

CHAPTER

# 1

## *Finding Something to Say*

## Overview

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Instead of reading this book straight through, you will probably refer to various chapters and parts of chapters as you need them. Even so, to put things in perspective and to help you get the most from your time, we will begin with an overview of the whole subject of writing.

We are not going to present a simple, foolproof formula guaranteed to make you a competent writer. Unfortunately, there is no such formula. Writing is like playing golf or the piano: you learn and improve by doing—by practicing, by listening to criticism, and by practicing some more. Good writing does more than just avoid blunders. It holds the reader's interest. When you write well, you begin by thinking through what you want to say. Then you say it, in clear, logical sentences and carefully chosen words, expressing your thoughts and feelings so that your audience will understand them just as you want them to be understood.

Most writing—certainly all the writing we will be concerned with here—has a purpose and a method suited to it. Writers tell stories: they say what happens (narration). Or they argue: they speak for or against something (argument). Or they describe: they tell how something looks, sounds, or moves (description). Or they explain: they tell how something works (process analysis) or why something happens (causal analysis). Writers have other methods available as well: classification, definition, comparison/contrast.

As you plan what you want to say in a paper, you will also be deciding which approach that you will use. This does not mean that you will choose one approach and ignore the rest. You may be called on to classify, argue, describe, analyze, or narrate, or define and argue, or describe and narrate, or do all of these in one paper. Nevertheless, the assignment, your own purpose, or a combination of your assignment and your purpose will usually make one approach predominant. For example, you may start out by describing ways in which consumers are deceived by advertisements and then end up arguing that there should be stricter regulation of such messaging. Because the emphasis in this case should fall on the argument, your purpose in describing advertisements is to prepare your reader to believe as you do about regulation.

If you chose to write an essay on Alateen, an organization that provides support to young people affected by problem drinking by other family members, your main purpose might be to explain what this group does and how it functions. You might compare it with Alcoholics Anonymous, or you might classify various programs for substance abusers and their families in relation to inpatient or outpatient treatment centers. You might also analyze different theories of alcoholism and drug abuse, using quotations from magazine and newspaper articles dealing with the causes of these problems. Perhaps you could attend an Alateen meeting and then describe the range of people you met or provide a narrative account of your visit. Finally, you might conclude

an essay with your opinion of the issues involved: Is Alateen helping to solve the problems of adolescents faced with substance abuse in their family? Still, your essay would remain mostly exploratory: to explain the role of Alateen, based on your experience and reading.

To a certain degree, all writing must be persuasive. It must persuade readers that it is worth their time and attention. What you have to say will get a fair hearing only if you make sure it deserves one. Writing that deserves to be read is the kind we will be concerned with throughout this book.

Writing is a process of generating ideas, and the first four chapters divide this ongoing process, for convenience, into prewriting, considering the reader, drafting, and revising. At each stage, focus on a few things at a time. Allow yourself time to plan and develop ideas by learning to think on paper, and do not worry about editing or correcting what you write until the composing process has run its course. Because writing is a complex activity, the stages often overlap or double back: you will simultaneously generate and react while considering your purpose and reader. But you must first find something to say.

## 1 Explore what you want to say.

Most writers have experienced the frustration of being unable to think of a fresh idea—or of discovering one too late. Thinking through some of the many possible subjects for writing and exploring what you already know about those subjects can keep you from becoming “stuck.” Anything can be turned into material for writing; how to do so through invention, the first stage in the writing process, is the topic of this chapter.

If you are new to college or university life, for instance, you might jot down whatever comes to mind as you think about your experience. Here are one student’s notes:

big campus	online courses
dorm living	a lot of reading
freedom—on my own	major—in what?
working—how many hours?	

You could then underline some of the more promising points on such a list, ones that could easily be developed with examples. If living away from home sounds like a good topic, you could write about the need to budget your time so that daily chores do not consume too much of it. Or you could consider the problems of working while pursuing a degree. Listing ideas in the order they occur to you is an easy way to get started. Such invention strategies are helpful both in locating subjects and in exploring them before you write your essay.

Sometimes, however, a subject is readily available or is assigned. For example, you are upset by a news story about the state legislature's plans to raise tuition rates and decide to send an email to the newspaper's "Letters" column. Or your employer asks for a report on building security. Or your instructor suggests five topics for an essay. Yet even when the subject is provided or limited for you, you will have to determine your own approach and decide what to say about it. In any case, careful planning is essential; successful writers seldom produce effective work without it.

In exploring what to say about a subject, try out some of the following invention strategies to determine which works best for you:

1. *Brainstorming* is one of the simplest ways to begin the writing process. You can generate ideas by talking about possible topics with a friend or group of friends. The result will be uneven, but ideas will emerge. If you don't have a friend willing to brainstorm with you, try recording yourself, talking freely about your subject for fifteen minutes. Then play the file back, noting any important ideas. To explore a point you have discovered, try another fifteen minutes on the recorder.
2. *Freewriting* is like voice recording on paper. Jot down your thoughts about your topic, writing continuously for fifteen minutes without stopping. Try to record your thoughts as fast as they occur. Ignore correctness or neatness. If you get stuck, write "I'm stuck"—or something similar—and keep going. After fifteen minutes, select anything from your notes that looks worthwhile. When you discover something promising, you can use the freewriting exercise again on this new idea. Here is an example of a student's freewriting exercise:

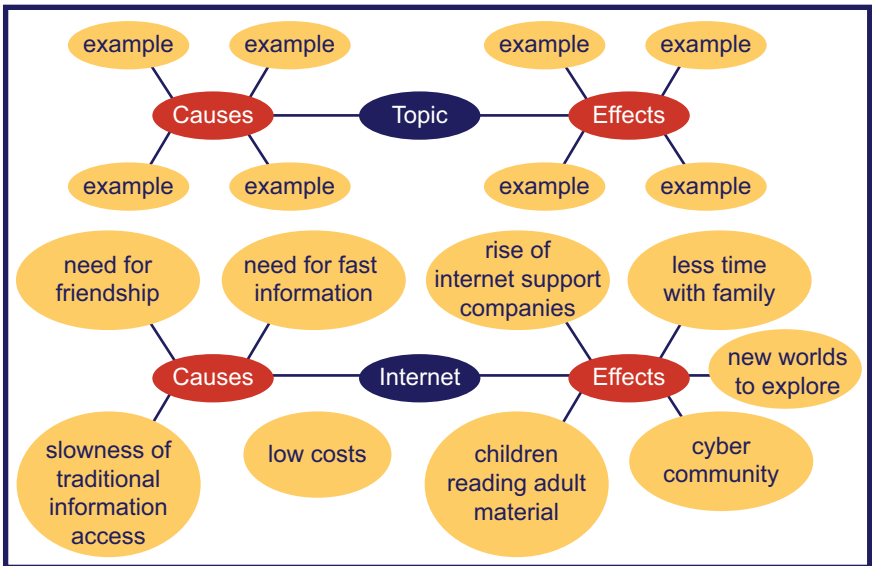
*Raise the minimum driving age to 18? There'd be chaos! You spend half your life waiting to get a driver's license, and then they tell you to wait two more years? Kids have got jobs, and school, and their parents don't have time to take them everywhere. But there would be less accidents, I have to admit. And insurance would surely go down (?). All in all it's an interesting idea—I'm just glad that I'm already 18.*

Even in this short excerpt, several possible points emerge for further exploration: fair treatment under the law, the high rate of traffic accidents involving young drivers, how insurance companies determine premiums.

Freewriting is most successful if you try to capture your mind in action without planning, structuring, or editing.

3. *Clustering* can also help you generate ideas and see the relations between them. Instead of sentences, clustering uses single terms, which are easier to jot down quickly. And instead of moving down the page, you begin clustering by writing down a possible subject in the middle of the page inside a circle (or balloon). From there you can take off in any direction with another term. Each new balloon may give rise to additional ideas, which get attached to the balloon that sparks them.

### Clustering



Again, work freely and quickly for fifteen minutes; then look at the clusters to see which ones look most promising. Using this technique, you could explore the causes and effects of the growth in popularity of the internet.

4. *Asking questions* can help you recall specific experiences or attitudes. If, for example, the subject of tattoos arises, you could ask yourself these questions:
  - Do I like tattoos? Why?
  - Do I like only certain types of tattoos? Which ones?
  - Is it a good idea to alter your skin permanently when you may change as a person as you grow older?
  - Will having a visible tattoo affect my ability to get a job?

Such exploratory questions involve classifying, analyzing, and persuading as you determine your own feelings about the subject. Various possible ideas can emerge:

- Tattoos can be visually appealing.
- Some tattoos are tasteful, but others are inappropriate for the workplace.
- New tattoos look good when fresh, but twenty years from now, those same tattoos will be faded and stretched.

Asking questions about the meaning of a word, the design of an object, or your reactions to a book or a movie can produce numerous topics for writing.

5. The *pentad* is an especially valuable form of asking questions. According to this technique, developed by Kenneth Burke, every human action is influenced by five elements: act (what), scene (where, when), agent (who), agency (how), and purpose (why). *Act* refers to anything that happens (or could happen) or anything that is the result of an activity. *Scene* is the setting or background of the action. The *agent* is the person (or force) responsible for (or influenced by) the action. *Agency* is the method that makes a thing happen, and *purpose* is the reason or motive for an action. These five elements parallel the journalist's familiar questions *who, what, where, when, how, and why*, but they also go further.

You can use these five terms to analyze current, historical, or fictional events; to explore characters in novels or films; to learn more about the people involved in a narrative; or to analyze your audience in an argument. However, the pentad is not applicable to objects (computers, for example).

Imagine, for a moment, that your college or university has announced a new policy to test incoming students for drugs. Those who test positive must undergo counseling while their admission is delayed. As a student senator, you are asked to write a column in the campus newspaper evaluating this ruling. You think through the topic in terms of the pentad:

What was done? (act)	new ruling? unconstitutional act? bold initiative?
When/where was it done? (scene)	after long consultation? in private? on campus?

Who did it? (agent)	governor? legislature? president of college? outsiders?
How was it done? (agency)	by open vote? secret agreement? outside pressure?
Why was it done? (purpose)	to protect young people? to keep out criminals? to earn votes? to appear strong? to appear innovative? to take a stance against drug dealing?

When we compare and relate the five terms, here is what happens when we think about the act (mandatory testing) in terms of the scene (university):

- How does the campus setting influence this act?
- Is the university being “used”?
- Are students being singled out because they are unsympathetic victims?
- Do officials hope the students will protest, hence turning public opinion against the students?

This example shows some of the many questions that can be generated when each of the five terms is considered in relation to the other four.

6. *Cubing* means examining a subject from six perspectives (a cube has six sides):
  1. Describe the subject. (What is its content?)
  2. Compare it. (What is it similar to or different from?)
  3. Associate it. (What does it remind you of?)
  4. Analyze it. (Explain how it was made.)
  5. Apply it. (Explain how it can be used.)
  6. Argue for or against it. (Take a stand.)

Write briefly (for three to five minutes) about the subject from *each* of the six points of view, beginning with what you know. Unlike the pentad, this exercise can be used for objects (a car, building, or sculpture) as well as for persons, events, and ideas.

7. Writing informally in a *journal* can provide valuable ideas for assigned essays. Or you can create your own blog. Unlike a diary or class notebook, a journal is a record of interesting impressions and experiences that you can share with others. It provides an opportunity for private writing and thinking. Some suggestions for writing in a journal:
  - a. Find a quiet spot where you can write for about fifteen minutes a day, freely recalling what you have observed and read. Do not worry about correct form. You can include the people you met, the ideas you discussed, the movies or lectures you attended, the food you ate—but note your reactions, explaining why you liked or disliked what you experienced.
  - b. Write about your progress in your writing and in other classes. What are you learning? What are your feelings about your work?
  - c. Keep a record of a major local or national event (such as a political scandal) as it unfolds over several weeks.

Because writing is a way of learning, journal entries will help you observe and reflect on your experiences. And they will often be of use in other, more formal writing.