

# Writing Strategies

## WRITING BASIC COLLEGE ESSAYS

Most essays combine **rhetorical modes** (strategies that help organize material): a process/analysis might also be an argument; a narrative might also compare and contrast; a compare and contrast might have paragraphs of cause and effect; most essays have description, and so on. The best writers don't rely on the five-paragraph format, though it helps to know how to compose in that format before moving on to other, more complex styles. The strategies in this section have been broken down into their basic rhetorical modes for clarity. It's up to the writer to decide which strategies need combining (in college, often the prompt will indicate the required format).

### Getting Started with Prewriting

Most writers have trouble getting started, but the temptress Procrastination can wreak havoc with grades, so resist the appeal of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other distractions. Traditional brainstorming techniques are outlined below for those who need a reminder. The standard ideas don't work for everyone, so use a method you deem

comfortable, whether it's listing, clustering, freewriting, or simply writing notes on scrap paper as ideas occur throughout the day. Sometimes, it only takes determination to get something down on paper. Ernest Hemingway, in *A Moveable Feast*, wrote, "But sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get it going, I would sit in front of the fire and squeeze the peel of the little oranges into the edge of the flame and watch the sputter of blue that they made. I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, 'Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence.'" If you write one sentence, another will usually follow.

### Traditional Brainstorming

**FREEWITING** Freewriting, a simple but useful technique, can help unstuck you. Write down any weird or not-so-weird ideas buzzing about in your head, without any thought to structure, grammar, or spelling. Just write nonstop. Don't even think. Just write, write, write. Though most of what comes out might look like alien messages from deep space, a brilliant idea or two might be lurking, waiting for you to discover and develop it.

**CLUSTERING** Write your topic in the center of a piece of paper and draw a circle around it. Draw lines out from your topic, like spokes of a wheel, and draw bubbles, like balloons, at the end of each line. Fill in each bubble with one thing that pops into your mind about your topic. Repeat this technique for each bubble.

**LISTING** If you're the type of person who likes to make daily lists, here's the brainstorming technique for you. Simply write your topic at the top of a sheet of paper and list whatever flashes into your head about that topic. A list might look like this:

***Too Much Childhood Supervision***

- no free time to play
- too many structured activities
- what happened to playing baseball in the park with no adults?
- need to learn independence
- too much pressure
- don't learn decision making
- can't solve their own problems
- must have some supervision and guidance, of course

Next, choose three or four interesting ideas from the list and write them at the top of a sheet of paper:

<i>independence</i>	<i>problem solving</i>	<i>decisions</i>
wimps	can't fix things	which college
too afraid	run to mom and dad	which major
live at home	disagreements	which job
can't grow up		

You could keep this up into infinity, but you only need to keep listing until you feel you have some solid ideas to start your essay. What you now have is an idea for a thesis and three developmental paragraphs and ideas for examples to support each idea.

### **Basic Try-Not-to-Rely-on-It Five-Paragraph Format**

This format works well as a first draft or perhaps on an in-class essay to help keep thoughts organized under time pressure, and it's a good place to start for novice writers, though once you master this basic strategy, it's time to move on to other rhetorical modes and blending styles. Basic essays consist of an introduction with a hook and a thesis, plan of development, three body paragraphs with topic sentences, and a conclusion.

### **THESIS STATEMENTS**

A thesis can occur anywhere in a paper: some writers lead up to their thesis at the end of an essay; others use a transition paragraph after the introduction, and occasionally a writer will sneak the thesis in somewhere in the middle of the paper, but traditional essays usually have the thesis stated at the end of the introduction. Before beginning to write an essay, it helps to have a working thesis in mind—a preliminary statement that might change as you think through ideas or research a topic.

Thesis statements control the essay; everything in the paper should relate to the thesis. It is the main point, often expressed as an opinion. Though not all papers require a thesis, most college writing does. There are a few rules to keep in mind when writing a thesis:

1. A thesis cannot be a fact. It should express a point of view or opinion. The statement "Television ads supporting presidential candidates often denigrate the opponent" is a fact, not a thesis.
2. A thesis should not be too broad: "There are many controversies surrounding televised presidential campaign ads" needs to be nar-

rowed to a specific issue. This statement also breaks the first rule: it's a fact.

3. A thesis should not announce its topic: avoid phrases like “I will discuss,” “this essay will show,” “this essay will analyze,” or “I think, I believe, it is my opinion.” The first three don't express an opinion, and the last three are generally considered weak style and a way of avoiding taking a strong stand. It's a you-can't-attack-my-opinion strategy. “This essay will analyze the controversy surrounding televised presidential campaigns” is not an appropriate thesis: it is too broad and doesn't express an opinion.

1. To build a strong thesis, start with a broad topic:  
American politics
2. Narrow the topic by carving out a special area, perhaps through brainstorming:  
Television's coverage of presidential campaigns.
3. Take a stand on the topic in a rough thesis (using a should/because construction in steps three and four will help determine if the statement has an opinion and plan of development):  
Television's coverage of presidential campaigns **should be** limited.
4. Add your plan of development—your reasons for your opinion that will be used in topic sentences: presidential campaigns **should be** limited **because** the media's bias for or against a candidate misleads the public, avoids the issues, and gives the media too much power over the outcome of elections.

This thesis, though roughly worded, has a clear focus, makes a statement rather than announcing the topic, and expresses an opinion (an opponent could argue against it).

5. Recast the thesis, smoothing out the basic wording:  
Although many might argue that limiting television coverage of presidential campaigns violates the idea of free press and free speech, the media's bias for or against a candidate takes focus away from the issues, misleading and unfairly influencing the public's view, granting the press too much power over the outcome of elections.

## Plan of Development and Topic Sentences

Like a thesis statement controls the ideas in the essay, the topic sentences control the ideas in the body paragraphs. Key words in the topic sentence can help keep the paragraph from wandering off topic. Looking at the plan of development in the above thesis—the three reasons stated at the end of the statement—the **first body paragraph** would focus on the media's ability to sway elections by taking focus away from the issues; **the second body paragraph** would discuss misleading and influencing the public's view; **the last reason** would argue the power of the press. Notice that each reason is discussed in the order it appears in the thesis.

This type of organizational strategy usually saves the strongest or most important reason for the last body paragraph, pyramiding paragraphs on top of each other, least to most important.

**Example Topic Sentence:** Though claiming objectivity, the mainstream media often has its own agenda, unfairly misleading the public about a candidate's views by focusing on personal rather than the political issues.

## BODY PARAGRAPHS

In addition to topic sentences, body paragraphs contain evidence—specific examples, supporting facts, statistics, explanations, personal experience, and description; if it's an argument essay (like the above topic) it might also incorporate refuting the opposition (see the “Writing Strategies for Argument”). In the topic on media bias, body paragraphs might contain examples of news broadcasts, perhaps contrasting interviews with two candidates that illustrate the types of questions the interviewer asked that helped the candidate avoid the issues, or description of misleading ads, and perhaps researched facts on how much air time candidates received in the last election, or supporting quotations.

Use numerous examples to support each point. A paragraph that relies on one or two examples weakens the stand, failing to sway many readers that you have a reasonable, balanced essay.

## Concluding Strategies for Body Paragraphs

Body paragraphs—and all other paragraphs—contain **concluding statements**, a last sentence that finishes off the paragraph, wrapping up the idea before transitioning into the next point. Writers use different strategies for concluding a paragraph, depending on their purpose.

### 1. Outrage Dressed as Statistic

Deborah Blum's essay "The Chemist's War" uses a bald, shocking statistic at the end of paragraph #4. Her essay recounts events during Prohibition when the federal government poisoned industrial alcohol manufactured in the United States to discourage people from drinking bootleg liquor. The statistic, stated matter-of-factly, outrages readers who, like Blum, were unaware that the government had gone to such lengths to enforce this law:

Frustrated that people continued to consume so much alcohol even after it was banned, federal officials had decided to try a different kind of enforcement. They ordered the poisoning of industrial alcohols manufactured in the United States, products regularly stolen by bootleggers and resold as drinkable spirits. The idea was to scare people into giving up illicit drinking. **Instead, by the time Prohibition ended in 1933, the federal poisoning program, by some estimates, had killed at least 10,000 people.**

Calling it "the federal poisoning program" and dangling the number of deaths at the end of the paragraph, neatly concludes the point, giving the reader cause to pause at the sheer callousness of the federal government, tying to the topic sentence in her next paragraph, "Although mostly forgotten today, the 'chemist's war of Prohibition' remains one of the strangest and most deadly decisions in American law-enforcement history." (The word "deadly" transitions to "killed," and "chemist's war" to "poisoning program".)

### 2. Provocative Questions

Though many handbooks and instructors advise students to avoid asking questions in an essay, professional writers use questions successfully, knowing that sometimes a provocative question can leave a reader thinking and feeling, lingering over the paragraph or anxious to move on to the next. In "The Surfing Savant" by Paul Solotaroff, an essay about a gifted surfer, Clay Marzo, with Asperger's syndrome, a form of high-functioning autism, he begins the second body paragraph describing all of the things that Marzo—though elegant, confident, and graceful on a surfboard—has trouble doing on land. Toward the end of this paragraph, he writes:

In middle school, Marzo was treated so badly that his mother, Jill, had to pull him out and teach him at home, where he wouldn't be punched for staring at wannabe thugs. His agonizing shyness has fractured his family and sparked ugly set-tos with his father, Gino, an old-school hard-hat striver who accused him of flaking off and screwing up his shot at stardom. **That charge hurts Clay more than the others combined: when your own father misconceives you so badly, how can you hope that strangers will understand?**

That question tugs at the readers' minds and hearts, hopefully evoking compassion for those afflicted with such a difficult and misunderstood disorder.

Bernard Cooper, in "Burl's," uses two questions at the end of a body paragraph that illustrate the conflict he felt as a young boy struggling with his sexual identity. In this paragraph, his parents have sent him to gymnastics class to try to "tilt" him toward the male side of his nature:

When the first day of gymnastics class arrived, my mother gave me money and a gym bag and sent me to the corner of Hollywood and Western to wait for a bus. The sun was bright, the traffic heavy. While I sat there, an argument raged inside my head, the familiar, battering debate between the wish to be like other boys and the wish to be like myself. **Why shouldn't I simply get up and go back home, where I'd be left alone to read and think? On the other hand, wouldn't life be easier if I liked athletics, or learned to like them?**

These questions illustrate the battering debate, his struggle to reconcile his desire to be himself with what others wanted and expected him to be—indeed, a battering debate.

In "Nourishing Awareness in Each Moment," Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh ends paragraph #2 with a series of questions that are statements in disguise:

Do you ever find yourself watching an awful TV program, unable to turn it off? The raucous noises, explo-

sions of gunfire, are upsetting. Yet you don't get up and turn it off. Why do you torture yourself in this way? Don't you want to close your windows? **Are you frightened of solitude—the emptiness and the loneliness you may find when you face yourself alone?**

These questions accuse the reader with the words *torture* and *frightened*; most will have to admit to occasionally falling into this TV trap.

### 3. Concluding Quotation

Though generally you want to lead in and out of quotations, sometimes they are more affective left on their own at the end of a paragraph, with just the lead-in.

In the second paragraph of “The Culture of Celebrity,” Joseph Epstein, after discussing the unruliness of words, how they seem to capriciously change meanings, their refusal to “remain in place and take orders,” he ends with a famous quote, **“‘The language,’ as Flaubert once protested in his attempt to tell his mistress Louise Colet how much he loved her, ‘is inept.’”**

### 4. A Short Sentence for Impact

Sometimes brevity speaks louder than a lengthy sentence or other technique. In paragraph #5 of “Joyas Voladoras,” Brian Doyle writes:

Mammals and birds have hearts with four chambers. Reptiles and turtles have hearts with three chambers. Fish have hearts with two chambers. Insects and mollusks have hearts with one chamber. Worms have hearts with one chamber, although they may have as many as eleven single-chambered hearts. Unicellular bacteria have no hearts at all; but even they have fluid eternally in motion, washing from one side of the cell to the other, swirling and whirling. No living being is without interior liquid motion. **We all churn inside.**

That short, impactful sentence, loaded with meaning, shifts the seemingly scientific discussion to his real point—heartbreak, both literally and metaphorically, leading into his beautiful, specific conclusion about the joys and agonies of the human heart.



Clayton Collins, in his essay on the neurologist Oliver Sacks and his work with music, quotes Sacks:

Sacks remembers a woman with Parkinson's who would sit perfectly still until "activated" by the music of Chopin, which she loved and knew by heart. She didn't have to hear a tune played. "It was sometimes sufficient to give her an opus number," Sacks says. "You would just say 'Opus 49,' and the F-minor *Fantasy* would start playing in her mind. **And she could move.**"

The remarkable fact that a woman frozen with Parkinson's can suddenly move upon hearing a scrap of music is best stated briefly, startling and emphatic.

Joyce Carol Oates, knowing the value of the short sentence, at the end of paragraph #3 in "On Boxing," after describing the beauty of the sport, simply writes "**All is Style.**"

## STRATEGIES FOR CREATING TITLES

Many titles—whether films, essays, novels, songs, or plays—often seem familiar, a where-have-I-heard-that-before refrain. Writers forage through history, literature, pop culture, music, film, almost every conceivable place, for snappy titles. A title is the first part of the essay readers see; don't bore them with one of those my-summer-vacation titles: "Animal Rights" or "Comparison Essay" or "Essay #1." Why title an essay "Animal Rights" when you can use something provocative that jumps off of a bumper sticker and gives it a little twist like "Save the Whales, Screw the Shrimp" by Joy Williams?

With electronic devices like iPhones and iPads, iPods and laptops, it's easy to have quick access to sources to pillage for titles. Scroll through the iPod for song titles to borrow; look at the Netflix list for films; google a dictionary of quotations for a famous quote and snag a few words that fit the topic; visit Amazon.com or the Barnes and Noble website for book and magazine titles; pick a favorite TV station and peruse the film show titles. *The History Channel*, *Animal Planet*, *Discovery* can also be ravaged. Much old literature—poems, plays, short stories, even novels—can be found on the web. It shouldn't take long browsing to find a title that fits your topic. Below are a few categories with examples from numerous writers who have pillaged other sources for strong titles. Writers borrow from a wide range of sources, including from each other.

**Literature** (novelists borrowing from poetry, essays, and the Bible).

*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck: from a line in a poem by Robert Burns called “To a Mouse.”

*East of Eden* by John Steinbeck from Genesis 4:16.

*Tender Is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald from “Ode to a Nightingale” by John Keats.

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway from “Meditation” 17 by John Donne.

*Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley from Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*.

*No Country for Old Men* by Cormac McCarthy from a line in the poem “Sailing to Byzantium” by William Butler Yeats.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou from a line in the poem “Sympathy” by Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

*Where Angels Fear to Tread* by E.M. Forester from “Essay on Criticism” by Alexander Pope.

**Music and Film** (essayists, novelists, and filmmakers borrowing from music and film)

“Somebody’s Baby” by Barbara Kingsolver, from the song “Somebody’s Baby” by Jackson Browne.

“A Voice for the Lonely” essay by Stephen Corey, a twist on “Only the Lonely” by Roy Orbison.

“Roll Over Bach, Too!” essay by Jack Kroll, a twist on “Roll Over, Beethoven” by the Beatles.

“Monster Mash” essay by Jack Kroll, from the song of the same title by Bobby Pickett.

*She’s Come Undone* by Wally Lamb, from the song of the same title by The Guess Who.

*Stand by Me* film, title borrowed from the song “Stand by Me” by Ben E. King.

*Sweet Home Alabama* film, title from the song “Sweet Home Alabama” by Lynyrd Skynrd.

“Modern Times” essay by Lawrence Weschler from the silent Charlie Chaplin film *Modern Times*.

**History and Pop Culture**

*The Big Bang Theory* TV series, borrowing from science.

*One Potato, Two Potato: The Folklore of American Children* a book by Mary and Herbert Knapp borrowing a line from a children’s rhyme.

“Got Corn?” an essay in the April 2012 *Smithsonian* magazine from the “Got Milk?” ads.

*Batteries Not Included* title of a film borrowed from the disclaimer on the side of electronics boxes. Student Juan Diaz titled a paper on cereal icons “Milk Not Included.”

“Fiddling While Africa Starves” an essay by P.J. O’Rourke, borrowed from history, the Emperor Nero who, it is said, fiddled while Rome burned.

“Name That Tune” by Louis Menand, the title a play on an old game show, Name That Tune. Brainstorm a list of game show titles and change a word to fit your topic. (This idea works well as a group activity.)

## HOOKS, INTRODUCTIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Numerous standard tricks for hooking the reader work well: tell a mini-story, describe a scene, ask a question, use a startling remark or statistic, a quotation—but taking these standard tips and reinventing them can generate more lively hooks and introductions. These same techniques—with a little reworking—can be used in either introductions or conclusions, with a few exceptions, noted below.

### Storytelling—The Personal Anecdote

This standard often works well, depending on the topic or the experience. Barbara Kingsolver, in “Somebody’s Baby,” begins her essay on Americans’ callous treatment of children not their own, with an anecdote that contrasts Spain’s loving treatment of her four-year-old daughter with the surliness of the Americans:

As I walked out the street entrance to my newly rented apartment, a guy in maroon high-tops and a skateboard haircut approached, making kissing noises and saying, “Hi, gorgeous.” Three weeks earlier, I would have assessed the degree of malice and made ready to run or tell him to bug off, depending. But now, instead, I smiled, and so did my four-year-old daughter, because after dozens of similar encounters I understood he didn’t mean me but her.

This was not the United States.

In her defense of “Naps,” Barbara Holland opens her essay by recounting an incident in France, being stranded on her boat in the canal because the gatekeeper was taking a nap.

In France, on a rented canal boat, my friends and I gazed in despair at the closed oaken gates of the lock. We'd come to them only seconds after the witching hour of noon, but we were too late. There was no one to open the lock for us; l'eclusiere was at lunch, and after lunch she would lay herself down, close her eyes, and nap. At two, but not before, she would emerge refreshed from her square granite house and set the great cogs in motion.

She uses this mini-story to illustrate that other countries take a rest in the middle of the day, unlike Americans who toil on in the afternoon, getting very little done as a result of skipping naps.

### **Storytelling—The Not-So-Personal Anecdote**

Often, writers will borrow stories from history, the news, or other sources. (When using excavated stories, it's best to put them in your own voice rather than quoting.) In "The Chemist's War," Deborah Blum begins her essay on the government alcohol poisoning program during Prohibition with a harrowing news story from history illustrating the results of this misguided idea.

It was Christmas Eve, 1926, the streets aglitter with snow and lights, when the man afraid of Santa Claus stumbled into the emergency room at New York City's Bellevue Hospital. He was flushed, gasping with fear: Santa Claus, he kept telling the nurses, was just behind him, wielding a baseball bat.

Before hospital staff realized how sick he was—the alcohol-induced hallucination was just a symptom—the man died. So did another holiday partygoer. And another. As dusk fell on Christmas, the hospital staff tallied up more than sixty people made desperately ill by alcohol and eight dead from it. Within the next two days, yet another twenty-three people died in the city from celebrating the season.

(Yes, it is acceptable to have two paragraphs for an introduction either for emphasis or to break up an otherwise too-long paragraph.)

### **Storytelling—Borrowing from Myth, Fable, Fairy Tale, and Legend**

With so many of these stories available online (an education website is usually the best source), it's easy to forage for a story with a theme that

complements a topic, and they work for either **introductions or conclusions**. Summarize and rewrite them rather than copying and quoting; also lead in and out of these stories to connect them to the thesis (see “Paraphrasing” and “Summarizing”). Libraries have numerous books like *Bullfinch's Mythology*, *Native American Myths and Legends*, *Irish Folk Tales*, and many multicultural collections of fairy tales.

These sources spark endless ideas: a psychology paper on narcissistic personality disorder with the Greek myth of Narcissus, the beautiful young man who fell in love with his own reflection, thinking it a beautiful nymph; a paper on sleep disorders paired with the god of sleep and dreams, Morpheus; an essay on too much drinking amongst college students with a story of Bacchus or Dionysus; mothers jealous of their daughters with the Grimm's “Snow White”; a definition essay on pride with Grimm's “Godfather Death.”

*Aesop's Fables* uses animal characters as stand-ins for humans, reflecting on human nature, so they make good fodder for a number of topics: definition papers on different human qualities like anger (“The Farmer and the Dog”), ingratitude or parental neglect (“The Cuckoo, The Hedge-Sparrow, and the Owl”), hypocrisy (“The Fox and the Cat”). These fables also work in essays on animals, for example “The Crow and the Pitcher,” to illustrate the intelligence of the crow.

### Making Use of Symbolism, Simile, and Metaphor

Writers often glean material from symbol dictionaries for introductions, body paragraphs, or conclusions. In “Disposable Rocket,” John Updike opens with a comparison: “Inhabiting a male body is much like having a bank account; as long as it's healthy, you don't have to think about it.” Reg Saner, in “Tree Beyond Imagining” uses several metaphors and similes in his introduction: “Seeing is not believing. Any tree 'acting out' in such hogwild and crazy ways—or so I used to feel—can't be truly arboreal. This one thinks it's a mad dog. Here's another trying to prove chaos might be a conifer. Yet another so riven, so warped, it looks like self-knowledge.” Gordon Grice in “Black Widow” discusses the symbol of this misunderstood arachnid, how we “project our archetypal terrors” onto the spider. Edward Hoagland, in “The Courage of Turtles,” opens his essay with this comparison: “A turtle is a kind of bird with the governor turned low.” (At this writing, online symbolism dictionaries have not proven useful as they mostly relate to dream symbolism.)

### Famous Quotations and Literary Openings

Dictionaries of quotations, another language resource to plunder, usually alphabetized by topic, are easy to navigate and contain a wide range

of subjects with several quotations for each entry by people ranging from Shakespeare to politicians, scientists, and philosophers—people ancient and modern, with widely different views.

Snippets of poems can also help build an introduction. Jack Kroll opens his essay with lines from Homer's *Illiad* to illustrate our long fascination with horror:

Then his teeth flew out; from two sides, blood came to his eyes; the blood that from lips and nostrils he was spilling, open-mouthed; death enveloped him in its black cloud.

Joyce Carol Oates opens her essay “On Boxing” (not in this edition) with a quote by Irish featherweight champion Barry McGuigan:

Why are you a boxer, Irish featherweight champion Barry McGuigan was asked.

He said, “I can't be poet. I can't tell stories.”

If a dictionary of quotations doesn't turn up a perfect quote, check the internet for old poetry and lines from plays and stories (similar to the advice under the “Titles” section).

See Section Five for advice on blending quotations.

**Startling Remarks** A short, startling sentence in the first line of an introduction or an appropriate comparison will usually get the reader's attention:

“A lot of hummingbirds die in their sleep.” Diane Ackerman

“I hunt black widow.” Gordon Grice.

“Oliver Sacks danced to the dead.” Clayton S. Collins

“I loved Prince when I was thirteen, and that was humiliating.” Chuck Klosterman

“Were you there?” Jack Kroll

Writers build on these remarks and comparisons to flesh out their introductions (see the essays for the complete introductions).

## Riddles

Professional writers use this versatile technique for topics ranging from animals, archaeology, and icons, to fairy tale characters, television per-

sonalities, and mental disorders. This riddle by George Hollister for a bird magazine uses short sentences and metaphoric language, saving the more obvious clues—"he doesn't need to fly because he can run faster" and "eats the snake"—for the end of the paragraph: "He's half tail and half feet. The rest of him is head and beak. When he runs, he moves on blurring wheels. He can turn on a dime and leave change. He doesn't need to fly because he can run faster. He kicks dirt in a snake's face and then eats the snake." The answer, of course, is a roadrunner.

Riddles can be tricky; they need to be challenging enough to intrigue the reader but not so difficult that they're impossible to guess.

Many instructions for writing riddles appear on the web, though mostly for poetry writing. Prose riddles leave more options as they don't have to rhyme. These basic guidelines use a student riddle by Sarah Cabbell in a fundamentals of composition course to exemplify some steps for creating riddles:

1. **After deciding on a topic, list the unique and significant details:** tentacles with suckers, no skeleton, is difficult to spot because it blends in with the rocks, people think it's deadly, it squirts ink, lives in the ocean.

If Sarah had written this list up as it is, the answer would be too obvious and spoil the riddle.

2. **Disguise obvious clues, using simile, metaphor, synonyms or antonyms:** instead of "it squirts ink" she compares it to a magician; tentacles become a skirt, and so on.
3. **Use the third person he, she, it, or they.** Sarah chose "it."
4. **Use simple or compound sentences (two sentences joined with a conjunction) to create interesting juxtapositions (the relationship of objects, perhaps ones that seem like contradictions but have enough truth to make them work):** "It has an excessive number of legs but is unable to walk."
5. **Build clues from the least obvious to the final clues that will help the reader guess, but not too easily:**

It is found throughout the world but can be hard to spot. It lives in the largest habitat on earth but makes its home in the smallest of places. It is thought to be deadly because of its legendary reputation from tall tales, but that is a misconception. Like a magician, it can perform a disappearing act. It seems to always wear a skirt, but because of its introverted personality, it never shows it off. It has an excessive number of legs but is unable to walk. It would be safe to say it is a real sucker.

6. **Reveal the answer in a second paragraph.** Sarah began her second paragraph with this **transition** sentence: “The octopus is one of the most misunderstood and mysterious animals in the ocean.”

**Personification** Applying human characteristics to an object challenges critical thinking, forcing the writer and the reader to think more complexly about a topic in order to find its not-so-obvious qualities. In an essay titled “It’s All in the Implications” (*Los Angeles Times*, 02/13/06), Pico Iyer personifies the word implication:

Once upon a time, there was a spirit called Implication. He didn’t get picked very often when the other kids were choosing teams, and he tended to live in the shadows. But he always had a sense of pride, deep down, because he knew that people would call on him in their most important moments: in bed beside someone they loved, or while on their knees whispering to what—or who—they believed in. Life wasn’t black or white, he knew; Implication was a friend of all the colors.

He continues the essay, with Implication being first blacklisted, becoming an outcast, then a fugitive when he walks into the post office and finds his name on the “10 Most Wanted List” along with Subtlety, Ambiguity, Diplomacy, and Mischief, a clever but grim commentary on the demise of language, lost to a world of quick sound bites.

Personification can make an **introduction** pop; it can also be combined with the riddle style. Think of a personification as a character sketch. Below is a list of details—a brainstorming list—that Ruth Gendler might have used for her personification of the quality “truth” (complete essay in the text).

### Guidelines for Personifying

1. Choose an object or human personality trait: **“Truth.”**
2. Assign a gender: **Male.**
3. Decide what the object or trait would look like if it were a person. No need to be detailed, but try to give it some physical characteristics: **Tall, unconventional looking, golden hair, short beard, spacious shoulders.**
4. What other qualities or objects would it have as friends or relatives: **Certainty and Uncertainty.**
5. Consider what type of job, hobbies, or activities would fit the personality profile: **Employed as a thief stealing illusions.**



**Fascinated with X-rays, photographs of cells, and the history of plants. Studies mime. Gentle nature, not sarcastic. Wrote film reviews but quit when he found his quotes taken out of context.**

6. Set the details up in a mini-story: **See the finished product in the text.**

### Extended Comparisons or Analogies

Though this technique works anywhere in an essay, it often makes a memorable conclusion. In Mark Twain's essay "Reading the River," he details what he gained and lost by becoming a river boat pilot on the Mississippi, concluding by comparing his inability to view the river simply for its beauty to a doctor who treats beautiful women only to see the disease:

No, the romance and beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat. Since those days, I have pitied doctors from my heart. What does the lovely flush in a beauty's cheek mean to a doctor but a "break" that ripples above some deadly disease? Are not all her visible charms sown thick with what are to him the signs and symbols of hidden decay? Does he ever see her beauty at all, or doesn't he simply view her professionally and comment upon her unwholesome condition all to himself? And doesn't he sometimes wonder whether he has gained most or lost most by learning his trade?

Try breaking down a social or political system to compare: In his research problem/solution paper, freshman composition student Robert Olswang compares the emperor penguin's social structure to socialism, drawing direct parallels, "His success and survival is due to a social cohesiveness that is not besieged by a systematic hierarchy where everyone is equal: where one goes, they all go." He builds on his comparison, using tenets of the socialist system to describe the penguins' actions. For the same assignment, another student used Zen Buddhism to compare to an egret.

Over the years, students have illustrated diverse, remarkable comparisons in their conclusions: a listing of abuse to a pair of old ballet slippers, that in the end, still have worth, can still dance; a daughter's relationship with her mother to a designer bag, an accessory for her mother to show off; a thorn tree to a father's anger. With a small bit of research and some thought,

writing memorable endings to essays becomes less of a struggle and banishes the tired restate-the-thesis conclusions teachers dread. With a few examples and some outside resources, imagination thrives.

## TRANSITIONS

An organized, well-written essay needs transitions between paragraphs and between ideas within paragraphs. Though writers use different strategies to transition, generally, the concluding line of one paragraph should have a link to a word or phrase in the first line of the next paragraph. Avoid high school transitions such as “first of all,” “secondly,” “however,” and “in conclusion.” There are stronger ways to transition:

### Using a different form of the same word to begin a new idea:

Barbara Holland uses “napper” and “napping” to transition between paragraphs #4 and #5:

“Fifteen minutes later the **napper** pops back to the surface as from time travel, bewildered to find that it’s only ten of two instead of centuries later.

Like skydiving, **napping** takes practice; the first few tries are **scary**.”

After this one-line paragraph, she moves into six, picking up the word “scary” and turning it into “scarier”:

“The American nap is even **scarier** because it’s unilateral.”

### Using words that mean the opposite:

In “Nourishing Awareness in Each Moment,” Thich Nhat Hanh ends his first paragraph with this line:

“Then I started a fire in the fireplace, and soon the crackling logs brought warmth back to the room.”

He builds on this idea of warmth in the first line of paragraph #2, steering the reader into another idea, using the opposite of warmth:

“Sometimes in a crowd we feel tired, **cold**, and lonely.”

He moves from physical warmth to emotional cold.

### Using words with similar meanings:

In "Meat" by Brian Doyle, at the end of paragraph three, he writes:

". . . Tommy was never going to be six feet tall, not in this life, and he was what even his mom called *husky*."

At the beginning of paragraph four, he ties the word *husky* to big guys:

"One time I asked Tommy why he called all the *big guys* Meat and he said it was just easier that way, learning their names was pointless because they all responded to the same simple stimuli."

In "A Voice for the Lonely," Stephen Corey uses the word "dawn" at the end of paragraph #1 with "early riser" in the beginning of paragraph #2; "transistor radio" at the end of #2, linked to "music" in paragraph #3.

**For more on transitions, see the "Styling" with "About Men" by Gretel Ehrlich and "Strategies for Writing the Personal Essay" for time transitions.**

Once finished with the big changes, work on editing for fragments, run-on sentences, punctuation, and other errors. It helps to read the paper aloud or have someone else read it. Reading the essay in reverse—beginning with the last sentence of the essay—isolates sentences, making it easier to spot mistakes.

### Revising and Editing

It's midnight the night before the paper is due. You've written a draft, so you're in good shape, right? Wrong. Most students think that having a draft means they can just hit spell check on the computer and then print. I admit that occasionally a student can pull this tactic off, but for the rest of us, we've only just begun. Writing means rewriting, rewriting, and more rewriting.

First, revise the paper. Revising means big changes, like adding or deleting information, reorganizing the essay, rewriting sentences, checking that the ideas are fully developed. Here's a list of questions to ask yourself about each developmental paragraph of your essay:

1. Can I add another example?
2. Can I add more information?
3. Can I describe something and make it more vivid for the reader?
4. Can I add a statistic or quote as evidence to strengthen my claim?
5. Can I explain a quote so the reader is clear on why I used it?
6. Have I related all of the material to my thesis statement or topic sentence?
7. Are there terms my reader may not understand (for example, surfing jargon) that I need to define?
8. Have I addressed all areas of the prompt?

All of these questions may not apply to every paper, but most of them will. You can always add an example or more information or description, and check to make sure that all of the material relates to the thesis or topic sentence.

Once revision is complete, edit for grammar, fragments, run-ons, comma splices, punctuation errors, and other mistakes. See the “Sweating the Small Stuff” for help and consult the glossary for examples of fragments, run-ons, and comma splices; review the rules in “Punctuation is Style: Basic Rules and Punctuation.”

## STRATEGIES FOR WRITING PERSONAL ESSAYS

Storytelling comes naturally. You tell stories almost every day. When trying to tell a story in writing, keep in mind that the reader can't ask questions. It's up to you to hold the reader's attention, make a point, keep to the story, and evoke a sense of time and place.

### Purpose

Why are you writing this story, sharing this memory? Though your purpose might be implied rather than stated directly, that purpose should be clear. Are you trying to inform, explain, teach, warn? Would the topic interest a general audience? Stories about car accidents or the horror of finding a significant other cheating don't offer much to the reader, even those who might have had the same experience. What kind of point can you offer that won't sound worn out? Don't drink and drive, or watch out for deceptive boyfriends or girlfriends, husbands or wives? David Sedaris's personal story about a conflict with a woman on an airplane who wanted to change seats comments on conflict/resolution. In “Mortality” by Bailey White, her car becomes a metaphor for aging. Bernard Cooper's “Burl's” explores not only sexual identity but an

epiphany he has that reality is not always what it seems. Have a thought-provoking purpose or the story falls flat.

### Zooming In

Most narratives zoom in on a small time period, and most writing books advise sticking to a 24-hour time period or less. For beginning writers, that's generally very good advice. Trying to write a life's story in a three-page essay, won't leave much room for detail and description. While experienced writers do sometimes flash forward or backward in time, like Edward Hoagland does in "The Courage of Turtles," many good narratives zoom in tight, like Lawrence Weschler's "Modern Times," which takes place in a few minutes in his office at work. The idea is to focus on a slice of life, to capture a meaningful moment in time. If you go much outside the 24-hour time frame, you could get into trouble with chronological order or confuse your reader by jumping in time without the proper transition.

### Time Transitions

Transitions—words or phrases that help you move smoothly from one idea to another—are crucial in narrative. When writing from memory, you make automatic adjustments in time in your head, but if you leap in time without informing your reader, confusion results. When you move your story in time, let the reader know with phrases like *later that day* or *the following morning*. If you do decide to make big leaps in time, use proper transition, time indicators like "When I was five" or "After I entered high school" to help the reader travel in time with you so the reader isn't confused, thinking a small child is doing something like driving a car.

### Evoking Senses

Another crucial element in writing memories is creating a vivid picture through description and sensory detail. You want the reader to hear, smell, taste, feel, see the experience. In "A Voice for the Lonely" Stephen Corey, instead of just telling the reader that it was quiet in the early mornings when he delivered newspapers, writes, "I recall stopping my brisk walk sometimes, especially in winter when every step squeaked and crunched on the snow that nearly always covered the ground, and marveling at how there were no sounds except those of my own making." He uses sound—squeaked and crunched—to show the silence. In "Burl's," Bernard Cooper describes the "medicinal odor of mothballs" that permeated his father's closet in paragraph #20, contrasting the smell of his mother's closet, "the air ripe with perfume"

in #22; the sense of touch, “But no matter how much I wanted them to fit, those shoes were as cold and hard as marble” and “I was seared by a gust of heat” in paragraph #5; sight, “In the periphery of my vision, the shelf of wigs looked like a throng of kindly bystanders”; taste, “tasted Tobasco sauce” in #4.

## WRITING STRATEGIES FOR EXPLAINING AND EXPLORING IDEAS

Most essays—while relying on a clear purpose, organized paragraphs with strong examples, vivid description, sentence variety, and specific details—often blend rhetorical modes: a narrative introduction for an argument paper; a definition paragraph in a cause and effect analysis; a contrast or comparison in a definition; and so on. Any of these modes can be combined to fit the writer's style or requirements of an essay.

### Comparison and Contrast

In a comparison or contrast essay, you're attempting to hold one thing up to another to make a point. In Pauline Kael's review of *The Little Mermaid*, she contrasts Disney's film version to the original story by Hans Christian Andersen to illustrate the inferiority of the Disney cartoon. Comparison shows similarities to make a point, while contrast focuses on differences. For beginning writers, it's sometimes easier to make a point by writing about differences, so the example illustrates a contrast.

There are two basic methods of organization for writing a comparison or contrast paper: one side at a time or point by point. In the one-side-at-a-time method—sometimes called the block method—the first half of the essay discusses one topic and the second half compares or contrasts the other topic. A paper like Kael's “The Little Mermaid,” contrasting Disney's *Cinderella* film with the old folktale from Grimms, might be organized like this:

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| Paragraph 1: | I. Introduction and Thesis  |
| Paragraph 2: | II. Disney Film <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Weak characterization</li> <li>b. Beauty wins as a primary lesson</li> <li>c. Spiritual element reduced to ninny fairy godmother</li> </ul> |
| Paragraph 3: | III. Grimms' Story <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Strong characterization</li> <li>b. Beauty comes from within</li> <li>c. Spiritual element in form of dead mother's spirit</li> </ul>    |
| Paragraph 4: | IV. Conclusion  |

Notice that the same points are covered for both versions. If you were to write in the second method, point by point, you would organize the essay this way:

- Paragraph 1: I. Introduction and Thesis
- Paragraph 2: II. Characterization
  - a. Disney: weak
  - b. Grimm: strong
- Paragraph 3: III. Beauty
  - a. Disney: beauty wins is primary lesson
  - b. Grimm: beauty comes from within
- Paragraph 4: IV. Spiritual Element
  - a. Disney spiritual element reduced to ninny fairy godmother
  - b. Grimm spiritual element in form of dead mother's spirit.
- Paragraph 5: V. Conclusion

Paragraphs don't always lay out so neatly into this formula. If paragraphs get too long, they might need broken up. For example, in the point-by-point method, break Characterization into two paragraphs: one for Disney and one for Grimm.

When comparing or contrasting, it's important to let the reader know which subject you're discussing by using transitions. Here's a list of transitions commonly used in comparison and contrast essays: *on the other hand, by contrast, similarly, by comparison*.

**CAUTION** Don't just show how two things are alike or different. There's no point to your essay if you fail to have an opinion. Why are you comparing? To show one's superiority over the other? To warn the reader? To promote understanding of an idea? You must have a **thesis statement**.

### Cause and Effect

Why do some young girls mutilate themselves? Why did the Anasazi Indians live in the remote cliffs and resort to cannibalism? What's causing the failure of our educational system? What caused the Los Angeles riots? Does excess television cause obesity in children? Cause and effect essays attempt to explain why something happens—causes—and the results of incidents—effects.

Usually results have many causes, so you want to examine your topic closely for hidden reasons. After the Los Angeles riots, many people blamed the failure of our court system to convict the police officers involved in the Rodney King beating, and while that event certainly triggered the riots, the causes are much more complex, rooted in many years of police brutality and poverty, among other things. If you're going to blame television for obesity in children, you'd better examine the children's eating habits and social lives. It could be that children who watch television and eat excessively do so because of another problem like being picked on in school or trying to escape painful family problems or abuse. It's rare that you can say "this caused that."

There's no one organizational strategy for writing cause and effect essays, but generally writers explain the problem and then examine the causes. For example, the causes of self-mutilation are complex: pressures of adolescence, self-blame, shame, anger, feelings of abandonment. To neglect one of these causes of this serious problem would result in simplistic thinking.

Often, in a short essay on a large event, it's better to narrow to a **specific cause**, though letting the reader know that many causes contributed to the event. The economic crash of 2008 had numerous causes, but the essay might focus on one contributor, the banking industry. The paper would focus more on the **effects**, though explaining in the first couple of paragraphs the problems with the banking industry followed by paragraphs discussing the results: unemployment, foreclosures, increase in homelessness and the amount of people on welfare, adults with children moving back in with parents.

A cause and effect essay on cheating in school might be first outlined for causes and effects:

#### "Cheating in School"

##### **Causes**

Peer pressure

Parental pressure

Laziness

Lack of ethics

Belief that everyone cheats

##### **Effects**

Not being prepared for the next level course

Getting caught cheating and kicked out of school

Difficulty getting accepted at another college

Not having the skills necessary for the job market

### Explaining a Process

Process Analysis essays break down a subject into its steps and explain to the reader how to do something: watch an animal in the wild, run a



marathon, grow tomatoes, tile a floor, or more serious topics like visit someone in prison. Often process essays take the command form **point of view** (see “Point of View” in “Sweating the Small Stuff”). Speech classes sometimes have students explain to the class how to do something in process analysis format.

Explaining or analyzing a process in writing isn’t much different from explaining it to a friend or to a class, though in writing, friends or peers cannot ask questions. Be aware of the audience by writing clear step-by-step instructions and considering the audience’s level of expertise. In an essay on how to grow orchids, a general reader—like your peers in a Speech class or an English teacher—will need more details and explanation than a gardening group that already has some experiencing tending plants.

In her essay “What Really Happened,” Madge McKeithen takes the reader through the detailed process of visiting a murderer in prison (one who murdered his wife, a friend of hers), from how to find the correctional institution in which the offender is incarcerated, through speaking with the lawyer who defended him, writing the request to visit, choosing a date, renting a car, checking into the facility, talking with the offender, receiving the hundreds of letters he sends over subsequent months, but most importantly, remembering her—the victim.

## WRITING STRATEGIES FOR DEFINING TERMS

Words can be slippery. They change meaning, wear disguises, take on new personas depending on who’s using them. Charity wears many masks, kindness one day, an insult to pride the next, sometimes a veil for greed. What determines greed for one person constitutes ambition for another. Words are master chameleons.

### Purpose

When writing a definition essay, the job is to rip off the masks, expose secrets; don’t be content with worn out definitions. Don’t write what everyone already knows about the word. For a more interesting paper, look at the side of the word nobody talks about. If you’re writing a paper defining the word *lonely*, don’t fall into the pity-all-the-lonely-people trap; you won’t offer your reader anything new; if, on the other hand, you take the road less traveled, as one student did, and write, “Loneliness doesn’t deserve pity or guilt. It deserves to be crushed in the street, crumpled under tires like dead leaves, crunched like a paper

bag. Maybe then, like the Phoenix that goes up in flames and rises from its own ashes, the lonely will create their own lives, stop hermiting themselves, learn to paint or take a dance class, volunteer for meals-on-wheels, join a singles club, and quit tormenting the rest of us with their sorrowful lives.” This thesis shocks the reader out of complacency.

### Language Resources

Finding a new angle for a thesis can be a difficult task, but looking up the word in various language resources can help you find an edge. Many language resources are available online and in the library or a bookstore. While a standard dictionary might be helpful, other, more exciting sources abound: dictionaries of quotations, dictionaries of slang, a thesaurus, and *The Oxford English Dictionary*. If you do decide to use a standard dictionary like *Webster's*, avoid boring phrases like “According to *Webster's* . . .” These phrases numb the mind, and the reader will be reluctant to read further. For the paper on loneliness, the student first used a dictionary of quotations to discover what others have said about the term, finding a quote by Paul Elmer More stating that people “hold themselves aloof in chosen loneliness of passion,” giving her the idea to focus on loneliness as self-pitying, self-inflicted isolation. She uses this quote in her essay as part of her conclusion.

Next, she visited a thesaurus, finding a bonanza of words to string together, creating an engaging inventory to underscore her point: “Loneliness is self-abandonment, icy isolation, me and my shadow, me-myself-and-I narcissism; single, solo, solitary, stag, I-travel-light baby; unescorted, unaccompanied, unaided, unassisted, pride run rampant.” Notice the thoughtful word arrangement. Rather than repeating a list from the thesaurus, she braids them—except for the first string—with **alliteration**, chaining together words beginning with *s*, following with a string of *u* words, using a semicolon to separate the strings. Both strands end with a punch, a more-than-one-word phrase breaking the monotony of a single-word list, emphasizing her notion that most people choose their loneliness. The first strand—notice the complete sentence—contains some alliteration (*m*), but mostly establishes the cold, selfish aspect of the term.

To further defend her definition, the student investigated *The Oxford English Dictionary* (or OED), a several volume set chronicling the history of the English language. She discovered that the word *lonely* derives from *alone*, which stems from Middle English, a combination of *all* plus *one*, or all one. From there she reasoned that *all one* has a selfish, me-me-me implication, further validating her view.

## Examples

In addition to a purpose for defining the word, the definition needs numerous examples. In the essay on loneliness, the student gives specific examples of sorrowful lives: the lonely business man, married to his job; the housewife stuck in an unhappy marriage; the whore on Harbor Boulevard. The student discusses each example, showing how most lonely people bring about their own loneliness, admitting that some loneliness results from mental illness, “but most lonely people wear their isolation like a crown of thorns.” She also harvests examples from pop culture, using the Beatles’ album *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band*, citing song lyrics that express America’s frenzy of pity for the lonely. Without specific, thoroughly discussed examples, the reader wouldn’t be convinced of such an unconventional point of view.

## Debunking Misconceptions and Preconceived Ideas

Don’t just rely on the obvious when writing a definition; be original. One strategy is to argue from negation, or what a word is not. In his essay “Charm,” from *I Can’t Stay Long*, Laurie Lee writes, “Certainly, charm is not a question of learning palpable tricks, like wrinkling your nose, or having a laugh in your voice, or gaily tossing your hair out of your dancing eyes and twisting your mouth into succulent love-knots.” He busts the standard view of charm, following with specifics defining charm: “Charm can’t withhold, but spends itself willingly on young and old alike, on the poor, the ugly, the dim, the boring, on the last fat man in the corner.”

Learning to write strong extended definitions is an important writing and thinking skill. Whether writing an essay defining Romanticism for art history, existentialism for philosophy, or Puritanism for religious studies, learning to capture elusive words and make them concrete challenges your mind, your assumptions, broadening your view of the world.

## WRITING STRATEGIES FOR ARGUING

Standing up to the high school bully. Wondering whether technology keeps us too much in touch. Deciding if we’ve lost the war on drugs. Rethinking the value of television talk shows. Opinions on these topics—and many others—form the basis for argument. The trick, though, when writing an argument essay is to support opinion with solid evidence. The goal is persuasion—don’t just spout an opinion. To convince a reader—especially one who doesn’t agree—state the point clearly, back it up with proof, and refute points from the other side.

## Stating the Point

The point is the **thesis statement**, the writer's opinion on the topic. "Drugs should be legalized because we've already lost the war" states an opinion without using *I*. Generally, in college argument essays, avoid using *I*. First, it's redundant: if you state it, then it is your opinion, no *I* needed. Second, it's considered weak, wishy-washy to write *I think* or *I believe*. It's akin to saying, "It's only my opinion, so don't take me that seriously." Stand up for your convictions with a forceful statement. Notice, too, that the above statement contains *should* and *because*. Those two words signal your opinion—*should*—and your reasons for that opinion—*because*. As you become more practiced at writing thesis statements, you'll want to drop the obvious use of *should* and *because*, writing your statement in a more polished manner, as Gore Vidal does in "Drugs": "It is possible to stop most drug addiction in the United States within a very short time. Simply make all drugs available and sell them at cost." Of course, if Vidal doesn't support that statement with solid evidence, we'd simply ignore him.

## Supporting Your Point

Support a point in an argument essay the same way as in any essay (see the section on Writing Basic College Essays), with strong examples, statistics, quotes, details. Know the topic, by researching. Explore both sides of the issue in order to refute the other side.

## Refuting the Opposition

Know the other side's objections to the argument and respond, showing how they might be wrong or misguided. One approach is to bring up their objections, either in the form of a quotation or paraphrase, and then respond: "Those who oppose legalizing drugs claim that legalization will lead to more drug addiction. Not so. People who are going to take drugs will do so, legal or not. During Prohibition, when alcohol was illegal, the law didn't stop alcoholism or drinking; it just turned it into a criminal activity." This strategy states the other side's view and then refutes it. The key is to be sure the reader knows when you are presenting an opposing view. Use phrases like "Opponents believe," to avoid confusing the reader.

## Organization

Though a basic organization—introduction with thesis, body paragraphs, conclusion—works for arguments, almost any mode can be used or blended with other modes for a hybrid: a contrast or comparison essay might begin with a narrative and then argue one side over another or a cause and effect might use a definition in the opening or body. It depends on the paper's purpose. For addressing the opposition, use statements from the opponent's view as topic sentences and refute them. Another strategy spends three or four paragraphs discussing the writer's views, and then presents the opposition's views in one or two paragraphs, refuting them as they're presented.

## WRITING STRATEGIES FOR CLASSIFICATION

When visiting Disneyland or Disney World, visitors find their way around by looking at a map divided into different areas, classified according to time or place: Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Fantasyland, Adventureland, Main Street USA, Critter Country, and so on. These classifications orient them to the park and let them know what to expect. Even a first-time visitor will probably figure out that Space Mountain is in Tomorrowland, not Frontierland. The descriptive names make sense of an otherwise chaotic place. A divided and classified closet: summer clothes, work attire, winter wardrobe; a pantry: canned goods, spices and baking supplies, breakfast items, boxed foods; a notebook: science, English, math, history, geology. If a hardware store heaped the paint in with the garden tools, the faucets in with the tulip bulbs, shoppers would walk out.

Writers often classify to make sense of a complex topic, poke fun or satirize, explain a comparison involving more than two subjects. A student might be asked to write a paper for a sociology class discussing parenting styles; periods of art in an art history class; types of earthquakes in a geology class. Classification can be useful for many topics.

In her essay "Friends, Good Friends—and Such Good Friends" (not in this book), Judith Viorst classifies her friends into seven categories: convenience friends, special-interest friends, historical friends, crossroads friends, cross-generational friends, part-of-a-couple friends, men who are friends. Viorst follows good rules of classification to write her essay:

## Purpose

1. Make a point. If you write an essay classifying teenagers according to high school cliques, and you just list the types, you aren't doing your reader a service. Anyone can make a list of types. The classification needs a thesis. Is it trying to warn the reader about a certain type of clique? Argue that cliques are detrimental to student learning? Illustrate that strict conformity leads to problems later in life? In Viorst's essay, she doesn't just discuss the types of friends; she makes a point:

I once would have said that a friend is a friend all the way, but now I believe that's a narrow point of view. For the friendships I have and the friendships I see are conducted at many levels of intensity, serve many different functions, meet different needs and range from those as all-the-way as the friendship of the soul sisters mentioned above to that of the most nonchalant and casual playmates.

She then discusses each class of friends, pointing out how the class fits into her definition of friendship. Notice that she busts the standard view of friendship as being the no-matter-what kind.

## Ruling Principle

2. Tie each category back to the thesis. For Viorst, it's the level of intimacy that ties the essay together. In English teacher jargon, this would be called the "Ruling Principle of Classification," how the topic is divided. Should a classification of rocks be by size, color, shape, composition? Pick one ruling principle and stick to it. If Viorst suddenly threw in a class of friends and didn't mention the intimacy factor, we would wonder why she added that category. If you classified Adventure films according to character types and then discussed a group by dialogue, the essay would be straying from the ruling principle, and would not stick together. The ruling principle is the glue of the essay.

## Support

3. Use numerous examples. Every essay needs strong examples. In her category on Convenience friends, after defining what she means by convenience, Viorst lists the types of things these women do for each other: "Convenience friends are convenient

indeed. They'll lend us their cups and silverware for a party. They'll drive our kids to soccer when we're sick. They'll take us to pick up our car when we need a lift to the garage. They'll even take our cats when we go on vacation." Listing specific good-neighbor chores gives her point weight. She goes on to give examples of what she would and would not discuss with a convenience friend, the intimacy factor, gluing her essay back to its point.

4. Avoid simplifying. Acknowledge that the topic may be more complex than the classification covers. Admit the generalization and mention possible exceptions to the categories. In a paper on high school cliques, admit that not every student fits neatly into one of these groups. The conclusion might be a good place to write a disclaimer.

### Labels

5. Label the groups. Notice that Viorst has descriptive labels that hint at the topic and give it flavor. The reader can tell by the label what to expect. When brainstorming a list of high school cliques, one class came up with the following groups: Rah Rahs (jocks and cheerleaders), Bandos (students in the band), Brains (formerly referred to as nerds), Misfits (students who dress and act in opposition to the rest of the crowd), Stoners (speaks for itself), Clubbies (students who always join clubs or run for office).

### Organization

6. Organize the paper. There are many ways to organize material for classification, depending on the topic, but here are two common methods: chronological and emphatic order. If classifying historical time periods, consider organizing chronologically—time order—in the order the events occurred in time. If organizing friends, use emphatic order—least important category or shortest category first, and the most important or longest last.

## SUMMARIZING

A summary is a restatement—in your own words—of another writer's work. In college, you might be asked to summarize a chapter in a textbook, summarize an article and then respond in an essay to the writer's ideas, or summarize to demonstrate understanding in a reading class. Learning to summarize helps you absorb material for tests, improve

reading comprehension, and learn to identify key points. To summarize correctly, follow these steps:

1. Read the article through once to get the general idea.
2. Read a second time, highlighting key ideas—or taking notes if you don't want to defile your book.
3. Then—without looking at the text—write one-sentence summaries for each paragraph of the writer's main ideas.
4. Now write a draft of the summary from the sentences, providing examples from each paragraph that support the main ideas.
5. Check the summary against the author's work, making sure your writing is in your own words. When using any of the author's original words, put them in quotation marks. It's okay to put quotation marks around parts of a sentence to distinguish the writer's words from your own. For example, if you are summarizing Shelby's Steele's piece from his book *The Content of Our Character*, you might write a sentence like this:

Although Steele concedes that prejudice against blacks is still a problem in America, overall, he thinks “there is also much opportunity.”

**Note:** See the Paraphrasing section for information on how to paraphrase correctly.

### TIPS FOR WRITING SUMMARIES

1. A summary should be about one-quarter the length of the article being summarized. If the summary is longer than one page, you may have to break it into paragraphs. A good rule is to change paragraphs when beginning to summarize a new idea.
2. Do not give an opinion in a summary. Save your views for critiques.
3. Always give the title of the text being summarized as well as the author's name in the introduction of the summary. Don't just write the title of the piece at the top of the page. Introduce the writer and the work:

In the article “Drugs” by Gore Vidal, the author argues in favor of legalizing all drugs.

Notice that this opening sentence introduces the title, the author, and the author's thesis.

4. Be sure to paraphrase correctly (see below).



## PARAPHRASING

Paraphrasing—simply put—means rewording. When taking an in-class essay examination based on material from a text, you repeat the material on the test in your own words. You're not quoting from the text but writing what you remember. You might use paraphrasing in a research paper to liven up another writer's words by using your own style, replacing a style that might otherwise sound dry.

A direct quote would look like this (the number in parentheses is the page number where the original statement is found):

Joseph Verrengia reports, "Laboratory tests on some of the artifacts, including a piece of human excrement, have revealed traces of a human protein that scientists say is the first direct evidence of cannibalism among the Anasazi" (15).

A paraphrase of the above quote might look something like this:

According to Joseph Verrengia, science has proven—using tests on human waste left at the scene of the crime—that the Anasazi did, indeed, chow down on their brethren, slicing and dicing, roasting and toasting their own kind, a grisly banquet for reasons unknown (15).

Give the source in both instances. It's unnecessary to cite every line of a summary as readers know the material has been reworded, but always give credit to others' words and ideas when paraphrasing in an essay. Otherwise, you're guilty of **plagiarism**.

Be sure to *completely* reword the material or put quotation marks around partially quoted material. When using any of the writer's original words, put quotation marks around them. If in the Verrengia example above the writer had written "piece of human excrement" instead of "human waste" and didn't put quotation marks around Verrengia's words, it would be considered plagiarism. See #5 under Summarizing.

## PLAGIARISM AND GENERAL ADVICE FOR USING SOURCES

*"This above all: To thine own self be true."*

—William Shakespeare

Many students come to college with mistaken or vague definitions of **plagiarism**. Most know that it's wrong to download a paper off the Internet or borrow another student's work and present it as their own—a

revolting practice—but knowing when to document a source can sometimes be confusing. Though most students have integrity and wouldn't plagiarize on purpose, some students pillage sources unintentionally, unaware that they are plagiarizing. You must give credit to every source. This is tricky business. However, if you remember some general guidelines, you'll be safe.

1. Always give an in-text citation showing the source of the material. See the research section for information on how to correctly cite material within an essay.
2. If information is common knowledge, or something you already know, you do not have to cite a source because *you* are the source. In a paper on AIDS, it's not necessary to cite a source on the transmission of the virus. For most people, that's common knowledge. If you're a saltwater aquarium hobbyist writing an essay on how to start an aquarium, then you're probably an expert on many aspects of this exotic pastime, so you don't have to cite that information unless it's something you have to look up.
3. Avoid overquoting or overparaphrasing—stringing material together with little of your own writing. Instead, comment on material, giving your own opinion. Ask yourself, “Do I agree with this writer? What do I think? How does the quote or paraphrase support or refute my own opinion? Is the material logical? Helpful to the reader?”
4. Blend quotations smoothly. Don't just leave them dangling. See the research section for how to blend quotes. The Summarizing section, above, also has ideas for blending quotes.
5. Make sure you've interpreted the quote correctly and that it's relevant to your point.
6. Be fair to the writer when quoting or paraphrasing. Partial quotations are acceptable as long as they don't change the meaning of the original work. Always use quotation marks around another's words.