CHAPTER

2

Rhetoric and the Writing Process

What Is Rhetoric?

Rhetoric is the art and craft of discourse; it is the study and creation of effective communication and persuasion. Studying rhetoric teaches us not only how to write persuasively but also how to understand the rhetorical efforts of others. Understanding rhetoric gives us the means of judging whose opinion about issues is the most accurate, useful, or valid, because such knowledge allows us to see beyond the persuasive techniques to the essence of the opinions. Further, understanding rhetoric is the best way of understanding the assumptions of and the points made by those who disagree with our positions. Further still, understanding rhetoric is the best way for us to deepen and refine our own positions and beliefs by exploring our own assumptions and our cultural contexts. In short, rhetoric teaches us how to find the limits of our own positions and beliefs, how to argue effectively against others' positions, and how to create powerful and persuasive arguments for our own beliefs.

Rhetoric has an obvious connection to exploratory writing. First, it helps us identify, explain, and defend our own beliefs and assumptions about ourselves and about the world around us. Second, it helps us analyze our relationship with people, ideas, places, and our culture. Third, it helps us engage intellectually with the ideas of others. Fourth, it forces us to think beyond ourselves and to turn our self-expression into communication with an audience. Fifth, and certainly far from least, rhetoric focuses our attention on the craft of writing and on the issue of style.

The first systematic and complete study of rhetoric was Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and it has been a major foundation for rhetorical theory. Given the crucial importance of communication to human life and society, though, it is hardly surprising that rhetoric has been examined, analyzed, and theorized about ever since Aristotle by many scholars, philosophers, critics, and **rhetoricians** (people who study the art and theory of rhetoric). In ancient times, rhetoricians mostly analyzed and theorized about speeches and the way they were presented in such places as the Athenian Assembly and the Roman Senate. The emphasis then was upon persuasion and the ways to sway an audience's opinion about political and judicial matters. In fact, Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given situation." He also emphasized the importance of understanding human psychology in order to be convincing. In other words, find every way of convincing people of X, and then use the methods that are most effective for the *particular* audience you are addressing.

Rhetoric is a fascinating study in itself, and it will be the topic of a future book. Briefly, though, in Aristotle's time, rhetoric was perceived to be the cornerstone of any citizen's education. Centuries later, in the Renaissance, it was still considered the foundation of education, and that is one of the reasons why the great Renaissance poets such as Shakespeare display such conscious rhetorical skill.

Over time, the objects of interest to rhetoricians grew to include not just speeches and written arguments but also any text created by humans that uses symbols to convey a conscious message that has some sort of persuasive intent, although that intent might be an unconscious one. Hence, a text might be a speech, an essay, a poem, a novel, a mime performance, a building, a painting, a film, a photograph, or even a garden. For the sake of this book, however, we will focus our attention on written texts.

In the 20th century, rhetoric fell, temporarily, on hard times as the conception of rhetoric as mere ornament and disguise gained popularity, particularly in politics. Although rhetoric has had a major resurgence in education in the last few decades, some of those negative associations still linger into the 21st century. For example, how many times have you heard someone say of a politician's speech, "That was nothing but rhetoric!" Obviously, such a statement is not a compliment. It means that the speech was "full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing." In such a vision, rhetoric is mere window dressing, a way of dressing up old ideas in new clothes, a way of substituting style for substance. (Please note that in my previous sentence I consciously use several rhetorical devices: "window dressing"—although a cliché—is an example of figurative language meant to remind you of the way mannequins are dressed up in store windows; the repetition of the word *dressing* in "dressing up old ideas in new clothes" is a linking device and echoes the concept of putting new outfits on those mannequins/ideas; and the cliché "substituting style for substance" employs the ever-popular rhetorical device of alliteration.) And the long sentence in parentheses that you just read is another rhetorical device called, appropriately enough, a parenthetical aside, the author addressing his readers.

The Rhetorical Situation, Audience, and Your Purpose

When we consider any act of communication, we face questions about the rhetorical situation, our audience, and our purpose.

The Rhetorical Situation

The **rhetorical situation** is the context in which we speak or write. It involves, at the very least, a writer, the writer's purpose, the topic, the audience, and an occasion. For instance, politicians often give a speech on the occasion of the Fourth of July. The occasion itself dictates what ideas and approaches are appropriate and which are not. Giving a speech that attacks

George Washington or Benjamin Franklin would not be appropriate for that occasion, but such a speech might be entirely appropriate for a conference of professional historians who were gathered to re-assess the United States' early years. An essay extolling the virtues of the New York Yankees and mocking the Boston Red Sox would probably be rejected by a Boston-based magazine, but it might be joyfully accepted by a New York magazine.

The rhetorical situation raises several major questions, three of which we will consider here: What is your *purpos*e for writing this particular essay? Who are your *readers*? What are *their expectations and levels of knowledge about your topic*?

Audience and Purpose

One of the most important lessons we can learn from rhetoric is the need *to write to and for* our audience. Writers write in order to influence their readers in some way. They might want to influence their readers to take some action (e.g., vote for a particular candidate, sign a petition, buy a certain product, fall in love with them), to alter or to maintain some belief, to accept or reject some interpretation (of a text, of the writers' actions).

In addition to such purposes, exploratory essayists also want to convince their readers that that their own experiences cast some kind of light onto those of their readers. In "The Singular First Person," for example, essayist Scott Russell Sanders says, "I assume the public does not give a hoot about my private life." After all, everyone has private lives. If he describes hiking up a mountain with his one-year-old son, he wonders why anyone would care to read that description. He says, "I choose to write about my experience not because it is mine, but because it seems to me a door through which others might pass." That is exactly the communication goal of all exploratory essayists—to transform their experiences and insights into doors through which their readers might pass to discover something new about themselves and about the world.

For those who keep journals or diaries for their own eyes only, we may say that rhetoric is not an issue since they are not writing to influence the thoughts or behavior of anyone. Although it might be argued that such writers do have an audience on one (their future selves) and that they might have some persuasive purpose (e.g., to convince their future selves how insightful their earlier selves were), such situations need not trouble us here since we are concerned with communication with other people now (your peers, your professors, your editors).

In exploratory writing, you have at least a threefold purpose—to say something about the topic (for example, an event or a text or a relationship), to reveal something about the sub-topic (yourself), and to persuade your readers that what you have to say has some significance for them. Most often, your purposes remain constant, and consciously knowing those purposes help you see how to deepen your ideas and what content to add or delete from your fast-write and early drafts. For example, if your purpose is to demonstrate the complexity of your motives for selecting a particular college, that purpose will require that you give readers many details about the thoughts and feelings you had as you evaluated various colleges. If, instead, your purpose is to reveal the complex emotions you felt once you were on campus, your motives for selecting the college in the first place might be reduced to a mere sentence ("After an agonizing process of selection, I found myself on campus . . .") or eliminated entirely. Devoting paragraphs to your evaluation process would hinder communication because it would prevent readers from having a clear sense of the essay's point.

Your purpose for writing may be the only element that is not significantly altered by the nature of your readers, although even it can be influenced in certain circumstances. Occasionally, who your readers are might cause a change in purpose. For instance, before you even start writing or while you are drafting, you might discover that what you intended to say about the topic is inappropriate for your particular audience (for example, perhaps it reveals too much about a friend or relative). Or you might find that the draft discloses more about you than you feel comfortable revealing to an audience. In such cases, then, even your purpose is altered by the nature of your readers. Most often, it is not.

However, your *readers' expectations and levels of knowledge about your topic* should influence almost ever other aspect of the essay you ultimately produce, including what content you include, the kinds of language you use, the tone you adopt, and the kinds of references and allusions you make. Consider this example. You are writing an essay about a family wedding you attended last summer. Your purposes are to show how unusual the wedding was, to put the wedding into the context of our culture's vision of weddings, and to reveal your mixed emotions about weddings in general and about this wedding in particular.

If your readers are your classmates, then you can assume the following about them before they read your essay: (1) your readers don't know members of your family, (2) they don't know your attitude towards various family members, (3) they don't know the quirks of your various family members, (4) they don't know your family's particular traditions and beliefs, (5) they don't know that Aunt Rose predicted divorce for the newlyweds within their first year, (6) they don't know that Aunt Rose is psychic and hasn't been wrong about a family wedding in 25 years, (7) they don't know what points you are planning to make about this wedding and about weddings in general. For such readers, you are going to have to provide a great deal of background information, physical descriptions of the major participants, and a detailed explanation of how you fit into all of this activity. Part of your communication task will be to give readers the "big picture" as well as to reveal your own thoughts and emotions. Since they don't know any of the people involved, you might allow yourself to be satiric, perhaps even mocking or sarcastic.

If, on the other hand, your readers will be primarily family members and people who also attended the wedding, the content of your essay will change even though your purpose will remain the same. For instance, you don't have to waste a lot of space filling in the "big picture" since your readers were all at the wedding. You won't have to explain that Uncle Phil is Aunt Sybil's eighth husband since everyone already knows that fact (although you might say something like "Aunt Sybil seemed confused about what she was supposed to do at a wedding that wasn't her own"). In this case, you might focus on two or three small events that those who attended the wedding might not have noticed. Certainly you might still sketch people's personalities since no one can know your particular vision of them, but you will probably be less sarcastic since your readers are the people discussed in the essay (or you might be particularly vicious, depending on how you feel about them, I suppose). If you personally think Aunt Rose is crazy in general but amazingly lucky in her predictions, and if you know Aunt Rose will read the essay, and if you don't want to hurt Aunt Rose's feelings, then you might mention her prediction but avoid commenting on her sanity (a comment you might hasten to make if your readers didn't know anyone at the wedding).

In addition to content, the types of language you use will be determined in large part by who your readers are. If you were writing an essay for a chess magazine about winning an important chess tournament, for example, you would not hesitate to use a technical term like "the Nimzo-Indian defense." If you were writing that same essay for readers whose interest in and knowledge of chess could not be assumed, you would have to consider seriously the advisability of using that term. At the very least, you would need to define the term if you did use it. More likely, however, you would decide that your essay would gain little from defining the defense since your readers probably wouldn't appreciate such detail anyway.

The same is true for references and allusions. If you are writing a literary analysis of a story by Nathaniel Hawthorne for an advanced course in American Literature, you wouldn't hesitate to make a passing allusion to Charles Brockden Brown. If you were analyzing that same Hawthorne story for an introductory literature class that includes people from a variety of majors, however, you should probably explain that Brown was an American novelist in the late 18th century.

Three Major Rhetorical Concepts

Three major concepts in rhetoric are logos, pathos, and ethos. Let's examine them briefly for now.

Logos

An appeal to *logos* is as “an appeal to the audience’s logic and reason.” We use logos when we want to have “mind-to-mind communication” with our audience, i.e., when we want to appeal to their intellect. When we write an exploratory analysis or argument, for instance, we will often appeal to logos because we need to show the logical connections between our ideas and to demonstrate how fact P leads to our assertion Q. We will discuss such techniques more fully in Chapter 9 (“Exploring Controversies”).

Pathos

An appeal to *pathos* (from the Greek word for *suffering* and *feeling*) is an appeal to readers’ emotions. We make such appeals with allusions to public symbols (e.g., the American flag) and to commonplaces (a culture or society’s unquestioned beliefs that seem to be undeniably true). Perhaps the most effective appeals to pathos, however, come from vivid metaphors and from vividly described scenes and events. We will explore such techniques in Chapter 11 (“Revising Content”).

Ethos

Ethos is often the most crucial type of appeal for exploratory writing. An appeal to ethos is an appeal to *the readers’ perception* of the writer. In other words, ethos is the sense of the writer’s personality that is evoked by the text itself. In exploratory essays, the sub-topic or co-topic of the essay is you, or, to be more exact, your ethos, the “created you,” your persona. Yet how do we take control of our ethos, how do we make it reflect the person we want to project to our readers?

The simple answer to this question is “By paying attention to absolutely every detail of the essay, every ‘jot and tittle’ that you write.” That is a tall order, of course, but everything in the text helps paint a picture of you, the writer and the person. Think about that for a moment—every word you choose, every sentence structure you select, every idea you express, every idea you hint at, your very tone and approach to your topic—all of those contribute to your readers’ sense of you, of your ethos. Ethos is partially created also by your attitude toward your readers: Are you an equal writing to equals? Are you a superior writing to an inferior? Are you an inferior writing to a superior?

Even the correctness of your grammar and of your spelling affects your ethos. When teachers complain about a student’s grammatical errors or sloppy proofreading, they are really revealing that the writer’s ethos has negatively affected them. For example, when students misspell Shakespeare’s name or refers to Virginia Woolf as *he*, teachers don’t assume that the students “don’t know any better.” Rather, they assume that the students don’t care enough to get the details straight. And, if teachers can't trust the students to get the factual details right, how are they supposed to trust the students' interpretation of the subtleties of a text?

Is this a fair judgment on the teachers' part? I don't know—in some cases, obviously not.

But I do know that such judgments are made every day not only by teachers, but also by supervisors, by employers, and by editors. I hear their complaints all the time. The point here is this: such errors undercut the writer's ethos. Once readers begin to doubt the writer's accuracy and concern about details, it is almost impossible to win their confidence back. Therefore, ethos is crucial in any form of writing. In exploratory writing, ethos is part of the point of every essay.

I can't overemphasize the fact that ethos is created by you, consciously or unconsciously. Without question, some aspects of ethos will slip in without your conscious attempts—that happens to all writers, be they student or professional writers. To be a successful writer of any kind, though, you need to shape your ethos in each text that you write, making at least most of your ethos consciously created.

The Five Canons of Rhetoric

In *De Inventione*, Roman orator and rhetorician Cicero divided rhetoric into five canons (or parts): invention (*invention*), arrangement (*dispositio*), style (*elocutio*), memory (*memoria*), and delivery (*pronuntiatio*).

Two of the canons—memory and delivery—may not seem as crucial to modern writers as they once were to orators in ancient Athens and Rome. Orators committed whole speeches to memory, and their manner of speaking and of using gestures was a crucial component of persuasion. These two components of rhetoric may seem unneeded today except for speech classes. Such an impression, however, is false.

Memory

Consider memory. We know, for example, that most televised political speeches are on Teleprompters for the speakers to read while seeming to look directly at those of us in the television audience; at conferences and professional meetings, speeches might be read verbatim or, more and more often, delivered extemporaneously from an outline. So memory *per se* seems an unimportant element of communication.

If we think about memory figuratively, however, we can see that *memory* really means getting the facts right and the ideas in the most effective order possible. Just as books, libraries, and the Internet have relieved us of the individual burden of memorizing huge blocks of material, so they have become the stand-in for our memory in this figurative sense. As writers, we still have to get the facts straight; we still have to link our ideas together coherently. In this way, then, the canon of memory lives on: Rather than pulling the information from our minds, we can now also pull it off the Internet or out of a book.

Delivery

Consider delivery. It, too, might seem less of a concern for us today, but, again, if we think about it figuratively and look beyond the oratorical framework of voice projection and gestures, we can see that delivery in today's world can refer to such things as formatting and the very way our writing looks on the page. Clearly, delivery can be crucial with such things as resumes and lab reports. To a lesser extent (but still important), the way an essay appears on the page can influence readers, at least unconsciously. When Montaigne originally published *Essais*, for example, each chapter was a single paragraph. Consider this fact—some chapters were more than 12,000 words long. His essay "Of Presumption," for instance, is more than 21 printed pages in one English language translation. How daunting a task would reading a 21-page long paragraph seem to modern readers?

In other words, even the delivery of an essay can affect readers and hence is a rhetorical element to be considered as we write. Although we are told that a paragraph is one idea fully developed, the truth is that such a definition actually does allow for a 21-page paragraph (or a book-length paragraph, for that matter). Everything depends upon our understanding of the phrases *one idea* and *fully developed*. Despite the question of "grammatical legitimacy," however, it is clear that few readers today would be thrilled to undertake a 21-page paragraph. Delivery, then, is important and influenced by the nature of our audience.

The importance to writing of the other three canons—arrangement, invention, and style—is probably more intuitively obvious.

Arrangement

Consider arrangement (what we often now call *organization*). Exploratory essays are no different from any other form of communication—they need an effective, clear, and logical structure. The organization exists to present your ideas in the most effective manner possible to your readers. Not surprisingly, all exploratory essays have a beginning, middle, and end. That simple fact, however, is not a very useful guideline in helping us organize our ideas.

Fortunately, ancient rhetoricians gave the issue of the organization much thought. Although they devoted their attention to speeches, their ideas are useful for essayists as well. They thought in terms of sections, noting that, in specific cases, some sections might be omitted or combined, depending upon the topic and audience.

Here is the basic rhetorical structure developed by such rhetoricians as Cicero and Quintilian:

- **Exordium** (Introduction): The exordium is intended to make the audience willing to listen. Modern rhetorical theory says that, if possible, the introduction should do several things:
    - It should establish some connection between the audience and writer (i.e., it should "predispose" the audience to listen via ethos).
    - It should hook the readers' attention.
    - It should give readers a reason for continuing to read—either by showing the importance of the topic and sub-topic or by revealing an engaging personality (ethos) so that readers will want to "get to know" the writer better.
    - It should announce your topic (the question your essay will answer or the issue that it will explore).
    - It should reveal what your approach to the topic will be.
    - It should establish what your primary tone will be.
    - It usually starts very close to your thesis (never start with "Since the beginning of recorded history. . . .").
    - If there is no Partitio, the introduction forecasts what the organization of the essay will be.
- **Narratio** (Background of the Issue, Statement of the Facts)—this section has several functions:
    - It gives your readers the relevant background information that they will need in order to understand your point.
    - It explains the situation and context.
    - For exploratory arguments, it includes up-to-date information about the current situation (e.g., pending legislation, proposed solutions).
    - It defines key terms that you will use and that readers might not know.
    - It explains why this situation/issue is a problem and for whom, explains any key concepts that are needed to understand the complexity of the issue, it at least hints at global significance of the essay and it defines any key terms your readers might not know.
    - In exploratory arguments, it states your position (thesis/claim).

- **Partitio** (Division, Forecast)—This section, often so brief that it is combined with the Exordium, outlines what will follow in the rest of the essay.
- **Confirmatio** (Proof)—This section tells the story (explorations of events), performs the analysis (explorations of self, other people, concepts, beliefs, texts, controversies), and gives evidence to illustrate or prove the claims made in the narratio:
  - It states your reasons for supporting your position, interpretation, or assertion of importance.
  - It gives your evidence for each reason.
- **Confutatio** or **Refutatio** (Refutation)—This section answers the opposition's counter arguments:
  - It anticipates your opponents' objections to your reasons and responds to those objections (exploratory arguments).
  - It explains your opponents' main reasons and evidence for supporting that position.
  - It refutes (or occasionally concedes) those reasons and evidence.
  - Some modern rhetoricians advocate a dramatic, back-and-forth presentation of pros and cons rather than saving all the refutation for the last major body section.
  - In essays whose primary goal is not the exploration of controversies, this section justifies your interpretation or analysis.
- **Peroratio** (Conclusion)—This section demonstrates again the "full strength" of your analysis or argument. Modern rhetorical theory suggests that your conclusion should never be only a summary or repetition of your major points, although often you might touch on the major points you have made. Your conclusion should always include a "discovery," an opening up toward the world beyond the limits of your essay:
  - It might include an explanation of some interesting and as yet unstated implication of your position/thesis or make the global significance explicit.
  - It might offer an indication of what future thinking must be done.
  - It might offer a suggestion of what new issues arise if your solution/position/interpretation is adopted.
  - It might explore of the implications of your interpretation/position for the larger issue that you mentioned in the introduction.

Style

Rhetoric has much to teach us about style, and we will consider style in Chapter 12 ("Revising Style"). Suffice it to say here that style is a vital aspect of exploratory essays since it is major bridge between you and your readers. Through style, readers come to know you at a level even deeper than that of thought.

One technique that I recommend throughout this text is the ancient rhetorical practice of imitation. Rhetoricians have taught that imitating the sentence structures and even the rhetorical strategies and arrangements of good models is one of the best ways of improving and deepening our own repertoire of resources. Here are two examples:

Example 1

- ***Original Sentence 1***: We caught two bass, hauling them in briskly as though they were mackerel, pulling them over the side of the boat in a businesslike manner without any landing net, and stunning them with a blow on the back of the head. . . . (E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake," paragraph 6)
- ***My analysis of Sentence 1***: A brief (four-word) independent clause tells us the point of the sentence. The rest of the sentence is made up of three free modifiers, each beginning with a present participle (*hauling*, *pulling*, and *stunning*). Such a structure allows the writer to state the main action in one general verb (in this case, *caught*) and then to elaborate on that action, giving specific details about exactly how that general action was accomplished using present participles called "free modifiers." These participles "unpack" or specify the idea contained in the general verb. Each participle phrase is separated by a comma.
- ***My imitation of Sentence 1 using my own material (with a nod to singer/songwriter Eric Clapton)***: I shot the sheriff, squeezing the trigger of my .38-caliber gun ever so gently, wincing at the sound of the explosion, and closing my eyes so I wouldn't see him crumple before me. (Note: This is a "humorous" imitation. I might have also written: I opened the trunk, fingering the latch carefully at first, prying underneath the clasp with my fingernails, and popping it open with a satisfying creak of old metal giving way.)

Example 2

- ***Original Sentence 2***: To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. (Joan Didion, "Why I Write," paragraph 9).

- ***My analysis of Sentence 2***: The subject of this sentence is an infinitive (*To shift*) followed by its direct object (*the structure of a sentence*), followed by a verb (*alters*) and its direct object (*the meaning of the sentence*). A comma separates this independent clause from an *as . . . as* construction that highlights two adverbs (*definitely* and *inflexibly*) The second *as* is a subordinating conjunction that introduces the dependent clause whose subject is *the position* and whose verb is *alters* and whose direct object is *the meaning . . . photographed*. Three things make this sentence notable: its use of the infinitive as a subject, its use of a comparison (an implied simile) of two unlike things (a sentence's structure is like the position of a camera), and the parallelism of the three direct objects (three nouns—*structure, meaning, meaning*)—followed by a prepositional phrase starting with *of*. So the structure is: *To do something to x is to change y, as -ly and -ly as q changes z.*
- ***My imitation of Sentence 2***: To change academic majors during your junior year is to create chaos in your life, as horribly and utterly as the iceberg created holes in the Titanic and guilt in the survivors.

For more about rhetorical stylistic features, please consult Chapter 12.

Invention

For ancient rhetoricians, invention (idea generation) was perhaps the most important canon of all. If we don't have anything of significance to say, then all the fancy arrangement and elaborate style in the world will not make our essay worth reading. Finding something to say, then, is the goal of invention, and rhetoricians have developed several techniques for doing just that. Modern composition theorists often call invention **prewriting**, and that is the term we will use from now on. Because prewriting is part of an overall vision of writing as a process, I will discuss it in the next major section.

The Writing Process

Writing is a process. Although the process is usually not very orderly, we can say that writing involves four steps or stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing.

Prewriting (Invention)

Anything that you do before writing a complete first draft is called prewriting. It includes such activities as talking about the topic with your friends, doing research, making notes, and planning. It includes all the idea generating techniques discussed later in this chapter: free association, freewriting, directed freewriting, listing, mind mapping or ballooning, idea trees, questioning, and perspectives.

Drafting

Once you have the major ideas in mind, you should write a complete draft of the essay. This will not be the final draft of your essay; in fact, that final essay may be several drafts away and might look almost nothing like this first draft. I call this first draft a **fast-write** because you should write it quickly, not stopping to worry about the finer points of style or punctuation or spelling. The fast-write's purpose is to let you get all the ideas into words, the words into sentences, the sentences into paragraphs, the paragraphs into some sort of coherent organization. If a tangent occurs to you as you fast-write, follow it. Tangents can become the main point or topic of your eventual final essay. Indeed, the very act of phrasing an idea in words can alter the idea and can raise new issues that you hadn't considered. The very words you chose carry implications and associations that can lead you to deeper insights. It may be helpful to think of the fast-write as self-expression, an act in which you tell yourself about the topic in the essay, an act in which you discover what you have to say about it.

Revising

Once the fast-write is completed, try to give yourself some time away from it (at least a few hours, preferably a few days). This hiatus allows your subconscious mind to continue working on the essay while your conscious mind deals with assignments from other courses and with life in general. When we try to revise immediately after writing a draft, it is almost impossible for us to see the essay on the screen or on the piece of paper before us; instead, we see the essay that is in our mind. We can't see accurately *what we wrote* because we are still seeing *what we intended to write*. We overlook information gaps and misleading statements. We see only with the writer's eyes, not with a reader's eyes. So we should take a break after the draft is finished. While our conscious mind is busy with other tasks, the essay in our mind fades. Thus when we return to the essay we actually wrote, our vision is not as clouded by our assumptions (and hopes) about what we really produced. We see it with a reader's eyes as well as with those of a writer. Then we are ready to revise.

To revise is to add and deepen ideas, to add examples and details, to fine-tune the style. Here's some general advice. Always look at your fast-write and early drafts with the *conviction* that you can say more. Never ask yourself, "Does anything need to be changed or added to this essay?" The very phrasing of the question invites a "No" response. Instead, tell yourself, "A lot has to be changed in the essay." A good way to start revising ideas is to ask yourself "Why?" after every statement in the essay. Then ask, "How do I know this?" And then, "What does this fact or statement reveal about my inner self, about the way I see the world?" Writing responses to each question (each time you ask it) will automatically deepen your insights and your essay. The responses might be one sentence long, or they might be several paragraphs long.

For any kind of revising, it is most efficient to focus on only one area as you go through the essay. If you try to focus on adding evidence and ideas and fixing verb tenses and changing the essay's structure all at the same time, you will inevitably miss areas that require attention and will feel overwhelmed by the whole revision process. Therefore, it is a good idea to go through the essay several times, each time concentrating on one element. For instance, you might go through the essay the first time concentrating on filling in background information for readers. Your second pass through the essay might focus on elaborating upon your feelings or thoughts. Your third pass through might focus on adding evidence or quotations where appropriate. Once the ideas are in place, look at the style, trying to sharpen and refine your prose. If you know you have problems making explicit connections between ideas, for example, you might make one pass through the essay looking only at transitions. Then make a second pass through the essay looking at verb tenses.

It is helpful to think of revision as the beginning of your dialogue with your readers. In the revision process, you play two roles—you "speak" the essay but you also imagine what your readers would ask to have clarified and developed more fully. Revision is the process by which you fashion your material for your readers; here you explain concepts or events or people that your readers might not understand. Here you add details they might "request." Here you use imagery to suggest the unexplainable. In short, revision is the stage at which the art and craft of writing come most fully into play. It is at this stage that self-expression truly becomes communication.

Editing

This final stage involves attending to grammatical, spelling, and mechanical details. Sloppiness in such details annoys your readers, undercuts your ethos, and impedes the act of communication. In fact, for many readers, errors obscure everything: If readers see errors, they are blinded to everything else, including the essay's ideas. They believe, rightly or wrongly, that error-laden writing signals inexact thinking. If you do not care enough to perfect your prose, they feel, then they do not have to care enough to pay close attention to what your essay says. In other words, everyone loses. Readers miss out on what you have to tell them, and all your hard work and good ideas accomplish nothing. Remember that you are writing about something important—your topic and your sub-topic (your self)—and that they deserve the best prose you can create. We will explore style and in depth in Chapter 12, "Revising Style."

In short, your purpose for writing and the nature of your readers can significantly influence the essay you produce. For many writers, considering the rhetorical situation is the first step in the revision process rather than part of their prewriting activity.

Let's consider the issue of prewriting and generating ideas in more detail.

Prewriting: Generating Ideas and Planning

Contrary to some popular notions, most writers do not have full-blown ideas popping out of our heads like Athena, fully armored in elegant prose and equipped with examples and arguments. For most of us, ideas need nurturing and time to reach maturity. Even a great idea needs time to develop, to stretch out the fingers of its implications, to reveal its true worth and its true limitations. Ancient rhetoricians spent much time developing techniques to help generate ideas.

You have probably developed some techniques that help you get started when you must write an essay, techniques that help you find the idea within you and wrap it up in words so you can see it. Whatever techniques work for you are great. I am not advocating that you abandon them. Unfortunately, idea generation methods come with no guarantees. A method that works miracles for you one time might fail you the next. Your state of mind, your attitude (both conscious and unconscious) towards the assignment or the topic or the teacher or toward yourself, or perhaps something as strange as the way your left hand happens to feel—all kinds of factors influence what idea generation technique will work at any given time. Here, however, are some methods that have been proven to work, some techniques that are particularly useful for exploratory writing, techniques to add to your repertoire. The beauty of knowing several strategies is that if Old Reliable fails you, other techniques are waiting backstage for just this moment: With the star technique is unable to perform, the understudy leaps upon the stage to perform impressively. After all, like the show, the writing must go on.

Free Association

This technique requires no writing at all. Simply let your mind wander. Talking aloud often helps me find a topic, particularly when whatever I really want to explore is hiding inside me (it is hiding because exploration is always a little bit scary as well as very exciting). By talking to myself (or to someone else I trust), I allow that topic to slip out and be seen. Using a tape recorder can also help.

Free association also works well if you have a particular assignment, such as “write a narrative about an important event” or “describe a person who has been significant in your life.” Begin by free associating to the words *event* or *person*. As you talk or think, the event or person you really want to explore may cough discretely in the background or may pop out and startle you.

Freewriting

Like free association, freewriting is a way of letting ideas slip from your subconscious into your conscious mind, but this time you write instead of talk. It is a particularly fruitful technique for the exploratory essay because it gets you in a frame of mind that allows free exploration. It is also particularly useful when you can’t think of anything to write about.

The technique is simple. Start with a blank sheet of paper or a blank computer screen. Relax. Then write *nonstop* for 10 minutes. Never raise the pen from the paper or your fingers from the keyboard. Just write. Don’t worry about punctuation or spelling. In fact, don’t even worry about making sense. You want to “numb” all the built-in inhibitions and restrictions that block the free flow of ideas. Never stop, and never re-read what you just wrote. If you are working on a computer, try turning off the monitor or blanking out the image on the screen. You are not writing an essay here; you are letting ideas slide pell-mell out of your fingers. Later you can worry about craft.

In other words, do not censor yourself.

When 10 minutes are up, read what you have written (and save it if you’re using a computer). Find the words, phrases, or lines that strike you (you don’t have to know *why* they strike you). Create a coherent sentence for each word or phrase, and select the most promising one to write at the top of a new sheet of paper or at the top of a blank screen and write for another 10 minutes. Make no conscious effort to direct your thoughts or to stick to the sentence you have written at the top. Just write nonstop again.

Repeat the process two or three times. By then you should have some ideas about what topic you want to deal with. Then you will probably employ another of the methods that follow to develop more insight into the topic.

Here is a 90-second sample of my freewriting:

> My room is cold and I feel like a machine gun in a 1940’s movie with lots of ammo and no target and fill up the cup and run it over the top you mop and sing a song and think a thought and find me a cabbage patch doll for Xmas with or without an X pal buddy friend amigo and all that good stuff stuff stuff is what we’re made of buddy good buddy sidekick I get a kick out of my sidekick that’s all folks and that’s the beginning and horror movies

> with “the beginning?” at the end instead of “the end” and doesn’t anything ever end and is this or that and then some more and road maps are tumbling down the falls of life whatever that is fat cat mat bat and all the ships at sea.

Note the word games that the subconscious likes to play (the rhymes such as *top/mop* and the puns such as “I get a kick out of my sidekick”). The triple repetition of the word *stuff* shows my mind trying to shift tracks—I just kept writing the same word until another idea appeared. It is very difficult to read the previous passage aloud because the logical connections are missing. But some of the ideas are connected by the process of association (for example, “sing a song” inspires “think a thought” and the “X” in “Xmas” seems to suggest “ex” as in “ex-friend”). After re-reading the passage, I might compose one or more of the following sentences:

1. Although I consider myself to be a peaceful person, I often describe myself in violent terms, comparing myself to such things as *machine guns*.
2. Many different words describe a *friend*, but each suggests an element of friendship rather than a total friend.
3. All the bad stuff in life just seems *to never end*.

Any one of these three sentences could be the topic of an exploratory essay.

Directed Freewriting

Directed freewriting is a variation of freewriting that is used when you have a topic but don’t have any ideas about it. In this case, write the topic at the top of a blank sheet of paper or top of the screen. Then follow the directions under “Freewriting.” For example, after finding the center-of-gravity sentences above, I could write “The violent me” (or “Friends” or “Never-ending bad stuff in life”) at the top of the sheet or screen and then do directed freewriting. Don’t try to force your freewriting to deal with the topic you have written, but allow the topic to guide you.

Listing

Like freewriting, this is a way of allowing your mind free range, permitting all sorts of associations to pop up. Once again, write your topic at the top of the page or screen. Then, in single words or short phrases, list everything that comes to mind about the topic. Don’t worry about connection or relevance; simply jot down everything that occurs to you. Once that is finished, look at the list carefully. Are there some items that seem to belong together? Group them, and try to assign a name to that group. Feel free to add to the list at any time and eliminate any items that don’t fit. Then try to write an assertion about each group. As you can see, this technique is a powerful tool for generating ideas and for seeing connections between them once you know what your topic is.

Some writers work better in the opposite direction: they begin with the categories and then list to find information to put into them. Whichever method works for you is the method you should use.

For example, if the topic were "love," the list might be:

Romeo and Juliet
passion
parental love
romance
dancing on a pier
beautiful eyes
my best friend
sex
friendship
parents
Elizabeth and Darcy (*Pride and Prejudice*)
nervous
dating
Humbert and Lolita
"Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places"
singles bars
fraternity parties
flowers and candy
sharing

Looking over that list, I see that most of the items fit into three categories:

1. types of love (passionate, romantic, parental, friendship)
2. fictional lovers (Elizabeth and Darcy, Romeo and Juliet)
3. dating (singles bars, fraternity parties, nervousness, flowers and candy)

If I were writing an exploratory essay about love, I might try to use all three categories as my major ideas, or, more likely, I would focus on one and try to develop more secondary ideas to go with it.

Mind Mapping or Ballooning

Much like listing, this technique allows you to put ideas in writing with no limiting structure. If you are anything like me, every time I start a list, I end up jamming in all kinds of oversights into tiny margins. The mind-mapping technique was invented for crowders like me.

Begin by turning a sheet of paper sideways; in the middle write your subject. One advantage of this technique is that it is non-linear; you don't have to decide about order or importance of items. So starting in the middle of the paper is helpful. For example, Carl had to describe his relationship with a pitcher in a little league game, a former friend who used his knowledge of Carl to defeat him at the plate. Carl began with the mind map in Figure 2-1, writing "pitcher" in the middle of a page and drawing a rectangle around it. Then he wrote words or phrases that occurred to him about that pitcher. He drew a rectangle around each word or phrase. Where it seemed appropriate, he drew a line (or a spoke) between circles, indicating some sort of connection between the circles that he would explore in his fast-write. Each spoke radiates from the center. His mind map is shown in Figure 2-1.

As you can see from the mind map, Carl saw significant connections between the pitcher's attitudes (anger and arrogance) and the "evil glint in his eye" (hence the arrows connecting their squares).

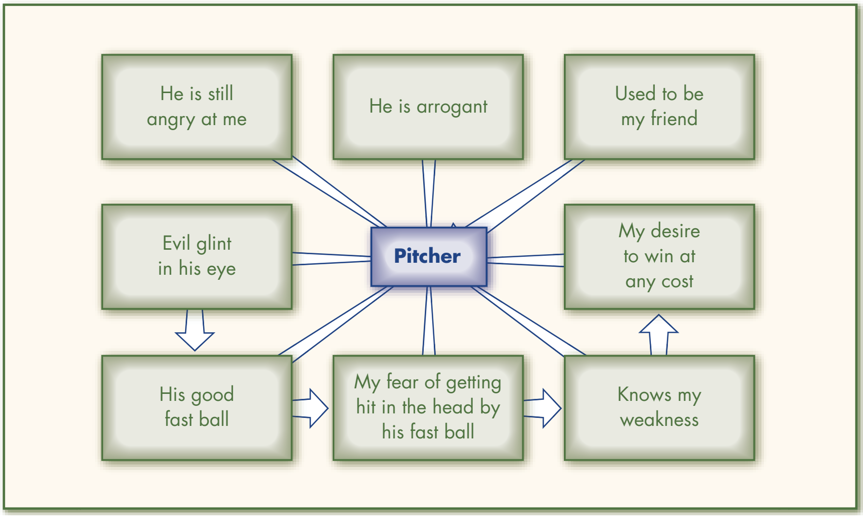
He is still angry at me
He is arrogant
Used to be my friend
Evil glint in his eye
Pitcher
My desire to win at any cost
His good fast ball
My fear of getting hit in the head by his fast ball
Knows my weakness

Figure 2-1
Example of Mind Map

Idea Trees

Similar to mind maps are idea trees. The major difference between the two is that idea trees allow you to see or impose an order on your material more easily. Write the key concept near the top of a page (or top of the screen) and make branches below it for major ideas. Figure 2-2 shows the beginning of an idea tree for an exploratory essay about honesty.

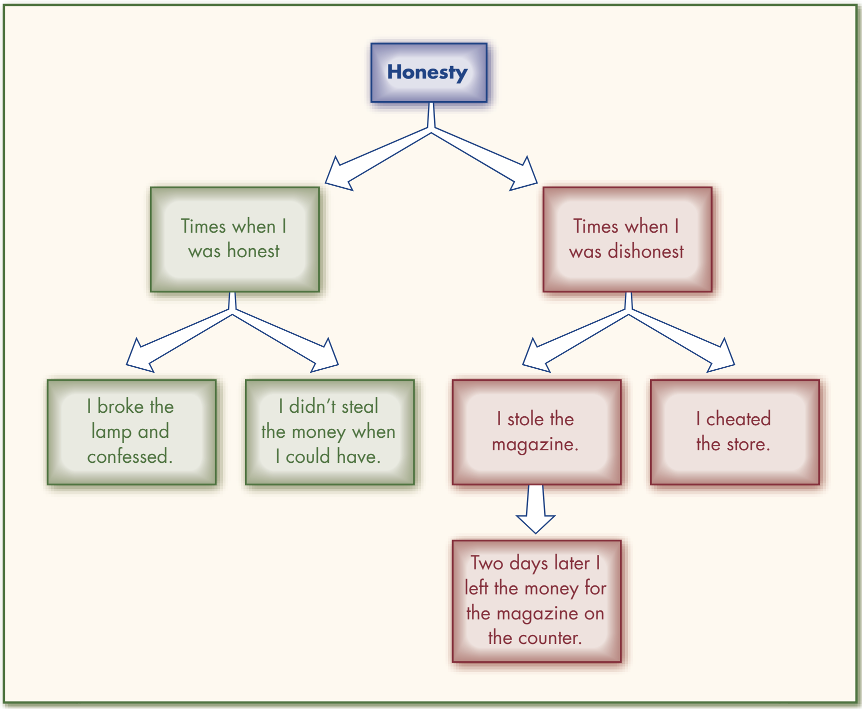
Honesty
Times when I was honest
Times when I was dishonest
I broke the lamp and confessed.
I didn't steal the money when I could have.
I stole the magazine.
I cheated the store.
Two days later I left the money for the magazine on the counter.

Figure 2-2
An Idea Tree for an Essay on Honesty

If this were a fully developed idea tree, the branches could continue and each episode on the third level would have details branching from it on the fourth level. Often it is a good idea to turn the paper horizontally to allow more space for branching to the left and right.

Questioning

Like listing, mind mapping, and creating idea trees, questioning is a good technique to use when you already have a topic in mind. *Topics* can be loosely classified as *objects* (anything with a physical presence including people, places, and things), *concepts* (such as truth and beauty), *events*, and *propositions* (for example, "There are three reasons why the vote should be given to anyone who is at least sixteen years old"). Each type of topic has its own list of questions that help us generate ideas about it. We will discuss these questions in the appropriate chapters to come. For now, these are some of the general questions that can prime the pump of our minds:

1. How might we define it?
2. How have others defined it?

3. What similar things is it like and unlike?
4. What is its relationship to something already known?
5. What criteria are we to use to evaluate or judge it?

Perspectives

Because no one sees any of your prewriting except you, part of the excitement of idea generation is the chance to explore something from different perspectives, to gamble, to make a fool of yourself and perhaps to thus discover something really interesting about your subject or yourself. That is what this technique is all about—*making a constructive fool out of yourself.* It uses role-playing. Once you know what your topic will be, write notes or even a full paragraph on whichever of the following seems helpful (and then try one or two that don't, making a leap of faith that they could possibly be helpful):

1. Assume the *Observer Perspective*—study the physical nature of your subject. If your subject is an object, person, place—describe it; if it is a text (for example, a book, poem, movie, painting) consider its physical layout (for instance, a poem's shape or arrangement of lines is often crucial, the order of scenes is important in books and movies); if it is an event, imagine the scene of that event (the sights, sounds, smells, textures).
2. Assume the *Insider Perspective*—what is it like *to be* that subject? What does it feel like to be a rock, a poem, your mother, your room? What does the world look like to you? Describe it through the eyes or senses or imagination of the subject you have become. If your subject is a poem or a piece of writing, imagine events in your life as lived through the ideas or concepts of the poem/book/historical event.
3. Assume the *Shallow Perspective*—you are someone who just can't see the value of your subject, who doubts its worth. Refuse to see its merits; prove that it has no real value.
4. *Assume the Depth Perspective*—you are still outside your subject, but now you care a great deal about it. Look for its essence. What makes it unique? What makes it valuable to you? To others?
5. Assume the *Conservationist Perspective*—how would the world be diminished or deprived if this subject were extinct? If it had never been? What can we do to better serve its needs or to help preserve it?
6. Assume the *Consumer Perspective*—how can we use this subject? Are there new, unthought-of of ways to use it, to exploit it, to derive some

benefit (no matter how small or selfish) from it? For example, someone might use the poem “She Walks in Beauty Like the Night” to impress a girlfriend.

7. Assume the *God Perspective*—look down from above, way above, so high above that you can see the grand scheme, you can see how all the pieces fit. Where does this subject fit in that grand scheme? How big a grand scheme can you devise? Start small and then work your way up the scale—for example, how does your mother really fit into the family unit? The neighborhood? The city? The state? The country? Womankind in general? Humankind in general? The animal kingdom? The earth’s ecological system? The universe?
8. Assume the *Flea Perspective*—you can’t see any big schemes (or at least, no schemes humans would call “big”). In this case, how does your subject appear to the “little guy”? To your younger brother or sister? To your pet goldfish? To your mother’s car keys? Concentrate on a small piece of your subject (if it is a poem, concentrate on a stanza; if your room, on the desk or your bed; if a philosophical argument, on the definition of one key term; if your mother, on her face or her typical morning’s activity).
9. Assume the *Joker Perspective*—make fun of your subject. Try to invent a pun about it. Make a joke about its name; mock it, parody it, caricature it. Imagine it in an absurd situation, acting absurdly (but in character, of course). Imagine it in an embarrassing situation (what would be an embarrassing situation for a rock? for the concept of existentialism?)
10. Assume the *Advocate Perspective*—make a case for the continuation of your subject, for increasing it or its power or number.
11. Assume the *Skeptic Perspective*—begin by listing every idea or assumption you have made about the topic/subject. Then attack each one, argue that the opposite idea is better.
12. Assume the *Perspective of the Person You Most Admire*—try to put yourself in that person’s mind, look at the subject through his or her eyes. Even try to imitate his or her style of writing or speech. For example, if you admire Thomas Jefferson, how would he view your subject (computers)? As inventor of the “seeing-eye” door, he would probably enjoy the inventiveness a great deal. As a “Renaissance man,” he might be highly impressed and enthusiastic about the computer’s potential to increase learning and the absorption of information. As a writer, he might be pleased by the speed of composition, although he might have reservations that such a machine

could encourage some people he could name to "run off at the mouth" a bit. Write in his style. Or, if you admire Ben Franklin or Oscar Wilde, try writing some pithy epigrams about the computer.

13. Assume the *Perspective of the Person You Dislike or Least Admire*—try to put yourself in that person's mind, look at the subject through his or her eyes. Again, total honesty here is crucial. Write a description of yourself from the point of view of that person. Assume you dislike Ben Franklin but you really like computers. Write some pithy epigrams attacking the computer—its impersonality, perhaps, its time-consuming games.
14. Assume a *Politician's Perspective*—argue that your subject is vital to national security; then argue that it is a waste of taxpayers' money or time or whatever.
15. Assume the *Poet's Perspective*—compare your subject to something with which it seems to have nothing in common. Create an *extended analogy* which shows connections between your subject and some dissimilar thing (for example, your mother to a door, a rock to a telephone, your mother to a rock, justice to a telephone).
16. Assume the *Novelist's Perspective*—create a narrative about your subject (your first encounter with a computer; an argument with your mother; your attempt to apply utilitarianism's "the greatest good for the greatest number" in a real situation).

Writing paragraphs in response to some of the previous perspectives gives you a chance to get outside your usual assumptions and beliefs, a chance to try out other voices. Nothing is too bizarre, too far out.

Remember, though, that all of these exercises are *prewriting*. You can't string a series of such paragraphs together and assume you have a complete exploratory essay. The techniques exist to help you see your topic/subject from different angles and in different lights. One (or more) of them might give you key insights into your connection to the topic/subject. Then the planning and drafting begin.

Planning

After all the idea generation is completed, you are ready for the final stage of prewriting, namely, planning. Here you begin the process of arranging your material, seeing which ideas lead to other ideas, which require some more idea generation. For some, this is the time to write an outline, whether a formal outline (with Roman numerals and capital letters) or a very informal scratch outline (a list of ideas in the order you think they should follow in your essay). For others, idea trees might be the schematic used to make the organization visual. Still others might simply plan in their minds where they will start and move right on into the drafting stage. The point is that somewhere in the writing process you will need to consider the arrangement of your ideas.

Suggestions for Writing

Write paragraphs about yourself from at least three of the perspectives described in this chapter. Obviously there may be a little overlap, but if you find yourself saying the same old thing over and over, try thinking of your subject as being upside down (or viewed at through your legs as you bend over), or force yourself to use the vocabulary of a 6–year–old (the “see Spot run” approach). Or try writing sentences about it using words that begin only with the letters *a–o*. Most of all, loosen up.

Key Terms

confirmatio

confutatio *or* refutatio

exordium

fast-write

narratio

partitio

peroratio

prewriting

rhetorical situation

rhetoricians