

THIRD EDITION

WRITING WORTH READING
The Critical Process

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Putting Words on Paper

Any writer overwhelmingly honest about pleasing himself is almost sure to please others.

— MARIANNE MOORE (1887–1972)
AMERICAN POET

SUBJECT AND THESIS: SAYING SOMETHING

Generating ideas is a first step toward writing, but once you have a fund of possibilities, you need to decide which idea or ideas are worth writing about.

If there is nothing to say, there is no point writing. All of us know people—and some of us have dear friends—who chatter on about nearly nothing. We put up with it because we love the person or the voice is soothing or the sound serves as a cover for our thoughts. But imagine finding that same chatter in print. We would not read it.

Writing worth reading must have both a worthwhile subject and a thesis. The invention methods we discussed in Chapter 4 may help a writer settle on a subject and an approach before he or she actually begins to write. Frequently, however, something worth saying does not precede the writing. In the act of writing, you may come upon the subject meant just for you. Putting sentences or paragraphs onto the paper may continue the invention process.

The Subject

The subject of an essay is often the “given” of a writing assignment. It may be as broad as the title of a course: “United States Foreign Policy after the Cold War,” “Abnormal Psychology,” “Classical Greece.” Just think of the possible ramifications of those topics. Classical Greece could include anything from structures of daily life or political organizations to philosophy or literature. And any one of these would be enormous. Greek philosophy, for instance, covers hundreds of years and dozens of important thinkers. You would have to narrow the subject to a size commensurate with your knowledge, your interests, the time you can allot, and the instructor’s expectations.

Sometimes instructors provide a narrow subject with built-in limits that tell you where you can and cannot go. These limits, implicit and explicit, help you focus in on the subject. Even then, you have to do some narrowing of your own. Suppose you receive this assignment in the Classical Greece course:

Compare the preoccupations and methods of Socrates with those of the pre-Socratic philosophers. Six to eight pages.

This is a huge topic. Books have been written on it and barely scratched the surface. A whole army of important Greek philosophers lived before Socrates, and, of course, Socrates alone is an immense subject. Your instructor would expect you to *select* one or perhaps two pre-Socratics for consideration. You might decide that Pythagoras is representative and interesting (besides, you have known his name ever since high-school geometry).

You would now have set up the two sides of the comparison: Socrates and Pythagoras. But you would still need to narrow the focus: “preoccupations and methods” covers just about everything. You would limit the number of headings under which to compare Pythagoras and Socrates. You might brainstorm a list of the preoccupations the two philosophers had in common:

the irrational
problems in perception
the physical universe

and many more. Which of these topics do you want to analyze? The same constraints operate: your knowledge, your interests, your sources, and the time and space allotted.

You may be drawn to “the irrational,” just as Pythagoras was. You may “feel” a distinct difference between Pythagoras and Socrates on this subject, but you may not know exactly what the difference is.

At this stage, let the problem percolate. Review all you have read by and about the two philosophers. Compare representative passages from

their writings. Review your class notes. When something strikes you, jot it down. But also let your mind wander (Hey, didn't Pythagoras believe in reincarnation?). Follow your thoughts wherever they lead. Take the brakes off your imagination. Speculate.

When a central concern begins to firm up in your mind, concentrate on it. Write it down so you will be sure not to forget: "What the two philosophers thought about the limits of reason." Having narrowed your subject and thereby set up a manageable comparison, you are well on your way to developing your thesis.

The Thesis

The idea around which your essay is organized and to which all the parts contribute is called a thesis. It is the point of the essay. In the following sections we discuss two kinds of thesis: the argumentative thesis, which argues a point, and the organizational thesis, which organizes information.

The Argumentative Thesis. When assigning an essay, most instructors call for an *expository* essay, that is, an interpretation of a topic. They expect students to develop an idea about a subject and then argue to prove it. This process demonstrates how students think, how they handle concepts, and how much they understand.

The argumentative thesis represents your opinion on the subject, your conviction, your evaluation, your discovery, your approach, your point of view. Note the word *your*. The subject belongs to the world; the thesis is your stamp on it.

You must, of course, get to the narrowed subject before you arrive at your thesis. The following examples show the narrowing process:

Assignment: A three-page essay on a difficult social issue

Broad subject: Marijuana

Narrowed subject: Marijuana and its use in medical treatment

Thesis: Because of its capacity to relieve pain, marijuana should be treated as a prescription drug for the very ill.

Assignment: A six-page essay on a novel read in this course

Broad subject: Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*

Narrowed subject: The protagonist Pip (still too broad)

More narrowed subject: Important places in Pip's life

Thesis: Three important places—the forge, Satis House, and the graveyard—shape Pip's fate.

Notice that the subjects are sentence fragments, but the theses are complete sentences. They make a completed thought about each subject.

You may not know what your thesis is when you start writing—it may result from putting ideas and impressions down on paper (yet another good use for free writing and journal keeping). But when you set about writing your final draft, you will certainly need to know your thesis. An essay without a thesis is like a ship without a rudder. It moves in circles.

Although a thesis need not be stated in a sentence or two, such an explicit statement can help you and your reader. Like a lodestar, it can help you stay on course and enable your reader to determine whether you are actually traveling where you said you would. Usually this explicit statement will occur in the first or second paragraph. From then on, you and your reader can check whether the essay is on course.

More often than not, you will state your thesis in a single sentence. There may be times, however, when your idea would burst out of a single sentence because it requires immediate explanation or qualification. You may then need two or more sentences. But remember that the longer the thesis, the more difficult for the reader to grasp. Try to make your thesis statement hard, tight, unmistakable.

A thesis is not a litany of cold facts. Facts say nothing about themselves. They simply are. When we write, we must show how facts connect and what they mean. In short, we must interpret. In a class on twentieth-century European history, the assignment was "In a four- to six-page paper, discuss the Aisne-Marne offensive." One student wrote this as his thesis:

On July 18, 1918, a quarter of a million American troops began the month-long Aisne-Marne offensive. This offensive forced the Germans to retreat to the Vesle River. It was followed by the Meuse-Argonne drive. The armistice was signed on November 11, 1918.

This paragraph consists entirely of facts you could find in any encyclopedia. The writer did not say why the facts are important. The rest of the essay was a simple chronology. This happened and then this and then this. The facts are cold indeed.

The writer warmed the facts up in his revision:

On July 18, 1918, a quarter of a million American troops began the month-long Aisne-Marne offensive. This offensive halted what had seemed to be an irresistible German attack, fortified the sagging Allied defenses, served notice of the American presence, and—perhaps most significant—caused widespread dissatisfaction and political unrest in Germany. It was the turning point of the war.

With that last sentence as his thesis, he now had the start of a very meaty six-page essay.

A thesis is not a gusher of feeling. We are not against feeling. On the contrary, we are all for expressing it in essays. But feeling alone will not

help the cause. Readers will not be stampeded—they *can* be persuaded. “Computers are fantastic and fun” is not very arguable or scintillating. Neither is “Enrico Caruso and Maria Callas had the most beautiful voices ever” or “Abortion is a horrible sin.” These explosions of feeling hardly promise an essay worth reading, one that is reasoned and supported.

In a second effort, the computer fancier tried to modulate her tone:

Computers are the most fantastic innovation ever to revolutionize human life.

Imagine trying to prove that a piece of hardware is “the most fantastic innovation.” What about the internal combustion machine, the lever, and the wheel? This thesis is still too large and too emotional for an essay. The writer made a final try:

Computers have revolutionized human life by drastically shortening the time it takes to perform previously difficult and lengthy intellectual operations.

The writer still has her work cut out for her, but now it is doable.

The thesis is not a grandiose generality. It is an assertion you can support in the time and space allotted. In a six- to eight-page paper, you can neither prove nor disprove the superiority of jazz over classical music or vice versa. You can neither prove nor disprove that the novel is dead. These assertions are too far-reaching for an essay. Don’t claim more than you can support. Be modest:

The very form of jazz has stimulated great creativity from musicians otherwise thwarted.

The thesis is not a recitation of the obvious. No one wants to read that “senators are subject to pressure from special-interest groups.” We know that already. We know that slavery is evil, that defense costs money, that science is challenging. Conventional opinions do not a lively essay make. If something is not worth arguing about, it is unlikely to be worth writing about. A good thesis is controversial. Although it should not be wild or crazy, it ought to have a sharp edge.

Sometimes you can turn blank statements of received wisdom—like those in the previous paragraph—into sharp statements with an argumentative edge:

Because special-interest groups—such as lobbies, religious groups, and corporations—have become so powerful, balancing their demands is at the heart of the American political system.

Slavery helped to bring about the development of democracy in Greece by providing philosophers leisure from onerous work.

Our Pacific fleet may be worth what it costs if it keeps China from attacking Taiwan.

An obsessive desire for scientific knowledge can be dangerous because, as the Frankenstein story suggests, we may lose control of our experiments.

We do not necessarily agree with these assertions, but they do have an argumentative edge, and we want to read what the writers have to say about them.

A thesis is not just the bald assertion of an opinion. The best theses do not make bald statements of opinion, however reasonable. A reader wants to know right away whether the issue is worth discussing and whether the writer will pursue an interesting idea. The following flat-footed assertions offer little for a reader to anticipate:

Live theater is a declining entertainment.

We should turn the churches into grain bins or art museums.

I prefer men who know they are chauvinists but don’t care to men who are chauvinists but don’t know it.

Why? why? and why again? Answering *why?* would limit the thesis, direct the discussion, sharpen the argumentative edge, and promise a more interesting essay. Look at the difference between

We should not allow the president to wage covert wars.

and

We should not allow the president to wage covert wars because such a right would upset the balance of powers mandated by the Constitution.

Another writer on waging covert wars might frame the thesis this way:

If we let the executive branch wage covert wars, we sacrifice the very basis of our Constitution.

Many theses will answer not *why?* but *how?* This question becomes particularly important when we make a proposal. Here is a proposal that could use a dose of *how?* to lift it above the platitudinous:

High-school students can become more sensitive to the needs of the elderly.

Sure, but ho-hum. Add the *how?* and the idea becomes more interesting:

If the high schools hired retired people as teachers’ aides, high-school students would become more sensitive to the needs of the elderly.

Suppose we keep the *how?* and add a *why?*

From such contact, students would learn how the elderly view the world and why they see it that way.

Now the writer promises a thoughtful essay.

Sometimes answering the question *under what circumstances?* can make a drab thesis more compelling:

Experimentation on animals should not be allowed.
can become

Unless laboratory scientists place the highest priority on minimizing pain, experimentation on animals should not be allowed.

Although and *when* clauses can suggest the circumstances under which the thesis assertion is true:

When voters suffer economically, they blame the party in control of the White House rather than Congress.

Although some individuals manage to climb the social ladder, social class is largely predetermined on the basis of inherited wealth and privilege.

A thesis that answers a question predicts the shape and even the content of the essay. It tells the writer what kind of support is needed, and it tells the reader that the journey won't be shrouded in fog but will be sharp and clear.

The most effective theses are succinct and their terms clear. The following thesis may well contain an idea worth pursuing, but the language in which it is expressed is so vague and scattered that we don't know what it really means:

The United States government concealed the whole question of CIA involvement in the Haitian military dictatorship because of what it thought Americans would tolerate, and Aristide and his supporters, once they were reestablished in power, weren't straight about it, and I think that explains these problems.

What involvement? What does *straight* mean? What *problems*? This thesis is so wordy and imprecise that the reader can have little idea what is coming. The student redesigned the thesis:

Because the United States government refused to admit that the CIA helped to finance the Haitian military dictatorship, Aristide and his democratic supporters remained suspicious of U.S. intentions and refused to accept American advice.

The difficulty between the two nations has now been focused. The subsequent sentences or paragraphs can give background for the U.S. position, the Haitian position, and the history of relations between the two countries, including Aristide's return to Haiti.

Notice that in the revision, the student dropped "I think." Because readers assume that the ideas expressed belong to the writer, phrases such as "I think" or "I feel" are redundant. When you clutter up your

prose with them, you sound unsure of yourself. The thesis is your special twist on the subject; *you* are the expert on what you think.

The Organizational Thesis. Thus far we have been discussing the expository essay, in which the writer makes an arguable assertion and then sets out to prove it. You may often be asked, in school and out, to do other kinds of writing—book reports, personal essays, explications, surveys of writings about a subject. You may be asked to narrate or describe, summarize or analyze. For these kinds of assignments, you will need to determine the most effective way to present the information. Accumulating and throwing facts at the reader higgledy-piggledy would lead to chaos. You need an *organizational thesis*.

Unlike the argumentative thesis, the organizational thesis does not primarily represent a point of view or an opinion. Rather, it prepares the reader for the information to come. It suggests the form and the focus of that information. It is as essential to the report and summary as the argumentative thesis is to the expository essay. Even a straight newspaper article has an organizational thesis, as in this opening paragraph:

Should home windows or shutters be required to withstand a direct hit from an eight-foot-long two-by-four shot from a cannon at thirty-five miles an hour, without creating a hole big enough to let in a three-inch sphere? That is the central question between home builders and insurance companies over new standards for windows designed to stand up to the high winds and flying debris of hurricanes. (Michael Quint, "A Storm Over Housing Codes," *New York Times*, December 1, 1995, p. C1.)

Now we know what kind of information to expect: a description of two positions regarding changes in building codes.

(For a full discussion of various kinds of organizational theses, see Chapter 15, Writing in All Disciplines: The Report.)

Tips for Subject and Thesis

- Narrow your subject to a manageable size.
- In papers that support an opinion, devise a sharp and clear argumentative thesis.
- Ask yourself, Is my thesis too factual? too emotional? grandiose? trite?
- Have you made your thesis interesting by answering *how?* or *why?* or *under what circumstances?*
- Are the terms of your thesis succinct and clear?
- In your thesis, avoid phrases such as *I think* or *I feel*.
- For reports or summaries, be sure you have a good organizational thesis.

EXERCISES FOR SUBJECT AND THESIS

1. The following subjects are too broad for an essay of 750–1,000 words. Reduce four of them to an appropriate size. You need not construct a thesis; this is an exercise in narrowing the subject. Be prepared to explain how and why you narrowed as you did.

newspapers	American children	DNA
violence	women in literature	missionaries
Rwanda	building bridges	rodents
2. Sometimes it is a good idea to narrow step by step. Choose two of your subjects from Exercise 1 and narrow them a step at a time four times.
3. With a partner, select three of the following overly broad assertions and separately write thesis statements appropriate for an essay of 750–1,000 words. Assert the negative if you prefer. Test the statements by the standards discussed in this chapter. Compare your thesis statements with your partner's. What kinds of differences do you find?

James Joyce was the greatest writer of this century.
 The quality of life ought to be improved.
 Affirmative action is essential.
 Taxes should be reduced.
 Genetic engineering is dangerous.
 Movies are more entertaining than television.
4. Rewrite the following statements to give them an argumentative edge.
 - a. Beethoven was a musician.
 - b. Waterskiing is exciting.
 - c. In time of war, traitors should be punished.
 - d. Police should be nice.
5. Evaluate the effectiveness of the following statements as theses for essays of 750–1,000 words. Rewrite the ineffective ones to make them workable. Bear in mind *why?* *how?* and *under what circumstances?* Note: you may not know what the writer had in mind—a major flaw in some thesis statements. If this is the case, construct a sound thesis for the indicated subject.
 - a. Fraternity initiations are like animal aggression.
 - b. The feminist movement threatens the institution of marriage.
 - c. Wood stoves obviate the internal redistribution of thermal energies.
 - d. Violence on television is a complex topic, but in this paper I will attempt to deal with it.
 - e. Private ownership of handguns poses a serious problem.

A man may write at any time, if he will set himself doggedly to it.

—SAMUEL JOHNSON (1709-1784)
ENGLISH WRITER AND CRITIC

DEVELOPING, ORGANIZING, DRAFTING: GETTING THE IDEAS WRITTEN

To get a workable and interesting thesis may take several tries, and you may even change your thesis after you finish your first draft. But when you feel you have a pretty good idea of what you are going to write, it is time to begin to get those thoughts clear and to put them on paper.

Writing involves our psychological state and our physical state, so much so that the ease of it depends on how good we feel, what response we hope for or fear, even our regard for the audience. No wonder it can sometimes not be free-form fun. As Samuel Johnson suggests, we must sometimes just be dogged about it.

Getting Ready

Before you start, plan your attack on the project. Think through your best way of getting down your thoughts. This part of the process will vary from person to person. Some will want to be tightly organized; others will just start writing. Save time and energy by proceeding in the way best for you.

The following advice should help with any writing task. It contains no big secrets or surefire tricks, only some points that will make your writing more enjoyable during the process and more effective with your reader.

First of all, make it easy on yourself. Don't wait until the last minute. Starting early provides a margin for error as well as ample time to perform the task.

Schedule a block of time for writing, and do nothing else during that time. When you write in tidbits, you are constantly starting up. This is as hard on writing as stop-and-go traffic is on cars.

Put yourself out of temptation's way. Find a quiet, well-lighted, nonsocial place where you won't be disturbed. Take the phone off the hook. Have a snack or soda nearby.

Keep supplies handy. When you have a head of steam, going off to the store for a new pencil or eraser will undoubtedly dissipate it.

Be sure your references and source materials are easily accessible. Your dictionary should always be nearby. Keep *Writing Worth Reading*

around for questions about writing. If you are using research, check to see that your major sources are with you. Be sure your notes are together, legible, and in order.

Computer Tip

Keep all word-processing supplies close at hand and plentiful. This includes at least one box of unused disks, one ream of printer paper, and at least one extra printer ribbon, ink cartridge, or toner cartridge.

Developing

Once you have settled on a subject and formulated a thesis, however tentative, start jotting down major supporting ideas. A good source of supporting ideas is what you generated from brainstorming, directed questioning, or one of the other invention techniques. Identify the ideas that relate directly to the thesis you are working on. Try the invention techniques again, this time with your thesis in mind.

Your major supporting ideas will probably be somewhat general or abstract, and you will need to develop evidence for them. *Evidence* is whatever the reader will accept without further explanation. It includes numbers, quotations, examples, the word of someone you and your reader both trust, the values you know you share. It is the common ground you and your reader can stand on. (For more on evidence, see Chapter 6, Using Evidence.)

Evidence lies also in your sources. If you are, for instance, writing an essay on a novel, refer to notes you took while reading, and page through the novel itself for apt quotations or examples. If you are writing about history, look in your textbook and other readings for facts you can use. If you are discussing a problem in sociology, develop your ideas by working up a chart or graph based on statistics you have collected. Always take careful notes.

You might find the *reasons chain* helpful in developing support. This is a chain of *because*s. Write down your thesis, and then write down *because*. Fill in the answer, and again write *because*. Keep going along that chain until the answer is self-evident. Then go back to the beginning and see whether you can develop another chain of *because*s.

Here is the reasons chain in action:

Thesis: The college curriculum should include a two-semester history requirement.

Because: It is the best way to ensure a knowledge of where we came from and how our values developed.

Because: Only with the knowledge of history can we fully understand contemporary society.

Because: Only when we fully understand our society will we know how to protect democracy.

Because: History teaches us that forces hostile to democracy lurk just below the surface of society and can break out at any time.

Because: The frequent reorganization of the Ku Klux Klan is an example.

We have probably hit the self-evident wall here, and so we try another chain based on the same thesis:

Because: Without a requirement, many students would not take the history course.

Because: The drive toward professionalism is so great in our schools.

That may or may not be self-evident. If not, the *because* might require some statistical evidence or a quotation from an expert.

Now we should look back at all the *because*s to be sure we have followed them. We can see, for instance, that the first *because* mentions cultural values, but we did not build a chain on that. It might be fruitful to forge that chain of reasons.

Because: Only if we understand how our values developed will we be able to protect them.

By means of the reasons chain, you can extend your understanding of your thesis and be far along the way to organizing. But always make certain that your evidence connects directly with your major point.

Organizing

When you organize, you systematically arrange the ideas and evidence that you intend to use in your essay. If you're not certain about your thesis, you may need to draft first, organize later. But if you have a good idea of what your thesis is, then arranging your ideas before you begin to write provides a sense of direction through the morass of facts and helps you find connections between important points.

As a first step, identify your major supporting ideas, making sure they are neither repetitious nor irrelevant. Under each, jot down the supporting evidence. If a piece of evidence won't fit, don't force it. If you have not generated enough evidence, try one of the invention techniques—they can work for small as well as for large points. Invention techniques can also help you get started organizing because they can help you see connections and group similar ideas.

Computer Tip

List your major points on your computer screen and check to be sure they are in the appropriate order. If not, move them around and test a different order. Likewise, you can reorder your supporting points.

With split screens and multiple windows, put your note file in one window and your major points in another. Scroll through your notes, find the ones you want, and lift them across to the appropriate major point.

Summary Paragraph. At this stage try writing a paragraph that begins with your thesis and continues with each major point expressed in a complete sentence. Such a summary paragraph could help you determine your general direction and focus. Here is a paragraph encompassing the thesis and all the major ideas for an essay on the Electoral College:

Because the Electoral College is unnecessary and potentially dangerous, we should support efforts to change the system. It once worked. The “winner-take-all” principle for each state’s delegates is unfair to minority political groups. It violates the “one-person, one-vote” principle. It threatens the federalist system. There is also the problem of small states having inordinate influence. The victory could go to a candidate the majority of people don’t want. Many have suggested changes. The best would be direct election.

Although it will not appear in the final essay, this paragraph—the whole essay boiled down—will help the writer see forward.

Computer Tip

Put several inches of space between each sentence of your summary paragraph. Developing each of those sentences into a paragraph will form a preliminary sketch of your essay.

Outlining. Whether you are writing a personal essay or a lengthy research paper, outlining can help you organize and develop your material. When you outline, you first divide your thesis into major components or headings and then arrange your ideas under those headings. This process can help you in several ways:

It forces you to get that thesis down on paper.

It identifies the main points.

It indicates at least a tentative organizational plan.

Outlines come in both informal and formal varieties.

Informal outlines or scratch lists: Making an informal outline, or scratch list, sometime during the writing process can help you figure out where you’re going and how to get there. To write an informal outline, divide your thesis into its major parts and use each part as a heading under which you place your supporting ideas.

Suppose your thesis is “Although profit margins have improved, downsizing of various corporations has resulted in economic decline for all but the highest economic classes.” Within that sentence lie several major ideas that you can jot down in a word or short phrase:

profit margins
downsizing
economic decline
the highest economic classes

You can then place your supporting ideas under the relevant heading. Under *profit margins*, for instance, you might jot down reminders to define the term, check the annual reports of a few typical corporations, and compare those with earlier reports. Under *downsizing*, again remind yourself to define the term and compare the number of employees now working at your selected corporations with, say, the number of employees ten years ago. After treating all the key terms with similar care, you should pretty well know the shape of your essay and the information you need. Of course, the more detailed your outline, the closer you are to a completed essay.

Formal outlines: Formal outlines break down, group, and arrange your ideas more thoroughly than informal outlines or scratch lists. We call this type of outline *formal* because it is a detailed, methodical effort to set forth the ultimate shape and even the content of your paper.

As with the informal outline, you start by dividing your thesis into major elements. Now, just as you carefully divided your thesis, you divide your major elements into their component ideas, and, where feasible, continue to subdivide until you have all your evidence clearly identified. In this way, you preserve your major divisions and establish the relative importance of your minor ideas.

In devising a formal outline, follow the conventional system of numbered or lettered headings. In the following example, we outline an essay on the gun control controversy:

Thesis: The two sides of the gun control controversy line up over the issue of individual rights versus society’s needs.

- I. Background
 - A. Description of issue
 - B. Evidence of controversy
 - 1. News media
 - 2. Legislative action

- a. Federal
- b. State and local
- II. Individual rights
 - A. Constitutional rights
 - 1. Right to bear arms
 - a. Legislative history
 - b. Supreme Court interpretations
 - 2. Right to self-defense
 - B. Tradition of vigilantism or citizen policing
 - C. Need to exercise rights
 - 1. Increase in crime
 - 2. Inadequacy of police
- III. Society's needs
 - A. Need to oversee access to firearms
 - 1. Easy to purchase
 - 2. Hard to control
 - B. Need to limit consequences of both illegal and legal use of guns
 - 1. Crimes
 - a. Comparison of United States and Great Britain
 - b. Domestic violence and violence against strangers
 - 2. Accidents
 - a. Children
 - b. Adults
 - C. Changes in society since Constitution
 - 1. Intention of Founders
 - 2. Growth of police forces

This outline is called a *topic outline* because it sets forth the paper's main topics in words and phrases. If you want more detail, try a *sentence outline*. Write a complete sentence for each item. Number III.A.2. above might read

States that try to control traffic in firearms fail because different states have different laws and purchasers in stringent states can simply go into adjacent states where firearm laws are more relaxed.

You can add more detail if you wish. You could, for instance, subdivide III.A.1. into a. and b. and write:

- a. Sporting goods stores often provide handguns without identification.
- b. Many people order handguns from mail-order businesses, as did Lee Harvey Oswald, accused of killing John F. Kennedy.

How much you subdivide depends on how near the completed essay you want to get by means of an outline. A complete formal outline appears on pages 405–07.

Three general rules apply to making outlines. First, items on the same level should be of the same general importance: that is, I. should be of equal importance to II., A. to B., and so on. After all, the point of the outline is to understand the relative importance of topics.

Second, whenever you divide a level, you need at least two parts beneath it: you can't cut a cake into one piece. Under I., if you have A., you need B., and so on. Each level in the preceding outline follows this rule.

Computer Tip

Many word-processing programs offer convenient outlining tools that will automatically keep track of your numbering as you add and delete entries and subentries. If you haven't done so already, explore your word-processing software's capabilities for outlining.

Third, items at each level should be grammatically parallel. If A. is a complete sentence, B. should be also. If (1) is a phrase, (2) should be a phrase. Otherwise, you may find it difficult to grasp which ideas belong together and in what way.

Even if your outline is less formal than our example, be sure you connect all points in intelligible order
distinguish major points from minor ones and emphasize them accordingly
gather evidence adequate to support each point.

Computer Tip

When outlining, leave extra space between each item. As you read over the outline, assess the smoothness of the logical progression. If you can't get across the spaces easily, you need to rethink your outline.

Organic Progression. Organization is not only form, but also order. How do we decide what order our ideas should follow? The best organization is, not surprisingly, organic: one idea grows out of another, and the essay proceeds according to inherent connections. To see these connections, do as much reading as you think you should—in fact, do more. Be as comfortable with the subject as possible. And then, after reviewing your notes, free-write, brainstorm, talk it out with a friend, or just think about it. Work it over in your journal. The more familiar you are with the subject, the more likely you are to see connections that

appear natural, even inevitable. Here is the summary of one essay that grew organically:

Because of the inevitable depletion of fossil fuel sources, we must immediately seek new sources of energy.

Coal is becoming scarce and more hazardous.

People have therefore turned to nuclear energy.

Fission has great problems, including safety.

Fusion is safer but costly.

Wind and waves produce energy but can't be major sources.

A major source has been hydroelectric power, but its capacity is limited.

Although expensive, unlimited solar energy promises to be our best source of energy.

This “organic” progression is actually quite logical. The first idea (depletion of resources) leads to an example (coal) and a cause-and-effect argument (because coal is scarce, people have turned to nuclear energy) and so on: the seed idea of depletion grows into the final thought.

The least interesting essays are those in which one idea is placed next to another without thought to connection, like stacking logs: “First, second, third, and so on.” To test whether your essay is a stack of logs, reverse the order of its ideas. If you find that the order doesn’t matter, you have a stack of logs.

Drafting

Drafting should be the least pressured stage of writing. You should let your ideas flow—no one is going to read your first efforts. Drafting can be free-form fun, a snap compared with the other stages.

Well, that is a bit of an exaggeration. It does not work that way every time. Sometimes getting that first draft on paper is painfully slow. Perhaps the subject is genuinely difficult, and it takes time to cobble together all the bits of information or fill out each step in a closely reasoned argument. Sometimes those very first inkblots are paralyzing and sometimes you may spend hours at a midparagraph sentence. Even James Joyce, a great writer, would stare out the window for hours on end seeking the right word.

Although no method is right for everyone, here are some suggestions for the drafting stage:

1. Keep three basic elements of your paper always in view: your purpose, your reader, and the big picture. Think about your goal. Can you get there from here? Have new ideas opened up new routes? Con-

sider whether you should revise your plan. Think about your reader. Imagine how the essay will sound, how it will look, and how it will be received.

2. Don’t try to write and edit at the same time. Writing a sentence, crossing it out, rewriting it, and worrying over the grammar or the wording can slow you down and endanger your mental health. When you hit on a new twist, you don’t need to go back right away to adjust the beginning—you can do that on the next draft. If a start-and-go-back method is the best way for you, however, then follow it. But most of us find it easier and more effective to write now, edit later.

By all means, when those blinding flashes of insight tell you, “Hold on! That sentence on page 3 should have read . . .” or “Use that juicy Smith quotation on page 5,” obey them. Fix up the suddenly offending passage, or at least make a note of it. And if you have an idea you know will work beautifully at the end of the essay, be sure to make a note of that. But what writers usually need most at this stage is a natural rhythm in writing, not an agonizing halt-and-about-face process. Try to press on.

3. Do not, however, force sections that just will not come. Many writers cannot begin with the introduction; they think it demands too much formality and precision all at once. Yet some cannot get started until that first paragraph is right.

Don’t fret: if you feel happiest writing middle paragraphs, go straight to one. Use any invention technique at any point in drafting. The satisfaction you derive from the easier writing will often speed the harder writing.

Computer Tip

Try “triple priming”—a word-processing technique that helps you when you just can’t get started. First, force yourself to draft one version of a passage and save it. Wait twenty minutes and then, without consulting the first effort, write another version of the same passage and save it. After another twenty minutes, write a third version. You may be pleased with one version in its entirety or with parts of all three, or you may have to start all over again. But at least you have started to think your way through the passage.

4. Read aloud to yourself. When you come to a natural pause—for instance, the end of a section—give voice to your silent words. Reading aloud is a good way to stay in close touch with your writing. It will tell

you whether you are moving at an appropriate pace and whether the writing flows smoothly. Of course, you will revise later, but reading aloud can help you to anticipate your next moves. It may give you some new ideas, reveal rough spots, or encourage you.

5. Recognize signs of tension. This may sound more like therapy than writing advice, but it concerns every writer. Frustration tends to grow slowly for a while and then hit a point at which it sends you through the roof. If you feel frustration building, stop before you explode. Take a break. Take a walk. Take a nap.

Like frustration, fatigue is an enemy of good writing. If you begin to get very tired, rest your eyes and your mind. Stop writing. Of course, if your paper is due in two hours, not writing may be hard to do—a good reason to make sure you are never in that position.

6. Regard the first draft as provisional. Few if any writers ever get it right the first time. A first draft is almost bound to be changed and improved. Be ready—perhaps even eager—to revise.

Computer Tip

As you draft, you can make comments to yourself, using capitals, different fonts, or different type sizes. If a paragraph seems underdeveloped, write **Need more**. If you haven't quite proved your point, write **PROVE IT**. With this method you preserve your train of thought and you can return later to respond to your comments.

Tips for Developing, Organizing, Drafting

- Look in your background material and your invention notes for evidence and ideas that need developing.
- Identify your main ideas and place supporting ideas under them.
- Select a congenial method of organization: a summary paragraph, an informal outline, or a formal outline.
- Think about the organic progression of your major ideas; avoid stacking ideas.
- While drafting, bear in mind your purpose, your audience, and the big picture.
- Use the invention techniques to develop points.
- Remember that few writers can write and edit at the same time.
- Treat your first draft as temporary, subject to drastic change.

EXERCISES FOR DEVELOPING, ORGANIZING, DRAFTING

1. Choose two ideas from a recent invention exercise you've done—brainstorming, free writing, clustering, using a journal—and develop each one with three pieces of evidence. Draft a paragraph for each.
2. Imagine that you have been asked to write your autobiography, including your life-to-be. Free-write or brainstorm your life, and then plan how you would go about writing it. Divide the subject into major periods, themes, events, people, or however you want to organize it. Turn in your organizational plan.
3. With a partner, identify the major supporting ideas for or against one of the following theses. Now each of you choose a form of organization from this list: summary paragraph, informal outline, formal outline. Compare what you have done. What differences do you find? Which organization seems better and why?
Because of hazards to health, football should be prohibited in high school.
Medicaid encourages fraudulence on the part of doctors and hospitals and sloth and dependence on recipients and should cease.
To control the spread of drug abuse, federal employees should be subject to random testing.
4. From the following list, choose the topic that most appeals to you. Construct a thesis, develop support, organize your ideas, and draft an essay—in that order.
anything that makes you particularly angry
the virtues and foibles of your mother's family
allergies you have known
the value of wearing, or not wearing, a wristwatch
the pitfalls of borrowing and lending

I'm goin' to change my way of livin'
and if that ain't enough,
Then I'll change the way I strut my stuff.

—BILLY HIGGINS AND W. BENTON OVERSTREET
AMERICAN POPULAR-SONG WRITERS

REVISING: GETTING THE WRITING RIGHT

Novelist Vladimir Nabokov once said, "I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasures." Professional writers like Nabokov do not treat a first draft as sacred, engraved in stone. They know that words rarely march onto the page in perfect order, thoughts clear, sentences elegant, phrases vigorous, punctuation accurate. They know that to be a good writer is to be a good rewriter.