE: Narration's hidden partners.** You may have a friend who talks or uses social media to go on and on about everything that happened that day, making you wonder "What's the point?" Although human beings are wired to tell stories, we're not wired to listen to endless narration that doesn't feel relevant. Whether you're writing a novel or writing your notes from an ethnographic observation of kids on a playground, your narration should always have a point—which means that effective narration nearly always partners with another move such as *explanation* or *argument*. You might use implicit goal statements rather than state directly that you're telling a story to persuade your readers to act, and you may use open-form paragraphs that let you subtly emphasize actions rather than stating them in topic sentences. But when writing a narrative, you should always know what other partner-move(s) you are including in your project.

Use narration to deepen personal connections

Narration is especially good for:

- Testifying about your own (or another person's) experience when it is relevant and trusted
- Sharing an immediate, specific, humanized viewpoint
- Engaging an audience emotionally
- Freewriting to increase your own connection to a writing task

Narration may be counterproductive when:

- Your audience does not trust or value one individual experience as useful data
- You need readers to focus on your main purpose without distraction
- You want readers to remain objective rather than emotional

Narration is found in multiple academic and professional documents: histories and biographies, field or lab notes, training manuals, and minutes of a meeting.

Practice

- To practice **generating** narrative, see Believing/Doubting, Funny Story, Off on a Rant, Scenarios, Seven Generations, or Used to Think / Now I think.
- To practice **organizing** narrative, see Shrunken Draft or Six Structures.

> ### Learn
>
> - To learn more about using narration as a **large-project goal** rather than a single move, see <u>Chapter 15: Developing Projects that Explain</u>.
> - To learn more about **organizing** your narrative or adapting your **focal statement**, see <u>Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft</u>.
> - To learn more about **adapting your style** to your narrative, see <u>Chapter 11, Editing in Context</u>.

14.3 Description

Description (a word based on the Latin verb "to write") is a broadly applicable approach: you use it in nearly every kind of writing you do. When you extend it beyond a phrase or a few sentences, so that it becomes a major move in your writing project, you need to tune your writing carefully to the audience and purpose of each situation. As with *explanation*, your goal is to provide information; descriptive writing often focuses more on the exact ways someone *observes and experiences* an event or scene, rather than a more objective explanation of what features or steps are important.

When readers ask for more description, they are signaling that they don't think the language a writer has provided has given enough information to replace the images and concepts already in their mind with new images and concepts. Beyond just understanding the information you say, readers of descriptive writing want to imagine for themselves the scene or situation you guide them toward. If readers are unfamiliar with your topic, you might need to solve the problem by providing more details overall so that your readers experience all the important elements. If readers are familiar with one version of your topic, you might enhance their understanding by identifying a few distinguishing details as vividly as possible: every time you describe your house as "the one halfway down the block with the big red door and the half-rusted blue truck in front" or you describe your uncle as "the tall guy with the off-beat saunter and a smile like Idris Elba," you pick a few key elements that help readers build a mental image that is different from *their* houses and uncles.

Extended description focuses on concrete details

Extended description can be characterized by sensory observation: often writers focus on sights and sounds, but research shows that readers also respond strongly to details about smells and tastes, and we use our sense of touch to

estimate connection or disconnection. In past centuries, when people had less access to pictures and videos, descriptions were necessary to share all of these senses. Even now, factors like smell, taste, and touch cannot be captured by video, so people still need writers using language carefully to convey these elements of an experience or process. Moreover, as a writer you can improve on a random video camera by selecting which details to focus on, and for how long, to help readers feel the importance of one element of a situation. To convey sensory impressions, writers need to go beyond adjectives like *little* or *warm*, drawing on exact details like "two centimeters long" or "eighty-seven degrees with almost no humidity."

Extended description also relies on factual language: among the obvious facts are weights and dimensions, speeds and densities, intensities and distances. Writers may also need to consider other factual properties, such as materials, composition, interactions, distribution, age or origin. How many details could you provide about a penny in your pocket, or about a sports car you drove last week, that would help readers experience it the way you did? The facts of a situation can alter over time, or change after an intervention or catalyst is introduced, so you may need multiple measurements and attention to what has changed. Don't forget to mention facts about what is surprisingly present, or what is absent or missing: a car that is fast but has very little engine noise delivers a different driving experience than a car with a loud "vroom!"

Extended description uses metaphorical language carefully

Some readers expect description to be mostly factual: your organic chemistry lab instructor may not want you to include any details that aren't measurable. But your ecology instructor may want you to address the human experience in your field notes: since facts aren't always enough to convey that experience, description can also be characterized by comparative language, either literal or figurative.

One way to move an unfamiliar image or concept vividly into a reader's mind is to compare it to a familiar one, or to one that the reader can construct from familiar components. You can write that your best friend's house smells "like a pie bakery," and then readers who are familiar with some version of actual bakery smells will add that to their new mental picture. Using a more metaphorical language, you can write that your grandmother was "as comforting as warm apple pie": readers who know the smell will draw a connection one way, and readers who don't know apple pie may still think of another comforting smell to help the *feeling* of your grandmother come through. You might need more details to share an experience with your reader: if you write that an old building "smelled like apple pie that had started to go sour, with a hint of old shoe leather," readers will start to assemble a complex smell in their heads understand your experience.

> **NOTE: Integrating micro-descriptions.** While some writing moves like narration and summary need to be presented in sizeable chunks (because a story isn't much of a story if there's just one moment), writers can choose description as a significant move even when we intend to use it in small pieces. For instance, journalists or podcast writers often weave description into their explanatory reports, adding an occasional sentence describing a town or a person who they interviewed. When they do that kind of brief-but-vivid writing throughout an article or episode, the pieces add up to a move that readers or listeners can recognize: "That was informative *and descriptive*." If you think readers will value or benefit from more connection to an issue but not be excited by long, eloquent meditations on all the details, you might commit to your descriptive move but use shorter, frequent bursts of sensory or metaphorical language.

Use extended description to inform and involve readers

Description is especially good for:

- Helping readers replicate a key situation or scenario in their own minds
- Giving a multidimensional picture of important people, places, objects, or events
- Making an unfamiliar or abstract concept seem more straightforward or realistic

Description can be counterproductive when:

- Your readers already know most of the details you can provide
- You need readers to move quickly to judgment or action
- Your balance of literal and figurative description doesn't match readers' expectations for a particular discipline or genre

Description is found in multiple academic and professional documents: journals, lab or field notes, client intake reports, travel reviews, video game proposals, or documentation of important office achievements or needs.

Practice

- To practice **generating** vivid description from your own knowledge, see Expand and Narrow or Explode a Moment.
- To practice **generating** vivid description that explores another perspective, see Inner Three-Year-Old, Scenarios, or Three Cubes.

> **Learn**
>
> - To learn more about using description as a **large-project goal** rather than a single move, see <u>Chapter 15: Developing Projects that Explain</u>.
> - To learn more about creating **descriptive sentences**, see <u>Chapter 11, Editing in Context</u>.

14.4 Summary

A formal *summary* is a specific kind of exposition, usually designed as a service to your readers. The goal of a summary is to explain a large amount of information—from a single source or about a single event or issue—in a condensed, accessible overview so that busy readers can understand the key elements without having to gather, organize, and review all the details themselves. You can see summaries all around you: plot summaries of books or movies, official minutes of a board meeting, sports-channel recaps of football games, and abstracts of scientific articles. Often after we review a summary, we make the decision to read, listen to, attend, or view the larger text or event, so a good summary can serve as an introduction and even an advertisement. Many times, however, we review a summary instead of taking time to read or view the larger text, so the summary needs to stand on its own as a reasonable representation of what readers most need to know in a particular context.

In a school situation, you might write a summary as a service to yourself, in order to enhance your own knowledge of a text or situation: since you learn as you write, you can teach yourself a concept, a line of argument, or a process by explaining it concisely in your own words. Your summary can also demonstrate to your instructor that you have understood the crucial elements of a text, process, or situation. By framing your knowledge in the language of the field or context and identifying the most important parts, you can show that you have learned a way of thinking that is appropriate for that situation as well as that you understand a few pertinent facts. In either case, writing a shorter summary can help you identify the core ideas and arguments of a text or situation; writing a more extended summary can help you map out the supporting evidence, reasoning, or contributing factors.

Summaries are objective and accurate

A summary of any kind is characterized by objectivity: unless you are specifically told otherwise, you should not include your judgments about the quality of the text, event, or process. Often you will summarize a text or event that contains other people's arguments or judgments, and your goal is to represent those

arguments without indicating whether you agree with or criticize them (even though sportscasters and movie reviewers often combine summaries with arguments about what went well or was done poorly). Part of being objective is being complete, because if you omit a central argument or concept, you may unintentionally prejudice your reader for (or against) the remaining arguments.

A summary requires accuracy but usually not direct repetition or duplication: usually a summary should be expressed in your own words (using paraphrase) rather than as a quilt of phrases or images from the original. In a very few situations, a direct quotation may be acceptable or even necessary, but by translating actions or concepts into new sentences, writers help our readers three ways: we can use fewer words, link ideas together more smoothly, and adapt the diction to match readers' knowledge. (Writers may need to repeat technical language, however: there may be no alternate term for a *liquid fluoride thorium reactor*, for instance.) In order to be accurate, summary writers need to be careful and active readers and re-readers who understand the background situation as well as the facts and the reasonings or events under consideration; otherwise, we make errors in choosing and paraphrasing important points. Overall, writers should accurately represent both the topic and the stance of the original: if the original performance included an argument or a particular point of view, the summary should identify that angle.

Summaries prioritize key issues

A summary reflects the priority and then the proportion of the original: your main responsibility is to convey the information most crucial to your readers. Usually this will be the information that the original authors or performers deemed most important: their arguments, results, and/or key examples. Readers trust summaries not just to indicate generally what was in the original, but how much emphasis was given in the original. Writers of very short summaries often represent only what the original author emphasized as the most major point or two. Writers of longer summaries (such as encyclopedia articles or book summaries) should try to represent the original ideas in proportion to their original importance: if a third of the original text focused on a single case study, a significant section of the summary should describe that study.

> **NOTE: Avoid the summary trap.** While writing an accurate, balanced, objective summary can require careful attention, summarizing someone else's points or actions is nearly always easier for writers than generating our own argument, response, or reflection. When writers are unfamiliar with a topic, unconfident about our own thinking, or even just tired, we can slide into writing more summary than we need (and more than readers expect). If you are working on a writing project that

requires summary plus other writing moves, keep checking your work to be sure that you are making the right moves at the right time.

Use summary to convey background or complex ideas quickly

Summary is especially good for:

- Bringing readers up to speed on specific sources of background information
- Giving credit to researchers who contributed facts or theories on an issue
- Simplifying an important but complicated situation for novices or newcomers
- Condensing your own or others' complex arguments for quick review by busy readers

Summary can be counterproductive when:

- The text or situation is simple or already familiar to your audience
- Writers reveal so much that readers are no longer interested in the original ("spoilers") or lose their focus
- Writers need to focus more on analysis or argumentation in order to make progress or meet readers' expectations

Summary is found in multiple academic and professional documents: abstracts or literature review sections of journal articles, the opening of a public speech for a general audience, a legal brief or political white paper, the start of a performance or event review, an annual report to stakeholders, or medical case notes.

Practice

- To practice **condensing information** that you can use in your summary, see Boil Down, Elevator Speech, or Shrunken Draft.
- To practice **organizing source information** that you can use in your summary, see Source Synthesis Grid or They Say + I Say.

Learn

- To learn more about how **discourse communities** influence the decisions you make in summarizing information, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about **active reading strategies** that will help you summarize a text, see Chapter 6, Reading as a Writer.
- To learn more about strategies for **paraphrasing** other texts accurately and ethically, see Chapter 22, Integrating and Acknowledging Sources.

14.5 Explanation and Definition

An *explanation*—sometimes called exposition or expository writing—provides facts and examples that are thorough enough that your reader can complete a process, replicate a thought-experiment, or understand a chain of reasoning that is clear to you. Often as a writer you have more at stake in an exposition than in a description or narration: even if a reader misses part of a story or misunderstands the exact color of a house, you may still make a strong connection and convey most of the scene. However, if a reader misses a step in assembling a complex machine or misunderstands a key legal concept regarding foster child placement, the reader—and others—could face significant negative consequences.

In a professional or workplace setting, writers often have to *explain how* a process happens (or give instructions on how to complete a process) or *explain why* something happens, outlining the causes and effects in a common sequence of events or behaviors. In a journalistic or social setting, writers may write a profile to *explain who* a person is or *explain what* an organization or destination is like. In an academic setting, writers may develop an *extended definition* to explain a complicated term, concept, or theory that specialists use in the field.

Explanation helps novices understand and act

Expository writing is characterized by an expert-to-nonexpert orientation: writers assume the stance of a knowledgeable insider clarifying complicated information for a novice or an interested bystander. Although the reader may not be familiar with the material, the explanation usually focuses on elements and actions that experts generally agree on: Pad Thai should usually be cooked with specific ingredients and these steps, circuit boards function according to standard principles, and Maslow's hierarchy of human needs involves basic concepts that are important for managers or for educational psychologists to know. Writing as an expert to a nonexpert audience is especially tricky because it can be difficult to anticipate (or remember) what novice readers don't know: your mind is so accustomed to knowing an idea that it may skip steps, oversimplify an explanation, or rely on specialized jargon in a way that leaves readers confused.

Explanations are often written to be complete and immediately useful: where a successful description of a great meal can "leave the reader wanting more," a successful explanation cannot. If the Pad Thai tastes bland or Maslow's hierarchy still seems irrelevant to modern corporations or classrooms, the explanation has failed even if it was vivid, entertaining, or accurate in many places. Usability is situational, so the instructions that your Aunt Lu can use to make Pad Thai successfully in her gourmet kitchen will probably be different from the ones that your teenage cousins need to cook a dish for their school's International Day. Writers may need to experiment with several levels of completeness, accessibility,

and clarity, and seek additional feedback from readers, in order to judge whether an explanation achieves their goals.

Explanation addresses the parts and the whole

Explanation is characterized by a parts-to-whole focus: writers need to show readers what each of the steps, parts, characteristics, aspects, or contributing factors is in itself, and then how (and possibly when) each of those parts contributes to the overall process, event, person, or concept. Some explanations, like Pad Thai instructions, arrange parts in chronological order; others, like an overview of management strategies, may arrange the parts in order of importance or complexity.

If you have ever felt frustrated by a poorly written instruction manual, you know how crucial it is for an expository writer to keep track of all the parts and delineate all the steps. Even for a more abstract explanation, such as a definition of "childhood," breaking the information into parts will help a reader: what are the foundational elements of the concept? what are the most widely accepted elements, and what details or nuances help readers see the limits of the concept? In some cases, parts or steps may themselves need to be subdivided into smaller parts: for instance, readers may need to consider that the step of etching of a circuit board can be completed in several possible ways.

> **NOTE: How to explain to your instructor.** Many of the explanations you write for school assignments have the opposite rhetorical situation from explanations outside of school: you are a novice explaining an idea to an expert, your instructor. Many course assignments and exams ask students to explain concepts, processes, or events as a way of demonstrating their learning. Novices explaining to experts might well feel nervous, and might assume they can skip steps or leave out "obvious" parts, since the instructor already knows so much. To succeed in this situation, you might need to imagine you are writing to someone even less experienced than you are who really needs the information, and adopt a confidence you don't yet feel.

Use explanation to inform novice readers and help them plan

Explanation is especially good for:

- Providing background information or definitions of key terms or concepts
- Establishing your authority on the known facts before you move to analysis
- Identifying the key elements of one or more proposals, processes, or theories before evaluating their merits
- Assisting novices in adapting to new situations and learning new concepts

Explanation can be counterproductive when:

- Readers already know as much about the issue as the writer does
- It is written at a level of jargon or complexity that readers cannot easily grasp
- It is incomplete or not detailed enough to directly guide readers' thinking or action
- You need to be moving directly into analysis or argumentation in order to meet your goal or your readers' expectations (see "Avoid the Summary Trap" in the Summary section earlier in this chapter)

Explanation is found in multiple academic and professional documents: midterm examinations, lab reports, training guides, biographies, product manuals, and progress reports.

Practice

- To **prepare** to explain by identifying what your audience may need to know, see Audience Profile, Inner Three-Year-Old, or Question Ladders.
- To **generate** explanations, see Expert/Novice, Explode a Moment, Subtopic Generator, or Used To Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about using description as a **large-project goal** rather than a single move, see Chapter 15: Developing Projects that Explain.
- To learn more about **organizing** your explanation, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.

14.6 Classification and Comparison

Writers use *classification* moves and *comparison* moves (which are also sometimes called comparison-and-contrast moves) when we want readers to review a complex concept, issue, or situation one piece at a time. A grocery store and an online news site each use classification to help customers easily find what they're looking for: coffee is often classified in an aisle along with other "breakfast foods" like tea, cereal, and snack bars, while a story about a university lacrosse team might be either in "sports" or in "local news," depending on its focus. When we review products or ideas next to one another, we can then compare and contrast them more easily—two brands of coffee, or all the local college team performances—and take action based on what we see.

As you make classification and comparison moves, you will typically take three steps to help readers understand your overall goal:

- Choose the categories or points of comparison
- Provide details that demonstrate similarities and differences
- Explain how the parts integrate into a whole

The divisions you draw and the connections you build can help readers who are unfamiliar with an issue or concept see how it works.

Finally, you should remember that while classification and comparison moves are distinct enough that writers use them deliberately, these moves rarely stand on their own. Just as gymnasts practice their landing moves but don't construct a whole tumbling routine out of landings, writers use comparison moves to present ideas to readers but rarely set out to write "a comparison-contrast essay." Instead, classification and comparison moves should amplify another goal. For instance, when you divide a narrative into beginning-middle-end, divide an explanation or instructions into first-second-third, or divide an argument into for-and-against, you are using classification and comparison to support another writing move—and that partner move will affect how you design your categories.

Classifications and comparisons depend on writers' choices about categories

Choosing the divisions or criteria requires most of the writer's insight. A typical grocery store classifies all its products into categories to place in different aisles: one for fresh produce, one for baking needs, one for canned foods. Some products like lettuce or flour have obvious homes, but others require more judgment. Does your store keep raisins with the fresh produce or the canned fruit, or perhaps put them in the baking supplies or the cereal aisle? Each choice could be explained by a different rationale, and would make sense to different people. Likewise, when you finally find the raisins together so you can compare them, you choose criteria to focus on: price is an obvious comparison, but some people choose by considering package size, organic vs. traditional farming sources, trusted brand names, or even the picture on the front.

Your choice of categories or criteria to use should reflect your overall goals and your audience's needs. If you are writing to explain graduation requirements at your college to a high-school sophomore, you may try to simplify the process by using obvious categories such as core requirements and classes in the major. If you are writing to argue to your college peers or administrators about the usefulness of required courses, you might create new categories of classes—"continuation of high school, new but not-challenging, new and challenging"—to help your reader see your particular view. If you are comparing films set in World War

II, you could compare their lead characters and main plot points to recommend to your friends which one to watch, or you could compare the lighting, camera angles, and editing of the battle scenes to show other film scholars how techniques evolved over time. Advanced writers often look for unexpected divisions or criteria so that they can show readers a new viewpoint: arranging a grocery store into categories according how far items traveled to get to your town would not make products easy to find, but might help readers see lettuce in a new light.

Classifications and comparisons require organized details and overall integration

You can see how comparing two films based on three categories or criteria could challenge your ability to keep ideas organized, especially if one category—camera angles—has subcategories for studio and on-site filming. Unless you create a predictable pattern, readers will get lost, and the advantage of seeing the parts will dissolve into the chaos of too many pieces. To solve this problem, writers usually choose either a block organization pattern (all the details about one movie, then all the details about the other) or a point-by-point organization pattern (all the details about lighting for both films, then all the details about studio camera angles). Often writers choose a block pattern when the differences are obvious or the argument is easy to make, and choose a point-by-point pattern when close comparisons are needed to identify specific areas of alignment or contrast.

Remember that your organization should also enable you to help readers understand the overall concept: how college requirements work, and how war films are made. It's easy to get swept away by all the details of each category or comparison and forget your partner move: what are you explaining, arguing, or reflecting on, and what do you most want readers to believe or do? You may weave your partner move into each section or use it mostly at the start and end of a document, but you need to make it visible to readers.

> **NOTE: Not just black-or-white.** Writers are often advised to make their classifications *complete and absolute*. For instance, the vehicles in a parking lot shouldn't be classified into just "family cars" and "pick-up trucks." That classification system isn't complete because some vehicles are neither category (it's hard to get a whole family onto a motorcycle) and the boundaries aren't absolute, because some vehicles might be both (an extended-cab truck might be a family's main vehicle). Similarly, writers can be urged to have black-or-white comparisons: positions are either for *or* against, prices are either high *or* low. Those guidelines may not work for the complicated situations that advanced writers and readers encounter, so writers may need to acknowledge that some category boundaries are permeable

or blurry (sometimes writers find that a knowledge problem is hard to separate from a rhetoric problem, even though the categories are still useful), and that some problems are too complex to reduce to a balanced two-part comparison (there might be three or even four sides to a story).

Use classification and comparison to break big ideas into manageable parts

Classification and comparison are especially good for:

- Explaining a complex concept by breaking it into parts or comparing it to a familiar idea or item
- Demonstrating a new way of looking at a familiar concept
- Identifying the key similarities and differences that readers need to know to choose a product or action
- Assisting novices in adapting to new situations and learning new concepts

Classification and comparison are counterproductive when:

- Categories or comparisons are so obvious that readers see nothing new
- Categories or comparisons don't account for all the important parts or criteria
- Categories or comparisons are not supported by exact and credible examples
- Readers are overwhelmed with details and cannot follow the overall explanation, argument, or reflection

Classification moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: philosophical analyses, ecology field reports, tour guides, inventories, scouting reports, market research, and crime scene analyses.

Comparison and/or contrast moves are also found in multiple academic and professional documents: literary analyses, art or product reviews, policy recommendations, cross-cultural analyses, physical therapy progress reports, or financial planning evaluations.

Practice

- To practice **creating categories** that can help your classification, see 3D Mind Map, Evidence Garden, or Subtopic Generator.
- To practice categorizing **elements of your own writing** to understand your processes better, see Genre Ethnography, Not-Talk, or Source Synthesis Grid.

14.7 Argumentation

Argumentative or persuasive writing moves are almost as fundamental to human communication as narrative moves are: even very young children learn to argue for what they want. Some writing scholars have gone as far as to suggest that all writing is argumentative, because writers nearly always want to change or expand the way readers think. The argumentative moves described here will help when you want to directly and significantly change your reader's mind or behavior. When you argue, you need to identify the point of disagreement, adapt to your readers' current values and reasons, and provide sufficient, credible evidence in support of your claims.

Because we argue about so many things, writers have developed different strategies to support different kinds of argument. The three classifications of argument below identify common types of argument. You may find you choose one over another for part of your writing project, or that you combine them: perhaps you will evaluate three budget plans in order to recommend a sound financial policy.

Evaluative arguments focus on criteria and concrete evidence

When writers make claims about the value of an object, performance, person, process, event, policy, or proposal, they make evaluative arguments. In today's world of likes, reviews, retweets, and comment boxes, people do a lot of quick and sometimes superficial evaluating, but advanced writers need to build a more thorough case. Writers need to identify and state the terms of argument—the criteria—because the disagreements can focus on abstract or very fine points of distinction. The phrase "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" has its roots in difficult evaluation arguments. All "beholders" have the right to argue that their criteria and evidence for judging something "beautiful" (or *effective,* or *too expensive*, or *acceptable*, or *unelectable*) are sufficient and even superior to other reasons and evidence.

Evaluation arguments are characterized by direct articulation of criteria or warrants: since "beholders" may have different standards, you must clarify whether you prefer a restaurant that has spicy or creamy food, an employee who is outspoken or one who is compliant, the cheapest or the fastest printer available. Two intelligent people who disagree about whether a restaurant, employee, or printer is "good" frequently do so because they use different criteria, or they rank criteria

in different orders, to determine what "good" means. Sometimes effective arguments are built on convincing readers that the criteria they have been using are insufficient: someone shopping for a printer that has a cheap initial sales price may benefit from knowing how to judge the price of ink cartridges needed to keep that printer running. In other cases, however, you need to work within your readers' criteria: if your company champions innovative thinking, you will find it difficult to persuade your boss to hire employees based on how well they follow directions. Either way, your evaluation needs to state and explain your reasoning for the criteria you will use.

Since evaluations argue for an abstract position like "delicious" or "effective," writers need to be particularly careful to provide exact measurements or examples for each criterion. When you are supporting your judgments about measurable criteria such as the price, fuel economy, or safety record of an automobile, you will be able to provide verifiable facts. When you are presenting evidence of a more abstract quality such as an employee's leadership and ingenuity, you may provide exact examples of the person's contributions to specific projects at work, a quotation from a manager's performance review, or concrete <u>descriptions</u> of how they interact with colleagues in a team meeting.

Evaluative argumentation is particularly useful for:

- Practicing or starting your argument moves, since "thumbs up/thumbs down" is a fundamental human judgment
- Writing persuasively about abstract concepts, emotions, theories, or performances
- Uncovering the hidden assumptions or conflicting values that complicate other arguments

Evaluative argumentation can be counterproductive when:

- You want to summarize someone else's writing or position objectively
- You want to describe a situation vividly without having readers see it as good or bad
- You need to create room for multiple value systems to be considered as part of an exploratory analysis or policy recommendation

Evaluative argumentation moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: movie or restaurant reviews, performance assessments, client intake reports, literature or arts analyses, candidate recommendations, health guidelines.

Cause and effect arguments address both near and distant events

When writers make claims about the most likely *causes* or *effects* of a decision,

event, policy, action, process, or program, they must consider not just the nearby or obvious causes/effects, but causes and effects that are more distant, less visible, and/or less directly linked to the center of attention. When people disagree about what the causes or effects of an action are, it's usually because they're looking at more distant points along a timeline.

For instance, few people watching an interview with survivors of a severe weather event will disagree about the immediate causes or effects: a tornado destroying a mobile home clearly caused injuries to the people inside the home. However, many people will disagree about more-distant causes of the family's suffering: did the town need better warning systems? do neighborhoods need more shelters or stricter building codes? Is climate change a factor? Many other people will disagree about the long-term effects: will paying the victims' medical and reconstruction costs affect the state budget? Will repeated tornados lower property values or drive down the town's population?

Causal arguments are characterized by attention to multiple possibilities. Very few events that involve complex natural or social environments have a single cause or a single effect. If you and your readers disagree about causes or effects, you are likely focusing on different decisions or priorities. To argue effectively, you need to imagine how alternate choices or forces could lead to different outcomes. You may find it useful to map out several steps in the causal chain that you expect your readers usually follow (A → B → C → D) so that you can identify the point of disagreement and provide evidence to support your alternate version (A → B → P → Q).

Finally, writers making causal arguments need to provide specific evidence to demonstrate the likelihood of each step in a process. If you skip steps or move too quickly through them—"Since the tornado destroyed 10% of houses in Arcadia this spring, it's obvious that our summer tourism income will drop by 50% over the next five years"—you will lose credibility. You may rely on measurable data (how many summer rental houses were destroyed), relevant comparisons (the revenue problems of a similar town after a tornado five years ago), or carefully mapped extrapolations (since surveys show tourists choose this town primarily for its 1970s vibe, replacement houses may be less attractive). The more carefully you can map out and support a sequence of events, the more persuasive you will be.

Causal argumentation is particularly useful for:

- Analyzing the complexity of a situation or decision
- Identifying events or situations that need additional research or study before new action is taken
- Uncovering the backstory or generalizations that complicate other arguments

Causal argumentation can be counterproductive when:

- You don't have credible data to support each step you identify in the chain of events
- You want to describe the value or benefits of a situation without being distracted by discussions of blame or liability
- You want to help readers explore possible ideas without getting caught up in precisely how they will work

Causal argumentation moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: lab reports, accident site analyses, analyses of historical events, medical research, sports journalism, financial planning, environmental studies.

Policy arguments respond to readers' values and resistances

Writers who want to change the world around them compose arguments that recommend solutions, actions, or policies for readers to adopt. At a national level, writers might propose a new environmental law; at a local level, writers might propose a new policy for speed limits on campus. Even at a personal level, you can see how job applications, plans for a start-up business selling handmade toys, and even marriage proposals all argue that someone should value you and take new action based on that value. Persuading readers to change their actions or their fundamental principles is often more difficult than asking them to agree that a laser printer is cost-effective or that eating too much fast food causes health problems. So people who write proposals and recommendations for change need to understand their own arguments and also prepare counterarguments for readers who might be skeptical or resistant to change.

Policy arguments often include evaluative arguments: writers need to demonstrate that a change will lead to "good" behavior, security, or progress. Because we know that readers resist change, writers need to choose criteria that closely match what readers already value: for example, your job application will emphasize skills that a specific employer needs in order to convince them to hire you. Policy arguments also often include cause-effect arguments: writers need to provide evidence to show how the new policy or action will lead, step by step, to the promised results. Skeptical readers may agree that a change would be beneficial (when drivers slow down, pedestrians on campus are less at risk) but they may still wonder whether a few signs or speed bumps would really cause all drivers to slow down.

In order to recommend a new policy or solution, writers will need to:

- Demonstrate how or why the current situation is problematic: if readers don't see a problem, they won't make an effort to change
- Identify and write to an audience that has the power to make or assist with a change

- Provide a clear plan of action with evidence that the plan is reasonable and feasible
- Respond to readers' strongest objections: will readers think the change conflicts with their principles, uses too much of their time or money, or requires too much effort for the benefits they will receive?

If a change were obvious and easy, it would already be adopted: writers generally don't need to argue that people should wear warmer clothes when it's cold outside. Writers who argue for change need to provide vivid examples and credible evidence that connect directly to readers' own goals, values, and abilities—and directly address and refute readers' protests.

Policy argumentation is particularly useful for:

- Addressing complicated issues that directly affect readers' lives
- Using your writing expertise to help readers move from dissatisfaction to positive action
- Taking an evaluative or causal argument to the next level of action and change

Policy argumentation can be counterproductive when:

- You don't yet know why your readers might be skeptical or resistant to change
- You don't have time or knowledge to fully address readers' resistances, or readers don't have time or power to make a change
- You want to describe a situation to connect with readers but you're not yet ready to suggest improvements

Policy argumentation moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: grant or project proposals, annual budgets, purchasing recommendations, opinions or op-eds, campaign speeches and political platforms, and personnel reviews.

Practice

- To practice **evaluative** arguments, see Believing/Doubting or Out On a Limb.
- To practice **causal** arguments, see Advertisement Analysis or Cause-Effect Map.
- To practice **policy** arguments, see Elevator Speech or Evil Genie.
- To practice **anticipating reader resistance**, see Assumption Inspection, Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Counterargument Generator, Reason Appallingly.

> **Learn**
>
> - To learn more about **argumentation as a large-project goal** rather than a single move, see <u>Chapter 17, Developing Projects that Argue</u>.
> - To learn more about **refutation** as a part of argumentation, see <u>Chapter 18, Developing Projects that Propose Change</u>.

14.8 Synthesis

Synthesis moves require writers to combine ideas from different sources, voices, perspectives, and/or fields, in a way that both summarizes the information and creates a new perspective. If you've ever heard the saying, "The whole is greater than just the sum of its parts," you've heard a description of synthesis work. This writing move is not just about arranging the pieces, but about drawing connections so that readers have an "aha!" moment that could not come from just looking at one piece or another.

While most writers use description and argument regularly in our daily lives, we typically don't have as much experience with formal synthesis. However, if you recently checked several websites for reviews of the latest smartphone so that you could tell your cousin which one to buy, you were using synthesis. Student writers are most likely to encounter synthesis moves in writing projects that draw on information from multiple articles or books, like a researched argument about generative artificial intelligence bots or a proposal about responding to local flooding. In the workplace, you might need to combine information from several branch office annual reports as you do an efficiency analysis to recommend which offices to expand or close.

Thinking about each of these cases, you can see how many steps are involved: synthesis writers need to identify what information readers need, locate credible sources, understand the information from each source, select and arrange the most relevant and engaging information, and draw a reasonable conclusion that makes one "big picture" from all of the parts. Sometimes writers think of synthesis as describing and joining a conversation, in order to imagine how all the parts fit together.

Synthesis requires accurate representation of others' perspectives

Synthesis writing draws on some of the same strategies that summary writing does. You might find that summarizing each source helps you prepare for synthesis, since one goal is to accurately represent the arguments and evidence of each voice or perspective that you include. As in the case of summary, synthesis writers need to read critically so that they fully understand each component

source. Writers will often use a blend of paraphrased information and integrated quotations to represent key ideas from each source.

Synthesis writers need to strive for three additional kinds of accuracy.

- Writers need to give a **complete** representation. Sometimes it is obvious what "complete" means: a manager needs to read and include information from reports of all seven branch offices, not just two or three. Other times, when you are investigating a new issue like the effects of local flooding, you won't know the whole story at the start, and you will need to review multiple sources to identify what experts deem most relevant.

- Writers need to give a **credible** representation. At a basic level, each individual source needs to be trusted by your readers; you can also build trust by demonstrating that you are not relying only on one kind of source or perspective.

- Writers need to give a **proportional** representation. If you find a dozen sources that demonstrate how climate change influences flooding and one source that argues that flooding is not related to larger climate issues, you cannot refer to just one source from each perspective if you want to provide an accurate representation.

Synthesis writing is thus not about finding a particular number of sources. To have credible coverage of an issue, you will often need to gather more information at first than you need to include in your project, and then select the most useful combination of perspectives.

Synthesis requires integration of the writer's views with other sources

Synthesis writing draws on some of the same strategies that argument writing does, because writers need to create a new perspective. Although synthesis strives for accuracy and balance, it is not truly objective writing: by selecting or not selecting a source, by including or not including some information, you are influencing readers to see a particular picture. You will thus find it helpful to identify your main goal and your readers' needs: do you want to emphasize an established position or set the foundation for creating a new argument? will you write for professional readers who want a quick overview or resistant readers who need in-depth evidence? You should design an initial plan or working thesis early in your writing process, in order to guide you in locating relevant, credible sources.

As a synthesis writer, you can try out different approaches: you might want to:

- **Demonstrate a significant consensus**. For example, you could integrate data from several years' worth of state and county reports to persuade readers that the flooding caused by King Tides in southern Florida is

> costing taxpayers significant money. (Writers can use signal words such as *Similarly, Likewise*, *In addition*, and *Moreover* to show how ideas add up to a big picture.)

- **Identify trends in a professional conversation** or reveal gaps in understanding. For example, you could connect election-year reporting from several online news sites to show which kind of voters are most often quoted, and which groups of voters are being left out of the reports. (Writers can use signal words such as *In addition, Generally*, or *Frequently* to show trends and signals such as *However, On the other hand,* or *Instead* to indicate a contradiction or gap.)

- **Create new understandings** by linking contrasting ideas or drawing from different fields. For example, you could connect sociological research on how communities respond to epidemics to medical research about how vaccines provide disease immunity in order to recommend an effective response to a new disease outbreak. (Writers can use signal words such as *Likewise*, *In the same way*, or *Furthermore* to represent connections and signals such as *For instance* or *As a result* to show deeper connections.)

In synthesis, writers emphasize our own perspective through selection, arrangement, and use of framing statements. In your recommendation about buying a smartphone, you might select information about speed and battery life for your cousin who travels a lot for business, and include less information about cameras. Your arrangement should also help readers spot your priorities: instead of describing ideas from one source at a time, try to use a point-by-point organizational structure based on key ideas or high-priority data. In a report on efficient branch offices, you could draft a section about annual profits and then a section about numbers of clients served, rather than describing each office one at a time.

Finally, you can use framing statements to help readers see patterns and draw the most important connections: depending on the genre, these sentences often come at the starts and/or conclusions of paragraphs or sections. In your analysis of King Tide flooding, you might introduce one section by indicating the points experts agree on, and introduce a second section by pointing out areas where further research needs to be done.

> **NOTE: Alternate between reading and writing.** Sometimes novice writers are tempted to write their ideas first, and then go look for sources that support them. That approach emphasizes your own contribution, but it can lower your accuracy: you might not look for voices that could add to or even contradict your assumptions, and so your synthesis would be incomplete. Other novice writers plan to do all their reading and notetaking first and then write up the results.

That approach can give you a broad picture of others' ideas, but it can diminish your own contribution. After reading lots of detailed reports by knowledgeable experts, even advanced writers can lose track of our own ideas or goals, or lose confidence in our ability to add to the conversation, and so we fall into a "summary trap" of repeating others' ideas in no particular order rather than writing true synthesis.

The best synthesis writing comes from a recursive process, in which writers go back and forth—several times—between reading others' ideas and identifying their own conclusions. You may need to gather a few sources and then step back to consider your goals and your readers' needs: do your findings still fit with your goals, and are you directly stating your conclusions? You may want to draft the first section of a synthesis and then stop and check: are you drawing on a credible and proportional set of source material, or do you need to locate better information? Your recursive process will help you fully integrate and balance multiple perspectives.

Use synthesis to re-present a complex issue

Synthesis writing is especially good for:

- Condensing in-depth research to share with a busy or inexperienced reader
- Demonstrating the breadth of consensus about an issue to reassure a skeptical reader
- Identifying gaps in current experts' understanding of an issue to justify a new line of investigation
- Assisting novices in adapting to new situations and learning new concepts

Synthesis writing is counterproductive when:

- Most or all sources say the same thing, and so you have nothing new to add
- Readers are too busy or too inexperienced to want all the details and just need recommendations
- You don't understand what the experts in the field are explaining well enough to share it with readers
- You don't have time or resources to identify diverse and credible sources

Synthesis moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: scholarly journal articles (especially any "literature review" sections), textbooks and guidebooks, corporate or organization reports, grant proposal justifications, and best-of-the-year reports on movies, music, or sports.

Practice

- To practice **preparing** for synthesis by collecting and organizing information, see <u>Date My Topic</u>, <u>Evidence Shopping List</u>, or <u>Source Synthesis Grid</u>.
- To practice **structuring and generating** your synthesis writing, see <u>Subtopic Generator</u> or <u>They Say + I Say</u>.

Learn

- To learn more about **active reading** strategies that can help you prepare for synthesis, see <u>Chapter 6, Reading as a Writer</u>.
- To learn more about using **signal words** to improve cohesion in your synthesis, see <u>Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft</u>.
- To learn more about **integrating source material** into your own synthesis writing, see <u>Chapter 22, Integrating and Acknowledging Sources</u>.

14.9 Exploration

Exploratory writing borrows from narration, explanation, and argument: writers may draw on a personal experience or story, and they often plan to demonstrate a point. However, writers who are exploring will focus on hypotheses and possibilities rather than only measurable facts. Instead of just narrating the events from your recent vacation in Guyana and showing how they have already changed your perspective, you might predict the *possible* long-term effects on your views, consider how a similar experience *might* affect other college students, or *investigate* some reasons why the idea of "vacation" could be complicated when people from rich nations visit locations with high local poverty levels. Exploratory writing should engage readers and stretch their understanding without being so vague or outlandish that they doubt its credibility.

Exploratory writing is most common in texts that consider how people experience their world: in these documents, writers may associate a concrete experience (starting college) with a more philosophical question (what does it mean to be "educated"?), or in projects where writers extrapolate from current events to hypothesize about human nature, social mores, ecological relationships, or innovative solutions. The first writers to examine an obvious problem like youth obesity and then propose how a tax on soft drinks might improve young people's health were exploring that idea without any way to know if it would actually work.

You may find that exploratory writing is most useful to you as a generative approach that helps with your initial thinking on a project or helps you get un-stuck in the middle of a longer project. But exploratory writing also has a valid place

even in formal academic, scientific, or professional writing: when someone asks you to "think outside of the box" for a proposal, a hypothesis, a design plan, or the recommendations section of your research report, you might well respond with exploratory writing rather than expository or argumentative moves.

Exploration features connections and suggestions

Exploratory writing is characterized by association and suggestion. Writers often consider connections that aren't immediately obvious: instead of describing a rainy day by identifying common items like puddles and umbrellas, an exploratory writer might associate the same rain with particular memories or emotions from childhood, with a concept of seasonality or change, with other kinds of water present in our daily lives, with other ways that people seek shelter from discomfort, or with the possibilities of drought or flooding that have occurred or may occur over a long period of time. A writer exploring a recent vacation might use question prompts such as *who*, *where*, *when*, and *why* to draw connections to other people who vacation, other places that people travel to, other times when people have traveled or will travel, and other reasons people give for traveling, whether for business or pleasure.

Exploratory writing usually has a goal or a point, but may not state that point as directly as argumentative writing does. Often writers begin with a question or an area of inquiry rather than with a claim or a recommendation, and conclude with a suggestion for next steps rather than a certainty about what's right. When you explore to improve your own understanding, you may find it's easier to keep an open mind if you aim to generate several different suggestions rather than aim for a single solution. When you decide to share exploratory writing with readers, you can incorporate more implicit claims and concept-based arguments: instead of starting a section of writing with a direct claim and evidence for your decision, you might use a more open-form paragraph structure that starts by identifying several options and closes by helping readers focus on one or more new ideas.

Exploration represents risky thinking reasonably

Exploratory writers need to tolerate and even enjoy risk-taking. A writer who concludes that "good friends are worth their weight in gold," for instance, takes few risks: both the writer and the reader likely agreed with that idea from the start. Although you may not think of yourself as a "creative writer," at least not in terms of writing in genres such as fiction or poetry, you know that all writers and leaders benefit from using strategies to think and write creatively about important issues. Fortunately, research shows that you can increase your creativity by deliberately practicing exploratory thinking.

- **Seek unusual angles or perspectives**. Once you have studied an idea enough to know the most typical ideas or scenarios, seek approaches that differ: draw on what's uncommon about your own experience; consider how people distant from you in location, age, or time would think; reframe a question by emphasizing what is often hidden or missing.

- **Consider provocative combinations**. Just as a description of a peanut-butter-and-pickle sandwich will engage readers who might be bored with a peanut-butter-and-jelly scenario, you can experiment with unusual connections: pick two people, two actions, two professions, or two principles that don't usually appear together and explore how they might have relevant connections.

- **Exaggerate or invert the current scene**. Explore a problem or scenario by exaggerating it (imagine it as being many times better or worse, much larger or smaller) or even converting it to an opposite scene (imagine that an election result is reversed, a tragedy never happened, or a fundamental force like gravity is absent).

- **Set more or fewer limits**. Consider new options by changing the boundaries: give yourself only 50 words or challenge yourself to write 500 words very quickly; assume you have unlimited funding or only $10 to solve a problem; consider the impact of an idea on a single five-year-old or a whole country; design a policy that nobody—or everybody—would object to.

- **Manage your dispositions**. Support your exploratory thinking by starting early so that you can step away and then come back later to a project; by changing your context through exercise, new experiences, or travel (even just to the other side of campus); and by telling yourself encouraging stories to improve your confidence and motivation.

To balance out risky ideas, exploratory writers can use careful progression, extrapolated support, and hedge language so that readers don't dismiss the ideas as random or fantastical. Exploration usually progresses in steps rather than leaps: a writer could move from describing today's rain to the memory of a sad rainy day to the concept of sadness to a discussion of medications for depression, rather than jumping from rain straight to Prozac. In addition, when writers cannot argue convincingly that X always leads to Y, they can argue that *something similar to X* has led to *something similar to Y*. The fact that residents of one small Appalachian town lost weight when they were advised to drink 1% rather than whole milk certainly does not prove that a New York City law banning supersized sugary drinks will have beneficial health effects for all eight million New Yorkers, but it does suggest how public policy can influence healthy behavior. By extrapolating from a single known situation to a broader unknown problem, though, a writer can reduce readers' skepticism.

Finally, writers can suggest that X *often* leads to Y or that X *might in some cases* lead to Y. Hedge language—words like *might*, *could*, *possible*, *many/some*, *often*, *a little/somewhat, suggest*, or *imply*—can be used in moderation to allow exploratory writers to go a little further out on a limb without making a firm claim that they cannot fully support. (Do you spot the hedge language in this paragraph about writing?)

> **NOTE: Avoid exploratory shortcuts.** Exploratory writing is an intense example of how writers learn while we write rather than only representing knowledge we have already acquired. While it's easier and faster to write about what you already know or agree with, doing so will shortcut your learning and leave your readers less surprised and thus less engaged. As an explorer, you can directly challenge your own opinions by asking *what if* the most flawed idea, experience, or solution you know of is more reasonable than you currently believe it is?
>
> You should also strive to consider known unknowns and even unknown unknowns: when you repeatedly ask yourself *what else* could be relevant, intriguing, or plausible, you can identify more provocative or creative connections or recommendations. Most importantly, you have to be willing to *change your mind* if you hope to represent truly new thinking. Once you identify an unfamiliar concept or approach, you may need to pause in your speculations to gather more information, but your time investment will pay off in more original, compelling, and memorable ideas.

Use exploration to increase innovation and emotional connection

Exploratory writing is particularly good for:

- Suggesting the broader implications of your conclusions or recommendations
- Engaging readers' imaginations and emotions in support of a large project or movement
- Creating a more original or attention-grabbing perspective so you can stand out when writing about a familiar issue
- Starting a project or trying to solve a tricky thought-problem

Exploratory writing can be counterproductive when:

- Readers expect factual or familiar information
- You need to convince readers of the practicality of your ideas or recommendations
- You do not have time or confidence to present fresh, risky alternatives
- You need to do so much hedging and qualifying that you undercut your ideas

Exploration moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: grant proposals, business plans, memoirs, research study conclusions, travelogues, philosophical treatises, and vision statements.

Practice

- To practice exploring **your own perspectives** thoroughly, see 3D Mind Map, Assumption Inspection, Believing/Doubting, Emperor for a Day, Evil Genie, Inner Three-Year-Old, Old Wine / New Bottles, Out On A Limb, or Question Ladders.
- To practice exploring perspectives that **other readers may provide**, see Audience Profile, Cousin Topics, Genre Switch, Keyword Bingo, or Stance Switch.

Learn

- To learn more about how to select **new perspectives** for your exploration, see Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project.
- To learn more about writing a **thesis or focal statement** for your exploration, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **surveying known and unknown information** regarding your explanation, see Chapter 19, Early Inquiry: Exploring Research Questions.

14.10 Reflection

Reflective or metacognitive writing moves require looking inward: *metacognitive* means "thinking about your thinking." While you would use exploratory moves to *change* your mind, you would use reflective writing moves to *understand* your own mind. Writers often know our own opinions very well, but we don't always understand our motivations, our assumptions, or our opportunities. In everyday discussion, people often connect reflection with emotions; however, writers also often use reflection to monitor choices, preferences, and processes. Because reflection is inward-looking, writers often reflect with ourselves as the main audience, but we can share our reflective knowledge with others to give them a "behind the scenes" understanding of our work. The more you understand how you make decisions and engage with complicated tasks, the easier it will be to keep doing actions that benefit you (like addressing your audience's needs) and change those that hold you back (like obsessing over errors in an early draft).

You may be most familiar with reflection as a move that looks backward in time: it's easiest for writers to consider the thinking that we already have completed. But reflection is not just about the past: writers should also use reflection to monitor

decisions in the middle of a project, as well as to predict what kind of steps or decisions will need to be made in the future. Indeed, the overall goal of reflective writing is future-oriented: writers reflect in order to make better decisions in upcoming situations, and sometimes to encourage others to make better decisions. The exercises in this book frequently ask you to write reflectively about how you write, so that both your successes and your challenges as a writer seem less mysterious, more controllable, and more transferable (or revisable) for future writing projects.

Reflective writing connects specific events to reasons

You can use reflection the way a detective would, to investigate the exact steps that led to your success, so you can repeat them, or the steps that led to a problem or failure, so you can change your actions. In complex tasks, success can be determined by very slight variations in practice, like a ski-jumper's timing or a botanist's decision about the humidity level in a greenhouse. So you will want to start by describing *exactly what* happened or could happen to you: what choices did you make, what actions did you take, and what products did you complete? Take time to map out as many separate steps as possible, so you can pinpoint a crucial decision—and use the language experts use to help you identify exact moves. For instance, instead of just saying, "Then I did my research," divide that step into multiple smaller steps, from deciding what to search for to locating texts to reading and taking notes. You might narrow your vision even further, describing what keywords or databases you used when you searched, and how long you spent. As an advanced writer, you might also note whether you adapted your inquiry to meet the audience or genre of your project.

After identifying *what* you did, you also need to explore *why* and *how* you made that choice. You might start with generalized or surface-level reasons such as "I ran out of time" or "That's how I had always done it." For your reflection to be most useful, though, you need to ask a second or even third level of *why* questions: why did you run out of time? why were you allocating less time to one task than another? how did you feel when you were in the middle of the experience? Throughout this process, try to be as honest as possible, and don't let yourself off the hook: in order to control your actions, you need to know your reasons for acting one way or another. Remember that your goal isn't to hide your failures, but to fail productively: to reflect on how you can improve for next time.

Reflective writing examines reasons and predicts improvements

A key goal of reflective writing is to improve your practice. So as you wrap up, you might explore the options or consequences by asking, "So, what next?" What resources or strategies could you consider next time, and what reasons could you give yourself to make a change? Since few of us change without understanding

why we should change, you should keep your detective hat on and reconsider your reasons. Perhaps you have a "good reason" for every action—but if you're not completely satisfied with all of your results, then you need to use your reflection to identify what to change. In addition to checking for any logical fallacy or unconscious bias, you might also raise questions about:

- A reason that is just a habit rather than a decision: "I've always done it this way"
- A reason that is out of date or out of place: "This always worked for me in my other school/class/job"
- A reason that you were given rather than one you chose: "My teacher/ parent/boss/friend said to do it this way"

Reflective writing gives you an opportunity to make a new choice that suits you, matches your current task, and is supported by strong evidence.

Once you understand your choices and motivations more clearly, a final step in reflective writing is to consider what actions you should take. You might use a "KQS" approach: what do you want to *keep* doing that is helping you succeed? what do you want to *quit* doing because it's not effective? and what do you want to *start* doing because it could lead to more success? Change can be difficult, so be realistic: give yourself a reasonable first step or two, and explain how you can commit to that step and what you expect the results to be, so your reflection gives you power rather than making you feel even more overwhelmed.

> **NOTE: Reflect like an engineer.** If you're not used to reflective writing moves, they can feel uncomfortable, difficult, or even irrelevant: why should you share your innermost feelings with strangers, or waste time explaining how you did something instead of putting extra time into the finished product that actually matters? It may help to think of reflection as less about feelings and more about structures or systems.
>
> Engineers, for instance, know that if there's a flaw in the underlying structure, a glitch in the baseline system, or a weak link in a core process, the whole project will be at best inefficient and at worst completely ineffective. So it's worth time to examine those foundations very carefully, even if they won't be directly visible in the final product or event. Likewise, research shows that people who reflect frequently on their choices and decisions—before, during, and after their work— can learn to spot weaknesses and inefficiencies more accurately so that they become faster, more precise, more adaptable, and more effective at what they do, whether they're athletes, scientists, politicians, or writers.

Use reflection to improve and plan

Reflective writing is particularly good for:

- Identifying past successes and failures to improve your own future performance
- Uncovering assumptions or motivations that are limiting your success
- Generating empathy with your readers about how difficult change is
- Preparing to take on a new and difficult project

Reflective writing can be counterproductive when:

- Readers expect factual or data-based information
- Readers' situations are so different from yours that your experience isn't relevant
- You do not remember your own decisions specifically enough to investigate them
- You are happy with your performance and have no need to improve or alter it

Reflection moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: committee action plans, progress reports, coaching talks at halftime, project "post-mortem" evaluations, self-assessments for annual performance reviews, recommendations for further research, motivational speeches, artists' statements, and portfolio introductions.

Practice

- To practice **generating initial reflections**, see Attitude Inventory, Gaining a Growth Mindset, Letter to Kermit, They Say + I Say, Used To Think / Now I Think, Values Freewrite, or Write The Problem.
- To practice **gaining further insights** through reflection, see Assumption Inspection, Inner Three-Year-Old, Mind the Gap, or Reason Appallingly.

Learn

- To learn more about **productive failure** and other habits of mind that support reflection and metacognition, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.
- To learn more about reflective writing as an integral part of your composing process, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process.

Chapter 15. Developing Projects that Explain

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize writing projects that require exposition
- Explore writing strategies that support exposition
- Reflect to predict, problem-solve, and improve throughout the process of writing explanations

For some writing situations, or some parts of writing situations, your overarching goal will be to **explain information, experiences, processes, or concepts that you**

understand fairly well, in such a way that readers who are unfamiliar with your experiences and knowledge come to understand them just as well as you do. In a school assignment, your stance may be a little different: you might write to someone who already knows the information (such as your instructor) in order to demonstrate your own comprehension. However, your goal will still be to provide sufficient information to support readers' understanding.

Before people commonly shared photographs and videos, we needed writers to explain everything. Only a talented writer could "show" hundreds of people an exotic vacation spot, the steps to fixing your bathroom sink, the conditions of workers in a meat processing plant, or the challenges of competing in an Olympic marathon. In our new information-rich, multimedia world, writers who *only* explain are less in demand—but all writers still need to be able to explain our ideas or experiences.

Advanced writers who are focusing on explanation can keep several threshold concepts in mind:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

There is no single definition of a "good writer"

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

Since writing creates knowledge rather than just reporting on it, you should note that an explanation is always *a little bit of an argument*. By selecting some details and omitting others, you present a *version* of the answer that you want readers to accept, so it's rarely entirely "objective." But the main goal of explaining what we know, do, or believe is to provide enough information to have readers say, "I understand" or "I see what you mean." When you are explaining a key concept or event in depth, then, you will need to answer the question, "How much information is enough?"

Because sharing information is a common goal of written communication, we have many words to identify slight variations or emphases: *explain*, *narrate*, *describe*, *illustrate*, *summarize*, *define*, *discuss*, and more. Rather than being concerned about nuances as you begin a project, you might find it helpful to make one initial decision: to identify whether you are conveying information about a process that unfolds over time or giving an overview of a relatively stable moment, object, or concept.

When you are explaining or narrating how events occur across time, you may find that making decisions about the breadth and depth of your coverage is straightforward. Whether you are writing about a trip you took, a laboratory experiment you conducted, or a rally you attended, the event probably has a beginning, middle, and end—and it may have steps or subsections you could address one at a time. You can then decide to give *an even distribution of information* (the same amount of detail about the first speech at the rally as the final speech), or provide information at *variable depths* (more information about the rally speeches by famous people than by local organizers).

Although the word *narrative* may seem to cover only personal writing, you may find you have opportunities to narrate or explain many kinds of events, such as:

- Your personal observations of a daily commute, championship game, family reunion, or first day of school
- Your professional observations of a client interview, surgical procedure, or composing process
- Your expert instructions ("how to") for driving to campus, cooking chicken masala, focusing a microscope, reconciling a budget, or increasing a website's visibility

When you are explaining or describing more stable concepts, scenes, objects, or texts, you may have more choices about what to include. Of course, if your goal is to summarize a text, then your outer boundaries may be already determined, just as they are in describing a rally, and you need only decide whether to do an even representation or describe some elements in more depth than others.

In many cases, though, you will also need to make your own informed choice about the boundaries of your subject: do you describe a whole town from east to west? do you profile a local politician's whole life starting with childhood? or do you select a smaller focal area that is most relevant to your expertise, your goals, and your readers' interests? As you consider each of the explanation situations below, imagine how you might expand or narrow the scope of your attention:

- Describe the sights, sounds, and smells of (part of) a neighborhood, vacation destination, research site, restaurant, or crime scene.
- Explain (some of) the details that distinguish one building, beaker, bicycle, or biryani from another.

- Summarize the (most important) examples, facts, and/or arguments of a textbook chapter, court case, medical history, or campaign speech.
- Define (one aspect of) a technical term, slang word, legal concept, prohibited behavior, scholarly theory such as *behaviorism* or *intersectionality*, or abstract concept such as *courage* or *success*.

It's important to know that even writers who have been telling stories or explaining concepts for decades get stuck: we may have a head full of information, but no reliable way to know how much of it, or which parts of it, to include as we write. Particularly as the ideas and experiences we explain become more complex, we may have to make difficult decisions about how to keep our readers fully engaged and informed. This chapter will help you explore key strategies that explainers use and guide you to reflect on your options at each stage of your project, so that you have the skills to successfully navigate the process of narrating or explaining.

Explore 15.1

Review the lists above for ideas, and note down 3-5 times you have explained an unfolding event or a more stable concept to someone recently. What was the most difficult explanation to complete, and what made it challenging?

Learn

- To learn more about distinguishing among strategies for narration, description, summary, and definition, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves.

15.1 How Much is Enough? Exploring Fundamental Exposition Strategies

Explaining, describing, or narrating what you already (mostly) know can seem like the simplest of writing tasks. Indeed, you may identify this kind of writing with texts from your very early days as a writer: telling stories about summer vacation, describing pets or books you read, reporting on presidents or turtles or famous inventions. So you may be inclined simply to "start writing" in this familiar approach.

However, as an advanced writer, you will benefit from taking time to explore challenges that explainers face, and strategies that they commonly use. Your previous instructors may have encouraged you to expand your approaches by suggesting that you "Show, don't tell" or "Write about what you know about" or "Say more!" Perhaps you found comments like these helpful, or perhaps they left you wondering why such simple advice—"just say more (but not too much)!"— was

so hard to follow successfully. After all, if you had known what "more" you needed to say, you'd have said it already, right?

Although it may seem to only involve basic common sense, even explaining simple concepts or narrating everyday experiences requires you to adopt strategies to solve three fundamental problems of written communication:

- **Strategy 1**: Write for readers who cannot read your mind.
- **Strategy 2**: Write for readers are always reading their own minds and relying on their own assumptions.
- **Strategy 3**: Attentively investigate sentences or explanations that seem "clear" but may be imprecise or insufficient.

To be a successful explainer, then, you need to be an investigator of your readers as well as your subject; you need to be a skeptic about how easy it is to modify someone's thinking; and you need to be a mediator who decides when to focus on your goals, when to focus on readers' needs, and especially where those goals and needs overlap.

Anticipate non-telepathic readers

How do you take something that's in your head and transport it accurately and vividly to someone else's head, *using primarily words* on a screen or page, when you may never even have met them? Developing powerful strategies to solve the "no telepathy" problem is a core challenge for most advanced writers. One example that may help you think about it comes from a very, very short science fiction story by E. Michael Blake published many years ago in a collection called *100 Great Science Fiction Short Short Stories* and titled "Science Fiction for Telepaths."

This is the entire story, just six words: **"Aw, you know what I mean."**

You can imagine the telepathic readers in a galaxy far, far away responding enthusiastically. "Aha, good one!" they might say, grinning and slapping their six knees with their eight hands. "The part about how the pseudo-dog jumped out the smazteenth-story window, grew a pair of blue buntle-wings and flew all the way to Pafflemagnt was excellent!" Because they read the writer's mind, they all immediately really did know all the exact details of the story without the writer including another word.

If we could read each other's minds, writing would be a lot easier (though other things might be more complicated!). Instead, in our non-telepathic world, we misunderstand each other frequently. It makes sense that we might misunderstand each other about complex topics such as international politics or nuclear fission. But the no-telepathy problem can pop up in very ordinary circumstances. Maybe you remember that sometimes you can be telling your best friend on this

planet a completely normal story about how your boss annoys you so much, and when you say, "You know what I mean?" sometimes your best friend says "No," and you have to explain it all over again.

This gap between what we know and what readers know is especially hard for writers because when we write and read our own writing, we are also reading our own minds. So what we wrote *plus what we remember* is clear to us. It is very hard to get out of our own brains and imagine how someone who can only see the words on the page will understand them. Without that imaginative leap, though, we can't even start to answer the question, "How much explanation is enough?"

Writers who want to explain their knowledge need to learn as much as possible not just about the subject, but about readers—either the very specific readers we know will engage with our writing, or the strangers who we imagine will encounter our text in the future. We need to uncover what readers know already, what they want or need to know, and how they will use that knowledge. Then we can rephrase the key question: "How much is enough *for these readers to be satisfied*?"

Adapt to readers' already-busy brains

Part of what you and your best friend may be running into is the state of *their* brain. When you say "my boss" and "annoys me," your friend's mind immediately fills up with *their* boss (who may just have given everyone a raise) or with *their* most recent experiences of being annoyed (which may have more to do with a younger sibling playing music too loudly than any workplace situation). Even if a friend says confidently, "I know just what you mean!" they could still be misunderstanding you. Since their mind is so full of their prior ideas, you will have to work extra hard to move your own ideas in, like squeezing your favorite bright orange chair in among all your roommate's plain brown furniture.

It turns out that many readers are happy with their own thoughts and assumptions, and are not ready to put in the effort to change. (Think of all the people who are certain they can figure out how to assemble a bookshelf or implement a new software application without reading all the instructions—even when the instructions are comprehensive and accessible.) In addition to learning and predicting what readers know, explainers have to account for readers' inertia by providing ideas, images, and data that are compelling and comprehensive enough to be worth readers' time.

In other words, explainers need to be skeptical about the impact our words will have, and look for ways to enhance and strengthen our writing so that readers can't easily ignore us. This helps us craft another version of our question: "How much is enough *for these readers to want to make space for new ways of thinking or feeling*?"

Go beyond the "little green ball"

Finally, you may discover that the main tools you work with as a writer—words—have serious limitations. That's due in part to the fullness of readers' brains, but also to the ways in which language is slippery. I think of this as the "Little Green Ball" problem. If I write the sentence "I have a little green ball" up on a whiteboard or screen, would you *know what I mean*? Remembering the previous discussions, you should probably say, "No." After all, I know what's in my mind, and you know what's in yours, but the bridge between us may not connect yet.

You can try a few experiments to check how this bridge wobbles and slides: first, bring your hands up in front of you and measure out the size of this "little" ball. Can you measure out more than one size that would qualify? (If you try this in a classroom of your peers, you might be surprised at what other people's brains defined as "little"!) Next, try to imagine at least two kinds of "green." How about three kinds? Finally, can you list more than one kind of "ball" that could be little and green? You don't have to be a math major to start to see how many permutations can come from all those variables.

A subset of the Little Green Ball Problem is the Some People Problem, which may also get in the way of talking to your best friend. If you say, "Some days, some people at work just annoy me so much with some stuff they do, do know what I mean?" your friend cannot possibly truthfully answer, "Yes." Because of your vague language, the images and experiences in your head have not crossed the bridge to replace the images and experiences in theirs. Are you annoyed two out of thirty days, or four out of five? Is everyone at work grating on your last nerve, or just the person across the hall? Are you annoyed at someone chewing gum too loudly, or are you fed up with senior managers who tell racist "jokes" and expect everyone to laugh? If you want your friend to know what you mean, you need to provide one-time-only examples to help bring your exact images to life: "For example, one time last week my boss said _____."

Of course, writers always need to choose what we focus on: if we went into deep detail about everything, we'd never finish writing anything. If I were telling you a story about my boss and being annoyed, and a little green ball were just an incidental part of it, I wouldn't really care if you imagined a tennis ball or a golf ball or a cricket ball. And sometimes we want to be vague: the lyricist of that hit pop song everybody's humming along to this week actually does want you to imagine it's *your* broken heart (or first love) that the singer is going on and on about.

But if I wanted you to go to ToysToysToys! and buy me a replacement for the ball I'm holding in my hand right now, I would care very much about the details, and I would want to use precise enough language to move an exact enough image from my brain across the bridge to your brain: "I need a little green ball about an

inch in diameter, light neon green like highlighter ink and made of smooth shiny rubber with a slightly rough line running around its equator as if two halves were joined together. When I drop it on the tile floor, it should bounce back nearly as high as my hand and keep bouncing." (You should be starting to "see what I mean" by now.)

These days, I could take a video of my ball and send it to your phone—but that strategy wouldn't work to show you my annoying boss, much less to summarize the key factors of a juvenile court case or explain how telomeres function. If I really needed you to know how frustrating the people I work with are, I would have to explain one-time-only examples of their exact actions and utterances (like the one manager who spelled my name wrong in the clunky 2017 database and refused to correct it so it took eight weeks for me to get my $162 raise).

Above all, then, explainers need to mediate between our brains and readers' brains, and not settle for the first phrase that occurs to us—because the easiest words are often not the most precise. We need to know what feels important and engaging to us, but also consider how colleagues or even strangers might have different expectations or needs. So a final version of our central question might look like this: "How much is enough *for these readers to gain an accurate understanding of the most important and/or unfamiliar points?*"

For most advanced explanation and expression situations, writers still need to use language to solve common communication problems, and that means writers need to:

- Investigate readers' needs and aim to match those needs with explanations and evidence on the page rather than hoping they'll read our minds

- Stay skeptical about what seems obvious to us, and instead provide vivid information that will compel readers to move past their own minds and relive their own experiences

- Mediate between our goals and readers' needs, especially by using a range of strategies to ensure that we are providing sufficient, specific, one-time-only, audience-adapted information to begin to move images, stories, and concepts from our writer brains to the brains of our readers.

Explore 15.2

Describe an event from yesterday or a place you went last week using two or three sentences filled with general "little green ball" or "some people do some things some times" phrases. Then rewrite or add two sentences to explain more specifically what you saw or did. Practice using the starting phrase, "For example, one ___," which can encourage you to transfer exact details from your head to your document where readers can see them.

15.2 Reflect To Predict: Exploring Your Exposition Project

All advanced writers benefit from planning a project, perhaps by writing an outline or identifying a research process; reflective writers take some additional steps to deliberately explore a range of options and predict which ones will be most successful.

Remember that you can DEAL as you explore and predict aspects of your project. Predicting as an explainer requires many of the same considerations as you will encounter in other writing tasks: you will want to **define** your audience and your goals, **explore** your own subject knowledge and consider your dispositions, **act** to acquire resources and develop early insights, and **learn** how you can combine new strategies with previous ones that have been successful for you as a writer.

Because you will need to provide *vivid and accurate information that meets readers' needs* in your narration or explanation, you may want to take some time with the explorations explained here.

Identify your goals and explore your readers' needs

The answer to "how much is enough?" depends on what you know, what your audience knows and is willing to learn, and what you need them to know. Once you investigate your readers, you should be able to predict what they most need to understand what you want to show them. Do they need the highest, most complete explanation right now, or should you simplify or narrow your presentation? It may also help to anticipate readers' attitudes: confident readers who have lots of experience can be as challenging to explain to as readers who have never thought about this issue or process before. Finally, you may want to explore how different stances can help build a bridge between your brain and your readers' brains: some readers will engage more deeply if you take a personal or exploratory stance, while readers in a different community or field may respond better to a formal tone and direct, concise explanations.

Explore the boundaries, emphasis, and order of your project

As you draft your document, consider how you can present compelling details without overwhelming your reader.

- **Exploring your boundaries** may be a straightforward process. In some cases, your subject matter will have one or more natural boundaries that you can adopt: events may be bounded by common units of time like a day or a week, or by their starting and finishing points, while places and objects are often clearly separated from their surroundings. In other cases, you may

have to choose how much you want to cover based on your goals and your readers' needs: if you are explaining a process or profiling a person, you may decide that you will have the strongest effect on readers by focusing on a small selection of that subject, or that readers need a broader overview.

- **Selecting your emphasis** depends on your goals: keep asking yourself what you *most* want readers to know or understand, and look for places where you can emphasize those concepts. Expository writing may be highly ordered or take a less direct path in engaging readers, but either way, readers will still need guiding statements to spot your main points. Remember also that you don't have to address all angles or subtopics in equal depth; you can provide more details about aspects that are important to you or difficult for readers, and fewer details about other aspects.
- **Choosing how to order an explanation** (from left to right? from start to finish? from least to most important?) may help you generate key ideas and help you connect the dots for your readers. Some explanations may fall into a linear order (from first to last, e.g.). In others, you will want to guide readers deliberately with your own point-by-point plan, perhaps moving between past and present, or building from easy to more complex ideas.

Once you have set your boundaries and focus, you might also experiment with phrasing your initial goal statement or thesis: most explanations and narratives use a concept-oriented approach to focusing readers' attention, but they vary widely in how direct and how complex their anchoring statements are.

Exercises to consider as you reflect to predict

- Before you set out to write the actual first pages of your explanation or narrative, you will want to acquire resources that will help you meet the challenges you've identified, and practice some of the strategies you may use as you compose. You already know of actions that can help you: perhaps you like to outline or freewrite; to sketch out a map, diagram, or timeline; or to plan a writing and revising schedule that meets your needs. As an explainer, you may also find the exercises below particularly helpful.

Practice

- To practice identifying **your goals** for explaining, see <u>Authority / Curiosity / Annoyance List</u>, <u>Backtalk</u>, or <u>Six Degrees</u>.
- To practice identifying what your **readers** may want or need, see <u>Audience Profile</u>, <u>Audience/Stakeholder Mapping</u>, <u>Audience Switch</u>, or <u>Stance Switch</u>.
- To practice determining your **boundaries, emphasis, and order**, see <u>Expand and Narrow</u>, <u>Explode a Moment</u>, <u>Inner Three-Year-Old</u>, <u>Six Structures</u>, or <u>Subtopic Generator</u>.

15.3 Reflect To Problem-Solve: Exploring Sticky Exposition Problems

Advanced writers often take steps to solve problems during the composing process; reflective writers look for ways to step back from a problem to explore likely alternatives rather than staring at a blinking cursor or "just doing it."

As you compose your explanation or narrative, you may encounter challenges that feel familiar to you: generating material, staying organized and focused, providing sufficient evidence, managing your time or finding a stronger motivation boost. When you get stuck, you can DEAL with your problem: define it, explore possible solutions, act to try out a new approach, and make a note of what you learned (did your strategy help?).

In composing an explanation, you might find that you get stuck trying to inhabit your own brain *and* your readers' brains at the same time, so you might need to identify and explore each challenge separately. What do you want to say? What are readers expecting and ready to encounter? The strategies noted here can help you alternate between these approaches and work toward a reasonable answer to "How much is enough?"

Provide enough information to support your goals

When your explanation addresses what you consider to be the most vital points—the emotional high point of a narrative, for instance, or the crucial first steps of an experiment—you will need to include more detail than you might initially think is necessary, so that newcomers can "see what you mean." Explainers don't always remember all the relevant details right from the start, so for key points you may need to dig into your own memory for specific details, go back to review your records, and/or check with others who were involved. In some cases you may need to stop writing in order to do some additional research so that you have exact statistics or examples to share. On the other hand, you may decide (or peer readers may tell you) that some steps or sections aren't as important, and in those cases, you can provide fewer details. You may find it helpful to assess your own *motivation* for working on this project to help dig into the details, and also manage your disposition for *openness*, so that you see new options for connecting with readers.

Provide enough information to meet readers' needs and abilities

As you write and revise, you need to strive to see your writing from your readers' perspective. Your best option, of course, is to find a peer or two to review your draft, to ask any reviewers to be honest about whether they "know what you mean," and to be willing to take their advice. If you can't recruit a reviewer, you

need to imagine your way into your readers' brains. Remind yourself about what they already know and believe, where they are most different from you, and what they will most struggle with or doubt: you may even want to list these points separately so you don't overlook them. Then review your draft looking specifically at the most important or difficult sections to check whether you need more detail, and looking at other sections (even ones you personally connect with) to see whether they can be condensed or deleted so as not to distract readers.

To create a full explanation you will need to use a balance of confidence in what you know and curiosity about new angles that will connect with readers, and so you will also need time management to give you opportunities to get that balance just right.

Exercises to consider as you reflect to problem-solve

When you get stuck composing your explanation, you may use strategies you've used before: taking a break, reviewing the assignment directions, talking to a friend, working on a different part of the writing task, or connecting to a value that motivates you. If you're stuck because you are struggling to share what's in your own brain so that you have a powerful effect on someone else's way of thinking, you may also find the exercises below helpful.

Practice

- To practice generating **your best ideas** as you explain, see Best And Better, Elevator Speech, Explode A Moment, Off On A Rant, Scenarios, or Seven Generations.
- To practice adapting to **readers' needs** as you explain, see Add/Move/ Change/Delete, Assumption Inspection, Backtalk, or Inner Three-Year-Old.

15.4 Reflect To Improve: Exploring Your Growth as an Explainer and a Writer

As you complete a draft or finalize your project, you will bene-fit not just from making a few final edits, but from taking time to reflect on your work, using a DEAL structure: define what you learned from this project, explore how to complete your revisions and identify key principles for writing, anticipate and adapt to meet the needs of future projects, and learn how you will keep improving as a writer.

You might also find that you want to explore some of the ways that you can improve your *explanatory* writing specifically, for this project and for future projects. Successful explanations require a keen attention to readers' needs, a skill that you may want

to add to your repertoire. You could thus give some extra time to the explorations explained here, so that you take full advantage of the opportunity to grow as a writer.

Assess your insights to rebalance your explanations

Since you will often learn as you write, both about your topic or story and about your readers' needs, you will want to pause after completing an initial draft to rebalance your information. First, you may need to adjust the scope or boundaries: is your area of focus small enough that you can provide adequate detail for readers who cannot read your mind? Next, you can make more local adjustments: where can you add *more* information or vivid "one-time-only" examples to reinforce points that are vital to you, or expand on points that your readers may struggle with or be curious about? Where could you get by with *less*? You should look for places where you can cut back on—or even cut out!—material that might distract your readers from the central ideas, even if these sentences or paragraphs are interesting to you personally.

Some explanations take a "get right to business" approach: in summaries, instructions, or other professional documents, you can look for ways to revise your introduction or the starts of your paragraphs or sections to give up-front statements that focus readers' attention. In narratives or more exploratory texts, you may not have as many direct topic sentences or subheaders, but you can revise to use cohesion strategies like repeated words or phrases to help readers draw connections to key concepts, and transition phrases to help readers follow you across time and space.

Identify explanation strategies to expand your writing story

Reflecting on how you have attended to your own goals as a writer while staying aware of your readers' expectations and needs can help you transfer your expository skills to another project. All writers benefit from remembering that readers can't read our minds and don't think the way we do: whether you're writing a short social media post or a long annual report, deciding how much information is enough—for you, for your readers, and for your goals—is a valuable skill.

Completing your explanation or narrative has likely helped you discover new strategies or principles that can become part of your writing story. For instance, once you're aware of the shortcomings of "little green ball" or "some people do some things some times" language in communicating convincingly with readers, you can challenge yourself to improve your specificity in many kinds of writing projects.

You may also have gained insight into some of your strengths, preferences, and growth areas as a writer. Maybe you can see more clearly that you are a writer who initially says just a little and needs to stretch to provide sufficient detail, or a writer who likes to tell a long story that gives too much information readers don't need. Both of these can be great strategies for getting started with a writing project, especially now that you know how to rebalance your explanation during revisions.

Exercises and resources to consider as you reflect to improve

When you are trying to decide "how much is enough" in your explanation or narrative, you might find that familiar strategies help: checking on feedback from your readers, freewriting in a new document to help generate additional details, or connecting to your core values for motivation. You may also find the exercises or resources below particularly helpful:

Practice

- To practice **identifying expository strategies** that may work for you in the future, see Add/Move/Change/Delete, Best and Better, Letter to Kermit, Shrunken Draft, or Ten Directed Revisions.

Learn

- To learn more about **revising**, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.
- To learn more about **paragraphs, organizational patterns, and cohesion**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **improving future writing tasks**, see Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory.

15.5 Sample Writing Projects That Rely on Exposition

Experience-based writing projects: Comfortable spaces and good reads

Experience Project A: Describe a public place on campus that feels comfortable to you—however you define "comfortable." Since the answer to "how much information is enough?" depends on your reader, you should select a particular reader or community of readers to address, and use a genre that appeals to that reader: a letter to a family member, a short section for a campus guidebook for new students, a blog post for your school organization's website. Provide enough details that your readers can "see what you mean" even if their idea of "comfortable" doesn't match yours.

Practice

- To practice **defining and describing** a place your readers have never been, see Audience Profile, Explode a Moment, Inner Three-Year-Old, Scenarios, or Used to Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding

- Narration to provide examples from your experience

- Description and definition of what "comfortable" means to you

- Evaluative argument to explain how this space meets your criteria for comfort, even if some readers might prefer another place

- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you explain your experiences, see

  - Chapter 19 on conducting self-based research

  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns

  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Experience Project B: Explain how you responded to the best (or worst) part of a book, movie, or TV show you saw recently, so that your friends can decide whether to read or view it themselves. Don't write a *review* arguing that the overall story was good or bad; focus on describing what elements caused *you* to react, and explain how/why you responded. Since just telling what happened (the plot and scene) won't show your experience, you'll need to balance summary of the story with information about your responses, and perhaps also explain some of the values or experiences that made you respond that way. Consider your genre: planning for a social media post will be different from writing a short, humorous presentation for an open-mic night. Provide enough details about each element (the scene, the exact words or events, and your response) that readers can "see what you mean."

Practice

- To practice **explaining your reactions** to readers who can't read your mind, see Audience Profile, Authority / Curiosity / Annoyance List, Believing / Doubting, Explode a Moment, Inner Three-Year-Old, Scenarios, They Say + I Say, or Used to Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding

  - Narration to provide examples from your viewing experience

  - Summary of the specific scene(s) that had most impact

  - Evaluative argument to explain how this performance meets your criteria for excellence (or awfulness), even if some readers might disagree

- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you explain your experiences, see

  - Chapter 6 on reading actively

  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns

  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Writing-about-writing project: Literacy narrative

Explain how you came to be a reader and/or a writer, and connect that experience to your reading or writing practice today. You might focus on a single event as you were learning to read or write: a class, a text, a project you completed. Or you might focus on a sequence of events or influences that help you show what was particularly easy, challenging, or decisive for you as a reader and/or writer. You can focus on reading and writing generally, or on a specific type of literacy: how you became literate in a particular language, in a particular genre of reading/writing, or about a specific field (what might it mean to "become literate in Minecraft"?). Provide "enough" details about what happened and how you felt or responded that your peers can understand how your reading/writing experience differs from and connects with theirs. Draw conclusions as you go, or at the end, about how these earlier experiences might influence the approaches and decisions you make today as a reader and writer.

Practice

- To practice **explaining your literacies**, see Attitude Inventory, Authority / Curiosity / Annoyance List, Believing / Doubting, Dialogue, Gray-Area Finder, Inner Three-Year-Old, Remix/Mashup, Used To Think / Now I Think, or Write the Problem.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration of one or more relevant past experiences and your responses
  - Description of specific events or texts
  - Reflection about how your past experiences and choices affect you today as a reader/writer
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you explain your experiences, see
  - Chapter 19 on conducting self-based research
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Inquiry-based writing project: Field or profession introduction

Explain your major, your job, your profession, or a significant avocation (something more encompassing than just an occasional-time hobby) to someone who is considering joining or participating in it. Instead of recommending whether

to join or not, aim for a mostly neutral explanation that presents information outsiders don't usually see and acknowledges some key opportunities, complications, and challenges of the work. If you've been doing this work for a long time, beware of your "expert blind spot": try to remember what is confusing, difficult, and most useful for newcomers, and delve into details that will help them understand both the big picture and the daily events. If you're relatively new to your position, do your own research to check your understanding, and consider sharing your information with a person who has been in the area for a while to get their feedback.

Your final project may be primarily a text-based document, but consider whether readers would benefit from seeing graphs or visuals, having sections and subheaders to structure the information, or using sidebars or an abstract to help gain a quick understanding of key facts.

Practice

- To practice **explaining your field**, see Audience Profile, Authority / Curiosity / Annoyance List, Evidence Shopping List, Expert-Novice, Gray-Area Finder, Scenarios, Three Cubes, or Used To Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration of one or more relevant past or present experiences
  - Description of specific events, tasks, or people
  - Classification of the types of tasks, skills, or decisions required for work
  - Synthesis of source material to build credibility and detail
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you explain your workplace or major, see
  - Chapter 5 on choosing and focusing a topic
  - Chapter 19 on gathering primary and secondary data
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 8 on designing multimodal documents
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Community-engaged writing project: Website (re)design

Design—or redesign—the key informational website pages for a local organization, real or hypothetical. You can choose a current campus group, community organization, or small business that doesn't yet have a (very good) website, or

you can imagine a plausible new organization that your school or city needs. You should plan to design a homepage, an "About Us" page, and at least one page that contains specialized information most users will want. If you (or someone on your team) is comfortable working with a site-building tool, you can use that, but it's fine to compose in a document, in a presentation or slide application, and/or using paper and pen; you can also include references to some elements you won't fully create ("Video of happy students goes here" or "The left menu pop-ups will include these items").

You should identify what the organization most wants to explain about itself, and what users most want to find out; if you're working for a real local organization, you may want to interview an employee or member, or survey possible users. Look at some websites for similar organizations to understand what's current and workable in the genre: layout, images, menus, links, tone and diction, and length. Focus most of your energy on selecting and providing the information that will help users understand and benefit from the organization's resources—if you create a beautiful website that doesn't answer users' questions, you won't help either the users or the organization.

Practice

- To practice **analyzing the genre needs**, see Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Genre Ethnography, or Map the Terrain.
- To practice **explaining the organization**, see 3D Mind Map, Evidence Shopping List, Expert-Novice, Subtopic Generator, Three Cubes.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Summary of the organization's mission and/or resources
  - Description of people, work sites, or key events
  - Classification of the types resources or projects the organization is responsible for
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you explain your workplace or major, see
  - Chapter 19 on gathering primary and secondary data
  - Chapter 13 on analyzing and using genre patterns
  - Chapter 7 on organizational patterns
  - Chapter 8 on designing multimodal documents
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Chapter 16. Developing Projects that Analyze

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize writing projects that require analysis
- Explore writing strategies that support analysis
- Reflect to predict, problem-solve, and improve throughout the process of writing analytically

For some writing situations, your overarching goal will be to **analyze a text, performance, event, data-set, or concept** in order to show how its pieces come

together to create a meaning or experience that is more complicated than most readers initially perceive. While writers who explain and argue often begin writing about a concept or experience we know well, writers who analyze often use our writing and reflecting to increase our own understanding of the event or issue—like forensics experts who analyze a fresh crime scene to determine what happened, or biologists who analyze river water to judge whether pollution is getting better or worse.

As you write to analyze, you might keep some threshold concepts in mind:

🚪 Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

🚪 Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

🚪 Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

In particular, writers can benefit from seeing analysis not just as *reaction* to a situation, but as *creation* of new knowledge: your role as an analyst is to provide insights to readers that they haven't already fully articulated or explored.

Analysis shares some characteristics of other purposes for writing. In writing analytically, for example, you will use explanation but go beyond it. Instead of writing just to *explain how to play the piano*, you could write to *analyze the characteristics of the specific style used by pianist Martha Argerich*, by considering various qualities of her performances. In writing analytically, you might not be arguing directly with your audience (*Argerich is the best pianist performing today!).* Yet you will need to draw conclusions that readers can debate: analysis provides the writer's judgment about which facts are important and how they fit together, not just a restatement of what is obvious.

Generally, analysis requires writers to examine the separate parts of a situation or issue and draw conclusions about how they interact. In addition, analysts often write from a defined perspective, or apply a professional framework, lens, or theory: analysts are looking *at* some specific elements, looking *for* some specific patterns, or looking at an issue *with* some specific goals. Because of this perspective-taking, each academic discipline or professional field defines "analysis" a little differently. After all, the "parts" of a civil war, a cancer cell, a sonata, and a

small business don't look at all the same, and a biochemist analyzes the effects of long-term illness using a framework that's different from a psychologist analyzing the same illness. Yet writers may use similar steps in each case.

You may find it helpful to consider whether you plan to analyze mostly to *interpret what something means* or to *explore how or why something happens*. **Interpretive analysis** explores the details of a text, data set, or performance, to draw conclusions about what it means or implies, especially when that meaning isn't immediately clear or agreed upon. In daily life, you might interpret a line in a recipe (what exactly does "sauté until softened" mean?) based on what you see in the accompanying photograph; in a report for school, you might analyze your peers' responses to a survey about finals week to interpret what "stress" means to them. Other analysts might give interpretations of:

- A text (or part of a text) such as a poem, novel, film, advertisement, or song lyrics
- A performance or artwork such as a play, jazz concert, sculpture installation, stand-up routine, or Bollywood dance
- A qualitative data set such as interview responses, observer's field notes, or client behaviors
- A quantitative data set such as Mississippi River flood levels, drug side-effects, or the movements of neutrinos

Causal analysis explores a chain of events or behaviors to draw conclusions about how or why one factor leads to or is influenced by another, particularly when the interactions are complicated, obscure, or variable. In daily life, you might try to discover how your new car's carpet gets so wet after it rains; in a psychology case study, you might analyze the effects of cognitive processing therapy for someone suffering from PTSD. Other analysts might examine:

- The motivations of a character, political leader, civic organization, or patient
- The origins of a religious sect, popular music trend, or chemical contamination
- The need for or effects of a public policy, highway expansion, solar flare, or meditation class
- The achievements or malfunctions of an algorithm, drone engine, rehabilitation procedure, or vocabulary lesson

In any analysis, you will want to consider whether your personal or professional perspective provides enough of a framework, or whether you and your readers will benefit if you use a specific theory or concept will help you look beyond the surface to help readers see something new or insightful about your issue. As an analyst, you might look specifically at a **framework** such as:

- The set of **rhetorical strategies** that are used in a text or performance
- The ways a **value** like *endurance*, *cost-effectiveness*, *encouragement*, or *accuracy* is demonstrated in one or more settings
- The ways a **theory** such as *modernism*, *behaviorism*, or *molecular orbital theory* reveals new insights about an object, event, or process
- The insights gained when someone from a new or unexpected **perspective**—*hometown, culture, gender, profession, experience-level, sports-team affinity*—reviews a situation or event

It makes sense that writers who analyze can get stuck, feel discouraged, or lose our way: it is often quite difficult to investigate an unfamiliar text or event in depth, select the aspects that we and readers will find most relevant, and write about a complicated issue in a way that helps readers easily understand our new insights. This chapter will help you explore key strategies that analysts use, and use them to help you reflect on your options at each stage of your project, so that you have the skills to successfully navigate the process of writing analytically.

Explore 16.1

Review the list above for ideas, and note down 3-5 times recently when you have had to gather evidence and thoughtfully analyze the options in a complex situation, whether in your daily life or for a school or work project.

16.1 It's Complicated: Exploring Fundamental Analysis Strategies

To prepare for writing an analysis, you should explore strategies that analysts commonly use. Analytical writers face some of the same challenges as expository writers, since our audiences have no mind-reading capabilities, and some of the same challenges as argument writers, since we do not receive a second opportunity to convince a skeptical reader. The main goal of analysis, though, is not just to move ideas into a reader's mind, but to help that reader see how a complex idea or process functions. Like referees watching a slow-motion replay or astronomers using a high-powered telescope, analysts try to identify more details than novices or passersby will see at first glance. The basic proposal of an analyst is, "This is more complicated than you might think, but I can help you understand it."

As writers who analyze, we need to constantly push ourselves to see complications where none are immediately visible and to represent those complications in an orderly manner. In many cases, your readers will have looked at the same text, performance, concept, data, or theory also, but they will not have seen its complexities in the way you are about to present them. You can think of your analytical writing as developing three kinds of "vision" strategies:

- **Strategy 1**: Select a lens and a frame to help you see what's going on.
- **Strategy 2**: Show your work to help readers see all the complicated parts.
- **Strategy 3**: Create a vision of the whole for readers to understand.

Select a lens and a frame

How do you see what's not obvious? In writing to analyze, you may need some specialized tools to improve your vision and critical thinking. You might bring to mind how scientists use telescopes and microscopes to help them see more than the human eye can behold: they have to select the lens they need and then decide where to point it. Likewise, you can improve your analysis when you understand or select an appropriate lens or perspective (*how* you will see something), and deliberately determine your frame or focus (*what* you will look at or for).

Your lens may be literal or more figurative. You know that if you literally change your perspective—you stand on your head, fly in an airplane, visit a new city, or peer through a rose-colored window—you will see things you hadn't noticed before. You may also see people around you differently after you change your mental perspective, perhaps by studying how unconscious bias occurs, or learning how advertising affects what we wear or eat. Academic disciplines and professional fields often use specific theories or frameworks to prompt analysts to look beyond the surface. These frameworks help you temporarily adopt a new perspective: you can choose a psychoanalytical lens to interpret the motives of a character in an August Wilson play, or you can use a systems theory lens to help you examine the commercial activities of a successful business.

You may have great freedom to adjust your frame, or you may find your options limited by your context or earlier choices. For instance, the lens you choose may already suggest what you can focus on: from an airplane, you cannot easily focus on the clothing of people on the ground, and from the perspective of a psychoanalytical approach, you will have less ability to address the cultural influences on a character in a play. Alternately, you may need to make your own decisions about how to direct your attention and your readers' attention to just a particular area, type, or selection of evidence so that you have time to examine the complications. Instead of trying to analyze all of a business' financial records, you could narrow the frame to focus just on records of expenses, on records from the past two years, or on records regarding a specific corporate partner.

In an assignment, sometimes your instructor chooses the lens and/or the frame for you. But outside of school, often these choices are up to you. If you need to "analyze the local demand for cybersecurity consulting," you could use your own personal experiences to determine important questions (lens) and then select a few of your colleagues (frame) to interview—or you could use a professional checklist of key factors in cybersecurity (lens) to help you examine the annual financial reports of three

local businesses (frame). Choosing a lens or frame can be as challenging as choosing an overall topic for your writing, and you may want to follow similar guidelines.

- Look for a lens and frame that are the **right choice**: they fit your field, class, or assignment and match your goals as a writer.
- Look for a lens and frame that are a **viable choice**: they address an issue that is debatable enough to provide room for interpretation, narrow enough to let you dig into the complications, and yet broad enough that you can find important aspects and connections to explore.
- Look for a lens and frame that are an **unexpected choice**: they help you show something that most readers in your audience won't have already seen for themselves. (In some scientific fields, you may need to use tools or report data exactly as prescribed for the situation—yet as an analyst, you want always to be ready to acknowledge data that break from the expected pattern.)

Sometimes when instructors or readers say, "We need more/deeper analysis," they mean, "We need to understand how your way of seeing is different from, and maybe better than, the way most people see it." Whether you have free choice or are working within the constraints of an assignment or professional task, you need to begin your analysis by being ready to explain your line of sight: "I am trying to see complications of this issue/event *through a lens of* ____ (or *from the perspective of* ____) and I am going to focus on ____ ."

Show your work step by step

Analysis is a thought-experiment: you are proposing a series of mental steps that your reader should complete in order to have more insight about this issue. Nobody thinks quite the way you do, and you are providing analysis using your own judgment in a debatable or complicated situation. So you have to show your reader precisely how you come to your conclusions and interpretations, step by step—as if you were showing your work in a calculus class or providing directions on how to complete a laboratory experiment involving potassium and hydrogen peroxide.

To assist your readers and stay organized yourself, you might consider four kinds of mental moves to help you "show your work":

- **Division**: Since analysis is about looking at the parts, you need to focus your and your readers' attention on one part at a time. Most interesting issues, data collections, or problems can be divided in different ways, and each of those divisions can be subdivided further. Each division or subdivision that you identify helps readers know *where* to focus their attention.
- **Claim**: For each of your divisions, you need to present an analytical claim, a debatable statement indicating what you see that's "really going on." Your

claim might emphasize your lens: look *this way*, using *these assumptions*, to understand the issue better. Alternately, your claim can emphasize your frame: it's important to examine *these* data, *this* event. A claim helps your readers know *how* you see and want them to see the issue.

- **Evidence**: For each of your claims, you need to provide precise evidence, from data, quotations, descriptions, explanations, experiences, examples, or connections. Often, analysis will reveal a pattern (of words, data points, or events) or a set of similarities/differences that a casual viewer might miss. Your evidence helps your reader see exactly *what* you are analyzing as clearly as possible, so that they can judge for themselves whether your claim is valid.

- **Interpretation or connection**: Readers cannot understand your line of thinking just by looking at your descriptions or evidence. If you want readers to be able to follow your thinking precisely, you have to explain how each part of the evidence matches your claim, so that readers understand *why* you have come to your conclusions.

Sometimes when instructors or readers say, "We need more/deeper analysis," they mean, "We need more examples of the pattern you see" or "We need to understand how the examples relate to your claims." In some cases, your "how" and "why" will seem very clear to you, because you have become accustomed to your way of seeing these complications. However, readers will often need more guidance in order to see a complicated issue through your eyes.

Create a new vision of the whole

Finally, sometimes when instructors or readers say, "We need more/deeper analysis," they mean, "We need you to identify what's new or improved about what you see or how you see it." Analysts need to identify a debate, a complication, or a "gray area" (where an interpretation or decision "could go either way"), and provide insight that changes how readers understand the overall event or issue. If you only summarize what happens in a movie scene, report that three businesses use cybersecurity consultants, or list two ways that the counselor in a case study is using behaviorist principles, you don't add your own new views.

You or your instructor may think of this final step, in short-cut form, as the "*so what?*" step: *so, what* does it all add up to? When you look closely, how do the parts you see add up to an insight that not all readers would reach on their own, and why is that insight helpful or relevant for those readers? Your answer provides a kind of argument, but in analysis, your emphasis is usually more on providing *one possible reasonable answer* rather than advocating for *the best* answer or *the one right* answer.

A key final step in an analysis is to articulate how "what's really going on" is different from—and usually more complicated than—"what seems to be going on."

You then need to decide how that new, more informed vision will benefit your readers.

- **Emotional richness**: When readers see more of the complexity of how other people act—whether they are fictional characters or real community residents—they often gain empathy, increase their enjoyment, lower their stress, or increase their own self-awareness.

- **Better decisions**: When readers see more of the causes, effects, or implications of a complicated event or situation, they can identify reasonable options and make more productive decisions about how to respond.

- **Broad applications**: When readers see a new pattern, an unexpected cause/effect, or surprising interrelationships among the parts or events of one complex situation, they may apply that knowledge to other situations to increase their understanding or prepare for well-reasoned action.

We are constantly analyzing the world around us. When writers sit down to compose an advanced analysis, we need strategies that help us to take the time to:

- Choose a lens and a frame that will help us see more details and connections than are immediately apparent

- Divide the issue into pieces, and then show our mental work explaining and connecting them so that readers can see what we see and how we see it

- Answer "so, what?" to help readers see how our analysis adds up to a relevant and useful idea

Explore 16.2

Consider an idea you wrote about earlier in this chapter, or pick a movie, activity, job, event, or class topic that you believe is more complicated than many people think. Using the models above, write a three-sentence analysis prep:

"I could investigate the complications of _____ *through a lens of* ___ (or *from the perspective of* _____) and I would narrow to *focus specifically on* _____ . I can *divide* this issue into at least two parts: _____ and _____. My readers will benefit from this analysis because _____."

Learn

- To learn more about **choosing a right, viable, unexpected topic**, see Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project.

- To learn more about strategies for **division and classification** or about **argument**, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves.

- To learn more about connecting to **readers who can't read your mind**, see Chapter 15, Developing Projects that Explain.

16.2 Reflect To Predict: Exploring Your Analysis Project

All advanced writers benefit from planning a project, perhaps by writing an outline or identifying a research process; reflective writers take some additional steps to deliberately explore a range of options and predict which ones will be most successful.

Remember that you can DEAL as you explore and predict aspects of your project. Predicting as an analyst requires many of the same considerations as you will encounter in other writing tasks: you will want to **define** your audience and your goals, **explore** your own subject knowledge and consider your dispositions, **act** to acquire resources and develop early insights, and **learn** how you can combine new strategies with previous ones that have been successful for you as a writer.

Because you will need to *identify and clarify what's complicated* in an analysis, you may want to take some time with the explorations explained here.

Explore your readers' assumptions

To show readers new complications or insights, you need to know not just who your readers are generally, but what they already *think* the issue or event is about—their assumptions. Otherwise, you may only describe what they already understand rather than analyzing more complex, less obvious patterns. While some readers will need you to present a little information about all the factors, in many analysis projects readers will benefit from a deeper exploration of a few key subtopics. After all, you don't want to analyze why a sports team had a lousy season if the reason is obvious to everyone.

Explore your options for framing and supporting analysis

If you are writing a school assignment, check to see whether your lens (*how* you will look at the issue) or your frame (*what* issue or part you should look at) has been chosen or suggested for you. If you are choosing an analysis topic for yourself, you might start by identifying two or three possibilities so that you can decide which one is most *right*, most *viable*, and most likely to provide *unexpected* or useful insights for your readers. Remember that you are likely to adjust this plan as you write and learn.

In some analysis projects—analyzing a text, performance, or dataset—your evidence is already available, and your role is to use your lens and frame to decide how to explore the ideas and which parts to focus on. For those cases, you will want to look carefully for patterns (repeated or trending events) and for small details that match or diverge from the pattern, so that you can identify aspects that are complicated or nuanced to focus on for your analysis

In other analysis projects, you may need extra time to identify and gather evidence (from interviews, documents, observations, or published research) before you can analyze it. Often, analysts take time to gather or observe more data than we can reasonably write about, in order to be sure that we see trends and patterns clearly before we begin to write. Finally, although you will be selecting data that illustrate your insights, you also want to be truthful in showing the complications: what is your plan to address outliers, gaps, or contradictions in your evidence?

Once you understand frame and lens, you might also experiment with phrasing your initial claim: you can focus readers' attention with an explicit statement or experiment with a more implicit or subject-oriented statement, but remember that analysis usually involves high complexity from the start.

Exercises to consider as you reflect to predict

Before you set out to write the actual first pages of your analysis, you will want to acquire resources that will help you meet the challenges you've identified, and practice some of the strategies you may use as you compose. You already know of actions that can help you: perhaps you like to outline or freewrite, to review sources and take notes, or to map out a schedule that meets your needs. As an analyst, you may also find the exercises below particularly helpful.

Practice

- To practice **framing your analysis**, see Assumption Inspection, Cause-Effect Map, Date My Topic, Magic Three Choices, Six Structures, or Subtopic Generator.

- To practice **identifying support that isn't obvious**, see Evidence Garden, Gray-Area Finder, Out on a Limb, Source Synthesis Grid, They Say + I Say.

16.3 Reflect To Problem-Solve: Exploring Sticky Analysis Problems

Advanced writers often take steps to solve problems during the composing process; reflective writers look for ways to step back from a problem to explore likely alternatives rather than staring at a blinking cursor or "just doing it."

As you compose your analysis, you may encounter challenges that feel familiar to you: generating material, staying organized and focused, providing sufficient evidence, managing your time or finding a stronger motivation boost. When you get stuck, you can DEAL with your problem: define it, explore possible solutions, act to try out a new approach, and make a note of what you learned (did your strategy help?).

In composing an analysis, you might find that you get stuck in trying to balance your efforts between modes of thinking and writing: analysts need to switch their attention between the parts and the whole, the patterns and the diversions, the quick insights and the careful documenting of a thought experiment. You may want to explore the balancing acts and strategies noted here, so that you have some new approaches ready to try.

Balance between openness and focus

Analysts study their issue or subject carefully before writing *and also* gain more insight as a result of their writing process. You might get stuck as an analyst if you try to start a project or a section without sketching your frame and focus—but you might also get stuck if you hold too tightly to your original plan. You can use a focused outline at the start to help you divide up your subtopics, or sketch a new outline for a paragraph or section to help you get unstuck as you compose. Meanwhile, exploratory freewriting or mind-mapping can help you spot unexpected connections at any point in your writing process. You will alternately need to lean into your curiosity and speculate ("what else could be going on here?"), and then turn around and confidently walk your readers through your reasoning step by step. Managing your dispositions of *openness* and flexibility alongside your dispositions for *persistence* for thinking systematically will also support your work here.

Balance evidence and judgments

Although analysis doesn't feature typical "for" or "against" arguments, you will need to include your own judgments alongside the evidence you gather. You may get stuck when you have written several sentences describing evidence, but lost your train of thinking about what it adds up to, or you may realize you have made several generalizations in a row and realize you need to back up and write about specific examples to show your work.

There is no single formula for balancing these modes, but readers often prefer writing that follows some kind of recognizable pattern, such as a closed-form paragraph or a point-by-point overall structure. Will you alternate evidence and judgment sentence-by-sentence or paragraph-by-paragraph, or do several rounds of one and then a few of the other? Will you use paragraph opening or closing sentences to connect to your lens and judgment? Often as you remind yourself and readers of your point by repeating key ideas, you will spot new insights you can share.

Exercises to consider as you reflect to problem-solve

When you get stuck composing your analysis, you may use strategies you've used before: taking a break, reviewing the assignment directions, talking to a friend,

working on a different part of the writing task, or connecting to a value that motivates you. If you're stuck because you are balancing analysis modes, you may also find the exercises below helpful.

Practice

- To practice **generating openness**, see <u>Magic Three Choices</u>, <u>Mind the Gap</u>, <u>Old Wine/New Bottles</u>, <u>Question Ladders</u>, <u>Scenarios</u>, or <u>Six Degrees</u>.

- To practice **focusing** and structuring your analysis, see <u>3D Mind Map</u>, <u>Elevator Speech</u>, <u>Six Structures</u>, or <u>Subtopic Generator</u>.

- To practice **strengthening your evidence**, see <u>Evidence Garden</u>, <u>Gray-Area Finder</u>, <u>Inner Three-Year-Old</u>, or <u>Reason Appallingly</u>.

- To practice **forming judgments**, see <u>Believing/Doubting</u>, <u>Off on a Rant</u>, <u>They Say + I Say</u>.

16.4 Reflect To Improve: Exploring Your Growth as an Analyst and a Writer

As you complete a draft or finalize your project, you will benefit not just from making a few final edits, but from taking time to reflect on your work: you will want to define what you learned from this project, explore how to complete your revisions and identify key principles for writing, anticipate and adapt to meet the needs of future projects, and learn how you will keep improving as a writer.

You might also find that you want to explore some of the ways that you can improve your analysis writing specifically, for this project and for future projects. Successful analysis documents require a particular blend of vision, structure, and flexibility that you may want to add to your repertoire. You could thus give some extra time to the explorations explained here, so that you take full advantage of the opportunity to grow as a writer.

Assess your insights to improve your analysis

Since you will often learn about your topic or issue as you analyze, you will want to pause after completing an initial draft to make sure that your final ideas are consistent with your early ones. You should also take steps to ensure that your overall judgments—your "so, what?" statements—are visible. Do you expect your readers primarily to gain a richer experience or viewpoint, or to take particular action?

Often analysts need to revise earlier paragraphs, and even revise their original thesis or framework, to help readers see all the complications they discovered,

right from the start. And rather than saving all your main judgments for your final paragraphs, you can use your revision process to ensure that you have included connections to your conclusions throughout your document, so that your whole project benefits from your learning.

Identify analysis strategies to expand your writing story

Reflecting on how you balanced the nuanced details with the big picture insights in this analysis project—and identifying the places where you still got stuck—can help you transfer your improved analysis skills to another project. It can be useful to remember that even when nobody tells you to "analyze this," most academic writing projects and many professional writing tasks require at least some analysis to show *how* or *why* an idea is valuable.

On a concrete level, you may discover that completing an analysis project helped you discover some new strategies or principles that can become part of your writing story. For instance, although "frame and lens" is particularly useful for analysis, that approach could be applied to other writing tasks if it helped you here; similarly, "stay open to new learning" could be a principle you want to consider adding to your theory of good writing.

At a more abstract level, completing an analysis project can help you understand some of your strengths, preferences, and growth areas as a writer. Sometimes writers are very comfortable looking for patterns and tiny details; other times, writers may feel frustrated by the analysis expectations in a particular field, or may wish for more opportunity to make bold statements or recommend direct action. Most fields and professions depend on analysis to map out complex problems, so deciding how you want to maintain, improve, or highlight your analysis skills can help you map out your lifelong learning as a writer.

Exercises to consider as you reflect to improve

When you are trying to decide what to keep and what to improve in your analysis, you might find that familiar strategies help: checking on feedback from your readers, using highlight colors to help you see patterns, or connecting to your core values for motivation. You may also find it helpful to explore the resources below to see which ones might support your work:

Practice

- To practice **highlighting analysis insights**, see Conclusion Transplant, Elevator Speech, Letter to Kermit, Ten Directed Revisions, Used to Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **revising**, see <u>Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection</u>.
- To learn more about **paragraphs, organizational patterns, and cohesion**, see <u>Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft</u>.
- To learn more about **improving future writing tasks**, see <u>Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory</u>.

16.5 Sample Writing Projects that Rely on Analysis

Experience-based writing project: Analyzing how expertise is developed

Recently, it's become commonplace to estimate that it takes 10,000 hours to develop expertise in an area. Yet clearly being the best takes more than just putting in time. Consider what it takes to be an expert—or just really good—at a task, sport, job, or performance that you're familiar with, and give your analysis of how some actions, knowledge, and/or attitudes contribute to mastery.

Write from an insider perspective, as someone who does or studies this kind of work, to help a novice decide how to plan their next several months or years. Consider your frame: you can't explain everything about expertise. Identify your subdivisions: what particular steps or categories do you want to emphasize? Then decide whether you already know enough to provide evidence of how experts in this area work, or if you will need to inquire further about some categories in order to show what's "really going on."

Practice

- To practice **analyzing** a situation based on your experiences and expectations, see <u>Assumption Inspection</u>, <u>Audience Switch</u>, <u>Authority/Curiosity/Annoyance List</u>, <u>Cause-Effect Map</u>, <u>Gray-Area Finder</u>, <u>Inner Three-Year-Old</u>, <u>Subtopic Generator</u>, <u>Used to Think / Now I Think</u>.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - <u>Narration</u> to provide examples from your experience;
  - <u>Definition</u> of what "mastery," overall or in part, looks like
  - <u>Classification</u> to help you identify and organize the parts
  - <u>Causal argument</u> to show how the pieces contribute to the whole

Learn (continued)

- Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
- Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Writing-about-writing project: Analyzing a text

Select a piece of writing—writing you admire, writing that annoys you, a peer's draft for an assignment, or an example of a genre you'd like to understand better—and analyze that writer's strategies. (Sometimes this is called *rhetorical analysis* of a text.) You'll use the perspective of an advanced writer who can see how another writer solves rhetorical problems (such as making their goal clear, connecting with the audience, or providing credible evidence), solves knowledge problems (such providing enough depth and addressing possible erroneous assumptions), and solves process or disposition problems (how the organization or design help readers stay engaged).

Choose your frame carefully: which aspects of writing do you most want to focus on? Consider what divisions you can use: what factors will best explain the document's success (and/or reveal its problems)? You may direct your analysis to the author, to a peer who wants to learn strategies to try or to avoid, or to yourself as you consider how this document affects you.

Practice

- To practice **analyzing** a text, see Audience Profile, Believing / Doubting, Genre Ethnography, Gray-Area Finder, Off on a Rant, Subtopic Generator, or They Say + I Say.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Summary of some parts of the text
  - Definition of key rhetorical terms
  - Classification to help you identify and organize the parts
  - Causal or evaluative argument to frame your "so, what?"
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you analyze a text, see
  - Chapter 13 on predicting and questioning genre patterns
  - Chapter 6 on reading actively
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Source-based writing project: Analyzing media coverage of an event

Review several stories that have been in the news recently about something "close to home" for you, such as your school, region, job, sport, or family heritage. (You can do a quick online search for *News About ___.*) Choose one issue or story that interests you and that you suspect is more complicated than a short article online or quick video can represent, and analyze several sources to help you identify complications. Your perspective might depend on the frame and divisions you select. For instance, as you review both short and longer reports, you might look for complicated components (many parts or events to consider); complicated sides, stakeholders, or values (more than just "pro" and "con"); or complicated causes or effects (not just what happens here and now, but what happened earlier or farther away).

You can bring an insider perspective or use a premise or theory you know from your work or major. Your goal is not to argue right or wrong, but to show your peers—and other people reading the news—that there's a lot more going on than they will find from reading just one short source. Remember your "so, what?": why should busy people take time to keep track of all these complications? You could write this as a typical essay, or consider creating your own news-video script or opinion blog.

Practice

- To practice **analyzing** how an event was represented, see <u>Assumption Inspection</u>, <u>Audience/Stakeholder Mapping</u>, <u>Evidence Shopping List</u>, <u>Gray-Area Finder</u>, <u>Six Structures</u>, <u>Source Synthesis Grid</u>, <u>Subtopic Generator</u>, <u>Used to Think / Now I Think</u>.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves**, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - <u>Summary</u> of the simplified news story;
  - <u>Classification</u> of the types of components you are revealing
  - <u>Exploration</u> of how some components can be significant to a full understanding of the issue
  - <u>Synthesis</u> of source material to build credibility and detail
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you analyze other writers' perspectives, see
  - Chapter 5 on <u>choosing a topic and focus</u>
  - Chapter 6 on <u>reading actively</u>
  - Chapter 7 on <u>implicit/explicit thesis statements</u> and <u>organizational patterns</u>
  - Chapter 11 on <u>editing to create an appropriate and consistent style</u>

Community-engaged writing project:
Analyzing an organization's outreach

Choose a student group or service on campus that you don't (yet) belong to or use much, but one that is related to a personal, academic, or professional interest of yours, and analyze some of the ways they are currently serving—or not serving—a student like you. You may want to review any website or flyers they have; request and review any mission statements, event plans, meeting agendas or minutes; and/or interview some leaders or members.

Establish your perspective: what makes you someone whose insights they might value? What principles, priorities, or theories will help you and them see what's not obvious? Also establish your frame: will you address a single question such as recruitment or events? Will you consider just events from this year or review several years' worth of events? Write a report to the current leader(s) of that group (using a genre they will actually read/watch) identifying their strengths, weaknesses, and possible new opportunities for connecting with and supporting students like you.

Practice

- To practice analyzing the impact of the organization, see Assumption Inspection, Audience Profile, Gray-Area Finder, Six Structures, Stance Switch, Subtopic Generator, Values Freewrite.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration of your own experiences or perspectives
  - Classification of the factors you are analyzing
  - Exploration of how some components can be significant to a full understanding of the issue
  - Evaluative argument to frame your "so, what?"
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you analyze how well the organization serves its clients, see
  - Chapter 20 on gathering primary and secondary data
  - Chapter 8 on designing and analyzing multimodal documents
  - Chapter 6 on reading actively
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Chapter 17. Developing Projects that Argue

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize writing projects that require argument
- Explore writing strategies that support argument
- Reflect to predict, problem-solve, and improve throughout the process of writing arguments

While much of your writing will be designed to move your reader or present

your own judgment in some way, in some writing situations your overarching goal will be to **change your readers' minds on a specific point of argument**. Argumentative writing can be highly motivating: the US is sometimes referred to as having "an argument culture," and writers often rise to the challenge of persuading a resistant audience to consider new ways of thinking. In school assignments, arguing logically within the frameworks of a field or discipline is also a major *way of thinking* that students are asked to demonstrate—in part because scholars and innovators use argumentation not just to defend positions but to create new knowledge. Formal written argument is thus an integral part of the culture of US academia.

Your lifelong experience as an arguer—whether you are used to dramatic vocal disagreements or quieter ways of indicating that you approve or disapprove of a situation—can serve you well as you work on a formal written argument, but it can also cause you to underestimate the workload or overlook key factors in your readers' experience. Likewise, some of the kinds of "arguments" you may see in your daily life aren't good models for someone who actually wants to change another person's beliefs or behavior. In popular media, people frequently list several reasons they believe in or support a position, without adapting those reasons to a specific audience or situation. Likewise, some school assignments may ask you to describe several "pros and cons" of a situation, regardless of your actual beliefs. A list of reasons or a description of relevant claims, even when they are supported by credible evidence, is not an effective argument. Advanced writers know that our statements are only effective when they are rhetorical—that is, when our writing is designed for and directly affects our readers.

As a result, the argument writing that seems to call for the most immediate passion and active engagement also benefits from the strongest reflective practice and exploration. Like an attorney preparing for weeks before a one-day trial, writers who argue often put in many hours of less visible inquiry, planning, and readjusting to create successful documents. People are generally not persuaded by random facts or ALL CAPS SENTENCES, so writers need to select and arrange arguments in ways that are relevant to and acceptable by our readers. To do this, we often begin by finding the root of the problem: "How do we disagree?"

Advanced arguers can keep several threshold concepts in mind:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Successful arguers seek always to understand our readers' reasons and locate evidence that readers will find persuasive.

🚪 Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Argument isn't about producing three correct points with two credible sources and one refutation: it's a social engagement. Persuasive arguers need connect claims and evidence to what we learn about the larger community contexts that influence readers' expectations and beliefs.

🚪 There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Since argument is contextual and rhetorical, there is no one right way to write an argument. Sometimes there's not even one clear best argument to make, so writers need to take extra time to explore and experiment before we commit to our central claims and approaches.

This chapter will help you explore key strategies that arguers use, and use them to help you reflect on your options at each stage of your project, so that you have the skills to successfully navigate the process of arguing your point.

Explore 17.1

Consider your recent conversations with friends or family, and note down one recent "low-stakes" argument you've had recently, and one disagreement that felt more important or impactful. Thinking back, how would you describe your argument style or approach—was it similar in both situations, or did you use different strategies?

17.1 How Do We Disagree? Exploring Fundamental Argument Strategies

While humans overall are storytelling beings, as an individual you may have been arguing with people even longer than you have been telling them stories. (There is a rumor in my own family that each child's first word was "No.") You may thus feel that you have a fair understanding of how to go about arguing, so when you create a written argument that does not satisfy a reader, it can feel very frustrating.

To understand this frustration, consider the difference between throwing a ball to a friend and designing a robot to accomplish the same task. Although you no longer think consciously about it, when you pick up a ball and glance at your friend across the yard, you are collecting, processing, and adapting to a wide range of information in real time: the weight of the ball against your fingertips, the distance you see between you and your friend, the wind you feel against your face. As you start to throw, your body continues to adapt to the size, shape, texture, and weight of the ball, and to any change in your friend's position.

If you had to build a device to deliver one ball to one location, much less a device that would adapt to different balls or locations, it would take hours. Similarly, moving from casual everyday spoken arguments to written argumentation means that you have to convert your intuitive skills into distinct strategies. You need strategies to reach readers who are at a distance in space and time. On top of that, as you may have read elsewhere in this book, you are writing for readers who cannot read your mind to understand your intent or your knowledge, who come from communities that rely on different types of evidence than you may be comfortable with, and who have not yet noticed all the nuances and complexities of your subject. Reflecting on these conditions and planning your argument can thus take more time than you expect. At the heart of formal argumentation are three strategies you can practice:

- **Strategy 1**: Identify what the disagreement is.
- **Strategy 2**: Understand the influence of an argument's "backstory."
- **Strategy 3**: Predict the right combination of sufficient and credible evidence, appeals, and/or reasoning to affect a range of readers at a distance in space and time.

You may hear these strategies identified by different names. A famous philosopher named Stephen Toulmin who studied arguments described this process as establishing the *claim*, the *warrant*, and the *grounds* or *data* of your argument; you may also hear instructors refer to strategies involving your *thesis*, your *assumption-checking*, and your *support*.

Moreover, writing successful arguments will require you to move in alternating directions in relation to your readers. At some points, you must *separate* yourself from your imagined readers; at others, you must identify where you and they *share* some common principles. When you are chatting with friends about whether to order pizza, these back-and-forth moves may occur intuitively, but when you are composing a complex written argument, you should focus on one kind of move at a time.

Establish and define the disagreement

Before you can know *why* your readers disagree with you, you need to know what you're *really* disagreeing about. This first step may seem unnecessary: who would write an argument without knowing what the disagreement was? Outside a school or work environment, a strongly felt disagreement—say, about which sports team is performing best this season—is often obvious, so you may not need to consider this step for long. But inside a classroom or professional office, some disagreements may be harder to pinpoint.

> **You may not really be disagreeing (yet)**: If your initial claim is too broad, too cautious, or too vague, you may still be focused on *explaining* a situation rather than arguing for a distinct position. The sentence "Sometimes writing is hard for students" will not provoke

many people to disagree. To create a foundation for a formal argument, you can narrow the focus ("Requiring college application essays"), make a bolder or more daring claim ("creates unfair disadvantages"), and identify a specific angle or aspect of the problem ("for students who cannot afford a private college-prep coach").

You may not know what your readers most disagree with you about: Disagreements are audience- and context-dependent: a claim about the benefits of telework will elicit calm nods in one workplace but fervent opposition in another, while the claim that "Pluto is a planet" elicited very little disagreement a few decades ago but is now widely argued against. If you have ever argued with a friend or family member over one event (like being late to dinner) only to discover that the person was actually angry about a different problem (your overall work schedule), you know how difficult it is to have a successful argument when the area of disagreement isn't fully defined.

You may not know the goal of disagreeing: In writing a timed essay response or in composing a newspaper editorial, you may be aiming to "win" an argument by successfully demonstrating how all credible evidence supports your view. On the other hand, in the opening rounds of a diplomatic negotiation or in recruiting a prospective client, you might "win" simply by sounding reasonable enough that the reader doesn't dismiss your ideas in the first round. In a political subcommittee, a custody mediation, or a project brainstorming session, you may need to reach a consensus in which all participants have compromised in some ways.

You may not see the nuances of a disagreement: In academic and professional writing, disagreements may arise about what appear to be very small matters: which of Elizabeth Bennet's younger sisters is the most thoroughly developed character in *Pride and Prejudice*, or whether a 5% increase in study participants' sleep time would be a significant enough gain to persuade scientists to adopt a new therapy. These arguments are important to the writers, and necessary to help them create new knowledge, but the exact contrary positions can be harder to distinguish when you are new to the conversation.

Sometimes writers find it useful to explore argument categories—also called *stases*—that were defined by philosophers such as Aristotle several thousand years ago to help discern what arguments are appropriate to a situation.

- **Arguments of fact,** definition or category: Pluto is not a planet; the current economic state is a recession; a "hybrid" car is still essentially an old-style gas-guzzler

- **Arguments of value or degree:** Pluto's status was unfairly changed; this is our worst recession in 100 years; fully electric cars are the best option for people concerned about climate change
- **Arguments of cause or effect:** Data from the New Horizons spacecraft about other exo-planets will cause a reevaluation of Pluto's status; the recession was the result of deregulation of the mortgage industry; buying an electric car will save you money over a ten-year period
- **Arguments of policy or solution:** Universities should support independent astronomers' work rather than big-budget space projects like New Horizons; the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau must be given more oversight power to prevent such abuses by lenders; special tax breaks for hybrid vehicle buyers should be canceled since they are now competitive on price and value

Often, arguments combine two or more of these approaches: "Data from the New Horizons spacecraft will not **cause** a reevaluation of Pluto's status, so funding **should be** redirected to smaller projects by independent scientists." The key is to know which approach(es) you are taking at any given time. You may also have to broaden or narrow the focus of your argument ("Battery-only cars are good for urban and some suburban drivers"), to simplify it or attend to complications, or to adapt it to the knowledge or concerns of your readers.

Understand the backstory

When you transplant an apple tree, you have to dig deep to bring all the roots along; when you "transplant" your readers to a new way of thinking, you need to consider their roots as well. This step can be harder than defining the main disagreement, because it involves mind-reading and counter-motion. That is, you have to learn to think like, and sometimes move directly toward, the very readers with whom you have just begun to disagree, rather than simply pile up the evidence in your favor. In most academic and professional written arguments, your goal is not just to find their soft spots so you can crush their resistance; arguers who empathize and find common ground with readers create more persuasive documents.

- **Identify core values in the backstory**. The reasons why you and your friends argue over which restaurant to order from rarely have to do with the "front-story" evidence. You all agree about the facts: the pepperoni pizza is spicy and hot but greasy, and the vegetarian restaurant is healthy and flavorful but has slow delivery time. You may disagree about the best choice because for this one evening, you each hold different values or priorities: one of you hates spicy food, one of you wants to lose weight (and thinks the pizza won't help), and one of you has a final exam to study for (and so needs a faster dinner).

- **Identify unstated assumptions in the backstory**. The reasons why Pluto was officially designated "the ninth planet in our solar system" one decade and "just one of several dwarf planets in the Kuiper belt" the next does not have to do with a change in the front-story facts about Pluto but with a change in the definitions about what constitutes a "planet." Scientists commonly accept that backstories change: as we learn more about astronomical bodies generally, we should be willing to revise our models and categories.

Before your readers will be persuaded by your evidence in the front story of an argument, they may need to agree with—or at least grant the possibility of worthiness to—your backstory and values. A challenge is that the backstory of your own argument may seem so obvious to you that you have difficulty imagining that others don't see and share your views on it. So before you begin amassing evidence about your topic or issue, you need to investigate your assumptions and those of your readers, as thoroughly as you can.

For instance, in order to argue that "An electric car is the most environmentally friendly vehicle you can purchase," you need to know whether your readers agree with your definition of "environmentally friendly car." If they value overall resource use more than reducing fossil fuel consumption, then purchasing *any* new car may not meet their values. To write a successful argument for readers with those values, you would need to address the *overall environmental costs* of buying a new electric car.

In a school assignment, you may be able to decide that your target audience does not include people who don't at least grant your basic premise: "If they don't want to help the environment at all, they won't ever buy an electric car, so I'm not writing to them." However, that approach only goes so far: eventually, writers must argue to people who disagree with or misunderstand *some* of our basic premises, values, and assumptions. By clarifying areas of common values with readers, you not only increase your chances of arguing successfully on a single point, but you adopt an approach that treats readers as reasonable colleagues, which will benefit all of your argumentative writing.

Explore 17.2

Name something that is your favorite (such as your favorite food, course, city, or cause). Staying with that one topic, list two different argumentative claims you support, but you think your peers would disagree with: you could write one that is evaluative ("X is *delicious/fun/important*"), one that is causal (what are the *origins* or *consequences* of X?), and/or one that focuses on policy ("Somebody *should* _____ regarding X."). Consider either the causal or policy statement: write one more sentence describing a backstory of why your peers might *reasonably* disagree: "My peers and I might have different values/expectations about _____."

Provide sufficient evidence, appeals, and reasoning

Once you know the disagreement focus and the backstory values (or warrants) for each person or group that has a stake in the situation, you can finally start building an argument. When writers argue, we do state our opinion, but it's not "*just* an opinion": it's an opinion supported by reasoning and evidence. If you just state your position, readers are unlikely to change. Unfortunately, you cannot learn to "support your argument" once and for all, the way you learn to snap your fingers. Persuading a cranky five-year-old to try a new food and persuading a skeptical investor to support a new business plan will require very different uses of evidence and reasoning.

When you argue with a friend in real time, you have multiple opportunities to correct, strengthen, and revise your approaches as your friend resists or poses questions. When you compose a textual and/or visual argument for one or more skeptical readers, you need to anticipate many possible resistances and questions—the way a programmer for a ball-throwing robot needs to account in advance for many throwing situations. You may need to develop additional skills with one of the following strategies in supporting your front-story.

Provide relevant, credible evidence to fit your audience

Instead of summarizing all the facts, advanced writers select data that best matches our readers' needs—and helps us address the strongest resistance points an audience will present. Just having "three points" to your argument isn't enough; you have to provide the evidence that best responds to readers' most serious doubts, and often that best-match evidence is the hardest to find or create. For example, gathering specific financial data to support a five-year earnings projection may be the hardest part of your business plan, yet you cannot leave it out: that will be among the first questions an investor will ask.

Likewise, you need to assemble support that your particular audience will view as credible. The five-year-old may be persuaded by an engaging story about Perry and the Parsnips, while the lead investors will want numbers based on sources they consider up-to-date and reliable. Other audiences may be persuaded by

comments from experts, studies published in reputable journals, detailed obser-vations you provide, and/or careful analytical reasoning. The more you know about the expectations of your readers' discourse community, the better you'll be able to match your arguments to their needs.

Provide a chain of reasoning that "shows your work"

If you ever felt frustrated when someone's argument was "Because I said so," you experienced an audience's reaction to insufficient reasoning. It's a little like hav-ing a friend who can do complicated chemistry equations in their head, without writing down all the steps. This quick calculation helps the work of the original thinker, but it does not help an outsider *replicate the thought experiment*. When you write an argument, you cannot just add in a fact or expert testimony here and there: you need to show your argument work just as equation-solvers show their mathematical work, so that someone who doesn't read your mind can replicate your thinking.

Some readers, in some straightforward situations, can make do with a short chain of reasoning; other readers and other arguments will require a longer chain. The shortest chain always has at least two links, so a fact, example, or quotation will need to be connected to your own reasoning: it cannot "speak for itself." Even a fairly simple or commonly agreed-on fact could be interpreted in multiple ways unless readers are guided directly to a conclusion.

> **Fact:** A recent survey shows that nearly 40% of teens say they sometimes text while driving . . .
>
> . . . which outnumbers those who admit to driving while intoxicat-ed, demonstrating how serious a problem texting is.
>
> . . . which is fewer than was reported just a few years ago, demon-strating that anti-texting campaigns are working.
>
> . . . which conflicts with other reputable surveys which show from 20% to 60% of teens admitting this behavior, demonstrating how difficult it is to accurately measure this problem.

To develop that last statement into a longer chain of reasoning, you could explain:

- which reputable person or organization conducted each reputable survey,
- how each survey was conducted that may have influenced its results,
- how this compares to the last several years' worth of similar surveys, and
- what challenges remain in designing and interpreting the results of the survey.

Do you need this level of detail? The answer to the question "How much is enough?" depends on several factors. An audience of skeptical sociologists reading an extended

article might need and appreciate that extended chain; an audience of state legislators reading a brief letter might not. As you build your chain, your own credibility is also a factor: if you are the US Surgeon General writing about cancer research, you may not need to show your work as much as if you are an unknown college student whose expertise in this area your readers may have little reason to trust.

Finally, the genre and purpose of the document are factors in your decision: in an assignment for a college class in the US—in a culture that places high value on accurate detail and specific logical moves—the overriding purpose is to show your work, even if you know your instructor doesn't really need the information you are providing. Meanwhile, in an advertisement or campaign speech, sometimes the purpose is specifically *not* to show the chain of reasoning, which might not hold up to scrutiny (what do baseball players really know about buying a pickup truck, after all?). In any case, if a reader says, "I'm not convinced," even when your facts are correct and your evidence is appropriate, that may signal that you need to add some more steps to your reasoning.

Provide a balance of appeals suitable to the audience and situation

When you think of finding "evidence" or "reasons" for your argument, you're usually working on an appeal to logic. This approach is highly valued in US academic writing, where the scientific method of hypothesis posing, experimentation, and analysis based on data anchors much of our approach to communication. Outside school, though, appeals to logic—or to *logos*, to use the Greek term—are often combined with or even superseded by two other kinds of appeals.

Appeals to emotions, or to *pathos*, are particularly common in advertising and in social media discussions. At root, most of these moves attempt to appeal to someone's fears (about growing old, losing money, or being disliked) or appeal to someone's desires (about having great friends, becoming rich and famous, or living an adventurous life). Emotional appeals have the advantage of being almost instantaneous: if you put a picture of a cute baby or a puppy up on a screen, the "Awwww!" reaction comes immediately, without anyone needing to read the fine print, calculate a percentage, or consult a manual.

Because emotional reactions are so instant and powerful, however, readers in US academic and professional settings sometimes feel that a writer is trying to manipulate rather than honestly persuade them. Writers must therefore adapt their use of emotional appeals to match a particular audience. You may feel justified in increasing the emotional appeals to your five-year-old ("Parsnips will help you grow up big and strong! Wonder Woman always eats her parsnips!"), but you might choose not to take that tack with your business investors ("Without this plan, children will be weeping in the streets!").

You can also make appeals to values your readers share—appeals to *ethos*—which happen frequently in political speeches as well as advertisements. A conspicuous

appeal to values suggests that readers should take a very particular action (voting, donating, buying) because that is a good way to show they believe in a very general value (patriotism, charity, human rights). In a more subtle appeal, a writer might argue that readers who want to make the world a better place for future generations (a moral value) should buy a car that pollutes less—or a celebrity or influencer will lend their good name (and, by implication, their respected values) to support a product or politician.

Like a celebrity on TV or TikTok, you also appeal to your readers' values to increase your own *ethos* or credibility. In some cases, you may tell a personal story that directly explains the principles or values that guide you and that you share with readers, or describe the professional experience that gives you particular insight into your current project. And in all your writing projects, your choices and approaches—such as using a particular genre or diction or referring to credible sources—can imply that you are "authentic" or a "hard worker" and so should be trusted by readers.

In academic and professional documents, a little emotional or ethical appeal—perhaps in the opening or closing sections—can have significant impact. However, they can also raise readers' skepticism if they suspect writers are using such appeals merely to conceal logical weaknesses in the core arguments, so you should use them carefully.

Use counterargument, concession, and refutation as persuasive strategies

Argument writers are often encouraged to summarize and respond to opposing points of view. When you directly state these counterarguments, you make a strong ethical appeal (by showing that you are the kind of writer who takes the time to understand your readers). You also clarify your own claims and evidence, since new information or arguments are often easier to understand when they are compared to contrasting or more familiar ideas. In most cases, you will also need to carefully refute these opposing claims—strongly if you are in a direct-debate mode, more gently if you are building to a compromise—so that readers are not left wondering what your true position is. However, in some cases you can build an ethical appeal by conceding a small point entirely, to show that you are willing to be reasonable: "It's true that if you already own a late-model fuel-efficient car, buying a new electric car will not save you enough money on fuel to offset the cost of buying another new car."

As you explore the options for constructing a written argument, you may need to loop through all three of these challenges more than once, like a robot-designer who adjusts the mechanism or programming, then tests the robot's ball-throwing, and then adjusts the mechanism again. Each time you define the argument more exactly, you'll find it easier to know how to uncover the values and assumptions that lie behind it, in order to see where you and your audience share common ground

and where you separate from one another. As you gain a clearer understanding of your readers' current position, you'll better be able to predict the kind and amount of evidence and reasoning that you will need to move them toward your own perspective. This cycle of refining your argument is crucial: Your readers will most likely encounter your document only one time, so your focus, connection, and support must guide them precisely toward the beliefs or actions you intend.

Explore 17.3

Write a one-sentence argument related to your favorite (or least favorite) food, class, place, or cause, stating it in a way that you imagine many people will disagree with. Now imagine the difference between trying to persuade a close friend to agree, and trying to persuade a highly-resistant reader (such as your grumpiest relative, your most skeptical instructor, or the owner of a business that strongly supports another food, place, or cause). Choose two of the strategies above: selecting evidence, choosing appeals, developing a chain of reasoning, or responding to counterarguments. For each of the two, write a sentence explaining how your approach to that strategy would be different depending on which audience you were persuading: "For a friend, I would use an appeal such as ___, while for a competing business owner I would use more _____ appeals."

Practice

- To learn about and practice avoiding **logical fallacies**, see Reason Appallingly.

Learn

- To learn more about **discourse communities**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about creating **counterarguments**, see Chapter 18, Developing Projects that Propose Change.

17.2 Reflect To Predict: Exploring Your Argument Project

All advanced writers benefit from planning a project, perhaps by writing an outline or identifying a research process; reflective writers take some additional steps to deliberately explore a range of options and predict which ones will be most successful.

Remember that you can DEAL as you explore and predict aspects of your project. Predicting as an arguer requires many of the same considerations as you will encounter in other writing tasks: you will want to **define** your audience and your goals, **explore** your own subject knowledge and consider your dispositions, **act** to acquire resources and develop early

insights, and **learn** how you can combine new strategies with previous ones that have been successful for you as a writer.

Because you will need to *identify the front-story, the backstory, and your key support* very early in the process of composing an argument, you may want to take some time with the explorations explained here.

Explore your position and your readers' concerns

Your answer to "how do we disagree?" depends fundamentally on understanding your own goal and your readers' values and expectations. Identify both the front story and the backstory of the argument: what do you and readers most disagree about, and what differences in assumptions and values are at the root of that conflict? You may be able to gain some initial perspective just by taking time to analyze the situation, but you may also need to seek out credible information about the issue and your readers. You should also consider how intensely readers doubt or disagree with your position, and whether there are any points you might be willing to concede or compromise on.

Explore details in the front story and backstory

While all writers research, argument writers need to research in three different layers—even, and perhaps especially, with arguments we think we already know well. You already have experience using research to assemble the reasons, explanations, and data that support your opinion. Yet in order to respond to your readers' counterarguments, you also need to inquire into some of the reasons, explanations, and data that contradict or question your perspective. (Remember that most interesting controversies have more than just two "sides," so it can help to examine several points of view.) Finally, you need to investigate your readers themselves: everything you can learn about their backstory assumptions and values will help you adapt your writing. Just as leaving out one instruction step could result in someone assembling a bookcase that tilts badly and fails to hold books, leaving out an inquiry step can result in an unstable argument that fails to persuade readers.

Explore the intensity, scope, and structure of your argument

Like explainers, arguers also have to answer the question "How much is enough?" When you can identify your goals and challenges up front, the better you'll be able to predict how much, and what kind, of arguments and evidence you will need to offer if you want to change readers' minds.

- Explore your goals and your readers' constraints. Just as it takes more energy to lift a heavy object than a lighter one, or throw a ball fifty feet rather than five, it will take more effort to persuade resistant readers than

to persuade those without a strong opinion, and more effort to argue successfully for a complete change of policy than to create a proposal for a local pilot project. Are you preparing to work on an intense argument, or are you stepping into a less strenuous challenge?

- The scope of your argument will also depend on your intentions and your readers' situation. For instance, when your audience is busy or the issue is less controversial, you may not need to present as much detail. When your audience is skeptical or you urgently need readers to change their thinking, you will need to provide more evidence, address counterarguments more thoroughly, and use a range of appeals—which may mean that you need to narrow your focus to cover less ground in more depth (from "fighting global warming" to "installing offshore wind turbines in Virginia," e.g.).

- Selecting an initial structure for your written argument is also a rhetorical decision. A simple argument for agreeable readers might work best in a block pattern of paragraphs, with counterarguments noted briefly and responded to near the end, where a more complex situation involving multiple perspectives might benefit from a side-by-side pattern comparing arguments and counterarguments.

Once you understand your intensity and scope, you might also experiment with phrasing your initial claim: most academic arguments use an explicit argument statement, but these can vary in complexity depending on the goals and readers.

Exercises to explore as you reflect to predict

Before you set out to write the actual first pages of your argument, you will want to acquire resources that will help you meet the challenges you've identified, and practice some of the strategies you may use as you compose. You already know of actions that can help you: perhaps you like to brainstorm initial pros and cons, read some popular articles about an issue, draft an outline, or schedule your research time. You might also explore some of the exercises below to see which might be particularly helpful in writing your arguments.

Practice

- To practice **identifying goals and concerns**, see Assumption Inspection, Audience profile, Believing/Doubting, Counterargument Generator, Off on a Rant, or They Say + I Say.
- To practice **inquiring about the front story and backstory**, see Audience/ Stakeholder Mapping, Date My Topic, Evidence Shopping List, or Reason Appallingly.
- To practice **exploring your scope and structure**, see Deluxe Project Scheduler, Expand and Narrow, Explode a Moment, or Six Structures.

17.3 Reflect To Problem-Solve: Exploring Sticky Argument Problems

Advanced writers often take steps to solve problems during the composing process; reflective writers look for ways to step back from a problem to explore likely alternatives rather than staring at a blinking cursor or "just doing it."

As you compose your argument, you may encounter challenges that feel familiar to you: generating material, staying organized and focused, providing sufficient evidence, managing your time or finding a stronger motivation boost. When you get stuck, you can DEAL with your problem: define it, explore possible solutions, act to try out a new approach, and make a note of what you learned: did your strategy help?

In composing an argument, you might find that you get stuck trying to align your original views with the available evidence and with readers' questions and resistance points. The deeper you go into articulating your claims, the harder it can be to imagine the thoughts of someone who doesn't think like you. You may want to explore the strategies noted here, so that you have some new approaches ready to try.

Focus and adapt your argument

The more you write about your issue, the more you learn—and the more you may become aware that your early arguments have evolved or need revising. You should specifically look for ways to ensure that your overall argument is debatable, consistent, and supported:

- Since it is easier—and less socially stressful—to summarize the facts of a situation or the explanations provided by other people, you may find that you have written a whole paragraph describing the history of electric cars, rather than arguing why someone should buy one. While adding some background information or quoting an interesting expert perspective can give readers useful context, you should look for ways to foreground your debatable claim and related reasons regularly in your document.

- As you write, you may find that you get caught up in an interesting sub-point or controversy: in order to persuade readers about the benefit of electric cars, you delve into the need for more places to charge a car, and then find yourself arguing for your city council to sponsor public charging stations. These points are *related* but perhaps not *essential* to an argument about buying a car—unless you decide you want to shift away from individual purchases to arguing about public policy.

- Sometimes you can improve a claim by adding more or better evidence or by "showing your work" more thoroughly. In other cases, though, you might need to change your overall argument. If you don't think you have data or examples strong enough persuade a particular group of readers that "A true electric car is *the most environmentally friendly* vehicle on the market," you might adapt to offer a less radical claim: "Battery operated cars are an *environmentally friendly* choice *for people who don't have access to public transportation*."

Your *persistence* with a clear argument will help you stay focused here—as long as you balance that disposition with your openness to readers' needs or concerns.

Explore your evidence options

As you draft your document, you should keep checking that you have the right evidence for your readers: evidence about the *most controversial* points, evidence that readers find *sufficient* and *credible* by their standards, and evidence that is *explained thoroughly* so that readers see how it supports your claim. If you're not sure that you are successfully "proving your point," you might need to step back and try another approach. Remember that you can combine types of evidence: statistics matched with examples, or expert testimony connected to emotional appeals from local residents. Sometimes you just need additional or more precise data, and you will need to re-research a point to find a stronger source; sometimes it will make sense to gain credibility by conceding an opposing point and moving on. And sometimes if you shift into writing to refute or respond to readers' concerns, you gain more insight into how to support your own arguments.

Exercises to explore as you reflect to problem-solve

When you get stuck composing your argument, you may use strategies you've used before: taking a break, reviewing the assignment directions, talking to a friend, working on a different part of the writing task, or connecting to a value that motivates you. If you're stuck because you are aren't sure whether your writing will persuade a resistant reader, you may also explore the exercises below to see which ones might be most helpful to try.

Practice

- To practice **focusing and structuring** your argument, see Add/Move/Change/Delete, Elevator Speech, Out On A Limb, Six Structures, or Subtopic Generator.
- To practice **strengthening your evidence**, see Dialogue, Inner Three-Year-Old, Rate My Source, Reason Appallingly, or They Say + I Say.

17.4 Reflect To Improve: Exploring Your Growth as an Arguer and a Writer

As you complete a draft or finalize your project, you will benefit not just from making a few final edits, but from taking time to reflect on your work: you will want to define what you learned from this project, explore how to complete your revisions and identify key principles for writing, anticipate and adapt to meet the needs of future projects, and learn how you will keep improving as a writer.

You might also find that you want to explore some of the ways that you can improve your *argument* writing specifically, for this project and for future projects. Successful argument documents require skills at anticipating and responding to readers' concerns that you may want to add to your repertoire. You could thus give some extra time to the explorations explained here, so that you take full advantage of the opportunity to grow as a writer.

Assess your insights to improve your arguments

Since you will learn about both your topic and your readers as you delve into an argument, you will want to pause after completing an initial draft to make sure your reasons and evidence still match your main goal and directly address your readers' concerns. Sometimes you find that your front story has evolved: you intended to argue about X, but became more focused on arguing about Y; you can revisit your introduction and early paragraphs to realign your draft to the current focus.

Similarly, feedback from your readers, or your own insights, may help you realize that your readers are more concerned about Z than you originally thought, and so you might need stronger or more clearly explained evidence, more focused appeals, or more direct responses to counterarguments for that section. Finally, once you're confident in your focus, you might see whether your project could benefit from following a consistent closed paragraph structure or using other coherence strategies to help readers keep track of the various sides of each point.

Identify argument strategies to expand your writing story

Reflecting on how you have framed your own argument while responding to readers' concerns in this project—and identifying the places where you still got stuck—can help you transfer your improved argument skills to another project. Since you are living and learning in an "argument culture," you may find that even unremarkable writing tasks like weekly reports or emails to co-workers benefit from your ability to frame and anticipate arguments.

Even if you've been arguing all your life, planning and completing a formal argument project has probably helped you discover some new strategies or principles that can become part of your writing story. For example, you might find that "always check the backstory" can become one of your goals, or you may have learned some strategies that help you organize a complex document.

Finally, working through an argument project can help you understand some of your strengths, preferences, and growth areas as a writer. Maybe you've always been comfortable stating your opinion about sports but now you think you need more practice writing and supporting a claim relevant to your field or your personal goals—or maybe you discovered you have untapped strengths at imagining and responding to readers' concerns. The more you can articulate your goals and abilities as an arguer, the more growth and success you can enable across your writing through your life and career.

Exercises and resources to explore as you reflect to improve

When you are considering the strategies that will best persuade readers to agree with your arguments, you might find that familiar strategies help: checking on feedback from your readers, using highlight colors to help you see patterns, or connecting to your core values for motivation. You may also find it helpful to explore the resources below to see which ones might support your work:

Practice

- To practice **highlighting argument insights**, see Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Conclusion Transplant, Letter to Kermit, Shrunken Draft, Ten Directed Revisions, Used To Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **revising**, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.
- To learn more about **paragraphs, organizational patterns, and cohesion**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **improving future writing tasks**, see Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory.

17.5 Sample Writing Projects that Rely on Argumentation

Experience-based writing project: Plain is the new fancy

The internet is full of fancy examples that everyone should envy: every day we see vacation destinations, clothing, technology, restaurants, colleges, craft projects,

video games, and athletic feats that dazzle us. Talk back to that conversation: drawing on your experiences and those of people you know well, write an argument to your peers in favor of choosing something plain instead. Take time to think carefully about your topic and angle, so you can focus on a topic and/or some reasons that are unexpected and that challenge readers' expectations.

Most of us would already agree that plain yoga pants are comfortable, that plain vegetables are more nutritious, or that a plain college will cost less, so those aren't arguable. But if you want to argue that yoga pants contribute to gender equity, that broccoli smoothies boost self-esteem, or that community colleges reduce family strife, you might pique readers' attention. Be sure to acknowledge skeptical readers' concerns, provide exact examples, and show your chain of reasoning. If a standard essay doesn't suit your thinking, consider composing the text for a public service announcement video, a script for a "Non-Desperate Housewives" scene, or a story for third-graders (but don't forget your goal of persuading your audience!).

Practice

- To practice **arguing** about your experiences and judgments, see Assumption Inspection, Believing/Doubting, Cause-Effect Map, Counterargument Generator, Genre Switch, Out On a Limb, Ten Ways To Choose a Topic, or Used To Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration to provide examples from your experience;
  - Causal argument and evaluative argument to explain how and why benefits occur; or
  - Reflection to consider how your own life has changed or could change for the better
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you argue about your experiences, see
  - Chapter 19 on conducting self-based research
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Writing-about-writing project: What best helps writers learn?

Working with a combination of personal and professional sources, create an argument about what most helps writers learn to write. You might decide to narrow your argument to a particular group of writers: writers *like you*, writers *in high*

school, or writers *with learning disabilities*. Or you might narrow to a particular kind of writing, such as *lab reports*, *literary analyses*, or *blog posts*. This textbook, like many scholarly publications in the field of writing studies, presents some arguments; you may agree or disagree with any of them, as long as you have evidence to support your claim.

Take time to adapt both your argument (front story and backstory) and your genre to a specific audience, and stay aware of what alternate views those readers may have. If you decide to write to scholars or instructors who already have a strong view about this, you might draft an academic essay with formal citations; if you decide to write to other students who are new to thinking about advanced writing strategies (for instance, students with less school experience), you might draft a video script or a poster.

Practice

- To practice **arguing** about how writers improve, see Audience Profile, Counterargument Generator, Expert/Novice Exploration, Letter to Kermit, Off on a Rant, Scenarios, Used to think / Now I think, or Values Freewrite.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration of your own or others' writing experiences
  - Definition of key rhetorical terms or strategies
  - Causal or evaluative argument to make your case
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you argue about how people write, see
  - Chapter 1 on threshold concepts
  - Chapter 19 on blending primary and secondary sources
  - Chapter 7 on open and closed paragraph structures
  - Chapter 11 on rhetorical sentences

Inquiry-based writing project: The first step(s)

Sometimes the hardest part of solving a problem is deciding what to do *first*: in some cases, we rush in without choosing the best path, and other times we stall out because we don't see an easy way to get started. For this project, pick a difficult challenge that is important to you personally or professionally, review what kinds of actions experts recommend, and write an argument about what the *first major step* in solving that problem (or perhaps the first *two* steps, but no more) should be.

Remember that your claim should be debatable: if the first step is obvious and easy, there's no need to write about it. If you choose a large global problem such as HIV or religious freedom, try to narrow your focus to a specific location or challenge; if you choose an individual problem such as quitting smoking or preparing for an ultramarathon, be sure to address the scholarly research as well as individual complexities. You may write directly to a person making this choice, or to an organization or agency that supports changes. Be sure to read widely enough to understand several options for *first steps* and why people disagree, so that you can address the front story and backstory elements and any counterarguments. Depending on your audience, you might write a letter, an online magazine article, or a scholarly report.

Practice

- To practice **arguing** about the most effective first step(s), see Assumption Inspection, Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Counterargument Generator, Emperor For a Day, Evidence Shopping List, Gray-Area Finder, Magic Three Choices, Six Structures, Source Synthesis Grid, Subtopic Generator, or Used to Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn about **additional writing moves**, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration of your own experiences
  - Description of other writers' experiences
  - Explanation of different possible steps and their consequences
  - Exploration of the difficulties that people or groups face getting started
  - Synthesis of material from several sources to build credibility and detail
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you locate and argue from credible data, see
  - Chapter 5 on choosing a topic
  - Chapter 19 on developing a research question
  - Chapter 20 on evaluating source information
  - Chapter 13 on using genre patterns
  - Chapter 7 on planning paragraph structures
  - Chapter 22 on integrating evidence from sources

Community-engaged writing project: Inclusive communities

Community organizations seek to serve a wide range of clients and constituencies, but identifying and reducing barriers to participation can take time, study, and

resources. Choose an organization or group in your campus or local community, especially one that you can visit personally for data collection or one with a comprehensive online presence, and evaluate that group's current level of inclusiveness. You can focus on one or more aspects of inclusion, such as how they include diverse staff or participants; how well their physical spaces, online resources, or services are accessible; or how their public statements, policies, or practices seek to involve a range of people and perspectives. You will need to argue that your criteria are valid, so you may need to do some research about what elements constitute an inclusive workplace or accessible materials, or to find examples of successful practices.

Since almost nobody will argue that inclusivity is a bad idea, consider focusing your arguments more narrowly, addressing how an organization that wants to do the right thing might more widely invite people to share its achievements and/or prioritize actions and resources to make beneficial improvements for employees or clients. Use specific evidence to support your judgments, which may be unanimous or mixed. You could write a report directly to someone in or responsible for the organization, or consider writing an argument or op-ed to a wider audience of the organization's supporters or clients.

Practice

- To practice **arguing** about which approaches best support inclusion and equity, see Assumption Inspection, Believing/Doubting, Evidence Shopping List, Keyword Bingo, Question Ladders, Scenarios, Subtopic Generator, or They Say + I Say.

Learn

- To learn about **additional writing moves**, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Description of the organization's facilities or practices
  - Definition of what an "effective" inclusion/equity strategy is
  - Evaluation arguments regarding the organization's performance
  - Reflection about your own experiences or assumptions
- To learn about **additional writing strategies** to help you document how effective an organization's inclusive efforts are, see
  - Chapter 19 on including diverse perspectives in your inquiry
  - Chapter 20 on gathering primary and secondary data
  - Chapter 21 on addressing conflicts and complications
  - Chapter 7 on using point-by-point organization
  - Chapter 22 on framing and citing your source information
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate style

Chapter 18. Developing Projects that Propose Change

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize writing projects that require change proposals
- Explore writing strategies that support change proposals
- Reflect to predict, problem-solve, and improve throughout the process of writing to recommend change

In some writing situations, persuading your reader to nod thoughtfully in agreement with your ideas is not enough: you need to reach out to one or more groups of readers and persuade them to **change behaviors, policies, resource allocations, or action plans**. You might need to change only a small corner of your world—your neighborhood, your child's school, your workplace—or you might hope to move others to take a single step on a long pathway of a larger change toward healthier families, less toxic communities, more efficient procedures or technologies, or more peaceful nations.

Change proposals occur across a wide variety of documents, including some changes that you may not think of as particularly remarkable or impactful:

- Job application letters (I recommend you hire me)
- Project or grant proposals (I recommend you support/fund my project)
- Advertisements (I recommend you buy my product)
- Candidate videos (I recommend you vote for me or my proposal)
- Self-improvement books (I recommend you adopt new behaviors)
- Community petitions (We recommend you change the law, policy, or financial plan)
- Advocacy websites (Our organization recommends you change how you vote or act)

In each of these cases, writers are stepping into a situation in which many people are happy with the status quo. That is, they are bound up in *inertia*. Physicists note that when we encounter bodies at rest, they will remain at rest—and that bodies in motion will continue moving with the same speed and direction—unless acted on by a sufficiently powerful outside force. Inertia is not just a property of inanimate objects like rocks or planets: the tendency to stay put, or to continue unswervingly along the current path, is a fundamental aspect of human behavior that shows up in individuals, groups, workplaces, and institutions.

As an advanced writer recommending change, you are the "outside force" that affects inertia. In person, you may exert the force of information or personal regard to change one friend's dinner choice; as a writer, when you compose a formal recommendation, you can exert persuasive force to request resources or actions from people who are unknown to you, from people who have more power than you do, from people who are at a distance, and/or from many people at once. When you are writing for change, you might keep several threshold comments in mind:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

🚪 Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

🚪 Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

🚪 There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

A recommendation for change is *more than an argument about ideas*. Most people would agree with arguments that eating healthier food is better, but we still love eating our burgers and brownies, because *change is hard*. Even though proposals for action are in some ways just another kind of argument, the inertia of individual and collective behaviors is so difficult to alter that you need to develop new strategies. Writers who plan to recommend that readers change their direction or speed need to answer the question, "What moves people to act differently?"

Explore 18.1

Review the list of documents given above for ideas, and note down 3-5 times recently when you have tried to persuade others to significantly change their behaviors or policies, whether in your daily life or for a school or work project. Were you successful?

18.1 Overcoming Inertia: Exploring Fundamental Strategies for Proposing Change

When you write to recommend changes, you need to keep this sentence in your head:

> If a change were obvious and easy, it would have been done already.

Most of the people around you are intelligent, good-willed, hard-working, generous human beings who would like their world to be better than it is. Like most of us, though, they find that motivating and sustaining even small changes can be difficult. It's not just life-changing promises or profound New Year's resolutions that are hard to keep: as an experiment some time, you might ask a friend who has a distinct diet-soda brand preference what it would really take to get them to start drinking the other brand. Change is difficult, and composing a document that will successfully educate, persuade, motivate, and direct one or more

readers to make a change and sustain that change can be a very challenging—and rewarding—task.

When you begin to write for change, you will need to consider the complex psychology and ecology of a situation, and develop strategies that will help you to negotiate among multiple and often contradictory factors:

- **Strategy 1**: Identify and balance the multiple factors that influence readers' actions and decisions.
- **Strategy 2**: Anticipate and respond successfully to readers' complex resistances.
- **Strategy 3**: Predict a feasible but unknown future based on a clearly but incompletely documented present.

Address the whole ecosystem of change

To see the ecosystem, you need to be willing to let go of a narrow approach to your issue. For example, an old European and American proverb suggests that once upon a time, a key battle was lost because—stay with me here—the king's messenger's horse's blacksmith could not find one last nail to properly attach the horse's protective shoes, and so the messenger never delivered a crucial piece of information to the king, "all for lack of a horseshoe nail." The lesson is that a single small factor or strategy can allow or prevent an important change.

From an ecosystem approach, however, that lost battle was more likely the result of many factors: the last-minute timing of the message, the poor inventory-management of the blacksmith who ran out of nails, and/or the single stranded messenger with only one form of transportation. (Why was the most vital message of the war sent with just one person on one horse?) When you are planning a change-proposal, you want to pay attention to the small details, but it's crucial that you also work with a broader system-wide view.

Choose an audience connected to the change you want

Which actor in the ecosystem can best create the change you are arguing for? Do you want to write to the king to challenge his single-messenger plan, the nail-delivery-workers' union to recommend new supply routes during wartime, or the local barons' congress to protest the war itself? Where an argument may have as few as two "sides," a change-process has multiple *stakeholders*—people, groups, or organizations who are affected by the situation and "have a stake" or an interest in how it turns out—and so there are multiple points for intervention and mediation. Your success as a writer may depend as much on where you apply pressure as on what argument strategies you decide to use and what data you bring in support.

Understand the situational network of constraints

Even once you identify your readers and your request—let's say you will write the head of the messenger's guild to recommend having more back-up messengers and horses available—you will want to keep the larger ecosystem in mind. The success of the messengers depends upon how guild interacts with politicians and bankers as well as how it is supported by local laws and roads. If you propose a change that solves the messenger problem but also creates a shortage of horses for generals, you will not be acclaimed as a successful communicator. Writers need to leave time for inquiry about related issues that might be affected by our proposals.

Acknowledge readers' multiple and overlapping identities

The head of the messenger's guild may also be a taxpayer who believes city residents are overcharged for road maintenance, or the parent of a nail-suppliers union member who wants the suppliers to work reasonable hours. Although you won't usually be able to know all your readers and their needs in detail, you will need to avoid making assumptions or generalizations about how all messengers think and what motivates them to change or resist change. Again, the more you know about all the variables that could be involved in the ecosystem of the change you are recommending, the more successful your writing will be.

These investigations and deliberations may seem more like "thinking" than like "writing" tasks, yet they are crucial to addressing the rhetorical context of your project. Even if you have already decided what the "right change" is, you will succeed only if you can communicate that change to readers who are in a position to enact it. (There's no use complaining to nail manufacturers about the cost of horses.) And if you recommend change to "the world at large" or "society" or "whoever reads this," you run the risk of your readers pointing their fingers to someone in another part of the ecosystem: "That sounds like *their* problem, not mine."

Explore 18.2

List 2-3 changes that you would like to recommend to your college or university president. Pick one of those changes, and identify 2-3 factors that influence whether or not that change would be possible. You might consider people, locations, budgets, laws, or values that have an effect on the president's decision making.

Then choose one of *those factors*, and list three factors that influence it. (For example, if you chose *state education laws* in the second round, you might identify state voters, federal education laws, and education researchers as third-round elements of the change ecosystem.) Finally, add a sentence: of all those factors, which one does the president have the most ability to respond to, and which the least?

Address readers' multiple resistances

Building a connection with readers in a change-focused writing project requires all of a writer's strategies. Change-writers need the mind-reading of expository writers, the complexity-awareness of analysis writers, and the assumption-checking of argument writers, as we try to understand and respond to our readers' current thinking. For this work, writers need to anticipate opposition, build connections, erode resistance, and motivate action for a reader in a particular context.

Consider diverse sources of readers' resistance

Your readers' current trajectory or beliefs have been influenced by years or even decades of information and experience. To understand their inertia, you can begin by checking on your own assumptions about why change has been slow in coming, and replace any preconceptions you may have (readers aren't just lazy) with evidence- or reasoning-based analysis of readers' likely motives. Face-to-face arguers can adapt to resistance points as they arise in conversation. In contrast, writers need to anticipate and plan in advance how to negotiate with readers in another room, another state, another year, or another country. Readers will likely have multiple, overlapping resistance points, some of which they may not themselves be fully aware of, so writers need a combination of inquiry and educated guesswork as we anticipate the strongest resistance areas.

Readers may be **knowledge-limited**: they

- Don't know about their options, or why one might be better than another
- Don't know how options could apply to their situation
- Misunderstand some key concepts or features related to their situation or options
- Don't know the benefits of changing to another way of thinking/acting

It is best to assume that your readers are not "stupid" (a character flaw) but rather that they have insufficient information. Most of us have to work hard to stay "up to date" on information that is relevant to us, and so we don't leave a lot of time to explore contradictory or alternative ideas. In order to make new information seem relevant and necessary to readers, you may need to demonstrate how new information applies to their current situation.

Readers may be **emotionally or intellectually invested** in the status quo: they

- Have put a lot of time/energy/ego into current ideas or practices
- Are persuaded by evidence that reaffirms their beliefs or values, and belong to communities that praise their beliefs (this is often called "confirmation bias")

- Enjoy the results of their current ideas or practices
- Are afraid of the risks or consequences associated with new thoughts/actions
- Are tired of trying out new things that never work as well as predicted

It's best to assume that your readers are no more "stubborn" than you are. We all invest in ideas and practices that are familiar to us and connect to our value systems, from our preferences in diet soda brands to our political views to our beliefs about how to raise kind, hard-working children. To make new ideas or practices seem reasonable, you may need either to connect them to readers' current values or—a more difficult task—negotiate a way for readers to set their current values aside, or put them lower on the priority list, in favor of the new ones.

Readers may be **resource-limited**: they

- Don't have the **time** to learn a whole new way or try out a new option in a crisis
  - or don't think they have the time it will take (knowledge limits)
  - or don't think it's worth spending time this way (emotionally/intellectually invested elsewhere)
- Don't have the **personnel** to take on a new project
  - or don't think they have enough personnel (knowledge limits)
  - or think personnel are more productive on other projects (emotionally/intellectually invested elsewhere)
- Don't have the **money** or the **materials** to devote to a new project
  - or don't think they have enough money/materials (knowledge limits)
  - or prefer directing money/materials toward other priorities (emotionally/intellectually invested elsewhere)
- Have no **control** over resource allocation
  - or think they can have no effect on resource allocation (knowledge limits)

It's best to assume your readers aren't sitting on resources which they see as entirely unencumbered. Even billionaires might have plans for their great wealth that do not involve your goals. If readers direct resources to the change you recommend, they may need to take resources from another group or project that can seem equally deserving. To help readers move toward change, you may have to explain why their resources will be equally or better put to use for the new project.

Prepare to respond to readers' inertia

Once you have identified the most intensive resistances to your proposed changes, you will need to build arguments directly in response. It may be helpful at this point to remember that *resistance* can be a sign of intelligence; another name for

your readers' response could be *critical thinking*. So while you may plan to direct-ly refute readers' ideas by addressing and discounting their counterarguments, you might also consider whether you should approach intelligent readers with a plan to use *concessions* or propose *compromises* to motivate an internal change. Your goal may be only to move readers past their concerns and excuses toward productive action—but you may also want to maintain a productive relationship with them and enlist their help with changes that you can all agree on.

Refutation

You may choose to **directly refute** readers' resistances or objections, using one of three common approaches:

> You may argue or provide evidence that a reader's position is **in-correct**: Responding by correcting factual error is the easiest and most direct refutation—but also the least common option among educated or committed readers. You should focus on correcting misinformation without accusing them of poor judgment, and provide information that is credible to those readers.

> If readers essentially understand the details, you may be able to ar-gue that their resistance is **correct but irrelevan***t,* in order to focus everyone's attention on the central issues. If readers are concerned about a drug's effect on five-year-olds when those children are highly unlikely to gain access to it, you can redirect them to more central issues of saving adult lives.

> In most cases—since if it were easy it would be done already—you will need to argue that readers' concerns are **correct and relevant but insufficient** to override the need for change. One strategy is to use analysis to argue that readers are not yet mindful of the com-plexity of a situation: "If one considers only A and B, the current plan seems sufficient; but if one considers C, D, and E as well, you see we need a new course of action." You may also wish to argue about the urgency or impact of a situation: "Doing X is import-ant, but doing Y *right now* is more important for more people with more impressive results."

To argue for change, writers often negotiate among a competing set of values ("We need to invest for the long term even if we lose money in the short term"). Shifting readers' values is tricky, because it's hard to identify which values un-derlie a resistance point, and because none of us likes to be asked to rethink the guiding principles that have served us well thus far. You will need to establish support from credible sources, but you may also need to strengthen the ethical and emotional appeals in your refutation.

Concession and compromise

In some situations, you will face resistances that cannot be refuted—or you will want to build a relationship with readers rather than demonstrate your superiority. Research shows that in complex negotiations, people who strive for a mutually successful outcome more than trying to prove that their side is "right" often create more sustainable solutions. So you may want to try approaches that build connections:

> You can **concede** that a point of resistance is entirely valid. The more sincere, complete, and specific your concession, the more credibility you may gain with your audience (a stronger appeal to ethos). Since writers are rarely right about everything, acknowledging some points of agreement with readers not only builds common ground but keeps us grounded in reality.

> You may call for **compromise**, in which you may describe some radical options for change but then argue for mutually agreeable actions that occur more in the middle of the continuum. Generally, you gain credibility by avoiding scare tactics or poor logic: avoid narrow "either my way or the highway" dramas and "slippery slope" descriptions that exaggerate the consequences of the current situation just to make your compromise position look better. You should aim to recommend helpful actions without either you or your readers "selling out" on a central principle.

> If you are joining a long-running conversation, positions on all sides may have become entrenched, and to move forward you may need to **construct** a third, fourth, or fifth option that has not yet been fully evaluated. Remember that *writers create new knowledge*, not just report it. Your insights into readers' concerns may spark ideas about ways to modify, expand, or redirect earlier lines of argument into new options that may satisfy multiple stakeholders.

Adapting to genres and audiences

In some proposals for change, writers address resistances and present counterarguments directly. A letter to a political representative might use second-person pronouns to address a reader directly: "You may worry that the vaccinations are too expensive, but compared to the cost of treating the disease, the cost is minimal." An academic essay or informational web page might use third-person examples: "According to studies, many parents are concerned about the cost of the vaccine; however, those costs can usually be covered through insurance or state health programs."

In other genres, a direct approach may not work. The change you want from an application letter is for you to be offered a job, and the change you want from a grant

proposal is to be offered a grant. Since everyone knows the goal, it can be considered counterproductive to address resistances directly: "You may be planning to hire someone with a higher GPA, but I bring crucial workplace skills to this position." Yet to succeed in writing for change, you must still anticipate and provide arguments in response to the concerns that might be raised. Perhaps you could explain your GPA, or simply strengthen your description of your advanced courses and internship experience. Either way, you need to anticipate readers' thinking in order to compose your response, even when you don't directly mention their resistance.

Overall, writers who argue for change need to negotiate a viable pathway through significant resistances. A reader who agrees in principle but does not get off the couch to go vote for the candidate you recommend doesn't help create actual changes any more than a reader who still disagrees with you. If you've ever used one flimsy excuse after another to talk yourself out of an action as minor as going to the gym on a cold day, finishing your homework rather than staying to chat online, or cleaning the house rather than playing outside with the kids, you will recognize the need to fully address readers' assumptions, questions, and resistances. You know that if you leave non-change pathways open, readers may be able to justify inaction and continue on their current course.

Predict a feasible future

To move readers forward, you need to document the present and then predict a reasonable future. You may occasionally argue for a return to policies, procedures, or behaviors that were previously in place; more commonly, you will ask readers to venture into much less familiar territory, taking risks that they cannot be certain will come with adequate rewards.

If predicting the future sounds impossible—after all, you don't have magical powers—you're partly right. Yet while you can't be 100% accurate, you should aim to provide as much specificity and convey as much confidence as possible without exaggerating the current challenges or straining your credibility too far. To convince readers that your proposed future is feasible, you might use one or more of the following strategies.

Predict by clarifying current consequences

If the present situation is causing serious enough problems for a wide enough group of people, then readers may be persuaded that a future without change will have detrimental effects. In such a case, the change you recommend may seem well worth taking some risks. Perhaps your audience is not fully aware of the extent of the current consequences (or of the potential consequences if no action is taken). So you might document the present carefully: "Each site already developed to drill for shale gas or install windmills has involved creating a network of roads, wells, and power supply lines that adversely affect groundwater

and wildlife." Your credible evidence about the measurable current consequences can encourage readers to prefer a different future.

Predict by extrapolating from current data

If you regularly work with numerical data, you are familiar with the benefits and limits of extrapolating from current data: how long, how far, and along what trajectory will a current trend continue? The longer the current trend and the more thorough and credible the data, the more reliable your prediction about the near future will be. You may need to use qualifying language in these kinds of arguments to help readers imagine a vivid future picture even when the outcomes are uncertain. Instead of saying that your proposal *will* lower the number of deaths from opioid abuse in your county, you can extrapolate carefully: Since a two-year pilot study observed a 20% decrease in deaths by providing outpatient counseling at one crisis support center, creating three more centers *could* save *up to* 600 lives per year.

Predict by analogy with a related current situation

Maybe nobody has solved the problem you are working on, but someone may have fully or partially solved a similar problem in another time or location, or for another group or profession. Any time you refer to a research study or an example from the town down the road, you are arguing by analogy: if it worked there, it should work here.

When you predict successful change via analogy—"Expanding mail-in voting and early in-person voting in Virginia would lessen the time people spend standing in line on election day, just as it has done in Oregon"—you have several tasks to accomplish. You must demonstrate credibly that the analogous change worked: that Oregon had better voting access than Virginia, even if there were still some problems in Oregon. You also need to establish the ways in which the two situations are similar: for this, Oregon's program may be a better example to show readers in Virginia than California's. Most importantly, you must be careful not to press an analogy argument too far. If the situations are too unlike to begin with—"Mail-in registration has been efficient for colleges and universities for decades, so we could use it for voting too"— readers will question your fundamental logic, and the analogy will fail.

All of these predictions require careful negotiation: the further you reach from readers' current, familiar experience (and from credible data about it), the less confident readers will be. Yet without some implied or stated arguments about the future, you cannot successfully motivate readers to change their present actions. How you handle that balancing act will depend on the strength and source of readers' resistance, as well as on your genre and rhetorical situation. Writers of academic journal articles often conservatively mention the "possible implications" of the currently reported data, suggesting that it needs to be confirmed by replication in subsequent studies. On the other hand, composers of websites for advocacy organizations often argue vividly about the long-term consequences of

decisions or policies, and grant applicants often lean on their prior successes to directly make the case that their next project also deserves funding. In all these cases, writers move readers toward change when we convince them that the future we imagine is not just beneficial but feasible.

Explore 18.3

Briefly describe a change that would improve your college or university campus (perhaps one you identified earlier). If that change were easy, it would already be done, so start by identifying two ways that campus leaders might resist or feel stuck: how are they limited by knowledge, values, and/ or resources? Then write a sentence or two to persuade leaders that, despite limitations or concerns, change is feasible. You can argue based on how bad the situation is now, based on reasonable extrapolations of how the situation could reasonably evolve, or based on analogy ("University X did this last year"). You can make up data now if you need to, but if you do that, add a note: "I'd need more research about this."

Practice

- To learn about and practice avoiding **logical fallacies** like confirmation bias, see Reason Appallingly.

Learn

- To learn more about **analyzing discourse communities**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about **using argumentative appeals**, see Chapter 17, Developing Projects that Argue.
- To learn more about **adapting to alternate genres**, see Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres.

18.2 Reflect To Predict: Exploring Your Change Proposal Project

All advanced writers benefit from planning a project, perhaps by writing an outline or identifying a research process; reflective writers take some additional steps to deliberately explore a range of options and predict which ones will be most successful.

Remember that you can DEAL as you explore and predict aspects of your project. Predicting as a change proposer requires many of the same considerations as you will encounter in other writing tasks: you will want to **define** your audience and your goals, **explore** your own subject knowledge and consider your dispositions, **act** to acquire resources and develop

early insights, and **learn** how you can combine new strategies with previous ones that have been successful for you as a writer.

Because you will need to *understand the ecosystem* surrounding your recommendation for change, you may want to take some time with the explorations explained here.

Explore your goals in relation to readers' constraints and opportunities

Envisioning a specific audience is never more important than when proposing change: when possible, you should direct your recommendations to readers with the ability to act on your advice for themselves or for others. Even when a goal-to-reader connection initially seems obvious, such as writing to your child's school principal to help reduce bullying on the playground, you should take time to explore alternatives (perhaps the local parent-teacher association or the state board of education could help provide resources or policies). You should also consider readers' inertia: why haven't they *already* taken up this change? The more you can investigate how why and how your readers may resist, and the constraints within their ecosystems, the more you'll know about the actions they are capable of taking. When the inertia is higher, you may need to focus on smaller steps toward change or to collect stronger evidence to move readers to action.

Explore the past, present, and future

To successfully argue for change, you need to know a little about what has already been tried and how people responded; you need to understand the current situation and how the consequences affect a wide range of stakeholders; and you need to examine data that helps you predict the future results of change. If you only address the problem right in front of you, you run the risk of readers saying, "We tried that last year and it didn't work" or "That sounds good in theory but it will never work here." You should also evaluate what resources you have for obtaining credible general knowledge (such as trends in university residence hall policies nationally) as well as specific local knowledge relevant to your readers (your local school policies).

Explore your scope and structure

Is it more effective to argue for one ambitious solution that will inspire readers? Or will readers in the community or profession respond better if you propose small steps or offer a compromise? Your decisions about the depth, breadth, order, and even genre of your document will depend in part on whether readers have the interest and time to review all the research or would prefer a quick list of steps or a chart with a three-year budget. If you are recommending a low-stakes change or connecting with readers who are likely to be flexible, you may find that it's effective to start with your own arguments and focus primarily on your recommendations using

a block pattern. When you anticipate that readers are more resistant or fearful, or when you are recommending a change that is risky or large-scale, you may want to start by reassuring readers that you understand their concerns—or integrate your responses to counterarguments throughout your document in a side-by-side pattern.

Once you understand your intensity and scope, you might also experiment with phrasing your initial claim: most proposals use an explicit argument statement that leans toward high complexity.

Exercises to consider as you reflect to predict

Before you set out to write the actual first pages of your change proposal, you will want to acquire resources that will help you meet the challenges you've identified, and practice some of the strategies you may use as you compose. You already know of actions that can help you: perhaps you like to list reasons supporting and resisting your view, read some popular articles about an issue, or set up note-taking cards or documents to track your thinking. As a proposal writer, you may also find the exercises below particularly helpful.

Practice

- To practice **identifying goals and constraints**, see Audience Profile, Audience Switch, Counterargument Generator, Emperor for a Day, Magic Three Choices, or Out on a Limb.
- To practice **inquiring about the change ecosystem**, see Assumption Inspection, Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Date My Topic, Evidence Shopping List, Mind the Gap, or Scenarios.
- To practice **exploring your scope and structure**, see Cousin Topics, Deluxe Project Scheduler, Expand and Narrow, Explode a Moment, or Six Structures.

18.3 Reflect To Problem-Solve: Exploring Sticky Proposal Problems

Advanced writers often take steps to solve problems during the composing process; reflective writers look for ways to step back from a problem to explore likely alternatives rather than staring at a blinking cursor or "just doing it."

As you compose your proposal, you may encounter challenges that feel familiar to you: generating material, staying organized and focused, providing sufficient evidence, managing your time or finding a stronger motivation boost. When you get stuck, you can DEAL with your problem: define it, explore possible solutions, act to try out a new approach, and make a note of what you learned: did your strategy help?

In writing to propose change, you might find that you get stuck trying to balance between fully describing the ecosystem and presenting a feasible, cohesive recommendation. While it can be an achievement sometimes just to get people to agree that change is needed, you also need to use your careful research and innovative thinking to identify the next necessary steps (otherwise you may be falling into the pattern noted in the old joke, "Everyone complains about the weather, but nobody *does* anything about it"). You may want to explore the strategies noted here, so that you have some new approaches ready to try.

Balance vision and reality

In arguing for change, writers are often encouraged to project confidence and create an inspiring vision in order to motivate readers. In order to open up space for change, you may need to be innovative and present reasonings, steps, or goals that readers have not considered before. However, you should also remember that writers motivate change by presenting complete, reasonable, and effective recommendations. If your advice is not supported by credible evidence, or if the change feels too extreme for readers to manage, your proposal will be less likely to succeed. If you're feeling stuck, you might experiment with aiming for a more exciting or influential change, or scaling back to recommend some initial steps or localized change that are strongly supported by your evidence. In this work, your dispositions of *confidence* need to balance with your dispositions for *openness* and curiosity: the more you can learn about your readers and the ecosystem of change, the more likely you will be to offer a feasible proposal.

Empathize with readers' goals and values

Often we propose change because we're frustrated with a current situation or the people leading it, yet it's hard to motivate people to change by scolding them. As you write, you should strive to see your recommendations from your readers' perspective. Most people aren't resisting change just to be ornery, but because they believe the current scene or system matches what they most value, or because they fear losing something they value. Once you can identify a reasonable alternate value and think, "If I valued X instead of Y, I would be skeptical of this proposal, too," then you will be able to investigate approaches to help you encourage change. You should be prepared to change your evidence and even revise your recommendations as you learn more about what might motivate readers.

Manage multiple points of view

With so many moving parts in a change proposal, writers can get a little lost. It can help to check in and ask yourself which of your main goals you're working on in a particular section, paragraph, or even sentence:

- Are you arguing that the problem is serious enough to require change, explaining how change happened elsewhere, or specifically recommending steps toward change?

- Are you providing direct recommendations to readers about what they should do and why, or addressing their counterarguments to reassure them that their values and experiences align with the change?

- Are you representing data or examples from credible sources, or stating your own argument or analysis based on the evidence presented?

When you yourself know your position and goal, then you can look for coherence strategies to help readers keep track of the pathway, through large patterns like paragraph order or smaller patterns like transition phrases, repeated key terms, and known-new conventions.

Exercises to consider as you reflect to problem-solve

When you get stuck composing your proposal for change, you may use strategies you've used before: taking a break, reviewing the assignment directions, talking to a friend, working on a different part of the writing task, or connecting to a value that motivates you. If you're stuck because you are aren't sure whether your writing will motivate readers to change, you may also find the exercises below helpful.

Practice

- To practice **exploring your proposal**, see Believing/Doubting, Emperor for a Day, Expand and Narrow, Gray Area Finder, Out on a Limb, Stance Switch, or Values Freewrite.

- To practice **exploring readers' needs or values**, see Assumption Inspection, Evidence Shopping List, Scenarios, Used to Think / Now I Think.

- To practice **considering multiple views** of a situation or recommendation, see 3D Mind Map, Dialogue, Source Synthesis Grid, They Say / I Say, Write the Problem.

18.4 Reflect To Improve: Exploring Your Growth as a Proposer and a Writer

As you complete a draft or finalize your project, you will benefit not just from making a few final edits, but from taking time to reflect on your work: you will want to define what you learned from this project, explore how to complete your revisions and identify key principles for writing, anticipate and adapt to meet the needs of future projects, and learn how you will keep improving as a writer.

You might also find that you want to explore some of the ways that you can improve your *proposal* writing specifically, for this project and for future projects. Successful proposal documents require skills at balancing the big picture with small details supporting feasibility that you may want to add to your repertoire. You could thus give some extra time to the explorations explained here, so that you take full advantage of the opportunity to grow as a writer.

Assess your insights to improve your proposal

The journey from an initial idea about "what I want to happen" to an understanding of "how others can make something happen" is filled with learning: about the topic, about readers and their ecosystems, about change processes generally, and even about yourself. It makes sense to pause after completing an initial draft to honestly assess that learning and apply it to revisions for your project—particularly if you've received feedback from readers. (One writer I know finished an essay recommending that students always turn off their cellphones in class because research showed that it detracts from student learning—but admitted that she herself was unpersuaded by that research and still kept her own phone on in classes, a realization that prompted her to rethink some of her arguments!)

Since proposers often gain strong insight into how hard change can be, they often need to recalibrate their arguments as they revise. Remember that if you or your readers have doubts about part of your recommendations, you can choose to strengthen your evidence (even if this means doing some new research), address readers' concerns or constraints more directly, or shift your advice to something more feasible. Sometimes it is better to succeed in persuading people to make a small, initial change—and perhaps consider what their next steps could be—than to have no effect at all.

Identify proposal strategies to expand your writing story

Reflecting on how you investigated a whole ecosystem in order to write a proposal to move one small piece of it—and identifying arguments that were tricky to make—can help you transfer your improved proposal-writing skills to another project. Whatever field or profession you are in or hope to be in, it's likely that one thing that distinguishes leaders from followers is the ability to imagine and successfully propose changes.

It might be interesting to consider how composing your writing story is itself a proposal for change, in which you identify both what *has always* worked for you as a writer along with some *new approaches* that you are planning to adopt as you grow and change (even if they seem difficult right now). In addition, you might look at how some key proposal strategies might also become part

of your story, whether they are focused generally on matching argument and evidence to readers' up-front needs, or more specifically on how you might use a combination of refutation and compromise to negotiate in difficult writing scenarios.

Writing for change nearly always helps writers understand our own strengths, preferences, and growth areas, because at least some part of this work is hard for nearly every writer. Maybe you've discovered that you're interested in all the interlocking pieces of an ecosystem (and so you get off on a tangent sometimes), or that you prefer "just the facts" reasoning (and so sometimes miss out on readers' more emotional or psychological resistance points). This could be a "meta" moment: learning how to change and improve yourself as a writer—or to grow in any profession—will draw on the same skills and strategies that you are using in a change proposal project. So even if you don't see a future for yourself as a grant writer or social activist, your proposal skills can prove valuable in a wide range of personal and professional situations.

Exercises to consider as you reflect to improve

Since proposing change relies on strategies you use in other writing tasks (explaining a problem, analyzing the effects of current actions, arguing for solutions), you might find that familiar strategies help: checking on feedback from your readers, using highlight colors to help you see patterns, or connecting to your core values for motivation. You may also find it helpful to explore the resources below to see which ones might support your work:

Practice

- To practice **highlighting insights about proposing change**, see Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Letter to Kermit, Scenarios, Shrunken Draft, Ten Directed Revisions, Used To Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **revising**, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.
- To learn more about **paragraphs, organizational patterns, and cohesion**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **improving future writing tasks**, see Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory.

18.5 Sample Writing Projects that Rely on Change Proposals

Experience-based writing project: Hard habit to break

One of the best ways to learn to empathize with readers who don't want to change is to become one. For this project, you will be both the author and the audience: select a habit you want to break, a new behavior pattern you want to adopt, or a goal you want to achieve, and write to yourself arguing in favor of that change. (If you can't think of any improvements for yourself, you can write to a very close friend or relative.) Psychologists explain that New Year's resolutions tend to fail because people set their sights too high and don't create a clear plan, so don't plan to quit smoking forever or give up all social media.

Instead, consider cutting back or setting a temporary limit.

Then identify as many of your resistances or concerns as you can (if it were easy, you'd already have done it), identify the values that support your current behavior, and map out responses to those points. Use a genre and style that you'll pay attention to: a humorous animation? a heartfelt letter? a step-by-step manual? If you need to do a little research, you can, but you should focus on providing reasons that address your specific concerns or fears, rather than lists of expert opinions that don't relate to your life.

Practice

- To practice writing **proposals** that you can use to change your own behavior, see Assumption Inspection, Believing/Doubting, Cause-Effect Map, Counterargument Generator, Reason Appallingly, Used To Think / Now I Think, or Values Freewrite.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration to provide examples from your experience
  - Causal argument and evaluative argument to explain how and why benefits occur
  - Reflection to consider how your own life has changed in past years or could now change for the better
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you complete a successful proposal, see
  - Chapter 19 on conducting self-based research
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Writing-about-writing project: Revision plan or genre critique

Every time you provide feedback as a peer reviewer, you are arguing for change. Instead of leaving just a few comments this time, create a full-scale revision plan. You can write to a peer about revising their recent draft. Alternately, you can write to an instructor or supervisor suggesting changes to a whole *genre* of writing in order to improve learning and/or communication: you could critique a midterm or final project genre that puts too many stresses or limits on writers, an annual report structure that wastes time or omits key details, or the design of your company's website or informational brochure.

Writers don't always accept others' suggestions easily. Thus you'll need to anticipate what the author or supervisor prefers about the current version and address those concerns, and provide very specific suggestions for changes, even to the point of writing sample sentences. To gain credibility, you might use specific terms about writing like those in this textbook, or conduct some research about the ways other writers compose in similar genres. You might draft an essay or memo, or try your hand at using a screencast app that lets you talk as you annotate a text. Remember that this is a persuasive assignment: your goal is not just to point out errors or problems, but to convince your audience to make a change.

Practice

- To practice **proposing** ways to improve a text or genre, see Audience Profile, Believing / Doubting, Best and Better, Counterargument Generator, Genre Switch, Ten Directed Revisions, Values Freewrite, or Write the Problem.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Description to identify a problem
  - Definition of key rhetorical terms or writing strategies
  - Causal or evaluative argument to make your case
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you propose specific, feasible changes to a text or genre, see
  - Chapter 1 on threshold concepts
  - Chapter 3 on adapting to discourse communities
  - Chapter 5 on identifying key elements of a text or assignment
  - Chapter 9 on reviewing a peer's draft
  - Chapter 13 on adapting genres
  - Chapter 11 on rhetorical sentences

Inquiry-based writing project: Home improvements

Identify a change that you'd like to see in your neighborhood, community, or workplace, and write to argue for (part of) that change. You need to select a specific audience that has some power to enact or support the change, and that is exact enough that it either has a mailing address or could fit into a room. Thus you can't write an open essay "to all parents," but you could write an article for an online parenting magazine or blog (which has an email address) or compose a presentation to give to the parent-teacher association of a local school district (which can meet in a room).

Remember that the more you can find out about the ecosystem surrounding your recommended change and about your readers, the more persuasive you can be. So you will need to locate sufficient credible data or information both to make your case for change/improvement and to predict and respond convincingly to your readers' disagreements, resistances, and concerns.

Practice

- To practice **proposing** community change, see <u>Assumption Inspection</u>, <u>Audience/Stakeholder Mapping</u>, <u>Counterargument Generator</u>, <u>Emperor for a Day</u>, <u>Evidence Shopping List</u>, <u>Evil Genie</u>, <u>Six Degrees</u>, <u>Six Structures</u>, <u>Source Synthesis Grid</u>, <u>Subtopic Generator</u>.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - <u>Description</u> of the difficult situation
  - <u>Explanation</u> of different possible steps and their consequences
  - <u>Synthesis</u> of material from several sources to build credibility and detail
  - <u>Exploration</u> of possible future results
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you propose focused and feasible change, see
  - Chapter 5 on <u>choosing a topic</u>
  - Chapter 20 on <u>gathering primary and secondary data</u> and <u>evaluating sources</u>
  - Chapter 21 on <u>addressing conflicts and complications</u>
  - Chapter 13 on <u>using genre patterns</u>
  - Chapter 7 on <u>planning paragraph structures</u>
  - Chapter 22 on <u>integrating evidence from sources</u>
  - Chapter 11 on <u>editing to create an appropriate style</u>

Community-engaged writing project: Funding proposal

Nearly all groups seek additional funding—and they need advanced writers to help craft their proposals. Choose an organization or group in your campus or local community, identify a project or event they want or need to improve, and write a proposal to get funding in support of it. You can address a local agency like a city council, a funding organization that offers grants, or a specific group of local donors. You can use hypothetical situations, but the more *real* you can make this project, the better: interview an organization leader to find out their needs, and do some research to identify an actual grant program or donor you could write to.

You will need to research the donor or grant giver that you select as your audience: what are their goals and values, what achievements will they most want to see, and what (if any) specifications do they give for writing a proposal? If you don't find proposal specs, use what you know about asking for change: identify what you want and why it's valuable; connect to readers' likely values and answer their concerns about what their money will be used for, convince them that the project is feasible, and provide credible evidence to support your arguments. If no structure is specified, choose a genre that helps you provide an organized argument about what you want and how they will benefit.

Practice

- To practice **proposing** that someone donate money to your organization or group, see Assumption Inspection, Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Counterargument Generator, Elevator Speech, Emperor for a Day, Scenarios, Six Structures.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Description of the organization's facilities, practices, goals, or clients
  - Causal or evaluative argument to identify the benefits the organization provides and how additional funding will improve its work
  - Synthesis of material from several sources to build credibility and detail
- To learn more about additional writing strategies to help you propose a reasonable project for funding, see
  - Chapter 20 on gathering primary and secondary data
  - Chapter 21 on addressing conflicts and complications
  - Chapter 22 on framing and citing your source information
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate style

Part Four. Inquiring and Researching

Chapter 19. Early Inquiry: Exploring Research Questions

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify the types and stages of inquiry that will best support your writing project
- View inquiry as recursive, multimodal, networked, rhetorical, and ethical
- Define and explore your initial question or hypothesis
- Conduct exploratory inquiry across multiple kinds of source material as you start your writing project

All writers research.

If you are familiar mostly with writing school "research papers," you may think of "research" as a separate, defined step that a few writers take once and are done

with—as in "choose a topic, research it, write your draft, and finish your essay." So the idea that advanced writers integrate informal and formal cycles of inquiry into nearly every writing task we complete may be surprising.

Yet it may also seem obvious. After all, the writer—the *author*—has to write from some position of *authority*, and so we nearly always have information we need to acquire or at least verify (was that family trip to Arkansas in 2019 or 2020?). Moreover, writers are curious beings: as we write, we think, and our thinking raises questions we want to know more about, so we inquire and explore in multiple stages during a writing project.

If we don't define "research" as "looking up six online articles and citing them" but as any kind of **deliberate, rhetorical inquiry** to improve our communication with readers, we recognize how often writers use inquiry processes, whether we're writing posts, poems, or proposals. Writers who are engaging in research and inquiry may want to keep several threshold concepts in mind:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

At a very simple level, research might include **a quick query for information**. For example, as you reply to a message from your favorite aunt, you could find and include links to two websites related to Crohn's disease, since she mentioned your cousin was just diagnosed. You might also include some information about a specialized clinic that your roommate's lab partner recommended when you asked yesterday. You never entered a library or conducted a formal interview, but your inquiries were purposeful and directly linked to your aunt's needs.

Research might also include an **informal survey of multiple perspectives**. For instance, in order to write a memo to your manager recommending the purchase of a back-up generator, you could check online reviews to find out about performance and reliability. You might also ask your tech support manager about the

building's power needs, call the local power company and the county to see what regulations they have for installing large generators, and text a friend at another company to see what they use. You never downloaded an article from the *Journal of Modern Supplemental Generators*, if there is such a thing, but each of these inquiry steps helped support your final written recommendation.

These days, research might include **using an AI chatbot to summarize public knowledge** on an issue or question. Generative artificial intelligence tools can provide increasingly useful first responses to researchers, but they do not yet fully replace the work of the writer. You might prompt a chatbot to "Identify five social determinants of health care that is available to fentanyl addicts" and receive a list that summarizes information available in the chatbot's database. The usefulness and accuracy of this summary will depend on how you designed the prompt, how carefully you check it for errors or "hallucinations," how you follow up to be sure you have the most recent information, and how you adapt the knowledge to your readers' needs—that is, it depends on your engagement as an active and skeptical researcher.

Explore 19.1

Think back over the last 24 hours—or keep track for the next 24 hours—and write a list of all the times you have participated in some kind of inquiry. You should include anything you "looked up" on your phone or computer, any time you asked a friend or an instructor for more information, and even any time you sat by yourself trying hard to remember a forgotten detail that you needed. As you look at your list, write a note: what kind of inquiry do you usually prefer? how might you use one of these strategies in your current project?

19.1 Researching as a Reflective Writer

Like writers, advanced researchers don't "just do it": we plan, act, and reflect throughout our process of learning more about a question or issue. Researchers in the 21st century rarely struggle simply to find some information somewhere, but we do face challenges in ensuring that the information is accessible, relevant, insightful, substantive, and credible (see Rate My Source in Chapter 25, Exercises for Starting and Deepening Inquiry, for more on using these A-RISC criteria).

Researching is also intertwined with writing: instead of a one-and-done approach where writers do all the research and then begin to write, we need to move between inquiring and writing, exploring and reflecting, reporting and evaluating. One word for this is *recursive*: each step occurs and re-occurs multiple times. In addition, it helps to acknowledge other ways that research requires active and flexible approaches: this work is multimodal, networked, rhetorical, and ethical.

Inquiry is recursive

Inquiry is not a single, isolated step in a linear process. The key steps of inquiry occur and repeat at several points, as writers

- experiment with expanding and narrowing our scope of attention;
- use strategies for gathering, evaluating, and analyzing information; and
- alternate between locating relevant information and writing about it.

Although you may have learned and even been successful with a linear process for inquiry-based writing (choose a topic → *find your information* → write your draft), you might already have found problems with that approach. Perhaps you chose a topic that turned out to be too big or too narrow (or too boring!) to research well, or perhaps peers or instructors reviewed your "final" draft and asked for more information or examples when you thought you were done.

Taking extra research steps is not a sign of your failure as a writer: advanced writers working on a complex project nearly always need to complete at least *three rounds* of research. Moreover, in each of these stages, writers move back and forth between gathering information, reading and evaluating it, and writing or revising writing.

Early inquiry: Explore research questions

In **Round One** of researching, advanced writers begin inquiring even before we have "chosen a topic" or fully planned our writing strategies. How can you choose or plan an investigation when you don't even know *what you don't know* and *what you need to know*? In this stage, which you might think of as "pre-search," your goal is to identify a viable, intriguing issue that is the right size and focus for your course, your readers, and your own goals. But you won't just be think-ing-and-choosing on your own: you will need to:

- **Gather** information about what is already known and relevant to your issue
- **Evaluate** kinds of research strategies and source material to identify what will serve your goals best
- **Write** to explore a problem or question
- **Revise** your initial proposal, hypothesis, or research plan as you learn more about the issue and your available resources

Early inquiry often takes place in the opening stages of a writing cycle. As a reflective researcher, you can use the DEAL framework: you are defining your writing task, exploring your resources, acting to locate your first useful sourc-es, and learning enough about the issue to ask better questions and make initial hypotheses.

Middle inquiry: Gather and evaluate information

In **Round Two**, your middle stage of inquiry will most resemble what happens in a "research paper" model: you settle on a question or set of questions, and seek answers. But instead of just "hunting" for answers you already agree with and then "writing up" the results, you try to learn enough that you can understand and join an ongoing conversation. In this stage, you might:

- **Gather** a wide range of perspectives to see how others are already discussing the issue
- **Evaluate** your information to select the sources that will be most relevant and credible to your readers
- **Write** notes or drafts to analyze and synthesize the information you've gathered
- **Revise** or shift your focus or arguments as you learn more about the issue

Middle inquiry also uses a reflective process that parallels the DEAL frame: you will more accurately define the key issues of your project, explore and evaluate resources in more depth, act to write your initial draft incorporating the information you've learned, and learn about the areas where you may still need more information.

Late inquiry: Address gaps and complications

In **Round Three**, as you complete your document draft, you often need to engage in more focused inquiry. Now that you know the issue, your readers, and your goals much more clearly—because writers always learn as we write!—you need to ensure that your data will actually help you move your readers. In this stage, you might:

- **Gather** additional information or analysis that can help you give a complete and responsible representation of the issue
- **Evaluate** counterarguments, alternate perspectives, resistance points, and gaps in the current conversation that could be addressed
- **Write** to go beyond reporting or critiquing others' ideas and toward creating new knowledge
- **Revise** your current argument or focus to match it to the best information you've located

In the late stages of assessing and adapting the rest of your document, you will often find that you still have inquiries to complete. Just as you created time for "pre-search" before you began writing, you need to leave time to "re-research" for in your final steps: defining any gaps or resistance points, exploring ways to respond credibly to those points, acting to complete the last revisions to your document, and stepping back to learn what strategies have been most helpful for us in the research process.

> ### Learn
>
> - To learn more about the A-RISC model and to practice evaluating your sources of information, see <u>Rate My Source</u>.
> - To learn more about strategies for choosing and focusing the topic of your inquiry, see <u>Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project</u>.
> - To learn more about the DEAL framework for reflective practice, see <u>Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process</u>.

Inquiry is multimodal

Advanced writers use multiple strategies for inquiry, across multiple types of sources.

For a "research paper," students typically use one mode of inquiry: they consult formal, published reports or analyses in which experts summarize key points. However, most writers draw information from a wide range of sources. Since there is no such thing as an absolutely bad source, only more or less appropriate sources for a given project, you might consult local primary sources (by interviewing an expert about generators) or look at informal published sources (by reviewing comments on a medical blog). Your sources must be credible to your most skeptical readers, but if you know that your boss will trust what the company's chief of facilities says, and you know that your aunt really wants to hear what other parents have experienced, those sources will be valid for those audiences.

Inquiry is networked

Advanced writers understand that good questions lead to other questions and that good sources or answers lead to other sources or answers.

Inquiry follows networks of questions

While school subjects are neatly divided into individual courses and essay topics, true inquiry subjects are endlessly linked into larger conversations. A single question about treatments for Crohn's disease is connected to larger questions about the causes of gluten intolerance, to narrower questions about a specific treatment's side-effects, and to questions that might initially seem unrelated, such as inquiries into food company monopolies.

When you are in an inquiry mode, try to leave time to understand how questions relate to one another across a network of inquiry, so that you don't overlook questions or results that could resonate strongly with you and your readers.

Inquiry follows networks of sources

Because knowledge is created over time and in discourse communities, every

discovery is networked to other relevant ideas and data. You probably already know that can follow a historical network by checking out earlier sources that are cited by the article you are reading.

You also know that you can follow a line of inquiry horizontally: every time a shopping website says, "Other customers who liked this product also liked X," it is helping you network your inquiry. For a formal inquiry project, you might see how a journal article about earthquakes will cite an esteemed geologist→whose webpage notes that he appeared on a news show on predicting earthquakes→that also featured a woman who was an eyewitness→who mentioned that her father also survived a similar earthquake 20 years earlier in another country. Each source here can help you tap into a larger network, helping you enrich your inquiry.

Inquiry is rhetorical

Advanced writers know that we must collect and analyze information rhetorically, with attention to the goals of the inquiry and the expectations of the audience.

The breadth and depth of inquiry is rhetorical

Students who write "research papers" often are told how much information they need: "Locate six sources" or "Write five pages." However, as an advanced writer and researcher you will need to make rhetorical choices guided by your goals: are you providing basic education on an issue or vigorously trying to instigate change? Your choices will also be guided by your readers' previous knowledge and their needs. When you have novice readers to inform or resistant readers to persuade, your inquiry must respond directly to their situation.

The resources used in inquiry are rhetorical

Students who write "research papers" are often told what sources are correct: "Use only peer-reviewed journal articles." However, as an advanced writer and researcher you will need to select and evaluate the appropriateness of information based on your goals and your readers' expectations. Your town council may be persuaded by results from a 100-person, three-question survey about a proposed curfew, while your sociology instructor might find that sample too small and the resulting statistical significance too weak for you to draw any conclusions at all. A single resource may function poorly in one rhetorical situation but well in another.

Inquiry is ethical

Advanced writers do more than "cite their sources": ethical research also involves being openminded about an issue, thorough in locating multiple credible views, and accurate in representing and acknowledging others' ideas.

Inquiring about multiple credible perspectives is ethical

Students who write "research papers" sometimes decide in advance what they believe, and look only for information that will confirm their view. (Sometimes they include an alternate view, but only because they intend from the start to show how it is wrong.) As an ethical researcher, you should ask real questions you don't know the answer to, keep an open mind as you inquire, and be prepared to change your mind if you find credible evidence. More than that, you should actively seek out information from credible alternate perspectives. Usually an issue that is important enough to write about has more than "two sides," and an experiment can have more than two outcomes. When you mentally prepare to look for a range of evidence, you can also find out what your "unknown unknowns" are—that is, you have the opportunity to learn about views, experiences, arguments, or data that you didn't initially realize existed.

Gathering, evaluating, and comprehending information is ethical

As an advanced researcher and writer, you will want to review enough evidence to make an informed, ethical decision about what to share with your readers. If you gave a new drug to one person and it worked, that wouldn't be enough information to conclude or argue for its efficacy; you'd need to do multiple tests in carefully controlled environments. If you read only one source, or only one type of source, or only sources that refer to one part of the issue, then you will be writing based on your assumptions rather than on evidence.

You also need to read and evaluate data and sources carefully, making sure that you use active reading strategies to understand the research context rather than only skimming for a good quotation. If you don't understand a concept but you write as if you are certain about it, you are not being truthful with your readers (this is one reason researchers sometimes begin by reviewing basic information in sources such as Wikipedia or querying a chatbot). In order to write based on a complete and multifaceted understanding of a complex issue, writers often read more sources or gather more data than we refer to in a written document, actively seeking perspectives that differ from our own initial views.

Tracking, representing, and acknowledging sources or data is ethical

You already know that if you refer to data, ideas, or quotations that you learn from another source, you need to acknowledge the source clearly to your readers, so that you gain credibility for yourself and recognize the work other researchers have done. In some academic essays, this ethical practice takes the form of structured citations; in other genres, you may use other strategies to acknowledge sources.

As you quote, paraphrase, or summarize information, you need to be complete and accurate. If other researchers state that a majority of students in their study were distracted by text messaging during class, you cannot exaggerate their

conclusions by saying all students everywhere are distracted; you also cannot suggest that these researchers believe that texting is always bad. As you review sources and data, then, you need to create a system for accurately tracking what they really said: identify information that is a direct quotation vs. your own summary, identify the authors' conclusions vs. your own opinions or analysis, and identify the exact details or limitations of their data.

Explore 19.2

Consider some of the recommendations noted in this section: use a back-and-forth recursive process of reading and writing in multiple stages, seek multiple kinds of sources beyond printed articles, let one source lead you across a network to another source, evaluate a source based on its rhetorical appropriateness for your goals and your audience's needs, and represent your findings completely and ethically.

Choose one of these strategies that you are already fairly comfortable with, and explain in a sentence or two how exactly you used it in a previous project. Choose another strategy that seems less familiar or more difficult, and explain in a sentence or two what might be hard about it and how you could adapt to using it in an upcoming project.

Learn

- To learn more about discourse communities, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.

- To learn more about active reading strategies, see Chapter 6, Reading as a Writer.

- To learn more about working ethically with sources, see Chapter 22, Integrating and Acknowledging Sources.

19.2 Defining the Questions

It can be said that advanced research is more about defining intriguing questions than it is about locating precise answers. While advanced writers eventually want to produce texts that provide reliable information, recommendations, and analyses, we are also aware that the advanced problems that most demand our attention do not have easy answers. Often as advanced researchers we are inquiring into just a part of an issue, or exploring an unusual connection among similar issues, and our careful *journey toward better understanding* is at least as important as landing on a "correct" answer.

Measure twice: Exploring and planning

If you are actually inquiring about an open question rather than just writing a

summary of what some people say, then you will need to cope with not just one but four categories of knowledge:

- What you know that you know
- What you know that you don't know
- What you don't know that you know
- What you don't know that you don't know

In order to define and ask real questions—to inquire, not just look for information that supports what you already believe (this is called confirmation bias)—you need to focus on what you don't know. That is, you need to cultivate *humility* about your own expertise and *curiosity* about others' knowledge. The third and fourth categories listed above are especially important: until you spend some time thinking about an issue, you don't know whether your own knowledge or assumptions are credible, and you really don't know what you don't know. Once you become familiar with the key questions surrounding an issue or situation, you can make an informed plan for your research.

If you're used to a linear, one-stage research model (choose a topic → find three sources → write your essay) then these early steps may seem awkward and even inefficient. Why not just start by finding the four sources for your project, so you can jump into writing? For advanced writers, early inquiry steps match the advice in the proverb "Measure twice, cut once": by taking time to consider the questions and get your bearings early in the process, you will make choices that can improve your motivation, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Even here at the beginning of your project, you will want to remember that:

- **Inquiry is recursive**: you may go back and forth between reading and writing, between exploring and deciding and exploring again.
- **Inquiry is multimodal**: you may need to use multiple types of sources and strategies.
- **Inquiry is networked**: one step or source should lead you to an even more interesting or relevant approach.
- **Inquiry is rhetorical**: you should identify your goals and anticipate readers' needs to guide your actions.
- **Inquiry is ethical**: you should begin inquiry with an open mind, and gather and record diverse sources of information carefully.

Since inquiry is recursive and networked, even this early inquiry cycle does not have a single sequence that every writer follows, or that you will follow every time. Whatever the order, you will likely work in most or all of four modes: develop a question, survey known information, write to reflect, and choose inquiry methods.

Develop a question or hypothesis

Identify a protest or puzzle

In school, a "research paper" often begins with a "topic" and sometimes even with a clear "position." Writers in such a situation may create an "all-about" essay based on what they already know that they know: "All About *Calymmochilus dispar* and *Gelis apterus*" or "All About How Bad Parking On Campus Is." Outside school, there remains a small demand for writers who understand the complex biological relationships of wasps like *C. dispar* and the ant-eating spiders they prey on, and can explain "all about" those interactions in short summaries that ordinary people can read. However, unless you simply need to demonstrate that you know some key facts in a field or that you can state those facts in error-free prose, "all about" research doesn't provide much motivation for you or useful learning for your readers.

Advanced inquiry, on the other hand, often begins with **a protest or a puzzle**: a "Darn it!" or a "Wha-a-at?"

Not all protests or puzzles lead to extended inquiry. A protest about stubbing your toe ("Darn it!") probably has no far-reaching ramifications, and a factual question about which team upset the defending champions last night ("Wha-a-at?") can be answered quickly with a few taps on your networked device. Likewise, your protest over the car that cut you off in traffic or your question about how to fill out a federal tax form may be forgotten by lunch. But then again, maybe you keep thinking: it does seem like more drivers than ever are behaving so badly in your city, and darn it, somebody should be doing something to fix it! Meanwhile, if you can't figure out the new tax form, you might wonder: how do people like your eighty-five-year-old grandmother get through it?

When you are writing for a school assignment about a specific issue, you may benefit from trying to develop a protest approach (what frustrates you or other stakeholders?) or a question approach (what puzzles you or seems debatable?) that you can build from in order to select an initial area of inquiry and give your project a stronger foundation.

Develop initial questions or hypotheses

If you define your inquiry as a topic, you may end up writing an "all about X" response. A better place to start is with a question or a hypothesis, so that you focus on inquiry that will add to what is already known. You should also take time to adjust your initial question or hypothesis since your first version may be too broad, too narrow, or too straightforward.

While it may seem obvious that a puzzle should be framed as a question and a protest as a hypothesis, that's not always the case. Some writers always prefer

open questions as they start, while others find that testable hypotheses give them stronger direction. More often, advanced writers decide on a case-by-case basis which one seems most helpful.

You might choose to write a focal question if . . .	You might choose to write an initial hypothesis if . . .
. . . you are new to studying this issue . . . the issue is new and so information is scarce . . . you want to stay as open-minded as possible . . . you are working in a field that is question-based . . . you plan to gather new data yourself	. . . you have some expertise in this field already . . . the issue is long-standing and some "sides" are clear . . . you want to move quickly in a definite direction . . . you are working in a field that tests hypotheses . . . you will mostly be analyzing others' positions

Next, you'll want to adjust the scope of your inquiry. Most often, writers who are developing their focal questions or initial hypothesis will need to narrow the scope of their inquiry.

- Since inquiry cycles are networked and recursive, even a small project is likely to expand. Without clear boundaries your inquiry could grow to fill infinite time and consume infinite resources, neither of which you or your readers have available.

- Since readers who cannot read minds require more precise detail and evidence than writers first anticipate, even a small-looking question will expand as it moves from a thought-experiment to a writing project.

If your initial question or hypothesis is too broad, you can take steps to explore narrower, less obvious, or more personally relevant angles. For instance, you could:

- **Focus on personal connections**. Which events, questions, or policies do you or people you know consider most irritating, intriguing, or important to address?

- **Identify relevant sub-issues**. What specific people, places, time periods, scenarios, effects, or processes are most severely affected? Which are often ignored but need attention?

- **Consider starting points**. If the problem is a large or longstanding one, what first steps would at least help improve or ease the situation? What underlying questions need attention—what needs to be measured, located, tracked, described, or revealed in order to study this puzzle?

- **Connect to your resources**. How can you best use your current knowledge or personal experience, your community connections, or your familiarity with print or personal information sources?

- **Review the conversation**. What has already been suggested, proposed, or even tried—for this precise issue and for related issues—and what options are still under discussion?

- **Tune in to your readers**. What questions or consequences resonate strongly with your audience or your discourse community, and what questions, limitations, or objections might they raise?

Occasionally, writers need to expand at least part of the scope of their inquiry, when they discover that they need to expand in order to have sufficient resources, to explain crucial parts of an issue they hadn't seen before, or to respond to readers' interests or situations. However, such an expansion often comes at a later point in the inquiry and writing process. For now, you should probably aim to narrow rather than expand your focus.

Finally, in order to avoid the "all-about" mode, you need to be sure that your question cannot be answered by a simple "Look it up!" search online. Likewise, you don't want your hypothesis to be so obvious that no reasonable person would debate it.

Which words or phrases in the Question-Hypothesis chart demonstrate that the writer has a puzzle or a protest rather than a bland "all about" stance? Which words or phrases show that the writer is aiming for more direction (to move quickly) or trying to leave some options open (to gain flexibility)?

Remember, even a narrow, open-ended, reasonable question or hypothesis is just a starting point: when you are studying live problems using an inquiry approach, you are likely to need to adjust your question or hypothesis as your knowledge and interests evolve.

Topic area	Factual "Look-up"	Initial Question	Non-debatable Point	Initial Hypothesis
Vacation spots near San Antonio	What are some popular vacation spots near San Antonio?	What are the best attractions for active families visiting San Antonio, Texas?	San Antonio has a lot of river-based activities for families.	Active families who want a memorable trip to San Antonio, Texas, should build their vacation around its distinctive river-based adventures.

Topic area	Factual "Look-up"	Initial Question	Non-debatable Point	Initial Hypothesis
Strategies for teaching art history	What kinds of strategies can college teachers use in large classes?	Do students in lecture-plus-discussion sections show any differences in their learning about art history compared to the students in the lecture-only sections?	Some students like discussion sections more than other students.	Students in lecture-plus-discussion sections will demonstrate some better learning than students in lecture-only sections of art history.
Coastal flood-protection approaches	How are new sand dunes usually constructed?	How do newly constructed sand dunes affect the economies of small seaside towns? How do direct effects on existing local businesses or tourism compare to less direct effects from weather protection or wildlife restoration?	Towns will benefit if fewer businesses flood.	Relocating businesses from flood-prone areas temporarily impacts local tourism, but good planning may help these communities adapt to new economic patterns.

Survey known information

When was the last time you ate at a new restaurant, bought a new kind of gadget, or made a travel reservation without first reading online to find out what others are saying about it? Instead of deciding on your topic and then seeking information—which is like paying up front for a hotel room and then reading the reviews of the hotel—you should consult source material during the process of identifying and revising your focal question or initial hypothesis, so that you understand the current context and conversation.

When you're still planning your inquiry, you don't need to find all the answers, take extended notes, or impress skeptical readers. You just want an overview. And so some of the sources, sites, and data that you encounter in your initial survey will not be ones that you refer to in your final project. If that seems like a waste of time to you—why locate a source that won't even "count" toward your

assignment?—remember that you're investing a little time now so that later searches will be more efficient.

As you survey known information, you might also bend or even break the "rules" for high-quality research. These strategies can keep you moving during early stages of inquiry:

- **Use popular (rather than specialized) sources**: the information in common, accessible sources such as Wikipedia, YouTube, a chatbot summary, or short news articles can help you quickly understand key elements of your issue.

- **Consult questionable sources**: when you locate some information that you disagree with, doubt, or think is irrelevant or severely biased, you can better decide on your standards for relevant and credible sources.

- **Skim rather than thoroughly read sources**: to identify relevant sources quickly, you should plan to read just the first and last few lines, to skip sections that are confusing, or to search just for mentions of your specific issue.

You should still use approaches that will make you an effective and efficient researcher:

- **Identify your goals** and/or your readers' needs before you start to search, so that you don't wander aimlessly like slow shoppers in a big-box store (inquiry is rhetorical).

- **Keep track of key concepts**, specialized terminology, or ideas/references that keep popping up in multiple sources, so that you can use those concepts to find even better information (inquiry is networked).

- **Consider a range of sources**, including people like friends and colleagues, public documents like reports and flyers, and multiple media including pictures, graphs, and videos, so that you are gaining the most complete view (inquiry is multimodal).

- **Take careful notes**, so that you always know what a source actually said and can acknowledge their words and ideas.

Write to explore and reflect

Sometimes the *worst* thing you can do is to begin an inquiry project by gathering lots of outside data without writing anything in your own voice—you can end up writing "all about" others' ideas without feeling committed to or motivated by your own goals. And since writing is a way not just to report what you know but to find out what you know, generate momentum and confidence, and even create new knowledge, you don't want to wait until you've made all your decisions before beginning to write.

Write to gain momentum and motivation

If you already know about or have experienced some key elements of your issue, then sitting down to write can be a good beginning strategy, even for a project that will require substantial additional research. On the other hand, if you're not yet sure whether or how you might be interested in this project, you can also take some writing time to build your own connection to an issue before you start looking up random facts. Sometimes writers find motivation in helping others: when you connect to your audience's needs, you may see the relevance and possible outcomes of your project.

Write to focus

If you know what you generally want to inquire about but it seems too vast or vague to handle in a single project, then you can use some writing strategies to gain focus—before you get lost on the "information highway." Some of these approaches are similar to strategies for generating momentum or confidence, because they can help you generate lots of sub-topics or angles. Once you have a wide range of ideas, remember to take the next step of choosing one or two that most interest you to write about in a more focused way, to see what knowledge you can build.

Write to connect or explore information

As you begin to gather data or review what is known about your issue, you may want to take some writing time to explore how you see different parts of your issue relating to one another, and what you think the significance of particular ideas might be. This kind of writing is different from simply "taking notes" about what you read. When you write to connect or explore, you focus your efforts on generating your own ideas about the events, people, places, circumstances, relationships, or results that you are considering, rather than only reporting what you have observed or read.

Write to plan your project

As your initial hypothesis or focusing question begins to take shape, you can write to identify resources and challenges you see in this project, as well as to create a plan for further inquiry. This writing is exploratory: any plan you make now may need to be revised as you work on your project. Some writers like to create a plan that focuses on dates and deliverables; others like to create a plan that focuses on challenges and strategies. When you tell yourself a story about your work, you can identify ways to adjust your focus, find better information, and choose feasible methods.

Explore 19.3

To explore an issue, topic area, or idea you have for an upcoming project, brainstorm a list of at least 10 Problems or 10 Questions related to the same issue. You should try this even if you think you've already completely and finally decided what you will write about, so that you have given yourself the best opportunity to be openminded at the very start of your project. If you get stuck, try to expand to a larger problem or narrow the scope to a more precise or local (but still open-ended) question, or inquire from the perspective of someone else who might be affected. When you're done, identify one list item that seems the easiest or most relevant for you to explore, and identify one item that seems difficult or "off the main path" but might lead to intriguing results.

Practice

- To practice **creating a mindset for inquiry**, see <u>Assumption Inspection</u>, <u>Authority/Curiosity/Annoyance List</u>, <u>Mind the Gap</u>, or <u>Reason Appallingly</u>.
- To practice **locating and evaluating initial sources**, see <u>Cousin Topics</u>, <u>Date My Topic</u>, <u>Keyword Bingo</u>, or <u>Rate My Source</u>.
- To practice **writing in an exploratory mode**, see <u>Believing/Doubting</u>, <u>Emperor for a Day</u>, <u>Expand and Narrow</u>, <u>Off on a Rant</u>, or <u>Seven Generations</u>.

19.3 Choosing Methods of Inquiry

For your school "research paper" assignments, you may have used only one kind of information source: a printed (or online) article from a magazine, journal, or book. But for the inquiry you do every day, at work and at home, you use a much wider range of methods and resources for finding out what you need to know. Careful problem solvers evaluate all their options—from formal and informal sources, researched arguments and informed analyses, and genres ranging from letters to videos and from recipes to social media posts—as they make and revise their plans for finding answers to their questions.

As you consider each approach, and each source within an approach, you need to think rhetorically:

- Will the information available suit your goals?
- Will the information available suit the needs of your readers?
- Will the information available be considered credible by most readers in your target audience?
- Will you have the skills, tools, and time necessary during this project to gather and analyze this type of information successfully?

Understand general research concepts

There is no such thing as a "bad source" or a "wrong research method," only a source of information that is not well-suited to the inquiry project, the goals, or the readers you are currently working with, or an approach that has not been undertaken at a level of quality expected by readers or reviewers. Since research is rhetorical, a source of information can only be *more appropriate* or *less appropriate* for your goals and your readers' needs. Thus an article from TeenVogue.com on celebrities who are climate activists might be just the right source when you're writing *to* US high school students and writing *about* how to generate enthusiasm for community-based conservation projects—but it might be less helpful when you are writing an analysis of local freshwater preservation strategies to share with your Wetlands Ecology seminar classmates.

As you explore your question or hypothesis, you should stay open to multiple pathways toward better understanding, and evaluate which one(s) best suit your project.

Identify primary and secondary research

In an inquiry project, you may create or gather *new* data or information: this is called **primary research**. When you provide new testimony based on your own specific experiences or observations, conduct a survey or interview with experts or informed participants, review the statistics from your company's balance sheet, or design an experiment to discover and record something about the physical world, you are seeing the actual data or ideas yourself. When you share and explain this data, you will be adding brand new information to the conversation that experts and scholars are having about an issue.

You may also or instead gather and analyze information or data that was reported by other people in articles, books, videos, or online sites: this is called **secondary research**. If someone else has analyzed the statistics or reported from the scene, they often make the information more accessible—but they may not include all the data, and they may emphasize points that you would not find important. If all you do is repeat what one or two of these sources have said, you might not be adding anything new to the conversation about your issue; you will need to add your own analysis and synthesis to contribute to readers' knowledge.

Sometimes people categorize secondary research sources as being either "popular" or "scholarly." These are *rhetorical* terms: their precise meanings depend on the person who uses each term and the community to which they belong.

For instance, "scholarly source" can be shorthand for "published in any academic research journal or book," but in some fields, experts also rely on sources that are published by government organizations (such as the Federal Aviation Administration), trade organizations (such as the Center for Audit Quality), or

professional conferences (such as IEEE: The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers).

Sources that are credible-to-scholars often appear in journals written for specialists in the field. Sometimes these can be identified by their title, which may include the word "Journal" or use several specialized terms that indicate only a specialist would read it: *Transactions on Aspect Oriented Software Development*. Some scholarly sources are books, or appear as chapters in books written for specialists in the field. In addition, scholarly sources often share the following characteristics:

- These articles, journals, and books often use a "blind peer review" process to select which articles get included: experts in the field ("peers" of the writers) read submissions while they are unable to access any information about the authors, so that reviewers don't make any decisions based on a writer's reputation or personality.
- These sources usually have editors who require authors to revise their work to meet the highest standard of research practices and written reporting.
- The authors of these sources usually cite additional credible secondary sources to support their conclusions.

Scholarly sources aren't always the best sources: they may be so specialized that they are difficult for others to understand. Depending on your goals and your readers, you may want to blend information from scholarly sources with information from more popular or accessible sources to understand an issue yourself and to help your readers comprehend a complicated situation.

Distinguish between qualitative and quantitative data

Some data is numerical and provided by exact, verifiable measurements: the height of Mt. Kilimanjaro, the speed of a bumblebee's wings, the percentage of cancer cells that survive in a lab experiment after being irradiated. That data is clearly quantitative: it is measured and written down as numbers.

Data about human beings and our choices is sometimes harder to quantify. However, when researchers create a careful methodology and study a large and representative sample, they can report reliable quantitative data about people. For instance, they might decide to ask all participants the same question in the same wording at the same time of day, and they might interview 500 (not just 5) college students who proportionally represent all the students at a university, including participants who are male and female, who are younger and older, and who are of different races, ethnicities, or sexual orientations in the same percentages as the whole university population is.

In order to fully understand human behavior, though, researchers also need to conduct qualitative research: research that focuses on the choices, judgments, and

interpretations that people make in response to their experiences. That is, it focuses on describing the qualities that people perceive, rather than measuring the quantities of their actions. In many discourse communities—including communities of nurses and market researchers, of historians and human-computer interaction scientists—the data that result from this type of inquiry are as valid as quantitative data, and are sometimes even more persuasive than numbers would be.

Qualitative data is not the same thing as anecdotes overheard at a lunch table. While anecdotes can be useful to gain readers' attention, qualitative data sets that provide credible evidence need to meet more stringent requirements and use a deliberate methodology to limit bias or randomness. For example, qualitative researchers might interview only 5 college students one time (or interview one student five times), but they would determine the most relevant questions to ask and appropriate neutral language for those questions; they would design a plan for recruiting participants who could provide the most applicable information; and they would use an organized system for tracking who said what using which words.

Although readers in some discourse communities will only accept quantitative data, research into decision-making shows that the people who firmly disagree with you might respond best to a combination of credible quantitative and qualitative evidence—to see the measurable facts as well as the human experiences. So advanced inquirers keep our eyes open for both kinds of data as we start to investigate a question or problem.

Manage your bias as a researcher

All researchers, like all writers, are biased: we hold some ideas to be more valuable than others. And many research-based documents are designed to be persuasive: the authors hope to *change readers' minds* with their data and analysis. A researcher who argues a point has not necessarily become so subjective that readers should discount their evidence. All researchers, however, need to manage our biases: when we assess all the relevant facts, provide credible evidence, consider alternatives, reveal our goals, and draw reasonable conclusions, we help readers trust that we are providing useful information rather than only our own narrow view.

One key challenge for researchers is managing "confirmation bias." If you've ever argued with someone who has strongly different views about politics, sports, or even food, you might have been frustrated at that person's unwillingness to consider any of the evidence you presented that challenged his or her viewpoint. As an advanced inquirer, you need to know that scholars predict that you, too—like nearly all human beings—may be twice as likely to believe information that confirms what you already think than you are to believe information that challenges your assumptions or presents new data. If you want to present honest, clear thinking to your readers, you will thus need to make extra efforts from the very beginning of your inquiry process

to uncover contradictory and unfamiliar ideas in order to test out whether they might have value and show how they are or are not relevant to your line of thinking.

Explore 19.4

Choose any two of the items below:

- A friend's description of the difficulty yesterday's Biology 101 final exam
- A survey of all 500 Biology 101 students that reports a high percentage found the final exam was very difficult
- An article in your campus paper reporting that many more Biology 101 students passed the final exam this year than in previous years, and quoting three students who said it was easy
- Your structured four-question interviews with three biology majors and three non-majors about how they studied for the exam that reveals non-majors studied for more hours
- A scholarly article that compares recent national studies about Biology 101 pass/fail rates to the authors' new analysis of pass/fail rates at your university, and finds students at your school fail more often

For each item you select, answer three questions:

- Does this item seem familiar or agreeable to you in a way that might trigger confirmation bias?
- Does this item include quantitative and/or qualitative data (or anecdotes only)?
- Does this item involve any primary research and/or secondary research?

Gather self-based data

You may not have counted "sitting down and thinking" as a form of inquiry, but establishing what you already know and searching your memories and personal records for specific Qdetails can be a powerful strategy for answering questions and gathering data in support of a hypothesis. In some fields and some documents, your own experiences and interpretations will prove to be engaging and credible data.

Kinds of self-based data

- **Factual information** drawn from past memory or current observation about events you have participated in, people you have met, places you have been, or concepts you have learned
- **Objects of study** you can locate in your personal belongings, from scrapbooks, social network sites, shelves, or filing cabinets as well as from attics, basements, or back yards
- **Reflective or interpretive judgments** you can make about a performance, proposal, or idea, or about your own feelings, experiences, or goals

Benefits and applications of self-based data

- Evidence from personal narratives can create links that engage readers.

- Your testimony, if you are an eye-witness, participant, or local expert, can provide crucial information not available from other sources.

- In some fields (literary studies, music criticism, psychoanalysis), *educated personal interpretation* is a high form of inquiry and scholarship.

Limitations and complications of self-based data

- Your memory may be incomplete or faulty; your observations may be affected by your assumptions or biases.

- You may not have sufficient understanding of a situation to make useful or reasonable observations or judgments.

- Your observations, judgments, interpretations, or testimony—even when informed and reasonable— may not be deemed credible by some audiences or appropriate for some genres.

Gather people-based data

You gather data from other people all the time. Sometimes you consult experts, and sometimes you consult ordinary people. When you shift from asking a quick question about how many of your friends have seen the latest superhero movie to a more systematic line of inquiry, you can use the information that other people provide as reliable data for your writing project.

Kinds of people-based data

- An **interview** with someone who knows more about your area of inquiry than you do can provide valuable information, whether that person has gained knowledge through personal experience or through extensive formal study.

- Structured observation of a group of people—an **ethnographic inquiry**— can help you understand some of the patterns of behavior that are typical of that group. Your ethnography can be either of a group you belong to (and so your perspective would be an insider or "emic" perspective) or of a group you don't know (from an outsider or "etic" perspective).

- A **survey** of a large collection of people could include close-ended questions (yes/no, multiple choice) or open-ended questions that require longer responses to help you see trends in knowledge or opinions. Your survey could be informally structured or carefully designed according to experimental parameters, depending on what your audience will find credible.

Benefits and applications of people-based data

- People can often provide more current, more local, and more emotionally rich data than printed sources.

- When you design an interview, ethnography, or survey, you can inquire about questions specific to your project, your goals, and your audience's needs as well as gathering more general background information.

- Writers don't need a lot of equipment or years of specialized training to contribute new people-based data to an ongoing scholarly or professional conversation.

Limitations and complications of people-based data

- Researchers need to treat other humans ethically: often this requires taking extra steps to inform them of the nature of the research project, obtain their formal consent to have their contributions shared with others, and represent their behaviors, words, and responses fairly and respectfully.

- Interview and survey designers need to learn to write questions that are relevant, neutral (not "leading"), and respectful of participants' time. Advanced researchers need to follow scholarly guidelines to write questions that will lead to reliable, precise data.

- Ethnographic observers need to understand how their own assumptions may influence what they look for and how they interpret what they see in others' words and actions, and either acknowledge or compensate for those biases.

- Researchers need to have reliable, methodical strategies for recording and analyzing data accurately: an audio or video device if permissible, a system of careful notetaking, and a balanced and deliberate approach to summarizing and representing data.

- Writers who report on people-based data need to carefully represent the level of its credibility: a survey of ten friends or an interview with an average employee may produce interesting descriptive results but not be as conclusive (or quantitatively reliable) as a survey of 1000 randomly sampled students that can be statistically analyzed, or as credible as an interview with a company specialist.

Gather reported data/analysis via the popular web

The popular web—what everyone encounters by opening a browser such as Chrome or Firefox and using a search engine such as Bing, Google, or Yahoo!—is a vast amalgam of secondary source information. On screen, a lot of the information looks the same, but you know it is vastly different in origin and thus in credibility. The page you are looking at could have been posted by Micah from

Mrs. Alvarado's fourth grade class in Dubuque, Iowa; by an unnamed college intern doing research for the organization Women for Women International; by someone called *@hithxbai* adding to a thread about someone's question on *Ask. com*; by a seasoned journalist reporting for (and fact-checked by) *The New York Times*; or by a professor at Stanford whose article for *Journal* of *Bioinformatics and Computational Biology* has been peer-reviewed by several experts in the field.

Since your goal in inquiry is not simply to "find three sources" but to "find information that credibly answers your questions and responds to your readers' needs," you need to remain particularly alert and engaged as you sort through the heaps of information on the popular web, blending the work of *finding* with the work of *evaluating* and the work of *improving your strategies* at each step of the process.

Kinds of popular web-based data

The types here are listed in order of increasing credibility to most academic and professional audiences.

- **Unchecked, unmoderated personal opinion**: personal posts, tweets, blogs, pictures, videos, and pages; unmoderated discussion forums; local projects such as neighborhood newsletters or class assignments; crowd-sourced sites such as answer boards, product or service review sites, and buy-an-essay sites; letters-to-the-editor or comments sections of news or analysis sites; tabloid news sites

- **Lightly checked or partly moderated information and analysis**: lower-end news or information sites such as Examiner.com; incomplete or "stub" pages of resource sites such as Wikipedia.com; essays, blogs, tweets, or videos by reputable people or organizations (including many but not all pages with an ".edu" address); reviews on specialty sites such as appcraver.com

- **Strongly checked and deliberately partisan general access information and analysis** (mostly factually true but inclusive of one perspective only): websites, tweets, and videos from political or activist organizations; blogs and news aggregators with a political angle (Huffingtonpost.com, RedState.com); information on commercial or business sites

- **Strongly checked and nonpartisan general access information and analysis**: major news sites with strong national or international reputations; government sites presenting policies or general-audience reports; thoroughly completed and edited pages of resource sites such as Wikipedia.com; online sites for reputable magazines (Science.com), journals, television shows, or local news organizations

- **Strongly checked and nonpartisan specialist information and analysis**: free-access articles from specialized journals such as *Evolutionary Psychology* or *Public Administration and Management*; specialized government

reports (such as recent groundwater sampling reports at Los Alamos National Laboratory, *lanl.gov*)

What about Wikipedia?

Since there is no such thing as a bad source, Wikipedia.com cannot be a bad source. It's often useful in the early stages of inquiry as you try to get a quick overall picture of an issue. Yet you may find it banned from course projects that you complete in college, and you may hear from other instructors or readers that even though they use it themselves, they don't consider it an *appropriate* source for information or data to use in an advanced inquiry project.

Some key limitations of Wikipedia (and similar sites) may make it a less appropriate source of information than others you could choose.

- Wikipedia is not consistently credible and accurate. Studies have shown that information on a page that receives constant attention from knowledgeable writers is likely to be as reliable as information in a more formally published article. However, as many as half of the pages on the site are "stubs," pages that are incomplete and may not have been checked by many additional authors.

- Information on Wikipedia, like information in most encyclopedias, is generalized to provide a basic background: it supports "look-up" questions but not in-depth inquiries. Thus you risk telling your readers what they already know or could look up themselves.

- Wikipedia is written by people who are doing precisely what you are doing: gathering secondary information and synthesizing it to create a smooth report. So the information you see there isn't even secondary source material; it's tertiary, or quaternary, or beyond quaternary. When you rely on Wikipedia, you may begin to sound more like a child talking at a lunch table than an advanced writer: "Celia said that Asha said that Justin said that Surima said . . . ." Fortunately, Wikipedia writers often provide links to their sources, which should provide links or citations to their sources, and in a networked age it might not take you very long to get straight to the in-depth original information and see for yourself.

What about generative artificial intelligence tools?

Like Wikipedia, Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, or Dall-E can provide some useful information during early inquiry—along with some risks. Because they are fast and powerful, they can provide a boost to your initial investigations. They may be especially useful for questions about *what you know that you don't know*. If your instructor approves of these tools, you might try putting in questions where you directly request alternative viewpoints or solutions, scenarios that

involve communities different from your own, reasons why your primary audience might resist your arguments, or specific examples from multiple historical periods.

However, because Gen-AI tools are still developing, and because they depend on the general information that has been published online, they have some disadvantages as search tools that you should consider:

- Where fully-developed Wikipedia entries have generally been reviewed by multiple people who have an interest, if not expertise, in the subject, which increases their reliability, Gen-AI answers do not have this human review. At the beginning of your inquiry journey, you may not yet know enough about the issue to spot errors, made-up sources (sometimes called "hallucinations"), or omissions. Imagine if you spoke no Mandarin, and you asked a Gen-AI tool to translate a passage from English into Mandarin (or the other way around): how could you check whether the translation was accurate? When you *don't know what you don't know*, Gen-AI tools are much more risky.

- Like open-web searches, Gen-AI tools are "GIGO," or "garbage-in, garbage-out." Because they produce lengthy, confident-sounding responses, you have the illusion of a complete and accurate answer. But if you did not phrase your request accurately or in a way that provides a complete overview of what you want to learn, the answer you receive may leave out or misrepresent important concepts.

- Gen-AI tools are not usually searching "the internet" the way that current search engines are; they are only searching information that has been specifically included in their database. So they may miss information that is recent, information from other countries or languages, or information that relates to your specific community or angle.

You might also be wary of the ways in which Gen-AI tools address (or lack) privacy, since they may be collecting information about you as you collect information from them. You may be concerned that the tools replicate biases that are present in the documents they use for their predictions, or you may worry about the exploitative ways that their databases are created (by including original art without the creators' permission, and by requiring low-salary workers to view offensive content in order to limit its impact).

As an advanced researcher, you know that sources and tools to support you are neither 100% good or 100% bad. Your task is to learn strategies that increase your success while lowering your risks, and to continue to carefully evaluate the results you receive.

Benefits and uses of popular web-based searches

- Popular web sources are often easy to find, access, and understand.
- Information on popular websites is often hyperlinked to other related information, making it simple to follow networks of ideas.

- Popular websites often provide better access to information in pictures, music, and videos than many other kinds of resources you have access to.
- Recent, very local, or very personalized information is more likely to appear in popular web sources than in journals or books.
- You can use a popular website search to quickly gain background information on your issue, understand what terms are commonly associated with it, learn what alternative or opposing viewpoints have been presented, and practice adjusting your keyword searching strategies.
- You can use a popular website search to help validate or explain information that you find in other sources: to determine an author or journal's credibility, for instance, or to gather definitions or explanations of complicated processes.

Limitations and complications of popular web-based data

- With typical popular search engines, you're on your own: nobody is organizing or evaluating information for you.
- Popular web search engines (like Google or Bing) or chatbots are not entirely neutral: they use algorithms to organize results in part based on what millions of ordinary people prefer as quick results, in part based on how savvy website designers optimize their pages for keyword searches, and in part based on your previous patterns of searching. Thus you may find it difficult to locate good information that is less popular, more complicated, or contrary to your or your readers' usual views.
- You may find it difficult to determine the home organization, author, publication date, or target audience of a popular web site, and thus difficult to verify its credibility well enough to satisfy to your readers.
- Popular web sites often repeat information that was reported elsewhere without always indicating the repetition or providing clear direction to the original data, so you may find it difficult to determine whether the information itself is recent, credible, or accurate.
- Popular web site texts are often geared to readers with limited education and short attention spans, so you may find it difficult to locate sources that address your issue with the depth, complexity, or range of well-researched data that you and your readers need to fulfill your goals.

Strategies to help you search the popular web efficiently and effectively

Since the point of the popular web is that *anyone* can post *anything*, without needing to pass a test or even identify themselves, advanced inquirers need to take extra care to ensure that we don't get overwhelmed by thousands of barely-relevant sources, and to establish that the information we find online is high-quality information.

To begin with, you can use the following strategies to make your search more efficient:

- Find out whether your search engine has advanced searching features (try searching the phrase "Advanced Search [Insert Name of Search Engine: Google, Yahoo!, Bing, etc.]") or allows Boolean operators or other characters as search filters. Some common advanced operations are

- Using quotation marks around an exact phrase you need, or a plus sign next to it: *"freshman fifteen"*

- Using the Boolean operator "NOT" or a minus sign to eliminate unwanted information: *YouTube NOT Kardashian*

- Read beyond the first 20 "hits." These are likely to have information that is the most familiar to your readers. Sources may also be at the top of a list because of sponsors or website algorithms, not because they're more relevant or reliable.

- Vary your search as you go: Change your language as you skim your sources and learn more about how insiders discuss your issue; switch from one search engine to another; move from text to video to news to see what other perspectives are available.

- Deliberately search for information or analysis that presents alternative, opposing, or unexpected points of view regarding your issue: You can add words such as *controversy*, *opposition*, *problems*, *alternatives*, *disadvantages*, or *cost* to your search string to start to uncover a range of views and resistance points.

Always cross-check your popular sources

It's not enough to locate relevant sources: since anyone can put anything online, true or not, advanced researchers need some initial strategies for weeding out flawed, untrue, or incomplete sources. In 2019, researchers at Stanford asked over 3000 high school students from across the US six questions about whether online sources were credible. Ninety percent failed at least four of the six questions.

- 52% rated a video of unidentified people stuffing papers in boxes as credible evidence of US voter fraud—even though it was filmed in Russia.

- 96% believed that a website about climate change was credible and unbiased even though the organization that produced it was entirely funded by fossil fuel corporations like Exxon.

In each case, the students were given ample class time and told they could use any online tools they wanted, yet they were swayed by what they saw on the first screen: vivid video, a nonprofit organization, a direct message.

Would you make the same errors?

The one step you can take that almost none of these students did is to **cross-check: open a new browser tab** and search another source—even Wikipedia—for background information on a site's author or organization, for a second source that corroborates the data, and/or for additional data about the issue that might not be mentioned. Unless you are certain that a source is reputable, objective, complete, and accurate, you must be your own detective agency—or risk sharing misinformation with your readers.

You should take some additional steps, even during these early steps of your search, to focus your attention on sources that are going to be credible to your readers. For popular web sources, you should use some basic detective skills to discover crucial information about a source's author, publisher, citations, and publication date.

- Make no assumptions: Corporations can own ".org" pages or sponsor a nonprofit charity; students can put non-factual information on a ".edu" page; a picture or video can be altered; a hate group can build a well-organized and polite webpage; a group that calls itself "nonpartisan" or "research-based" may be significantly biased.

- For information about your source that you cannot find directly on the page or in the document, go back to the home page or root URL address (https://ThisFirstPartIsTheRootURL.com) and look for an About Us page, a Goals page, or a Submission Guidelines page, to see how long the site has been available, what its goals are, how it reviews the information published on it, and who writes or produces for it.

- When you cannot locate information about an organization or author within a page or document, you can quickly do a separate search to find how others in the field view this publisher, source, or organization, or to find out what the author's credentials are and what else he or she has written.

Gather reported data/analysis via databases and library catalogs

A database is different from the whole internet the way a filing cabinet organized alphabetically by subject and then by date is different from a random heap of a million sheets of paper. If you've ever worked at an office that has filing cabinets, or one that has a system for storing information by categories in a database, then you know that for information to go into a database, smart people have to make several decisions:

- How to organize the categories of the database
- What information to let in, and what to keep out
- What category (or categories) to file each piece of information under

Computer algorithms can help sort and maintain databases, but decisions about creating and structuring complex databases need to be made by human beings. When you use a database, or search in a library, you benefit from the critical thinking that other people have already done.

Information databases such as your library's search system—or specific databases within it created by EBSCO, ProQuest, Lexis-Nexis, JSTOR, or PsychINFO—can connect you to secondary sources such as newspapers, magazines, journals, and books efficiently, as if you had just hired dozens of extra people who put in the time to select, organize, and file individual sources. If you attend a university, you have already paid to hire these people with your tuition and fees; if you use a public library, your taxes have already paid for your database access.

You also see *more* information—strange as it may seem, not everything is available on the public web. Magazine and journal publishers that are still trying to make money by selling subscriptions will allow electronic copies of articles to be distributed through a paid database for use by other researchers like you. And even sources like "Google Books" survey only a fraction of published books. So in addition to gaining your own personal research assistants, you gain access to your own private library that's not yet available to the average person online.

It can take time to learn how to use a database well, just as it took time to learn how to drive a car when you were already comfortable walking. It's sometimes not as convenient to fuel, repair, and park a car as it is just to put on some shoes and walk. But like your car, a database can get you to your destination faster and take you to new ideas that were out of reach on the popular web.

Kinds of secondary source databases

Library catalog: All libraries have a catalog that searches the books and journals that are present in the library. Since items are organized by subject, author, and date, when you find one book, the catalog will help you see what other books have similar information.

Library global search engine: A large library may have a generalized search feature linked to its front page that searches *all its books* and also *thousands of articles* that are available through its databases.

Generalist indexing and full-text databases: Databases such as Academic Search Complete, Lexis-Nexis Academic, and ProQuest Research Library include abstracts of and often full-text articles from newspapers, general interest magazines (such as *Psychology Today*), corporate or trade publications (such as *Advertising Age*), scholarly or professional journals (such as *The Journal of Laser Applications*), and sometimes books or chapters of books.

Specialized indexing and/or full-text databases: Databases such as the Modern Language Association International Bibliography, Computers and Applied Sciences

Complete, and Science Citation Index Expanded will include more references to specialized or "scholarly" publications relevant to that specific field. Some specialized databases may only have article abstracts (no full text), but they are able to quickly handle a search among millions of articles and chapters not listed in other databases.

Specialized organization-based indexes: Some individual publishers, organizations, or professional groups sponsor databases that allow you to locate particular kinds of documents or texts that are in a specific field. You might search in Congressional Research Service Reports for information about proposed legislation, in PsychExtra from the American Psychological Association for reports from research institutes and scientific societies that aren't indexed in other databases, or in ERIC to locate published and unpublished research in education.

Kinds of sources in databases

Although database sources will all look very much alike on a computer screen, not all of them are of equal use or credibility. If you pay attention to the *type* of source you are looking at, you may gain some clues about its credibility, accessibility, and relevance.

- **A newspaper source** can address very recent, very local, and very trendy issues because its writers and editors work quickly: writers often observe, write, and revise a story in a day or two. Writers often aim for a neutral point of view, but specific sections of a newspaper (opinions, editorials, letters) can be non-neutral. The larger the city or organization publishing the paper, and the older the paper, the more likely that it will have a stronger reputation to protect, more experienced reporters, and a better fact-checking and editing team, all of which increase its credibility.

- **A magazine or other weekly or monthly periodical**, whether still publishing a print edition (*Game Informer Magazine*) or entirely online (*Wired Magazine*) can address either a general audience or specialize in one topic area: its writers can follow relatively recent stories but they have more time to provide in-depth analysis than newspaper writers do—but they may be less current or local. Not all magazines are equally credible on all issues: *Wired* is likely to be seen as much more credible on technology topics than it is on issues of agriculture or music education. Some magazines (like *Sierra* for environmentalists or *Reason* for libertarians) support particular points of view, and so may have limited credibility.

- **An article from an academic or "scholarly" journal, or a book or book-chapter** will address a narrow angle of an issue in great depth— but may not have the most up-to-date information. Writers often take a year or more to complete their inquiry and writing, and the blind peer review process with additional revisions and rounds of editing and fact-checking can take another year or more. Articles are usually

expected to address alternatives or opposing viewpoints with some objectivity. While some journals have higher standards than others, most established journals will be highly credible to an audience of university faculty or experts in a field. However, they will not usually address very recent events, cover many local angles, or use language or concepts accessible to a broad audience.

- **An institutional report, government document, doctoral dissertation, or conference proceeding** may be associated with another credible review process that helps assure its reliability—an institution, corporation, or government agency tracks the author's work, or a student's thesis committee and university set standards for a document's quality. You may have to determine from field to field whether these documents have in-depth information, whether your readers consider them credible, and whether they support a single point of view or consider multiple perspectives objectively.

- **An individual conference paper, presentation, or report** will provide an informed but possibly less formal view. Some databases, such as the education database ERIC, include unpublished, unreviewed work in order to foster the fastest exchange of ideas. These sources should be considered one at a time just as you consider popular web sources carefully: some may be highly relevant and credible, and others may not be.

You can use the popular web to find information about the publication (how long has it been around and what are its goals? what kind of acceptance rate does it have?), the author or authors of the text, and what others are saying on the issue so that you know whether this view is mainstream or fringe.

Benefits and uses of database inquiry

- Databases increase the "people power" of your information gathering, so instead of hunting for information as a "lone wolf," you're always hunting as part of a pack that combines their talents with yours.

- Databases usually incorporate advanced search techniques that allow you to quickly eliminate sources you don't consider relevant or credible, and locate other similar information.

- Databases frequently grant access to sources that have high value and credibility among college readers and other expert audiences.

- You can use a general or specialized database to find information or analysis when you know you need to address complications and alternatives; when you need thoughtful background or connections to advanced theories or principles; and when you need to persuade a skeptical and/or highly educated audience.

- You can use a specialized database (and you may also need help from a librarian) when you are hunting for the answer to a specific question or for a particular kind of analysis or data, and you don't have time to sort through three million popular web sources.

Limitations and complications of database inquiry

- Databases have limited access: in most cases, you need to be on location at a library that subscribes to them or to have a password to access the resources.

- Databases work best after you invest some time in learning how to use their tools, and they don't all use the same layout or have the same options.

- Not all references you find in a database will include the full text of the original source: you might need to track down the full text in another database, look it up in your library's print collection, or find it through interlibrary loan.

- Specialized or "scholarly" sources that can be accessed through databases are often difficult for non-specialists to read, and may not be either as "local" or as current as popular web sources.

- Databases don't automatically guarantee that the sources they reference will be of high quality or of high relevance (according to your and your readers' standards), so you still need to evaluate each source you find.

Strategies for searching through databases

- Databases rely on precise *keywords* more than the popular web does. Try using more formal rather than lunch-table words (*literature* vs. *books*) substituting similar words (*Islamic* vs. *Muslim*), or using terms that are more specific or more general (*Asian* vs. *Chinese* vs. *Shanghai*). As you find relevant sources, check what keywords they are categorized by so that you can use those terms more in your search.

- Use a *subject term* search: all articles on a similar subject will be labeled with the same subject terms even if their authors don't use a particular word.

- Use the *Boolean operators* and other common search modifiers that most standard database searches provide: "AND" helps you limit your search to sources that include all the listed terms; "OR" lets you expand your search to include multiple terms, "NOT" lets you exclude terms, and an asterisk often lets you look for word variations ("communicat*" will find *communication, communicator,* and *communicating*).

- Use *filters* in the database to restrict what you see: choose the date-range, limit your search to peer-reviewed scholarly journals, or search only

sources with full-text documents attached. Some databases will let you search for similar sources once you find a text that's "perfect" for you.

- *Be patient* as you work in a new database, and take time to learn its options and structures. Make each good source teach you how to find better sources: take note of the subject terms, specialized language, journal, or ideas stated in the abstract to learn how this database identifies and groups key ideas.

Consult a librarian when you have the opportunity

You can increase the "people power" of your database search significantly with one additional step: asking a librarian. Just as you should never sit staring at a screen while you have "writer's block," you should never sit staring at a screen with "library block" or "researcher's block." When you *know* or strongly suspect that good or better information exists but you cannot find it, you should ask an expert to assist you.

College and university librarians have advanced degrees specifically in *collecting, organizing, and locating information*, and they want to help you find what you need. Your tuition and your tax dollars have already paid for their support, so you should take advantage of it whenever you can. These days, you may be able to reach a librarian through a chat window or text message without ever leaving your desk.

You can maximize your librarian support with just a little preparation: instead of "I have a paper due tomorrow on elephants and I need five sources, what do I do?" advanced researchers ask specific questions:

- "When I do a general search for _____ I get ten thousand sources, but when I narrow it to _____, I only get five that don't help much. How can I create more reasonable search?"
- "I've found six sources explaining why _____ is a good plan, but I'm having trouble finding alternate plans or opposing analyses about it: what else can I try?"
- "All the information I've found on _____ so far is too basic [or too advanced]: how do I change my search strategy to find books or articles that match my readers' needs?"
- "I need to know what the average price of farmland in Weld County was for each decade in the 20th century, and how that translates to current dollars: how do you suggest I look for that data?"

Remember that librarians are people, too: if you don't feel you've gotten the best answer to your first question, consider asking a different question or even trying again later when a different person is available who might have more helpful perspectives.

Focus on equity: Inquire by including diverse perspectives

Like writers, researchers who are starting a project need to take active steps to identify our own assumptions and resist our own biases, to stay skeptical about the assumptions and biases that are embedded in the data or sources we locate, and to seek out relevant alternate perspectives even when they are not immediately evident in a quick online search.

In other words, inquiry requires a disposition of openness. Instead of preparing ourselves for conflict by identifying only data or expert views that support our current knowledge, advanced writers and researchers seek perspectives, data, explanations, and examples that help us understand the complexity of a situation and provide our own readers with an accurate view. This work is part of being an ethical researcher: even when we intend to argue for a specific stance or outcome, we act responsibly by approaching inquiry *as a process of learning* in which we might change our minds.

Beyond "find three sources": Understand systems of discrimination in research

In the same way that "good" writing is not a neutral judgment, "good" research is not always neutrally defined. The sources that we view are researched and written by people who have been working in cultures that enable and reinscribe systemic racism and discrimination—so simply "finding three sources" is not going to provide you with an ethical, inclusive project.

For instance, it's helpful to remember that:

- Funding for research has historically been given more often to people from White, Christian, wealthy backgrounds and those from elite universities and institutions than to people from less powerful or minoritized groups
- Research funding often supports inquiry into problems that affect a few powerful people, leaving a wide range of issues unassessed and a wide range of solutions unexplored
- The scholars who write research reports, as well as those who participate in the peer-review process employed by the scholarly journals and national publications, may be working from conscious or unconscious biases and assumptions that unfairly limit other researchers or suppress important investigations

The existence of bias and discrimination doesn't mean that "anything goes" or that all information sources are equally unreliable. As a researcher, you should still be wary of a single writer publishing their analyses on an open website or launching opinions into social media; you should strive to cross-check and corroborate their claims using other sources. As an *inclusive* researcher, however,

you have a responsibility to do the hard work of assembling and judging sources for yourself: you must consider and actively seek out alternative and underrepresented perspectives, and then hold them to a high standard of credibility and relevance.

Beyond "both sides": Inquire about multiple perspectives

We live in a complicated world, and most of the interesting areas for inquiry involve multifaceted, interconnected problems. As an advanced researcher, you should use deliberate strategies to ensure that you are considering a wide range of viewpoints. At a basic level, you already know that you should understand the most obvious oppositions to any argument you wish to make, so that you can respond to or refute those claims. More than "seeing both sides," though, you should consider additional goals and strategies for your early inquiry:

- Add keywords such as *opposition, limitations, concerns, resistance,* or *complications* to your searches, to try gain better understanding of why a question or a problem has not yet been solved.
- Take time to imagine multiple stakeholders in a project or event, including leaders and advocates as well as people who may have been marginalized or erased from the conversation but who are affected by the outcomes, and then deliberately search for their perspectives.
- Remember that the algorithms that identify "top matches" to your search are not neutral and may overlook contributions by researchers and advocates from underrepresented and minoritized groups—so you may need to deliberately search for their insights.

Numbers don't tell the whole story, but if you've located ten sources so far and nine of them are written by or about people from similar backgrounds (which you know because you cross-checked to find out!), or they are providing very similar arguments or analyses, you should pause and check your own strategies. You are researching in the 21st century, not the early 1900s: in the billions of sources at your fingertips, you can likely find some credible information that expands your and your readers' views.

When you search consciously for multiple perspectives, you not only act ethically and inclusively as a researcher, but you lay the ground for a more successful project. Instead of restating ideas or solutions that everyone else has already found, you are more likely to propose a unique angle or viable solution that will strongly engage and motivate your readers.

Beyond "credible": Don't settle for biased or exclusionary sources

A government website, news organization, academic journal, or famous scholar may generally be a "credible" source that you and your readers trust, and yet a

specific article, study, example, or argument may reveal biases, overlook the ways that structural discrimination affects the issue, or exclude crucial perspectives.

A report or article doesn't have to be directly insulting of a group of people to be treating them or their views unfairly: discrimination can show up through omission or erasure of some key perspectives, or through unsupported generalizations about groups of people (even seemingly positive ones such as Asian Americans being a "model minority"). In the early stages of your research, you won't always be reading sources thoroughly, but you should still be skeptical of:

- Sources that discuss an issue in terms of "society" or "all people" or "teenagers" generally without acknowledging that people from minoritized or underrepresented backgrounds may have very different experiences, resources, or needs

- Sources that provide examples or cite studies that seem to primarily include White, middle-class, male, and/or straight/cisgender experiences or perspectives

- Sources that present simple explanations of causes or solutions without acknowledging how systemic discrimination or racism may affect events or decisions

You can use these sources in your research, of course—there are no categorically "bad sources"—but you will need to be prepared to critique any discriminatory practices or propositions that they offer.

If you are reviewing new sources about a question or problem and find that they frequently exclude, denigrate, or generalize about a group of people that you personally identify with, you don't have to settle for an inquiry project that replicates discriminatory practices: you may need to try more deliberate search strategies, alone or with a librarian, to locate credible research that fairly represents and examines key issues. Alternately, you may choose to work with your instructor to find a new angle or topic that you can inquire about that will enable you to explore questions and contribute your insights without so regularly encountering harmful materials. If you are a White researcher who is practicing anti-racism, or a Christian researcher aiming to be an ally to people from Muslim or Buddhist religious backgrounds, you can plan out your search strategies to deliberately seek sources and present analyses that help you push back against exclusion, racism, or discrimination.

Explore 19.5

Consider your current inquiry project, and answer three questions:

- What facts or arguments are most familiar or agreeable to you, and how can you seek out and be open to alternate perspectives?

Explore 19.5 (continued)

- What's one example of quantitative data (countable/measurable) you could seek, and one kind of qualitative data (interpretive/descriptive) you could seek?

- Beyond "scholarly journal articles," what are two other kinds of data that your readers might find credible? In a sentence each, describe what you might want to learn and what kind of source(s) you might consult.

Chapter 20. Middle Inquiry: Finding, Evaluating, and Integrating Information

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify how your inquiry project will be part of a larger conversation
- Locate and evaluate source material that is accessible, relevant, insightful, substantive, and credible
- Organize your source material into a map for your writing project
- Work recursively as you move between locating, evaluating, and writing about information related to your project

Once you have done your initial explorations and "pre-search" as part of your early inquiry process, you should have a clearer view of the initial hypotheses and questions that interest you most, as well as a sense of what other people have been saying about these issues.

Your middle round of inquiry may begin to look and feel more like a typical "research paper" experience: you will locate, evaluate, and analyze information and data that you are likely to use in your final project. Remember that you should work rhetorically as a researcher, perhaps keeping some key threshold concepts in mind:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

Moreover, since inquiry is not just rhetorical but also **multimodal**, **recursive**, **networked**, and **ethical**, you will need to do more than find three sources with a few startling facts that you can quote in your document to "prove your point." At this middle stage, you are likely to focus on finding out what you don't know, and beginning to arrange your ideas to share with other readers. To continue to research rhetorically and reflectively, you might:

- **Gather** a wide range of perspectives to see how others are already discussing the issue
- **Evaluate** your information to select the sources that will be most relevant and credible to your readers
- **Write** notes or drafts to analyze and synthesize the information you've gathered
- **Revise** or shift your focus or arguments as you learn more about the issue

20.1 Finding and Joining Relevant Conversations

When you write as an inquirer, you don't stand alone on a hilltop and shout random ideas into the darkness: you join a conversation that has already been going on, and you try to inform or persuade people who already have knowledge or opinions on a subject. You thus need to find out not just what you don't know, but what other people already know. Writing scholar Kenneth Burke compares this step to carefully "entering a parlor"—or a kitchen, a break room

at work, a chat thread, or an online forum—that is full of people already talking about your issue:

> When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion . . . . You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your [view]. Someone answers; you answer [them]; another comes to your defense . . . . The hour grows late, you must depart . . . with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

You already know that that first step, finding out what the key conversation points are, is crucial in our daily interactions with other people, whether in person or online. If you just barge in and start making claims, people might think you are impolite, uninformed, irrelevant, or even hostile. The more you find out about the basic themes of the conversation that's already going on, the better your chances of contributing an interesting comment that people will respect, engage with, or find insightful.

The same is true when you are writing, although the speed of the conversation slows down: many people have been writing about your issue, or some aspect of your issue, for months or years before you sat down and opened up a blank page on your screen, and your contributions will be read by other people in a week, a month, or years from now. Instead of imagining yourself emerging from the shadows, delivering a box of facts, and disappearing into the night, you should plan to show how your ideas relate to key points expressed by others before you, and encourage the next round of readers to engage with and respond to your propositions.

Use reflective approaches

In the same way that advanced writers don't just sit down and start to write, advanced inquirers don't "just do it" either. Whether you're interviewing experts, using secondary sources from the popular web, consulting a subject-specific database, or reviewing physical books or reports from a library or other site, you will benefit from using an inquiry plan that helps you consider and analyze your moves as you go forward.

To push back against the impulse to just "find five sources" and jump into writing, keep the DEAL reflective framework in mind. As an advanced inquirer, you are still learning and gaining confidence:

- Continue to **define** and redefine the key issues of your project, letting new sources help you see more clearly and setting less useful sources aside.
- **Evaluate** your resources as you go, judging your individual sources to ensure they are credible, relevant, and insightful, and mapping your collection of information to identify new patterns, connections, and gaps.

- Leave yourself time to **act** by writing (more of) your draft as you go, developing your own analyses and incorporating the information you've learned.
- Keep your disposition of humility and curiosity as you continue to **learn** about the areas where you may still need to gather more information and adapt your own hypotheses or arguments.

Reflective writers move constantly learning and doing, between paying attention to others' ideas and developing our own, between digging deep into an issue and stepping back to see the bigger picture and assess our progress. Our goal is to create new knowledge that benefits our readers, and that work requires patience and flexibility.

Use rhetorical and ethical approaches

When you just need a quick answer to a straightforward question, a short search on the open internet works beautifully: you type or speak your question ("What is money in Malaysia called?" or even just "money Malaysia") and instantly receive an answer ("*ringgit* and *sen*"). An open search for basic information may still be helpful at this stage of your inquiry project, though you should be aware of the limitations and complications of quick searches that may compromise your goals.

To identify relevant **conversations** that you can join, however, you will need more rhetorical inquiry strategies. You aren't searching only for facts; you are inquiring about the state of the current conversation, and planning to convey those facts to readers in a way that answers a crucial question and/or proposes a relevant and useful hypothesis.

Consider your goals and your unknowns

To begin with, it may be helpful to re-state your current working question or hypothesis, and identify:

- What you already know you know (and so might not need much more information on)
- What exact angles are your top priority, and what aspects you believe you most want or need to know more about, especially with regard to opposing or alternative views
- What areas you are still uncertain about but think you should explore—especially as they might involve underrepresented or marginalized perspectives

As you focus on the exact angles of your inquiry, you work rhetorically by keeping your own goals in mind. You are not a robot gathering information to produce a general report; you are a writer who intends to solve a problem and/or engage a group of readers.

Consider the community's conversations

In addition, your inquiry needs to consider how other people—experts, stakeholders, and other involved communities—are writing and thinking about your issue. Adding one of the terms or phrases below the keywords you're using to search about your topic can help you "listen in" on specific discussions:

- **"Research on _____":** What are experts who do research on related topics saying about it?

- **"History of _____":** What do people who have been working on this issue a long time say happened in the earliest stages of this puzzle or problem—or say is the most recent development?

- **"Support for _____"** or **"Opposition to _____":** What are people who share your perspective saying? What are people with a different perspective saying?

- **"Personal stories of _____":** What are regular people who tell their own first-hand stories saying?

- **"_____ in [location name]":** What are people in your community, or who live somewhere else, saying about it?

- **"_____ for [group or profession]":** What are people who might be your readers—or people from that discourse community—saying? What do other writers have to say about how less visible or less powerful groups of people are affected by this issue?

When you use your search keywords—or your prompt for a generative artificial intelligence chatbot—to specify the context or angle of information that will best help you connect with your readers, you are inquiring rhetorically.

Keep ethical principles in mind

Ethical, credible inquiry is rhetorical because it relies on common values. When you strive to meet your and your readers' expectations for finding and representing information that is fair, accurate, comprehensive, trustworthy, and supportive of a community's growth and well-being, you are researching ethically. In general, you want to pay attention to ethics at several points in this stage of inquiry:

- Inquire to identify multiple perspectives as you seek out sources.

- Evaluate the credibility and relevance of individual sources as you locate them.

- Read sources actively and critically so that you understand the context and key principles that you can share with your readers, rather than only seeking a "good quote."

- Take deliberate action to counter the algorithms, cultural biases, and

systemic racism that may have silenced or hidden voices from minoritized communities.

It may seem that it takes longer to inquire rhetorically and ethically than to "find five sources," but in the long run these strategies help you increase both your efficiency and your satisfaction. When you articulate your goals clearly, you spend less time reviewing irrelevant sources; when you know what others are saying, you save time by not having to invent good ideas from scratch or repeat work that has already been done; and when you research ethically, you gain credibility so that your writing is more engaging for you and persuasive for your readers.

Use recursive, multimodal, and networked approaches

It's good to keep reminding yourself that learning does not happen in a straight line, such as "Gather some sources, then review them, then write about them." As tempting as it is to schedule a single afternoon to "do my research," a more recursive approach will actually save you time and energy. You improve your efficiency and accuracy as an inquirer when you:

- **Move between locating and evaluating information**: when you take time to determine which of a few sources or data you've gathered so far is *most* accurate, relevant, or credible, your next round of inquiry will be more effective
- **Move between locating information and mapping it to the conversation**: when you take time to map out what you already know and how it connects to what *others* already know, you can use the trends and gaps to improve your next search
- **Move between locating and writing about information**: when you take time to begin writing your interpretations of the information you've found, you discover more about your own conclusions, which can help you review your sources more productively

For example, if you're working on a fairly familiar line of inquiry— *what did my family do for fun when I was growing up in San Antonio, Texas, that I could share with others?*—you may be tempted to set a clear schedule once you've looked at some sources and narrowed your focus. You decide you'll talk to your siblings, check a few websites about Enchanted Rock, brainstorm your draft, and write it up.

But what if one of the website descriptions of trails in the park completely contradicts your memories of what you did? Maybe it turns out your siblings are not much help after all, but one of the websites also refers you to an article about boat tours, which helps you remember an afternoon you spent with your cousins, and now you need to call them instead. If you work on each stage a little at a time, you can learn as you go and make sure that you have the energy and resources you need for each step before you take the next one.

If you had planned a linear approach where you decided in advance on your topic and sources, and then you had to change them all, you might have felt as though you fouled up the whole process and your project was falling apart. If instead you plan from the start that your middle inquiry cycle will go back and forth between steps and will likely involve some adjustments and changes as you go, then every change can be a sign that you're making progress.

Explore 20.1

Consider a conversation that you are currently having with multiple people. This could be a private conversation with friends or family; it could be a conversation with members of a team, online discussion board, or community group; it could be a conversation within another course, your workplace colleagues, or members of your laboratory. Briefly describe two or three themes that come up frequently in this conversation, as well as one or two pieces of "insider knowledge" that this discourse community understands (but that outsiders might not know about). If you decided to add a new person to the conversation—someone intelligent and well-intentioned—how long would they need to participate to become aware of your themes? What would an unsuccessful first contribution or question look like (that would mark them as a newcomer or perhaps annoy someone in the group), and how could they make a better one?

Learn

- To learn more about **discourse communities**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about **reflective practice** and the DEAL framework, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process.
- To learn more about **developing a working question or hypothesis**, see Chapter 19, Early Inquiry: Exploring Research Questions.
- To learn more about the **advantages and limitations of online sources**, see Chapter 19, Early Inquiry: Exploring Research Questions.

20.2 Gathering Sufficient Relevant, Credible, Ethical Information

One of the common questions that novice writers ask when they begin working on a school based "research project" is "How many sources do I need?" Advanced writers know that "enough" is not a number of sources; it's a rhetorical decision:

- What information do you need as the writer to be able to explain your key points?
- What kinds of information sources will your readers trust, connect with, and learn from?

As you work into your middle stage of inquiry, you need strategies that will help you make good decisions about what information to gather, from how many resources, and connected to which angles or arguments.

Gather more than you need

As an advanced and ethical writer, your goal is not just to back up your current point of view, but to inquire about all the aspects of your issue. Whether you are helping your readers to understand the features of a portable solar panel, choose the best campground, implement a reasonable flood-prevention policy, or adopt a more relevant art history curriculum, your middle-stage research should focus on understanding the big picture as well as locating specific information.

You need to be able to:

- Gather **highly relevant** information, by your own and your readers' standards
- Gather **strongly credible** information, by your readers' standards
- Gather an **ethically complete** set of information, including material on alternative, opposing, or underrepresented theories, causes, interpretations, or solutions
- **Narrow, expand, or redirect** your question or hypothesis in light of new data or information

In order to know if you have enough relevant, credible, and complete information, you need to become familiar with a wide range of source material. If you skim two newspaper reports or review just one art history course description, you'll never know if you have found the most credible and complete information. As you work on your inquiry as a writer, then, you nearly always need to locate more information than you will end up using directly in writing your document: you need to find some sources just to know what material is *not* useful, intriguing, credible, or relevant.

Outside school, you likely already use this big-picture approach: after all, the last time you considered buying a $200 set of speakers or a $500 tablet, you probably didn't settle for the conclusion of one product review. If you were planning to buy a $30,000 car or a $350,000 house, you would want to gather even more information from a wide range of sources: your own observations, published analyses, comparisons to other cars or houses, and perhaps even a hired expert to do an inspection.

Whether you're inquiring about a house to purchase or about recent advances in coastal flood protection, it's good to remember that you will likely still be working with four categories of information about which you are inquiring:

- **Category 1**: Information you know that you know
- **Category 2**: Information you don't know that you know

- **Category 3**: Information you know that you don't know
- **Category 4**: Information you don't know that you don't know

While a "research paper" writer might focus on Category 3, finding out answers to a couple of obvious questions, ethical writers pay special attention to the balance between Category 1 and Category 4. In an era when anyone with a keyboard can share information, advanced researchers need to double check whether what we *think we know* is truly correct and complete; we also need to actively seek out ideas that might not naturally occur to us.

Plan carefully to gather primary data

Although you live in an "Information Age" and have access to more secondary published data than has ever been available before, you may still want to gather or create your own primary data. You may gather data from yourself as a witness or expert; from other people through interviews, surveys, or ethnographic observation; or through experimental measurement of the physical world or specific processes. Doing your own research may take more time, so plan ahead in order to be efficient without sacrificing quality or integrity.

Identify the information that primary sources or methods can best provide

To be ethical and efficient, you want to determine in advance what data you most need and what data are most available from your experiment or gathering process. Primary data can help you:

- Analyze aspects of a local or very recent situation
- Provide vivid examples that resonate with readers
- Create new knowledge rather than only reporting on others' ideas

When you know *why* you want primary data, you can tailor your methods or questions to help you achieve those goals: if you want sympathetic stories about surviving a hurricane, you will ask different questions than if you need to identify local trends in rebuilding after the storm.

To develop a plan for avoid duplicating previous information gathering, you may have to complete background research in secondary sources *before* you begin primary research. After all, you don't want to waste time surveying community members if a local news organization has recently published a relevant, well-designed survey, and you don't want to repeat an experiment on an organic fertilization process that has already been proved not to work by several credible recent studies.

Evaluate primary sources' relevance, credibility, and availability

You should also match your questions to the expertise or experience of your participants: if you are observing or surveying college students, they will be most

reliable on issues related to their experience as students, as adolescents, and as residents of a particular neighborhood. For example, students at your school will have useful and credible insights about an art history course they have taken; on the other hand, while the same students may also have opinions about flood control, your readers may not trust or be interested in those opinions.

Similarly, you should evaluate what you have access to: will your online survey reach 5 people or 50? will you have time to observe one professor or three? If you can only contact a few people, you may not be able to credibly predict a trend—but you can still provide vivid examples that readers will find engaging.

Make plans to gather appropriate data

Once you have determined that gathering your own data will benefit your inquiry, you should take some time to set the arrangements up to increase your success. Before you decide who you want to interview or what group you want to observe, you can do some background "lookup" research to find out about the people, organizations, or technologies you might encounter: out of three art history professors, which one teaches the most introductory level classes? You should also plan how you will contact possible participants, arrange for access to a site, and record the information you gather.

Finally, because live research is complicated, you should create a schedule that leaves you plenty of extra time. Also consider creating "Plan B" by listing several possibilities for each key decision you need to make: who to consult, what to focus on, when and where to begin or complete your inquiry, how or for how long to conduct your survey or observation.

Apply a relevant, ethical information gathering process

If you are working in a laboratory, you have most likely already determined your questions and methods for gathering data. But even in a less formal situation— you plan to interview a business owner, analyze a business spreadsheet, observe a class discussion, or just try to recall a family vacation—you need careful preparation in order to conduct reliable inquiry.

As researchers, we need to compensate for the fact that we tend to *find what we are looking for* and to miss what we don't consider important. So you need to take time in advance to prepare questions or observation guidelines that will help you gather complete, impartial data. You might use some of the following steps:

- Generate a wide-ranging list of possible questions: include both closed questions (yes/no) and open-ended questions, and include questions about major and minor aspects of your issue.
- Seek unexpected information, by including unusual questions or observation opportunities: consider asking questions about alternative approaches

or surprising experiences, and identify some seemingly inconsequential people or details you can observe or ask about.

- Narrow the question set or observation checklist for your initial inquiry: enough points to cover your core information needs but not so many that the time taken in answering them or analyzing the answers will exceed participants' patience or your resources

- Use neutral wording for your questions so that they ask for information in an open-minded way (you could choose "What do you remember about the damage Hurricane Ian caused to your store?" rather than "How did Hurricane Ian destroy your business?")

When you have a good question list, you might ask a peer for feedback on it or for help practicing your interview in advance, to be sure that your inquiry approach has the best opportunity to succeed.

Finally, you should follow ethical research practices. When you gather people-based data, you need to be sure that participants are adults in a fully public space—like a food court or city park—or that they have been directly informed about how you plan to share their data and have freely given their consent for you to observe or question them for your project. (Your instructor or supervisor may expect that you have participants sign a formal written consent to share their information.)

In interviews and observations as in all research, you are expected to be fair: to design your inquiry in a way that won't bias the results (don't ask only people who have received a parking ticket to give their opinions about campus parking) and to report your data accurately and completely (don't leave out data that contradicts your own view). You should record details carefully so that you can explain your process as well as your results: readers will want to know whether you interviewed a few of your best friends or whether you deliberately sought out a broader range of participants to gain credibility.

Practice

- To practice **defining your research steps**, see Audience Profile, Deluxe Project Scheduler, or Evidence Shopping List.

- To practice **exploring primary sources with an open mind**, see Assumption Inspection, Counterargument Generator, Magic Three Choices, Question Ladders, or Used to Think / Now I Think.

Use advanced strategies when gathering secondary information

Today anyone with an internet connection can publish their ideas—factual or not—for everyone to read. As a result, you need advanced writing and research

strategies more than ever:

- To stand out from the crowd, you need to bring the best (not just the easiest) information into your writing.
- To have an impact on readers who either think all opinions are equal, or think nobody's ideas are trustworthy, you need to strongly demonstrate the credibility of your information.
- To promote ethical, productive conversations, you need to avoid sharing misinformation or exaggerated speculations.

It may be tempting to rely on quick-search strategies you have used before, but advanced writers gain power and confidence by using a more critical and carefully planned approach to secondary source-based research.

Identify what information you need to locate

When you go shopping at a big store without a list, you often buy what you don't need and forget to buy what you need; you may also wander slowly through the store aisles rather or stare in bewilderment at a huge shelf of cereal boxes. If you begin surfing the internet or searching a database without a list of what you want to find, you will encounter the same problems: your inquiry process will be inaccurate, slow, and incomplete. Even though you cannot know what exists until you find it, you can visualize clearly what you already know, what you know you don't know, and what you know that you most want to know at this point—and you can anticipate what kinds of sources provide the best answers.

Evaluate appropriate sources and tools

There are no "bad sources" or search tools: only sources or tools that are inappropriate for a specific goal or a particular audience. Advanced researchers use different tools to locate credible secondary sources depending on the situation:

- Use popular web searches to gather general background information, to locate very recent or very local reports, to learn what topics and terminologies are most often being considered, or to check on the credibility of other sources or their authors.
- Use generative artificial intelligence tools or chatbots to ask for suggestions on opposing perspectives, audience resistance points, or alternative viewpoints you might not know about (but be wary about their accuracy on specific points).
- Use database searches to increase your access to more in-depth or scholarly sources, to discover subject terms and categories that can lead you to clusters of information, to network your search to related topics, and to find resources to persuade very educated or resistant readers.
- Use library searches (and librarian support) to increase the "people

power" of your inquiry, to access more complex or historical analysis for sophisticated readers, to access local or specialized documents, or to trace answers to challenging questions.

Plan a search strategy that uses multiple steps

In a previous "research paper" mode, your plan may have been to locate any five sources that were generally relevant, then read and highlight them all, and then move directly to composing. As an advanced inquirer and writer, you will be more efficient and successful if you plan to move back and forth among finding, evaluating, reading, and writing about your sources.

- **Identify sources and trends**. As you search for answers to the top questions on your list, pay attention both to individual sources that seem relevant and credible as well as to the trends that help define the conversation: what are many or few people discussing? Write yourself some notes to help your searching and composing: what terminology do they use? what or who are they *not* writing about?

- **Skim and appraise for credibility and relevance**. Before you commit to reading or downloading a source, use some pre-reading strategies to consider a few key features—opening/closing, headings or subject terms, abstract or citations—that will help you make sure it strongly meets *all* your advanced criteria: not just "generally relevant" but also accessible, insightful, substantive, and credible to your specific readers.

- **Sort, review, and analyze**. After you've located a few high-quality sources, stop and take time to read one or two in more depth and add them to your map of key points: what do you have a lot of information on, and what do you still need? Leave yourself some time in the middle of your searching to write about what you've found, to see if the data you've found and the issues you most want to write about still match.

You might bookmark, tag, save, or print a few "low" or "medium" quality sources as you get going, but you should soon be keeping only high-quality sources. Remember, too, that your focal question or initial hypothesis is not cast in concrete. You may still discover that you want to narrow or shift the focus of your inquiry during this stage of your process, so you don't want to rule out information too quickly.

Adapt and improve your search strategies as you go

Once you've found your first two or three quality sources, pause to use what you know to improve your search process for the next round.

- *Adapt your terminology*. Improve your keywords and combinations of search terms based on language you see in the abstracts, database subject headings, sub-headers, and text used in your first sources

- *Adapt your focus.* In databases and library catalogs, begin to use advanced search features such as Boolean operators, subject headings, or search filters that help you focus on time ranges or types of source material
- *Adapt your range.* Use a deliberate strategy to help you locate sources outside your comfort zone, such as adding phrases like "opposition" or "research study" to your search terms
- *Adapt your networking.* Make each strong source lead you to additional sources by checking who and what its author cites, formally or informally, and by scanning for the names of other organizations, theories or principles, or key events that you could focus on in your inquiry

Remember, too, that you can adapt and improve your project to match the research you're finding: try writing a more specific or more complete working hypothesis that accounts for what you've learned so far.

Practice

- To practice **locating and evaluating high-quality secondary sources**, see <u>Cousin Topics</u>, <u>Keyword Bingo</u>, <u>Mind the Gap</u>, <u>Rate My Source</u>, <u>They Say + I Say</u>.
- To practice **annotating secondary sources** as you read them, try an exercise like <u>Annotation, Snapshots, or Talk Back</u>.

Learn

- To learn more about **secondary source searching**, see <u>Chapter 19, Early Inquiry: Exploring Research Questions</u>.
- To learn more about active reading strategies, see <u>Chapter 6, Reading as a Writer</u>.

Lower the risk of bias and disinformation: Evaluate and cross-check your sources

Advanced and ethical writers need to take deliberate steps to ensure that the information we provide to readers is reliable and relevant. In the information overload of the twenty-first century, amid open-access social media and lively conversations about how inaccurate information can spread like wildfire, it may seem as though this task is even more challenging than ever. But evaluating source quality has always been a writer's task, because a "high quality" source depends on so many elements of the rhetorical situation.

Evaluate each source using the A-RISC criteria

You may already have learned that a source of information—from primary or secondary research—needs to be credible. Credibility is rhetorical: that is, you

and your readers all need to trust that the source is providing a high level of accurate and complete information given the context of the research. One common way to remember some of the elements of credibility is with the acronym "CRAP": this helps writers look for sources that can be verified as having Current information, a Reliable level of accurate information, an Authoritative writer or organization providing the information, and a clear Purpose that is not compromised by intense biases.

But correct and verifiable information isn't the only sign that a source is high quality, and not all sources that are appropriate for a writer's work are credible. For instance, a writer exploring the effects of wartime propaganda will want to include examples of that propaganda even though they are not current, accurate, or unbiased, because they are a crucial part of the evidence readers need.

Credibility should be one part of a larger set of criteria for evaluating a source. A more expansive list of source-quality criteria would be the *A-RISC* guide noted here:

- **Accessible:** The source is written in language and with the right level of specialized context to allow the writer and reader to understand key information.

- **Relevant:** The source contains information that directly connects to the researcher's goals and provides information that matches the readers' needs.

- **Insightful:** The source provides new information or analysis, or a new application of a theory or paradigm, so as to extend the researcher's knowledge and enable readers to gain an understanding beyond a surface level.

- **Substantive:** The source gives enough depth of information and analysis to provide a complete picture of (part of) an issue, without overlooking contrary or marginalized perspectives.

- **Credible:** the source meets the "CRAP" test for Currency of data, Reliability of verifiable information, Authority and expertise of the source, and a Purpose that is not compromised by significant bias or conflict of interest.

As you track individual source quality, remember that sources don't have to be perfect to be useful and worthwhile:

- Highly *credible* sources are often *less accessible* to non-specialist readers, so there may be room in your research collection for some medium-credibility sources that help you and others comprehend or connect with the issues

- A source does not need to be 100% about your exact issue to have at least one section that is *relevant* to a question you're investigating or a perspective you want to represent

- One or two sources that provide *insightful* analysis or a *substantive* review of data may be more useful than a dozen *relevant* sources that all give brief or superficial information

You will also want to track the major content of each source as you go along. Your prereading strategies and critical reading approaches will help you make realistic judgments about the relevance and substance of each source. You can use annotations, notes, or tags to identify what the argument or main emphasis is, what the key evidence is (personal stories? recent research studies?), and whether the source addresses any counterarguments or alternative views.

Cross-check the author, publisher, sources, and conclusions

If you have ever graphed data points to find a trend line, you know that any single data point is insufficient, by itself, to indicate a reliable trend. At least two points are necessary for the researcher to have any idea whether they have found a rare anomaly or an event that is worth further exploration.

Finding a published source gives you one point: A single person had a single idea and made it available. To find out whether your source is trending toward credibility, you need to find additional data. Fortunately, the internet is filled with data: with a simple "lookup" search, you can cross-check any of the following:

- The **author**, who may have a profession or other publications that help confirm their expertise on a topic
- The **publication**, which may have an About Us page or a Wikipedia entry that helps identify any biases or commitments to accuracy (such as expert peer review or fact-checking)
- Any **sources** or studies cited by the author that may provide further evidence (if they also seem credible) of the reliability of the data
- The data and **conclusions**, because several credible sources arguing the same point can help you gain confidence in the reliability of the information
- The arguments of **opposing, alternative, or minoritized perspectives**, to help you be sure you are joining a conversation among reasonable people who disagree rather than finding a small pocket of earnest people who believe the Earth is flat, or relying on a study that only examined the experiences of wealthy people in US cities

Cross-checking does take a little extra time, but it is vital for:

- Any popular online source, including sources provided by an online chatbot or search tool
- Any example that is provided to you by a single person in an interview, survey, or social media post
- Any source from any type of media, including books and scholarly journals, that completely agrees with you (because of your own confirmation bias)
- Any source from any type of media that presents a surprising or drastic conclusion (because of your readers' skepticism)

Explore 20.2

If you've already done some pre-search as part of your early inquiry, you are ready to make a rhetorical source-gathering plan. Rather than settling for whatever sources come up in your first try, take some time now to set the bar high by imagining the best possible research outcomes. Use any four of the categories below to start your plan. For each of the four that you choose, write a sentence identifying a dream source (primary or secondary) you'd like to look for; you might use a structure such as "A _____ [type of source] focusing on _____ that answers my [or my readers'] question about _____." (Note that this is a great plan to share with a librarian!):

- Background of the problem or issue
- Specialized information about one aspect of the issue
- Local information or personal stories
- Statistical data
- Alternate or opposing perspectives
- Expert analysis
- Examples of problems or solutions

Practice

- To practice **evaluating secondary sources**, see Rate My Source.
- To practice **exploring your own biases** or knowledge gaps, see Assumption Inspection, Believing/Doubting, Counterargument Generator, Mind the Gap, Reason Appallingly.

20.3 Mapping Your Data Collection

You will initially evaluate your primary data and secondary source material as you gather it, skimming the beginnings, endings, or abstracts of published sources to ensure that you don't collect information that is entirely irrelevant or unreliable. You might assess individual sources using advanced criteria such as accessibility, relevance, insight, substance, and credibility (A-RISC).

You also need to track a bigger picture. Since you are investigating a complex issue, you are unlikely to find a "superhero source" that can solve all of your questions in a flash. (And if you did, wouldn't that mean that there's no need for you to complete your project, since someone else has already done it?) Instead, you will create valuable knowledge to serve your readers by locating and synthesizing information from multiple sources, each of which contributes a part of the crucial information.

Thus you should also leave time to map your whole collection (so far), so that you can be sure you are using your time wisely and creating a rhetorically appropriate

foundation of research. To what degree does the combined data, information, and analysis present a complete picture? How do specific pieces contribute to your understanding of the conversation that has evolved about your topic or question? Since no one source will solve your inquiry problem, you need to track whether you've assembled an effective collection. As in assembling a sports team or a choir, you might combine some generalized sources with a few that have specific information or qualities you value.

When you can explain the quality level and key information of each source, the ways their ideas overlap and respond to each other, *and* the overall patterns in the public conversation about your issue, you have the fundamental components of an **annotated bibliography**. In a school or laboratory setting, you may produce writing in this genre as a stand-alone task, to help you and others see the trends and gaps in current discussions. Even if nobody assigns you to write a separate document, though, tracking these elements will make your research work more efficient and prepare you for composing.

Design a "map" that meets your needs

A pile or folder of sources is just information, like a mini-internet on your desk or your computer. To transform information into organized knowledge, you need to identify categories and relationships among different sources—that is, you need a map.

The map you design for your project can look like a geographical map: you could identify how different ideas seem connected by roads or separated by mountain-range barriers, draw in "towns" and "streets" with subtopics and sources you have uncovered, and leave blank some of the "wilderness" areas you are still trying to learn about. You can also map sources via a list or spreadsheet, a collection of free-write exercises, a two-column log, an annotated bibliography, or a set of color-coded note cards or stickies.

Your mapping is likely to lead you back to more researching: you will spot gaps in the map that you want or need to fill, or you will become interested in clusters of ideas that seem worth exploring more deeply. But your mapping should also lead you on toward writing. First, your mapping is an organizational strategy: while you can match your sources to subpoints you have already generated, your source map may suggest revisions of additional or alternate focal points for writing. Moreover, as you draft sentences that articulate not just what "they say," but also what you say in response, you will strengthen your understanding of your own role in the conversation and chart your own pathway on the map.

Remember that your goal as an inquirer who writes is not just to report what everyone else says, but to give your own perspective, analysis, arguments, or recommendations. The more you know about the ideas already under discussion,

the more easily you can select which ones to amplify, which to disagree with, and where to add new insight.

Track your informational knowns, unknowns, and needs

At the most basic level, you should list or map what you know and still need to know about your issue. You should update this list or map at several points in your inquiry, just as you would update a holiday shopping list as you move from store to store: what have you learned that was on your list to learn, what information or perspectives do you still need to collect, and what have you just figured out you want to know more about?

Track the quality and range of the collected sources

As you spend a little more time researching, you will be able to evaluate quality and diversity of your evidence set as a whole, considering your goals and your readers' needs. Remember that it may take more than simply citing one source to move or persuade a real reader: some readers may remain skeptical unless several sources corroborate a point, unless the data is accessible and relevant to them, or unless you know and address their resistances and counterarguments. As a whole, and in relation to each main sub-point you're considering, does your collection have a reasonable balance of quantitative and qualitative evidence? of reliable information and expert analysis? of accessible and credible sources? of perspectives from multiple stakeholders, participants, analysts, or competitors?

Track the conversational overlaps and interactions

Finally, as you move toward composing, you will benefit from mapping the key trends, voices, and positions in the conversation about your issue. Which of your sources present viewpoints of homeowners who experienced a hurricane, and which present? (Some sources may fit into multiple categories.) If the authors of three articles about strategies for teaching art history sat down for coffee, what would they agree and disagree about? Do you notice any trends or gaps in the discussion—for instance, do most of the descriptions of activities near San Antonio seem to focus on families with older kids or people with high incomes? has it been easy or difficult to find information about access for people with disabilities?

Review and organize as you go

How do researchers keep up momentum in finding individual sources while leaving time to organize and assess the whole collection? Try these strategies.

Scan-and-delve

When skimming a text isn't enough to reveal its best contributions to a conversation, but you don't have time to read the whole piece, you can scan it to identify

one or two areas of at least 2-3 paragraphs that seem most relevant to your inquiry, and then read and annotate those sections carefully.

Tag or chart your sources

Use a spreadsheet, table, or notation system to track key information about your sources. In addition to bibliographic data like author, title, URL, and maybe the keywords you used to locate it, you can tag a source the way you tag photos, using descriptive terms that help you remember its major topics and qualities (e.g. #opposingview or #statistics). If physical organizers such as notecards or sticky notes aren't your preference, consider using a free reference manager program such as Zotero or Mendeley. (Bonus: they'll format your citations for you if you need that step.)

Write to briefly summarize and critique

Try to do a little writing in between your rounds of reviewing sources, while your insights are fresh in your mind. A two-column log can help you understand what you have read, draw connections to the larger conversation, and get a head start on composing.

Always identify whose words are whose

As you move information around, use a system you can rely on to track who said what. Be consistent and meticulous about using quotation marks, fonts or colors, or another coding plan to indicate any text, statistic, or example that came from someone else's writing, so you can accurately distinguish quotations from paraphrases or analyses.

Explore 20.3

In a sentence or two, describe the information management processes you used the last time you gathered information from multiple sources, either for a school project or for a personal goal (such as buying a new computer). How did you keep track of sources you found, judge their quality, identify the best information in those sources, compare them to one another, and/or recall key points from them as you started to write your project or make your decision? Which approach worked best, and which worked least well for you? What's one new or upgraded strategy you'd like to try differently with your current project?

Practice

- To practice **mapping** your information, see 3D Mind Map, Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Map the Terrain, Source Synthesis Grid, Subtopic Generator, They Say + I Say.
- To practice **writing informally** between rounds of research, see Backtalk, Off on a Rant, or Seven Generations.

Learn

- To learn more about **synthesis** writing, see <u>Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves</u>.
- To learn more about **balancing quotation and paraphrase**, see <u>Chapter 22, Integrating and Acknowledging Sources</u>.

20.4 Writing As You Learn, Learning As You Write

Instead of waiting to write until all the research is complete, advanced writers alternate between writing and searching in a truly recursive process, so that each informs the other. To benefit from this approach, you will need to give yourself permission to be writing even when you don't feel ready to write. Writing during middle inquiry is like scheduling a scrimmage or on-stage rehearsal: diving in helps reveal what you know and—importantly—helps you predict where you need to improve before you get to the final performance. This writing also helps you become the boss of your own writing project, rather than just repeating what others have said.

Write notes that analyze and synthesize

Reading what many other people think can increase writers' knowledge, but that influx of other voices can also limit our own confidence and reduce our ability to create fresh insights, connections, and perceptions. Whether you are taking notes directly on your sources or in a separate document or notebook, you need to begin writing original sentences that move past summary of *what* others have said into analysis and synthesis.

Analysis "takes apart" someone else's ideas to judge how they work, how well they work, and whether they fit a particular context. To write analytical notes, you might compose several sentences that:

- Ask questions and/or make judgments about the value of another author's evidence or claims
- Explore whether the distant causes or eventual effects that the author reports really make sense
- Examine how well the facts or conclusions presented about one case fit into the precise issue you and your readers find yourselves most concerned about

Your stance as an analyzer is *skeptical*: you may think at first that something you read is mostly brilliant, but you want to be very careful not to buy into someone else's argument or data until you have questioned all the angles.

Synthesis "puts together" ideas from different authors, disciplines, viewpoints, or contexts in order to create a new idea. To write synthetically, you might compose several sentences that:

- Explain how ideas from two sources connect (or differ) *and why that matters* to your readers
- Show how applying a principle from one context to a new context will produce a new, valuable result
- Review several studies in order to show that there is an important area that has not been studied

A key move of synthesis is to explain your "so, what?": how do the similarities or conflicts mean something significant to your readers? Your stance as a synthesizer is *exploratory*: you want to look beyond the obvious connections to see what else might be going on, and you may want to look for unusual combinations to investigate.

Begin drafting your project

Writers often benefit from working directly on a project draft even in the middle stage when we don't know all the answers. You don't have to try to write your whole document start to finish. Instead, try one of the strategies below to help you understand the current conversation and how your project will fit into it.

Write on a single sub-point or argument angle

Review the area of your issue that you know or care the most about, and begin writing directly to your reader: what priorities, judgments, patterns, arguments, recommendations, cautions, and/or new connections can you offer?

Your writing can be as short as five or six sentences: to focus on your own insights, try to begin each composing session by writing your own statement about *what works* or *what connects*. If you have gaps in your knowledge, just add a note to yourself and keep going: "According to Kaplan [get quote later], a man-made dune would cost too much; however, Jann and Zawacki's data [check for this] suggest that costs are reasonable enough to be affordable for a community like Seaside Heights." When you write down what you don't know right next to what you do know, you leave yourself a clear map of your current and future inquiry work.

Write in a familiar or accessible genre

If you're feeling overwhelmed, you can begin writing in a more familiar voice or genre and then switch the tone, style, organization, and/or stance as you revise later. A chemist who is struggling with an unfamiliar grant proposal structure

might find it easier to begin writing using familiar headings such as *Methods*, *Data and Results*, or *Conclusions*. Similarly, a physical therapist might find that writing an action plan is easier at the start than trying to produce the scholarly diction and citation style required of a formal journal article.

If you take this route, you should still focus on communicating to your reader about *what works* and *what connects* and *why that is important*; you should refer to specific source material even if you normally wouldn't include that level of detail in a letter to a friend or a social media post.

Write in a "zero draft" approach

Over the years as a writer you may have raised your expectations of what a "first draft" looks like. When you're writing in a familiar genre or field, your "drafts" might already have introductions and conclusions, use complete paragraphs, have all the pieces in a reasonable order, and contain engaging and correct phrasing. Not only is that level of completion difficult to achieve with a complex inquiry project draft, but aiming for that level of certainty could hamper your inquiry and flexibility at this stage.

It may help to call your middle-inquiry writing by a new name. In writing a *zero draft* rather than a "first draft," for instance, you may be more tolerant of composing an introductory "paragraph" with just an opening sentence or two setting a scene ("I remember being on a hill overlooking San Antonio just as the stars came out") and/or a sentence or two stating your focal question or initial hypothesis. The next "paragraph" may be a fully developed background paragraph, or it may read "Add background paragraph here" and give a list of topics or sources to be mentioned.

Even in a zero draft, you should push yourself to expand your original thinking through synthesis and analysis, not just summary. Challenge yourself to state bluntly, even if not yet beautifully, what you see going on and what you wonder about: *What works, and how, and in what context? What connects, and why is that important?*

Whatever approach you choose to start writing, remember that your goal is to become a better researcher and prepare to understand and join the ongoing conversation rather than to complete the best draft. Your writing should lead you back to additional inquiry, critical reading, and mapping steps.

Adapt your focal question or initial hypothesis

During your early inquiry stage, you may have identified an early puzzle ("Whaa-a-a-a?") or protest ("Darnit!") that led you to an initial focal question or hypothesis. Since true puzzles or problems don't stay inside neat boundaries, and you have become smarter than you were when you started, that plan probably needs revising.

Middle inquiry is a good time to ask yourself whether another approach—a broader view, a narrower focus, or a different angle or emphasis—would be a better match for your goals, your readers' interests or questions, the available data, the genre you want to write in, and/or the time and energy you have left for completing the project. Be as realistic as possible: don't let your initial vision get in the way of a powerful, feasible final project.

Of course, changing your focus midway through can feel scary or frustrating. However, making a course correction at this point is exactly the kind of productive failure that benefits advanced writers and researchers. When writers modify an initial hypothesis, it shows we are learning from our inquiry (not just reporting data without thinking about it) and that we are keeping a close eye on our dynamic, rhetorical goals.

When and how to broaden your inquiry

Your inquiry may reveal either too few sources or too many complications for your original plan. For instance, you might find that *improving art history teaching strategies* is too narrow an issue to find reliable sources on, or that it is strongly linked to larger questions about *improving college courses* overall. There's no need to panic and choose a whole new topic, or write a lot of filler: you can expand your overall project focus without drastic change, as if you were renovating to add another bedroom to your current house rather than picking up and moving.

- **Expand in small steps**. Don't switch drastically to exploring all innovations in teaching everywhere. Think of concentric circles rippling out from a pebble dropped in a pond: stretch out just one level, to *improving introductory college courses* or *improving lecture-based courses*.
- **Expand toward known resources**. The point of alternating research with writing is to use what you're learning; you can direct your expansion toward an area that you now see is currently engaging other credible writers in the field. Perhaps you can add *curriculum revision* to your inquiry about *classroom teaching strategies*.

If you expand carefully, you can take advantage of the work you've already done, while addressing any problems with your initial plan.

When and how to narrow your inquiry

It's very common for writers get started on an inquiry only to discover that what looked small from a distance seems much larger and more intricate as we learn more about it. Perhaps experts in the field have conducted so much research and analysis that you cannot quickly represent the whole conversation, or maybe stakeholders are so strongly divided that you won't be able to persuade readers with just a couple of quick points. You may thus need to switch

from a wide-angle lens—*how towns should cope with storm-based flooding*—to a microscope-level view—*how man-made dunes can protect two East Coast towns in the US*.

- **Narrow toward what's plausible**. What seems most urgent or reasonable to scholars and stakeholders in the field? Where do you see strong clusters of information that you can rely on? If you have found statistics, financial reports, *and* personal experience stories about *building flood-resistant housing*, that could be a rich subtopic to explore in depth.

- **Narrow toward what's difficult**. Though it sounds paradoxical, often investigating a *difficult* angle creates a *plausible* inquiry approach. When you move toward a controversy or a gap in the conversation, you may increase your and your readers' interest, and have room to propose new ideas rather than just repeating the current conversation: what steps would be necessary to gain support for *banning new structures from flood-prone areas entirely*?

Writers often find cutting back difficult: once we've read and written about multiple angles, choosing only a few can feel like making a sacrifice. (Remember, though, that your readers won't know what's not there: my original draft of this "Write and Adapt" section was twice as long as this version is, and although I miss some of those pieces, I imagine that you aren't sad to have a shorter, more relevant reading!) If you are still feeling uncertain, try writing a few sentences justifying your decision. These may not end up in your final written project, but for now, they can help you maintain your new narrow focus.

When and how to refocus your inquiry

If your inquiry feels about the right size but just doesn't seem to fit as well as you would like with your goals and interests, your readers' needs or demands, or the resources available to you, then you might need a new angle, a new ingredient, or a new motivation. You should not automatically give yourself permission to change course every time your inquiry becomes difficult, but if you have been working diligently and you believe the project still "needs something," like a pot of jambalaya or egg drop soup that doesn't taste right yet, you should deliberately explore some alternatives.

- **Re-energize your connection**. If you need a fresh angle or motivation for your inquiry into new art history pedagogies, you might connect to an element of your personal or local experience: you can tap into an area you happen to know a lot about (your passion for manga) or a recent local story about field trips to the African American History and Culture Museum. To raise your energy, you could raise the stakes by looking for a more provocative line of inquiry to pursue, such as doubling the number of art-history study-abroad options.

- **Shift your frame**. Just as you'd gain new understanding by moving a telescope across a landscape, you can shift your emphasis (from curriculum design to student behaviors), shift your perspective (from the big picture of a whole university to an examination of a single course meeting), or shift your target audience slightly (from all faculty to a department chair or dean).

- **Challenge your assumptions**. Even school assignments that require a particular genre may have more flexibility than you might assume: do you always need a full historical review of a situation, or can you spend more time on current examples? could you integrate visuals or sound to highlight key points? is there room for variation in your stance, voice, or diction that would help you better engage readers?

Even a slight change to your guiding question or hypothesis can open up many opportunities for new insight, particularly at a middle stage in the inquiry process.

When you plan to use this kind of recursive pattern during the middle stage of inquiry—alternating among locating sources, writing analytically and synthetically, and considering your focus—you will be able to experiment with small changes as you go, and change back if they don't work. If you had discovered a problem at two in the morning of the day your project was due, you might only have time to make a single, all-or-nothing change and hope for the best. But when you give yourself room to work recursively, you can solve research problems as you go along, and thus lower your own stress levels, increase your engagement with the project, and produce a final document that meets your and your readers' needs much more powerfully.

Explore 20.4

Level-up from a three-part linear plan (find sources → read sources → write a draft) by writing an eight- or nine-part recursive plan that mixes searching, evaluating and mapping, and drafting. Try to be specific about each step: "Find sources about/such as ___," "Skim/review/evaluate sources looking for ___," and/or "Write a little about/to create ___." Finish with a "note to self": What's the most persuasive argument you can think of to convince yourself to try to follow this advanced, integrated plan?

Practice

- To practice **generating a "zero draft,"** see Backtalk, Believing/Doubting, Dialogue, Off on a Rant, Seven Generations, They Say + I Say, or Three Cubes.

- To practice **resizing or refocusing** your inquiry, see Emperor for a Day, Evil Genie, Expand and Narrow, Genre Switch, Gray-Area Finder, Letter to Kermit, Out on a Limb, Used to Think / Now I Think, or Write the Problem.

Learn

- To learn more about **productive failure**, see <u>Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits</u>.
- To learn more about **forming a thesis or argument**, see <u>Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft</u>.
- To learn more about **analysis**, see <u>Chapter 16, Developing Projects that Analyze</u>.

Chapter 21. Late Inquiry: Addressing Gaps and Complications

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify your needs for and strategies supporting your final searches for information
- Adapt your claims and analyses to compensate for information you cannot locate
- Evaluate the opportunities for new conclusions or recommendations regarding the issue you are studying
- Create new knowledge about your issue and share your insights with readers

In earlier years, when you finished a full draft of "a research paper" with some decent sources supporting your point, you might have stopped inquiring and just worked on editing. But advanced writers working on complex problems need to plan for one final round of inquiry.

Even though—or perhaps especially since—you may be feeling physically, mentally, or emotionally tired from the work on your writing project, you need to look for opportunities to finish your inquiry in a way that will help you reach your goals. Like a programmer running test cases of their completed code to discover where the bugs are, or a basketball coach giving their team some new strategies at halftime during a playoff game, writers can pause to make final adjustments once we've completed a full draft and can better identify whether what we have actually answered the questions we tell readers we will answer.

To conclude your inquiry rhetorically and reflectively, you will need to:

- **Gather** additional information or analysis that can help you give a complete and responsible representation of the issue
- **Evaluate** counterarguments, alternate perspectives, resistance points, and gaps in the current conversation that could be addressed
- **Write** to go beyond reporting or critiquing others' ideas and toward creating new knowledge
- **Revise** your current argument or focus to match it to the best information you've located

You might think of this late-stage inquiry as "hunting" research as opposed to the broader "gathering" research of the middle stage. It may require more or less effort depending on your exact project, but you shouldn't skip it entirely.

- **For a short or low-stakes inquiry project**—such as a blog post about best family activities in San Antonio—your final inquiry steps may involve a few fact-checks about current costs and perhaps a response to a query from a peer reviewer who suggests you consider options for families that include children with disabilities.
- **For a more complex or high-resistance inquiry project**—a proposal to a city council that they should build flood-protecting dunes in the next five years—your final steps may involve more interviews with local officials or business owners to prepare to respond to counterarguments that will arise, identifying more specific local budget plans, or reading more about the newest studies on long-term climate change and hurricane patterns.

Whether you need "one more quotation" or not doesn't depend on an abstract number assigned by a teacher, but on the goals you set for your writing and the ways you predict that your readers will react. Inquiry is always rhetorical, and late-stage researchers may benefit from keeping some key threshold concepts in mind:

🚪 Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

🚪 Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

> 🚪 **There are many ways to solve a writing problem**
>
> Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

Advanced writers often seek to create knowledge rather than just report it, and to do that, we need to identify opportunities to contribute a fresh perspective, new data, and/or original recommendations. In addition to revising your early draft, then, you will find it useful to revise some of your prior research strategies to best support your current goals and meet your final challenges.

21.1 Addressing Key Conflicts, Doubts, and Alternatives

All through your project, you have been trying to imagine the data you need to answer not just your "known unknowns" but your "unknown unknowns": the questions, complications, and alternative viewpoints you did not know even existed when you first started. Now that you know more about your own goals and the larger conversation, you need to look carefully to spot the last few objections, confusions, or blind spots that prevent you from moving readers' minds.

Writers often know, if we're honest with ourselves, where we have provided vivid details or made a strong case, and where we are hoping readers just go along and don't question us too much. As you review your draft, you may be concerned that the current data, information, or analysis is not as precise, engaging, or persuasive as you want it to be: after all, having *some* information is not the same thing as having *sufficient*, *credible*, *ethical,* and *effective* information.

Set your late-stage inquiry priorities and plans

You cannot answer all possible resistances about every small issue from every possible reader—and not all readers have time to sort through the details of every aspect of your proposal. Instead of just reading through your draft hoping something stands out to you as a glaring weakness in your evidence, you can focus your attention on some of the most common late-stage inquiry challenges.

Since you're the boss of your project, you should start with your own priorities: what topics, insights, or recommendations are you most motivated to share with readers? If you are responding to readers' requests or completing a school assignment, check in with the formal expectations: what will readers or instructors consider necessary information or arguments to include?

You can also double-check any point in your document where:

- The concept is **abstract** or complicated

- The issue you address is **unresolved** or highly debated among experts in the field
- The information, effects, or proposals you offer are likely to be **unfamiliar** to readers
- Your specific readers are likely to be most **doubtful** about or resistant to your ideas

Rather than quickly tapping out a public internet search on your phone, you should make a final inquiry plan that considers all your options. As a first step, consider rereading sources or reports you have already located while using your strongest active reading strategies: in your early reading and writing, you may have overlooked a stronger example or an alternate perspective. You should also check the citations and acknowledgments of your current sources, since the data those writers gathered is likely to already be relevant and credible for your readers. And if you need specific information, you may find that new inquiry approaches—such as consulting a specialized database or interviewing a local expert via video—are more effective than replaying your previous searches.

Finally, you may find that a librarian is exceedingly helpful now, when you know how to explain what you're hunting for and what you have already found. And from a librarian's point of view, you are a now a dream client: you are knowledgeable, you are motivated, and you are about to present them with a really intriguing puzzle that will catch their professional attention.

Inquire rhetorically

If you discover a basic knowledge gap—you just need *new information*, such as rainfall statistics for the last four local hurricanes—you can use inquiry strategies that you're already familiar with from your early and middle inquiry stages. In other cases, you may have some information but have concerns that it needs more specificity or power in order to accomplish your goals and engage your readers. You may need to approach your question from a different angle or use new resources or methods that help you respond to readers' needs.

Triangulate your support

For your most important arguments or resistant readers, you may need to demonstrate that your explanations and conclusions are supported by several data points, not just one quotation from one source (even if it is a highly credible source). Sometimes you will gain power simply from demonstrating that more than one credible analysis has reached similar conclusions ("Groenenthal and Chu's study *also supports* more team-based learning"). In other cases, you may also want use new keywords or approaches to search for evidence that connects to different members of your audience ("Students who were surveyed also say . . .")

or to combine different kinds of evidence, such as numerical data *and* personal experiences.

Improve your credibility

The sources you trust may not be the same sources that your readers will trust: check each of your key sources of information, and/or your explanation of your methods for gathering primary data, to be sure that they will live up to the expectations of your readers and the discourse community they belong to. For instance, you might need to locate and review an original study rather than a short news report that describes it, or to create a chart with exact data rather than summarizing the results. In other cases, you may need to look for more local or personally relevant examples: readers at a small state college may not consider studies done with students at Stanford or Harvard to be relevant to their art history classes.

Address complexity and feasibility

If you are recommending change, even a small one, you might have been tempted in your first draft to avoid a difficult question or resistance point, such as how much time, money, stress, collaboration among agencies, or rare materials your change will involve. As you complete your final inquiry, you need to consider how a skeptical reader might respond when you ask for action: what data, examples, or reassurances can you provide? You may need additional inquiry to show:

- How changes are possible, step by step
- Why changes are worth the effort or expense that readers will incur
- How changes have been proven to achieve results for people similar to your readers

If you cannot find a single source that answers readers' concerns, you may have to find several sources that you can synthesize later: one that describes the cost for building dunes on the Texas coast, one that demonstrates how dunes reduce flood damage, and even one that quotes a resident about experiencing a storm on a protected coastline.

Consider the *other* other side

In a complicated problem, writers usually find more than "two sides" in response to a proposition. One way to check your own assumptions and engage more readers is to inquire about third and fourth perspectives. In Seaside Heights, aside from the business owners and environmentalists, what other groups might benefit from or resist rebuilding or relocating businesses after the hurricane: taxpayers? unemployed residents? tourists? Are there any middle-ground responses between "everybody rebuilds" and "nobody can rebuild in the flood-prone area"? You don't need to represent the views of every food-truck owner or pharmacist,

but you should consider what "*other* other sides" your readers might be part of or interested in, and seek information to respond to those perspectives and positions.

Explore 21.1

Late-stage inquiry benefits from honest rhetorical reflection. To start this process, summarize your current rhetorical situation: "My main goal with this project is to _____; my readers' main point of uncertainty or concern is _____." Then write four more notes: Where exactly does your current evidence *best* support your goal, *least* support your goal, *most completely* respond to readers' concerns, and *least strongly* respond to those concerns? Be as forthright as possible, especially about your *readers' main concerns*: if you have a lot of information about the benefits of a solution, but you suspect that readers are more concerned about financial costs, you need to address that issue directly.

Practice

- To practice **identifying complications**, see Assumption Inspection, Believing/Doubting, Evil Genie, Gray-Area Finder, Out on a Limb, Reason Appallingly, or Three Cubes.
- To practice **addressing readers' questions or concerns**, see Audience/ Stakeholder Mapping, Counterargument Generator, Inner Three-Year-Old, They Say + I Say, Used To Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **reading sources actively**, see Chapter 6, Reading as a Writer.
- To learn more about **supporting a recommendation for change**, see Chapter 18, Developing Projects that Propose Change.
- To learn more about **advanced strategies for locating sources**, see Chapter 19, Early Inquiry: Exploring Research Questions.

21.2 Creating New Knowledge

When you're writing about a complex problem, you are likely to discover that there is no single, simple answer. Rather than get frustrated that nobody has fixed the issue yet, you should take this as indication that you're doing important work that readers will value. As an advanced writer, you can go beyond agreeing or disagreeing with arguments that other people have made, and provide your readers with something new, something they cannot easily find on their own or in another accessible document:

- New data gathered through interviews, observations, or experiments
- Fresh insight gained by looking at a problem from your own personal, professional, or community perspective
- Relevant recommendations synthesized by combining ideas from a unique collection of other source material

As you reach the final stages of inquiry, and you've committed to a draft of the project, you are more aware of what your audience most needs or will benefit from, and more aware of what information is available (and what is missing) in the expert conversation around you. You can thus take one more look for opportunities to extend your explanations or arguments into new territory.

Identify opportunities for contributions

As a newcomer to a field, you may struggle with finding confidence that your views will make a valid contribution to a conversation held by so many experts. Yet knowledge is usually created in small steps: If you have been working on a line of inquiry for a while, and you have tracked several possible sources for information, and you have sought assistance from a librarian, and still no clear answer emerges, you may have identified a gap in the commonly available knowledge of the field or conversation.

If there's a gap or debate, what could you contribute?

- **A local connection or personal view**: if you have traveled to San Antonio or taken an art history class, then including your own specific experience not only helps support your reasoning about other data, but contributes information that no other writer has yet brought to the conversation.
- **A localized application or personalized recommendation**: if most of the experts have focused on East Coast hurricanes or on how two-parent families manage vacation time, then you could use your experience of living in communities on the Florida coast or single-parenting to expand the conversation.
- **An updated review and judgment**: if experts in a conversation are still debating about quality, causes, or solutions, you have as much right as anyone to review the evidence, right up to the most recent ideas, and provide your own reasoned judgment about which approach is most beneficial, accurate, or feasible. (The more you address gray areas rather than simply agreeing with one stance, the more you contribute to your readers' improved understanding.)
- **Updated data or new solution**: if you have collected qualitative or quantitative data, that new data will expand readers' knowledge, even if your data mostly reinforces what is already known. Likewise, if you are ready

to synthesize several perspectives to suggest a new procedure, device, or solution—or even a slightly different step or approach that you haven't seen mentioned—you will contribute to what is known about the issue.

Create new information through synthesis or extrapolation

You don't always have to bring new data or wildly different opinions to contribute: you may instead build new knowledge by thoughtfully—and perhaps innovatively—combining information from several sources.

Perhaps your university's art history senior capstone course has sixty students (and the dean you interviewed said that the course size cannot be changed in the near future), yet all the scholarship you've read about the new student-centered humanities curriculum focuses on courses of thirty or fewer students. In this case, you may need to draw on scholarship about improving large lecture courses in biology or engineering at other schools, and adapt some of those strategies to create class activities that will be relevant for art history faculty at your school. That kind of synthesis of information from related or complementary fields is a common way of building new knowledge.

Similarly, in order to estimate a plausible budget for building a protective dune at Seaside Heights, you may need to review the costs for a smaller local rehabilitation project ten years ago and extrapolate what a larger project today might cost based on information you can find about materials and the rate of inflation. Alternately, you could report on the actual costs of recent levees in New Orleans as well as a dune modification project off the coast of South Carolina, and reasonably extrapolate from that data to suggest how the Seaside Heights costs might compare.

To contribute knowledge through synthesis or extrapolation, you will need to be creative and persistent about hunting for the baseline data that "adds up" to your new ideas. You will also need to take several sentences (or perhaps a whole paragraph or more) to show how you have built your new information, a step at a time. You may also need to use appropriate hedge language (see below) to indicate to readers that your argument is reasonable but untested.

Explore 21.2

You don't have to be a nationally recognized expert to create knowledge; you just have to have the patience to look carefully for evidence that few other people have attended to, and the confidence to share your ideas publicly. Nobody but you has lived through the last five years of your life; nobody but you has read the exact same set of sources you've just read while thinking about your issue. Experiment with being a knowledge creator: write three or four sentences exploring the idea that "Because I have seen/done/learned/read/experienced _____ and _____, I might have a new perspective to offer on this issue regarding _____."

Practice

- To practice **inquiring into a new perspective**, see <u>Cousin Topics</u>, <u>Emperor for a Day</u>, <u>Evidence Shopping List</u>, <u>Gray-Area Finder</u>, <u>Mind the Gap</u>, <u>Out on a Limb</u>, or <u>Question Ladders</u>.

- To practice **synthesizing information to create new knowledge**, see <u>3D Mind Map</u>, <u>Map the Terrain</u>, or <u>Source Synthesis Grid</u>.

Learn

- To learn more about using **synthesis or exploration** strategies to create knowledge, see <u>Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves</u>.

- To learn more about **seeking data from underrepresented communities**, see <u>Chapter 19, Early Inquiry: Exploring Research Questions</u>.

21.3 Adapting to New or Missing Evidence

Late-stage inquirers are also document revisers. Certainly as you find evidence that helps readers engage with sections of your document that you have already drafted, you will work to integrate that evidence. Remember that while there's no rule about how long a paragraph should be, if you add multiple new examples into a section of your document, you may need to reorganize the structure to help readers stay focused.

On the other hand, if you are not able to locate additional evidence you wanted to include, or if you expand or intensify your focus, you will need to modify your writing. Although you will rarely take such drastic action as deleting a major point, you may limit the scope of what you consider, redirect your efforts to another claim, and/or acknowledge the lack of information.

Adapt your analysis to address incomplete information

You might simply not be able to find some answers. You could just hope that your readers don't notice that you are "out on a limb" with no support. But the better solution is to revise your writing so that your claims match your evidence as closely as possible. You can scale back what you claim or recommend, or you acknowledge the problem by directly identifying the gap as an indication that others need to work on.

The strategies below may help you to adapt your document to match the best inquiry process you have been able to sustain.

Hedge

If you discover that in at least one part of your project, you do not have the support to fully justify a claim or argument, you can inch backwards from your claim using a hedge phrase here or there. A hedge phrase turns an absolute claim such as *A new sand dune will protect Seaside Heights from economic destruction by hurricanes* into a more limited claim:

- A new sand dune *is likely to* protect Seaside Heights . . .
- A new sand dune will protect Seaside Heights from *some of the* economic destruction . . .
- A new sand dune will protect Seaside Heights from the economic destruction *of most* hurricanes.

You can use hedge words that reduce quantity or completion (going from "all" to *most, many, a majority of, several, some, a few,* or *selected,* among others). You can hedge the intensity or duration of a claim (from "absolutely" to *maybe, partly, mainly, generally, usually, overall, frequently* or *often*, among others). And you can hedge the certainty of a claim (from "definitely" to *likely, perhaps, apparently, presumably, reasonably, somewhat*, or *possibly*, among others).

If you use too many hedge phrases, of course, you can start to sound indecisive or timid: readers do expect you to know *something* definite, otherwise why would they read your document? However, advanced writers often use hedge phrases to signal that they understand how complicated a situation is.

Stage

If you discover that you don't have sufficient evidence to persuade your readers of a major claim or recommendation, then you may decide to focus on stages or sections of your issue. What could you highlight as a first step, as a top priority, or as a most interesting piece of the puzzle? Perhaps your article about art history curriculum could *mention* strategies for lectures, new technologies, and assignments, but you could put most of your focus on collaborative learning in and out of class as a productive first stage for instructors to concentrate on.

Acknowledge or concede

Some inquiries simply do not lead to clear answers: the data conflict, the experts are divided, the local information is incomplete, or the problem turns out to have deeper roots than anyone predicted. Rather than trying to make the situation look simpler or clearer than it is, you may have to create an argument based on complications. You can state outright where you anticipate difficulty, or you may have to concede a point: "While a few large city parks are accessible via a reasonable taxi ride, families who want a true sense of the natural world of south Texas will need to rent a car and be prepared to spend a full day headed out of town." In

many fields, writers *both* make a clear (if limited) recommendation *and* acknowledge the additional research that still needs to be done on a complex issue.

Adapt your thesis to reflect new understandings

Inquiry-based writing projects are not like puzzles where you snap in the final missing piece that fits perfectly and walk away. They are more like large hanging mobiles: if you add or remove one object, you change the balance of the whole interconnected piece, which may leave it askew or wobbly. As you locate additional information, you may need to adapt your larger claims, address audience resistances, or even modify your thesis or overall conclusions.

If you discover new evidence or an opportunity to contribute knowledge more directly, you can extend or extrapolate your claims: maybe you discover that only two San Antonio sites meet both your original goals of being outdoors, river-based, and family friendly, as well as your new goal of being accessible to children with disabilities—and you add a recommendation that visitors should lobby for better access at other venues. Or perhaps you discover that you cannot support a major claim credibly enough to satisfy your readers: In a true inquiry mode, writers continue to evaluate what we can reasonably present to readers right up to the moment we send a document out.

There are no exact rules for how or where you state your overall argument; you may have a simple or complex statement, one that is highly argumentative or primarily descriptive. As you adapt your document during final inquiry, however, you might check whether you have met the following criteria especially in your introductory and concluding sections.

- Your writing should **accurately address the key points** of your document. In the process of composing, you may have moved away from your initial question or hypothesis a bit; you may also have come to more interesting conclusions or narrowed the scope of your recommendations. Your framing arguments need to reflect those adjustments.

- Your writing should **identify what you want from your readers** (your "so what?"). Since there was a puzzle or problem that prompted the inquiry, you probably want readers engaged in using the answers or solutions, not just admiring your information. If you have modified your recommendations near the middle or end of your document, be sure that you have adjusted your framing statements to match.

- Your writing should **acknowledge key complications**. In many situations, writers gain credibility by acknowledging directly that we know our report may be controversial or our plan difficult to implement. If your inquiry has helped you see how many more factors are involved with your issue than you first thought, you will help your readers by

revealing those interactions directly in the opening and concluding sections of your project.

- Your statement should **identify your new contributions**. Perhaps you have selected information that is most relevant to your readers' specific context; perhaps your data provides a new context for previous studies; perhaps you have new insights or recommendations to offer on a performance, theory, event, or problem. Diverse, impatient readers may benefit from you indicating exactly what you add to their understanding.

Explore 21.3

Choose either your introductory paragraph(s) or your concluding paragraph(s) to practice some revisions on. Change at least three sentences so that the paragraph more accurately previews or acknowledges your current position: use hedge words, focus on a single stage, acknowledge limitations or complications, or add more specific and accurate indicators of your goals or findings. Remember that you don't need to cram all of your complex thinking into a sentence or two: take the time you need to walk your readers up to and out from your key points.

Practice

- To practice **adapting your focus or argument**, see Audience Switch, Boil Down, or Stance Switch.
- To practice **revising your document** to match your knowledge and goals, see Add/Move/Change/Delete, Conclusion Transplant, Expand and Narrow, Lowest Common Denominator, Shrunken Draft, or Ten Directed Revisions.

Learn

- See Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft to learn more about
  - Revising a thesis statement
  - Adapting your organizational patterns
  - Writing rhetorically effective introductions and conclusions
- To learn more about late-stage revision strategies, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.

Chapter 22. Integrating and Acknowledging Sources

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize the key reasons that writers integrate and cite their sources
- Identify strategies to use for integrating source material with your own analysis
- Explore the complexities of acknowledging source material
- Avoid plagiarism and other significant errors in acknowledging sources

When you narrate a story about last summer or give directions to your home, you write entirely in your own voice from your own point of view, and readers will find that your consistent perspective helps give the document a sense of "flow." However, in other writing situations, you may have reasons to interrupt your own presentation of ideas to include information from outside sources: you can provide exact evidence and gain readers' respect and trust by mentioning, summarizing, paraphrasing, and/or quoting material that other credible participants or experts have provided.

However, any time you interrupt a stream of thought or vary a writing pattern, you risk your readers feeling lost—and one goal advanced writers share is trying to keep our readers engaged. In addition, advanced writers need to give credit to others for their words, ideas, and research, so learning good strategies for integrating and acknowledging any material provided by others will improve your writing. Since writing with sources requires an *especially* rhetorical effort to address multiple voices, values, and needs, you may want to keep some threshold concepts in mind:

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

22.1 Create a Conversation That Is Smooth, Credible, and Ethical

One reason to learn good strategies for integrating outside source material is to improve your cohesion or flow. There's no official rule that says every quotation needs to begin with a tag phrase such as "Nguyen argues . . ." But if Nguyen's words suddenly appear in your text—especially if Nguyen uses more technical terms, unfamiliar examples, or roundabout phrasing than you do—readers may feel as though Nguyen has barged into the document rudely, and as a result readers may find themselves disoriented or even grumpy.

Your goal is to create the sense of a smooth conversation among voices, where you are the host or emcee providing context and commentary. While a spoken conversation can evolve randomly, in a textual conversation writers need to use deliberate strategies to provide structure and flow.

In addition, US academic and professional writers belong to discourse communities in which many readers expect us to clearly identify any information that we did not dream up on our own. Readers may expect advanced writers to acknowledge or cite additional sources because:

- Readers may doubt that a writer is experienced enough to provide the most credible information

- Readers may doubt that a writer's credible information is part of a reliable pattern rather than being just one random, isolated experience that would never happen again

- Readers may believe in *intellectual property*—the concept that people own their ideas and the exact words used to express those ideas, just as much as we own phones and houses—and so worry that a writer is not giving credit to the other people who created an idea or gathered the data

Moreover, US academic culture is made up of people who make a living from their intellectual property, and so readers may think that their *ideas* are more precious than their house or their car! That's another reason that academic readers often expect writers to use a very formal citation structure to indicate the exact source of these external ideas, especially in formal genres such as a researched essay or a project report.

Although you may have instructors who focus on the intellectual property issue and their concerns about citation rules, you should keep the goals of *credibility* and *cohesion* strongly in mind. Even in a genre like an online product review or a short documentary video—genres that don't use quotation marks or APA-style citations—writers gain credibility and flow when we use strategies like the ones below to acknowledge sources and keep readers focused on our main arguments, analyses, and interpretations.

22.2 Carefully Select and Integrate Source Information

Use an appropriate blend of quotation, paraphrase, and summary

You've been using these three strategies your whole life. In talking to your friends, you summarize a boring movie, paraphrase what your mom said about borrowing her car (because you don't want to transmit every word including the fact that she still calls you "pumpkin-sweetie"), and quote an exceedingly silly sentence your friend said about downward-facing-dog pose during yoga class yesterday.

As an advanced writer, your job is to understand how each one can be useful in a writing situation, and deploy them as strategically as possible.

- **Summary** is helpful for taking a lot of information from another source and compressing it to a few sentences, to give readers a quick overview without too much interruption. A *good* summary contains the same ideas (not leaving out a key element), in the same balance (not making one issue overly dominant), with the same perspective (not making a tragedy seem humorous), and the same purpose (arguing or explaining) as the original.

- **Paraphrase** is helpful for presenting another person's single point with continuity and clarity. When you state someone else's ideas in your own words, you keep just one voice smoothly connecting with your readers— and you can often "translate" advanced or technical ideas into words that your readers can more easily understand. A *good* paraphrase includes phrases or sentences that are about the same length and specificity of the original, but that use mostly your own words and word order (though you may be able to repeat a technical term like *carbon dating* or a common phrase like "they say").

- **Quoting** is helpful for provoking or persuading on a controversial or intense topic. A *good* quotation in most academic genres will be *smoothly integrated and cited, perhaps using the SLICE approach explained later in this chapter*. Because quotations provide the most interruption, in most of your documents you should use them only when they give your writing

  - **power**: the other person said it better than you ever could,

  - **precision**: the other person's exact words are the point: the words themselves in that particular order mean something special, or

  - **professionalism**: the other person is an expert discussing a controversial or surprising point, and you need the ethos of your reader trusting their authority in their voice.

Remember that in some discourse communities and some genres, readers value direct quotations highly (such as when you analyze a short story or a movie for an essay for your English instructor) and in others, readers prefer paraphrases over direct quotations (such as when you write a literature review or summary of previous research in psychology or chemistry).

Make a plan for selecting quotations or key information

If you're going to interrupt your own ideas to include facts or words from another source, you should have a very good reason for doing so: the information should be vital, credible, and appropriate. Although it's tempting to search a source document quickly for any mention of *penguin diet* or *carbon taxes* and then paste a quotation with that phrase into your writing, advanced writers select

information more deliberately. In addition to selecting *provocative* information for a direct quotation, you should consider whether information that you quote or paraphrase matches your exact needs as a writer. At different points in your essay, you may want to increase your credibility or the precision of your ideas by using sources to:

- **Confirm** a general concept or history that experts agree on but that your readers may not be familiar with
- **Demonstrate** a concept or point vividly with data or examples that are more specific, up-to-date, relevant to your readers, or reliable than the ones you personally know about
- **Propose** claims that match or counter your own argument, to show your readers how other experts or stakeholders participate in the conversation

If you only include other experts' claims but none of their evidence, you may lose credibility; if you only include other writers' evidence, readers may not understand how experts view the situation overall.

Don't assume source information "speaks for itself"

Even a startling-sounding statistic, such as a murder rate that has dropped by 50% or 100 children home sick from school with influenza, may not mean the same thing to your audience as you think it means, or seem as credible or relevant as you believe it is. A declining murder rate may be temporary, may be measured by a particular political group with an agenda, and/or may have many causes; similarly, a hundred sick children may be a lot in a small town or relatively few in New York City or Tokyo. If you want to change readers' minds, you may need to both indicate the credibility of the source and take time to explain how the information supports your own points—even when directly stating the connection begins to feel somewhat repetitive.

For instance, you may add phrases or sentences to help you:

- **Contextualize** the source data or concepts, by providing information about the speaker, the source, the credibility of the data, or relevant background events: "This report, *which was generated in response to the September 2017 floods*, notes that . . ."
- **Translate** or define any exact terms, phrases, or references that your audience may not know: "Uddin and Syed's analysis of Okun's law—*referring to the relationship between unemployment and economic growth*—is relevant because . . . "
- **Focus** readers' attention on a key concept, data point, or word choice that they might otherwise overlook: "When the senator *uses the word 'democrat' rather than 'democratic'* in this statement, she emphasizes . . ."

- **Connect** the information to a particular subtopic or angle of your argument, particularly if you are synthesizing ideas from different sources or fields: "Zambrano's data on hotel water use in Las Vegas, Nevada, *shows what California businesses may face* soon . . ."
- **Frame** how readers should interpret the data or information, especially if there might be controversy: "Protests like these in Tunisia *do not prove that* its residents have full freedom of speech . . ."

Signal how you want readers to view others' perspectives

When you introduce outside information with a neutral tag phrase such as "Adorno writes," you give no direct indication of your judgment of Adorno's ideas. However, readers may presume that since you include Adorno's words, data, or ideas, you endorse them. Yet you will not equally endorse all the ideas or words you include in your documents; you will not even equally admire everything that Adorno writes. To help your readers understand how you view the voices and perspectives, consider using alternate verbs that signal whether you believe the information is well worth attending to or is just an idea that is being discussed somewhere.

You can also, of course, take time before or after a quotation to explain in more detail the reasons why the information or argument is convincing, intriguing, surprising, unsupported, or incorrect. The more strategies you use to make readers aware of your relationship to outside information, and its relationship to your own explanations and analyses, the more readers will perceive your writing as having "flow" and continuity.

SLICE your quotations like a surgeon

To increase your cohesion and credibility, you should avoid dropping long quotations into your document just to stand on their own, like a UFO landing in the middle of a busy street. Instead, use the following steps: Select, Limit, Integrate, Cite, and Explain your quotations.

Select the best quotation

Be sure it matches exactly what you want to say, or shows exactly what you want to argue against. A poorly chosen quotation can take your reader's attention away from your own ideas, or suggest that you don't really know what you mean. Don't just choose something you highlighted! Consider: do you want to show the author's own example, or are you looking for a statement of their general argument?

Limit your quotation size

The sentences that another writer has composed worked for their situation, but perhaps will not work as well for yours. You should aim to limit your quoted text to the minimum effective size. Short quotations are easier to integrate into your own sentence structure, so that your reader skims smoothly along from word to word. They let you remain in control of the essay, instead of turning your essay over to other writers.

In many academic or professional documents, think about having a 10-15 word limit: given the general point an outside author is making, which phrase or idea is most original, most provocative, most unexpected, most well-written? For instance, instead of quoting a 38-word sentence from an article by Jean Twenge such as, "**Eighth-graders who are heavy users of social media increase their risk of depression by 27 percent, while those who play sports, go to religious services, or even do homework more than the average teen cut their risk significantly**," you could paraphrase some information and combine it with brief quotations:

- Quote a key phrase as-is: **Twenge cites a study of eighth graders social media users that reports they "increase their risk of depression by 27 percent."** (Note that you don't need ellipses if you leave out words at the start or end of a quoted phrase.)

- Leave out less relevant material in the middle of a quotation, using ellipses to indicate an omission: **A study of social media users showed that "Eighth-graders . . . increase their risk of depression by 27 percent" (Twenge).**

- Quote a key phrase and use square brackets to add some missing information in your own words: **Twenge notes that active teens "cut their risk [of depression] significantly."** (Be sure not to change the author's intended meaning with your omissions or additions.)

Integrate your quotation

To improve the flow of your writing, you should work any quotation into your own sentence: avoid *Unidentified Flying Quotations* (UFQs). You should clearly identify whose language you're borrowing; you may also want to explain to your reader something about the outside author's expertise, to show how powerful your new evidence is.

- Use a short "tag phrase" with a comma. **Douglass writes, "_____." OR According to Douglass, "____." OR Frederick Douglass, drawing on his former life as a slave, argues, "_____."**

Tag Phrase Verbs

This author makes a powerful point	This author makes a strong point	This author makes a factual point	This author makes a weaker point
argues,	agrees that . . .	adds,	admits,
claims,	confirms that . . .	comments,	acknowledges,
declares,	emphasizes that . . .	illustrates this by saying,	asserts,
insists,	reasons,	notes,	believes,
refutes the point that . . .	suggests,	observes,	contends,
rejects the idea that . . .	grants that . . .	points out,	implies that . . .
		reports,	

- Use a longer explanatory phrase with a colon. **Kingsolver argues that eating local food increases connection to the community: "_____."**
- Work the author's words directly into your own sentence. (Hint: It should read as smoothly without the quotation marks as with them). **Paarlberg critiques "modern eco-foodies" as unrealistic, and says we need to "de-romanticize" our views of farming.**

Cite or acknowledge all sourced material

If you didn't write it, you need to acknowledge it—even if the quotation is very short. You should use the approach best suited to your genre and discipline. (See more about this later in the chapter.) This example uses the Modern Language Association (MLA) format for an in-text citation that includes the author's last name and the page number.

- She also explains that "there is no *she* or *her* in the tax laws" (Anthony 391).

In MLA style, if you give the author's name in the tag phrase, you need only give the page number. Be sure to check the punctuation for your citation format as well.

Explain how the quotation connects to your idea

You know words and ideas can be quoted out of context and can be interpreted to mean many different things. Is the glass half empty or half full? If researcher daynah boyd says, "Privacy is an ongoing process," does that seem insightful to you, or just vague? Is it encouraging or frustrating to think of privacy that way? Does she make her case or dodge the question? Which word or phrase is most significant to you, and why? Add a whole sentence or two if you need to!

Explore 22.1

Copy out a paragraph from one of your sources, and practice your source-management strategies on it. First, write a sentence that either summarizes the main argument and evidence of the whole paragraph or accurately paraphrases one key sentence. Then write a pair of sentences in which you integrate and explain the importance of a short quotation, using all of your SLICE approaches. Add a final note: What, if anything, did you do differently here than you are used to doing when you incorporate sources into your own writing?

22.3 Balance Source Information With Your Own Claims and Analyses

Sometimes, in a school assignment, it can seem as though you are only supposed to repeat what you have been told or read about. Even in school, though, instructors often hope that you will be able to represent your learning in your own terms and perhaps with a fresh angle. In most other situations, your goal of the writer is nearly always to present your own explanations or arguments as the primary feature of the text: if readers wanted to know what other sources said, they could read the other sources. To achieve this balance in each document or section, you may need to limit the number and length of quotations (and paraphrases), consider where and how you rely on sourced information, and explain how each piece of information contributes to your goal for the document.

Although your source information may come from people who are more experienced, credible, or famous than you, remember that you are still the author—and the authority—for your own document. Your role is not just to introduce other speakers and get off the stage, but to select, direct, frame, synthesize, and analyze information to create a new document that addresses your readers' specific needs and expectations. Writers should thus strive to balance others' ideas with their own contributions.

Balance sourced material at beginnings, middles, and ends of sections

Readers of many genres of academic and professional writing pay close attention to the sentences that occur at the starts and ends of documents, paragraphs, or other sections. Although you can use a short quotation sometimes at the start of a document to gain readers' attention, you may want to claim most of these visible spots for your own voice, so that you are gaining and directing your readers' attention based on your own perspective, rather than letting someone else's words, ideas, or facts speak for you. You can then increase your use of paraphrases and quotations in the middles of paragraphs or sections.

Select and limit quotations for balance

Although there is no perfect ratio, in many documents you should include more of your own input or analysis than of others' information. Thus, you should endeavor to keep outsiders' contributions as minimal as possible. First, you should shorten individual quotations to focus readers' attention on selected phrases that you couldn't say better yourself. Unless you are writing a report in which you are required to include all external data (all of an external lab's results, all of the spoken comments at a meeting, all of the technical specifications of the appliances you are evaluating), you should be cautious about adding a very long quotation or summary section to your document.

Also, for each section of your document, you should invest equal time in framing and explaining outside words and data. Your readers may expect, especially after a long quotation or summary of information from someone else, that you will have an equally substantive and extended analysis to offer, in which you address and analyze several separate items of the passage to which you just referred.

Use an alternating pattern for balance

You are likely to create a paragraph pattern in which summary, paraphrase, or quotation of another person or text alternates with your own explanation, analysis, or arguments. In a short work, or in an argumentative essay, this alternating pattern may occur within a paragraph: a phrase or sentence, introduced and/or followed by one or more sentences of your own analysis. You might also alternate between direct quotations and paraphrased or summarized information (unless you're writing for readers in a discourse community that highly values quotations or that strongly prefers paraphrased information). In a longer work or a report genre, this pattern may happen in larger chunks, with one or more summary or "literature review" paragraphs early on that explain what other sources have already contributed on the subject, and one or more analytical or concluding paragraphs/sections later that extend your own response.

Balance your use of multiple sources

When you write in a genre such as a movie review, you will refer almost entirely to one source. When you use a particular text or viewpoint as a lens or critical standpoint—such as considering a Freudian psychoanalytic view of divorce, or looking at how Madeleine Albright's approach to politics affected negotiations in central Asia—you will extensively quote and summarize from that one respected source, perhaps for several sentences or even several paragraphs in a row. In other situations, however, readers may not respond as well to that one-main-source approach.

You do not need to use all sources equally, but you should be wary of relying on a single source for any document or any long section of a document. When you summarize a single source at length, you become that source's "yes-person": your own new views, the ones readers most want to learn, can get lost. Also, you provide no option for readers to cross-check: what if your one source is wrong or incomplete or not entirely credible? When you integrate parallel views from two or more sources—"In a study with results similar to Michoski's findings, Trulio reports that . . ."—you not only increase your credibility with readers, but you create new knowledge by synthesizing information that may not have been previously connected.

Explore 22.2

Review a piece of your source-based writing from earlier in this class, or from another class you completed in the past year or two. (Alternately, you can review a peer's current draft for this project.) Write two sentences as if you were completing a peer review: One should praise a source-balancing strategy that you or your peer used, and one should give a specific suggestion ("In your third paragraph . . .") to improve the use of other sources' language and information.

22.4 Identify the Complexities of Using and Citing Sources

Source citation is rhetorical. This means that like the choices you make about your frame or focus, your evidence, your genre, and your writing style, you will make different choices about citation as you move from one writing situation to another, from one instructor to another, and from one source to another. If you have been thinking for a while that citation is more complicated than people seem to think, you're right.

Different discourse communities have different expectations about the best way for an author to integrate and acknowledge sources beyond their own ideas. And as more and more resources are accessed and even created online, the line between *correct and effective* source use and *incorrect or unethical* source use gets even more blurry. Because advanced writers know we may face multiple definitions of what to cite, when to cite, and how to cite, it's a good idea to anticipate complications and directly ask what the expectations are for each document we compose.

What gets cited? Common knowledge, boilerplate, remix, and Gen-AI

Do all writers always directly acknowledge all their sources? You know enough to guess that this is a rhetorical decision rather than a 100% rule. Here are some places where writers' choices are more complex.

Common knowledge

Writers no longer routinely cite a source for the information that "The earth orbits the sun." We expect most readers will accept this as common knowledge. But what's "common" is rhetorical. For instance, you may belong to a community that commonly knows philosophical statements by Emmanuel Kant or the ten baseball players with the most home runs this year. When you write for that community, you may do less acknowledgment—but when you write for outsiders who don't share your "common" knowledge, you will gain credibility and produce a richer conversation through more exact citation.

Professional "boilerplate" writing

Inside a corporation or institution, documents often repeat information and sentences without indicating the original author. Text from mission statements, quarterly reports, and policies is routinely repeated without quotation or citation: it may be considered collectively authored or owned. Even your instructor's syllabus may contain passages written by someone else and used without citation. If you go to work for another business, though, it may not be considered ethical to reuse your previous employer's language without consent or acknowledgment.

Casual or artistic remix

In the 2020s, your conversations and social media feeds are likely full of casual, informal remix: you toss in a quotation from a popular film as you chat with friends, you add your words to a visual meme started by someone else, or you dance at a club to a DJ's mix of two songs. Artists, too, often remix using others' images or ideas, from Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup posters to the latest parody song by your favorite influencer. Most artwork and parody remixes are legal, and most casual remixes go unnoticed—but if the originator of an idea, song, or design gets worried that a remix is misrepresenting the original or making money that the original author wants to make, they may have a legal case to ask for acknowledgment. And in an academic or professional setting, your readers may prefer that you make a clear distinction between your original contributions and what you borrow from other sources.

What about generative artificial intelligence?

You are living through a very fast evolution of a very complex set of questions about Gen-AI tools. Some of the news you read every day may be produced by Gen-AI, and you would never know: the rhetorical question to ask here is, "Would it make a difference to you if it was?" In some contexts or communities, text that was produced by a generative AI tool or chatbot may be treated like boilerplate text: when a high value is placed on efficiency and a low value placed on originality, Gen-AI text may be presented without indication or citation. In

other situations, including some classrooms, you may be encouraged to take a remix approach: combine Gen-AI text with your own, and indicate generally where you have extended or modified it yourself. And in still other situations, a high value on the author's creativity or perspective—or a high value on how the writer is *learning or practicing* their own strategies—may mean that readers insist that Gen-AI text be as distinctly separated and cited as a more traditional published source. As the writer, you are expected to find out what your readers prefer: if nobody tells you, you should ask an instructor, supervisor, or other key reader.

How do citations change? Adapting citation patterns to new genres

For your school writing, you may learn an exact academic style of citing sources. Learning a pattern like the one sponsored by the Modern Language Association (MLA), the American Psychological Association (APA), or the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) will help you meet readers' expectations. Like any pattern, a citation style gives readers speed and accuracy: if the order of a citation is always Author, Article Title, Journal Title, then readers know they can skip to the third element and it will always be the journal title.

When you select an appropriate citation pattern and use it correctly, just as when you spell names correctly and proofread for sentence errors, readers in a community may grant you credibility: you "write like an insider." These citation patterns are rhetorical: they are defined by current experts and often reveal what the community values—whether or not those values seem reasonable. For instance, the "author+date" structure of an APA-style citation shows that experts in that field prefer to know when research was published in order to evaluate its credibility: it makes sense that a 2001 study about adolescent depression may no longer be accurate or relevant. On the other hand, some scholars argue that the emphasis on last names in APA-style citation (which requires first initials rather than full names in a References list at the end of a document) limits readers' ability to see whether information comes from women researchers as well as men, and so may make it harder to recognize and redress gender gaps in whose work gets cited.

Citation is complicated. As you switch communities and genres, you will want to identify and use the patterns expected by their readers:

- **Magazine and journal writing** often names and describes a source, but doesn't provide in-text citation or a full list of sources at the end.
- **Blog and webpage writing** often provides direct hyperlinks to an original source rather than a formal list.
- **Social media posts** often "tag" another writer, organization, or thread to give credit and gain credibility.

- **Documentary films** and art exhibit brochures may not indicate their sources in the main scenes or text, but may have final visuals or pages that acknowledge source material.

Although a minimalist citation pattern may be acceptable in a genre you're using, remember that finding some visible strategy to represent a complete conversation and acknowledge others' contributions will strengthen your writing in many rhetorical situations.

What's next for citation? Acknowledging sources in the "gap generation"

Fifty years ago, nearly all credible information was published in paper formats, gathered together into individual magazines or journals, and stored in hardback books on dusty library shelves, organized by topic, by date, and by author. When readers wanted to check out a source that a writer referred to, they needed to know the exact title, the exact author(s), the exact date, and the exact page. Without all that information arranged in a clear order, readers would need to spend hours or even weeks tracking down information. So they expected lengthy citations that followed precise rules.

Fifty years from now, a significant majority of credible information will be available in digital form, and much of it will be keyword searchable. Readers with an online connection may be able to follow a direct hyperlink straight to the source, or do a quick search using just the author and topic, and they will expect that in a matter of minutes they will identify the source that a writer referred to.

You are writing in a gap generation: Much information is available online and locatable via a keyword search. However, not only is a lot of information still organized in printed materials not freely available, but the people with the power to set the expectations of a discourse community are still old enough to believe in and be reassured by the practice of providing a full citation. When you write for readers in these discourse communities, using their formal genres, you may still need to follow their expectations in order to gain credibility as an honest, thorough, and detail-oriented writer.

Maybe you will be part of the generation that changes our citation expectations!

How do writers cope? Balancing rules and rhetoric

You may have seen other writing textbooks that contain pages and pages of examples of how to construct different citations in different styles. For a book like this one that is focused on *teaching you to solve writing problems through reflective practice*, though, that approach doesn't make sense. While you should try to keep track of important rules, you also need to focus on larger

rhetorical concerns. Whether or not your future instructors or supervisors give you a list or a set of rules, you are still *responsible* for identifying and meeting your readers' citation expectations. This is a good time to practice your skills:

- **Ask directly:** since citation practices not only change among genres, disciplines, and courses, but evolve over time, advanced writers need to ask directly what their current readers expect.

- **Look it up**: lists of rules for citation styles are now commonplace in print and online; these resources are accurate, and frequently updated—whether on the general popular web or on the exact website of your school, program, workplace, or target publication.

- **Keep learning**: most writers will need to use at least two or three different citation or acknowledgment styles during their careers, since citations need to change to match new genres, disciplines, and workplaces.

- **Automate it**: writers increasingly have access to automated tools for creating citations, from quick online bibliography tools to comprehensive source management systems like Zotero or Mendeley, many of which are available at little or no cost to the writer.

22.5 Avoid Plagiarism and Common Citation Errors

Advanced writers in the US understand that copying someone else's ideas, data, sentences, or even phrases and presenting them as your own with no acknowledgment is seen as unethical. These expectations are linked to cultural beliefs in individual originality and ownership of ideas, which are strong values in US college and university communities. Readers in these discourse communities also expect that most writers will focus on adding new ideas into a conversation, even as writers also refer to the words and ideas of others.

Many school-based conversations about *plagiarism*—the use of someone else's language or ideas without full acknowledgment—focus on the morality and ethics of the writer's actions. Academic readers who identify source information that has not been cited worry that the writer aims to deceive them or to cheat on an assignment rather than doing their own work. Because cheating is the opposite of learning, in a school environment there can be significant penalties for students whose writing is determined to be plagiarized. As a writer for a school assignment that involves additional sources, you may find yourself stressed out about meeting the rules and avoiding penalties.

It's important to remember, though, that *cohesion* and *credibility* are equally important reasons to take good care with your source acknowledgments. If you don't acknowledge other writers' work systematically, you make it difficult for readers to follow the thread of a conversation so that they can draw reasonable

conclusions. And if your readers cannot distinguish one source from another, they may miss out on both your own new ideas and the strong, credible support you have included for those ideas.

In between large-scale cheating, such as copying a whole text or section of someone's writing and turning it in while pretending you wrote it, and very small proofreading mistakes, such as omitting a comma in a works-cited entry, there lies a large and murky continuum of errors. You should always directly inquire with an instructor or supervisor about what they will identify and penalize as *plagiarism* and what they will identify as a correctable *error*.

Avoid plagiarism: Find a third way

Why do writers copy large sections of someone else's writing and pretend that they themselves are the author? Research shows that writers are most tempted to plagiarize when under stress. Generally, people don't go to school or work fully intending to cheat their way through. However, when writers face high expectations in high-stakes situations (we need this good grade, this scholarship, or this contract in order to avoid failure) and we worry that our own time, comprehension, or skills will not be good enough to meet our readers' needs by a particular deadline, we may wonder if *just this one time* we can substitute someone else's writing for our own.

One reason I have written this book is to try to lower that stress: to focus on how students like you can stay aware of the rhetorical situation of a writing task, work in stages and steps, and use reflective practice solve your own writing problems so that you can see how to succeed using your own work. If you get to a place where it looks like your only choice is *either* to do your work and fail, *or* to cheat and succeed, I encourage you to take a step back, check with a friend, writing tutor, or instructor, and look for a third or fourth pathway that nearly always exists. Remember that in a learning situation, turning in an imperfect piece of writing where you did the best you could is better for you as a writer, better for you as a learner, and better for you as an ethical person, than turning in work that you cheated on.

More commonly, though, writers *intend* do our own work and to meet readers' expectations about acknowledging our sources. However, since different discourse communities and genres have different and often complex citation patterns, even experienced writers often make errors as we refer to others' information and language. In situations where precision is important, some academic or professional readers may identify these errors as plagiarism, whether or not the writer was attempting to deceive. So you should also learn about some of the more common errors writers make with sources, and develop strategies to avoid them.

Avoid patchwriting or incomplete paraphrase

Many writers were taught a word-to-word-substitution form of paraphrase as a first strategy: just change the words in the original sentence to synonyms. If a sentence says, "*Writers need to change their citation style to match their genre,*" a substitution-based paraphrase might read "*Authors must alter their acknowledgment approach to align with their document type.*"

The second sentence, however, is not yet a full and original paraphrase by the strictest of academic standards, because it uses the same sentence structure. Paraphrasing word-by-word also tends to limit writers' clarity, both because it can produce awkward language (who says "acknowledgment approach" in real life?) and because it doesn't help writers convey what we see as the crucial content. Remember, paraphrasing is most helpful at creating cohesion and clarity—but not if we write tortured sentences. A better paraphrase would re-state the whole idea: "Each new genre requires writers to cite sources differently."

Full paraphrase isn't always easy, especially with academic or professional sources, because those authors often use technical terms that can't and shouldn't be replaced, and because in order to reorder the sentence, a writer needs to be absolutely sure of its original meaning. When writers are working with difficult reading and unfamiliar concepts, paraphrasing is really difficult, and so we sometimes end up with **patchwriting**: sentences that contain patches of our own new words and patches of the original sentence. When these sentences have no quotation marks, readers may assume that all the words are our own when they're not.

Patchwriting is common: many writers patchwrite, and lots of writers have been told that it's ok to do (or not told that it's wrong). Moreover, patchwriting can be one way of learning the language of a new field. But advanced writers working in academic or professional genres should develop strategies to go beyond this approach so they can write more complete and accurate paraphrases.

The first example in the chart below comes from a field that I study, as a writing-textbook author who is interested in how students learn. While I might warm up with a patch-write, or experiment with alternating my language and quoted language, I know the ideas well enough that I can eventually create a clear (and short!) fully paraphrased version. But when I'm working in an unfamiliar field, as in the second example, I don't know what terms mean, which ones are common, which I can replace with less specialized words, and how I can best replace them. Indeed, I may not be able to even do a full paraphrase until I learn more and completely understand the reading. If you know more chemistry than I do, you can probably improve my patchwriting—do you spot any errors?—and correct my paraphrase so that I have a smoother, more accurate idea in the last cell of the chart (I'm pretty sure that "dries out from its solvent" is neither smooth nor accurate).

	Known field	Unfamiliar field
Original	"Such [concept] inventories are carefully developed to probe the extent to which students can apply relevant disciplinary concepts . . .to novel situations appropriate to the course content" (Wieman, 2019).	Structural and hydrogen bonding analysis suggests that this refolding is driven by the desolvation of the protein's hydrophobic core (Kozuch, Stillinger, & Debendetti, 2019).
Patchwriting paraphrase (not always acceptable, and not always accurate)	These idea **inventories** are thoughtfully designed to investigate **the extent to which students can** use related disciplinary points in new areas **appropriate** to class material (Wieman, 2019).	Review of **structural and hydrogen bonding** indicates that the **refolding** is a result of the **desolvation of the** molecule's water-resistant **core** (Kozuch, Stillinger, & Debendetti, 2019).
Patchwriting quoted (acceptable but sometimes awkward)	These "concept inventories" are thoughtfully developed to investigate how students "apply relevant disciplinary concepts" that match class material (Wieman, 2019).	A review of "structural and hydrogen bonding analysis" indicates that "refolding" happens when the "protein's hydrophobic core" dehydrates (Kozuch, Stillinger, & Debendetti, 2019).
Full paraphrase (always acceptable: note that writers may keep one or two common technical phrases without quoting)	Faculty can use an assignment like concept inventories to understand how well students solve new problems using conventional approaches (Wieman, 2019).	When this protein's core dries out from its solvent, it's clear from a study of the structure and the hydrogen bonding that the result is a refolding (Kozuch, Stillinger, & Debendetti, 2019).

If you find that you've been patchwriting rather than paraphrasing—and your instructor or supervisor indicates that that's not acceptable—a quick fix is to go back to using direct quotations, which are nearly always acceptable. However, that approach can disrupt your cohesion and distract readers; your document can start to look like someone else wrote most of it. A better response is to help your readers by doing your background research so that you understand the information and can present it to readers accurately in wholly new, accurate phrasings that you and they will understand.

Avoid insufficient acknowledgment

As they skim through an online magazine article, readers might agree that a single sentence at the end of the piece that identifies each of the writer's sources is sufficient. In academic and professional writing, readers often prefer much more frequent and precise indications of who said what, so that there's less likelihood of confusion. Since "sufficient" is a rhetorical term—one that depends on your

genre, discipline, instructor, supervisor, and other readers—you should always investigate whether you need to do one or more of the following:

- **Use more quotation marks:** put quotation marks around any sentences or phrases that are copied from another source. This can include even very short phrases like "compassionate conservatism" or "I have a dream," especially if the original writer or speaker created and used them for a very specific effect.

- **Give more frequent citations:** give a brief citation or acknowledgment in the text of your document right next to *every sentence* with a quotation, summary, or paraphrase that relies on an outside source—whether it comes from a printed journal, an online site, or an interview or conversation. If you believe it is absolutely clear to readers that three sentences in a row use information from the same source, you may be able to formally cite only one of the three; if not, use the same citation to "tag" each sentence.

- **Cite your multimedia**: give a brief citation (or other appropriate acknowledgment) in the text of your document next to every chart, diagram, photo, or audio clip that you found in an outside source, or that you created using data from another source.

- **Provide full source information**: give a full citation (or other appropriate acknowledgment) at the end of your document—such as those in a Works Cited or References list—that gives complete information about all the sources from which you quoted or used words, data, or ideas so that your readers can easily locate the source themselves. This usually includes key information such as author, title, source location (book, journal, and/or URL), and date of publication.

- **Cite your chatbot:** give a brief citation or acknowledgment of the Gen-AI tool or chatbot you used to produce a paragraph or section of your document; consider putting quotation marks around sentences that you copied directly from the bot's text.

In most formal academic citation styles—such as MLA or IEEE—writers need to do all of the first four acknowledgment moves listed here, consistently. In some documents or sections of your writing, that may mean that you have dozens of in-text citations as well as a final list of sources. Citation of chatbots or Gen-AI tools is a rapidly evolving situation; if you haven't received a direct explanation, citation of chatbots is likely to be seen as an ethical approach. Advanced writers thus need to use great care as we review and take notes on our sources, so we can trace every statistic and every phrase back to its original source. And as writers proofread and edit documents that include outside source information, we need to take care that we have included all the citations we need.

Use chatbots and other artificial intelligence tools wisely

Writers have always used tools to aid us: paper was an advance over clay tablets, pencils were an advance over quill pens, and word processors with spell-check were an advance over basic typewriters and print dictionaries. As a writer and a student right now, you are participating in a rapidly changing conversation about another set of tools as we examine how writers can and should use generative artificial intelligence tools (Gen-AI) such as ChatGPT, Claude, or Bing, to support our work.

You may read or hear about some very sticky questions that are relevant to a discussion of plagiarism, since there are questions regarding both the *originality* and the *credibility* of the text produced by such tools. For instance, Gen-AI tools and chatbots generate text that seems "original," but is dependent on the use of other authors' material that is published online but used without those authors' permission. In addition, Gen-AI tools often make errors in the text they produce that reduce their credibility: they may "hallucinate" facts, examples, or sources that do not exist or that do not say what the Gen-AI report indicates they say.

Most importantly, we are all exploring the ways in which writers may use Gen-AI tools in ways that enhance—but not *replace*—our originality, credibility, and human insight. You know that "There is no single definition of a 'good writer,'" and so you can understand that there is not currently a definition of "how a good writer uses text-generation tools," and there may never be a single definition. For example, you may believe that it is perfectly fine for a writer to use a tool to check for sentence-level errors, and that it is unethical for a writer to submit a document that was completely generated by a chatbot. Yet you may also know that "grammar checkers" reinforce the use of one kind of English in ways that discriminate against the ways other writers use English, while there seems to be very little ethical difference between "update this document using our company boilerplate text" and "use a chatbot to create a form letter for our clients."

It can be confusing when the rules for Gen-AI use change from one class to another, or even from one writing project to another. But it's also exciting to have opportunities to learn how to use a new tool to supplement the other skills you're developing. Part of "adapting dynamically to readers and contexts" in the upcoming years will be adapting to the opportunities and limitations concerning your use of Gen-AI tools. As a reflective writer, it's up to you to ask for guidance and support, to adjust your writing to meet your readers' expectations, and to advocate for opportunities that you believe are ethical and wise.

Avoid formatting or mechanics errors

Because information used to be so difficult to locate (see "Gap Generation" earlier in this chapter), many formal academic citation styles developed a complex

shorthand: by putting citation information in a particular order, with particular punctuation and fonts, writers could provide lots of location guidance in a compressed space. Citation styles thus have a kind of *secret code*: underlined words mean one thing, and quoted words mean another. For instance, underlined or italic titles can be used to indicate material that is bound into a book, while quoted or plain titles indicate material that is found *inside* a bound book.

The conventions that each citation style uses may make little sense to you now in the twenty-first century, when you can locate many sources just through a keyword search, and they all appear equally on your screen. Eventually, you can become part of the discourse community that changes the conventions. Until then, you might think of your ability to use a community's preferred style—and to get all the tiny details right—as a kind of "secret handshake" that demonstrates you have learned the insider code, as well as a way of showing that you can pay attention to detail.

Among the formatting or mechanics errors you may need to check for are the following:

- **The right overall style, and the right style for each kind of source**: you need to know whether your readers prefer MLA or APA (or Chicago A or Chicago B: there is always a new style to learn!), and you need to know whether your source is a *book*, a *journal*, a *whole website*, or a *single post or section*, because slightly different formats apply to each source type. (Most of these differences make sense: All books have titles and page numbers, and almost no Tweets have either, so writers need to use different citation patterns).

- **Punctuation marks around quotations**, which follow grammatical conventions.

- **Punctuation marks inside and around in-text citations**: in MLA style, in-text citations have no punctuation inside the parentheses, and normal sentence punctuation comes after the citation; in other styles, you may need commas or abbreviations inside the parentheses.

- **Punctuation and font styles used in end-of-text citations** (like Works Cited or References lists): different citation styles use commas, colons, periods, italics, and quotation marks in different patterns that can seem like an obscure secret code.

- **Order of information**: one main order-difference is that MLA style citations put the publication year at the end, and APA and other styles put the publication year earlier—because it may not make much difference whether an analysis of Willa Cather's early-twentieth-century novels was published in 1999 or 2017, but it would make a lot of difference in an article on artificial intelligence. You should also check to make sure you're not adding unnecessary information.

- **Capitalization and abbreviation patterns**: in some citation styles, all names and titles are capitalized and spelled out for formality; in others, readers prefer fewer capitalized words and more abbreviations to increase readers' speed.

- **Consistency**: whatever style you use, stay with that style. If you mention publication year sometimes and not others, not only will you provide more disruption to your document's cohesion, but readers may worry that you are providing incomplete acknowledgments. If you are citing a source that is so new or unusual that you cannot find a clear guide or model for it—for example, you want to quote from a TikTok video published under a pseudonym that you saved but that is no longer accessible online—try to use a pattern similar to one you have used with other sources.

- **Arrangement on the page**: many end-of-text citation lists are alphabetical (using whatever the first word of the citation is) but some are chrono-logical or numerical; many lists use a "hanging indent" so that every line under the first one in each entry is indented for easier reading.

Note that if you use an online bibliography-formatting tool, or if you download formatted citations from your library or other software, you are still responsible for proofreading for errors. While you are citing in the "generation gap," even if you have a great citation tool, you should still learn how to check a style's format-ting rules so you can spot any problems.

It's vital to remember that nobody is born naturally capable of formatting citations perfectly, and nobody memorizes all of their possible options. You can be a great writer and still make errors in your citation lists: errors don't mean you intended to deceive your readers, and good writing depends on many different characteristics. However, when you're writing for an audience that values intellectual property, ac-curacy, and attention to detail—which is a pretty good description of most college instructors—you will gain credibility and power by taking time to identify and pro-duce appropriate acknowledgments and citations of your source material.

Explore 22.3

Imagine a writer at a computer at two in the morning when a major proj-ect draft is due. Now imagine that that writer—perhaps a friend, perhaps an earlier version of yourself, perhaps a younger student—has just finished a page that has some misuse of sources on it, but you can help them improve. Usually these errors happen out of confusion or ignorance about what's allowed and how best to work with sources, so start by writing 3-4 sentences in which you explain a couple of strategies that the writer could use to improve their work. Finally, since sometimes errors happen out of fear or stress, tell the writer something about the goals or the actual work of advanced writers that might help them feel less alone and less pressured to submit unethical or ineffective writing.

Learn

- To learn more about how to **improve your writing dispositions** to limit your frustration and lower the temptation to plagiarize, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.
- To learn more about the ways **discourse communities can affect citation**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about **using cohesion strategies to integrate information**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **how genres can influence citation**, see Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres.

Part Five. Exercises

Chapter 23. Exercises for Analyzing Audience and Genre

We can think about "exercises" two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn't happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we're stuck, we don't have "writer's block"—instead, we just have a problem we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- **D**efining a problem,
- **E**xploring some options for addressing it,
- **A**cting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- **L**earning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

Avoid high expectations

Practice may "make perfect," but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the "right" answers. Just keep writing answers.

Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer overall.

23.1 Advertisement Analysis

Define your goal

Use this exercise to recognize common visual argument strategies that you could adapt for your writing.

Background

For more information on layout and design principles like *Z-line* and *alignment*, see Chapter 8, Designing Across Modalities.

Take action

Set the context: Locate 2 advertisements or posters. In a few sentences, describe the target audience of each advertisement or poster. What are the top two or three clues

you have that support your audience analysis? Also identify what the purpose of the advertisement is: is it only to persuade readers to make a purchase, or also to create an emotion, change a long-term behavior, or produce a line of thinking?

Begin the analysis: Using paragraphs, lists, or a two-column log, note details for each advertisement that contribute to its persuasive power. You might address some of these features:

- **Importance**: Use the Z-line, the size and color of objects, and comparison of foreground and background objects to identify what the authors want readers to pay the most and least attention to.
- **CRAP**: Identify how the authors use contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity (link) to organize and emphasize information.
- **Alternatives and absences**: Identify key words, objects, or people, and discuss how even a slight change (in diction, size, or age, for instance) would alter the argument; also identify what information, objects, or (categories of) people are not featured, and discuss how their absence affects the argument.
- **Appeals**: Identify how the ads appeal not just to logical reasoning but to common values (*ethos*) and to the desires or fears (*pathos*) of readers.
- **Space and abstraction**: Identify how the authors use empty or unspecified space, abstract design elements, or seemingly unrelated elements (kittens in a juice ad) to guide readers' responses or emphasize their message.

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude by writing a sentence or two that identify persuasive strategies you might use in your own current writing project.

Explore related exercises

Diction Flexer, Elevator Speech, Scenarios

23.2 Audience Profile

Define your goal

Use this exercise to create a clearer mental image of a primary audience, so you can write directly to them.

Background

Writers are usually much more effective when writing to known, specific readers than to broad, general audiences. To challenge yourself, you want to imagine a reader who is

- invested in the issue
- educated enough to keep up with you in a debate, and
- skeptical about anything you propose.

Take action

See them: With those characteristics in mind, write a one-paragraph profile of a single important reader (besides your instructor) for your project: give them a name, hometown, and profession. Explain why this reader has a stake in this issue: why or how will it affect them? Then write a few sentences showing their point of view about the topic: what do they already know about it, and what do they hope or fear will happen? what are the main questions or objections they would raise? If they were writing a letter, blog, or social media post about it, what would it say? what picture or graph would be included?

Really see them: Take care as you write to avoid stereotyping or badmouthing this reader. Check on your assumptions: are you imagining this reader as having demographic data similar to yours (age, race/ethnicity, sexuality, family, schooling, religion, income)? If so, is that a likely case for your audience, or just your usual habit? If this reader has a different identity or context from you, do you have experience or evidence that is helping you consider their perspective, or should you do some research to find out more about their needs or expectations? *Add one more sentence*: What's one way that this reader might surprise you with their concerns or priorities?

Tell them: When you have your profile written, start a second paragraph as a letter to your reader: Dear X. In informal daily language, try to explain: what do you think are the two or three most important things you want them to learn about this issue? why/how will they benefit from paying attention to your views?

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with a sentence about writing to this audience: how might your arguments, evidence, genre, or organization change in order to best connect with them?
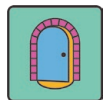
Explore related exercises

Believing/Doubting, Dialogue, Evidence Shopping List

23.3 Audience/Stakeholder Mapping

Define your goal

Use this exercise to understand the competing needs of multiple audiences.

Background

While basic documents like a memo or report may have a one-person or homogeneous one-organization audience, more public or persuasive documents may need to address multiple groups or a single group that contains members with diverse perspectives. You do not have to become a politician who promises everything to everybody, but you may benefit from mapping out audience areas of knowledge and concern to better address competing and overlapping needs.

Take action

Begin by generating a list of audience members you would like to reach, by person, type, or group names. If there aren't official names or people, designate "people who support X strongly" or "people who have studied Y for years" or "newcomers to Boston" as well as groups who aren't those people. Then create either a knowledge map or a concerns map, depending on whether you are focused on gathering information or structuring your arguments.

Create a knowledge map: To help you decide how much information or analysis to provide, map the knowledge or understanding of these audiences. Add each group's name to your page with a short note: "Knows A but not B" or "Understands at a high level" or "Needs a lot of background info." Try to place audiences with similar understandings near one another on the page. If you wish, you can add circles around each audience's name that might overlap (like a Venn diagram) to show the degree that some audiences have similar knowledge backgrounds. You can also add other map features such as roads, mountain ranges, or deep crevasses to help you visualize connections or separations between audience groups. You might want to label any overlaps or connecting roads so you can see key information that several audiences want addressed: "Confusion about legal issues."

Create a concerns map: To help you decide how best to persuade these audiences, map the concerns or resistances that each one has. (This is a separate map from the knowledge map.) Add each group's name to your page with a short note: "Believes A but doubts B" or "Highly concerned about X" or "Needs to be motivated to act." Try to place audiences with similar concerns near one another on the page. If you wish, you can add circles around each audience's name that might overlap (like a Venn diagram) to show the degree that some audiences have similar levels of resistance or worry. You can also add other map features such as roads, mountain ranges, or deep crevasses to help you visualize connections or separations between audience groups. You might want to label any overlaps or connecting roads so you can see key points that several audiences want addressed: "Concerns about costs."

Reflect to learn and connect

When you have completed your map, spend a few minutes writing about the landscape: which of these individuals or groups do you see as primary and secondary audiences, and which will you choose not to focus your attention on at this time (though of course they may encounter your document)? What common issues will you want to emphasize to help all audiences connect better with your main goals? At what points in your text could you specifically address the needs of secondary audiences—briefly, perhaps—while showing that those ideas are connected to the needs of the primary audience?

Explore related exercises

Counterargument Generator, Off on a Rant, Seven Generations

23.4 Audience Switch

Define your goal

Use this exercise to explore multiple perspectives about an issue and understand what knowledge must be gained and shared.

Take action

Freewrite option: Identify and describe a target audience member (age, gender, region, profession, level of agreement on the issue: see *audience profile* above) and write for 5-10 minutes to explain a key concept or convince the audience of an important argument. Keep this reader's specific interests and questions in mind, and try to engage their curiosity and respond to their objections. Then describe a different reader: one who has more knowledge or power (or less), one who is much younger or is less familiar with the situation, or one who is more skeptical or more in agreement, and write for 5-10 minutes to explain or argue the same point to that person. At the end, write a few sentences to yourself: what kinds of adaptations did you make? how would a change in audience like that affect your research or writing strategies for the whole project? what kind of target audience would you be most motivated, or most challenged, to use for this project?

Chart option: Identify and describe at least three different target audience members (age, gender, region, profession, level of agreement on the issue: see *audience profile* above) for your project, and use them to complete a chart like the one below.

	Reader 1 =	Reader 2 =	Reader 3 =
Background information I must provide			
Two most relevant aspects for this reader			

	Reader 1 =	Reader 2 =	Reader 3 =
A question this reader is likely to ask			
This reader's main worry or objection			
Kind of evidence or approach that will impress this reader			
Sample sentence showing level of knowledge and diction appropriate for this reader			

Reflect to learn and connect

At the end, write a few sentences to yourself: how would a change in audience like these affect your research or writing strategies for the whole project? what kind of target audience would you be most motivated, or most challenged, to use for this project?

Explore related exercises

Evidence Garden, Inner Three-Year-Old, Seven Generations

23.5 Elevator Speech

Define your goal

Use this exercise to identify the core arguments or ideas and the strongest supporting evidence of your project, and to imagine the response of a key audience member in order to focus your research and writing.

Background

In an "elevator speech" scenario, you suddenly find yourself in an elevator with a Very Important Person related to your project: a president or high-level manager of your company, a powerful politician who sits on a relevant committee, a celebrity with an interest in this cause and a lot of money to donate. Even if the building is tall and the elevator is slow, you may have only sixty to ninety seconds to introduce yourself and pitch your idea, so you need to focus on the most important points.

Take action

Draft: Very quickly (as if you've just spotted the person waiting for the elevator and don't have much time to get ready) write a draft of an elevator speech, no more than 200 words. Start with two short introductory sentences. Introduce the audience as if you already knew they were connected to your issue: "Hello,

Senator Brown, I know you're interested in _____." Introduce yourself: "My name is ____, and I'm working on a project that supports/argues _____ , and I/we could use your support." Explain exactly what this person could do to support your cause, and give the main specific reasons they would want to do so. (Hint: this paragraph and the one before it equal about 200 words: it's not much space!)

Partner option: Present your speech to a partner in a live setting, with all your best persuasive eye-contact and sincerity of tone. As your partner gives you their speech, listen in the mindset of the specified audience: what persuades you? what questions do you have? After the speech, ask skeptical questions: after all, you don't lend your support to just anybody who traps you in an elevator on a Tuesday morning. Pause after each speech for the speaker to make notes about what worked well and what needed improvement.

Link it back: If you had a partner ask you questions, consider whether you need and have answers to them. If not, consider your speech from your audience's point of view, and write down two or three likely questions that they would need you to answer.

Reflect to learn and connect

Now go back to your notes or your draft: how can you use your elevator speech language early and often to focus your reader's attention on key elements of your argument? How does having a specific person in mind as an audience help you see what evidence you want to focus on and where you need more or less explanation?

Explore related exercises

Counterargument Generator, Evidence Shopping List, Used to Think / Now I Think

23.6 Expert/Novice Exploration

Define your goal

Use this exercise to explore strategies for revising/adapting a text to meet the needs of a more or less well-informed audience.

Background

It can be easy to get into the habit of writing either for "everyone" or writing for someone whose understanding of an issue is approximately the same as your own. By experimenting with text changes that specifically address the needs of

different readers, you can gain more insight into your own goals and more consistency with your approach.

Take action

Choose a paragraph from your current document, and copy it into your writing space. Unless this paragraph includes your overall argument, add a sentence or two that state your main focus or argument for this document. Then choose whether you want to make it appeal more to newcomers or experienced readers.

Modify for novice readers: Imagine that you are revising this document so that beginners can read it easily: these readers can be significantly younger, less experienced in the specific field or issue, and/or less motivated than the audience you have generally been imagining. Give your novice reader a name to help keep them clear in your mind. Remember that these readers might get frustrated easily in trying to read your document. Use the revision levels below to make at least six changes to your paragraph to help those readers connect and understand: experiment with changes at each level of revision.

Modify for expert readers: Imagine that you are revising this document so that advanced readers will find it engaging and illuminating: these readers can be significantly older than you were thinking; they might be experts in this field or in this issue, and/or might be highly motivated by and involved with the arguments. Give your expert reader a name (and maybe a job or professional title) to help keep them clear in your mind. Remember that these readers might expect you to sound credible and engage them with precise, complex ideas. Use the revision levels below to make at least six changes to your paragraph to help those readers engage and trust your judgment: experiment with changes at each level of revision.

Explore revision levels: Make additions, deletions, or modifications in each category. In some cases, you'll be creating whole new sentences; in others, you can just change a few words. If you need to make something up—a fact, a pretend source, a conclusion—you can do so in order to get the feel of the change (but star * any new sentence that's fictional so you remember!).

- **Information and key concepts**: Identify what your audience already knows or doesn't know, and decide what kind of information you need to add, cut, or adapt. You might want to include more background, more steps, or simplified concepts for your novice readers; you may need to include more exact or detailed information, more credible sources, or more precise measurements or examples, for advanced readers.

- **Analysis and argument**: Identify how committed your readers are to completely understanding this issue/idea. Will novice readers get bored if you go too in-depth or provide too many examples? Do experts need you

to dig deep and include more conclusions about small changes, gray areas, or sub-issues that are relevant to the conversations in the field?

- **Diction and word choice**: Identify key sentences in your paragraph (including ones you may already have revised) and look for ways to modify key words or phrases to meet your readers' expectations. (If you focus on changing important phrases only, you will be less likely to adopt an insincere tone that either condescends to beginners or sounds pretentious to advanced readers.) You might want to use less or more field-specific terminology ("jargon"); you might want to include more or less "filler" language to help invite and reassure readers.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're finished, write yourself a note: what was hard or easy about the changes you made, and which kind of change(s) do you think you should try to do more of as you revise in order to make your document match your readers' needs?

Explore related exercises

Boil Down, Gray-Area Finder, Letter to Kermit

23.7 Genre Ethnography

Define your goal

Use this exercise to understand some of the key expectations and variations of the genre in which you plan to write.

Background

An ethnographer usually observes a person or group of people to determine how their behaviors are affected by (and contribute to) their culture. Similarly, you can examine some sample documents to determine how their features are determined by and vary from the expectations of their genre.

Take action

Collect three sample documents in or close to the genre in which you are going to compose. If you can't find exactly what you need—a letter to a senator or a school assembly video (though you might be amazed what you can find online)— come close: find a sample of a business letter or short argumentative policy statement, or find a video of another presentation to a similar audience.

Complete 4-5 rows of a log like the one below. Try to include at least two thoughtful sentences of explanation for each box about a document you found: how does that document respond to the criterion, and what evidence in the document

(quote a short phrase if you'd like) supports your conclusion? If two sample documents are exactly the same for one criterion, you can say so, but try to be aware of even small differences that can reveal where writers have "wiggle room" to connect with readers. Also be as specific as you can in describing your plans for your own composing: what information, strategies, or design elements will help you achieve your goals?

	Sample Doc 1=	Sample Doc 2=	Sample Doc 3=	Something I could do to make my document effective
Who uses this genre, and where?				
How do they use this genre, and why?				
What is this genre usually about or focused on?				
How is this genre usually organized or designed?				
What approach(es) or stance(es) does this genre take toward the reader?				
What diction, style, tone, visuals, or other elements characterize this genre?				

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, write yourself a few reminder notes: what patterns and expectations in this genre seem the most consistent or even rigid? where is there the most room for variation?

Explore related exercises

Audience Profile, Diction Flexer, Out on a Limb

23.8 Genre Switch

Define your goal

Use this exercise to use an alternate genre as a lens through which to gain a new perspective on your topic area or issue, and/or to experiment with how a new genre might better suit your or your readers' needs.

Take action

Short/exploratory version: Choose a highly structured, even stereotyped or exaggerated genre that you know well and that is quite unlike the academic or professional genre you are currently using. You might consider genres like haiku or limerick poetry, beverage commercials, recipes, detective TV shows, love songs, manga comics, wedding announcements, sports play-by-play calls, Tweets or status updates, lab reports, cereal boxes, or whatever the latest video meme is. Take a few minutes to write down the main expectations of that genre: tone, length, content, and emphasis. Then write the core idea(s) of your current project into (the start of) a text in that new genre. Don't worry about getting the language or design exactly right: try to mimic the feel and perspective of the genre.

Long/transformative version: Choose an alternate genre you know that might also work for the goals and readers of your current document. You might consider moving to a shorter genre (memo, cover blurb, news story, white paper), a multimodal genre (brochure, poster, campaign speech), or an online genre (webpage, animation, video). Take a few minutes to write down a description of a target audience and their main expectations for that genre: tone, length, content, and emphasis. You might sketch an overview: what parts of your current work would you keep, modify, emphasize, or delete as you moved to this new genre? Then write the core idea(s) of your current project into (the start of) a text in the new genre. Don't worry about getting the language or design exactly right, but do try to make your core ideas come alive for your audience: how will you have the greatest impact?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, write for a few minutes about what you noticed: how is the new genre more and/or less effective at meeting your and your readers' needs? If you stay with your current genre and project, how might you use approaches from the alternate genre to improve it?

Explore related exercises

Add/Move/Change/Delete, Best and Better, Counterargument Generator

23.9 Genre Triple Log

Define your goal

Use this exercise to explore how a new genre might increase and/or limit your ability to communicate with your readers.

Take action

Anchor: Begin by briefly describing your current goal or key argument for your writing project. Also describe your target audience: what do they know and need to know, how much time and interest do they have in this issue, what resistances might they have?

Explore: Now list at least 10 different genres you might possibly be able to use to communicate your ideas to this audience. Don't forget to consider professional genres (memo, report), informal genres (tweet, text), and specialized genres (recipe, horror movie script).

Compare: Using a list—or a chart like the one below—explore three of those genres a little further. What are three reasons that each genre might possibly be effective at achieving your goals? What are three reasons that the genre might not be your best choice? Stretch your brain and try to give different reasons as you move from one section of the log to another.

Genre 1	Three reasons it could work	Three reasons it might not work
Genre 2	Three reasons it could work	Three reasons it might not work
Genre 3	Three reasons it could work	Three reasons it might not work

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude by writing yourself a note: List two or three of your reasons (for or against) that you think are most important to consider for choosing the genre of this project. Of your three genres, which one might best serve your and your audience's needs right now, and why?

Explore related exercises

Genre Ethnography, Seven Generations, Three Cubes

Chapter 24. Exercises for Identifying Writers' Goals

We can think about "exercises" two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn't happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we're stuck, we don't have "writer's block"—instead, we just have a problem we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can

help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- **D**efining a problem,
- **E**xploring some options for addressing it,
- **A**cting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- **L**earning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

Avoid high expectations

Practice may "make perfect," but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the "right" answers. Just keep writing answers.

Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer overall.

24.1 Authority/Curiosity/Annoyance List
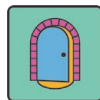
Define your goal

Use this exercise to discover what writing topics or problems you are already connected to.

Take action

Option: You can use this exercise as a completely open-ended idea-generator, or you can generate the three lists below *in relation to a specific course subject area, assigned essay topic,* or *team project focus,* if you already know your writing will be constrained to a more limited set of topics.

Authority: Begin by generating a list of at least 10-15 issues, concepts, people, places, hobbies, foods, movies, skills, or obscure art movements that you think you know more about than the average person does. You might, in fact, be an expert about these areas, or you might just have some insider knowledge or practical experience that not everyone does. Try to list a few things that you think people in your class, workplace, or community would be surprised to find out that you know or care about.

Curiosity: Then generate a list of at least 8-10 issues, concepts, people, places, problems, causes, procedures, historical events, technologies, careers, or human behaviors that you find puzzling or would like to know more about. Try asking some "why?" or "how?" questions. You should feel free to include small curiosities ("how do they get toothpaste into the tube?") if you really have spent time wondering about them, as well as larger puzzles; try to list a few unexpected curiosities that you think not many people spend time wondering about.

Annoyance: Finally, generate a list of at least 8-10 issues, concepts, people, events, policies, behaviors, conflicts, products, movies, games, or habits that bother, irritate, or deeply frustrate or anger you. Try to include some items that you think are important to only a small or local group of people as well as some that aggravate or provoke thousands more, and to include some annoyances that you think few people in your peer group have recently noticed as a problem.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you have a robust list, go back and star or circle one "obvious" and one "obscure" item in each list, to help remind you of ways you can immediately connect with or immediately be surprising to an audience simply by choosing to write about a conversation you already find resonant.

Explore related exercises

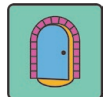Off on a Rant, Six Degrees, Subtopic Generator

24.2 Backtalk

Define your goal

Use this exercise to turn negative energy into productive energy for a writing project.

Background

If you find yourself assigned to write about a book, question, issue, or field that you don't care about—or even better, that you actively *dislike*—you can often use

that response to generate some powerful writing.

Take action

Write for 10-15 minutes as honestly and specifically as possible about what you don't like and why you don't like it: you might frame this as a letter to an instructor, to the chair of a department, to a specialist in the field or an author/creator, or to an editor of a journal who had just run a whole special issue on this topic. Identify as many *specific examples* as possible about the text or issue that seem vague, simple, irrelevant, confusing, overrated, unsupported, contradictory, or just uninteresting. You might also point out elements in your personal or professional context that make this issue/text a bad match for you right now: how does your background, education, or professional focus pull you away from the assigned text or topic?

Reflect to learn and connect

What if it's *not just you*? If one person trips on a sidewalk, it might just be clumsiness, but if a dozen people do in one morning, maybe there is a problem with the sidewalk. Write for 5 more minutes to generate some additional statements that begin, "Maybe there's a problem with . . ." If you're not sure whether these ideas are still within the assignment boundaries, check with your instructor before following through on them.

Explore related exercises

Dialogue, Gray-Area Finder, Off on a Rant

24.3 Lowest Common Denominator
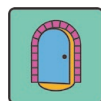
Define your goal

Use this exercise to generate opening paragraphs that connect with a target audience.

Background

In math, the lowest common denominator is the simplest way to convert unlike fractions so that you can work with them in a single equation. In writing, you can think of the lowest common denominator as the closest place where both you and your target audience have a common interest and can begin a conversation with equal enthusiasm. The LCD varies with audience: a project about new accounting procedures that's written for accountants can link to readers at the start by referring to a specific part of the new rule; a project on the same issue written for small business owners might start by mentioning the challenge of meeting

business regulations; that project written for congressional aides might begin by reminding them of similar legislation about health-care procedures.

Take action

Identify the overlaps: Note your main goal and your target audience at the top of your page. Begin by freewriting—or start a list in the first column of a three-column chart—about your readers' possible relationships to your issue: what do they already know and believe about it? what experiences have they had that relate to it? what questions are they likely to have about it? what effects does it or might it soon have on their personal or professional lives? what would startle or concern them most about it?

Connect the facts: Continue writing—or start your second column—by listing specific, memorable facts, examples, quotations, or conundrums that you know or have learned about your issue that parallel the questions and connections you were just writing about. Try to choose and even "convert" your knowledge to your readers' terms as precisely as possible: some readers will want to know precisely about "last-in-first-out" reporting standards, while others will be more interested in overall efficiency of reporting using some numerical data, and some in the concept of international government mandates about reporting with no fancy terms or data.

Link the emotions: Next, considering that you are beginning a relationship and thus must consider the emotional qualities of it (or lack thereof), add some notes—or complete your third column—about how different connections would provoke readers to feel. Which connections would spark hope, excitement, curiosity? Which connections would spark concern, fear, frustration? Which connections would set a more neutral, professional tone? Add some notes: what are the benefits of having your readers begin in one mood over another?

Write the LCD: When you have several good options, try out one or two sample LCD sentences. You can write them informally to get a feel for the connection ("Hi, Reader, since you're interested in ___, you might be interested to know that ___") or try out a more formal approach that could begin a document ("Given the current problems with ___, concern is growing about the need for better standards in ___ ").

Reflect to learn and connect

Which part of this exercise was most helpful? Write your future self a note: "Next time you get stuck working on the start of a document, remember to try ____."

Explore related exercises

Believing/Doubting, Conclusion Transplant, Six Structures

24.4 Magic Three Choices

Define your goal

Use this exercise to improve your decision-making ability in a difficult, "blocked," or high-stakes situation.

Background

Researchers who study scientists, managers, politicians, and other "deciders" have demonstrated that human beings make more rational, more successful decisions when we are *choosing from at least three fully viable options*.

When someone's choice is "this or nothing," the person tends to choose "this," because "nothing" seems scary. When someone's choice is between "this" and "that," the person is biased to choose what is most familiar, which often leads to repeating past mistakes. But when someone's choice is among three completely viable options (not "chocolate cake" vs. "mud pie" vs. "stale oatmeal"), that person's critical thinking fully engages and their decision is more likely to produce a successful outcome. You may give yourself more than three choices, but *three* is both a proven minimum for success and a number that often has a kind of magical feel to it (think of how many fantasy stories involve three wishes, three chances, or three doors), so choosing among three options can feel very satisfying.

Take action

Try it small: Design three sentences, such as three versions of a sentence stating your main argument, or three versions of the very first sentence for your document. Begin by writing out your very best version of the sentence so far. Read it again so you know what it says.

Then scroll down the page or open a new file so you don't see the first version, take a breath, and try a second version. Do something intentionally different to this one: include more information about causes or consequences, address the reader more directly or use a more formal voice, take a firmer stance or provide more options, include more details (make them up if you have to) or be more straightforward. Reread that sentence, and improve it some: make it a completely viable sentence in itself, one that fits your goals and fits the project.

Finally, scroll down or open a third file, and try a third sentence. Again, try to do something different: maybe this time, try writing a sentence you might not normally write, one that goes out on a limb or aims to shake the reader up a bit, one that's longer or shorter than your usual style, one with a quotation or a prediction (make them up if you need to), one that shows more humor, wordplay, or expert diction than you often use. Reread and revise that sentence, too, so that you believe it is viable and competent.

Make a choice*:* Now go back and look at all three sentences, and write yourself a short Decision Recommendation Paragraph. (If you have the option to get feedback from a peer, this is a good time to do so.) What do you see as the advantages or strengths of each sentence, given your goals and your audience's needs in this project? What do you see as the drawbacks or weaknesses of each sentence? Based on this analysis, what advice do you give yourself: choose one sentence? work on a fourth sentence that combines elements from some of the others, or that takes another approach entirely? why? It's fine if you still prefer the first sentence (as long as your other sentences weren't "mud pie" sentences): now you know you are making an informed choice, not just settling for the first words out of your head.

Try it larger. You can also use this process for other decisions. Creating the options to make some other choices may take a little longer, but research has demonstrated that you can save yourself time by choosing well at the start of a process rather than sinking lots of time into an unworkable approach. Remember that your options don't have to be perfect, but each one should be significantly, intentionally using a different approach (try opening a separate file for each one) and you should make each one an entirely viable option, if perhaps a risk-taking or innovative move.

- Write three project proposals, emphasizing different interests or angles
- Create three separate outlines, or parts of outlines, for your project
- Write three versions of your interview questions
- Write three versions of a tricky synthesis paragraph, using different sources and/or including more or less information
- Write three drafts of a concluding paragraph
- Do three layout sketches for a poster or slide
- Write three revision plans or refocusing paragraphs to guide your work

Make a choice: Remember to go back and look at all three options, and write yourself a short Decision Recommendation Paragraph. What do you see as the advantages or strengths of each one, given your goals and your audience's needs in this project? Based on this analysis, what advice do you give yourself: choose one sentence? work on a fourth sentence that combines elements from some of the others, or that takes another approach entirely? why?

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with a note about how you can apply this strategy elsewhere in your document or your current writing projects: what's at least one more place that you need to make similar careful decisions?

Explore related exercises

Best and Better, Ten Directed Revisions, Used to Think/Now I Think

24.5 Not-talk

Define your goal

Use this exercise to use what you know about familiar writing tasks to help plan your strategies for an unfamiliar one.

Background

Researchers have found that people often teach themselves new skills by identifying *what not to do* based on previous experience with other activities. A ballet dancer learning hip-hop has to learn *not* to straighten their legs every time they stand up; a newly promoted manager may have to remember they are *not* the team leader who is expected to speak first in their new job. Advanced writers often understand new tasks or genres by identifying how they are *not like* other tasks or genres they have written in before. Because "not-talk" is often informal and exploratory, you may feel more comfortable using a spoken rather than written approach: you can interview a friend and take notes on one another's ideas, or you can dictate a note into your phone or tablet. Alternately, you can write out your ideas in an informal list or paragraph.

Take action

Briefly describe the writing task you need to complete now, and then list at least two or three other documents or writing tasks that you have worked on recently that are *not* exactly like this current task. Your "not" tasks can be similar to your current task: for instance, you can compare a book review in an American history class with a literary analysis paper for an English literature class. Your "not" tasks can also be a little or a lot different: you could also compare a movie review, an argumentative analysis for a history class, or a biology lab report.

Explain several ways that one of your "not" tasks is in fact *not* like the task you are currently working on. You might consider obvious details such as the length, layout, diction, or topic, as well as more rhetorical issues such as the audience expectations or your own goals, knowledge problems such as the depth of inquiry you need to conduct, or process challenges having to do with organization, timing, or opportunities for feedback. Try to identify one or two aspects that are *close but not quite the same* as in your current project: where might a less attentive writer barge ahead thinking they could just do the same thing, but you've noticed something that could be an important difference between the two? Also try to think about what you usually or always do as a writer in your more familiar tasks that you might not need to do or be able to do in the current one. When you're done talking about how the first not-task is not like your current task, go to the second one (or switch with your partner).

Review your answers and list three or four of the differences that seem most important and/or most difficult. Write yourself a note about how you might go about creating a new strategy or finding a new resource to bridge one or more of these gaps.
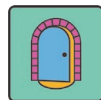
Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with some "Yes-talk": tell or write yourself some notes about what you *can* carry over from one or more previous projects to help you cope with the new project.

Explore related exercises

Genre Switch, Remix/Mashup, Stance Switch

24.6 Old Wine, New Bottles

Define your goal

Use this exercise to explore pathways for generating an argument or analysis that doesn't only repeat what you've been told (by an instructor or by other reports or analyses).

Background

Consider a relevant scenario: Your American History 101 class of 150 people has been assigned to write about whether Alexis de Tocqueville's writings prefigured modern concepts of US identity, and you want to stand out from the other students. Or you're assigned to write an argument about web-based vs. device-based applications, and you agree 100% one source you found supporting device-based, but you don't want to just repeat it. Or you want to propose cheaper parking on campus, but the student newspaper editor says he's heard it all before and won't publish a tired old argument. Or you want to start a blog about being a new mom—just like every other new mom does. How can you make yourself heard as a new voice in the crowd?

Take action

Sketch out ideas using two or three of the following strategies: make notes about the argument and the support you could use in your project.

- **Personalize it**: Brainstorm all the ways that your specific situation and identity—your age, gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, geographical location, job, family or medical history, hobbies, travel experiences, friendships, and pet peeves—connect you to or disconnect you from this issue. Not all audiences will be receptive to a first-person narrative, but

even without saying "One day last week I . . .," you can focus at least part of your attention on the exact element that most applies to your situation—and then frame it as crucial for *many* readers to attend to.

- **Get an angle**: Consider the issue as linked to various locations, to different communities or subgroups of people affected by it, as it might be or have been viewed at different times in history; look far back to see all the causes that led to it or far out to see all the effects it might generate; consider the biggest and the smallest pictures (an eon, a day, a person, a cell);

- **Synthesize it**: Synthesis is "bringing together," and the more dissimilar the objects, fields, or ideas you bring together, the newer the resulting concept. What field do you already know about that other readers won't expect to see combined with de Tocqueville (stagecraft), smartphone apps (tutoring rural school kids), or motherhood (your training as a systems engineer), that you could use to synthesize an idea that is "bigger than the sum of its parts"? What cousin topic fields could you investigate to find an outlier source to help synthesize cross-disciplinary or alternate-perspective ideas? Weaving ideas together in a new way, even if none of them is your brand new idea, is still a new contribution on your part.

- **Inch out on a limb**: If you can take your whole point out on a limb, great. If not, you can use proposals, suggestions, or hypotheticals to inch your way out. Even data-based researchers often use a final paragraph to suggest what additional questions remain unanswered and should be investigated in future studies; other writers can use hypothetical examples ("Suppose for the sake of argument that we built a fourth parking garage") or describe proposals that are acknowledged to be beyond current resources ("What if all US parents had a year's paid leave?") that create room to engage readers in new, carefully structured thinking.

- **Add a bright feather**: Sometimes an old hat perks up when you add one bright new feather. Can you include a vivid framing story that updates the situation for current readers? Add one new idea to resonate with your situation, place, or community? Provide a little new data from an interview with the buildings and grounds supervisor or survey of evening-class students about their current parking habits?

- **Re-mediate it**: Not all rhetorical situations are open to multimedia or alternate genre documents—but you might find it worthwhile to ask about your options for working with pictures or graphs, short audio or video recordings, audience-interaction elements, or other design features, for sections or the entirety of your project. Remember that content should change as form and media options change: the new media and design may improve the wine as well as the bottle.

Be careful that your newly bottled argument still meets your goals and, if

necessary, is appropriate for your assignment, in terms of demonstrating ways of thinking and addressing the key issues.

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with some notes about what additional inquiry, analysis, and design work you might need in order for your project to live up to your new ideas.

Explore related exercises

Cousin Topics, Inner Three-Year-Old, Out on a Limb, Seven Generations

24.7 Out on a Limb

Define your goal

Use this exercise to increase the risk-factor, focus, "originality," intrigue, and/or power of your current claim without overreaching.

Background

In the initial stages of working on an argument or a problem, writers often start with a general concept of the issue, the kind that anyone might have. You might envision someone climbing a tree but staying very close to the trunk: he would be hard to see unless he stepped further "out on a limb." In order to catch and keep readers' attention, a writer needs to step away from what everyone already believes—but they should not go so far out on a limb that there is no supporting evidence and the branch breaks under their feet. After you have been thinking about your issue for a while, you can try some approaches for "going out on a limb" a little further.

Take action

Write out or copy your current working thesis sentence(s) on a new page. For each of the steps below, create a new version based on one of the earlier versions, so that you can compare the various versions. When you get to a version that you think has gone beyond what you can reasonably support with credible evidence and reasoning, stop and label it "too far out on a limb."

Intensify: Like adding a little salt and then a little more, add intensifying words or phrases to make the condition seem more dire, the solution more effective, the insight more revealing, or the analysis more encompassing.

- The nursing school application exam fee is too high.
- The nursing school application exam fee is unfairly high.
- The high nursing school application exam fee discriminates against low-income students.

- The high nursing school application exam fee was designed by the federal government to keep poor urban students out of the profession. (*Too far out on a limb!*)

Specify: Like increasing the power of a microscope lens, add narrowing words or phrases to limit the scope of the problem to a location, a group, a time period, or a set of circumstances, or to propose a single step, approach, or theory in response, in order to investigate an angle not everyone has paid attention to yet.

- New democratic governments in northern Africa face challenges.
- New democratic governments in northern Africa face difficulty keeping all parties involved in the process.
- New democratic governments in northern Africa face difficulty keeping all parties involved in the process, and should focus on developing a system of proportional representation.
- Egypt faces difficulty keeping all parties involved in its new governing process, and should immediately adopt the German system of proportional representation which will solve that problem. (*Too far out on a limb!*)

Qualify: In some situations, you may have an audience that will tolerate a suggestion which you cannot entirely prove, as long as you don't get too wild or too wishy-washy. Qualifying words or constructions will let you indicate that you want your audience to join you out on a limb and to think beyond the demonstrable facts: *may, might, could, possibly, perhaps, somewhat, some, a few, often, many, commonly.*

- The high nursing school application exam fee discriminates against low-income students, *possibly* lowering the number of Latinx Americans entering the profession. (Reasonably qualified)
- The *somewhat* high nursing school application exam fee *perhaps* discriminates against *some* low-income students, *possibly* lowering the number of Latinx Americans who *might* enter the profession. (Too wishy-washy!)
- New democratic governments in northern Africa face difficulty keeping all parties involved in the process, and should focus on developing a system of proportional representation, or they *may* risk returning to dictatorships or anarchy. (Reasonably qualified)
- New democratic governments in northern Africa face difficulty keeping all parties involved in the process, and should focus on developing a system of proportional representation, *possibly even* imposing martial law to ensure all parties are included on voting day. (*Too wildly counterproductive!*)

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude by writing yourself a few notes. What additional inquiry or analysis

will you need to do to provide convincing support for your new claim? Where else in your document will you need to make adjustments to accommodate your new stance and your new relationship with readers?

Explore related exercises

Date My Topic, Evidence Shopping List, Learn-Write Timeline

24.8 Six Degrees
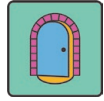
Define your goal

Choose a topic to write about that connects to interests you already have or messages you already want to convey—or identify connections you can make to the topic/issues of a writing project that is out of your control—so that you have more confidence and motivation as a writer.

Background

"Six degrees of separation" is the name of a popular social network theory, a play, a movie, and (as "Six degrees of Kevin Bacon") a party game from the 1990s. The popular theory is that any two people on the planet are connected, through their friends and friends-of-friends, by no more than six steps. In accordance with this theory, then, you should be able to connect to a wide variety of issues you can write about by taking six or fewer steps outward from topics, events, or ideas that you already care about.

Take action

Step One: Identify several potential interests that you could already "go off on a rant" or "talk all day" about, or that you have successfully written about before. Try to generate at least 10-15 issues along several lines of thinking.

- **General interests**: Create a list of topics about which you are significantly more knowledgeable, curious, or irritated than the average person around you. What do you talk or post online about already?

- **Area interests**: If you know your writing project will connect to your sociology class, your job as a law office clerk, or your internship at a local vet clinic, and you already have interests or experiences in that field, generate a list of topics or questions related to that area that you have been paying attention to recently or that you have been trying to learn more about.

- **Past successes**: Think back to writing tasks you have completed recently that have been relatively successful for you, and write a descriptive list of those projects. Instead of just listing the topics, try also to identify the core approach(es) and stances that make you successful: when you succeed, are

you explaining, arguing, proposing, analyzing evidence or data, or creating new stories?

- **Values and goals**: Create a list of central values you hold about being a good citizen and responsible human (such as "being grateful" or "being dependable"), and/or list some of your immediate or long-term goals related to your school or professional writing situation (to learn about/how to ___, to manage your time, or to get promoted to a leadership role).

Step Two: Write at least three Interest Topics (such as "Star Wars") at the top of your page. Write your Target Topic (such as "essay on habitats of waterfowl") at the bottom of your page. Using intermediate topics as stepping stones, create a series of links that helps you see at least one possible relationship between them: What do you particularly like about your Interest Topic? What's an area of that topic that might lean you toward your Target? ("Rebels win against odds → Requires astounding luck and talent → Is luck a factor for habitat preservation? → 'lucky ducks' vs. ducks protected by laws")

Suggestions for Step Two in a Controlled Situation: If your writing topic has been assigned to you, more or less—everyone in your class must write about the gender roles in *Frankenstein* or the comparative value of two approaches to ensuring food safety, or your manager wants an assessment of a new data processing program—then your goal is to draw connections specifically to that Target Topic.

- **Set up**: Write your Target Topic at the bottom of your page. From the list(s) you wrote in Step One, choose three Interest Topics to write at the top of your page: you might choose one that very strongly motivates you, one that already seems to be leaning toward your Target Topic in some way, and one that looks like a complete outlier with no hope of making a connection, just to challenge your brain.

- **Explore from your interests**: You can work downward to start. You might begin by reaching out very generally from your Interest Topic (ice hockey, for instance), by noting that for you, the most fascinating characteristic of hockey is its teamwork, its physical contact, or its penalty-box rules. Or you could start right away with more specific direction: list one angle of your Interest Topic that might lean toward gender roles in *Frankenstein* (hockey is very combative), toward food safety regulations (there are some rules to prevent injuries in hockey, but not too many), or toward data processing programs (hockey is a very high-speed game).

- **Explore from your assignment**: You can also work upward, generally or with direction toward your Interests: many characters in *Frankenstein* (as in many ice-hockey leagues) are men looking for fame or prominence; one of the food-safety rules you're looking at (like illegal "checking" in hockey) is hard to detect and enforce; and good data processing programs

(like hockey players) may need to perform equally well at a variety of tasks. Complete as many top-to-bottom pathways as you can.

> **NOTE:** In an extreme case like this one, you might not mention "hockey" anywhere in your final writing project, but if you write about an unfamiliar issue while thinking about its possible parallels to something you are passionate about and familiar with, your writing will likely be easier and stronger.

Suggestions for Step Two in an Exploratory Situation: If your writing topic has some or a lot of flexibility—you can "explain the core features of any discovery in astronomy in the past 50 years" or "recommend one significant change in middle school teacher support and/or evaluation policies" or even "write an argument about an issue that is important to you"—then your goal is to explore several possible connections to determine your best options.

- **Set up**: Write your Exploratory or General Topic at the bottom of your page. From the list(s) you wrote in Step One, choose three Interest Topics to write at the top of your page: you might choose one that very strongly motivates you, one that already seems to be leaning toward your goal in some way, and one that looks like a complete outlier with no hope of making a connection but that could give you good exploratory room and options you hadn't considered before.

- **Explore from your interests**: You can begin by working downward or outward from your Interest Topics. You can reach out generally from a starting point: your interest in gospel music, for instance, could suggest you also have interests in investigating or reporting on religion, culture, American music traditions, history, performance, collaboration, and perhaps elements of your childhood or family experiences, as well as particular artists or musical styles. You might work outward further to consider whether there's a period of history you connect to (the Civil Rights era? earlier history of colonial America or more recent history of cross-cultural immigration?) or kinds of collaborations you admire (two-person partnerships or larger groups/teams?).

- **Explore from your goals**: You can also start to work up from the bottom, or to be more directive in your top-down connections: do you want to look for astronomy discoveries that were made by partners or teams? do you want to examine school policies that encourage teachers to experiment with performative teaching styles that increase classroom engagement, or that support diversity among school faculty? If you have a professional interest in obtaining a leadership position someday, perhaps you want to look for connections to changes being recommended by the local mayor, or to the roles that school principals take in supporting teachers.

When you have many options, create as many possible pathways as you can think of, and "try them on" in your head: which ones make you feel more connected to and engaged by the possibilities for writing?

Step Three: When you have created one or more pathways between your interests and your target Topic, choose a possible pathway and write yourself a short paragraph explaining how "Thinking about X can help me write about Y," where X is your interest and Y is your assignment. ("Thinking about ice hockey could help me write about food safety because I could focus on the balance between 'playing the game smoothly' and 'keeping everyone safe.' Also, I could really look at whether all those regulations are necessary, since in hockey we all know that having some risk allows us to create a more innovative, exciting game.")

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude by writing one or two sentences to your future self: What interests, questions, or commitments do you have that seem like they might frequently link to a wide range of topics for future writing?

Explore related exercises

Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Date My Topic, Six Structures

24.9 Stance Switch

Define your goal

Use this exercise to try out an authorial stance that may give you more insight into your issue, freedom to describe difficult or sensitive aspects of it, or credibility with your readers without losing a connection to your core identity or goals.

Background

You may have noticed that you stand a little taller when you put on a business suit, that you feel more like dancing when you put on a T-shirt, or that other people treat you with respect when you stride confidently into a room even if you've never been there before. You're the same person whatever stance or clothing you adopt, but your external attributes can influence both your behavior and others' response to your behavior. Similarly, when you adopt a stance and a voice as a writer, those decisions can influence how you think, what you write, and how others respond, so experimenting with your stance can help you tap into ideas you didn't know you had and gain readers' respect without sacrificing your integrity as a writer. Your *stance* as a writer involves both your attitude (confident, relaxed, knowledgeable, exploratory, humorous, serious) and your relationship

with your readers (professional, personal, demanding, requesting, authoritative, supportive, engaged, distant, motivating, calming).

Take action

Note three different stances you could take in your current writing project. You can describe them using just words like those listed above, or you can describe mini-scenarios (teacher writing to fourth-grader, lab professor writing to intern, friend writing to friend, activist writing a speech to a crowd). If you'd like stance can be the one you're currently using for your project.

Choose a key moment—either an important point or argument, a paragraph you're currently working on, or a part of the issue you're stuck on—and freewrite for 5-6 minutes from within that stance. Try to really "get into the part": feel what it's like to have that goal and that relationship; use the language and the authority vested in you; reach out (or hold back) just the way such a writer would. You can even be a bit overdramatic if you want: write like the extra-jargony journal writers you've been reading, or like a hyperactive ten-year-old excited about something for the first time, sketching stick figures in the margins. Write quickly without worrying about getting all the details or facts exactly right: your goal is to get the feel of writing within this stance.

Repeat for the two other stances, writing about the exact same angle of your project, just from an alternate position. When you're done, go back and underline the most powerful or interesting sentence from each stance's writing.

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with a note to yourself: what do these powerful parts have in common that helps you see what lies at the heart of your ideas on this issue? Also note if writing in one of the stances helped you make a connection or break out of a sticky spot: how else might you tap into this strategy or energy for your project, *even if* you still need to present (most of) the final project from a less comfortable stance?
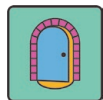
Explore related exercises

Cousin Topics, Diction Flexer, Elevator Speech, Out on a Limb

24.10 Ten Ways to Choose a Topic

Define your goal

Use this exercise to choose a topic for *assigned* writing that connects to issues that interest, motivate, or concern you *personally*.

Take action

Pick an approach, and write your first list. In each of these cases, generating a longer list (closer to 10) will help you dig ideas out of your brain that weren't obvious but that might be intriguing, motivating, or surprisingly relevant.

1. **What I know**: List 5-10 concepts, examples, or experiences that you already know well that are within or related to the general issue you're focused on

2. **Where I stand**: List 5-10 personal beliefs or values, aspects of your identity, family perspectives, or community factors that are within or related to the general issue you're focused on

3. **What stands out**: List 5-10 aspects that are within or related to the general issue you're focused on that you can see vividly in your mind's eye, that everyone is talking about, that have the largest costs or benefits, or that are the most unusual or surprising

4. **What puzzles me**: List 5-10 questions, inconsistencies, contradictions, or recent changes that are related to the general issue you're focused on

5. **What's combinable**: List 5-10 entirely different subjects or events that you know something about that are **different from** but could be **compared, contrasted with, or connected to** the general issue you're focused on in order to reveal a new side of it

6. **What's missing**: List 5-10 factors, groups, causes or effects, costs or benefits, locations or experiences, that are often missing or overlooked when people consider the general issue you're focused on

7. **What's the _____iest**: List 5-10 "extreme" factors in the general issue you're focused on: for instance, you might list some of the best/worst, most/least expensive or effective, earliest/latest, nearest/farthest, easiest/hardest, largest/smallest, fastest/slowest, or clearest/muddiest elements

8. **What's before/next?** Work backward in time for 5-10 steps: what happened just prior to the current state of this issue, and what happened before that, and what happened before that—OR work forward in time for 5-10 steps: if things keep going the way they're going, what might be the next event or result, and the one after that, and the one after that?

9. **What I would command**: List 5-10 changes you would make—if you had enough power and resources—to people, communities, laws, actions, objects, or attitudes related to the general issue you're focused on

10. **Who I reach**: List 5-10 views, questions, or arguments that someone who approached this general issue from an angle different from yours (because of the person's age, identity, affiliations, goals, experiences, or values) might raise

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with a note to yourself: what kinds of issues, questions, or angles from the lists you wrote here give you the most motivation or confidence for continuing with your writing project?

Explore related exercises

<u>Believing/Doubting</u>, <u>Expand and Narrow</u>, <u>Used to Think / Now I Think</u>

24.11 They Say + I Say (Two-Column and Three-Column Logs)

Define your goal

Use this exercise to move from summary to response as you read another text, and to generate analytical and synthetic knowledge about an issue.

Background

When we read first and then write, it can be tempting simply to repeat what we've read; on the other hand, it can be exciting to simply spout off our own opinions. Summarizing someone else's ideas is easier than generating our own, and generating our own random ideas is easier than combining our ideas—through analysis and synthesis—with what other writers say. Sometimes writers benefit from deliberately separating these modes of writing to make sure we are getting the best combination of ideas.

Take action

Two-column log: Draw a vertical line on paper or create a two-column table in a document.

- In the left column (They Claim), provide a direct quotation from the author's text. It can be something you agree with, disagree with, were surprised by, or have questions about.

- In the right column (I Respond), write a sentence or two explaining your response: what connections, questions, concerns, memories, or emotions does the quotation evoke **for you,** and why? What memories or experiences that **only you** have had in exactly the way you had them does this quotation/idea connect to? and So, What? Try to write sentences that only you could write, about exact documents you have written or wanted to write, or classes you took, or comments you received about writing. Be as vivid as you can.

- As you respond, try not to just agree: Provide a reason, story, or example showing why you agree. **Do not** just translate the sentence ("I think this

means that . . ." or "Here the author is saying . . ."): talk back to it, talk out from it, dig around in your head for a new connection or question.

Two-column log, advanced moves: In your second column, you can try out some advanced thinking. Instead of just giving your first ideas, see if you can disagree with explanation, agree and extend the argument further, agree and add emphasis to a specific element, partially agree but note what's missing or complicated, or both connect ideas and distinguish them from one another.

Two-column log, four perspectives: In your second column, try out some of each of these four argumentative moves: provide a new *definition* or challenge an accepted definition of a concept; describe a *cause or effect* that the writer has not addressed, explain what's *good/beneficial* and what's *bad/destructive* about the author's idea; or suggest a *solution or a new policy* that could address the author's idea.

Three-column log: Label your first two columns as above: They Say and I Say. Then choose an option for your third column. You can write about "So, what?" to explore the effects or importance of the idea; you can try to "Extend or Challenge" the idea; you can start a note about how these ideas might work in "My Project."

Three-column log, synthesis: Create *two* They Say columns, to record parallel or contrasting ideas from two separate sources, then create an "I connect" column or a "Third point of view" column to help you think about how to build up new knowledge that neither of the original authors had considered.

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude by summing up the two or three most interesting, motivating, or unexpected things from your "I Say" column that could bring energy and depth to your current project.

Explore related exercises

Believing/Doubting, Subtopic Generator, Rate My Source

Chapter 25. Exercises for Starting and Deepening Inquiry

We can think about "exercises" two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn't happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we're stuck, we don't have "writer's block"—instead, we just have a problem we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- **D**efining a problem,
- **E**xploring some options for addressing it,

- **A**cting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- **L**earning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

Avoid high expectations

Practice may "make perfect," but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the "right" answers. Just keep writing answers.

Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer overall.

25.1 Cousin Topics

Define your goal

Use this exercise to explore avenues of inquiry that might lead to relevant source material, parallel case evidence, or unexpected insights.

Background

A cousin is a relative who is often at a similar level in a genealogical family tree, but on a separate branch; a cousin *topic* is an area of inquiry that has parallels to your own but draws on a separate "branch" of scholarship and/or experience. If you are inquiring about cameras in your town that identify speeding cars, then cousin topics could branch off from any of those key phrases to include other tools for identifying speeding cars; other towns with similar cameras; cameras that identify other vehicle infractions such as stoplight violations; and cameras that identify wrongdoing by people in boats or on foot.

Vary the parts: Write a sentence or two that describe your area of inquiry, and then circle or box the key words or phrases in it. For each key phrase, write a sentence describing a new area of inquiry, as in the example above, that changes the key phrase. If you can think of more than one way to change the key phrase, write more than one sentence per phrase.

Vary the core elements: Consider any of the "reporters' questions" that your key words haven't already pushed you to reconsider: *Who else*—people who are older/younger, in a different field or profession, with more or less power or money—might be experiencing a similar problem? *Where else*—in a different community, state, or nation—are people experiencing similar challenges? *When else*—three years ago? ten? fifty?—did people encounter a problem that shares common elements with yours? *How else*—with different tools, laws, systems, agreements—have people approached a challenge like this one? Write yourself some more sentences describing other possible cousin topics.

Consider the complications: A stoplight camera is not exactly the same thing as a speed-limit camera, and people who support one may not support the other. Write a few sentences explaining specifically how two cousin topics are alike, and how they are different from one another, so that you can think about how helpful the ideas from the cousin topic will be in considering your main issue.

Reflect to learn and connect

Write yourself a note: which cousins seem most useful to contact or investigate as you continue working on your project? What follow-up questions could you ask about those related issues? Where could you go to locate additional information?

Explore related exercises

Date My Topic, Evidence Shopping List, Inner Three-Year-Old

25.2 Date My Topic
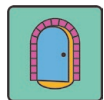
Define your goal

Use this exercise to uncover what is already known, arguable, and/or current about an issue you are interested in writing about before you commit to a lengthy project.

Background

Most of us would never buy a pair of shoes, meet a stranger for coffee, or even choose a TV comedy show to watch for an hour without doing a little research

first (are the shoes durable? does the stranger have a social media profile that shows whether or not he likes dogs?). Yet students in school often "choose a topic" for a project they will spend hours, days, weeks, or even months on without looking around to find out whether it's really as interesting and manageable as they hope—or whether there are better options. Doing some early-stage research can help us confidently select, or smartly avoid, an area of inquiry to follow.

Take action

Set your standards: Just like you consider your criteria for clothes to buy or people to date, you should identify what you're looking for in a good topic for a project. Does it need to be something you're interested in, or related to a course theme? Should it be highly controversial, currently under discussion, significant to your region, or accessible to novice readers? Will you benefit if you can easily locate credible research on the issue, if the topic is very broad or very narrow, or if there's a problem that nobody has solved yet? Begin by writing the 3-5 most important characteristics of your "dream topic."

Name your goal: An online shoe store will allow you to select specific aspects of your shoes by name: you know that if you choose a particular brand name, a type of shoe (loafer vs. athletic), a price-range, or a color, you will home in on different shoes. When you look for information about your topic, the focus and exact words of your search will determine what you find out. List 4-6 questions that you most want to find out right now. Then list 8-10 words you might use to search for information: be sure to include synonyms (car, automobile, vehicle) for some key terms, because not all search engines will catch related issues.

Find out the mainstream view: Although your instructor may caution you that sites like Wikipedia, Yahoo News, or Joe's Cool Website are not credible enough for the purposes of your final project, they can help you find out whether you want to start a long-term relationship with this issue. Choose a question or a search phrase, and search at least two of the following ways: Search on one or more common platforms (Google, Yahoo, Bing, or even TikTok); search by using a "News" tab or adding "News about" to your search string; search by adding a descriptor like "Controversies about ___," "Reviews of ___," or "History of ____" to your open search; search using a generative-artificial-intelligence tool like ChatGPT. Remember this is just a date: skim articles quickly rather than reading them. Write several sentences: what are people interested in, arguing about, or discovering related to your topic? Also, what related issues—and what specific terminology—do they identify that you might find useful?

Find out the scholarly view: If you're writing for a class project, you should probably know a little about what people who hang around colleges and

universities are saying about your topic. Maybe they've decided it's not very interesting anymore—or conversely, maybe they've decided it's even more exciting than you think. Choose at least one of the following strategies to find out:

- Search in Google Scholar or another research-oriented engine in the open internet
- Search in a general database from your library, like ProQuest or Academic Search Complete or your library's main search engine
- Search in a relevant subject-specific database from your library, such as Psychological Abstracts
- Use a chatbot or other Gen-AI tool and specify that you want sources that come from published research taken from highly credible journals

Remember this is just a date: Skim the abstracts or descriptions quickly rather than reading them. Write several sentences: what are people interested in, arguing about, or discovering related to your topic? Also, what related issues—and what specific *terminology*—do they identify that you might find useful?

Reflect to learn and connect

Look back at your key criteria for a "dream topic." Suggest two ways that you might narrow, focus, or change your original topic idea to build the best possible relationship with this project going forward.

Explore related exercises

Keyword Bingo, Magic Three Choices, Rate My Source, Seven Generations

25.3 Evidence Garden

Define your goal

Use this exercise to gain rhetorical flexibility by imagining multiple relationships between readers and supporting evidence; to spot an unusual strategy that might engage skeptical readers.

Take action

Generate: Put a few words describing your topic or issue at the top of your page, and begin sketching out a "garden plot": if you're working on screen, you might insert a 3x4 table; if you're working with markers on paper or stylus on tablet, you can be more freeform. In each box or garden area, "plant" one of the following evidence types (even if you think it doesn't at all match your issue or audience) and leave space to write several lines:

- One-time story (from personal experience, yours or someone else's)
- Deep description (of person, place, object)
- Fact/statistic
- Expert testimony
- Comparison/analogy
- Professional theory/guiding principle
- Relevant example
- Case study
- Experimental data/research report
- Informed opinion/prediction/reflection
- Audio/visual evidence
- Physical artifact

Connect: At the bottom of the page, briefly describe three readers you might aim to reach for your project. To gain maximum flexibility, at least one of these readers should be outside your current target audience—someone from a different age group or stakeholder group, someone with higher or lower investment in the issue—because having an outlier may help you consider better strategies for your major audience.

Garden: Now plant your garden: in each plot, write two or three notes, each about a very specific evidence point you could explore, even if you don't fully know that information yet—or even if you have to make up some facts for now: "Number of hotels in San Antonio with bedbugs reported last year" or "Statement from Marriott CEO" or "compare to Grand Wailea on Maui" or "study shows low profits after bad internet reviews."

Harvest: Finally, imagine that you can send your readers through to fill their baskets for a salad: for each reader, identify the three most persuasive pieces of evidence *plus* one that you think they might be intrigued by for some extra flavor or color. Write those down next to each reader's description at the bottom of your page.

Reflect to learn and connect

Add a final note or two: What core evidence do you now want to (re)focus on for your project? what additional inquiry or analysis might you pursue as a way to distinguish your project in the eyes of your audience?

Explore related exercises

3D Mind-Map, Counterargument Generator, Question Ladders

25.4 Evidence Shopping List

Define your goal

Use this exercise to broaden the types of evidence you consider searching for, in support of critical researching, while narrowing the scope of your search. Your goal is to limit the time you spend looking for exactly the right information—or to improve the prompt or question that you provide to a chatbot or Gen-AI tool.

Background

You live in an age of information overload, and so you need strategies for being a "smart shopper." If you go to a big-box store and forget your shopping list, you can become overwhelmed: you start to walk slowly, you get stuck staring at the sixteen different brands or flavors you must choose from, and often you buy items you don't need or can't afford. If you start researching without a list, you can also slow down, get overwhelmed by how much is there, and forget to locate the resources that will most help you. Since inquiry is rhetorical, the best lists will help you search not just for what *you* need but for what *your readers* will need.

Take action

Gathering stage: Use a log like the one below to visualize the kind of background information that you will most need to gather in order to have enough knowledge to move forward with your project. You might need a lot of one kind of background information and not much of another, so you don't have to fill in every box.

Information Type	Such as . . .	Could find this via . . . (website, journal, interview, book, video . . .)
History of this issue		
Scholarly theories about this issue		
Policies, laws, organizations about this issue		
Conversations about related topics		
Unsolved questions or controversies		

Hunting stage: Use a log like the one below to visualize the kind of specific supporting evidence that you might need to hunt for in order to answer the questions of skeptical readers in your primary and secondary audiences. Your readers might trust one kind of evidence much more than another, so you might have several items in one box and few or none in others.

	Possible Reader #1: _____	Possible Reader #2: _____	Could find this via . . . (website, journal, interview, book, video . . .)
Personal experiences from memories of . . .			
Descriptions or specific examples of . . .			
Observations and/or measurements of . . .			
Comparisons to other organizations/events such as . . .			
Data from interviews or surveys of . . .			
Case studies of . . .			
Expert testimony (about what? from whom?)			
Expert opinions or theories about . . .			
Historical records such as . . .			
Research reports about . . .			
Government documents or reports about . . .			
Statistics such as . . .			
Financial data about . . .			
Other:			

Reflect to learn and connect

Star * the items on either list that seem most important, and write yourself a note about your next strategies for finding reliable answers to these questions.
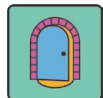
Explore related exercises

Gray-Area Finder, Emperor for a Day, Seven Generations

25.5 Keyword Bingo

Define your goal

Use this exercise to broaden the terms you use in searching for information on

the popular web or in a library database, so that you speed your search without missing crucial information.

Background

If you've ever debated whether to call a beverage a "soda," a "pop," or just a "Coke," you know how confusing it can be when people use different words to mean the same item or concept. On the popular web, a search engine algorithm might look at your search for "cars" and also automatically also indicate sources about "autos" or "automobiles," but it might not. In a library database, "college" might be a key word that refers to one set of schools and "university" might refer to another. As you experiment with terms that are related to your inquiry, you can give yourself the best chance of finding the information you need, whatever it's named.

Take action

Set your goals: Before you begin searching for sources online or in a database, write a full sentence that describes the exact question or topic you need more information about. Identify 3-5 key words from your question. These are likely to be nouns or crucial adjectives (there's a difference between searching for information on *musicians* and searching for information on *American* musicians or *contemporary* musicians).

Use the "BINGO" card below to help you create additional terms, combinations, and phrases that might help you home in on the exact data or testimony you need. You should play out at least two different keywords:

- Your keyword counts for the central box (N-3)
- Your goal is to get any five-in-a-row: across, down, or diagonal. You will need to write at least four new words or phrases to get a BINGO: for instance, you might use the directions in B-1, B-3, B-4, and B-5 to modify your keyword four times (a "free" space doesn't require a new word or phrase)
- If your question is about laws to increase solar energy use in your local community, one key phrase might be "solar energy," and you might respond "B-1 = solar energy AND camping, B-2 = Free, B-3 = sun power, B-4 = photovoltaics, and B-5 = solar energy OR accessible"
- Remember that your combination phrases can use either an AND approach or an OR approach: in many databases,
  - if you think you will find too much information, you need a narrower search, so you would use AND or PLUS
  - if you think you won't find enough information, or you want to check both synonyms (auto/car) you need a broader search, and so you would use *OR*

	B	I	N	G	O
1	Keyword + second word to connect to your exact experience	Opposite word to help you find alternatives or resistances	Word or phrase about a very broad related concept	FREE	Keyword + a second word or phrase to indicate an example or scenario
2	FREE	Keyword + second word to connect to your general interest in the area	Word or phrase about a broader concept	Keyword + second word to indicate results (cause, improve, poli- cy . . .)	Related word from the abstract or first sentence of a source you already found
3	Related word or phrase used in slang or for young children	Related word or phrase used in lunch-table talk	KEYWORD	Related word or phrase used by scholars or analysts	Related word or phrase used by experts/ specialists
4	Related word you found in a Wikipedia article on your keyword	Keyword + second word to indicate loca- tion, group, or time period	Word or phrase about a narrower angle	Keyword + second word to connect to your readers' general interest in the area	FREE
5	Keyword + second word to indicate a relevant value (good, fast, cheap, efficient . . .)	FREE	Word or phrase about a very narrow aspect	Keyword + second word to indicate kind of source (data, research, report, story)	Keyword + second word to connect to a specific experience of one targeted reader

Reflect to learn and connect

When you've completed two rounds, finish with a note: what *two* new words or combos seem like they will be most helpful as you search?

Explore related exercises

Date My Topic, Evidence Shopping List, Source Synthesis Grid

25.6 Map The Terrain

Define your goal

Use this exercise to visualize the conversation taking place about an issue you are writing on.

Take action

Set the context: Write a sentence or two explaining the main issue or goal of your writing project. Then jot down a list of at least 7-10 different "voices" that are participating in this conversation: these might be participants in related events, stakeholders and opponents, scholars or theorists in the field, authors of secondary sources you have been gathering during your inquiry, organizations advocating for change, people you have interviewed or surveyed, and/or members of your target audience group. For each voice, add a note about its main goal, position, or contribution: what information does that person or group bring, what position does he/she/it stake out, what goal does he/she/it have?

Make a map: Take out a blank sheet of paper or open a document in a program in which you are comfortable drawing shapes and figures. Your goal is to create a physical map of how these voices relate to one another using one of the options below. This might take you a couple of tries, so don't worry about getting it right the first time out. Also, while you can stay with a basic approach if you worry about your drawing skills, you might find that *attempting* to draw more than lines and circles opens up pathways in your brain that help feed your higher thinking and create new understandings about your project. Since you won't be graded on your artistic quality, feel free to experiment with colors, figures, and visual representations.

- **Traditional map**: You can draw a traditional map, with your "voices" positioned as towns, cities, and countries—near the center of the map if they are important in the conversation, near the edges if they are not, larger if they cover more ground, smaller if they have less to contribute. Place similar voices close together, and/or insert roads or rivers to connect them; use lakes, mountains, forests, swamps, and/or deserts to indicate spaces or barriers between voices that disagree or have alternate points of view. You may name the places on your map by the original voice names, or provide new names that help indicate how you view the conversation evolving in relation to your issue.

- **Basic Venn diagram map**: In a Venn diagram, two overlapping circles show what percentage of two separate categories is shared. You can assign each of your "voices" to a circle (or a square, or hexagon), draw it larger or smaller to show how powerful the voice is, and situate it on the page to show whether it is at the center of the conversation or on the fringe, and to show which other voices it is nearest to or furthest from. Some of your "voice" circles might overlap one another to show that they agree or address some of the same information; in other cases, you might add walls or barriers to your map to show how opposing circles will never be in contact with one another.

- **Collage map**: You can use cut-outs from hard-copy newspapers or magazines you own or pictures or icons/photos you download into your document to represent each "voice." Try to make the image larger or more vibrant or more powerful-looking if the voice is more important, and smaller or weaker-looking if the voice is a sideline-voice; tape or paste the image centrally on the page if it is central to the conversation, and be sure to have voices that make similar points situated next to or even overlapping one another.

Identify features, connections, and empty spaces: You will need to write or type names and perhaps some descriptions near your circles, images, or cities to help explain the voices on your map. Regardless of your type of map, you are welcome to draw in some other map-like features such as roads, mountains, swamps, or deserts, to show places where the conversation has connection points or difficulties, and to demonstrate the character of the conversation: is it friendly? intense? scattered? tangled? Finally, think about leaving some *empty spaces* for voices you haven't yet heard from: what stakeholders are being ignored? what questions haven't you found answers to yet? which local or recent issues have not been adequately addressed? what complications are difficult to solve?

Reflect to learn and connect

Write a sentence or two about what the map tells you: which "places" on this map would someone (especially from your group of readers) most like to visit? How might someone plan a trip (organize a writing project) around this map? What "voices" were hard to find a place for, and what voices seemed to be missing? Write a sentence or two about what you think your next steps on this project (planning, inquiring, reading, revising) should involve.

Explore related exercises

Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Counterargument Generator, Gray-Area Finder

25.7 Question Ladders: Known/Unknown Survey

Define your goal

Use this exercise to use a basic-to-complex set of questions to determine what knowledge and understanding you already have about an issue, and what further inquiry you could pursue.

Take action

Set your context: Write a sentence or two at the top of your page about your

current writing project or the issue you're working on. Create a two-column log: label the left side "Known/Confident" and the right side "Unknown."

Find the knowns and unknowns: For at least three of the information-levels listed below, use the left column to quickly list as many aspects as possible of what you already know or can consider about your issue. You may use full sentences or simple phrases; try to add ideas that only you might know, and to reach for ideas that you know but don't always think about. Use the right-hand column to list similar kinds of information that you don't yet know but that you're curious about or that your readers might ask questions about.

- **Facts, known**: What precise facts, occurrences, experiences, measurements, or examples are you sure you know of right now? Are there any that you know that lots of people don't know? **Facts, unknown**: What factual questions or data might you or your readers need to know? What reasonable factual questions might someone ask about this issue or situation?

- **Explanations, known**: What do you understand clearly about how this person / place / object / situation functions, or what its essential nature is? What leads up to it or supports it, and what happens then? Who and what else is involved? **Explanations, unknown**: What don't you understand about its nature or its function? What important questions might readers ask that begin with "I just don't understand how/why ___?"

- **Connections, known**: What do you know for sure that this person / place / object / situation is just like or completely unlike? In what categories are you sure it belongs or doesn't belong? **Connections, unknown**: What *might* you or your readers consider comparing this to, if you knew more about it? What *could* be another person / place / object / situation that could help you explain how this one works, should work, or should avoid working?

- **Predictions, confident**: What are you confident is likely to happen regarding this person / place / object / situation in the near future? What interpretations," reading between the lines," or "behind the scenes" analyses can you suggest with some assurance? **Predictions, unknown**: What important questions still remain, in your mind or the minds of readers, about the future related to this issue? What gray areas are difficult to interpret, and what remains confusing or complicated to analyze?

- **Judgments, confident:** What evidence-based conclusions or recommendations can you already make with confidence regarding this issue? **Judgments, unknown**: What kinds of conclusions, decisions, or judgments would you or your readers like to be able to make, that you do not have sufficient supporting evidence for right now?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you have completed several pairs of Known and Unknown listings, take a few minutes to review your Unknown categories, and write several sentences that can serve as an initial inquiry plan: what steps can you take, and what kind of sources can you consult, to help you fill in the gaps in your and your readers' understanding?

Explore related exercises

Evidence Shopping List, Map the Terrain, Source Synthesis Grid

25.8 Rate My Source

Define your goal

Use this exercise to determine if a secondary source of information is high-enough quality to use for your writing project.

Background

Is your source **a risk** to cite, or is it high quality to meet the demands of your specific project? You might know that you should check your source for "credibility": one popular approach to that is to ask about CRAP: whether the source is:

- **C**urrent enough to be valuable,
- **R**eliable in acknowledging sources and presenting accurate analysis,
- **A**uthoritative by virtue of the author or organization's expertise, and
- clear in its **P**urpose, without a level of bias that interferes with accuracy or thoroughness.

But credibility is only one way that a source is useful. Some completely non-credible sources—such as incorrect and sexist rants posted anonymously on social media—could still be useful for a researcher to refer to if they met other criteria. After all, if you want to write about how sexism appears on social media, those rants would be accessible and relevant, and studying a hundred of them would provide a substantial record that could help you provide new insights about your question.

So it helps to check your source out completely. To find out whether your source is valuable for your particular project, without too many risks, you can check it using the **A-RISC** guide below. A source that scores 12-15 points, with few or no subscores of "1," is likely to be acceptable to most academic or professional audiences. However, if you're relying on one source significantly in your project, or it is the basis for a key argument, you will probably want to aim for a score of 16-20

points on that keystone source.

- **Note 1**: It's unlikely that a source will earn a perfect score, since sources that are *very substantive/credible* are usually not written in the most highly *accessible* style. As a researcher, you will need to look for sources that, individually and collectively, balance these characteristics.
- **Note 2**: These categories are *rhetorical*, because what is "credible" for one audience or "relevant" for one project will change as the audience, goals, and genre change.
- **Note 3**: Thus there is *no such thing as a "bad source"*—only a source that is less appropriate or powerful for a particular project, goal, or audience.

Take action

Review your external source—whether it is a website, news article, scholarly journal report, editorial opinion, marketing analysis, research study, or interview with an expert—using the chart below. Give your source a score of 1-5 in each of the five categories, and add up the total.

	1	2	3	4	5
Accessible: Allows the researcher to understand key information	Only a PhD expert could understand this source	The source is written mostly for an audience of specialists in the field	The source is written for an educated audience that knows something about the field	Any adult could read and understand this source	A fifth-grade student could understand this source
Relevant: Connects to the researcher's goal and needs	The source mentions something about part of the current topic	A section of the source is connected to questions or issues of this project	All or most of source is about an issue that's connected to this project	The source is related, and at least one section is precisely about the key issue of the project	The whole source addresses a key issue for this project
Insightful: Provides new information or analysis to extend the researcher's knowledge	The source presents obvious ideas: most people know this information already	The source reports information that is familiar to people who attend to this issue	The source has a few new ideas, data points, or arguments, but mostly reports common information	The source presents several new ideas or a significant amount of unfamiliar data	The source is a new research study or provides fresh analysis from a new perspective

	1	2	3	4	5
Substantive: Gives enough depth of information and analysis to provide a complete picture, without overlooking contrary or marginalized perspectives	The source is very brief (300-500 words or less) and/or presents a general picture (e.g., short news article or overview)	The source is brief (500-1000 words) and/or provides mostly description and summary (e.g., full news report or blog post)	The source is medium length and provides some analysis or depth of detail (e.g., 3-5 page magazine or journal article or extended web resource, 5-10 minute video)	The source is extended and provides in-depth analysis and addresses multiple perspectives (e.g., special report in print or video, multi-section website, short scholarly article)	The source goes deeply in-depth on a key question, fully exploring alternate perspectives (e.g., scholarly article, book chapter, book or documentary film)
Credible: Meets the "CRAP" test for Currency of data, Reliability of verifiable information, Authority and expertise of the source, and a Purpose that is not compromised by bias or conflict of interest	The author and publication are unknown or are not verified as expert; the source gives mostly opinion without citation to external sources, and may reveal significant bias; there is no date or the document is out-of-date	The author or publication can be verified as having a history of reliable information, but may not be widely known or respected; there is some reference to valid external sources or specific experiences; the document is recent enough for the researcher's needs	The author or organization is a known expert and/or the publication has mainstream media-level credibility (CNN, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, US Census); the document may be recent or have historical value; the focus of the source is primarily the author's educated opinion or observations with few sources cited; bias may be present if openly acknowledged	The author or organization is a known expert and/or the publication has mainstream media-level credibility (CNN, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, US Census); the source refers to some specialized data in the field and acknowledges alternate views; the document has been reviewed for accuracy and provides recent data	The author, organization, and/or publication is known and respected specifically for work in the field/area of the project; the source cites multiple external sources related to the field and examines alternate perspectives; the document has been reviewed for accuracy and analysis; information is up-to-date and connected to current conversations

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, write yourself a note: Does the score you got reflect your sense of this source's quality? If you wanted to find a higher-quality source, what features would you want to look for especially? And if you wanted a *complementary* source—one that was strong in areas where this source is weaker—what might you go looking for?

Explore related exercises

Evidence Garden, Reason Appallingly, They Say + I Say

Chapter 26. Exercises for Critical Thinking and Assumption Checking

We can think about "exercises" two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn't happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we're stuck, we don't have "writer's block"—instead, we just have a problem we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- **D**efining a problem,

- Exploring some options for addressing it,
- Acting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- Learning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

Avoid high expectations

Practice may "make perfect," but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the "right" answers. Just keep writing answers.

Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer overall.

26.1 Assumption Inspection

Define your goal

Use this exercise to identify any assumptions that you hold, or that your readers may hold, that you need to consider as you create your arguments.

Background

Instructors sometimes caution writers to "avoid bias," but the truth is that all writers have biases: we assume certain things about our world and the people in it. Your goal as a writer is always to *know* what your assumptions are, often to *anticipate* what your readers' assumptions are, and decide whether you need to *state* those assumptions, *change* those assumptions, or *limit the effect* of those assumptions by presenting additional information.

Take action

Identify key assumptions. Check the list of common assumptions or biases below—or do a quick internet search for "common biases"—and choose *two* that you think you might be susceptible to in the case of your current writing project.

- **Familiarity bias**: "I like what I know." We are inclined to believe, trust, or value ideas or options that are familiar to us over ones that are new to us.

- **Isolation bias**: "I seek what I already know." When we set off to learn something "new," we often select news sources, social settings, or inquiry paths that keep us inside our familiar "information bubble."

- **Confirmation bias**: "I believe what I already know." When we encounter new information, we trust ideas that reinforce or match our current thinking, even if they come from dubious sources, and doubt ideas that seem strange, even when presented by a source we trust.

- **Fundamental attribution error**: "I know they're jerks, unlike me." When someone shocks or annoys us, we believe they are acting badly, even if we sometimes do the same thing with reasonable cause ("That idiot is going too fast" vs. "I'm late for work so it's ok to speed up a bit.")

- **First-impression bias/anchoring**: "I already know what I need to know." We are reluctant to let go of the way we first thought about a person, event, or idea.

- **Stereotyping**: "I know one so I know them all." We hold opinions about all lawyers, jocks, cities, motorcycles, or rutabagas and don't pay attention to how individuals may differ.

Explain your biases. Now write a brief "if/then" scenario for each bias you chose about your own ideas about your current project. To help yourself as much as possible, try to identify examples that *you might actually think*, at least sometimes, rather than picking outlandish claims you'd never make.

> "If I were caught up in _____ bias, then I might rely too much on _____ and so I might erroneously think _____. To resist that kind of thinking, I could _____."

Anticipate readers' biases. Consider your target audience, and what an intelligent but cognitively biased reader might think about your issue or recommendations. Write two "if/then" scenarios from that person's perspective, and include your responses:

> "If my reader were caught up in _____ bias, then they might rely too much on _____ and so they might erroneously think _____. To respond to that kind of thinking, I could _____."

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude by writing your future self a sentence or two of advice: what biases are you most likely to hold, and how will you remember to check those assumptions in future projects?

Explore related exercises

Counterargument Generator, Reason Appallingly, Used to Think / Now I Think

26.2 Believing/Doubting

Define your goal

Use this exercise to explore multiple points of view about an issue and to uncover the "gray areas" of complicated questions.

Take action

Begin by writing a claim, argument, or hypothesis—your own or one from your reading—at the top of your document.

Write a "believing" paragraph. As enthusiastically as you can, give *specific* reasons why this claim is the most sensible, most feasible, most reasonable approach to the issue that can be imagined. Explain how someone who supports this idea has considered the short- and long-term effects and seen all the fantastic benefits, and identify what those are and who the beneficiaries are. If you haven't completed much research on this issue yet but you're pretty certain that there are studies that prove one merit or another, you can mention the likelihood that such research exists.

Switch gears and write a "doubting" paragraph about the *same* claim. As skeptically as you can, give *specific* reasons why this is the most foolish, most haphazard, most unreasonable approach to the issue that can be imagined. Explain how someone who supports this idea has clearly not begun to consider the terrible short- and long-term consequences; identify the various groups of people who are or could be adversely affected by any continuation of this proposal, and identify what those problems would be. If you haven't completed much research on this issue yet, you can still raise serious questions that you believe thoughtful scholars must somewhere be investigating.
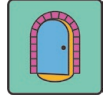
Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by writing a couple of sentences to yourself: what puzzles, gray areas, or possible resistances have you identified that you might want to investigate further?

Explore related exercises

Backtalk, Dialogue, Values Freewrite

26.3 Counterargument Generator

Define your goal

Use this exercise to anticipate points of resistance that a skeptical reader might raise so you can respond to those resistances.

Background

In order to write convincingly, you need to imagine, the best you can, how some-one who is *not you* thinks. You need to go beyond stating facts that seem obvious to you, and begin replying to the toughest questions or denials that another edu-cated reader could make.

Take action

Choose a key reader or stakeholder relevant to your argument; briefly describe them (see Audience Profile). Briefly list your main arguments or proposals.

Consider lack of knowledge, because resistances based on simple ignorance are the easiest to respond to. Perhaps your readers:

- Don't know about their options, or why one might be better than another
- Don't understand the range of options open to them in particular
- Don't know how generalized options could apply to this situation
- Can't imagine another way of thinking about their options
- Don't know the benefits of changing to another way of thinking/acting

Write out two or three statements from your reader's point of view: "I don't know how . . ." or "I think only ___ is possible."

> **NOTE:** Do not imagine that your reader is a buffoon who thinks the world is flat: imagine an intelligent but misinformed reader who hasn't learned or observed all the details you have been carefully studying. What did *you* not know several months or years ago that you know more about now?

Consider emotional or intellectual commitment next, because most readers like the way they think now, and like most of us, they resist learning a new way to think or behave. Perhaps your readers:

- Have put a lot of time/energy/ego into current ideas/practices

- Are comfortable with research/analysis that gives them reason to stay with their beliefs
- Enjoy the results of their current ideas/practices
- Don't feel that your option is truly better than theirs
- Are worried that taking a new track would bring unfortunate consequences to themselves or others
- Are afraid of the risks of new thought/action
- Are tired of trying out new things that never work

Write out two or three statements that could seem quite reasonable (not just selfish or stubborn) from your reader's point of view: "I support the theory/view that ____ because ____" or "I benefit from the current situation because ____."

Consider how limited access to resources can lead to resistance. These barriers are sometimes the most difficult to overcome because you as the writer may have no ability to affect them directly. (But note that sometimes readers just *think* they have no resources, in which case, you can use the strategies above to persuade them.) Perhaps your readers:

- Don't have the **time** to learn a whole new way or try out a new or more complicated option, especially in a crisis
  - or don't think they have the time (knowledge/emotion)
  - or don't think it's worth spending time this way (knowledge/emotion)
- Don't have the **personnel** to take on a new project
  - or don't think they have what it will take (knowledge)
  - or think personnel are more productive elsewhere (knowledge/emotion)
- Don't have the **money** to spend on new processes
  - or prefer spending the money elsewhere (knowledge/emotion)
  - or don't think they have as much as they'll need (knowledge)
- Have no **control** over resource allocation
  - or think they can have no effect (knowledge/emotion)

Write out two or three statements about resources from your reader's point of view. "The ____ of this recommendation would cost too much," or "The ____ is a good idea but we need all our people working on ____ instead." (Notice that some resistances about resources may also be linked to readers' lack of knowledge or their personal or professional beliefs about priorities.)

### Reflect to learn and connect

Write yourself a few sentences: Which of these statements can you respond to with clear facts? Which with reasoned arguments or examples? Which resistances

will require you to gather more information, and which might you need to concede as serious problems that everyone should consider?

Explore related exercises

Dialogue, Evidence Garden, Six Structures

26.4 Evil Genie
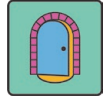
Define your goal

Use this exercise to consider arguments, approaches, or solutions beyond what is immediately obvious.

Take action

Briefly describe the top three reasons, resources, or recommendations that support the argument in your writing project using direct language: "X should happen or Y will continue to be the case," "P is the ultimate cause of Q," or perhaps "In order to improve, we need A, B, and C."

Now imagine that you've encountered an Evil Genie. Instead of granting you three wishes, the genie takes away your options: *all* the options you just listed. X will never happen, and A, B, and C are forbidden. From here on out, you are not allowed to stay in the current situation, with all its problems, or simply to give up and provide no further analysis on the issue. Neither are you allowed to argue for any of the causes, changes, resources, or supports that you have just asked for or recommended. All of those possibilities have been moved off the table. But like any protagonist facing down an Evil Genie, you will not be intimidated. You can begin to rummage through your pockets, open the cabinets and drawers of the room you're in, ask your faithful companions for ideas, and brainstorm a new plan. (If you want some more inspiration, do a web search to learn about the TV hero MacGyver.)

Revise your plan: What approaches, resources, or reasoning might still help you persuade your readers? Your new strategies may not be plans that solve the whole problem, make everyone blissfully happy, address all the complications, or last for more than a few months, but they should be plans that still move you toward your goal of engaging with the problem at hand in a way that will intrigue and perhaps satisfy your readers. You may need to write some notes about additional inquiry you need to complete in order to make good on these new approaches: are there facts you would need to check, sources you would want to consult, data you would need to analyze? If you can think of more than one "Plan Z," note that down, too.

Reflect to learn and connect

Take two minutes at the end of your writing to circle or highlight any idea that

might be worth considering even if the Evil Genie's spell wears off and you can have your original ideas back. Research shows that often, people get caught up in "either/or" thinking that too-narrowly frames a problem, and your expedition to "and/and" thinking here might have broken you out into productive new ground.

Explore related exercises

Cousin Topics, Gray-Area Finder, Magic Three Choices

26.5 Gray-Area Finder

Define your goal

Use this exercise to uncover complications in a topic area, question, or issue that can help you choose a focus or wrestle with an advanced concept in depth.

Background

A "gray area" is a concept that is open to interpretation, or that could involve several valid stances or outcomes. You're looking for moments of instability or change which could be interpreted different ways by different stakeholders (glass-half-full or glass-half-empty, for instance). If "it's complicated," then there's no easy answer, and that means that there's room for further discussion. And that means that there's a reason to write about it. You also want to find a "gray area" that matters to the overall conversation. (If it's debatable whether the flood waters rose to 12 feet or 13 feet, but either way was a disaster for the residents of Small-ville, that's not a good place to focus your attention.)

Take action

List as many complicated or "gray" areas in each category below as you can think of that are related to your issue, even if you think they might be too insig-nificant or not directly connected. Briefly explain why each item in your list is "gray" or complicated.

- **Switch viewpoints**: What is a "good thing" for some people (e.g., bosses) that could be harmful or cause problems for other people (e.g., workers), at the same or a different location?

- **Time travel**: What is an action that helps a situation now that might have negative long-term effects? What decision that causes initial harm might have eventual benefits?

- **Change lenses**: What is a situation or choice viewed through one set of criteria (financial or environmental gain, greatest benefit for all, one set of religious or cultural values, speed or duration of solution) that might look different if viewed with a different set of priorities or values?

- **Check patterns**: Where do expected patterns break down? What outlying data or behaviors call the pattern itself into question? What old patterns have been stretched too far, and what new patterns have not yet been explored?

- **Who's missing?** Who is affected by the situation but does not have their perspectives included in the reports, stories, or general information usually presented about this issue? Additional views often complicate our understanding.

- **What's surprising?** When you (or others involved) first encountered this issue, or became familiar with the situation, what was surprising? The difference between expectations and reality often is tied to a complication.

- **What's unknowable?** In many situations, we face variables—human and environmental—that we cannot measure or predict accurately. How do unknown or unmeasurable factors create complications?

Reflect to learn and connect

Star two or three of the gray-areas you listed that you might investigate further. Take two minutes to freewrite about one of them: what are the various possible "sides" (often there are more than two) you can identify? what additional inquiries can you make to learn more?

Explore related exercises

Counterargument Generator, Keyword Bingo, Off on a Rant

26.6 Mind The Gap

Define your goal

Use this exercise to ask questions and use strategies that help you fill in the gaps in your knowledge: ideas that may outside your expertise, behind your assumptions, underneath your confirmation bias, or beyond the edge of your "filter bubble."

Background

London subway riders may recall the phrase "mind the gap," reminding preoccupied riders not to trip as they step from a car to the platform. Writers also need to address the gaps in our minds and our research. For instance, even when we know the general terms of an opposing or alternate view, we don't usually know how or why others hold that view. On top of that, as Eli Pariser has noted, the algorithms of online search engines and social media track our preferences and so often direct us to ideas we already believe, blocking anything that might disrupt our comfortable "filter bubble." Just like modern cars that have a special camera

that surveys the roadway outside drivers' field of vision and regular mirrors, writers and researchers need strategies to see what we're missing, especially if we don't even know we're missing it.

Take action

Set the context: Write a sentence at the top of your page describing the focus and/or goal of your current writing project, and follow with a sentence about the most interesting or important research you have found so far.

Identify gaps in your knowledge. From the list below, identify three ways to find out what you don't know that you don't know. Use the search strategy in relation to your current project and then write a note about two sources that show up that you hadn't seen before: why would or wouldn't they help you gain a fuller picture of your issue?

- **Change the bubble**: Switch between search engines (e.g., from Google to Bing) or databases (e.g., from a general one such as ProQuest Research Library to a specific one focused on Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies); alternately, try an internet search on a computer or device that you don't own, to see if search engines tuned to someone else's "filter bubble" algorithms let in different information.

- **Reverse directions**: Search directly using terms that emphasize disagreement: add a term such as "oppose," "alternative," "anti," or "critic" to your search keywords, and skim several sources.

- **Alter the genre**: Switch between news, opinion, reports, and research study sources: if you have been finding mostly short, factual news reports, try adding a word such as "analysis," "commentary," or "editorial" to your search; if you have mostly seen general opinions, try adding a phrase such as "research study," "legislation," or "scientific analysis."

- **Counter the bias**: Algorithms reinforce the social biases and systemic discrimination of the culture they were built in, so you may need to search directly for perspectives that have been suppressed or overlooked, such as those from "Indigenous leaders," "college students with disabilities," or "Black women doctors."

- **Explore a new thought trail**: Choose a source that includes references or citations; pick one reference that seems the *least like* your current research trail while still being at least tangentially relevant, and track it down.
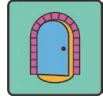
Reflect to learn and connect

Finish with an overall sentence or two about plans for your current project: what invisible, uncomfortable, or unexpected ideas could be helpful for you to identify and include?

Explore related exercises

Cousin Topics, Keyword Bingo, Question Ladders

26.7 Reason Appallingly

Define your goal

Use this exercise to use the easy task of writing illogical arguments to gain awareness of an issue and generate more logical supporting arguments.

Background

You may recognize some of the faulty argument strategies listed below—also known as "logical fallacies"—from the language of infomercials, political attack ads, or your younger sibling's reasons why they should get to stay out late. But most of us make these faulty arguments now and then, when we are tired or think nobody will hold us to a higher standard. A good way to sensitize yourself to this poor logical behavior—and to write something easier than your *real* arguments for a while—is to deliberately behave badly and then reform your ways.

Take action

Write illogically: Choose three or four of the faulty argument styles described below, and write a claim related to your current project that uses that faulty style. You may write a claim supporting your view and/or a claim that opposes your view. Feel free to be as outlandishly illogical as you can.

- **Either-or argument**: Represent a complex problem or its solution as having only two options, both of which are at the extreme ends of the scale of possibilities, rather than having multiple options, some of which are better than others: "Either everyone buys hybrid and electric cars now, or we run out of fossil fuels in 50 years and nobody can drive."

- **Hasty generalization**: Draw a sweeping conclusion based on too little evidence: "The success of Toyota's Prius model shows that all car companies can convert to 100% hybrids or electrics in three years without difficulty."

- **Slippery slope**: Claim (without convincing evidence) that one change will necessarily snowball into a series of increasingly drastic changes with no stopping point: "Legislation supporting ethanol-based engines rather than electrics will cause more and more of our valuable cropland to be devoted to fuel, increasing food prices and plunging the nation into recession from which we won't be able to recover."

- **Straw man or red herring**: Distract readers by describing a problem or opposing argument that isn't really central to the main issues at hand. A "straw man" is an exaggerated or barely believable idea that sounds more

menacing than it really is, either to make the other side look bad or to make your side look good when you oppose them: "At least we won't all be driving 6 MPG Humvees!" is a straw man point if almost no US residents own such vehicles. A "red herring" idea is like a stinky fish used to confuse hunting dogs: "You think government support of electric cars is bad? It's part of the same plot to sell our national forests to the United Nations!"

- **Faulty causality**: Claim that two events occurring at about the same time are related causally without sufficient proof. (The fancy Latin phrase for this illogical thinking is *post hoc ergo propter hoc*: "After this, therefore because of this.") "Smog in LA has gone down because more people are driving electric vehicles" links low smog to a single cause when there may have been multiple causes, or no link at all except the passage of time.

- **Ad hominem or bandwagon**: Appeal to human values, negative and positive. These approaches can be persuasive, but they are not logically sound. "*Ad hominem*" ("to the man") indicates an attack on a person rather than an argument about the logic of their position: "Senator Brown supports electric cars but always flies a fuel-hogging charter jet between Washington and Oregon, so they can't be trusted." A "bandwagon" appeal asks for support based on the shared values of a peer community: "Hybrids will soon be the fastest growing niche of the car market, and you don't want to be the last parents on the block driving your kids in a gas guzzling dinosaur."

Practice better logic: When you've written several logically flawed statements, go back and try to rewrite one or two of them so that they represent stronger arguments.

Reflect to learn and connect

Where would you need to complete additional research to support a more logical claim, or to respond to a logical challenge from a resistant reader?
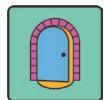
Explore related exercises

Cause-Effect Map, Question Ladders, Rate My Source

26.8 Source Synthesis Grid

Define your goal

Use this exercise to begin to map the overlapping contributions of your secondary sources to your project.

Take action

Set the context: Briefly describe the question you're investigating: what are some possible answers to it, and which answer are you thinking (so far) might be most persuasive? List the sub-issues or questions (at least three or four) that are connected to your question.

Create a grid or table that lists your sub-issues across the top and leaves room for you to list your sources—articles, websites, interviews—down the side. Fill in as many of the grid boxes or table cells as you can: you may be brief, but leave yourself as clear a note as possible so that you remember what you found and decided. For a project on how to support high school math teachers in their first five years of teaching, your grid might look like this:

	Classes for new math teachers	**Peer mentoring for new math teachers**	**Alternate view: new teachers don't need help**
Article by Brown	two examples	no description	no mention
Article by Samatar	says it's insufficient (p. 11)	two-year study of this (p. 15-21)	no mention
Book chapter by Brierova	strongly opposes this view (p. 221)	no description	argues for this (having field knowledge only is fine)
Interview with Espinosa	supports but worries about time/money	strongly supports: has been a peer mentor	strongly opposes

Reflect to learn and connect

When you have completed your grid, write yourself a note: which sub-topic column has the most information in it, and where do you see the most blank spots? If you have time, pick one of the rich columns, and try drafting a quick-and-dirty synthesis paragraph from it, even without double-checking the precise information from your sources, just to get a feel for the flow of your information.

Explore related exercises

Assumption Inspection, Evidence Shopping List, Map the Terrain

26.9 Used to Think / Now I Think

Define your goal

Use this exercise to identify and develop habits of curiosity and flexibility of thought that can help you resist biases, connect with readers, and produce insightful or creative results.

Background

Academic, political, and professional settings encourage us to *defend the views we already hold*, but don't always help us *recognize and enhance how we change our own minds*. Writers need to argue persuasively, of course, but we also need to be ready to understand how readers with other views perceive the world, and we need to be able to offer ideas and solutions that don't follow standard expectations. "Creativity" isn't just something a few people have, but is a state of mind that all of us can practice.

Take action

Look back: Consider your whole lifetime, and write at least five sentences that identify a time when you changed your mind: "I used to think ____, but now I think ____." These can go back to when you were a child; they can refer to serious or frivolous beliefs. Then pick one of those sentences to expand: Try to identify the people, experiences, evidence, or contexts that helped you change your mind.

Look currently: Consider your current writing project, and write 5 more "Used to think / now I think" sentences. If you haven't exactly changed your mind (yet) or learned new information, you can look for places that might be open to change: "I used to be certain that ____, but now I wonder if _____ ." Pick one of those sentences to expand: What people, experiences, evidence, or context changed—or might be enough to change—your mind?

Look ahead: Imagine that you are 5, 10, or even 20 years into the future, and you're considering the same issues that are in your writing project now. Who knows what the future holds, right? Imagine that many things have changed around that future self, and so that future you has new ideas. Write at least two sentences explaining how that might happen, from your future perspective: "I used to think ____, but then _____ happened, and so now I think ____."

Reflect to learn and connect

When you imagine alternatives, even if you don't quite believe them yet, you create space to make recommendations or arguments that intrigue your readers. What one "now I think" idea that you wrote could you investigate further?

Explore related exercises

Emperor For a Day, Rate My Source, Subtopic Generator

Chapter 27. Exercises for Generating and Organizing

In this Chapter

We can think about "exercises" two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn't happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we're stuck, we don't have "writer's block"—instead, we just have a problem

we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- **D**efining a problem,
- **E**xploring some options for addressing it,
- **A**cting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- **L**earning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

Avoid high expectations

Practice may "make perfect," but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the "right" answers. Just keep writing answers.

Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer overall.

27.1 3D Mind Map

Define your goal

Generate topic and subtopic ideas, see connections, and identify areas rich in complications.

Background

You may have drawn mind-maps or bubble-diagrams before to help you consider ideas. This exercise is designed to stretch you a little further than most mapping events, in two ways. First, you'll be encouraged in every stage to list more than

just the first three or four ideas that occur to you: this way, you push your brain to send you new ideas rather than only writing the ones you had at the start. Second, you'll be asked to annotate your first-dimension map to help you think about connections and arguments, so that you start to generate higher-order thinking that will help you jump-start your actual writing.

Take action

Draw the first dimension: Core ideas. Draw or insert a circle and write/type your main topic inside it. Around that circle, draw at least 5-7 lines leading to new circles; inside those secondary circles, write ideas, questions, or descriptors that are related ideas or subtopics to the main circle. From most or all of the secondary circles, draw several lines leading out to new circles with new ideas or subtopics (ask yourself, "who, what, where, when, why, how many, what kinds, who cares?").

Repeat these steps: try to go out to at least *four or five levels of circles*; try to generate as many ideas as you can, even if you think they might not be exactly right for your project. (You don't need to generate lines from every circle, or to have the same number of ideas each time.) If one cluster of circles starts to capture your attention, feel free to spend more time on that part of the map. If you need more paper, get some, or if you need to move to a new page in your document, do it: don't let your tools limit your thinking!

Draw the second dimension: Connections. Look at your first-dimension map and begin to draw new connecting lines: where does a third-level bubble connect to a fifth-level bubble on the other side of the map? (You can use a new color or style of line if you'd like.) You should add at least a dozen new lines, perhaps more, as you build your second layer of your map. If the connection isn't obvious, write a note on or near the line to remind yourself what link you see. Try to look for unexpected connections, and pay attention to any circle that starts to accumulate extra links, because these are the ideas that could lead you to interesting writing.

Draw the third dimension: Complications. Identify at least two places on your map that seem more complicated than others. Sometimes these are second- or third-level circles where a lot of lines from all over the map converge: these ideas are complicated because they are connected to so many parts of the puzzle. Sometimes these are circles that just led you to write out lists of questions around them, or that lead to a clear This vs. That set of ideas. Nearby or on a separate page, write a Complications Note for each of these two nodes: "The topic/idea/question of _____ is complicated because it's hard to decide/choose whether/how_____."

Reflect to learn and connect

Star or highlight one section of the map that is particularly interesting to you *and* complicated enough that readers need your help figuring it out, and write

yourself some advice: "As a first/next step, I want to take some time to explore ___ because ____."

Explore related exercises

Authority/Curiosity/Annoyance List, Off on a Rant, Scenarios

27.2 Cause-Effect Map

Define your goal

Use this exercise to explore causal relationships in order to identify complexities and puzzles or unexpected outcomes.

Take action

You should aim to draw two maps: one in the top left corner reaching out to the right, one in the lower right corner reaching over to the left. (These two maps won't connect: they map the future and the past of the same situation.) If you need to use two pages or two online spaces, that's fine. As usual, it's important to go out several levels to discover ideas that aren't obvious but may be important.

Chart the Effects: On the left-hand side of your document, draw or insert a circle or box: inside it, write a short description of the current state of your issue. Draw a few lines out from it and connect those to circles: inside each circle, write an immediate effect of this situation, if left unchanged, on a different stakeholder, community, or component.

From each of those Stage One circles, draw another line or two connected to some Stage Two circles: in a few days, weeks, or months, what could happen as a result of *that* community or component's situation? Repeat the process with a few more circles going out to Stage Three and even Stage Four, going from near or *proximate* effects to more *distant* effects. Distant effects are harder to prove, but they often represent more substantial consequences and more interesting ripples to investigate.

Chart the Causes: Move down or to the next page, and on the right-hand side of your document, draw or insert a circle: inside it, write a short description of the current state of your issue. Draw a few lines out to the left of it, and connect those to circles. Inside each circle, write an immediate cause of this situation: whose decision (or what entity or action) helped lead to this state?

From each of those Stage One circles, draw another line or two to the left, connected to some Stage Two circles: what pressures, circumstances, people, or events influenced the actors in Stage One? Repeat the process with a few more circles going out to Stage Three and even Stage Four, going from near or *proximate* causes to more *distant* causes. Distant causes, as you'll see, are intertwined

and thus harder to isolate, but they are often overlooked and thus present more interesting fields for investigation.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you have finished, highlight or star a few of your outer-stage causes or effects that seem most interesting, most overlooked, or most pertinent to your audience. Write yourself a few sentences about what aspects of these causes or effects might be worthy of further inquiry or discussion.

Explore related exercises

Assumption Inspection, Emperor for a Day, Subtopic Generator

27.3 Dialogue

Define your goal

Use this exercise to identify and track multiple arguments, perspectives, or lines of thinking related to your project.

Take action

Set the context: At the top of your page, write your current best statement of your main focal point or argument, and describe the audience you most want to reach.

Frame the dialogue: Choose one of the dialogue options below that will most help you move forward and identify the voices. Choose "Sides" if you are most interested in tracking different arguments; choose "Stakeholders" if you want to think about alternate perspectives from readers who will be affected; choose "Sources" if you want to understand how other texts you've been reading might interact.

- **Sides option**: Remember that there are usually more than "two sides" to any argument, so you need to begin by identifying at least three or four different points of view: you can consider your view, a directly opposing view, and a third or fourth view that might come from someone who is less knowledgeable, less involved, or concerned with a different angle or solution. Remember that you are identifying positions: what goal does each arguer most favor?

- **Stakeholders option**: If you are proposing a change or solution, then many different people might have a "stake" in what you propose: powerful people, people directly affected, people who are nearby but might be overlooked. Identify at least three or four different stakeholders who have something to gain or lose from your recommendations. Here you are identifying (types of) real people: what values and concerns might each of them have?

- **Sources option**: If you are gathering knowledge from two or more different sources—by reading articles, observing sites, and/or interviewing experts—you should start to see that some individual sources or some types of views come out with strong perspectives: maybe some provide local or personal information while others provide factual data, some argue for or against a position, and some may be more credible than others. Here you are identifying the contributions of each text or source: what focus and goal does each of them have?

Identify the speakers. Begin by giving each of your participants a name: the name can be a personal name (Lydia, Me, and Chan) or the name can be a concept name (Supports State Park, Opposes State Park, Doesn't Care)—or you can combine the two approaches (Marissa Bigwig, Ali Campaigner, José Homeowner). You can also give or create biographical data (age, occupation, gender or ethnicity, family status) and/or you can describe the participant's key values or arguments (emphasizes kids' needs, values low cost and efficiency).

Write your dialogue in which each participant "speaks" on your issue at least four times. Just as in a real dialogue—you can imagine them having lunch together using informal conversational language, or debating formally on a stage—the participants should respond to one another's points, not just state their own ideas and sit down: they can agree or disagree, ask questions, raise challenges or concerns, or provide a rebuttal. What would each participant think is most important to address?

- Participants can "speak" in general terms, but you will gain more understanding of their positions if you have them provide two or three sentences per turn so they can give examples, describe viewpoints, or identify key factors that influence their views.
- You may put all participant ideas in your own words, or if you are drawing from other sources, you can use a combination of your paraphrases and some short direct quotations to help you focus on precisely what they know or believe.
- Participants can always speak in the same order, or you can vary the order as two voices go back and forth discussing part of the issue.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you have finished your dialogue, go back and star or highlight one pair of comments (such as Participant B's question and Participant C's answer) and write yourself a note about why you find it most helpful or interesting: does this highlight the differences, show common ground, or provide a better option for understanding the issue?

27.4 Emperor For a Day
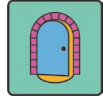
Define your goal

Use this exercise to consider a range of beneficial options without at first being distracted by feasibility or resistance.

Take action

Imagine that you have been made emperor, and you have 24 hours to issue decrees that will be immediately obeyed and will persist across the land even after you return to your everyday life. You are a generous, benevolent emperor, and you want to use your power to improve matters concerning the situation/issue you have been focusing on recently. You can't change how people think (nor would you want to!), but you can change the structures that reward or limit behavior.

As you make your list of decrees—at least 8-10—consider some of the categories below. You should also challenge yourself to create some unexpected or small-scale decrees that nonetheless could have significant effects (what could happen if everyone were required to say a cheerful "Good morning" to at least one neighbor once a day, or if all four-year-olds were issued a computer, a soccer ball, and a guitar?).

- Financial plans: Who must spend how much money on what, with what goals?
- Policies about education, social interaction, legal or illegal behavior
- Government regulation about business, environment, or research
- Policies applying to a particular group of people, locality, or situation
- Laws about governance, elections, or future emperors

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, star or circle one or two decrees that might have real-life parallels you could investigate or recommend a first step toward, even if you're unlikely to see immediate and complete obedience with the snap of your imperial fingers. What lines of inquiry might you undertake to find out what could be possible?

27.5 Explode a Moment

Define your goal

Use this exercise to uncover hidden complexities and develop richer details in support of key ideas.

Background

This strategy can work equally well when you choose one angle of a topic you're just getting to know, when you focus on one section of your current draft in which you think you're just scratching the surface but probably have a lot more to say, or when you're working to revise a section that seems thin but in which you believe you've already said all you could the first time around.

Take action

Choose a subtopic area or a sentence or two from a paragraph/section you've written that seems important but underdeveloped. Pick the tiniest-but-intriguing idea that you can. Copy that sentence into a new document. Freewrite (generating ideas as quickly and steadily as you can, without worrying about correctness or coverage) for at least 15-20 minutes (a full if drafty paragraph) *focusing on just that piece* of the issue, trying to notice details you hadn't noticed before. If you wish, you can use one of the following approaches:

- **Scenario**: Describe everything that is happening in a relevant scene, from the people and place to the sounds and smells to the feelings and memories. If you were filming this sentence for a movie, how would you do it?

- **Stases**: Consider one or more of these common argument approaches or *stases*:
  - What *value* judgments would you make about this moment: what is beneficial or effective, and what is harmful or frustrating? Might someone else see it with different values?
  - What short- and long-term *causes* led up to this exact moment, and/or what immediate and distant effects might be the result? Which people were or might be involved?
  - How could this moment be both a *solution* to some problems and a cause of others, and what next steps would you (or others) recommend?

- **Stakeholders**: Imagine two people who are not major players but who are involved in or will be affected by this moment: family members, workers, neighbors, referees, reporters. What would they see, ask, remember, feel, support, doubt, or argue about this moment?

Reflect to learn and connect

Take two minutes at the end to underline or highlight any phrases or sentences you wrote that have ideas you might add into your draft, or to write yourself a note: If you were going to focus your whole project on just this one moment, could you? what areas would you need to cover?

Explore related exercises

Inside Out, Shrunken Draft, Ten Directed Revisions

27.6 Inner Three-Year-Old

Define your goal

Use this exercise to extend your thinking past an obvious answer or assumption.

Take action

Set the context: List one of your claims or sub-claims. "I believe/argue that ____."

Find your child-perspective: Imagine starting a dialogue with a curious child who responds to each of your answers with a truly inquiring question: "But why is *that* true?" or "But how does *that* happen?" (An adult version of this question is "What makes you say that?") Write out that dialogue—including your answers and your inner child's questions—for at least five rounds of Q&A (take at least 15 minutes).

As you answer, be as careful, specific, and thorough as you can: give the adult answer, the one suitable for your audience, even though it's a child's question. If you don't know the answer, you can say you don't know, but be prepared for the child to ask why you don't know!

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, write yourself a note: what additional details or explanations might you add into your writing? Do you need to do any more research to help you answer possible readers' questions?

Explore related exercises

Believing/Doubting, Six Degrees, They Say + I Say

27.7 Off on a Rant
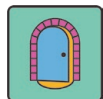
Define your goal

Use this exercise to generate energy, emotional connection, and specific details related to a potential topic or subtopic for a writing project.

Background

A *rant* is a stage of thought and communication part way between a simple opinion ("Yes, they are." "No, they aren't.") and a focused, educated argument ("The most significant causes of obesity in children under 10 are . . ."). In everyday life, most of us have subjects we are likely to "go off on a rant" on without much provocation: the way other people drive, politics, an annoying person at work, a frustrating roommate or relative, or the poor customer service from a phone company. When we rant, we usually do two things: we speak *personally with energy*, and we go on *at length with details*: "And then they said . . . which reminds me of another time when . . ."

Take action

"Go off on a rant" about your current topic or issue: Begin by writing about what is most bothersome, harmful, confusing, stressful, difficult, or misunderstood about it, for you, for your field/profession, or for people affected by the situation. If you don't yet feel a deep, personal attachment to the issue, try to take on the persona of someone who does, just for the sake of the experiment. Give as many vivid, specific examples as you can of what the problems are: you can prompt yourself by beginning some sentences directly with "For example, one time _____." Keep writing for at least 15-20 minutes.

Use a "freewriting" protocol: Don't worry about spelling or sentence structure, and keep writing as fast as you can. If your initial rant leads to a slightly different rant on a related topic that makes you even *more* engaged in the problem, follow the new lead, but remember that you're ranting with details, not just shouting out one opinion after another.

Aim for high energy: Try to rant at least until you hit on the part of the issue that resonates most with you—"But you know what *really* gets to me? The part where . . ."—and then stay there with as many examples as you can.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you finish, take a minute to look back to see if your rant opened up any new avenues or focal points. Since you were tapping an emotional as well as an intellectual response, you might be able to complete a sentence like this to help you (re)start your writing: "Although many people looking at _____ would focus on ___, a more pressing/interesting/relevant problem is _____."

Explore related exercises

3D Mind Map, Assumption Inspection, Subtopic Generator

27.8 Scenarios

Define your goal

Use this exercise to start, restart, or focus your inquiry or writing by vividly imagining people or situations that could be affected by issues you are inquiring or writing about.

Take action

Choose one of the scenario types listed below, and write a rich paragraph describing as many details as possible about it, as if you were looking at a snapshot or a short movie scene: the setting (including sounds and smells), what has happened just before and/or what is just about to happen, the people present and absent (their ages, occupations, cultural backgrounds, and goals or needs), and any relevant thoughts, emotions, and or dialogue among them.

Try not to create a stereotype, since that will tempt you to generalize rather than dig for interesting details. If you imagine a family having dinner, don't just give them one son and one daughter; if you imagine a workplace, don't just imagine straight middle-class white men in ties.

- **Issue or problem scenario**: Imagine a scene in which the effects of what you are writing about are clearly evident. When you decided to write about this issue, or when you start to think about it as taking place in the real world, what kind of setting and people enter your mind's eye?

- **Solution or field-test scenario**: Imagine a scene in which you or someone has finally been able to implement a possible intervention, field test, change in policy, or solution. When you think about the results of your best-case scenario, what precisely are you envisioning as one reasonable possible outcome in one place and/or for one person or group?

- **Opponents or deciders scenario**: Imagine a scene in which two or more people who oppose or resist your argument or perspective—or two or more people who have the power to make changes to help you—are having an ordinary moment in their day. When they're not directly focused on your issue, what *are* they focused on? What do you see going on around them that is part of their daily world?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you've finished writing your scenario, write yourself a note: what are two or three details you included that you could write more about, research more about, or use to help you frame your arguments more carefully as you work on your project? How so?

Explore related exercises

Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Counterargument Generator, Seven Generations

27.9 Seven Generations
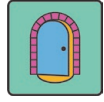
Define your goal

Use one of the exercises below to begin generating ideas about your project or issue, or to generate additional or refreshed ideas at any point in a writing process, without worrying about evaluating or organizing those ideas.

The exercises are ordered from those providing less structure to those providing slightly more structure:

- Freewrite
- Video/Audio Log
- Loop
- Macro/Micro
- Lists
- Bubble Mapping
- Draw it

Background

Go easy and go long: Generational writing (or spoken journaling) has two key principles: in order to create a lot of ideas at one sitting, or to get unstuck when you feel stuck, you need to go easy and go long.

- To go easy, you need to set aside your internal censors and lower some of your picky standards: don't worry about whether your sentences are complete, your words are precisely the right ones, your structure makes sense, or your commas are in the correct places. It's ok to veer onto a tangent, change your mind, or leave part of an exercise underdeveloped.

- To go long, you need to commit to adding more to any one exercise than you think you need: spend a full 20 or 30 minutes without being distracted by a phone or social media site, and keep generating material into a third or fourth level so that you get past what you already knew you knew about your topic/issue into what you didn't really know you knew or were interested in about it. Keep asking yourself: **what else?**

Take action

Freewrite just to gain ideas: Freewriting (sometimes called "brainstorming") is the most open-ended type of generational writing, designed primarily to increase

your overall fluency as a writer. In true freewriting, you don't even focus on a particular writing project; you simply take out a pen or open a document and begin writing about whatever you are thinking about that day or hour. Your goal is to bring your brain back into a writing mode of any sort, so that when you go back to work on your project, you'll be warmed up and more prepared to make a contribution. In project-based freewriting, you could instead choose to begin writing with a sentence or question that currently interests you about your topic or issue: "I think ____ is important because _____ ." Either way, you then need to keep writing as quickly as you can for a full 15-20 minutes or more (set a timer if it helps). Remember that your goal here is *generation* of ideas, not the creation of perfect designs.

- As you write, keep writing. Don't pause and stare into space: If you can't think of anything to write, write the sentence "I can't think of anything else to say" several times until you come up with a more interesting sentence to write—even if the new sentence feels off-topic from where you were previously.

- Don't cross words out or delete them; don't look up a synonym or worry about punctuation. If you need to freewrite in a language other than English so that you have better access to your ideas, you can try that.

- If you run out of things to say about one idea, you can just move on to the next one: "Anyway, another thing I wanted to say is . . ."

Reflect to learn and connect

When your time is up, you can look back and underline or highlight two or three phrases that you like the best.

Take action

Start a video log, audio journal, or interview to talk it out: If you want to generate material but the thought of another empty page or blinking cursor wears you out, you might try using your phone or computer to record yourself in a spoken "freetalking" exercise, either audio or video. Make sure you're ready to capture at least 10-15 minutes' worth of your think-aloud ideas (set a timer!). For some people, the protocols for freewriting are enough to get them started: begin with a few sentences about what is on your mind (perhaps related to your writing project), and *keep talking*, not worrying about whether the ideas are exactly relevant or the sentences are correct and precise, until your timer runs out.

- Don't pause or censor what you say; if you get stuck, say, "I can't think of anything to say about ____" several times until you start to think of something else you could say that's at least a little more interesting to you.

- If you're feeling awkward, you can imagine you're being interviewed as an "expert in the field" or a first-hand witness, and the interviewer has just

asked you a basic question about how or why you got interested in an area, or what you think is important for others to know about it. If you run out of things to say, imagine the interviewer saying, "That's fascinating; what else can you tell us about it?" so that you can respond, "Well, another thing is . . ." and keep talking.

Reflect to learn and connect

When your time is up (and 10 minutes talking to yourself can seem like a long time!), stop. You can immediately replay the recording and copy down a few ideas that you liked best—or if it feels odd to listen to yourself right away, you can come back in a while and, with a little more emotional distance, treat your recording like any other source you might find online that may have a few good ideas you can take away.

Take action

Write in loops to gain more focus: Looping is like freewriting with a tour guide added in to point out exciting attractions, so you can give yourself a little more direction. For this approach, you will need at least 20-30 minutes and a timer that you can set to go off (so you're not distracted by constantly checking the clock). Looping resembles freewriting, though most often writers use it to try to focus on a specific topic rather than to write about whatever is on their mind at the moment.

- **Write:** Set your timer for 5 or 10 minutes and write about your topic or issue, using the freewriting rules described above: no stopping, no worrying, no fixing, no deleting. Produce as much writing as you can.
- **Refocus**: Stop when the timer goes off. Reread what you've written, and underline or highlight a short phrase (maybe 4-8 words) that you think best gets to the heart of what you want to share with your audience.
- **Write:** Copy that key phrase on a new line, take a minute to focus on exactly what it suggests and what questions it raises, reset your timer for 5-10 minutes, and write what now comes to mind that is connected exactly to your key phrase.
- **Repeat** at least twice more: Choose a key phrase from the most recent stage of writing you completed, copy it, focus on it, and write about it for 5-10 minutes. At each stage, you should be generating not just a collection of ideas, but an increasingly focused group of ideas and sentences.

Reflect to learn and connect

When your time is up, look back through all your stages and underline or highlight any additional sentences you like the best.

Take action

Move from macro to micro to gain perspective: A more specific version of looping uses a micro-to-macro structure or a macro-to-micro structure. The basic expectations of freewriting and looping apply: you will need at least 20-25 minutes, and you will need to write as much and as quickly as you can, without worrying about perfect sentences or precise relevance from one thought to the next.

- **Micro to macro**: Choose a *very tiny* single element related to your issue, topic, or project: one person/place/object, one day or moment, one small fact or statistic, even a single word.

  - **Write**: Set your timer for 5-10 minutes, and write as much as you can about what you know or what you wonder about that tiny element, just the element in itself.

  - **Refocus**: Widen your perspective just a little bit. Don't go from one frog to the whole biosphere, or one failed product to the overall gross domestic product measurement of the US. Instead, consider adding just one more element (a second kind of frog), or a second kind of perspective (historical, regional, financial) to "ripple outward" just one level from your first vision. Set your timer for 5 minutes; write down what you've added; and then write as much as you can about your slightly larger picture. What new conflicts or opportunities come to mind, and what questions or issues could you pursue?

  - **Repeat** at least twice: Make the scene just a little larger each time, set your timer for 5 minutes, and write quickly and without censoring what you write.

- **Macro to micro**: Choose a *really large aspect* of your issue: a philosophical question, the big disagreement, the most famous scenario, the angle that affects thousands or millions of people, the ultimate problem.

  - **Write**: Set your timer for 5-10 minutes and write about this big issue: How does it have so much impact? What do you know or still wonder about this macro-level scene?

  - **Refocus**: Narrow your perspective just a little bit. You could focus in on a region, group, or historical period; focus just on causes or just on effects; or focus just on one argument, theory, or solution. Set your timer for 5 minutes: what do you see when you look at this aspect more closely?

  - **Repeat** at least twice: Narrow the focus a little bit further each time, aiming to move your attention to local or individual problems, places, moments, or even single objects or words. Set your timer for 5 minutes, and write quickly without censoring what you write.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, look back over what you've written and underline or highlight your best sentences.

Take action

Write a list (or two) to cover as much ground as possible: Generative writing does not need to involve sentences. In the simplest form of idea generation, all you need to write is a list of words or phrases that you associate with the issue or topic you're interested in.

- **Go extremely easy**: Allow yourself to add anything at all to your lists, even if some items initially seem silly, inappropriate, or even impossible.

- **Go extremely long**: Your lists need to have 20, 30, or maybe 50 or more items on them. (If you write a list of 5 or 10 items, you'll only be writing down what you already know that you know, and so you won't generate anything new to help yourself out.) You might want to set a timer and keep listing for 20 or 25 minutes, just as you would with a more sentence-based exercise.

- **Use a targeted list to deepen your focus**: Instead of simply free-associating any words or phrases about your issue, set yourself some targets or goals: make a list of "Possible solutions," "Sensory details," "Character motivations," or "What's missing from the picture." By challenging yourself to create a long list where you originally imagined only a few options, you generate new opportunities for inquiry and development.

- **Use comparative lists to jump-start your analysis**: Line up a few targeted lists to create a comparison: the most common of these is a "Pro" list matched with a "Con" list to present arguments for and against a proposal. However, you might get more mileage out of a three-way or four-way comparison that breaks open any black-and-white thinking a writer could get trapped in: list solutions for Local, Regional, and National organizations to consider; list what happens Before, During, and After a key event; list the possible effects of a decision on four different groups of stakeholders such as Teachers, Students, Parents, and Community Members.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're all out of ideas, or your timer goes off, go back and circle several items that you might want to explore further. (You can also draw some lines or circles to connect similar items, or write yourself some sentences about trends or patterns you see emerging in your list.)

Take action

Draw a bubble map to grow beyond preconceptions: Sometimes a list or even a collection of lists is too linear: you want to spread out on a page in multiple directions to grow your ideas across multiple connections. (See <u>Six Structures</u> for ways to use a similar approach to focus on organization and relationships, and see <u>3D Mind Map</u> for ways to use this approach to move toward analysis and insight.)

As with a list, you need to *go extremely easy* and *go extremely long.* You need to allow yourself to add anything at all to your map, even if some items initially seem silly or inappropriate, and you need to spread out: six or seven idea-circles around every key idea, and four or five rings or layers of circles expanding out from the middle. The first one or two ideas you think of at each point will be what you (and many other people) already know; your more interesting generations will come as you push yourself to add more ideas onto your page or screen.

- **Set the context**: Draw or insert a circle and write/type your main topic inside it. (In a word processing document, you can just insert text-boxes without circles. If you use a prefabricated mapping tool, look for one that isn't just top-down or left-right, because your ideas may need to go in multiple directions.)
- **Identify some connected elements**: Around that circle, draw at least 5-7 lines leading to new circles; inside those secondary circles, write ideas, questions, or descriptors that are related ideas or subtopics—even if they feel only distantly related—to the main circle.
- **Repeat at least two more layers**: Around many of the secondary circles, draw several lines leading to new circles. Focus on *unexpected* ideas that might not have occurred to you before. Ask yourself, "who, what, where, when, why, how many, what kinds, who cares?" and especially, "what *else* might connect?" Try to generate as many ideas as you can, even if you think they might not be exactly right for your project. (You don't need to generate lines from every circle, or to have the same number of ideas each time.)
- **Allow your ideas to grow**: If one cluster of circles starts to capture your attention, feel free to spend more time on that area. If you need more paper, get some, or if you need to move to a new page in your document, do it: don't let your tools limit your thinking!

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, you might circle the clusters that caught your attention most, and/or write a few sentences about trends or patterns you see emerging on your page(s).

Take action

Draw images to use alternate parts of your brain: You can generate ideas for writing by combining words with images, or even by moving away from words altogether. You can bring out your paints and glitter pens, or you can just do simple sketches. As long as you can recognize what you are drawing for yourself, your work will be successful. Your goal is still to notice and note down aspects of your topic or issue that you might not have seen before, or seen in a particular way, and you need to invest enough time and playfulness—to go long and go easy—to allow yourself to generate truly new ideas.

- **Draw literally**: In some cases, you can generate ideas by drawing (part of) something related to your writing. Perhaps you can draw a single scene related to a key event or solution. Or you can draw a common setting, a tool or object, or someone performing an action that is relevant to your writing.

- **Draw imaginatively**: You might also consider drawing a pair or series of pictures: one representing the current state and one representing what you hope or recommend for the future, or scenes representing the views of different stakeholders. Your goal as you draw is to consider the details you need to add and the relationships among the parts of your picture: even if a scene is vivid in your mind, reproducing it on paper can make you more aware of what is present and absent, and how different parts work together.

- **Draw metaphorically**: If you try to imagine your topic or project as if it were a familiar object—a house, a town, a human body, a bicycle, a tree—you can sketch that object and then begin to label its parts as if they were subtopics or parts of your writing project. What might be the "front door" of your proposal, the "head" of your essay, the "side streets" of your memoir? Try to add more details as you go: give the town a supermarket and a school, or give the house several bedrooms and a living room with several couches, and ask yourself what ideas these could represent.

- **Draw abstractly**: You can use circles, squares, stars, and wavy lines to help you create a map or diagram of what the pieces of the problem are, or what the pieces of the solution might be. What ideas are close to one another, and what ideas are farther away? Which are larger or smaller?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you've finished your sketch or drawing, add some circles or arrows to note the key features that you want to write about, and/or write yourself a few sentences about details or trends that you noticed while you were drawing.

Explore related exercises

Elevator Speech, Six Structures, Subtopic Generator

27.10 Shrunken Draft

Define your goal

Use this exercise to minimize your current draft so that you can gather a sense of what its core elements are, the better to prioritize, rearrange, and/or refocus the overall document.

Take action

State your purpose: Without looking back at your document, write 2-3 sentences that explain what you most want to convey to your audience or persuade them to believe or act on.

Shrink your document: Use one of the strategies below to condense your current document to a collection of sentences, about one sentence per paragraph or one per every two paragraphs.

- **Extraction version**: Take out a blank page or open a new document. If you'd like, you can have a copy of your current draft, print or on screen, nearby so you can glance at it.
  - Write out, in informal language, a short sketch of your document: if it is under 2000-3000 words, you will probably write one sentence for every paragraph or so in the original.
  - Do not reread and copy the original: just glance over if you need to so you can remind yourself what comes next. Remember that you're not including all the details, just the main arguments or key explanations ("Then it's important to know how the candidate selection process concludes").
  - Do not add sentences to describe paragraphs that do not yet exist in your draft. Do add in the statement of purpose you wrote earlier.
- **Evaporation version**: Open your document on your screen, and save a new copy of it. Delete all but one sentence of every paragraph—the sentence that best conveys what that paragraph is about. Do not add any sentences to sum up paragraphs or convey information that is not already present in your draft. Do add in the statement of purpose you wrote earlier.

Analyze the bones: Read your shrunken draft out loud to yourself, and write yourself several notes about what you notice about it.

- **Check your focus**: Which of the points you most want to convey to your readers seem underrepresented or absent? Which if any points are repeated and might be deleted or condensed? Are there any other points you would like to be more direct about, or to provide more evidence for?

- **Check your structure**: If you were going to rearrange these points, what might be one alternate arrangement? If you were going to split one of these points into two parts, which one might you split, and how?

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with some suggestions to yourself for revising the full-scale draft: what do you want to try when you go back to it?

Explore related exercises

Explode a Moment, Subtopic Generator, Ten Directed Revisions

27.11 Six Structures

Define your goal

Use this exercise to begin creating structures that can organize your project at the beginning, or to generate additional structural options at any point in a writing process, without worrying about evaluating or following through on all the ideas you identify. The six options here are presented from *strictly structured* to *more loosely structured*:

- Outline
- Tree
- Bubble Map
- Classification
- Timeline
- Comparison Grid

Background

Go easy and go long. Organizational writing has two key principles: in order to create a lot of options at one sitting, or to get unstuck when you feel stuck, you need to go easy and go long.

- **Go easy**: Set aside your internal censors and lower some of your picky standards. Don't worry about whether the ideas in a cluster are exactly parallel, or your responses repeat themselves sometimes.
- **Go long**: Commit to adding more words or levels to any one exercise than you think you need. You should write quickly and spend at least a full 20 or 30 minutes without being distracted by a phone or social media site. Keep representing material into a third or fourth tier at each stage, and always look for cross connections or opportunities for reorganizing, so

that you get past *what you knew you knew* about your topic/issue into *what you didn't really know you knew or were interested in* about it. Keep asking yourself: how else could this work?

Take action

Outline: You can use pen(cil) and notebook paper, but also consider using your word processor's automatic outlining setting for ease of re-ordering, or alternately consider using colored markers or bright sticky notes on large paper to engage your visual brain. Although you may have learned rules or steps for making a traditional outline, such as "start at the beginning and work to the end" or "every 'A' must have a 'B,'" you can ignore these steps and write quickly and easily when you are writing to learn.

Start anywhere! You may start by listing out all the main points you can think of; by naming one major point and listing all the sub-points of that idea you can think of; by writing your main argument at the top and your main conclusions at the bottom; or any other easy starting point. Sometimes you can leave an "A" all by itself; other times, you will write "A" through "M" or even "Q." (If you get to "Q," you might consider refocusing your whole project right on that sub-issue!)

- **Use more words**: In order to pull information out of your brain and onto the page, use long phrases or even sentences whenever you can. For instance, under the header "rebuilding downtown after the hurricane" don't just write "poor" and "middle class" but write "poor people will need subsidies?" and "middle class households will file insurance claims" to remind yourself what you might investigate.

- **Use more categories** at each stage than you think you'll need: more main topics, more sub-topics, more sub-sub-topics (go ahead and add "rich people: will they even come back?" and "what happened to unhoused or food-insecure people?" to the downtown rebuilding list, even if you're not sure you'll investigate those issues). The extra lines may trigger you to think of an angle that's more interesting than you had originally considered—or they may simply help you create a fuller picture for your readers.

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Take action

Tree: If you like the orderly concept of an outline, but keeping track of 1's and 2's and A's and B's isn't for you, you might prefer to work with a tree—or to use

one of your word processor's line-and-box charts (Microsoft Word calls this "SmartArt").

- **Start simply**: On paper, you might want start in the middle (perhaps arranging a sheet in wide or "landscape" orientation) with the tree on its side growing from left to right. Add your first line or box, the trunk, naming your main issue, question, or argument. (Your tree can also grow from the top or from the bottom.)

- **Branch out** from that start point with several lines to connect to your major issues, and branch out from each of those to sub-topics, and so on. Write quickly, without worrying about correctness.
  - Use any order, and remember that you do not have to spend equal amounts of time on all of the parts of the tree. Indeed, you might discover that one branch has enough ideas to support your project all by itself.
  - Use more words: if you're writing about Hegel's philosophy or patent-office applications, you may need to leave enough space on your branches or in your boxes for full intelligent phrases that capture your whole thought, such as "phenomenology of spirit" or "affirmative act by inventor."

- **Go to the smaller branches**: Challenge yourself to create more sub-topics and more sub-sub-topics than you think you'll really need. Before you leave a branch, ask yourself: can I think of any other issue? Do any of these issues have questions or sub-issues I can think of that interest me? What about sub-sub-sub-issues? Most people agree that the great beauty of trees lies in their leaves and blossoms, far out away from the trunk: push your thinking all the way to the tips.

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Take action

Bubble map: If you want the structure of a tree but you want more freedom to connect in multiple directions, you can create a bubble-map, mind-map, or cluster chart. You can draw with pencil on paper (or use colored pencils or markers, or use colored sticky notes), or use the mapping function of your word processor, or search online for a free mind-mapping program. (See Seven Generations for ideas about how to use this mapping approach in a more generative way, or 3D Mind Map for ideas about using bubble-mapping to

generate deeper analysis or insight.)

- **Set the context**: Draw or insert a circle and write/type your main topic inside it. (In a word processing document, you can just insert text-boxes without circles. If you use a prefabricated mapping tool, look for one that isn't just top-down or left-right, because your ideas may need to go in multiple directions.)

- **Identify the main subtopics**: Around that circle, draw at least 5-7 lines leading to new circles; inside those secondary circles, write ideas or questions that can serve as subtopics to the main circle. Try to imagine how your issue is made up of many smaller pieces: what steps, causes, effects, people, problems, or solutions catch your attention? You might ask yourself, "who, what, where, when, why, how many, what kinds, who cares?" or especially, "What else has an impact?"

- **Use more words**: You may be writing about complex issues such as the problems of genetically modified agriculture or the challenges of water conservation, and so you'll need to leave space to use sentences or long phrases such as "resistance from organic farmers" or "strategies for conservation in high-tech electronic manufacturing" to describe your exact ideas.

- **Narrow your focus**: Around many of the secondary circles, draw several lines leading to new circles with subtopics: again, try to focus on the *smaller parts* that contribute to each secondary issue.

- **Repeat at least two more layers**: Try to generate as many sub-issues, and sub-sub-issues as you can, even if you think they might not be exactly right for your project. If one cluster of circles starts to capture your attention, feel free to spend more time on that part of the map. If you need more paper, get some, or if you need to move to a new page in your online document, do it: don't let your tools limit your thinking.

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Take action

Classification: Your ability to classify what you see serves as a core survival strategy: these plants are edible, those aren't; these animals will try to kill you, those won't. Being able to classify and reclassify elements of the issues you're investigating for your writing task can also be a survival strategy, because the first way you think about organizing your project might not be the best way to present it to your readers.

- **Identify possible subsections**: As you think about classifications—which we often consider as "kinds of ___" or "types of ___" or "parts of ___"— you might want to consider the following possible ways to break out your issue: Time periods, locations, important people or groups of people affected, possible causes, possible effects, recommendations or goals, questions to pose, the 5 best/worst ___ , the 4 most/least important (or surprising) ___ , overlooked points, connections or patterns, personal favorites. You might set each list out in parallel columns:

Category A	Category B	Category C	Category D
item/idea	item/idea	item/idea	item/idea
item/idea	item/idea	item/idea	item/idea
item/idea	item/idea	item/idea	item/idea

- **Extend your lists**: Write as many items under each category as you can, even if some of them seem a bit obvious or a bit silly at first, so that you are stretching your brain and writing to learn.

- **Try adding one extra subsection**: If you created three, add a fourth, and list some ideas under it. You can either split one category into two (going from "Past/Present/Future" to "Past/Present/Near Future/Distant Future) or find a separate subtopic (going from "Pro/Con/Don't care" to "Pro/Con/Don't know/Don't care")

- **Try at least one alternate structure**. Just as there are lots of ways to organize your heap of laundry into separate piles (by color, by how dirty items are, by which items you need for tomorrow and which can wait, by how long they will take to dry), there are lots of ways to classify elements of your issue. Instead of arranging ideas according to the "Past/Present/Future" of a problem, could you classify "Easy solutions/Medium-hard solutions/Challenging solutions" to the problem?

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Take action

Timeline: If you're working with a narrative, analyzing a text in which the order of events is important, discussing a complicated process or instructions, or creating arguments that depend on knowing and explaining how actions will cause or have caused results, you may want to draft a careful timeline to help visualize the sequence of events. Your timeline may not necessarily structure your whole

project—not all documents are 100% chronological in their final presentation—but knowing the sequence clearly in your head can help you with other kinds of structures as well.

- **Start any time!** You can start your timeline at any point, and you can work forward and/or backward. Because of that option, and because you will want to push yourself toward digging for more details, you should leave yourself extra space on any page—physical or on-screen—around every incident you add, so you can write down new information later. If you need to get extra paper or add pages or sticky-notes, do so!

- **Extend beyond immediate events**. In order for a timeline to help you learn, you should push your brain in at least one of three ways beyond writing down events as they ordinarily occur to you ("this happened, then that, then the next thing").

- **Go far**: Extend both past and future as far as possible, even if you have to begin to use your imagination because you do not have specific data.

- **Get detailed**: You should fill in the intermediary steps whenever possible: what comes between lunch and dinner, between the wind-up and the pitch, between inhaling and exhaling? Again, you may not know for sure, but trying to imagine what else could occur will help you help your reader consider additional possibilities.

- **Find alternatives**: Consider branching into alternate timelines, such as tracing different (hypothetical) causes, or considering what would happen if other choices (had) led to different consequences?

- **Use phrases and sentences** to explain moments or events: if you are describing how to grow a cell culture or analyzing the effects of divorce proceedings on adolescents, you may need room for longer phrases such as "perform filter sterilization" or "assess contributions of personality dispositions.

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Take action

Comparison: When you know that your project relies in some way on a basic two-part classification—you have arguments for and against a policy; you are comparing two products, performances, or services; you have to assess "before" and "after" scenarios—you can create a comparison grid to help you map out your ideas. You may already have worked with a technique like this before: now

your goal is to use advanced writing strategies to gain the most write-to-learn benefits from your work while staying organized.

- **Set your columns**: You will find it simple to set up a comparison grid on paper or screen, whether you simply divide your writing space into two columns or create a full table like this one:

Product A / Before / Pro	Product B / After / Con
Idea 1A	Idea 1B
Idea 2A	
	Idea 3B
Idea 4B	Idea 4A

- **Use the structure to spark thinking**: Both columns are important individually and as they reflect one another, so you should try to have ideas be similar from side to side. You should leave space between items if you are writing on paper, and be ready to add space or relocate lines if you are writing on screen. After all, Product A and Product B may not lead you to think the same way. You may come up with features of Product B that you didn't notice originally about A, but that apply, so you should spend separate time on your second list, not just write it as a mirror of the first. (You might also have features of A that aren't present in B, or vice versa.)
- **Build more subtopics**: Your goal in a comparison grid, as with any other structure exercise, is to consider as many sub-areas and sub-sub-areas as possible, so that you stretch your brain beyond the first five elements that you already know you know. Remember to represent each idea in fully complicated phrases or sentences: if the supporting arguments for a new community garden include "teaching children the value of patience" and counterarguments include concerns about "reduced funding for summer teen basketball league," don't just say "kids" and "sports."

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Explore related exercises

Lowest Common Denominator, Problem Solver Parallels, Source Synthesis Grid

27.12 Subtopic Generator

Define your goal

Use this exercise to turn up the microscope magnification on your question, issue, concern, or topic so that you can see the parts or sub-issues that comprise it, in order to focus your attention for research, paragraph development, or project-narrowing.

Take action

Divide: Choose one of the division strategies below and generate a list of 5-7 possible subtopics that fit that category. Try to make at least one or two subtopics surprising or "out on a limb": groups or issues that are so small or overlooked or unusual that not many people might even consider them.

Sub-divide: Circle 3-4 of the new subtopics that you just created that you're interested in. Pick **one** of them and use a category below to subdivide it even further, at least 3-5 ways.

Re-divide: Repeat Round 1 and Round 2 with a different division strategy.

Evaluate: Choose any of your new subtopics or sub-subtopics, and write a short paragraph: What images come to mind when you think about this sub-issue? What do you already know is the most interesting problem or question for this sub issue? How does it connect to what your readers know or need to know? What might you have to find out if you were going to write more about this?

- **Subdivide by time**. What happens or should happen first, second, third, and forth? Alternately, what happened a long time ago, several years ago, a few days ago, yesterday? What might happen tomorrow, in a week, in ten years? (What's the smallest subdivision of time that will make a difference in your topic/issue?)

- **Subdivide by place**. What different locations are affected, and how are they affected differently? These may be different geographical regions (Virginia, California); different of environments (rural, suburban, urban); different nations, climates, or schools; different corners of a meadow or different quadrants of a painting. (How small can you go before two places are affected exactly the same way?

- **Subdivide by causes or effects**. What are the various forces, events, people, laws, or actions that have led to this situation? What are the most immediate causes, the causes of those causes, and the distant causes? What will be the most immediate effects, locally and nearby, on different groups or organizations; what will be later effects, and much later effects? (Are you sure you've got all the interesting causes, that no other factors—time,

money, temperature, politics, personality, chance, or skill were involved? Have you considered all the effects of interest to all your readers, especially your critical or resistant ones?)

- **Subdivide by people**. Which groups of people have power to make changes, and which groups of people are affected? Consider dividing people by age, gender, occupation, or other identity. Consider formal organizations or officials; consider small groups that are often overlooked. Consider groups that were involved in the past and others that will soon be involved; consider groups that are local and ones that are distant but still affected. Might you even imagine a specific (real or hypothetical) individual, on a Tuesday afternoon?

- **Subdivide by types of ___**. You invent "types of ___" every day to organize your world: types of freeway drivers, types of cellphone users, types of dogs at a dog park, types of obstacle walls in a video game. What "types of ___" are there in your topic area: types of cell formations, types of client behavior, types of college student stress, types of sales strategies, types of coding errors?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, identify at least one subtopic that surprised or intrigued you, and write a note about how you could follow up to read or write more about it.

Explore related exercises

Explode a Moment, Gray-Area Finder, Three Cubes

27.13 Three Cubes

Define your goal

Use this exercise to help you generate more ideas about your topic by moving into more thorough and analytical thinking. The six-sided cube approach is designed specifically to enable you to see more than "two sides" to the issue you are writing about.

Take action

Choose a cube exercise from the list below, and explore each of the six ways of inquiring that it presents. Remember the key principles of idea-generation.

- **Go easy**: Do not worry about whether you are writing correctly or answering the question precisely the right way or staying exactly on topic, and if you run out of things to say you can write "I can't think of anything to say."

- **Go long**: Try to answer each part of the "cube" with at least a full sentence or two or a long list, digging down to think of all the possible ways you

can reply to that prompt. Instead of just listing one person for "who," for instance, list everyone that occurs to you: remember, it's not until *after* you've written down the obvious answers that you start to benefit from the time you spend freewriting.

Reporter's Cube for Better Explanations: Write a sentence that explains your issue, argument, question, or goal with your current writing project. Then write at least 2-3 sentences in response to each of the six questions of the cube.

- **Who** is involved in this issue? Who has power, who is affected, who is obviously important, who might be overlooked, who are you knowledgeable/curious about, who will your readers care about, who should be contacted for more information, who else needs to be considered?

- **What** is the main idea/question/problem that you are most curious about or interested in? What will readers be most interested in? What caused it and what will it lead to? What's controversial or fascinating about it? What's known or overlooked about it?

- **Where** are the events related to this idea/issue, or the people most connected to it, located or most likely to be found? In what settings—countries, cities, buildings, businesses, rooms—does it become most valuable or relevant? Where is it least valuable or relevant?

- **When** did this idea/issue/question first become important? When did key events happen that readers should know about? When did you first become aware of or interested in it? When do you expect a change? When will it no longer be important/interesting?

- **Why** is this idea/issue/question interesting, important, controversial, valuable, noticeable? Why does it happen or not happen, to/with some people and not others, in some situations and not others? Why do some people support or engage with is and others don't? Why are you writing about it, and why should readers take note?

- **How** does this idea/issue/question work, function, come into being, survive, affect people, improve or complicate our world? *How much* . . . of it is there . . . money or time will it take . . . effort will be needed? *How many* . . . people will be involved. . . parts does it have . . . steps will be needed? *How long* . . . has it taken to get this far . . . will it take to get to the next stage . . . do we have before real change is needed?

Analyst's Cube for Wider Thinking: Write a sentence that explains your issue, argument, question, or goal with your current writing project. Then write at least 2-3 sentences in response to each of the six questions of the cube.

- **Describe** your object/idea/issue/question, or a one-person scenario related to it: give as much rich, concrete detail as you can. What exactly do you know about what this looks like, feels like, smells like, sounds like? If

you—or someone you know—had to live an hour right in the middle of it, what would that hour be like? What is the tiniest detail you can imagine, and the most powerful force involved?

- **Compare** your object/idea/issue/question, or contrast it: what is it like or not like? You can compare it to something reasonable and literal (skydiving is a little like jumping off a diving board) or you can compare it to something much more metaphorical (skydiving is like hanging in blue space waiting for the earth to come get you). Stay with the comparison for several points: exactly how are the two ideas alike and how are they different?

- **Associate** your object/idea/issue/question with anything else that you connect it to: what does it remind you of? What other people, places, events, or objects seem linked to it? What larger issues or smaller issues does it connect to? When your readers think of it, what else will they likely think of?

- **Analyze** your object/idea/issue/question: break it down and discuss its parts and how they add up to the whole. Consider what causes it or what its effects are. What are some separate qualities of it that make it better or worse than average? What features stand out, and which ones get overlooked?

- **Apply** your object/idea/issue/question: when it's "in the real world," what is it actually doing, or how might it function? Who benefits from it, now, and who doesn't? (How about in the past or in the future?) What might make it more effective, powerful, ethical, accessible, or renewable?

- **Argue** about your object/idea/issue/question: what do you want to claim about its value, its effects, its past or future, the right or wrong way to view it? What might others claim in return?

Negotiator's Cube for Expanded Problem Solving: Write a sentence that explains your issue, argument, question, or goal with your current writing project. Then write at least 2-3 sentences in response to each of the six questions of the cube.

- **Argue**: State your main argument, your main reasons for it, the main evidence or groups or stakeholders that support that argument. Why are you committed to this argument? Why should readers be committed to it?

- **Counter-argue**: State the most reasonable and most powerful core argument(s) or resistances against your argument. Give the reason(s) for it/them, the main evidence that you can guess at or might need to find, the groups or kinds of people who support this position. Imagine why intelligent people hold this position (through ignorance of facts, emotional or intellectual commitment to another view/backstory, lack of resources to make a change, etc.)

- **See people**: List as many individual people, titles of people, kinds or groups of people, or locations of people, that were/are connected to or were/will be affected by this argument as you can. Who will/would benefit from one outcome vs. another? Try to consider people unlike the ones who first occurred to you, or people who are often less visible or have less voice: people with more or less money, more or less power, older or younger, of different social backgrounds, who will also be affected, and explain how.

- **See power**: List as many people, titles of people, offices, or organizations that have the power to take some action regarding this situation as you can. Perhaps they can take personal action; perhaps they have the resources to create action on a larger scale or to foster group collaboration for problem solving. Identify what each person/group might accomplish.

- **See possibilities**: A "pro-con" argument with "two sides" assumes a limited set of options: "burgers vs. pizza" for dinner assumes there's no option for tofu stir fry; "environment vs. jobs" assumes that there are no jobs in the environmental energy industry. Look for at least two or three ways to increase the possibilities in your original pro-con, even if you have to invent something that isn't quite real or take a risk you're not certain is worthwhile: what if there were (somehow) more time, more funding, more space, more people, more compromise, more choices, better technology, more collaboration, less pressure to change everything at once? What "third side" might one of the people you described above offer?

- **Create a winning vision**: What might a win-win scenario look like? In a "pro-con" argument, the goal is often to subdue your opponent at all costs; in a negotiation, the goal can be to create a long-term solution in which the most possible people get closest to their needs and values. Describe at least one scenario or argument different from your original claim that could allow multiple groups or stakeholders to believe that they had gained something of value from the solution or change that had been achieved.

Reflect to learn and connect

As you finish your cube, take a few minutes to write yourself some notes. Which of your sentences gave you new ways to consider your issue and your writing project? Which suggested lines of inquiry you might need to investigate further? What's one way you might revise your main argument or thesis to reflect your new awareness?

Explore related exercises

3D Mind Map, Expand and Narrow, Question Ladders

Chapter 28. Exercises for Revising

We can think about "exercises" two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn't happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we're stuck, we don't have "writer's block"—instead, we just have a problem we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can

633

help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- **D**efining a problem,
- **E**xploring some options for addressing it,
- **A**cting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- **L**earning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

Avoid high expectations

Practice may "make perfect," but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the "right" answers. Just keep writing answers.

Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer.

28.1 Add/Move/Change/Delete

Define your goal

Identify some options for revising your writing.

Background

When writers revise, we tend to wait until we spot an obvious problem before we change anything. In that approach, we miss out on less obvious (to us) problems, and we might entirely overlook our opportunities for growth in places that don't need "fixing." This exercise creates arbitrary problems for you to consider; your goal is to decide if in solving them, you actually create a stronger piece of writing. If not, you can always undo the revision—but in the process, you gain mental muscles for controlling your writing.

Take action

Set up: Print or save a copy of your document, so that if you decide you don't really like any of these revisions, you can revert to your original. Then try at least 3-4 rounds of add/move/change/delete: You can use each level once, or repeat a level with a different part of your draft.

Level 1: Revise a sentence for precision. In a key sentence such as your first or last sentence, your main argument, or an important claim statement, *add* one word, *move* one word, *change* one word to a more effective word, and *delete* one word. Repeat for other key sentences as needed.

Level 2: Revise a paragraph for cohesion. In one body paragraph, *add* one sentence to provide clarification or more evidence; *move* one sentence to help guide the reader better; *change* one sentence in terms of its content or structure (you could split it or combine with another, rearrange its parts, or have it include more or better information); and *delete* one sentence.

Yes, for the purposes of the exercise, you have to determine which sentence is the "weakest of the herd" that you would delete, even if you are proud of all of your sentences, and even if you are sure that you need every sentence. For the purposes of the exercise, these must be four different sentences: this is how writers push ourselves to look honestly at our work and try to improve even when we think we are working at a high level. In your *real* revision, you can revise rather than cut a sentence, and you can modify rather than add a sentence; the extremes of the exercise are designed to help you see the fault lines rather than glossing over them.

Level 3: Revise a document for emphasis and clarity. Considering your whole essay, you can either start to make these paragraph-level changes in the text or write a note in the margin. Identify a paragraph that you should probably *add* so that your major ideas have the necessary effects on your readers—and explain what it would be about, and where it would go. Write a note about a paragraph that you could or should *move*: where would it go, and how could it help the reader to encounter it earlier or later? Write a note about how you could significantly *change* a paragraph for the better: would you shorten or lengthen it, emphasize your argument or evidence, or alter the tone or voice? Finally, write a note about which paragraph you would mark to *delete* right now: what is your "weakest link" paragraph, the one that is least related, most repetitive, most convoluted, or least convincing?

Again, these should be four different paragraphs, and you have to make all four decisions to complete the exercise. (You might imagine that someone is going to keep your phone in their pocket until you're done!) In your real revision, you might not add or delete a whole paragraph, but using this exercise can help you be honest about the strengths and weaknesses of your current draft. Your goal is to jolt your brain out of seeing your essay the way you've been seeing it for days

and weeks, and re-see it, so that you can revise it with the best chance of creating writing that powerfully affects your reader.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, write a few sentences as a note to yourself: what did you find yourself *adding*, *moving*, *changing*, or *deleting* at each level? Try to identify the *kind* of words, sentences, or arguments that needed more of your thinking, so you know what you should be paying attention to as you revise other parts of your essay. What writing problems were you most often solving?

Explore related exercises

Assumption Inspection, Ten Directed Revisions, Write the Problem

28.2 Best and Better

Define your goal

Use this exercise to begin revisions in a positive, focused way, drawing on your own knowledge and success.

Take action

Choose your best: Select a sentence or small section of your document that you think is already your "best" work so far: your clearest statement of your point, your most vivid or persuasive example, your most engaging description, your most smoothly integrated quotation, your best use of a semi-colon to create a complex sentence. If you don't trust yourself, you could remember what others have said about your writing in the past, or you could ask someone to tell you what they think the best sentence on your first page is, and why. Write yourself a comment in or near your document: "This is a good _____ because _____" to reinforce your success story.

Let your best help you be better: Look for a new place in your document where you could make a similar sentence or section "better," using your successful section as a model. What kind of example in your fourth paragraph would be vivid as the one in your third? How could the quotation in your second paragraph be integrated into your writing as smoothly as the one you found in your fifth paragraph? You can make the revision right now, or write yourself a note about exactly how you intend to revise: "I want this to be as _____ as my best sentence/example/paragraph, so I will try to _____."

Repeat this process at least two more times: Either find two new places for a similar "better" improvement, or find two new kinds of "best" spots to implement in your draft.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, write yourself a confidence-boosting note: "Dear self, I've no-ticed that you often do ____ pretty well; keep looking for places where you can use that strategy so that your readers will _____ more."

Explore related exercises

Genre Switch, Inside Out, Write the Problem

28.3 Boil Down

Define your goal

Use this exercise to identify the exact change that you seek to catalyze in your reader, the better to focus your writing to support that change.

Background

When we're looking at complex problems, writers can get a little lost in all of the nitty-gritty details. If *we* get lost, though, we are sure to lose our readers. So it's vital that writers take time after writing an early draft to step back and recommit to our core arguments and recommendations—or revise them if our own ideas have changed. When we "boil down" our claims to short, direct language, we can check whether we actually make those points directly to our readers.

Take action

Reconnect to your core goals: Write or copy out a one-sentence statement of your current central argument, hypothesis, or recommendation.

Consider a distracted reader: Imagine that a key reader from your primary au-dience texts you the following questions after reading your document, and that your answer is not allowed to be "Enh, I just wanted you to think about it a bit more, but I don't really care." In texting back to answer your reader, who is in a hurry, you must answer in ten or fewer words each time. If it helps, you can create a 5x10 table in your document and put one word in each box.

- What do you want me (your reader) to do now?
- Why should I do this?
- Why haven't I done this yet (probably)?
- How exactly will I benefit from doing this now?
- What evidence do you have that this action will bring those benefits?

Review your draft: Now for each question and answer, identify one sentence in your draft where you say—or come close to saying—that exact point, and copy/

paste that sentence to this exercise. For at least *one* sentence, revise so that you are more direct, more authoritative, or more specific.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, finish with a three-sentence plan: What 1-2 revisions can you make to the opening and/or closing paragraphs of your document to show readers "what you want"? What 1-2 changes could you make to the opening or closing sentences of a body paragraph, to help your reader connect your evidence to your goal? What's one place in your draft where you might need to add more data, evidence, explanation, or analysis to be persuasive?

Explore related exercises

Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Conclusion Transplant, Reason Appallingly

28.4 Conclusion Transplant

Define your goal

Use this exercise to use newfound understanding to anchor the opening sequence of a document.

Background

Since writers learn as we write, we often find ourselves writing conclusion sections that do not merely repeat what our working claims or draft introductions said, but address alternate visions, attend to richer complications, and/or present our own arguments in more direct or specific terms. These new understandings are highly valuable. *Writing your way eventually into what you most wanted to say* is not the same thing as *framing your argument for readers*, however. Most of us live and work in a culture of readers who expect to know up front what our pitch is or what our bottom line is going to be, so they know what they should focus their attention on.

Take action

Set the context: Without looking back at your draft, write a sentence that sums up what you most want to argue to readers. You might also take a minute to look back at your assignment instructions, if you have them: what focus or angle were you expected to address?

Home in on your conclusion: Review your draft, paying particular attention to the final paragraph or two—your conclusion. Copy out the 2-3 sentences or phrases from the end of your document that best match the goal statement you just wrote.

Consider a transplant: Now review your opening paragraph or two—your introduction. Copy out the 2-3 sentences in your first paragraphs that best match the concluding remarks you've been working on. If you notice that the ones at the end are more direct, more accurate, more engaging, or more complete, write a sentence about your plan for *transplanting* them to the beginning for a stronger start. Don't be afraid to modify or delete earlier intro sentences that were serving as a working thesis or introduction: they served the purpose of getting you started, but you wrote them when you knew less than you know now, and so you can set them aside.

Enhance your argument: "But what happens to my conclusion if I take out its vital sentences?" All is not lost! With a stronger introduction and in-between analysis, you can now push your conclusion a little further. Add a note about how you could enhance your concluding sentences to make your argument more direct, more tuned to your audience, or more "out on a limb."

Reflect to learn and connect

Remember that you will likely have to adjust the rest of the essay to compensate. Write a few notes about which paragraphs or sections will need some adjusting so that they better connect to your newly articulated focus.

Explore related exercises

Elevator Speech, Final Four Proofreading Moves, Old Wine, New Bottles

28.5 Diction Flexer

Define your goal

Use this exercise to explore how the language you choose for your writing project affects its meaning, effectiveness, and direction.

Take action

Set the context: Begin by writing out your main goal for your document, and briefly describe your current primary audience: what do they know and need to know, and what do you know about the discourse community they belong?

Practice flexibility: Copy out 4-6 sentences from a key section of your document: you can choose a section that you're already confident about or one that you suspect is not yet reaching your readers. Then rewrite those sentences using at least two of the approaches or registers below, using as much exaggeration as you are comfortable with. Try to choose a register that differs significantly from your current writing style.

- **Informal register**: Rewrite your sentences using only language you might use with your friends at lunch or in a text message. You might use slang or abbreviations, sentence fragments or sudden exclamations. Be sure to check all your words: don't leave in a "furthermore" or a reference to "graphical presentation" if you'd never say that in a sentence while eating popcorn with friends.

- **Clickbait register**: Rewrite your sentences in a high-energy, easy-to-understand style that dramatizes how urgent and/or beneficial your ideas are. You may need to cut out some specifics and add exclamations in order to catch people's attention as they scroll through their feeds; you might need more vivid verbs or adjectives. Don't leave a flat or boring sentence, or your audience might click somewhere else!

- **High expertise register**: Rewrite your sentences using as much relevant jargon ("the small perturbations of X-axis variables" or "her complex psychosomatic adaptations") as you can. You may need to go back to some of your sources or run an internet search for "expert analysis of ____" to remind yourself of some important terminology. You may also want to try combining short sentences with semicolons, *althoughs*, or "and as a result" phrasings, to emphasize how connected your analysis is.

- **Descriptive register**: Rewrite your sentences to pack in as much descriptive detail as possible. You can add or intensify your adjectives and adverbs, from "excruciating" to "enchantingly." You might also include more descriptive phrases set off with commas ("Hanssen, *a highly respected multimillionaire lawyer*, argues . . ." or "The house, *teetering on the edge of the sixty-foot-high cliff*, remains . . ."). Readers should never doubt what something looks, feels, behaves, or smells like.

- **Storybook or poster register**: Rewrite your sentences to become as short, powerful, and accessible as possible, without giving up too much important information. You may not make it all the way to "See Eli run. Run, Eli, run!" or to "Uncle Sam wants YOU—to prevent forest fires," but you should aim for concise declarations of key issues. Keep readers focused on what's most important.

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude by writing yourself a note: identify one or two goals you worked toward in your diction revisions—creating energy, showing analysis, connecting to readers, clarifying your point—that could benefit your actual writing task. Are there sections of your document (your introduction, your recommendations) where one of these registers would be appropriate? Underline or star a couple of sentences that you might keep or use as models to help you in adapting your diction to best meet the needs of your current project.

28.6 Expand and Narrow
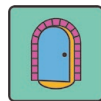
Define your goal

Use this exercise to change the focus or boundaries of the issue you're considering so that you can locate relevant information and/or make a project smaller and more manageable.

Background

You might need to expand your original vision of an issue if you find you don't have very much to say about it, if you need to connect with more readers, or if you have difficulty finding sufficient supporting data about it. Perhaps neither you nor many other people find it compelling to write just about soccer players' shoes or how two-year-olds learn verbs—but you might all find the project more engaging if you examine a larger related issue, such as sportswear marketing or pre-school language acquisition.

You might need to narrow your original vision of an issue if you find it overwhelming or too difficult to be specific about for a short project; you might also narrow so that you don't have to read a zillion sources or so you can find an angle that will intrigue your target audience. Perhaps neither you nor readers will find a new or interesting connection from a three-page report that tries to explain all of global warming or a summary of US space exploration programs—but you could more easily dig into some questions about the effects of melting Antarctic glaciers or the experiences of female astronauts after they return.

Take action

Expand: Choose two of the expansion options described below. Use at least three or four steps or layers for each one. You can write out your answers in a list, or use a tree or mind-map with lines or bubbles spreading out on a page. Challenge yourself to reach for connections, complex problems, and big ideas.

- **Who else** might be involved or affected? Can you expand by considering age, interests, or profession?
- **What other** causes or effects, problems or solutions are related? Can you expand by considering the scope of the argument?
- **Where else** is relevant or affected by this situation? Can you expand by going from states to nations or by considering international implications?
- **When**: What other timelines or eras might also be connected? Can you

expand by considering longer-term effects, or by going from the present to the past or future?

- **Why**: What bigger reasons or deeper values are relevant here? Can you expand by thinking about complex motivations people have, or by investigating more radical or profound choices that need to be made?

- **How** does this issue/idea connect to other issues you've read about, interests you have, or choices your readers need to make? Can you expand by considering a web of related concepts or problems?

Narrow: Choose two of the options described below. Use at least three or four steps or layers for each one. You can write out your answers in a list, freewrite some responses, or use a tree or mind-map with lines or bubbles spreading out on a page. Challenge yourself to go as small as you think is feasible (and maybe even one step smaller: once you start thinking about it, the inside may be bigger than you imagined).

- **Narrow by people**: What's one sub-group of people or even a single individual who might be most affected, or need to change the most? What particular aspects of your issue are relevant and not relevant to him/her/them?

- **Narrow by location**: What one city or town, one school or course, one neighborhood or street, might be affected by, or be a prime example of, the issue you're discussing? What priorities would you set for that location?

- **Narrow by timepoint**: Can you pick a decade, a year, or even a month when this issue seemed most important—or a time when the causes were just revving up, or a time when the effects were most evident? What aspects of your issue were/are most crucial to examine at that time?

- **Narrow by resources**: What if you or a person or organization in power only had a few months or weeks, only had a small group of supporters or workers, only had a very tiny amount of funding to help implement changes or improvements? What aspects of your issue might be feasible or crucial to address in that limited-resource scenario?

- **Narrow by steps**: What if your job is not to explain the whole solution, but just to get people started on the first step, or help them envision the second or third step? Sometimes it's important just to identify one cause or one solution, to gather initial evidence, or to mobilize public opinion: what are some small steps that you could focus on for your project?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, consider your current experience and your long-term experience as a writer: in the future, are you most likely to need to expand or to narrow your focus? Write yourself a note of advice for upcoming writing projects.

Explore related exercises

Cousin Topics, Date My Topic, Six Degrees

28.7 Final Four Proofreading Moves

Define your goal

Use this exercise to raise the bar for rhetorical editing and proofreading accuracy.

Background

Writers who just "look over" a document in a few minutes are likely to "overlook" both errors and inappropriate writing moves. Advanced writers know that proofreading is a rhetorical skill that requires attention to one's goals, readers, and genre. Writers also need to employ critical thinking strategies to help compensate for our tendency to read what we intended rather than what we wrote. To add final polish to a document you've already invested hours or days in composing, you need to review it using deliberate strategies appropriate to your goals.

Take action

Proofread deliberately and with focus: Choose one strategy in one of the four categories to start your review process. Spend at least 15-20 minutes just on that approach, and track the changes you make.

- **Interrupt your flow** to proofread for word-level errors
- **Choose your battles** to proofread for likely or serious problems
- **Watch your language** to proofread for powerful language use
- **Polish your front door** to proofread the sections that will make the strongest impression on readers

Proof set 1: Interrupt your flow. If your goal is primarily to identify *sentence- or word-level errors*, you'll benefit from moving your brain out of the "flow" of reading these familiar words silently from top to bottom. Research shows that readers tend to make corrections of our own writing in our heads rather than notice the errors on the page or screen. To interrupt your flow and make your sentences feel "strange" enough that you'll see what you wrote rather than what you think you wrote, try one of these strategies.

- **Read out loud, with energy**: If possible, stand up, use enough volume that your voice will carry across a room, and read dramatically—pause deliberately where you have placed punctuation, emphasize key words, and enunciate each word clearly. If you spot something, you can just highlight or circle it to return to later. This approach is particularly effective for

native speakers who may "hear" or "trip over" an error even when they don't spot it on the page.

- **Read backwards** one paragraph at a time or even one sentence at a time—use your finger on the page to hold your attention or adjust your screen size so that you can't skip around as you focus just on a small part of your text.

- **Change your view** by switching your font, your font size, your font or screen color, or your page margins, so that you are seeing your text in a fresh way. Be dramatic: go to 18- or 20-point font, or to 3" margins, so that the words and sentences fully rearrange on the page.

- **Listen to your words**: Ask your friend—or your computer—to read the text to you, while you follow along with your copy, checking that what is spoken matches what you wanted to say.

Proof set 2: Choose your battles. As you're proofreading and editing, you'll benefit from identifying and focusing on just one kind of writing challenge at a time. It's difficult to keep all possible errors at the front of your brain at once, so reviewing for just one category—especially a category that you struggle with or your readers emphasize as important—can increase your accuracy and engagement. Even though it seems like you might spend extra time by reviewing the whole document more than once, you may find that several short, targeted reviews where you look at just the relevant sentences or sections produce higher accuracy in less time.

- **Length:** Spot and review any especially long or especially short sentences that might be run-ons or fragments

- **Punctuation**: Spot and review any instance of one kind of punctuation that is troublesome for you, such as looking at each comma or each semicolon

- **Quotes**: Spot and review each quotation or in-text citation to check for punctuation or integration errors

- **Features**: Spot and review each instance of a key genre element, such as captions for pictures or graphs or sub-headers for memos or reports

- **Individual challenges**: Spot and review each instance of text that might display an error you know you personally struggle with: you could look at subject-verb agreements, pronouns, transition words, or passive verbs such as "is" or "are."

Proof set 3: Watch your language. Writers often find it difficult to choose the best words to express our ideas. Although your school teachers may have strongly encouraged you to use more sophisticated vocabulary, the "best" words aren't always sophisticated, nor do they always mean exactly what you want to say. Depending on your genre and your readers, you may need words that reveal action,

words that demonstrate expertise, words that reveal your own "voice," and/or words that connect to readers' experiences.

Try searching your document for one kind of tricky word or phrasing at a time:

- **Jargon**: Words or phrases that are highly specialized, jargony, or technical. Check whether you're sure you have (and understand) the exact right word; consider switching to a more precise or a more commonly used phrase if you think readers might not understand what you mean

- **Vague**: Words or phrases that are vague or generalized. If you see a lot of "things," "stuff," or plural statements such as "sometimes some people do some things in some ways," consider switching to a more precise or specialist phrasing or include more exact explanations ("for example, one time . . .").

- **Genre- or goal-specific**: Words or phrases that might not match your perspective, topic, genre, or readers. Perhaps for a chemistry report you should avoid "I" and "we" pronouns, but for your sociology or hotel management project you need that personal approach; perhaps for a technological instruction sheet you need specialized terms but you want your pet-sitting business brochure to use slang and informal sentences to mimic the reassuring way your grandmother talks.

- **Low-energy**: Words or phrases that slow down the reader's experience. If the genre and argument allow it, consider changing sentences with static verbs like "is," "are," "has," or "does" so that they emphasize action or processes (from "the bomb was defused" to "the SWAT team defused the bomb").

- **Repetition or unnecessary synonyms**: You want words or phrases that balance novelty and variety with clarity and precision. For instance, you may have learned already to seek ways to use synonyms to help add interest to your writing, so that you discuss "farming" but also "agriculture," "cultivation," and "harvesting." In other cases, though, you know that a giraffe is really just a giraffe and the US electoral college is always the US electoral college, and so repeating the same word gives your writing precision and cohesion.

Proof set 4: Polish your front door. If you have limited time for reviewing, you'll benefit from investing your time in sections or features that readers will pay the most attention to. Take a moment and think: when someone hands you a document to review, what parts do you notice first? What are you most likely to remember? In the document you're creating, what parts are most important for accomplishing your goals? These might include

- **First impressions**: your title and opening paragraph, or sentences that begin new sections

- **Final thoughts**: sentences at the ends of sections or the concluding section of your document

- **Argument highlights**: which sentences make your case most directly? what's your best evidence or your most compelling example?
- **High visibility sites**: do you have subheadings, graphics, or photos with captions that might catch readers' eyes?

Once you identify five or six high-priority sites, you can read those sentences slowly to catch errors—and you might also check on one or more of the following:

- **Slim down**: are you using short declarative sentences to make key points visible?
- **Draw connections**: are you using longer sentences to show how important elements connect?
- **Turn up the color**: could you switch in one more vivid verb or add more precisely descriptive language?
- **Make it pretty**: add a metaphor or other comparison, give it rhythm with a list of three or balance it in two equal sides, or use alliteration to repeat common sounds

Reflect to learn and connect

Once you've completed a round of proofreading, write yourself a note: What were the main kinds of changes you discovered you needed to make (give a few specific examples)? What are the benefits and drawbacks of the approach you just tried? In what kind of situation might you use it again, or choose a different option?

Explore related exercises

Best and Better, Ten Directed Revisions, Remix/Mashup

28.8 Inside Out

Define your goal

Use this exercise to find the essential ideas of your current draft so you can foreground them.

Take action

Find the inside scoop: Review your current draft, looking for your most essential, fundamental sentences *aside from the sentence(s) you currently consider your "thesis."* You're looking to highlight or underline about 4-5 sentences; each one should meet some of or all of the following conditions:

- It was written by you, not quoted from someone else's writing.
- It "rings true" to your experience, your position, your understanding of the issue at hand, without dodging or hedging or qualifying.

- It is a sentence nobody but you would have written just that way (consider the difference between "Sometimes writing is hard," which lots of people could say, and "When I write, I feel as though I am trying to bowl while wearing ugly green shoes two sizes too big," which probably only one person would say).
- It goes "out on a limb" or takes a provocative stance or provides an important detail that many other people have missed.

Often these sentences are buried in the middles or ends of paragraphs, or toward the end of your essay: remember that you learned as you wrote, so some of your later sentences were written by a smarter person!

Name your fundamentals: Copy these sentences onto a new page. Now, thinking about just these vivid ideas, imagine that someone has asked you what the most important point(s) in your document is/are, and write for 5-10 minutes as a response to that question. What truths, what goals, and what key situations are embedded in these sentences?

Bring the inside out: Look back at your current whole draft, and make some notes about how to ensure that these core ideas shine brightly throughout your document? Could you revise your intro, your thesis sentence(s), your conclusion? Could you use the starts or ends of key paragraphs to help your new ideas pop out at a reader? Are there paragraphs or sentences that need to be modified or deleted to help you show your best insights to the world?

Reflect to learn and connect

There may be lots of reasons your best ideas are hidden. Writers often learn as we write, and so we have our "aha!" moments in the middles of random paragraphs. Sometimes we don't even recognize our best ideas when they show up! Writers may also be hesitant to stand out, to say something risky, or to celebrate our own ideas. Write yourself a note: what do you think contributes to your good ideas staying hidden "inside," and how can you help yourself bring those good ideas "outside" where others can see them?
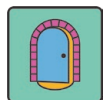
Explore related exercises

Add/Move/Change/Delete, Explode a Moment, Off on a Rant

28.9 Letter to Kermit

Define your goal

Use this exercise to imagine giving advice about a writing strategy that could help in your own situation.

Background

Kermit the Frog is a popular US children's show puppet who often laments being green, admires rainbows, or worries about his relationship to the overbearing Miss Piggy. He is a calm, encouraging, simple soul, and once you watch a video or two about him, which you can find online, it should seem easy to write him a letter of advice. (However, if you'd rather write advice to another fictional character, you may: you could advise Harry Potter's friend Hermione Granger on her essay about time travel strategies, or provide anime character Arsene Lupin III with suggestions on his memoirs about defeating Inspector Zenigata.)

Your goal is to take advantage of what researchers know about learning and deciding: we often give better, quicker advice to other people than to ourselves.

Take action

Set your context: Begin by writing a sentence or two describing in very general terms the writing task *you* are working on. Are you drafting a proposal to argue for change? Revising an essay to demonstrate your understanding of a principle or a text? Storyboarding a video to give instructions on how to complete a process? What feels hardest to you about the work you're doing now?

Transfer to Kermit: Write a sentence or two imagining what Kermit (or another character) might be trying to do in a similar situation: trying to persuade Miss Piggy to take a difficult movie role? explaining why he likes being a green frog? Your view of Kermit's writing task doesn't have to be an exact match; you just have to be able to imagine Kermit wanting to write it, and being frustrated that he's stuck on some challenges similar to yours.

Briefly list out three or four problems that you think Kermit might be having with his project. One or two of them can be problems similar to ones you've already been solving pretty well, like "getting started" or "finding enough to write about." One or two of them should sound like the problems you're struggling with right now: "the opposition is too strong" or "there are too many reasons and they're hard to organize."

Start your letter: "Dear Kermit [or other character], I hear you're having trouble writing (about) _____." Try to imagine kindly Kermit waiting on your response, and be as specific and reassuring as you can: identify each problem, and provide some specific suggestions for him to try out. "Maybe what you have is a rhetoric problem, not understanding why your audience, Miss Piggy, doesn't like to play this type of role due to something in her past, and so you should ask some of her childhood friends or relatives about how she grew up." Since the situation is imaginary, your answers can have imaginary elements, even as the strategies are real: if you need to suggest that Kermit consult Fozzy Bear for advice or use the

Grumpy Old Men as a skeptical audience, do so. Finish your letter by reminding Kermit that you're confident he can figure out how to complete his project and explain why you're eager to read it.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, write yourself two notes. The first note should begin with an optimistic reminder: "Someone might be eagerly waiting to read my project because _____ ." Give yourself the benefit of the doubt here, just as Kermit might if he were writing back to advise *you*. The second note should begin with an optimistic recommendation: "One of the strategies I recommended to Kermit might also be useful for me to try a version of now: for instance, I could _____." Alternately, if those strategies don't quite fit but they've reminded you of something else you could try, add that to your note.

Explore related exercises

Best and Better, Expand and Narrow, Inner Three-Year-Old

28.10 Power Sentences

Define your goal

Use this exercise to practice improving sentences so that they express complex concepts clearly.

Background

Physical fitness coaches often recommend that people base their workouts on having "a strong core"—usually the abdominal and back muscles—and then build strength, endurance, and flexibility out through the rest of the body. Writers can also benefit from identifying the "strong core" of a sentence or a pair of sentences, and then adding power strategically.

Take action

Choose your sentences: Copy two or three sentences that appear next to one another in a crucial section of your current (or a recent) writing project.

Identify the "core": Use boldface or underline to identify the **subject** and the **verb** (and maybe the **object**) in each original sentence. You need to identify these key grammatical elements in order to have the most control over your revisions.

> Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins. (**Chris** + **earned** + **MD**)

> Chris is a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA. (**Chris** + **is** + **practitioner**)

It's likely that your sentences already have additional words and phrases in them. You can either work with the original longer sentence, or carve it down to its core and rebuild from that.

You should know that most native speakers of English don't need to know the names of all the grammatical parts in order to "write good sentences," but knowing some names can help you gain more control over your writing, especially for approaches that feel new to you. As you work on revisions, see if you can identify the kinds of phrases and structures you have already been using.

Boost your writing: Use at least three of the "Power Up" moves below to improve your sentences.

- Combine two core sentences to create a compound sentence with a semi-colon or conjunction
- Try a "secret handshake" semi-colon sentence
- Add one (more) descriptor phrase into a core sentence (preposition, appositive, or verbal)
- Combine two core sentences to create a complex sentence using a subordinating conjunction
- Edit one or more sentences to add more active or vivid subjects and verbs
- Edit one or more sentences to delete unnecessary phrases

Don't forget to reflect on your work when you've finished editing your sentences!

Power Up 1: Expand a sentence—or combine two sentences—using a compound or complex sentence structure. Your goal is to provide more information *and* to show how that information is related to your core sentence. These models still use one or both of the same core sentences: *Chris + is + practitioner* or *Chris + earned + MD*.

- **Compound sentence**: A compound sentence joins two complete core sentences by using a coordinating conjunction or a semi-colon. Writers use different coordinating conjunctions (*for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *so*) to specify different relationships between the ideas. A semi-colon just indicates that there is some kind of relationship in the thoughts but doesn't specify the connection. How do the examples below tell slightly different stories?
  - Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins; they are a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
  - Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins, so now they are a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
  - Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins, but now they are a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.

- **Complex sentence**: A complex sentence joins two complete core sentences by using a subordinating conjunction. (Twenty common subordinating conjunctions include *after, although, as soon as, because, before, even if, even though, if, in order to, now that, once, since, so that, unless, until, when, whenever, whether, while,* and *why*.) Usually a comma separates the two parts.

  The core sentence is *Name + is/became + GP*. When you add a subordinating conjunction to a sentence, you make that idea subordinate or dependent, and it no longer functions as a core sentence. (*After Chris earned their MD* is not a complete sentence.) Note how each sentence now tells a different story:

  ◦ After Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins, they became a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.

  ◦ Although Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins, they became a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.

  ◦ As soon as Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins, they became a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.

Power Up 2: "Secret handshake" sentence: Academic writers use one particular compound sentence structure so frequently that using it can serve as a kind of "secret handshake" to demonstrate that you belong in the advanced writing club. The sentence structure mirrors a crucial argument move: because advanced writers join a conversation rather than just yelling our own arguments out, we often acknowledge what other writers have concluded, and then explain how our ideas or arguments expand or even contradict what they say.

- The basic sentence structure for this handshake sentence is this: **Core Sentence** + *semi-colon* + *"however"* + *comma* + **Core Sentence**.

  ◦ Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins; however, they became a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.

- A more advanced idea structure for the handshake sentence makes the conversation (they said + I say) more evident: **Some experts say X; however, [I argue] Y instead.** You might need to add language beyond your chosen core sentences to frame a full argumentative contrast that takes advantage of this sentence structure:

  ◦ Chris's advisers recommended that Chris use their prestigious degree from Johns Hopkins to join an elite hospital in Boston or New York; however, Chris wanted to use these skills to serve ordinary people in their home town of Roanoke, VA.

Power Up 3: Expand a sentence by inserting a descriptor phrase. Your goal is to provide more information embedded in the sentence, so readers have more detail without a lot more words.

These model sentences keep the same strong core (*Chris + is + practitioner* and *Chris + earned + MD*). You can either *add* different descriptor phrases or use a structure to *combine* sentences so that one describes the other. Choose one version below as a model to revise your sentence.

- **Prepositional phrase**: Prepositions are any word that relates two ideas in space/time/concept (the 20 most commonly used English prepositions are *about, after, against, as, at, between, by, during, for, from, in, into, like, of, on, out, over, through, to,* and *with*). You can add several prepositional phrases together; they don't usually need to be separated with commas.
  - Chris earned their MD <u>at</u> Johns Hopkins **after they turned 30**.
  - Chris is a general practitioner **with a private practice** <u>in</u> Roanoke, VA.
- **Appositive phrase**: An appositive is a noun phrase that renames the noun it comes next to; the phrase is set off with commas. Think of it like an equals sign: *Chris = Hopkins graduate* and *Chris = my older sibling*.
  - Chris, **a Johns Hopkins medical school graduate**, is now a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
  - Chris, <u>my older sibling</u> and <u>a Johns Hopkins medical school graduate</u>, is now a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
- **Verbal phrase**: Verbal phrases *look* like verbs but aren't. A verbal phrase may have a *participle* (which looks like a past tense, "-ed" verb) or a *gerund* (an "-ing" form of a verb) along with a subordinating conjunction, like "who," "after," or "because." Sometimes it has an *infinitive* construction (a "to" form of the verb, as in "I like to write"). Note how the verbal construction "*who earned*" or "*after earning*" allows a writer to condense two sentences' worth of information into one.
  - Chris, **who earned their MD at Johns Hopkins**, is now a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
  - Chris is now a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA, **after earning their MD at Johns Hopkins**.

Power Up 4: Edit to focus on clear actors and vivid verbs. Your goal is to help readers see your key point quickly and stay engaged.

If your sentences sometimes get long and tangled, see if you can locate the core sentence and give it more power: look for a stronger verb (it may be camouflaged as a gerund or a participle), move the subject of the sentence to the subject position, and/or unclutter the beginning of the sentence. Sometimes writers cannot or should not make these changes to sentences in academic prose, but often we have better options than we think we do.

- In their work as a GP in Roanoke, it is possible for Chris to spend hours and hours helping up to 30 patients per day.

- In Roanoke, **Chris** often **helps** up to 30 patients per day.

This revision changed the core from **It + is + possible** to **Chris + helps + patients**, and moved Chris—our hero!—from the middle to the beginning of the sentence.

Power Up 5: Eliminate unnecessary language. Your goal is to write a more concise sentence by focusing on key information rather than trying to sound important. However, be sure to keep any specialized language that your audience will need in order to understand the nuances of a particular argument. Be clear, but do not oversimplify a situation.

Often writers can cut our longer sentences by 6-10 words and not miss anything important.

- While it could be noted that several of my purposes run similar to and parallel with Chappell's, I have discovered that I rely to some degree more heavily on Engeström's painstakingly detailed models to recommend that at least for the time being teachers and educators make opposing contradictions appear in a more knowable way to the students who may be perceiving them.

The sentence above can reasonably be revised to the next one: Do you see how shorter phrases, stronger verbs, and the cutting of unnecessary phrases helps readers follow the thinking?

- While my purposes run parallel with Chappell's, I rely more heavily on Engeström's detailed models to recommend that teachers make contradictions more visible to students.

However, you would not want to oversimplify just to make a shorter sentence; if you need specific ideas or terms to make your point or connect with your audience, keep them. The following sentence loses the key elements:

- Like many researchers, I think contradictions are good.

Reflect to learn and connect

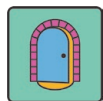When you're done, finish up by adding a note: Which move do you think you want to try again as you edit your document, and how will it help you?

Explore related exercises

Diction Flexer, Final Four Proofreading Moves, Ten Directed Revisions

28.11 Sentence Doctor

Define your goal

Use this exercise to *diagnose* possible sentence problems in your own writing as you edit, and then *prescribe* a possible remedy or correction you can use.

Background

How do you correct an error if you don't know it's there? And how do you fix it if you don't know what the best remedies are, or if your sentences don't look anything like the ones in your guidebook? Like careful physicians, advanced writers learn to look for symptoms or other signs that help us locate possible problems, diagnose common errors, and identify a reasonable solution.

Note about generative artificial intelligence: The advent of sophisticated grammar checkers and generative artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT or Bard *might* mean that you have less need to learn how to fix your own sentences. If you are writing something not very important or complex, a chatbot fix is likely to be correct (if not very lively). If you're working on writing that is more important to you, consider using a Chatbot Option to get *assistance* while you continue to *improve your learning*.

Take action

Select your focus area(s): Choose one or two of the common sentence problems listed in below that you think you are most likely to run into.

Investigate risky symptoms: Copy/paste 3-4 *possible* problem-sentences. Remember that not all long sentences are run-ons, and not all single commas are errors; your goal is to focus your attention in places with higher risk of problems.

- Chatbot option: Input some of your text into a chatbot and ask it to bold-face any sentences that have errors without fixing or labeling any of those errors.
- Check your own understanding: Can you tell what the errors might be?

Diagnose each sentence: What evidence do you have that there's an error or not?

- Chatbot option: Input some of your text into a chatbot and ask it to bold-face any sentences with errors and tell you what the name or type of error is, without fixing any of the errors.
- Check your own understanding: Can you see how you might improve the sentences?

Propose a remedy for at least one sentence: What's one way you could improve it? Remember that there are always multiple ways to improve a sentence.

- Chatbot option: Input your new sentence into a chatbot and ask if it has any corrections or alternatives to suggest.
- Check your own understanding: Do you agree with the advice? Why or why not?

Identify something you could learn more about by looking at a print or online

style guide, if you wanted to gain more sentence knowledge.

Don't forget to add your reflective writing when you finish.

Run-on, comma splice, or fused sentence

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any particularly long sentence
  - Any sentence with a single comma in the middle
  - Any sentence with several pronouns (he . . . he . . . he . . . or they . . . they . . .)
- Diagnose problems
  - Locate subject-verb pairs: if you spot more than one *she verb . . . she verb* pair, you might have a problem
  - NOTE: Sentences with a conjunction (*and, but, so, after, while, although*) between parts may be correct
- Propose a remedy
  - Create separate sentences; test by having each one start with subject-verb
  - Add a semi-colon between core sentences
  - Use a coordinating conjunction like *and* or *but*
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - Semi-colons and colons
  - Coordinating conjunctions
  - Subordinating conjunctions
  - Subordinate clauses

Sentence fragment

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any particularly short sentence
  - Any sentence that starts with an "-ing" word
  - Any sentence that starts with *Although*, *After*, *Because*, or another subordinating conjunction
  - Any sentence that starts with a phrase like *For example the X* or *Such as X.*
- Diagnose problems
  - Underline any subject+verb pairs
  - Make sure the first verb is real (not a "verbal" ending with *-ing* or *-ed*; if the verb is the first word, it's risky
  - If a conjunction starts the sentence, it's risky unless you see two subject-verb pairs

- ◦ NOTE: A short sentence that starts with subject+verb is often correct
- Propose a remedy
  - ◦ Join the short sentence to the previous sentence with a comma or colon
  - ◦ Revise to start the sentence with a strong subject+verb pair
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - ◦ Semi-colons and colons
  - ◦ Coordinating conjunctions
  - ◦ Subordinating conjunctions
  - ◦ Gerunds and participles

Comma errors

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - ◦ Any sentence that starts with something other than a name or pronoun
  - ◦ Any sentence with a conjunction such as *and*, *but*, *so*, or *after*, *since*, or *when*
  - ◦ Any sentence with just one comma
- Diagnose problems
  - ◦ Check if you have an introductory word (*Also*, *However*) or a short phrase before your main subject starts
  - ◦ Check if you have coordinating conjunction (*and*, *but*, or, *so*) or a clause that is subordinated with after, since, when or a similar conjunction
  - ◦ Check if there's a descriptive phrase, *like this one here*, that you could put parentheses around and still make sense
  - ◦ NOTE: Some short sentences may not need commas in order to be clear
- Propose a remedy
  - ◦ Add a comma after an introductory word or phrase, right before the main subject+verb pair
  - ◦ Add a comma before *and*, *but*, *so* (not after!)
  - ◦ Add a comma after the whole clause that begins with a subordinating conjunction clause (*After*+subject+verb), putting the comma right before the next subject-verb pair
  - ◦ Use a pair of commas the way you'd use parentheses around a descriptive phrase
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - ◦ Introductory phrases
  - ◦ Transition words or phrases
  - ◦ Coordinating conjunctions

- ◦ Subordinating conjunctions
- ◦ Restrictive and non-restrictive phrases

Vague pronoun

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - ◦ Any sentence or long phrase that begins with *He*, *She*, or *They*
  - ◦ Any sentence or long phrase that begins with *This*, *That*, *It* or *It's*
- Diagnose problems
  - ◦ Look at the previous sentence: does it name only one person/group that the current *He/She/They* start could be referring to?
  - ◦ Look at the previous sentence: does it describe only one specific event or item that *This* or *It* could refer to?
  - ◦ NOTE: Sentences that include *This*+noun are often correct
- Propose a remedy
  - ◦ If there is any possible confusion, use the name rather than the pronoun
  - ◦ Add a noun after *This*: *This* table, *This* situation, *This* proposal
  - ◦ If you are referring to a complex idea, use several words to precisely identify the idea: *The government's handling of the epidemic* was . . . , or *Our first-place finish* revealed that . . .
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - ◦ Pronouns
  - ◦ Antecedents
  - ◦ Concrete vs. abstract nouns

Inactive sentences

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - ◦ Any sentence with an *is*, *was*, *are*, or *were* verb
  - ◦ Any sentence with low-action verbs such as *has/have*, *seem*, *make*, or *say*
- Diagnose problems
  - ◦ Identify the subject or actor in the sentence and ask yourself, "What did they do?"
  - ◦ Identify a hidden verb—look for an *-ed* word such as repaired→repair or an *-ing* word such as breaking→broke—and ask yourself, "Who did this?"
  - ◦ NOTE: Some sentences need to describe a steady state (It *was* hot) or need to focus on the situation more than the actor (The election *was* rigged)
- Propose a remedy

- ◦ Try revising the sentence by putting the actor and the action close to the start; you may be able to leave out some words
- ◦ Imagine the actual scene and focus on what happened or changed: select a new vivid verb to convey the exact action
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - ◦ Passive voice
  - ◦ Auxiliary verbs
  - ◦ Gerunds and participles
  - ◦ Nominalization

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish with a note about how you could *diagnose* and *remedy* one other sentence problem not listed in the table. (Option: You could share your strategy with other students to expand each other's knowledge.)

- You might choose a usage error you make frequently or a style challenge that's important for this document (such as using formal language or varying your sentence structure).
- You could choose an error from Lunsford and Lunsford's "20 Most Common Errors" list: word errors such as an "its/it's" or "there/their/they're" confusion, missing citation, punctuation error with a quotation, unnecessary or missing capitalization, unnecessary shift in verb tense, unnecessary or missing apostrophe, or poorly integrated quotation. (To learn more about the Top 20, see Chapter 11, Editing in Context.)
- You could identify symptoms or signs that you can continue to look for that would help you identify *possible* areas of concern. What would be one way you could fix or improve a sentence if you found a problem?

Explore related exercises

Final Four Proofreading Moves, Power Sentences, Write the Problem

28.12 Ten Directed Revisions

Define your goal

Use this exercise to re-see and revise your project by focusing on one writing or revising goal at a time

Background

Sometimes revising is harder than writing—in part because writers get comfortable with the current draft and have difficulty seeing what else could be done, and

in part because even making what looks like a simple change can set off a cascade of other challenges that can feel overwhelming. To revise well, writers need to challenge themselves to be honest, attentive, risk-taking, and thorough.

- **Honest** revisers tell themselves that the third paragraph or the fourth example isn't as strong as the others.
- **Attentive** revisers don't just "look over" a document but go through a list of key revisions based on their goals and readers' needs.
- **Risk-taking** revisers experiment with significant changes, not just sentence-edits.
- **Thorough** revisers don't just change the most visible weaknesses but use their awareness to improve the achievements of every paragraph or section.

When you address one particular kind of revision at a time, rather than just looking at a document generally and hoping you see something you can change, you improve your honesty, attention, and thoroughness, and give yourself more permission to take risks.

Take action

To ensure you have met your revision goals, select at least three of these revision activities to complete. Each should take you 5-10 minutes. Finish with a few sentences to reflect on your work.

- **Tasks and goals check**: Review your situation by writing two foundation sentences. First, state what your readers most need from this document (if you're writing a school assignment, you should look back at the assignment directions). Second, state your own main point or argument, using fresh words rather than copying what you've already written. Compare the two, and write a note that says "My own points _____ (strongly, sort of, barely) match my readers' needs." Next, review at least three or four paragraphs in your document: at the end of any paragraph that strongly meets your readers' needs, write "Matches readers!" and at the end of any paragraph that directly matches your own point, write "Matches argument!" Finish by writing yourself a note: what parts of your writing align most strongly with both the readers' needs and your own arguments, and which should you revise?
- **Structure and focus check**: Write a new sentence that states what you most want readers to acknowledge, agree to, and/or do after finishing this essay. Then write a *functional outline* of your document, one sentence per paragraph or section. In a functional outline, you indicate both the subtopic and the purpose of each part: "Paragraph 2 describes temperature change in Alaska *in order to show readers why* we need new policies about protecting endangered species. Paragraph 3 describes the situation of Steller sea lions *to give readers background* on a specific species' experience." If

any paragraph has more than one topic, or more than one goal, add an additional sentence. Finish by writing two possible revision sentences from the list below. You don't *have* to complete these revisions, but you should challenge yourself to consider bold steps.

- "I could switch the order of ____ and ____ in order to be better at ____"
- "I could delete the paragraph/section about ____ in order to focus more on ____"
- "I could split the paragraph/section on ____ (or combine the two about ____) in order to emphasize ____"
- "I could add a whole new paragraph/section on ____ in order to strengthen my point about ____."

- **Paragraph development check**: Although paragraphs—even academic essay paragraphs—don't follow a formula, most paragraphs will use some predictable and repeated strategies. Start by reviewing the common paragraph tasks listed below, and select three or four that you believe are most relevant to your writing project or hardest for you to attend to in your early drafts. Then select one body paragraph for review. You should indicate *how well* it meets each goal and highlight all or part of the sentence(s) *where* it accomplishes that goal. When you've finished, write yourself a note: what one or two paragraph moves are you usually accomplishing well, and what one or two moves do you want to improve in your paragraphs?

Introduce the sub-topic	Describe concepts or theories	Provide vivid examples or exact factual evidence
Connect different ideas together	Provide your own new analysis or interpretation	Engage the reader's curiosity or sympathy
Show a relationship to your overall point	Directly make your own argument about values, causes, effects, policies, or actions	Address and respond to alternate or opposing views

- **Conclusion power check**: Conclusions have specific tasks in most documents—and since writers often compose them last, they can reveal some of the smartest thinking in the project. Underline the sentence in your introductory section that best articulates the point or focus of your project. Then underline the sentence in your concluding section that best articulates the point or focus of your project. If the second sentence is any clearer, more complete, or more engaging than what you found in your introduction, write yourself a note: "Transplant this to the intro and revise later"—acknowledging that since you got smarter while you wrote, you can now use that intelligence to strengthen the beginning of your project. Now rate your concluding remarks on the following criteria, ranking

from 1 (not very strong) to 5 (exceptionally strong) to make sure you're not rushing past important moves:

- ◦ How well does your conclusion show readers the big picture?
- ◦ How well does your conclusion draw connections among the parts of your issue?
- ◦ How well does your conclusion give readers a new direction for their thinking or action?
- ◦ Add a note: which of these aspects could you revise to strengthen your ending?

- **Introduction power check**: Introductions have specific tasks in most documents—and these can be difficult to do well in a first draft. To revise, consider specific strategies for the title and the first several sentences of your document. Then rate your introductory remarks on the following criteria, ranking from 1 (not very strong) to 5 (exceptionally strong):

  - ◦ How well does your introduction connect with readers' current interests or needs?
  - ◦ How well does your introduction engage readers with important background examples or vivid language?
  - ◦ How well does your introduction provide an overview of all the main points of your document?
  - ◦ How well does your introduction make your own stance and goal clear?
  - ◦ Add a note: which of these aspects could you revise to strengthen your opening?

- **Chorus and connection check ("flow")**: Although you don't want to repeat basic facts, you can improve the cohesion and flow of your document by repeating key ideas and terms. Underline the sentence in your opening section that best states the main point or argument of the document; then underline the sentence in your concluding section that best states this main point. Remember that to improve flow and cohesion, writers can repeat key ideas and phrasings throughout a document, the way that pop singers repeat the chorus to a song, and that the starts or finishes of paragraphs are often good places to make connections and arguments visible. Now read just the first and last sentence of each body paragraph. If a sentence seems like a clear echo of the underlined sentences, and it makes a new point of your own (not just "Taro Yamada says we should think about some stuff") write "Good chorus!" next to it. If it doesn't quite, write "Make my stance/argument clearer" next to it. Add a note: which paragraphs could you revise, change, or delete to be sure you're staying focused?

- **Specificity check**: Remind yourself that an example often has more power when it provides a single, authoritative, vivid moment or statistic for readers to consider. Thus where a sentence such as "It's clear that *lots* of *teenagers* in *our world* today have some *different ideas* about their privacy when they use *many* of their social media *accounts*" gives a general idea, a revised version would be stronger: "Teens like Samaine J. think they are private simply when they 'block [their] parents from Facebook' (Boyd 20), while my cousin Miko, for instance, thinks he stays private by only using Snapchat because it erases what he sends." Moreover, since few people will be persuaded by reading one example or knowing one data point (one could just be an accident or coincidence), a strong paragraph will benefit from having two or three examples. For this review, begin reading the third paragraph of the document. If a sentence is mostly "some people do some things in some ways, you know what I mean?" (generalization, lots of plurals, no exact example), draw an arrow to label it a "*Some People* Sentence." If a sentence gives an *exact statistic*, a *one-person-one-time example*, or a *vivid image*, draw an arrow and label it "Great Specific Detail!" (Not every sentence needs to be labeled.) Do the same thing for another paragraph or two. Add a note: what are two places that you could add evidentiary power? Do you already know of more detailed information, or will you need further research to find it out?

- **Resistant audience check**: If you are writing to persuade an audience that doesn't agree with you, it's often not enough to just state your own position and hammer it home. As you revise, take a close look at how you are addressing your readers' concerns and resistance points. First, locate any sentence or section where you acknowledge valid alternatives or complications: "Opponents might argue that ___," or "Current residents might be concerned that ___," or "This solution is not 100% effective," and write a note: "Good resistance acknowledgment!" Then check to see if that sentence or section also includes a direct response or refutation, and includes evidence the reader would find credible: "However, recent research shows ___, and so residents should feel confident that ___." If any of your arguments is missing any one of these moves (acknowledgment, response, and credible counter-evidence), write a note: "Provide more ___ for readers here."

- **Secondary source power check**: Quotations and paraphrases of secondary source information do not "speak for themselves." Locate at least three places your document uses an outside source and check each one using the list below. Write a note for each: "This sourced reference has good ___ but could use more/better ___."

  ◦ **Selection**: The information or quotation should be directly relevant to the point the paragraph/section is making.

- ◦ **Limitation**: Direct quotations should be as short as possible to keep readers focused on the exact phrase with the best evidence.
- ◦ **Integration**: In many disciplines and genres, the speaker/author of the quotation, and perhaps the issue under consideration, should be identified to integrate the idea into the surrounding text: "According to Aziz . . ." Where possible, paraphrase part or all of the information to keep sentences in the writer's voice for cohesion.
- ◦ **Citation**: Quotations, paraphrases, and summaries need to be cited or acknowledged according to the expectations of the discipline/genre.
- ◦ **Explanation**: Sentences before or after the sourced information should directly explain how it supports the writer's point.
- ◦ **Qualification**: In many disciplines and genres, readers benefit from knowing up front why the source is credible ("Aziz, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, argues ____").
- ◦ **Corroboration**: A single source might be seen as a random outlier; a reference to one or more similar, credible sources that have similar perspectives will reinforce the point.

- **Visual/design check**: Your document's genre may allow or even require features such as non-text evidence (graphs, charts, diagrams, pictures); layout choices such as subheadings, columns, or clusters; or choices in fonts, colors, or camera angles. Pick any one element and check every instance—each subheading, each font chosen—using the following criteria. Finish with a note: what two changes could you make to improve the design of your document?
  - ◦ **Is each ____ constructive**: Does it substantially add to the message, or is it just filling space or distracting readers from the central purpose?
  - ◦ **Is each ____ complete**: Does it have all the information (caption, citation, legend) necessary for readers to understand and find it credible?
  - ◦ **Is each ____ consistent**: Does it match the style of other elements exactly to enhance the cohesion and flow of the document?
  - ◦ **Is each ____ connected**: Can readers see how it fits with key arguments or other design elements, and will readers understand the order or flow of elements through the document?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done with all three, write one *risk-taking* sentence ("If I had time and energy to make one big change, I would revise ____") and one *thorough revision* sentence ("If I change ____ in paragraph ____ as indicated, I would probably also have to adjust these two other parts of my document: ____ and ____").

Explore related exercises

Evil Genie, Final Four Proofreading Moves, Magic Three Choices

28.13 Write It Worse

Define your goal

Use this exercise to break through "writer's block" and activate your knowledge about your goals and your readers' needs by deliberately creating writing that fails to meet those standards and then beginning to improve it.

Take action

Identify a problem spot in the project you are working on: your title, your introduction, a paragraph responding to counterarguments, your final sentence or two.

- If you are in the process of composing your first draft of this tricky section, your task here is to **write a really bad example** of it.
- If you are revising a section you have already drafted, your job is to write out a version that is **much, much worse** than the one you have already written.

You should do this on a new page or in a new document window without looking back at the early version if possible. If the section is short, like a title or sentence, you might write out two or three bad examples. If the section is long, like an academic paragraph, you might write a short bad version.

Give your bad draft some careful thought before you start it: you need it to fail in multiple ways while still being recognizable as a section vaguely related to your project. Identify several criteria: a title for an academic article should be serious and specific; it should use the language of the field; it should predict the topic and argument of the article. Therefore, "Yo, Dudes: Some Stuff I Learned About Phytoplankton Last Summer" is a fairly bad academic title.

Similarly, a paragraph in a researched argument essay should articulate a reasonable claim, have multiple credible facts, integrate and explain information, use language accessible to readers, and show why the information is relevant. Thus a sixteen-line block quote followed by "And therefore I'm right that all income taxes are evil" is not a functional piece of writing for that context. (If your new draft is so bad it's laughable, then you're engaging a more positive disposition as well moving forward on an analytical level, and thus solving two problems at once!)

Finish #1: Improve your first try. If you've just written a very bad first draft, finish by writing (part of) it just a little better, so that you know you can revise it. You're still not aiming to produce excellent writing, just something that is a tiny

bit less-than-awful. Then write yourself several notes about what else needs to be improved for this section to better meet your goals and the needs of your readers. (It's nearly always easier to improve a bad piece of writing than to produce a perfect one out of the blue.)

Finish #2: Improve your current draft. If you've just written a much worse version of a section you had completed for an earlier draft, finish by listing out the top three revision strategies you would need to use in order for this version to meet your goals and your readers' expectations, and to fit the rest of your draft. Then revise (part of) it to make it better according to those goals. Finally, compare your new revised version and your list of strategies to your previous draft: often if you do a complete "tear-down" and rebuild a section, you discover new pathways toward successful writing.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, turn the tables and write your future self a backwards complement, just for fun: "Hey, Self, remember that even when your writing isn't all that great, it could still be way worse by having more/less ___ or by ____ [another bad strategy you tried out here]."

Explore related exercises

Attitude Inventory, Not-Talk, Reason Appallingly

Chapter 29. Exercises for Improving Writing Dispositions

We can think about "exercises" two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn't happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we're stuck, we don't have "writer's block"—instead, we just have a problem we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- **D**efining a problem,

- Exploring some options for addressing it,
- Acting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- Learning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

Avoid high expectations

Practice may "make perfect," but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the "right" answers. Just keep writing answers.

Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer overall.

29.1 Attitude Inventory

Define your goal

Use this exercise to identify and respond to attitudes or judgments about your approach to writing that may be limiting your development as a writer.

Background

In order to help writers learn, teachers and tutors not only explain "rules" which turn out not to be rules (such as "always put your thesis at the end of your first paragraph), but they also suggest strategies or describe processes that turn out not to be useful for all writers at all times (such as "always write an outline before starting to draft an essay"). In trying to be helpful, these writing coaches can unintentionally make writers feel worse when those writers fall short or fail in the recommended practices.

If you hear this kind of advice, you might begin to think that you are a "bad writer" because you don't follow advice, or because you don't succeed when you try to follow the advice. Writers can have lower **confidence** and **curiosity** when we place limits on ourselves as we write. However, advanced writers can work to discover our own productive writing practices, and in order to do so, we may need to let go of negative attitudes and judgments that are holding us back.

Take action

Write about your past writing in response to two or three of the questions below. Be as honest as you can: when you remember a story or an example, take the time to explain it.

- Do you worry even before you start a writing project that you'll be "doing it wrong"?
- Do you ever write "out of order" or using steps or strategies that you're not "supposed to" use?
- Do you ever get frustrated because you follow writing steps exactly the way an instructor or book recommends, or the way your friends write, but your grades or results aren't as strong as you hoped?
- On some writing tasks, do you "force yourself" to write in a way that goes against what you feel or believe is right?
- Do you ever critique yourself for "probably doing it wrong" in the middle of a writing project?
- Are there some kinds of writing you do that you know you can do well at and look forward to, for school or outside of school, and other kinds that you think you do poorly at and/or dread doing?
- Do you ever set clear rules for yourself about how to get your writing projects done, and critique yourself when you don't meet those rules?
- Were you ever surprised when you used writing strategies that used to be successful for you and they turned out not to produce successful results in a new situation?

Write to tell yourself a new story: Since you know that "there is no single definition of a good writer" and "good writers frequently struggle and revise," you're ready to tell yourself a new story. Take five minutes to write a paragraph to give yourself some new advice: What could you say to yourself the next time you hear your self-judgment voices in your head telling you that you're doing it all wrong or that you need to limit yourself to a single strategy? How could you create a voice that helps you see a range of ways to "write it right"? What phrases could remind you to be patient with yourself as a writer and give yourself permission to experiment, struggle, innovate, fail, revise, and adapt? Which of your strategies

that often make you feel better about yourself or your writing can you call on to help you counteract the negative voices?

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by making a plan: The next time you start to feel like a "bad writer," what will you do to remind yourself how you can improve your disposition?

Explore related exercises

Believing/Doubting, Seven Generations, Values Freewrite

29.2 Deluxe Project Scheduler

Define your goal

Use this exercise to create a realistic, flexible, motivating, relevant schedule for completing a writing project.

Background

Writers can benefit from looking ahead and marking due-dates on our calendars; sometimes advanced writers plan out times to do individual project steps. This planning activity is part of what scholars call "becoming a self-regulated learner": someone who takes charge of their own steps and processes. **Self-regulation** can also improve your **confidence** and **persistence**. A regular calendar can help, but like a New Year's Resolution to exercise more, eat less, or meditate daily, a simple calendar notation can be easy to ignore or schedule over, so you may need a stronger approach.

Take action

The deluxe calendar below features several self-regulating approaches not available from a simple date/task schedule. By using a calendar like this, you can

- **Identify the problems** that need solving, to link the task to a clear reason/goal
- **Predict your whole project**, including multiple facets and possible challenges
- **Describe multiple stages** of a writing project, to emphasize the benefits of a recursive process
- **Schedule** specific, relevant, completable tasks, so that you can take one step at a time
- **Reflect to predict** difficulty or resistance, so that you can locate necessary time and resources for key stages

- **Connect** to specific benefits to help with your motivation and persistence

Create an opening description for your calendar that identifies key features of your project:

- Project:
- Genre:
- Audience:
- Main goal/argument:
- Most similar recent writing success:

Create a table like the one below that emphasizes the DEAL framework of reflective writers: Define a problem, Explore possible steps or strategies, Act to move the project forward, and Learn how to do the next step or project.

- Add some dates to define the early, middle, and late sections in your upcoming writing project schedule. If you want to add some more "early-middle" or "late-middle" dates, you can do so.
- Fill in at least three cells in each row with specific directions
- At least once per row, add a reflective note to yourself to help you approach the work with a growth mindset:
- "One challenge I anticipate here is _____"
- "One benefit of working on this now is _____"

	Define the problem: My main writing challenge overall at this point is likely to be =_____	Explore resources: One reading, thinking, learning, or inquiring task I could do at this point =_____	Explore strategies: One strategy or exercise I could use at this point =_____	Take specific action: One section of the document that could be drafted or revised now = _____	Reflect and learn: One element to rethink, review, revise, or reenergize at this point =_____
Do this early: before _____ [date]					
Do this in the middle: before _____ [date]					
Do this near the end: before _____ [date]					

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're finished, kick off your project by writing a three-day plan to get going. In the next 3 days, spending at least 20 minutes per day, what steps could you take that help get you to your next goal(s)?

Explore related exercises

Attitude Inventory, Magic Three Choices, Remix/Mashup

29.3 Funny Story

Define your goal

Use this exercise to shift your frame of mind toward the positive in order to enable your work on your writing project.

Background

In the same way that smiling uses muscles that trigger your brain's happiness centers even if you are fake-smiling, writing about something cheerful can reorient you away from your frustrations about your major writing project. Use this updated view to help you increase your **confidence**, **motivation**, or **persistence**.

Take action

Take a break from your formal writing project to freewrite (writing steadily without worrying about correctness or precision) for 15-20 minutes about a funny event or story: a "you had to be there" moment when all your friends ended up in giggles, your tenth birthday party, a classic scene from your favorite movie or TV show, something silly that your nephew said or did as a toddler, or a video someone shared with you recently. Don't *explain* why it is funny: just tell the story ("So there was this aardvark . . ."). If you run out of one story and have time left, write another story about a different funny episode.

Reflect to learn and connect

When your freewriting time is done, write several sentences to take advantage of your improved, more positive attitude: what do you *like best* or *feel most connected to* about your current writing project? Why might it be interesting or useful to your readers? What part of it could you try working on now to stay with that feeling of connection?

Explore related exercises

Emperor For a Day, Genre Switch, Inner Three-Year-Old

29.4 Gaining a Growth Mindset

Define your goal

Use this exercise to shift your mental frame toward a problem-solving mode.

Background

Researcher Carol Dweck, among others, has demonstrated in study after study that people with a "growth mindset" (those who believe they can improve their performance by learning and practicing better strategies) succeed at a far better rate than people with a "fixed mindset" (those who believe they only have a certain amount of talent or intelligence in one area). She and others have also demonstrated that a "growth mindset" can be learned by anyone in any situation.

Dweck acknowledges that "growth mindset" people with plentiful resources—time, money, health, or emotional support—often have more opportunities than those with fewer resources, but she focuses on what people can immediately change about their situation, which is their mindset. This alternate view can help you increase your **confidence**, **self-regulation**, and **persistence**.

Take action

Look back: Take a look at your own work so far on your project, and write a few sentences about what is *not going well right now*. Where are you stuck, what is frustrating, and/or why are you worried it might not go well?

Look outward: Take just a few minutes to look at a piece of writing by someone else that you admire in some way: it can be a reading for a class you're taking, a peer's essay, a funny online post, or another document you read recently. Write a sentence or two about *what is going well* in that piece of writing: what do you admire, enjoy, or wish you could do?

Think strategically: Now imagine, with as much determination as you can, that this other writer is not by nature any more talented, intelligent, or lucky than you are—that at least in the case of this one piece of writing, they were simply someone who was *using better strategies for writing* than you are using right now, the way a music group that has rehearsed for six months will perform better than an equally capable one that has just met. You have to play a believing game here about how "you can become a good writer and a better writer."

Get specific in your imagining, and write a sentence or two: *What sorts* of strategies *might* that other writer have practiced particularly hard at? What decisions and practices *might* have led to the kind of writing you admire? Perhaps this writer works hard to be aware of rhetorical strategies like assessing what readers need or understanding how a genre works. Perhaps this writer uses knowledge

strategies to consider and respond to complicated or resistant views. Maybe this writer took extra process steps to generate a number of possible ideas before settling on one, or to revise several times to get the structure or language just right. Or it could be that this writer had good disposition strategies: they looked for ways to connect their interests to the project to stay motivated, or they were deliberate in making time to consult with others.

Look inward: Remind yourself that your goal as a writer is to improve your writing strategies just a little bit. Write a few sentences: which of the strategies that you just listed could you try to improve on as you work on your current project? How do you think using each strategy better might help you with the problem(s) you identified at the start of this exercise?

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by *looking ahead*: The next time you lose confidence—as a writer, or in some other area of your life—how can you remind yourself that your job is to *keep growing* rather than to *be perfect right now*?

Explore related exercises

Deluxe Project Scheduler, Scenarios, Seven Generations

29.5 Learn-Write Timeline

Define your goal

Use this exercise to create a writing plan that integrates writing with learning, so that each form of work assists the other.

Background

Writers often anticipate doing all their learning first, and all their writing last, either because they find learning easier than writing and are procrastinating the harder work, or because they are afraid to write something incorrect due to a lack of learning. Not only is this approach a kind of trap—there is always "one more book/article to read" or "one more data analysis to run"—but it prevents writers from taking advantage of writing-to-learn and writing part of a document strategies that can help improve thinking and time management. Moreover, writing often *undoes* or *calls into question* previous learning, provoking a need for additional inquiry and then further writing in an ongoing cycle. Making a plan like this can help with **self-regulation** and **persistence**.

Take action

Build your plan: Create a three-column grid like the one below; include at

least four or five dates or timeline points. You may spread your dates out evenly throughout your (remaining) time before your project is due, or you may work out a short timeline for just part of the process.

Date/Time	Learning/Research Goal	Writing Goal
Tuesday	Locate three credible sources about the causes of the flooding	Write two paragraphs "off on a rant" about why floods are a problem for Arlington residents
Friday		
Monday		

Identify your learning/research goals: Be as specific as you can, and consider setting goals that begin with relatively simple tasks and move toward more difficult tasks. (If you are not doing a source-based research project, consider other learning steps: what will you need to reread? what kinds of data mapping can you do? whom could you interview, what could you practice on your own, or how could you categorize or organize information?)

Identify your writing goals: Focus on generation of material and/or organization or planning. Remember that you can lower the stress level by assigning yourself a rant or a freewrite that is designed as a write-to-learn exercise, or focus on a more productive schedule by assigning yourself pieces of your project such as an introductory paragraph or the start of an argument section. Most often you'll want to spend 20-30 minutes on an early writing task, though you could spend more if you find that worthwhile.

Keep an open mind: Since you learn as you research and write, by your third date you may find yourself revising your timeline; that's a good sign rather than an indication that this exercise failed you as a writer.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're finished, write a "success prediction": What step that you listed seems most within your grasp and motivation? What about that step makes it seem accessible? Also write a "challenge prediction": what step that you listed seems most difficult or frustrating? What additional help, resources, or motivation can you locate that would alleviate some of the stress around it?

Explore related exercises

Evidence Garden, Seven Generations, Ten Directed Revisions

29.6 Problem Solver Parallels
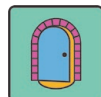
Define your goal

Use this exercise to draw on your prior experience in other fields to better understand how a writing probleQm solving process works. This exercise can help build your **confidence** and **motivation**.

Take action

Find your confidence: List 3-4 areas in which you are already pretty good at solving problems. These can be academic areas such as math or history; artistic or athletic areas such as trumpet performance or lacrosse defense; or work or personal areas such as child care, office management, cooking, home repair, online gaming, or relationships.

Choose one of those areas, and in a few sentences describe a specific problem: either choose one you ran into recently, or describe a kind of problem that you are likely to run into pretty frequently. Your problem should be complicated and "ill-structured"—that is, it should be the kind of "messy" problem that doesn't have a clear, immediate answer. Choose a story problem rather than a single equation, a game situation rather than a single play, an evening's menu rather than a single dish.

Identify your strategies: Write 1-2 sentences to explain your thinking and/or actions at each step of the six-part problem-solving process:

- **Identify the problem**: What do you look for to help you decide what kind of problem you face, what the key factors of it are, and what the most difficult parts will be? What are some of the most common elements or challenges in a problem like this?

- **Evaluate your resources**: When you encounter this type of problem, what are your main personal and/or professional strengths for solving it? What kind of outside resources, additional help, or new skills do you sometimes need to acquire?

- **Develop a plan**: You probably don't always write up a four-step plan for solving an everyday problem, but you may have routines or guidelines that you often follow, or strategies that you typically use to help you out. What guides you as you prepare to Take action? What do you try to keep in mind?

- **Apply the strategies**: When you are in the middle of solving the problem, playing the game, performing the piece, or completing the project, what is happening? Do you stop and start a lot, or go with the flow? Do you work solo, or consult others? Is your motivation consistent, or does it rise and fall?

- **Assess your progress**: As you move toward the endpoint of your game, performance, or project, how do you know whether it is going well? Do you judge based on your own perceptions, or get feedback from other people? Do you adapt your approach as you go along, or stick with your original plan until the end?

- **Review and prepare**: You probably don't keep a journal about all your problem solving, but perhaps you take a minute or two to sigh in relief, joy, or frustration at the end of your work on a problem. When you do, what are you most likely thinking? When you have successfully completed a performance or task, how does that make you think about the next upcoming task? When you have been less successful, do you try to "learn a lesson" to make future performances go more smoothly?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you've finished these descriptions, take a few minutes to consider how your actions related to this kind of problem solving connect to how you are used to working on your writing, and write yourself a few notes. Which sentence that you wrote sounds most similar to an approach or attitude you have about writing? Which sentence sounds least similar? And which sentence sounds most like the way you *wish* you felt about working on your writing?

Explore related exercises

Authority/Curiosity/Annoyance List, Remix/Mashup, Ten Ways to Choose a Topic

29.7 Remix/Mashup

Define your goal

Use this exercise to create a new problem-solving strategy or writing process by mixing a previously successful writing approach with a newly learned approach.

Background

You are already an experienced writing-problem solver who uses a range of skills and strategies successfully as you communicate with others, whether you are working on a school essay or posting online. Your goal when you learn a new strategy or approach is to integrate the best of the new knowledge with the best of the old knowledge—not add one on top of the other, or replace one with the other, but *remix* the two to create a new working theory that makes sense *to you* about how to solve writing problems. Drawing on past successes can help improve your **openness** and **confidence** as well as your **persistence**.

Take action

Look back: Begin by writing a few sentences or a short paragraph about strategies you were taught before this class, or ones that or you have been using in completing writing tasks outside class. Even if your strategy was "just stare at the screen until something came to me" or "wait until the deadline for inspiration about a topic" or "scribble an outline on scratch paper," write about that approach: that is what has been working for you up until now. Try to give some detail about this approach: what are the pieces or steps of it? how long have you been writing this way? where do you think you learned it? what did it feel like when it worked well? what have been the main achievements and drawbacks to it?

Check the present: Write a few more sentences about what you've recently been learning about solving writing problems: what new strategies for solving knowledge, process, rhetoric, or disposition problems seem most helpful to you? What new terms or concepts have caught your attention? What sorts of writing problems do you think you'll encounter where these strategies might be most useful? Why do you think they might work, and what doubts do you have about trying them out?

Plan your strategy remix: Create a remix or mashup of the two approaches: you can write a paragraph, or use a list or two-column log, to explain when and where you will use strategies from the old and new approaches—or combine them for a third, completely original problem solving style. Consider which approaches might be useful early or late in a writing project, which might be useful for a simple/familiar or a difficult/unfamiliar writing task, and which might be useful with different genres or audiences for writing. Are there any steps, new or old, that you will leave out because they don't fit who you are as a writer right now? Are there any approaches that you still need to invent because of the writing problems you need to solve right now?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, take a few minutes to apply what you've learned: how could you use this new remixed approach today, with a writing project (for school or in your life) that you are working on now?

Explore related exercises

Genre Switch, Learn-Write Timeline, Letter to Kermit

29.8 Values Freewrite

Define your goal

Use this exercise to increase your positive attitude and confidence about completing your writing project by connecting to your core beliefs and values.
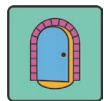
Background

Research has shown that your **self-confidence** and **persistence** in the face of difficulty are strongly linked to your personal set of values and life priorities, and that even a simple act of writing to remind yourself about your values can change both your attitude and your ability to accomplish key tasks. If you have been spending too much time worrying about how others judge you, then you can benefit from getting in touch with the values that helped you succeed this far.

Take action

List your values: List at least 4-6 characteristics, behaviors, or beliefs that you personally value most: you might consider qualities such as creativity, relationships with family and friends, independence, learning and gaining knowledge, athletic ability, loyalty to a social group, career accomplishments, spiritual or religious values, perseverance, or sense of humor. The characteristics you choose don't need to have anything to do with your current project, with writing generally, or even with school or learning.

Explain your values: Choose two or three of the characteristics or beliefs you just listed, and take a paragraph or two to explain why and how each one has been important to you. You might describe events or situations in which you learned about or practiced these values, or people who helped you realize them. Try to focus on your specific connection to these qualities: what do they mean to you, and how have they affected your own life?

Remember that this is informal freewriting: you don't need to worry about spelling, word choice, or sentence structure. As you conclude, you might want to think and write about your current intentions regarding these particular values: how important are they going to be to you in the coming weeks and months, and how could you be taking steps to continue to live according to these principles?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you have finished writing, underline the two or three most important phrases or sentences you wrote, the ones you want to remember going forward.

Explore related exercises

Best and Better, Learn-Write Timeline, Off on a Rant

29.9 Write the Problem

Define your goal

Use this exercise to use a write-to-learn approach to help diagnose and either solve or detour around a writing problem.
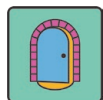
Background

If you're stuck writing and you want to move forward but you don't know how, sometimes it helps simply to freewrite *about* the situation of being stuck. At the very least, you're writing rather than staring at the screen (or eating your way through the stale food in your refrigerator). More likely, though, your capacity for learning as you write will allow you to gain perspective and come up with a new direction to take when you're done. Remember the freewriting rules: write quickly, don't worry about correctness or precision, and keep writing, even if you have to write "I don't know what else to write" several times until your brain feeds you a more interesting idea. Exploring what makes you feel stuck can help with your **motivation** (because a problem with a name can feel easier to solve) as well as your **openness** (because you might discover a whole new challenge or a whole new solution).

Take action

Write why you're stuck: You can simply freewrite for your full 15-20 minutes (set a timer) beginning with the sentence, "I'm having the most trouble writing this _____ because _____" and see where that takes you. Try to give specific examples: what exact approaches or concerns are you struggling with most?

If it's helpful, you can explore one of the approaches below. Try to write at least three or four sentences about each starting point, giving some examples, before you move on, to give your brain time to develop some interesting thinking about it.

- "I was doing ok writing the ____ but I got stuck on ____ because ____."
- "This would be a lot easier to write if _____. For instance, ____."
- "I can usually write ____ but this seems hard because _____. I mean, _____."
- "If I had to guess, I'd say this was mostly a rhetoric/knowledge/process/disposition problem because _____ . For instance, _____."
- "This problem feels a little like a problem I had once in writing ____ . That time, I ended up _____. "

Reflect to learn and connect

Finally, when your time is up, write yourself a note: Did you come up with a strategy you could try to work on at this point of your project? Should you skip to a different part of the project that you think you could be more successful at? Or is it truly time to move on to another kind of work and come back to this project at a later time, perhaps after you've asked for help from a peer, tutor, instructor, or supervisor?

Explore related exercises

Best and Better, Emperor for a Day, Ten Directed Revisions

Exercises in Alphabetical Order

The following exercises are available in Chapters 23 through 29.

Rethinking Your Writing

A comprehensive, flexibly designed textbook that draws on recent research about threshold concepts and reflective practice, *Rethinking Your Writing* offers a transfer-focused approach that emphasizes students' repeated practice in identifying their own writing challenges and strategies. This open-access textbook presents the learning of writing as a situated, rhetorical, recursive process of problems wrestled with and decisions made—starting from conceptual decisions such as identifying audience and content needs to late-stage choices during drafting, revision, editing, and polishing. Extensive discussions of threshold concepts, reflective writing, peer review, revision strategies, and writers' dispositions enhance support for reflection. Activities and opportunities for additional learning support student engagement with key concepts, writing processes, rhetorical situations, and issues of equity and inclusion. In *Rethinking Your Writing*, E. Shelley Reid offers a textbook designed from the start to function as an ebook, with each section crosslinked to related material elsewhere in the book.

E. Shelley Reid is Associate Professor of English and Executive Director of the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning at George Mason University. Her work on teacher preparation, mentoring, and writing education appears in *Composition Studies*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Pedagogy*, *To Improve the Academy*, *Writing Program Administration*, and *Writing Spaces*.