3. Teenage years are wild.

- During adolescence, the world makes sense, even though that sense is a complete illusion.
- A fourteen-year-old boy can barely contain all the energy coursing through his veins. He spends most of his time struggling to tame instincts that he cannot even name.
- Before leaving our formative years, we might glimpse the best and worst habits we have acquired from our families—if we are lucky.

So how does someone go from a broad, flat statement to a revelatory idea? Intensive analysis! More intensive analysis always (not sometimes, but *always!*) leads to more intensive and focused statements. When writers have difficulty expressing an intensive single statement, they can retool the key verbs and nouns. Notice how the more intensive and revelatory statements often avoid linking verbs (*is, am, are, was, were,* and so on). Instead, to pull the readers' mind through ideas, they rely on active verbs *(develop, create, mirror, keep, glimpse).* Changing the verb in a sentence can prompt the writer to think differently, in more intensive ways.

ACTIVITY

Create a broad, flat sentence, something that offers very little new insight. Then, from that sentence, develop three or more intense, focused, and insightful statements. In these more insightful statements, try to reveal something that normally goes ignored or that rarely gets considered. To create more insightful statements, (1) replace broad nouns with more specific nouns; (2) replace linking verbs with active verbs. Use adventurous or unusual verbs . . . and see where your mind goes.

Evolution of a Thesis

The thesis of a remembering essay suggests the *significance of the memory.* Notice how the following statement evolves from a description of what happened to an explanation of its significance:

- I remember as a kid sitting in my grandparents' backyard listening to them and my parents tell boring family stories.
- I realize now that I learned a lot about my family history from sitting around as a kid listening to my grandparents and parents tell family stories.
- We learn important things about who we are and where we came from by listening to family stories.
- Though we might prefer not to hear them, we can better understand who we are and why by taking in family stories as children.

Common Thesis Problem: Avoiding Clichés

When it comes time to craft a focused statement, writers should avoid the temptation to flatten out their experiences into an overused phrase, or *cliché*. Clichés have a comfortable ring to them, but they rarely prompt new insight or reveal complexities. In fact, clichés often *cover up* complexities because they are applied as blanket statements to many different situations:

- You don't know what you've got until it's gone.
- Blood is thicker than water.
- What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger.
- Home is where the heart is.

Such statements may be true and worth considering, but academic writing seeks to reveal something new. Clichés are worn-out expressions. They might sound like profound statements, but when a thesis is a cliché, the main idea of the essay doesn't reveal something new. Instead, it restates an old, worn-out idea.

Revising Your Thesis

Share your thesis statement with a group of peers:

- What general words can be replaced with specific ones?
- What clichés can be replaced with intense, revelatory language?
- How can the thesis better express the significance of the memory?
- What is the most important point about this memory?

Rhetorical Tools

Even though the writing for this chapter is personal in nature, it needs to develop a point that connects to the public. As author Joan Didion said in her interview with the *Paris Review,* "Quite often you want to tell somebody your dream, your nightmare. Well, nobody wants to hear about someone else's dream, good or bad; nobody wants to walk around with it. The writer is always tricking the reader into listening to the dream." To do this, writers can use various tools.

Narration

Narration is a retelling of events, a story. As Joan Didion argues, we must do more than tell a story. We must trick readers into listening to the story and accepting its significance. The art of storytelling involves pace, or the movement of events. At important points in a narrative, the amount of detail tends to increase, and so readers slow down and experience each moment.

But good storytellers move quickly through less important events. It might be helpful to think of this strategy as it works in movies: at the climax of an adventure movie, the events slow down (we see the lead character's hand grasping for the light saber; we hear each breath of the character as she runs down the hallway and toward the open window), but during less important moments, an entire day or week can flash by in a second.

In her narrative, Jennifer Schwind-Pawlak moves quickly through unimportant events. She quickly relates the pregame events (going to church, suiting up) because they do not have a significant impact on the main idea of the essay:

> Sunday, the morning of the fifth game of the season, came with no warning. I got up, went to church with the family, then came home to suit up for the game. Upon arrival at the field, I was greeted by the coach and went to take my place along the sidelines with the rest of my team.

However, the narrative slows down (and offers more details) at important moments:

> Joann (the name I call my mother when she does something embarrassing) was screaming at the coach. In a voice so screeching that it rivaled fingernails on a blackboard, she told him that he was a disgraceful coach and that he should be ashamed of himself. She continued to point out the error of his ways by reminding him that I had not played at all in the game. How could she do this to me? My mother had managed to enlighten the few people that hadn't noticed on their own that I had not played at all. What was she thinking? She might as well have rented billboard space saying, "So what if Jeni sucks at soccer? The coach wouldn't let her play." My only thought was, "I don't want to go to school tomorrow!"

As you consider your own narrative, slow the pace when relaying events that are directly related to your main idea.

Allusions

Allusions are references to some public bit of knowledge (such as a historical event, a political situation, or a popular culture figure). An allusion can give a personal essay a more public and broader feeling. It can make the ideas and events of a personal situation relate to the readers through a shared culture. Because the allusion is shared knowledge, it communicates this broader, public feeling more quickly than a longer explanation would. This helps to keep the essay moving along. For example, Bosley's allusion to the Hooters restaurant chain ("to be performed, not in swimsuits, but in short-shorts and white T-shirts, Hooters-style . . .") quickly creates an image in the readers' mind because of the shared knowledge about the Hooters uniform. Later, when Bosley refers to "the save-the-whales-and-rainforest civic-mindedness required not only of Miss America, but of Junior Miss America, too," she quickly communicates an idea that without the allusion would take much longer to explain. Because the allusion is public knowledge, the writer connects with the readers because they feel that they, too, are *in on it.*

Dialogue

Dialogue, discussion between two or more people, can make an event or memory more real and engaging to the readers. It is most valuable when used to emphasize a main point and show something significant. Conveying general events is better left to narration. Formatting for dialogue involves several steps:

- Use quotation marks before and after the actual spoken words.
- Put end punctuation (such as a period) inside the end quotation marks.
- Indent when a new speaker begins.

Integrating a speaker's words can be accomplished in several ways:

- Use a comma between the quotation and the speaking verb (*explained, asked, said, yelled, proclaimed,* etc.).

  Louisa asked, "What are we going to do now?"

- Use a colon before the speaker's words. In this case, the narrator usually forecasts the ideas or mood of the speaker in the sentence preceding the colon.

  I was clearly agitated by her accusation: "What the heck are you talking about?"

- Work the speaker's words directly into the grammar of your sentence.

  But Louisa was convinced that our decision would "hurt us either way."

- See all of these rules operating in the following exchange:

  "Come on in," Mr. Smith said.

  "Hey, something smells great," I said as I walked into his lamp-lit living room. The small terrier looked up out of its lazy place on the sofa as Mr. Smith reached to get his wallet.

  "Yep, I've been cookin' my chili again. It's Max's favorite." He gestured at the complacent blurry-eyed dog. "So, is the price of papers still the same?"

  "Well, as far as I know, it's still $4.25 for the month." And then without considering the consequences, I asked the wrong question: "How have you been, Mr. Smith?" It took him 45 minutes to explain his "return to normal" after a long spell of stomach flu.

In this example, notice how attributive phrases (such as *he said*), which give ownership to the spoken words, are absent after the second indentation. Generally, after the dialogue pattern is established and the readers can easily tell who is speaking, attributive phrases are unnecessary.

ACTIVITY

Before drafting your essay, use writing to plan:

- Write down your thesis.
- What narrative events will you move through quickly, and what narrative events will you slow down for?
- What historical, popular, or fictional situations, events, or characters relate to your situation?
- If you are considering dialogue, how will that dialogue help show the significance of the main idea?

Revision

Revision, when you step back and analyze your own rhetorical decisions, is a necessary part of good writing, and of one's development as a writer and thinker. Writers can revise alone or with others.

Peer Review

Peer review, revising with the help of others, can be done in various ways. Your instructor may provide specific guidelines and, of course, you are free to try different approaches outside the classroom. If your instructor asks you to exchange essays with a peer or form small groups and read your essays aloud, the following advice can help you work efficiently and get results:

- Provide peer reviewers with a readable copy of your draft.
- Help focus the reviewers by writing down your carefully worded questions about your draft.
- If you read your essay aloud, don't read too fast.
- Be specific when responding. In addition to saying what you think, say why you think it.
- Be honest and encouraging. Providing only praise will not help the writer, yet phrasing your comments too negatively might be discouraging.
- Do not defend your essay, but instead view it as a work in progress. Be open to all ideas.
- Consider all comments, then make the changes you think are appropriate.