

Chapter 1

Introduction: Fourteen Short Takes on Writing and the Writing Process

THIS IS A “HOW TO THINK ABOUT ...” and “Where to Look for ...” chapter, consisting of a sequence of short takes on topics that are especially helpful to understand at the beginning of a writing course. Although you will find more extended discussions of most of these topics later in the book, we think you will find it useful to have them assembled here in compact, browseable form. Learning to be a better writer is not just a matter of acquiring skills. (To a significant extent it involves learning new ways of thinking about what writing is and what it does.)

Because the organization of the chapter is modular, you can easily skip around in it to sample what it has to offer. There is, however, a logic to the order of the short takes, which is why the chapter is not arranged alphabetically. Typically, each short take triggers the next. Cumulatively, the short takes tell a story about making the transition to college writing. Some of the entries will be more pertinent for you now than others. Return to the chapter from time to time and browse for concepts and key terms you have come to need.

ORDER OF THE SHORT TAKES

- Thinking About Writing as a Tool of Thought
- Analysis: A Quick Definition
- What Do Faculty Want from Student Writing?
- Breaking Out of 5-Paragraph Form
- Writing Traditional Papers in the Digital Age
- What’s Different About Writing Arguments in College?
- Rhetoric: What It Is and Why You Need It
- Writing about Reading: Beyond “Banking”
- Freewriting: How and Why to Do It
- Process and Product: Some Ways of Thinking About the Writing Process

- How to Think About Grammar and Style (Beyond Error-Catching)
- A Quick Word on Style Guides
- How to Think About Writing in the Disciplines
- Academic vs. Nonacademic Writing: How Different Are They?

THINKING ABOUT WRITING AS A TOOL OF THOUGHT

Learning to write well means more than learning to organize information in appropriate forms and construct clear and grammatically correct sentences. Learning to write well means learning ways of using writing in order to think well.

The achievement of good writing does, of course, require attention to form, but writing is not just a thing, a container for displaying already completed acts of thinking—it is also a mental activity. Through writing, we figure out what things mean, which is this book's definition of analysis.

The book will make you much more aware of your own acts of thinking and will show you how to experiment more deliberately with ways of having ideas—for example, by sampling kinds of informal and exploratory writing that will enhance your ability to learn.

As the next few chapters will show, the analytical process is surprisingly formulaic. It consists of a fairly limited set of basic moves. People who think well have these moves at their disposal, whether they are aware of using them or not. Analysis, the book argues, is a frame of mind, a set of habits for observing and making sense of the world.

ANALYSIS: A QUICK DEFINITION

Just about all of the reading and writing you will do in college is analytical. Such writing is concerned with accurate description and with thinking collaboratively (rather than combatively) with readers about ways of understanding what things might mean. The problem is that much of what we hear on television or read online seems to be primarily devoted to bludgeoning other people into submission with argumentative claims. The book's analytical methods provide a set of moves that derail more unproductive responses, such as agree/disagree, like/dislike, and other forms of gladiatorial opinion-swapping.

Chapter 2 offers the first set of methods, along with discussion of the counterproductive habits of mind they are designed to deflect. Chapter 3 defines analysis in detail (in what we call the five analytical moves) and shows you how it operates differently from other forms of thinking and writing. For now, we offer the following list on the goals of analysis and its identifying traits:

Analysis Defined

1. Analysis seeks to discover what something means. An analytical argument makes claims for how something might be best understood and in what context.
2. Analysis deliberately delays evaluation and judgment.

3. Analysis begins in and values uncertainty rather than starting from settled convictions.
4. Analytical arguments are usually pluralistic; they tend to try on more than one way of thinking about how something might be best understood.

WHAT DO FACULTY WANT FROM STUDENT WRITING?

Here is a list of faculty expectations based on what faculty across the curriculum say at our seminars on writing:

- Analysis rather than passive summary, personal reaction and opinions
- Analysis before argument, understanding in depth before taking a stand
- Alternatives to agree-disagree & like-dislike responses
- Tolerance of uncertainty
- Respect for complexity
- Ability to apply theories from reading, using them as lenses
- Acquiring and understanding the purpose of disciplinary conventions
- Ability to use secondary sources in ways other than plugging them in as “answers”

Overall, what faculty across the curriculum want is for students to learn to do things with course material beyond merely reporting it on the one hand, and just reacting to it with personal response on the other. This is the crux of the issue that *Writing Analytically* addresses: how to locate a middle ground between passive summary and personal response. We call that middle ground analysis.

To these expectations, we would add that the ability to cultivate interest and curiosity is a great desideratum of faculty across the curriculum. They want students to understand that interest need not precede writing; interest is more often a product of writing.

BREAKING OUT OF 5-PARAGRAPH FORM

The shift from high school to college writing is not just a difference in degree but a difference in kind. The changes it requires in matters of form and style are inevitably also changes in thinking. In order to make these changes in thinking, you may need to “unlearn” some practices you’ve previously been taught. At the top of the unlearning list for many entering college students is 5-paragraph form—the rigid, one-size-fits-all organizational scheme that is still taught in many high schools.

If you have come to rely on this form, giving it up can be anxiety-producing. This is especially so when you are asked to abandon an all-purpose form and replace it with a set of different forms for different situations. But it's essential to let go of this particular security blanket.

So, what's wrong with 5-paragraph form? Its rigid, arbitrary and mechanical organizational scheme values structure over just about everything else, especially in-depth thinking.

The formula's defenders say that essays need to be organized and that the simple three-part thesis and three-body paragraphs (one reason and/or example for each) and repetitive conclusion meets that need. They also say that 5-paragraph form is useful for helping writers to get started. The problem with treating 5-paragraph form as a relatively benign aid to clarity is that like any habit it is very hard to break.

Students who can't break the habit remain handicapped because 5-paragraph form runs counter to virtually all of the values and attitudes that they need in order to grow as writers and thinkers—such as respect for complexity, tolerance of uncertainty, and the willingness to test and complicate rather than just assert ideas.

The form actually discourages thinking by conditioning writers to be afraid of looking closely at evidence. If they look too closely, they might find something that doesn't fit, at which point the prefabricated organizational scheme falls apart. But it is precisely the something-that-doesn't-seem-to-fit, the thing writers call a "complication," that triggers good ideas.

Finally, what about the perception that students need to master 5-paragraph form in order to do well on SAT exams and other forms of standardized testing? Standardized tests in writing usually don't encourage writers to take the kinds of risks in both form and content that good writers must learn to take. But it is a myth that SAT evaluators reward 5-paragraph form. In fact, the two criteria that most often earn high scores from graders are length (yes, length) and vocabulary (Michael Winerip, "SAT Essay Test Rewards Length and Ignores Errors," the *New York Times*, May 4, 2005, On Education). Readers of writing-based college entrance exams give high marks not to writing that has a tidy structure but to writing that avoids clichés and overstated claims and that employs sentence and essay structures capable of accommodating complex ideas. (See Chapter 10 for alternatives to 5-paragraph form that can accommodate complexity. See especially the Template for Using 10 on 1.)

ON WRITING TRADITIONAL ESSAYS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

You might be wondering why it is that colleges and universities continue to ask students to write traditional essays in an age when so much communication is dominated by the short and often multi-modal forms of the Internet. Does the arrival of the Internet with its blogs and web pages and YouTube clips mean that the traditional essay is rapidly becoming extinct? Why shouldn't college students spend their time learning to write exclusively in these new forms rather than learning to do a kind of writing they might not use after college?

There are several answers to these questions. First and most importantly, learning to write the traditional essay is the only way to develop the skills and habits of mind necessary for engaging in acts of sustained, in-depth reflection. Nor does it matter if you never write essays or lab reports or academic articles after college. It is not the presentation that matters—the forms of college writing—so much as what the forms allow you to do as a thinker.

In this chapter's short take on the writing process (See *Process and Product: Some Ways of Thinking About the Writing Process*), we point out that the form of a finished piece of writing does not disclose the process that would allow a writer to produce it. The necessarily concise lists of PowerPoints and of some kinds of writing on the Web don't just spring into being in that form. The careful compression in such forms is typically the product of writing as a tool of thought.

Finally, we are advising that traditional forms and formats are only a part of what you need to learn in order to grow as a writer and thinker. The first unit of this book, for example, although its assignments can lead to traditional essays, focuses primarily on ways of using writing in order to improve your ability to observe. This kind of writing—exploratory writing, writing to help you discover ideas—can fuel various formats, including multi-modal ones.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT WRITING ARGUMENTS IN COLLEGE?

Insofar as you will be asked to write arguments in college, they will differ in significant ways from what you hear on crossfire-style talk shows and "news" programs. In made-for-TV arguments, people set out to defeat other people's positions and thus "win." Arguments in college are more *exploratory*—aimed at locating new ways of understanding something or at finding a tentative solution to a problem. Such arguments lead with analysis rather than position-taking. The claims you arrive at in an analysis are, in fact, arguments—analytical arguments.

Here are some of the differences between argument as it is too often conducted in the media and argument of the type cultivated by college writing:

- has more than two sides
- moves from much more carefully defined and smaller (less global) claims
- seeks out common ground between competing points of view rather than solely emphasizing difference
- uses potentially contradictory evidence to test and qualify claims rather than ignoring such evidence or housing it solely as concessions ("okay, I'll give you that point, but ...") and refutations ("here is why you are wrong!")
- adopts a civil and nonadversarial **ethos** (self-presentation) and **rhetorical stance** (relationship with the audience) (see Chapter 3)
- avoids stating positions as though they were obviously and self-evidently true
- avoids cheap tricks such as straw man—misrepresenting or trivializing another's position so that it is easy to knock down and blow away—and name calling and other of the logical fallacies (see Chapter 9)
- includes much more evidence and careful analysis of that evidence

Targeting the Opinionated and the Argumentative We can cap this brief discussion of modes of argument in college by targeting two words that are sometimes

misunderstood—**opinionated** and **argumentative**. These are not neutral terms. Saying that someone is opinionated is not the same as saying that he or she has opinions, nor is an argumentative person simply one who offers arguments. The opinionated person has too many opinions—a firmly held view on virtually everything, and the argumentative person is one for whom argument is a form of interpersonal warfare and for whom relationships tend to be competitive and adversarial. Both terms are associated with being close-minded and uncivil.

Although members of the academic world frequently disagree with each other and call attention to those disagreements, they do not lead with conflict and criticism. For knowledge to grow in the academic world, people have to continue to talk with each other and hear what each other has to say. (See *Naturalizing Our Assumptions* and “I Didn’t Know You Wanted My Opinion” in *Chapter 2*.)

RHETORIC: WHAT IT IS AND WHY YOU NEED IT

Long before there were courses on writing, people studied a subject called rhetoric—as they still do. Rhetoric is a way of thinking about thinking. It offers ways of generating and evaluating arguments as well as ways of arranging them for maximum effect in particular situations. This book is a rhetoric in the sense that it offers methods for observing all manner of data and arriving at ideas. The division of rhetoric devoted to the generation of ideas is called “invention.” *Writing Analytically* is an invention-oriented rhetoric.

{In ancient Greece, where rhetoric was first developed as a systematic body of knowledge, emphasis was on public speaking.} When Aristotle trained his students in rhetoric, he was preparing them to make arguments in the *agora*, the central assembly place in Athens where social, political, and religious issues of the day were decided. A person well-trained in rhetoric was adept at finding available arguments on the spot. Rhetorical training provided its practitioners with particular habits of mind.

Today, training in rhetoric continues to be especially helpful for all people who wish to enter public discourse and contribute to civil debate on key issues. In one of the best current textbooks on classical rhetoric, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (Pearson/Longman 2004), authors Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee say about rhetoric that “its use allows people to make important choices without resorting to less palatable means of persuasion—coercion or violence” (2).

Unfortunately, the word “rhetoric” has suffered a serious decline in popular perception. To some people, rhetoric has come to mean something like empty, willfully deceitful, and sometimes just plain dishonest uses of language. People who think of rhetoric in this way will say things like “It was all just rhetoric,” that is, all talk and no substance.

In order to make use of all that a rhetorical orientation toward writing and thinking can offer, you will first need to understand rhetoric as something other than a way of dressing up lies and making poor decisions sound respectable. We offer the

following two ways of thinking about rhetoric—not just the rhetorics of the ancient Greeks, but the various kinds of rhetorics that have been invented since:

1. a rhetoric is a systematic body of techniques for coming to understand and find things to say about a subject (invention), and
2. rhetoric is also the term used to describe a speaker’s or writer’s way of using language to appeal to a particular audience.

It is from the second definition—rhetoric as a means of arranging language in order to persuade—that the negative definition of rhetoric has come. But finding a way of saying something so that others might hear and consider it does not necessarily mean that people skilled at rhetoric are puffed up tricksters.

{The various academic disciplines you will study have rhetorics, which is a very helpful way to understand them.} The struggles we all have with writing are to a significant extent rhetorical, because writers are concerned not just with what they want to say but with how to say it so as to be best understood by their target audiences.

It follows that stylistic decisions are always also rhetorical decisions. This is why writers cannot rely on a single set of style prescriptions for all occasions. Different styles have different rhetorical implications and effects. (See *the short take on Style Guides*.)

Two Key Terms

Here are two key terms from classical rhetoric that you will encounter in this book:

Heuristic: Although this word has other meanings in disciplines such as engineering, in classical rhetoric a heuristic was an aid to discovery. It comes from the Greek word *heuriskein*, which means “to find out” or “discover.” *Heuriskein* is the Greek equivalent of the Latin word, *invenire*, which means “to find” or “to come upon” (Crowley 20). This book’s analytical methods, such as the ones you will find in the two Toolkits (Chapters 2 and 4), are *heuristics*.

Commonplace: Rhetorical training provided rhetors—those who were skilled at public speaking—with pre-determined arguments called places that might fit any number of situations. The Greek word for “place”—*topoi*—gives us our word topic. Our word “commonplace” is descended from the way classical rhetoric treats commonplaces: as commonly held beliefs.

Here is a 20th-century definition of the term commonplace from an essay by David Bartholomae called “Inventing the University.” Bartholomae argues that college writing—especially writing in the academic disciplines—requires students to learn not just forms and styles, but disciplinary commonplaces, the commonly held ways of thinking in the various academic communities that make up the university:

A ‘commonplace,’ then, is a culturally or institutionally authorized concept or statement that carries with it its own necessary elaboration. We all use commonplaces to orient ourselves

in the world; they provide a point of reference and a set of 'prearticulated' explanations that are readily available to organize and interpret experience" (24).

* This is a useful way of understanding what you are being asked to acquire in a college or graduate school education, the commonly held concepts that each discipline accepts as givens.

A rhetorical orientation is especially prominent in the following places in *Writing Analytically*:

- short take on Writing in the Disciplines in this chapter, which explains why you should think about disciplinary formats rhetorically
- Chapter 3, where analysis is defined rhetorically
- Chapters 15 and 16, where paper organization and types of introductory and concluding paragraphs are explained rhetorically
- Chapters 17 and 18, where word choice and sentence structure are treated rhetorically

WRITING ABOUT READING: BEYOND "BANKING"

Both the amount of reading and what you are expected to do with it will undergo significant upgrades in college. It is fairly common for those new to college writing to expect to write about reading in one of three ways: by handing it back on tests, by agreeing or disagreeing with it, or by registering a more elemental personal response, which is a common student misunderstanding triggered by the so-called "reaction paper." Much of the writing about reading you will be asked to do in college will move you beyond these three responses.

The Banking Model of Education—and Beyond

You will of course be responsible for retaining what you have read and "handing it back" on examinations. This is known as the **banking** model of education. The learner (in the banking model) is mostly a passive conduit taking things in and spitting them back out. Educational theorist Paolo Freire mounted a famous attack on this model, arguing that an education consisting entirely of "banking"—information in/information out—does not teach thinking. Being able to recite the ideas of others does not automatically render a person capable of thinking about these ideas or producing them.

Banking is not limited to quizzes and exams. It also occurs when teachers, through the best of intentions, do too much of the thinking for you. When there is discussion of the reading in class, for example, it often moves from a teacher's questions. If you write about the reading, this often takes place after the teacher has presented his or her explanations in lectures, maybe even with PowerPoints that foreground the teacher's selection of important points. In these ways, you are "protected" from the task of treating the reading as raw material, so to speak.

At some point, however, you have to figure out how to "process" complex course information for yourself. It is hard to learn to do a cartwheel solely by watching someone else do one. And the best way to learn is to write about the reading, not after the teacher has banked it for you but before.

Why write about reading? It will teach you how to do the things with readings that your teachers know how to do—how to find the questions rather than just the answers, how to make connections between one reading and another, how to bring together key passages from readings and put these into conversation with each other, and how to apply an idea or methodology in a reading to understanding something else.

Virtually all of the methods and procedures in this book can help you to write analytically about reading. See especially:

- Chapters 2 and 4, the two Toolkits of Analytical Methods, offer heuristics that are essential for analyzing reading
- Chapter 5, Writing About Reading: More Moves to Make with Written Texts, shows you how to use a reading as a lens
- Chapter 13, Using Sources Analytically: The Conversation Model, shows you how to put readings into conversation with each other and how to find your own voice in the conversation
- Chapter 7, Making Common Topics More Analytical, helps you with traditional assignments that involve writing about reading such as summary, comparison/contrast, and the so-called "reaction" paper

FREEWITING: HOW AND WHY TO DO IT

Freewriting is a method of arriving at ideas by writing continuously about a subject for a limited period of time without pausing to edit or revise. The rationale behind this activity can be understood through a well-known remark by the novelist E.M. Forster (in regard to the "tyranny" of prearranging everything): "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" Freewriting gives you the chance to see what you'll say.

Author Anne Lamott writes eloquently (in *Bird by Bird*) about the censors we all hear as nasty voices in our heads that keep us from writing. These are the internalized voices of past critics whose comments have become magnified to suggest that we will never get it right. Freewriting allows us to tune out these voices long enough to discover what we might think.

There aren't many rules to freewriting—just that you have to keep your pen (or fingers on the keyboard) moving. Don't reread as you go. Don't pause to correct things. Don't cross things out. Don't quit when you think you have run out of things to say. Just keep writing.

There are various forms of freewriting. For academic and other analytical projects, we recommend **passage-based focused freewriting**. In passage-based focused freewriting (see Chapters 4 and 5), class members embark from and attempt to stay grounded in some short passage or single sentence (usually their choice) from the

day's reading. In this way, they learn to choose and develop starting points for discussion, rather than rely on a teacher's questions.

The practice of freewriting has long been advocated by writer, teacher, and writing theorist Peter Elbow who argues that poor writing occurs when writers try to draft and edit at the same time. There are sound psychological and cognitive reasons for trying not to get too bogged down in "fixing" things in the early drafting stages. First, it is hard to keep your larger purpose in sight if you constantly worry about making mistakes or being wrong. You need to keep moving, even when you know parts of what you have written are not yet good enough. Second, it is hard to discover where to go next if you keep looking back. Some people keep reading what they've just written, hoping to find the next move. But when you instead try to write fast—to forge ahead without looking back—you are more likely to discover a new leaping-off point, some connection to another and possibly better idea. Freewriting lets this process happen. Give it the chance to surprise you.

Here are some of the things that regular freewriting accomplishes:

- develops fluency
- deters writer's block
- encourages experimentation
- requires you to find your own starting points for writing and run with them
- provides a nurturing alternative to rigidly format-driven writing
- allows you to observe your characteristic ways of moving as a thinker, your habits of mind

Some Useful Techniques for Freewriting

Here are some analytical methods from later in the book that work especially well to generate freewrites:

- Paraphrase × 3, Notice and Focus, and So What? from Chapter 2
- Making the Implicit Explicit from Chapter 3
- Uncovering Assumptions, Reformulating Binaries, Seems to Be About X, and Difference within Similarity from Chapter 4
- 10 on 1 in Chapter 10

PROCESS AND PRODUCT: SOME WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT THE WRITING PROCESS

Process and **product** are the usual terms for thinking about the relation between exploratory writing (such as freewriting) and the more finished kinds of assignments to which it may lead. The **process** includes everything you needed to do in order to get to the finished draft, which is known as the **product**. In classical rhetoric, the terms are **invention** and **arrangement** (See the short take on

Rhetoric). In the invention stage, you follow prescribed methods for coming up with things to say, material which can then be arranged into the most effective form (presentation).

Writing is a recursive, not a linear process. Generation and presentation require different kinds of writing and thinking activities, though in practice these phases overlap. Writers do not simply finish a rough draft, then revise it, and then edit it in the tidy three-stage process commonly taught in school. They might, for example, make several different starts at the same writing task, then revise it, then learn from these revisions that they need to do more drafting, and so on.

Your goal is to generate enough material to locate your best options. Even in disciplines that do not encourage forms of exploratory writing (such as psychology and the natural sciences), because they concentrate instead on the forms of finished products, you can make use of your own informal writing, dwelling longer in the process, so as to learn how to arrive at more thoughtful products.

To a significant extent, the final draft re-creates for the reader the writer's experience of arriving at his or her key ideas. Good analytical writing, at whatever stage, has an exploratory feel. It shares its discovery process with the reader. This is true, by the way, even in such tightly predetermined forms as that of the scientific lab report. The report format actually requires the writer to recreate the steps that took him or her to conclusions.

Tips for Managing the Writing Process

Start anywhere that gets you going. The writing process is nonlinear. Very few writers simply begin at the beginning and write straight through to the end. Sometimes your best bet is to write individual paragraphs and then arrange them later.

Allow yourself to write a crummy first draft if that is how you work best. Get something on paper before worrying about what others might think of it. A writer's assumptions about his or her audience can help to generate writing but can also create writer's block. When you get stuck or frustrated, don't worry—just keep writing.

If you draft on a computer, try not to hit delete prematurely. Instead, rename each of your drafts. Hang on to false starts; they may help you later.

Postpone anxiety about grammar and spelling and style. You can revise and correct your draft once you have given yourself the opportunity to discover what you want to say.

Know that what works for one writer might not work for another. There is no one right way to conduct the writing process. Some writers need to outline; other writers need to write first and then might use outlining later to figure out what is going on in their drafts. Some writers absolutely must write an introduction before they can move forward. Others need to jump in elsewhere and write the introduction last. Experiment! Devote some time to finding out what works for you.

Put your unconscious on the job. You can't always write through an act of will. Sometimes, when the words aren't coming, it helps to go do something else—take a shower, go for a walk. Often you will find that a part of your brain has remained on the job. We call this resource in the writing process **the back-burner**—the place where things keep quietly stewing while you are thinking about something else. If you are really stuck, take some notes right before bedtime and write as soon as you wake in the morning.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT GRAMMAR AND STYLE (BEYOND ERROR-CATCHING)

{ A mantra of the book is that a sentence is the shape that thought takes. The goal of the book's treatment of grammar and style is to get you to refocus your attention from anxiety about error-detection to particular interest in the structures of sentences.

Many people are unduly anxious about grammar—so much so that they have trouble writing. Error-avoidance is important in the final stages of drafting, but it is also a very limited and limiting perspective on sentences. Instead, look at sentences in terms of logic and rhetoric. Ask yourself, "So what that the sentence is constructed in the way that it is? How does this shape relate to the way of thinking that the sentence contains?"

You need at least a minimal amount of grammatical terminology for understanding the shapes of sentences. Try to acquire this vocabulary as early in a writing course as you can. You need to be able to recognize and construct the following: **dependent clause, independent clause, simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, compound-complex sentence, cumulative sentence, periodic sentence.** (See Chapter 18.)

Because punctuation makes sentence shapes visible, you should also know the basics of punctuation. In particular, learn the primary rules governing commas. (No, the fact that you pause is not a reliable indicator.) See the short guide to punctuation early in Chapter 19.

Once you orient yourself toward thinking about the shapes of sentences, you will be able to use sentences that clarify for readers the way you organize your ideas and place emphasis. You will maximize your choices and increase your persuasive power. When analyzing the sentences of others, this knowledge will give you insight into the writer's thinking: how the ideas are ranked and connected.

As for error-catching, you can revise and correct your draft once you've given yourself the opportunity to discover what you want to say. And, as we have been suggesting here, instead of dwelling on errors, try to cultivate an interest in the shapes of good sentences. See "go-to" sentence in Chapter 2, which will tell you how to use the grammar and style unit to start recognizing the connections between the characteristic shapes of a writer's sentences and the way he or she thinks.

A QUICK WORD ON STYLE GUIDES

Style guides are fine, provided they don't acquire the status of law, which is to say that you shouldn't take them as offering the last word. Some style guides have acquired almost cult status—Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, for example. Among E.B.

White's letters, now collected at Cornell University, are many in which White is clearly responding with discomfort to letter writers appealing to him as the ultimate authority on style.

In one letter, he writes, "There are no rules of writing (who could possibly invent them?); there are only guidelines, and the guidelines can, and should be, 17 ★
chucked out the window whenever they get in your way or in your hair. I have Rules are
never paid the slightest attention to 'The Elements of Style' when I was busy writ- made to be
ing. [...] If the book inhibits you or constrains you, you should build a bonfire broken
and throw the book into the flames" (qtd. in "The Phenomenon of the Little,
Book: Letters to E.B. White on *The Elements of Style*," an unpublished talk by
Katherine K. Gottschalk, given at the 2010 Conference on College Composition
and Communication, pp. 5–6).

In an entertaining article by Catherine Prendergast, we also learn that *Elements of Style* was found among other do-it-yourself manuals on the bookshelf of Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber ("The Fighting Style: Reading the Unabomber's Strunk and White," *College English*, Volume 72, Number 1, September 2009).

The problem with subscribing to one set of style "rules" is that this practice ignores rhetoric and context. There simply is no one set of rules that is appropriate for all occasions. In his essay, "Style and Good Style," philosophy professor Monroe Beardsley takes this point one step further. He writes: "Many charming, clever, and memorable things have been said about style—most of which turn out to be highly misleading when subjected to analysis" (4). Changes in style, says Beardsley, always produce changes in meaning: "If the teacher advises a change of words, or of word order, he is recommending a different meaning" (13).

Here is one of the examples Beardsley offers in his measured attack on the rules 17
in Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. Strunk and White, offering the common stylistic advice that writers should seek to replace forms of "to be" with active verbs, suggest that the sentence "There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground" should be replaced with "Dead leaves covered the ground." Of this suggested change, Beardsley observes, "But isn't that a difference in meaning? For one thing, there are more leaves in the second sentence. The second one says that the ground was covered; the first one only speaks of a great number. Stylistic advice is a rather odd sort of thing if it consists in telling students to pile up the leaves in their descriptions" (6).

Similarly, the usual advice that writers should avoid the "not-un" formation produces not just a change in style but a change in meaning. Saying "I am not unhappy" is not the same thing as saying "I am happy"—which is the kind of bolder, more decisive statement that *Elements of Style* recommends.

So, style guides are useful provided you recognize that style guidelines always carry with them an unstated preference for a certain kind of approach to the world—a certain kind of speaking persona, which may or may not be suited to what you wish to say. Richard Lanham's very useful "paramedic method," which we discuss in Chapter 18, puts a lot of emphasis on active verbs, the active voice, and on reducing "Latinate" diction. This emphasis produces a vigorous style but one that is not consistent, for example, with the stylistic conventions of science writing.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

There will be days when you feel that each classroom you walk into is asking you to learn a different language. To some extent you're right. To navigate your way across the curriculum successfully, you will need to recognize that matters of form are also matters of epistemology, which is to say that they are indicative of each discipline's ways of knowing. Embedded in a discipline's ways of writing—its key terms and stylistic conventions—are its primary assumptions about thinking, how it should be done and toward what end.

No single book or course can equip you with all that you will need to write like a scientist or a psychologist or an art historian. What this book can do is teach you how to think about discipline-specific writing practices and how to analyze them for their logic and rhetoric. Once you acquire these skills, you will find it easier to adapt to the different kinds of writing you will encounter in college. You will also learn to see the common ways of thinking that underlie stylistic differences. For now, let's focus briefly on some interesting differences.

Here are three brief examples of significant stylistic differences. Think about what makes each difference more than simply superficial. Contemplate what these rules reveal about the particular discipline's values. And how do these rules implicitly define the relationship of the writer to his or her subject matter and assumed audience?

- A. In psychology and some other social and natural sciences, writers paraphrase and cite other writers but do not include the language being paraphrased. In English, religion, and other disciplines in the humanities, writers also paraphrase, but they quote the language being paraphrased.
- B. It is still largely true that in the sciences, particularly the natural sciences, writers use the passive rather than the active voice. So, the scientist would write: "The air was pumped out of the chamber" (passive voice, which leaves out the person performing the action, leading with the action instead) rather than "We pumped the air out of the chamber" (active voice, which includes the person performing the action).
- C. In the sciences, writers typically do not criticize other scientists' work, although in the opening section of lab reports they survey other relevant studies and use these to explain the need for their current research. By contrast, writers in the humanities and some social sciences commonly build a piece of writing and research upon the discovery of a problem—that will be stated explicitly—in someone else's writing and research.

At the end of the chapter, we suggest that you interview a professor (perhaps from your major) to collect brief examples of what he or she considers good writing in his or her academic discipline. Some disciplines accept a wider variety of suitable forms and styles than others. There are lots of acceptable ways to write a history, English, or economics paper but only one way to write an acceptable lab report in biology. Your best bet is to study examples of what different disciplines think of as good writing, especially in disciplines where there is no rulebook for matters of form.

For the book's specific advice on writing in the disciplines plus discussion of common denominators, see the following:

- Chapters 15 and 16, the opening chapters of Unit III, entitled Matters of Form: The Shapes That Thought Takes
- Voices from Across the Curriculum (interspersed throughout the text), written by professors in various disciplines who offer their perspective on such matters as introductions and determining what counts as evidence

ACADEMIC VS. NONACADEMIC WRITING: HOW DIFFERENT ARE THEY?

We conclude this chapter with some final reflections on what it means to call writing "academic." Not all writing that has proved central to academic disciplines—such as works by philosophers, novelists, or world leaders—was written by academic writers. And not all writing by academics is meant only for other academics. This is especially the case when academics are engaged in problem solving outside the university—in public policy or government, for example—or when they write for popular audiences. Scientists, such as Steven Pinker and Simon Baron-Cohen, for example, publish in both scientific journals and in more popular publications.

Nonetheless, academic writers are typically cautious about trying to translate their work into forms suitable for consumption by nonacademics. This is not just in-group behavior but a product of the nature of academic research and writing.

Scientists, for example, typically focus on very small, narrowly defined questions, such as the function of a single receptor in the brain or a single kind of cellular reaction. Also, much scientific research goes on for a long time. Public radio recently interviewed a scientist who is involved in a 40-year-long study of a particular small mammal, looking for changes in size and breeding habits in response to such factors as global warming. In science in particular and in academic fields more generally, the results don't come quickly or easily and are often necessarily uncertain.

Translating these carefully contextualized, narrowly focused, and often long-term studies in a way that would make them interesting and available to a general audience is difficult. This is so not only because nonscientists have trouble with scientific language but because nonacademic readers often distort or overextend the science writing they take in.

The single biggest difference between academic and nonacademic writing is the size of the claims. General audiences often expect bigger and more definitive claims than carefully qualified academic writing is willing to make. The desire for overly authoritative claims and immediate answers that characterizes mainstream media produces an appropriate wariness among scientists and other academics.

In any case, learning to write in one or more of the academic disciplines will change the way you think. The analytical habits of mind you will have acquired inside of your chosen disciplines will grant you confidence and independence as a learner. They will cause you to see more in whatever you read, to arrive at more carefully limited claims about it, and to have more patience with yourself and others as thinkers.

Assignments

1. **Write a Literacy Narrative.** Write a short autobiographical piece that presents a chapter in your history as a writer. Describe what you now take to be an especially formative experience in how you came to be the writer you are today. What practices and ideas has this experience or set of related experiences led to? You might begin by freewriting a draft for 15 minutes in class. This narrative offers a good way to begin exploring your ways of thinking about writing and about yourself as a writer. The early lessons we take in about writing—sometimes accidentally—affect many of us more than we recognize.
2. **Collect Samples of Good Writing.** Begin collecting examples of good writing in a discipline of your choice from a professor of your choice. You might, for example, begin a collection of introductory and concluding paragraphs because these are critical sites in all writing and are especially useful in understanding the ways different disciplines frame and present information.
3. **Experiment with the Five-Finger Exercise.** The primary shift in thinking that the book promotes is from the general and global to the particular and local—to a focus on words and sentences and details, rather than on the large (general) picture. In order to introduce this re-orientation, we offer a writing activity taken from a famous fiction writer, Ernest Hemingway. He called it his “five-finger exercise,” probably by analogy with the exercises that piano players do in order to make certain ways of moving their fingers more automatic.

Read the passage below, wherein Hemingway (calling himself “Your Correspondent”) offers advice to a young writer (referred to as “Mice”) who has come to him for advice. Then start practicing Hemingway’s recommended exercise of *tracing impressions back to the details that caused them*.

Everything we have to say in the book relates in one way or another to Hemingway’s advice, which is relevant to writing of all kinds, not just fiction. To become more aware—which is key to becoming a better writer—we have to train ourselves to notice more: both our impressions of things and how these are formed. Becoming more aware of our own responses is step one. Step two is tracing these impressions back to the particular details of experience that caused them.

Mice: How can a writer train himself?

Your Correspondent: Watch what happens today. If we get into a fish see exactly what it is that everyone does. If you get a kick out of it while he is jumping, remember back until you see exactly what the action was that gave you the emotion. Whether it was the rising of the line from the water and the way it tightened like a fiddle string until drops started from it, or the way he smashed and threw water when he jumped. Remember

what the noises were and what was said. 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. That’s a five finger exercise.

Mice: All right. [...]

Your Correspondent: Listen now. When people talk, listen completely. Don’t be thinking what you’re going to say. Most people never listen. Nor do they observe. You should be able to go into a room and when you come out know everything that you saw there and not only that. If that room gave you any feeling, you should know exactly what it was that gave you that feeling. Try that for practice. When you’re in town stand outside the theater and see how the people differ in the way they get out of taxis and motor cars. There are a thousand ways to practice. And always think of other people. (Ernest Hemingway, “Monologue to the Maestro: A High Seas Letter,” *Esquire*: October 1935 rpt. in *ByLine*)

Start practicing by doing the exercise aloud with others. Write down the three details you think contributed most to your response to a particular setting, such as a classroom or other place on campus. Then share these with the class or in a small group. Next, use the exercise to produce a short piece of descriptive writing about some location of your choice or that the class might visit as a group. Take time to just observe the scene, register your responses to it and write down details. Then recast your writing into a descriptive paragraph. Keep revising your description until you have a rendering of your “data”—the details—that will cause your readers to think and feel about the scene as you do. Try to limit the number of evaluative adjectives you use—words like *ugly*, *beautiful*, *depressing*, and so on. Let the details do most of the work.