

CHAPTER

1

Introduction to Exploratory Writing

The unexamined life is not worth living.

—Socrates

I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.

—Joan Didion



Those are the underlying tenets of this book—the beliefs that the process of examining our own lives is crucial to education and to our development as people and that one of the best ways to examine ourselves is through writing. In short, that is the definition of *exploratory writing*: to use the act of writing to examine your life, your thoughts, your beliefs, and your feelings, to use writing to discover more about your **inner self** as well as to discover more about the outside world and how you connect to it. Exploratory essays tell readers about the **topic** (i.e., the “official subject”) such as an event, a text, an idea, a controversy; they also tell readers something important about the **sub-topic**, namely you the writer.

In fact, one of the major reasons people read exploratory essays is to “meet” the writer. Not surprisingly, scientific reports and news articles are rarely exploratory essays because they focus only on the official subject—the experiment, the automobile accident at Dead Man’s Curve. Their readers want and expect only information about the topic.

This is not the case, however, for exploratory essays. Their readers are always looking for the sub-topic as well, always asking the following kinds of questions: “What does the official subject mean to you, the writer?” “What does it mean *to be* you?” “How are you similar and dissimilar to other people?” “What ideas, beliefs, and feelings motivate you?” “In what ways do you connect with the world beyond your skin?” Answering such questions includes writing about your past, your associates, your environment (work, college, home, places where you spend time), your goals and beliefs, your actions, your patterns of behavior, your reactions to texts, and your analysis of controversial issues.

Ultimately, it is an impossibility to write without revealing part of your self. As I will discuss later in this chapter, objectivity in writing is an illusion, although it is an illusion that many writers strive to create. In exploratory essays, however, writers consciously try to reveal parts of their personalities. Often, in fact, they consciously shape the aspects of their personalities that they reveal.

Writing: A Private Act Made Public

Writing is probably the most private act you will ever do for the public. Seated at your desk or on your bed or in the library, fingers gripping a pen or poised above the keyboard, you are alone with your thoughts, your fears, your hopes, your plans, your beliefs, your knowledge, your past. Regardless of how often you ask your friends or writing center tutors or teachers or editors for advice, ultimately the act of writing is a solitary affair: you and words trying to form some sort of union that will reveal your thoughts or emotions.

Despite the privacy of the creative act, much of what you write will eventually be read by someone else—by friends and relatives, by your teachers, and perhaps by classmates and peers—in short, by readers.

Writing, then, is a private act often made public.

And in that paradox lies the essence of writing: a private act made public. When we write only for ourselves as in a journal, we frequently experience a kind of freedom. The private act frees us. Since no one else will read our words and hence no one else will judge us by what we say or how we say it, we are free to play with unorthodox ideas and to use language that we might not use in writing intended for an audience.

In such journal writing, we often don't bother to express our ideas fully or to provide all the relevant details of the event we describe or of the thought process we followed. After all, we are the only audience and we assume that we will always remember all the important details.

Just as the privacy of writing sets us free, so its public nature might seem to limit us. Most of us don't want to be judged on the basis of *all* our ideas or fantasies or experiences. Fortunately, no one expects us to detail everything. Let's explore this issue of what exactly our subject matter should be when we write for readers.

Personal versus Private Subject Matter

Any subject is appropriate for an exploratory essay if it reveals you, your experiences, your beliefs, your mind working with ideas. As noted a moment ago, most exploratory essays have a topic (for example, your father, definitions of success, your first date, the Bermuda Triangle, an up-coming election, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*) and a sub-topic (you). The act of exploring yourself is one of the goals of every exploratory essay. Ultimately, no subject matter or topic is inappropriate *if you are comfortable with the idea of writing about it*. Over the years, my students have written much about a variety of topics and sub-topics: for example, conflicts with their parents, conflicts within themselves, the horror of being raped, the struggle with being anorexic, the process of overcoming their fear of speaking in public, the impact of alcoholism on a family member or on themselves, drug addiction, homosexuality, their agony about stuttering, the impact of being abused as children, their fears of commitment, deciding to have or not have an abortion, their *real* hopes for the future (rather than those programmed into them by society), successful and unsuccessful relationships.

In other words, no topic or sub-topic is inappropriate *if you are comfortable enough to write about it*. The key here is your degree of comfort. Let's draw a distinction between personal and private topics. **Personal topics** are those which you can bring yourself to write about in order to reveal something

about your personality, your thoughts, your beliefs, your life experiences. They are the topics you might discuss with acquaintances, friends, religious leaders or therapists. You might find that you have some psychological or emotional resistance to writing about some of these personal topics (revealing ourselves to others is often a difficult thing to do), but often that resistance fades as you discover the excitement of exploration and of the act of writing itself.

If the resistance or discomfort doesn't fade as you write, abandon that topic—perhaps it really is a private topic for you. **Private topics** are those which you can not bring yourself to write about for readers. For your whole life, such topics can stay where they are, hidden and safe. They are simply too private to explore in front of an audience. It is important to note that, as the semester progresses, some topics that seemed to be private might turn out to be merely personal. Nothing is automatically or irrevocably private or personal. In other words, the distinction here is based entirely on *your perception*, and perceptions sometimes change.

How can you tell whether the topic you have selected is personal, private, or a personal topic that only seems private? Here are some guidelines:

- If you feel a little nervous about the topic as you write, you are probably breaking new ground for yourself as a writer and as a person. Keep writing; it is probably a personal topic.
- If, however, you are having a very strong negative reaction as you write (or as you think about writing), it is probably a private topic. Stop writing and select a different one.
- If you have physical symptoms (sweaty palms, shaking hands, tears) as you write or think about the topic, stop. It is a private subject.
- If you find yourself procrastinating more than usual about beginning the paper, or, paradoxically, if you find you have no feelings or ideas about the topic at all, then your topic is probably private. Select a new one.

Each topic has its own time to be explored. Ultimately, we should probably write about all personal and private topics because the very act of writing somehow frees us from their power. The act of putting the experience or feeling into words demystifies it and makes it somehow manageable.

Some topics, however, require time. Remember: exploratory writing doesn't end with the semester. You can continue such writing for the rest of your life. If there is a topic you want to write about but you just can't bring yourself to do it now, you can do it later.

In addition, many published essays deal with topics that you might have originally believed were private. Seeing such topics in print might free you to write about similar topics. At the very least, such published essays reveal just how similar we are to other thoughtful people.

Writing to Readers

Let's assume, then, that at least some topics are ready to be explored. Although revealing anything about ourselves can seem scary, the benefits of writing exploratory essays far outweigh that the "danger" of revelation.

On the practical level, knowing that we are writing to readers other than ourselves can improve our memory and style. Knowing that other people will read our essays forces us to fill in the details, each of which might lead us to a new and deeper understanding of our lives and of ourselves. Once we have deepened our understanding and developed the details, we have an essay we can truly value. In order to make our readers value it too, we refine its style, looking for just the right word or phrase that will have an emotional impact on them or which will clarify our thoughts for them.

Frankly, we ourselves don't fully understand an event in our lives or a facet of our personality until we try to write about it for someone else. The very act of trying to explain it deepens our own understanding of it. Trying to explain (perhaps for the first time) the assumptions that underlay a particular action or attitude of ours can be very revealing because our readers (unlike ourselves) might ask, "Why would you think *that*?" Often we don't really know why we thought *that* until we try to explain it to them and thus explain it to ourselves at the same time.

Writing to readers, then, is a very effective way to push ourselves deeper into our topics. In our early drafts, we are actually writing to ourselves, discovering what we know and think about the topic. In other words, our early drafts are **self-expression** just as writing in a journal is self-expression. If our only audience is ourselves, the chances are that we won't care much about craft or even about exactness since we assume our memories will always be able to fill in whatever gaps we have left in the text. With readers other than ourselves, however, we are forced to do more. We must clarify thoughts, give examples, and explain our assumptions. We are forced to structure the information in a way that is most accessible to other people. We must work to create effects—making something dramatic or humorous or climatic. We begin to be concerned about the *effect* of our words and ideas on someone else, about ways to appeal to readers' emotions and senses and intellect. Although we might not be able to duplicate exactly our feelings or the process of our thought, we can create prose that approximates them. In short, the presence of readers forces us to turn self-expression into **communication**, prose that is crafted and polished to meet the needs of our readers.

In exploratory essays, we should be as concerned with the craft of the essay as we are with its content. Such exploratory essays communicate important insights to our readers. As poet May Sarton says,

I believe one has to stop holding back for fear of alienating some imaginary reader or real relative or friend, and come out with personal truth. If we are

to understand the human condition, and if we are to accept ourselves in all the complexity, self-doubt, extravagance of feeling, guilt, joy, the slow freeing of the self to its full capacity for action and creation, both as human being and as artist, we have to know all we can about each other, and we have to be willing to go naked.¹

In this wonderful brief passage, Sartre highlights the fear most writers have of revealing too much and thus hurting someone they love. Her response to that is to ignore the fear and write. Even more importantly, however, Sartre says we must “go naked” (metaphorically) in order to communicate our personal truth so that we all can understand humankind and the human condition more fully.

Types of Exploratory Essays

The process that begins with exploratory writing has several end products, all covered by the term *exploratory essay*. More specifically, exploratory essays include the personal essay, the familiar essay, and the literary essay. Although each of these types focuses upon a particular element of what we can generically call “the exploratory essay,” all share the freedom to use the resources of language to explore a wide range of topics. The term *personal essay*, for example, suggests the revelation of the writer’s self—opinions, emotions, beliefs, life experiences. In such essays, the author becomes a **co-topic** or even the main topic rather than a sub-topic in the essay. *Familiar essay* suggests the writer’s friendly attitude and tone towards the reader, the essay’s “commonplace” subject matter, and its informal and at times almost conversational mode of expression. *Literary essay* suggests the greater emphasis upon the essay itself as a crafted artifact rather than as a simple deliverer of messages, the even more significant emphasis upon the greater use of “literary” devices such as dialogue, description of scene, dramatic heightening, and figurative language. As critic Robert Scholes notes,

Essays are not necessarily literary but become so to the extent that they adopt the dominant qualities of any of the three major forms of literature. The more an essay alludes or fictionalizes, the more the author adopts a role or suggests one for the reader, the more the language becomes sonorous or figured, the more literary the essay (or the letter, the prayer, the speech, etc.) becomes.²

In short, exploratory essays reveal the art and craft of the essay form. All forms of the exploratory essay allow us to explore ourselves in terms of other topics such as events from our lives, important events and people, texts, ideas, beliefs, controversies. And they encourage us to do so artfully.

Thinking for Ourselves

College is a place for questing and questioning, a place where each solution raises more problems. That is what makes learning so exciting—the delving deeper and deeper into the question, discovering new depths just when we think we have devised an answer. For the true learner, doubt is the only certainty. No fact is so true that it can't be questioned. No truth is so sure that such questioning does not illuminate it. In fact, the very purpose of education is to teach us to question everything.

We call this process “thinking for ourselves.”

Thinking for ourselves—that means we must learn to engage with the ideas we encounter, to test them against our own experiences. When an idea proves to be sound, it articulates what we have felt or sensed or suspected but couldn't quite pin down for ourselves because we lacked the necessary concepts or terminology.

When an idea doesn't ring true, we question it; the idea might seem to account for something we have observed, but it doesn't leap out at us as the truth. We think about it, perhaps we even write about it in a journal. We read an article or book to gain more context. Perhaps we talk to someone who is interested in that topic. We do all this in order to resolve the issue to our satisfaction. At times, we will disagree with the idea because it is not congruent with our experiences. Sometimes, of course, concepts are wrong. At other times, concepts are difficult and we may not have enough experience or information to judge them. Ultimately, we need a critical mass of information to make us confident enough to interact with the texts, to question their assumptions, to carry on a dialogue with texts. In any event, we continue to test the ideas against our own knowledge and experience.

That is what exploratory writing helps us to do.

Writing about Personal Experience

Perhaps the advice most often given to writers has been “write about what you know.” Simple common sense tells us that selecting a subject about which we know nothing will make our essay a disastrous hodgepodge of generalizations (unless we do a great deal of research before we begin writing). Obviously, then, it is prudent to write about something we know. In many ways, that is the advice this text gives: write about what you know. That the events you have experienced are potential subjects for exploratory essays is obvious by now. Usually the first thing that occurs to us as personal subject matter is what we have done or experienced.

Yet those events are but the beginning. Anything that you have ever experienced or reacted to in any way is part of your **personal experience**: every book you have read, everything you have seen on television and in the

movies, every song lyric you have listened to, every conversation you have overheard, every family story ever told to you, every adventure recounted to you by family or friends or strangers. More: every thought you have ever thought, every attitude you have ever held, every observation you have ever made, every fantasy you have ever had, every dream that you remember—all are part of you, part of your personal experience. All are fair game for exploratory essays.

Personal experience, then, can be broken down into five categories:

- Events you have participated in
- Events you have witnessed
- Mental occurrences such as thoughts or fantasies
- Attitudes such as assumptions or beliefs
- Any external information (facts or opinions) that you have acquired from any source including television, movies, conversations, books, songs, lectures

The value of personal experiences for exploratory essays cannot be overstated. After all, you are the sub-topic of your exploratory essays, and, in many ways, you are the sum of your personal experiences.

The Exploratory Essay Explained

You have probably had the following experience: you are reading a book, either for pleasure or for class. Suddenly you realize that your thoughts have strayed away from the book, following some tangent. You may not even remember the last page or two that you know your eyes traveled over. Sometimes this straying occurs because the book bores you (or frustrates you if you are cramming for an exam); at other times, the words have triggered a line of thought that you start pursuing beyond the confines of the book's page. Such straying can be an enjoyable experience if you are reading for pleasure. Overall, such interaction with the book is highly desirable; it is part of the process of learning. Further, such wanderings are not restricted to reading. Your mind can start exploring while you are in the midst of activity—for example, while you walk across campus, take an exam, listen to a lecture, or hang glide.

Montaigne's Essais

In the sixteenth century, a French diplomat named Michel de Montaigne had such experiences. Unlike most of us, however, he began recording the ideas that came to mind as he read. He realized that such strayings from the act of reading or from other activities were valuable in and of themselves—in fact,

that they were the essence of thought and education. His “records” became the source of a new literary form—the essay. With tongue in cheek, he explained why he started writing down these “strayings”:

When I lately retired to my own house, determined as far as possible to concern myself with nothing else than spending in privacy and repose the little remainder of time I have to live, I fancied I could not more oblige my mind than to permit it a full leisure to entertain itself and come to rest in itself, which I hoped it might now the more easily do, having with time become more settled and mature; but I find . . . that, quite the contrary, like a runaway horse it gives itself a hundred times more trouble than it used to take for others, and creates me so many chimeras and fantastic monsters, one upon another, without order or design, that, the better at leisure to contemplate their strangeness and absurdity, I have begun to record them, hoping in time to make it [his mind] ashamed of them.³

His self-deprecating humor here does not disguise his intentions: First, he is writing in order to discover all the “fantastic monsters” his mind can conjure; second, he is recording his thoughts for himself and others to examine.

In 1580, with the publication of the first volume of these short pieces, entitled *Essais* (“Attempts”), the essay form was born. Montaigne was very clear that his “attempts” were tentative compared to the ordinary philosophical writings of his day; in other words, he did not adopt the tone used by his peers in their philosophical essays—a tone of certainty and of intellectual confidence. Instead, his tone was conversational, friendly, open to suggestions. In his “personal essays,” Montaigne wrote not so much to prove a point or to convince his readers as to explore the implications of an idea and to discover how true it was.

In the quotation from Montaigne just given, we have several of the characteristics of the exploratory essay: First, it is *personal in subject matter*, finding its topic in a subject that is of deep interest to the writer. Second, it is *personal in approach*, revealing aspects of the writer as the subject at hand illuminates them. The justification for this personal approach rests in part on the assumption that all people are similar; Montaigne implies that, if we look honestly and deeply into any person, we will find truths appropriate to all people. Each of us is humankind in miniature. Third, notice *the extended use of figurative language* (in this case the simile comparing his mind to a runaway horse). Such language is also characteristic of the exploratory essay.

Goals of the Exploratory Essay

In many ways, the exploratory essay carries on the essay tradition begun by Montaigne, who used the essay to explore his ideas and observations. That is what the exploratory essay encourages you to do—to explore the world, to test limits, to juggle concepts, to push language to its creative limits. These goals

are what made the essay such a valuable form for the Renaissance: it offered writers a chance to try out ideas, to bounce them against one another. These are the goals that make it valuable today, for you as a student and as a person.

In practical academic terms, the exploratory essay fulfills at least two useful functions. First, it is the best way to discover what original notions you have about any topic. Second, it is an exciting way to see how bits of knowledge from various fields can fit together in interesting and revealing ways. Often information from each course seems to be compartmentalized: an insight drawn from a poem by Keats goes in the drawer marked “Literature”; a fact about cell reproduction goes into the drawer labeled “Biology.” To see the connections between ideas in all disciplines is one of the goals of exploratory writing. Further, writing exploratory essays can help you identify what touches you in any field—from art to zoology—and to see how those fields connect. Further still, such essays can help you to discover the “truths” that you believe and those you don’t, to define the problems that interest you and those that don’t.

Put a slightly different way, exploratory writing tries to engage your whole self in each essay you write: all the information, all the observations, and all of the insights you have accumulated since the doctor first got your attention with a slap on your bottom. Such discovery, connection, and involvement are some of the major goals of education.

A Vehicle of Inquiry

The exploratory essay, then, is a vehicle of inquiry. Think of this image literally: The exploratory essay is a vehicle—a bicycle, a plane, a car—that carries you through an investigation. Let’s assume that the vehicle is a car and that it has a full load of passengers. After a while, the car stops so that a different person can take over as driver. Although all the people in the car have agreed about the ultimate destination and although everyone has agreed to follow a particular route, the new driver sees a side road that looks interesting or he remembers that the world’s largest mouse trap is on display a few miles off the road or he has a sudden unconscious desire to turn the steering wheel. Whatever the reason, he takes a detour. Some of the other passengers might grumble a bit, but the road has been taken.

The car is your essay; the passengers are your ideas. In the process of writing a draft, you might find that an idea—an idea which you originally thought of as a minor supporting idea sitting quietly in the backseat—has become the driver, has turned your essay down a different road. Perhaps, in fact, this particular idea was hiding in the trunk and you didn’t even know it was along for the ride until it slipped into the driver’s seat. Given the number of passengers (ideas) in the car, your essay might ultimately end your journey at a different place from the one you intended. In any event, though,

you do end up somewhere, and the surprise destination is often more interesting than the one you had planned on at the beginning. Because writing is a process, there are many opportunities for such surprising turns and unforeseen destinations.

Of course, if the tangents take you into an area of your experience that you are not quite ready to deal with, the exploratory writing will make you uncomfortable. This is why cars have reverse gears—you can always turn the car around and retrace your path to the original highway. Similarly, you as writer can always stop the experience by taking your fingers off the keys or by capping your pen. Although most professional writers at times feel as though their ideas are running away with them, the fact of the matter is that they (and you) are ultimately in control. The trick is to let that vehicle carry you at least a little way off course as you draft an essay so that you can be sure that your original route really was the best one to take.

Implications of the Exploratory Essay

Such focusing on yourself is not to suggest that you don't have to read, or listen in class, or do research in order to make your writing interesting and informative. Learning is a lifetime occupation. Every day in college you are required to read, to think about what you have read and heard and done, to assimilate it all in some way. Exploratory writing helps you relate the new information and ideas to yourself and to other insights you have acquired. It helps you grow intellectually, and it helps you monitor that growth. By making the learning process conscious, exploratory writing makes the learning deeper and more relevant to you.

We should not forget the example of Montaigne here. He always sought out interesting facts and ideas by reading everything he could lay his hands on and by talking with anyone who had something to say. Then Montaigne wrote about what he had read and heard to explore those ideas and to play with them intellectually.

External Details versus Internal Details

External details can be taken in by the five senses. *Internal details*, on the other hand, are your feelings and thoughts. In exploratory essays, both the external and internal details of your life are important, but they are important in different ways. For example, external details are important in setting the context of a particular event, for setting the scene, and for making the event and the people involved in that event “real” for your readers. Such details are part of the craft of writing, of putting your readers “into the picture” rather than simply telling them about it.

If you merely give the external details, however, you have not written an exploratory essay. Certainly you may have revealed a lot about *your external life*, but you have not revealed a lot about your inner self. To change a superficial “this is my life” essay into a true exploratory essay, you must describe and analyze your reactions, thoughts, and feelings.

For example, it might be incredibly wonderful for you to win \$50 million in the lottery. That external fact, however, is not the stuff that exploratory essays are made of. The “stuff” would be the complex emotions that accompanied that event—for example, you would probably discuss the joy, but also the fear about the inevitable changes in your life that would follow the doubts about whom you could trust. Or suppose that your family moved to ten different states in five years—that would be an interesting external detail. How you felt about each of those moves, what those moves did to your self-esteem, to your ability to interact with other children, to your sense of permanence—that would be good material for an exploratory essay.

The Illusion of Objectivity

Exploratory essays are not and cannot be objective. Fortunately, exploratory writing revels in subjectivity. That is its *raison d’etre*.

If this subjectivity seems dangerous or anti-intellectual, it isn’t. The truth of the matter is that we can never escape our subjectivity completely, so why not ride that subjectivity as far as it will take us? Each of us filters reality through our assumptions, prejudices, and beliefs. Some scientists now suggest that the only unfiltered experience we can have is the act of smelling. Data from all the senses except (perhaps) smell get “processed” before catching the attention of our mind. This is one explanation of why a smell can trigger a vivid and profound memory from many years ago whereas other sense data get us involved in the *act* of remembering instead of the *experience* of remembering.

One of the advantages of exploratory writing is that it makes us more aware of the extent of that filtering. Even everyday language suggests that this filtering occurs. When people want to suggest that you are overly optimistic, for example, they often say, “You’re looking at the world through rose-colored glasses.” In actuality, we all wear metaphorical glasses; only the hues of their lenses differ, not the fact of our wearing glasses. They distort, bend, twist, and color all we see. It is the nature of the beast called *human*: we are not objective receivers with perfect reception.

Distortions can be interesting, even beautiful. If you don’t believe it, look at a painting by any impressionist (or by any artist, for that matter). If the artist’s “distortion” matches yours, the painting will seem perfectly “realistic.” Obviously, though, no painting can actually give us reality; at the very least, it reduces a three-dimensional object or person to two dimensions. Beyond that, the artist has painted his or her vision of that person or that landscape,

not the real person or the real landscape. The artist's subjectivity and distortions are in play. They have to be; all of our distortions are always in play, because we humans *are* our distortions.

This is a profound philosophical issue, the intricacies of which are beyond the scope of this book. Yet it is important that you recognize the subjective nature of *all* your perceptions. For that recognition is one of the cornerstones upon which exploratory writing is built. Because distortions inevitably (and, I might add, gloriously) exist, it is of great interest and practical benefit to discover what our particular distortions are. We can do that by writing not only to report what we think we see or understand, but also why we think and understand it in just that particular way.

Is there a contradiction here? Sure. Since we are inevitably and incurably subjective, even our examination of our own subjectivity will be, well, subjective. Yet becoming aware of our own subjectivity opens up numerous ideas and approaches that we might otherwise reject if we believed we were simply accurate recorders of reality; knowing that we don't automatically have the truth about anything makes us more willing to hear what other people have to say about everything.

One of the most interesting aspects of any exploratory essay, then, is the writer who is revealed in it. But there is likely to be other interesting material too: information (consider the way Annie Dillard tells us so much about wildlife while still revealing so much about herself), the opinions of others (that is, quotations from primary and secondary sources), insights into events or people, interesting images and language. Each of those pieces of information is enhanced, not ruined, by revelations about the writer.

In short, as an essayist observing yourself engaging with a topic, you discover insights into both yourself and the topic. Both are interesting.

Inward and Outward Exploration

This whole writing process, then, is a moving inward and then outward, then inward and outward, and so on. In other words, you explore both your inner world and the outer world, using each to illustrate and clarify the other. In the early stages of thinking about and drafting your essay, you go inward to discover your thoughts and feelings, then you move outward to see if they coincide with the real world, then you carry new real-world information back inward to see how it alters or adds nuances to your inner world, then you move outward again to discover the opinions of others, then back inward to weigh their ideas against yours. Back and forth. Inward and outward. Then you revise, often going outward again to find new sources. Your final move outward occurs when you share the results of your exploration with your readers after revising and crafting the final draft especially for them.

Guidelines for Exploratory Essayists

Here are some basic guidelines that many exploratory essayists follow:

1. Be *truthful* in what you say, *adventurous* in how you write, and *thoughtful* in how you revise.
2. Write *modern edited English* to aid in communication. Occasional slang words or specialized language may be used to give the sense of people's real speech, but such terms should be "translated" for your readers if you are not sure they will understand them.
3. Push yourself and your ideas in every essay; never settle for the easy essay. Select topics that interest you and then try to dig into them and into yourself. Use the topic to illuminate your self and your self to illuminate the topic.
4. Avoid plagiarizing. Although this advice may seem inappropriate because you are writing about yourself, it is possible to plagiarize unintentionally when you do research. We will discuss plagiarism in more depth in Chapter 11 ("Revising Content").
5. Never forget that the only constant subject in exploratory writing is your inner self.

Suggestions for Initial Explorations of Self

1. Symbols are powerful. Select one *public symbol* (for instance, the American flag, red roses, a BMW) and one *private symbol* (anything that has symbolic value for you but not necessarily for the average person in the street) and for each write about: (a) their meanings for others and (b) their meanings for you.
2. Sum up what you know about yourself so far by doing at least one of the following as a form of prewriting:
 - a. Briefly explain your personal history: for example, where you were born, who your parents are, the number of siblings you have, schools you attended, the major things you learned there. Then explain which of those facts you would like to change (for instance, maybe you wish you had been born in a big city instead

of in a small town) and why. If you don't want to change any of them, why not? Then go one step further: what is the significance of each of these details to you?

- b. Using vivid words and details, describe your personality. List at least four key personality traits (for example, "usually honest," "usually thoughtful," "usually timid," "usually concerned about my appearance," "usually concerned about animals").
- c. What makes you different from everyone else in the class? Make the list as long as you can. What makes you similar to everyone else in class? Make the list as long as you can.
- d. What was the best thing you ever did? Explain why it was the best and in what sense it was the best (for instance, the most honorable? the most effective? the most fun?)
- e. Describe the way you study and learn. What kind of environment do you like? Why?

Readings

Of Giving the Lie

Michel de Montaigne

Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) was a major writer of the French Renaissance. His motivation for creating the essay form might be encapsulated in the following sentence: “I have never seen a greater monster or miracle than myself.” Monster and miracle, Montaigne wanted to understand every facet of his complex self, at least in part in order to understand humankind. His legacy is both the form he created and the fascinating human being who inhabits it in his Essais.

Inward Exploration

Write at least one paragraph detailing your reservations or concerns about making yourself an important part of your essays.

[1] Well, but some one will say to me, this design of making a man’s self the subject of his writing, were indeed excusable in rare and famous men, who by their reputation had given others a curiosity to be fully informed of them. It is most true, I confess and know very well, that a mechanic will scarce lift his eyes from his work to look at an ordinary man, whereas a man will forsake his business and his shop to stare at an eminent person when he comes into a town. It misbecomes any other to give his own character, but him who has qualities worthy of imitation, and whose life and opinions may serve for example: Caesar and Xenophon had a just and solid foundation whereon to found their narrations, the greatness of their own performances; and were to be wished that we had the journals of Alexander the Great, the commentaries that Augustus, Cato, Sylla, Brutus, and others left of their actions; of such persons men love and contemplate the very statues even in copper and marble.

[2] This remonstrance is very true; but it very little concerns me:

I repeat my poems only to my friends, and when bound to do so; not before everyone and everywhere; there are plenty of reciters in the open marketplace and at the baths.—Horace

I do not here form a statue to erect in the great square of a city, in a church, or any public place:

I study not to make my pages swell with empty trifles; you and I are talking in private.—Persius

[3] It is for some corner of a library, or to entertain a neighbor, a kinsman, a friend, who has a mind to renew his acquaintance and familiarity with me in this image of myself. Others have been encouraged to speak of themselves, because they found the subject worthy and rich; I, on the contrary, am the bolder, by reason the subject is so poor and sterile that I cannot be suspected of ostentation.

[4] I judge freely of the actions of others; I give little of my own to judge of, because they are nothing: I do not find so much good in myself, that I cannot tell it without blushing.

[5] What contentment would it not be to me to hear any one thus relate to me the manners, faces, countenances, the ordinary words and fortunes of my ancestors? How attentively should I listen to it! In earnest, it would be evil nature to despise so much as the pictures of our friends and predecessors, the fashion of their clothes and arms. I preserve their writing, seal, and a particular sword they wore, and have not thrown the long staves my father used to carry in his hand, out of my closet.

A father's garment and ring is by so much dearer to his posterity, as there is the greater affection towards parents.—St. Augustine

[6] If my posterity, nevertheless, shall be of another mind, I shall be avenged on them; for they cannot care less for me than I shall then do for them. All the traffic that I have in this with the public is, that I borrow their utensils of writing, which are more easy and most at hand; and in recompense shall, peradventure, keep a pound of butter in the market from melting in the sun*:

Let not wrappers be wanting to tunny-fish, nor olives; and I shall supply loose coverings to mackerel.—Martial

[7] And though nobody should read me, have I wasted time in entertaining myself so many idle hours in so pleasing and useful thoughts? In molding this figure upon myself, I have been so often constrained to temper and compose myself in a right posture, that the copy is truly taken, and has in some sort formed itself; painting myself for others, I represent myself in a better coloring than my own natural complexion. I have no more made my book than my book has made me: 'tis a book consubstantial with the author, of a peculiar design, a parcel of my life, and whose business is not designed for others, as that of all other books is. In giving myself so continual and so exact an account of myself, have I lost my time? For they who sometimes cursorily survey themselves only, do not so strictly examine themselves, nor penetrate so deep, as he who makes it his business, his study, and his employment,

*Here Montaigne speculates that his manuscript might be used to wrap butter.

who intends a lasting record, with all his fidelity, and with all his force: The most delicious pleasures digested within, avoid leaving any trace of themselves, and avoid the sight not only of the people, but of any other person.

[8] How often has this work diverted me from troublesome thoughts? And all that are frivolous should be reputed so. Nature has presented us with a large faculty of entertaining ourselves alone; and often calls us to it, to teach us that we owe ourselves in part to society, but chiefly and mostly to ourselves. That I may habituate my fancy even to meditate in some method and to some end, and to keep it from losing itself and roving at random, 'tis but to give to body and to record all the little thoughts that present themselves to it. I give ear to my whimsies, because I am to record them. It often falls out, that being displeas'd at some action that civility and reason will not permit me openly to reprove, I here disgorge myself, not without design of public instruction: and also these poetical lashes—

A slap on his eye, a slap on his snout, a slap on Sagoin's back.—Marot

—imprint themselves better upon paper than upon the flesh. What if I listen to books a little more attentively than ordinary, since I watch if I can purloin anything that may adorn or support my own?

[9] I have not at all studied to make a book; but I have in some sort studied because I had made it; if it be studying to scratch and pinch now one author, and then another, either by the head or foot, not with any design to form opinions from them, but to assist, second, and fortify those I already have embraced.

[10] But whom shall we believe in the report he makes of himself in so corrupt an age? Considering there are so few, if, any at all, whom we can believe when speaking of others, where there is less interest to lie. The first thing done in the corruption of manners is banishing truth; for, as Pindar says, to be true is the beginning of a great virtue, and the first article that Plato requires in the governor of his Republic. The truth of these days is not that which really is, but what every man persuades another man to believe; as we generally give the name of money not only to pieces of the dust alloy, but even to the false also, if they will pass. Our nation has long been reproach'd with this vice; for Salvianus of Marseilles, who lived in the time of the Emperor Valentinian, says that lying and forswearing themselves is with the French not a vice, but a way of speaking. He who would enhance this testimony might say that it is now a virtue in them; men form and fashion themselves to it as to an exercise of honor; for dissimulation is one of the most notable qualities of this age.

[11] I have often considered whence this custom that we so religiously observe should spring, of being more highly offended with the reproach of a

vice so familiar to us than with any other, and that it should be the highest insult that can in words be done us to reproach us with a lie. Upon examination, I find that it is natural most to defend the defects with which we are most tainted. It seems as if by resenting and being moved at the accusation, we in some sort acquit ourselves of the fault; though we have it in effect, we condemn it in outward appearance.

[12] May it not also be that this reproach seems to imply cowardice and feebleness of heart? Of which can there be a more manifest sign than to eat a man's own words—nay, to lie against a man's own knowledge?

[13] Lying is a base vice; a vice that one of the ancients portrays in the most odious colors when he says, "that it is to manifest a contempt of God, and withal a fear of men." It is not possible more fully to represent the horror, baseness, and irregularity of it; for what can a man imagine more hateful and contemptible than to be a coward towards men, and valiant against his Maker? Our intelligence being by no other way communicable to one another but by a particular word, he who falsifies that betrays public society. 'Tis the only way by which we communicate our thoughts and wills; 'tis the interpreter of the soul, and if it deceive us, we no longer know nor have further tie upon one another; if that deceive us, it breaks all our correspondence, and dissolves all the ties of government.

[14] Certain nations of the newly discovered Indies (I need not give them names, seeing they are no more; for, by wonderful and unheard of example, the desolation of that conquest has extended to the utter abolition of names and the ancient knowledge of places) offered to their gods human blood, but only such as was drawn from the tongue and ears, to expiate for the sin of lying, as well heard as pronounced.

[15] That good fellow of Greece[†] said that children are amused with toys and men with words.

[16] As to our diverse usages of giving the lie, and the laws of honor in that case, and the alteration they have received, I defer saying what I know of them to another time, and shall learn, if I can, in the meanwhile, at what time the custom took beginning of so exactly weighing and measuring words, and of making our honor interested in them; for it is easy to judge that it was not anciently amongst the Romans and Greeks. And it has often seemed to me strange to see them rail at and give one another the lie without any quarrel. Their laws of duty steered some other course than ours. Caesar is sometimes called thief, and sometimes drunkard, to his teeth. We see the liberty of invective they practiced upon one another, I mean the greatest chiefs of war of both nations, where words are only revenged with words, and do not proceed any farther.

[†]Plutarch, *Life of Lysander*

Outward Exploration: Suggestions for Discussion and Writing

1. In this essay, Montaigne justifies his reasons for writing about himself. Explain his reasons, examining them in light of your own reasons.
2. Consider Montaigne's complex tone throughout this essay. For instance, he says that he is "bolder" than the famous people who write about themselves because he himself is, as a subject, "so poor and sterile that I cannot be suspected of ostentation." What is Montaigne's tone here? Honest? Self-deprecating? Sarcastic? Ironic? Humorous? Sad? Analyze his essay in terms of his shades of tone.
3. According to Montaigne, people would want to read only about a person "who has qualities worthy of imitation, and whose life and opinions may serve" as an example for humankind. Write an essay in which you agree or disagree. You might use examples from your own reading. You might include names of people whose inner lives you would be interested in learning about. You might consider personal essays you have read in the past that were written by people who are not particularly famous.
4. Translations of texts can vary significantly from one era to the next. The translation in this book was done in 1877 by Charles Cotton. In your library, find a more modern translation (e.g., from the mid-to-late 20th century) of this same essay. Write a comparison and contrast of the two translations. Which one do you find more accessible, more enjoyable? Explain the reasons why, illustrating your points with close analysis of several pairs of translation of the same paragraphs.

Rhetoric and Style

Consider the two translated versions of one sentence by Montaigne:

1. "What if I listen to books a little more attentively than ordinary, since I watch if I can purloin anything that may adorn or support my own?" [translated by Charles Cotton, 1877]
2. "What if I lend a slightly more attentive ear to books, since I have been lying in wait to pilfer something from them to adorn or support my own?" [translated by Donald M. Frame, 1957]

What conclusions might we draw about shades of meaning from this admittedly tiny sample of two versions? Paraphrase the idea contained in Montaigne's sentence. Then try to state his idea in your own words and using your own sentence structure.

On the Pleasure of Hating

William Hazlitt

William Hazlitt (1778–1830) was a journalist and theater critic for several London publications and a well-known critic of literature. His reputation has lived on today, though, primarily for his witty and sophisticated personal essays. The following essay is from The Plain Speaker (1826).

Inward Exploration

Write at least paragraph on what the title of this essay makes you think (before you read the essay).

[1] There is a spider crawling along the matted floor of the room where I sit (not the one which has been so well allegorized in the admirable *Lines to a Spider*, but another of the same edifying breed)—he runs with heedless, hurried haste, he hobbles awkwardly towards me, he stops—he sees the giant shadow before him, and, at a loss whether to retreat or proceed, meditates his huge foe—but as I do not start up and seize upon the straggling caitiff, as he would upon a hapless fly within his toils, he takes heart, and ventures on, with mingled cunning, impudence, and fear. As he passes me, I lift up the matting to assist his escape, am glad to get rid of the unwelcome intruder, and shudder at the recollection after he is gone. A child, a woman, a clown, or a moralist a century ago, would have crushed the little reptile to death—my philosophy has got beyond that—I bear the creature no ill-will, but still I hate the very sight of it. The spirit of malevolence survives the practical exertion of it. We learn to curb our will and keep our overt actions within the bounds of humanity, long before we can subdue our sentiments and imaginations to the same mild tone. We give up the external demonstration, the brute violence, but cannot part with the essence or principle of hostility. We do not tread upon the poor little animal in question (that seems barbarous and pitiful!) but we regard it with a sort of mystic horror and superstitious loathing. It will ask another hundred years of fine writing and hard thinking to cure us of the prejudice, and make us feel towards this ill-omened tribe with something of ‘the milk of human kindness,’ instead of their own shyness and venom.

[2] Nature seems (the more we look into it) made up of antipathies: without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool, were it not ruffled by the jarring interests, the unruly passions of men. The white streak in our own fortunes is brightened (or just rendered visible) by making all around it as dark as possible; so the rainbow paints its form upon the cloud. Is it pride? Is it envy? Is it the force of contrast? Is it weakness or malice? But so it is, that there is a secret affinity, a hankering after evil in the human mind, and that it takes a perverse, but a

fortunate delight in mischief, since it is a never-failing source of satisfaction. Pure good soon grows insipid, wants variety and spirit. Pain is a bittersweet, which never surfeits. Love turns, with a little indulgence, to indifference or disgust: hatred alone is immortal. Do we not see this principle at work every where? Animals torment and worry one another without mercy: children kill flies for sport: every one reads the accidents and offences in a newspaper, as the cream of the jest: a whole town runs to be present at a fire, and the spectator by no means exults to see it extinguished. It is better to have it so, but it diminishes the interest; and our feelings take part with our passions, rather than with our understandings. Men assemble in crowds, with eager enthusiasm, to witness a tragedy: but if there were an execution going forward in the next street, as Mr. Burke observes, the theatre would be left empty. A strange cur in a village, an idiot, a crazy woman, are set upon and baited by the whole community. Public nuisances are in the nature of public benefits. How long did the Pope, the Bourbons, and the Inquisition keep the people of England in breath, and supply them with nicknames to vent their spleen upon! Had they done us any harm of late? No: but we have always a quantity of superfluous bile upon the stomach, and we wanted an object to let it out upon. How loth were we to give up our pious belief in ghosts and witches, because we liked to persecute the one, and frighten ourselves to death with the other! It is not the quality so much as the quantity of excitement that we are anxious about: we cannot bear a state of indifference and *ennui*: the mind seems to abhor a vacuum as much as ever matter was supposed to do. Even when the spirit of the age (that is, the progress of intellectual refinement, warring with our natural infirmities) no longer allows us to carry our vindictive and headstrong humours into effect, we try to revive them in description, and keep up the old bugbears, the phantoms of our terror and our hate, in imagination. We burn Guy Faux in effigy, and the hooting and buffeting and maltreating that poor tattered figure of rags and straw makes a festival in every village in England once a year. Protestants and Papists do not now burn one another at the stake: but we subscribe to new editions of Fox's *Book of Martyrs*; and the secret of carry us back to the feuds, the heart-burnings, the havoc, the dismay, the wrongs and the revenge of a barbarous age and people—to the rooted prejudices and deadly animosities of sects and parties in politics and religion, and of contending chiefs and clans in war and intrigue. We feel the full force of the spirit of hatred with all of them in turn. As we read, we throw aside the trammels of civilization, the flimsy veil of humanity. 'Off, you lendings!' The wild beast resumes its sway within us, we feel like hunting-animals, and as the hound starts in his sleep and rushes on the chase in fancy, the heart rouses itself in its native lair, and utters a wild cry of joy, at being restored once more to freedom and lawless, unrestrained impulses. Every one has his full swing, or goes to the Devil his own way. Here are no Jeremy Bentham Panopticons, none of Mr. Owen's impassable Parallelograms, (Rob Roy would have

spurned and poured a thousand curses on them), no long calculations of self-interest—the will takes its instant way to its object; as the mountain-torrent flings itself over the precipice, the greatest possible good of each individual consists in doing all the mischief he can to his neighbor: that is charming, and finds a sure and sympathetic chord in every breast! So Mr. Irving, the celebrated preacher, has rekindled the old, original, almost exploded hell-fire in the aisles of the Caledonian Chapel, as they introduce the real water of the New River at Sadler's Wells, to the delight and astonishment of his fair audience. 'Tis pretty, though a plague, to sit and peep into the pit of Tophet, to play at snap-dragon with flames and brimstone (it gives a smart electrical shock, a lively fillip to delicate constitutions), and to see Mr. Irving, like a huge Titan, looking as grim and swarthy as if he had to forge tortures for all the damned! What a strange being man is! Not content with doing all he can to vex and hurt his fellows here, 'upon this bank and shoal of time,' where one would think there were heart-aches, pain, disappointment, anguish, tears, sighs, and groans enough, the bigoted maniac takes him to the top of the high peak of school divinity to hurl him down the yawning gulf of penal fire; his speculative malice asks eternity to wreak its infinite spite in, and calls on the Almighty to execute its relentless doom! The cannibals burn their enemies and eat them, in good-fellowship with one another: meek Christian divines cast those who differ from them but a hair's breadth, body and soul, into hell-fire, for the glory of God and the good of his creatures. It is well that the power of such persons is not co-ordinate with their wills: indeed, it is from the sense of their weakness and inability to control the opinions of others, that they thus "outdo termagant," and endeavour to frighten them into conformity by big words and monstrous denunciations.

[3] The pleasure of hating, like a poisonous mineral, eats into the heart of religion, and turns it to rankling spleen and bigotry; it makes patriotism an excuse for carrying fire, pestilence, and famine into other lands: it leaves to virtue nothing but the spirit of censoriousness, and a narrow, jealous, inquisitorial watchfulness over the actions and motives of others. What have the different sects, creeds, doctrines in religion been but so many pretexts set up for men to wrangle, to quarrel, to tear one another in pieces about, like a target as a mark to shoot at? Does anyone suppose that the love of country in an Englishman implies any friendly feeling or disposition to serve another, bearing the same name? No, it means only hatred to the French, or the inhabitants of any other country that we happen to be at war with for the time. Does the love of virtue denote any wish to discover or amend our own faults? No, but it atones for an obstinate adherence to our own vices by the most virulent intolerance to human frailties. This principle is of a most universal application. It extends to good as well as evil: if it makes us hate folly, it makes us no less dissatisfied with distinguished merit. If it inclines us to resent the wrongs of others, it impels us to be as impatient of their prosperity. We revenge injuries: we repay benefits with ingratitude. Even our strongest

partialities and likings soon take this turn. "That which was luscious as locusts, anon becomes bitter as coloquintida"; and love and friendship melt in their own fires. We hate old friends: we hate old books: we hate old opinions; and at last we come to hate ourselves.

[4] I have observed that few of those, whom I have formerly known most intimate, continue on the same friendly footing, or combine the steadiness with the warmth of attachment. I have been acquainted with two or three knots of inseparable companions, who saw each other "six days in the week," that have broken up and dispersed. I have quarreled with almost all my old friends, (they might say this is owing to my bad temper, but) they have also quarreled with one another. What is become of "that set of whist-players," celebrated by Elia in his notable *Epistle to Robert Southey, Esq.* (and now I think of it—that I myself have celebrated in this very volume) "that for so many years called Admiral Burney friend"? They are scattered, like last year's snow. Some of them are dead—or gone to live at a distance or pass one another in the street like strangers; or if they stop to speak, do it as coolly and try to cut one another as soon as possible. Some of us have grown rich—others poor. Some have got places under Government—others a niche in the *Quarterly Review*. Some of us have dearly earned a name in the world; whilst others remain in their original privacy. We despise the one; and envy and are glad to mortify the other. Times are changed; we cannot revive our old feelings; and we avoid the sight and are uneasy in the presence of those, who remind us of our infirmity, and put us upon an effort at seeming cordiality, which embarrasses ourselves and does not impose upon our quondam associates. Old friendships are like meats served up repeatedly, cold, comfortless, and distasteful. The stomach turns against them. Either constant intercourse and familiarity breed weariness and contempt; or, if we meet again after an interval of absence, we appear no longer the same. One is too wise, another too foolish for us; and we wonder we did not find this out before. We are disconcerted and kept in a state of continual alarm by the wit of one, or tired to death of the dullness of another. The good things of the first (besides leaving stings behind them) by repetition grow stale, and lose their startling effect; and the insipidity of the last becomes intolerable. The most amusing or instructive companion is at best like a favorite volume, that we wish after a time to lay upon the shelf; but as our friends are not willing to be laid there, this produces a misunderstanding and ill-blood between us. Or, if the zeal and integrity of friendship is not abated, or its career interrupted by any obstacle arising out of its own nature, we look out for other subjects of complaint and sources of dissatisfaction. We begin to criticize each other's dress, looks, and general character. "Such a one is a pleasant fellow, but it is a pity he sits so late!" Another fails to keep his appointments, and that is a sore that never heals. We get acquainted with some fashionable young men or with a mistress, and wish to introduce our friend; but he is awkward and a sloven, the interview does

not answer, and this throws cold water on our intercourse. Or he makes himself obnoxious to opinion—and we shrink from our own convictions on the subject as an excuse for not defending him. All or any of these causes mount up in time to a ground of coolness or irritation—and at last they break out into open violence as the only amends we can make ourselves for suppressing them so long, or the readiest means of banishing recollections of former kindness, so little compatible with our present feelings. We may try to tamper with the wounds or patch up the carcass of departed friendship, but the one will hardly bear the handling, and the other is not worth the trouble of embalming! The only way to be reconciled to old friends is to part with them for good: at a distance we may chance to be thrown back (in a waking dream) upon old times and old feelings: or at any rate, we should not think of renewing our intimacy, till we have fairly spit our spite, or said, thought, and felt all the ill we can of each other. Or if we can pick a quarrel with some one else, and make him the scapegoat, this is an excellent contrivance to heal a broken bone. I think I must be friends with Lamb again, since he has written that magnanimous Letter to Southey, and told him a piece of his mind!—I don't know what it is that attaches me to H—so much, except that he and I, whenever we meet, sit in judgment on another set of old friends, and “carve them as a dish fit for the Gods.” There was L[eigh] H[unt], John Scott, Mrs. [Montagu], whose dark raven locks make a picturesque background to our discourse, B—, who is grown fat, and is, they say, married, R[ickman]; these had all separated long ago, and their foibles are the common link that holds us together. We do not affect to condole or whine over their follies; we enjoy, we laugh at them till we are ready to burst our sides, “sans intermission, for hours by the dial.” We serve up a course of anecdotes, traits, masterstrokes of character, and cut and hack at them till we are weary. Perhaps some of them are even with us. For my own part, as I once said, I like a friend the better for having faults that one can talk about. “Then,” said Mrs. [Montagu], “you will never cease to be a philanthropist!” Those in question were some of the choice-spirits of the age, not “fellows of no mark or likelihood”; and we so far did them justice: but it is well they did not hear what we sometimes said of them. I care little what anyone says of me, particularly behind my back, and in the way of critical and analytical discussion—it is looks of dislike and scorn that I answer with the worst venom of my pen. The expression of the face wounds me more than the expressions of the tongue. If I have in one instance mistaken this expression, or resorted to this remedy where I ought not, I am sorry for it. But the face was too fine over which it mantled, and I am too old to have misunderstood it! . . . I sometimes go up to —'s; and as often as I do, resolve never to go again. I do not find the old homely welcome. The ghost of friendship meets me at the door, and sits with me all dinner-time. They have got a set of fine notions and new acquaintance. Allusions to past occurrences are thought trivial, nor is it always safe to touch upon more general subjects. M. does not begin as he formerly

did every five minutes, "Fawcett used to say," &c. That topic is something worn. The girls are grown up, and have a thousand accomplishments. I perceive there is a jealousy on both sides. They think I give myself airs, and I fancy the same of them. Every time I am asked, "If I do not think Mr. Washington Irving a very fine writer?" I shall not go again till I receive an invitation for Christmas-day in company with Mr. Liston. The only intimacy I never found to flinch or fade was a purely intellectual one. There was none of the cant of candor in it, none of the whine of mawkish sensibility. Our mutual acquaintances were considered merely as subjects of conversation and knowledge, not at all of affection. We regarded them no more in our experiments than "mice in an air-pump"; or like malefactors, they were regularly cut down and given over to the dissecting-knife. We spared neither friend nor foe. We sacrificed human infirmities at the shrine of truth. The skeletons of character might be seen, after the juice was extracted, dangling in the air like flies in cobwebs: or they were kept for future inspection in some refined acid. The demonstration was as beautiful as it was new. There is no surfeiting on gall: nothing keeps so well as a decoction of spleen. We grow tired of every thing but turning others into ridicule, and congratulating ourselves on their defects.

[5]We take a dislike to our favorite books, after a time, for the same reason. We cannot read the same works for ever. Our honeymoon, even though we wed the Muse, must come to an end; and is followed by indifference, if not by disgust. There are some works, those indeed that produce the most striking effect at first by novelty and boldness of outline, that will not bear reading twice: others of a less extravagant character, and that excite and repay attention by a greater nicety of details, have hardly interest enough to keep alive our continued enthusiasm. The popularity of the most successful writers operates to wean us from them, by the cant and fuss that is made about them, by hearing their names everlastingly repeated, and by the number of ignorant and indiscriminate admirers they draw after them: we as little like to have to drag, others from their unmerited obscurity, lest we should be exposed to the charge of affectation and singularity of taste. There is nothing to be said respecting an author that all the world have made up their minds about: it is a thankless as well as hopeless task to recommend one that nobody has ever heard of. To cry up Shakespeare as the God of our idolatry, seems like a vulgar, national prejudice: to take down a volume of Chaucer, or Spenser, or Beaumont and Fletcher, or Ford, or Marlowe, has very much the look of pedantry and egotism. I confess it makes me hate the very name of Fame and Genius when works like these are "gone into the wastes of time," while each successive generation of fools is busily employed in reading the trash of the day, and women of fashion gravely join with their waiting-maids in discussing the preference between *Paradise Lost* and Mr. Moore's [romance novel] *Loves of the Angels*. I was pleased the other day on going

into a shop to ask, "If they had any of the Scotch Novels?" to be told "That they had just sent out the last, Sir Andrew Wylie!" Mr. Galt will also be pleased with this answer! The reputation of some books is raw and unaired: that of others is worm-eaten and moldy. Why fix our affections on that which we cannot bring ourselves to have faith in, or which others have long ceased to trouble themselves about? I am half afraid to look into *Tom Jones*, lest it should not answer my expectations at this time of day; and if it did not, I should certainly be disposed to fling it into the fire, and never look into another novel while I lived. But surely, it may be said, there are some works, that, like nature, can never grow old; and that must always touch the imagination and passions alike! Or there are passages that seem as if we might brood over them all our lives, and not exhaust the sentiments of love and admiration they excite: they become favorites, and we are fond of them to a sort of dotage. Here is one:

Sitting in my window
 Printing my thoughts in lawn, I saw a god,
 I thought (but it was you), enter our gates;
 My blood flew out and back again, as fast
 As I had puffed it forth and sucked it in
 Like breath; then was I called away in haste
 To entertain you: never was a man
 Thrust from a sheepcote to a sceptre, raised
 So high in thoughts as I; you left a kiss
 Upon these lips then, which I mean to keep
 From you for ever. I did hear you talk
 Far above singing!

A passage like this indeed leaves a taste on the palate like nectar, and we seem in reading it to sit with the Gods at their golden tables: but if we repeat it often in ordinary moods, it loses its flavor, becomes vapid, "the wine of poetry is drank, and but the lees remain," Or, on the other hand, if we call in the aid of extraordinary circumstances to set it off to advantage, as the reciting it to a friend, or after having our feelings excited by a long walk in some romantic situation, or while we

play with Amaryllis in the shade,
 Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair

we afterwards miss the accompanying circumstances, and instead of transferring the recollection of them to the favorable side, regret what we have lost, and strive in vain to bring back "the irrevocable hour"—wondering in some instances how we survive it, and at the melancholy blank that is left behind! The pleasure rises to its height in some moment of calm solitude or

intoxicating sympathy, declines ever after, and from the comparison and a conscious falling-off, leaves rather a sense of satiety and irksomeness behind it. . . . "Is it the same in pictures?" I confess it is, with all but those from Titian's hand. Don't know why, but an air breathes from his landscapes, pure, refreshing as if it came from other years; there is a look in his faces that never passes away. I saw one the other day. Amidst the heartless desolation and glittering finery of Fonthill, there is a portfolio of the Dresden Gallery. It opens, and a young female head looks from it; a child, yet woman grown; with an air of rustic innocence and the graces of a princess, her eyes like those of doves, the lips about to open, a smile of pleasure dimpling the whole face, the jewels sparkling in her crisped hair, her youthful shape compressed in a rich antique dress, as the bursting leaves contain the April buds! Why do I not call up this image of gentle sweetness, and place it as a perpetual barrier between mischance and me? It is because pleasure asks a greater effort of the mind to support it than pain; and we turn, after a little idle dalliance, from what we love to what we hate!

[6] As to my old opinions, I am heartily sick of them. I have reason, for they have deceived me sadly. I was taught to think, and I was willing to believe, that genius was not a bawd, that virtue was not a mask, that liberty was not a name, that love had its seat in the human heart. Now I would care little if these words were struck out of the dictionary, or if I had never heard them. They are become to my ears a mockery and a dream. Instead of patriots and friends of freedom, I see nothing but the tyrant and the slave, the people linked with kings to rivet on the chains of despotism and superstition. I see folly join with knavery, and together make up public spirit and public opinions. I see the insolent Tory, the blind Reformer, the coward Whig! If mankind had wished for what is right, they might have had it long ago. The theory is plain enough; but they are prone to mischief, "to every good work reprobate." I have seen all that had been done by the mighty yearnings of the spirit and intellect of men, "of whom the world was not worthy," and that promised a proud opening to truth and good through the vista of future years, undone by one man, with just glimmering of understanding enough to feel that he was a king, but not to comprehend how he could be king of a free people! I have seen this triumph celebrated by poets, the friends of my youth and the friends of man, but who were carried away by the infuriate tide that, setting in from a throne, bore down every distinction of right reason before it; and I have seen all those who did not join in applauding this insult and outrage on humanity proscribed, hunted down (they and their friends made a bye-word of), so that it has become an understood thing that no one can live by his talents or knowledge who is not ready to prostitute those talents and that knowledge to betray his species, and prey upon his fellow man. "This was some time a mystery: but the time gives evidence of it." The echoes of liberty had awakened once more in Spain, and the morning of human hope dawned again: but that dawn has been overcast by the foul

breath of bigotry, and those reviving sounds stifled by fresh cries from the time-rent towers of the Inquisition—man yielding (as it is fit he should) first to brute force, but more to the innate perversity and dastard spirit of his own nature, which leaves no room for farther hope or disappointment, And England, that arch-reformer, that heroic deliverer, that mouther about liberty and tool of power, stands gaping by, not feeling the blight and mildew coming over it, nor its very bones crack and turn to a paste under the grasp and circling folds of this new monster, Legitimacy! In private life do we not see hypocrisy, servility, selfishness, folly, and impudence succeed, while modesty shrinks from the encounter, and merit is trodden under foot? How often is ‘the rose plucked from the forehead of a virtuous love to plant a blister there’! What chance is there of the success of real passion? What certainty of its continuance? Seeing all this as I do, and unraveling the web of human life into its various threads of meanness, spite, cowardice, want of feeling, and want of understanding, of indifference towards others and ignorance of ourselves—seeing custom prevail over all excellence, itself giving way to infamy—mistaken as I have been in my public and private hopes, calculating others from myself, and calculating wrong; always disappointed where I placed most reliance; the dupe of friendship, and the fool of love; have I not reason to hate and to despise myself? Indeed I do; and chiefly for not having hated and despised the world enough.‡

Outward Exploration: Writing

1. Hazlitt states, “Nature seems (the more we look into it) made up of antipathies: without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action.” Hazlitt asserts that hate is the driving force behind thought and action. Write an essay agreeing or disagreeing or taking some middle ground position on this idea. Draw upon your own personal experiences, your readings, and whatever other sources your instructor suggests.

‡ [Hazlitt’s note] The only exception to the general drift of this Essay (and that is an exception in theory—I know of none in practice) is, that in reading we always take the right side, and make the case properly our own. Our imaginations are sufficiently excited, we have nothing to do with the matter but as a pure creation of the mind, and we therefore yield to the natural, unwarped impression of good and evil. Our own passions, interests, and prejudices out of the question, or in an abstracted point of view, we judge fairly and conscientiously; for conscience is nothing but the abstract idea of right and wrong. But no sooner have we to act or suffer, than the spirit of contradiction or some other demon comes into play, and there is an end of common sense and reason. Even the very strength of the speculative faculty, or the desire to square things with an ideal standard of perfection (whether we can or no) leads. Perhaps to half the absurdities and miseries of mankind. We are hunting after what we cannot find, and quarrelling with the good within our reach. Among the thousands that have read *The Heart of Mid Lothian* there assuredly never was a single person who did not wish Jeanie Deans success. Even Gentle George was sorry for what he had done, when it was over, though he would have played the same prank the next day; and the unknown author, in his immediate character of contributor to Blackwood and the Sentinel, is about as respectable a personage as Daddy Ratton himself. On the stage, every one takes part with Othello against Iago. Do boys at school, in reading Homer, generally side with the Greeks or Trojans?

2. In paragraph 5, Hazlitt writes, “I am half afraid to look into *Tom Jones*, lest it should not answer my expectations at this time of day; and if it did not, I should certainly be disposed to fling it into the fire, and never look into another novel while I lived.” Write an essay in which you explore your own feelings about returning to something that you most greatly enjoyed—for example, it might be a favorite movie or friendship or song from childhood.
3. Hazlitt says, “If mankind had wished for what is right, they might have had it long ago.” To what does he ascribe the fact that we do not yet what “what is right”? Is he right that we still do not have “what is right”? What is *right* anyway? Write an essay that explores his meaning and your reactions to it and the reasons supporting your reaction.
4. Write an exploratory analysis of Hazlitt’s persona (**ethos**—see Chapter 2) based on this essay. Note the nuances and subtle revelations throughout the essay.

Rhetoric and Style

1. Writers have long known the persuasive power of figurative examples. Analyze Hazlitt’s second paragraph closely—list all the examples he gives to illustrate his point.
2. Consider the following sentence from paragraph 4:

We may try to tamper with the wounds or patch up the carcass of departed friendship, but the one will hardly bear the handling, and the other is not worth the trouble of embalming!

The structure is as follows:

- Pronoun (“We”—subject of the first independent clause)
- Predicate verb of the sentence (“may try”)
- Infinitive (“to tamper”)
- Preposition (“with”)
- Article (“the”)
- Noun (“wounds”—object of the preposition “with”)
- Coordinating conjunction (“or”)

- Implied infinitive (“[to] patch”)
- Preposition (“up”—part of the verbal phrase “patch up”)
- Article (“the”)
- Noun (“carcass”—object of the preposition “up”)
- Preposition (“of”)
- Noun (“friendship”—object of the preposition “of”)
- Coordinating conjunction (“but”—joining two independent clauses)
- Article (“the”)
- Pronoun (“one”—subject of the second independent clause and a reference to “wounds”)
- Auxiliary verb (“will”)
- Adverb (“hardly”—modifying the verb “bear”)
- Predicate verb of the clause (“bear”) Article (“the”)
- Gerund (“handling”—a verb form acting as a noun—in this case, the direct object of the verb “will bear”)
- Comma (separating the 2nd and 3rd independent clauses)
- Article (“the”)
- Pronoun (“other”—referring to “carcass”)
- Auxiliary verb (“is”)
- Adverb (“not”)
- Preposition (“worth”)
- Article (“the”)
- Noun (“trouble”—object of the preposition “worth”)
- Preposition (“of”)
- Gerund (“embalming”—object of the preposition “of”)

What are notable here are the balanced structure of the sentence and the sharp wit of the sentiment. The structure has the subject, verb, and two infinitive phrases in the first clause; the word *but* signals that the first clause will be qualified or contradicted; then the second and third independent clauses (the second qualifies the first infinitive phrase; the third, the second infinitive phrase). The sentence’s wit comes from Hazlitt’s playing with “wounds/handling” and “carcass/embalming.” Using your own material, write a sentence that imitates this structure and wit.

Key Terms

communication
co-topic
inner self
personal experience
personal topics
private topics
self-expression
sub-topic
topic

Endnotes

1. May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude* (New York: Norton, 1973), 77.
2. Robert Scholes, "Toward a Semiotics of Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, 4, no. 1 (1977): 111.
3. Michel de Montaigne, "Of Idleness," *Project Gutenberg's The Essays of Montaigne, Complete*, by Michel de Montaigne. Trans. Charles Cotton.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm#2HCH0008>.