7
Prewriting techniques

This is the first requirement for good writing: truth; not the truth . . . but some kind of truth—a connection between the things written about, the words used in the writing, and the author's real experience in the world he knows well—whether in fact or dream or imagination.

KEN MACRORIE

The prewriting techniques discussed in this chapter help students assess the dimensions of a rhetorical problem and plan its solution. They trigger perceptual and conceptual processes, permitting writers to recall experiences, break through stereotyped thinking, examine relationships between ideas, assess the expectations of their audience, find an implicit order in their subject matter, and discover how they feel about the work.[1] Some prewriting activities enable writers to probe

1. An indispensable bibliographical essay that surveys methods of invention as well as the history of the art is Richard Young, "Recent Developments in Rhetorical Invention," in *Teaching Composition: Twelve Bibliographical Essays*, ed. Gary Tate (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1987), pp. 1–38. As Young points out, the term *prewriting* technically denotes the techniques of invention developed by D. Gordon Rohman and Albert O. Wlecke—journals, meditation, and analogy—that emphasize creative thinking and the "self-actualization" of the writer [cf. D. Gordon Rohman and Albert O. Wlecke, *Pre-Writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing* (USOE Cooperative Research Project No. 2174; East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1964)]. However, I use *prewriting* throughout this book as a synonym for "invention," primarily because current usage among writing teachers assigns the term broader meaning than Rohman and Wlecke intended.

the subject from several perspectives; others help writers assess their relationship to an audience. Some use pictures, talk, or pantomime to generate ideas, while others ask students to write lists, notes, and scratch outlines.

As a rule, the more time students spend on a variety of prewriting activities, the more successful the paper will be. In working out the possibilities an assignment suggests, students discover what they honestly want to say and address some of the decisions they must make if the paper is to express a message effectively. Writing the first draft becomes easier because some writing—notes, lists, freewriting—has already taken place. Drafting also becomes more productive because students are less preoccupied with formulating ideas from scratch and freer to discover new messages as the words appear on the page.

In many composition textbooks, the only prewriting technique discussed is the formal outline. Although writers rarely construct elaborate outlines, informal outlines serve a useful purpose. Outlining can help students shape raw material generated by other prewriting activities. Outlining also can serve revision because when students outline a draft they may discover digressions, inconsistencies, or other organizational problems to work on. Nevertheless, outlining represents only one of many prewriting activities.

Because prewriting is a means to an end, I don't grade the notes, lists, and miscellaneous scratch work my students turn in with their final drafts. I look through the material, however, to discover which students need help generating more support for their topics or making prewriting work more efficiently for them. I also involve students in several prewriting activities, not just one, for each assignment. Sequencing several kinds of prewriting activities encourages students to explore their subjects thoroughly, planning their response to an assignment gradually, moving tentatively but then more confidently toward a first draft. Eventually, students modify and combine in whatever ways work best for them the techniques discussed in this chapter. All of them offer writers places to begin, keys of different shapes and sizes that grant access to experience, memory, and intuition.

Perception exercises

Thinking games, "conceptual blockbusting," and sense-scrambling activities encourage students to think about how they think. By analyzing the steps they go through to "have ideas" or solve problems, they discover barriers that block perceptions.[2] Much of the material in Chapter 6, including the five-of-hearts exercise, can prompt a discus-

2. James L. Adams, *Conceptual Blockbusting: A Pleasurable Guide to Better Problem Solving* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1974), is a useful discussion of how to cultivate thinking and problem-solving abilities. The book analyzes barriers to thinking and suggests strategies for breaking through them.

sion of these perceptual, cultural, emotional, and intellectual barriers. To demonstrate these principles, you might ask students to pair up and by turns lead each other blindfolded on a tour of the building or some other familiar place. Deprived of their visual orientations, they can appreciate perceptions gained through other senses: smell, touch, hearing. Students also might discuss pictures, a busy city street for example, and then draw the scene from various perspectives. What would a bird's-eye view of the picture look like? How would you draw it if you were standing at the right-hand side of the picture looking left? After students have compared their drawings and discussed the differences in perspective, the class can move on to other prewriting activities directly relevant to a particular assignment.

For many students, arts and media that don't involve writing offer a comfortable place to begin probing a subject. Pantomime and role-playing encourage students to act out a subject before translating it into written form. Especially when an issue admits several points of view or when an audience may hold diverse opinions about a subject, role-playing clarifies the options students must consider. Assignments involving argumentation can begin with impromptu debates, which might then be worked into brief written dialogues and from there into more formal kinds of discourse. Similarly, students can translate reading assignments, pictures, or music from one medium to another, then to a third and finally to a written form. The assumption behind these activities is that similar principles govern commmunication in various media. When students practice the "language" of pictorial art, of gesture, and of music, they also learn principles that reinforce their use of the spoken and written word. Furthermore, in responding to cartoons, music, and pantomime, students become more sensitive observers of their world.

Not every piece of writing, of course, finds a convenient beginning in art, music, or drama, but all writing can begin with speech, a comfortable means of expression for most people. As Robert Zoellner and others have suggested, talking out a rhetorical problem helps students define and solve it: "Since students have a greater fluency in speaking than in writing because they practice it more, speaking can be used as a stage prior to writing and can provide the basis for moving through increasingly adequate written versions of a unit of discourse."[3] All students, especially those whose fear of failure makes writing anything, even scratch notes, difficult, need opportunities to explain their plans to themselves or discuss them with other students, a sympathetic teacher, or even a tape recorder. Every assignment should provide several opportunities for students to discuss their work-in-progress with one another.

3. Young, p. 37; cf. Robert Zoellner, "A Behavioral Approach to Writing," *College English* 30 (January 1969), 267–320.

Brainstorming and clustering

Brainstorming is an unstructured probing of a topic. Like free association, brainstorming allows writers to venture whatever comes to mind about a subject, no matter how obvious or strange the ideas might be. When the entire class brainstorms a topic, the teacher generally writes on the board whatever words and phrases students call out. When students brainstorm topics on their own, they list whatever details occur to them. As a rule, general or superficial observations head the list, but as students begin to examine the subject more closely, useful and interesting details begin to appear. To be useful, of course, the list must contain abundant raw material.

Sometimes, however, brainstorming yields only rambling, unfocused, or repetitive generalizations. If the teacher has presented the technique as an end in itself, students may conclude, "Okay, she wants a list of 100 details, so I'll give her a list of 100 details." The purpose of brainstorming is neither list making nor reaching a precise number of details. As Donald Murray advises in *A Writer Teaches Writing*, "The teacher must, in such lists as this, begin to encourage honesty, to have the student look into himself and into his subject with candor and vigor. The list also gives the teacher a chance to defeat the cliché and the vague generalization by saying to the student, 'What does that mean? Can you be more specific?' The teacher should praise a student when he gets a good concrete detail which has the ring of reality" (1st ed., p. 78). At least initially, students need guidance in generating *useful* details and enough of them to permit discarding those that seem irrelevant. Students also need reminding that list making serves a larger purpose, to explore the subject thoroughly and discover what makes it interesting or important.

Teachers can go over these lists with individual students in brief conferences during class. An especially rich list can be the subject of whole-class discussion, followed by groups of students reviewing their own lists with one another. What details seem most forceful? In what ways could details be grouped? What patterns have emerged in the list? What dimensions of the subject seemed to attract the writer's interest? What details must be left out at this point if the first draft is to hang together? A discussion along these lines helps students discover organizational possibilities in the raw material and suggests options for developing the paper.

Following such a discussion, students might begin clustering their material, grouping and regrouping items into a diagram such as the one in Figure 7.1. Called "mapping," "clustering," or "webbing," the process of creating such drawings helps writers explore the organizational possibilities in their material. Unlike formal outlines, with their restrictive system of Roman and Arabic numerals and their need for parallelism, cluster diagrams represent provisional representations

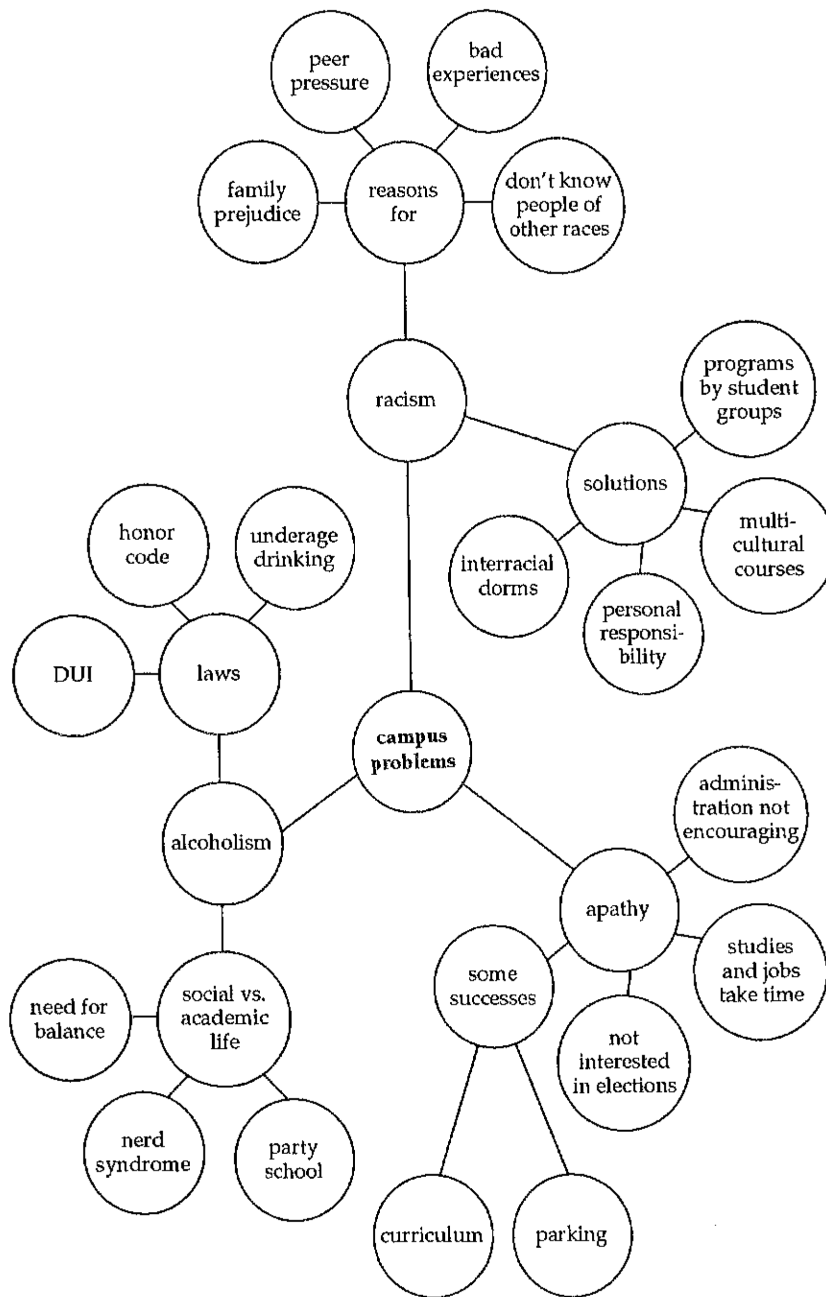

FIGURE 7.1 Cluster Diagram

of the relationships among topics, subtopics, and supporting evidence. If one area of the diagram looks skimpy, additional brainstorming will provide more material (or the writer may abandon it altogether). Heavy branches may need subdividing.

The clusters in Figure 7.1 grew out of a brainstorming session on the topic "campus problems." As it happened, the class creating the diagram eventually abandoned "campus problems" as the topic because the material in some of the subtopics—"alcoholism," "racism," and "apathy"—seemed more interesting. As with most cluster diagrams, any branch could be developed into a new, more detailed diagram. The purpose of clustering is to help a writer discover order in a subject and to transform lists of details into meaningful groupings, some of which eventually may find a place in a first draft.

Freewriting

Freewriting, a technique advocated by Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie, offers students a risk-free way of getting words onto a page without having to worry about their correctness. Elbow explains the technique this way:

> The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, "I can't think of it." Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it's fine to write "I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say" as many times as you want: or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again: or anything else. The only requirement is that you *never* stop. (*Writing without Teachers*, p. 3)

Elbow recommends that students freewrite at least three times a week. Freewritings, he insists, should *never* be graded. Their primary purpose is to get something on paper, and "it's an unnecessary burden to try to think of words and also worry at the same time whether they're the right words" (p. 5). Macrorie advocates freewriting because it produces honest writing, writing that is free from phoniness or pretension. The writer must write fast enough to use "his own natural language without thinking of his expression" (*Telling Writing*, p. 9).

Some teachers do not constrain freewriting in any way; others offer a phrase or the beginning of a sentence to help students get started. Teachers also can sequence freewriting exercises in several ways to move students closer to more formal drafts. For example, after students have completed a freewriting, they may read it aloud or silently to find words, phrases, a sentence or two that seem especially appeal-

ing. These words then offer a place to begin a second freewriting. The second freewriting may suggest ideas for a third and so on.

Murray sequences freewritings by incorporating student response at each stage.[4] First, students write freely for five minutes or so. Then, working in pairs, they discuss the freewriting by answering a question about it: "What appeared on the page that you didn't expect?" After a few minutes of discussion, students complete a second freewriting and stop to discuss it: "What idea do you want to develop in the next freewriting?" The procedure is repeated six or seven times, a new question guiding the students' discussion after each period of writing. The questions help students focus on what has appeared, on where the composing process is taking them. Teachers and students may substitute their own questions to guide the discussion, focusing on the writing but at the same time leaving students free to let their own language take charge of the page: What is the writing telling you? How do you (the writer) feel about what is appearing on the page? What do you (the reader) need to know that I haven't told you yet?

Freewriting encourages students to overcome their fear of the blank page and their stifling preoccupation with correctness. The technique encourages play with language and uses language as an aid to thinking. A freewriting represents a writer talking out an idea; it is not a polished communication intended for an outside audience. Needless to say, if teachers grade freewritings, they are no longer "free." Threatened by grades, students will shift their attention from generating and developing ideas to editing a finished product.

Journals

Journals, commonplace books, or writer's notebooks have been indispensable tools for many writers, the famous and not so famous. Some journals, like diaries, record experiences and observations meant only to be read by their authors. Other journals, Virginia Woolf's *Writer's Diary* and Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Journals* for example, contain such significant information about an author's life and work that they reach a large public audience. Many professional writers use journals to sketch out, organize, draft, and revise their work before they submit it for publication.

The journal has several uses in a writing class. Many teachers set aside the first few minutes of every class period for journal writing. While the teacher checks the roll, returns papers, or reviews the lesson

4. Donald Murray, workshop presentation, South Carolina English Teachers Conference, University of South Carolina, October 21, 1978. See also "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference," *College English* 41 (September 1979), 13–18. "Looping" and "cubing," which also depend on completing series of freewritings, are described in Elizabeth Cowan Neeld, *Writing*, 3d ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1990), pp. 20–21 and 315–16 respectively.

plan, students use the time to write whatever they want in their journals. The procedure settles the class down to work and gives students daily writing practice. To avoid treating the journal as inconsequential busywork, students should have opportunities to develop the material recorded in their journals into more formal assignments. Journals also can become workbooks for the course. In them, students may practice freewriting, respond to reading assignments, jot down leading ideas in preparation for class discussion, work out plans for papers, complete sentence-combining exercises, work on revisions, experiment with stylistic effects, keep track of spelling demons, and note which writing problems they have conquered and which still need work.

Unaccustomed to writing without some teacher-made assignment in front of them, students may protest that they can't think of anything to write in their journals, or they may devote several entries to deliberately "detached" topics: "I got up at eight, skipped breakfast, and went to class. Nothing much happened today." When this happens, teachers can discuss the difference between simply recording experiences and the more productive activity of reacting to or reflecting on events. They might also suggest that students capture a feeling in words or speculate about some imaginary, "what if" situation. If these open-ended, deliberately vague suggestions don't work, the following list might help, at least until students become comfortable pursuing their own interests.[5]

1. Speculate. Why do you spend so much time in a certain place? Why do you read a certain book or see a particular movie more than once?
2. Sketch in words a person who doesn't know you're watching: a woman studying her reflection in a store window, a spectator at a sports event, a student studying desperately.
3. Record some observations about a current song, book, movie, television program.
4. React to something you've read recently. Was it well written? Why or why not? What strategies did the writer use to get you to like or dislike the piece?
5. Try to capture an incident of night fear—when a bush became a bear, for example—so that a reader might feel the same way you did.
6. Explain an important lesson you learned as a child.
7. If peace were a way of life and not merely a sentiment, what would you have to give up?
8. Describe your idea of paradise or hell.

5. Adapted from a list developed by Connie Pritchard, University of South Carolina, Fall 1977. See also Macrorie, *Telling Writing*, pp. 140–51.

9. Write a nasty letter complaining about some product that didn't work or some service that was performed poorly.
10. Pretend you're the consumer relations official for the company in number 9. Write a calm, convincing response to your complaint.
11. If you were an administrator in this school, what's the first change you'd make? Why?
12. Tell what season of the year brings the things you like best.
13. You have been given the power to make one person, and only one, disappear. Whom would you eliminate and why?

Most teachers read their students' journals periodically, every few weeks or so. Eventually, they may assign the entire journal a percentage of the final grade; students receive credit simply for writing regularly. Other teachers base the grade for the journal on the quantity of writing it contains, thirty entries receiving an A, twenty to twenty-nine entries earning a B, and so on. Grading individual entries in journals is counterproductive because it discourages provisional thinking and regular practice with writing. Journals offer students a place to write without fear of making mistakes or facing criticism for what they have to say. Comments on journal entries should be positive, encouraging further writing or deeper exploration of an idea: "I felt that way too when my best friend misunderstood what I said." "It must have taken courage to tell your parents this; why not write an entry as if you were telling the story from their point of view?" Students should feel free to write "Do not read" across the top of an entry they don't want anyone else to see or to fold the page over and staple it. A teacher unable to resist temptation should ask students to remove personal entries before the journals are turned in.

When I read a set of journals, occasionally I'll come across an entry full of obscenities. They're meant to shock me. Generally, I ignore them the first time around; if they appear again, I usually discuss the journal with the student. In a fit of frustration, I once asked a student to write another entry defining some of the four-letter words he'd used. He never did. Much more common are the touchingly painful accounts of personal traumas students sometimes share with their English teachers. If I ignore the entry because it makes me uncomfortable, the student will conclude that I can't handle honest, sensitive topics and prefer to read only about "safe," academic subjects. If I write some gratuitous comment in the margin, I belittle the experience. When I discover students working out difficult experiences by writing them down in a journal, I generally encourage them to tackle the problem in several entries. They may have detected an irony in the experience, a weakness or strength in themselves, or a serious flaw in their idealistic notions about people. They need to examine further

what they have found, first to understand it for themselves and perhaps later to share it with a larger audience. Precisely because such entries contain honest statements about important problems, they deserve to be treated seriously.

Heuristics

Heuristics derive ultimately from the *topoi* of classical rhetoric. In Book Two of the *Rhetoric,* Aristotle discusses twenty-eight "universal topics for enthymemes on all matters," among them, arguing from opposites, dividing the subject, exploring various senses of an ambiguous term, examining cause and effect. Although the classical *topoi* represent lines of reasoning speakers might pursue to invent arguments, heuristics prompt thinking by means of questions. The questions are ordered so that writers can explore the subject systematically and efficiently, but they also are open-ended to stimulate intuition and memory as well as reason. Most students are already familiar with the heuristic procedure journalists use: Who? What? When? Where? How? These questions help reporters compose effective lead paragraphs in news stories. Conditioned by years of testing, students often think that heuristic questions must have right and wrong answers; they don't. They increase the possibilities for probing a topic thoroughly, and they usually generate provisional answers. Ideally, those tentative answers should lead students to formulate further questions.

In *Writing* (3d ed., pp. 328–29), Elizabeth Cowan Neeld presents a heuristic derived from the categories "definition," "comparison," "relationship," "testimony," and "circumstance." The author encourages students to take the questions one at a time, thoughtfully, replacing the blank with a subject they want to explore and writing brief notes to answer the questions. If students get stuck on a question, they should move on. When they have finished the entire list, they should reread their notes, starring the material that looks promising.

Definition

1. How does the dictionary define ______ ?
2. What earlier words did ______ come from?
3. What do *I* mean by ______ ?
4. What group of things does ______ seem to belong to? How is ______ different from other things in this group?
5. What parts can ______ be divided into?
6. Did ______ mean something in the past that it doesn't mean now? If so, what? What does this former meaning tell us about how the idea grew and developed?
7. Does ______ mean something now that it didn't years ago? If so, what?

8. What other words mean approximately the same as ______ ?
9. What are some concrete examples of ______ ?
10. When is the meaning of ______ misunderstood?

Comparison

1. What is ______ similar to? In what ways?
2. What is ______ different from? In what ways?
3. ______ is superior to what? In what ways?
4. ______ is inferior to what? In what ways?
5. ______ is most unlike what? (What is it opposite to?) In what ways?
6. ______ is most like what? In what ways?

Relationship

1. What causes ______ ?
2. What is the purpose of ______ ?
3. Why does ______ happen?
4. What comes before ______ ?
5. What comes after ______ ?

Circumstance

1. Is ______ possible or impossible?
2. What qualities, conditions, or circumstances make ______ possible or impossible?
3. Supposing that ______ is possible, is it also desirable? Why?
4. When did ______ happen previously?
5. Who has done or experienced ______ ?
6. Who can do ______ ?
7. If ______ starts, what makes it end?
8. What would it take for ______ to happen now?
9. What would prevent ______ from happening?

Testimony

1. What have I heard people say about ______ ?
2. Do I know any facts or statistics about ______ ? If so, what?
3. Have I talked with anyone about ______ ?
4. Do I know any famous or well-known saying (e.g., "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush") about ______ ?
5. Can I quote any proverbs or any poems about ______ ?
6. Are there any laws about ______ ?
7. Do I remember any songs about ______ ? Do I remember anything I've read about ______ in books or magazines? Anything I've seen in a movie or on television?
8. Do I want to do any research on ______ ?

The dramatistic pentad is a heuristic derived from Kenneth Burke's rhetoric of human motives discussed in Chapter 4:

What was done? (act)

Where or when was it done? (scene)

Who did it? (agent)

How was it done? (agency)

Why was it done? (purpose)

Although Burke originally posed these questions to explore the complicated motives of human actions, most composition teachers use the heuristic with a simpler aim in mind: to help students generate descriptive or narrative material. As a prewriting technique, the pentad works well for investigating literary topics, historical or current events, and biographical subjects. The pentad gains additional heuristic power when any two of the five terms are regarded together, as "ratios." Consider, for example, how the act : scene ratio informs the plot of any murder mystery. Or how the act : purpose ratio characterizes what some people call *euthanasia* and others, *murder*.

Another series of questions, adapted from Richard Larson's problem-solving model, suggests ways to engage issues-oriented subjects, the sort teachers often assign for persuasive papers. Students also may find the heuristic useful in sorting through other problems: personal difficulties, writing problems, or the problem posed by a writing assignment.

What is the problem?

Why is the problem indeed a problem?

What goals must be served by whatever action or solution that is taken?

Which goals have the highest priority?

What procedures might attain the stated goals?

What can I predict about the consequences of each possible action?

How do the actions compare with each other as potential solutions to the problem?

Which course of action is best?

In answering these questions, students define the problem, analyze it, formulate several potential solutions, and select the best solution. "In every problem," writes Edward P. J. Corbett, "there are some things that you know or can easily find out, but there is something too that you don't know. It is the *unknown* that creates the problem. When confronted with a problem, you have to take note of all the things you do know. Then, by a series of inferences from the known, you try to

form a hypothesis to determine whether your theory leads you to discover the unknown that is causing the problem" (*The Little Rhetoric and Handbook*, p. 44). Teachers too can employ the heuristic to define, analyze, and solve teaching problems or conduct research.

Because most writing teachers also teach literature courses, a heuristic for analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating literature can pose useful questions to guide students' reading or help them explore literary topics. Corbett devised the series of questions shown in Figure 7.2a–c, which have been adapted from *The Little Rhetoric and Handbook* (pp. 186–221).

Obviously, students don't need to answer all of Corbett's questions every time they read a literary work. Routinely dragging the class through each question would be boring busywork. The questions have value insofar as they guide reading, suggest new ideas to explore, or encourage a closer examination of the text. The questions can be broken apart, altered, or culled selectively. At some point, students need to frame their own questions to explain their response to the work.

Because most textbooks devote little attention to audience, students may need help defining for whom they are writing and why. A heuristic for assessing the audience provides such help. Audience analysis not only generates content, depending on what a reader already knows about a subject, but it also encourages writers to think early on about their tone and point of view. The following questions, adapted from Karl R. Wallace's "*Topoi* and the Problem of Invention," ask writers to identify several characteristics of an audience:

How old is the audience?

What is the economic or social condition of the audience?

What is the educational status of the audience?

What general philosophies of government or politics does the audience hold?

What values and beliefs would be common to an audience of this age?

What economic or social values is the audience likely to hold?

What value does the audience place on education, religion, work?

Which of these values—economic, social, political, educational—is most important to the audience? Least important?

In general, how does the audience feel about its heritage or events that happened in the past? That are going on in the present? What hopes for the future does the audience hold?

In general, does the audience expect certain patterns of thought in what it reads? Should I include a lot of data to convince the audience of my point? What authorities would be most convinc-

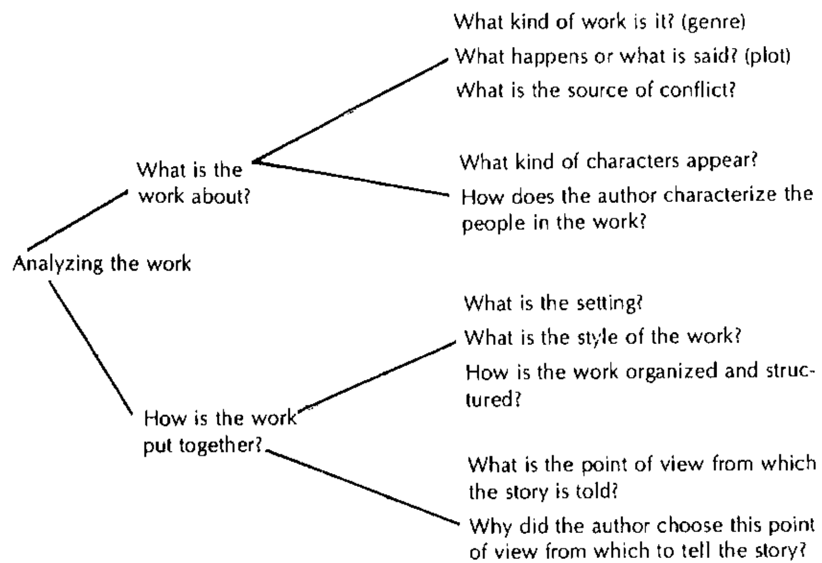

FIGURE 7.2a

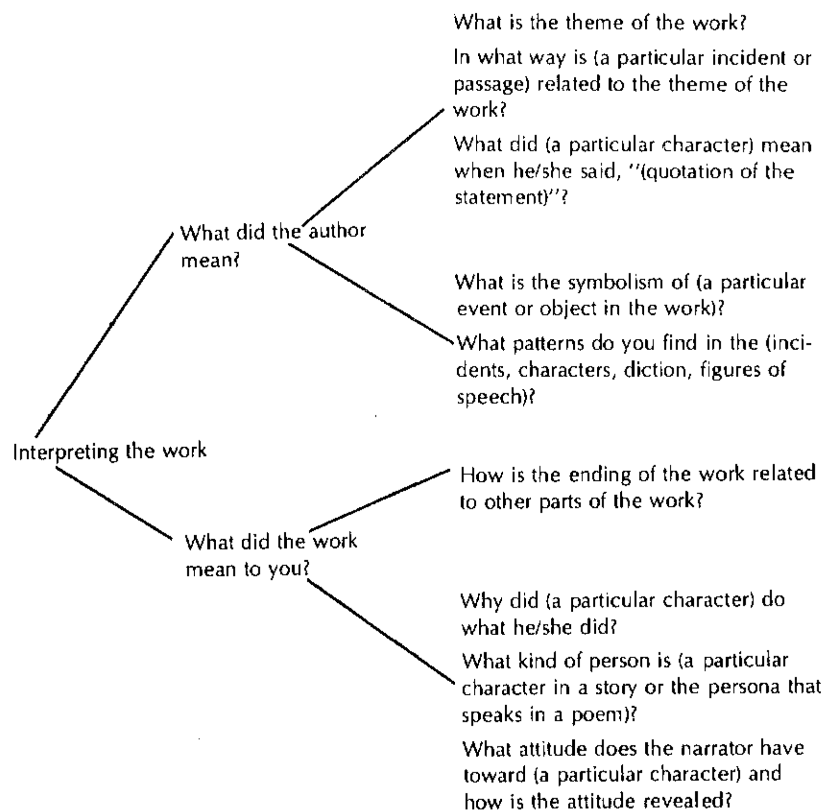

FIGURE 7.2b

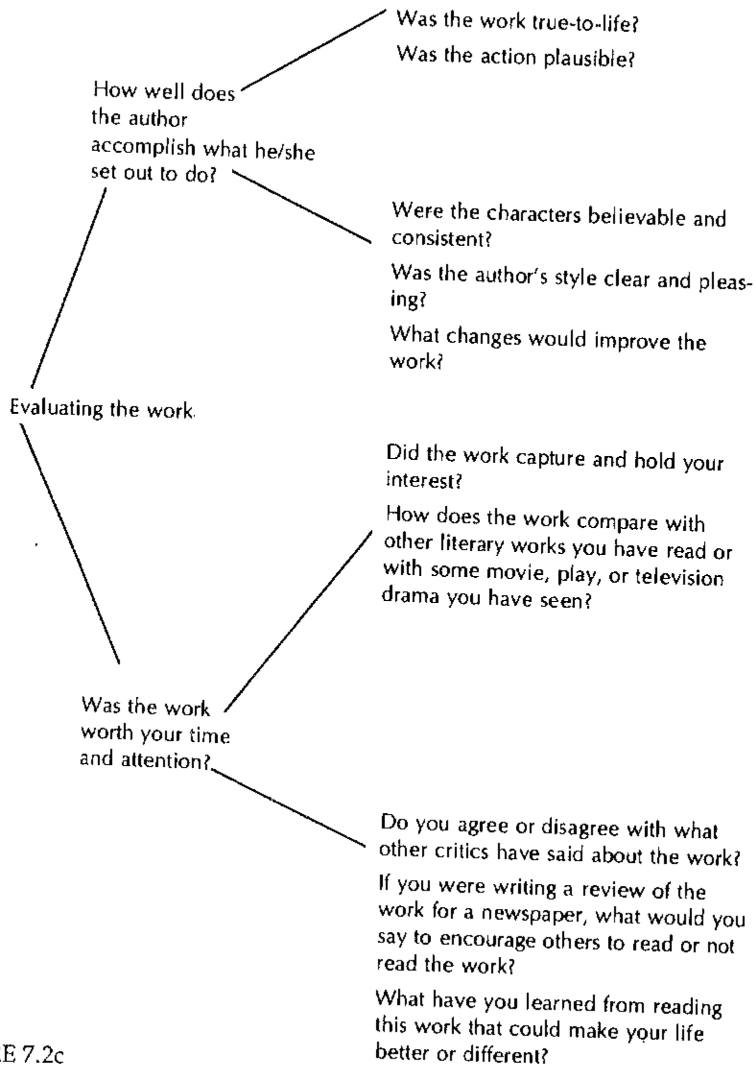

FIGURE 7.2c

ing? Does the audience need to see the causes and effects of my proposals? Would stories and analogies confuse my readers or encourage them to understand what I want to say? What terms will I need to define, and what terms can I assume are already understood?

What sorts of issues most frequently make the audience angry or defensive?

What things can I say without antagonizing my audience?

What options do I have for presenting unpopular opinions to my audience?

What is the most convincing appeal I could make? Should I try to convince by being reasonable and logical? Should I appeal to the emotions? Or should I demonstrate that I am an honest, trustworthy, sympathetic expert whom the audience can trust?

Have I stereotyped my audience, overlooking individuals who may hold views that are different from those the rest of my audience believes in?

Am I just saying what my audience wants to hear or am I also saying what I honestly believe to be true?

After students have grown comfortable with relatively simple prewriting techniques—brainstorming, clustering, freewriting, answering questions—they may want to use more elaborate heuristics to probe the subject even further.[6]

The following heuristic is adapted from Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike's *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (1970) and permits us to examine a subject systematically from several perspectives. Although we customarily consider a subject from only one point of view, tagmemic invention forces us to shift mental gears to see it differently. According to Young, Becker, and Pike, anything—an object, event, concept—can be viewed from three perspectives. We usually regard an oak tree, to use their example, as an isolated, static entity, as a "thing" or particle. But we also could view the oak as a process (wave), as a participant in the natural growth cycle that begins with an acorn and ends when the tree rots or is cut into lumber. Or we may regard the tree as a system (field) of roots, trunk, branches, and leaves. These three perspectives—particle, wave, field—permit us to consider the same subject from three angles: as a static entity, as a dynamic process, and as a system.

Furthermore, in order to "know" this oak tree, we must be able to figure out three aspects of its existence (regardless of which perspective we assume):

1. *How is it unique?* As an entity, process, or system, how does it differ from everything else? Young, Becker, and Pike label this aspect "contrast."
2. *How much can it change and still be itself?* How much "varia-

6. See, for example, Richard L. Larson, "Discovery through Questioning: A Plan for Teaching Rhetorical Invention," *College English* 30 (November 1968), 126–34; and Tommy J. Boley, "A Heuristic for Persuasion," *College Composition and Communication* 30 (May 1979), 187–91.

tion" is possible in the oak (viewed as entity, process, or system) before it becomes something other than an oak?

3. *How does it fit into larger systems of which it is a part?* What is its "distribution"? In other words, the oak tree not only *is* a system, but it also belongs to other systems. It is affected by a system of seasonal changes; it participates in the ecosystem of the surrounding countryside; it plays a role in an economic system to which lumber production, tourism, and national parks belong.

The six concepts—particle, wave, field, contrast, variation, and distribution—can be arranged to produce a nine-cell chart, often referred to as a *tagmemic grid* or *matrix* (see *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*, p. 127).

Although the nine-cell matrix can generate enormous amounts of material about a subject, most students need considerable practice using the technique before they find it helpful and comfortable. For this reason, you may prefer to introduce students to a simplified version of the matrix such as the one W. Ross Winterowd includes in *The Contemporary Writer* (p. 94):

> The Los Angeles freeway system, for instance, can be viewed
>
> 1. *As an Isolated, Static Entity.* We ask, What features characterize it? We can draw a map of it; we can measure its total length; we can count the number of overpasses and underpasses. We can describe it in great detail. In fact, such a description could well demand a number of thick volumes. But the point is that we can view anything as an isolated, static entity and begin to find those features that characterize it.
> 2. *As One Among Many of a Class.* We ask, How does it differ from others in its class? From this point of view, we would compare the Los Angeles freeway system with others like it. I, for instance, immediately think of the difference between the L. A. freeway system and the turnpikes of the East and Midwest, as well as the German Autobahnen.
> 3. *As Part of a Larger System.* We ask, How does it fit into larger systems of which it is a part? The L. A. freeway system would be worthless if it did not integrate with national, state, and county highway systems; therefore, its place in these larger systems is crucial.
> 4. *As a Process, Rather Than as a Static Entity.* We ask, How is it changing? In regard to the L. A. freeway system, this question brings up the whole problem of planning for the future, which implies the problem of history, or how the system got to be the way it currently is.
> 5. *As a System, Rather Than as an Entity.* We ask, What are the parts, and how do they work together? Now we are focusing on the L. A. Freeways as a transportation system, each part of which must integrate and function with the whole.

Models

Discussing models for student writers to emulate is a technique as old as rhetoric itself. For centuries, teachers of rhetoric and composition have asked students to imitate noteworthy essays, aphorisms, fables, speeches, and excerpts from works by great writers. Advocates of the practice believe that it exposes students to important cultural values and helps them develop their sense of style. To imitate an excellent writer, students have to read carefully, analyze the text closely, and then use similar constructions in creating their own texts. Although close imitation is no longer a staple of contemporary writing classes, most writing teachers still present models that illustrate approaches students may take in responding to assignments.

The most common model in today's writing course is the expository essay, perhaps because it is the most frequent form of discourse students write. Despite a long tradition of using essays to teach writing, we ought to question their purpose. What kinds of models are appropriate? In what ways are they helpful? When should they be introduced? How should they be discussed?

First, the models don't always have to be essays. Letters, advertisements, reports, memoranda, newspapers, policy statements, even junk mail, can illustrate rhetorical strategies. Students themselves can bring these materials to class, providing their own examples of the kinds of writing they are practicing.

Second, the models discussed in class don't have to be written by professionals. Good student writing should serve as a model most of the time because it best exemplifies those rhetorical strategies we expect to find in students' papers. Good student writing teaches writers of similar age and experience how to plan their work, how to anticipate problems of organization and language, and how to frame their notions of audience, purpose, subject, and persona. Furthermore, student models have an important advantage over professional models: the author is sitting in the class, a live, present author who can help us sort out intended meanings or points of confusion. Student writing also represents a more realistic, attainable model than the writing of professionals. Students know that they aren't the kind of writer Montaigne or Martin Luther King, Jr., were. Nor do we want them to be. Instead, we want them to use their own voices to express their own messages, to discover their own purposes for writing. From time to time, we may even want to discuss examples of atrocious professional prose to reinforce the notion that students sometimes write better than professionals.

Third, in discussing any model, the focus should be primarily on *how* the writer solves problems. Of course, we also have some responsibility for helping students understand *what* the writer says, for teaching students to read critically and carefully. But we should avoid ap-

proaching models, especially those written by professionals, as literary works subject to intense critical analysis. In a writing course, unlike a literature course, models serve not so much as literary artifacts to interpret, but as examples of the rhetorical problems, decisions, and choices student writers confront.

Fourth, most writing teachers introduce models prematurely. The best time to discuss a model is *after* students have already completed some prewriting and perhaps an early draft. That is when they are most likely to appreciate the rhetorical problem an assignment poses and to benefit from discovering how another writer addresses similar difficulties. Students cannot value the strategies a model illustrates if their own writing projects are not yet very far along. After students understand by experience the demands an assignment makes of them, examining a model can be instructive. Then they can know firsthand what options the writer had in presenting a subject, what choices he or she made and perhaps rejected, and how the strategies evident in the model apply to the student's work-in-progress.

The value of a model is what it can teach us about our own writing projects. Consequently, we don't need to belabor their discussion. One or two models for each assignment should be plenty. Most of the time, devoting fifteen to twenty minutes of a class period for their discussion should be adequate if we ask the right questions.

What are the right questions? Robert Bain's "Framework for Judging" is a good place to begin.[7]

Framework for Judging

1. A writer promises to do something. What does this writer promise to do? Does the writer keep that promise? If not, where and why does she or he fail to do so?
2. What seems to be the writer's attitude toward the reader? Does the writer treat the audience playfully, seriously, with sarcasm? What does the writer's attitude toward the audience say about him/her and his/her subject?
3. Is the writer's attitude toward the subject convincing? Is the writer simply filling space or writing about feelings and ideas that matter? How can we tell?
4. Is there a perceivable order to the presentation? Can we follow and describe that order? If not, where does the writer lose us and why?
5. Has the writer omitted any important details or arguments that would help us understand the piece? Has the writer included details or arguments not connected with the ideas and feelings being discussed?

7. The framework is adapted from Robert A. Bain, "Reading Student Papers," *College Composition and Communication* 25 (October 1974), 307–9.

6. Does each paragraph signal clearly to the reader the direction in which the writer's ideas and feelings are moving? Does each paragraph develop and complete the idea it introduces? If we lose our way in a paragraph, where and why do we get lost?
7. Are the rhythms and patterns of sentences appropriate to the writer's subject and voice? If the sentences seem to be "Dick-and-Jane sentences," how could the writer combine them to break up this pattern? If the sentences are so long that we get lost in them, where could the writer break sentences into shorter units? Does the writer use passive voice excessively? If so, is that usage justified?
8. Is the language of the piece appropriate to the writer's voice and subject? If the writer uses big words, is she or he showing off or trying to help us understand better? Is the language fairly free of clichés, jargon, and worn-out words and phrases? If the writer bends or breaks rules of language, making up new words or running them together, what are some reasons for doing so?
9. Has the writer observed the conventions of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization? If not, is there a good reason for not doing so?

This sequence of questions places larger rhetorical concerns first, asking students to consider subject, audience, purpose, paragraphs, and sentences before attending to matters of punctuation and usage. Bain's questions also serve several functions. Because the framework helps writers discover what they propose to do and how they intend to go about it, the questions provide an excellent heuristic for planning responses to writing assignments. They also can organize discussions of student writing or some other model. Applied to student or professional models, the framework focuses discussion on *how* the model works, on ways to solve problems in writing. The questions serve revision too. Students can work through them, on their own or in a draft workshop with other students, as they review their drafts. Not all of the questions need answering all of the time. A fifteen-minute class discussion of a student's paper, for example, might cover only the first four sets of questions; a draft workshop early in the term, only the questions in the fourth set.

Eventually, writers must stop generating answers to questions and begin organizing their raw material. They must evaluate what prewriting has yielded, identify hierarchies and classes, assign importance to some ideas and abandon others, and tentatively arrange whatever materials belong in a draft. It's difficult to say when generating material stops and shaping it begins because prewriting, writing, and rewriting don't follow a strict linear sequence. Sometimes prewriting

activities generate material that reveals its own implicit organization. Sometimes writers don't discover the best way to organize their material until they've completed two or three drafts. Furthermore, as writers draft and rewrite their work, they often discover "holes" in the discourse. They stop drafting and return to prewriting, generating additional material to fill the gaps.

Most students begin drafting too soon, before they have sufficiently probed the subject, developed their own point of view, and made a commitment to the message. Their papers remain general because they haven't found enough interesting possibilities to pursue in their raw material or have failed to develop meaningful plans and goals to guide subsequent work. To address these problems, we must teach prewriting. We must give students a repertoire of planning strategies that, used in various combinations, will yield abundant raw material. Students need specific instruction in how to use a particular prewriting technique and enough practice with it to gain a sense of its potential. We can give them this practice if we structure writing assignments to move from brainstorming and freewriting to research and note-taking to responding to a heuristic, from role-playing to talking out ideas with classmates to writing them down. We also can collect scratch work and jotted notes from time to time, not merely to ensure that students give adequate time to prewriting, but also to guide them in developing more efficient, effective plans. Students should view these prewriting activities, not as isolated events, but as parts of a process that always looks ahead to drafting and revising. They are ways to let a piece of writing grow, ways to let us find a topic but also to let the topic find us.