

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

A few rules are worth highlighting here:

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

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

ASSIGNMENT: Analyze a Portrait or Other Visual Image

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

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

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

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

Counterproductive Habits of Mind

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

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

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

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

FEAR OF UNCERTAINTY

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

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

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

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

—Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 1817

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

PREJUDGING

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

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

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

BLINDED BY HABIT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the philosopher David Hume, writing about perception, asserted that our lives are spent in “dogmatic slumbers,” so ensnared in conventional notions of just about everything that we don’t really see.

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

THE JUDGMENT REFLEX

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

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

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

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

In some ways, the rest of this book consists of a set of methods for blocking the judgment reflex in favor of more thoughtful responses. For now, here are two moves to make in order to short circuit the judgment reflex and begin replacing it with a more thoughtful, patient, and curious habit of mind. First, try the cure that Carl Rogers recommended to negotiators in industry and government. Do not assert an agreement

THE PROBLEM

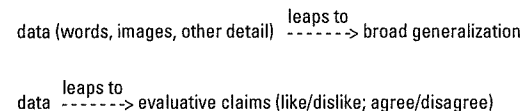


FIGURE 2.1

The Problems with Generalizing and Judging

or disagreement with another person’s position until you can repeat that position in a way the other person would accept as fair and accurate. This is surprisingly hard to do because we are usually so busy calling up judgments of our own that we barely hear what the other person is saying.

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

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

■ Try this 2.1: Distinguishing Evaluative from Nonevaluative Words

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

■ Try this 2.2: Experiment with Adjectives and Adverbs

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

GENERALIZING

What it all boils down to is... What this adds up to is... The gist of her speech was. . .

Generalizing is not always a bad habit. Reducing complex events, theories, books, or speeches to a reasonably accurate summarizing statement requires practice and skill. We generalize from our experience because this is one way of arriving at ideas.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

■ Try this 2.3: Locating Words on the Abstraction Ladder

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

■ Try this 2.4: Distinguishing Abstract from Concrete Words

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

OVERPERSONALIZING (NATURALIZING OUR ASSUMPTIONS)

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

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

VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Habits of Mind

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

—Mark Scitutto, *Professor of Psychology*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

subjective vs. objective

personal expression vs. impersonal analysis

passionately engaged vs. detached, impassively neutral

genuinely felt vs. heartless

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

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

■ Try this 2.5: *Tracing Impressions Back to Causes*

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

■ Try this 2.6: *Looking for Naturalized Assumptions*

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

OPINIONS (VERSUS IDEAS)

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

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

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

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

WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE AN IDEA

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

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

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

VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Ideas versus Opinions

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

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

—Jack Gambino, *Professor of Political Science*

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

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

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

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

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

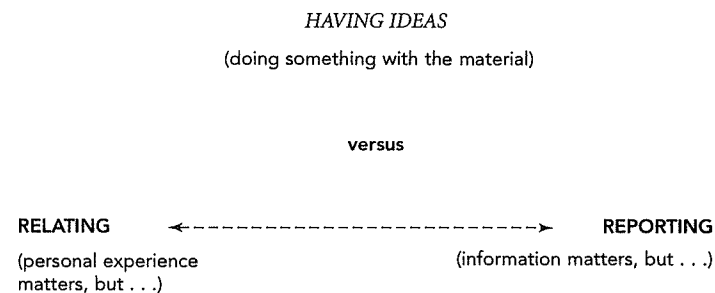


FIGURE 2.2

Having Ideas Ideas occupy a middle ground between the extremes of sheer personal response and faceless reportage of information.

RULES OF THUMB FOR HANDLING COMPLEXITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ASSIGNMENT: Observation Practice

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

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

A Toolkit of Analytical Methods

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

—Gail Godwin, "How I Write" (Boston: *The Writer*, October 1987)

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

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

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

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