Writing Analytically

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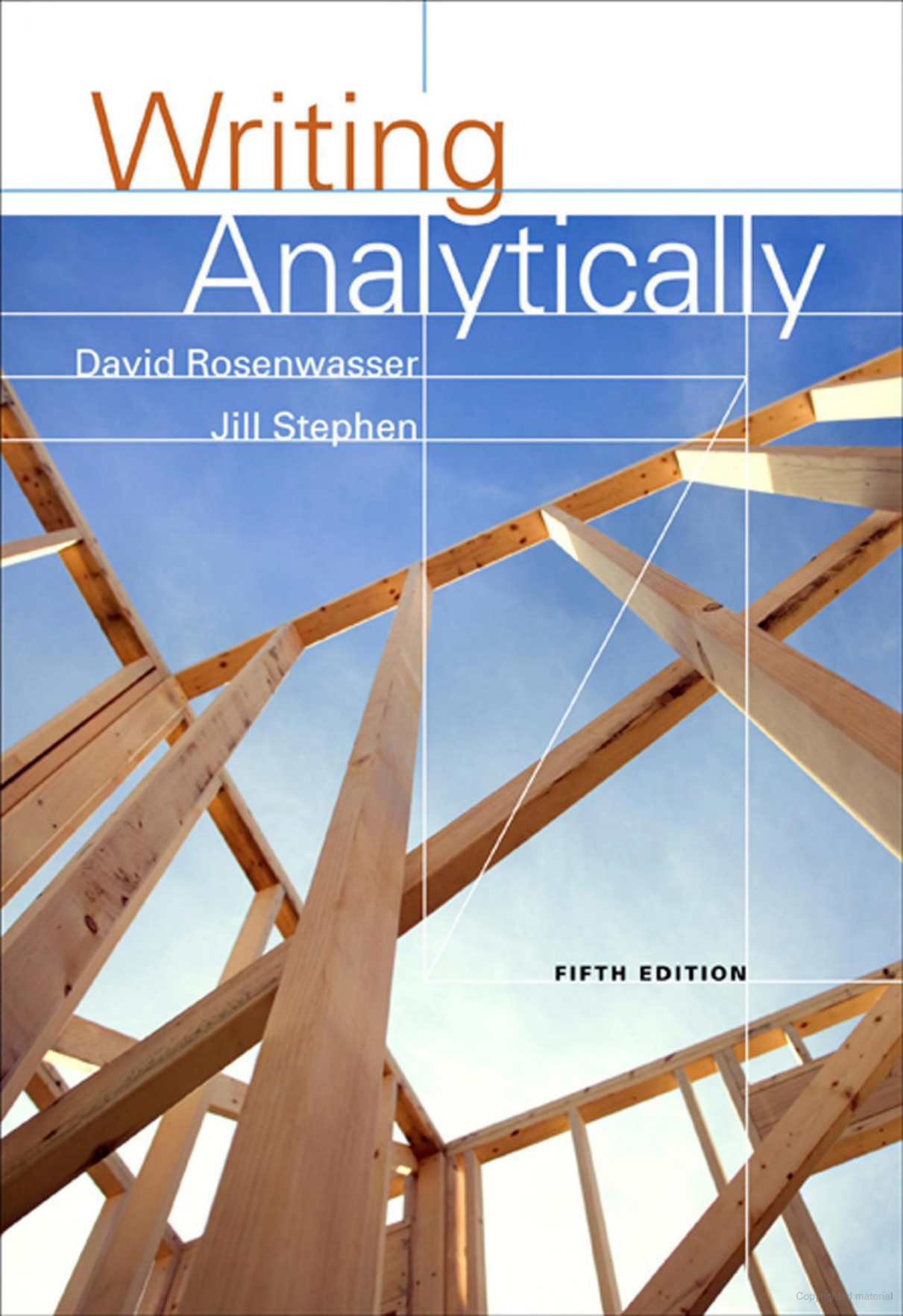

FIFTH EDITION

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Muhlenberg College

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PREFACE

Writing Analytically focuses on ways of using writing to discover and develop ideas. That is, the book treats writing as a tool of thought—a means of undertaking sustained acts of inquiry and reflection.

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

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

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

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

By the time we came to writing the third edition, we had begun to focus on observation skills. We recognized that students' lack of these skills is as much a problem as thought-strangling formats like five-paragraph form or a too-rigid notion of thesis. We began to understand that observation doesn't come naturally; it needs to be taught. The book advocates locating observation as a separate phase of thinking before the writer becomes committed to a thesis. Much weak writing is prematurely and too narrowly thesis driven precisely because people try to formulate the thesis before they have done much (or any) analyzing.

Though the book's chapters form a logical sequence, each can also stand alone and be used in different sequences.

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

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

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

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

THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

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

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

The book is also heavily influenced by the early proponents of the process movement in writing pedagogy. Books such as Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* and Ken Macrorie's *Telling Writing* were standard fare in graduate programs when we began to teach. We came of age, so to speak, accepting that writing instruction should focus on writers' process and not just on ways of shaping finished products. As is now generally recognized, the inherent romanticism and expressivist bias of the process approach to writing limited its usefulness for people who were interested in teaching students how to write for academic audiences. Despite the social scientific approach that researchers such as Janet Emig, James Britton, and Linda Flower (to name a few) brought to the

understanding of students' writing process, the process approach to writing instruction suffered a decline in status as trends in college writing programs took up other causes. (See, for example, the arguments of Patricia Bizzell, David Bartholomae, Charles Bazerman, and others, who reoriented compositionists toward discourse analysis and ethnographic research on the writing practices of other disciplines.)

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

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

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

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

describe systematically what good thinkers do—as acts of mind—when they are confronted with data.

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

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

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

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

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

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen are Professors of English at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where they have co-directed a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program since 1987. They began teaching writing to college

students in the 1970s—David at the University of Virginia and then at the College of William and Mary, and Jill at New York University and then at Hunter College (CUNY). *Writing Analytically* has grown out of their undergraduate teaching and the seminars on writing and writing instruction that they have offered to faculty at Muhlenberg and at other colleges and universities across the country.

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UNIT I

The Analytical Frame of Mind: Introduction to Analytical Methods

CHAPTER 1
Analysis: What It Is and What It Does

CHAPTER 2
Counterproductive Habits of Mind

CHAPTER 3
A Toolkit of Analytical Methods

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

CHAPTER 5
Analyzing Arguments

CHAPTER 6
Topics and Modes of Analysis

CHAPTER 1

Analysis: What It Is and What It Does

FIRST PRINCIPLES

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

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

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

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

ANALYSIS DEFINED

We have seized upon analysis as the book's focus because it is the skill most commonly called for in college courses and beyond. The faculty with whom we work encourage analytical writing because it offers alternatives both to oversimplified thinking of

the like/dislike, agree/disagree variety and to the cut-and-paste compilation of sheer information. It is the kind of writing that helps people not only to retain and assimilate information, but to use information in the service of their own thinking about the world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FIVE ANALYTICAL MOVES

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

Move 1: Suspend Judgment

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

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

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

Move 2: Define Significant Parts and How They're Related

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

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

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

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

Move 4: Look for Patterns

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

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

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

2. *Look for binary oppositions.* Sometimes patterns of repetition that you begin to notice in a particular subject matter are significant because they are part of a contrast—a basic opposition—around which the subject matter is structured. A binary opposition is a pair of elements in which the two members of the pair are opposites; the word *binary* means "consisting of two." Some examples of binary oppositions that we encounter frequently are nature/civilization, city/country, public/private, organic/inorganic, voluntary/involuntary. One advantage of detecting repetition is that it will lead you to discover binaries, which are central to locating issues and concerns. (For more on working with binary oppositions, see Chapters 3 and 5.)

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

   Just as people tend to leap to evaluative judgments, they also tend to avoid information that challenges (by not conforming to) opinions they already hold. Screening out anything that would ruffle the pattern they've begun to

see, they ignore the evidence that might lead them to a better theory. (For more on this process of using anomalous evidence to evolve an essay's main idea, see Chapter 9, Making a Thesis Evolve.) Anomalies are important because noticing them often leads to new and better ideas. Most advances in scientific thought, for example, have arisen when a scientist observes some phenomenon that does not fit with a prevailing theory.

Move 5: Keep Reformulating Questions and Explanations

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

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

Which details seem significant? Why?

What does the detail mean?

What else might it mean?

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

How do the details fit together? What do they have in common?

What does this pattern of details mean?

What else might this same pattern of details mean? How else could it be explained?

(Move: Look for Patterns)

What details don't seem to fit? How might they be connected with other details to form a different pattern?

What does this new pattern mean? How might it cause me to read the meaning of individual details differently?

(Moves: Look for Anomalies and Keep Asking Questions)

The process of posing and answering such questions—the analytical process—is one of trial and error. Learning to write well is largely a matter of learning how to frame questions. One of the main things you acquire in the study of an academic discipline is knowledge of the kinds of questions that the discipline typically asks. For example, an economics professor and a sociology professor might observe the same phenomenon, such as a sharp decline in health benefits for the elderly, and analyze its causes and significance in different ways. The economist might consider how such

benefits are financed and how changes in government policy and the country's population patterns might explain the declining supply of funds for the elderly. The sociologist might ask about attitudes toward the elderly and about the social structures that the elderly rely on for support.

ANALYSIS AT WORK: A SAMPLE PAPER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In some ways these four paragraphs of draft exemplify a writer in the process of discovering a workable idea. They begin with a list of similar examples, briefly noted. As the examples accumulate, the writer begins to make connections and formulate trial explanations. We have not included enough of this excerpt to get to the tentative thesis the draft is working toward, although that thesis is already beginning to emerge. What we want to emphasize here is the writer's willingness to accumulate data and to locate it in various patterns of similarity and contrast.

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

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

DISTINGUISHING ANALYSIS FROM ARGUMENT, SUMMARY, AND EXPRESSIVE WRITING

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

These three categories of writing are not mutually exclusive. So, for example, expressive (writer-centered) writing is also analytical in its attempts to define and explain a writer's feelings, reactions, and experiences. And analysis is a form

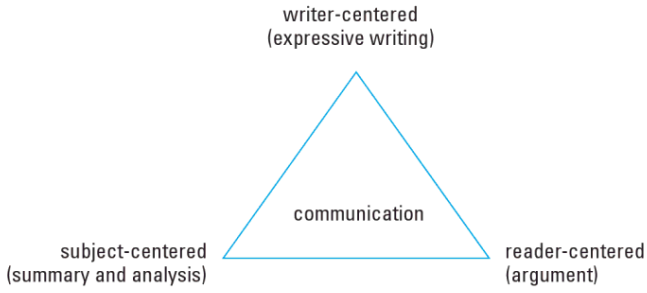

FIGURE 1.1
Diagram of Communication Triangle

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

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

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

ANALYSIS AND PERSONAL ASSOCIATIONS

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

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

Data	Method of Analysis	Interpretive Leaps
subject in profile, not looking at us →	make implicit explicit (speculate about what the detail might suggest) →	figure strikes us as separate, nonconfrontational, passive
folded hands, fitted lace cap, contained hair, expressionless face →	locate pattern of same or similar detail; make what is implicit in pattern of details explicit →	figure strikes us as self-contained, powerful in her separateness and self-enclosure—self-sufficient?
patterned curtain and picture versus still figure and blank wall; slightly frilled lace cuffs and ties on cap versus plain black dress →	locate organizing contrast; make what is implicit in the contrast explicit →	austerity and containment of the figure made more pronounced by slight contrast with busier, more lively, and more ornate elements and with little picture showing world outside
slightly slouched body position and presence of support for feet →	anomalies; make what is implicit in the anomalies explicit →	these details destabilize the serenity of the figure, adding some tension to the picture in the form of slightly uneasy posture and figure's need for support: she looks too long, drooped in on her own spine

FIGURE 1.3
Summary and Analysis of *Whistler's Mother* Diagram

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

A few rules are worth highlighting here:

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

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

ASSIGNMENT: Analyze a Portrait or Other Visual Image

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

Counterproductive Habits of Mind

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

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

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

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

FEAR OF UNCERTAINTY

Most of us learn early in life to pretend that we understand things even when we don't. Rather than ask questions and risk looking foolish, we nod our heads. Soon, we even come to believe that we understand things when really we don't, or not nearly as well as we think we do. This understandable but problematic human trait means that to

become better thinkers, most of us have to cultivate a more positive attitude toward not knowing. Prepare to be surprised at how difficult this can be.

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

> I had not had a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability,* that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.
>
> *—Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 1817*

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

PREJUDGING

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

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

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

BLINDED BY HABIT

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

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

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

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

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

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

That's one reason for the prominence of the buzz phrase "thinking outside the box"—which appears to mean getting beyond outworn ways of thinking about things. But more than that, the phrase assumes that most of the time most of us are trapped inside the box—inside a set of prefabricated answers (clichés) and like/dislike responses. This is not a new phenomenon, of course—250 years ago

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You might try using "Level 3 Generality" as a convenient tag phrase reminding you to steer clear of the higher reaches of abstract generalization, some so high up the ladder from the concrete stuff that produced them that there is barely enough

air to sustain the thought. Why Level 3 instead of Level 2? There aren't just two categories, abstract and concrete; the categories are the ends of a continuum, a sliding scale. And too often when writers try to concretize their generalizations, the results are still too general: they change *animal* to *mammal,* but they need *cow* or, better, *black angus.*

Try this 2.3: *Locating Words on the Abstraction Ladder*

Find a word above (more abstract) and a word below (more concrete) for each of the following words: society, food, train, taxes, school, government, cooking oil, organism, story, magazine.

Try this 2.4: *Distinguishing Abstract from Concrete Words*

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

OVERPERSONALIZING (NATURALIZING OUR ASSUMPTIONS)

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

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

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Habits of Mind

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

—Mark Sciutto, *Professor of Psychology*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

subjective vs. objective

personal expression vs. impersonal analysis

passionately engaged vs. detached, impassively neutral

genuinely felt vs. heartless

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

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

Try this 2.5: *Tracing Impressions Back to Causes*

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

Try this 2.6: *Looking for Naturalized Assumptions*

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

OPINIONS (VERSUS IDEAS)

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

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

Our opinions are learned. They are products of our culture and our upbringing—not personal possessions. It is okay to have opinions, but dangerous to give too many of them protected-species status, walling them off into a reserve, not to be touched by reasoning or evidence.

Some things, of course, we have to take on faith. Religious convictions, for example, are more than opinions, though they operate in a similar way: we believe where we can't always prove. But even our most sacred convictions are not really harmed by thinking. The world's religions are constantly engaged in interpreting and reinterpreting what religious texts mean, what various traditional practices mean, and how they may or may not be adapted to the attitudes and practices of the world as it is today.

WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE AN IDEA

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

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

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

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Ideas versus Opinions

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

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

—Jack Gambino, *Professor of Political Science*

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

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

4. *Begin with questions, not answers.* Whether you are focusing on an assigned topic or devising one of your own, you are usually better off to begin with something that you don't understand very well and want to understand better. Begin by asking what kinds of questions the material poses. So, for example, if you are convinced that Robinson Crusoe changes throughout Defoe's novel and you write a paper cataloging those changes, you essentially are composing a selective plot summary. If, by contrast, you wonder why Crusoe walls himself within a fortress after he discovers a footprint in the sand, you will be more likely to interpret the significance of events than just to report them.
5. *Write all of the time about what you are studying.* Doing so is probably the single best preparation for developing your own interest in a subject and for finding interesting approaches to it. Don't wait to start writing until you think you have an idea you can organize a paper around. By writing informally—as a matter of routine—about what you are studying, you can acquire the habits of mind necessary to having and developing ideas. Similarly, by reading as often and as attentively as you can, and writing spontaneously about what you read, you will accustom yourself to being a less passive consumer of ideas and information, and will have more ideas and information available to think actively with and about. (See Freewriting in Chapter 3, A Toolkit of Analytical Methods, for more.)
6. *Accept that interest is a product of writing—not a prerequisite.* The best way to get interested is to expect to become interested. Writing gives you the opportunity to cultivate your curiosity by thinking exploratively. Rather than approaching topics in a mechanical way, or putting them off to the last possible moment and doing the assignment grudgingly, try giving yourself and the topic the benefit of the doubt. If you can suspend judgment and start writing, you will often find yourself uncovering interests where you had not seen them before.
7. *Use the "backburner."* In restaurants, the backburner is the place that chefs leave their sauces and soup stocks to simmer while they are actively engaged in other, more immediately pressing and faster operations on the frontburners.

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

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

ASSIGNMENT: Observation Practice

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

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

CHAPTER 3

A Toolkit of Analytical Methods

> Once I begin the act of writing, it all falls away—the view from the window, the tools, the talismans, even the snoring cat—and I am unconscious of myself and my surroundings while I fuse language with idea, make a specific image visible or audible through the discovery of the right words . . . One's carping inner critics are silenced for a time, and, as a result, what is produced is a little bit different from anything I had planned. There is always a surprise, a revelation. During the act of writing I have told myself something that I didn't know I knew.
>
> —Gail Godwin, "How I Write" (Boston: *The Writer,* October 1987)

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

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

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

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

> Since really serious exposure in public today is assumed to be synonymous with being seen on television, it would seem to follow that televised space is the premier public space. Many things that people say to me on television, however, would never be tolerated in a genuine public space—in a jury box, for example, or even on a city sidewalk. TV is an enormous, ramified extension of the billion living rooms and bedrooms in which it's consumed. You rarely hear a person on the subway talking loudly about, say, incontinence, but on television it's been happening for years. TV is devoid of shame, and without shame there can be no distinction between public and private.

Franzen here enables us to see freshly by offering us details that challenge our conventional notions of public and private. Seeing in this way requires that we attend carefully to the concrete aspect of things.

We admit that in some cases it is the fear of the unfamiliar rather than the blindness bred of habit that keeps people from looking closely at things. Such is the situation of college students confronted with difficult and unfamiliar reading. And so, there is clearly some value in using habit to domesticate the unfamiliar in particular (and daunting) circumstances. Nevertheless, it's probably easier to overcome the fear of grappling with new material than it is to turn off the notion that meanings are obvious. (On strategies for tackling difficult reading, see the discussions of Paraphrase × 3 and Passage-Based Focused Freewriting later in this chapter. See also Chapter 13, Reading Analytically.)

Before introducing the Toolkit, we should say that what we are proposing is (in a sense) nothing new. There is a long history dating back to the ancient Greek and Roman rhetoricians of using formulae to discover and develop ideas. In classical rhetoric, the pursuit and presentation of ideas—of workable claims for arguments—was divided into five stages: *inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria,* and *pronuntiatio.* For present purposes we need to concentrate on only two—*inventio* (invention) and *dispositio* (disposition). Disposition includes the various means of effectively organizing a speech or piece of writing, given that rhetoric is concerned with the means of persuasion. Invention includes various ways of finding things to say, of discovering arguable claims to develop and dispose (arrange).

The early rhetoricians thought of invention in terms of what they called "topics," from the Greek word *topoi,* meaning place or region. The topics were "places" that an orator (speech-maker) could visit, mentally, to discover possible ways of developing a subject. The topics are what we might now think of as strategies—a word which, interestingly, has its roots in the Greek word for army, and, thus, with the idea of winning over an audience to your point of view and defeating enemies. Because the quality and plausibility of a writer's ideas constitute, arguably, the best means of persuading an audience, we here emphasize ways of discovering as much as possible about your evidence.

THE TOOLKIT

What follows are a set of fundamental analytical activities—tools that effective thinkers use constantly, whether they are aware of using them or not. Some people do indeed have ideas as sudden flashes of inspiration (in the blink of an eye), but there