

Chapter 2

Toolkit of Analytical Methods I: Seeing Better, Seeing More

"Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope." Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

"See better, Lear." Shakespeare, *King Lear*

FOCUS ON THE DETAILS

This chapter offers a set of tools for training your ways of seeing and making sense of things—the world, images, and especially written texts. Rhetoricians call these tools *heuristics*, from the Greek word for discovery. Heuristic has the same root as Eureka—"I've found it!" All of the heuristics in this chapter seek to help you to discover things to say about whatever you are studying. The final third of the chapter surveys the counterproductive habits of mind that these activities seek to replace.

NOTICING

- Noticing significant detail is a skill that can be improved through practice.
- The ability to notice is blocked by common habits of mind: judging and generalizing and leaping prematurely to conclusions.
- One solution: experiment with eliminating the words *like*, *dislike*, *agree*, and *disagree* from your vocabulary, at least for a while.
- Another solution: slow down. Dwell longer in the open-ended, exploratory, information-gathering stage.

A. The Heuristics

There are two broad categories of heuristics in this chapter—observation strategies and interpretive prompts. Both seek to retrain the way you focus your attention from the global (general) to the local. Here is a list of the chapter's heuristics, each with a very brief summary of what it involves. We will then go on to explain each in more detail.

HEURISTICS

1. Notice and Focus + Ranking
(select a few details as most important: What do you find most “Interesting” or “Strange”?)
2. The Method: Looking for Patterns of Repetition and Contrast
(organize details into groupings based on similarity or opposition)
3. Asking So What?
(make the leap from observing X to querying what X means)
4. Paraphrase × (times) 3
(recast the key words in new language to question what they mean)
5. Identifying a “Go To” Sentence
(locate the sentence shape a writer habitually uses; then ponder how that shape reveals the writer’s habitual ways of seeing)

Note: these heuristics are not formulae for organizing papers. They are “thinking moves” designed to produce higher quality material that will eventually go into an essay or argument or report. The heuristics lend themselves to group work, to collaborative thinking, as well as individual work. The best way to get good at these observation and thinking skills is to try them out repeatedly with other writers. In Unit II, you’ll be invited to put them to work in writing papers and other kinds of assignments.

1. NOTICE AND FOCUS + RANKING

RULES OF NOTICE & HABITS OF MIND: SLOW DOWN

Not “What do you think?” &
Not “What do you like or dislike?”
but
“What do you notice?”

A few prompts:

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

The activity called Notice and Focus guides you to dwell longer with the data before feeling compelled to decide what the data mean. Repeatedly returning to the question, “What do you notice?” is one of the best ways to counteract the tendency to generalize too rapidly. “What do you notice?” redirects attention to the subject matter itself and delays the pressure to come up with answers.

Start by noticing as much as you can about whatever it is you are studying. Next, narrow your scope to a representative portion of your evidence, and then dwell with the data. Record what you see. Don’t move to generalization, or worse, to judgment.

What this procedure will begin to demonstrate is how useful description is as a tool for arriving at ideas. If you stay at the description stage longer, deliberately delaying leaps to conclusions, you are more likely to arrive at better ideas. Training yourself to notice will improve your memory and your ability to think.

Step 1: Cast a wide net by continuing to **list details** you notice. Go longer than you normally would before stopping—often the tenth or eleventh detail is the one that will eventually lead to your best idea.

Step 2: Focus inside what you’ve noticed. **Rank** the various features of your subject you have noticed. Answer the question “What details (specific features of the subject matter) are most interesting (or significant or revealing or strange)?” The purpose of relying on *interesting* or one of the other suggested words is that these will help to deactivate the like/dislike switch of the judgment reflex and replace it with a more analytical perspective.

Step 3: Say **why** three things you selected struck you as the most interesting (or revealing or significant or strange). Saying why will trigger interpretive leaps to the possible meaning of whatever you find most interesting in your observations.

Discussion Let’s pause a moment to ponder the key words in step 2: interesting, revealing, strange. What does it mean to find something *interesting*? Often, we are interested by things that have captured our attention without our clearly knowing why. Interest and curiosity are near cousins. To say that something is interesting is not the end but the beginning of analysis: then you figure out what is interesting about this feature of your subject and why.

The word *strange* is a useful prompt because it gives us permission to notice oddities and things that initially seem not to fit. Strange, in this context, is not a judgmental term but one denoting features of a subject or situation that aren’t readily explainable. Where you locate something strange, you have isolated something to interpret—to figure out what makes it strange and why.

Along similar lines, the words *revealing* and *significant* work by requiring you to make choices that can lead to interpretive leaps. If something strikes you as revealing or significant, even if you’re not yet sure why, you will eventually begin producing some explanation. What is revealed, and why is it revealing?

Troubleshooting Notice and Focus

In the Noticing phase of Notice and Focus, you will be tempted to begin having ideas and making claims about your subject. Resist this temptation. Many of those first stabs at ideas will be overly general, fairly obvious, and they will block further noticing.

A Quick Note on 10 on 1

In later chapters (4 & 10), you will encounter a key heuristic that is the cousin of Notice and Focus. It is called “10 on 1”—based on the notion that it is productive to say more about less, to make ten points or observations about a single example rather

than making the same overly general or obvious point about ten related examples. Like Notice and Focus, 10 on 1 depends on extended observation but it reduces scope to a single representative piece of evidence.

Try This 2.1: Doing Notice and Focus with a Room

Practice this activity as a class or in small groups with the room you're in. List a number of details about it, then rank the three most important ones. Use as a focusing question any of the four words suggested above—*interesting*, *significant*, *revealing*, or *strange*. Or come up with your own focus for the ranking, such as the three aspects of the room that seem most to affect the way you feel and behave in the space. Then you might go home and repeat the exercise alone in the room of your choice. Start out not with “what do I think?” but with “what do I notice?” And remember to keep the process going longer than might feel comfortable: “what else do I notice?”

Try This 2.2: Notice and Focus Fieldwork

Try this exercise with a range of subjects: an editorial, the front page of a newspaper, a website, a key paragraph from something you are reading, the style of a favorite writer, conversations overheard around campus, looking at people's shoes, political speeches, a photograph, a cartoon, and so forth. (The speech bank at americanrhetoric.com is an excellent source.) Remember to include all three steps: notice, rank, and say why.

2. THE METHOD: WORK WITH PATTERNS OF REPETITION AND CONTRAST

THE METHOD

What repeats?
 What goes with what? (strands)
 What is opposed to what? (binaries)
 (for all of these questions) ---> SO WHAT?
 What doesn't fit? (anomalies) So what?

“The Method” is our shorthand for a systematic procedure for analyzing evidence by looking for patterns of repetition and contrast. It offers a way to get the big picture

without overgeneralizing—it is insistently empirical. It also has an uncanny ability to help you figure out what is most important in anything you read.

Using The Method induces you to get physical with the data—literally, for you will find yourself circling, underlining, and listing. Although you will thus descend from the heights of abstraction to the realm of concrete detail, the point of tallying repetitions and strands and binaries and then selecting the most important and interesting ones is to trigger ideas. The discipline required to notice patterns in the language will produce more specific, more carefully grounded conclusions than you otherwise might have made.

Like Notice and Focus, The Method orients you toward significant detail; but whereas Notice and Focus is a deliberately unstructured activity, The Method applies a matrix or grid of observational moves to a subject.

Step 1: List exact **repetitions** and the number of each (words, details). For example, if forms of the word *seems* repeat three times, write “seems × 3.” With images, the repeated appearance of high foreheads would constitute an exact repetition.

Concentrate on substantive (meaning-carrying) words. Only in rare cases will words like “and” or “the” merit attention as a significant repetition. At the most literal level, whatever repeats is what the thing is about.

Step 2: List repetitions of the same or similar kind of detail or word—which we call **strands** (for example, *polite*, *courteous*, *decorous*). Be able to explain the strand's connecting logic with a label: manners.

Step 3: List details or words that form or suggest **binary oppositions**—pairs of words or details that are opposites—and select from these the most important ones, which function as **organizing contrasts** (for example, *open/closed*, *ugly/beautiful*, *global/local*). Binaries help you locate what is at stake in the subject—the tensions and issues it is trying to resolve.

Step 4: Choose ONE repetition or strand or binary as most important or interesting and explain in one healthy paragraph why you think it's important. (This ranking, as in Notice and Focus, prompts an interpretive leap.)

Step 5: Locate **anomalies**: exceptions to the pattern, things that seem not to fit. Anomalies become evident only after you have discerned a pattern, so it is best to locate repetitions, strands, and organizing contrasts—things that fit together in some way—before looking for things that seem not to fit. Once you see an anomaly, you will often find that it is part of a strand you had not detected (and perhaps one side of a previously unseen binary).

Discussion The method of looking for patterns works through a series of steps. Hold yourself initially to doing the steps one at a time and in order. Later, you will be able to record your answers under each of the three steps simultaneously. Although the steps of The Method are discrete and modular, they are also consecutive. They proceed by a kind of narrative logic. Each step leads logically to the next, and then to various kinds of regrouping, which is actually rethinking.

Tip: Expect ideas to suggest themselves to you as you move through the steps of The Method. Strands often begin to suggest other strands that are in opposition to them. Words you first took to be parts of one strand may migrate to different strands. This process of noticing and then relocating words and details into different patterns is one aspect of doing The Method that can push your analysis to interpretation.

The Method can be applied to virtually anything you wish to analyze—an essay, a political campaign, a work of visual or verbal art, a dense passage from some secondary source you feel is important but can't quite figure out, and—last but not least—your own writing.

It may be helpful to think of this method of analysis as a form of mental doodling. Rather than worrying about what you are going to say, or about whether or not you understand, you instead get out a pencil and start tallying up what you see. Engaged in this process, you'll soon find yourself gaining entry to the logic of your subject matter. To some extent, doing The Method is archaeological. It digs into the language or the material details of whatever you are analyzing in order to unearth its thinking. This is most evident in the discovery of organizing contrasts.

Binary oppositions often indicate places where there is struggle among various points of view. And there is usually no single “right” answer about which of a number of binaries is the primary organizing contrast. One of the best ways to develop your analyses is to try on different possible oppositions as the primary one. A related technique is to repeatedly recast the key terms in the binaries. (*For more on this technique, see “reformulating binaries” in Chapter 4: Toolkit of Analytical Methods II.*)

Two Examples of The Method Generating Ideas

Try noticing repetitions and contrasts in your own writing. This will help you to recognize and develop your ideas. In the paragraph below, you can see how the writer's noticing strands and binaries directs his thinking.

The most striking aspect of the spots is how different they are from typical fashion advertising. If you look at men's fashion magazines, for example, at the advertisements for the suits of Ralph Lauren or Valentino or Hugo Boss, they almost always consist of a beautiful man, with something interesting done to his hair, wearing a gorgeous outfit. At the most, the man may be gesturing discreetly, or smiling in the demure way that a man like that might smile after, say, telling the supermodel at the next table no thanks he has to catch an early-morning flight to Milan. But that's all. The beautiful face and the clothes tell the whole story. The Dockers ads, though, are almost exactly the opposite. There's no face. The camera is jumping around so much that it's tough to concentrate on the clothes. And instead of stark simplicity, the fashion image is overlaid with a constant, confusing patter. It's almost as if the Dockers ads weren't primarily concerned with clothes at all—and in fact that's exactly what Levi's intended. What the company had discovered,

in its research, was that baby-boomer men felt that the chief thing missing from their lives was male friendship. Caught between the demands of the families that many of them had started in the eighties and career considerations that had grown more onerous, they felt they had lost touch with other men. The purpose of the ads—the chatter, the lounging around, the quick cuts—was simply to conjure up a place where men could put on one-hundred-percent-cotton khakis and reconnect with one another. In the original advertising brief, that imaginary place was dubbed Dockers World.

—Malcolm Gladwell, “Listening to Khakis”

First, Gladwell notes the differences in two kinds of fashion ads aimed at men. There are the high fashion ads and the Dockers ads. In the first of these, the word “beautiful” repeats twice as part of a strand (including “gorgeous,” “interesting,” “supermodel,” “demure”). The writer then poses traits of the Dockers ads as an opposing strand. Instead of beautiful face there is no face, instead of “gorgeous outfit,” “it's tough to concentrate on the clothes.” These oppositions cause the writer to make his interpretive leap, that the Dockers ads “weren't primarily concerned with clothes at all” and that this was intentional.

In the student essay below, Lesley Stephen develops a key contrast between two thinkers, Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault, by noticing the different meanings that each attaches to some of the same key words. The Method helps to locate the key terms and to define them by seeing what other words they suggest (strands).

Freud defines civilization as serving two main purposes. The first is to protect men against nature, and the second is to adjust their mutual relations. Freud seems to offer returning to nature as a possible solution for men's sexual freedom. I think Freud might believe that returning to nature by rejecting civilization could bring about sexual freedom, but that sexual freedom does not necessarily equal happiness.

Foucault completely defies Freud's idea that sexuality is natural and that repression exists as anti-sexuality. He believes that everything is created from discourse; nothing is natural. And because nothing is natural, nothing is repressed. There is no such thing as a natural desire; if the desire exists, it is because it is already part of the discourse.

By focusing on repetitions of the words “nature” and “natural” and then seeing what goes with what, the writer creates a succinct and revealing comparison.

Doing The Method on a Poem

Here is an example of how one might do The Method on a piece of text—in this case, a student poem. We use a poem because it is compact and so allows us to illustrate efficiently how The Method works. See also the use of The Method on a visual image in Chapter 6, Making Interpretations Plausible.

Brooklyn Heights, 4:00 A.M.
 Dana Ferrelli
 sipping a warm forty oz.
 Coors Light on a stoop in
 Brooklyn Heights. I look
 across the street, in the open window;
 Blonde bobbing heads, the
 smack of a jump rope, laughter
 of my friends breaking
 beer bottles. Putting out their
 burning filters on the #5 of
 a hopscotch court.
 We reminisce of days when we were
 Fat, pimple faced—
 look how far we've come. But tomorrow
 a little blonde girl will
 pick up a Marlboro Light filter, just to play.
 And I'll buy another forty, because
 that's how I play now.
 Reminiscing about how far I've come

Doing the Method on a Poem: Our Analysis

1. *Words that repeat exactly:* forty \times 2, blonde \times 2, how far we've (I've) come \times 2, light \times 2, reminisce, reminiscing \times 2, filter, filters \times 2, Brooklyn Heights \times 2
2. *Strands:* jump rope, laughter, play, hopscotch (connecting logic: childhood games representing the carefree worldview of childhood) Coors Light, Marlboro Light filters, beer bottles (connecting logic: drugs, adult "games," escapism?)
 Smack, burning, breaking (violent actions and powerful emotion: burning)
3. *Binary oppositions:* how far we've come/how far I've come (a move from plural to singular, from a sense of group identity to isolation, from group values to a more individual consideration)
 Blonde bobbing heads/little blonde girl
 Burning/putting out

Coors Light, Marlboro Lights/jump rope, hopscotch
 How far I've come (two meanings of *far*?, one positive, one not)
 Heights/stoop
 Present/past

4. *Ranked repetitions, strands and binaries plus paragraph explaining the choice of one of these as central to understanding.*

Most important repetitions: forty, how far we've/I've come

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

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

Analysis (Healthy Paragraphs) The repetition of *forty* (forty ounce beer) is interesting. It signals a certain weariness—perhaps with a kind of pun on forty to suggest middle age and thus the speaker's concern about moving toward being older in a way that seems stale and flat. The beer, after all, is warm—which is not the best state for a beer to be in, once opened, if it is to retain its taste and character. Forty ounces of beer might also suggest excess—"supersizing."

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

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

Why Do The Method?

It does take some getting used to, working with The Method. It fragments everything; it can appear as if you are ignoring the usual cues by which you make sense of things, such as reading consecutively, from a to b to c, rather than looking for

and tabulating all of the a's, all of the b's and so forth. And why read for pattern in the first place? Two answers are:

- The Method can help you to control in condensed form a wealth of information. The organizational grids will bring out the features of the subject that are most important, what the reading or image is most concerned with (which repeats), and what it is concerned or worried about (what is opposed to what).
- The Method can spur you to discover things to say about whatever you are analyzing. In the normal process of observing, and especially of reading, we are often not attending to what repeats or contrasts. We're just taking in the information—not *doing* anything with it. But when you do things with information, that promotes thinking; it makes you an active learner.

Try This 2.3: Experiment in a Group Setting with The Method—Use a Visual Image by Adrian Tomine

Often, it will seem strange at first to read or analyze in the somewhat mechanical form that The Method prescribes, so it makes sense to work collaboratively at first, in small groups or with everyone in the class, to collect the data. Appoint one group member as scribe. Keep each other on task—do each step discretely. As with Notice and Focus, prolong the observation phase and refrain from judgments and big claims, at least until you begin writing about what is important (step 4).

Try an image by Adrian Tomine—a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine and a graphic novelist. Just use Google Images for “New Yorker covers + Tomine” to obtain a range of possibilities. We suggest his August 24, 2009 cover, “Double Feature”—an image of a crowd at dusk beneath the Brooklyn Bridge. Then, for homework, repeat the exercise alone, using a second Tomine cover—we suggest the November 8, 2004 cover, “Missed Connection,” featuring a man and a woman looking at each other from passing subway cars.

Try This 2.4: Apply The Method to Arts & Letters Daily

Select any article from our favorite website, Arts & Letters Daily (aldaily.com), and do The Method on it. You can actually apply The Method to anything you are reading, especially a piece you wish to understand better. You can use the front page of the newspaper, a speech from the American Rhetoric website, perhaps a series of editorials on the same subject, an essay, one or more poems by the same author (because The Method is useful for reading across texts for common denominators), and so on. You can work with as little as a few paragraphs or as much as an entire article or chapter or book. The key is to practice the procedure so that it becomes familiar: so that you will begin to look for repetitions and contrasts almost naturally.

3. ASKING “SO WHAT?”

PUSHING OBSERVATIONS TO CONCLUSIONS: ASKING SO WHAT?

(*shorthand for*)

What does the observation imply?

Why does this observation matter?

Where does this observation get us?

How can we begin to theorize the significance of the observation?

Asking So what? is a universal prompt for spurring the move from observation to implication and ultimately interpretation. Asking So what?—or its milder cousin, And so?—is a calling to account, a way of pressing yourself to confront that essential question, “Why does this matter?” It is thus a challenge to make meaning through a creative leap—to move beyond the patterns and emphases you’ve been observing in the data to tentative conclusions about what these observations suggest. In step 4 of The Method, when you select a single repetition, strand, or contrast and write about why it’s important, you are essentially asking So what? and answering that question.

Step 1: describe significant evidence, paraphrasing key language and looking for interesting patterns of repetition and contrast.

Step 2: begin to query your own observations by making what is implicit explicit.

Step 3: push your observations and statements of implications to interpretive conclusions by again asking So what?

Discussion First, a note on implication—crucial to step 2, and a subject treated at length in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to know that implications are suggested meanings. We look at the evidence and draw a conclusion that is not directly stated but that follows from what we see.

For example, a recent article in *Foreign Policy* entitled “Bury the Graveyard” demonstrates that the reputation of Afghanistan as “the graveyard of empires” is a “bogus history,” or myth. So what? The *implication*, unstated but palpable, is that the makers of U.S. foreign policy should seek out another version of the history of military intervention in Afghanistan—one that might put current military efforts there in a better light. When you ask So what? you are looking to make overt (direct, clear) what is at present indirect.

The tone of So what? can sound rude or at least brusque, but that directness can be liberating. Often, writers will go to great lengths to avoid stating what they take something to mean. After all, that leaves them open to attack, they fear, if they get it wrong. But asking So what? is a way of forcing yourself to take the plunge without too much hoopla. And when you are tempted to stop thinking too soon, asking So what? will press you onward.

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

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

MOVING FORWARD

Observation --> So what? --> Implications

Implications --> So what? --> Conclusions

Asking So What?: An Example

The following is the opening paragraph of a talk given by a professor of Political Science at our college, Dr. Jack Gambino, on the occasion of a gallery opening featuring the work of two contemporary photographers of urban and industrial landscapes. We have located in brackets our annotations of his turns of thought, as these pivot on "strange" and "So what?" (Note: images referred to in the example are available from Google Images—type in Camilo Vergara Fern Street 1988, also Edward Burtynsky.)

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

**Danger: Men Working
W. Hargrove Demolition**

Perhaps that warning captures the ominous atmosphere of these very different kinds of photographic documents by Camilo Vergara and Edward Burtynsky: "Danger: Men Working." Watch out—human beings are at work! But the work that is presented is not so much a building-up as it is a tearing-down—the work of demolition. [*strange: tearing down is unexpected; writer asks So what? and answers:*] Of course, demolition is often necessary in order to construct anew: old buildings are leveled for new projects, whether you are building a highway or bridge in an American city or a dam in the Chinese countryside. You might call modernity itself, as so many have, a process of creative destruction, a term used variously to describe modern art, capitalism, and technological innovation. The photographs in this exhibit, however, force us to pay attention to the "destructive" side of

this modern equation. [*strange: photos emphasize destruction and not creation; writer asks So what? and answers*] What both Burtynsky and Vergara do in their respective ways is to put up a warning sign—they question whether the reworking of our natural and social environment leads to a sustainable human future. And they wonder whether the process of creative destruction may not have spun recklessly out of control, producing places that are neither habitable nor sustainable. In fact, a common element connecting the two photographic versions is the near absence of people in the landscape. [*writer points to supporting feature of evidence, which he will further theorize*] While we see the evidence of the transforming power of human production on the physical and social environment, neither Vergara's urban ruins nor Burtynsky's industrial sites actually show us "men working." [*writer continues to move by noticing strange absence of people in photographs of sites where men work*] Isolated figures peer suspiciously out back doors or pick through the rubble, but they appear out of place. [*writer asks a final So what? and arrives at a conclusion:*] It is this sense of displacement—of human beings alienated from the environments they themselves have created—that provides the most haunting aspect of the work of these two photographers.

The Gambino paragraph is a good example of how asking So what? generates forward momentum for the analysis. Notice the pattern by which the paragraph moves: the observation of something strange, about which the writer asks and answers So what? several times until arriving at a final So what?—the point at which he decides what his observations ultimately mean. We call the final So what? in this chain of thinking "**the ultimate So what?**" because it moves from implications to the writer's culminating point.

Try This 2.5: Track the "So What?" Question

The aim of this exercise is to sensitize you to the various moves a writer makes when he or she presents and analyzes information. Locate any piece of analytical prose—an article from Arts & Letters Daily online, a passage from a textbook, a paper you or a friend has written. Focus on how it proceeds more than on what it says. That is, look for places where the writer moves from presenting evidence (step 1) to formulating that evidence into patterns of connection or contrast (step 2) and then asking So what? about it (step 3). Identify these moves in the margin as we have done inside brackets in the Gambino example.

4. PARAPHRASE × (TIMES) 3

PARAPHRASE × 3: HOW TO DO IT

Locate a short key passage.

Assume you *don't* understand it completely.

Substitute other concrete language for ALL of the key words.

Repeat the paraphrasing several (3) times.

Ponder the differences in implication among the versions. Return to the original passage and interpret its meanings: what do the words imply?

Paraphrasing is one of the simplest and most overlooked ways of discovering ideas and stimulating interpretation. Once you begin paraphrasing regularly, you will swiftly understand why: paraphrasing inevitably discloses that what is being paraphrased is more complicated than it first appeared. And so it will get you to start questioning what important passages and key details mean rather than assuming you understand them.

The word *paraphrase* means to put one phrase next to (“para”) another phrase. When you recast a sentence or two—finding the best synonyms you can think of for the original language, translating it into a parallel statement—you are thinking about what the original words mean. (Paraphrasing stays much closer to the actual words than summarizing.) The use of “× 3” (times 3) in our label is a reminder to paraphrase key words more than once, not settling too soon for a best synonym.

Note: You should also be aware that different academic disciplines treat paraphrase somewhat differently. In the humanities, it is essential first to quote an important passage and then to paraphrase it. In the social sciences, however, especially in psychology, you paraphrase but never quote another’s language.

Step 1: Select a short passage (as little as a single sentence or even a phrase) from whatever you are studying that you think is interesting, perhaps puzzling, and especially useful for understanding the material. Assume you *don't* understand it completely, even if you think you do.

Step 2: Find synonyms for all of the key terms. Don’t just go for the gist, a loose approximation of what was said. Substitute language virtually word-for-word to produce a parallel version of the original statement.

Step 3: Repeat this entire rephrasing several times (we suggest three). This will produce a range of possible implications that the original passage may possess.

Step 4: Contemplate the various versions you have produced. Which seem most plausible as restatements of what the original piece intends to communicate? Where can you not determine which of two restatements might win out as most accurate?

Step 5: Return to the original passage and reflect: what do you now recognize about the passage on the basis of your repeated restatements? What does it appear to mean? What else might it mean?

Discussion Like the other heuristics in this chapter, Paraphrase × 3 seeks to locate you in the local, the particular, and the concrete rather than the global, the overly general and the abstract. Rather than make a broad claim about what a sentence or passage says, a paraphrase stays much closer to the actual words. Most students think of paraphrase in the context of avoiding plagiarism (“putting it in your own words”) and demonstrating their understanding of assigned reading. In more advanced writing, paraphrase serves the purpose of producing the literature review—survey of relevant research—that forms the introduction to reports in the sciences. Paraphrase as an act of analytical translation, however, goes further.

Why is paraphrasing useful? When you paraphrase language, whether your own or language you encounter in your reading, you are not just defining terms but opening out the wide range of implications those words inevitably possess. When we read, it is easy to skip quickly over the words, assuming we know what they mean. Yet when people start talking about what particular words mean—the difference, for example, between *assertive* and *aggressive* or the meaning of ordinary words such as *polite* or *realistic* or *gentlemanly*—they usually find less agreement than expected.

Here’s a theory that underlies paraphrase as an interpretive tool. What we see as reality is shaped by the words we use. What we say is inescapably a product of how we say it. This idea is known as the constitutive theory of language. It is opposed to the so-called “transparent” theory of language—that we can see through words to some meaning that exists beyond and is independent of them. The transparent theory of language, which assumes that the meanings of words are obvious and self-evident, is rejected by linguists and other language specialists. They know that to change a word is inevitably to change meaning. So, to make paraphrase work for you:

- don’t assume you know the meanings of words you encounter
- assume instead that words may have more than one clear meaning, depending on context.

How Paraphrase × 3 Unlocks Implications: An Example

Like the “So what?” question, paraphrasing is an effective way of bringing out implications, meanings that are there in the original but not overt. And especially if you paraphrase the same passage repeatedly, you will discover which of the words are most “slippery”—elusive, hard to define simply and unambiguously.

Let’s look at a brief example of Paraphrase × 3. The sentence comes from a book entitled *The Literature Workshop* by Sheridan Blau.

“A conviction of certainty is one of the most certain signs of ignorance and may be the best operational definition of stupidity” (213).

1. Absence of doubt is a clear indication of cluelessness and is perhaps the top way of understanding the lack of intelligence.

2. A feeling of being right is one of the most reliable indexes of lack of knowledge and may show in action the meaning of mental incapacity.
3. Being confident that you are correct is a foolproof warning that you don't know what's going on, and this kind of confidence may be an embodiment of foolishness.

Having arrived at these three paraphrases, we can use them to explore what they suggest—i.e., their implications. Here is a short list. Once you start paraphrasing, you discover that there's a lot going on in this sentence.

- One implication of the sentence is that as people come to know more and more, they feel less confident about what they know.
- Another is that ignorance and stupidity are probably not the same thing though they are often equated.
- Another is that there's a difference between feeling certain about something and being aware of this certainty as a conviction.
- Another implication is that stupidity is hard to define—perhaps it can only be defined in practice, “operationally,” and not as an abstract concept.

As we paraphrased, we were struck by the repetition of “certainty” in “certain,” which led us to wonder about the tone of the passage. Tone may be understood as the implicit point of view, the unspoken attitude of the statement towards itself and its readers. The piece overtly attacks “a conviction of certainty” as “a sign of ignorance” and perhaps (“may be”) “a definition of stupidity.” So by implication, being less sure you are right would be a sign of wisdom. But the statement itself seems extremely sure of itself, brimming with confidence: it asserts “a certain sign.”

One implication of this apparent contradiction is that we are meant to take the statement with a grain of salt; read it as poking fun at itself (ironically)—demonstrating the very attitude it advises us to avoid.

Try This 2.6: Experiment with Paraphrase × 3

Recast the substantive language of the following statements using Paraphrase × 3:

- “I am entitled to my opinion.”
- “We hold these truths to be self-evident.”
- “That’s just common sense.”

What do you come to understand about these remarks as a result of paraphrasing? Which words, for example, are most slippery (that is difficult to define and thus rephrase), and why?

It is interesting to note, by the way, that Thomas Jefferson originally wrote the words “sacred and undeniable” in his draft of the Declaration of Independence, instead of “self-evident.” So what?

Try This 2.7: Paraphrase and Implication

Two recent books on Abraham Lincoln offer a fascinating conflict in their accounts of the president's death. Use paraphrase to discuss the difference between these two accounts.

- a. “Now he belongs to the ages”—Edwin Stanton, Lincoln's Secretary of War, as Lincoln expired, according to Doris Kearns Goodwin in *Team of Rivals*.

versus

- b. “Now he belongs to the angels”—Edwin Stanton, Lincoln's Secretary of War, as Lincoln expired, according to James L. Swanson in *Manhunt*.

You might also consider for a moment an assignment a student of ours, Sean Heron, gave to a class of high school students he was student-teaching during a unit on the Civil War. He asked students to paraphrase three times the following sentence: “The South left the country.” His goal, he reported, was to get them to see that “because language is open to interpretation, and history is conveyed through language, history must also be open to interpretation.” Use paraphrase × 3 to figure out how Sean's sentence slants history.

5. IDENTIFYING THE “GO TO” SENTENCE

Every writer has a “go to” sentence, a characteristic way of putting things. With a little practice, you can learn to spot writers' “go to” sentences. These can reveal a lot about how the writer thinks and the ways he or she approaches the world.

Once you've acquired some of the specialized vocabulary of grammar and style, you will be able to see the shapes of sentences more easily and to understand what those shapes tell you about both the writer and his or her point of view on the subject at hand. But you don't need a lot of specialized vocabulary to begin; this exercise is based on careful description. (To acquire the terms and concepts you need, see Chapter 18, The Rhetoric of the Sentence and The Glossary of Grammatical Terms at the end of Chapter 19.)

Step 1: Select a single characteristic sentence from your own writing or from a reading—a sentence shape that repeats frequently or at certain habitual spots (such as the beginnings or ends of paragraphs).

Step 2: Describe the structure of the sentence: its basic shape. Identify what you think are the sentence's most distinctive features.

Step 3: Decide how this particular sentence shape reveals tendencies of the way the writer thinks. Consider sentence structure, word order, kinds of words, etc.

Discussion All of us have “go to” sentences that we fall back on in daily life—in speaking as well as writing. It is illuminating (and fun) to try to become aware of

these. Our choice of sentence shapes is influenced by how we tend to think, but the shape we go to also varies according to the subjects we are writing and talking about and the rhetorical situation in which we are doing so.

A sentence is the shape thought takes. That is a mantra already offered in the discussions of grammar and style in Chapter 1, and it bears repeating. The particular ways of ordering words that each of us habitually goes to are actually features of who we are; our “go to” sentences embody how we characteristically respond to the world.

Some Examples of “Go To” Sentences

For example, if a person’s “go to” sentence takes the form “Not only x, but y,” he or she is inclined to define things thoroughly by contrasting what something is with what it is not. A person who says “I am not unhappy” is a person who wishes to avoid blunt claims and prefers subtler descriptions of mental states. A person who is not unhappy differs from a person who is happy and willing to say so. Note, by the way, how little technical vocabulary you actually need to talk about the shape and effect of these sentences.

Here’s another example: “Although x, the fact is that y,”

Although the President raised the number of troops in Afghanistan, the fact is that he presented a timetable for complete troop withdrawal.

Although the show Cupcake Wars on the Food Network decadently panders to pop culture, the fact is that I cannot watch it without wanting to bake cupcakes.

With this sentence type, some technical vocabulary would help. The sentence begins with what is known as a subordinate or dependent clause. Subordination usually indicates a desire to qualify (put limits on) one’s claims. The use of the phrase “the fact is” in the second half of the sentence, the independent clause, indicates a less qualified and more certain way of thinking. This is an interesting tension between the two halves of the sentence and thus the two different ways of thinking they suggest.

Here’s one more example, taken from a student’s memoir, of how sentence shape matches subject matter:

I wish I could tell you more about that night, but it’s kind of blurry. What do I remember? My father’s voice, “Mommy passed away.” I know I cried, but for how long I don’t remember. My boyfriend was there; he only heard my end of the conversation. He drove me home from college. I guess that took a couple of hours. There was a box of tissues on my lap, but I didn’t use any. He smoked a cigarette at one point, and opened up a window. The black air rushed in and settled on me like a heavy cloak.

Notice how flat and largely unembellished these statements are: “He drove me home from college”; “He smoked a cigarette at one point, and opened the window.” Here again it is useful if you have a little technical vocabulary, but you don’t need much.

It will help if you know the difference between *coordinate* sentences, in which everything is treated at one level of importance, and *subordinate* sentences in which some things depend upon and are set up as less important than other things. This writer and her sentences are shell-shocked by an unexpected tragedy that renders everything that happens the same, basically meaningless. The passage contains virtually no subordination and instead a number of short declarative sentences.

Try This 2.8: Identify the Features of “Go To” Sentences

Below are examples of “go to” sentences contributed by colleagues at our institution, taken from their own professional writing. What features do you see as distinguishing the shapes of these sentences, and so what? That is, (1) describe the shape of each sentence, and (2) suggest what the shapes “say” about the kind of thinker each writer is, and why you think so.

- a. Earlier steel studies compared work, family, and community in ethnically defined neighborhoods surrounding the mills—in the case of Bethlehem within the “shadow of the steel stacks—until the lure of suburbia disrupted working class living patterns, changed neighborhood ethnic composition, and dispersed extended families, thereby complicating the very nature and definition of a steel community.” (Susan Clemens, Professor of History)
- b1. But there is another burden which, although also strongly related to the external political and historical events of the time, is internal to the text itself.
- b2. But it is evident that, after the arguments that Adorno presents against Kierkegaard have been examined, Adorno’s claims have less to do with Kierkegaard than with a desire to read something else into and against Kierkegaard. (Marcia Morgan, Professor of Philosophy)
- c1. BCM 441 is a course concerned with the content, presentation, and evaluation of modern biochemistry.
- c2. It is through metabolism that stored nutrients, ingested foods, and the energy of light are converted to complex biomolecules and the energy to drive cellular processes.
- c3. As part of the project, Joe and his lab partner performed a pull down assay to detect stable protein-protein interactions, a chemical cross linking assay to detect transient interactions, and then prepared target protein bands for analysis by mass spectrometry. (Keri Colabroy, Professor of Biochemistry)

Try This 2.9: Find One of Your Own "Go To" Sentences

Locate a sentence in something you have written. Reading for repetition will help you find a characteristic sentence shape. You might try looking for key connecting words, such as "and" or "but" or "however" or "because" or for characteristic ways that your sentences begin and end. Remember that you are not looking for bad examples or to criticize your own writing. You're looking to identify and understand the sentence shapes you rely on. This exercise is useful to do in small groups. When time allows, we like having students present their "go to" sentence and analysis to the class.

B. 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.

So far, you have been working through the solutions. For the rest of the chapter, we will spell out in more detail the problems. Here's a quick review of the solutions.

SOLUTIONS THE CHAPTER HAS OFFERED:

Slow down: describe what you are studying; give yourself more chances to see what you think.

Start your thinking with the local rather than the global; trace impressions back to causes; apply the heuristics

Recognize and reject the reflex move to generalization and judgment

Assume you don't completely understand what you are studying; look for questions rather than answers; invite rather than flee uncertainty

THE PROBLEM**leaps to**

data (words, images, other detail) -----> broad generalization

leaps to

data -----> evaluative claims (like/dislike; agree/disagree)

REACTING IS NOT THINKING

A lot of what passes for thinking is merely reacting. Ask someone for a description of a place, a movie, a new CD, and see what you get: 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. All of the tools in the toolkit seek to slow down unthinking (reflex) reactions.

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.

On this note, we turn to a closer examination of four of the most stubbornly counterproductive habits of mind: (1) premature leaps, (2) the judgment reflex, (3) generalizing, and (4) naturalizing assumptions (overpersonalizing).

1. PREMATURE LEAPS

In a way, the premature leap is the most fundamental bad habit. The others—reflex judgments, generalizing, and overpersonalizing—are all versions of leaping too quickly to conclusions.

A classic example of the premature leap is the one that inexperienced writers make to arrive at a thesis statement 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. Typically, they find themselves proving the obvious—some too general and superficial idea. Worse, they miss opportunities for the better paper lurking in the more complicated evidence screened out by the desire to make the thesis "work."

You'll know you are becoming a more accomplished analytical writer when the meaning of your evidence starts to seem less rather than more clear to you, perhaps even strange—and you don't panic. Then you will begin to see details you hadn't seen before and a range of competing meanings where you had thought there was only one.

Make It Strange

Making it strange rather than trying to normalize what you see and read is a productive habit of mind. It opposes our more usual habit to quickly render things familiar by locating them in comfortable and habitual categories. One purpose of writing, as the writer David Lodge suggests, "is to overcome the deadening effects of habit by representing familiar things in unfamiliar ways." *Defamiliarization* is a term used by artists, philosophers and psychologists to talk about the need to fight against the deadening effects of habit. 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).

The following quotation from an article entitled “The Transition to College Reading” remarks on the need for defamiliarizing in its account of students’ misunderstandings of readings:

“I find that [students] are most inclined to substitute what they generally think a text should be saying for what it actually says [. . .] They want to read every text as saying something extremely familiar that they might agree with.”
Robert Scholes, “The Transition to College Reading,”
Pedagogy, volume 2, number 2, Duke UP, 2002, page 165.

What is interesting here is the idea that people actually substitute something they already think, their habitual frames of reference, for what is actually on the page.

Get Comfortable with Uncertainty

To short-circuit premature leaps and see through the veil of familiarity, you’ll need to find ways of becoming more comfortable with uncertainty. In fact, it’s a healthy practice to assume you’re missing something, always. Prepare to be surprised at how difficult this can be. Why? 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.

The nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson, writes about this problem in her poem that begins “Perception of an object/Costs precise the object’s loss.” The point of the Dickinson poem is a paradox: when we think we understand something, we in a sense cease to see it. Our idea of the thing has replaced the thing itself, producing a form of mental blindness—loss of the object.

By training yourself to be more comfortable with not knowing, you give yourself license to start working with your material, the data, *before* you try to decide what you think it means. Only then will you be able to *see the questions*, which are usually much more interesting than the temporary stopping points you have elected as answers.

2. THE JUDGMENT REFLEX

In its most primitive form—most automatic and least thoughtful—judging is like an on/off switch. When the switch gets thrown in one direction or the other—good/bad, right/wrong, positive/negative—the resulting judgment predetermines and over-directs 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.

It would be impossible to overstate the mind-numbing effect that the judgment reflex has on thinking. 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 plus their judgment of the others’ judgments: I think it was a good movie and 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”).

This is not to say that all judging should be avoided. Obviously, we all need to make decisions: whether we should or shouldn’t vote for a particular candidate, for instance. 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.

Three Cures for the Judgment Reflex

- Neither agree nor disagree with another person’s position until you can repeat that position in a way the other person would accept as fair and accurate. Carl Rogers recommends this strategy to negotiators in industry and government.
- Try eliminating the word “should” from your vocabulary for a while. Judgments often take the form of *should* statements.
- Try eliminating evaluative adjectives—those that offer judgments with no data. “Jagged” is a descriptive, concrete adjective. It offers something we can experience. “Beautiful” is an evaluative adjective. It offers only judgment. Sometimes the concrete-abstract divide is complicated. Consider for example the word “green,” a literal color with figurative associations (envious, innocent, ecological, etc.).

Try This 2.10: 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 2.11: 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.

3. GENERALIZING

Vagueness and generality are major blocks to learning because, like the other habits of mind discussed so far, they allow you to dismiss virtually everything you've read and heard except the general idea you've arrived at: What it all boils down to is . . . What this adds up to is . . . The gist of her speech was . . .

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

Often, the generalizations that come to mind are so broad that they tell us nothing. To say, for example, that the economy of a particular emerging nation is inefficient, accomplishes very little, since the generalization could fit almost any economy.

Take My Word for It?

Generalizing is not always a bad habit. We generalize from our experience because this is one way of arriving at ideas. Summary writing, which you will do a lot of in college, is a useful form of generalizing. Summarizing materials helps you to learn and to share information with others.

The problem comes when generalizations omit any supporting details. Consider for a moment what you are actually asking others to do when you offer them a generalization such as “The proposed changes in immigration policy are a disaster.” 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 changes are a disaster 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 lead to different conclusions and a different reading of the data, but at least conversation has become possible.

Antidotes to Habitual Generalizing

- Trace your general impressions back to the details that caused them. This tracing of attitudes back to their concrete causes is one of the most basic and necessary moves in the analytical habit of mind. Train yourself to become more conscious about where your generalizations come from (see the Five-Finger Exercise at the end of Chapter 1).
- Think of the words you use as steps on an abstraction ladder, and consciously climb down the ladder from abstract to concrete. “Mammal,” for example, is higher on the abstraction ladder than “cow.” A concrete word appeals to the senses. Abstract words are not available to our senses of touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell.

“Peace-keeping force” is an abstract phrase. It conjures up a concept, but in an abstract and general way. “Submarine” is concrete. 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.

Try This 2.12: 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 2.13: Distinguishing Abstract from Concrete Words

Make a list of the first 10 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.

4. NATURALIZING OUR ASSUMPTIONS (OVERPERSONALIZING)

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. The overpersonalizer assumes that because he or she experienced or believes X, everyone else does, too.

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 way of thinking is called “**naturalizing our assumptions.**” The word *naturalize* in this context means we are representing—and seeing—our own assumptions as natural, as simply the way things are *and ought to be*.

Writers who naturalize their own assumptions tend to make personal experiences and prejudices an *unquestioned* standard of value. A person who has a nightmarish experience in the emergency room may lead him to reject a plan for nationalized health care, but his writing needs to examine in detail the holes in the plan, not simply evoke the three hours waiting to get seen by a doctor.

Try This 2.14: Fieldwork: Looking for Naturalized Assumptions

Take a day to research just how pervasive a habit of mind naturalizing assumptions is in the world around you. Start listening to the things people say in everyday conversation. (Lunch lines are a choice site for a little surreptitious overhearing.) Or read some newspaper editorials with your morning coffee (a pretty disturbing way to start the day in most cases). Jot down examples of people naturalizing their assumptions.

"I Didn't Know You Wanted My Opinion"

We cannot leave the topic of naturalizing assumptions—assuming our way of seeing the world is the only way—without contemplating the key term at the heart of the subject: opinions. Over the years, those of us who teach have heard our students say a million times, "I didn't know you wanted my opinion."

This classic student/teacher miscommunication warrants some analysis. What, in this context, does the word "opinion" mean? You may have already done some thinking on opinions and people's attitude toward them in the paraphrase $\times 3$ section of this toolkit. There we asked you to paraphrase the assertion "I am entitled to my opinion." Now let's pursue the implications (which is what analysis does) of the exclamation—or complaint—"I didn't know you wanted my opinion."

- Paraphrase #1: You should have told me sooner that it is okay for me to talk about my personal beliefs!
- Paraphrase #2: I am pleasantly surprised to find that you are interested in my feelings and experience.
- Paraphrase #3: I had not anticipated that you might expect me to say what I think.

Paraphrases 1 and 2 reveal a common but problematic definition of opinion as personal beliefs and feelings. This way of thinking leads to the implicit ground rule that when a teacher asks for personal opinion, students believe they do not need to provide evidence or reasoning. They're in a "free zone," which is why another ground rule seems to be that "opinion pieces" should be graded more leniently or not at all.

The problem with this way of understanding opinion is that it assumes our opinions are merely personal. In fact, our opinions are never just our opinions. They are deeply embedded in the conceptual fabric of a culture, and they are always learned.

As contemporary cultural theorists are fond of pointing out, the "I" is not a wholly autonomous free agent who writes from a unique point of view. Rather, the "I" is shaped by forces outside the self—social, cultural, educational, historical, and so on. Chronic naturalizers will not see the extent to which they are socially constructed, sites through which dominant cultural ways of understanding the world (ideologies) circulate. To put it perhaps too strongly, they're like actors who don't know they're actors, reciting various cultural scripts they don't realize are scripts.

What about the third paraphrase, "I had not anticipated that you might expect me to say what I think"? Paraphrase #3 reveals a person who recognizes that she is being asked to share her thinking, not just her views.

She is ready to think more about what opinion means. Is an opinion the same as an idea or theory? Are most ideas just opinions? How do I figure out what I think about things other than simply consulting my ready store of familiar views?

What do faculty *really* want when they make assignments to which students respond, "I didn't know you wanted my opinion"? Faculty at our college tell us they want two things:

- (1) for students to do more than merely transmit information
- (2) for students to do more than merely react and instead find thoughtful ways to engage the information and develop a stake in it.

Opinions: Are They Counterproductive Habits of Mind?

So: are opinions counterproductive habits of mind? Not necessarily. It would be naïve to say that each of us should get rid of our opinions in order to think well. This simply is not possible nor is it desirable. To see opinions only in the negative would be to diminish the important role that they play in the lives of individuals and of cultures. Rather than trying to suppress opinions, we need to take responsibility as thinkers for having opinions about things and for respecting the fact that other people have opinions too. It's a civic duty.

We should examine our opinions, not primarily to assert and defend them, but to explore them for what they might reveal about ourselves and the communities to which we belong. Opinions as kneejerk reactions—reflexes—cannot help us. But thoughtful examination of our opinions can.

Habits of Mind in Psychology: A Psychologist Speaks

In the following Voice from Across the Curriculum, clinician and psychology professor Mark Sciutto notes that the problematic habits of mind identified in this chapter are also recognized as problems in the discipline of psychology. In cognitive behavior therapy, these habits are called automatic thoughts.

Voices From Across the Curriculum

- 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 Sciutto, Professor of Psychology

To familiarize yourself further with the thinking errors identified by cognitive therapy, one place to look is *Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond* by Judith S. Beck (the daughter of Aaron) (NY: The Guilford Press, 1995). There Dr. Beck lists 12 of the most common "automatic thoughts" that she labels "mistakes in thinking." These include "Emotional reasoning," about which she writes,

"You think something must be true because you 'feel' (actually believe) it so strongly, ignoring or discounting evidence to the contrary" (119).

Opinions—A Democratic Disease? A Political Science Professor Speaks

As a final word for the chapter, we turn to our colleague, Jack Gambino, who offers the view of a social scientist that everything is not opinion, nor are all opinions equal in weight.

Voices From Across the Curriculum

- Many students taking political science courses 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

Assignments: Using the Toolkit

1. **Do The Method on a Reading.** Look for repetitions, strands, and binaries in the paragraphs below, the opening of an article entitled “The End of Solitude” by William Deresiewicz, which appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on January 30, 2009 and at <http://chronicle.com/article/The-End-of-Solitude/3708>. After selecting the repetition, strand, or organizing contrast you find most important, try writing several paragraphs about it.

What does the contemporary self want? The camera has created a culture of celebrity; the computer is creating a culture of connectivity. As the two technologies converge—broadband tipping the Web from text to image, social-networking sites spreading the mesh of interconnection ever wider—the two cultures betray a common impulse. Celebrity and connectivity are both ways of becoming known. This is what the contemporary self wants. It wants to be recognized, wants to be connected: It wants to be visible. If not to the millions, on *Survivor* or Oprah, then to the hundreds, on Twitter or Facebook. This is the quality that validates us, this is how we become real to ourselves—by being seen by others. The great contemporary terror is anonymity. If Lionel Trilling was right, if the property that grounded the self, in Romanticism, was sincerity, and in modernism it was authenticity, then in postmodernism it is visibility.

So we live exclusively in relation to others, and what disappears from our lives is solitude. Technology is taking away our privacy and our concentration, but it is also taking away our ability to be alone. Though I shouldn't say taking away. We are doing this to ourselves; we are discarding these riches as fast as we can. I was told by one of her

older relatives that a teenager I know had sent 3,000 text messages one recent month. That's 100 a day, or about one every 10 waking minutes, morning, noon, and night, weekdays and weekends, class time, lunch time, homework time, and toothbrushing time. So on average, she's never alone for more than 10 minutes at once. Which means, she's never alone.

2. **Paraphrase a Complicated Passage.** Paraphrasing can help you to understand sophisticated material by uncovering the implications of the language. As a case in point, consider this passage from an article about *Life* magazine by Wendy Kozol entitled, “The Kind of People Who Make Good Americans: Nationalism and *Life*'s Family Ideal.” Rather than simply skipping those passages that seem unclear, the savvy analytical writer could confront them head-on through paraphrase. Try Paraphrase \times 3 with this passage, from page 186:

Traditional depictions of the family present it as a voluntary site of intimacy and warmth, but it also functions as a site of consumption. At the same time capitalism lauds the work ethic and the family as spheres of morality safe from the materialism of the outside world. These contradictions produce a ‘legitimation crisis’ by which capitalist societies become ever more dependent for legitimacy on the very sociocultural motivations that capitalism undermines. (186; rpt in *Rhetorical Visions* by Wendy Hesford, pp. 177–200).

3. **Experiment with Notice and Focus and The Method.** Find a subject to analyze using Notice and Focus and then The Method. Your aim here initially is not to write a formal paper but to do data-gathering on the page. Notice as much as you can about it. Then organize your observations using The Method: What details repeat? What is opposed to what?

After you have written the paragraph that is the final part of The Method, revise and expand your work into a short essay. Don't worry too much at this point about form (introductory paragraph, for example) or thesis. Just write at greater length about what you noticed and what you selected as most revealing or interesting or strange or significant, and why.

You can do this writing with either print or nonprint materials. For some suggestions, see Try This 2.2 and 2.4. The Method could yield interesting results applied to the architecture on your campus, the student newspaper, campus clothing styles, or the latest news about the economy.

4. **Analyze an Image in Relation to Text.** The Adrian Tomine *New Yorker* covers that we referred to in Try This 2.3 could produce a good short paper. You could do The Method on the two covers in order to write a comparative paper. Or, you could do The Method on the Tomine cover called “Double Feature” and the two paragraphs from “The End of Solitude” above, and write about them comparatively. (Note: the entire article is available online.)