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# Preface

## About OpenStax

OpenStax is part of Rice University, which is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable corporation. As an educational initiative, it's our mission to transform learning so that education works for every student. Through our partnerships with philanthropic foundations and our alliance with other educational resource companies, we're breaking down the most common barriers to learning. Because we believe that everyone should and can have access to knowledge.

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### Format

You can access this textbook for free in web view or PDF through OpenStax.org, and for a low cost in print.

## About *Writing Guide with Handbook*

*Writing Guide with Handbook* bridges the gap between everyday rhetoric and academic discourse by revealing to students that they are already engaged in rhetorical work within the familiar contexts of personal interaction and social media. The text seeks to extend these existing skills by showing students how to construct a variety of compelling compositions within self-defined contexts. *Writing Guide with Handbook* breaks down barriers in the field of composition by offering an inviting and inclusive approach to students of all intersectional identities. To meet this goal, the text creates a reciprocal relationship between daily conversation and the evolving world of academia, which must allow itself to be shaped by students as much as it seeks to shape them.

*Writing Guide with Handbook* was conceived in 2020—the year that brought everything into question for

students and instructors alike. Would we avert the climate crisis? Would we survive a global pandemic? Would we achieve gender equality? Would we finally acknowledge that Black lives and Black linguistics matter? Would we show acceptance toward refugees and Dreamers? Would we embrace multilingualism? How would we navigate our way through one existential crisis after another? Put simply, the answer for some of us has become that we write . . . we write for our lives. We write calls to action on social media. We write protest signs to carry in the streets. We write proposed legislation to create change. We write our stories . . . and we write the stories of those who cannot write their own.

In a world with so many questions and seemingly so few answers, the writing classroom as supported by *Writing Guide with Handbook* becomes an essential space for navigating hard conversations about *what is right* versus *what is easy*. The text invites students and instructors to practice invitational, rather than confrontational, verbal and written conversations. These classroom communities will learn to communicate about culture in its broadest sense without divisiveness. Instructors will be empowered to emphasize meaning and voice over outdated writing traditions and to teach empathy as a rhetorical strategy. Students will be empowered to negotiate their identities and their cultures through language as they, too, join us in writing for their lives.

## Pedagogical Foundation

The OpenStax *Writing Guide with Handbook* is organized according to relevant writing genres, with the writing process, effective writing practices or strategies—including graphic organizers, writing frames, and word banks to support visual learning—and conventions of usage and style contextually embedded. The text includes an editing and documentation handbook, which is linked to the Editing Focus feature located in each genre chapter. This organizational approach allows instructors and students to focus on the importance of argumentation and research. In addition, the text allows for nimble customization based on inclusive assignments that welcome all voices and experiences to the academic forum as appropriate to the teaching styles of individual instructors and writing programs.

## Highlights

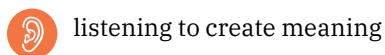
- **Cultural awareness** is a defined outcome of the text. As a standalone aspect of the rhetorical situation, this outcome supports a culturally integrated pedagogical approach. As such, it is evident throughout the text. In addition, multiculturalism is supported by a repeating chapter-level feature on diverse trailblazers who are working innovatively within each genre. Annotated writing samples in each chapter cross time, space, and culture to emphasize the contributions of many to the genre. There is also a chapter titled “Language, Identity, and Culture,” which focuses on contemporary cultural issues and invites students to participate in the ongoing dialogue over the power of language to define and shape both identity and culture. Students of all identities are invited to write about and reflect on their personal experiences with rhetoric in public or private settings. Writing assignments are inclusive so as to invite a wide range of subjects, voices, and viewpoints into the classroom, reinforcing the idea that all are welcome and respected. Writing assignments also include suggestions for differing cultural or linguistic approaches. In addition, writing practices and graphic organizers are marked by targeted icons with regard to culture, linguistics, and learning styles to help instructors and students scaffold assignments.

 understanding content through the broad lens of language

 understanding content through the broad lens of culture

 seeing to create meaning

 voice to text



listening to create meaning



movement to create meaning



where ideas come from and how to capture them

- **Critical language awareness** is an important part of the goal of cultural awareness. The text invites and encourages instructors and students to openly and regularly challenge and question accepted conventions and practices with regard to language use with the understanding that language both results from and transmits social, political, and ideological beliefs and practices. In so doing, language is a force of both liberation and oppression. Critical language awareness is a journey, not an end destination. As language grows and evolves, so too must our willingness to engage with it in culturally inclusive ways.

With this awareness in mind, OpenStax has not censored the racial slur that appears in the excerpt from Frederick Douglass's autobiography in Chapter 3. Because the issues regarding the usage of the word are complex and evolving, instructors may choose to discuss with students the usage of the word in the text and how that might differ from the practice of reading it aloud in the class, for example. For support, the introduction to the text provides a research-based discussion of the term and its usage.

- **Process orientation** is supported by two different chapter structures that move students through the writing process in elongated and abbreviated ways. Five genre assignments guide students through a complete experience with the writing process, including formatting that is relevant to the genre. Other optional writing assignments feature an abbreviated process so that instructors and students are afforded the time to build out their courses in customized ways. Complex genres such as position argument and argumentative research are covered through a multiple-chapter approach so that students are supported throughout the writing process. Each of the genre chapters includes modeling through an annotated sample, a Quick Launch guide that includes a graphic organizer to get students started writing, and an evaluation rubric that informs the drafting process. Finally, students are encouraged in the ongoing construction and self-evaluation of a writing portfolio through a concluding feature in each chapter and a final chapter titled "Portfolio Reflection."
- **Editing in context** is supported through a chapter-level Editing Focus feature that calls out a particular editing issue related to the genre. The feature instructs students in recognizing and editing the error. Each Editing Focus feature is linked to the appropriate section of the Handbook, as these editing focuses are based on the 10 most important editing topics as suggested by instructors of writing. Given that the *Modern Language Association Handbook*, 9th edition, was published in 2021, simultaneous to the developmental process of this text, OpenStax has relied on the *Modern Language Association Handbook*, 8th edition, for citation information. Any discrepancies will be addressed in a future reprint of this text.
- **Information and media literacy** is supported through specific chapters, such as "Multimodal and Online Writing" and "Image Analysis." In addition, the Genre Trailblazer feature includes those who work in genres such as newspapers, visual arts, and film.
- **Media assets** are featured in 14 chapters. These assets invite students to consider and practice the application of varying genre characteristics as well as steps in the writing process, such as peer review and revision. The media assets may be completed by students individually in class or at home; by groups in class; or by the class as a whole with the instructor leading. For support, these assets are discussed at point of use in the Instructor's Manual.

## Key Features

- **Learning Outcomes** begin each numbered section. These sets of clear and concise outcomes have been thoroughly revised to be both measurable and closely aligned with current teaching practice. These outcomes are designed to help the instructor decide what content to include or assign and to guide student

expectations of learning. After completing each chapter and writing assignment, students should be able to demonstrate mastery of the learning outcomes.

- **Genre Trailblazer** introduces and grounds each chapter by presenting one of a diverse group of contemporary artists who are doing innovative work within the genre. Discussion questions invite students to consider the ways in which each trailblazer is working within or challenging the conventions of a genre.
- **Glance at Genre** introduces students to each genre through key characteristics and important terminology.
- **Annotated Sample Readings** or **Student Samples** provide alternating annotated readings by professional authors and student writers. The annotations point out characteristics of each genre. Discussion questions invite students to consider the ways in which authors meet or challenge these characteristics.
- **Writing Process** steps present students with a writing assignment in each chapter genre and then lead them through a recursive drafting process. This section provides students with Quick Launch strategies, graphic organizers, samples and models, and invitations to develop their assignments in varying ways.
- **Editing Focus** presents students with an editing focus and then invites them to practice and apply the focus in a number of ways. This feature, as well as other activities, will also be addressed in the instructor's manual and the student toolkit so that instructors can use it flexibly.
- **Evaluation** is approached through a sample rubric, which is provided for every assignment.
- **Spotlight on . . .** provides students with additional information on topics related to the genres.
- **Portfolio Reflections** help students incorporate each assignment into ongoing portfolios. Students are encouraged throughout the text to keep course portfolios in print or digital format.
- **Further Reading** helps students further explore the chapter genre through references and links to other information sources.

## About the Authors

### Senior Contributing Authors

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Dr. Michelle Bachelor Robinson directs the Comprehensive Writing Program and is an assistant professor of writing and rhetoric at Spelman College. For five weeks each summer, she also serves as faculty for the Middlebury College Bread Loaf School of English, a summer residential graduate program for secondary educators. Her research and teaching focus on community engagement, historiography, African American rhetoric and literacy, composition pedagogy and theory, and student and program assessment. She is the coeditor of the *Routledge Reader of African American Rhetoric* and has published articles in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *Peitho: Journal of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition*, the *Alabama Humanities Review*, and the *Journal of Social Work Education*. Her early career was spent as a secondary educator, teaching high school students in the subjects of writing, literature, reading, debate, and drama. Dr. Robinson currently serves as the higher-education cochair of the College Board test development committee for the Advanced Placement (AP) English Language Exam, as well as a member of the test development committee for the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) for College Composition. Dr. Robinson also served on the executive committee for the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) from 2017 to 2020 and is still actively involved in that national work.

#### **Maria Jerskey, City University of New York**

Dr. Maria Jerskey is a professor of education and language acquisition at the City University of New York (CUNY), where she teaches courses in ESL, linguistics, bilingualism, and French to community college students and academic writing to graduate students. She is the founder and director of the Literacy Brokers Program, which supports and promotes the publishing practices of multilingual scholars. Dr. Jerskey has published widely and been involved in national professional committees and organizations that focus on bringing current research and scholarship to bear on institutionalized practices that disenfranchise

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***featuring Toby Fulwiler, Emeritus, University of Vermont***

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## **Additional Resources**

### **Student and Instructor Resources**

We've compiled additional resources for both students and instructors, including an instructor's manual, lecture slides, and a student-facing toolkit. Instructor resources require a verified instructor account, for which you can apply when you log in or create your account on OpenStax.org. Take advantage of these resources to supplement *Writing Guide with Handbook*.

#### **Instructor's Manual**

Designed to provide guidance for delivering the textbook content in dynamic and interesting ways, the instructor's manual includes chapter-by-chapter teaching tips, classroom activities, answers to the discussion questions, and suggestions for integrating the chapter content and the toolkit (see below). In addition, the manual offers sample syllabi, tips for creating assignments, advice for classroom management and responding to student writing, suggestions for using culturally responsive and anti-racist teaching practices, an overview of the handbook in the textbook, and a glossary of terms. Authored by Carol Hollar-Zwick, writer and curriculum designer.

#### **Lecture Slides**

The PowerPoint slides provide outlines, images, and an overview of chapter topics as a starting place for instructors to build their lectures. Authored by Michael Hartwell, composition instructor and English-language tutor.

#### **Toolkit**

The student-facing toolkit provides practice and instruction to accompany each chapter's assignment. With frames for writing at the sentence, paragraph, and assignment levels, the toolkit allows instructors to provide scaffolded support. Authored by Victoria Friedrich, writer and curriculum designer.

#### **Community Hubs**

OpenStax partners with the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) to offer Community Hubs on OER Commons—a platform for instructors to share community-created resources that support OpenStax books, free of charge. Through our Community Hubs, instructors can upload their own materials or download resources to use in their own courses, including additional ancillaries, teaching material, multimedia, and relevant course content. We encourage instructors to join the hubs for the subjects most relevant to your teaching and research as an opportunity both to enrich your courses and to engage with other faculty. To reach the Community Hubs, visit [www.oercommons.org/hubs/openstax](http://www.oercommons.org/hubs/openstax).

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# **Unit 1**

## **The Things We Carry: Experience, Culture, and Language**

### **Introduction**

Unit 1 is about **you**—who you are and what you bring to the writing classroom. In his short story “The Things They Carried” (1990), American author and Vietnam War (1954–1975) veteran Tim O’Brien (b. 1946) suggests that the identities of soldiers may be explored through an examination of the items they choose to carry in their packs. Of course, in their new roles as soldiers, they carry items related to survival—weapons and rations—but they also carry other items. Some carry photographs of loved ones, others carry good luck charms or religious icons, and still others carry paper and pen for writing home. Like these soldiers, you carry experiences into the writing classroom that will inform your participation. Your prior experiences with language, culture, and literacy define the unique viewpoint that you will offer during classroom discussions and writings. During this journey, your classmates will learn from you, as you will learn from them. In this way, a new element of your identity will evolve—that of a college student.

# The Digital World: Building on What You Already Know to Respond Critically

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**FIGURE 1.1** Whether these students realize it or not, they are engaging in rhetoric by consuming and posting information on social media. (credit: "Together and Alone" by Garry Knight/flickr, CC-BY)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 1.1** "Reading" to Understand and Respond
- 1.2** Social Media Trailblazer: Selena Gomez
- 1.3** Glance at Critical Response: Rhetoric and Critical Thinking
- 1.4** Annotated Student Sample: Social Media Post and Responses on Voter Suppression
- 1.5** Writing Process: Thinking Critically About a "Text"
- 1.6** Evaluation: Intention vs. Execution
- 1.7** Spotlight on ... Academia
- 1.8** Portfolio: Tracing Writing Development

**INTRODUCTION** Your past experiences with computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices represent your conscious choice to connect with a global community. For example, you may post on social media sites where you receive instant feedback from around the world in the form of reposts or likes. Through these interactions, you are empowered to influence people more than at any other point in history. In fact, you may be on the road to becoming the next big social media influencer—a person with established credentials in a certain field with access to a large audience and who, because of popularity, can influence others' actions. With applications that instantly translate into many languages, even language has become less of a barrier to your potential audience and thus to your potential influence. However, even though the world may be more

connected now than ever before and communication may be faster, easier, more powerful, and more widely accessible, the basics of communication have not changed.

**A****B****C** The essential element of all communication, past and present, including your social media posts and related comments, is the **rhetorical situation**: the **conditions**, or circumstances, of the communication and the **agents**, or people involved, in that communication. Notice that the term comes from the word **rhetoric**. Originally, *rhetoric* referred to the art of persuasive speaking or writing. Now it is used more inclusively to mean the “techniques and theories of communication.” And notice, too, that like the people in [Figure 1.1](#), you are already using rhetoric every day as you find yourself in different rhetorical situations on social media. In this chapter, you will learn more about the use of rhetoric within rhetorical situations as you begin the journey of constructing bridges among the communication taking place on social media, in the world of academia, and in the world at large.

## 1.1 "Reading" to Understand and Respond

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify genre elements and determine how conventions are shaped by audience, purpose, language, culture, and expectation.
- Articulate the importance of inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating in varying rhetorical and cultural contexts.
- Identify relationships between ideas, patterns of organization, and interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements in a diverse range of texts.

**A****B****C** To read and write well means to read and write critically. *What are you saying that's new, different, insightful, or edgy?* In fact, a major goal of most college curricula is to train students to be critical readers, writers, and thinkers so that they carry those habits into the real and virtual worlds beyond campus borders. *What, you may ask, does it mean to be critical? How does being a critical reader, writer, and thinker differ from being an ordinary reader, writer, and thinker?* Being critical in reading means knowing how to analyze distinctions, interpretations, and conclusions. Being critical in writing means making distinctions, developing interpretations, and drawing conclusions that stand up to thoughtful scrutiny by others. Becoming a critical thinker, then, means learning to exercise reason and judgment whenever you encounter the language of others or generate language yourself. Beginning with social media and then moving into the world of academia, this chapter explores strategies for helping you become a more accomplished critical reader and emphasizes the close thinking relationship between critical reading and critical writing.

### Rhetoric and the Rhetorical Situation

**A****B****C** To begin to read, write, and think critically, it is helpful to look at something familiar such as social media and the way it is used. Interactions on social media, as in all types of conversation, present rhetorical situations that form the basis of communication. In the most basic terms, a rhetorical situation has two elements: agents and conditions. Agents are the originators (initiators) and the audience of the communication. The originator may have a real audience or an anticipated audience. A real audience is made up of people the originator may know personally or know of. For example, if you are the originator, your real audience could be a group of your peers to whom you present your ideas in class. Or it could be a person to whom you send a text message. You know the members of the class and know something about them. Similarly, you know the person to whom you send the text. An anticipated audience is one you hope to reach or one you expect will engage with your communication. When you post on social media platforms, for instance, your audience is probably anticipated. While you might have followers, you may not know them personally, but you anticipate who they are and how they might react.

**A****B****C** The conditions of a rhetorical situation refer to the genre, purpose, stance, context, and culture. The **genre**, or medium, is the mode in which you communicate. You may speak persuasively in class, or you may send a text

message; both are genres. The **purpose** is your reason or reasons for the communication. For example, if you are presenting to your class, your purpose might be to do well and get a good grade, but it also might be to inform or to persuade your classmates. Likewise, you might want to gain attention by posting something on social media that connects to other people's thoughts and feelings. The third condition is the **stance**, which is your take, or viewpoint, as presented in the communication. Your stance may be that college loans should be forgiven, or it may be that college loans should be repaid in full. The **context** is the setting of the rhetorical situation. Some examples might be a communication taking place during a global pandemic or during a Black Lives Matter protest. The context affects the ways in which a particular social, political, or economic situation influences the process of communication. The final element is **culture**, which refers to groups of people who share commonalities. When communicating, you make assumptions about the cultural traits of your audience, perhaps expecting that they will agree with you regarding certain values or beliefs. For example, if you are communicating with an American audience, you may assume a positive value for democracy or a dislike of foreign interference. Conversely, you also may communicate with people whose cultural views are at odds or in conflict with your own: for example, a man who publicly advocates outdated gender views might have trouble communicating culturally with a younger female audience. The ways in which you choose to communicate to those within and those outside of your culture are likely to differ as you craft a stance within a given context for a particular purpose and audience.

As you work through a deeper understanding of rhetoric within a rhetorical situation, remember a few key points. When you read, write, and think critically or rhetorically, you try to figure out why a message is being communicated in a certain way. Reading language rhetorically means figuring out *why* and *how* it works or fails to work in achieving its communicative purpose. Writing rhetorically means being conscious of the ways in which you construct a message within a clearly defined rhetorical situation. Thinking rhetorically means considering the possibilities of meaning as conveyed through language and image. By putting these concepts together, you will come to understand how these elements work in concert with each other and affect your interactions with the world.

### Social Media Savvy

 Social media is an important part of modern life, and many people maintain multiple social media accounts. These applications can educate and help you connect to others. However, every post you make on any social media platform leaves a digital footprint—the sum of your online behavior. These footprints might reflect on you positively or negatively. On one hand, if you repost a baby goat jumping around a barnyard, you and others may laugh and no harm is done. On the other hand, if you are upset or angry and post something nasty about someone, the target can be harmed through cyberbullying and your online reputation tarnished. It is important to understand that the footprint you leave may never go away and may cause trouble for you down the road.

Negative footprints could hurt your credibility regarding future admissions to programs or future employment. Comedian Kevin Hart (b. 1979), for example, lost a job hosting the Academy Awards when some of his negative posts resurfaced, even after he rescinded them and acknowledged the problem. Right or wrong, social media leaves a trail for others to find. *In other words, what are you showing others about your talents and skills through your social media presence?* The point is that with its wonder and power, social media should be treated responsibly and with an awareness of its longevity. One way to better judge what you might post would be to consider the rhetorical situation so that you can anticipate an audience reaction based on genre, purpose, stance, context, and cultural awareness.



## 1.2 Trailblazer

### Social Media Trailblazer: Selena Gomez

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating in various rhetorical contexts.
- Identify the elements of successful social media use.



**FIGURE 1.2** Selena Gomez (credit: "Selena Gomez" by jenniferlinneaphotography/flickr, CC BY 2.0))

*"Our actions and words have an impact on others—whether on social media or in real life."*

#### Authenticity as Rhetoric



By any standard, singer, actor, and philanthropist Selena Gomez (b. 1992) is an influencer. By 2021, Gomez had amassed around 65 million [Twitter](https://openstax.org/r/selenagomeztwitter) (<https://openstax.org/r/selenagomeztwitter>) followers and over 260 million [Instagram](https://openstax.org/r/selenagomezinsta) (<https://openstax.org/r/selenagomezinsta>) followers, placing her among celebrities with top follower counts. Gomez was born in Grand Prairie, Texas, but raised outside of Dallas. She is named after the popular Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla-Perez (1971–1995), who was murdered by her fan club president but still maintains an avid following. Gomez entered show business as a child, inspired by the single mother, an amateur actress, who raised her. After roles on [Barney and Friends](https://openstax.org/r/barneyandfriends) (<https://openstax.org/r/barneyandfriends>) (from 2002–2004) and *Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over* (2003), Gomez auditioned for the world of Disney. Appearing first on *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* (2005–2008), Gomez landed a lead role as Alex Russo on Disney's *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007–2012), for which she also sang the [theme song](https://openstax.org/r/themesong) (<https://openstax.org/r/themesong>). By 2012, Gomez was ready to depart from such family-friendly roles, taking parts in films such as *Spring Breakers* (2012), *The Dead Don't Die* (2019), and *A Rainy Day in New York* (2019). Gomez's music career paralleled that of her acting career; she began as a member of the band Selena Gomez and the Scene (2009) and launched her solo career in 2012. Gomez has released the solo albums *Stars Dance* (2013), *Revival* (2015), and *Rare* (<https://openstax.org/r/rare>) (2020).

Despite Gomez's success as a public figure, her relationship with social media has been rocky. Gomez describes her social media strategy as "intentional . . . I don't take a lot of pointless pictures." Gomez recognizes the power of her social media platform, and she has used it to champion the causes that she cares about. As a person diagnosed with both lupus (2015) and bipolar disorder (2018), Gomez has used social media to advocate for mental and physical health causes. (Lupus is an inflammatory disease caused by the immune system attacking its own tissue; bipolar disorder is characterized by extreme mood swings.) Gomez says, "Everything that I'm attached to has a charity aspect." She continues, "If something good isn't coming out of it, I'm not going to do it." This "intentional," open approach to her personal difficulties and her emphasis on building positivity out of struggle generates an intimacy with fans that has served to increase her following.

However, the most radical action that Gomez may have committed with regard to social media was her decision to quit it. Suffering from publicity overload, cyberbullying, and a negatively changing sense of self, Gomez handed over her Instagram account to her assistant in 2017. She has also handed her Instagram account over to people such as Georgia voting rights advocate [Stacey Abrams](https://openstax.org/r/staceyabrams) (<https://openstax.org/r/staceyabrams>) (b. 1973) as part of the [#ShareTheMicNow](https://openstax.org/r/sharethemicnow) (<https://openstax.org/r/sharethemicnow>) campaign, which amplifies the voices of Black women. Gomez deleted social media apps from her smartphone and gave up knowledge of her passwords. She claims that the move has been liberating: "I suddenly had to learn how to be with myself." She reflects that there were 150 million people on her phone, and "I just put it down. . . . That was such a relief."

Despite the shift in approach, Gomez's relationship with social media remains strong. She actively cultivates a "deliberate . . . vulnerability" through her unwillingness to shy away from tough or important issues. Regardless of which of Gomez's assistants hits the "post" button, Gomez's focus on giving of herself to improve society resonates with her fans.

### Discussion Questions

1. Have you heard of Selena Gomez? What did you know about her before reading this feature?
2. If you consider her background, what skills do you think have helped Gomez establish her savvy rhetorical presence on social media? Which skills do you relate to, and how might you use them?
3. In what ways has Gomez used her struggles with mental and physical health to amplify her platform? How might this context affect the rhetorical situation?
4. Explain how authenticity helps Gomez communicate. What influence does one's experience have on the rhetorical situation?
5. In what ways does Gomez rely on emotional appeals to her audience? In what ways does she incorporate ethics, logic, or timeliness?

## 1.3 Glance at Critical Response: Rhetoric and Critical Thinking

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Use words, images, and specific rhetorical terminology to understand, discuss, and analyze a variety of texts.
- Determine how genre conventions are shaped by audience, purpose, language, culture, and expectation.
- Distinguish among different types of rhetorical situations and communicate effectively within them.



Every day you find yourself in rhetorical situations and use rhetoric to communicate with and to persuade others, even though you might not realize you are doing it. For example, when you voice your opinion or respond to another's opinion, you are thinking rhetorically. Your purpose is often to convince others that you have a valid opinion, and maybe even issue a call to action. Obviously, you use words to communicate and present your position. But you may communicate effectively through images as well.



## Words and Images



Both words and images convey information, but each does so in significantly different ways. In English, words are written sequentially, from left to right. A look at a daily newspaper or web page reveals textual information further augmented by headlines, titles, subtitles, boldface, italics, white space, and images. By the time readers get to college, they have internalized predictive strategies to help them critically understand a variety of written texts and the images that accompany them. For example, you might be able to predict the words in a sentence as you are reading it. You also know the purpose of headers and other markers that guide you through the reading.

To be a critical reader, though, you need to be more than a good predictor. In addition to following the thread of communication, you need to evaluate its logic. To do that, you need to ask questions such as these as you consider the argument: *Is it fair (i.e., unbiased)? Does it provide credible evidence? Does it make sense, or is it reasonably plausible?* Then, based on what you have decided, you can accept or reject its conclusions. You may also consider alternative possibilities so that you can learn more. In this way, you read actively, searching for information and ideas that you understand and can use to further your own thinking, writing, and speaking. To move from understanding to critical awareness, plan to read a text more than once and in more than one way. One good strategy is to ask questions of a text rather than to accept the author's ideas as fact. Another strategy is to take notes about your understanding of the passage. And another is to make connections between concepts in different parts of a reading. Maybe an idea on page 4 is reiterated on page 18. To be an active, engaged reader, you will need to build bridges that illustrate how concepts become part of a larger argument. Part of being a good reader is the act of building information bridges within a text and across all the related information you encounter, including your experiences.

With this goal in mind, beware of passive reading. If you ever have been reading and completed a page or paragraph and realized you have little idea of what you've just read, you have been reading passively or just moving your eyes across the page. Although you might be able to claim you "read" the material, you have not engaged with the text to learn from it, which is the point of reading. You haven't built bridges that connect to other material. Remember, words help you make sense of the world, communicate in the world, and create a record to reflect on so that you can build bridges across the information you encounter.



Images, however, present a different set of problems for critical readers. Sometimes having little or no accompanying text, images require a different skill set. For example, in looking at a photograph or drawing, you find different information presented simultaneously. This presentation allows you to scan or stop anywhere in the image—at least theoretically. Because visual information is presented simultaneously, its general meaning may be apparent at a glance, while more nuanced or complicated meanings may take a long time to figure out. And even then, odds are these meanings will vary from one viewer to another.



**FIGURE 1.3** Young woman looking away from the viewer or old woman in profile? (credit: "My wife and my mother-in-law" by W. E. (William Ely) Hill/Public Domain)



In the well-known image shown in [Figure 1.3](#), *do you see an old woman or a young woman?* Although the image remains static, your interpretation of it may change depending on any number of factors, including your experience, culture, and education. Once you become aware of the two perspectives of this image, you can see the "other" easily. But if you are not told about the two ways to "see" it, you might defend a perspective without realizing that you are missing another one. Most visuals, however, are not optical illusions; less noticeable perspectives may require more analysis and may be more influenced by your cultural identity and the ways in which you are accustomed to interpreting. In any case, this image is a reminder to have an open mind and be willing to challenge your perspectives against your interpretations. As such, like written communication, images require analysis before they can be understood thoroughly and evaluation before they can be judged on a wider scale.



If you have experience with social media, you may be familiar with the way users respond to images or words by introducing another image: the **meme**. A meme is a photograph containing text that presents one viewer's response. The term *meme* originates from the Greek root *mim*, meaning "mime" or "mimic," and the English suffix *-eme*. In the 1970s, British evolutionary biologist and author Richard Dawkins (b. 1941) created the term for use as "a unit of cultural transmission," and he understood it to be "the cultural equivalent of a gene." Today, according to the dictionary definition, memes are "amusing or interesting items that spread widely through the Internet." For example, maybe you have seen a meme of an upset cat or of a friend turning around to look at something else while another friend is relating something important. The text that accompanies these pictures provides some expression on the part of the originator that the audience usually finds humorous, relatable, or capable of arousing any range of emotion or thought. For example, in the photograph shown in [Figure 1.4](#) of a critter standing at attention, the author of the text conveys anxiousness. The use of the word *like* has been popularized in the meme genre to mean "to give an example."



**FIGURE 1.4** Example of a meme (credit: “Waiting for you like . . .” by Marco Verch/flickr/CC BY 2.0)

While these playful aspects of images are important, you also should recognize how images fit into the rhetorical situation. Consider the same elements, such as context and genre, when viewing images. You may find multiple perspectives to consider. In addition, *where* images show up in a text or for an audience might be important. These are all aspects of understanding the situation and thinking critically. Engaged readers try to connect and build bridges to information across text and images.

As you consider your reading and viewing experiences on social media and elsewhere, note that your responses involve some basic critical thinking strategies. Some of these include summary, paraphrase, analysis, and evaluation, which are defined in the next section. The remaining parts of this chapter will focus on written communication. While this chapter touches only briefly on visual discourse, [Image Analysis: What You See](#) presents an extensive discussion on visual communication.

### Relation to Academics



As with all disciplines, rhetoric has its own vocabulary. What follows are key terms, definitions, and elements of rhetoric. Become familiar with them as you discuss and write responses to the various texts and images you will encounter.

- **Analysis:** detailed breakdown or other explanation of some aspect or aspects of a text. Analysis helps readers understand the meaning of a text.
- **Authority:** credibility; background that reflects experience, knowledge, or understanding of a situation. An authoritative voice is clear, direct, factual, and specific, leaving an impression of confidence.
- **Context:** setting—time and place—of the rhetorical situation. The context affects the ways in which a particular social, political, or economic situation influences the process of communication. Depending on context, you may need to adapt your text to audience background and knowledge by supplying (or omitting) information, clarifying terminology, or using language that best reaches your readers.
- **Culture:** group of people who share common beliefs and lived experiences. Each person belongs to various cultures, such as a workplace, school, sports team fan, or community.
- **Evaluation:** systematic assessment and judgment based on specific and articulated criteria, with a goal to improve understanding.
- **Evidence:** support or proof for a fact, opinion, or statement. Evidence can be presented as statistics, examples, expert opinions, analogies, case studies, text quotations, research in the field, videos, interviews, and other sources of credible information.
- **Media literacy:** ability to create, understand, and evaluate various types of media; more specifically, the ability to apply critical thinking skills to them.
- **Meme:** image (usually) with accompanying text that calls for a response or elicits a reaction.

- **Paraphrase:** rewording of original text to make it clearer for readers. When they are part of your text, paraphrases require a citation of the original source.
- **Rhetoric:** use of effective communication in written, visual, or other forms and understanding of its impact on audiences as well as of its organization and structure.
- **Rhetorical situation:** instance of communication; the conditions of a communication and the agents of that communication.
- **Social media:** all digital tools that allow individuals or groups to create, post, share, or otherwise express themselves in a public forum. Social media platforms publish instantly and can reach a wide audience.
- **Summary:** condensed account of a text or other form of communication, noting its main points. Summaries are written in one's own words and require appropriate attribution when used as part of a paper.
- **Tone:** an author's projected or perceived attitude toward the subject matter and audience. Word choice, vocal inflection, pacing, and other stylistic choices may make the author sound angry, sarcastic, apologetic, resigned, uncertain, authoritative, and so on.

As you read through these terms, you likely recognize most of them and realize you are adept in some rhetorical situations. For example, when you talk with friends about your trip to the local mall, you provide details they will understand. You might refer to previous trips or tell them what is on sale or that you expect to see someone from school there. In other words, you understand the components of the rhetorical situation. However, if you tell your grandparents about the same trip, the rhetorical situation will be different, and you will approach the interaction differently. Because the audience is different, you likely will explain the event with more detail to address the fact that they don't go to the mall often, or you will omit specific details that your grandparents will not understand or find interesting. For instance, instead of telling them about the video game store, you might tell them about the pretzel café.

As part of your understanding of the rhetorical situation, you might summarize specific elements, again depending on the intended audience. You might speak briefly about the pretzel café to your friends but spend more time detailing the various toppings for your grandparents. If, by chance, you have previously stopped to have a pretzel, you might provide your analysis and evaluation of the service and the food. Once again, you are engaged in rhetoric by showing an understanding of and the ability to develop a strategy for approaching a particular rhetorical situation. The point is to recognize that rhetorical situations differ, depending, in this case, on the audience. Awareness of the rhetorical situation applies to academic writing as well. You change your presentation, tone, style, and other elements to fit the conditions of the situation.

## 1.4 Annotated Student Sample: Social Media Post and Responses on Voter Suppression

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Determine how conventions are shaped by purpose, language, culture, and expectations.
- Read for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating in varying rhetorical and cultural contexts.
- Distinguish relationships between genre conventions, ideas, patterns of organization, and interplay between various elements and how they influence the rhetorical situation.

## Introduction



**FIGURE 1.5** In Ohio, legal voter Larry Harmon was purged from the voter rolls because he had not voted since 2008. (credit: “Kaptur stands up for Ohio voters at Supreme Court” by Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0)

**A****B****C** In the social media thread that follows, Proud Immigrant Citizen @primmcit posts about immigration and voter suppression. Others add their comments regarding voter suppression. Consider the ways in which each person responds to this initial post.

### LIVING BY THEIR OWN WORDS

#### Social Media Thread

Proud Immigrant Citizen @primmcit

POTUS and DOJ have created a section dedicated to denaturalization. Strips citizenship and disenfranchises immigrant citizens, mainly persons of color, on trumped-up charges. Not-so-subtle way to control who can and cannot vote! This is a nightmare!

*This opening post sets up a rhetorical situation. The genre is social media in which the platform limits the number of characters. The author's purpose is to inform others about a policy. It may also be to collect "likes" or reposts to spread the information, regardless of its accuracy. The audience is a collection of social media users—some known, some unknown. The author's stance is against the denaturalization policy. The context is a POTUS/DOJ action against immigrants. The culture shows a conflict between immigrants and the current administration (and its supporters).*

History Buff @historyfuture

This is not new. Immigration Act of 1924 limited number of new immigrants to 2% of current U.S. citizens of that nationality. Largest groups (e.g., White people from northwest Europe) kept getting bigger. Effective way to concentrate political power.

*This response provides further information about the rhetorical situation by offering historical context, which, again, may or may not be accurate.*

Proud Immigrant Citizen @primmcit | It may not be new, but it's still wrong!

*The original poster reiterates their stance.*

American and Proud @IPledge

Are you for real saying that the government shouldn't control immigration? I don't want all these criminals voting, and I've had it up to here with everyone's stupid complaining!

*This response provides an inaccurate summary of the original post. The tone shows anger and unwillingness to engage in meaningful discussion or to learn more about the issue. This person's mind is made up, so it would be hard to convince them to take a new or refined position.*

Peter @BetweenTheLines

No, Proud Immigrant is saying that denaturalization is being used as a means of voter suppression.

*This response corrects the previous responder with an accurate paraphrase of the original poster's stance and hints at the factual nature of the original post.*

Karen @ConservativeGirl

What are the trumped-up charges? Can you direct me to some evidence? Sounds like a lot of liberal garbage.

*This responder, although clearly against the original poster's stance, properly asks for evidence—something that may be provided through a link to keep the character count within the confines of the genre. Based on the handle and the end of the post, this person may or may not be open to a new perspective or factual information about the issue.*

Miguel @BothSides

Liberal or conservative, voter suppression is one of the most dangerous threats to our democracy.

*This responder offers an evaluation, regardless of stance. The tone indicates a reasonable attitude. However, by stating "liberal or conservative," this post may limit the audience since other cultures, such as moderate or progressive, may be following the thread.*

Sarah @IWatch

When the news talks about low voter turnout in an election, it's hard to know why people didn't show up.

*This responder begins an analysis of the original post by providing a questioning tone. However, this post does not seem to further the discussion; it makes a statement and does not follow up with new information or ideas.*

Mario @MyVote

Exactly, did they stay home by choice, or were they "encouraged" to stay home by government red tape?

*This responder clarifies the analytical question and tries to reengage previous responders. The question also opens up the potential for new evidence from others.*

Maria @HomeGirl

It's not just immigrants. After Obama was elected, more than 20 states passed measures to limit voting in Black and Brown neighborhoods.

*This responder offers possible evidence to support the ongoing problem of voter suppression. While unverified, it provides a strong starting point for further inquiry and discussion so that evidence can be brought into the discussion.*

Malik @BlackPanther

This kind of racism isn't new. History Buff @historyfuture is right. Closing polling locations in Black and Brown neighborhoods is the new poll tax or literacy test.

*This responder makes a connection between the past and present—an element of analysis.*

Cho @HistoryRepeats Yes, the party seeking power wants their voters to turn out, not all voters.

*This responder makes an inference based on the accumulation of evidence. While the conclusion may be sound, it remains unclear.*

Megan @FightThePower It's easier to suppress the votes of non-supporters than to try to win them over.

*This responder makes another inference based on the accumulation of evidence and alludes to previous instances of voter suppression along with potential rationale.*

Marco @DontMessWithMe That's why we need to #StayInLine

*This responder presents a potential call to action—something people can do to fight voter suppression. This call to action assumes the audience within the given culture understands or can find out what #StayInLine means and how to become involved.*

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## Conclusion

You are likely familiar with this type of social media thread—users from different cultures and with differing views coming together to comment on a post. What you may not have realized is that these users and others like them are engaging in rhetoric by responding to a text through summary, paraphrase, analysis, evaluation, calls for evidence, or proposals of action. Again, they demonstrate an understanding of the rhetorical situation and how to navigate within it.

## Discussion Questions

1. How might you have responded to the initial post, and why?
2. How do the usernames or handles affect your reading of the posts?
3. What might you have posted to begin a discussion about the voter suppression? How might each of these responders have interacted with your post?
4. What did you learn from the posts, and how might you confirm (or deny) the information provided? What specific items should you research to better engage with and further the discussion?
5. What conventions of social media do you notice (or do you recognize as missing)?

## 1.5 Writing Process: Thinking Critically About a “Text”

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Develop and implement flexible strategies for reading and rereading.
- Articulate how organizational features function for different audiences, creating cultural awareness within rhetorical situations.
- Determine how genre conventions for structure, paragraphs, tone, and mechanics vary.
- Identify common formats and design features for different kinds of text.
- Read and write critically within social media platforms.

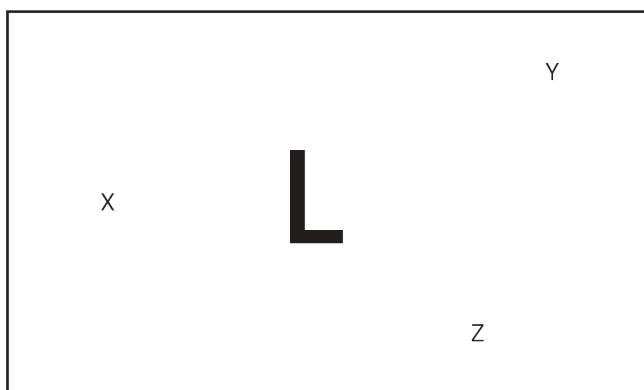


Thinking critically is crucial to success both in and after school. Indeed, this skill may be the foundation of all education. Most of *Writing Guide with Handbook* explores strategies for helping you become an accomplished critical writer, but as you have already learned, a close relationship exists between critical writing and critical reading. Reading and writing, like producing and consuming, are two sides of the same coin. When you study one, you inevitably learn more about the other at the same time. The more you attend to the language of published writers, the more you will learn about your own language. The more you attend to your own written language, the more you will learn about the texts you read.

## Summary of Assignment: Critical Response

Select a short “text” for response. The “text” may be written, visual, or a combination of both. Keeping in mind the example of Selena Gomez or other social media activists (such as Swedish environmentalist Greta Thunberg [b. 2003] or conservative speaker and entrepreneur Wayne Dupree [b. 1968]), focus on a text, perhaps a meme or social media post, that addresses an aspect of social activism. First, read it completely for understanding. Summarize or paraphrase the main ideas of the text to check for comprehension. Second, read it critically to determine its purpose, to analyze its use of language (or another element), and to evaluate it. Finally, write a short (1–2 pages) critical response to the text, perhaps recommending or not recommending it to other readers, explaining its significance in a particular area of life or field of study, or even commenting on the diction or style of the communication and its potential impact on readers.

**Another Lens.** When you consider another perspective, you often learn information you have not considered before. Look at [Figure 1.6](#):



**FIGURE 1.6** What X, Y, and Z see (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)



If you have the perspective of the X, all you see is the “back” of the L. You might not even know it’s an L. You might think it is an I, but it also could be the side of an M, or an N, or even a P. From the perspective of X, you have only limited information about the structure, letter, or whatever is in front of you. If you take the perspective of Y, you have a different information, which contrasts with what you learned from X. Furthermore, neither X nor Y has the perspective of Z. As you can see, combining the perspectives gives you a more comprehensive picture. Although it is unlikely you will ever get a complete and accurate picture of any given situation, by considering other perspectives, you begin to think critically to understand an issue, problem, or condition.

As a class or in small groups, agree on a short text to read and respond to, as described. Share your responses in small groups, paying particular attention to the evaluation, analysis, and evidence that each person presents. Revise your initial response based on these new, shared perspectives from your classmates about the same text. The goal is to learn from others’ perspectives. In so doing, consider how your classmates’ perspectives enhance your comprehension and broaden your ability to understand the interpretations of the text. As you revise, incorporate this new knowledge, and consider how the various cultures and interpretations based on culture can lead to understanding and even misunderstanding. Finally, pay attention to how you might consider these multiple perspectives to clarify the text’s purpose or meaning for an audience.

### Quick Launch: Mapping the Rhetorical Situation

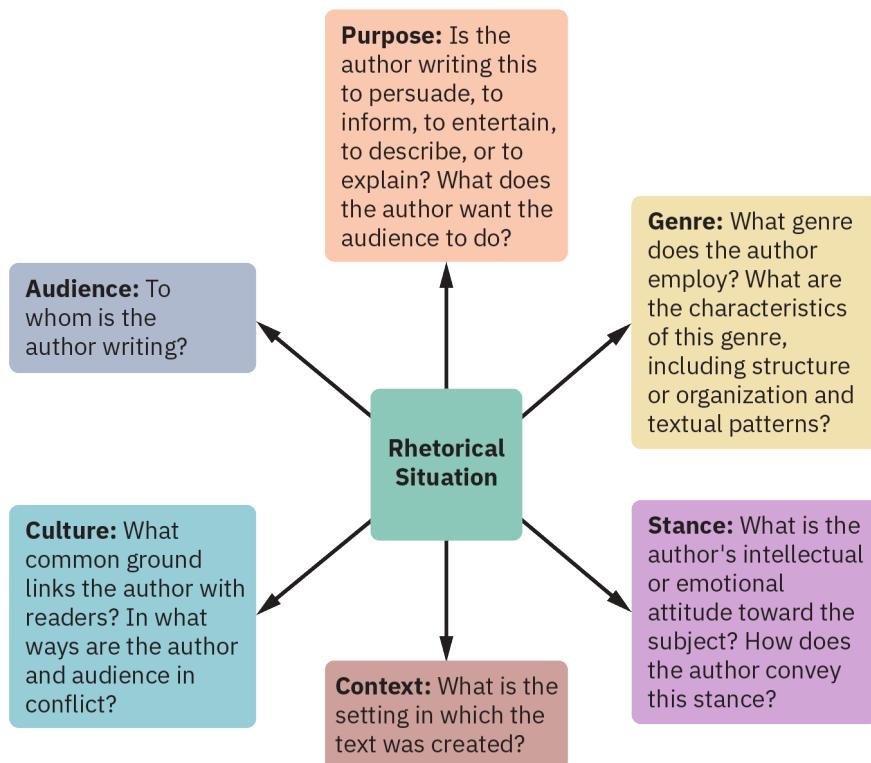


When you first sit down to write, you can use any of several methods to get going. The blank page can be intimidating, and facing a blank page is one of the reasons writing can be challenging at first. Figure out which “launch” methods work best for you and your style(s) of thinking and writing. Sometimes this stage is called **prewriting** or **planning**. Taking the time to prewrite helps you decide how to proceed to the actual writing and builds your confidence in the process. Some people make concept maps, others make checklists, and still



others create formal outlines. Some do research on a topic before they start, whereas others just sit down and write whatever comes to mind, a process called **freewrite**. There is no perfect or correct way to begin writing. The important thing is to discover which strategies work for you for a particular writing task, and then to use them.

-  For this writing task, create a concept map with six radiating circles (or use six index cards that you can physically move around on a tabletop). Label the map as noted in [Figure 1.7](#). In each radiating circle, fill in the information regarding the rhetorical situation (that is, the agents and the five conditions: genre, purpose, stance, context, and culture) in relation to your chosen text. As you assess the rhetorical situation, you will further your understanding of the text, and you may begin to find areas for analysis or evaluation.
- 



**FIGURE 1.7** Concept map (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

### Drafting: Restating, Analyzing, and Evaluating

-  To restate and then respond to a text, you need to both reread and “resee” it, reconsidering its rhetorical situation and your reaction to it. Be sure that you grasp the main ideas within the text but move beyond that to a critical understanding of the text as a cultural artifact. In responding, you start a conversation with the text so that you enter into the framework and context of the communication. In general, when responding to a text, you have to

- understand what it means within its rhetorical situation;
- analyze its meaning;
- evaluate its significance; and
- determine how to incorporate it into your own thinking and writing.

#### Responding to Understand: Summary

A summary is a condensed version of a longer text that reviews its main ideas. Shorter than the original text, a summary is written in your own words. To prepare a summary, you may outline or annotate the text to highlight relationships between ideas or conclusions. Reread sections of the text such as abstracts, first and last paragraphs, and sections titled “Summary,” “Observations,” or “Conclusion(s).” Also consider headings,

subheadings, and visuals, all of which often name main ideas. Remember, you want to provide a summary in your own words of the source’s work, not your interpretation or opinion of it. Review this video on [summarizing \(<https://openstax.org/r/summarizing>\)](https://openstax.org/r/summarizing) for more information.

### **Responding to Clarify: Paraphrase**

A paraphrase is a restatement of a text or part of a text, written in your own words, to clarify its meaning for your readers. A paraphrase is usually about the same length as the original text, although it can be either longer or shorter. Your goal in paraphrasing is to provide readers with clarity about a complex idea while still maintaining the perspective of the source. Paraphrasing can be difficult and requires practice, so be sure to [review \(<https://openstax.org/r/review>\)](https://openstax.org/r/review).

### **Responding to Analyze**

Responding to analyze means moving beyond a basic understanding and appreciation of what the text *says* and examining it to see how it was put together in order to deepen your comprehension. From thorough analysis, you can arrive at your own theory regarding what the text *means*. Thus, analysis leads to interpretation and to evaluation, or judgment of its merits.

In responding to analyze, consider the following questions: *How has the author constructed this text? What is the author’s subject, tone, and message or theme? For what reason or purpose has the author constructed this text in this way at this time?* An analysis provides an understanding of the ways in which the parts of the text form a whole within a rhetorical situation. Any such response points to important ideas and makes connections to provide textual evidence to support the analysis.

To read a text analytically, mark it for

- points of agreement and disagreement with claims or assertions;
- convincing examples that support claims or assertions;
- implications or consequences of believing the author;
- personal associations with text material;
- connections to other “texts” you have read;
- recurring images, symbols, diction, phrases, ideas, and so on; and
- conclusions.

Consider developing a coding system for cross-referencing to show that one annotation, passage, or idea is related to another. Some students write comments on different features of the text in different colors, such as green for nature imagery, blue for key terms, red for interesting anecdotes, and so on. Other students use numbers, such as 1 for plot, 2 for character, and so on.

Visit [Walden University \(<https://openstax.org/r/WaldenUniversity>\)](https://openstax.org/r/WaldenUniversity) for more detail on including analysis in your writing. You can also refer to [Rhetorical Analysis: Interpreting the Art of Rhetoric](#) for more on rhetorical analysis and [Print or Textual Analysis: What You Read](#) for more on print or textual analysis.

### **Responding to Evaluate**

Responding to evaluate means deciding whether you think the text accomplishes its purposes effectively. *In other words, does the text do what it claims to do?* You can also determine the significance of the text and its implications. Of course, different genres of texts should be judged using different criteria. To evaluate a text, you need to understand and analyze it in order to support your judgments.



In an **argument**, a writer (or speaker) advances claims and supports them with logical reasoning and evidence. A **claim** is a statement that something is true (or valid) or that some action should be taken. Every claim in an argument should be supported by logical **reasoning** (e.g., cause and effect, comparison and contrast, or problem and solution) and by reliable and sufficient **evidence** (e.g., facts, statistics, anecdotes, examples, or quotations). When responding to an argument, ask the following questions: *Is the claim based on*

*presented facts—information that can be verified? Is the claim based on credible inferences—connections between textual evidence and personal knowledge or experience? Is the claim based on unsubstantiated opinions—personal belief?* All three elements—facts, inferences, and opinions—have their places in argumentative texts. However, the strongest arguments are those based on verifiable facts and reasonably drawn inferences. Look out for opinions masquerading as facts and for inferences stemming from insufficient facts. Refer to the social media exchange in the [Annotated Student Sample](#) and recognize how those posts present information to help you see these connections.

An **informational text** presents facts and draws conclusions based on those facts. When responding to an informational text, ensure that the facts are accurate, that the inferences rely on facts, and that opinions presented as evidence are based on expertise, not emotion. Decide whether the author presents enough reliable facts to justify the conclusions. In addition, consider whether the author is reliable and reasonable. Also, ask questions, such as *Is the tone objective? Has all the relevant information been presented? Is the author an expert in the field? What necessary or useful information seems missing? Are other perspectives missing?*

To understand an informational text, you need some context for the new ideas you encounter, some knowledge of the terms and ideas, and knowledge of the rules that govern the genre. It would be difficult to read the Emancipation Proclamation with no knowledge of the Civil War (1861–1865) or the practice of enslavement. It would also be difficult to read a biology textbook chapter about photosynthesis but know nothing of plants, cell structure, or chemical reactions. The more you know, the more you learn; the more you learn, the more critical your reading, writing, and thinking will be. As you gain knowledge, you will naturally ask more questions and make more connections or bridges between information sources, thereby enhancing your reading, writing, and critical thinking skills.

Many college instructors will ask you to read about subjects that are new to you. First, of course, it's important to understand what you read. Comprehension means being proactive as a reader: looking up words you do not know, taking meaningful notes, asking questions, understanding the rhetorical situation of the text, and so on. Second, you want to improve your skills to analyze or evaluate texts critically and write about this understanding. *However, how do you develop context, learn background, and find the rules to help you read unfamiliar texts on unfamiliar subjects? What strategies or shortcuts can speed up the learning process?*

As an experiment, read the following statement issued by President Harry S. Truman (1884–1972), take notes, and practice being a proactive reader who focuses on comprehension, the rhetorical situation, and critical analysis of the passage:



**FIGURE 1.8** Harry S. Truman (credit: “Portrait of President Harry S. Truman” by National Archives and Records Administration/Public Domain)

Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, and destroyed its usefulness to the enemy. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of T.N.T. It had more than two thousand times the blast power of the British Grand Slam, which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare.

*How did you do? Did your reasoning go something like this?*

- Noting the setting—Hiroshima, Japan. Prior historical knowledge suggests that Hiroshima is one of the cities on which the United States dropped an atomic bomb near the end of World War II (1939–1945).
- Staying with the first sentence, Truman focuses on Hiroshima as something useful to the enemy that has been destroyed. There is no mention of human casualties.
- The second sentence focuses on the destructive power of the bomb, suggesting the force of the United States’s arsenal.
- Out of curiosity, you might have looked up the British Grand Slam to learn it was a powerful bomb type developed by engineer and inventor Sir Barnes Wallis (1887–1979) and used during World War II. Here, too, Truman suggests that the United States is even more powerful than its ally Great Britain.
- The tone of the text is prideful, as if using the largest bomb in the history of warfare is a grand accomplishment.

Whether reading new texts, learning new information, or witnessing unfamiliar events, you usually draw meaning by following a process something like this one—trying to identify what you see, hear, or read; questioning what you do not understand; making and testing predictions; and consulting authorities for confirmation or credible information. In this way, comprehension leads to critical analysis, understanding, and evaluation.

You will encounter different text types, too. Authors of **literary texts** such as short stories, poems, and plays may strive to make their work believable, enjoyable, and effective in conveying their themes. To locate a **theme**, look for recurring language, ideas, or images. Consider how the characters change between the beginning and the end of the story. Then, consider whether the author’s choices effectively convey the theme.

The strongest responses to literature or other art forms are based on textual evidence, as in most academic writing. Visit [Colorado State University](https://openstax.org/r/Colorado_State_University) ([https://openstax.org/r/Colorado\\_State\\_University](https://openstax.org/r/Colorado_State_University)) for more insight into evaluation.

You also can refer to [Evaluation or Review: Would You Recommend It?](#) for more on evaluation or review and [Print or Textual Analysis: What You Read](#) for more direction in approaching narrative texts.

### Responding to Write

 Once you understand a text, examine it more slowly to analyze and evaluate its cultural assumptions, its arguments, its evidence, its logic, and its conclusions. The best way to do this is to respond, or “talk back,” to the text in writing. Again, pay attention to the rhetorical situation: the agents and conditions. Talking back can take various forms, from actually saying words to yourself or aloud, to making margin notes, to composing a critical response. Respond to passages that cause you to pause for a moment to reflect, to question, to read again, or to say “Ah!” or “Aha!” Your reactions may suggest something important, maybe a revelation or an insight. Whichever it may be, take note of it because you may not have that reaction on another reading.

If the text is informational, try to capture the statements that are repeated or that pull together or summarize ideas. These are often critical elements to understand and possibly evaluate later. If the text is argumentative, examine the claim, reasoning, and each piece of supporting evidence. You can always go back to examine evidence or look up sources the author used when you want to gain a better understanding of the text’s purpose and position in a larger conversation. If the text is literary, pay extra attention to language features, such as images, metaphors, and crisp dialogue. Often, authors use these elements to help create a character, such as a character that always says “ya know” after every sentence, thus making a character more individual and realistic.

 Basically, you want to note what’s happening to you as you read. Ask about the text’s effect on you. *How are you reacting? What are you thinking or feeling? What do you like? What do you dislike? What do you trust or distrust? Why?* These responses are useful especially if the information is new or unexpected. By noting them, you will be able to build your understanding and convey that to readers. Part of the goal as a writer is to take the connections and bridges you have made and provide them for *your* readers to help them follow the logic of those connections.

Responding to a text in writing also means locating specific evidence to quote, paraphrase, or summarize in support of your analysis or evaluation. When you quote, you use the exact language of the text; when you summarize, you reduce the text to a brief statement of its main ideas in your own words; when you paraphrase, you restate the text in your own words. In all these cases—quotation, summary, or paraphrase—you will need to cite or reference the original source. Proper and consistent citation is important for several reasons. It helps establish your authority, thus building your credibility with readers. It also allows readers to go to your sources for more details or specifics so that they, too, can take part in the conversation. And it shows you are crediting your sources, thus avoiding plagiarism. To learn more about source citation, consult [MLA Documentation and Format](#) or [APA Documentation and Format](#).

Use this media interactive to practice identifying the different ways in which readers respond to texts. Then, examine the annotated professional critical response model below.

### Critical Response: An Annotated Model

#### The Case of Jean Gianini

In 1914, in the village of Poland, New York, sixteen-year-old Jean Gianini murdered his former teacher Lydia Beecher. During the commission of this brutal murder, Gianini provided evidence that tied him to the murder through a lost a button at the crime scene. Upon arrest, Gianini confessed to the crime. At the trial, Gianni’s defense lawyers claimed that Gianini was legally insane during the commission of his crime. Psychologist Dr. Henry Herbert Goddard was called to testify as an expert witness.

Here, as the author, Henry Herbert Goddard (1866–1957), analyzes “*The Case of Jean Gianini*” (1915). The selection that follows demonstrates a framework and an example of a critical response to a text. It has been excerpted for clarity and space.

### Introduction

In the introduction to his critical response, Goddard includes the title of the work and a summary of the rhetorical situation. He ends the introduction with a statement of evaluation.

“We find the defendant in this case not guilty as charged . . .”

Such was the verdict by the jury of the Supreme Court of Herkimer County, New York, on May 28th, 1914, in the case of the people vs. Jean Gianini, indicted for the murder of Lida Beecher, his former teacher.

*Here, the author cites the title of the text—a court case—and provides some early context.*

The prosecution and, at first at least, the majority of the citizens of the community held that this had been a carefully planned, premeditated, cold-blooded murder of the most atrocious character, committed with a fiendishness seldom seen among human beings. It was, on the other hand, claimed by the defense that the boy . . . had only the intelligence of a ten-year-old child, that he did not know the nature and quality of his act, and that he did not have any true realization of the enormity of his crime. For some reason unaccountable to a great many people, the jury accepted the view of the defense.

*Here, the author provides elements of the rhetorical situation: culture, context, and stance. Shared cultural assumptions are that the guilty will be punished. Contextual details of the trial include a summary of the defense and the jury’s reaction. The phrase “unaccountable to a great many people” may suggest that the author does not agree with the jury’s “not guilty” verdict.*

Not infrequently have verdicts in murder trials been unacceptable to the populace. In that respect this verdict is not an exceptional one, but from other standpoints it is remarkable. Probably no verdict in modern times has marked so great a step forward in society’s treatment of the wrongdoer. For the first time in history psychological tests of intelligence have been admitted into court and the mentality of the accused established on the basis of these facts.

The value of this verdict cannot be overestimated. It establishes a new standard in criminal procedure.

*Here, the author offers commentary about the larger meaning of this case, historically. In addition, the author concludes with a statement of evaluation—the importance of the verdict to the administration of justice.*

### Body

The next several body paragraphs provide Goddard with the opportunity to offer the reasons behind his evaluation. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence to maintain focus and organization. For each reason offered, explanation of its importance and supporting evidence from the text through quotations, summaries, or paraphrases should follow. See [MLA Documentation and Format](#) or [APA Documentation and Format](#) for guidance on citation.

One of the unique features, so far as court procedure is concerned, was the introduction into the case, of examinations by means of the Binet-Simon Measuring Scale of Intelligence.

*In this passage, the author gives one reason to support both his and the jury’s assessment of Jean’s intelligence—an intelligence test. Moreover, it is presented as a new scientific tool, which it was in 1915, to help establish the case.*

The writer's examination of Jean consisted largely of the use of these tests, and as a result he estimated his mentality at approximately ten years of age. It was somewhat difficult to estimate his mentality with the usual exactness since others had already used the tests, and it was impossible to say how much Jean had learned from his previous examinations. As a matter of fact, in some cases at least, he had not profited by the experiences which should have helped him greatly [ . . . ] For example, one of the tests is to draw from memory a diagram which he has been allowed to study for ten seconds. It is clear that if one were given this test two or three times, at the last trial he should have a pretty good idea of it and be able to draw it correctly. Although the writer's use of this test was in the last of the series of those who tested him, yet he did not succeed in drawing it. This is usually drawn by a child of ten years. When asked to repeat a certain sentence, he replied, "Oh, I have been asked that a hundred times." But in spite of the fact that he had heard it several times he failed to remember it, and yet this sentence is generally remembered by a child of twelve.

*Here, the author introduces evidence from the test through summary. Yet, he employs some faulty cause-and-effect reasoning. Based on Jean's response to repeating a sentence, is it possible that he refuses to participate in the tests rather than that he is unable to produce the desired responses? By not considering alternative conclusions (or perspectives), the author shows a bias against Jean and favoritism toward the test and the conclusion he draws from it.*

### Conclusion

To conclude, Goddard shares with readers his final thoughts about the text and leaves the readers with something to think about.

Our general studies have not yet gone far enough, and certainly our study of this particular family is far from sufficient, to enable us to decide whether this is a matter of heredity or whether we shall say that Jean's condition as well as that of the first child is traceable directly to the mother's insanity or to her alcoholism.

For the present purpose, of course, it does not matter. We see in these facts, whether we regard them as causes or merely as symptoms of a deeper lying cause, sufficient reason for Jean's [intellectual condition]. [ . . . ] The next important question that arises is a legal one of whether [ . . . ] he knew the nature and quality of his act and that it was wrong.

*Finally, the author introduces subsequent (and maybe distracting) information. Additionally, the author concedes to the popular assessment of Jean's mental condition, but he raises a legal question that prompts readers to continue thinking: Does one's intellectual capacity excuse one from criminal culpability?*

Now, it is your turn to put this knowledge to work. Use a graphic organizer like [Table 1.1](#) to get started drafting your ideas in response to your chosen text.

Structure of Response	Content of Response	Your Response
Introduction	Author Title of Work Summary of rhetorical situation Statement of analysis or evaluation	
Body 1	Point 1 of analysis or evaluation Evidence from text in form of quotation, summary, or paraphrase	

**TABLE 1.1** Drafting frame

Structure of Response	Content of Response	Your Response
Body 2	Point 2 of analysis or evaluation Evidence from text in form of quotation, summary, or paraphrase	
Body 3	Point 3 of analysis or evaluation Evidence from text in form of quotation, summary, or paraphrase	
Body 4 (if needed)	Point 4 of analysis or evaluation Evidence from text in form of quotation, summary, or paraphrase	
Body 5 (if needed)	Point 5 of analysis or evaluation Evidence from text in form of quotation, summary, or paraphrase	
Conclusion	Final conclusions regarding analysis or evaluation Leave readers thinking or suggest action	

**TABLE 1.1** Drafting frame

In addition, use these sentence starters as needed during drafting:

**Summary:**

[Name of author] explains \_\_\_\_\_.

After discussing \_\_\_\_\_, the author claims \_\_\_\_\_.

[Author’s name]’s main point is \_\_\_\_\_.

**Paraphrase:**

In other words, the author is saying that \_\_\_\_\_.

To paraphrase, the author claims that \_\_\_\_\_.

To simplify this idea, think about it in this way: \_\_\_\_\_.

**Analysis:**

[Name of author] develops \_\_\_\_\_ to show \_\_\_\_\_.

The author’s use of \_\_\_\_\_ supports \_\_\_\_\_.

The author employs \_\_\_\_\_ to create \_\_\_\_\_.

**Evaluation:**

The most important aspect of this text is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

[Name of author] fails to address \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, which makes me think about the impact on \_\_\_\_\_.

I think [name of author] is wrong [or correct] because \_\_\_\_\_.

**Evidence:**

As an example, the author says, “\_\_\_\_\_.” (Be sure to provide accurate citation!)

The sentence “\_\_\_\_\_” suggests that \_\_\_\_\_.

The use of the word “\_\_\_\_\_” creates the impression that \_\_\_\_\_.

As often as possible, use the author’s name rather than a pronoun. The first time you mention it, write the full name as it is listed on the source you are using. Then, use the last name only, and be certain to cite properly. Finally, edit and revise your work to catch any oversights.

## 1.6 Evaluation: Intention vs. Execution

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Distinguish variations in genre conventions.
- Differentiate between intention and execution with regard to intended meaning.
- Articulate how rubrics provide insight into the final outcomes of an assignment.



When you write, you try to convert what is in your mind into words on paper or on a screen. Because you are writing for others, your thoughts must be understandable to them. Have you ever said, “I know what I *mean*; I just don’t know how to say it”? Your **intention** is what you mean, and your **execution** is how you say it. Sometimes, however, intention and execution don’t convey the same thing. When this gap occurs, your intention needs some focus so that you can execute.

Rubrics help you direct your prewriting and drafting to fulfill the criteria of an assignment. In basic terms, a rubric provides a guide for drafting and evaluating a paper (or other project). More important, it helps you understand your intention and process it into execution. At times, having an idea of how a work will be evaluated is useful so that you can address the elements of the rubric as you draft and revise. Nevertheless, you should understand that any rubric will not cover every aspect of a given assignment. You also will need to consider other factors while drafting. In addition, rubrics may be based on conventions already discussed in class or a previous reading. For example, part of the following rubric is “analyzing and evaluating the text.” If you do not know what these terms mean or how to analyze or evaluate the text, having such criteria is useless. In other words, to be able to analyze and evaluate a text, you need to know *how to analyze and evaluate a text*. This observation brings you back to the rhetorical situation and the other important elements of this chapter. So be sure to review, take meaningful notes, and understand what you will need to do. Once you are ready, use this rubric to evaluate the chapter’s assigned writing task.

### Rubric

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
5 <b>Skillful</b>	The text always adheres to the task as discussed in Section 1.5: summarizing, paraphrasing, explaining, analyzing, and evaluating a reading selection. The text also shows ample evidence of the writer’s intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The written work consistently features clear and coherent language that allows readers to move seamlessly from section to section with clearly linked concepts and transitions. The writing is consistently focused on the topic.	Each aspect of the rhetorical situation is clearly identifiable, presented clearly, and understood. The language is perfectly suited to the writer’s purpose and audience.

TABLE 1.2

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
<b>4</b> <b>Accomplished</b>	The text usually adheres to the task as discussed in Section 1.5: summarizing, paraphrasing, explaining, analyzing, and evaluating a reading selection. The text also shows some evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writing usually provides clear and coherent language that allows readers to move easily from section to section with linked concepts and transitions. The writing is mostly focused on the topic.	Most aspects of the rhetorical situation are identifiable, presented clearly, and understood. Language is generally suited to the writer's purpose and audience.
<b>3</b> <b>Capable</b>	The text generally adheres to the task as discussed in Section 1.5: summarizing, paraphrasing, explaining, analyzing, and evaluating a reading selection. The text also shows limited evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writing provides general awareness of clear and coherent language and sometimes allows readers to move from section to section with basic linking of concepts and meaningful transitions. The writing may show a lack of focus on the topic.	Some aspects of the rhetorical situation are identifiable, presented, and partly understood. Language is sometimes unsuited to the writer's purpose and audience.
<b>2</b> <b>Developing</b>	The text occasionally adheres to the task as discussed in Section 1.5: summarizing, paraphrasing, explaining, analyzing, and evaluating a reading selection. The text also shows emerging evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writing provides minimal attention to clear and coherent language and does not adequately allow readers to move from section to section through the use of linked concepts or transitions. The writing is often unfocused.	One aspect of the rhetorical situation is identifiable and presented and is partially or minimally understood. Language is mostly unsuited to the writer's purpose and audience.
<b>1</b> <b>Beginning</b>	The text does not adhere to the task as discussed in Section 1.5: summarizing, paraphrasing, explaining, analyzing, and evaluating a reading selection. The text also shows little to no evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writing reflects minimal or no attention to clear and coherent language and may hinder readers in moving from section to section. Transitions are either missing or incorrect. The writing is unfocused.	No aspect of the rhetorical situation is identifiable, presented, or understood. Language is unsuited to the writer's purpose and audience.

**TABLE 1.2**

## 1.7 Spotlight on ... Academia

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Determine how various mediums address, affect, and interact with a range of audiences.
- Examine the importance of your college experience and larger impact on society.
- Write and post texts in different environments and in varying rhetorical situations.

### The Role of the Classroom in This Brave New World



The term **academia** refers to “the life, community, or environment of teachers, schools, and education.” With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the world of academia was challenged. There were logistical challenges, of course: *How would students and teachers attend classes and remain safe? In what ways could digital learning replace classroom learning effectively?* But there were deeper philosophical challenges: *What is the real value of a traditional college education in a world that is seemingly on the brink of one crisis after another? Would the classroom become something of value, leading the way in this brave new world, or would it become obsolete?* While some students chose not to return to their classrooms in the fall of 2020, others either returned or logged on virtually. Whichever way students decided to engage, the larger purpose of college was challenged.



**FIGURE 1.9** Students in a virtual classroom during the 2020 pandemic (credit: “Chaps Work From Home 31” by COD Newsroom/flickr, CC BY 2.0)

At its best, the college experience is one of personal transformation. The student embarks on a journey of empowerment, learning to understand the world around them, then to participate in it, and finally to influence it. It is a journey from understanding to analysis and from evaluation to problem-solving. The final awarding of a degree calls a student to action. *What will you do with the newly gained knowledge and practiced skill sets? How will you make an impact the world in positive ways? Will you develop the vaccine for the next health threat? Will you address centuries of racial injustice in ways never before attempted? What unique contribution can only you make at this time and in this place?* The question is not really whether the college classroom has a role to play in this world, but whether it will rise above outdated traditions to the level of

impactful engagement. One thing is certain, however; the answer starts with you and the publication of your ideas.

### Authentic Publication

To practice your knowledge and use some of the tools in your growing skill set, do this short activity. If you have a social media account, use it to bridge social media and academia by publishing a version of your critical response that meets the characteristics of the platform, likely by reducing the character count or posting a video. First, summarize or paraphrase your main points. Research a link you might include to provide readers with background information and a larger context of your rhetorical situation. Next, create a post that asks an honest, analytical, or evaluative question about the topic. In determining your phrasing, assess the rhetorical situation. If you can, tag a few of your followers to encourage them to respond. You might even mention that this is part of a school project or add a hashtag—a word or phrase preceded by # that categorizes the accompanying text. If you are on multiple platforms, try different versions or approaches to see which one generates the most attention and discussion.

As a result, you might learn something compelling or find your interest piqued by engaging with others. Maybe you can even incorporate what you learn into your portfolio reflection, which is covered at the end of this chapter. Remember, part of the goal of writing is learning. Writing helps you solidify what you are thinking, what it might mean, why it matters, how to say it, and how to communicate it to others. Using various media to convey information will continue to be an essential element of your education and your life, so be sure to practice it.

## 1.8 Portfolio: Tracing Writing Development

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Reflect on the development of composing processes.
- Reflect on how those composing processes affect your work.



**FIGURE 1.10** (credit: “Carbon fiber keyboard” by H. Sterling Cross/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0)

### The Portfolio: And So It Begins . . .

In simplest terms, a writing portfolio is a collection of your writing contained within a single binder or folder. This writing may have been done over a number of weeks, months, or even years. It may be organized chronologically, thematically, or according to quality. A private writing portfolio may contain writing that you wish to keep only for yourself. In this case, you decide what is in it and what it looks like. However, a writing portfolio assigned for a class will contain writing to be shared with an audience to demonstrate the growth of

your writing and reasoning abilities. One kind of writing portfolio, accumulated during a college course, presents a record of your work over a semester, and your instructor may be use it to assign a grade. Another type of portfolio presents a condensed, edited story of your semester's progress in a more narrative form.

The most common type of portfolio assigned in a writing course combines the cumulative work collected over the semester, plus a cover letter in which you explain the nature and value of these papers. Sometimes you will be asked to assign yourself a grade on the basis of your own assessment. The following suggestions may help you prepare a course portfolio:

- **Make your portfolio speak for you.** If your course portfolio is clean, complete, and carefully organized, that is how it will be judged. If it is unique, colorful, creative, and imaginative, that, too, is how it will be judged. Similarly, your folder will be judged more critically if it is messy, incomplete, and haphazardly put together. Before giving your portfolio to somebody else for evaluation, consider whether it reflects how you want to be presented.
- **Include exactly what is asked for.** If an instructor wants three finished papers and a dozen sample journal entries, that is the minimum your course portfolio should contain. Sometimes you can include more than what is asked for, but never include less.
- **Add supplemental material judiciously.** Course portfolios are among the most flexible means of presenting yourself. If you believe that supplemental writing will show you in a better light, include that too, but only after the required material. If you include extra material, attach a memo to explain why it is there and what you think it adds to your portfolio. Supplemental writing might include journals, letters, sketches, or diagrams that suggest other useful dimensions of your thinking.
- **Include perfect final drafts.** At least make them as close to perfect as you can. Show that your own standard for finished work is high. Check spelling, grammar, citation, formatting, and font sizes and types. You should go over your work carefully and be able to find the smallest errors. In addition, if you are asked for a hard copy of your portfolio, final drafts should be double-spaced and printed on only one side of high-quality paper, unless another format is requested. And, of course, your work should be carefully proofread and should follow the language and genre conventions appropriate to the task.
- **Demonstrate growth.** This is a tall order, but course portfolios, unlike most other assessment instruments, can show positive change. The primary value of portfolios in writing classes is that they allow you to demonstrate how a finished paper came into being. Consequently, instructors frequently ask for early drafts to be attached to final drafts of each paper, the most recent on top, so they can see how you followed revision suggestions, how much effort you invested, how many drafts you wrote, and how often you took risks and tried to improve. To build such a record of your work, make sure the date of every draft is clearly marked on each one, and keep it in a safe place (and backed up electronically).
- **Demonstrate work in progress.** Course portfolios allow writers to present partially finished work that suggests future directions and intentions. Both instructors and potential employers may find such preliminary drafts or outlines as valuable as some of your finished work. When you include a tentative draft, be sure to attach a memo or note explaining why you still believe it has merit and in which direction you plan to take your next revisions.
- **Attach a table of contents.** For portfolios containing more than three papers, attach a separate table of contents. For those containing only a few papers, embed your table of contents in the cover letter.
- **Organize your work using clear logic.** Three methods of organization are particularly appealing:
  - **Chronological order:** Writing is arranged in order, beginning with the first week of class and ending with the last week, with all drafts, papers, journal entries, letters, and such fitting in place according to the date written. Only the cover letter is out of chronological order, appearing at the beginning and serving as an introduction to what follows. This method allows you to show the evolution of growth most clearly, with your latest writing (presumably the best) presented at the end.
  - **Reverse chronological order:** The most recent writing is up front, and the earliest writing at the back. In this instance, the most recent written document—the cover letter—is in place at the beginning of the portfolio. This method features your latest (presumably the best) work up front and allows readers to

trace the history of how it got there.

- **Best-first order:** You place your strongest writing up front and your weakest in back. Organizing a portfolio this way suggests that the work *you* consider strongest should count most heavily in evaluating the semester's work.

With each completed chapter in this textbook, you will add to this portfolio. As you work through the chapters and complete the assignments, save each one on your computer or in the cloud, unless your instructor asks you to print your work and arrange it in a binder. Each assignment becomes an artifact that will form a piece of your portfolio. Depending on your preference or your instructor's approach, you may write a little about each assignment as you add to the portfolio. As you compile your portfolio, take some time to read the assignments—drafts and finished products—carefully. Undoubtedly, you will see improvement in your writing over a short amount of time. Be sure to make note of this improvement because it will prove useful moving forward.

### Reflective Task: The Freedom of Freewriting



As you begin your portfolio with the addition of your critical response, compose an accompanying freewrite, sometimes called a quick write. In this case, you will be responding to your own text—a powerful tool in your intellectual development. To begin, write quickly and without stopping about the process of composing your critical response and the finished product. See where your thoughts go, a process that often helps you clarify your own thoughts about the subject—your own text and its creation. When you freewrite, write to yourself in your own natural style, without worrying about sentence structure, grammar, spelling, or punctuation. The purpose is to help you tie together the ideas from your writing process, your assignment, and other thoughts and experiences in your mind. One future value of freewriting is that the process tends to generate questions at random, capture them, and leave the answering for a later task or assignment. Another bonus of freewriting is that you will build confidence with writing and become more disciplined when you have to write. In other words, the more you write, the more confidence you will have in your voice and your writing.

By now you may have realized that writing, whether on social media platforms or in the classroom, is a conversation. The conversation may take place with yourself (freewriting), with your instructor and classmates (assignment), or with the world (social media). You have learned how people like Selena Gomez and others use simple and effective strategies, such as vulnerability, understanding, analysis, and evaluation, to engage in such conversations. Now adopt these same processes—try them on for size, practice them, and learn to master them. As you move through the remainder of this course and text, compose with intention by keeping in mind the limits and freedoms of a particular defined rhetorical situation.

## Further Reading

It's a good idea to familiarize yourself with texts of evaluation and analysis. Below, you will find a few titles with which to start.

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# Language, Identity, and Culture: Exploring, Employing, Embracing

2



**FIGURE 2.1** In a 19th-century lithograph, Cherokee leader Sequoyah, unable to read or write, is shown with a table depicting the writing system he created for his native Cherokee language. His invention of the Cherokee syllabary, a collection of symbols representing the syllables of the spoken language, would provide a divided Cherokee nation with a way to communicate and thus create a sense of identity and unity. (credit: "Sequoyah" by Lehman and Duval/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 2.1** Seeds of Self
- 2.2** Identity Trailblazer: Cathy Park Hong
- 2.3** Glance at the Issues: Oppression and Reclamation
- 2.4** Annotated Sample Reading from *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois
- 2.5** Writing Process: Thinking Critically about How Identity Is Constructed Through Writing
- 2.6** Evaluation: Antiracism and Inclusivity
- 2.7** Spotlight on ... Variations of English
- 2.8** Portfolio: Decolonizing Self

**INTRODUCTION** Based on his dealings with white people who could read and write, Sequoyah (c. 1775–1843), a Cherokee leader, believed that power resulted from the ability to share knowledge. A written language comprehensible and accessible to the Cherokee people could be far more effective in preserving their culture than relying on memory or oral tradition. Hoping to unite and strengthen the Cherokee politically after they were forced from their lands by the U.S. government, Sequoyah spent 10 years developing a method for his

people to communicate in writing. His language system, based on written symbols representing syllables spoken in the Cherokee language, was treated skeptically at first but was later adopted and used in Cherokee newspapers, official documents, and descriptions of rituals and medicines.

Although the use of the Cherokee language eventually gave way to English, Sequoyah remained true to all aspects of Cherokee culture. He spoke only Cherokee, wore the clothing of his people, and followed Cherokee religious customs, refusing to assimilate in any way. As evidenced by Sequoyah's ideas about communication, language, writing, and culture are clearly linked. Although Sequoyah had political purposes in mind, a common language is an important element of shared culture and goes further in developing a sense of cultural identity than what Sequoyah may have envisioned at the time.

While all humans have the same basic needs—food, water, shelter, affection, and a sense of belonging—cultural identity is shaped by family, upbringing, language, and geographical location. You may have grown up in a small town, in a large city, or in the suburbs; you may have been raised with siblings and may have attended church; you may speak more than one language. You may be single, married, or dating; you may drive a car, SUV, or truck. All your lived experiences have shaped who you are today. **Identity** is the word that encompasses all the parts of yourself that make you who you are. For example, if you were to respond to all of the scenarios presented in the sentences above, your answers would collectively make up at least some of your identity.

Having a variety of identities might result in both advantages and disadvantages associated with your lived experiences. Those advantages are called privileges, and the disadvantages **discrimination**. When you consider that people have multiple identities, also consider that these multiple identities lead to various points of **intersection** among lived experiences. The idea of **intersectionality**, then, helps you consider systems of privilege or discrimination projected onto people as a consequence of their identities.

Considering your own identity and position in the world, as well as the identities and positions of others, gives critical meaning to your personal and academic writing. Experiences make people who they are, teaching them how to move through the world and consider the effects their actions and words have on others.

In this chapter, you will explore the concept of cultural identity. *What kind of lived experiences have you had?* How have those experiences shaped and molded you? What experiences have others had, and how have those experiences shaped them?

Whenever you consider lived experiences, think about the contexts in which they occur, and the systems of communication used in those contexts. The word **culture** includes the expressions, customs, practices, and experiences that connect a person to other people in their present, past, and future. Who you are is closely connected to the cultures you inhabit and the ways in which you communicate. Among the more noticeable markers of your identities are the languages you speak. In this chapter, **language** is defined as a system of words used to communicate. Just as you likely have multiple identities, you likely speak varieties of languages as part of each of those identities.

The goal of this chapter in particular, and this text in general, is to help you think critically about language, culture, and identity in ways that make room for everyone's lived experiences. In this chapter, you will learn how authors use language to communicate their sense of cultural identity. You will read about Cathy Park Hong and W. E. B. Du Bois, activists who have used writing to explore identity and culture. You will examine your own culture as well as your personal, unconscious bias, reflecting on both of these aspects of identity to increase your understanding of the world.

## 2.1 Seeds of Self

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the importance of communication in various cultural, language-related, and rhetorical situations.
- Articulate how language use can promote social justice and equality.



Between 1870 and 1900, nearly 12 million immigrants arrived in the United States, many through Ellis Island.

Many sought relief from religious and political persecution; others were skilled workers in search of jobs. Once in the United States, many immigrants faced difficulties adjusting to the demands of life in a new country, including the challenges of learning a new language and new customs. They moved into neighborhoods where others from the same country already resided. There, they lived among those who knew their language and customs, ate familiar food, and participated in cultural practices handed down by their ancestors. Living in immigrant communities reminded people of their home countries and kept their cultures alive.

### Understanding Culture



Culture includes observable aspects, such as the religion and language of a group of people, as well as intangible aspects, such as shared preferences, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, in Black women's natural hair culture, wash day practices might be prescribed and may involve assistance from other members of the group, whether family or friends. This community has a shared vocabulary of hair types labeled from 1 to 4 for curl type and A to C for curl diameter, as well as steps such as *detangle* and *lift* and styling techniques such as *twist out*, *braid out*, *wash and go*, and *updo*. These terms evolved from Black women's shared experiences. Likewise, in Hispanic culture, the *quinceañera* is a custom and rite of passage for 15-year-old girls. The elaborate celebration is attended by the girl's extended family and recognized by the cultural community at large. Participation in regular daily practices, such as Black women's natural hair culture, and once-in-a-lifetime celebrations, such as the *quinceañera*, can contribute to a person's culture and sense of identity.



The iceberg is often used as a metaphor for culture. The top of the iceberg, visible to all, is much smaller than the part hidden below the water. So it is with culture. The less obvious parts of culture can sometimes be "hidden" from observers. This lack of knowledge can make understanding cultures other than your own more difficult because these hidden parts are more challenging to recognize or understand.



**FIGURE 2.2** Icebergs often serve as a metaphor for the aspects of culture that seem "hidden" or invisible. Notice how only part of the iceberg is visible above the water. (credit: "iceberg" by Ce?sar Henrique de Santis Nascimento/flickr, Public Domain)

Within a culture, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are both taught explicitly and learned implicitly. Think back for a moment to your high school days. You may have attended a freshman orientation that included a tour of the building, a summary of school rules, and an overview of the school schedule. This orientation was the beginning of your cultural understanding of the school and your role in it. But as you began attending regularly, you probably learned other, often unspoken cultural traditions and norms—perhaps ninth graders were expected to sit in a certain part of the cafeteria, for example. All cultures teach in similar ways. This conscious and unconscious learning process develops beliefs and attitudes that you come to view as valid. You then express these beliefs through your actions and teach them to other members.

Culture is not static; it changes and grows dynamically in response to any number of variables. Some aspects are difficult to interpret, particularly language. In fact, culture plays a significant role in the use of language. Not only does it affect *what* is said, but culture also affects *how* it is said (including tone). Different aspects of culture can be interpreted differently by various groups, making language among the most challenging aspects of culture.

### Situating Self



Attending college and participating in academic traditions are now a part of your identity. This new environment not only welcomes the traditions you bring with you but also will teach you new ones, thereby broadening your view of culture and the world. In this new cultural environment, you may struggle to find your place. Embrace this struggle because it is a sign of personal growth and development. What is important to note is that even though you may struggle to situate yourself in this new environment, nothing should prevent the self you bring with you to college from finding its proper place. In other words, you do not need to lose who you are to become who you will be. Former First Lady Michelle Obama (b. 1964) writes in her book *Becoming* (2018) that your personal story “is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.” So make space in your understanding of yourself for the value that your cultural experiences provide to others in this new environment. By sharing yourself—your culture and identity—with peers and professors, you give them an opportunity to develop and grow. College or university is a place for you to have experiences that help you first figure out who you already are and then explore who you want to be. Allow these experiences to provide that opportunity.

A **cultural system** includes all parts of a culture that shape its members: its beliefs, traditions, and rituals. Self-awareness about your own culture includes an examination of who and what have influenced your perception of the world and how you experience it. This perception, often called a **cultural lens**, affects how you understand the world and will change as you form new experiences. For example, your religious culture may influence your beliefs. However, if challenged by a new cultural experience, those beliefs may be reinforced, shift, or change completely.

### Exploring Voice



One discovery that often comes out of a first-year college writing experience is finding your writing voice. When instructors talk about **voice** in writing, they are imagining a rhetorical mixture of these elements:

- **Vocabulary:** the words used to express your thoughts
- **Tone:** the attitude conveyed through your words
- **Viewpoint:** the position or perspective that comes through your writing
- **Syntax:** the order or arrangement of words



Because they provide innumerable possibilities, combinations of words, attitude, perspective, and word order will create a unique signature for your writing—one that expresses your identity as a writer.

Communication is a cornerstone of culture. It is the way people share experiences, build relationships, and develop community. Similarly, expressing communication through writing is a powerful way to share culture. Just as a person’s body language reveals a deeper meaning behind their spoken language, so does a writer’s

voice provide deeper insight into their culture and identity.



## 2.2 Trailblazer

### Identity Trailblazer: Cathy Park Hong

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how authors weave identity into their compositions.
- Articulate how genre conventions are shaped by purpose, culture, and expectation.



**FIGURE 2.3** Cathy Park Hong (<https://openstax.org/r/cathyparkhong>) writes about racism from the perspective of Asians and Asian Americans. (credit: “Racism is not an option” by GoToVan/flickr, CC BY 2.0)

*“Sometimes you need to explain your experiences in order to understand them yourself.”*

#### Fear: The Enemy Within



Cathy Park Hong (b. 1976) is an Asian American poet, writer, and educator committed to exploring living art. Born to Korean parents in Los Angeles, California, Hong studied at Oberlin College and at the Writers'



Workshop at the University of Iowa, where she earned a master of fine arts degree. She has received numerous fellowships, including a Fulbright scholarship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. Hong has taught at Sarah Lawrence College and Rutgers University and served as poetry editor for the *New Republic*.

In her work, Hong explores her search for identity as a first-generation Asian American, specifically her struggles with feeling alienated from Anglo-American culture. Hong's first publication, the book of poems *Translating Mo'um* (2002), examines the often tenuous challenges experienced by first-generation Americans, specifically regarding language. Her second book of poems, *Dance Dance Revolution: Poems* (2007), won the Barnard Women Poets Prize. The work incorporates the idea of “code switching,” a technique in which people switch between languages or language forms, such as formal and colloquial.

Hong most recently published a collection of essays titled *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020), a memoir that takes on the lens of cultural criticism. Writing from her personal experiences as an Asian American woman growing up and living in America, Hong delves into deeply painful and often unseen racial trauma experienced by Asians and Asian Americans. Published as anti-Asian hate crimes gained

increasing national attention, Hong's essays help readers understand the curious place that Asian Americans inhabit in American race relations, where they are viewed as caricatures of the "model minority" and face invisible racism.

The title of *Minor Feelings* comes from the word *han*, which Koreans use to describe emotions that include anger, melancholy, envy, and shame. Hong believes these same emotions are shared by minorities in America today. She expresses difficulty in using the pronoun *we* in her writing because of the diversity of Asian Americans. Yet she notes that what this diverse population has in common is that even as second- and third-generation Americans, Asian Americans find they still don't enjoy first-class status in American life in the same way that White Americans do. She proposes thinking of the label *Asian Americans* as "less of an identity, and more as a coalition" (Hong, "Why") in order to seek common ground with others who share similar experiences. Hong believes that one key is cross-cultural community building among Asian communities and between Asian, Black, Latina/Latino, and Indigenous communities.

Hong's poetry and essays also explore the racism she has experienced in the literary world, from graduate school to literary circles. Perhaps the most maddening part of those experiences, she notes, is that her perception of racism is constantly "questioned or dismissed" (Hong, *Minor* 55). Although writing about racial experiences was discouraged as "anti-academic" when she was a student, Hong has made a career of sharing these experiences through poetry and prose. She hopes that her work not only helps Asian Americans feel recognized and acknowledged but also encourages readers of all ethnicities to practice self-interrogation.

### Discussion Questions

1. Cathy Park Hong recalls not having an outlet to express the racism she experienced growing up. How has writing provided that outlet for her as an adult?
2. Race informs Hong's writing, though the academic circles she was a part of discouraged this. How can art and language be influenced by identity?
3. How has Hong's work helped her explore her own culture and provided a window for others to understand it?
4. The myth of the model minority isolates Asian Americans from other people of color. How does Hong's writing work to overcome this isolation?

## 2.3 Glance at the Issues: Oppression and Reclamation

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Articulate how language conventions shape and are shaped by readers' and writers' practices and purposes.
- Define *oppression* and explain its effects.
- Define *inclusion* and summarize ways to write inclusively.

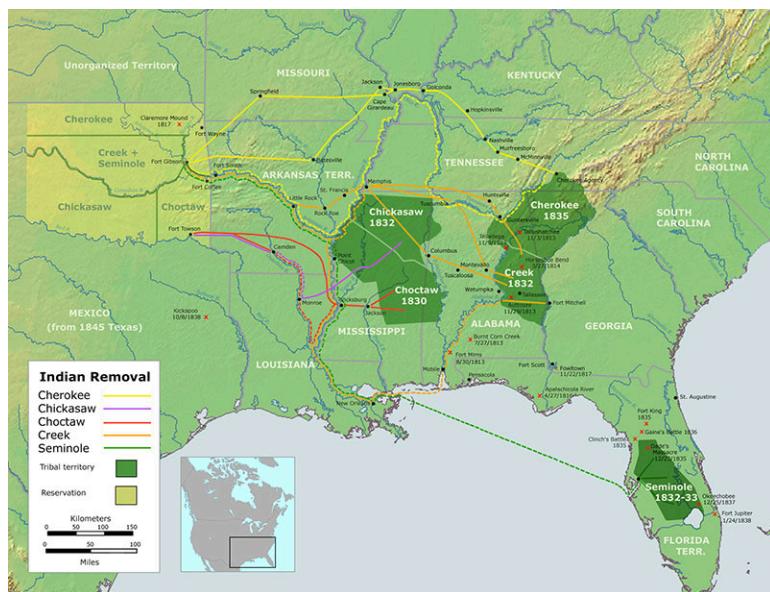
Writing about identity and culture gives authors the opportunity to share personal experiences and provides a vehicle for storytelling. This storytelling can turn into a purposeful message with meaningful rhetorical impact.

### What Is Oppression?



Some languages, cultures, and identities face discrimination. People often believe that for one group to advance, another must be held back. This suppression of growth, advancement, economic development, and educational opportunity has led to systems of **oppression**—prolonged and sustained unjust treatment—for some groups. For example, Black people from various parts of Africa endured centuries of oppression because of the transatlantic slave trade. Between the mid-16th and mid-19th centuries, European, Spanish, and American groups captured an estimated 10–12 million African men, women, and children from their

homelands, boarded them on ships, and transported them to Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas to be sold into enslavement. After 1865, when the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in the United States, Black people continued to be denied basic human rights, such as the opportunity to work at certain jobs, despite their educational achievement; to be served a meal in a restaurant; to use a public restroom or water fountain; to shop for necessities in a grocery or department store; or to live peacefully in their own communities. Black Americans have continued to be subjected to social inequities. As a community, they suffer from higher rates of incarceration, lower pay rates, fewer educational opportunities, and higher mortality at the hands of law enforcement— injustices that stem from racist policies of centuries past. Similarly, Indigenous people have been subjected to hundreds of years of oppression and silencing, often the result of colonialization, which included stripping them of their customs, land, language, and lives.



**FIGURE 2.4** This map shows the routes of the [Trail of Tears](https://openstax.org/r/trailoftears) (<https://openstax.org/r/trailoftears>) (1836–1839), the U.S. government's forced relocation of tens of thousands of Native Americans from their lands in the southeastern United States to "Indian Territory" in what is now Oklahoma. Thousands died of starvation, exposure, or disease during the long and brutal 1,200-mile journey, much of it on foot. (credit: "Trails of Tears" by Nikator and www.demis.nl/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Oppression isn't just a historical problem—it extends to society today. In the two decades since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States and the subsequent War on Terror, Muslims and Sikhs have experienced hate crimes and oppression. People who identify as LGBTQ have been shunned or persecuted, subjected to hate crimes, and banned from serving in the military and have struggled to gain the right to marry. [This TED Talk](https://openstax.org/r/thistedtalk) (<https://openstax.org/r/thistedtalk>) highlights the struggle for transgender rights.

In addition, migrant and refugee families, largely from countries in Central and South America, have been separated and jailed in recent efforts to curtail immigration along the southern U.S. border. Asian Americans have been subjected to racially motivated harassment and attacks, heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the violent March 2021 mass shooting at an Asian American massage parlor. [This TED Talk](https://openstax.org/r/talksstereotype) (<https://openstax.org/r/talksstereotype>) discusses the harm of Asian stereotypes. Discrimination has persisted for generations and continues to make it difficult for those who oppress to view the oppressed as their equals.

### Reclaiming Humanity



One way to help restructure the world to reduce or even eliminate oppression is to explore your own biases. A **bias** occurs when you prejudicially favor one person, place, thing, or idea over another. People are naturally conditioned to favor the familiar over the unfamiliar. If you begin to question why you think as you do or make the decisions you make, you may begin to view others as equal, even though they may look different, live

differently, and experience the world differently.

Two of the most frequent ways people isolate others are through markers of identity, especially race and gender, and through language varieties, such as standard and nonstandard English. If your view of people is primarily influenced by their physical features and the words they speak, you do not allow yourself to engage fully with them in their humanity.

Viewing others as people first and understanding the importance of questioning the lens through which you view them is the beginning. However, you also have to think critically about language bias. When you hear people of African descent speak in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or speak English with Caribbean or African accents, you may make assumptions about who they are and what they know. When you encounter people who speak English with Spanish accents, you also may make assumptions about who they are and their place in the world. However, when you hear British English or English spoken with a French, German, or Slavic accent, you may notice the difference, but you also may make a different set of assumptions about those people.

### **Anti-racism as Inclusion**



One way to be inclusive is to write in specifically anti-racist ways. Inclusive writing begins with identifying ways in which language can be and has been used to exclude cultures, social groups, or races. Exclusive



language is, unfortunately, ingrained in much of academia. It is a product of habit and the assumption that all readers are alike, with similar experiences, values, and beliefs. To write inclusively, think beyond yourself by considering other perspectives, groups, and races that may be harmed by thoughtless word choices.

Here are several principles to help you develop inclusive and anti-racist writing:

- Consider the assumptions you make about readers, and then work to address those assumptions.
- Choose language carefully.
- Revise with a critical eye. Look for racist phrases and words that label cultures negatively.
- Seek feedback and receive it with an open mind primed for learning. Because writing is personal, you may easily feel offended or dismissive. However, feedback, especially from people whose perspective differs from yours, can help you grow in anti-racist knowledge.
- Consider rhetoric and presentation. Aim to make your writing understandable, straightforward, and accessible. Use a glossary or footnotes to explain complex terms or ideas.
- Avoid casual phrases that suggest people with disabilities or from other cultures are victims and avoid euphemisms that refer to cultures to which you do not belong. Similarly, avoid using mental health issues in metaphors.
- Think about your adjectives. Some groups or people prefer not to be described by an adjective. It is important to follow individual groups' preferences for being referred to in either person-first or identity-first language.
- Avoid stereotyping; write about an individual as an individual, not as if they represent an entire group or culture. You may also choose to use gender-neutral pronouns.
- Be precise with meaning. Rather than describing something as "crazy," try a more precise term such as *intense*, *uncontrolled*, or *foolish* to give a more accurate description.
- Impact overrules intent. The impact of your language on your reader is more important than your good intentions. When you learn better, do better.

### **Exploring the Issues**



The following key terms and characteristics provide a better understand of anti-racist and inclusive writing:

- **Ally:** a person who identifies as a supporter of marginalized groups and who advocates for them
- **Anti-racist:** adhering to a set of beliefs and actions that oppose racism and promote inclusion and equality of marginalized groups

- **Critical race theory:** the idea that racism is ingrained in the institutions and systems of American society
- **Cultural appropriation:** taking the creative or artistic forms of a different culture and using them as one's own, particularly in a way that is disrespectful of the original context
- **Culture:** the shared beliefs, values, and assumptions of a group of people
- **Emotional tax:** the invisible mental stress taken on by people of marginalized backgrounds in an attempt to feel included, respected, and safe
- **Ethnocentrism:** the idea that one's own culture is inherently better than other cultures
- **Intersectionality:** the intertwining of different aspects of social identities, including gender, race, culture, ethnicity, social class, religion, and sexual orientation, that results in unique experiences and opportunities
- **Microaggression:** behavior or speech that subtly or indirectly expresses prejudice based on race, gender, ability, age, or other aspects of identity, often but not always without an individual's conscious intention  
(For example, the drill team director instructs all members to wear their hair straight for competition.)
- **Neurodiversity:** the idea that humans have a range of differences in neurological functioning that should be respected
- **Unconscious bias:** any implicit, unfair preferences that people hold without being aware of them

## 2.4 Annotated Sample Reading from *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Articulate how conventions are shaped by purpose, language, culture, and expectation.
- Analyze relationships between ideas and patterns of organization.
- Analyze how W. E. B. Du Bois uses language, identity, and culture to shape his writing.

### Introduction



**FIGURE 2.5** W. E. B. Du Bois (credit: “Du Bois, W. E. B.” Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was an American historian and sociologist who graduated from Fisk University in

1888 and Harvard University in 1895. Du Bois deeply influenced the civil rights movement in the United States and is widely regarded as among the most important Black protest leaders and activists of the first half of the 20th century. He helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and his essay collection *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is considered seminal American literature.

Du Bois conducted sociological investigations of Black life in America, specifically the disenfranchisement of Black Americans and the pervasive nature of racism, including how it can influence how people of color see themselves. Du Bois dedicated years of his life to sociological studies of Black people in America, at first applying social science in his quest for racial and social justice. However, he eventually came to believe that the only path to progress was through protest. In his written works, particularly *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois discusses the dual nature of living as a Black person in America and feeling unable to be both a “Negro” and an American at once. In the excerpt below, Du Bois explains his famed theories of the color line, the veil, and double consciousness.

Du Bois’s work was a direct result of the world in which he lived and the one from which previous generations came—one that highlighted the complex issues of race and conflict in America. He wrote both for Black and White audiences, professing that his message was for all and affected the very heart of American democracy. Learning about the struggles of Black people in 19th- and early 20th-century America is still important today, and even a century later, Du Bois’s words can help all people understand the complex contextual issues that affect race relations. Understanding these challenges encourages tolerance, acceptance, and connections between cultures.

## LIVING BY THEIR OWN WORDS

### Between Me and the World



Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.



**The Color Line.** Du Bois previously introduced the “color line,” the divide between races, in his “Forethought.” This line is sometimes invisible, but at other times, it is a physical line. The example of White people wondering what it feels like to be “a problem” demonstrates the invisible color line separating Black and White citizens into two separate communities.

**Audience.** Du Bois probably is writing with a White audience in mind, as Black readers likely understand the ideas he proposes. He uses academic language, which may be his authentic voice as an academic and a writer, but he also seeks to reach his intended audience.

And yet, being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe. It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one, all in a day, as it were. I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.

**The Veil.** Du Bois's anecdote about the girl refusing his card introduces his idea of the "veil," a symbol he uses throughout the text to demonstrate the color line. The veil represents the different worlds that Black and White people must inhabit. Though invisible, the veil shuts Du Bois out of this girl's world.

I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the words I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could never decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head,—some way. With other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny: their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.

**Point of View and Voice.** Du Bois uses the first-person point of view to relate his lived experiences. He writes in a voice that invites readers to picture him speaking, asking rhetorical questions.

**Vivid Language.** Du Bois uses vivid language to emphasize the bitterness created by the treatment of Black children. The image of the "prison-house" walls closing in shows the inability to escape the veil that society placed between White and Black children. Du Bois emphasizes the impact of this separation in the choice that Black children must make: accept that they will never have the opportunities enjoyed by White children or hopelessly try to achieve them.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

**Double Consciousness.** Du Bois expands the image of the veil separating the worlds of Black and White people to include the idea of "double-consciousness": that Black people see themselves through the eyes of White people. Racist ideation is inescapable, and Black people end up viewing their own culture negatively.

**Conflict.** These ideas of double consciousness and the veil leave Black Americans at war with themselves. Du Bois uses the metaphor of a measuring tape meant for one world but used to measure another and the warring idea of "twoness."

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

**Culture and Self.** Du Bois explores the concept of self through the lens of Africanism and Americanism. He recognizes that the "Negro soul" has an important place in the world. Yet he feels that holding on to his Black roots means that the world sees him as un-American and leaves him without opportunity.

This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten. The shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx. Through history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness. Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man's turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness. And yet it is not weakness,—it is the contradiction of double aims.

**Simile.** *The comparison of Black men to falling stars, never allowed to reveal the possibilities of their success, demonstrates the difficulties they face.*

### Discussion Questions

1. What might have been the impact of Du Bois's use of academic language on his audience?
2. How does Du Bois use his personal experience to relate the experiences of a broader culture?
3. What impact do the images of shadows and darkness have on Du Bois's message?
4. In this section of the text, Du Bois focuses on internalization of race. How does this concept illustrate the impact of racism on society?

### Assumptions and Stereotypes

Du Bois experiences the veil between worlds as a Black American because of assumptions and stereotypes. Unfortunately, such assumptions and stereotypes still exist in America today. In Chapter 2, you have begun to learn about the impact of language on culture and about how developing anti-racist and inclusive ideas is an important part of the composition process.

## 2.5 Writing Process: Thinking Critically about How Identity Is Constructed Through Writing

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the importance of communication in various cultural, language, and rhetorical situations.
- Implement a variety of drafting strategies to demonstrate the connection between language and social justice.
- Apply the composition processes and tools as a means to discover and reconsider ideas.
- Participate in the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes.
- Give and act on productive feedback to works in progress.

Now it's your turn to join this cultural conversation. As you write, keep your audience in mind as well as the principles of inclusivity and anti-racism that you have learned about. Consider how you can share your personal experiences, ideas, and beliefs in a way that is inclusive of all and shows sensitivity to the culture of your readers.

### Summary of Assignment: Cultural Artifact



Choose an artifact that symbolizes something about a culture to which you belong. This might be a physical object that you have, or it may be a metaphorical object, such as Du Bois's color line or veil, that represents something larger about your culture. Write approximately 350–700 words describing it, using sensory detail and explaining its meaning both to you personally and within your culture. To begin your thinking, view [this TEDx Talk](https://openstax.org/r/thistedxtalk) (<https://openstax.org/r/thistedxtalk>) for a discussion of cultural artifacts and narrative led by artist David Bailey.



**Another Lens 1.** Choose a space that is important to a cultural community to which you belong. While visiting

 this space, conduct an hour-long observation. Respond in writing to these items: *Describe the space in detail. What do you see permanently affixed in the space? What activity is going on? How is the space currently used? What is the atmosphere? How are you feeling while conducting your observation?* Then, do some brief research on the space (using the Internet, the library, or campus archives), and answer these questions: *What is the history of the space? When was it established, and under what circumstances? How has this space been used in the past? What is your response or reaction to this history?* Then write a passage in which you highlight a unique feature of the space and your cultural relationship to it.

 **Another Lens 2.** Considering Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, explore the ways in which you may experience competing identities or competing cultures in your own life. *What experiences have you had or witnessed where language clashed with or supported your identity or culture? What happened? How did others react? How did you react? What insight does your experience offer on this discussion of rhetoric and the power of language to define, shape, and change or give birth to identity or culture?*

### Quick Launch: Joining the Dialogue

 You may choose to use journaling to develop your language use and voice. Journaling, or keeping a written record of your thoughts and ideas, can clarify your thoughts and emotions, help you better understand your values, and increase your creativity. The following two journaling techniques should help you get started.

#### Character Sketch and Captured Moment

Because your cultural artifact may be tied to a person, a character sketch might help you think about its significance. A character sketch is a brief description of a real or fictional person—in this case, likely someone you know or even yourself. In it, you describe the character’s personality, physical traits, habits, history, relationships, and ties to the cultural artifact. You may include research about the character to introduce readers to them. Use the following format if you need more guidance:

#### Character Sketch

- Introduction
- Quotation
- Anecdote about the character
- Most important traits
- Supporting Details
- Physical appearance
- Actions
- Thoughts
- Language
- Ties to cultural artifact

A character sketch of your grandmother might read as follows.

My first memory of Nonna materializes in the kitchen, where we are baking Swedish cookies together. She carefully shows me how to measure ingredients, stirring with her hand over mine in her deep “cookie-making” bowl. Nonna is a slight woman with a big heart full of kindness. She teaches me many skills, both in and out of the kitchen, that I still use today. Some have proven to be life lessons. She never met a stranger she didn’t like and often said it takes more effort to be unkind than kind. Because of Nonna, the Swedish cookie has become a metaphor for my life. The ingredients of one’s life make up an identity, and the combination is always delicious.

Another journaling technique is to record a captured moment through the examination of a cultural artifact. This exercise lets you use an artifact as a means to look at an event in your life and create a written piece that captures its importance, emotion, or meaning. Select an artifact and an experience. Think about what they mean to you. *What do you remember, and why?* Then go deeper. Analyze the long-term meaning of it in your

life. Try to recreate the artifact and then the experience in your mind, and relive the sensations you experienced in the moment.

### Choose the Artifact



Begin your assignment by choosing your artifact. You may take inspiration from W. E. B. Du Bois's image of the veil in the annotated sample in the previous section. Or, going back to the beginning of this chapter and Sequoyah's syllabary, you may choose to take inspiration from something linguistic, an expression or a way of talking that is associated with your culture. You may choose an artifact that, like the veil, has metaphorical significance. Or you may choose a more tangible artifact, such as a religious symbol, a traditional clothing item, or any number of objects related to your chosen culture.

Once you have chosen your artifact, do a prewriting exercise called a **freewrite**. In this activity, set a time limit (say, 10 minutes), and write whatever comes to mind about your object within that time. Don't worry about organization, flow, grammar, punctuation, or whether your writing is "good"; just write. This exercise not only gets your creative juices flowing but also allows you to put pen to paper and opens your mind to what may be subconscious thoughts about the object as it relates to culture.

Next, it is time to take a more refined approach to planning your writing. Think back to [The Digital World: Building on What You Already Know to Respond Critically](#), which addresses the different purposes for writing. To help shape your writing use a separate sheet of paper to answer the questions in [Table 2.1](#).

Who is my audience?
What is my purpose for writing?
What organizational strategies will I use?
How will I introduce my artifact?
How will I describe my artifact using sensory language?
Will I share personal anecdotes, examples, or ideas?
How will I add cultural context to my writing to help my audience understand my culture?
What transitions will I use?
How will I end my writing?

**TABLE 2.1** Planning questions

### Drafting: Critical Context



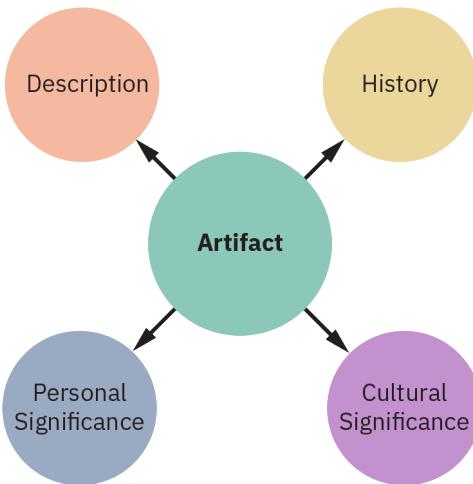
In your writing, try to incorporate and respond to the current cultural climate. **Context** is information that helps readers understand the cultural factors that affect your ideas, actions, and thoughts. Context helps build the relationship between you as a writer and your audience, providing clarity and meaning. For example, Du Bois's veil means very little until readers understand the deep racial divide that existed during his lifetime, including Jim Crow laws, segregation, and violent crimes committed against his fellow Black Americans.



#### Cultural Context

Sharing cultural context helps your readers understand elements of culture they may be unfamiliar with. Consider what background information you need to provide, especially information that is integral to readers' understanding of the traditions, beliefs, and actions that relate to your artifact. Essentially, you will need to close the gap between your own culture and that of your readers.

 Armed with your freewrite and your answers to the questions as a starting place, create your first draft. As you write, embed cultural context and explain the significance of your artifact in a way that is relatable and meaningful to your audience. Like Du Bois, try to use figurative language, such as similes or personification, in your description, and include the relevant sensory elements of the artifact: its appearance, taste, smell, sound, and feel. See [Print or Textual Analysis: What You Read](#) for definitions and examples of some figurative language, or consult [this site \(<https://openstax.org/r/figurativelanguage>\)](https://openstax.org/r/figurativelanguage). Consider using a graphic organizer like [Figure 2.6](#) as a guide. Add more outer circles if needed, and be mindful of writing in a way that it is accessible and inclusive.



**FIGURE 2.6** Idea web (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Remember that your first draft is just a starting point. The most important thing is to get your ideas on paper. This draft can be considered a test of sorts—one that determines what should and should not appear in the final paper.

Consider the following sensory description of Broadway in New York, written by British novelist Charles Dickens (1812–1870) in his book *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842). *What does Dickens, as a British observer, note about this street in America? How does he use language to convey what he sees, hears, and smells? In what ways does he use language to convey a British viewpoint?*

Warm weather! The sun strikes upon our heads at this open window, as though its rays were concentrated through a burning-glass; but the day is in its zenith, and the season an unusual one. Was there ever such a sunny street as this Broadway! The pavement stones are polished with the tread of feet until they shine again; the red bricks of the houses might be yet in the dry, hot kilns; and the roofs of those omnibuses look as though, if water were poured on them, they would hiss and smoke, and smell like half-quenched fires. No stint of omnibuses here! Half-a-dozen have gone by within as many minutes. Plenty of hackney cabs and coaches too; gigs, phaetons, large-wheeled tilburies, and private carriages—rather of a clumsy make, and not very different from the public vehicles, but built for the heavy roads beyond the city pavement. . . . [C]oachmen . . . in straw hats, black hats, white hats, glazed caps, fur caps; in coats of drab, black, brown, green, blue, nankeen, striped jean and linen; and there, in that one instance (look while it passes, or it will be too late), in suits of livery. Some southern republican that, who puts his blacks in uniform, and swells with Sultan pomp and power. Yonder, where that phaeton with the well-clipped pair of grays has stopped—standing at their heads now—is a Yorkshire groom, who has not been very long in these parts, and looks sorrowfully round for a companion pair of top-boots, which he may traverse the city half a year without meeting. Heaven save the ladies, how they dress! We have seen more colours in these ten minutes, than we should have seen elsewhere, in as many days. What various parasols! what rainbow silks and satins! what pinking of thin stockings, and pinching of thin shoes, and fluttering of ribbons and silk tassels, and display of rich cloaks with gaudy hoods and linings! The young gentlemen are fond, you see, of turning down their shirt-collars and cultivating their whiskers, especially under the chin; but they cannot approach the ladies in their dress or bearing, being, to say the truth, humanity of quite another sort. Byrons of the desk and counter, pass on, and let us see what kind of men those are behind ye: those two labourers in holiday clothes, of whom one carries in his hand a crumpled scrap of paper from which he tries to spell out a hard name, while the other looks about for it on all the doors and windows.

*Now, how might Dickens go on to provide context and make connections between British and American cultures so that readers understand both more keenly?* Although *American Notes* is generally critical of the United States, this description creates a positive mood, as if Dickens recognizes something of home during his visit to Broadway—a cultural artifact. This recognition suggests that moments of unexpected joy can create connections between cultures.

### Peer Review:

One of the most helpful parts of the writing process can be soliciting input from a peer reviewer. This input will be particularly helpful for this assignment if the peer reviewer is not a member of the culture you are writing about. An outsider's view will help you determine whether you have included appropriate cultural context. Peer reviewers can use the following sentence starters to provide feedback.

- One piece of your writing I found meaningful was \_\_\_\_\_.
- Something new I learned about your culture is \_\_\_\_\_; you explained this well by \_\_\_\_\_.
- Something I was confused by was \_\_\_\_\_; I don't understand this because \_\_\_\_\_.
- A major point that I think needs more detail or explanation is \_\_\_\_\_.
- In my opinion, the purpose of your paper is \_\_\_\_\_.
- To me, it seems that your audience is \_\_\_\_\_.
- I would describe the voice of your piece as \_\_\_\_\_.
- I think you could better build cultural context by \_\_\_\_\_.

### Revising:

Writing is a **recursive** process; you will push forward, step back, and repeat steps multiple times as your ideas develop and change. As you reread, you may want to add, delete, reorder, or otherwise change your draft. This response is natural. You may need to return to the brainstorming process to mine for new ideas or organizational principles.

As you reread and prepare for revisions, focus on the voice you have used. *If a friend were to read your draft,*

could they “hear” you in it? If not, work on revising to create a more natural cadence and tone. Another area of focus should be to explain cultural context and build cultural bridges. Use your peer reviewer’s feedback to develop a piece that will be meaningful to your audience.

While describing your artifact is likely a deeply personal endeavor, an important part of writing is to consider your audience. Composition offers a unique opportunity to build and share cultural understanding. One way to achieve this goal is by using anti-racist and inclusive language. Try to view your composition from outside of your own experience.

- Is any language or are any ideas harmful or offensive to other cultures?
- Are you using the language of preference for a specified group?
- Can people of various abilities read and understand your writing?

One overarching strategy you can use for anti-racist revision is to constantly question commonly used words and phrases. For example, the word *Eskimo* is a European term used to describe people living in the Arctic without regard for differentiation. The term was later used to describe a popular frozen treat known as an *Eskimo pie*. Today, the term is considered offensive to Inuit communities—Indigenous people living in Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. You can also make yourself aware of the evolving preferences for language use. For example, the term *Negro* gave way to *African American*, which is now giving way to the term *Black*. Finally, consider the use of the word *see*, for example, to mean “to understand”: *Do you see what I mean?* Is the use of *see* in this way inclusive of a visually impaired person who may be reading your text? To start, determine one or two places to include anti-racist or inclusive language or ideas in your writing, and build those into your piece.

## 2.6 Evaluation: Antiracism and Inclusivity

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Apply or challenge measurement outcomes for anti-racist and inclusive language.
- Compare your written work with evaluation criteria.



Learning to be both anti-racist and inclusive in your writing will help you share your culture with others and build bridges with cultures that differ from yours. As a writer, you have a unique opportunity to share your understandings, beliefs, and ideas, but if you do so in a way that limits understanding, you will reach only those who already agree with you or have similar experiences.



Anti-racist writing actively identifies and opposes racism. Its goal is to directly challenge racist ideas, methods, and behaviors and to replace them with anti-racist ones. Unfortunately, the history of academic writing often has been entrenched in racism at institutional and structural levels. Like Du Bois’s “double-consciousness,” students from other cultures have been penalized unfairly for their adherence to cultural traditions. American culture has made some strides, yet it isn’t enough to be “not racist”—it must do better by being actively anti-racist. One way to do this is to work to understand, use, and appreciate cultural forms, voices, and attitudes and to share beliefs that communicate identity and issues within cultures.

Inclusive writing encourages writers to think about what readers need and how they interact with the content. Inclusive writing represents culture authentically, helping readers find common threads in the writer’s words, though they may not share a particular culture.

Ask a peer to use the following rubric to evaluate your final draft. The rubric is designed to help you think about your writing in anti-racist and inclusive terms.

**Rubric**

<b>Score</b>	<b>Critical Language Awareness</b>	<b>Clarity and Coherence</b>	<b>Rhetorical Choices</b>
<b>5</b> <b>Skillful</b>	The text works to communicate cultural ideas using inclusive language and shows ample evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer presents an artifact and describes it clearly with sensory detail and figurative language. The connection to culture is evident and successfully builds cultural context. The writer's ideas are well organized and linked with appropriate transitions.	The paper consistently exhibits strong cultural awareness in the author's rhetorical choices. It uses anti-racist and inclusive language to appeal to readers from a variety of cultural backgrounds.
<b>4</b> <b>Accomplished</b>	The text works to communicate cultural ideas using some inclusive language and shows some evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer presents an artifact and describes it with some sensory detail and figurative language. The connection to culture is evident and builds cultural context. The writer's ideas are organized and linked with some transitions.	The paper exhibits some cultural awareness in the author's rhetorical choices. It uses mostly anti-racist and inclusive language to appeal to readers from a variety of cultural backgrounds.
<b>3</b> <b>Capable</b>	The text tries to communicate cultural ideas using limited inclusive language and shows limited evidence of the writer's intent to meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer presents an artifact with some description but uses little or no figurative language. The connection to culture and cultural context may sometimes be weak. Some, but not all, of the writer's ideas are presented clearly; the writing is choppy at times and needs more, or more appropriate, transitions.	The paper exhibits some, but not enough, cultural awareness in the author's rhetorical choices. It uses some anti-racist and inclusive language but needs work to appeal to readers from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

**TABLE 2.2**

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
<b>2 Developing</b>	The text attempts to communicate cultural ideas using emerging inclusive language and shows emerging evidence of the writer's intent to meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer presents an artifact with little connection to culture and only minimally develops cultural context. The description is basic, lacking sensory details and figurative language. The writer has used few transitions or has used them incorrectly.	The paper exhibits weak cultural awareness in the author's rhetorical choices. It uses minimal anti-racist and inclusive language and does not appeal to readers from a variety of cultural backgrounds.
<b>1 Beginning</b>	The text begins to communicate cultural ideas but uses little to no inclusive language and shows little to no evidence of the writer's intent to meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer does not describe an artifact in any detail and makes no mention of cultural connection or cultural context. The ideas are disconnected, and no transitions are used.	The paper does not exhibit cultural awareness in the author's rhetorical choices. It does not use anti-racist or inclusive language and does not appeal to readers from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

**TABLE 2.2**

## 2.7 Spotlight on ... Variations of English

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify situations and contexts calling for purposeful shifts in voice, diction, tone, level of formality, and structure.
- Identify linguistic structures, including American English dialects.
- Write a description in an authentic voice.

### English and Its Dialects



Although English is the primary language of the United States, distinctive **dialects**, or forms of language specific to a particular region or social group, vary according to location, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other factors. American dialects may have their own grammar, vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation, and common expressions. Many, mainly regional, differences in pronunciation are often marked by **rhotic** and **non-rhotic** accents. Speakers with rhotic accents pronounce the /r/ before consonants and at the end of a word. Those with non-rhotic accents do not pronounce the /r/; for example, think of the Boston accent pronunciation of *park* as *pahk* or the Coastal Southern (areas along the Gulf of Mexico) pronunciation of *better* as *bettuh*.



While the American Midwest has what might be considered the closest variation to **General American English**, the language spoken by most Americans, it has its own regional and cultural dialect variations. In characteristic **Midwest American English** words such as *cot* and *caught* are pronounced as homophones. As in rhotic dialects, /r/ sounds are pronounced, even in words that don't contain the letter *r*: *wash*, for example,

becomes *warsh*. And /s/ may be added to words as a grammatical construction: *Alls* we need is more ice cream.

Variations in pronunciation and dialect result from a host of factors. Dialects are formed when people are divided socially, geographically, or both. Despite the difficulties in categorizing such complex variations in language, most scholars agree that dialects can be classified on the basis of location and social groupings, despite the overlap between them. A **regional dialect** is a variation in language that occurs within a geographical region. A **social dialect** includes differences in speech associated with a social group or socioeconomic level.

Among the most common—and most debated—language variations is **African American Vernacular English (AAVE)**. AAVE, also referred to as **Black English Vernacular** or **Ebonics**, is a generalized term for a variety of dialects spoken by Black Americans. These dialects are influenced by American Southern dialects. With roots in the language patterns of people descended from enslaved Africans in the United States, AAVE has its own syntax, grammar, and tense system. Some common features include the absence of third-person singular and possessive pronouns and the use of double negatives.

AAVE has distinct grammar conventions. The speaker or writer will often omit forms of the verb *to be* from a sentence, as in these examples:

“What [omitted *is*] he talking about?”

“She [omitted *was*] the one who took it.”

While General American English requires verb and tense agreement, AAVE features more variations. For example, in AAVE, the word *been* is often placed before a verb in order to convey a past event: for example, “He *been married*” rather than the General American English “He was married.” This change in grammar can actually convey different meanings. In General American English, the sentence implies that the man is no longer married, whereas the sentence in AAVE indicates that the man is still married.

This is by no means an inclusive list of AAVE conventions, as languages are constantly evolving. Understanding that language differences result from culture, identity, and geography and that you, as a writer, have the opportunity to express yourself using your social norms is an important first step in recognizing the role of culture in language.

Although differences in pronunciation abound, English dialects are widely classified as “standard” or “nonstandard.” **Standard dialect** follows specific rules for syntax, vocabulary, and grammar. This dialect is often perceived as more academic than nonstandard dialects and is used in formal situations. Other dialects, usually lacking such standardization and generally perceived as having less stature, are considered **nonstandard dialects**. For years, academic scholars and teachers have subscribed to the idea that so-called standard English should be the default dialect used in schools and academic writing. This dialect is spoken by newscasters, television news anchors, and a large percentage of middle-class Americans, especially those with formal educations.

And yet you, like others, have your own patterns of speech based largely on your culture, family, and region. **Code-switching**, or alternating between two or more languages or language forms, was taught explicitly in schools with the intent that students learn to speak and write standard English for certain academic and professional situations. However, newer research in best practices is revealing that allowing students to learn in and use their authentic voices, including nonstandard dialects, is a more equitable practice that is both culturally responsible and beneficial to learning.

### “Students’ Right to Their Own Language”



The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) is the world’s largest professional organization committed to writing research, theory, and teaching. It publishes the quarterly journal *College Composition and Communication* and holds an annual convention. The CCCC also publishes position statements on writing and the teaching of writing based on research, best practices of writing pedagogy, and



language practices. Recent research completed by the CCCC addresses the use of a wide variety of linguistic expressions and choices, including various regional and cultural dialects.

In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication adopted “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” a statement that affirmed students’ rights to use “their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture” or those that help them create their own identity. The statement recognizes that so-called General American English is aligned with a dominant White majority and includes implicit bias against students from other backgrounds. Finally, the statement reinforces the idea that a nation that praises and encourages diversity, particularly in academic circles, should not only accept diversity in language and dialect but also celebrate it. Doing so allows students to use the totality of their lived experiences, cultural language, and ideas to create fuller meaning in their writing. Over the years, the statement has undergone revisions and has been expanded to address students learning and writing in a second language.

This statement takes a step toward confronting the assumptions and hidden bias present in the educational system and works toward creating more equitable, anti-racist teaching for students, particularly from Black and other BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) backgrounds. The most recent updated and reaffirmed [statement \(<https://openstax.org/r/statementnewsrto>\)](https://openstax.org/r/statementnewsrto) stems from 2014.

### Demand for Linguistic Justice

One position statement released by the CCCC in July 2020 was “This Ain’t Another Statement! This Is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” Responding to the historical and sociopolitical context of today’s world, this statement coincided with #BlackLivesMatter, a movement to fight racism directed at the Black community, often at the hands of police and vigilantes. The statement shifts the narrative to composition and communication, asking how Black lives matter in language education, research, and scholarship.

The CCCC strongly promotes students’ language rights based on their own cultural backgrounds, yet it acknowledges that language rights have suffered from a similarly “inadequate response” as other social justice movements. Specifically for Black students and writers, cultural traditions such as **AAVE/Ebonics** continue to be devalued and diminished in line with the devaluation of Black lives. The demand upholds the organization’s earlier statement that Ebonics communicates Black traditions and social truths. The statement includes these demands:

- That teachers stop teaching only standard English as the communicative norm
- That teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch and instead teach about linguistic racism
- That teachers teach “Black Linguistic Consciousness” and work to unravel anti-Black linguistic racism
- That Black perspectives be included in the research and teaching of Black language

You can learn more about the impact of linguistic bias in education in [this TEDx Talk \(\[https://openstax.org/r/thistedxtalk\\\_QrTFJ5NIM1g\]\(https://openstax.org/r/thistedxtalk\_QrTFJ5NIM1g\)\)](https://openstax.org/r/thistedxtalk_QrTFJ5NIM1g).

### Publication: Writing as Your Artifact



Try this short exercise to identify and practice writing in a dialect that directly reflects the culture your artifact comes from. Write a short three- to five-paragraph story from the perspective of the artifact you chose for this chapter’s writing assignment. *What might your artifact see, hear, feel, or experience in its everyday life?*



Concentrate on using an authentic dialect, including vocabulary, grammatical conventions, and sentence structure, when constructing your story. As you reread your writing, ensure that you can hear your authentic voice in the text.



When all stories have been written, consider collaborating with your instructor to collect them in a class book that includes illustrations of the artifacts and a short quotation from the point of view of each artifact, similar to the format of the Trailblazer sections of this book.

## 2.8 Portfolio: Decolonizing Self

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Write a reflection of your composition process and how it affects your work.
- Apply the composing processes as a means to discover and reconsider ideas.

After each writing assignment in this course, you will reflect on and write about the composition process. Doing so makes you a more thoughtful writer as you think about the ideas, audience, purpose, and cultural considerations of your work.

### The Colonized Self

The colonized lived experience is an important topic of academic discourse. When one refers to a situation as colonized, they mean that the ideas, customs, and culture of one group of people have been imposed onto the Indigenous people of a land. For example, colonization occurred when European explorers arrived in the Americas between the 16th and 18th centuries to inhabit land already populated by various Native American peoples with their own culture and customs. Many scholars and students are interested in exploring what it means to remove this foreign experience from the curriculum and to discontinue operating under the assumption that groups in power determine customs and culture.

Such a process begins with an examination of individual identities and cultures. You have likely attended school in systems that privilege a mainstream culture over all others. The challenge is to figure out the identity of your authentic self, stripped of colonizing forces, the way Sequoyah, Cathy Park Hong, W. E. B. Du Bois, and others have tried to do. Essentially, two versions exist of the self: the **colonized self** that conforms to academic standards even when they do not align with personal cultural experiences and the **decolonized self** that challenges mainstream standards, especially when they do not include or make space for lived experiences. So what does the process of decolonizing look like?

### The Decolonized Self

Throughout much of American history, education has focused on advancing the colonial purposes of assimilation. This practice can be harmful to everyone, especially to students identifying as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color). While outright racism and exclusion are now frowned upon in academia, colonial racism and exclusion persist through more subtle means: systems of oppression, curricula, and institutional structures.

As a student and writer, you likely have experienced the effects of colonization either to your benefit or your detriment. While it can be difficult to break through entrenched racism and exclusion, through the process of decolonization you can form your identity and better understand the identities of people from other cultures.

The word decolonization refers to the process of a nation or territory breaking free from an oppressive colonial power that controls it. In essence, decolonization is a statement of independence. When used in cultural terms, *decolonization* refers to challenging and changing the individual and collective consciousness rooted in racism and oppression. Essentially, then, it means undoing colonial practices that have influenced education in the past and continue to do so today. You can learn more about decolonizing education in [this TEDx Talk](https://openstax.org/r/thistedxtalk_zeKHOTDwZxU) ([https://openstax.org/r/thistedxtalk\\_zeKHOTDwZxU](https://openstax.org/r/thistedxtalk_zeKHOTDwZxU)).

As you work to develop your decolonized self, you will likely spend time on introspection, examining unconscious biases and how they affect your perspective on your culture and other cultures. Learning to be anti-racist and inclusive is a lifelong process, one that can be developed in part through the writing process. Continual questioning and reflection is the most important part of decolonization.

### Reflection Prompt

In your portfolio for this chapter, imagine that other students in colleges and universities across the country

are talking about some of these same cultural issues. Think of it as one big conversation. American philosopher and rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1897–1993) created the metaphor of a *parlor* where academics across time and space have gathered to help you imagine what academic conversations must be like. Burke describes an academic conversation as “unending”: “Others . . . are engaged in a heated discussion. . . . You listen for a while . . . then you put in your oar” (Burke 110). In other words, as you write, you are adding to a timeless conversation among thinkers and authors. Your words help define cultural understanding of the future. (More about this “conversation” appears in [Glance at Genre: Introducing Research as Evidence](#).)

Consider Burke’s concept of joining an unending conversation along with the intersections of your cultural identities. Write a reflection in which you imagine what happens in the Burkean parlor of your own making when you enter. *How does the conversation change as a result of your presence? What parts of yourself contribute to, or maybe even derail, the ongoing conversations? How does the parlor change after you leave? Do you leave the parlor bubbling like warm, nourishing soup or in (figurative) flames?*

*[continued from previous conversation]*

**Former U.S. President Barack Obama:** “The worst thing that colonialism did was to cloud our view of our past.”

**Nigerian Author Chinua Achebe:** “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

**British Writer E. M. Forster:** “And Englishmen like posing as gods.”

**American Professor J. M. Blaut:** “Eurocentrism is quite simply the colonizer’s model of the world.”

**American Theologian Catherine Keller:** “Western dominology can with religious sanction identify anything dark, profound, or fluid with a revolting chaos.”

**Senegalese Author Mariama Bâ:** “The assimilationist dream of the colonist drew into its crucible our mode of thought and way of life.”

**Antiguan American Author Jamaica Kinkaid:** “What I see is the millions of people . . . made orphans: no motherland . . . no . . . holy ground.”

**African American Author Ralph Ellison:** “When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.”

**YOU:** “. . .”

*[to be continued]*

## Further Reading

To read more about the process of exploring language, identity, and culture, you may seek out the following authors and titles.

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# Literacy Narrative: Building Bridges, Bridging Gaps

3



**FIGURE 3.1** Five Black officers of the Women’s League in Newport, Rhode Island, c. 1899. Mary Dickerson (1830–1914) and her husband, Silas, moved to Newport, Rhode Island, around 1865. Empowered by literacy, Mary had founded a dressmaking business by 1872, and she helped found the New England Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs (later renamed the Northeastern Federation), which is still active, in 1896 and the Rhode Island Union of Colored Women’s Clubs in 1903. The women pictured, among others, are credited with “an inherited interest in social questions and a . . . spirit and pride” that contributed to social equality and justice, including the empowerment of women through the right to vote. For more information, read Mary Dickerson’s [obituary](https://openstax.org/r/obituary) (<https://openstax.org/r/obituary>). (credit: “Five female Negro officers of Women’s League, Newport, R.I.” by Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Public Domain)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 3.1 Identity and Expression
- 3.2 Literacy Narrative Trailblazer: Tara Westover
- 3.3 Glance at Genre: The Literacy Narrative
- 3.4 Annotated Sample Reading: from Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass by Frederick Douglass
- 3.5 Writing Process: Tracing the Beginnings of Literacy
- 3.6 Editing Focus: Sentence Structure
- 3.7 Evaluation: Self-Evaluating
- 3.8 Spotlight on ... The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN)
- 3.9 Portfolio: A Literacy Artifact

**INTRODUCTION** “Literacy is now understood as a means of . . . communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich, and fast-changing world,” according to UNESCO. The literacy narrative is a genre that provides an account of an individual or a member of a community and their experience with learning. Combining the broad definition of *literacy* with the term *narrative*, or *storytelling*, produces the literacy narrative: a story that provides an account of a learning experience. As you begin to reflect on what it means to learn, particularly in a college setting, this chapter will guide you through an exploration of the various features of the literacy narrative genre to prepare you to write one of your own.

One path to becoming familiar with the language of higher institutional learning, or the academy, is what professors like to call *entering the academic discourse community*. This phrase means that you begin to reflect on the experiences that have laid the path for your admission to this new community. In the traditional sense, when talking about **literacy**, people think of reading and writing. However, in the modern multimedia and kinesthetic world, the definition of *literacy* has been expanded to mean “competence in communication,” including a multitude of methods, modes, and texts. This emerging definition means that literacy includes the abilities to compose and interpret messages using images, visual arrangements, spoken words, and other modes beyond simple written texts. People are considered literate in almost any concentrated area in which they demonstrate knowledge and communicate proficiently.



**FIGURE 3.2** In fact, literacy may no longer involve physical pages of paper. (credit: “Woman working on iPad” by Marco Verch/flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Having this broad understanding of literacy allows individuals to think about the **genre**, or writing type, of the **literacy narrative** in many ways: ways that are textual, musical, digital, social, communal—the list continues. What scholars know for certain is that literacy involves individual as well as community engagement. One does not achieve literacy through isolation but rather as a result of active engagements with members of communities.

### 3.1 Identity and Expression

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

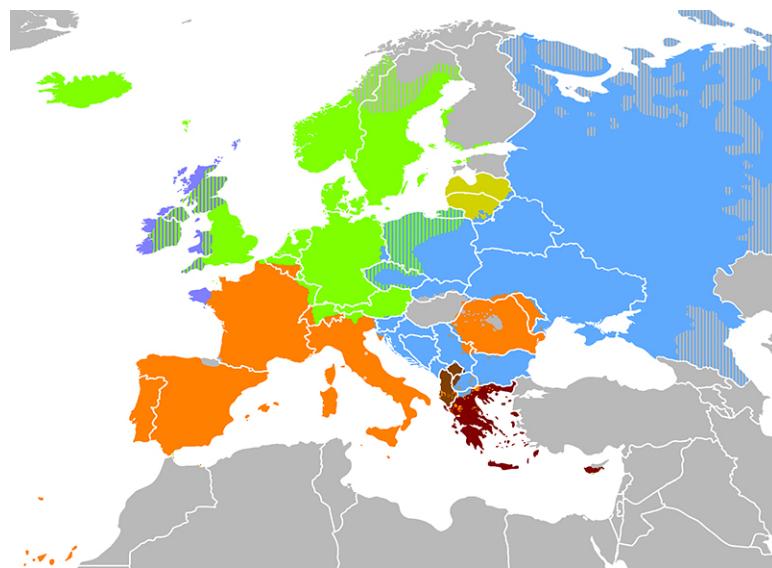
- Use reading and composing for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating.
- Discern the nature of identity in various rhetorical and cultural contexts.



You likely express your identity, or ideas about who you are, through language. The language you use also signals the ways in which you are rooted in specific culture, or groups of people who share common beliefs and lived experiences. Because the ways in which people speak and write are closely intertwined with their self-images and community affiliations, you can think, communicate, and interact most freely with others by



using your personal **idiolect**—that is, your individual way of speaking and writing—which is based in cultural language use. This section examines a few myths about language use and explores some productive ways to think about language and communication.



**FIGURE 3.3** Various language families in Europe (credit: “Indo-European languages” by Servitje/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### Language and Identity

As members of different communities, most Americans speak and write in a number of English varieties without even thinking about doing so. Like others, you generally speak differently with friends than you do with elders. You usually use different types of language when texting on your phone than when writing a professional email. As you make these communication choices based on different settings and audiences, you signal your identity and culture through word choice, sentence structure, and use of language in specific situations. For example, when speaking with friends, you may engage in wordplay to show identification with the group. On the other hand, you may speak with respect to elders to show an identity as a well-mannered younger relative, and you may use a standard email format to show a professional identity. If you speak other languages, you may find yourself freely switching between English and those other languages when conversing with people who share the same linguistic abilities; these shifts from one language to another showcase your identity as a multilingual person. As author Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004) writes in *Borderlands / La Frontera*, “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white” (59).

Every time you communicate, you signal some aspect of your identity. In the same way that everyone has multiple, intersecting identities, everyone has multiple ways of expressing themselves through language. As members of a multiethnic, multicultural society, everyone should recognize and respect these personal ways of communicating, which are integral to a shared human experience.



**FIGURE 3.4** Many view the world as a global village, which contains many language identities. (credit: “Anonymous globe of flags” by Wikimedia Commons, CC0)

### Expressing Identity in Writing



Even though individuals speak and write effectively using different varieties of English, many people nevertheless believe that one standard, “proper” English variety exists and that this “correct” way of speaking and writing should be used universally in all settings. This viewpoint considers varieties of English outside the imagined norm to be “wrong,” “bad,” or “substandard.” For example, speakers of some southern U.S. English varieties are often judged as “poor” or “unintelligent.” Similarly, people who speak English with the accent of another language may be incorrectly assumed to be illiterate. If you speak and write using one of those undervalued English varieties, others may have judged you for your language use or told you that your writing is “wrong.” Even without such judgment, you may have felt apprehensive when sharing your writing with others; you may still fear a harsh assessment, or you may feel vulnerable when others read your compositions.





**FIGURE 3.5** Leaders of the Writing in a Foreign Language panel at Finncon 2013 (credit: “Writing in a foreign language at Finncon 2013” by Henry So?derlund/ Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

ABC

The truth is that people speak and write in different ways for different **rhetorical situation**, or instances of communication. People in different communities and professions employ distinct kinds of English. You already use different varieties of English in different parts of your life; as you progress through college and into your career, you will learn the language expectations for the rhetorical situations you will encounter in those spaces. In learning these expectations, you will gain new identities. For example, you may become someone who knows how to write an exemplary lab report, you could develop an identity as an emerging researcher in any number of fields, or you may simply become someone who is comfortable letting other people read your writing. These new linguistic identities do not need to replace language use in other areas of your life. For instance, you should not feel the need to use a different form of grammar or punctuation in your social media posts. You should feel comfortable using your familiar English varieties in familiar rhetorical situations while, if needed, using new varieties of English you may learn in the new rhetorical situations you encounter. Additionally, you can and should seek out opportunities to use your familiar, nonacademic English varieties in academic and professional settings when you feel it is appropriate and aligns with the expectations of your instructor or employer.

Because people write in many different settings for many reasons, no particular English variety is appropriate for all writing tasks. As you become more familiar with the different ways English is used in different settings and communities, you can choose which variety to draw on in each rhetorical situation. You also may choose whether to meet or to disrupt the expectations of the people you are communicating with. In making these choices, you will rely on your existing literacies as well as newly learned ones.



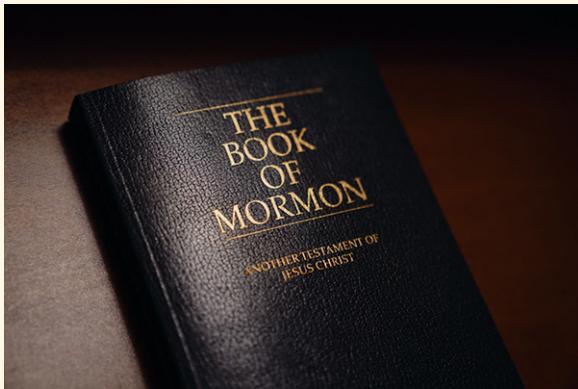
## 3.2 Trailblazer

### Literacy Narrative Trailblazer: Tara Westover

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Use reading for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating.
- Identify various types of literacy in the context of a literacy narrative.



**FIGURE 3.6** The Book of Mormon was the basis of one of [Tara Westover's \(<https://openstax.org/r/Tara>\)](https://openstax.org/r/Tara) early literacies. (credit: "The Book of Mormon" by Tony Webster/flickr, CC BY 2.0)

*"We are all more complicated than the role we are assigned in stories."*

### Being Educated



In her 2018 best seller, *Educated: A Memoir*, Tara Westover (b. 1986) considers the effects of academic and nonacademic literacies in her life. She also contemplates the ways in which identification with certain literacies can both create and disturb an individual's relationships and community memberships. While *Educated* addresses a variety of themes, including the tensions that family members must confront when they disagree, the memoir can be read largely as a literacy narrative.

Early in her memoir, Westover discusses a range of literacies she developed as the youngest of seven children in a homeschooled family. Although she was taught to read, her literary world consisted almost exclusively of the Book of Mormon and other religious texts. Her other literacies included preserving food, preparing herbs, and caring for the animals on the family farm, located on an Idaho mountain. She felt a keen sense of belonging both to her family and to their mountain home. Westover also learned how to work in and survive the dangerous junkyard her family owned and operated. Even though many family members sustained a variety of horrific accidents and injuries over the years, mostly at the junkyard or in car accidents, the family relied entirely on natural remedies; both parents considered doctors and medicine to be sinful. Despite the range of literacies that Westover learned at home, her parents did not value formal schooling and were indifferent to the development of a broad understanding of science, history, or current events. The Westover children were almost entirely self-directed in their academic studies.

As a young child, Westover fully embraced her parents' beliefs that "government schooling" was wholly unchristian and equivalent to brainwashing. Her brother Tyler, however, had always loved "book learning" and decided to leave home to attend college. He could not fully articulate why he felt compelled to be the first to leave, and his departure intrigued Westover. She, too, began to think about pursuing higher education. After another brother became physically abusive toward her, Tyler encouraged her to use college as an escape. She then bought an ACT prep book, studied on her own, and did well enough on the exams to be accepted to Brigham Young University.

Westover articulates in her memoir that once on campus, she realized how her haphazard homeschooling experience had left her with large gaps in knowledge and no preparation for studying and taking tests. As she improved her academic skills, she also learned methods of academic inquiry that were at odds with her parents' faith-based interpretations of both world and personal events.

As Westover gained a science-based worldview through her college experience, she struggled to integrate her

new understandings with her family's perspectives; in other words, her new literacies were at odds with her old ones. She still felt connected to her family, but her new understanding of the world was irreconcilable with her father's survivalist, fundamentalist beliefs. When she refused to submit to her father's will and return to his rigid worldview and interpretation of Mormonism, Westover's relationship with most of her family members disintegrated. Instead, she used her academic literacies to examine the history of their religion in her doctoral research. All three Westover children who left the mountain—and, to some extent, their family—earned PhDs.

For Westover, the schism with her family was not primarily the result of her literacy learning; rather, the relationship ruptured because she refused to repudiate her newfound knowledge as inferior to her family's ways of knowing. In subsequent interviews, Westover has discussed the loss she felt in being cut off from her family and place of origin. Although many college students experience similar challenges when integrating new ways of encountering the world with their family's views of "how things are" or "how things should be," some families feel enriched by the new information, whereas others feel threatened by it.

### Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the literacies that Westover learned while living at home? How might they conflict with the new ones learned away from home?
2. How might literacy learning have the potential both to separate and to unite individuals and their communities?
3. Do you think the Westovers with PhDs are more "literate" than the ones who remained at home? Explain your answer.
4. How are literacy and gaining new literacies related? Ambition? Desire for knowledge? Rebellion? Dissatisfaction? Explain your answer.
5. How do your childhood literacy experiences align with Westover's? How do they differ?
6. At this point in your college experience, have you had any encounters with ideas that conflict with the value system(s) with which you were raised, as Westover did? How do you envision navigating those differences?

## 3.3 Glance at Genre: The Literacy Narrative

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read and compose in several genres to understand how genre conventions shape and are shaped by readers' and writers' practices and purposes.
- Match the capacities of different environments to varying rhetorical situations.

Over time, people have developed specific ways of writing for particular rhetorical situations. These distinctive ways of writing can be referred to in part as genres. You may have heard the term *genre* in reference to publishing categories, such as novels or memoirs, but the term can refer to any type of writing that conforms to specific forms and benchmarks. Many genres include stories of different kinds—for example, folktales, short stories, accounts of events, and biographies. As author Jonathan Gottschall says in his 2012 book of the same title, humankind is "the storytelling animal"; people of all cultures have engaged in telling stories, both as storytellers and as audience members. Simply put, narrative stories are essential to many genres of writing.



**FIGURE 3.7** Bronwyn Vaughan, storyteller (credit: “At the foot of the storytellers chair” by Mosman Library/flickr, CC BY 2.0)

### Exploring Narrative: Elements of Storytelling

Narratives, whether about literacy or anything else, include these key elements:

- **Plot.** Authors of narratives tell about one or more events. In fiction, the plot is the sequence of those events. In nonfiction, a plot is often referred to simply as the events, but nonfiction texts follow similar plot patterns, including exposition or introduction, a series of events leading to a climax or discovery, and events following the climax or discovery.
- **Characters.** The events in the story happen to characters, or individuals who are part of the story. In nonfiction, these characters are usually real people. The audience should feel a connection to the main character or characters. Readers may like or dislike characters, blame them or feel sorry for them, identify with them or not. Skilled writers portray characters through the use of dialogue, actions or behavior, and thoughts so that readers can understand what these individuals are like.
- **Setting.** Stories, fiction and nonfiction, take place in settings, which include locations, time periods, and the cultures in which the characters or real people are immersed.
- **Problem and Resolution.** In narratives, the characters generally encounter one or more problems. The tension caused by the problem builds to a climax. The resolution of the problem and the built-up tension usually occurs near the end of the story.
- **Story Arc.** Most narratives have a story arc—a beginning, a middle, and an end—but not necessarily in that order. The story arc, or order of events, may occur chronologically, or the story may begin in the middle of the action and explain earlier events later in the sequence.

### Specific Details and Other Conventions

To immerse the audience in the story, authors provide specific details of the scenes and action. Many authors, and teachers, call this strategy “showing, not telling.” These aspects can include the following elements:

- **Sensory Details:** Full, literal or figurative descriptions of the things that the characters see, smell, hear, touch, and taste in their surroundings.
- **Dialogue:** Conversation between characters.
- **Action:** Vivid portrayal of the events in the story. Writers often use short sentences and strong verbs to indicate physical or mental action.
- **Engaging Language:** Sentence structure and word choices, including **tone** (vocal attitude of the narrator or characters), **diction** (language used by the narrator or characters), and **varied constructions** (different kinds of sentences), that provide specific, clear, and compelling information for the audience.

## Establishing the Significance

 Most importantly, the audience must feel that the story has some significance. While the author's main point may only be implied, rather than stated outright as in a conventional academic essay, readers should understand the point of the story and believe that it matters.



**FIGURE 3.8** Malala Yousafzai in 2015 (credit: “Malala Yousafzai- Education for girls” by UK Department for International Development/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0)

For example, in the prologue to her memoir about the importance of education for girls, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (2013), Malala Yousafzai (b. 1997) writes, “The day when everything changed was Tuesday, 9 October 2012.” Yousafzai provides reference to an exact date, the precise moment when a Taliban gunman shot her in the head because she had spoken publicly in favor of girls’ right to education. Identifying the date in this way is a technique that serves a variety of purposes. This technique provides a focal point to draw the audience into the story, identifies details that serve as rising action that the audience can assume will culminate on this date, marks the setting in both time and place for the audience, and ultimately foreshadows a climax of action for the reader. The following elements, therefore, are crucial for writers of narratives to consider when creating content for their writing.

- **Audience.** Narratives are designed to appeal to specific audiences; authors choose storytelling elements, details, and language strategies to engage the target audience.
- **Purpose.** Authors may tell stories for different reasons: to entertain, to reinforce cultural norms, to educate, or to strengthen social ties. The same story may, and often does, fulfill more than one purpose.

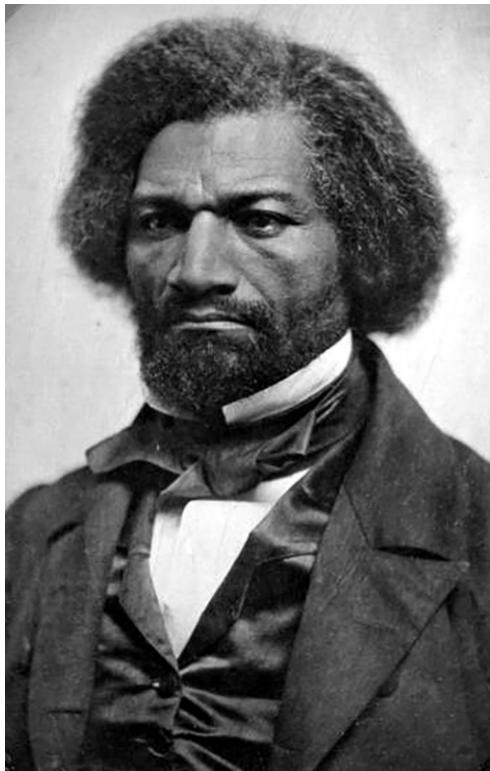
## 3.4 Annotated Sample Reading: from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read in several genres to understand how conventions are shaped by purpose, language, culture, and expectation.
- Use reading for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating in varying rhetorical and cultural contexts.
- Read a diverse range of texts, attending to relationships among ideas, patterns of organization, and interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements.

## Introduction



**FIGURE 3.9** Frederick Douglass: speaker, writer, abolitionist (credit: “Frederick Douglass, from an 1856 Ambrotype in the National Portrait Gallery” by Mike Licht, NotionsCapital.com/flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was born into slavery in Maryland. He never knew his father, barely knew his mother, and was separated from his grandmother at a young age. As a boy, Douglass understood there to be a connection between literacy and freedom. In the excerpt from his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, that follows, you will learn about how Douglass learned to read. By age 12, he was reading texts about the natural rights of human beings. At age 15, he began educating other enslaved people. When Douglass was 20, he met Anna Murray, whom he would later marry. Murray helped Douglass plot his escape from slavery. Dressed as a sailor, Douglass bought a train ticket northward. Within 24 hours, he arrived in New York City and declared himself free. Douglass went on to work as an activist in the abolitionist movement as well as the women’s suffrage movement.



In the portion of the text included here, Douglass chooses to represent the dialogue of Mr. Auld, an enslaver who by the laws of the time owns Douglass. Douglass describes this moment with detail and accuracy, including Mr. Auld's use of a racial slur. In an [interview](https://openstax.org/r/interview) (<https://openstax.org/r/interview>) with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), Harvard professor Randall Kennedy (b. 1954), who has traced the historical evolution of the word, notes that one of its first uses, recorded in 1619, appears to have been descriptive rather than derogatory. However, by the mid-1800s, White people had appropriated the term and begun using it with its current negative connotation. In response, over time, Black people have reclaimed the word (or variations of it) for different purposes, including mirroring racism, creating irony, and reclaiming community and personal power—using the word for a contrasting purpose to the way others use it. Despite this evolution, Professor Kennedy explains that the use of the word should be accompanied by a deep understanding of one's audience and by being clear about the intention. However, even when intention is very clear and malice is not intended, harm can, and likely will, occur. Thus, Professor Kennedy cautions that all people should understand the history of the word, be aware of its potential negative effect on an audience, and therefore use it sparingly, or preferably not at all.

In the case of Mr. Auld and Douglass, Douglass gives an account of Auld's exact language in order to hold a mirror to the racism of Mr. Auld—and the reading audience of his memoir—and to emphasize the theme that literacy (or education) is one way to combat racism.



## LIVING BY THEIR OWN WORDS

### Literacy from Unexpected Sources

*From the title and from Douglass's use of pronoun I, you know this work is autobiographical and therefore written from the first-person point of view.*

*[excerpt begins with first full paragraph on page 33 and ends on page 34 where the paragraph ends]*

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read.

*Douglass describes the background situation and the culture of the time, which he will defy in his quest for literacy. The word choice in his narration of events indicates that he is writing for an educated audience.*

To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy."

*In sharing this part of the narrative, Douglass underscores the importance of literacy. He provides a description of Mr. Auld, a slaveholder, who seeks to impose illiteracy as a means to oppress others. In this description of Mr. Auld's reaction, Douglass shows that slaveholders feared the power that enslaved people would have if they could read and write.*

*Douglass provides the details of Auld's dialogue not only because it is a convention of narrative genre but also because it demonstrates the purpose and motivation for his forthcoming pursuit of literacy. We have chosen to maintain the authenticity of the original text by using the language that Douglass offers to quote Mr. Auld's dialogue because it both provides context for the rhetorical situation and underscores the value of the attainment of literacy for Douglass. However, contemporary audiences must understand that this language should be uttered only under very narrow circumstances in any current rhetorical situation. In general, it is best to avoid its use.*

These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master.

*In this reflection, Douglass has a definitive and transformative moment with reading and writing. The moment that sparked a desire for literacy is a common feature in literacy narratives, particularly those of enslaved people. In that moment, he understood the value of literacy and its life-changing possibilities; that transformative moment is a central part of the arc of this literacy narrative.*

Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

*Douglass articulates that this moment changed his relationship to literacy and ignited a purposeful engagement with language and learning that would last throughout his long life. The rhythm, sentence structure, and poetic phrasing in this reflection provide further evidence that Douglass, over the course of his life, actively pursued and mastered language after having this experience with Mr. Auld.*

[excerpt continues with the beginning of Chapter 7 on page 36 and ends with the end of the paragraph at the top of page 39]

[In Chapter 7, the narrative continues] I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by any one else. It is due, however, to my mistress to say of her, that she did not adopt this course of treatment immediately. She at first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute.

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practise her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself.

*Douglass describes in detail a person in his life and his relationship to her. He uses specific diction to describe her kindness and to help readers get to know her—a “tear” for the “suffering”; “bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner.”*

She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her apprehension. She was an apt woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other.

*The fact that Douglass can understand the harm caused by the institution of slavery to slaveholders as well as to enslaved people shows a level of sophistication in thought, identifies the complexity and detriment of this historical period, and demonstrates an acute awareness of the rhetorical situation, especially for his audience for this text.*

*The way that he articulates compassion for the slaveholders, despite their ill treatment of him, would create empathy in his readers and possibly provide a revelation for his audience.*

From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*.

*Once again, Douglass underscores the value that literacy has for transforming the lived experiences of enslaved people. The reference to the *inch* and the *ell* circles back to Mr. Auld's warnings and recalls the impact of that moment on his life.*

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country.

*Douglass comments on the culture of the time, which still permitted slavery; he is sensitive to the fact that these boys might be embarrassed by their participation in unacceptable, though humanitarian, behavior. His audience will also recognize the irony in his tone when he writes that it is “an unpardonable offense to teach slaves . . . in this Christian country.” Such behavior is surely “unchristian.”*

It is enough to say of the dear little fellows, that they lived on Philpot Street, very near Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard. I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. “You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life!* Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?” These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.

*Douglass pursues and attains literacy not only for his own benefit; his knowledge also allows him to begin to instruct, as well as advocate for, those around him. Douglass's use of language and his understanding of the rhetorical situation give the audience evidence of the power of literacy for all people, round out the arc of his narrative, and provide a resolution.*

## Discussion Questions

- Based on what you have learned about literacy thus far, would you consider this excerpt from Frederick Douglass's autobiography a literacy narrative? Explain your response by providing evidence from Douglass's text.
- How do Douglass's descriptions of Mr. and Mrs. Auld make these characters come to life for the reader?
- What do Douglass's tone, use of language, and commentary reveal about him and why literacy was so important?
- African American storytelling features a common trope (device) of a trickster character. The trickster is characterized by intellect or secret knowledge that they use to defy convention. How does Douglass play the

role of trickster in this excerpt from his narrative, and what impact does this rhetorical device have on the reading audience?

- What elements of Douglass's narrative might help you develop your own narrative about literacy?

### 3.5 Writing Process: Tracing the Beginnings of Literacy

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Develop a writing project through multiple drafts.
- Use composing for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating in various rhetorical, cultural, and language situations.
- Give and act on productive feedback to works in progress.
- Benefit from the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes.
- Use language structures, including multilingual structures, grammar, punctuation, and spelling, during the processes of composing and revising.

Many inexperienced writers imagine that “good” writers compose their texts all at once, from beginning to end, and need only a small amount of attention to polish the grammar and punctuation before arriving at a final draft. In reality, however, the **writing process** (steps for creating a finished composition) is typically **recursive**. That is, it repeats steps multiple times, not necessarily in the same order, and the process is more messy than linear or systematic. You can think of the writing process in terms of these broad categories:

- Prewriting.** You will end up with a stronger composition if you do some work before you begin writing. Before putting complete sentences on a page, take some time to think about the rhetorical situation for your writing, gather your thoughts, and consider how you might arrange your ideas.
- Drafting.** In the past, you may have dedicated most of your writing time to drafting, or putting words into a document. When you have strong prewriting and revision habits, however, drafting is often a smaller portion of the writing process.
- Peer Review.** Almost all strong writers rely on feedback from others, whether peers, instructors, or editors. Your instructor may guide you in some peer review exercises to complete with your classmates, or you might choose to consult with your university’s writing center. When others give you clear, honest feedback on your draft, you can use that information to strengthen your piece.
- Revision.** After you have a draft, carefully consider how to make it more effective in reaching the audience and fulfilling its purpose. You can make changes that affect the piece as a whole; such changes are often called global revisions. You can also make changes that affect only the meaning of a sentence or a word; these changes can be called local revisions.

#### Summary of Assignment: Independent Literacy Narrative



In this assignment, you will write an essay in which you offer a developed narrative about an aspect of your literacy practice or experience. Consider some of these questions to generate ideas for writing: *What literacies and learning experiences have had profound effects on your life? When did this engagement occur? Where were you? Were there other participants? Have you told this story before? If so, how often, and why do you think you return to it? Has this engagement shaped your current literacy practices? Will it shape your practices going forward?*

The development of your literacy experiences can take multiple paths. If you use the tools provided in this section, you will be able to effectively compose a unique literacy narrative that reflects your identities and experiences. The questions prompting your writing in this section can help you begin to develop an independent literacy narrative. The next section, on community literacy narratives, helps you consider your composition course community and ways to think about your shared experiences around literacy. The following section, on literacy narrative research, guides you to a database of literacy narratives that offer an opportunity to analyze the ways in which others in the academic community have reflected on their literacy

experiences. Further sections will guide you through the development and organization of your work as you navigate this genre.

 **Another Lens 1.** As an alternative to an individual literacy narrative, members of your composition course community can develop a set of interview questions that will allow you to learn more about each other's past and present experiences with literacy. After the community has determined what the interview questions will be, choose a partner from the composition community to work with on this assignment; alternatively, your instructor may assign partners for the class. Using the interview questions you have discussed and developed, you will conduct an interview with your partner, and they with you. Your instructor will allow you and your peers to record and transcribe one another's responses and post them where all students in the community have access. After you have completed, transcribed, and posted your interviews, everyone will closely examine each of their peers' interviews and look for recurring themes as well as unique aspects of the narratives shared. This assignment will inevitably illuminate both the communal nature and the unique, independent experiences of literacy engagement.

 **Another Lens 2.** Using DALN (<https://openstax.org/r/daln>), perform a keyword search for literacy narratives on one aspect or area of concentration that interests you, such as music, dance, or poetry. Select two or more narratives from the archive to read and analyze. Read and annotate each narrative, and then think about a unique position you can take when discussing these stories. Use these questions to guide the development of your stance: *Do you have experiences in this concentrated area of literacy? If so, how do your experiences intersect with or depart from the ones you are reading? What common themes, if any, do these narratives share? What do these narratives reveal about literacy practices in general and about this area of concentration in particular?*

### Quick Launch: Defining Your Rhetorical Situation, Generating Ideas, and Organizing

When you are writing a literacy narrative, think about

- your audience and purpose for writing;
- the ideas and experiences that best reflect your encounters with various literacies; and
- the order in which you would like to present your information.

#### The Rhetorical Situation

A **rhetorical situation** occurs every time anyone communicates with anyone else. To prepare to write your literacy narrative, use a graphic organizer like [Table 3.1](#) to outline the rhetorical situation by addressing the following aspects:

Rhetorical Situation Element	Brainstorming Questions	Examples	Your Notes
Author (who)	Which of your identities will you inhabit as you write this assignment?	Student in this class? Member of a specific family? Part of a particular cultural group? Person who loves a certain literacy?	

**TABLE 3.1**

Rhetorical Situation Element	Brainstorming Questions	Examples	Your Notes
<b>Message</b> (what)	What do you want to communicate?	Significance of a particular literacy? Meaning of a given literacy in my life?	
<b>Audience</b> (to whom)	Who is your primary audience? How will you shape your writing to best connect with this audience? Do you need to consider any secondary audiences?	My class community? My instructor? Will I want to share this narrative with others outside of class? If so, with whom? How will I shape my language to communicate with these audiences?	
<b>Purpose</b> (why)	Earning a grade is a valid purpose, but what other reasons do you have for writing this piece?	Informing readers about a specific literacy or about my community partner? Persuading readers to see a literacy or my community partner differently? Entertaining readers? Reflecting on a deeper meaning of a literacy or literacy experience?	
<b>Means</b> (how)	Your instructor will provide the means for this assignment: write a text that conforms to the expectations of the literacy narrative genre, and submit it in the way the instructor expects.	Given: literacy narrative May I include visual elements, and do I want to do so? Should my drafts and final submission be printed or submitted electronically? What program should I use to create the document (Microsoft Word, for example)? How and when will I submit drafts in progress and the final draft?	

**TABLE 3.1**

Rhetorical Situation Element	Brainstorming Questions	Examples	Your Notes
Context (when/where)	How will the time period or location change the way you develop your piece?	What is happening right now in my city, county, state, area, or nation or the world that relates to this narrative?  Have any new literacies appeared recently that relate to my narrative?  Does anything about my college or university connect with this piece of writing?	
Culture (community)	What social, cultural, or environmental assumptions do you, your subject, or your audience have?	How will I negotiate between my identity and communication style and the expectations of others?	

**TABLE 3.1**

### Generating Ideas



In addition to these notes, write a few ideas relating to your literacy experiences. Feel free to use bullet points or incomplete sentences.

- What instructors, formal or informal, helped or hindered you in learning literacies?
- Which of your literacies feel(s) most comfortable?
- Which literacy experiences have transformed you?
- Do you use specialized language to signal your identity as part of a community or cultural group?
- After you look back over your notes, what is the most compelling story about a literacy or literacy experience that you can share, and what is the significance of that story?

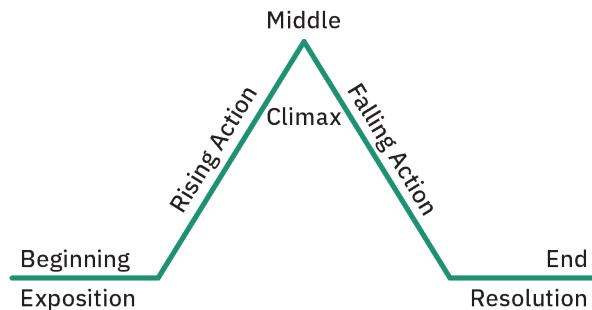
### Organizing



In one last step before beginning to draft your literacy narrative, think visually about how you will put the pieces together.

- Where will you begin and end your literacy narrative, and what is your story arc? Will you jump right into some richly described action, or will you set the scene for the reader by describing an important story locale first?
- What tension will the story resolve?
- What specific sensory details, dialogue, and action will you include?
- What vignettes, or small scenes, will you include, and in what order should the audience encounter them?
- Some of your paragraphs will “show” scenes to your readers, and some of your paragraphs will “tell” your readers explanatory information. After you decide what elements to show to your readers through vivid descriptions and what elements you will inform your readers about, decide how to order those elements within your draft.
- Review the specific writing prompt given in the summary of the assignment, and make any additional

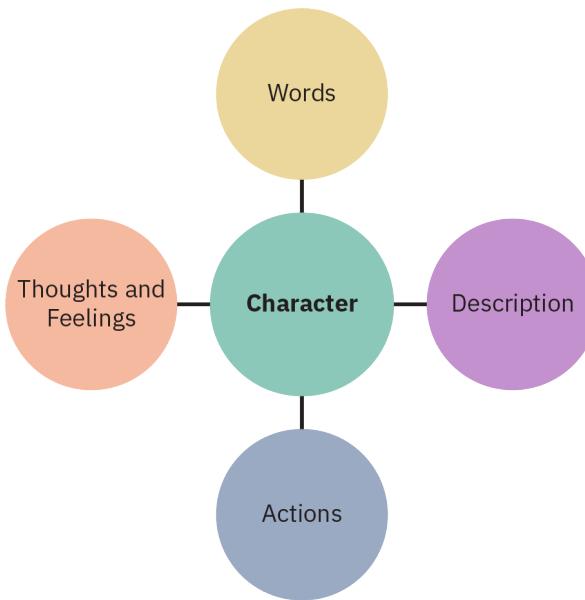
notes needed in response to that material. Use visual organizers in such as those presented in [Figure 3.10](#) through [Figure 3.13](#) to develop the plan for your draft:



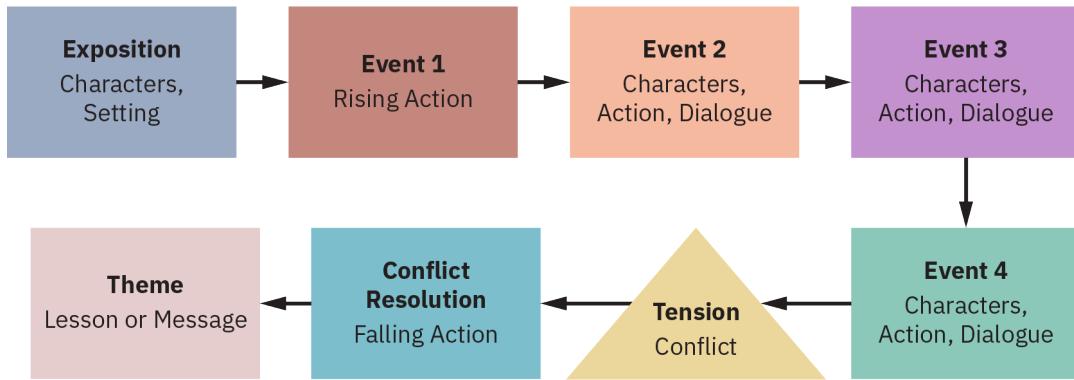
**FIGURE 3.10** Plot diagram (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Drawing:	
	Dialogue: Description:
	Dialogue: Description:
	Dialogue: Description:
	Dialogue: Description:

**FIGURE 3.11** Storyboard (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)



**FIGURE 3.12** Web diagram (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)



**FIGURE 3.13** Graphic sequence chart (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Use the graphic organizer structure above that best helps you establish the narrative arc for your literacy story, including the following elements:

- **Beginning.** Set the scene by providing information about the characters, setting (where and when the narrative takes place), culture, background, and situation.
- **Rising Action.** In each successive section, whether it is a paragraph or more, add dialogue and other details to make your story vivid and engaging for readers so that they will want to continue reading. Tell your story in an order that makes sense and is clear to readers.
- **Climax.** At this point, show what finally happened to clinch the experience. *How did the literacy experience finally take hold? Or why didn't it? What happened at this “climactic” moment?*
- **Falling Action.** This is the part where the tension is released and you have achieved—or not—what you set out to do. This section may be quite short, as it may simply describe a new feeling or reaction. It leads directly to the next section, which may be more reflective.
- **Resolution.** This is a reflective portion. *How has this new literacy affected you? How do you view things differently? How do you think it affected the person who taught you or others with whom you are close?*

### **Drafting: Writing from Personal Experience and Observation**

Now that you have planned your literacy narrative, you are ready to begin drafting. If you have been thoughtful in preparing to write, drafting usually proceeds quickly and smoothly. Use your notes to guide you in composing the first draft. As you write about specific events and scenes, create a rich picture for your reader

by using concrete, sensory details and specific rather than general nouns as shown in [Table 3.2](#).

Person		Place	Thing	Idea
General	girl	park	game	competition
Less Specific	schoolmate	bench	chess	tournament
More Specific	Sasha	gaming area	board	semifinal match
Sensory	tall, dark-haired Sasha	quiet, tree-shaded gaming area	glossy black and white board	popcorn-scented semifinal match

**TABLE 3.2**

### Using Frederick Douglass's Text as a Drafting Model

As Douglass does, create your literacy narrative from your recollections of people, places, things, and events. Reread the following passage.

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. It is enough to say of the dear little fellows, that they lived on Philpot Street, very near Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard. I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life!* Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?" These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.

In this selection from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, elements of the literacy narrative genre as explained in [Glance at Genre: The Literacy Narrative](#) are evident. First, Douglass introduces additional characters who help him resolve his earlier complication of being prevented from learning to read by the Aulds. The interaction he records here reiterates the larger conflict of the narrative: Douglass's continuing enslavement. Although he does not give many scenic details, few more would be needed, for he places the action on the street near a shipyard, thereby giving an indication of the surroundings. Douglass presents his own words in dialogue to reinforce for readers that he knows how to speak and write in the ways that white people with means were taught at the time. In this piece, set against the backdrop of a culture that insisted on viewing enslaved people as "brutes," Douglass demonstrates his dignity by displaying his facility with language and his humanity by offering bread to hungry children who have more freedom and opportunity, but less food, than he does.



To create a draft that draws on multiple elements of storytelling, as this selection from Douglass does, you may need to generate ideas for additional scenes, or you may need to revisit a particular place so that you can

provide concrete and sensory details for your readers. Refer to the storyboarding, web diagram, and plot flow charts in the “Organizing” section above to further develop your draft.

### Another Way to Draft the Literacy Narrative

Read the literacy narrative by American author and educator Helen Keller (1880–1968). An Alabama native, Keller lost both sight and hearing after a serious illness as a young child. The selection relates a transformational literacy moment in her life, when Anne Sullivan (1866–1936), Keller’s teacher, helps her understand the connection between hand-spelled words and physical items. Keller’s literacies, along with heroic support from her teacher, later enabled her to complete college and tour as an activist and lecturer.



**FIGURE 3.14** Helen Keller with Anne Sullivan, July 1888 (credit: “Helen Keller with Anne Sullivan in July 1888” by Family member of Thaxter P. Spencer/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to me. I am filled with wonder when I consider the immeasurable contrasts between the two lives which it connects. It was the third of March, 1887, three months before I was seven years old.

*The introduction sketches the boundaries of this literacy narrative by noting that the arrival of a teacher separated Keller’s life into two distinct parts.*

On the afternoon of that eventful day, I stood on the porch, dumb, expectant. I guessed vaguely from my mother’s signs and from the hurrying to and fro in the house that something unusual was about to happen, so I went to the door and waited on the steps. The afternoon sun penetrated the mass of honeysuckle that covered the porch, and fell on my upturned face. My fingers lingered almost unconsciously on the familiar leaves and blossoms which had just come forth to greet the sweet southern spring. I did not know what the future held of marvel or surprise for me. Anger and bitterness had preyed upon me continually for weeks and a deep languor had succeeded this passionate struggle.

*This paragraph helps establish the problem to be resolved in this short narrative: Keller is “dumb” but “expectant.” Additionally, the three characters in this section have been introduced—mother, teacher, and Keller herself—though the audience has few details yet about any of them. The author provides some sensory details in this paragraph,*

however, including her mother's movements, the afternoon sun, and the tactile feeling of the honeysuckle.

Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line, and had no way of knowing how near the harbour was. "Light! give me light!" was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.

*When Keller's autobiography was originally written, the audience was readers of the Ladies' Home Journal, a monthly magazine popular with homemakers; Keller's autobiography was published in monthly installments. Keller appeals to this audience with her allusions to Judeo-Christian imagery and an evocative writing style. While her wording may seem a bit overdone today, such phrasing would have been familiar to her contemporary readers. A year later, in 1903, Keller's story was published as a book and expanded to a much wider audience.*

I felt approaching footsteps, I stretched out my hand as I supposed to my mother. Some one took it, and I was caught up and held close in the arms of her who had come to reveal all things to me, and, more than all things else, to love me.

*The subject of love often appears in the literacy narrative genre, whether love of a certain skill or pastime or love for a relative or teacher who taught a certain literacy.*

The morning after my teacher came she led me into her room and gave me a doll. The little blind children at the Perkins Institution had sent it and Laura Bridgman had dressed it; but I did not know this until afterward. When I had played with it a little while, Miss Sullivan slowly spelled into my hand the word "d-o-l-l." I was at once interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it. When I finally succeeded in making the letters correctly I was flushed with childish pleasure and pride. Running downstairs to my mother I held up my hand and made the letters for doll. I did not know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed; I was simply making my fingers go in monkey-like imitation. In the days that followed I learned to spell in this uncomprehending way a great many words, among them pin, hat, cup and a few verbs like sit, stand and walk. But my teacher had been with me several weeks before I understood that everything has a name.

*With the introduction of finger spelling, this paragraph and the next present the rising action building toward the climax of this story.*

One day, while I was playing with my new doll, Miss Sullivan put my big rag doll into my lap also, spelled "d-o-l-l" and tried to make me understand that "d-o-l-l" applied to both. Earlier in the day we had had a tussle over the words "m-u-g" and "w-a-t-e-r." Miss Sullivan had tried to impress it upon me that "m-u-g" is mug and that "w-a-t-e-r" is water, but I persisted in confounding the two. In despair she had dropped the subject for the time, only to renew it at the first opportunity. I became impatient at her repeated attempts and, seizing the new doll, I dashed it upon the floor. I was keenly delighted when I felt the fragments of the broken doll at my feet. Neither sorrow nor regret followed my passionate outburst. I had not loved the doll. In the still, dark world in which I lived there was no strong sentiment or tenderness. I felt my teacher sweep the fragments to one side of the hearth, and I had a sense of satisfaction that the cause of my discomfort was removed. She brought me my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.

*In Keller's "still, dark world," she offers little indication of setting, giving the audience only glimpses of her surroundings: honeysuckle, a house with interior stairs, and a hearth in her teacher's room. Because she could not converse at the time, the only dialogue in this story appears in the form of the finger-spelled words. Plot tensions rise with Keller's action of breaking the doll.*

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Some one was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

*Keller’s literacy in finger spelling not only laid the foundation for her future literacies in reading, writing, and speaking but also provided her foundational access to language itself. This paragraph provides the climax of this story as well as the resolution for the problem introduced earlier; having been introduced to language, Keller is no longer “dumb” (though she cannot yet speak).*

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow.

I learned a great many new words that day. I do not remember what they all were; but I do know that mother, father, sister, teacher were among them—words that were to make the world blossom for me, “like Aaron’s rod, with flowers.” It would have been difficult to find a happier child than I was as I lay in my crib at the close of that eventful day and lived over the joys it had brought me, and for the first time longed for a new day to come.

*The final two paragraphs offer falling action following the dramatic climax.*

Consider the ways in which Douglass’s account and Keller’s account are stylistically similar and different. Both use figurative language—“bread of knowledge”—and make allusions to the Christian tradition. However, Douglass uses dialogue to illustrate a social disparity, whereas Keller’s transformation and her language are largely internal. You should make use of the strategies that best fit your own literacy narrative as shown in [Table 3.3](#).

Writing Strategy	Examples and Explanation	Try It
Reflective diction	<p>Remember Filled with wonder Consider Guessed vaguely Unconsciously Uncomprehending Confounding</p> <p><i>Keller uses these words to suggest that the transformation is mental rather than physical.</i></p>	<p>In your literacy narrative, where does the shift in being occur? Is it mental, emotional, spiritual, or physical? Is it social, political, or cultural?</p> <p>What words might you use throughout your draft to convey this idea?</p> <p>Create a word bank from which to draw.</p>
Figurative language (such as comparison through metaphor and simile)	<p>Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line, and had no way of knowing how near the harbour was. “Light! give me light!” was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.</p> <p><i>Keller’s comparison between a ship lost in the fog and her preliterate life provides insight into her mental state.</i></p>	<p>Complete the following sentence frames:</p> <p>My literary practice or experience is like _____.</p> <p>My literary practice or experience is as _____ as _____.</p> <p>My literary practice or experience is a(n) _____ (insert a noun) because _____.</p> <p>Add versions of some or all of these sentences to your draft.</p>

**TABLE 3.3**

Writing Strategy	Examples and Explanation	Try It
Sensory language	<p>We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered.</p> <p>As the cool stream gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other the word <i>water</i>, first slowly, then rapidly.</p> <p><i>Keller involves readers in the experience by appealing to their senses.</i></p>	<p>Complete the following sentence:</p> <p>My literary practice or experience ...</p> <p>... sounds like _____.</p> <p>... smells like _____.</p> <p>... tastes like _____.</p> <p>... feels like _____.</p> <p>... looks like _____.</p> <p>Add versions of some or all of these sentences to your draft.</p>

**TABLE 3.3**

Writing Strategy	Examples and Explanation	Try It
Allusion	<p>“like Aaron’s rod, with flowers”</p> <p><i>Keller equates her literacy with a biblical miracle.</i></p>	<p>Complete the following sentences:</p> <p>My literary practice or experience reminds me of . . .</p> <p>. . . the book _____.</p> <p>. . . the movie _____.</p> <p>. . . the story _____.</p> <p>. . . the TV show _____.</p> <p>. . . the play _____.</p> <p>. . . the song _____.</p> <p>Add versions of some or all these sentences to your draft.</p>
Shift in perception	<p>On the afternoon of that eventful day, I stood on the porch, dumb, expectant. . . That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!</p> <p><i>Keller shifts from expectancy to awakening through literacy.</i></p>	<p>Complete the following sentence:</p> <p>My literary practice or experience caused me to shift from _____ to _____.</p> <p>Add a version of this sentence to your draft.</p>

**TABLE 3.3**

Writing Strategy	Examples and Explanation	Try It
Theme	<p>“Light! give me light!” was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.</p> <p><i>Keller equates her literacy with light and then love.</i></p>	<p>Complete the following sentence:</p> <p>My literary practice or experience means _____ to me.</p> <p>Add a version of this sentence to your draft.</p>

**TABLE 3.3**

### Peer Review: Giving Specific Praise and Constructive Feedback

Although the writing process does not always occur in a prescribed sequence (you can move among steps of the process in a variety of ways), participating in peer review is a necessary part of the writing process. Having the response and feedback of an outside reader can help you shape your writing into work that makes you proud. A peer review occurs when someone at your level (a peer) offers an evaluation of your writing. Instructors aid in this process by giving you and your peers judgment criteria and guidelines to follow, and the feedback of the reader should help you revise your writing before your instructor evaluates it and offers a grade.

When given the opportunity to engage in a peer review activity, use the following steps to provide your peers with effective, evidence-based feedback for their writing.

- Review all the criteria and guidelines for the assignment.
- Read the writing all the way through carefully before offering any feedback.
- Read the peer review exercise, tool, or instrument provided by the instructor.
- Apply and complete the peer review exercise while rereading the work.
- Provide feedback to your peer. Your comments should focus on these questions:
  - In what ways are the organization and coherence of the narrative logical and clear so that you can follow events?
  - What, if anything, do you not understand or need further explanation about?
  - What do you want to know more about?

Following these steps will give your reading the necessary context and situate your feedback within the criteria and guidelines of the assignment. This process will be critical to the revision process for your peer. In addition, reading and evaluating the work of another, and using the criteria and guidelines for that assignment, will strengthen your writing skills and help you when you revise your own work.

Before you can engage in a successful peer review exercise, you must develop a first draft and carefully read it to determine whether you need to make any of these changes.

- On a global, or structural, level, do you need to insert material, delete tangents, or rearrange some sections? Make the changes necessary to strengthen the coherence of your draft as whole
- On a local, or surface, level, check for grammar, punctuation, and capitalization errors.

After you have done a thorough check of your own work, you are ready to share the draft of your literacy narrative with a peer review partner or group. Depending on the guidance of your instructor, you may use a

peer review activity such as the one provided in [Table 3.4](#) to evaluate the literacy narrative and provide feedback to your partner or group members.

#### Guided Peer Review Activity

<b>Essay Criteria</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Suggestion for Revision</b>
The narrative engages the identity of the writer.	List evidence of the writer's identity in the narrative: 1. 2. 3.	The writer could strengthen the ways in which identity is represented in the narrative by making the following changes: 1. 2. 3.
The narrative is written from a particular viewpoint or perspective.	List evidence that indicates the viewpoint or perspective of the narrative: 1. 2. 3.	The writer could develop a (stronger) viewpoint or perspective in the narrative by making the following changes: 1. 2. 3.
The narrative has moments that are centered on either a past or present literacy experience.	Provide evidence from the narrative of past or present literacy experience(s): 1. 2. 3.	The narrative could be better developed if the following literacy experience(s) were included or expanded: 1. 2. 3.
The narrative has a literacy experience that is the focus of the writing.	Identify the literacy experience that is the focus of the narrative:	The focal literacy experience would be stronger with the following details and/or development: 1. 2. 3.
The narrative identifies social, cultural, or environmental influences on the literacy experience(s).	List the ways in which the narrative includes social, cultural, or environmental influences on the literacy experience(s): 1. 2. 3.	The literacy narrative would be stronger if the experiences included these details about social, cultural, or environmental influences: 1. 2. 3.

**TABLE 3.4**

Essay Criteria	Evidence	Suggestion for Revision
The details of the narrative include descriptions of people, places, things, and events.	<p>Identify examples within the narrative that provide details about people, places, things, and events:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>	<p>The narrative would be stronger if the following details about people, places, things, and events were more fully developed:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>
The elements of the rhetorical situation—author, message, audience, purpose, means, context, and culture—are addressed and included in the essay.	<p>List elements of the rhetorical situation included in the narrative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Author</li> <li>• Message</li> <li>• Audience</li> <li>• Purpose</li> <li>• Means</li> <li>• Context</li> <li>• Culture</li> </ul>	<p>The narrative would be more effective if the following elements of the rhetorical situation were more fully developed and provided greater details (list all that apply):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Author</li> <li>• Message</li> <li>• Audience</li> <li>• Purpose</li> <li>• Means</li> <li>• Context</li> <li>• Culture</li> </ul>

**TABLE 3.4**

After you and your partner have completed the written guided exercise, spend some time talking about the elements of the essay and the feedback that you are giving one another. Talk through the suggestions, and ask questions about issues that arise during your assessment of one another's writing.

### **Revising: Adding and Deleting Information**

After you have completed the peer review exercise and received the related constructive feedback, you are ready to revise your literacy narrative in preparation for submission to your instructor for grading and a possible publication venue. (See “[Spotlight on . . . the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives \(DALN\)](#).”) The peer review exercise guided you and your partner or group members through a thorough assessment of your narratives. If you are not able to participate in peer review, make an appointment with your campus writing center to receive similar feedback. After getting responses from peers or the writing center, the next step is to take that feedback and make changes to your draft.

Look at the criteria in the first row of the peer review chart above, and then look at the evidence for that criteria that your partner listed. *Does your reviewer's understanding of the parts of your essay match your own? Where are the disconnects between what you intended for a section of your writing and what your reviewer has read and understood?* These points of disconnect are good places to begin your revisions. Your peer reviewers represent your audience, so if they experience some misunderstandings in the reading of your narrative, you will want to make changes to clarify your writing.

Imagine you have written a literacy narrative in which you discuss the difficulty of learning to read music. Imagine the opening paragraph contains the following sentence: “I have always had a hard time reading music.” Your peer reviewer might list in column 2, for the first criterion on engaging identity, that you read music, and that is all. Such a brief and limited assessment might lead your partner to suggest in column 3 that

you strengthen your identity by answering the following questions:

- When and why did you begin trying to learn to read music?
- Do you come from a musical background?
- Did you have a music reading teacher, or are you self-taught?
- What are your specific challenges in reading music?

During the discussion after the written peer review, you might share the details of your learning to play the piano: that you were five years old and that your grandmother was your teacher. Your revision for this opening paragraph might then include a sentence such as the following: “I have struggled to read music since I began playing piano at five years old, when my grandmother, our church musician, gave me my first lesson.” This process demonstrates the way in which the peer review should lead to substantive change and revision in your writing.

You will want to read and discuss the details of the evidence (column 2) and suggestions (column 3) for each of the above criteria (column 1) with your peer review partner. On the basis of your partner’s assessment—and your own judgment, of course—make any necessary revisions before submitting your literacy narrative for grading. The more time you take to go through this process, the more developed and comprehensive your writing will be. Some people may feel anxious about having others read their work, but the scenario provided above demonstrates the valuable ways in which a preliminary reading audience can help improve the narrative.

### 3.6 Editing Focus: Sentence Structure

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Use language structures, including multilingual structures, grammar, punctuation, and spelling, during the process of editing.
- Develop flexible strategies for drafting, reviewing, collaborating, revising, rewriting, and editing.
- Use composing processes and tools as a means to discover and reconsider ideas.

After writing a draft of your literacy narrative and revising it to strengthen the overall structure and content of the text, you are ready to pay closer attention to individual sentences within it. This section offers several strategies for improving your sentences to communicate meaning more effectively to your audience and to make the reading experience more engaging.

#### Sentence Combining

**Sentence combining** is an often-used revision strategy that can completely transform a narrative. When writers compose early drafts with many short sentences rather than more sophisticated efforts at varied or complex sentence construction, the writing appears choppy and disjointed. Once you have a complete draft of your essay, consider combining sentences to provide your audience with more effective and nuanced ways of reading your work. You can combine short, repetitive sentences into a simple sentence with a compound predicate or subject, as in the first example below. Or you can combine the shorter sentences into a complex sentence with a dependent clause, as in the second example. See [Clear and Effective Sentences](#) for more information about effective sentences and sentence structure.

**1a.** I learned to play piano. I was five years old. Learning to play piano is my literacy experience. Memorizing the location of the keys is also my literacy experience.

**1b.** Learning to play piano at the age of five and memorizing the location of the keys are my literacy experiences.

**2a.** I learned to read in first grade. Learning to read made me want to be a teacher. I want to share my experience with reading with future first graders.

**2b.** Learning to read as a first grader made me want to become a teacher so that I could share my experiences with future first graders.

Read through the draft of your essay, and look for sentences that are closely related enough that they can be combined for richer meaning. However, keep in mind that short sentences can be effective in your writing, especially when you want to create realistic dialogue or show action. Strive to create a balance among sentence lengths and types to engage your audience. Remember, too, that the best test of whether words are pulling their own weight and providing rhythm, balance, and emphasis is to read the passage aloud. Let your ear tell you what is sharp and clear and what could benefit from editing.

### Revising Common Sentence Patterns for More Effective Communication

If you have often been told to make your sentences clearer, less wordy, or both, but you do not know where to start, this section offers some quick strategies to address some of the most common issues that contribute to unclear or wordy writing.

**Defining You and This.** One common pattern that makes writing less clear is the use of *you* to mean “a random person” rather than “you,” the audience. Here is an example, followed by a revision.

**1a.** You must plan your document carefully to connect with your audience.

**1b.** Writers must plan their documents carefully to connect with their audiences.

This sentence is stronger with the revision clearly indicating who needs to plan their writing. You might be writing a piece addressed directly to the audience, as this textbook is. If so, be careful to distinguish between the use of *you* to mean your specific audience—appropriate when directly addressing an audience—and a hazier use of *you* that needs clarification. Use the “find” function to search your document for the word *you*, and then replace every unclear *you* with a definite noun.

Another pattern affecting the clarity of written work is using the word *this* on its own without an explanation of what “this” is. Here is an example, along with its revision.

**1a.** This can be confusing to the reader.

**1b.** This lack of explanation can be confusing to the reader.

In the first sentence, the audience wonders, “This what?” In the second sentence, the writer simply adds a noun phrase to explain, and readers will appreciate the clarification. Use the “find” function to search your document for *this*, and make sure you have defined or explained *this* in all cases.

**Revising Sentences to Change There are / There is or It is.** Readers relate better to sentences that feature a “doer”—someone or something performing an action—and an “action”—the activity of the doer. For this reason, writing that overuses the sentence patterns *There are . . . / There is . . .* and *It is . . .* in place of a doer and action can seem unclear, remote, or dull for the reader. As you revise such sentences, you may find at times that you need to insert a doer or an action; one or both may be missing from the first version of the sentence. Here is one example, with a suggested revision.

**1a.** There are many strategies to revise written work.

**1b.** Authors employ many strategies to revise written work.

In the first sentence, the doer (“authors”) is implied, but the second sentence includes a doer for a more reader-friendly version.

Sentences using the *It is . . .* pattern need similar attention to present a doer and an action to the reader. Here is one example and revision.

**1a.** It is challenging and rewarding to revise a composition.

**1b.** I feel challenged and rewarded when revising a composition.

Again, the first sentence needs an agent to do the sentence's actions. Use the "find" function to search your document for "there are," "there is," and "it is," and replace these weaker sentence constructions with doers and actions wherever possible.

**Eliminating Wordiness.** To begin, look at the sentences below to get a sense of what wordiness is. Eliminating wordiness should not alter or omit information. In these sentences, the information remains the same, but the edited sentence shows a trimmed-down version. *There was* and *that* are eliminated, as is the unnecessary adverb *really*; *was shining* becomes *shone*; and the phrase *waves in the ocean* becomes *ocean waves*.

**1a.** There was a really bright light that was shining on the waves in the ocean.

**1b.** A bright light shone on the ocean waves.

In general, try to cut out words that do not add meaning, rhythm, or emphasis. Sentences clogged with unnecessary words often cause readers to lose interest, patience, and comprehension. Edit sentences to include concrete nouns and action verbs—or "doers" and "actions," as described above. Additionally, choosing modifiers carefully will help you weed out unnecessary words. Look at the following sentences, which all say essentially the same thing. However, you will see some changes and omissions.

- In almost every situation that I can think of, except with few exceptions, it will make good sense for you to look for as many places as possible to cut out needless, redundant, and repetitive words from the papers and reports, paragraphs and sentences you write for college assignments. (49 words)
- In most situations, it makes good sense to cut out needless words from your college papers. (16 words)
- Whenever possible, omit needless words from your writing. (8 words)
- Omit needless words. (3 words)

The 49-word sentence is full of early-draft language; you can almost visualize the writer finding their way while writing. The 16-word sentence says much the same thing with far fewer words. Most of this editing simply cut out unnecessary words. Only at the end were several wordy phrases condensed: "from the papers and reports, paragraphs and sentences you write for college assignments" was reduced to "from your college papers." That 16-word sentence was reduced by half by rephrasing and dropping the emphasis on college writing. And that sentence was whittled down by nearly two-thirds to arrive at the core three-word sentence, "Omit needless words."

The first sentence is long-winded by any standard or in any context; each of the next three might serve well in different situations. Thus, when you edit to make language more concise, think about the overall effect you intend to create. Sometimes the briefest construction is not the best one for your purpose. For example, the three-word sentence is more suited to a brief list than to a sentence of advice for this book.

### Editing for More Effective Sentences

This paragraph from a student's first draft of a narrative contains sentences that need editing. On a separate sheet of paper, revise the sentences to eliminate *There are . . . / It is . . .*, unclear *you* and *this*, and wordiness. For better flow, combine sentences that are repetitive or choppy.

It is now hours later. I think it is almost midnight, in fact. I have finally managed to get my paper started and studied for my exam. My eyes are very tired. I get up and leave my comfortable chair. Next, I walk out of the library. You have to walk through a glass door. I retrace the path that goes back to my apartment, where I came from earlier.

Revision: \_\_\_\_\_

Since it is midnight, it is dark, and I nervously listen to footsteps. They are coming up behind me. Then they get too close for comfort. This is really making me very, very nervous. I am really very scared, but I step over to the sidewalk's edge. I am trying to be calm, and I let a man walk briskly past. Phew!

Revision: \_\_\_\_\_

When I am finally at my door to my apartment, I fumble for the key to the door. I insert the key in the lock. I open the door, put my hand on the switch to turn on the hall light, and step inside the door to my apartment. There are two slices of pizza left in the box that is on the kitchen counter. They are really cold and very congealed.

Revision: \_\_\_\_\_

**Possible edited version.** Hours later—my paper started, my exam studied for, my eyes tired—I leave my comfortable chair in the library, go through the glass door, and retrace the path to my apartment. It is midnight now. I listen closely when I hear footsteps approaching behind me, their steady rhythm making me nervous. Scared, I step to the sidewalk’s edge to let a man walk briskly past. Phew! At my apartment door, I fumble for the key, insert it in the lock, open the door, turn on the hall light, and step inside. On the kitchen counter, I see the box with its two slices of cold, congealed pizza.

## 3.7 Evaluation: Self-Evaluating

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Gain experience negotiating variations in genre conventions.
- Learn common formats and design features for different kinds of texts.
- Identify how genre conventions for structure, paragraphing, tone, and mechanics vary.

The section below provides a rubric that your instructor will use to evaluate the aspect of your literacy experience that you have chosen to explore in a full essay. Refer to it frequently throughout the writing process to make sure that you are fulfilling the requirements of the assignment.

### Rubric

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
5 <b>Skillful</b>	The text always adheres to the “Editing Focus” of this chapter—combining independent clauses appropriately, as discussed in Section 3.6—and employs a variety of complex sentence structures. The text also shows ample evidence of the writer’s intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The text always maintains focus on the central narrative and provides detailed description and thorough development of characters, setting, and sensory details, and it demonstrates a clear and organized sequence of events.	The text always demonstrates an awareness of the rhetorical situation: author, message, audience, purpose, means, context, and culture.

TABLE 3.5

<b>Score</b>	<b>Critical Language Awareness</b>	<b>Clarity and Coherence</b>	<b>Rhetorical Choices</b>
<b>4 Accomplished</b>	<p>The text usually adheres to the “Editing Focus” of this chapter—combining independent clauses appropriately, as discussed in Section 3.6—and employs complex sentence structures.</p> <p>The text also shows some evidence of the writer’s intent to meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.</p>	<p>The text usually maintains focus on the central narrative and provides detailed description and development of characters, setting, and sensory details, and it demonstrates an organized sequence of events.</p>	<p>The text consistently demonstrates an awareness of the rhetorical situation: author, message, audience, purpose, means, context, and culture.</p>
<b>3 Capable</b>	<p>The text generally adheres to the “Editing Focus” of this chapter—combining independent clauses appropriately, as discussed in Section 3.6—and employs complex sentence structures.</p> <p>The text also shows limited evidence of the writer’s intent to meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.</p>	<p>The text generally maintains focus on the central narrative and provides detailed description and development of characters, setting, and sensory details, and it demonstrates some organization in the sequence of events.</p>	<p>The text generally demonstrates an awareness of the rhetorical situation: author, message, audience, purpose, means, context, and culture.</p>
<b>2 Developing</b>	<p>The text occasionally adheres to the “Editing Focus” of this chapter—combining independent clauses appropriately, as discussed in Section 3.6—and employs complex sentence structures.</p> <p>The text also shows emerging evidence of the writer’s intent to meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.</p>	<p>The text occasionally maintains focus on the central narrative and provides detailed description and thorough development of characters, setting, and sensory details, and it demonstrates an attempt at organization in the sequence of events.</p>	<p>The text occasionally demonstrates an awareness of the rhetorical situation: author, message, audience, purpose, means, context, and culture.</p>
<b>1 Beginning</b>	<p>The text does not adhere to the “Editing Focus” of this chapter—combining independent clauses in meaningful ways, as discussed in Section 3.6—or employ complex sentence structures.</p> <p>The text also shows little to no evidence of the writer’s intent to meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.</p>	<p>The text does not maintain focus on the central narrative or provide detailed description or thorough development of characters, setting, or sensory details, and it does not demonstrate a clear and organized sequence of events.</p>	<p>The text does not demonstrate an awareness of the rhetorical situation: author, message, audience, purpose, means, context, and culture.</p>

**TABLE 3.5**

## 3.8 Spotlight on ... The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN)

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences.
- Match the capacities of different environments to varying rhetorical situations.



**FIGURE 3.15** Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom (credit: “The Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom” by Garrett/flickr, CC BY 2.0)

An archive is a collection of artifacts, often historical, that serve to document a time period, location, or group of people. Archives may be located far from cities, accessible only in person, and they typically house rare documents that visitors view or handle with particular care. When an archive is digitized, however, visitors are allowed to view the document in virtual spaces, thus creating an open and accessible environment. The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) “is an open public resource made up of stories from people just like you about their experiences learning to read, write, and generally communicate with the world around them.” People who have diverse identities, lived experiences, and engagement with literacies have uploaded their literacy narratives and given permission for their stories to be read and shared with public audiences.

### Using the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN)

The DALN is completely keyword searchable, so if you are looking to read literacy narratives on particular subjects—such as music or dance as literacy, or any other concentrated subject about which one can demonstrate knowledge—you can search for shared narratives with these literacies. As the website states, “The DALN invites people of all ages, races, communities, backgrounds, and interests to contribute stories about how—and in what circumstances—they read, write, and compose meaning, and how they learned to do so (or helped others learn).” Sharing your literacy narrative in the DALN can be a rewarding way to celebrate the completion of this writing milestone. The DALN welcomes literacy narratives of all kinds and in all formats, including diaries, blogs, poetry, music, videos, letters, stories, chat rooms, and so on.

### Publish Your Literacy Narrative

After you have completed and revised your literacy narrative, consider sharing it with the [DALN](https://openstax.org/r/daln) (<https://openstax.org/r/daln>) You may also want to consider reimagining your literacy narrative in the form of a podcast or a TED Talk-type video. The TED Talks in TED Talk is an acronym that stands for the phrase “Technology, Entertainment, and Design.” [TED](https://openstax.org/r/ted) (<https://openstax.org/r/ted>) is a nonprofit organization devoted to the distribution of ideas; the website is keyword searchable and provides an archive where you can find short talks about just about any topic. The [criteria](https://openstax.org/r/criteria) (<https://openstax.org/r/criteria>) for a TED Talk can be found on the organization’s website. To prepare for this publication alternative, take an opportunity to watch the

following sample TED Talks that fit the genre of literacy narrative:

- [Luvvie Ajayi](https://openstax.org/r/luvvieajayi) (<https://openstax.org/r/luvvieajayi>) discusses how blogging and creating a post that went viral led to her identifying as a writer.
- [John Trischitti](https://openstax.org/r/johntrischitti) (<https://openstax.org/r/johntrischitti>) talks about how reading literally saves lives and advocates for providing young people with books to secure their futures.

## 3.9 Portfolio: A Literacy Artifact

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Reflect on the development of composing processes.
- Consider how those processes affect your work.

Your instructor may require a portfolio as a part of the composition course curriculum. A portfolio is a collection of your work, gathered in a single place for the purpose of assessing your growth and achievement as a writer. A portfolio allows you not only to include writing artifacts but also to reflect on the process of composing those artifacts. In this section, you will have an opportunity to compose a reflection on the process of writing your literacy narrative.

### Reflection Prompt

One of the most valuable writing exercises is to reflect on work you have completed or experiences you have had. Reflection supports learning by allowing writers to articulate the impact that experiences have had on various aspects of their lives. In responding to the ideas in this section, take some time to reflect on your experiences, as well as the experiences of others, with literacy and learning. Using the guidelines your instructor provides, compose a reflection that responds to the following questions:

- How has your understanding of literacies been affected by the opportunity to reflect on your engagement with literacy practices, the practices of those in your composition course community, or the practices of people beyond your immediate community?
- How will this experience and reflection affect your future engagement with various literacies?

### Literacy Narrative Revision

Submitting the best version of your work is an important part of preparing a portfolio. After you have received a graded essay with comments from your instructor, use those comments as a resource to revise the essay for a final time. You will want to use this revised essay for your portfolio submission.

## Further Reading

The digital and hard-copy texts and other materials listed below can provide additional models and context for your work in reading and writing in the literacy narrative genre.

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## **Unit 2**

# **Bridging the Divide Between Personal Identity and Academia**

### **Introduction**

Unit 2 is about **academia**, a term for the world of education. The challenge in this part of your journey is learning to showcase your identity and your viewpoint within an exploration of traditional writing genres. You will learn that academia is defined in part by its traditions. In the writing classroom, expect to be asked to write in a variety of narrative and academic genres. Each of these genres is characterized by a defined set of structures and expectations. However, because writing is also a creative art form, you will find more than enough room in academia to develop your individual voice and to challenge conventions and expectations as you write about different subjects. As you approach the assignments in this unit, consider ways to infuse your writing with your personality and identity—your unique voice.

# Memoir or Personal Narrative: Learning Lessons from the Personal

4



**FIGURE 4.1** Personal narratives and memoirs give the narrator's perspective on a life experience. Here, a Florida family is having a makeshift meal together at a shelter set up during Hurricane Charley in 2004 for people who had to evacuate their homes. How do you imagine the parents and children are feeling and getting along during this time? What might the children, now adults, say about their memories of the hurricane? Family relationships and living through natural disasters are frequent subjects of personal writing. (credit: "Photograph by Mark Wolfe" by Mark Wolfe/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 4.1 Exploring the Past to Understand the Present
- 4.2 Memoir Trailblazer: Ta-Nehisi Coates
- 4.3 Glance at Genre: Conflict, Detail, and Revelation
- 4.4 Annotated Sample Reading: from *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain
- 4.5 Writing Process: Making the Personal Public
- 4.6 Editing Focus: More on Characterization and Point of View
- 4.7 Evaluation: Structure and Organization
- 4.8 Spotlight on ... Multilingual Writers
- 4.9 Portfolio: Filtered Memories

**INTRODUCTION** Since pen was first put to paper, authors have been recording their personal experiences in order to perpetuate them, share meaningful lessons learned, or simply entertain an audience. Indeed, even as far back as Roman ruler Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE), who wrote accounts of his epic battles, authors have

written to preserve history, seek acclaim for accomplishments, and pass down wisdom. Writing about your own life can feel alternately satisfying, terrifying, and exhilarating. It allows you to share meaningful personal experiences, to reflect on them, and to connect on a new level with your audience. Personal writing can reveal more than just events you've experienced—it tells your audience who you are as you relate personal experiences to convey humor, compassion, fears, and beliefs.

ABC

A **personal narrative** is a form of nonfiction writing in which the author recounts an event or incident from their life. A **memoir** is a type of nonfiction writing in which the author tells a first-person version of a time period or an event in their life. Because the two genres, or forms of writing, share more similarities than differences, they are covered here together. Personal writing, whether a narrative or a memoir, is an opportunity to share your lived experiences with readers. A personal narrative tells a story and often includes memories and **anecdotes** (short, amusing, or interesting stories about something that happened in real life) to relate events and ideas. Like all good writing, personal narratives have an overarching **theme** (message you want to impart to your readers) and a purpose beyond the story itself. Although personal narratives usually follow the traditional narrative arc of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution, personal writing has several unique features. Unlike some forms of academic writing, personal writing welcomes the use of **first-person point of view** (narrator participates in events), and narratives and memoirs often have a narrow focus.

The key to effective personal writing is to know your audience and purpose. You may write to relay an event, to teach a lesson, or to explore an idea. You may write to help provide relief from stages of deep emotion (a process called *catharsis*), to evoke an emotional response, or simply to entertain readers. Above all, a personal narrative or memoir tells about an individual's experience or a series of events in a way that emotionally engages readers. The more clearly and vividly you share your experience, the more likely readers will be moved.

This chapter presents an excerpt from American writer Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), a memoir about his years as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River. Studying this text and Twain's use of the components of personal narrative will help you understand how authors create meaningful accounts of personal events. Later in the chapter, you too will create a personal narrative about an important event in your life.

## 4.1 Exploring the Past to Understand the Present

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating.
- Read in several genres to understand how genre conventions shape and are shaped by readers' and writers' practices and purposes.

ABC

Personal writing is unique in that it tells *your* story. Because it is a form of storytelling, there may be a tendency to discount personal writing as less academic or less valuable a skill than more formal writing. Although it may allow for greater freedom in style and content, personal writing is valuable in its own right because it enables you to make sense of the world as you—not others—experience it.

Two genres of this type of writing are personal narratives and memoirs. A **genre** is a category of writing that features compositions with distinct characteristics, styles, content, and formats. These two genres belong to the larger family of **creative nonfiction**, a term that applies to the kind of nonfiction writing that shares many traits with fiction writing. The main difference is that the plots, settings, and characters come from real life rather than an author's imagination. (For more about the characteristics of literary nonfiction, see [Print or Textual Analysis: What You Read](#).) Works of creative nonfiction include American writers Sebastian Junger's (b. 1962) *The Perfect Storm* (1997), Jon Krakauer's (b. 1954) *Into Thin Air* (1997), and Terry Tempest Williams's (b. 1955) *Refuge* (1991). Shorter pieces appear regularly in popular literary magazines, especially in *The New*

*Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *The Atlantic*, as well as in periodicals such as *Sports Illustrated*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Writers of narrative nonfiction commonly borrow stylistic and formal techniques from the fast-paced visual narratives of film and television as well as from the innovative language of poetry, fiction, and drama. These influences encourage a multifaceted, multidimensional prose style to keep pace with the multifaceted and multidimensional real world. In addition to memoirs and personal narratives, biographies, autobiographies, and literary journalism are considered creative nonfiction.

### Differences between Memoir and Personal Narrative

Both a memoir and a personal narrative are accounts of personal experiences written in a narrative style, but there are some differences. A memoir is an account of certain incidents in a person's life, often from a specific period of time. The narrator is a character in the story and reflects on past events to draw a conclusion based on those events. Memoirs focus on how the author remembers a part of their own life. On the other hand, personal narratives typically center on one major event through which the narrator reveals thoughts, feelings, and possibly related experiences. Like other works in the narrative genre, personal narratives and memoirs develop setting, plot, characterization, and dialogue.

The word *memoir* comes from the French *mémoire*, meaning "memory." Personal writing relies on memory but is not necessarily an account of every detail of the event the author is writing about. If this were the case, it could make for dry and tedious reading, contrary to what most authors seek—audience engagement. The more important aim is to create a composition that is emotionally authentic and conveys the core sentiment of an event, time period, or lesson and its impact on you, the writer. In the next section, you will meet an author who does just that. He reflects on deeply personal events from his own life as they relate to broader cultural and social issues. The subject of your personal narrative or memoir should not be just *you*, though you will tell a story from your life. The overall message of the story should be about something bigger—a universal understanding, a lesson learned, a common human experience. The more readers can relate to your story through the details you include, the more it will mean to them.

### The Cultural Aspect



Personal writing provides a unique opportunity to explore cultural contexts. **Culture**—shared values, customs, arts, and traits of a social group—is at the heart of personal narratives and memoirs and should be part of their central focus. Including historical information, anecdotes, and vivid details in your writing, as well as using a specific and relevant English variety, helps you depict the cultures that are part of your life and enhances readers' understanding. Thus, readers are likely to experience deeper **empathy** and emotional responses in connection to the larger issues presented. You also provide opportunities for culture to be shared as a common human experience.



## 4.2 Trailblazer

### Memoir Trailblazer: Ta-Nehisi Coates

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read for inquiry, learning, and critical thinking to determine how authors develop personal narratives and memoirs.
- Identify composition techniques for personal writing in various rhetorical and cultural contexts.



*“I just felt this . . .  
deep need to express  
myself. . . . I felt the  
deep need to  
understand.”*

**FIGURE 4.2** Author Ta-Nehisi Coates often frames current events from the perspective of his own lived experiences. (credit: “Ta Nehisi Coates 2 BBF 2010 Shankbone” by David Shankbone/ Wikicommons, CC BY 3.0)

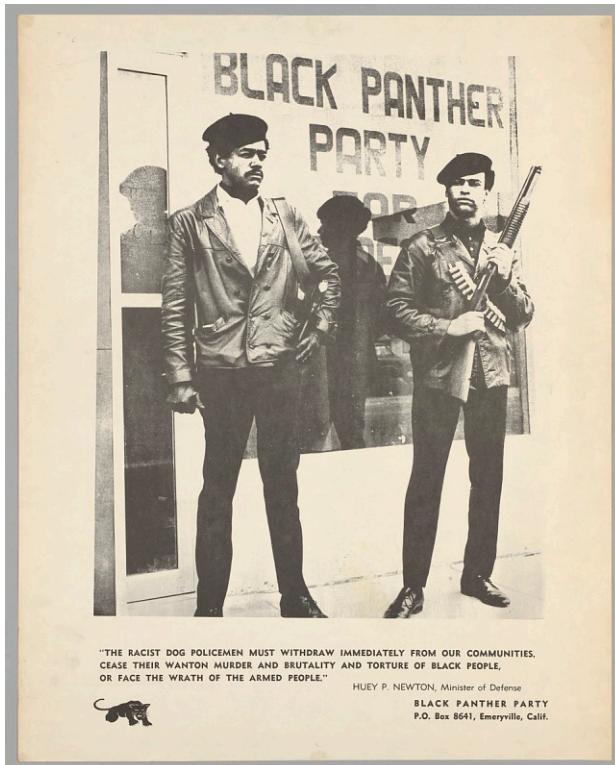
### The Storyteller’s Tools: Context and Voice

Ta-Nehisi Coates (b. 1975) is a best-selling author, journalist, and educator. His writing explores complex issues such as race relations, urban policing, and racial identity, often focusing on his personal experiences as a person of color. Coates was born in Baltimore, Maryland. His mother was a teacher, his father a librarian and founder of the Black Classic Press, which publishes and republishes significant works by and about lesser-known people of African descent. Reading the works of these authors instilled in Coates a lifelong love of reading and learning and a desire to experience the world outside his neighborhood.

 Coates began his writing vocation at age 17, first exploring the genre of poetry. He studied journalism at Howard University for five years but did not graduate. However, he did write and begin earning bylines as a young writer, publishing articles in popular periodicals such as *Washington Monthly*, *Mother Jones*, and *Time*. In 2008, he became a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, often writing articles and covering stories about national current events. Among other topics, he has written about Barack Obama (b. 1961) as the first Black president and the shooting of Florida teen Trayvon Martin (1995–2012).

 True to the genre of personal narrative, Coates focuses his writing not only on his lived experiences but also on their meaning in the context of larger cultural and social issues, specifically examining race relations and racial equity. In 2008, Coates published his first book, the critically acclaimed memoir *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood*. In it, he writes about his childhood, especially his memories of his father. A former member of the Black Panther Party (founded in 1966), Coates’s father raised

him and his six siblings as a family unit in West Baltimore. Coates's father and the children's four mothers raised the siblings together. Though they didn't all live together, they were a continuing and active presence in one another's lives.



**FIGURE 4.3** Bobby Seale (left; b. 1936) and Huey P. Newton (right; 1942–1989) founded the Black Panther Party in 1966 in response to police violence and racism. (credit: “Black and white poster of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale” by Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Public Domain)

Coates credits his unusual upbringing with providing him both stability and early access to influential “Afro-centric” literature, which would influence his life and career. His memoir reflects the steps his father took to encourage his son’s development into adulthood, from reading all types of books to exploring the neighborhood to helping him grapple with what it means to be a Black man in America. This lived experience is central to the personal narrative he creates in *The Beautiful Struggle*.

Coates’s best-known essay, “The Case for Reparations,” which proposes reparations for slavery, was published in *The Atlantic* in June 2014. Framing his argument around the history of slavery, Coates paints a picture detailing the connections among slavery, race, and economics, specifically focusing on the modern Chicago housing crisis and policy. “The essence of American racism is disrespect,” he proposes.

The next year, Coates published the best seller *Between the World and Me*, a personal narrative written as a letter to his teenage son. In this book, recounting his own upbringing in Baltimore’s violent inner city during the crack cocaine epidemic, Coates explores the idea that the structure of American society fosters white supremacy. He reveals his wish for his son, now “growing into consciousness”: “that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable.” In 2019, Coates published his first novel, *The Water Dancer*, a work of historical fiction about a slave who helps in the Underground Railroad.

In addition to writing, Coates is an educator. From 2012 to 2014, he was a visiting professor at MIT, and in 2014, he joined the faculty of the City University of New York as a journalist-in-residence. Coates compares writing to a refining process: by applying pressure to yourself, you develop new muscles. He calls writing “an act of physical courage” that relies on the revision process to translate thought to page: “I . . . consider the entire process about failure, and I think that’s . . . why more people don’t write.”

Coates uses **doubling** in his writing. Because he is both protagonist and narrator, he sees himself as both subject and object, both character and storyteller, and at once a participant and an observer in his narration. Such doubling is often symbolic in memoirs, represented by paired events or mirroring.

You can watch [Advice on Writing](https://openstax.org/r/adviceonwriting) (<https://openstax.org/r/adviceonwriting>) to learn more of Coates's advice to writers such as yourself. You can also read some of his [articles](https://openstax.org/r/articles) (<https://openstax.org/r/articles>) to study his writing style. Listen as American correspondent Martha Teichner (b. 1948), interviews Coates on [CBS Sunday Morning](https://openstax.org/r/cbssundaymorning) (<https://openstax.org/r/cbssundaymorning>), November 5, 2017.

### Discussion Questions

1. How might Coates's use of personal stories influence the emotions of his readers?
2. How might Coates use personal anecdotes and current events to create commentary on broad historical ideas? What personal events can you link to more wide-ranging ideas or issues?
3. What is the impact of the cultural and lived experiences that Coates weaves into his personal writing? How would the impact differ if he wrote in a more academic style?
4. Coates says his writing process is about pressure and failure. In what way is failure part of the development of narrative writing?
5. On what turning points or important events might Coates focus in his memoir when discussing his father?

## 4.3 Glance at Genre: Conflict, Detail, and Revelation

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify common formats and design features used to develop a personal narrative or memoir.
- Show that genre conventions are shaped by purpose, culture, and expectation.

In personal writing genres, you share experiences of your life, centering them on a specific theme or memory. Unlike an autobiography, which typically extends across an entire lifetime or at least a number of years, memoirs and personal narratives are shaped by a narrower focus, with more specific storytelling surrounding a time period or an event. When writing in these personal genres, authors seek to make an emotional connection with their audience to relate an experience, emotion, or lesson learned.

### Characteristics of Memoirs and Personal Narratives



One way to approach a memoir or personal narrative is to think of it as a written series of photographs—snapshots of a period of time, moment, or sequence of events connected by a theme. In fact, writing prose snapshots is analogous to constructing and arranging a photo album composed of separate images. Photo albums, when carefully assembled from informational snapshots, tell stories with clear beginnings, middles, and endings. However, they show a lot of white space between one picture and the next, with few transitions explaining how the photographer got from one scene to another. In other words, while photo albums tell stories, they do so piecemeal, requiring viewers to fill in or imagine what happens between shots. You also might think of snapshots as individual slides in a slideshow or pictures in an exhibition—each the work of the same maker, each a different view, all connected by some logic, the whole presenting a story.



Written snapshots function in the same way as visual snapshots, each connected to the next by white space. Sometimes written snapshots can function as a series of complete and independent paragraphs, each an entire thought, without obvious connections or transitions to the preceding or following paragraph. White space between one snapshot and another gives readers breathing space, allowing them time to digest one thought before continuing to the next. It also exercises readers' imaginations; as they participate in constructing logic that offers textual meaning, the readers themselves make connections and construct meaning. At other times, snapshots flow more directly, one after another, through chronological, circular,

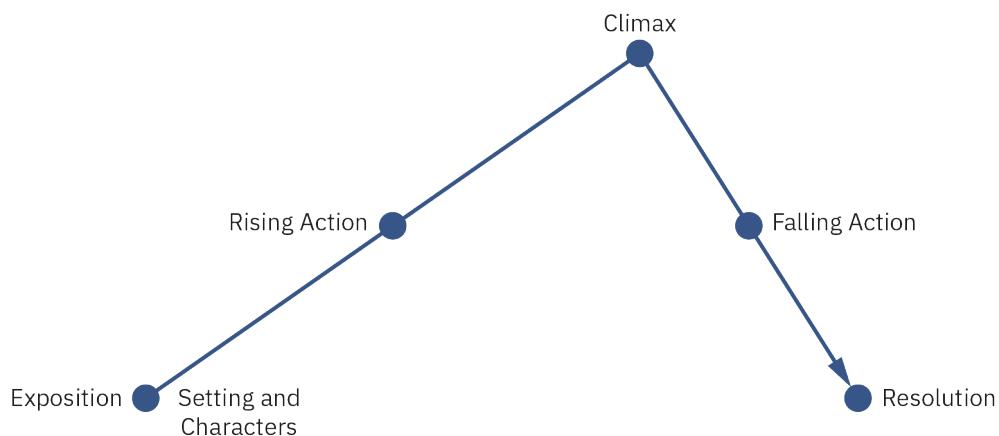
parallel, or other structures to move from event to event.

The secret to using snapshots successfully in your writing is to place them carefully in an order that conveys a theme and creates an unbreakable thread. And as with visual snapshots, writers must carefully choose which moments to include—and which to omit. Because they tell stories, memoirs and personal narratives share aspects of the fictional narrative genre. In writing them, you will use crafting tools to tell a vivid and purposeful story that takes into consideration your personal experience and the needs of your reader.

### The Storyteller's Dilemma: Clarity of Action

ABC

How you construct your story is as important as the story you choose to tell. Deciding on the most effective way the way to tell the story—that is, deciding what framework to use—helps you develop clarity of action to lead readers to the theme or message you seek to develop. Various components work together to bring clarity, but most often in a memoir or personal narrative, clarity comes from plot and character development. Narratives often follow a general structure called an *arc* to develop characters and plot and build the emotional impact of a story. Look at [Figure 4.4](#) for an idea of what a story arc looks like.



**FIGURE 4.4** Narrative arc (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

This arc, also called a *narrative arc* or a *plot triangle*, is composed of the following elements:

- The **exposition** sets up the narrative. It introduces characters and setting and establishes the primary conflict of the story, allowing readers to learn the who, what, when, where, and why of the events that will unfold.
- Next, the **rising action** fully develops the conflict. This developed series of events, the longest part of the narrative, produces increasing tension that engages readers.
- The **climax** is the turning point of the narrative, in which the story reaches its highest point of tension and conflict. It is the moment when some kind of action must be taken.
- In the **falling action**, the conflict begins to be resolved, and the tension lessens.
- Finally, during the **resolution**, the conflict is resolved, and the narrative ends. In memoirs and personal narratives, the resolution often includes or precedes a reflection that examines the broader implications of the theme or lessons learned. Of course, as in real life, conflicts are not always resolved, but the narrator can still reflect on the outcome of the situation.

Although many narratives and memoirs follow this plot-driven arc, narratives can also focus on character arcs. Character-driven narratives explore an individual, most often the narrator, and their development. The stories focus on creating an emotional connection between the character and the reader. Both plot and character arcs may be, and often are, present in memoirs and personal narratives.

Regardless of whether the focus is on plot or characters, conflict is synonymous with the reason for telling your story—it is the driving force. Conflict is often the main challenge faced by a character, and it urges the story along by engaging readers through tension and encouraging them to keep reading. Without conflict, your

memoir or personal narrative will lack an overall theme. The major conflict is the undercurrent that drives each scene and is often developed by an **inciting incident**. Introduced in the exposition and developed in the rising action, this incident sets the **mood** of the story and engages readers. After the story's climax, where the conflict reaches its peak, the tension gradually resolves during the falling action and moves toward resolution, during which you can explicitly or implicitly explore the theme that ties the story elements together. Sometimes the resolution is accompanied by a **revelation**, in which the narrator or reader understands something about the bigger picture, such as a lesson learned from the events recounted or knowledge about the general human condition. Of course, each scene or section should have its own conflict, connected in some way to the overarching message of your writing. As you write, ask yourself, *What's the conflict?* By identifying the conflict explicitly, you will ensure that it remains central to your narrative.

Two important aspects of plot structure regarding time in a memoir are *chronos* and *kairos*. **Chronos** is the sequence of events told according to their order. This order is often chronological and linear, but not always—it can be interrupted, fragmented, circular, or otherwise out of sequence and can sometimes include flashbacks. **Chronos** develops themes by the telling of events. **Kairos**, on the other hand, is the Greek concept of timeliness. Events told through the lens of *kairos* are often transcendental, an argument that is made at the right time, often rooted in a cultural moment or movement.

Other important aspects of personal writing overlap with the narrative genre. Both reader engagement and plot rely largely on vivid details and sensory descriptions to move readers through the story. For more information on narrative elements that may enhance your personal narrative or memoir, revisit [Literacy Narrative: Building Bridges, Bridging Gaps](#).

### Key Terms for Memoir or Personal Narrative Writing

- **Anecdotes:** a short, interesting story or event told to demonstrate a point or amuse the audience.
- **Bias:** the inclusion or exclusion of certain events and facts, the decisions about word choice, and the consistency of tone. All work together to convey a particular feeling or attitude. Bias comes from a specific stance or worldview and can limit a text, particularly if that bias is left unexamined.
- **Characters:** fictional people (or other beings) created in a work of literature. The narrator of a memoir or personal narrative is the nonfiction equivalent of the main character.
- **Climax:** the point of highest level of interest and emotional response in a narrative.
- **Conclusion:** in narrative writing, the resolution. It is the point at which the narrator has reached a decision.
- **Conflict:** the major challenge that the main character faces.
- **Doubling:** a mirroring of events, objects, characters, or concepts in a memoir.
- **Exposition:** the beginning section of a narrative that introduces the characters, setting, and plot.
- **Falling action:** the section of the plot after the climax in which tension from the main conflict is decreased and the narrative moves toward the conclusion, or resolution.
- **Flashback:** a scene that interrupts the chronological order of the main narrative to return to a scene from an earlier time.
- **Foreshadowing:** hints of what is to come in the text.
- **Mood:** the atmosphere of the text, often achieved through details, description, and setting.
- **Plot:** the events that make up a narrative or story.
- **Point of view:** the perspective from which a narrative is told. Memoirs and personal narratives usually use the first-person point of view, or tell the story through the eyes of the narrator.
- **Resolution:** the point at which a story's conflict is settled; the conclusion of a narrative.
- **Revelation:** a discovery about a person, event, or idea that shapes the plot.
- **Rising action:** a series of events in the plot in which tension surrounding the major conflict increases and the plot moves toward its climax.
- **Setting:** when and where a narrative occurs. Setting is revealed through narration and details.
- **Theme:** the underlying idea that reveals the author's message about a narrative.

- **Vivid details:** sensory language and detailed descriptions that help readers gain a deeper and fuller understanding of ideas and events in the narrative.
- **Voice:** the combination of vocabulary, tone, sentence structure, dialogue, and other details that make a text authentic and engaging. Voice is the “identity” or “personality” of the writer and includes the specific English variety used by the narrator and characters.

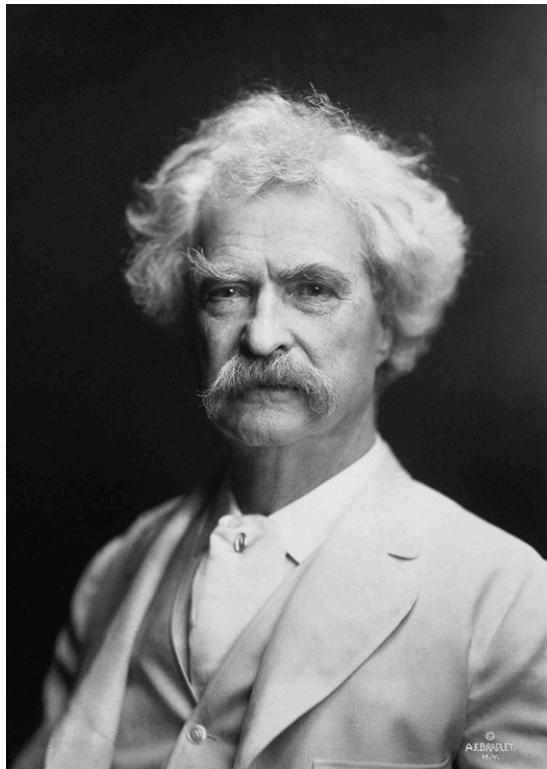
## 4.4 Annotated Sample Reading: from *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read for understanding, showing that genre conventions are shaped by purpose, culture, and expectation.
- Analyze relationships between ideas and patterns of organization in a nonfiction text.

### Introduction



**FIGURE 4.5** Mark Twain, 1907 (credit: “Mark Twain” by A.F. Bradley/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)



An image in literature is a description that engages one of the five senses. Details rich in **imagery** appeal to readers’ emotions, create new meaning, and draw an audience into the story. Sensory images—what the narrator sees, hears, tastes, feels, and smells—should be specific and contain emotional content that enhances your writing. When you write your personal narrative, you will use imagery to engage readers, convey meaning, and bring your story to life.



In the text excerpt you are about to read, Mark Twain (1835–1910) uses imagery to place readers with him aboard a steamboat on the Mississippi River as Mr. Bixby trains him to pilot it. As you read, put yourself in the shoes of the narrator—Mark Twain. Notice how vividly he describes sensory experiences and how they enhance your understanding of his purpose.

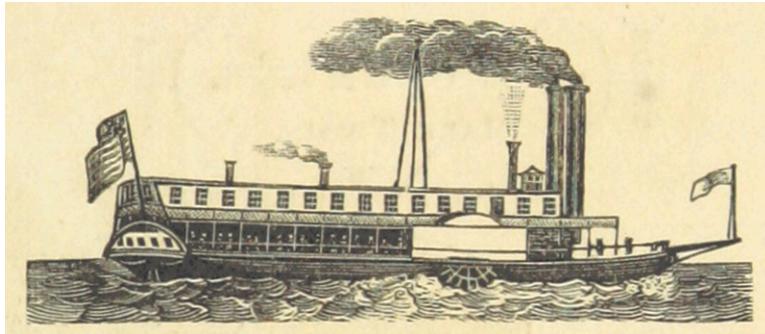


Twain lived in a pre–Civil War America in which slavery was accepted and prevalent. He used his literature to criticize slavery and hierarchical social codes of the American South, though he wasn’t necessarily an outspoken opponent in his public life. Twain provides an example of the ways in which literature can subtly influence the beliefs and identities of generations of readers. Visit [Project Gutenberg](https://openstax.org/r/) (<https://openstax.org/r/>)

[projectgutenberg](http://www.gutenberg.org)) for the full text of *Life on the Mississippi*.

## LIVING BY THEIR OWN WORDS

### The Storyteller's World: Entering through Imagery



**FIGURE 4.6** In this illustration, appearing in *Life on the Mississippi*, the steamboat is an older vessel but is similar to the one in Twain's memoir. (credit: "MISSISSIPPI STEAMBOAT - FIFTY YEARS AGO" by Samuel Langhorne Clemens/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Mr. Bixby served me in this fashion once, and for years afterward I used to blush even in my sleep when I thought of it. I had become a good steersman [a person steering a boat or ship]; so good, indeed, that I had all the work to do on our watch, night and day; Mr. Bixby seldom made a suggestion to me; all he ever did was to take the wheel on particularly bad nights or in particularly bad crossings, land the boat when she needed to be landed, play gentleman of leisure nine-tenths of the watch, and collect the wages. The lower river was about bank-full, and if anybody had questioned my ability to run any crossing between Cairo and New Orleans without help or instruction, I should have felt irreparably hurt. The idea of being afraid of any crossing in the lot, in the *day-time*, was a thing too preposterous for contemplation. Well, one matchless summer's day I was bowling down the bend above island 66, brimful of self-conceit and carrying my nose as high as a giraffe's, when Mr. Bixby said,—

**Point of view.** Twain writes in first person, using the pronouns *I* and *me*.

**Exposition.** Though the excerpt starts in the middle of a chapter of a larger work, this paragraph begins an anecdote that Twain relates about a specific incident in his time in training. The paragraph acts as the exposition, establishing the setting, characters, and lead-in to the conflict related in the anecdote.

**Reflection.** Twain's reflection of the memory, saying he would "blush even in my sleep," reveals his embarrassment in a way that readers can relate to.

"I am going below a while. I suppose you know the next crossing?"

This was almost an affront. It was about the plainest and simplest crossing in the whole river. One couldn't come to any harm, whether he ran it right or not; and as for depth, there never had been any bottom there. I knew all this, perfectly well.

"Know how to *run* it? Why, I can run it with my eyes shut."

**Tone.** In this dialogue, the narrator takes on a tone of confidence, which helps develop his own voice and character.

**Dialogue.** Twain uses dialogue to recreate the scene and reveal characters.

"How much water is there in it?"

"Well, that is an odd question. I couldn't get bottom there with a church steeple." "You think so, do you?"

The very tone of the question shook my confidence. That was what Mr. Bixby was expecting. He left, without saying anything more. I began to imagine all sorts of things. Mr. Bixby, unknown to me, of course, sent somebody down to the forecastle [forward part of the ship, below the deck] with some mysterious instructions to the leadsmen, another messenger was sent to whisper among the officers, and then Mr. Bixby went into hiding behind a smoke-stack where he could observe, results. Presently the captain stepped out on the hurricane deck [an upper deck on a ship]; next the chief mate appeared; then a clerk. Every moment or two a straggler was added to my audience; and before I got to the head of the island I had fifteen or twenty people assembled down there under my nose. I began to wonder what the trouble was. As I started across, the captain glanced aloft at me and said, with a sham uneasiness in his voice,—

**Vivid Details and Imagery.** Twain builds tension through vivid detail and imagery that recreates the sounds and paints a picture of his experience. From the whispers of the messengers to the sight of more and more people appearing on the deck to observe the narrator, readers can almost feel the narrator becoming more nervous.

**Rising Action.** The reader begins to understand the conflict through the sequence of events. This rising action builds tension by contrasting Twain's earlier stated confidence with his increasing anxiety.

“Where is Mr. Bixby?” “Gone below, sir.”

**Dialogue.** Twain employs dialogue to advance the plot and simultaneously increase tension, thus defining the conflict. The dialogue here signals the narrator’s move from confidence to anxiety, the next line indicating that the captain’s questioning “did the business” for him. Dialogue also helps establish authenticity and recreate “reality” for readers, allowing them an opportunity to “witness” the scene and the characters directly.

But that did the business for me. My imagination began to construct dangers out of nothing, and they multiplied faster than I could keep the run of them. All at once I imagined I saw shoal [shallow] water ahead! The wave of coward agony that surged through me then came near dislocating every joint in me. All my confidence in that crossing vanished. I seized the bell-rope; dropped it, ashamed; seized it again; dropped it once more; clutched it tremblingly once again, and pulled it so feebly that I could hardly hear the stroke myself. Captain and mate sang out instantly, and both together,—

**Vivid Description.** Twain moves the plot toward the climax in this paragraph, particularly with his description of the dangers multiplying and the peril he imagines.

**Mood.** In this section, Twain creates a frazzled and frantic mood through not only the details and description but also the sentence structure. Particularly in the sentence “I seized the bell-rope; dropped it, ashamed; seized it again; dropped it once more . . . ,” the short, connected clauses and phrases and the repetition of the words dropped and seized all add to the sense of panic.

“Starboard lead there! and quick about it!”

This was another shock. I began to climb the wheel like a squirrel; but I would hardly get the boat started to port [the left side of the ship when a person on board is facing forward] before I would see new dangers on that side, and away I would spin to the other; only to find perils accumulating to starboard [the right side of the ship when a person on board is facing forward], and be crazy to get to port again. Then came the leadsmen’s sepulchral [bleak, morbid] cry:—

**Organization.** After the introduction in which Twain writes in the present tense to indicate he will tell an embarrassing story from the past, the rest of the passage follows a chronological organization, recounting the event from beginning to end.

“D-e-e-p four!” Deep four in a bottomless crossing! The terror of it took my breath away.

“M-a-r-k three! . . . M-a-r-k three . . . Quarter less three! . . . Half twain!”

This was frightful! I seized the bell-ropes and stopped the engines.

“Quarter twain! Quarter twain! *Mark* twain!”

**Dialogue.** Here, the dialogue emphasizes the narrator’s terror and leads to the climax.

I was helpless. I did not know what in the world to do. I was quaking from head to foot, and I could have hung my hat on my eyes, they stuck out so far.

**Hyperbole.** Twain uses a combination of sensory detail and hyperbole, or exaggeration, to emphasize how panicked he feels in the moment.

“Quarter *less* twain! Nine and a *half*!”

We were *drawing* nine! My hands were in a nerveless flutter. I could not ring a bell intelligibly with them. I flew to the speaking-tube and shouted to the engineer,—

“Oh, Ben, if you love me, *back* her! Quick, Ben! Oh, back the immortal *soul* out of her!”

**Climax.** In this part of the story the narrator calls out for help as the tension reaches its peak.

I heard the door close gently. I looked around, and there stood Mr. Bixby, smiling a bland, sweet smile. Then the audience on the hurricane deck sent up a thundergust [roar] of humiliating laughter. I saw it all, now, and I felt meaner than the meanest man in human history. I laid in the lead, set the boat in her marks, came ahead on the engines, and said:—

**Vivid Details.** The narrator describes Mr. Bixby’s “bland” smile, contrasted with the uproarious laughter of the rest of the group. He also uses vivid details to describe his own reaction: he “felt meaner than the meanest man in human history.”

**Falling Action.** After it is revealed that the group was tricking Twain, the tension begins to dissipate.

“It was a fine trick to play on an orphan, *wasn’t* it? I suppose I’ll never hear the last of how I was ass enough to heave the lead at the head of 66.”

“Well, no, you won’t, maybe. In fact I hope you won’t; for I want you to learn something by that experience. Didn’t you *know* there was no bottom in that crossing?”

“Yes, sir, I did.”

“Very well, then. You shouldn’t have allowed me or anybody else to shake your confidence in that knowledge. Try to remember that. And another thing: when you get into a dangerous place, don’t turn coward. That isn’t going to help matters any.”

**Theme.** Through this dialogue, Twain introduces the message of the story. More than providing an amusing recollection about a time he was embarrassed, his purpose is to convey the message that it is important to rely on your knowledge and training rather than allow fear to rule.

It was a good enough lesson, but pretty hardly learned. Yet about the hardest part of it was that for months I so often had to hear a phrase which I had conceived a particular distaste for. It was, “Oh, Ben, if you love me, *back* her!”

**Resolution.** The narrator explicitly states his lesson learned at the end of the story and adds a detail about his continuing humiliation.

## Discussion Questions

- For what reason might Twain have chosen to tell this anecdote in his memoir?
- How does telling this story help Twain reveal his experience of learning to be a riverboat pilot?
- How does Twain build tension to support the conflict in the anecdote?

4. How does the narrator pull the reader into the action in the paragraph beginning “But that did the business for me”?
5. How do the narrator’s word choices in the story shape the tone and mood?
6. How does Twain’s use of vivid details and descriptions help the reader connect to the text?

## 4.5 Writing Process: Making the Personal Public

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Develop a writing project through multiple drafts.
- Apply correct genre conventions for structure, paragraphs, tone, and mechanics.
- Write with purposeful shifts in voice, diction, tone, formality, and structure appropriate to personal narratives.
- Proficiently employ cultural and language variations in composition.
- Experience the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes.
- Give and act on productive feedback to works in progress.



Now it’s your turn to put pen to paper and experience the genre through action. Once you choose a moment to write about and begin the narrative process, you may want to rearrange, rewrite, or even omit some parts entirely. The goal is to create a story that not only gets your message across but also creates an emotional connection with your readers.

### Summary of Assignment: A Turning Point

Choose an event from your life that has stuck in your memory as a turning point of some sort. Certainly, you can write about major milestones—graduations, achievements, and the like—but consider small moments and events, too: something that someone said to you or that you overheard, a time you got or didn’t get what you wanted, a time you were disappointed, or a time you thought you knew better than a more experienced person. To get the most accurate perspective of the event, go back in time as far as you can so that you think about the event as objectively as possible and know it as a real and meaningful turning point. Write a story about the event, and use narrative techniques to show why the event has become meaningful. Here are some other ideas about possible turning points:

- A changed attitude toward a friend, sibling, or other family member
- A change of major, if that change is a big step away from what you planned to do
- Making or not making the cut for a team or some other group
- Your feelings when you learned something about yourself or someone close to you
- A move from another country to the United States or from another U.S. location to where you are now
- Becoming fluent in another language
- Realizing that a certain behavior either gets you what you want or doesn’t
- Realizing that someone you admire is not so admirable, or vice versa
- Becoming friends with someone you didn’t expect to be friends with
- Facing an illness or crisis and how it changed or didn’t change you



**Another Lens.** An alternative to writing a first-person narrative about a turning point is to consider writing about the event from the perspective of someone—or something—else. If the story involves another person in addition to yourself, consider making that person the narrator and having them tell the story as they might view it. Also consider telling your story from an outside observer’s perspective, or even from the perspective of an inanimate object—for example, the pen used to sign a contract. This perspective may be beneficial for exploring your own emotions and may also offer a helpful alternative if including details about your personal life in your story makes you uncomfortable.



### Quick Launch: Plot Diagram

Once you have chosen a topic, freewrite for 5 to 10 minutes, considering the following questions:

- Why is this event memorable?
- What conflict did you face?
- What images come to mind when you think of this event?

 Then, begin to isolate details to create a plot diagram. Remember, following a plot diagram involves focusing on the building of tension surrounding the conflict in a story and then resolving it in a meaningful way.

### Drafting: Conflict, Point of View, Organization, and Reflection

With the skeleton of a plot diagram in mind, freewrite again for 5 to 10 minutes, considering the following questions:

- Why is this event memorable?
- What conflict did you face?
- What images come to mind when you think of this event?
- What do you want to express to your readers about the event?
- What lessons did you learn from the event?

#### Purpose

Along with your freewrite, consider what message you want to leave with readers. The reason this moment is important to you should be made clear to readers through the development of the story, most often through the conflict and its resolution. Remember that the conflict is the primary problem or obstacle that the main character—most likely you in this personal narrative—faces and must overcome in order to reach a resolution. Conflict in a personal narrative, as in fiction, usually consists of one or more of five main conflict types:

- Character vs. character
- Character vs. self
- Character vs. environment or nature
- Character vs. society
- Character vs. fate or the supernatural

The **purpose** and theme are shaped by the conflict. Consider the conflict in the Mark Twain excerpt. Twain needs to run a crossing that, at the beginning of the passage, he feels confident to handle. But as the story progresses and Mr. Bixby sends more people to make him nervous, Twain begins to second-guess himself.

But that did the business for me. My imagination began to construct dangers out of nothing, and they multiplied faster than I could keep the run of them. All at once I imagined I saw shoal water ahead! The wave of coward agony that surged through me then came near dislocating every joint in me. All my confidence in that crossing vanished. I seized the bell-rope; dropped it, ashamed; seized it again; dropped it once more; clutched it tremblingly once again, and pulled it so feebly that I could hardly hear the stroke myself.

This conflict not only builds the reader's interest in the main character's problem but also helps Twain develop the theme, his message to the reader: you must rely on your knowledge and training rather than second-guess yourself. In this anecdote, the theme is explicitly stated, but more often than not, authors are more subtle, requiring readers to infer themes on the basis of details in the text. The ways in which you craft your conflict and theme will affect its significance to your readers.

To help you organize your work, complete a graphic organizer like [Table 4.1](#) as you are able at this point. You may want to revise it later as you write your draft.

<b>Basic Story Elements</b>	
<b>Purpose</b>	
<b>Conflict</b>	
<b>Main Characters</b>	
<b>Theme</b>	

**TABLE 4.1** Basic story elements

### Plot Elements



Now that you have considered your overall message and have a general idea of what you will write about, think of how you will structure your story. You already have diagrammed some of the Mark Twain excerpt and know how plots move along. One idea for organizing the plot of your narrative is to write down individual moments or events on notecards and physically place them on a table to mimic a hands-on plot diagram. You should have a series of events leading to the climax and fewer events that make up the falling action. This method of plot diagramming also helps you identify where holes may turn up in your plan. For example: *Is your exposition missing key background information that is necessary for readers to understand the story? Have you created sufficient tension in the lead-up to the climax of your story?* Examine your plot diagram to identify where you need more (or perhaps less) detail in your outline. You might notice that the plot diagram is a bit lopsided, skewing left. If it does, then much of your story leads up to the climax, as it should, with fewer words between the climax and resolution.

Most, but not all, personal narratives are written in chronological order; that is, the storyteller follows the sequence of events according to the order in which they occur. However, there are other structures, such as anecdotes told according to theme, through flashbacks, or in reverse chronological order. The order in which you recount events is important in building tension in the story, thus stimulating readers' curiosity. Seriously consider how each choice that you make will create readers' engagement and emotional connection to your story as you plan toward the climax.

### Exposition

Next, follow your plot diagram to begin writing your narrative. Start with a strong introduction. Try to think of this introductory section as the “hook,” engaging readers so that they want to continue reading. Create the introduction with vivid details or a relatable anecdote. Remember that this section will introduce the main characters, the setting, and the conflict. Here are some suggestions for an opening strategy, all of which should be brief, generally not more than two paragraphs:

- Anecdote related to your story
- Description of one of the characters involved
- Scenario in which you ask readers what they might do in that situation
- Description of a setting in which you found yourself
- Significant dialogue or action that you will explain later
- One or more open-ended questions that relate closely to the theme; avoid yes/no questions

### Transitions

As you do in other writing, build your overall structure through **transitions**—words and phrases you use to move readers through events, ideas, and time. Transitions smooth connections between ideas, clarifying them

and making reading easier. In narratives, transitions often indicate the passage of time. They may also introduce new characters or ideas, tie ideas together, or make connections to the larger theme or message.

Transitions may be concrete, as is the one Mark Twain uses: “Well, one matchless summer’s day . . .” This statement clearly establishes the passage of time. But transitions can also be abstract or subtle, helping the author organize ideas and information. More subtle transitions include changes in elements such as tone, voice, point of view, or even setting. Use the plot diagram as an outline, and move from event to event as you draft your narrative. You will have freedom with paragraph length and structure because you will use dialogue and description. Also, some events or characters may require more detail than others. As you write your narrative, use transitions to move readers along until you ultimately resolve the central conflict and tie its resolution to the theme.

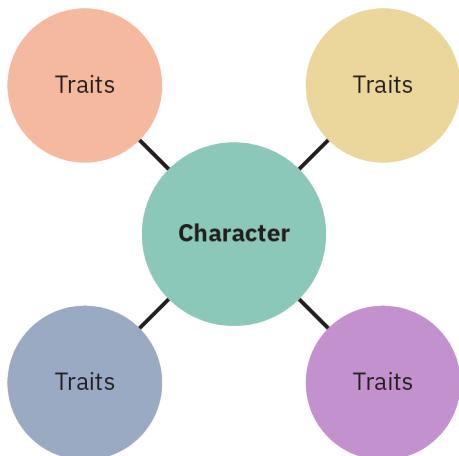
### Point of View

Authors have options for narrating a literary work—that is, they can choose from whose **point of view** they tell the story. In your narrative, you most likely will use the **first-person point of view**. When a story is told from this point of view, the narrator is a character in the story and tells it as it happens—that is, as the narrator experiences the event. Mark Twain tells his story from the first-person point of view in the excerpt from *Life on the Mississippi*. The first sentence of that excerpt reads, “Mr. Bixby served me in this fashion once, and for years afterward I used to blush even in my sleep when I thought of it.” Not only do readers understand that the narrator is telling the story, using pronouns such as *me* and *I*, but the narrator also describes his feelings (“blush[ing] even in my sleep”) and thoughts. For more information about point of view, see [Editing Focus: Characterization and Point of View](#) and [Point of View](#).

### Characters

Characters in a personal narrative are generally real people, at least in part. As the author, you can focus on certain character traits and ignore, minimize, or exaggerate others. In making the people in your narrative come to life, you will likely assign them different ways of behaving and speaking. For example, one character may use long words and speak condescendingly to another. Another character may find conversation difficult and say little, relying on gestures more than words. Still another character might be generous, sympathetic, arrogant, or sneaky. When creating characters, make sure the characters’ language and behavior reflect their characterizations. For more information about characterization, see [Editing Focus: Characterization and Point of View](#).

You can use a web diagram, similar to the one shown in [Figure 4.7](#), to keep track of characters’ traits.



**FIGURE 4.7** Character web (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

### Setting

Where and when your narrative takes place is an important part of a narrative, as it is in the excerpt from

Twain's story. You may want to describe a setting in detail if it is important in the course of the story, or you may find it a less essential part of the narrative. In either case, the setting must be described to some extent to give the narrative a sense of time and place.

### Verb Tense

Choose the **tense** in which you want to tell your story, and ensure that you stay consistent throughout the narrative. Typically, you will choose between past tense and present tense. **Past tense** provides a familiar sense of storytelling, as Twain develops in his anecdote: "I looked around, and there stood Mr. Bixby, smiling a bland, sweet smile." Another option is to tell your story in the **present tense**, which provides a sense of urgency to the events and allows readers to feel closer to the action. If you are considering using the present tense, try substituting it in the excerpt from *Life on the Mississippi*. Consider how it sounds and the difficulties you might encounter in using it. Whichever tense you choose, however, the most important thing is to stick to it, changing it only to indicate a change in chronology. For example, if you are narrating in the present tense and want to indicate something that happened at a time before the events of your story, you would change tenses for clarity. Read more about verb tense consistency in [Editing Focus: Verb Tense Consistency](#).

### Active vs. Passive Voice

Verbs have two voices: active and passive. In an active-voice sentence structure, the subject performs the action of the verb. In a passive-voice sentence structure, the subject receives the action of the verb. Consider the examples in [Table 4.2](#).

Active Voice	Passive Voice
I devoured the silky pudding.	The silky pudding was devoured by me.
The teacher will give you directions.	Directions will be given to you by the teacher.
The barnacles scraped my skin.	My skin was scraped by the barnacles.
The sloth carried her baby on her back.	The baby sloth was carried by its mother on her back.
The two presidents are signing the agreement.	The agreement is being signed by the two presidents.
A tornado destroyed the neighborhood.	The neighborhood was destroyed by a tornado.

**TABLE 4.2** Active vs. passive voice

The meanings in both passive and active voice remain the same, yet their effect is different. In active voice, the message will be clearer and often more convincing. While it is not wrong to write in the passive voice on occasion, you will usually strengthen your writing by focusing on how a subject performs an action rather than removing it from the direct action. For more information about active and passive voice, see [Clear and Effective Sentences](#).

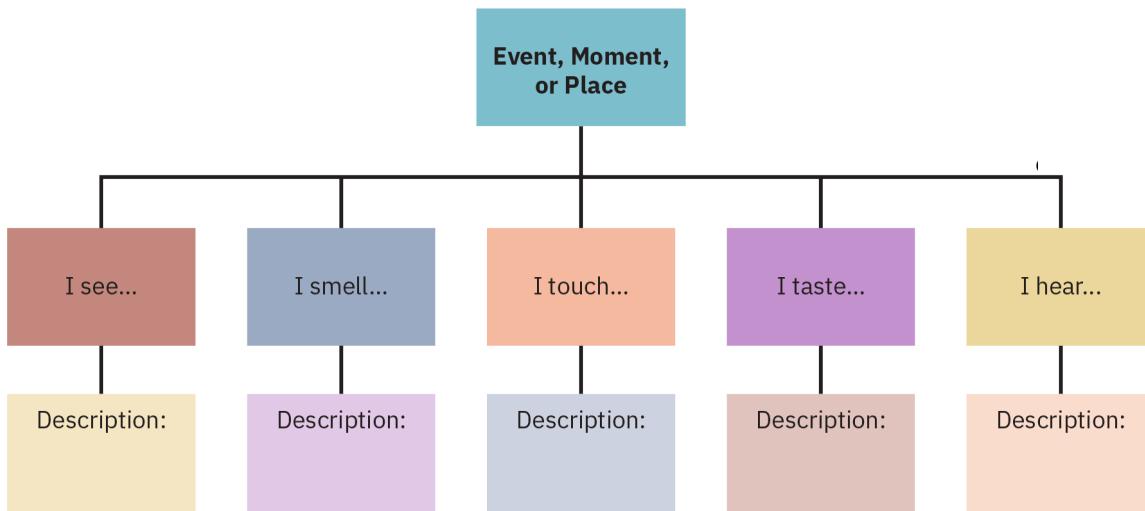
### Imagery



In personal narratives and memoirs, imagery not only brings the experience to life but also engages readers through their senses. For example, Twain appeals to the sense of hearing when he describes "the leadsmen's sepulchral cry:—'D-e-e-p four!'" The use of figurative language, such as similes, metaphors, hyperbole, or personification, often enhances these descriptions. Think of images and figurative language as ways of *showing* versus *telling*. Consider Twain's recounting of the moment he loses his nerve: "I began to climb the wheel like a squirrel." Certainly, he could have said instead, "I spun the wheel back and forth." But the use of figurative language, in this case a simile comparing his action to a squirrel's, helps readers imagine and share Twain's terror as if they are experiencing the event in the same way. Within a scene in your story, choose an



event, moment, or place, and practice using imagery to describe it. Then use a graphic organizer like [Figure 4.8](#) to imagine how you might use each sense to describe the same event or another event, moment, or place from your story.



**FIGURE 4.8** Senses chart (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

For your narrative, you do not have to use all the descriptions in the graphic organizer, and doing so would likely clutter your story. Choose the best, most powerful details to enhance your writing and help readers viscerally experience the event, moment, or place.

### Sentence Structure

You can structure your text in various ways to achieve your intended mood, tone, and overall message. No matter what your form or style, sentences are your main units of composition, explaining the world in terms of subjects, actions, and objects: some force (a subject) does something (action) that causes something else to happen (an object). Narrative writing, like all prose, is built around complete and predictable sentences.

Sometimes, however, writers use sentences in less predictable and more playful ways. For example, **fragmented sentences** suggest fragmented stories. Fragmented sentences can be used judiciously in conventional writing, even academic writing, as long as their purpose is clear and your fragment is not mistaken for a grammatical error. Writers sometimes use fragments audaciously and sometimes with abandon to create the special effects they want: *A flash of movement. A bit of a story. A frozen scene.*

Fragments force quick reading, ask for impressionistic understanding, and suggest parts rather than wholes. Like snapshots, fragments invite strong reader participation to stitch information together and move toward clear meaning. Fragmented sentences suggest, too, that things are moving fast. Often used in dialogue as well to mimic real speech, purposeful fragments can be powerful: *Deliberate. Intentional. Careful. Functional. Usually brief.*

Consider British novelist Charles Dickens's (1812–1870) use of fragments in this story told in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836). The impact of the sentence fragments here conveys a sensory experience and creates a mood for the reader.

“Heads, heads—take care of your heads!” cried the loquacious stranger, as they came out under the low archway, which in those days formed the entrance to the coach-yard. “Terrible place—dangerous work—other day—five children—mother—tall lady, eating sandwiches—for got the arch—crash—knock—children look round—mother’s head off—sandwich in her hand—no mouth to put it in—head of a family off—shocking, shocking!”

On the opposite pole of sentence structure are **labyrinthine sentences**. A labyrinthine sentence seems never

to end. Instead, it goes on and on and on, using all sorts of punctuation and grammatical tricks to create a compound sentence (two or more independent clauses joined by a comma and a conjunction such as *and*, *or*, or *but*) or a complex sentence (one independent clause with one or more dependent clauses). Such sentences are often written to suggest that events or time are running together and hard to separate. However, such writing may more often suggest error than experiment, so be careful.

Another type of sentence variation is achieved through repetition of words, phrases, or sentences for emphasis. Repeated words and ideas suggest continuity of idea and theme, help meld ideas and paragraphs, and sometimes create rhythms that are pleasing to the ear. While **refrain** is a term more often associated with music, poetry, and sermons, it is a form of repetition that is quite powerful in prose as well. A refrain is a phrase or group of words repeated throughout a text to remind readers (or listeners) of an important theme. For example, the words “I have a dream” are a refrain from American activist Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1929–1968) speech by the same name. Look at how Mark Twain uses repetition to increase the tension.

I seized the bell-rope; dropped it, ashamed; seized it again; dropped it once more; clutched it tremblingly once again, and pulled it so feebly that I could hardly hear the stroke myself.

Variation in sentence structure, established through such techniques as fragments, labyrinthine sentences, and repetition, creates certain effects within the text because each technique conveys its information in an unmistakable way. These techniques are stylistic devices that add an emotional dimension to the typically factual material of narrative prose without announcing, labeling, or dictating what those emotions should be. The wordplay of alternate-style composing allows narrative prose to convey themes more often conveyed through more obviously poetic forms. These sentence variations are a large component of what constitutes voice. For more information about sentence structure, see [Clear and Effective Sentences](#).

### Voice

 As you write, focus on developing your **voice**, which in writing is the identity or personality of the narrator or writer. A writer’s voice is sometimes equated with an individual’s personal style—the elements that contribute to the way that person looks and acts. *Do you favor certain kinds of clothing? Do you walk in a certain way? Do you have certain characteristic gestures or speech patterns?* In writing, your voice is the sum total of the words you choose, the way you use them, the attitude you project by your word choice, the mood you create, the way your words describe characters, the way characters speak and behave, and the way you relate events. In personal writing, voice comes through via narration, dialogue, and characterization and the way you project your personality through them.

Further, writers often speak with more than one voice, or maybe with a single voice that has a wide range, varied registers, multiple tones, and different pitches. In any given composition, a writer may try to say two things at the same time. Sometimes writers question their own assertions, sometimes they say one thing aloud and think another silently to themselves, sometimes they say one thing that means two things, and sometimes they express contradictions, paradoxes, or conundrums.

Double voices in a text may be indicated by parentheses—the equivalent of an actor speaking an aside on the stage or in a film. In a film, the internal monologue of a character may be revealed as a voice-over or through printed subtitles while another reaction is happening on-screen. With text, you can change the type size or font or switch to *italic*, **boldface**, or CAPITAL LETTERS to signal a switch in your voice as a writer. The double voice can also occur without distinguishing markers at all or with simple paragraph breaks or spaces.

Effective voice can be achieved through sentence structure and word choices. Try to balance **descriptive language** and **dialogue**. You likely have heard the expression “Show, don’t tell.” Use narration to describe events, actions, and even the narrator’s thoughts, but don’t fall into the trap of feeling as though you need to describe *everything*. Allow events to flow naturally through the narration, weaving in action and dialogue. Precisely placed dialogue can reinforce the narration.

Because voice infuses personality into the composition, the lack of voice or a weak voice may make your story read like a timeline rather than selected events leading to a meaningful turning point. You want your voice to be consistent, reliable, and relatable to your readers. Often this voice will sound like you, infusing your personality or identity into the text. If you recreate authentic (or a good imitation of authentic) dialogue, narration, and description, your voice will likely be strongest, as it suggests a real connection with you.

### Mood

When expressing the narrator's emotions and point of view about the events of the text, voice is a major factor in creating **mood** (atmosphere). For example, a mood may be gloomy, happy, or tense. The same event told by a narrator with a casual, lighthearted voice can be read completely differently if narrated with a formal, argumentative voice. Consider these two sentences and the effect created by the word choice:

- The rain danced on the pavement, sparkling droplets falling from cotton balls above.
- The rain pounded the pavement, pouring buckets from thundering gray clouds above.

The mood in the first sentence reflects a positive disposition toward the rain. The second sentence, though it says nearly the same thing, shows a negative attitude, expressing the violence of the rain. The two distinct moods, developed through imagery, details, and language, influence the reader's perception of the rain.

### Conclusion and Reflection

At the end of your story, you will have the opportunity to reflect on the turning-point event, its impact on you, and perhaps its application to a universal theme. In the Twain example, the reflection is relatively straightforward.

“Very well, then. You shouldn’t have allowed me or anybody else to shake your confidence in that knowledge. Try to remember that. And another thing: when you get into a dangerous place, don’t turn coward. That isn’t going to help matters any.”

It was a good enough lesson, but pretty hardly learned. Yet about the hardest part of it was that for months I so often had to hear a phrase which I had conceived a particular distaste for. It was, “Oh, Ben, if you love me, back her!”

Twain uses Mr. Bixby’s words to teach both himself and readers the lesson. Twain’s reflection also points to a universal lesson, creating a relatable thread from which readers can learn. As you compose your reflection, ask yourself these questions:

- What have you learned from your turning point?
- What can readers learn from your turning point?
- How will you express this lesson?

You may reflect by using literary elements such as imagery or figurative language that help develop the theme or message. You will want to leave room for your readers’ own interpretations so that they can apply the lesson to their own lives, as Twain does. Certainly, most people have doubted their knowledge and abilities at some point, and Mr. Bixby’s directive “Don’t turn coward” has universal meaning.

### Peer Review: Focus on Big-Picture Elements

After your first draft is complete, begin the process of peer review. In this initial review, peer reviewers should focus on big-picture elements, such as plot, point of view, organization, and reflection. Peer reviewers can use the following sentence starters to assess these elements.

- My first impression of the story is \_\_\_\_\_. From it, I learned \_\_\_\_\_.
- The story begins with/by \_\_\_\_\_. It could be made more engaging by \_\_\_\_\_.
- The author uses dialogue to \_\_\_\_\_.
- The narrative is organized by \_\_\_\_\_. Doing \_\_\_\_\_ could strengthen the organization.

- The author's main point is \_\_\_\_\_ and is developed by \_\_\_\_\_.
- The author wants to tell me \_\_\_\_\_.
- I think these details could be made stronger to better develop the main idea or theme of \_\_\_\_\_.

In addition, peer reviewers may choose to mark the manuscript in the following ways:

- Circle unnecessary details. Underline places where more vivid details would bring events or ideas to life.
- Mark places where transitions are needed.
- Place quotation marks in the margin to indicate places where dialogue might better develop the story.

### Revising: Let the Small Stuff Go for Now



After reading through your peer review, you now have the opportunity to revise your story. When you **revising**, reimagine your manuscript until it reaches your audience in the way you want it to. Begin this process by identifying the physical changes you want to make. These might include moving, adding, or deleting content and rewriting ideas. There are also nonphysical ways to revise. Focus on the big picture; think about whether the way you have told your story has delivered your intended message effectively. Avoid getting caught up in minute details before you have shaped the narrative to relate your intended ideas.

Use the following checklist to work through the revision process.

- Introduction:** Does the introduction hook the reader and establish the background knowledge needed, including plot and setting?
- Sequence of events:** Is the story told in a logical and consistent order?
- Vivid details:** Do you provide vivid details that engage your readers' senses?
- Tone and mood:** Are the tone and mood effective for your purpose?
- Characterization, narration, and voice:** Have you developed consistent and specific characterization through your narration and voice?
- Dialogue:** Does the dialogue help move the plot and reflect the characters?
- Transitions:** Have you used clear transitions and time signals to establish chronology and connect important ideas?
- Structure:** Have you developed a cohesive structure, including varying sentence lengths and structures? Can you improve sentences by restructuring, combining, or separating them?
- Conclusion:** Does your conclusion clearly explain the significance of the turning-point event, including its relationship to the theme you want to develop?

## 4.6 Editing Focus: More on Characterization and Point of View

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Correctly identify and use conventions of the personal narrative genre, including structure, paragraphing, tone, and mechanics.
- Gain experience negotiating variations in genre conventions.

When you began writing your story, you likely concentrated on developing the plot and placing events and ideas in an order that made sense. Now, as you edit, work toward refining characterization and point of view in your narrative.

### The Storyteller's Personas: Characterization



After you have developed your narrative, consider the characterization you used to develop the narrator's voice. Characterization helps create a picture of the narrator as a character, drawing the reader in and giving life and interest to the story. **Persona**, from the Latin word for a type of mask worn by stage actors, develops the impression the narrator leaves on the reader.

A persona is actually a construct. Although the story is about you, the actual character on the page is *not* you.

Like the Latin word, it is a mask, or a stand-in for you. You can carefully choose a persona for your character to communicate more authentically and directly with your audience. In real life, your persona refers to your appearance, mannerisms, voice, and body language. In a personal narrative, it is similar—the voice of the narrator as developed through thoughts, actions, and dialogue. Just as you might have a different persona when interacting with a teacher than you would with a friend, your persona as narrator should be carefully crafted to create the most meaning. Use your inner life to help bring the narrator to life. You can be who you want (or do not want) to be.

Consider how Twain creates a persona at the beginning of the excerpt from *Life on the Mississippi*. The opening of the excerpt provides information about both the narrator and Mr. Bixby, and the characterization of each supports the other. The narrator is portrayed as the junior steersman. He is confident but perhaps slightly cross at doing the majority of the work while the more experienced Mr. Bixby plays “gentleman of leisure.”

I had become a good steersman; so good, indeed, that I had all the work to do on our watch, night and day; Mr. Bixby seldom made a suggestion to me; all he ever did was to take the wheel on particularly bad nights or in particularly bad crossings, land the boat when she needed to be landed, play gentleman of leisure nine-tenths of the watch, and collect the wages.

Like Twain, you can develop persona through characterization in your story. Keep in mind that characters are viewed through your eyes. Other people or characters may view them differently, but in your personal narrative, it is your opinion that counts most. Use the following tips to strengthen characterization:

- Observe and report on a character’s surroundings.
- Relay a character’s personality through mannerisms, style, physical appearance, and dialogue.
- Build characters on the basis of relationships and roles.
- Report on how characters interact with one another and how they confront events.
- Relate characters to time.
- Express a character’s role in plot events.

### Choosing the First-Person Point of View



Remember that point of view has to do with the narrator of a story and how that narrator reports and understands events. A narrator may be biased or only have access to certain information and will relate and interpret events accordingly. You most likely have chosen or been assigned to write from the first-person point of view.

#### First-Person Point of View

A **first-person narrator** is a character in the story, whether fiction or nonfiction. Memoirs and autobiographies, as well as personal narratives and many works of fiction, are narrated from the first-person point of view. In telling their stories, first-person narrators, whether real people or fictional characters, are part of the story. They participate in the action, share opinions, and provide descriptions and interpretations. It is important in writing to remember that these narrators know only what they observe around them—what they learn from dialogue, what they are told, and what actions or events occur. They do not know what other characters are thinking and cannot go beyond what they imagine regarding other characters. For example, as Mark Twain begins to steer the boat, he observes Mr. Bixby leave and the others arrive. He cannot know what they are thinking or what motivates them. First-person narrators use *I* and *me* to indicate that they are the ones speaking and observing.

First-person point of view is the most frequently used in memoirs and personal narratives and serves as an authentic and credible point of view.

#### Third-Person Point of View

**Third-person narration** is also used frequently in narrative writing, but usually in fiction and nonpersonal narratives. In this point of view, a narrator who is not a character tells the story. In other words, the narrator is

outside the story and sees it from a broader angle. The narrator's point of view may be **limited point of view**, in which case the narrator aligns with one or several characters and knows only what they know—that is, the narrator reveals only the thoughts of that one or those several characters. Alternatively, the point of view may be **omniscient**, or all-knowing. Omniscient narrators know all characters' thoughts and actions regardless of whether the characters are present. Third-person narrators do not put themselves in the story, and they narrate with third-person pronouns such as *he*, *she*, and *they*. This point of view may provide more reliable and objective narration—but not always.

### Second-Person Point of View

A final type of narration is the **second-person point of view**, in which the narrator uses the pronoun *you* to address readers directly. As in first-person narration, the narrator in this case is usually a character in the story; however, **second-person narration** folds the reader into the story as a character, a technique that draws them closer to the plot. Consider how American author Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) draws in the reader in the opening of his short story “The Haunted Mind” (1835).

What a singular moment is the first one when you have hardly begun to recollect yourself after starting from midnight slumber! By unclosing your eyes so suddenly, you seem to have surprised the personages of your dream in full convocation round your bed, and catch one broad glance at them before they can flit into obscurity.

The second-person point of view is used much less in literary writing than either first or third person. Although it sometimes can be an effective perspective for experienced authors, second person presents problems for both readers and writers. It is difficult to develop successfully, and it's easy to lose track of the narration, thus confusing the reader. You can be sure that if you as the author have difficulty following the narration as you work through the revision process, your readers have little chance. Also, use of the second-person point of view may not be clear to readers who might not notice a difference between addressing readers as *you* simply to provide some information and actually drawing readers into the story as characters. Finally, second person can be difficult for readers to trust, for you are essentially asking them to suspend disbelief and take on all the qualities and experiences that you, as the author, assign them.

You will mostly likely use first-person narration as you retell a turning point in your life, but whichever narration you choose, be consistent.

### Practice with Point of View



To become more familiar with first- and third-person points of view, rewrite a paragraph of your personal narrative using both types of third-person point of view, limited and omniscient. For the limited point of view, choose one of the characters for the narrator to focus on. For the omniscient point of view, focus on all of the characters. Then reflect on how the point of view changes the story. *Which point of view do you prefer—first, limited third, or omniscient third? Why?*

## 4.7 Evaluation: Structure and Organization

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Develop flexible strategies for reviewing and revising.
- Give and act on productive feedback for works in progress.
- Correctly identify and use conventions of the personal narrative genre, including structure, paragraphing, tone, and mechanics.

Ask your peer reviewer to evaluate your second draft by using the rubric in this section. The rubric can help you evaluate your writing regarding the conventions and style of a personal narrative. Though you may make personal writing choices that your peer reviewer doesn't agree with, a peer's perspective offers you a window into a reader's mind and can help you ensure that your story's impact matches your intentions. After

considering your peer reviewer's feedback, revise your paper by incorporating the changes you believe will strengthen it.

### Rubric

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
<b>5</b> <b>Skillful</b>	The text always adheres to the "Editing Focus" of this chapter—characterization and point of view, discussed in Section 4.6—and reflects well-developed, relatable characters and a consistent point of view. The text also shows ample evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer creates a meaningful narrative and provides effective development of characters, vivid details, and reflection through a clear and organized sequence of events. Tenses are always consistent, and events are seamlessly connected with transitions.	The writer consistently demonstrates strong awareness of the rhetorical situation, including narrator, message, audience, purpose, context, and culture. The writer uses dialogue and action to bring readers into the scene. Sentences are varied appropriately.
<b>4</b> <b>Accomplished</b>	The text usually adheres to the "Editing Focus" of this chapter—characterization and point of view, discussed in Section 4.6—and reflects developed, relatable characters and a consistent point of view. The text also shows some evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer creates a consistent narrative and provides effective development of characters, some vivid details, and reflection through a fairly well-organized sequence of events. Tenses are usually consistent, and events are usually connected with transitions.	The writer usually demonstrates strong awareness of the rhetorical situation, including narrator, message, audience, purpose, context, and culture. The writer uses dialogue and action to bring readers into the scene. Some sentences are varied.
<b>3</b> <b>Capable</b>	The text generally adheres to the "Editing Focus" of this chapter—characterization and point of view, discussed in Section 4.6—and reflects fairly developed, relatable characters and a somewhat consistent point of view. The text also shows limited evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer sometimes creates a consistent narrative and provides reasonably effective development of characters, some vivid details, and reflection through a somewhat organized sequence of events. Tenses may be inconsistent at times, and more transitions may be needed for coherence.	The writer sometimes demonstrates awareness of the rhetorical situation, including narrator, message, audience, purpose, context, and culture. The writer uses some dialogue and action to bring readers into the scene, but more of both are needed. Some sentences may be varied.

**TABLE 4.3**

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
<b>2 Developing</b>	The text occasionally adheres to the “Editing Focus” of this chapter—characterization and point of view, discussed in Section 4.6—and reflects somewhat developed, relatable characters and a somewhat inconsistent point of view. The text also shows emerging evidence of the writer’s intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer rarely creates a consistent narrative and provides little development of characters, few details, and minimal reflection through a mostly disorganized sequence of events. Tenses are inconsistent or ineffective, and transitions are lacking or inappropriate.	The writer may occasionally demonstrate awareness of the rhetorical situation, including narrator, message, audience, purpose, context, and culture. The writer uses little dialogue and action to bring readers into the scene. Sentence structure shows little variation.
<b>1 Beginning</b>	The text does not adhere to the “Editing Focus” of this chapter—characterization and point of view, discussed in Section 4.6—and reflects undeveloped, unrelated characters and an inconsistent point of view. The text also shows little to no evidence of the writer’s intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The writer creates a disorganized narrative with little or no development of characters, details, and reflection. Tenses are inconsistent or ineffective, and transitions are lacking or inappropriate.	The writer demonstrates little or no awareness of the rhetorical situation, including narrator, message, audience, purpose, context, and culture. The writer uses little or no dialogue and action. Sentence structure is not varied.

**TABLE 4.3**

## 4.8 Spotlight on ... Multilingual Writers

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Respond to a variety of situations and contexts by recognizing diction, tone, formality, design, medium, or structure to meet the situation.
- Read a diverse range of texts, attending especially to patterns of organization, the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements, and how these features function for different audiences and situations.

Multilingual writers are those who write in both first and second (or third . . . or more!) languages, as opposed to monolingual writers, who write in a single language. In the United States, it is not uncommon that English is the second language of multilingual authors, many of whom may have extensive familiarity and literacy in both their first and second languages. Colleges and universities, too, in their quest to include a more diverse population within their ranks, have seen an increase in multilingual writers and students.



Addressing the needs of multilingual students and writers deserves special attention, as these writers may experience a variety of differences between writing in their first languages and in English. In fact, the



landscape and functions of various parts of writing—linguistics, audience, and rhetorical appeals, to name a few—vary across languages and cultures. While certain expectations exist in the academic sphere—for example, the way rhetorical appeals are incorporated within a position argument—different cultural practices and assumptions may require different processes for those writing from the perspective of multiple languages

or cultures. Understanding academic literacies can be challenging enough for students entrenched in the typical American classroom, and space should be carved out for those coming from different outlooks, particularly multilingual writers.

Multilingual writers have much to offer to classrooms and readers' literary experiences. In the past, languages have been viewed as occupying separate spaces in a multilingual writer's mind. It is commonly accepted that multilingual authors switch between the linguistic and cultural norms of each of their languages. But separate languages are also cohesive, allowing authors to draw on a wide variety of inventory from a different language as they compose, thus enhancing their writing.

### The Storyteller's Purpose: The Truth of the Human Experience

-  Consider adding multilingual elements to your writing if you are a multilingual author. Language can create a mood and atmosphere for your readers, helping communicate cultural and linguistic individualities. You might add narration or dialogue in a language other than English to the story of your personal turning point if it makes sense within the narrative. For example, you might use dialogue to convey a young woman's conversation with her Mexican grandmother:

*"Te amo, nieta," she whispered gently.*

This can be a more powerful use of language and culture than simply stating that the grandmother spoke in Spanish, allowing the reader to experience the culture through language. Or a character may ask a question or make a statement in another language, allowing the reader to understand through the context of surrounding narration or dialogue:

*"Vous avez des livres de Dickens?" the woman inquired. "Yes," I responded, "we have several books by Dickens."*

Alternatively, consider sharing your own thoughts in another language, retaining traces of that language's structure and grammar. [Reflection Trailblazer: Sandra Cisneros](#) does this in Spanish, and Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie (b. 1977) does this in Igbo. Both serve as models of how to incorporate another language into writing. In addition, some professional authors write in the language of the country they live in. For example, Irish playwright, poet, and novelist Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) lived in France and wrote in both French and English. American author Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967), who was born in London to Indian parents, lived for years in Italy and has written in Italian as well as her native English.

### Publish Your Work

Publishing your personal writing is the next step you may want to take. In addition to your campus literary magazine, the following journals accept undergraduate creative work and are often looking for submissions.

- [\*The Allegheny Review\*](https://openstax.org/r/thealleghneyreview)
- [\*Creative Nonfiction\*](https://openstax.org/r/creativenonfiction)
- [\*Inquiries Journal\*](https://openstax.org/r/inquiriesjournal)
- [\*International Journal of Undergraduate Research & Creative Activities\*](https://openstax.org/r/internationaljournal)

## 4.9 Portfolio: Filtered Memories

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Reflect on the composition process.
- Reflect on how the composition process affects your writing.
- Use composition for learning, critical thinking, and communicating in various rhetorical contexts.

As part of this course, you are creating a portfolio of your compositions to show your development as a writer. As you add to this portfolio, you assess your growth as a writer. The portfolio of your work allows you not only

to have a record of your compositions but also to reflect on those compositions and the process involved in writing them. In this section, you will write a reflection on the process you followed in writing your turning-point story, including revision and editing. Consider your original intention when creating your essay and how close your final composition comes to fulfilling that intention.

### Reflective Task

Answer the following questions before writing several paragraphs reflecting on the personal turning point you wrote about in this chapter. Consider both the process and the outcome of the writing assignment.

- Why did you choose the turning-point moment or event that you did?
- Which part of the writing process came the most naturally? Which was the most difficult?
- Which parts of the composition do you think are the strongest? Why?
- Which parts of the composition would you still like to improve?
- How did you develop your voice as a narrator as you wrote?
- If you were to write another turning-point story, what would you do differently? (Consider topic, organization, structure, point of view, and voice.)
- How did your story change through the revision and peer-editing processes? Name at least two changes you made, and reflect on how they made the piece stronger.
- What did you learn about yourself, both as a writer and as a person, from this exercise?

## Further Reading

The following titles are good examples of essays, memoirs, and poems that tell personal stories.

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- Beasley, Sandra. *Don't Kill the Birthday Girl: Tales from an Allergic Life*. Crown, 2011.
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- Twain, Mark. *Life on the Mississippi*. James R. Osgood, 1883. *Project Gutenberg*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/245/old/orig245-h/245-h.htm>.

# Profile: Telling a Rich and Compelling Story

5



**FIGURE 5.1** Writer Gay Talese (b. 1932) revolutionized both journalism and profile writing. His piece “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” appeared in Esquire magazine’s April 1966 issue and was among the earliest and most influential examples of the “new journalism” movement of the 1960s and ’70s. A key element of the movement was journalists’ use of literary techniques in longer pieces of media writing, aiming to get at “truth” rather than simply providing facts. Because Sinatra (shown here in a 1960 photo) refused interview requests, Talese built the profile entirely from field observations and interviews with others. (credit: 20th Century Fox/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 5.1 Profiles as Inspiration
- 5.2 Profile Trailblazer: Veronica Chambers
- 5.3 Glance at Genre: Subject, Angle, Background, and Description
- 5.4 Annotated Sample Reading: “Remembering John Lewis” by Carla D. Hayden
- 5.5 Writing Process: Focusing on the Angle of Your Subject
- 5.6 Editing Focus: Verb Tense Consistency
- 5.7 Evaluation: Text as Personal Introduction
- 5.8 Spotlight on ... Profiling a Cultural Artifact
- 5.9 Portfolio: Subject as a Reflection of Self

**INTRODUCTION** This chapter explores the process of **profile writing**. Writers compose these articles or essays to present some essential insight about the subject to the audience; subjects can span a wide variety of

topics, including individuals, groups, places, and events. A good profile tells one clear, overarching story, chosen from other possible stories about the subject.

Although the central purpose of a profile is to convey a sense of the subject's significance, a profile may have a more specific goal. Profile writers may simply want to inform audiences about their subjects, or they may aim to inspire audiences with the examples their subjects provide, highlighting something overlooked or underappreciated about them. In all cases, though, the writer's goal is to share a crucial insight about the subject with the audience.

Profiles lie on a spectrum between two related forms: informal interviews and formal biographies. Like interviews, profiles usually depend on direct conversations with living people. Like biographies, they make use of other sources of information about the subject. Profiles such as those published in popular magazines are usually longer and more focused than interviews but considerably shorter than biographies. The material in this chapter will help you develop a profile that will show a new perspective on a subject of your choosing to inform and inspire your readers.

## 5.1 Profiles as Inspiration

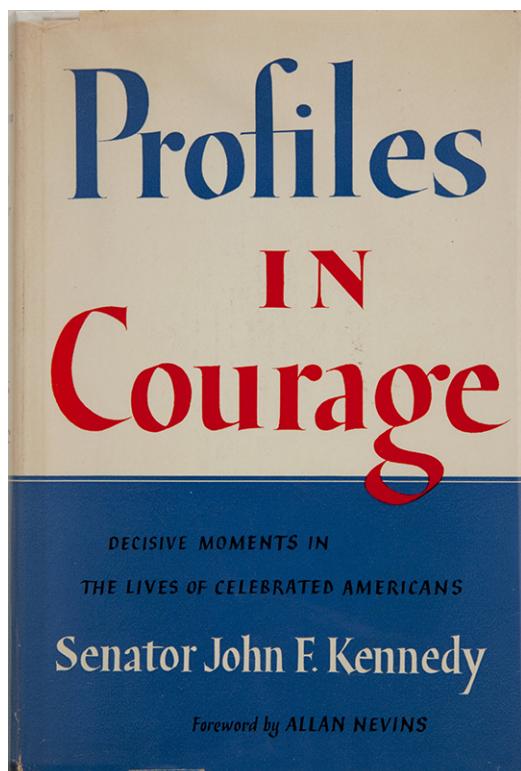
### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of profile writing.
- Explain how the profile genre has developed.



Beginning with its first issue in 1925, *The New Yorker* magazine has run a regular feature called "Profiles." The earliest of this series of biographical sketches combined the elements still in use for profiles today: anecdotes (brief stories), interview data, descriptions of the subject and their surroundings, and researched information to provide background and context. In the early 1950s, then senator John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) had an idea to develop a similar article about U.S. senators who had shown moral courage in the face of opposition. He asked one of his speechwriters, Ted Sorenson (1928–2010), to research examples of senators who had displayed this quality. As he researched, Sorenson found so much information that he suggested Kennedy write a book about these individuals.



**FIGURE 5.2** Cover of *Profiles in Courage* (credit: “First edition front cover of *Profiles in Courage*” by Unknown Author/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The 1956 volume, titled *Profiles in Courage*, spotlights eight senators who took unpopular stances against majority consensus; subjects range from John Quincy Adams (1767–1848) to Robert A. Taft (1889–1953). Many of the profiled senators lost political power as a result of their actions. The John F. Kennedy Library Foundation later established the Profile in Courage Award, given to “a public official (or officials) at the federal, state, or local level whose actions demonstrate the qualities of politically courageous leadership” ([About the Award \(<https://openstax.org/r/abouttheaward>\)](https://openstax.org/r/abouttheaward)). Kennedy’s book established a connection between the profile genre and the idea of courage, and other writers have continued drawing on this connection.

One such writer is Veronica Chambers, this chapter’s trailblazer. In her book *Resist: 40 Profiles of Ordinary People Who Rose Up against Tyranny and Injustice*, Chambers includes profiles of individuals who displayed uncommon and often unpopular courage. Although profile pieces do not always focus on courageous people as subjects, that particular focus can provide a strong angle—a viewpoint or lens—for profile writing. Like Kennedy and Chambers, profile writers often communicate admiration for some attribute that their subject displays, whether courage or another quality that might provide an example to others.

Although other types of writing can inspire readers to develop admirable qualities, profiles do so particularly well. They are generally short enough to read in one sitting and strongly focus on one main idea for readers to absorb. They are compelling because they combine elements of both storytelling and reporting. Profiles of people who embody certain ideals or principles can provide models for readers to become better at living up to those principles.



## 5.2 Trailblazer

### Profile Trailblazer: Veronica Chambers

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating in varying rhetorical and cultural contexts.
- Determine how genre conventions are shaped by purpose, culture, and expectation.
- Comment on the interplay among author, subject, and audience.



*“There is  
not a  
story  
where the  
oppressor  
wins  
forever.”*

**FIGURE 5.3** In her profiling work, [Veronica Chambers \(<https://openstax.org/r/veronicachampers>\)](https://openstax.org/r/veronicachampers) highlights ordinary heroes such as civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, shown here as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegate at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 1964. (credit: “Fannie Lou Hamer, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegate, at the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 1964” by Leffler, Warren K.,/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Public Domain)



You may know Veronica Chambers (b. 1970) from having read *Mama's Girl*, her 1996 memoir about being raised in Brooklyn by her mother, who had immigrated with her from Panama. You may have seen one of the many books that Chambers has coauthored, such as *Yes, Chef* with Marcus Samuelsson, published in 2013; *Make It Messy*, also with Marcus Samuelsson, published in 2015; or *Thirty two (32) Yolks*, with Eric Ripert,

published in 2016. Building on these successes, Chambers—who has served as senior editor at several major publications, including *Glamour*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times Magazine*—has recently focused on developing an array of young adult books highlighting the voices and histories of marginalized people, mainly Black women.

In the expanded paperback edition of *Resist: 40 Profiles of Ordinary People Who Rose Up against Tyranny and Injustice*, published in 2020, Chambers delves into the profile genre, covering a variety of well-known and influential subjects dating from as early as 1429 to the present day. While many of her subjects are Black American women, such as civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977) and Georgia politician Stacey Abrams (b. 1973), the collection includes people from around the world and from different cultures, among them Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948), German industrialist Oskar Schindler (1908–1974), and South African singer Miriam Makeba (1932–2008). In every chapter, Chambers uses the profile genre to highlight one key aspect of each of her subjects' lives.

### Paying Attention to the Subject's Voice

Profiles aim to help readers better understand their subject by focusing on one major idea. When the subject is a person, readers can better understand that person by reading their spoken or written words. Chambers uses this technique throughout her book. In the first chapter, Chambers tells the story of French heroine Joan of Arc (c. 1412–1431), centering on the idea that individuals are born for a purpose. Readers can better understand Joan of Arc's singlemindedness because of the chapter's **epigraph** (quotation provided at the beginning of a written piece that indicates how readers should approach the text), attributed to the subject: "I am not afraid.... I was born to do this" (Chambers, *Resist* 9). The profile itself offers an additional direct quote: "All battles are first won or lost in the mind" (10). Other chapters, such as those profiling Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) and former South African president Nelson Mandela (1918–2013), also begin with the subject's words in an epigraph or employ both strategies—epigraph plus direct quotes within the profile. (You may choose to use either or both of these strategies in your profile as well.)

### Recognizing the Author's Voice

Profile writers may choose to include themselves in the piece, referring to their own experiences and interactions with the subject. In this collection, Chambers instead speaks in her own voice in the "resist lesson" at the end of each chapter. These "resist lessons" distill each profile's focus into a short phrase, such as "We must speak for the voiceless" (the lesson for the profile of Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, 1879–1919) and "Honor the hands that harvest your crops" (the lesson for the combined profile of American labor leaders Dolores Huerta (b. 1930) and Cesar Chavez, 1927–1993).

### Negotiating among Author's Voice, Subject's Voice, and Genre Expectations

The profile genre enjoys considerable variety. While Chambers does not include her own experiences in this collection, other writers do insert themselves into the profiles they write. Yet even without first-person commentary, Chambers clearly communicates her opinions of the subjects with her word choices and "resist lessons." Either choice—including the author directly in the text or not—can be appropriate, depending on the rhetorical situation.

### Discussion Questions

1. Now that you have read the information provided in the chapter thus far, what do you think are the differences between a profile and a memoir or biography?
2. Why might you include or exclude your own voice or experiences in the profile you write?
3. Given that many of her subjects are historical figures, how do you think Chambers found the information for the profiles included in her book? How would research on someone who lived in the past differ from research on a living person?

4. How is the profile genre uniquely suited to showcase the idea of courage or some other admirable trait?
5. What profiles have you encountered that have inspired you? How have they done so? If you haven't read any inspiring profiles, what subjects—people, places, or events—would you like to see profiled? Why?

### 5.3 Glance at Genre: Subject, Angle, Background, and Description

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify elements of the profile genre.
- Identify research methods for writing profiles.

Profile writing are articles or essays in which the writer focuses on a specific trait or behavior that reveals something essential about the subject. Much profile material comes from interviews either with the subject or with people who know about the subject. However, interviews may not always be part of a profile, for profile writers also draw on other sources of information. In creating profiles, writers usually combine the techniques of narrative, or storytelling, and reporting, or including information that answers the questions of *who, what, when, where, why, and how*.

#### Potential Profile Subjects and Angles



You can find profile subjects everywhere. The purpose of a profile is to give readers an insight into something fundamental about the subject, whether that subject is a person, a social group, a building, a piece of art, a public space, or a cultural tradition. Writers of profiles often conduct several types of research, including interviews and **field observations**, as well as consult related published sources. A profile usually reveals one aspect of the subject to the audience; this focus is called an **angle**. To decide which angle to take, profile writers look for patterns in their research, then consider their audience when making choices about both the angle and the **tone**, or attitude toward the subject.

#### Defining Terms and Writing in the Genre



These terms, or **genre elements**, are frequently used in profile writing. The following definitions apply specifically to the ways in which the terms are used in this genre.

- **Anecdotes:** brief stories about specific moments that offer insights into the profile subject.
- **Background information:** key to understanding the profile's significance. Background information includes biographical data and other information about the history of the profile subject. It often helps establish context as well.
- **Chronological order:** information or a narrative presented in time order, from earliest to most recent.
- **Context:** the situation or circumstances that surround a profile subject. Situating profile subjects within their contexts can offer deeper insights about them.
- **Factual information:** accurate and verifiable data and other material gathered from research.
- **Field notes:** information gathered and recorded by observing the profile subject within a particular environment.
- **Location:** places relevant to the profile subject. For a person, location might include birthplace, place of residence, or place where events occurred.
- **Narrative structure:** text organized as narratives, or stories, weaving research into the story as applicable.
- **Quotation:** words spoken or written by the subject or from interviews about the subject.
- **Reporting structure:** structure that relays factual information and answers *who, what, when, where, why, and how* questions.
- **Show and tell:** descriptive and narrative techniques to help readers imagine the subject combined with reporting techniques to relay factual information.
- **Spatial structure:** used in profiles of buildings, artworks, and public spaces. This structure reflects a "tour" of the space or image.

- **Thick description:** combination of sensory perceptions to create a vivid image for readers.
- **Tone:** the writer’s attitude toward the subject. For example, tone can be admiring, grateful, sarcastic, disparaging, angry, respectful, gracious, neutral, and so on.
- **Topical structure:** structure that focuses on several specific topics within the profile.

## 5.4 Annotated Sample Reading: “Remembering John Lewis” by Carla D. Hayden

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Determine and articulate how conventions are shaped by purpose, language, culture, and expectation.
- Analyze and evaluate relationships between ideas and patterns of organization in the profile genre.

### Introduction



**FIGURE 5.4** John Lewis, 2006 (credit: “Rep. John Lewis (D-GA)” by United States House of Representatives/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)



**FIGURE 5.5** Carla D. Hayden, 2020 (credit: “Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden, 2020” by Shawn Miller/Library of Congress Life/Wikimedia Commons, CC0)

Just two days after the death of politician and civil rights icon John Lewis (1940–2020), Librarian of Congress Carla D. Hayden (b. 1952) published the following profile on the Library of Congress blog. As you will learn from the annotations, she uses a variety of profile genre elements in her piece. While reading Hayden’s profile of Lewis, consider how you might use some of her strategies in your own work.



## LIVING BY THEIR OWN WORDS

### The Power of "Good Trouble"

**Angle and Choice of Subject.** Hayden signals her profile’s angle in the title, linking Lewis’s signature phrase “good trouble” with the idea of power. Additionally, important dates—deaths, current events, or anniversaries of such happenings—often provide the incentive for writing profiles.

Few people that you meet truly rouse the best in you. They are walking heroes, living historymakers. Their words and deeds have a thunderous impact on your soul. Congressman John Robert Lewis was such a person for me. I join the world in mourning the passing of this civil rights legend.

**Writer’s Voice.** Hayden chooses to insert her own voice and experience to connect with her readers. She also expands on the theme of “power” introduced in the title, using words and phrases such as heroes, historymakers, thunderous impact, and legend.

**Tone.** The words she uses to describe Lewis indicate a tone of respect and admiration.

The son of a sharecropper growing up in rural Alabama, he said as a little boy he was in constant fear because of signs that said “no colored boys, no colored girls.” His parents and grandparents used to tell him “don’t get in trouble.” Nevertheless, as a young man he was inspired to activism by the Montgomery Bus Boycott that started when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat.

**Structure.** This paragraph features a chronological structure, beginning with Lewis’s childhood and creating a timeline from there to the beginning of his activism.

**Theme and Background.** This paragraph also introduces the idea of “trouble,” which drove Lewis’s ideas about how to behave. Thus, it provides necessary background information for the points that follow, giving context for Lewis’s catchphrase of “good trouble.”

This past December, the Library of Congress opened an extensive exhibition, “Rosa Parks: In Her Own Words,” where the congressman spoke. “Rosa Parks inspired us to get in trouble. And I’ve been getting in trouble ever since,” said Lewis. “She inspired us to find a way, to get in the way, to get in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble.” Over the years, he was able to meet and work with Rosa Parks who taught him about the philosophy and discipline of non-violence. “She kept on saying to each one of us, you too can do something,” he said. “And for people if you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, do something. We cannot afford to be quiet.” You can hear Lewis himself discuss the [legacy of Parks](https://openstax.org/r/legacyofparks) (<https://openstax.org/r/legacyofparks>).

**Theme, Quotations, Audience.** This paragraph continues the theme of “trouble,” redefining the idea now in Lewis’s terms. The paragraph also continues the theme of power. This paragraph focuses almost entirely on quoted material from Lewis, giving readers a direct connection to his voice. The embedded video allows readers to see and hear Lewis speaking, reinforcing this strategy. Lastly, Hayden refers to an event at the Library of Congress; this event is relevant to readers of the Library of Congress blog.

During the exhibition opening, John Lewis told how he was inspired by Rosa Parks to write to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He was given a round trip bus ticket to Montgomery to meet with Dr. King and upon meeting him was nicknamed, “The Boy from Troy.”

**Location.** Hayden places Lewis in different locations; the mention of a location-specific nickname personalizes him further. Hayden also places Lewis at pivotal civil rights events.

**Audience.** This final placement of Lewis in the Library of Congress on several occasions is an effective choice to connect with readers of the Library of Congress blog.

He risked his life countless times by organizing voter registration drives, sit-ins at lunch counters and was beaten and arrested for challenging the injustice of Jim Crow segregation in the South. While still a young man, John Lewis was already a nationally recognized leader and was named one of the Big Six leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. He was also the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and his papers and interviews from this time are held at the Library of Congress. At the age of 23, he was a keynote speaker at the historic March on Washington in 1963.

**Factual Information, Background, and Context.** This paragraph offers a series of facts to back Hayden’s points. It also provides more background and context for Lewis’s later political efforts. This information is common knowledge, repeated in a variety of credible sources. Hayden takes care to note that Lewis’s papers are housed at the Library of Congress, a relevant detail for her audience.

On March 7, 1965, John Lewis led more than 600 peaceful protestors across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma to demonstrate the need for voting rights in the state of Alabama. They were greeted by brutal attacks by Alabama State Troopers that became known as “Bloody Sunday.”

**Anecdote and Context.** This paragraph offers a brief anecdote about a defining moment of Lewis’s life, thus strengthening the power of the story and communicating the context of Lewis’s early activism.

Despite numerous arrests and physical injuries, John Lewis remained a devoted advocate of the philosophy of nonviolence. He was elected to the Atlanta City Council and then the representative of Georgia’s Fifth Congressional District. He stuck to Rosa Parks’ advice to never be quiet and to continue getting into “good trouble.”

**Angle and Secondary Research.** This paragraph continues the writer's angle of "good trouble" and offers information from secondary sources.

The congressman was a frequent guest at the Library of Congress. His generous spirit touched everyone he met in the halls of the Library—whether it was reading his graphic novel "March" or speaking at public events—his gentle temperament kept you at ease. His graphic novel allowed him to continue to connect with a new generation of young readers in the hope of inspiring them the way Rosa Parks had inspired him.

**Angle, Context, and Field Research.** In this paragraph, Hayden implies that part of Lewis's power came from his generosity and gentle temperament. She also shows readers that Lewis understood his work in the context of Parks's achievements and that he hoped to provide the same context for activists who followed him. Instead of providing direct quotes, Hayden offers details that come from field research.

In November, John Lewis celebrated the AIDS Memorial Quilt collection arriving at the Library of Congress. His message of peaceful resolve, perseverance and care still rings loud. "In the height of the civil rights movement, we spoke of love," Lewis said. "On one occasion Dr. King said to some of us, just love everybody. Love them who fail to love you, just love. Just love a little hell out of everybody."

**Quoted Material and Field Research.** Using Lewis's own words supports both his commitment to nonviolence and Dr. King's playfulness with language. Hayden was likely present at the event when Lewis spoke; videos of and articles about the event corroborate her report.

The world mourns. But we also celebrate a great warrior and fighter of injustice. Let us remember his story and listen to the words he passionately shared for more than a half a century. Congressman John Robert Lewis embodies the best in all of us. Let his legacy and spirit live on. I offer my prayers and condolences to his family and to the grateful people of his district in Georgia.

**Theme and Angle.** Hayden ends by reconnecting to the themes that run through the profile. In returning to these themes, Hayden confirms and completes the angle of this profile.

## Discussion Questions

- How does the title both focus the scope and signal the angle of this blog post?
- How effective is Hayden's angle in this piece? Provide evidence for your assessment.
- In what ways might Hayden, as librarian of Congress, have developed this profile further or differently?
- How might you revise this piece to fit into a "profiles in courage" collection targeted at a more general audience?
- How do the first and last paragraphs work differently from the other paragraphs in the text? How do Hayden's choices for these paragraphs affect the cohesiveness of the profile she has written?

## 5.5 Writing Process: Focusing on the Angle of Your Subject

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Plan a research calendar.
- Conduct primary research, including field observations and interviews.
- Conduct secondary research, drawing on credible academic and popular sources.
- Compose an email that meets professional standards of the genre.
- Synthesize research findings using elements of the profile genre to create a written profile.
- Give and receive constructive feedback in peer review exercises.
- Revise a draft in response to feedback.

Now that you are familiar with the structure and content of profiles, you are ready to write one of your own.

This section will show you how to apply the ideas and genre elements presented earlier in this chapter to develop your profile essay.

### Summary of Assignment: A Profile in Courage or Other Admirable Trait

For this assignment, you will develop an essay that profiles the courage—or another admirable aspect—of someone or something associated with your college campus. You will create a profile of a person, group, place, or event that exemplifies the admirable aspect as you define it. For your profile, you will conduct the specific kinds of research done by profile writers: interviews, field research, and secondary research from credible sources.

Once you have compiled your research, you will decide on the focus and angle of your piece, then plan and develop your draft. You will also participate in peer review to receive guidance for any needed revisions. Throughout the process, you will focus on developing an essay that shows readers how your subject exemplifies the admirable trait you have chosen.

**Another Lens.** Another option for this assignment is a group writing project for your class or smaller groups within the class. Your instructor will decide whether the project will be completed by the whole class or smaller groups. With your peers, you will write a collaborative profile in courage of your class or group as a whole, showing how you all exemplify courage together. All students will contribute anecdotes about courage from their own lives in addition to conducting all other research on which profiles are based. The class or group will then work together to organize, draft, revise, edit, and proofread the collective composition.

#### Defining the Admirable Trait



Before beginning your profile, choose the admirable trait on which you will focus, and then create your own definition of it. This definition will help you select your subject and focus your research. Consider including the definition in your final product as well.

First, to decide on the trait, follow these steps:

- Set a timer for five minutes. During that time, write or record a comprehensive list of traits you admire in other people. Include a wide range of possibilities, such as “humor,” “generosity,” “patience,” and so on. To generate a robust list, think also of the people you admire, and then pinpoint the attributes you admire about them.
- Consider all of the traits you have listed, and select one to focus on for this project.

Next, use one or more of the following methods to begin defining the aspect of the subject that you admire:

- Think about the admirable trait you have chosen, and write down a few words or phrases that you associate with it.
- Assemble a collage of images that make you think of the admirable trait.
- Write brief notes about moments when you have personally shown the trait you are focusing on—or about times you have seen others exhibit this trait.

Looking at all of these notes, write your personal definition of the admirable trait. Your draft definition will probably evolve as you develop your profile. If so, great! That means you have been thinking more about the idea. Here is a sample definition of an admirable trait: *Kindness is grace in action; it shows itself when people are willing to truly listen to others and to understand the world from another vantage point. People embody kindness when they choose to respond gently rather than angrily or when they help others without complaining.*

#### Choosing a Subject



Now that you have a working definition of the trait you are using to focus your profile, you can choose your subject. Members of the campus community are usually willing subjects: professors, librarians, resident assistants, alumni, staff, and coaches, to name a few. You might also consider buildings, public spaces, or

public art on campus. In addition, the local community may contain potential subjects—for example, business owners, city administrators, and other local individuals, groups, or events peripherally associated with your school. Also consider discussing your project with an archivist if one is available on campus or in your community; these specialist librarians always have interesting subjects to recommend for research. Follow these steps to choose a subject:

- Jot down notes about intriguing buildings, public spaces, pieces of public art, people, events, and groups on or near campus.
- Do a quick online search—perhaps on the campus website—to see what information is available about several potential subjects that most intrigue you. Remember that this research is simply to narrow your options; you will conduct more careful and thorough research after making your final choice.
- Having gathered preliminary information, think about which potential subject best connects to the definition of the admirable trait you have developed. Also, think about which subject most interests you.

Now weigh the factors you have considered here, and choose the subject you would most like to pursue. If you are having trouble choosing between two subjects, discuss your options with your instructor or with someone in the campus writing center. Once you have chosen a subject, you can plan your research. You will need to schedule interviews, field observations, and time for secondary research before you begin organizing your findings and drafting your paper.



**FIGURE 5.6** Carmichael Library, University of Montevallo, April 19, 2007. Professor Art Scott Stephens speaks to research students at the Prints and Poems program. (credit: “Prints and Poems 2007” by carmichaellibrary/flickr, CC BY 2.0)

### Preparing to Write: Conducting Research



Profile writers learn as much about their subjects as possible. Be sure to take advantage of all available sources of information, and follow up on new leads wherever you find them. After completing your research, you will be able to refine your angle and draft your piece. As you gather your research, keep your target audience in mind, and look for details about your subject that will interest them. For example, Carla D. Hayden included information about events in which John Lewis participated at the Library of Congress. These details would interest Library of Congress blog readers, the audience for this piece.

You will need to complete three kinds of research for your profile: interviews, field research and secondary research; see [The Research Process: Where to Look for Existing Sources](#) and [The Research Process: How to Create Sources](#). These types of research are outlined in [Table 5.1](#) for efficient planning and discussed in detail below.

## Plan Your Research Calendar

---

### Interviews

- If you can speak to your subject, find their contact information.
  - If you cannot speak directly to your subject, make a list of professionals with knowledge about your subject, and decide which person to contact first. One or two interviews should provide enough information for this assignment.
  - In either case, compose a **professional email** (see below) to respectfully ask for a brief phone call, video conference, or in-person meeting. Send these emails as soon as you have chosen your subject so that you have time to schedule the interview before you begin drafting.
- 

### Field Research

- If your subject is a person, send a professional email (see below) to ask when you might observe them doing their job.
  - If your subject is not a person, decide when to be in the space to make your **field notes**. Be sure to obtain any needed permission to be in the space.
  - In both cases, set aside 30 minutes to an hour to make your field notes, using **thick description** (explained below).
- 

### Secondary Research

- Set aside time for several research sessions to find credible information about your subject. Refer to Chapters [Research Process: Accessing and Recording Information](#) and [Annotated Bibliography: Gathering, Evaluating, and Documenting Sources](#) for research guidance.
  - If you have trouble finding the information you need, contact one of your research librarians; they would be happy to help.
- 

**TABLE 5.1** Research Planning Calendar

#### Professional Email Standards



Before you begin to do research, you will need to contact people via email about setting up interviews or gathering other necessary information. To come across as a credible researcher, follow professional email protocol when contacting subjects for interviews or other information. Subjects will take you and your requests far more seriously when you follow the protocols in [Table 5.2](#).

#### Professional Email

---

Take care to use professional email etiquette when contacting potential interview subjects.

---

**TABLE 5.2** Email Protocols

Professional Email	
• <b>Subject Line.</b> Your subject line, like an essay title, should represent your main point.	Subject: Interview Request
• <b>Salutation.</b> Open with a polite greeting; use the person's title or honorific (such as Mr., Ms., Mrs., or Dr.).	Dear Dr. Kamau,
• <b>Introduction.</b> Introduce yourself to the person. Your name will appear in the signature line; here, offer information that shows the relationship you have to the request.	I am a student in Dr. Liu's first-year composition class, and I am researching the English Language Institute (ELI) on campus in order to write a profile on tenacity in relation to the ELI.
• <b>Statement of Purpose.</b> State your purpose clearly.	I am writing to ask for a brief interview with you to find out more about the ELI.
• <b>Statement of Request.</b> Make a polite request.	Would you have 15 minutes within the next week to speak with me by phone or videoconference?
• <b>Next Steps.</b> Say what you would like to happen next.	I hope to hear from you soon.
• <b>Closing.</b> Include a polite closing line, use a professional complimentary close, and type your full name.	Thank you for considering this request. [Best, Regards, Sincerely, Yours] Sylvia Varela

**TABLE 5.2** Email Protocols

### Interviews

Talking with your subject—or a professional who knows a great deal about your subject—is often the best place to start your research. Interviews generally fall into the category of **primary research**, or research you collect directly for yourself. Try to interview your profile subject directly if the subject is a person. You also may find interviews with or about your subject that journalists have completed and published, though these would not be primary research. If you are unable to interview your subject directly, try to interview someone who has credible information about your subject; such interviews would be primary research as well. People who know, live, and work with your subject can provide additional, helpful background information. Try to set up a few short interviews with these people to deepen your insights.



The easiest way to conduct an interview is to schedule a brief, informal conversation in a comfortable setting. For a successful interview, have questions prepared and be ready to take notes as you talk. Following in [Table 5.3](#) are sample questions you might ask. To add to this list, think about your preliminary research as well as the definition of the admirable trait you are using for your profile.

Note that you will need to cite any interviews you conduct, both within the text and in the Works Cited list. The Works Cited entry for an interview will read as follows:

[Last name of interviewee], [First name of interviewee]. Personal interview. Day Month (abbreviated) Year.

### Interview Planning Worksheet

**If you are interviewing your subject:**

- What have you been doing or thinking about recently?
- What about your work/hobby/area of focus is most interesting to you?
- What aspect of your work/hobby/area of focus has surprised you?
- What do you wish people knew about your work/hobby/area of focus?
- How might you define [the admirable trait]?
- How do you see the idea of [the admirable trait] relating to your work/hobby/area of focus?
- As I was preparing for this interview, I learned <WOL>. Could you tell me more about that?

**If you are interviewing someone about your subject:**

- How did you learn about this subject?
- What is the most fascinating part about this subject for you?
- What should people know about this subject that may be overlooked?
- How might you define [the admirable trait]?
- Do you see the idea of [the admirable trait] relating to this subject? If so, how?
- As I was preparing for this interview, I learned <WOL>. Could you tell me more about that?

**TABLE 5.3** Interview planning worksheet

#### Thick Description



Another form of primary research is field observation. If at all possible, observe your subject in their element—watch them (with permission!) during their workday, spend an extended period of time in a related space, or watch available videos of your subject. In all cases, take thorough and detailed notes to create a **thick description**, or a careful record of every sensory detail you can capture—smells, sounds, sights, textures, physical sensations, and perhaps tastes. This thick description can provide meaningful details to illuminate the points in your piece. Meticulously record all sensory information about your subject and their setting, writing in-depth notes about what you see, smell, hear, feel, and taste. Remember to use words that express size, shape, color, texture, and sound. If you are taking notes on a person, describe their clothing, gestures, and physical characteristics. At the same time, take note of the interview setting. If the interview takes place in a neutral space, the setting can provide a backdrop for the profile. If the interview setting is a person's room or apartment, record the details that tell the most about your subject's special interests. If you are not used to taking these kinds of notes, practice doing so by following the steps in [Table 5.4](#).

#### Practice Field Notes and Thick Description

Practice creating field notes with a peer. Take about 10 minutes to record as much sensory information as possible.

- What do you hear, close by and farther away?
- What do you feel? Are there specific textures in your surroundings?
- What do you smell? What seems to be the source of the smells?
- Can you taste anything?
- What do you see? Describe the space as well as your peer (without judgment).

When the 10 minutes are up, discuss the experience with your peer. Use these techniques to enliven the points you make in your profile.

**TABLE 5.4** Field notes and thick description guide

You will also need to cite your field notes, both within the text and in the Works Cited list. The Works Cited

entry for the field notes should be arranged according to this model:

[Your last name], [Your first name]. Field notes. [Name of the department you are affiliated with], [Name of your university], Day Month (abbreviated) Year. Raw data.

### Secondary Research and Other Written and Published Information

Profile writers supplement their primary research findings through **secondary research**, or research that others have completed and published. Ensure that any supplemental information you use comes from **credible sources**; these include peer-reviewed journals for academic sources and well-established, highly regarded organizations for public, nonacademic ones. Keep careful records of this research so that you can cite each source appropriately. Use the tools available from the [Modern Language Association](https://openstax.org/r/modernlanguage) (<https://openstax.org/r/modernlanguage>) and in [Research Process: Accessing and Recording Information](#) and [Annotated Bibliography: Gathering, Evaluating, and Documenting Sources](#) for guidance in researching and managing source material. For more details on citing sources, see [MLA Documentation and Format](#) and [APA Documentation and Format](#).

Additionally, ask your subject for their résumé and any writing samples they may have developed. While this type of research may not be available about your subject, as many ordinary people have not published anything, find and read any existing publications by or about your subject. Additionally, you can focus your secondary research on information related to your subject rather than about your subject specifically. For example, Carla D. Hayden, in writing the profile of John Lewis, could have researched Bloody Sunday more generally, or she could have found secondary research about the AIDS quilt to which she refers. To see how authors can use such secondary research, read the sample of student work later in this section as well as the blog post in [Spotlight on . . . Profiling a Cultural Artifact](#).

### Synthesizing Research

After you have completed your research, the next step is to **synthesize** it, or put it all together. You can simplify this task by filling in a graphic organizer such as [Table 5.5](#) with your findings and potential angles you might take in your profile.

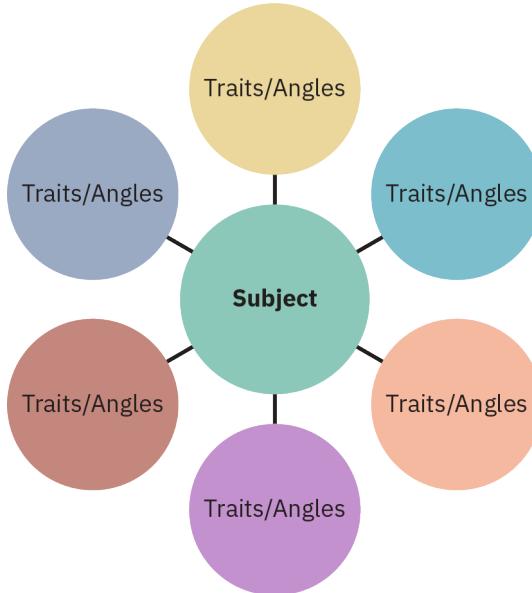
**Synthesizing: Putting Your Research Together**

Source	Element	Potential Angle
List your sources by type:	List the elements you can draw from the sources—quotations, anecdotes, facts, background information, contextual information:	List potential angles you could take relating to the information in the other columns:
Interview(s)		
Field observation location and date		
Sources from secondary research		

**TABLE 5.5** Synthesizing table

### Quick Launch: Consider the Angle

 After completing and synthesizing your research, consider your information carefully to decide on the most compelling angle and supporting information for your audience. While your general angle is the idea of the admirable trait in relation to your subject, aim to develop a personal insight within that focus. Brainstorm different points you can make about the trait that may surprise and engage your audience. Review the table you completed for synthesizing information, and then complete a web diagram such as [Figure 5.7](#) with possible ideas.



**FIGURE 5.7** Planning web (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

After considering your notes and the completed web, decide which angle will work best. To help you make that decision, think about the information you have gathered so far as well as potential audience appeal. Review the model texts in this chapter to determine how each presents a unique angle on its subject.

### Drafting: Finalizing and Supporting Your Angle

Remember that the writing process is **recursive**, meaning you will move back and forth among the steps in the process multiple times rather than progress through each step only once. For example, you may decide to conduct a bit more research while you are drafting or after you have received feedback from peer review. To include this new research, you may need to rearrange the structure of your draft. As you draft, keep focused on your angle at all times. Losing focus and including irrelevant material may weaken your profile and cause readers to lose interest in the subject.

#### Organization

As discussed in [Glance at Genre: Subject, Angle, Background, and Description](#), profiles can be organized in several ways: chronologically, spatially, or topically. Review the information you inserted in response to [Table 5.1](#), along with your admirable trait definition, to decide which organizational strategy would work best for your piece. Then use the following sections to organize the introduction, body, and conclusion of your work. When organizing your draft, think about where to place each piece of information to convey your points most effectively. Rather than using a strict chronological structure throughout your draft, you may find your piece is more effective if you begin with a topical structure and then provide some information chronologically.

#### Introduction and Thesis

Like introductions in most of the writing you do, the profile introduction establishes some background and

context for readers to understand your main point. Think about what readers need to know in order to appreciate your angle, and include that information in the introduction. Some writers prefer to compose their introductions first, whereas others wait until after they have developed a draft of the body. Whichever strategy you use, be sure that the introduction engages readers so that they want to continue reading. Refer to the sample texts in this chapter for models of introductory texts.

Remember, too, that your thesis should appear as the last sentence, or close to the end, of the introduction. For the profile, your thesis would be a sentence or two explaining your angle. For example:

- [Name of subject] showed [the admirable trait] not only in [doing something that shows the trait] but even more so by refusing to [accept or participate in something].
- [Name of subject] plays a unique part in the [history, life, culture] of [place, group] because [reason for angle].

Try one of these models, or a variation of it, as the first draft of your thesis.

### **Body Paragraphs**

Each body paragraph should support the angle you have taken, advancing your thesis, or main point. For suggestions on developing body paragraphs in narrative writing, see [Literacy Narrative: Building Bridges, Bridging Gaps](#) and [Memoir or Personal Narrative: Learning Lessons from the Personal](#). For each paragraph, synthesize details—examples, anecdotes, quotations, location, background information, or descriptions of events—from more than one source to support your angle. By including all of these elements, necessary explanations, and a combination of narrative and reporting, you will create the strongest possible profile piece. See the section [Spotlight on . . . Profiling a Cultural Artifact](#) to explore examples of how these elements can work in the paragraphs of a blog post profiling a cultural artifact. In each paragraph, consider drawing on the following:

- **Show and Tell.** In balancing between interviews and biographies, profile writers use both narrative and reporting techniques—that is, they both show and tell readers information about the subject. As you read your notes, decide which elements you will use to show readers something about your subject and which elements you will simply report.
- **Quoted Material.** If your subject has said something in a memorable way, present their words directly to readers. Doing so increases your readers' sense of the subject's voice.
- **Anecdotes.** Very brief scenarios or stories about something your subject has done, or about the subject itself, contribute to readers' understanding. Often, anecdotes reflect field research, showing the subject "in action" or reflecting what others think about the subject. For example, Carla D. Hayden relates anecdotes about John Lewis's actions leading 600 protesters in Selma, Alabama.
- **Background Information.** You may have one or more paragraphs in which you present background information—but only information that is relevant to the profile. If you highlight an individual's success or their contributions to society or a cause, then that person's humble beginnings may be relevant as a contrast. Hayden mentions Lewis's impoverished youth for this reason. Including background information helps readers place the subject in time and within their culture.
- **Location.** Placing your subject in a setting, in either the past or the present, helps readers understand and visualize the subject in a particular context. Be sure to include location in at least one body paragraph.

The sample texts in this chapter provide models for you to use when developing your draft. Use a graphic organizer like [Table 5.6](#) to identify the following profile genre elements in one or more of the model texts featured in this chapter: [Annotated Sample Reading](#), the student sample in this section, or [Spotlight on . . . Profiling a Cultural Artifact](#). Remember that single paragraphs often synthesize more than one type of information and use more than one strategy.

Strategies Used in This Chapter's Sample Texts	Example of the Strategy That You Found in One or More Sample Texts
Draw the reader in with a brief, compelling description of the subject.	
Offer quoted material.	
Connect to both current and historical contexts.	
Offer background information.	
Use narrative, or storytelling, techniques.	
Use reporting techniques, providing supporting facts and answering questions of who, what, when, where, why, and how.	
Provide a brief anecdote.	
Offer “thick description” from field notes.	
Synthesize information from multiple sources within a paragraph.	

**TABLE 5.6** Strategy table

Additionally, tone, a writer’s attitude toward their subject, is particularly important in profiles because it conveys authenticity to readers. If you praise a subject but your tone or attitude reflects detachment or lack of interest, readers will notice the discrepancy. Hayden’s attitude toward her subject, John Lewis, is one of respect and admiration. If you are writing about someone courageous, then your tone will probably be similar to hers. Remember, though, that you are the narrator, and thus you set the tone. If you insert quotations by people who don’t think as you do, make sure that doing so suits your purpose. By including information in the areas covered above and maintaining a consistent and appropriate tone, you will have the basis of a strong and engaging profile.

### Conclusion

The conclusion is your opportunity to pull all the points of the essay together. Many writers like to restate the main point they have sustained throughout the essay in the conclusion. Another strong move for the conclusion is to tell readers the **exigency** of the piece—in other words, why the information is important and why they should care about it. After your introduction and body are complete, read through your draft; this process will often give you a sense of what still needs to be said in the conclusion. Refer to the sample texts in this chapter for models of conclusion paragraphs.

### Review Your Draft

After you have written a rough first draft, including the introduction and conclusion, read the entire piece three times:

- **Revise.** Read once for the big picture to judge whether you have enough content and whether the content is arranged in a way that makes sense. Revise your work as needed.
- **Edit.** Read a second time for mid-level concerns such as sentence variety, word choice, and consistent use of tenses: [Editing Focus: Verb Tense Consistency](#). Think about whether you need to break some sentences apart or combine some sentences for smoother flow. Follow the chronology of your profile to ensure that the narration stays in the present or past tense and that events are clearly set in time. Read your composition aloud to see whether you overuse some words. Edit your work as needed.
- **Proofread.** After editing, read through a third time with an eye on small details to proofread your work.

Change spelling or punctuation as needed to meet the expectations of the rhetorical situation. Check that you have formatted according to the required **style guide**, or standards of writing, such as Modern Language Association (MLA) or American Psychological Association (APA) style.

Revisit these three steps after you have received feedback from the peer review exercise that follows. If you have access to a campus writing center, you may consult with tutors there for support at any stage of your writing process.

### Peer Review: Written Responses

After you have developed a solid draft, you are ready to receive feedback from your peers. To prepare for peer review, reread the assignment prompt in [Writing Process: Focusing on the Angle of Your Subject](#) and the assessment rubric in [Evaluation: Text as Personal Introduction](#). Then, read your peer's entire profile before giving feedback. In your feedback, strive to be both clear and kind—clearly state the strengths and weaknesses of the text in the most supportive way possible. If you need guidance, use the model sentences in [Table 5.7](#) to structure your feedback.

#### Peer Review Feedback Model Sentences

- These three aspects of your draft work well: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
- You might consider strengthening your draft \_\_\_\_\_ by doing these things: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
- As you revise your work, I suggest addressing these three areas: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.

**TABLE 5.7** Feedback sentences

After reading your peer's profile all the way through, use [Table 5.8](#) to provide thoughtful and detailed feedback.

Date	Review of [peer] by [insert your name]
Profile Genre Element	Feedback for Your Peer
<b>Subject</b>	What interests you about your peer's subject? What information could your peer provide to deepen that interest?
<b>Angle</b>	What angle has your peer taken in this draft? What suggestions do you have for refining the angle?
<b>Structure</b>	How has your peer organized the profile? If you would recommend a different structure, what would you recommend, and why?
<b>Paragraph Focus</b> (anecdote, quotes, facts, background, and context)	Has your peer included an array of genre elements in the paragraphs? How could your peer strengthen this aspect of the work?

**TABLE 5.8** Peer review guide

<b>Tone, Tense, and Description</b>	Is your peer's tone, or written attitude, appropriate for the profile? Why or why not? What suggestions do you have for strengthening or changing the tone?  Are verb tenses consistent? If not, how might your peer adjust them?  How might your peer show readers aspects of the subject as well as tell about them?
<b>Research</b>	How does your peer's draft show evidence of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• interview research?</li> <li>• field research and thick description?</li> <li>• credible secondary research? How can you tell that the secondary research is credible?</li> </ul>
<b>Audience</b>	What suggestions do you have for your peer to connect better with the intended audience?
<b>Additional Comments</b>	In what other ways might your peer strengthen the draft?

**TABLE 5.8** Peer review guide

### **Revising: Incorporating Written Responses**

After you have received feedback from your peer(s), read it carefully. If you have received feedback from more than one peer, strongly consider addressing comments on which they agree. If you have received comments encouraging you to make revision, editing, and proofreading changes, prioritize revision—making major changes in content, structure, and organization. You may need to add, delete, or rearrange information or the way in which you present the material. You may rearrange information within paragraphs or add topic sentences if needed. Much of the feedback your peers give you based on the form above will probably fit into the category of revision.

#### **Evaluate Yourself**

Another way to approach revision is to compare and contrast your work against the rubric for the assignment in [Evaluation: Text as Personal Introduction](#), which guides you through the process of evaluating your work using the standards given in the assignment rubric.

#### **Use the Rubric to Improve Your Draft**

- Review the benchmarks for “Skillful” Critical Language Awareness, and then **make notes on your draft in response to the following questions:**
  - Have you carefully proofread your work to check especially for issues of subject-verb consistency?
  - Look at your sentence structures. Do you have sentences of different lengths and complexities in your text? Where might you improve the sentence variety throughout your draft?
  - Do you meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically challenging ways?

**TABLE 5.9** Revision guide

### Use the Rubric to Improve Your Draft

---

- Review the benchmarks for “Skillful” Clarity and Coherence, and then answer the following questions:
    - How might you revise the structure of your draft even more effectively? Should you consider reordering any elements or information?
    - Review your body paragraphs. Do you have a good balance of anecdotes, quotations, location, thick description, and background? If you have overused or omitted any of these elements, revise accordingly, making sure that ideas flow smoothly.
    - Where could you strengthen the use of interview research and field notes? Do you need to gather additional material?
    - Where could your secondary research better support the points you make throughout the draft? Do you need to gather additional secondary research?
    - Do you include elements of narrative, or storytelling, that help readers imagine the spaces or actions you cover? Where could you strengthen the narrative?
    - Do you include elements of reporting, or relaying information to readers? Where does this strategy need strengthening?
    - Have you used appropriate transitions to ensure coherence and connect ideas?
    - Do all your points support your thesis?
  
  - Review the benchmarks for “Skillful” Rhetorical Choices, and then answer the following questions:
    - Think again about your subject choice. You should probably not consider changing your subject at this stage of your project, but do think about this question: Are you presenting the subject in the best light to appeal to your audience?
    - Think again about your angle. Do you need to refine or amend your angle to better connect with your audience?
    - Read your piece out loud to check the tone. Do you need to shift the tone to better reach your audience?
    - Read your piece all the way through, noting places that do not hold your interest as strongly as others. What can you do to make those places more compelling for your reader?
- 

**Use your notes from this worksheet to revise, edit, and proofread your work.**

---

**TABLE 5.9** Revision guide

#### Revised Draft Profile Sample

This section provides one example of a revised profile draft written by a first-year college student. As you will read, the admirable quality that Houston Byrd focuses on in this essay is that his subject, a bricks-and-mortar video store, offers “a crucial and important service to its community.” You will also see the ways in which Byrd both “shows and tells” readers about his subject, offering information drawn from each type of required research: interview, field observation, and secondary sources. Byrd has chosen to insert himself and his experiences of his subject fully into this profile. Review [Glance at Genre: Subject, Angle, Background, and Description](#), and then read Byrd’s essay to see how well he incorporates the narrative and reporting profile genre elements in his draft.

After Byrd received peer feedback, he decided that his previous draft did not need much revision; he was happy with his structure, and the organization made sense to his readers. One peer suggested that Byrd insert topic sentences in each paragraph, but he ultimately decided not to do so because he thought his paragraphs held together well as written. As you revise your work in response to peer feedback, you may also choose to accept some suggestions while rejecting others.

Byrd paid close attention to peer feedback indicating that his draft had many long, complicated sentences; in

the draft below, the originals are noted after the edited sentences. He also acted on feedback about verb tense consistency. Furthermore, Byrd made proofreading changes, such as adding the MLA-required right header and changing the placement of some punctuation marks. As with all writing, this draft could be improved even more with further revision. After reading the essay, discuss with a peer the revision, editing, and proofreading changes you would recommend if you were reading this draft for peer review.

### **Heaven Is in Toad Frog Alley**

The realm of physical film, if not already dead, is dying. More so than decaying cellulose, the entire medium as an art form is declining. According to *The Guardian*, DVD and Blu-Ray sales were down this past holiday over 30% each (Swaney). Some say that streaming services and on-demand viewing are the culprits. Whatever the case, the answer is not so simple, and the notion is very alarming. The decrease in relevance of physical media is no secret. Mass closures of video rental powerhouses such as Blockbuster Video and Movie Gallery began at the turn of the decade.

*The original sentence read: It is no secret that physical media has been on the decline, especially with the mass closures of video rental powerhouses such as Blockbuster Video and Movie Gallery near the beginning of the decade. This example demonstrates a pattern throughout the revised draft in which Byrd broke apart some of his longer sentences and improved their wording. Notice that he changes tense in the last sentence for a reason: the trend is happening now, but video rental stores began closing in the past.*

Though the memory lives on in millennial nostalgia, the world of physical movie sales is not completely irrelevant. Many of the large rental chains have since closed down, but beyond the major highways is an all-but-forgotten world of local video stores. In my home state, one store in particular, called Toad Frog Alley Videos, lives in that world, located in the small town of Cleveland, Alabama. I had the privilege of visiting the store and speaking with its owner, Kandy Little, about her experiences operating in a time when physical media is scarce. Through my visit and conversation, I have come to appreciate the importance of Toad Frog Alley Videos. I truly believe that the store provides a crucial and important service to its community, as well as highlights the nature of physical film and the need for preservation.

*In this introductory paragraph, Byrd establishes the stakes for his profile subject, offering both background and context for understanding the video store's importance to its community. He also makes some editing and proofreading changes to strengthen the draft and presents his main point, or thesis, here at the end of the introduction.*

Miles off of I-65, a major Alabama interstate, Toad Frog Alley stands, an almost well-kept secret. The idea of such a welcoming business being hidden saddened me—and still does—but in turn gave the illusion of adventure. Driving through winding county roads to get there, I could feel the world almost disappearing into unexplored territory.

*Original: There is a moment, winding through country roads, where the world seems to disappear into unexplored territory. Byrd corrected the sentence to get rid of a “there is” construction, a dangling modifier, and inconsistent verb tenses..*

Suddenly, there were no street names, no lines on the pavement, and sometimes no pavement at all. At the end of one of these “not much of a road” roads stood Toad Frog Alley Videos.

*Byrd changed the underlined verb from is to stands for a more vivid verb. He then changed it to the past tense to maintain consistency with the verbs he uses in relating his visit to the store.*

My first impression stepping inside was awe. Shelves lining the walls reached from floor to ceiling, each packed full of titles, perfectly alphabetized and separated by genre.

*Original: Lining the walls were shelves that reached from floor to ceiling. Each shelf was completely full of titles, which were perfectly alphabetized and separated by genre. In this case, Byrd combined, rather than separated, sentences to avoid repetition, substitute more active verbs, and vary sentence structure.*

Between the walls were standalone shelves, organized in the same fashion. I expected a kind of personal collection, but I felt as if I had actually traveled back in time to the major rental stores of old (or rather of ten years ago). To community members, the setup meant another option for Saturday night, but for a film lover like me,

*Original: for me, a film lover,*

this place was heaven.

*In the body of his draft, Byrd advances his thesis, drawing on information from each of the required types of sources.*

After my initial feelings, I was hit with a second wave, one that can only be described as abysmal. At the front of the store was a counter, being worked by one employee. The register was clunky and archaic, which made

*Original: something that makes*

a public library look like the headquarters of Google. In the center of the store was a foldable table that read “FOR SALE.” On the table lay DVDs, either damaged or unwanted, strewn about with no rhyme or reason.

*Original: The table was filled with DVDs, some damaged and some unwanted, strewn about with no rhyme or reason like the rest of the store.*

Aside from me, there was only one patron, a middle-aged woman, shopping as if she had been there before but did not know what she wanted. I started to become depressed. I was not sure exactly what I had imagined, but I knew this place was nowhere close. I had convinced myself I was on a journey to find the “last great video store,” an oasis of film, flowing with patrons renting *Milk* and *American Honey*.

*Original: I did not know what exactly I had imagined, but with my passion for physical film and rental stores alike, I had convinced myself I was on a journey to find the “last great video store,” an oasis of film, flowing with patrons renting Milk and American Honey. This sentence is another example in which Byrd broke a longer sentence apart and polished the wording.*

Only when

*Original: It was not until*

I took a breath and began looking around was I able to see Toad Frog Valley for what the store

*Original: it*

was. Every blank wall space featured posters, equally sporting Oscar winners and underground art-house films.

*This sentence provides a solid example of revising a “there were” or “there are” sentence construction; the original read: There were posters on every blank wall space, not just of each year’s Oscar winner, but underground art-house films as well.*

The endcaps of each standalone shelf were filled with top picks, recent releases, or staff choices.

*Here, Byrd revises for varied word choice; the original read: top picks, recent releases, or staff picks.*

A television in the corner softly played a film of the employee’s choice. Toad Frog Alley

*Original: This*

may not have been the perfect haven for cinephiles and collectors that I had hoped, but it showed an undeniable element of care. The store was something of a museum, one that lets people borrow the items they love. I left with a smile on my face and a movie in my hand.

I want to believe that everyone has experienced a similar video store moment. If that were true, though, why did so many close in the first place?

*Original: I want to believe that if everyone could experience a moment of awe in a video store, then the demand would resurface, but if that were true, why did so many close in the first place?*

Why also are stores like Toad Frog Alley still operating? Back in 2010, when rental chains were beginning to close doors indefinitely, many entertainment news sites noticed a trend. Among them was *The Hollywood Reporter*, which noted that over 35% of independent video stores had tanning beds. They reported the trend, saying, “[Independents] use every niche they can think of to survive and be respected in their communities” (Bond). While tanning beds may look like the supplemental savior for many locally owned stores, this notion

Here, Byrd defines the word *this* by inserting the word *notion*.

is not necessarily the case, says Kandy Little. Kandy is the owner of Toad Frog Valley Video Store and has been since 1995.

*The tense shifts to present when Kandy Little is discussed but returns to the past when Byrd relates her background.*

Ironically, Kandy bought a tanning salon in hopes of opening a video store. At the time, there was a much higher demand for rentals in almost every community, and Toad Frog Alley was no exception. Though she admits tanning has increased over the years (with rentals, of course, declining), to Kandy, tanning was not the savior. “[Toad Frog Alley Videos] is still open because I work it myself most of the time,” she says. “No one else will take care of your business as well as you do.” With an inventory of over 5,000 films, Kandy believes that physical media is important for her community. Local business is important for creating jobs and city revenue, and Kandy provides both through her love of movies.

Even though Toad Frog Alley is doing well, the scarcity of rental stores is something to consider. In the digital age, media is accessible to practically everyone. Streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu have made media available for viewers without requiring them to leave their homes. For physical rentals,

*Original: As far as physical rentals go,*

nationwide kiosks called Redbox are set up in major grocery stores and pharmacies. In largely populated areas, these services have contributed to the downfall of video stores. In small towns across the country, however, many stores like Toad Frog Alley are still alive.

*Original: In largely populated areas, these services have contributed to the downfall of video stores, but in rural America, many stores like Toad Frog Alley are still alive. This revision heightens the contrast between populated areas and small towns.*

In 2018, the *Harvard Political Review* looked into why rural areas are struggling socioeconomically. The research concluded that the problem comes from the inability to keep the attention of a younger generation. The idea of the “American Dream” is largely accompanied by main streets, small towns, and mom-and-pop shops. Unfortunately, countryside communities are suffering, despite featuring many of these elements.

*Original: Though the idea of the “American Dream” is largely accompanied by main streets, small towns, and mom-and-pop shops, rural communities have seen drastic population decreases even while holding many of these. The revision breaks the original sentence apart and makes stronger, clearer word choices.*

Farming, a large majority of pastoral industry, has become increasingly mechanized with technological advancement. On top of that, failing education and inadequate healthcare in underfunded areas have contributed to population loss as well. Many young people are unwilling to live in rural America,

*Original: in these rural areas,*

and thus jobs

*Deleted: , one of the largest incentives in most communities,*

have become scarce. The *Review* states that “ultimately, the only way citizens will be attracted to small towns is if the quality of life is attractive and sustainable... [but] the growing demand of the U.S. economy will continue drawing people toward... [a] quality of life often deemed synonymous with urban living” (Elkadi). This cycle leaves many rural settings unappealing, not only to residents but also to businesses like Internet providers. In many cases, rural areas are deemed unprofitable for modern services. Descriptions so negative contribute to the lack of digital services available to communities. Businesses

*Original: Stores*

such as Toad Frog Alley thus provide a necessary service for a town that may have little access to digital content.

All of these factors raise

*Original: This raises*

a question: Is physical media doomed to a state of limbo in rural communities? Some believe film was meant to die, and should. Following the controversial shutdown of the “classic films” streaming service FilmStruck, Professor Katherine Groo shared a perspective in *The Washington Post*: “The collapse of FilmStruck might go some way toward reminding us of the fundamental *virtuality* [sic] of film and film spectatorship” (Groo). Groo goes so far as to ask “whether [FilmStruck’s catalog listings] are the works we need to rescreen or urge others to discover.” Groo does not lament the death of FilmStruck as film “erosion” or “erasure.”

*In the original, the previous sentence occurred later in the paragraph; Byrd moved it here in the revision to present the information in a way that made more sense for readers.*

She mentions different film archives, like the Library of Congress and Kanopy, doing open-access experimentation, but overlooks an important factor. Groo asserts that only the privileged are able to access a paid service, but she neglects rural areas and others that cannot access archives, paid or free.

*Deleted: For people like Kandy Little,*

Toad Frog Alley remains important for the enjoyment and education of people in the town that film provides. As technology keeps progressing, archaic forms of media consumption are necessary for areas that do not yet have access to the new technologies. Kandy predicts this, and more, when asked about the digital age and the coexistence of physical and online media:

*Original: Kandy predicts this, and more, when I asked her how she felt about the digital age, and the coexistence of physical and online media:*

“Studios are already giving exclusive rights to different cable companies. Once the avenues are spread out, customers will have to pay more for accessing media. The video store is here offering better prices and more media in one place.” To her, the transition back into physical media is only a matter of time.

As a proponent of physical media, I am thankful that Kandy and Toad Frog Alley exist. Though nothing is wrong with enjoying the luxuries of streaming, and digital film preservation is admirable, the market is becoming saturated. Saturated markets lead to higher prices and necessitate multiple subscriptions just to access desired films.

*Original: Though it is not wrong to enjoy the luxuries of streaming, and digital film preservation is admirable, the market is becoming saturated, which leads to higher prices and necessitates multiple subscriptions just to access desired films..*

Though people in rural communities are still able to rent videos, they would be left behind in the case of film becoming solely digital. Video stores provide important business and atmosphere to communities. Even though digitizing film is more affordable and accessible to many people, it may not be what is best for both films and consumers.

*In the original, these sentences were combined with , and.*

For those like me, with a passion for film, the only reciprocity for the love that video stores instill is to show love in the form of support. As Kandy eloquently said at the end of our interview, “I really don’t have a favorite film. I just love films.”

*In referring a past event while he narrates in the present tense, Byrd uses the past tense.*

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## 5.6 Editing Focus: Verb Tense Consistency

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Apply various editing strategies to a draft in progress.
- Implement consistent use of verbs in a draft in progress.



When you edit, you make changes at the sentence level: phrasing, grammar, mechanics, and wording. Read your paper aloud to check for needed editing. Alternately, you could have your device read the paper to you if it has that feature. As you read or listen, if you notice that something does not sound quite right, your draft probably needs editing at that point. Additionally, if your electronic draft shows blue underlining, check whether you should accept the changes suggested by your software. Once you have thoroughly reviewed each sentence in your draft, read aloud or listen to the entire piece again to see how it flows, making any additional needed changes as you go along.

### English Varieties and Verbs



This section focuses on English verb tense consistency when editing. Every English speaker converses in one or more forms of the language. In the past, people have referred to these forms as *dialects*. Today, linguists more commonly call them *English varieties*. Every **English variety** uses verbs, as do most languages. Verbs are the words that express the action in a sentence. Their most distinguishing feature is that they change according to tense—that is, they take on different forms to express action that happened in the past, happens in the present, or will happen in the future.

As you edit your profile, you will need to match the English variety you use to the expectations of your audience. If your instructor is your only reader, you will probably need to use an English variety appropriate for

an academic setting. If the instructor has asked you to write a profile to appeal to another audience, think about how the English variety you choose might connect better with that audience.

In every English variety, the form of the verb changes to indicate whether something is happening currently or has happened already. These changes that indicate time differences are called **verb tenses**. If an action or description occurs now or occurs regularly, in the present time, writers use the **present tense**. Conversely, if the action occurred in the past and no longer occurs, writers use the **past tense**.

**Present tense:** She walks to class.

**Past tense:** She walked to class yesterday.

In simple sentences such as these, choosing a verb tense is fairly straightforward. The author decides when to place the event in time and chooses the corresponding verb form. Although people easily use different verb tenses every day, getting them right in writing can be tricky at times. Writers may accidentally change from past to present tense within a text—or even within the same sentence—for no particular reason. Consider these examples:

**Sentence 1:** I lost a glove on my walk, but I find it later.

**Sentence 2:** I lost a glove on my walk, but I found it later.

In Sentence 1, the verb *lost* places the action in the past; the present-tense verb *find* is not consistent with that pattern. The revision in Sentence 2 places all of the action in the same time frame: the past. Because changing the tense for no reason can confuse the audience, be sure to use the same verb tense throughout, whether events happen in the past or they happen in the present.

However, you *do* need to change tenses to indicate a difference in time, and such differences occur often. This situation is why choosing verb tenses in writing can sometimes pose challenges for writers. If you are using the present tense in writing but you want to tell about something that happened in the past, you need to change tenses to make that time difference clear. Look at these sentences:

**Sentence 1:** The artist **uses** bright colors in her paintings. She **says** that when she **is** a child, these colors **attract** her.

**Sentence 2:** The artist **uses** bright colors in her paintings. She **says** that when she **was** a child, these colors **attracted** her.

The writer is discussing the artist in the present tense, and the artist is speaking in the present tense. However, she is telling about her childhood, which took place in the past. Therefore, she and the writer use both past and present tense to make the time distinction clear. To put all events in the present tense would not make sense in such cases. Look at the verb tense consistency revisions Houston Byrd made to his essay in [Focusing on the Angle of Your Subject](#). When he tells about his trip to the store, describes it, and refers to his interview with the owner, he generally uses—or has revised to use—the past tense, whereas most of the essay is written in the present tense.

### Proofreading

Another type of editing is proofreading. When you proofread, you check for small details, such as typing mistakes, that need fixing. If your instructor has asked you to follow a given style guide, such as MLA or APA, make sure your draft is formatted according to those guidelines. If any words are underlined in red on your electronic document (indicating a misspelling), address those issues as you complete your draft. Lastly, read each sentence individually, starting at the bottom of the draft, to make sure your spelling and punctuation meet the requirements for the genre and audience.

You may feel that you are not yet a strong enough writer to edit or proofread on your own. If so, take advantage of your instructor's office hours or your college's writing center for support in developing your work.

### Practice with Verb Tense Consistency

Depending on your writing context, you may be asked to write mainly in either the past or the present tense. For example, MLA style asks writers to refer to textual materials in the present tense, even though they have already been written.

With a peer partner, practice choosing the most effective verb forms in the following sentences. Complete the exercise twice—once for a text written mainly in the present tense, and once again for a text written mainly in past tense. Because events happen at different times, you may have a combination of tenses.

1. Carla D. Hayden (writes, wrote) \_\_\_\_\_ about John Lewis's courageous stance against injustice when he (led, leads) the Selma protests.
2. People throughout the country (admire, admired) \_\_\_\_\_ John Lewis and (mourn, mourned) \_\_\_\_\_ his death.
3. In 1995, Hayden (receives, received) \_\_\_\_\_ the Librarian of the Year Award, and in 2016, she (is, was) \_\_\_\_\_ listed by *Fortune* magazine as one of the world's 50 greatest leaders.

To check your draft for verb tense issues, read your profile aloud to a peer partner. If you notice that some verbs are in the past tense and some are in the present, make them all one consistent tense throughout the text—*unless* they indicate a change in time, which they often do. Making your verb tenses consistent will help clarify your ideas for readers.

## 5.7 Evaluation: Text as Personal Introduction

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Apply profile genre conventions for structure, paragraphing, tone, and mechanics to a draft in progress.
- Evaluate your text according to a given standard.

One way to think about a profile is this: you are personally introducing your subject to your readers. When making introductions in everyday life, people generally highlight preferences that will help the people being introduced relate more easily to one another. For example, you might mention a specific shared video game interest when introducing gamers, or you could mention an appreciation for a particular musician shared by the people being introduced. In a similar way, include information in your profile that will connect your subject to your audience.

In addition to making a personal introduction, you are striving to meet the standards of the profile genre. The following rubric will help you assess your use of interviews, field research, and secondary research. It will also help you evaluate how well you have organized, written, and revised the draft. Lastly, the rubric will help you determine whether your draft meets the criteria for the profile genre, including subject, angle, and tone. Aim to revise your draft to meet the “Skillful” criteria for each area of focus.

### Rubric

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
5 <b>Skillful</b>	The text always adheres to the “Editing Focus” of this chapter—verb tense consistency, as discussed in Section 5.6—and employs a variety of sentence	The text presents robust interview research, carefully noted field research, and both credible and applicable secondary research. The profile reflects a thoughtful balance of narrative and reporting techniques through which the subject is clearly depicted.	The subject, angle, tone, and content have been carefully chosen and remain consistent throughout. Mastery

TABLE 5.10

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
4 <b>Accomplished</b>	structures. The text also shows ample evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	Effective and appropriate transitions help create a unified whole. Anecdotes, quotations, location, thick detail, and background flow together seamlessly and create a full and engaging profile.	of these elements powerfully holds the interest of the target audience throughout the piece.
3 <b>Capable</b>	The text usually adheres to the "Editing Focus" of this chapter—verb tense consistency, as discussed in Section 5.6—and employs a variety of sentence structures. The text also shows some evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The text presents strong interview and field research and both credible and applicable secondary research. The profile usually reflects a thoughtful balance of narrative and reporting techniques through which the subject is depicted. Generally effective and appropriate transitions help create a unified whole. Some anecdotes, quotations, location, thick detail, and background flow together and create a generally engaging profile.	The subject, angle, tone, and content have been carefully chosen but may not always be consistent. Control of these elements generally holds the interest of the target audience throughout the piece.
	The text generally adheres to the "Editing Focus" of this chapter—verb tense consistency, as discussed in Section 5.6—and employs some variety in sentence structures. The text also shows limited evidence of the writer's intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The text presents fairly thorough interview research, competent field research, and reasonably credible and applicable secondary research. The profile may reflect a balance of narrative and reporting techniques through which the subject is depicted, but it may tend toward too much reporting. Some effective and appropriate transitions connect ideas, but more are needed for a unified whole. Some anecdotes, quotations, location, thick detail, and background create an inconsistently engaging profile.	The subject, angle, tone, and content have been inconsistently chosen. The writer occasionally loses focus in one or more of these areas. Some control of these elements holds the interest of the target audience in parts of the piece.

**TABLE 5.10**

Score	Critical Language Awareness	Clarity and Coherence	Rhetorical Choices
<b>2</b> <b>Developing</b>	The text occasionally adheres to the “Editing Focus” of this chapter—verb tense consistency, as discussed in Section 5.6—and employs little variety in sentence structures. The text also shows emerging evidence of the writer’s intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The information is frequently disorganized and reflects a minimal, if any, overall plan. Research is haphazard and usually undocumented. The writer shows little or no balance between narrative and reporting techniques and included only a few of the following: anecdotes, quotations, location, thick detail, and background. Some transitions may create unity in parts, but in general, the paper lacks effective and appropriate transitions. The uneven text ultimately creates a minimally clear profile.	The subject, angle, tone, and content do not appear well chosen. The writer frequently loses focus in one or more of these areas. The interest of the target audience would be lost in many parts of the piece.
<b>1</b> <b>Beginning</b>	The text does not adhere to the “Editing Focus” of this chapter—verb tense consistency, as discussed in Section 5.6—and employs little to no variety in sentence structures. The text also shows little to no evidence of the writer’s intent to consciously meet or challenge conventional expectations in rhetorically effective ways.	The information is consistently disorganized and reflects minimal, if any, overall planning. Research, if any, is haphazard and usually undocumented. The writer shows little or no balance between narrative and reporting techniques and has included only one or two of the following: anecdotes, quotations, location, thick detail, and background. The paper lacks effective and appropriate transitions and is, therefore, incoherent. The uneven text ultimately creates an unclear and unengaging profile.	The subject, angle, tone, and content appear poorly chosen if they are present at all. The draft lacks focus and consequently holds little or no audience interest.

**TABLE 5.10**

## 5.8 Spotlight on ... Profiling a Cultural Artifact

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Read in the profile genre to understand how conventions are shaped by purpose, language, culture, and expectation.
- Read one of a diverse range of texts, attending to relationships among ideas, patterns of organization, and interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements.
- Analyze a composition in relation to a specific historical and cultural context.

If you would like to profile a subject other than a person, you may be unsure of how to make such a focus work. This section features a profile of a cultural artifact and discusses how the elements of profile writing work within the piece.



First, here is some background to help you better understand the blog post: On December 7, 1941, Japanese fighter planes attacked the United States military base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, damaging or destroying

more than a dozen ships and hundreds of airplanes. In direct response to this bombing and to fears that Americans of Japanese descent might spy on U.S. military installations, all Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans living on America's West Coast—about 120,000 men, women, and children in all—were detained in internment camps for the remainder of the war.

As you will read in the profile, people living in the camps created newspapers for fellow detainees; the subject of this profile is the newspapers themselves. Author Mark Hartsell published his profile of the newspapers, [Journalism, behind Barbed Wire](https://openstax.org/r/barbedwire) (<https://openstax.org/r/barbedwire>) , on the Library of Congress blog on May 5, 2017. Look at these notes to find out how profile genre elements can work when the writer focuses on a cultural artifact such as these newspapers.



**FIGURE 5.8** Roy Takeno, editor of the Manzanar Free Press, reads the newspaper at the internment camp in Manzanar, California, 1943. (credit: Ansel Adams/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

*As you find when you click on the link above to visit the blog post, Hartsell uses images to show his subject to readers. Providing images can be a particularly strong choice for profiles of places or cultural artifacts.*

For these journalists, the assignment was like no other: Create newspapers to tell the story of their own families being forced from their homes, to chronicle the hardships and heartaches of life behind barbed wire for Japanese-Americans held in World War II internment camps. “These are not normal times nor is this an ordinary community,” the editors of the *Heart Mountain Sentinel* wrote in their first issue. “There is confusion, doubt and fear mingled together with hope and courage as this community goes about the task of rebuilding many dear things that were crumbled as if by a giant hand.” Today, the Library of Congress places online a rare collection of newspapers that, like the *Sentinel*, were produced by Japanese-Americans interned at U.S. government camps during the war. The collection includes more than 4,600 English- and Japanese-language issues published in 13 camps and later microfilmed by the Library. “What we have the power to do is bring these more to the public,” said Malea Walker, a librarian in the Serial and Government Publications Division who contributed to the project. “I think that’s important, to bring it into the public eye to see, especially on the 75th anniversary.... Seeing the people in the Japanese internment camps as people is an important story.”

*Although the blog places almost every sentence in its own “paragraph” for easier online readability, the first four*

sections function as a cohesive opening paragraph as presented here. Notice how the author supports his points with information synthesized from a variety of sources: quoted material from both the newspapers and one of the project's curators, background, historical context, and other factual information.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order that allowed the forcible removal of nearly 120,000 U.S. citizens and residents of Japanese descent from their homes to government-run assembly and relocation camps across the West—desolate places such as Manzanar in the shadow of the Sierras, Poston in the Arizona desert, Granada on the eastern Colorado plains. There, housed in temporary barracks and surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers, the residents built wartime communities, organizing governing bodies, farms, schools, libraries. They founded newspapers, too—publications that relayed official announcements, editorialized about important issues, reported camp news, followed the exploits of Japanese-Americans in the U.S. military and recorded the daily activities of residents for whom, even in confinement, life still went on. In the camps, residents lived and died, worked and played, got married and had children. One couple got married at the Tanforan assembly center in California, then shipped out to the Topaz camp in Utah the next day. Their first home as a married couple, the *Topaz Times* noted, was a barracks behind barbed wire in the western Utah desert.

*This section offers additional background information and information from secondary research, woven with specific details to help readers imagine the backdrop for the newspaper writing. Hartsell offers a brief overview of typical content found in these newspapers; this description indicates that he has reviewed primary documents. The section concludes with a brief anecdote to show the human face of the original camp newspaper audience.*

The internees created their publications from scratch, right down to the names. The Tule Lake camp dubbed its paper the *Tulean Dispatch*—a compromise between *The Tulean* and *The Dusty Dispatch*, two entries in its name-the-newspaper contest. (The winners got a box of chocolates.) Most of the newspapers were simply mimeographed or sometimes handwritten, but a few were formatted and printed like big-city dailies. The *Sentinel* was printed by the town newspaper in nearby Cody, Wyoming, and eventually grew a circulation of 6,000.

*After covering background and context, Hartsell turns to focus on his profile subject. He discusses specific details of naming and producing the newspapers; he also includes information about the writers and their decisions regarding newspaper content.*

Many of the internees who edited and wrote for the camp newspapers had worked as journalists before the war. They knew this job wouldn't be easy, requiring a delicate balance of covering news, keeping spirits up and getting along with the administration. The papers, though not explicitly censored, sometimes hesitated to cover controversial issues, such as strikes at Heart Mountain or Poston. Instead, many adopted editorial policies that would serve as “a strong constructive force in the community,” as a *Poston Chronicle* journalist later noted in an oral history. They mostly cooperated with the administration, stopped rumors and played up stories that would strengthen morale. Demonstrating loyalty to the U.S. was a frequent theme. The *Sentinel* mailed a copy of its first issue to Roosevelt in the hope, the editors wrote, that he would “find in its pages the loyalty and progress here at Heart Mountain.” A *Topaz Times* editorial objected to segregated Army units but nevertheless urged Japanese-American citizens to serve “to prove that the great majority of the group they represent are loyal.” “Our paper was always coming out with editorials supporting loyalty toward this country,” the *Poston* journalist said. “This rubbed some... the wrong way and every once in a while a delegation would come around to protest.”

*People reading these newspapers in current times may be surprised that such newspapers often featured content with a focus on loyalty to the United States. While Hartsell does not dig deeply into alternative views held by internees, he does indicate that some disagreed with the emphasis on such content. Readers are often interested in learning surprising or counterintuitive information about a profile subject.*

... (section removed)

As the war neared its end in 1945, the camps prepared for closure. Residents departed, populations shrank, schools shuttered, community organizations dissolved, and newspapers signed off with “–30–,” used by journalists to mark a story’s end. That Oct. 23, the *Poston Chronicle* published its final issue, reflecting on the history it had both recorded and made. “For many weeks, the story of Poston has unfolded in the pages of the Chronicle,” the editors wrote. “It is the story of people who have made the best of a tragic situation; the story of their frustrations, their anxieties, their heartaches—and their pleasures, for the story has its lighter moments. Now Poston is finished; the story is ended. And we should be glad that this is so, for the story has a happy ending. The time of anxiety and of waiting is over. Life begins again.”

*Hartsell closes with a chronological structure, concluding his piece with the closing of the internment camps and their newspapers. He allows the voices of the editors to have the last word.*

### Publishing Your Profile

Because your individual profile is about someone or something related to campus, once you have developed your final draft, you may want to share your work with others at your school. Here are some suggestions:

#### Group Publication

One option for sharing your work is to create a class book that includes the profiles each student has written. As an alternative, each class member might contribute their own autobiographical profile in which they highlight a moment when they witnessed or enacted an admirable trait. When the individual pieces are complete, class members will work in teams to collect, compile, introduce, and produce the essay collection. The instructor or one of the class teams might compose an afterword to explain the project. The final project could be housed in the campus archives or linked on the campus website.

#### Campus Newspaper

Another option is to work either individually or in a small group to build on your profile about someone or something of interest to other students, faculty, or staff at your school. Check with the editor of your campus newspaper to learn whether they have suggestions for a revised angle, if needed, and whether they would be interested in publishing your completed profile.

## 5.9 Portfolio: Subject as a Reflection of Self

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Reflect on the development of composing processes.
- Reflect on how those processes affect your final product.

As you develop a writing portfolio over the course of the semester, you will also reflect on your experience and writing process for each project. This section guides you in reflecting on your experience as you developed your profile.

### Reflective Task



Take a few moments to jot down notes—by hand or electronically—in response to the following questions:

- What have you learned about yourself in researching and drafting this profile?
- What did you learn in your research that surprised you?
- What challenges did you face in gathering your primary research from interviews and field observations?
- What challenges did you face in gathering your secondary research from academic and other credible sources?
- Do you now think differently about the trait you focused on in your profile? If so, how has your understanding changed? If your thinking about that trait has not changed, how was it reinforced in this project?

- If you were to begin this project again, how would you approach it differently?
- With whom would you like to share your finished project? Why?
- What other audiences might be interested in this piece?

After reflecting on your writing process and experience, organize your thoughts thematically. For example, if some parts of the process were more challenging for you and other parts were less so, you could organize your reflection around those two ideas. Or you could separate your reflection into sections according to the parts of the writing process that were familiar and the parts that were new to you in this project.

Once you have organized your notes into sections focusing on coherent themes, draft a professional email to your instructor to report the insights you have gained from your reflection. Find out from your instructor whether you should actually send the reflection via email or if you should attach it to your final profile document instead.

### Further Reading

With their signature blend of narrative and reporting, profiles can be found in all sorts of media, including blogs, magazines, and podcasts. Once you start looking for profiles, you will find them everywhere. Here are several places to find profile writing:

- *Esquire* (<https://openstax.org/r/esquire>). This magazine routinely runs profile features.
- *Humans of New York* (<https://openstax.org/r/humansofnewyork>). Originally a photography project, this blog presents photographs of, interviews with, and short stories about people who live in New York. Although the pieces are not all profiles, many of them meet the criteria for this genre.
- *The New Yorker* (<https://openstax.org/r/theneowyorker>). This magazine still runs profiles in each issue.
- *This American Life* (<https://openstax.org/r/thisamericanlife>). This weekly public radio program focuses on storytelling about compelling people.

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# Proposal: Writing About Problems and Solutions

6



**FIGURE 6.1** Mathematician [Katherine Johnson](https://openstax.org/r/katherinejohnson) (<https://openstax.org/r/katherinejohnson>) (1918–2020) was a NASA employee. Her calculations of orbital mechanics led to the success of the first spaceflight and many others. One of the first Black women hired at the agency, she stood out for her curiosity and desire to fully understand the work she was assigned. She is best known for calculating the trajectory for the first moon landing. Given the problem of when to launch, she proposed solving the problem by saying: “You tell me when you want it and where you want it to land, and I’ll do it backwards and tell you when to take off.” Not only a mathematician, Johnson wrote or cowrote 26 research articles during her 33 years with the space program. She was made famous by *Hidden Figures* (2016), a book later made into a film. (credit: “Katherine Johnson at NASA, in 1966” by NASA/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 6.1 Proposing Change: Thinking Critically About Problems and Solutions
- 6.2 Proposal Trailblazer: Atul Gawande
- 6.3 Glance at Genre: Features of Proposals
- 6.4 Annotated Student Sample: “Slowing Climate Change” by Shawn Krukowski
- 6.5 Writing Process: Creating a Proposal
- 6.6 Editing Focus: Subject-Verb Agreement
- 6.7 Evaluation: Conventions, Clarity, and Coherence
- 6.8 Spotlight on ... Technical Writing as a Career
- 6.9 Portfolio: Reflecting on Problems and Solutions

**INTRODUCTION** You are likely familiar with the term **proposal**—people propose toasts to celebrate occasions and make marriage proposals. Businesses create proposals to describe the services they will provide and at what cost—from electricians, plumbers, and decorators to advertising firms, website designers, and caterers. Sometimes the proposals are for a specific project; sometimes they are general. In these types of real-world proposals, the problem being solved is straightforward, but often it is not stated directly: for example, someone needs an extra bathroom built in their house, a revision to their website, or food for a gathering, and the person needing a service will contact a provider.

The **purpose** of the kind of proposal you will write in this chapter is to propose, or suggest, a solution to a problem, usually one whose solution is not straightforward. Proposals of this type call on writers to explain the problem so that readers understand it is real and needs a solution. Because these problems are often complex, they usually have more than one solution, and sometimes the writer will recommend several possible solutions. For example, imagine you are studying food science. You likely pay more attention to food than most people do, and perhaps you've noticed a lot of food being thrown away in a cafeteria on your campus. You believe it is important to reduce food waste. Solving this problem of wasted food will require investigation and research into what food is being thrown away; why students, faculty members, and employees are throwing it away; possible ways to reduce the amount of wasted food; and a recommendation to the people who can put your proposal—that is, your proposed solution—into action. This is one example of the kind of problem you might write about in this chapter.

## 6.1 Proposing Change: Thinking Critically About Problems and Solutions

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Ask critical-thinking questions about problems to explore an idea for a proposal.
- Distinguish between fact and opinion.
- Recognize and locate bias in reading and in yourself.

As a proposal writer, you will offer factual evidence to show a problem exists and needs to be addressed. Then you will present and recommend one or more solutions, again providing evidence to show that your solution or solutions are viable. To accomplish this task, you'll need to think critically about problems and potential solutions, know the difference between fact and opinion, and identify bias.

### Adopting a Problem-Solving Mindset



As you start thinking about a problem you would like to explore, gather information by reading, viewing, or talking with others. Is there a local problem you have noticed—perhaps you think your campus needs better transportation, more diverse food options, more mental health services, or a new student organization related to a cause you care about? Or is there a larger issue that is important to you, such as funding for public schools, better access to health care, or helping the environment?

As you gather ideas, think critically about what you are learning. Asking questions like the ones below can help you get into a problem-solving mindset:

#### Questions about Problems

- What is/was the cause of the problem?
- What is/was the effect of the problem?
- What makes this problem a problem?

#### Questions about Solutions

- Have solutions to this problem been proposed in the past? What are they?
- Why have the solutions proposed in the past succeeded or not succeeded in solving the problem?
- Who can put the solutions into action?

The proposal that appears in [Annotated Student Sample](#) of this chapter, written by student Shawn Krukowski, takes on a large, complex problem: climate change. At the start of the project, Shawn thought about his topic in terms of the questions above:

- What is the cause of climate change?
- What is the effect of climate change?
- What makes climate change a problem?
- What are some possible solutions to climate change?
- What solutions to climate change have been tried in the past?
- Why have the solutions tried in the past been unsuccessful in solving climate change?
- Who can put the solutions into action?

In writing answers to these questions, Shawn identified what he needed to learn about climate change before he began his reading and research.

### Distinguishing Fact from Opinion

A proposal contains both fact and opinion. Proposal writers use facts as evidence to show that the problem they are writing about is real. They use facts to show that the proposed solution can work. They give opinions (based on evidence) when they recommend a solution to their audience and call them to action. See [Argumentative Research: Enhancing the Art of Rhetoric with Evidence](#) for more about facts and opinions.



It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish fact from opinion, allegations, and fake news. Social media platforms, in particular, make it hard for many people to distinguish between sources that are credible and those that are not. As a writer, you need to use a critical eye to examine what you read and see.

**Facts** are statements that can be proven or whose truth can be inferred. They are built on evidence and data. The following are examples of factual statements:

- The first mass-produced hybrid vehicle was the Toyota Prius, which was launched in Japan in 1997.
- Americans born after 1996 are considered Generation Z.

Facts that use numbers are called **statistics**:

- According to the Pew Research Center, 50 percent of Gen Z-ers aged 18–23 reported that they or someone in their household had lost a job or taken a pay cut in March 2020, the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The six-year graduation rate for full-time undergraduate students was 62 percent in 2018.

**Opinions** are statements of belief or value. Opinions form the basis of recommended solutions in proposals. Below is an opinion that precedes a list of recommendations to raise the graduation rate:

- The six-year graduation rate for full-time undergraduate students, which was 62% in 2018, can and should be improved by taking the following steps...

### Recognizing Bias



Critical thinking and reading of information involve recognizing bias. **Bias** is commonly defined as a preconceived opinion, or a prejudice, about something—a subject, an idea, a person, or a group of people, for example. As a proposal writer, you will need to recognize bias in the information you read as you learn about the problem and to recognize possible bias in your own thinking as well.

#### Bias in Sources

Some writing is intentionally biased and intended to persuade, such as editorials and opinion essays, also called op-eds (because of their placement *opposite* the *editorial* page in print newspapers). Writing meant to persuade is generally not used as source material in a proposal. Instead, seek out informative, neutral sources that consider more than one aspect of a problem. Be aware, however, that even sources that seem impartial

may contain some bias. Bias becomes a problem when a source that seems objective and trustworthy contains language and images intended to sway your opinion, or when a source downplays or ignores one or more aspects of a topic.

The evidence you use to support the discussion of a problem or the worth of a solution should not be heavily biased. As you consider sources for your proposal, the following tips can help you spot bias and read critically:

- **Determine the purpose of the source.** Is the writing intended to inform you or to persuade you?
- **Distinguish between fact and opinion.** Mark facts and opinions when gathering information from the source.
- **Pay attention to the language and what the writer emphasizes.** Does the language include inflammatory words or descriptions intended to sway readers? What do the title, introduction, and any headings tell you about the author's approach to the subject?
- **Research the author.** Is the writer an impartial expert? Or is the writer known for being biased?
- **Read multiple sources on the topic.** Learn whether the source is omitting or glossing over important information and credible views.
- **Look critically at the images and any media that support the writing.** How do they reinforce positive or negative treatment of the subject?

#### Bias in Yourself

Most individuals bring what psychologists call **cognitive bias** to the interactions in their lives, whether with information or with other people. Cognitive bias refers to how humans' thinking patterns affect how they take in and process new information. As you research information for a proposal, also be aware of **confirmation bias**, which is the tendency to seek out and accept information that supports (or confirms) a belief you already have and to ignore or dismiss information that challenges that belief.

For example, perhaps you believe strongly that the graduation rate at the college you attend is too low and that more students would graduate if the college provided more financial aid in the form of grants. With that belief, you would likely be more receptive to facts and statistics showing that students who receive financial aid in the form of grants, not loans, are more likely to graduate. However, if you believe that more students would graduate if they took advantage of the academic support services the college offers, then you would likely be more receptive to facts and statistics showing that students who work hard and use academic support services graduate in higher numbers.

As you read about problems and solutions, the best way to guard against bias is to be aware that bias exists, to question what you read, and to challenge your own beliefs. You can learn more about bias, especially in language, in [Spotlight on ... Bias in Language and Research](#).



## 6.2 Trailblazer

### Proposal Trailblazer: Atul Gawande

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe a particular problem and a proposed solution.
- Discuss the process of identifying a problem and proposing a solution.
- Articulate how proposals to solve problems reach their intended audience.

**FIGURE 6.2** Atul Gawande (<https://openstax.org/r/atulgawande>) thinks graphically about solving problems. (credit: “Sketched Book - The Checklist Manifesto - How to Get Things Right” by Sacha Chua/flickr, CC BY 2.0)

“What do you do when expertise is not enough?”

## Medical Problem Solver



Born in New York City, surgeon and author Atul Gawande (b. 1965) graduated from Stanford University in 1987 with a degree in biology and political science. A Rhodes Scholarship enabled him to study at the University of Oxford, where he earned a master’s degree in philosophy, politics, and economics. Returning to the United States from England, Gawande entered politics and worked for Al Gore’s (b. 1948) presidential campaign and later served as a health care adviser during the Clinton administration (1993–2001). Gawande graduated from Harvard Medical School with an MD in 1995 and an MPH (master of public health) in 1999. Among his main concerns and frequent topics of his written work have been patient care and medical ethics.

In the mid-2000s, Dr. Gawande came across a simple idea for improving medical care. Another physician, Peter Pronovost (b. 1965), a critical care specialist, had identified a solution to the problem of patients in intensive care units (ICUs) developing infections after having central intravenous lines inserted. The cause of the problem was human error. Doctors knew the steps they needed to follow to prevent infection when they inserted a central line, but some of them skipped at least one of the steps. When they did, the risk of a dangerous infection increased, which in turn increased the likelihood of a poor outcome for the patient—longer illness, additional surgery, or death.

Borrowing a method from airplane pilots, who must go through a checklist before being cleared for takeoff, Dr. Pronovost proposed a similar solution for ICU doctors: a checklist of five things they needed to do when inserting a central intravenous line. Dr. Pronovost ran an experiment in the ICU at the hospital where he worked. Doctors were instructed to follow the steps on the checklist, and nurses who assisted during the procedure were told to observe and speak up if a doctor skipped a step.

The checklist worked. The infection rate dropped dramatically, reducing ICU stays, saving lives, and saving money. Dr. Pronovost began writing checklists for other ICU situations. These checklists were successful as well in addressing particular problems.

Approached by the World Health Organization, Dr. Gawande worked with a team around the world to develop a checklist to improve the safety of surgery. As a surgeon, he was well aware of complications that could occur as a result of mistakes before, during, and after surgery. The team created a 19-point “safe surgery” checklist that was tested at eight hospitals around the world, including one in the United States. The checklist worked again—all eight hospitals saw the rate of significant postsurgical complications and deaths drop by an average

of more than 35 percent, with no additional costs.

The problem the two doctors identified is both simple and complex. The problem is not that doctors lack knowledge; the problem is that because the situations they encounter are often complicated and urgent, doctors do not always correctly apply what they know.

The solution proposed by Dr. Gawande and Dr. Pronovost is similarly both simple and complex: to improve accuracy, use a checklist. However, other doctors needed to be convinced that a simple change like this would improve medical care. To persuade others, Gawande and Pronovost wrote articles for medical journals in which they presented the problem they studied, the methods they used, the results of their experiments, and the solution they recommended. Dr. Gawande then went on to apply the checklist solution to preventable problems in fields outside of medicine in his book *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right* (2009), which became a best seller.

### Discussion Questions

1. How did Drs. Pronovost and Gawande define the problems they were trying to solve?
2. What evidence did Drs. Pronovost and Gawande use to support their proposed solutions?
3. Who was the audience for the doctors' proposals? Why might some audience members be hesitant about accepting the checklist solution?
4. Think about the relationship between doctors and nurses. Who has more authority in a medical setting? How might the doctors' and nurses' reactions to using the checklist differ?
5. In what ways is the problem the doctors tackled both simple and complex?
6. In what ways is the solution the doctors proposed both simple and complex?

## 6.3 Glance at Genre: Features of Proposals

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the roles of purpose and audience in writing a proposal.
- Define key features and characteristics of proposals.

As you think about the problem for your proposal, it is important to understand the rhetorical situation, or the circumstance in which a writer communicates with an audience of readers, including your purpose, audience expectations, and the key elements of the proposal genre. The rhetorical situation and its relationship to writing your proposal is discussed more fully in [Writing Process: Creating a Proposal](#).

### Defining Your Purpose

Your purpose is your reason for writing. The broad purpose for most academic and real-world proposals is to offer a solution to a problem. You, the writer, are tasked with identifying a problem and recommending a solution. You may need to write a proposal for a research project in a sociology class, or you may need to write a business proposal for a marketing class or a business you've started. Many topics are suitable for a proposal in a college writing class. For example, some problems are local and can be acted on directly, such as improving access to mental health services on your campus, offering a new food delivery option to campus buildings, designating quiet study spaces in your library, or bringing a farmer's market to your campus. Others are large-scale, research-oriented proposals such as reducing automobile emissions, providing broadband Internet access nationwide, or reforming immigration policies in the United States. Read your assignment carefully, and be sure you know the requirements and the amount of flexibility you have.

## Tuning in to Audience Expectations

The **audience** for your writing consists of the people who will read it or who could read it. *Are you writing for your instructor? For your classmates? For students or administrators on your campus or people in your community?* Think about the action they can take to solve the problem. For example, if the problem you're presenting is a lack of diverse food options on your campus, a proposal to other students would perhaps ask students to join you in calling for change in dining options, whereas a proposal to administrators would request specific changes.

Whoever your readers are, they expect you to do the following:

- **Address a specific, well-defined problem.** As the writer, ensure that your readers know what the problem is and why it needs to be solved. Some problems are well-known, whereas others need to be explained.
- **Have an idea of what they already know.** It is up to you as the writer to learn as much as possible about your audience. You need to know how receptive your audience may be to your suggestions and what they know about the problem you're proposing to solve. Their knowledge—or lack thereof—will require you to adjust your writing as needed. If readers are new to the problem, they expect you to provide the necessary background information. If they are knowledgeable about the problem, they expect you to cover background information quickly.
- **Provide reliable information.** in the form of specific facts, statistics, and examples. Whether you present your own research or information from sources, readers expect you to have done your homework and present trustworthy information about the problem and the solution.
- **Structure your proposal in a logical way.** Open with an introduction that tells readers the subject of the proposal, and follow with a logical structure.
- **Adopt an objective stance.** Writing objectively means adopting a position and tone that are neutral and free from bias, personal feelings, and emotional language. In doing so, you show respect for your readers' knowledge and intelligence, and you build credibility and trust, or **ethos**, with your readers.
- **Tell them what you want them to do in response to your proposal.** Do you want them to engage other members of the community? Build something? Contact their legislators? Although they may not do what you want, they are unlikely to act at all if you don't tell them what you would like them to do.

## Exploring the Genre



A formal proposal may include the components addressed in [Analytical Report: Writing from Facts](#). If you're writing a business proposal (a document that proposes a transaction between a business and a client and also spells out deliverables, a schedule, costs, and payment), you can find a full discussion in OpenStax's forthcoming *Business Communications* text.

The following are key terms and characteristics of problem-solution proposals:

- **Abstract or executive summary:** paragraph that summarizes the problem and recommended solution. The purpose is to present information in the most concise and economical way possible for your readers.
- **Audience:** readers of a proposal or any piece of writing.
- **Bias:** a preconceived opinion about something, such as a subject, an idea, a person, or a group of people. As a reader, be attentive to potential bias in sources; as a writer, be attentive to bias in yourself.
- **Body:** main part of a proposal; appears between the introduction and the conclusion and recommendation. The body of a proposal consists of paragraphs that discuss the problem and present a solution or solutions.
- **Citation of sources:** references in the text of a proposal to sources the writer has used as evidence. The sources are also listed, with full bibliographic information, at the end of the proposal. Citing sources is essential to avoid plagiarism.
- **Conclusion and recommendation:** last part of a proposal. The conclusion restates the problem and recommends a solution. This paragraph often issues a call to action.

- **Critical thinking:** ability to look beneath the surface of words and images to analyze, interpret, and evaluate.
- **Ethos:** also known as ethical appeal; the sense that the writer or other authority is trustworthy and credible.
- **Evidence:** statements of fact, statistics, examples, and expert opinion or knowledge that support the writer's points.
- **Facts:** statements whose truth can be proven or verified.
- **Introduction:** first part of a proposal, in which the writer introduces the problem to be addressed. Often, the thesis appears at the end of the introduction.
- **Objections:** questions or opposition readers may have about a proposed solution. These also are known as **counterclaims**.
- **Objective stance:** writing that is free from bias, personal feelings, and emotional language. An objective stance is especially important in a proposal.
- **Problem:** central topic to be discussed in a proposal.
- **Purpose:** reason for writing the proposal, usually to examine a problem and propose a solution.
- **Solution or solutions:** proposed resolution or resolutions to the problem, the central topic of a proposal.
- **Statistics:** factual statements that include numbers and often serve as evidence in a proposal.
- **Synthesis:** making connections between ideas and combining them to arrive at an original conclusion. Synthesizing draws from others' opinions and ideas, facts, statistics, and the writer's information based on research or original thought.
- **Thesis:** the main idea you will convey in your proposal and to which all paragraphs in the paper should relate.
- **Topic sentence:** a sentence that states the main idea of each paragraph.

## 6.4 Annotated Student Sample: “Slowing Climate Change” by Shawn Krukowski

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the features common to proposals.
- Analyze the organizational structure of a proposal and how writers develop ideas.
- Articulate how writers use and cite evidence to build credibility.
- Identify sources of evidence within a text and in source citations.

### Introduction



**FIGURE 6.3** Student author Shawn Krukowski (credit: “Reading in Tulane University Library New Orleans July 2003” by Tulane Public Relations/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0)

The proposal that follows was written by student Shawn Krukowski for a first-year composition course. Shawn’s assignment was to research a contemporary problem and propose one or more solutions. Deeply concerned about climate change, Shawn chose to research ways to slow the process. In his proposal, he recommends two solutions he thinks are most promising.



**FIGURE 6.4** This U.S. Coast Guard photograph shows the flooding in New Iberia, Louisiana, after Hurricane Ike in September 2008. Scientists attribute increased hurricane severity to climate change. (credit: “Hurricane Ike New Iberia” by Coast Guard Jayhawk 6031/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)



## LIVING BY THEIR OWN WORDS

### A Call to Action

The earth’s climate is changing. Although the climate has been changing slowly for the past 22,000 years, the rate of change has increased dramatically. Previously, natural climate changes occurred gradually, sometimes extending over thousands of years. Since the mid-20th century, however, climate change has accelerated exponentially, a result primarily of human activities, and is reaching a crisis level.

Critical as it is, however, climate change can be controlled. Thanks to current knowledge of science and existing technologies, it is possible to respond effectively. Although many concerned citizens, companies, and organizations in the private sector are taking action in their own spheres, other individuals, corporations, and organizations are ignoring, or even denying, the problem. What is needed to slow climate change is unified action in two key areas—mitigation and adaptation—spurred by government leadership in the United States and a global commitment to addressing the problem immediately.

**Introduction.** *The proposal opens with an overview of the problem and pivots to the solution in the second paragraph.*

**Thesis Statement.** *The thesis statement in last sentence of the introduction previews the organization of the proposal and the recommended solutions.*

### Problem: Negative Effects of Climate Change

**Heading.** *Centered, boldface headings mark major sections of the proposal.*

**Body.** *The three paragraphs under this heading discuss the problem.*

**Topic Sentence.** *The paragraph opens with a sentence stating the topics developed in the following paragraphs.*

For the 4,000 years leading up to the Industrial Revolution, global temperatures remained relatively constant, with a few dips of less than 1°C. Previous climate change occurred so gradually that life forms were able to adapt to it. Some species became extinct, but others survived and thrived. In just the past 100 years, however, temperatures have risen by approximately the same amount that they rose over the previous 4,000 years.

**Audience.** *Without knowing for sure the extent of readers' knowledge of climate change, the writer provides background for them to understand the problem.*

The rapid increase in temperature has a negative global impact. First, as temperatures rise, glaciers and polar ice are melting at a faster rate; in fact, by the middle of this century, the Arctic Ocean is projected to be ice-free in summer. As a result, global sea levels are projected to rise from two to four feet by 2100 (U.S. Global Change Research Program [USGCRP], 2014a). If this rise actually does happen, many coastal ecosystems and human communities will disappear.

**Discussion of the Problem.** *The first main point of the problem is discussed in this paragraph.*

**Statistics as Evidence.** *The writer provides specific numbers and cites the source in APA style.*

**Transitions.** *The writer uses transitions here (first, as a result, and second in the next paragraph) and elsewhere to make connections between ideas and to enable readers to follow them more easily. At the same time, the transitions give the proposal coherence.*

Second, weather of all types is becoming more extreme: heat waves are hotter, cold snaps are colder, and precipitation patterns are changing, causing longer droughts and increased flooding. Oceans are becoming more acidic as they increase their absorption of carbon dioxide. This change affects coral reefs and other marine life. Since the 1980s, hurricanes have increased in frequency, intensity, and duration. As shown in Figure 6.5, the 2020 hurricane season was the most active on record, with 30 named storms, a recording-breaking 11 storms hitting the U.S. coastline (compared to 9 in 1916), and 10 named storms in September—the highest monthly number on record. Together, these storms caused more than \$40 billion in damage. Not only was this the fifth consecutive above-normal hurricane season, it was preceded by four consecutive above-normal years in 1998 to 2001 (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2020).

**Discussion of the Problem.** *The second main point of the problem is discussed in this paragraph.*

**Visual as Evidence.** *The writer refers to "Figure 6.4" in the text and places the figure below the paragraph.*



**FIGURE 6.5** An overview of the 2020 hurricane season in the Atlantic Ocean. From “Record-Breaking Atlantic Hurricane Season Draws to an End,” NOAA National Weather Service. Copyright 2020 by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

**Source Citation in APA Style: Visual.** *The writer gives the figure a number, a title, an explanatory note, and a source citation. The source is also cited in the list of references.*

## Solutions: Mitigation and Adaptation

**Heading.** *The centered, boldface heading marks the start of the solutions section of the proposal.*

**Body.** *The eight paragraphs under this heading discuss the solutions given in the thesis statement.*

**Topic Sentence.** *The paragraph opens with a sentence stating the topics developed in the following paragraphs.*

To control the effects of climate change, immediate action in two key ways is needed: mitigation and adaptation. Mitigating climate change by reducing and stabilizing the carbon emissions that produce greenhouse gases is the only long-term way to avoid a disastrous future. In addition, adaptation is imperative to allow ecosystems, food systems, and development to become more sustainable.

Mitigation and adaptation will not happen on their own; action on such a vast scale will require governments around the globe to take initiatives. The United States needs to cooperate with other nations and assume a leadership role in fighting climate change.

**Objective Stance.** *The writer presents evidence (facts, statistics, and examples) in neutral, unemotional language, which builds credibility, or ethos, with readers.*

### Mitigation

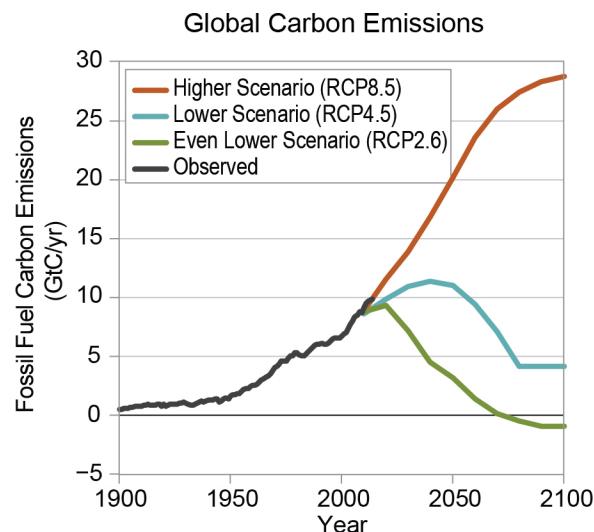
**Heading.** *The flush-left, boldface heading marks the first subsection of the solutions.*

**Topic Sentence.** *The paragraph opens with a sentence stating the solution developed in the following paragraphs.*

The first challenge is to reduce the flow of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The Union of Concerned Scientists (2020) warns that “net zero” carbon emissions—meaning that no more carbon enters the atmosphere than is removed—needs to be reached by 2050 or sooner. As shown in Figure 6.6, reducing carbon emissions will require a massive effort, given the skyrocketing rate of increase of greenhouse gases since 1900 (USGCRP, 2014b).

**Synthesis.** In this paragraph, the writer synthesizes factual evidence from two sources and cites them in APA style.

**Visual as Evidence.** The writer refers to “Figure 6.5” in the text and places the figure below the paragraph.



**FIGURE 6.6** Increases in carbon by the burning of fossil fuels since 1900. From “Our Changing Climate,” National Climate Assessment (<https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/2/>). Copyright 2014 by the U.S. Global Change Research Program.

**Source Citation in APA Style: Visual.** The writer gives the figure a number, a title, an explanatory note, and a source citation. The source is also cited in the list of references.

Significant national policy changes must be made and must include multiple approaches; here are two areas of concern:

**Presentation of Solutions.** For clarity, the writer numbers the two items to be discussed.

1. Transportation systems. In the United States in 2018, more than one-quarter—28.2 percent—of emissions resulted from the consumption of fossil fuels for transportation. More than half of these emissions came from passenger cars, light-duty trucks, sport utility vehicles, and minivans (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], 2020). Priorities for mitigation should include using fuels that emit less carbon; improving fuel efficiency; and reducing the need for travel through urban planning, telecommuting and videoconferencing, and biking and pedestrian initiatives.

**Statistics as Evidence.** The writer provides specific numbers and cites the source in APA style.

**Source Citation in APA Style: Group Author.** The parenthetical citation gives the group’s name, an abbreviation to be used in subsequent citations, and the year of publication.

Curtailing travel has a demonstrable effect. Scientists have recorded a dramatic drop in emissions during government-imposed travel and business restrictions in 2020. Intended to slow the spread of COVID-19, these restrictions also decreased air pollution significantly. For example, during the first six weeks of restrictions in the San Francisco Bay area, traffic was reduced by about 45 percent, and emissions were roughly a quarter lower than the previous six weeks. Similar findings were observed around the globe, with reductions of up to 80 percent (Bourzac, 2020).

**Statistics as Evidence.** The writer provides specific numbers and cites the source in APA style.

**Source Citation in APA Style: One Author.** The parenthetical citation gives the author’s name and the year of publication.

2. Energy production. The second-largest source of emissions is the use of fossil fuels to produce energy, primarily electricity, which accounted for 26.9 percent of U.S. emissions (EPA, 2020). Fossil fuels can be replaced by solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal sources. Solar voltaic systems have the potential to become the least expensive energy in the world (Green America, 2020). Solar sources should be complemented by wind power, which tends to increase at night when the sun is absent. According to the Copenhagen Consensus, the most effective way to combat climate change is to increase investment in green research and development (Lomborg, 2020). Notable successes in the countries of Morocco and The Gambia, both of which have committed to investing in national programs to limit emissions primarily by generating electricity from renewable sources (Mulvaney, 2019).

**Synthesis.** The writer develops the paragraph by synthesizing evidence from four sources and cites them in APA style.

A second way to move toward net zero is to actively remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Forests and oceans are so-called “sinks” that collect and store carbon (EPA, 2020). Tropical forests that once made up 12 percent of global land masses now cover only 5 percent, and the loss of these tropical forest sinks has caused 16 to 19 percent of greenhouse gas emissions (Green America, 2020). Worldwide reforestation is vital and demands both commitment and funding on a global scale. New technologies also allow “direct air capture,” which filters carbon from the air, and “carbon capture,” which prevents it from leaving smokestacks.

All of these technologies should be governmentally supported and even mandated, where appropriate.

**Synthesis.** The writer develops the paragraph by synthesizing evidence from two sources and cites them in APA style.

## Adaptation

**Heading.** The flush-left, boldface heading marks the second subsection of the solutions.

**Topic Sentence.** The paragraph opens with a sentence stating the solution developed in the following paragraphs.

Historically, civilizations have adapted to climate changes, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Our modern civilization is largely the result of climate stability over the past 12,000 years. However, as the climate changes, humans must learn to adapt on a national, community, and individual level in many areas. While each country sets its own laws and regulations, certain principles apply worldwide.

1. Infrastructure. Buildings—residential, commercial, and industrial—produce about 33 percent of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide (Biello, 2007). Stricter standards for new construction, plus incentives for investing in insulation and other improvements to existing structures, are needed. Development in high-risk areas needs to be discouraged. Improved roads and transportation systems would help reduce fuel use. Incentives for decreasing energy consumption are needed to reduce rising demands for power.

**Statistics as Evidence.** The writer provides specific numbers and cites the source in APA style.

**Source Citation in APA Style: One Author.** The parenthetical citation gives the author’s name and the year of

*publication.*

2. Food waste. More than 30 percent of the food produced in the United States is never consumed, and food waste causes 44 gigatons of carbon emissions a year (Green America, 2020). In a landfill, the nutrients in wasted food never return to the soil; instead, methane, a greenhouse gas, is produced. High-income countries such as the United States need to address wasteful processing and distribution systems. Low-income countries, on the other hand, need an infrastructure that supports proper food storage and handling. Educating consumers also must be a priority.

**Statistics as Evidence.** *The writer provides specific numbers and cites the source in APA style.*

**Source Citation in APA Style: Group Author.** *The parenthetical citation gives the group's name and the year of publication.*

3. Consumerism. People living in consumer nations have become accustomed to abundance. Many purchases are nonessential yet consume fossil fuels to manufacture, package, market, and ship products. During World War II, the U.S. government promoted the slogan “Use It Up, Wear It Out, Make It Do, or Do Without.” This attitude was widely accepted because people recognized a common purpose in the war effort. A similar shift in mindset is needed today.

Adaptation is not only possible but also economically advantageous. One case study is Walmart, which is the world’s largest company by revenue. According to Dearn (2020), the company announced a plan to reduce its global emissions to zero by 2040. Among the goals is powering its facilities with 100 percent renewable energy and using electric vehicles with zero emissions. As of 2020, about 29 percent of its energy is from renewable sources. Although the 2040 goal applies to Walmart facilities only, plans are underway to reduce indirect emissions, such as those from its supply chain. According to CEO Doug McMillon, the company’s commitment is to “becoming a regenerative company—one that works to restore, renew and replenish in addition to preserving our planet, and encourages others to do the same” (Dearn, 2020). In addition to encouraging other corporations, these goals present a challenge to the government to take action on climate change.

**Extended Example as Evidence.** *The writer indicates where borrowed information from the source begins and ends, and cites the source in APA style.*

**Source Citation in APA Style: One Author.** *The parenthetical citation gives only the year of publication because the author’s name is cited in the sentence.*

## Objections to Taking Action

**Heading.** *The centered, boldface heading marks the start of the writer’s discussion of potential objections to the proposed solutions.*

**Body.** *The writer devotes two paragraphs to objections.*

**Topic Sentence.** *The paragraph opens with a sentence stating the topics developed in the following paragraphs.*

Despite scientific evidence, some people and groups deny that climate change is real or, if they admit it exists, insist it is not a valid concern. Those who think climate change is not a problem point to Earth’s millennia-long history of changing climate as evidence that life has always persisted. However, their claims do not consider the difference between “then” and “now.” Most of the change predates human civilization, which has benefited from thousands of years of stable climate. The rapid change since the Industrial Revolution is unprecedented in human history.

Those who deny climate change or its dangers seek primarily to relax or remove pollution standards and regulations in order to protect, or maximize profit from, their industries. To date, their lobbying has been successful. For example, the world’s fossil-fuel industry received \$5.3 trillion in 2015 alone, while the U.S. wind-energy industry received \$12.3 billion in subsidies between 2000 and 2020 (Green America, 2020).

**Statistics as Evidence.** The writer provides specific numbers and cites the source in APA style.

**Source Citation in APA Style: Group Author.** The parenthetical citation gives the group's name and the year of publication.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

**Heading.** The centered, boldface heading marks the start of the conclusion and recommendation.

**Conclusion and Recommendation.** The proposal concludes with a restatement of the proposed solutions and a call to action.

Greenhouse gases can be reduced to acceptable levels; the technology already exists. But that technology cannot function without strong governmental policies prioritizing the environment, coupled with serious investment in research and development of climate-friendly technologies.

The United States government must place its full support behind efforts to reduce greenhouse gasses and mitigate climate change. Rejoining the Paris Agreement is a good first step, but it is not enough. Citizens must demand that their elected officials at the local, state, and national levels accept responsibility to take action on both mitigation and adaptation. Without full governmental support, good intentions fall short of reaching net-zero emissions and cannot achieve the adaptation in attitude and lifestyle necessary for public compliance. There is no alternative to accepting this reality. Addressing climate change is too important to remain optional.

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<https://nca2014.globalchange.gov/highlights/report-findings/our-changing-climate#tab1-images>

**References Page in APA Style.** All sources cited in the text of the report—and only those sources—are listed in alphabetical order with full publication information. See the Handbook for more on APA documentation style.

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The following link takes you to another model of an [annotated sample paper \(https://openstax.org/r/annotatedsamplepaper\)](https://openstax.org/r/annotatedsamplepaper) on solutions to animal testing posted by the University of Arizona's Global Campus Writing Center.

### Discussion Questions

1. How is the proposal organized? Make an informal outline of the main points.
2. Identify types of evidence that the writer uses in the text of the proposal, such as statements of fact, statistics, examples, and visuals. What are the sources of his evidence? Are the sources credible and reliable?
3. Analyze the writer's stance. Is he objective? Does he reveal bias? Give examples of objectivity and/or bias that you see.
4. Climate change is a broad topic for a proposal of this length. In fact, Shawn Krukowski's instructor suggested that he narrow it. What advice would you give about narrowing the topic?
5. Discuss the proposal in terms of its purpose and audience. What is the purpose of the proposal? What action does Shawn want readers to take after reading it? How effective is his call to action?
6. What are three strengths of the proposal? What are three weaknesses?

## 6.5 Writing Process: Creating a Proposal

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the elements of the rhetorical situation for your proposal.
- Apply prewriting strategies to discover a problem to write about.
- Gather and synthesize information from appropriate sources.
- Draft a thesis statement and create an organizational plan.
- Compose a proposal that develops your ideas and integrates evidence from sources.
- Implement strategies for drafting, peer reviewing, and revising.



Sometimes writing a paper comes easily, but more often writers work hard to generate ideas and evidence, organize their thoughts, draft, and revise. Experienced writers do their work in multiple steps, and most engage in a **recursive** process that involves thinking and rethinking, writing and rewriting, and repeating steps multiple times as their ideas develop and sharpen. In broad strokes, most writers go through the following steps to achieve a polished piece of writing:

- **Planning and Organization.** Your proposal will come together more easily if you spend time at the start considering the rhetorical situation, understanding your assignment, gathering ideas and evidence, drafting a thesis statement, and creating an organizational plan.
- **Drafting.** When you have a good grasp of the problem and solution you are going to write about and how you will organize your proposal, you are ready to draft.
- **Review.** With a first draft in hand, make time to get feedback from others. Depending on the structure of your class, you may receive feedback from your instructor or your classmates. You can also work with a tutor in the writing center on your campus, or you can ask someone else you trust, such as a friend, roommate, or family member, to read your writing critically and give honest feedback.
- **Revising.** After reviewing feedback from your readers, plan to revise. Focus on their comments: Is your

thesis clear? Do you need to make organizational changes to the proposal? Do you need to explain or connect your ideas more clearly?

### Considering the Rhetorical Situation



Like other kinds of writing projects, a proposal starts with assessing the **rhetorical situation**—the circumstance in which a writer communicates with an audience of readers about a subject. As a proposal writer, you make choices based on the purpose for your writing, the audience who will read it, the **genre**, and the expectations of the community and culture in which you are working. The brainstorming questions in [Table 6.1](#) can help you begin:

Rhetorical Situation Element	Brainstorming Questions	Your Responses
<b>Topic</b>  Are you free to choose your own problem and solution to write about, or is your topic specified?	What do you want to know more about? What requirements do you have? Do you need to do research?	
<b>Purpose</b>  What is the purpose of the proposal?	Is the purpose to examine a problem and explain possible solutions? Or is it to recommend a specific solution?	
<b>Audience</b>  Who will read your writing?	Who is your primary audience—your instructor? Your classmates? Other students or administrators on your campus? People in your community? How will you shape your writing to connect most effectively with this audience? Do you need to consider secondary audiences, such as people outside of class? If so, who are those readers?	
<b>Presentation</b>  In what format should you prepare your proposal?	Should you prepare a written proposal or use another medium? Should you include visuals and other media along with text, such as figures, charts, graphs, photographs, audio, or video? What other presentation requirements do you need to be aware of?	
<b>Context</b>  How do the time period and location affect decisions you make about your proposal?	What problems in your city, county, state, area, nation, or the world need a solution? What current events or new information might relate to the problem? Is your college or university relevant to the problem?	

**TABLE 6.1** Brainstorming Questions about the Rhetorical Situation

Rhetorical Situation Element	Brainstorming Questions	Your Responses
<b>Culture and Community</b> What social or cultural assumptions do you or your audience have?	How will you show awareness of your community's social and cultural expectations in your writing?	

**TABLE 6.1** Brainstorming Questions about the Rhetorical Situation

### Summary of Assignment

Write a proposal that discusses a problem you want to learn more about and that recommends a solution. The problem you choose must be a current problem, even though it may have been a problem for many years. The problem must also affect many people, and it must have an actual solution or solutions that you can learn about through research. In other words, the problem cannot be unique to you, and the solution you recommend cannot be one you only imagine; both the problem and the solution must be grounded in reality.

One way to get ideas about a problem to write about is to read a high-quality newspaper, website, or social media account for a week. Read widely on whatever platform you choose so that you learn what people are saying, what a newspaper's editorial board is taking a stand on, what opinion writers are making cases for in op-eds, and what community members are commenting on. You'll begin to get a handle on problems in your community or state that people care about. If you read a paper or website with a national or international audience, you'll learn about problems that affect people in other places.

You will need to consult and cite at least five reliable sources. They can be scholarly, but they do not have to be. They must be credible, trustworthy, and unbiased. Possible sources include articles from reputable newspapers, magazines, and academic and professional journals; reputable websites; government sources; and visual sources. Depending on your topic, you may want to conduct a survey, an interview, or an experiment. See [Research Process: Accessing and Recording Information](#) and [Annotated Bibliography: Gathering, Evaluating, and Documenting Sources](#) for information about creating and finding sources. Your proposal can include a visual or media source if it provides appropriate, relevant evidence.



**Another Lens.** Another way to approach a proposal assignment is to consider problems that affect you directly and affect others. Perhaps you are concerned about running up student loan debt. Or perhaps you worry about how to pay your rent while earning minimum wage. These concerns are valid and affect many college students around the United States. Another way is to think about problems that affect others. Perhaps students in your class or on your campus have backgrounds and experiences that differ from yours—*what problems or challenges might they have encountered during their time in college that you don't know about?*

As you think about the purpose and audience for your proposal, think again about the rhetorical situation, specifically about the audience you want to reach and the mode of presentation best suited to them and your purpose. For example, say you're dissatisfied with the process for electing student leaders on your campus. If your purpose is to identify the problems in the process and propose a change, then your audience would include other students, the group or committee that oversees student elections, and perhaps others. To reach other students who might also be dissatisfied, you might write an article, editorial, or letter for the campus newspaper, social media page, or website, depending on how students on your campus get news. In addition, you might organize a meeting of other students to get their input on the problem. To reach the decision

makers, which may include elected students, faculty, and administrators, you might need to prepare an oral presentation and a slide deck.

Below in [Figure 6.7](#) are three slides from Shawn Krukowski's proposal that he adapted for a presentation: the title slide, a slide on one aspect of the problem, and a slide introducing one of the proposed solutions.

**SLOWING CLIMATE CHANGE: A CALL TO ACTION**

Shawn Krukowski

**Problem**  
The Effects of Climate Change

<b>14</b> Hurricanes Average season has six	<b>11</b> Storms hit the U.S. coastline, (4 of which came ashore in Louisiana) Previous record: 1911-1910	<b>30</b> Named storms Bertha, Fabian, Irene, Iselle, Jerry, Kristy, Lee, Edouard, Vicki, Wilma, Rita, Hurricane, Bertha, Gustav, Gamma, Helene, Kyle, Lili, Marco, Michelle, Orlene, Odile, Totu
<b>7</b> Major hurricanes Average season has three	<b>10</b> Named storms that formed in September Most for any month on record	<b>10</b> Rapidly intensifying storms sampled by NOAA and the U.S. Air Force

EXTREME WEATHER: The 2018 hurricane season broke records.

Source: NOAA National Weather Service, <https://www.noaa.gov/media-release/record-breaking-atlantic-hurricane-season-draws-to-end>

**Solutions**  
Mitigation and Adaptation

Year	Higher Scenario (RCP8.5)	Lower Scenario (RCP4.5)	Even Lower Scenario (RCP2.6)	Observed
1900	~2	~2	~2	~2
1950	~4	~4	~4	~4
2000	~10	~10	~10	~10
2050	~25	~15	~5	~15
2100	~30	~20	~5	~25

MITIGATION can reduce and stabilize the carbon emissions that have produced increasing amounts of greenhouse gases since 1850.

Source: National Climate Assessment, <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/2/>

**FIGURE 6.7** Presentation Slides (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

### Quick Launch: Finding a Problem to Write About



A proposal must address a real-life problem and present one or more workable solutions. Usually, problems worth writing about are not easily solved; if they were, they would no longer be considered problems. Indeed, problems in proposals are often complex, and solutions are often complicated and involve trade-offs. Sometimes people disagree about whether the problem is a problem at all and whether any proposed solutions are viable solutions.

#### Exploring a Problem

One way to generate ideas about a problem is to brainstorm. To explore a topic for your proposal, use a graphic organizer like [Table 6.2](#) to write responses to the following statements and questions:

Exploring Questions	Your Responses
What problem am I interested in learning about?	
How do I know this is a problem?	
What are a few examples of the problem?	
What causes the problem?	
Who is affected by the problem?	
What are some negative effects of the problem?	
Why should the problem be solved?	
What are the potential consequences of the problem if nothing is done?	
What are some realistic solutions to the problem?	

**TABLE 6.2** Exploration Questions

For example, perhaps you’re considering a career in information technology, and you’re taking an IT class. You might be interested in exploring the problem of data breaches. A data breach is a real-world problem with possible solutions, so it passes the first test of being an actual problem with possible solutions. Your responses to the questions above might look something like those in [Table 6.3](#):

Exploring Questions	Sample Responses
A problem I’m interested in learning more about is...	Data breaches
How I know data breaches are a problem...	In my class, we’re spending a lot of time on data security and breaches. Also, data breaches are in the news almost constantly, and a Google search turns up many that don’t make the news.
What are a few examples of data breaches?	I’ve heard about people getting their information stolen. I’ve heard about foreign governments, like Russia, stealing national security information and trying to interfere in recent elections. In my class, I’m learning about businesses that have customer and employee information stolen.
What causes data breaches?	Hackers have a variety of methods to break into websites, to get people to click on links, and to lure people to give out information.
Who is affected by data breaches?	Individual people, businesses, utility companies, schools and universities, governments (local, state, and national)—pretty much anyone can be affected.

**TABLE 6.3** Exploration Questions on Data Breaches

Exploring Questions	Sample Responses
What are some negative effects of data breaches?	Identity theft, financial theft, national security, power shutdowns, and election interference. Data breaches cause chaos and cost a lot of money.
Why should the problem of data breaches be solved?	People need the personal, financial, and medical information they share with businesses and other organizations to remain private. Businesses and organizations need to keep their operations secure. Governments need to keep national security secrets from getting into the hands of people who want to harm them.
What are the potential consequences of data breaches if nothing is done?	People will continue to be victims of identity theft and all that goes with it, including losing money, and they will lose trust in institutions they used to trust, like banks, hospitals, and the government.
What are some realistic solutions to data breaches?	Increased security for individuals, like two-factor authentication, stronger passwords, and education to avoid getting scammed. For companies and governments, stronger protections on websites. I need to learn more.

**TABLE 6.3** Exploration Questions on Data Breaches

### Narrowing and Focusing

Many problems for a proposal can be too broad to tackle in a single paper. For example, the sample above reveals that data breaches are indeed a problem but that several aspects can be explored. If you tried to cover all the aspects, you would be left writing general paragraphs with little specific information. The topic needs to be narrowed and focused.

The data breaches example above could be narrowed to the following problems—and possibly even more. Note that the questions start to zero in on possible solutions, too. In your own writing, as you brainstorm, try placing subtopics you discover into their own categories and asking more questions, as shown in [Table 6.4](#).

Narrowing a Problem	Focusing Questions
Problem: Hackers get into computer systems and steal information.	What tactics do hackers use? What do they steal? What do they do with what they steal? How successful are they? How can hacking be stopped or reduced?
Problem: Data breaches harm individuals.	What happens to people when their information is stolen? In what ways is their information used? What should people do when they discover their information has been stolen? Are there steps they can take to protect their information?

**TABLE 6.4** Focusing on a Topic

Narrowing a Problem	Focusing Questions
Problem: Data breaches harm businesses, organizations, and medical systems.	What happens to businesses, organizations, and medical systems when hackers break in? What kind of information is stolen? How is the information used? What do businesses, organizations, and medical systems do, or what should they do, when they know about a breach? How can data breaches be prevented?
Problem: Data breaches harm governments.	What happens to governments when hackers break into their systems? What kind of information is stolen? How is the information used? What should governments do when they know about a breach? How can data breaches be prevented?

**TABLE 6.4** Focusing on a Topic

### Sample Proposal Topics



The following broad topics are potentially suitable as a start for a proposal. Choose one of these or one of your own, and ask the exploring questions. Then look at your responses, and ask focusing questions. Continue to focus until you have a specific problem that you can discuss in sufficient depth and offer a concrete solution or solutions.

- **Health fields:** cost of medical and dental care for uninsured people, management of chronic conditions and diseases, infection control, vaccinations, access to mental health care, drug use and addiction, sports injuries, workplace safety
- **Education:** gaps in academic achievement, curriculum, recruitment and retention of staff and/or students, buildings and grounds, graduation rates, cocurricular activities
- **Environment:** forest management and fires, hurricanes and other extreme storms, water and air pollution, sustainable development, invasive species, waste management, recycling and composting, community gardening
- **Engineering and computer science:** robotics, vehicles and transportation, digital divide, online privacy, misinformation and misbehavior on social media, video games
- **Business and manufacturing:** quality improvement, process improvement, cost control, communication, social media, pay equity, fundraising, sourcing of materials, net-zero energy processes, workplace safety
- **Policy and politics:** public institutions, such as public schools, libraries, transportation systems, and parks; taxes, fees, and services; donations to political campaigns; healthcare, such as Medicare and Medicaid; social security; unemployment insurance; services for active military and veterans; immigration policy
- **Society and culture:** social media and free speech; inequality in housing, employment, education, and more; cancel culture; bullying; wealth and poverty; support for the arts; athletes and sports; disparities related to race, sex, gender identity and expression, age, and/or ability

### Gathering Information

Proposals are rooted in information and evidence; therefore, most proposal assignments require you to conduct research. Depending on your assignment, you may need to do formal research, an activity that involves finding sources and evaluating them for reliability, reading them carefully and taking notes, and citing all words you quote and ideas you borrow. See [Research Process: Accessing and Recording Information](#) and [Annotated Bibliography: Gathering, Evaluating, and Documenting Sources](#) for detailed instruction on conducting research. If you are proposing a solution to a problem in your local community or on your campus, you may need to conduct primary research as well, such as a survey or interviews with people who live or work there.

Whether you conduct in-depth research or do background reading, keep track of the ideas that come to you and the information you learn. You can write or dictate notes using an app on your phone or computer, or you can jot notes in a journal if you prefer pen and paper. Then, when you are ready to begin to organize what you have learned, you will have a record of your thoughts and information. Always track the source of the information you gather, whether from your reading or a person you interviewed, so that you can return to that source if you need more information and can credit the source in your paper.

### Kinds of Evidence

You will use **evidence** to demonstrate that the problem is real and worthy of being solved and that your recommended solution is workable. Choose evidence for your proposal that is rooted in facts. In addition, choose evidence that best supports the angle you take on your topic and meets your instructor's requirements. Cite all evidence you use from a source. Consider the following kinds of evidence and examples of each:

- **Definition:** an explanation of a key word, idea, or concept.

*The Personal Data Notification & Protection Act of 2017 defines a security breach as “a compromise of the security, confidentiality, or integrity of, or the loss of, computerized data that results in... (i) the unauthorized acquisition of sensitive personally identifiable information; or (ii) access to sensitive personally identifiable information that is for an unauthorized purpose, or in excess of authorization.”*

- **Example:** an illustration of an idea or concept.

*Every month, university staff members receive a fake phishing email from the IT department. The goal is to train employees of the university to be critical readers of every email they receive.*

- **Expert opinion:** a statement by a professional whose opinion is respected in the field.

*In The Sixth Extinction, science writer Elizabeth Kolbert observes that humans are making the choice about “which evolutionary pathways will remain and open and which will be forever closed” (268).*

- **Fact:** information that is true and can be proven correct or accurate. Statements of fact are built on evidence and data.

*In March and April of 2020, 43 states in the United States issued orders directing residents to stay home except for essential activities.*

- **Interview:** a person-to-person, phone, or remote conversation that involves an interviewer posing questions to another person or group of people.

*During an interview, I asked about parents’ decisions to vaccinate their children. One pediatrician said, “The majority of parents see the benefits of immunizations for their children and for public health. For those who don’t, I talk to them and try to understand why they feel the way they do.”*

- **Quotation:** the exact words of an author or speaker.

*According to the Federal Aviation Administration, SpaceX was required to conduct a “comprehensive review of the company’s safety culture, operational decision-making, and process discipline,” in addition to investigating the crash of its prototype spacecraft (Chang).*

- **Statistics:** numerical fact or item of data.

*According to the Environmental Protection Agency, more than 40 million tons of food waste were generated in 2017, comprising 15.2% of all trash sent to landfills (DeSilver).*

- **Survey:** a structured interview in which respondents are all asked the same questions and their answers are tabulated and interpreted. Surveys reveal attitudes, beliefs, or habits of the general public or segments of the population.

*In a survey of adults conducted in July 2020, 64 percent of respondents said that social media have a mostly negative effect on American society (Auxier).*

- **Visuals** and other media: graphs, figures, tables, photographs, diagrams, charts, maps, videos, audio recordings, etc.

## Thesis and Organization

### Drafting a Thesis

When you have a solid grasp of the problem and solution, try drafting a **thesis**. A thesis is the main idea that you will convey in your proposal and to which all the paragraphs in the paper should relate. In a proposal, you will likely express this main idea in a **thesis statement** of one or two sentences toward the end of the introduction.

For example, in the thesis statement Shawn Krukowski wrote for his proposal on climate change, he identifies the problem and previews the solutions he presents:

*What is needed to slow climate change is unified action in two key areas—mitigation and adaptation—spurred by government leadership in the United States and a global commitment to addressing the problem immediately.*

Here is another example that identifies a problem and multiple solutions:

*The number of women employed in the IT field is decreasing every year, a trend that can be changed with a multifaceted approach that includes initiatives in middle schools, high schools, and colleges; active recruitment; mentoring programs; and flexible work arrangements.*

After you draft a thesis statement, ask these questions and revise it as needed:

- Is it engaging? A thesis for a proposal should pique readers' interest in the problem and possible solutions.
- Is it precise and specific? If you are interested in curbing the spread of invasive plant species, for example, your thesis should indicate which environment the plant or plants are invading and that you are proposing ways to stop the spread.

### Organizing Your Ideas



A proposal has a recognizable shape, starting with an introduction, followed by discussions of the problem, possible solutions, potential objections to the solutions, and a conclusion with a recommendation. A graphic organizer like [Table 6.5](#) can help you organize your ideas and evidence.

Proposal Section	Content	Your Notes
Introduction (usually one paragraph, but can be two)	<p>Draw readers in with an overview. Provide necessary background here or in the description of the problem, defining terms as needed.</p> <p>State the thesis.</p>	
Description of the Problem (one or more paragraphs)	<p>Explain the problem, establishing it as a problem in need of a solution.</p> <p>Develop the paragraph(s) with evidence.</p>	

**TABLE 6.5** Proposal Organization