**Principles**

A *principle* is a definition of what writing, reading, and thinking *should be*. And when you define a principle well enough, you uncover methods for developing it. As a reader and a writer, you should consider various principles, try them out, and develop a body of effective personal principles. You should also develop *production spaces* that allow for the development of your principles.

For this course you will use my current four principles: **focus**, **depth**, **clarity**, and **life**. Develop these in all of your work, and I will use them to grade your work. I will now define these four principles and give some methods for developing them.

**Focus.** Focus is created through a choice.

Ways to develop focus:

1. Choose based on

* your interests, and
* what works.

1. Complete the text type’s *starting job*, a choice or choices, based on the text-type job, that guide idea development. In *idea development* you choose by generating, deepening, and organizing ideas.
2. Deeply and specifically connect ideas. Focus is formed (and re-formed) through

* the choice of a main idea (the specific connection of every idea on the paragraph, section, or overall level) and,
* the choice of a main idea's direction toward a job.

With any set of ideas there are many, many good ways to form a main idea, and there are many, many good ways to direct any main idea. You just need to choose one good way.

1. Be economical. Use as few ideas as possible, and get the most depth out of the ideas you use by deepening them and connecting them to one another.
2. Develop your *production spaces* according to your principles (adjusting the choices of place, time of day, work and break times, posture, materials, methods, attitudes, jobs, and goals). Choose what to work on now and what to work on later (giving yourself clear notes for future work). Generally follow the motto: “Good work, done early and gradually.” Production-spaces choices strongly affect your other choices.
3. Practice focus. Be aware of your choices (those made and those not yet made). Furthermore, choose how much to lock down a choice and how much to keep it open (for instance, when working on starting jobs, idea development, main ideas, etc.).
4. Actively read (as explained below).

**Depth.** A deep idea is (eventually) both unexpected and convincing.

Ways to develop depth:

1. Ask questions and try to answer them deeply (including *why*, *how*, and *definition* questions—and don’t avoid questions with seemingly obvious answers). Continue with more questions and more answers. Keep asking questions until you are satisfied with your depth.
2. Deeply and specifically connect ideas.
3. Contradict your ideas (and those of others).
4. Allow yourself to *play*. That means that you don’t exactly know what is going to happen or where your ideas will lead. You will figure it out as you go.
5. Depth is movement, change. Deeply and specifically connect ideas as you move through the text, creating a depth that builds continually and thus is always relatively unexpected (the “growing snowball” effect).
6. Depth can and should be shared, but it is fundamentally personal. In developing depth, follow your interests and your special way of thinking. Develop depth so that your ideas are unexpected and convincing for you, and then, secondarily, for an “ideal” reader (who wants to enjoy your work, who enjoys depth).
7. Practice depth. Practice assessing whether an idea is deep, how to push an idea into further depth, and when depth-development and depth-connection feels complete.
8. Actively read (as explained below).

**Clarity.** A clear style is precise and concise.

Ways to develop clarity:

1. State your ideas simply and naturally. Here are some ways to do that:

* When your idea is unclear, step back and ask yourself, “What am I trying to say here?” Then just say the idea aloud, simply and naturally. If it’s good, write it down (otherwise keep trying to say it), and you might compare the earlier version and the spoken version, using from either what seems best.
* Use an example or examples to make your more “real” and understandable.
* Transition precisely between your ideas (using repeated terms, thoughtful punctuation, transitional phrases, etc.). When it makes the writing clearer, state what you’ve done, what you are doing, or what you are going to do.
* Be consistent in your style (repeating the same patterns unless you have a good reason for changing them).

1. If there is a chance for confusion, define terms in the particular or deep way that you are using them.
2. Organize (group, order, cut) your words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and sections in order to build simply and understandably toward a main idea.

* Group. Decide what most clearly groups together (on the sentence level, paragraph level, and section level). Use paragraphs and sentence breaks to help you establish focal points, and to judge whether a focal point has sufficient focus and depth development.
* Order. Choose an effective “known-new” order for your words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and sections. Choose what you want to establish first as “known” and what you want to then establish as “new” in relation to it (based on what builds best toward the paragraph or section main idea). Transition precisely between your ideas.
* Cut. Be as concise as you can without damaging precision or life. Pretend that you are getting paid for every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, and punctuation mark that you can cut (or that you can replace with something shorter). A healthy balance between precision and concision gives the ideas “punch.”

1. Pace the time given to each idea (slow down or speed up) according to your ideas’ focus and depth.
2. Develop and choose the main idea for each paragraph, section, and overall text. Make the building of focus and depth toward the main idea clear. Be able to say the main idea as a “main idea statement” (a single statement, able to be stated with a single breath, that captures the focus and depth of the main idea, yet is as simple and understandable as possible). When doing so supports clarity, write down this “main idea statement” (usually at the beginning or end of the paragraph, section, or text). (Clarifying a “main idea statement” will help you to assess and develop its main idea.)
3. Develop clichés and hollow parts by building them toward precision (using the “stepping stone” technique).
4. Create a clear visual style. Space (vertically and horizontally) between parts in a way that is precise (easy to read) and concise. Be consistent in your use of all visual elements (spacing, font, etc.).
5. Practice clarity. Throughout the writing process (idea development, writing, revising) work toward the sweet spot where precision and concision meet.
6. Actively read (as explained below).

**Life.** A living style speaks in a present and developing voice.

Ways to develop life:

1. Choose a voice based on both

* who you are, and
* what works (for what you’re doing).

1. Shape that voice to be

* Tonally stimulating to the focus and depth (including purposeful shifts in tone),
* Musical,
* *Your* voice, but elevated in clarity and life. (Make sure that your style always sounds at least similar to something that you might say).

1. Grow your voice.

* Take ownership over your own writing. Include enough of your own personality to remind yourself that the writing is yours.
* Imitate voices that you like, while adjusting them to be fresh and fitting.
* Note parts of your writing that you like, and what you don’t like. In that way, shape your writing in a particular piece of writing and generally.
* Take risks. Make unexpected stylistic choices that complement the focus and depth of your ideas. (For example, trying out a strange punctuation mark, or subtle humor.)

1. Develop clichés and hollow parts by building them toward freshness (using the “stepping stone” technique).
2. Create effective contrasts within the text.
3. Talk to the reader with *immediacy*. As appropriate, present yourself as thinking (developing and adjusting ideas, making choices) and feeling emotions within the “time” of the text (as the reader moves from start to finish). Ask questions and give commands when appropriate.
4. Enjoy your work when you can, and “tilt” your attitude toward enjoying it.
5. Practice life. Listen for life in the speaking and writing of others, and practice performing your voice when speaking and writing.
6. Actively read (as explained below).

**Active Reading**

Good reading is an essential part of good writing. Read well through *active reading*: performing a text as you read, marking interesting or useful parts, writing down ideas and questions, and looking back over your active-reading work. Practice reading and writing by doing a lot of reading and writing!

* Develop **focus** and **depth** while reading by writing down new ideas, modifications, problems, questions, and jobs as you go.

Check for focused and deep main ideas (paragraph, section, overall). Develop any lack in focus or depth. Adjust main ideas in relation to other main ideas (paragraph, section, overall). Build each idea toward a focused and deep main idea.

If you discover the need for more depth as you revise, try the following: Read through the paragraph or section that you want to deepen. Pick the one or two ideas that interest you most. Try to deepen those ideas (in themselves and in their connection with the other ideas).

Sometimes when you read your own writing it will give you new ideas. Be ready to write those down. As you revise the writing will have different things to say to you, and the ideas that it gives will make the writing tighter and tighter.

* Develop **clarity** and **life** while reading by performing the text and listening to the text’s style. Listen for clarity and life in the forward flow of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. (And if mumble through the text rather than perform it, I am more likely to make bad style edits.) Adjust the text where it lacks clarity or life, then listen to the flow again, repeating this process as needed. Create a smooth and effective performance flow from part to part.

Try to separate yourself from your text so that you can read it like it’s not yours. To help separate yourself from your text, take a break from the text before reading it again.

* Try these different modes of reading:
  + Read silently or aloud.
  + Read your text as if it were a speech.
  + Read on paper or a computer or a phone.
  + Read to someone, with a pencil ready to mark down parts and ideas that need development (or pretend that you are reading to someone).
  + Let someone read and give you notes (and tell them what to look for when that helps). Apply notes from a teacher or editor, including notes from previous writing.
  + Without directly reading the text, discuss it and its ideas with someone.
  + Try out different places to start and stop (the whole thing, reverse-paragraph order, a certain section, a certain paragraph).
* The development of one of the principles helps in the development of them all. (For example, developing the clarity of an idea can give you new ways to develop its depth.) So all of the principles (including clarity and life) should be developed throughout the writing process (idea development, writing, and revising)—and not just at the end. Even when you are writing in scratch form, push your ideas toward clarity and life.
* Develop your work until each part is focused, deep, clear, and alive. When a part is lacking, don’t see it as a failure; see it as an opportunity: either develop it right away or give yourself a note to develop it later. Remember the “stepping stone” mindset: use a problem as a “bridge” toward success.