

Writing Analytically

FOURTH EDITION

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CONTENTS

Preface

ix

CHAPTER 1	Seeing Better: The Analytical Habit of Mind	1
Section 1: Seeing the Details	2	Freewriting: How to Do It and What It's Good For 15
Noticing (and the Deadening Effect of Habit)	2	Counterproductive Habits of Mind 17
Tracing Impressions Back to Causes What We Do When We Describe Things	3	Section 3: The Basic Analytical Strategies: From Observations to Ideas 24
Evaluative and Abstract versus Concrete Words	4	The Dogfish Problem: Premature Leaps to Thesis 24
Showing versus Telling	4	What It Means to Have an Idea 24
A Note on Matching Sentence Shapes to Subjects	5	Moving from Idea to Thesis Statement: What a Good Thesis Looks Like 26
Writing the Self as an Introduction to Analysis	9	Notice and Focus (Ranking) 29
Section 2: Opening Things Up: Negative Capability, Paraphrase \times 3, Free-Writing, and Counterproductive Habits of Mind	10	Prompts: Interesting and Strange 30
Negative Capability: Locating an Area of Uncertainty	11	Pushing Observations to Conclusions: Asking So What? 32
Paraphrase \times 3: Opening Up the Meaning of Words	12	Narrow Your Scope by Doing 10 on 1 33
The Importance of Exploratory Writing	13	Section 4: How to Mark Up a Draft 34
	14	Doing 10 on 1: An Example from Student Writing 34
		How to Analyze a Freewrite for Ideas: An Example 35
CHAPTER 2	What Is Analysis and How Does It Work?	41
A. Five Analytical Moves	42	B. Some Common Charges
Move 1: Suspend Judgment	42	Against Analysis 61
Move 2: Define Significant Parts and How They're Related	43	Charge 1: "Analysis Kills Enjoyment" 62
Move 3: Look for Patterns of Repetition and Contrast and for Anomaly (the Method)	44	Charge 2: "Analysis Finds Meanings that Are Not There" 62
Move 4: Make the Implicit Explicit	57	Charge 3: "Some Subjects Weren't Meant to Be Analyzed" 65
Move 5: Keep Reformulating Questions and Explanations	60	C. Rhetorical Analysis 69
		Rhetorical Analysis of a Place: A Brief Example 70
		Rhetorical Analysis of an Advertisement: An Example 71
CHAPTER 3	Putting Analysis to Work: Three Extended Examples	77
A. Extended Example 1: Moving from Description to Interpretation	77	The Limits on Interpretation 82
Differentiating Analysis from Summary	78	Multiple Meanings and Interpretive Contexts 82
Differentiating Analysis from Expressive Writing	81	Author's Intention as an Interpretive Context 83

CONTENTS

v

The Fortune Cookie School of Interpretation	85	Making an Interpretation Plausible	91
The "Anything Goes" School of Interpretation	86	Arriving at an Interpretive Conclusion: Making Choices	92
Seems to Be about <i>X</i> but Could Also Be (Is "Really") about <i>Y</i>	86	C. Extended Example 3: Analyzing an Argument by Reformulating Binaries and Uncovering Assumptions	93
B. Extended Example 2: Selecting an Interpretive Context	88	Thinking With and About Binaries	94
Looking for Patterns of Repetition and Contrast: An Example	89	Uncovering Assumptions (Reasoning Back to Premises)	97
Pushing Observations to Conclusions: Selecting an Interpretive Context	90		
CHAPTER 4	Reading: How to Do It and What to Do with It	109	
A. How to Read: Words Matter	110	Comparing and Contrasting One Reading with Another	123
Becoming Conversant versus Reading for the Gist	110	Reading and Writing Definitions	126
A Frame for Reading Critically: The Pitch, the Complaint, and the Moment	111	Reading, Binary Thinking, and Avoiding Agree/Disagree	128
Passage-Based Focused Freewriting	113	Using a Reading as a Model	129
Paraphrase \times 3	116	Ways to Mark What a Reading Does (Rather than Says)	131
Summary	117	Uncovering the Assumptions in a Reading	132
Strategies for Making Summaries More Analytical	118	Reading With and Against the Grain	133
B. What to Do with the Reading: Avoiding the Matching Exercise	120		
Applying a Reading as a Lens	121		
CHAPTER 5	Linking Evidence and Claims: 10 on 1 versus 1 on 10	137	
A. Linking Evidence and Claims	137	C. Building a Paper by Analyzing Evidence in Depth: "10 on 1"	148
The Function of Evidence	137	What the "1" Is	149
The Fallacy that Facts Can Speak for Themselves	138	What the "10" Are	149
Supporting Unsubstantiated Claims: Providing Evidence	139	Pan, Track, and Zoom: The Film Analogy	150
Distinguishing Evidence from Claims	140	Demonstrating the Representativeness of Your Example	153
Giving Evidence a Point: Making Details Speak	141	10 on 1 and Disciplinary Conventions	154
B. Developing a Thesis Is More Than Repeating an Idea ("1 on 10")	143	Converting a 1-on-10 Paper into a 10-on-1 Paper: An Extended Example	155
What's Wrong with Five-Paragraph Form?	144	A Template for Organizing Papers Using 10 on 1	160
What Five-Paragraph Form Looks Like	146		

CHAPTER 6 Making a Thesis Evolve		163
What's Wrong with a Static Thesis?	164	The Evolving Thesis and Introductory and Concluding Paragraphs 177
A. Evolving a Thesis	165	C. Evolving a Thesis in an Exploratory Draft: <i>Las Meninas</i> 179
The Reciprocal Relationship Between Working Thesis and Evidence: The Thesis as a Camera Lens	165	Description to Analysis: The Exploratory Draft 181
A First Note on the Shape of Thesis Statements	167	Interpretive Leaps and Complicating Evidence 182
Procedure for Making the Thesis Evolve Through Successive Complications: The Example of <i>Educating Rita</i>	168	Revising the Exploratory Draft 182
B. Using the Evolving Thesis to Organize the Final Draft	171	Testing the Adequacy of the Thesis 183
The Evolving Thesis and Common Thought Patterns: Deduction and Induction	173	How the Next Draft Might Go 183
The Evolving Thesis as Hypothesis and Conclusion in the Natural and Social Sciences	175	D. The Evolving Thesis in a Final Draft 184
		Recap of the Evolving Thesis in <i>Good Bye Lenin!</i> Before and After the Fall 189
CHAPTER 7 Recognizing and Fixing Weak Thesis Statements		197
A. Five Kinds of Weak Theses and How to Fix Them	197	B. How to Rephrase Thesis Statements: Specify and Subordinate 205
Weak Thesis Type 1: The Thesis Makes No Claim	198	Another Note on the Phrasing of Thesis Statements: Questions 207
Weak Thesis Type 2: The Thesis Is Obviously True or Is a Statement of Fact	198	C. Working with Categorical Thinking 208
Weak Thesis Type 3: The Thesis Restates Conventional Wisdom	199	Two Ways to Improve the Logic of Your Thesis Statements 209
Weak Thesis Type 4: The Thesis Offers Personal Conviction as the Basis for the Claim	201	Close Reading versus Debate-Style Argument 211
Weak Thesis Type 5: The Thesis Makes an Overly Broad Claim	204	D. Common Logical Errors in Constructing a Thesis 212
CHAPTER 8 Introductions and Conclusions		219
A. Introductions and Conclusions as Social Sites	219	D. Opening Gambits: Five Good Ways to Begin 226
B. The Function of Introductions	220	Gambit 1: Challenge a Commonly Held View 226
Putting an Issue or Question in Context	221	Gambit 2: Begin with a Definition 226
Using Procedural Openings	221	Gambit 3: Offer a Working Hypothesis 227
C. How Much to Introduce Up Front	223	Gambit 4: Lead with Your Second-Best Example 227
Typical Problems that Are Symptoms of Doing Too Much	223	Gambit 5: Exemplify the Topic with a Narrative 227

E. The Function of Conclusions	229	Overstatement	234
Ways of Concluding	232	Anticlimax	234
Three Strategies for Writing Effective Conclusions	232	G. Scientific Format: Introductions and Conclusions	235
F. Solving Typical Problems in Conclusions	233	Introductions of Reports in the Sciences	235
Redundancy	233	Discussion Sections of Reports in the Sciences	237
Raising a Totally New Point	234		
CHAPTER 9 Organization: Forms and Formats		241	
A. The Two Functions of Formats: Product and Process	242	Organizing Comparisons and Contrasts	249
Using Formats Heuristically: An Example	242	Climactic Order	249
Formats in the Natural and Social Sciences	243	How Thesis Shapes Predict the Shape of the Paper	250
B. The Psychology of Form	245	The Shaping Force of Transitions	251
How to Locate Concessions and Refutations	247	The Virtues of Paragraphing	253
CHAPTER 10 Style: Choosing Words		257	
A. Not Just Icing on the Cake	258	D. Shades of Meaning: Choosing the Best Word	265
B. Tone	260	What's Bad about "Good" and "Bad" (and Other Broad, Judgmental Terms)	267
Levels of Style: Who's Writing to Whom, and Why Does It Matter?	261	Concrete and Abstract Diction	267
C. The Person Question	263	Latinate Diction	269
The First-Person Pronoun "I": Pro and Con	263	Using and Avoiding Jargon	270
The Second-Person Pronoun "You" and the Imperative Mood	264	The Politics of Language	272
CHAPTER 11 Style: Shaping Sentences (and Cutting the Fat)		275	
A. How to Recognize the Four Basic Sentence Shapes	276	C. Periodic and Cumulative Sentences: Adding Shapes to the Main Clause	283
The Simple Sentence	276	The Periodic Sentence: Snapping Shut	283
The Compound Sentence	277	The Cumulative Sentence: Starting Fast	285
The Complex Sentence	277		
The Compound-Complex Sentence	278	D. Cutting the Fat	286
B. Coordination, Subordination, and Emphasis	278	Expletive Constructions	287
Coordination	278	Static (Intransitive) versus Active (Transitive) Verbs: "To Be" or "Not to Be"	287
Reversing the Order of Coordinate Clauses	279	Active and Passive Voices: Doing and Being Done To	289
Subordination	280	Experiment!	292
Reversing Main and Subordinate Clauses	280		
Parallel Structure	281		

mean, and how they may or may not be adapted to the attitudes and practices of the world as it is today.

SECTION 3: THE BASIC ANALYTICAL STRATEGIES: FROM OBSERVATIONS TO IDEAS

This part of the chapter offers an observation exercise (Notice and focus, plus interesting and strange), another version of this exercise (10 on 1), and a verbal prompt for pushing observations to conclusions: the So what? question. This sequence of activities is our basic analytical formula. Spend some time practicing these moves and continue to use them with other exercises in this book.

THE DOGFISH PROBLEM: PREMATURE LEAPS TO THESIS

Often, it is not just carelessness or a judgmental cast of mind that closes down the information-gathering stage. People sometimes have unreasonable expectations of themselves when it comes to having ideas. They think that they should get to ideas right away, that arriving at a “thesis” is a necessary starting point for analysis. We like calling this “idea-first—look-later” anxiety *the dogfish problem* (a term coined by the writer Walker Percy in his essay about ways of knowing called “The Loss of the Creature”). For our purposes, the dogfish problem sets up an analogy between writing and other forms of analysis. A writer trying to start with a thesis before looking openly (with negative capability) at the evidence is like a scientist trying to theorize about the nature of dogfish with no more than a cursory look at one.

Our discussion of what it means to have an idea (below) is premised on avoidance of the dogfish problem in favor of negative capability (discussed in Section 2). Having ideas is dependent on allowing yourself to notice things in your subject that you want to better understand rather than glossing over things with a quick and too easy understanding. This relates, of course, to what we have said so far about how attending to conclusions but not their causes prevents us from thinking and seeing. The main point in the following discussion of ideas is that you need to start with something that is puzzling rather than with things that you think are clearly and obviously true.

WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE AN IDEA

As a general rule, analytical topics privilege live questions over inert answers. 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 our book.

Some years ago, while teaching a writing seminar for faculty in the writing across the curriculum program at our college, we were taken aback by faculty response to the suggestion that they should be expecting their students to arrive at ideas. “Ideas!” one professor of psychology exclaimed. “Do you mean like a PhD thesis?” We were unprepared for this reaction, because our seminars had taught us that faculty across the curriculum, regardless of discipline, shared similar expectations of their students’ writing. Faculty told us they wanted not passive summary, not issue-oriented argument, and not personal “reaction” papers, but analysis. And yet they were dubious about accepting that their undergraduate students could arrive at ideas, which is the aim of analysis.

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 one in a PhD thesis, it revises complex concepts in a discipline. But the opposite expectation seems to us to be just as clearly wrong—that undergraduates are simply too inexperienced in the various academic disciplines to do anything but absorb information.

And so, we began looking at ideas—in our own writing, in our colleagues’ writing, in our students’ writing. Our primary discovery was that ideas are usually much smaller in scope, much less grand, than people seem to expect them to be. We also discovered that it is easiest to understand what ideas are by considering what ideas do and where they can be found. Here is a partial list:

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

Analysis places you in a situation where there are problems to resolve and competing ideas for you to bring into some kind of alignment. The starting point for analysis is a situation where there is something for you to negotiate, where you are required not just to list answers but to ask questions, make choices, and engage in reasoning about the meaning and significance of your evidence.

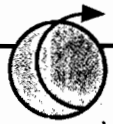
WHAT’S AN IDEA?

An idea usually starts with an observation that is puzzling, with something you want to figure out.

- Something *smaller* than most people suspect
- A subtle distinction
- A qualification
- An unearthed connection between two positions not previously linked
- Discovery of a question where there seemed not to be one
- Something that accounts for some *dissonance*, what seemed not to fit together

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT IDEAS

- Something large and global, and usually contentious
- Like a PhD thesis?



Try this 1.13: Researching Ideas Across the Curriculum

As you go through your education, you may find it interesting to think about how different disciplines seem to define what an idea is, what it does, and how you recognize one. Visit a professor in a discipline you find interesting and interview him or her about what constitutes an idea in that discipline. Ask for one or two single-sentence statements of ideas that the professor may have seen lately in a journal in his or her field, or may be working on in his or her research. You might also ask the professor to share with you a couple of good ideas that past students have arrived at in his or her courses. Write an account of your interview, including an example of what your interviewee considered a good idea and why.

MOVING FROM IDEA TO THESIS STATEMENT: WHAT A GOOD THESIS LOOKS LIKE

There are considerable misunderstandings about thesis statements among students—and among many teachers. The most disabling misunderstanding for students is that a writer needs to have a thesis before he or she begins writing. Good thesis statements are the product of writing, not its precursor. Worrying about having a thesis statement too early in the writing process will just about guarantee papers that support overly general and often obvious ideas. Arriving prematurely at claims also blinds writers to complicating evidence (that which runs counter to the thesis) and so—as we argue at length in Chapter 6, “Making a Thesis Evolve”—deprives writers of their best opportunities to arrive at better ideas.

Another disabling assumption is that good writing must include, preferably in the first or second paragraph, a single-sentence (at most, two-sentence) statement of a governing idea that the paper will go on to support. This sentence is typically meant to appear at the end of the introductory paragraph, although the location of a paper's primary claim differs across the academic disciplines and according to whether the paper is deductively or inductively organized.

The fact is that the main idea of most analytical writing is too complex to be asserted as a single-sentence claim—at least one that would be understood at the beginning of the paper. Nevertheless, it is also true that a writer has not moved from the exploratory writing phase to the writing of a paper until he or she has discovered an idea around which his or her thinking can cohere. Without a governing idea to hold on to, readers will not understand why you are telling them what you are telling them. For a paper to make sense to readers, a thesis, or, in the case of inductively organized papers, a thesis “trail” (some sense of the issues and questions that are generating the paper's forward momentum) must be evident.

The best way to learn about thesis statements is to look for them in published writing. When you start doing this, you will find that the single-sentence thesis statement as prescribed in writing textbooks is a rather rare specimen. It is most common in argument, wherein a writer has a proposition that he or she wants

readers to either adopt or dismiss. In analytical writing, the thesis is more likely to become evident in phases. Sometimes, for example, as much as the first third of a paper will explore an idea that the rest of the paper will subsequently replace with a different, though not necessarily opposing, perspective. If you look closely, however, you will see the markers—the trail—that lets readers anticipate a shift from one possible way of seeing things to another.

This point—about the pressure of one way of seeing things against another—allows us to define what a good thesis in an analytical paper looks like. It is important to remember that a thesis is an *idea*. It is a thought that you have arrived at about your evidence, rather than something you can expect to find, ready-made, in whatever it is you are studying.

Good writing, especially good analytical writing, begins with something puzzling that the writer wishes to understand better. The pursuit of understanding is exploratory. “Good” thesis statements enable exploration. “Bad” thesis statements disable it by closing things down way too tightly at the outset.

A strong thesis comes from carefully examining and questioning your subject to arrive at a theory about its meaning and significance that would not have been immediately obvious to your readers. A weak thesis either makes no claim or makes a claim that doesn't need proving, such as a statement of fact or an opinion with which virtually all of your readers would most likely agree before reading your essay (for example, “Exercise is good for you”).

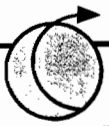
“Good” thesis statements enable exploration. “Bad” thesis statements disable it by closing things down way too tightly at the outset.

Here are two characteristics that an idea needs to have to work as a thesis:

1. The thesis of an analytical paper is an idea about what some feature or features of your subject *means*.
2. A thesis should be an idea that is in need of argument, which is to say it should not be a statement of fact or an idea with which most readers would already agree.

Below are six examples of good thesis statements, which is to say good translations of ideas into forms that could direct the development of an essay. None of these appeared in the first paragraph of the paper for which they served as the “driver.” But each was clearly led to by a “thesis trail,” and each emerged fairly early in the essay as the writer's explanation of the particular phenomenon he or she had noticed that served as a launching pad for the essay.

Let's consider how these statements, as good examples of what a thesis should look like, relate to the defining characteristics of ideas as explained in the section above, “What It Means to Have an Idea.” The first thing you should notice about all these thesis statements is *the presence of tension*—the pressure of one idea against another idea, of one potentially viable way of seeing things against another viable, but finally less satisfactory way of seeing things.



Try this 1.14: Spotting the Tension in Good Thesis Statements

A quick review of our list of things that ideas do will reveal that good ideas usually take place with the aid of some kind of back pressure, by which we mean that the idea takes shape by pushing against (so to speak) another way of seeing things. This is not the same as setting out to overturn and completely refute one idea in favor of another. More often what happens is that the thesis statement's primary idea emerges as some kind of clarification of another idea. Both ideas remain, but the forward momentum of the thesis comes from playing the newer idea off the older one, wherein the newer idea clarifies and builds upon the older one.

Look at the thesis statements below, all of which are taken from published analytical essays. Find the tension in each, which is to say the defining pressure of one idea against another possibility. In the first thesis sentence, for example, the primary idea is that the new advertising campaign for Dockers trousers is radical. The back pressure against which this idea takes shape is that this new campaign may not seem radical. The writer will demonstrate the truth of both of these claims, rather than overturning one and then championing the other. The same can be said of the parts of the second thesis statement. One part of the thesis makes claims for the benefits of cosmetic surgery. The forward momentum of the thesis statement comes from the back pressure of this idea against the idea that cosmetic surgery will also make life worse for everyone. Notice that the thesis statement does not simply say, "Cosmetic surgery is bad."

1. It may not seem like it, but "Nice Pants" is as radical a campaign as the original Dockers series.
2. If opponents of cosmetic surgery are too quick to dismiss those who claim great psychological benefits, protesters are far too willing to dismiss those who raise concerns. Cosmetic surgery might make individual people happier, but in the aggregate it makes life worse for everyone.
3. The history of thought in the modern era of history of thinking about the self may be an exaggeration, but the consequences of this vision of a self set apart have surely been felt in every field of inquiry.
4. We may join with the modern builders in justifying the violence of means—the sculptor's hammer and chisel—by appealing to ends that serve the greater good. Yet too often modern planners and engineers would justify the creative destruction of habitat as necessary for doubtful utopias.
5. The derogation of middlebrow, in short, has gone much too far. It's time to bring middlebrow out of its cultural closet, to hail its emollient properties, to trumpet its mending virtues. For middlebrow not only entertains, it educates—pleasurably training us to appreciate high art.
6. There is a connection between the idea of place and the reality of cellular telephones. It is not encouraging. Places are unique—or at least we like to believe they are—and we strive to experience them as a kind of engagement with particulars. Cell phones are precisely the opposite.

If you have been taught to write in five-paragraph form in school (which is just about the only place that this oversimplified organizational scheme can be found), you will initially have some difficulty writing thesis statements of the sort you have just seen. This is because the typical three-part thesis of five-paragraph form offers a short list of broadly stated topics (rather than well-defined claims about the topics) and then offers examples of each part in the body paragraphs. This form invites listing rather than the articulation of ideas.

There is nothing wrong with partitioning the development of a subject into manageable parts (the best thing about five-paragraph form). There is a lot wrong with a thesis that makes no claim or an overly general and obvious claim such as "Television causes adolescents to become violent, lazy, and ill read." All of these general claims may be true, but nothing much of substance can be said about them in a short paper that is trying to cover all three. And notice the lack of tension in this sample thesis statement. Try writing a better thesis statement—one that has tension—about the effect of some aspect of television on teenagers. (See Chapter 7 for more on good and bad thesis statements.)

NOTICE AND FOCUS (RANKING)

So far this chapter has offered three strategies for getting past generalizations—tracing impressions back to causes (Hemingway's five-finger exercise), freewriting (various forms of exploratory writing), and paraphrase $\times 3$ (a means of fighting the tendency to think that the meaning of words is self-evident). The next technique—Notice and focus—is aimed at helping you dwell longer with the data before feeling compelled to decide what the data means. Observation and interpretation go hand in hand, but it helps greatly to allow yourself a distinct observation stage and to prolong this beyond what most people find comfortable. The more you allow yourself to notice—the longer you allow yourself to dwell with the data before searching after a "point" about it—the richer and more rewarding your interpretation of the evidence will ultimately be.

Notice and focus is governed by repeatedly returning to the question "What do you notice?" As we have been arguing in the chapter so far, most people's tendency is to generalize and thus to rapidly move away from whatever it is they are looking at. The question What do you notice? redirects attention to the subject matter itself and delays the pressure to come up with answers, with a closing off of the experience.

So, the **first step** is for you to repeatedly answer the question What do you notice? Be sure to cite actual details of the thing being observed rather than moving to more general observations about it. (Note that this is more difficult than it sounds.) This phase of the exercise should produce an extended and unordered list of details—features of the thing being observed—that call attention to themselves for one reason or another.

The **second step** is the focusing part in which you *rank* (create an order of importance for) the various features of your subject you have noticed. Answer the question "What three details (specific features of the subject matter) are most interesting (or significant or revealing or strange)?" The purpose of relying on *interesting* or one of the other suggested words is that these will help to deactivate the like/dislike switch of the judgment reflex, and replace it with a more analytical perspective.

The **third step** in this process is to say why the three things you selected struck you as the most interesting (or revealing or significant or strange). This prioritizing of your observations triggers interpretive leaps to the meaning of whatever it is that you find most interesting in your observations.

Remember to start by noticing as much as you can about whatever it is you are studying. Narrow your scope to a representative portion of your evidence, and then dwell with the data. Record what you see. Don't move to generalization, or worse, to judgment. What this procedure will begin to demonstrate is how useful description is as a tool for arriving at ideas. Stay at the description stage longer (in that attitude of uncertainty we recommend), and have better ideas. Training yourself to notice will improve your memory and your ability to think.

Try this 1.15: Doing Notice and Focus with Words and Places and Images

Begin practicing this technique with visual detail. List a number of details about a place, for example, or about a magazine advertisement or some other visual image. Once you have allowed yourself to notice a number of things about the place or the image, choose the details that you think are most important for understanding its character. In both the noticing and focusing stages, use the four words suggested above—*interesting*, *significant*, *revealing*, or *strange*. In our classes we invite student thinking by advising them to keep completing the sentence "What I find interesting about this is . . ."

Next, try this exercise with other subjects—a photograph, a cartoon, an editorial, conversations overheard around campus, looking at people's shoes, political speeches, and so forth. Make Notice and focus a habit of mind.

PROMPTS: INTERESTING AND STRANGE

Consider the verbal prompts *interesting*, *strange*, *revealing*, and *significant*. What do these do? First, they offer alternatives to the judgment reflex (like/dislike, right/wrong, and should/shouldn't). The prompts shift attention from pro/con argument to thinking aimed at understanding, at theorizing about the nature of things. The same words also press you to notice more and to stay more aware of the connections between your responses and the particulars that gave rise to them.

What does it mean to find something "interesting"? Often we are interested by things that have captured our attention without our clearly knowing why. Interest and curiosity are near cousins. Interest is also related to negative capability. When you can allow yourself to think that you don't have to have all the answers immediately, you can trust yourself to dwell with questions, a primary characteristic of good thinking.

The word *strange* is a useful prompt because it gives us permission to notice oddities, the things we called anomalies. *Strange* invites us to *defamiliarize* (notice what is strange—unfamiliar) about things within our range of notice.

RULES OF NOTICE & HABITS OF MIND

WORDS MATTER

- Not "What do you think?" &
- Not "What do you like or dislike?"

but

- "What do you notice?"

A few prompts:

- What do you find most INTERESTING?
- What do you find most STRANGE?
- What do you find most REVEALING?

Strange, in this context, is not a judgmental term but one denoting features of a subject or situation that aren't readily explainable. Where you locate something strange, you have something to interpret—to figure out what makes it strange and why.

Along similar lines, the words *revealing* and *significant* work by requiring you to make choices that can lead to interpretive leaps. If something strikes you as revealing, even if you're not yet sure why, you will eventually have to produce some theories on what it reveals. If something strikes you as significant, you will motivate yourself to come up with some things that it might signify or "say."

Try this 1.16: A Noticing Exercise on Conversation

Listen in on some conversations, writing down as much seemingly relevant detail (exact words and probably the physical actions that accompany them) as you can. Don't worry about order. Just keep recording what you hear and asking yourself what you notice. You will be able to shape the piece later in a way that you think best represents what you heard. After you have done the work of recording, say to yourself, What did I learn? What was especially *interesting*, or *revealing*, or *strange* about what I heard? Respond to these questions with freewriting, preferably in more than one freewriting session. Then produce two pieces of revised (shaped and ordered) writing: One should be the show-versus-tell "recording" of what you heard, the one that you hope will communicate by re-creating—without your explicitly telling—the effect that the talk had on you. The other should be a blend of empirical detail (showing) and analysis (your interpretation). Analyze rather than judge. Don't tell your readers what you liked or disliked. Tell them instead what was interesting and revealing and why.

PUSHING OBSERVATIONS TO CONCLUSIONS: ASKING SO WHAT?

The prompt for making the move from observation to implication and ultimately interpretation is: So what? The question is shorthand for questions such as the following:

- Why does this observation matter? What does it mean?
- Where does this observation get us?
- How can we begin to generalize about the subject?

Asking, So what? is a calling to account, which is why, in conversation, its force is potentially rude. That is, the question intervenes rather peremptorily with a “Why does *this* matter?” It is thus a challenge to make meaning through a creative leap—to move beyond the patterns and emphases you’ve been observing in the data to tentative conclusions on what these observations suggest.

The peremptoriness of the So what? question can, we think, be liberating. Okay, take the plunge, it says. Start laying out possible interpretations. And, when you are tempted to stop thinking too soon, asking So what? will press you onward.

At the least, consider asking and answering So what? at the ends of paragraphs. And then, if you ask So what? again of the first answer you’ve offered, you’ll often tell yourself where your thinking needs to go next.

For example, let’s say you make a number of observations about the nature of e-mail communication—it’s cheap, informal, often grammatically incorrect, full of abbreviations (“IMHO”), and ephemeral (impermanent). You rank these and decide that its ephemerality is most interesting. So what? Well, that’s why so many people use it, you speculate, because it doesn’t last. So what that its popularity follows from its ephemerality? Well, apparently we like being released from the hard-and-fast rules of formal communication; e-mail frees us. So what? Well, . . .

The repeated asking of this question causes people to push on from and pursue the implications of their first responses; it prompts people to reason in a chain, rather than settling prematurely for a single link.

In Chapter 6, “Making a Thesis Evolve,” we have more to say about what to do when your answer to So what? calls to mind conflicting data or an opposing idea, and thus interferes with the forward flow of your thinking. For now, start experimenting with asking So what?

Asking So What?: An Example The following is the opening paragraph of a talk given by a professor of Political Science, Dr. Jack Gambino, at our college on the occasion of a gallery opening. Study this piece of writing for the various methods of observation and interpretation it uses. Start by noticing the particular details that the writer has chosen to notice. Then look for places where he goes after implication (makes the details speak) by deciding what is interesting or strange or revealing about particular details. Finally, try putting question marks at the places where it seems to you that the writer has asked himself So what?

If you look closely at Camilo Vergara’s photo of Fern Street, Camden, 1988, you’ll notice a sign on the side of a dilapidated building:

Danger: Men Working
W. Hargrove Demolition

Perhaps that warning captures the ominous atmosphere of these very different kinds of photographic documents by Camilo Vergara and Edward Burtynsky: “Danger: Men Working.” Watch out—human beings are at work! But the work that is presented is not so much a building-up ‘as it is a tearing-down—the work of demolition. Of course, demolition is often necessary in order to construct anew: old buildings are leveled for new projects, whether you are building a highway or bridge in an American city or a dam in the Chinese countryside. You might call modernity itself, as so many have, a process of creative destruction, a term used variously to describe modern art, capitalism, and technological innovation. The photographs in this exhibit, however, force us to pay attention to the “destructive” side of this modern equation. What both Burtynsky and Vergara do in their respective ways is to put up a warning sign—they question whether the reworking of our natural and social environment leads to a sustainable human future. And they wonder whether the process of creative destruction may not have spun recklessly out of control, producing places that are neither habitable nor sustainable. In fact, a common element connecting the two photographic versions is the near absence of people in the landscape. While we see the evidence of the transforming power of human production on the physical and social environment, neither Vergara’s urban ruins nor Burtynsky’s industrial sites actually show us “men working.” Isolated figures peer suspiciously out back doors or pick through the rubble, but they appear out of place. It is this sense of displacement—of human beings alienated from the environments they themselves have created—that provides the most haunting aspect of the work of these two photographers.

NARROW YOUR SCOPE BY DOING 10 ON 1

One sure way to notice more is to narrow your scope. The wider your scope, and the more ground you try to cover, the less you will be able to say in any sort of depth about your subject.

The term *10 on 1* is shorthand for the principle that it is better to make ten observations or points about a single representative issue or example (10 on 1) than to make the same basic point about ten related issues or examples (1 on 10). Doing 10 on 1 teaches writers to narrow their focus and then analyze in depth, drawing out as much meaning as possible from their best examples.

Ten, in this case, is an arbitrary number. We offer it to you as a reminder that the best writing comes when writers engage in prolonged scrutiny of a single telling piece of evidence rather than shutting down their thinking with a premature leap to the first idea that might serve as a thesis (the tendency we labeled earlier as the dogfish problem). A paper that has evolved from detailed analysis of what the writer takes to be his or her single most telling example is far more likely to arrive at a good idea than a paper that settles prematurely for one idea and applies it mechanically to each piece of evidence it encounters.

What exactly are the “1” and the “10,” and how do you go about finding them? In the case of 10 on 1, the 1 is a representative example, an opportunity to narrow your focus to the point where you could consider your subject in more detail, drawing out observations and implications (10). The 10 are the observations you make about your representative example—ten things you notice about it, some combination of observations and implications. The practice of doing 10 on 1 is the opposite of attaching a single observation or implication to ten examples.

The shift from making one observation about ten examples to making ten possible observations about your single best example is the aim of the exercise. If you can keep the number ten in mind, it will prod you to keep asking yourself questions rather than stopping the observation process too soon. What do I notice? What else do I notice? What might this imply? What else might it imply?

How then should you go about selecting the example that you will analyze in depth? In many cases, your thinking process will start with a version of 1 on 10 as a preliminary step—locating some single trait or set of traits that a number of examples in your subject seem to share. Then you can narrow your scope to one of these ten examples that seems interestingly representative, thereby creating a space for in-depth analysis.

For extended discussion of doing 10 on 1, see Chapter 5, “Linking Evidence and Claims: 10 on 1 versus 1 on 10.” We include brief mention of 10 on 1 in this chapter in order to better integrate it with our other observational strategies, such as Notice and focus, which it builds upon.

SECTION 4: HOW TO MARK UP A DRAFT

This last section of the chapter opens with a student freewrite and then offers a technique for analyzing a freewrite to better see its thinking and how this thinking might be developed.

DOING 10 ON 1: AN EXAMPLE FROM STUDENT WRITING

Freewrite on a scene from the film *Good Bye Lenin!*

By Sarah Kesh

The movie shows us Alex and Lara’s first date, which is to a sort of underground music club where the performers wear costumes made of plastic tubing and leather, and play loud hard-core rock music. At first, the musicians look surreal, as though they are part of a strange dream from which, at any moment, Alex will awake. The Western rock is real, though, as are the sci-fi costumes, and the scene moves forward to show Alex and Lara climbing a stairway out onto what looks like a fire escape and then through a window and into an apartment.

Here, Alex and Lara settle down into conversation. The young couple sits, hand in hand, and gazes together into the night sky; yet, as the camera pans away, we see that the apartment where the two have retreated is missing its façade. Inside, three walls are still decorated, complete with furniture, wallpaper, and even working lamps; yet, the two sit on the ledge of the fourth wall, which has crumbled away completely.

What Is Analysis and How Does It Work?

Quick Take

To analyze something is to ask what that something means. It asks how something does what it does or why it is as it is.

Analysis is a form of detective work that begins not with the views you already have, but with something you are seeking to understand.

As we said in the discussion of “What It Means to Have an Idea” in Chapter 1, analysis typically pursues something puzzling; it finds questions where there seemed not to be any; and it makes connections that might not have been evident at first.

People analyze all the time, but they don’t always realize that this is what they’re doing. A first step, then, toward becoming a better analytical thinker and writer is to become more aware of your own thinking processes, building on skills you already possess and eliminating habits that get in the way. Toward this end, here are five moves to practice, five activities people engage in when they analyze. The remainder of the chapter explains and offers examples of these moves as analytical activities.

- Move 1: Suspend Judgment (understand before you judge)
- Move 2: Define Significant Parts and How They’re Related
- Move 3: Look for Patterns of Repetition and Contrast and for Anomaly
- Move 4: Make the Implicit Explicit (convert to direct statement meanings that are suggested indirectly)
- Move 5: Keep Reformulating Questions and Explanations

The first of these five moves, *suspending judgment*, is really more a precondition than an actual activity, but because it takes an act of will to suspend judgment and substitute other ways of thinking, we include it as an analytical move.

The second two activities—*defining significant parts and how they’re related*, and *looking for patterns of repetition and contrast*—are the primary ways of looking at evidence analytically. The two are related. Looking for patterns is your best means of deciding which parts of a subject to focus on and how best to relate these to each other and to your subject as a whole.

The last two moves, *making the implicit explicit* and *repeatedly reformulating questions and explanations*, are the steps that push observations toward conclusions (the “So what?” part of the process, as explained in Chapter 1).

This chapter has a lot to say about implication, because a primary definition of analysis is that it makes the implicit explicit. The chapter offers exercises for recognizing the difference between an implication and a hidden meaning. The hidden meaning theory of interpretation (“reading between the lines”) misinterprets analysis as a fanciful imposition of a writer’s feelings and opinions onto a subject (“reading into the subject”). Analysis, the chapter argues, is a systematic and logical way of reading the lines themselves rather than the white space that lies between them.

The chapter ends by illustrating the importance of selecting and defending the appropriateness of an *interpretive context* as a means of legitimizing a writer’s theory about what something means. We illustrate the concept of interpretive context with two short examples and one longer one—a student paper analyzing a perfume advertisement. Chapter 3 offers three more examples of analytical writing, each illustrating the role of the five analytical moves and the concept of interpretive context.

A. FIVE ANALYTICAL MOVES

Analysis is the search for meaningful pattern. In Chapter 1 we talked about the analytical habit of mind: the habit of attending to detail, of tracing impressions back to causes, of searching out questions rather than rushing to answers. That chapter, you’ll recall, recommended locating yourself in an area of uncertainty, where there is something to figure out. Overall, the chapter defined the analytical habit of mind as an exploratory stance toward experience.

The first chapter’s various thinking and writing practices—Hemingway’s five-finger exercise, showing versus telling, freewriting, paraphrase $\times 3$, Notice and focus, asking So what?, and 10 on 1—all share the goal of opening up rather than closing down a subject and the writer’s thinking about it.

This chapter, in addition to offering further definitions of analysis—as a process—will provide you with an additional technique for making observations about evidence. This technique, looking for patterns of repetition and contrast (“the Method”), is a sequence of steps for noticing meaningful patterns in whatever it is you are studying.

MOVE 1: SUSPEND JUDGMENT

We discussed this essential move in some detail in Chapter 1, so we’ll just restate it briefly here. Suspending judgment is a necessary precursor to thinking analytically because our habitual tendency to evaluate tends to shut 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.

In the last chapter we suggested that you could get around this reflex move to judgment in several ways. One is to trace impressions back to causes, rather than just settling into and accepting the judgment. Another is to remember that judgments usually say more about the person doing the judging than they do about the subject. 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.

Judgments usually say more about the person doing the judging than they do about the subject. The determination that something is “boring” is especially revealing in this regard.

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. The phrase *naturalizing your own assumptions* helps too. It can be used as a kind of mantra to help you notice when you are slipping into the assumption that what feels right and “natural” for you is self-evidently true, right, and natural for others too.

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, and
- consider how these parts are related, both to each other and to the subject as a whole.

One common denominator of all effective analytical writing is that it pays close attention to detail. We analyze because our global responses—to a play, for example, or a speech or a social problem—are too general. The move from generalization to analysis, from the larger subject to its key components, is characteristic of good thinking. To understand a subject, we need to get past our first, generic, evaluative response to discover what the subject is “made of,” the particulars that contribute most strongly to the character of the whole.

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

VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Science as a Process of Argument

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

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

—Bruce Wightman, Professor of Biology

MOVE 3: LOOK FOR PATTERNS OF REPETITION AND CONTRAST AND FOR ANOMALY (THE METHOD)

We have been defining analysis as understanding parts in relation to each other and to a whole. 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 procedures for selecting significant parts of the whole. First, we'll briefly discuss the three procedures. Then we will restate them in the form of an observation strategy (the Method) for locating meaningful patterns.

Look for a pattern of repetition (exact repetitions and strands). 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 or lease, a reader quickly becomes aware of words that are part of a particular idea or pattern of thinking, as in, 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. A reader of the play would do well to look for various occurrences of words and other details that might be part of this pattern. Let's say you notice that references to seeing and eyes almost always occur along with another strand of language having to do with the concept of proof. How might noticing

these two strands lead to an idea? You might start by inferring from the two patterns that the play is concerned with ways of knowing (proving) and with seeing as opposed to other ways of knowing, such as faith or intuition.

Look for binary oppositions and organizing contrasts. Repetition of the same or similar type of word or detail (strands) almost always causes you to notice contrasts (opposing words and details) as well. A strand having to do with eyes and seeing may be contrasted with another strand having to do with its opposite: blindness and ways of accessing experience other than through the eyes. You will find a number of oppositions in virtually anything you study. These usually appear as what are called binary oppositions.

A binary opposition is a pair of elements (words, details, concepts, etc.) in which the two members of the pair are more or less direct opposites. The word *binary* means "consisting of two." We say more below and in subsequent chapters (especially the last section of Chapter 3, "Analyzing an Argument by Reformulating Binaries and Uncovering Assumptions") about the value of searching out binary oppositions. For now, we ask you to begin noticing the oppositions that occur in things that you look at and read.

Through noticing binaries and then casting and recasting the words you use to name them, you enable yourself to discover what is at stake in whatever you are looking at or reading. Writing, as we argue in more detail in our chapter on reading, is virtually always attempting to address some problem or issue. Until you can find the problem, until you can see how the issue is defined, you will not fully understand what you are reading. This is why the process of noticing binaries is valuable.

Look for anomalies—things that seem unusual, that seem not to fit. An anomaly (*a* = not, and *nom* = name) is something that is hard to name, what the dictionary defines as a deviation from the normal order. Along with looking for pattern, it is fruitful to attend to anomalous details—those that seem not to fit the pattern. Anomalies help us revise our stereotypical assumptions. A recent TV commercial for a baseball team, for example, featured its star player 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 intellect don't belong together.

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 has observed some phenomenon that does not fit with a prevailing theory. 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. The result is that they ignore the evidence that might lead them to a better theory. (For much more on this process of using potentially contradictory and seemingly anomalous evidence to evolve an essay's main idea, see Chapter 6, "Making a Thesis Evolve.")

We will now recast the process of looking for repetition and contrast into a series of steps that we call the Method (for short).

Looking for Patterns of Repetition and Contrast (The Method) Looking for patterns of repetition and contrast (the Method) is a universal assignment, by which we mean that it works with all kinds of materials—a political speech, an essay, a film or scene from a film, a place, a book of poems, a photograph, your own essay drafts that you seek to revise—and with a wide range of purposes. The method of

looking for patterns works through a series of steps. Hold yourself initially to doing the steps one at a time and in order. List what you notice for each step as thoroughly as you can before moving on. As you get adept at using this procedure, you will be able to record your answers under each of the three steps simultaneously. This analytical method can be applied to virtually anything.

Step 1. *Locate exact repetitions*—identical or nearly identical words or details—and note the number of times each repeats.

For example, if the word *seems* repeats three times, write “seems × 3.” Consider different forms of the same word—*seemed*, *seem*—as exact repetitions. Similarly, if you are working with images rather than words, the repeated appearance of high foreheads would constitute an exact repetition.

Concentrate on substantive words, although sometimes seemingly unimportant words such as *and* become interesting when they begin to repeat a lot. If you are working with a longer text, such as an essay or book chapter or short story, limit yourself to recording the half-dozen or so words that call attention to themselves through repetition.

Step 2. *Locate repetition of the same or similar kind of detail or word (strands) and name the connecting logic.* A strand is a grouping of the same or similar kinds of words or details. (For example, *polite*, *courteous*, *mannerly* and *accuse*, *defense*, *justice*, *witness* are strands.)

Simply listing the various strands that you find in your evidence will go a long way toward helping you discover what is most interesting and important for you to address. But to use the discovery of strands as an analytical tool, you have to do more than list. You have to name the common denominators that make the words or details in your list identifiable as a strand. Naming and renaming your strands will trigger ideas; it is itself an analytical move. And again, when working with longer pieces, try to locate the half-dozen strands that seem to you most important.

Step 3. *Locate details or words that form or suggest binary oppositions, and select from these the most important ones, which function as organizing contrasts.*

Sometimes patterns of repetition that you begin to notice in a particular subject matter will be significant because they are part of a contrast—a basic opposition—around which the subject matter is structured. To find these oppositions, ask yourself, *What is opposed to what?*

When looking for binary oppositions, start with what's on the page. List words and details that are set in opposition to other words and details. Gradually move to implied binaries, but keep these close to the data. Images of rocks and water, for example, might suggest the implied binary permanence/impermanence or the binary unchanging/changing.

One advantage of detecting binary oppositions and elements of them that repeat is that this process will lead you to discover *organizing contrasts*, which are key in helping you locate central issues and concerns in the material you are studying. Organizing contrasts unify and give structure to the whole. Some examples that we encounter frequently are nature/civilization, city/country, public/private, organic/inorganic, and voluntary/involuntary.

Step 4. *List what you take to be the two most important exact repetitions, two most important strands, and two most important binaries.* Usually you will find that strands work in opposition to other strands.

At this point you are ready to use *ranking* (selecting some items from your lists as more important, more interesting than others) as a means of moving toward interpretive leaps. We ask you to choose the two most important kinds of repetition from each of your three kinds of lists so that you don't cut out too much data too soon. Your most important binaries might be a pair of opposed terms and/or ideas, but each might also be a strand that is opposed to another strand.

Step 5. *Write one healthy paragraph—half a page or so—in which you explain your choice of one repetition or one strand or one binary as most important for understanding whatever it is that you have been observing.*

Anomaly

After you have produced your three lists, selected the most important items from each, and written a paragraph explaining your ranking, you are ready to add a step to the process of looking for patterns. Along with looking for patterns, it is fruitful to attend to anomalous details—those that seem not to fit the pattern.

Like searching out binary oppositions, searching out anomalies often takes you to those places in your subject matter where something is going on—where some kind of breaking out of an old pattern or some attempt at “re-seeing” is beginning.

Why add anomalies as a separate activity? Anomalies become evident only after you have begun to discern a pattern, so it is best to locate repetitions, strands, and organizing contrasts—things that fit together in some way—before looking for things that seem not to fit. Once you see an anomaly, you will often find that it is part of a strand you had not detected, a strand that may be the other side of a previously unseen binary. In this respect, looking for anomalies is great for shaking yourself out of potentially limited ways of looking at your evidence and getting you to consider other possible interpretations. See an example of the use of anomaly in the essay on Ovid later in the chapter, as well as in the student essay on a dance performance toward the end of the chapter.

“The Method”: What It Is and Why It Works

Think of this method of analysis as a form of mental doodling, which is actually what it is. The major advantage of this kind of doodling is that it encourages the attitude of *negative capability* that we spoke of in Chapter 1. Rather than worrying about what you are going to say, or about whether or not you understand, you instead get out a pencil and start tallying up what you see. Engaged in this process, you'll soon find yourself gaining entry to the logic of your subject matter.

While you are involved in the kinds of observing and listing activities that this method involves, you will be allowing your mind to range freely over the data. The activities of circling, underlining, and listing cause you to get physical with your data, and thus to come down from abstractions into the realm of concrete detail.

The Method shares aims with the observation strategies introduced in Chapter 1, but its approach to evidence differs in interesting ways. The primary observation strategy of Chapter 1, Notice and focus, tends to cut through to individual details. It

acts like a laser beam to target something interesting and often anomalous (strange) that allows a writer to economically capture the character of the whole through a representative part. Because it relies on what you happen to notice or find interesting, Notice and focus is more intuitive and more reliant on fortuitous discoveries than the method of looking for patterns.

Looking for patterns, by contrast, is more comprehensive. It goes for the whole picture, involving methodical application of a matrix or grid of observational moves upon a subject. Although these are separate moves, they also work together and build cumulatively to the discovery of an infrastructure, a blueprint of the whole.

Strands, Binaries, and the Writing (and Revision) Process

What is the value of looking for strands—groups of the same or similar kinds of details (or words)? The presence of strands in written or visual texts has much to do with the way we arrive at ideas, the way we go about finding out what we think. When you write a paper or a letter or a story or a poem, or when you compose some kind of picture, your thinking (at the semiconscious and subconscious, as well as the conscious levels) moves not just forward, in a straight line, but sideways and in circles.

LOOKING FOR PATTERNS OF REPETITION AND CONTRAST (THE METHOD)

- Do the steps (in writing) one at a time and in order.
- Resist the urge to leap to conclusions; dwell with the data first.

Step 1. List all details (or words) that repeat exactly and the number of repetitions of each.

Step 2. List strands—groupings of the same or similar kinds of words, details.

(for example: *polite, courteous, mannerly*)

Be able to explain the strand's connecting logic; name it.

Think carefully about what goes with what.

Step 3. List organizing contrasts—binary oppositions.

(for example, *open/closed, round/pointed*)

Start with what's on the page.

Gradually move to implied binaries but stay close to the data.

List as many binaries as you can.

Step 4. Select and list the two most significant repetitions, the two most significant strands, and the two most significant binaries.

Step 5. Select and list the one repeated detail, or one strand, or one binary that you take to be the most significant for arriving at ideas about what the image communicates. Write one paragraph explaining your choice.

This is to say that much of the thinking that we do as we write and as we read happens through a process of association, which is, by its very nature, repetitive. In associative thinking, thoughts develop as words, and details suggest other words and details that are like them. As you habituate yourself to looking for patterns of repetition and contrast, you will be surprised at how much repetition (of various kinds) goes on in any piece of communication.

When you write a paper or a letter or a story or a poem, or when you compose some kind of picture, your thinking (at the semiconscious and subconscious, as well as the conscious levels) moves not just forward, in a straight line, but sideways and in circles.

Revision is the process of consciously recognizing and clarifying patterns of repetition and contrast in your drafts. Recognizing patterns of repetition and contrast helps writers and artists come to see what they wish to say; the same process of recognition produces readers' and viewers' understanding of the things they read and see. In this sense, writing (making something out of words) and reading (arriving at an understanding of someone else's words) operate in much the same way.

Try this 2.1: Doing the Method on a Poem

Use the Method on the following student poem. Write up the lists called for in steps 1–4 of the Method, and then write the healthy paragraph called for in step 5 in which you explain your choice of one exact repetition, one strand, or one binary as most significant. We have done this for you below in the section called "Doing the Method: An Example." If you can make up your own lists and write your own paragraph before looking at ours, you'll learn more. There is, however, another "Try this" later in this chapter that we do not analyze for you.

Brooklyn Heights, 4:00 A.M.

Dana Ferrelli

sipping a warm forty oz.
Coors Light on a stoop in
Brooklyn Heights. I look
across the street, in the open window;
Blonde bobbing heads, the
smack of a jump rope, laughter
of my friends breaking
beer bottles. Putting out their
burning filters on the #5 of
a hopscotch court.
We reminisce of days when we were
Fat, pimple faced—

look how far we've come. But tomorrow
 a little blonde girl will
 pick up a Marlboro Light filter, just to play.
 And I'll buy another forty, because
 that's how I play now.

Reminiscing about how far I've come

Doing the Method on a Poem: Our Analysis

1. *Words that repeat exactly*: forty × 2, blonde × 2, how far we've (I've) come × 2, light × 2, reminisce, reminiscing × 2, filter, filters × 2, Brooklyn Heights × 2
2. *Strands*: jump rope, laughter, play, hopscotch (connecting logic: childhood games representing the carefree worldview of childhood)

Coors Light, Marlboro Light filters, beer bottles (drugs, adult "games," escapism?)
 Smack, burning, breaking (violent actions and powerful emotion: burning)

3. *Binary oppositions*: how far we've come/how far I've come (a move from plural to singular, from a sense of group identity to isolation, from group values to a more individual consideration)

Blonde bobbing heads/little blonde girl
 Burning/putting out
 Coors Light, Marlboro Lights/jump rope, hopscotch
 How far I've come (two meanings of *far*?, one positive, one not)
 Heights/stoop
 Present/past

4. *Two most important repetitions*: forty, how far we've/I've come

Two most important strands: jump rope, laughter, play, hopscotch
 Coors Light, Marlboro Light filters, beer bottles

Two most important binaries: jump rope, laughter, play, hopscotch versus
 Coors Light, Marlboro Light filters, beer bottles;
 Burning/putting out

5. *Write one healthy paragraph in which you explain your choice of one repetition or one strand or one binary as most important for understanding whatever it is that you have been observing.*

This is a poem about growing up—or failing to grow up, both being subjects about which the poem expresses mixed emotions. The repetition of *forty* (forty-ounce beer, forty cigarettes) is interesting in this context. It signals a certain weariness—perhaps with a kind of pun on forty to suggest middle age and thus the speaker's concern about moving toward being older in a way that seems stale and flat. The beer, after all, is warm—which is not the best state for a beer to be in, once opened, if it is to retain its taste and character. Forty cigarettes, forty ounces of beer—"supersizing"—suggest excess.

This reading of forty as excess along with the possible allusion to middle age takes us to what is, in our reading of the poem, the most important (or at least most interesting) binary opposition: *burning versus putting out*. We are attracted to this binary because it seems to be part of a more intense strand in the poem, one that runs counter to the weary prospect of moving on toward a perhaps lonely ("how far I've come") middle-aged feeling. Burning goes with breaking and the smack of the jump rope, and even putting out, if we visualize putting out not just as fire extinguished but in terms of putting a cigarette out by pushing the burning end of it into something (the number 5 on the Hopscotch court). The poem's language has a violent and passionate edge to it, even though the violent words are not always in a violent context (for example, the smack of the jump rope).

This is a rather melancholy poem in which, perhaps, the poetic voice is mourning the passing, the "putting out" of the passion of youth ("burning"). In the poem's more obvious binary—the opposition of childhood games to more "adult" ones—the same melancholy plays itself out, making the poem's refrain-like repetition of "how far I've come" ring with unhappy irony. The little blonde girl is an image of the speaker's own past self (since the poem talks about reminiscing), and the speaker mourns that little girl's (her own) passing into a more uncertain and less carefree state. It is 4:00 A.M. in Brooklyn Heights—just about the end of night, the darkest point perhaps before the beginning of morning, and windows in the poem are open, so things are not all bad. The friends make noise together, break bottles together, revisit hopscotch square 5 together, and contemplate moving on.

Analysis of Our Analysis The point of tallying repetitions and strands and binaries and then selecting the most important and interesting ones is to trigger ideas. The hope is that the discipline of having to look closely at and notice patterns in the language will produce more specific, more carefully grounded conclusions than you otherwise might notice.

Virtually everything in our three paragraphs moves from the repeated words and patterns we noticed in the evidence. We didn't go outside the poem to generalities, nor did we take some single item out of context (looking for pattern helps prevent you from doing that) and produce an interpretation that might not be true to the rest of the poem.

We couldn't, by the way, find any anomalies in the poem—things that seemed not to fit. Of course, it is often the case that what at first seems to be an anomaly is actually part of a pattern you haven't yet fully noticed. For good examples of writers making use of anomalies in their evidence, see the Ovid example and the student paper on dance later in the chapter.



Try this 2.2: Doing the Method on a Speech

Here is a speech that no doubt all readers of this book will know. Many of you may even have committed it to memory at some point.

Try looking for patterns of repetition and contrast in it. See what this method allows you to notice about what is already a familiar piece of prose. Later, after you read our chapter on sentence style, you could come back to this speech and see what you notice in it if you look for pattern in terms of Lincoln's syntactical choices. This exercise could also

serve as a model for further practice in looking for patterns of repetition and contrast in speeches. Speeches by various presidents, for example, are easy to find on the Internet. Your aim in doing the Method on speeches is to arrive at conclusions about the speech that get beyond the obvious and the general. What does doing the Method on this speech cause you to notice that you may not have noticed before?

The Gettysburg Address
Nov. 19, 1863

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of it as a final resting place for those who died here that the nation might live. This we may, in all propriety do. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have hallowed it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

It is rather for us the living, we here be dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.

Start by listing words that repeat exactly. Then list repetitions of the same or similar kinds of words (strands). Then list words that fall into opposition to each other—binary oppositions. As you start listing, you will find that strands begin to suggest other strands that are in opposition to them. And you may find that words you first took to be parts of a single strand are actually parts of different strands and are, perhaps, in opposition. This process of noticing and then relocating words and details into different patterns is the part of doing the Method that pushes your analysis to possible interpretations.

A Note on the Importance of Finding Binaries

Let's think further about what binaries are and what they reveal. Binaries are deeply engrained in the ways that we think. Thinking is not possible without them. But the discovery of binaries is not an end unto itself. Why is it useful to

find binary oppositions (binaries)? And why isn't this search for binaries a problem, like approaching the world as though everything in it could be divided into only two possibilities (either/or thinking)?

When you run into a binary opposition in your thinking, it is like a fork in the road, a place where two paths going in different directions present themselves and you pause to choose the direction you will take. Binary oppositions are sites of uncertainty, places where there is struggle among various points of view. As such, binaries are the breeding ground of ideas.

Binary oppositions are sites of uncertainty, places where there is struggle among various points of view.

When you find a binary opposition in an essay, a film, or a political campaign, you locate the argument that the film, essay, or campaign is having with itself, the place where something is at issue. You avoid the rigidifying and reductive habit of mind called either/or thinking when you allow yourself to notice binaries, but immediately begin to ask questions about and complicate them. To “complicate” a binary is to discover evidence that unsettles it and to formulate alternatively worded binaries that more accurately describe what is at issue in the evidence.

As a general rule, analysis favors live questions—where something remains to be resolved—over inert answers, places where things are already pretty much nailed down and don't leave much space for further thinking. Finding binaries will help you find the questions around which almost anything is organized. This is why we ask you to select those binary oppositions in your subject matter that seem to you to be “organizing contrasts.” Much analytical thinking, whether you are aware of doing it or not, involves determining which of a number of opposing elements is the most fundamental, the most important for understanding how something operates as a whole. Think of an organizing contrast as the structural beam that gives conceptual shape to a piece. (See Chapter 3, Section C).

There is usually no single “right” answer about which of a number of binary oppositions is the primary organizing contrast. This is because analytical thinking involves interpretation. Interpretive conclusions are not matters of fact, but theories. It is in the nature of theories to be tentative and open to alternative readings of the same information. This is why good analytical thinking takes time and is inevitably open-ended.

Analysis at Work: An Example (a Student Draft on Ovid's Metamorphoses)

This preliminary draft of a paper on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a collection of short mythological tales dating from ancient Rome, exemplifies a writer in the process of discovering a workable idea. She begins with a list of similar examples. 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 it 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.

The draft begins with two loosely connected observations about Ovid's stories: 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.

We have included annotations in the draft to suggest how the writer's ideas evolve as she looks for pattern, contrast, and anomaly. Notice in particular how the writer manages to remain open to reformulation.

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 was changed 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, since 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 and his severed head continue 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.]

Thinking Recursively: Reformulating Binaries

For the purposes of using the Method, recursive thinking is essential. Working with strands is an inherently recursive activity because you'll tend to first think that one set of words or details fits together as a strand and then you'll find yourself regrouping—reformulating your strands as new patterns begin to strike you. As you begin to notice repetitions, they tend to suggest strands, and strands tend to beget organizing contrasts.

Thinking is not simply linear and progressive, moving from point A to point B to point C like stops on a train. Careful thinkers are always retracing their steps, questioning their first—and second—impressions, assuming that they've missed something. All good thinking is *recursive*—that is, it repeatedly goes over the same ground, reformulating ideas and rethinking connections.

Nowhere is it more important to *reformulate* than in working with organizing contrasts. This is because the habit of mind called binary (either/or) thinking can retard thought through oversimplification—through a tendency toward rigidly dichotomized points of view. But finding binary oppositions as a means of locating what is at issue and then using the binaries to *start* rather than end your thinking process is not reductive. Notice how in the Ovid example the writer keeps reformulating her ways of categorizing her data.

Let's consider a brief example in which a writer starts with the binary: was the poet Emily Dickinson psychotic, or was she a poetic genius? This is a useful, if overstated, starting point for prompting thinking. Going over the same ground, the writer might next decide that the opposing terms *insanity* and *poetic genius* don't accurately name the issue. He or she might decide, as the poet Adrienne Rich did, that poetic genius is often perceived as insanity by the culture at large and, thus, it's not a viable either/or formulation. This move, by the way, is known as *collapsing the binary*: coming to see that what had appeared to be an opposition is really two parts of one complex phenomenon.

Perhaps the insanity/poetic genius binary would be better reformulated in terms of conventionality/unconventionality—a binary that might lead the writer to start reappraising the ways in which Dickinson is not as eccentric as she at first appears to be.

Regrouping Strands and Binaries as a Method of Analysis: An Example

Although the steps of the Method are discrete and modular, they are also consecutive; they entail a kind of narrative logic. Each step leads logically to the next and then to various kinds of regrouping (which is actually rethinking). Let's run through a hypothetical example of this way of thinking with repetition, strands, and binaries.

The first step, the discovery of repetition, reveals what a piece of writing is about. If, for example, a piece of reading reveals numerous repetitions of the word *duty*, you would then know that (whatever the piece might think about *duty*) it is clearly, at the most factual level, *about duty*.

The repetition of *duty* might alert you to look for other related words that will begin to suggest themselves as part of a strand—at which point you would begin to educe and construct a *discourse* of duty, a strand of related words that your observation of repetitions of the word *duty* illuminated. You might then notice *guilt*, *responsibility*, *shame*, *obligation*, *task*, and so on as a *discursive strand* that further reveals what the piece is about. At this point of strand formation, you have already made an interpretive leap (observation has blended into interpretation). You would need to follow this up consciously by *articulating the logic of the strand*. In this case, it might be “words that suggest the writer’s worries about performing certain acts.”

Note that what the text thinks of the duty strand—what it is inviting us to think of duty, and how it resolves the problem or issue or question associated with duty—requires a step beyond noticing that the text is about duty because that word repeats. The formulation of a primary strand, which reveals what the text is about and interested in, usually leads to a next step: what the text is worried about, anxious about, trying to resolve. The formulation of a strand is thus usually one half of an organizing contrast.

The formulation of a primary strand, which reveals what the text is about and interested in, usually leads to a next step: what the text is worried about, anxious about, trying to resolve.

So we should ask ourselves, What is duty in tension with here? To what is it opposed? Often the answer will turn out to be another term in the strand—let's say *shame*. And so we come to see, as our analysis evolves, that two words we had first grouped together, and rightly so, can also be separated into an organizing contrast, with each as the key term in its own strand. If you look back at our analysis of the poem above, you can see this happening.

The *duty* strand might retain *task*, *responsibility*, *work*, *reward*, and others from the original strand, which would now be “the upside of doing what is expected.” The opposing *shame* strand might include *guilt* and other words that the discovery of this new strand would start to illuminate, say, *fear*, *humble*, *revulsion*. If the *duty* strand is the “upside,” then the *shame* and *guilt* strand is the “downside,” that which the text is worried and potentially anxious about.

The writer's consideration of how the text mediates the tension made apparent by this reward/revulsion, duty/guilt contrast would be the primary culminating business of the analysis, which might issue in a thesis such as “Although the American

tobacco industry repeatedly pays lip service to the guilt it feels for making a profit on the lungs of its citizenry, ultimately it flees the shame in the name of corporate responsibility to serving its shareholders their slice of the American dream.”

Try this 2.3: Apply the Method to Something You Are Reading

Try the Method on a piece of reading that you wish to understand better, perhaps a series of editorials on the same subject, an essay, one or more poems by the same author (since the Method is useful for reading across texts for common denominators), a collection of stories, a political speech, and so on. You can work with as little as a few paragraphs or as much as an entire article or chapter or book. By focusing on repetition (exact repetitions and strands), contrast (binary oppositions), and anomalies, you press yourself to get closer to your data—to become more aware of what the subject is made of, rather than generalizing broadly about it.

This exercise can produce fruitful results with almost any kind of material. It offers, for example, a very useful way of accessing and characterizing the mental habits of particular authors. It is also particularly useful with complex theoretical arguments, as it allows you to gradually discover what the argument is made of rather than allowing yourself to become daunted by the scope and difficulty of the material. For more suggestions on working with difficult theoretical readings, see the sections on paraphrase × 3 in Chapter 1, “the pitch and the complaint” in Chapter 4, and our example of uncovering assumptions in a reading, which appears at the end of Chapter 3.

MOVE 4: MAKE THE IMPLICIT EXPLICIT

A definition of analytical writing to which this book repeatedly returns is that it makes explicit (overtly stated) what is implicit (suggested but not directly stated) in both your subject and your own thinking. This process of converting suggestions into direct statements is essential to analysis, but it is also the feature of analyzing that is least understood by inexperienced writers. They fear that, like the emperor's new clothes, implications aren't really “there,” but are instead the phantasms of an overactive imagination. “Reading between the lines” is the common and telling phrase that expresses this anxiety. The implication is that analysis makes something out of nothing—the spaces between the lines—rather than what is there in black and white. Another version of this anxiety is implied by the term *hidden meanings*.

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Implication versus Hidden Meanings

The problem some people have with this analytical move—making the implicit explicit—is that it focuses on a “part” of the whole that is not overtly (materially) present, but rather is something that some part of the whole suggests. Making the implicit explicit is an interpretive move and not simply a matter of observation. This aspect of analytical thinking is the least understood by people who are easily put off by analysis. Such people invariably jeer at analysis for allegedly picking things apart (which we call defining significant parts in relation to the whole) and finding “hidden meanings” (which we call making the implicit explicit).

Implications are not hidden, but neither are they completely spelled out so that they can be simply extracted. The word *implication* comes from the Latin *implicare*, which means “folded in.” The word *explicit* is in opposition to the idea of implication. It means “folded out.”

This etymology of the two words, *implicit* and *explicit*, suggests that meanings aren’t actually “hidden,” but neither are they opened to full view. An act of mind is required to take what is folded in and fold it out for all to see. What follows is a brief exercise on implication consisting of a series of observations for which you are asked to supply implications. On the basis of this activity, we then ask you to theorize the difference between an implication and a hidden meaning.

**Try this 2.4: Inferring Implications from Observations**

Do this exercise along with other people if you can, because part of its aim is to determine the extent to which different people infer the same implications. Write a list of as many plausible implications as you can think of for each of the items below.

1. The sidewalk is disappearing as a feature of the American residential landscape. New housing developments have them only if a township requires them of the developer.
2. New house designs are tending increasingly toward open plans in which the kitchen is not separated from the rest of the house. New house designs continue to have a room called the living room, usually a space at the front of the house near the front door, but many (not all) also have a separate space called the family room, which is usually in some part of the house farther removed from the front door and closer to the kitchen.
3. “Good fences make good neighbors.”—Robert Frost
4. In the female brain, there are more connections between the right hemisphere (emotions, spatial reasoning) and the left hemisphere (verbal facility). In the male brain, these two hemispheres remain more separate.
5. An increasing number of juveniles—people under the age of eighteen—are being tried and convicted as adults, rather than as minors, in America, with the result that more minors are serving adult sentences for crimes they committed while still in their teens.
6. Neuroscientists tell us that the frontal cortex of the brain, the part that is responsible for judgment and especially for impulse control, is not fully developed in humans until roughly the age of twenty-one. What are the implications of this observation relative to observation 5?

7. Linguists have long commented on the tendency of women’s speech to use rising inflection at the end of statements as if the statements were questions. An actual command form—Be home by midnight!—thus becomes a question instead. What are we to make of the fact that in recent years younger men (under 30) have begun to end declarative statements and command forms with rising inflections?
8. Shopping malls and grocery stores rarely have clocks.

After you have made your list of implications for each item, consider how you arrived at them. On the basis of this experience, how would you answer the following questions? What is the difference between an idea being “hidden” and an idea being implied? What, in other words, is an implication? To what extent do you think most people would arrive at the same implications that you did?

Having done the preceding exercise with inferring implications, you could now make up your own list of observations and pursue implications. Make some observations, for example, about the following, and then suggest the possible implications of your observations.

- changing trends in automobiles today
- what your local newspaper chooses to put on its front page (or editorial page) over the course of a week
- shows (or advertisements) that appear on network television (as opposed to cable) during one hour of evening prime time
- advertisements for scotch whiskey in highbrow magazines

We end this discussion of the fourth analytical move, making the implicit explicit, with a quick summary of the steps that analysis typically takes from observations to conclusions. These steps may be charted as follows:

Observation (description) → Implications → Conclusions (So what?)

In *step 1* of this process, you describe your evidence, paraphrasing key language and looking for interesting patterns of repetition and contrast.

In *step 2* you begin querying your own observations by making what is implicit explicit.

In the *final step* you push your observations and statements of implications to interpretive conclusions by asking, So what?

As we have argued in this chapter and in Chapter 1, the analytical process requires certain critical shifts in your attention. In Chapter 1, with the exercise called Notice and focus, we noted that writers need to start by asking themselves not “What do I think?” but “What do I notice?”

A similar shift that is conducive to inferring implication is:

Not What do I think?
but
What does it say?

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 outset exactly where you are going, how all 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 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 will work with almost anything you want to think about. As you will see, they 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 of Repetition and Contrast)

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, Keep Reformulating 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.

Whatever questions you ask, the answers you propose will often produce more questions. Like signposts on a trail, details (data) that initially seem to point in one direction may, on closer examination, lead you someplace else. Dealing with these realities of analytical writing requires patience, but it will also make you a more confident thinker, because you'll come to know that your uncertainty is a normal and necessary part of writing.

Using Exploratory Writing to Find Workable Questions

The process of having ideas rarely moves steadily forward, traveling in an uninterrupted line from point to point like a connect-the-dots picture. Instead, thinking and writing are *recursive* activities, which means that we move forward by looking backward, by repeatedly going over the same ground, looking for wrong turns, uncovering signposts we may have missed, and reinterpreting signposts passed earlier because of what we later discovered.

A good paper is essentially the answer to a good question, an explanation of some feature or features of your subject that need explaining. If you don't take the time to look for questions, you might end up writing a tidy but relatively pointless paper. Spend some time simply recording what you notice about your subject without worrying about where these observations might lead. By opening up your thinking in this way, you will discover more data to think with, more possible starting points from which to develop an idea. And you will be less likely to get trapped into seeing only those features of your subject that support the first conclusion you come to.

A good paper is essentially the answer to a good question, an explanation of some feature or features of your subject that need explaining. If you don't take the time to look for questions, you might end up writing a tidy but relatively pointless paper.

When you shift from exploratory writing to writing a first draft, you may not—and most likely will not—have all the answers, but you will waste significantly less time chasing ill-focused and inadequately considered ideas than might otherwise have been the case. Even as you write this draft, however, a good phrase to keep in mind is *Share your thought processes with the reader*. If readers can't see how you got to the position you are offering them, they have little reason to accept it, no matter how smooth the sentence style, grammar, paragraphing, and organization may be.

B. SOME COMMON CHARGES AGAINST ANALYSIS

Once you accept the challenge of thinking and writing analytically—the careful, recursive, and nonjudgmental observation of your subject and of your own thoughts—you can expect to encounter another obstacle. Although analysis is an activity we call on constantly in our everyday lives, many people are deeply suspicious of it. “Why can't you just enjoy the movie rather than picking it apart?” they'll say. Or, “Oh, you're just making that up!” You may even be accused of being unfeeling if you adopt an analytical stance, because it is typical of the anti-intellectual position to insist that feeling and thinking are separate and essentially incompatible activities. Some people fear that trusting our intellects will make us less feeling and sensitive. With this fear goes the opposite one—that trusting our feelings will necessarily render us incapable of thinking. Both of these suspicions about analysis have long histories.

Though among the most astutely analytical of thinkers, the famous nineteenth-century English Romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote that “we murder to dissect,” thus giving voice to the still common anxiety that analysis takes the life