

CHAPTER 2

Reading Analytically

Overview Virtually all college-level writing assignments call for students to write about reading and to use writing in order to better understand reading. The chapter suggests skills that will help writers become more active and more confident readers.

The chapter's strategies include a sequence for writing and talking about reading, including POINTING, PARAPHRASE \times 3, and PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING. The chapter demonstrates how to unearth the logical structure of a reading by UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS and TRACKING BINARIES, and it explains how to apply a reading as a lens for understanding other material. For more extended discussion of summary and other traditional reading-based writing assignments, see Chapter 3. On using secondary sources in research-based writing, see Chapter 7.

Becoming Conversant Instead of Reading for the Gist

This chapter will teach you how to do things with readings:

- how to find the questions rather than just the answers,
- how to put key passages from readings into conversation with each other,
- how to use an idea or methodology in a reading in order to generate thinking about something else, and
- how to gain control of complex ideas on your own rather than needing others (such as teachers) to do this work for you.

These tasks require you to change your orientation to reading. How, you might ask, do I make this change, given that I am reading difficult material produced by experts?

The challenge of reading well is to become conversant rather than reading for the gist. Many readers operate under the mistaken impression that they are to read for the gist—for the main point, to be gleaned through a glancing speed-reading. Reading for the gist causes readers to leap to global (and usually unsubstantiated) impressions, attending only superficially to what they are reading. Although there are virtues to skimming, the vast majority of writing tasks that you will encounter in college and in the workplace require your *conversancy* with material that you have read.

To become conversant means that you should be able to:

- talk about the reading conversationally with other people and answer questions about it without having to look everything up, and
- converse with the material—to be in some kind of dialogue with it, to see the questions the material asks, and to pose your own questions about it.

Few people are able to really understand things they read or see without making the language of that material in some way their own. We become conversant, in other words, by finding ways to actively engage material rather than moving passively through it.

If you are to play this more active role in writing about reading, you must accept that you need to:

1. *Learn to speak the language of the text.* Every course is in some sense a foreign language course: if a writer wishes to be heard, he or she needs to acquire the vocabulary of the experts. That's why it's so important to pay attention to the actual words in a reading and to use them when you write.
2. *Treat reading as a physical as well as a mental activity.* Passing your eyes or highlighter over the text or generalizing about it or copying notes from someone else's power point will not teach you the skills to become an independent thinker. These activities are too passive; they don't trigger your brain into engaging the material. To get physical with the reading, focus on particular words and sentences, copy them out, restate them, and clarify for yourself what you do and do not understand.

Beyond the Banking Model of Education

The educational theorist Paolo Friere famously criticized a model of education that he compared to banking. In the banking model of education, students are like banks, accepting deposits of information from their teachers and then withdrawing them to give back on exams. Friere argued that an education consisting entirely of "banking"—information in/information out—does not teach thinking. Being able to recite the ideas other people have had does not automatically render a person capable of thinking about these ideas or producing them. So how can a reader accomplish the goal of acquiring new information from a reading while also learning to think about it—to be more than a passive conduit through which ideas pass? In a word, you multitask. The rest of this chapter will offer strategies to help you assimilate the information in a reading as you begin to formulate ways of responding to it. To start, let's look at how the way the information is presented contributes to what it means.

Rejecting the Transparent Theory of Language

Any child psychology textbook will tell you that as we acquire language, we acquire categories that shape our understanding of the world. Words allow us

to ask for things, to say what's on our mind. To an enormous extent, we understand the world and our relation to it by working through language.

Considering how central language is in our lives, it's amazing how little we think about words themselves. We tend to assume that things mean simply or singly, but virtually all words have multiple meanings, and words mean differently depending on context. Consider the following examples of memorably silly headlines: "Teacher Strikes Idle Kids," "New Vaccines May Contain Rabies," "Local High School Drop-outs Cut in Half," and "Include Your Children When Baking Cookies" (or if you prefer, "Kids Make Nutritious Snacks"). Language is always getting away from us—in such sentences as "The bandage was wound around the wound," or in the classic, "Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana." The meanings of words and the kinds of sense a sentence makes are rarely stable.

The transparent theory of language assumes the opposite, that words are more like clear windows opening to a meaning that can be separated from language. It also assumes that the meanings of words are obvious and self-evident. This theory is roundly rejected by linguists and other language specialists. They know that to change a word is inevitably to change meaning. This view, which is known as the constitutive theory of language, holds that what we see as reality is shaped by the words we use. What we say is inescapably a product of how we say it. And so failure to arrest attention on the words themselves causes readers to miss all but the vaguest impression of the ideas that the words constitute.

Seek to Understand the Reading Fairly on Its Own Terms

Most good reading starts by giving the reading the benefit of the doubt: this is known as producing a sympathetic reading, or reading with the grain. This advice applies whether or not you are inclined to agree with the claims in the reading. When you are seeking to entertain the reading on its own terms, first you have to decide to suspend judgment as an act of mind, trying instead to think with the piece.

Reading with the grain does not mean passive restatement—just ventriloquizing what the author has to say. A sympathetic reading can and should also be an *active reading*, one in which you as the writer help your reader gain some perspective on the piece. Chapter 1 has already given you some tools for accomplishing this task: NOTICE AND FOCUS (ranking), and THE METHOD to find patterns and uncover tensions (what is opposed to what). These tools allow you to answer the crucial question, "what is at stake in the piece, and why?" And as we will discuss later in this chapter, you also ask the standard rhetorical question, "what is this piece inviting us to think, and by what means?"

This chapter will add several new strategies, beginning with ways of focusing more closely on key words and sentences. But first let us take up briefly what writers are being asked to do when instructed to write a critique of a reading.

How to Write a Critique

We have just said that good reading starts by seeking to understand a piece on its own terms, regardless of your point of view on the subject. Does understanding a piece on its own terms mean that your role as a writer is limited to supportive restatement of what another writer has said?

In a critique, you still are expected to help readers to understand a reading as an author might wish it to be understood, but you are also expected to provide some thinking of your own on the reading. Note that this does not mean your thinking about the subject of the reading, but instead your thinking about the writer's thinking about the subject.

Because people take critique to mean "criticize," they usually assume that they should find ways of being oppositional. An effective critique usually does not sit in judgment. You are not being asked on the model of talk-show, big-opinion culture, to go in and demolish the piece. Critique does not mean to attack. Instead, you are trying to put the piece into some kind of perspective, often more than one possible perspective, for your readers.

It helps to remember that a reading's ways of presenting its ideas (the "how") is part of its content (the "what"). So a good critique includes attention to both what the reading says and how it says it. Here is a list of some of the things that you might choose to do in a critique (you can't do them all). These include strategies from Chapter 1 as well as moves you will encounter later in this or subsequent chapters.

- Explain what is at stake in the piece. What, in other words, is opposed to what, and why, according to the writer (implicitly, explicitly, or both) and why does the writer think it matters?
- Determine what the reading seems to wish to accomplish, which is not always the same thing as that which it explicitly argues. Do this in the context of what this chapter will later define as *THE PITCH, THE COMPLAINT, AND THE MOMENT*.
- Make the implicit explicit. What might the piece be saying that goes beyond what it overtly argues? This is Move #3 of the Five Analytical Moves.
- Try to figure out what the consequences of the piece might be. That is, if we think in the way that the reading suggests, what might follow? What might we gain? What might we lose?
- Locate the reading in the context of other similar readings as part of an ongoing conversation.
- Consider how well the evidence in the piece seems to support its claims and how well the writer explains her reasons for saying the evidence means what she says it does. See Chapter 4.

- Consider the logical structure of the piece by *UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS* and *TRACKING BINARIES*, which you will find discussed later in this chapter. In this way you might locate arguments the piece is having with itself, and potentially conflicting or contradictory assumptions upon which the piece is built. Revealing such tensions need not launch an attack on the piece. Rather, it establishes perspective on the way that the reading goes about making its case.

Consider the following rhetorical analysis of a commencement address delivered by novelist David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College in 2005 (later published as "This Is Water"). Notice how the writer uses description in order to arrive at ideas about the speech. Description is essential in a critique, just as it is in any analytical writing. You need to start by offering your reader some significant detail in order to ground your thinking. When you select particular details and call attention to them by describing them, you are likely to begin noticing what these details suggest. Description presents details so that analysis can make them speak.

Consider how the writer of this analysis makes implicit tensions in the speech explicit. As a result, we get some perspective on the character of the speech as a whole and on the character of its writer (*ethos*), which goes beyond simple restatement. We are given some critical distance on the piece, which is what critique does, without inviting us to approve or disapprove.

"I am not the wise old fish" (1).

"Please don't worry that I am getting ready to lecture you about compassion" (2).

"Please don't think that I am giving you moral advice" (5).

"Please don't dismiss it as just some finger-wagging Dr. Laura sermon" (7).

A recurrent feature of the address is the author's imploring his audience ("Please") not to assume that he is offering moral instruction. The sheer repetition of this pattern suggests that he is worried about sounding like a sermonizer, that the writer is anxious about the didacticism of his speech.

But obviously the piece does advance a moral position; it does want us to think about something serious, which is part of its function as a commencement address. What's most interesting is the final apology, offered just as the piece ends (7). Here Wallace appears to shift ground. Rather than denying that he's "the wise old fish" (1), he denies that he is Dr. Laura, or rather, he pleads not to be dismissed as a Dr. Laura. So he's saying, in effect, that we should not see him as a TV personality who scolds ("finger wagging") and offers moral lessons for daily life ("sermon").

Why is he so worried about the didactic function? Obviously, he is thinking of his audience, fearful of appearing to be superior, and fearful that his audience does not want to be preached at. But he cannot resist the didactic impulse the occasion bestows. In these terms, what is interesting is the divided nature of the address: on the one hand, full of parables—little stories with moral intent—and on the other

hand, full of repeated denials of the very moral impulse his narratives and the occasion itself generically decree.

VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

What Do We Mean by Critical Reading? A Music Professor Speaks

As a first step, we consider what we mean by a “critical reading.” Because the term itself has become so ingrained in our consciousness, we rarely think critically about what it means. So, we discuss moving beyond a summary of the content and cursory judgment. I ask students to take notes on each reading (content and commentary) and conclude with three points. These points may include a main idea of the article or a part of the author’s argument they found particularly interesting. We try to locate insights into the author’s reason for writing the essay and rhetorical gestures or techniques used by the author to influence the reader.

Does the author make his or her objectives and biases explicit? If not, we examine the rhetorical strategies authors employ to convince us of their objectivity. We observe the ways that language colors the presentation of facts—how “a bitter civil war that pitted the slaveholding Southern states against the rest of the country” was probably not written by an author sympathetic to the Confederacy.

Much of our time is spent investigating how authors construct their narratives: the way the argument is formed and its ideological position. These ways of viewing the reading help us to move beyond restatement, delay judgment, and evaluate readings on a more sophisticated level.

—TED CONNER, PROFESSOR OF MUSIC

Focus on Individual Sentences

Analyzing needs to be anchored. Anchoring to a general impression—a global sense of what the reading is about—is like putting a hook in a cloud. There is nothing specific to think about, to rephrase, to nudge toward implications or back to assumptions. The best way to remember what you read and to have ideas about it is to start with the local: focus on individual sentences and short passages, and build up a knowledge base from there.

It does not matter which sentences you start with. What matters is to choose sentences that strike you as especially interesting, revealing, or strange (See NOTICE AND FOCUS, Chapter 1.) Good reading is *slow* reading: it stops your forward momentum long enough to allow you to dwell on individual sentences and make the effort necessary to understand them.

A second and related way that people neglect the actual words is that they approach the reading looking to *react*. They are so busy looking to respond to other people’s statements that they don’t listen to what the other person is saying. A recent article on reading by the literary and educational theorist Robert Scholes suggests that people read badly because they substitute

for the words on the page some association or predetermined idea that the words accidentally trigger in them. As a result, they replay their own perceptions rather than taking in what the writer is actually saying. (See Robert Scholes, “The Transition to College Reading,” *Pedagogy*, volume 2, number 2, Duke UP, 2002, pp. 165–172.)

We will now survey a few techniques for focusing on individual sentences.

Pointing

Pointing is a practice (associated with two writing theorists and master teachers, Peter Elbow and Sheridan Blau) in which members of a group take turns reading sentences aloud. Pointing provides a way of summarizing without generalizing, and it is one of the best ways to build community and to stimulate discussion (see Figure 2.1).

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- 1 **Select sentences from a reading that you are willing to voice.**
 - 2 **Take turns reading individual sentences aloud.** No one raises hands or comments on the sentences during the pointing. Read only one of your chosen sentences at a time. Later in the session, you may read again.
 - 3 **Let the recitation build.** Some sentences repeat as refrains; others segue or answer previous sentences. Pointing usually lasts about five minutes and ends more or less naturally, when people no longer have sentences they wish to read.

FIGURE 2.1

Pointing

Pointing stirs our memories about the particular language of a piece. In reading aloud and hearing others do it, you hear key words and discover questions you’d not seen before; and the range of possible starting points for getting at what is central in the reading inevitably multiplies. Pointing is an antidote for the limiting assumption that a reading has only one main idea. It also remedies the tendency of group discussion to veer into general impressions and loose associations.

Using Quotation

Quoting key words and sentences from a reading keeps you focused on specific words and ideas rather than general impressions. It is not enough, however, to quote key sentences from a reading without discussing what you take them to mean, for what a sentence means is never self-evident. A mantra of this book is that analytical writers quote *in order to analyze*. That is, they follow up quotation by voicing what specifically they understand that quote to mean. The best way to arrive at that meaning is to paraphrase. (Some disciplines, it must be acknowledged, refrain from quoting and include only the paraphrase.) In any case, a quote cannot serve as your “answer” by itself; you can’t use a quote in place of your own active explanation of what a reading is saying. Quotes only help you to focus and launch that explanation. (For more on this subject, see Chapter 7.)

PARAPHRASE × 3

Paraphrasing is one of the simplest and most overlooked ways of discovering ideas and stimulating interpretation. Like POINTING, PARAPHRASE × 3 seeks to locate you in the local, the particular, and the concrete rather than the global, the overly general and the abstract. Rather than make a broad claim about what a sentence or passage says, a paraphrase stays much closer to the actual words.

The word *paraphrase* means to put one phrase next to (“para”) another phrase. When you recast a sentence or two—finding the best synonyms you can think of for the original language, translating it into a parallel statement—you are thinking about what the original words mean. The use of “× 3” (times 3) in our label is a reminder to paraphrase key words more than once, not settling too soon for a best synonym (see Figure 2.2).

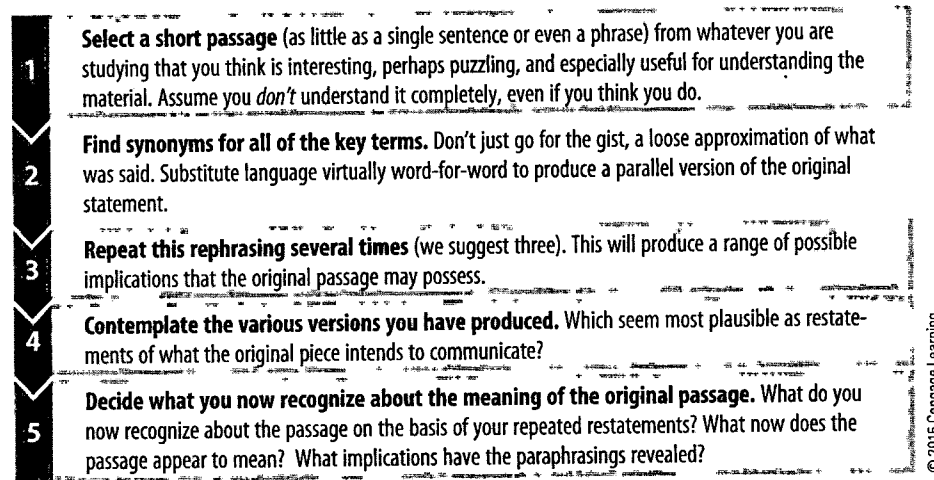


FIGURE 2.2
PARAPHRASE × 3

When you paraphrase language, whether your own or language you encounter in your reading, you are not just defining terms but opening out the wide range of implications those words inevitably possess. When we read, it is easy to skip quickly over the words, assuming we know what they mean. Yet when people start talking about what particular words mean—the difference, for example, between *assertive* and *aggressive* or the meaning of ordinary words such as *polite* or *realistic* or *gentlemanly*—they usually find less agreement than expected.

Note: Different academic disciplines treat paraphrase somewhat differently. In the humanities, it is essential first to quote an important passage and then to paraphrase it. In the social sciences, however, especially in Psychology; you paraphrase but rarely if ever quote. In more advanced writing in the social sciences, paraphrase serves the purpose of producing the literature review—survey of relevant research—that forms the introduction to reports.

HOW PARAPHRASE × 3 UNLOCKS IMPLICATIONS: AN EXAMPLE LIKE THE “SO WHAT?” question, paraphrasing is an effective way of bringing out implications, meanings that are there in the original but not overt. And especially if you paraphrase the same passage repeatedly, you will discover which of the words are most “slippery”—elusive, hard to define simply and unambiguously.

Let's look at a brief example of PARAPHRASE × 3. The sentence comes from a book entitled *The Literature Workshop* by Sheridan Blau. We have paraphrased it three times.

“A conviction of certainty is one of the most certain signs of ignorance and may be the best operational definition of stupidity” (213).

1. Absence of doubt is a clear indication of cluelessness and is perhaps the top way of understanding the lack of intelligence.
2. A feeling of being right is one of the most reliable indexes of lack of knowledge and may show in action the meaning of mental incapacity.
3. Being confident that you are correct is a foolproof warning that you don't know what's going on, and this kind of confidence may be an embodiment of foolishness.

Having arrived at these three paraphrases, we can use them to explore what they suggest—i.e., their implications. Here is a short list. Once you start paraphrasing, you discover that there's a lot going on in this sentence.

- One implication of the sentence is that as people come to know more and more, they feel less confident about what they know.
- Another is that ignorance and stupidity are probably not the same thing, though they are often equated.
- Another is that there's a difference between feeling certain about something and being aware of this certainty as a conviction.
- Another implication is that stupidity is hard to define—perhaps it can only be defined in practice, “operationally,” and not as an abstract concept.

As we paraphrased, we were struck by the repetition of “certainty” in “certain,” which led us to wonder about the tone of the sentence. Tone may be understood as the implicit point of view, the unspoken attitude of the statement towards itself and its readers. The piece overtly attacks “a conviction of certainty” as “a sign of ignorance” and perhaps (“may be”) “a definition of stupidity.” So by implication, being less sure you are right would be a sign of wisdom. But the statement itself seems extremely sure of itself, brimming with confidence: it asserts “a certain sign.”

One implication of this apparent contradiction is that we are meant to take the statement with a grain of salt—that is, read it as poking fun at itself (ironically), demonstrating the very attitude it advises us to avoid.

TRY THIS 2.1: Experiment with PARAPHRASE × 3

Recast the substantive language of the following statements using PARAPHRASE × 3:

- “I am entitled to my opinion.”
- “We hold these truths to be self-evident.”
- “That’s just common sense.”

What do you come to understand about these remarks as a result of paraphrasing? Which words, for example, are most slippery (that is, difficult to define and thus rephrase) and why?

It is interesting to note, by the way, that Thomas Jefferson originally wrote the words “sacred and undeniable” in his draft of the Declaration of Independence, instead of “self-evident.” So what?

TRY THIS 2.2: Paraphrase and Implication

Consider for a moment an assignment a former student of ours, Sean Heron, gave to a class of high school students he was student-teaching during a unit on the Civil War. He asked students to paraphrase three times the following sentence: “The South left the country.” His goal, he reported, was to get them to see that “because language is open to interpretation, and history is conveyed through language, history must also be open to interpretation.” Use PARAPHRASE × 3 to figure out how Sean’s sentence slants history.

PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING

PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING increases your ability to learn from what you read. It is probably the single best way to arrive at ideas about what you are reading. The passage-based version differs from regular freewriting (see Chapter 1) by limiting the focus to a piece of text. It prompts in-depth analysis of a representative example, on the assumption that you’ll attain a better appreciation of the whole after you’ve explored how a piece of it works.

The more you practice PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING, the better you will get—the easier you will find things to say about your chosen passage. Ask yourself:

- “What one passage in the reading do you think most needs to be discussed—is most useful and interesting for understanding the material?”
- “What one passage seems puzzling, difficult to pin down, anomalous, or even just unclear—and how might this be explained?”

The impromptu nature of PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING encourages you to take chances, to think out loud on the page. It invites you to notice what you notice in the moment and take some stabs at what the passage might mean without having to worry about formulating a weighty thesis statement or maintaining consistency. It allows you to worry less about what you don’t understand and instead start to work things out as you write.

A lot of great papers start not as outlines but as freewrites, written in class or out (see Figure 2.3).

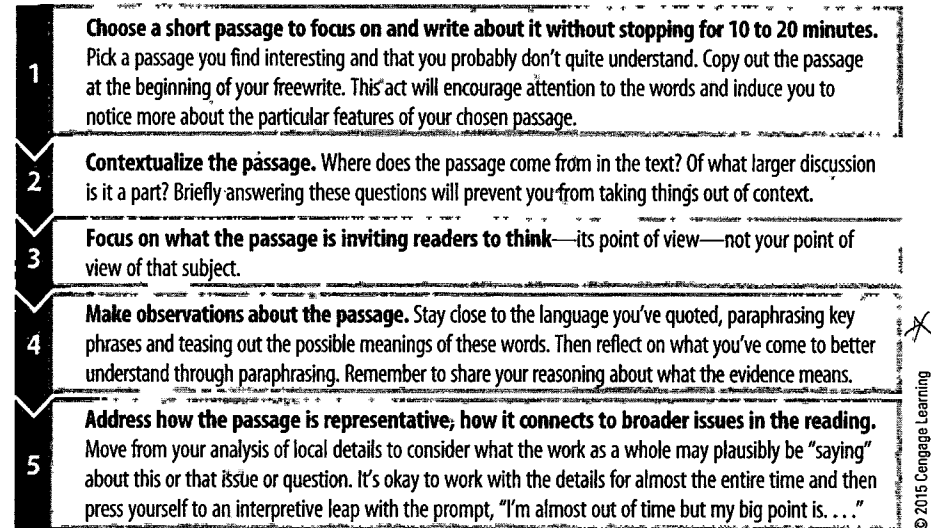


FIGURE 2.3

PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING

Note: It's okay to work with the details for almost the entire time and then press yourself to an interpretive leap with the prompt, but my big point is. . .

Some Moves to Make in PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITES PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING incorporates a number of the methods we have been discussing in these first two chapters. So, for example:

- it often starts with observations discovered by doing NOTICE AND FOCUS
- it grows out of doing THE METHOD, further developing the paragraph that explains why you chose one repetition, strand or binary as most important
- in analyzing the chosen passage, writers normally paraphrase key words
- and they keep the writing going by insistently ASKING “so what?” at the ends of paragraphs.

The best PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITES usually arrive at one or more of the following:

- **Interpretation**, which uses restatement to figure out what the sentence from the text means.
- **Implication**. A useful (and logical) next step is to go after implication. If X or Y is true, then what might follow from it? (Or “So what?”)
- **Application**. A passage that is resonant in some way for the reader might lead him or her to write about some practical way of applying the reading—for example, as a lens for understanding other material.

- **Assumptions.** We lay out implications by moving forward (so to speak). We unearth assumptions by moving backwards. If a text asks us to believe X, what else must it already believe? From what unstated assumptions, in other words, would X follow?
- **Queries.** What questions, what interpretive difficulties and struggles are raised by the reading?

Notice how the writers use these moves in the examples that follow.

From PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITE to Formal Essay It is often productive to take a focused freewrite and type it, revising and further freewriting until you have filled the inevitable gaps in your thinking that the time limit has created. (One colleague of ours has students revise and expand in a different font, so both can see how the thinking is evolving.) Eventually, you can build up, through a process of accretion, the thinking for an entire paper in this way.

An especially useful way of making PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING productive academically is to freewrite for fifteen minutes every day on a different passage as you move through a book. If, for example, you are discussing a book over four class periods, prepare for each class by giving fifteen minutes to a passage before you attend. You will not only discover things to say, but also you will begin to write your way to an essay.

A way to get from a freewrite to an essay is to keep starting new free-writes from the best ideas in your earlier ones. Try putting an asterisk in the margin next to your best idea or question, and start another PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITE from there.

PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING: An Example Below is an example of a student's exploratory writing on an essay by the twentieth-century African-American writer Langston Hughes. The piece is a twenty-minute reflection on two excerpts. Most notable about this piece, perhaps, is the sheer number of interesting ideas. That may be because the writer continually returns to the language of the original quotes for inspiration. She is not restricted by maintaining a single and consistent thread. Notice, however, that as the freewrite progresses, a primary focus (on the second of her two quotes) seems to emerge.

Passages from "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" by Langston Hughes

"But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. Yet the Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not like me to write about it. The old subconscious "white is best" runs through her mind. . . . And now she turns up her nose at jazz and all its manifestations—likewise almost everything else distinctly racial."

"We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

Langston Hughes's 1926 essay on the situation of the Negro artist in America sets up some interesting issues that are as relevant today as they were in Hughes's time. Interestingly, the final sentence of the essay ("We build our temples. . .") will be echoed some four decades later by the Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, but with a different spin on the idea of freedom. Hughes writes, "we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves." King says, "Free at last, free at last, my God almighty, we're free at last." King asserts an opening out into the world—a freeing of black people, finally, from slavery and then another century of oppression.

Hughes speaks of blacks in a more isolated position—"on top of the mountain" and "within ourselves." Although the mountain may stand for a height from which the artist can speak, it is hard to be heard from the top of mountains. It is one thing to be free. It is another to be free within oneself. What does this phrase mean? If I am free within myself I am at least less vulnerable to those who would restrict me from without. I can live with their restrictions. Mine is an inner freedom. Does inner freedom empower artists? Perhaps it does. It may allow them to say what they want and not worry about what others say or think. This is one thing that Hughes seems to be calling for. But he is also worried about lack of recognition of Negro artists, not only by whites but by blacks. His use of the repeated phrase, tom-tom, is interesting in this respect. It, like the word "mountain," becomes a kind of refrain in the essay—announcing both a desire to rise above the world and its difficulties (mountain) and a desire to be heard (tom-tom and mountain as pulpit).

The idea of revolt, outright rebellion, is present but subdued in the essay. The tom-tom is a "revolt against weariness" and also an instrument for expressing "joy and laughter." The tom-tom also suggests a link with a past African and probably Native American culture—communicating by drum and music and dance. White culture in the essay stands for a joyless world of "work work work." This is something I would like to think about more, as the essay seems to link the loss of soul with the middle and upper classes, both black and white.

And so the essay seeks to claim another space among those he calls "the low down folks, the so-called common element." Of these he says ". . . they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance!" In these lines Hughes the poet clearly appears. Does he say then that the Negro artist needs to draw from those of his own people who are the most removed from middle class American life? If I had more time, I would start thinking here about Hughes's use of the words "race" and "racial" . . . (Reprinted with permission from the June 23, 1926 issue of *The Nation*. For subscription information, call 1-800-333-8536. Portions of each week's *Nation* magazine can be accessed at <http://www.thenation.com>.)

PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING: Another Example PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING is especially well-suited to doing rhetorical analysis, as in the following example. As we explained in Chapter 1, rhetorical analysis seeks to understand how a writer's word choice reveals his or her way of appealing to a target audience. Sometimes in-class writings are done in response to a

prompt. The prompt for this freewrite was, "How does Obama's first inaugural address compare with his election night victory speech?"

What was most interesting to me about Obama's inaugural speech was his use of the collective first person—"we," "our," "us," etc.—as opposed to the singular "I." This is especially different from his victory speech, which did make use of the singular "I" and addressed the audience as "you." These pronoun choices are actually very conducive to the tone of each speech. Obama's victory speech was a victory speech—it was meant to be joyful, hopeful, optimistic, and, of course, thankful... so every use of "you" is not accusatory, but rather congratulatory and proud—e.g. "this is because of you," "you have done this," "this is your victory."

On the other hand, Obama's inaugural speech was by and large a more somber piece of writing—as the President said to George Stephanopolous, he wanted to capture that moment in history as exactly as possible. "You" here is not the American public as in the victory speech; rather, "you" is any "enemy" of America. And "I," it seems, has become "we." This choice automatically makes Obama the voice of society, as though speaking for every American. This is a really subtle but smart choice to make, because the listener or reader is hearing everything he says as his or her own position. Using that collective first person also puts Obama on the same level as everyone else, and when he does blame America for its own problems, the "our's" and "we's" soften the blow. The "you's" here are harsh and accusatory but meant for that great, terrible, unnamed enemy to "our" freedom and happiness.

I found a lot more obvious echoes to Lincoln in this speech as compared to the victory speech, coupled with earth imagery—for example, "we cannot hallow this ground" (Lincoln) vs. "what the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted" (Obama). This ties America to the actual physical land. It romanticizes and makes permanent the ideas of our country—a nice setting behind all of the nation's troubles—while simultaneously adding to the so-desired degree of "timelessness" of Obama's first inaugural address.

You can sense the writer, Molly Harper, gathering steam here as she begins to make connections in her evidence, yet her rhetorical analysis got started from simple observation of Obama's pronouns and then the significance of the contrast between them in the two speeches she is comparing.

TRY THIS 2.3: Do a PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITE

Select a passage from any of the material that you are reading and copy it at the top of the page. Remember to choose the passage in response to the question, "What is the single sentence that I think it is most important for us to discuss and why?" Then do a twenty-minute focused freewrite, applying the steps offered above. Discover what you think by seeing what you say.

TRY THIS 2.4: Writing & Reading with Others: A Sequence of Activities

1. Spend 5–10 minutes pointing on some piece of reading. Remember that no one should comment on his or her choice of sentences during the pointing exercise.

2. Without pausing for discussion, spend 10 minutes doing a PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITE on a sentence or several similar sentences from the reading. It is important to write nonstop and to keep writing throughout the appointed time.
3. Volunteers should then take turns reading all or part of their freewrites aloud to the group without comment. It is useful for people to read, rather than describe or summarize, what they wrote. As each person reads, listeners should jot down words and phrases that catch their attention.
4. After each freewrite is read, listeners call out what they heard in the freewrite by responding to the question, "What did you hear?"

Keep a Commonplace Book

Professional writers have long kept commonplace books—essentially, records of their reading. Most such books consist primarily of quotations that the writers have found striking and memorable. This practice is closely related to POINTING, PARAPHRASE $\times 3$, and PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRTING.

The word "place" comes from the Latin *locus* in classical rhetoric and is related to places that rhetoricians thought of as reliable starting points from which a writer could launch arguments. A commonplace book is a collection of ideas, a storehouse for thinking that a writer might later draw on to stimulate his or her own writing.

The goal of keeping a commonplace book in a course is to bring you closer to the language you find most interesting, which you inscribe in your memory as you copy it onto the page. (Aim for two quotations with citation from each reading.) It's remarkable what you will notice about a sentence if you copy it out, rather than just underlining or highlighting it. Moreover, you will find yourself remembering the original language that has struck you most forcefully in the reading. That way you can continue to ponder key words and phrases and to stay engaged, almost physically, with what the writers have said.

In addition to being a record of your reading, the commonplace book is also a record of your thinking about the reading. Try to write a sentence or two after most of your quotes, noting what you find of interest there, perhaps paraphrasing key terms. Alternatively, you might append a paragraph after all of your quotes from the reading, responding to them as a group. Remember not to judge the passages you select in like-dislike terms.

Situate the Reading Rhetorically

There is no such thing as "just information." Virtually all readings possess what speech-act theorists call "illocutionary force," by which is meant the goal of an utterance. Everything you read, to varying degrees, is aware of you, the audience, and is dealing with you in some way.

One of the most productive ways of analyzing a reading is to consider the frame within which a piece is presented: who its intended audience is, what it seeks to persuade that audience about, and how the writer presents himself or herself to appeal to that audience. Readings virtually never treat these questions explicitly, and thus, it is a valuable analytical move to infer a reading's assumptions about audience.

FIND THE PITCH, THE COMPLAINT, AND THE MOMENT

An element of situating a reading rhetorically is to locate what it seeks to accomplish and what it is set against at a given moment in time. We address these concerns as a quest to find what we call **THE PITCH, THE COMPLAINT, AND THE MOMENT**:

- **THE PITCH**, what the piece wishes you to believe.
- **THE COMPLAINT**, what the piece is reacting to or worried about.
- **THE MOMENT**, the historical and cultural context within which the piece is operating.

Here's a bit more on each.

THE PITCH: A reading is an argument, a presentation of information that makes a case of some sort, even if the argument is not explicitly stated. Look for language that reveals the position or positions the piece seems interested in having you adopt.

THE COMPLAINT: A reading is a reaction to some situation, some set of circumstances that the piece has set out to address, even though the writer may not say so openly. An indispensable means of understanding someone else's writing is to figure out what seems to have caused the person to write the piece in the first place. Writers write, presumably, because they think something needs to be addressed. What is that something? Look for language in the piece that reveals the writer's starting point. If you can find the position or situation he or she is worried about and possibly trying to correct, you will more easily locate the pitch, the position the piece asks you to accept.

THE MOMENT: A reading is a response to the world conditioned by the writer's particular moment in time. In your attempt to figure out not only what a piece says but also where it is coming from (the causes of its having been written in the first place and the positions it works to establish), history is significant. When was the piece written? Where? What else was going on at the time that might have shaped the writer's ideas and attitudes?

Rhetoricians sometimes use a term from classical rhetoric, *kairos*, for what this book calls the moment. This Greek word has been translated roughly as "the right time." Another useful term for the concept of the moment is *exigence*, which refers to a writer's reasons for writing, such as a problem that requires immediate attention.

THE PITCH, THE COMPLAINT, AND THE MOMENT: Two Brief Examples Here are two examples of student writing in response to the request that they

locate **THE PITCH, THE COMPLAINT, AND THE MOMENT** for a famous essay in the field of Composition and Rhetoric, "Inventing the University" by David Bartholomae.

Bartholomae's complaint seems to center around the idea that writing is typically taught at a grammatical, not intellectual, level. "Basic" writers are identified by their sentence level compositional errors, not by the content of their ideas or ability to present a complex argument. Bartholomae argues that students must be drawn into the language and mindset of academia before they have the authority to confidently expand upon more complicated ideas. Students are expected to fluently participate in academic discourse long before they have the authority to pull it off with ease. Therefore, students should be familiarized with the world of academia and led through the preliminary steps towards becoming proficient in its language. This is the only way to make them more authoritative writers.

And here is another example that treats the moment in particular:

The moment, or the specific time in which the essay was written, offers some valuable insight into what might have shaped Bartholomae's perspective. First, it is important to note the other writers and thinkers Bartholomae cites throughout the essay. Take the author's frequent mention of writer Pat Bizzell whom Bartholomae deems "one of the most important scholars now writing on 'basic writers'" and whom he recognizes as "owing a great debt to." He credits Bizzell with seeing how difficult it is for young writers to learn the complex vocabularies and conventions of academic discourse.

There are most likely other, more broadly cultural, influences at work as well, such as the American political scene in 1985. In 1984 Ronald Reagan was re-elected president. His presidency and the conservative climate it fostered sparked change in Americans' attitude toward education. Reagan's policies mandated spending cuts and, it can reasonably be assumed, invited certain anti-academic and more pre-professional attitudes. In this moment, then, Bartholomae's concerns about higher education and the need for students to gain access into the privileged world of the educated begins to make more sense.

Audience Analysis: A Brief Example Consider the following paragraph of student writing on the same essay, this time focused on how the essay's author establishes his relationship with his target audience. Here is the assignment the writer was responding to: Write a brief analysis of the essay's rhetoric—the various methods it employs to gain acceptance with its target audience.
a) Who is the target audience? How can you tell? Cite and analyze evidence.
b) What decisions has the author made on how best to "sell" his argument to this audience? How do you know?

Bartholomae often uses the inclusive "us" to describe academia, putting the reader (presumably, academics) above the level of those being discussed. Students must be taught "to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (3). He effectively builds up the reader, perhaps making him or her more open to absorbing the argument that follows. He refrains from

criticizing, including his audience in his idea and putting them on the same level as he is. He refers to the students as “our students” and writes almost as though the reader is separate from any flaws in the current system. He writes to colleagues, with the tone of one sharing something new and interesting.

TRY THIS 2.5: Locating THE PITCH AND THE COMPLAINT

Go to aldaily.com (Arts & Letters Daily, the website sponsored by the Chronicle of Higher Education). Locate an article on a topic you find interesting. It should be a substantive piece of thinking, as opposed to an editorial or a piece of popular commentary. Find language that you think reveals THE PITCH and THE COMPLAINT in your chosen article. Type out these sentences and be ready to explain your choices.

Focus on the Structure of Thinking in a Reading

One reason readers get lost is because they lack perspective: they’re trying so hard to understand what a text is saying word by word and sentence by sentence that, as the old saying goes, they can’t see the forest for the trees. It can often be immensely useful to read for the larger cognitive structure of a piece, and two of the best ways to see this structure are to focus on its underlying assumptions or to track its use of binary oppositions. The first uncovers its premises; the second reveals its preoccupations. (For more on logical analysis, see Chapter 4, Reasoning from Evidence to Claims.)

UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS

To read well requires you to see the writer’s reasoning process, especially the assumptions (the premises) upon which the writer’s thinking rests. An assumption is an underlying belief from which other statements spring. Assumptions are often left unstated, which is why they need to be uncovered.

UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS is a version of Move 3 of the Five Analytical Moves from Chapter 1: it renders the implicit explicit. But in this case, what is revealed is not what follows from a given statement, but rather, what precedes it.

The ability to UNCOVER ASSUMPTIONS is a powerful analytical procedure to learn. It gives you insight into the root, the basic givens that a piece of writing has assumed are true. When you locate assumptions in a text, you understand the text better—where it’s coming from, what else it believes that is more fundamental than what it is overtly declaring. The essential move is to ask, “Given its overt claim, what must this reading also already believe?” To answer this question you need to make inferences from the primary claims to the ideas that underlie them. In effect, you are reasoning backwards, reinventing the chain of thinking that led the writer to the position you are now analyzing (see Figure 2.4).

The practice of UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS will also help you to develop and revise your own work. When you work back to your own premises, you will often find what else you believe, at a more basic level, that you did not realize you believed.

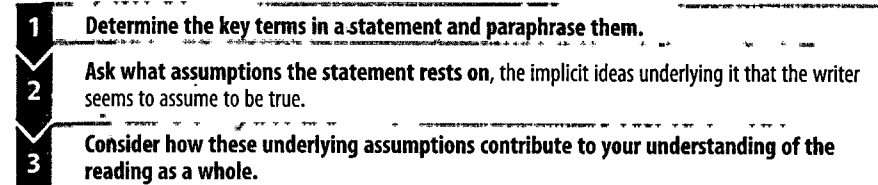


FIGURE 2.4

UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS

UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS: An Example Consider the claim, “Tax laws benefit the wealthy.”

We might paraphrase the claim as “The rules for paying income tax give rich people monetary advantages” or “The rules for paying income tax help the rich get richer.”

Now let’s look at the implicit ideas that the claim assumes to be true:

Tax laws don’t treat people equally.

Tax laws may have unintended consequences.

If we assume that the speaker is worried about tax laws possibly benefiting the wealthy, then a few more assumptions can be inferred:

Tax laws shouldn’t benefit anybody.

Tax laws shouldn’t benefit those who are already advantaged.

This process of definition will help you see the key concepts upon which the claim depends. Regardless of the position you might adopt—attacking tax laws, defending them, showing how they actually benefit everyone, or whatever—you would risk arguing blindly if you failed to question what the purpose of tax law is in the first place.

The wording of this claim seems to conceal an egalitarian premise: the assumption that tax laws should not benefit anyone, or, at least, that they should benefit everyone equally. But what is the purpose of tax laws? Should they redress economic inequities? Should they spur the economy by rewarding those who generate capital? Our point here is that you would need to move your thesis back to this point and test the validity of the assumptions upon which it rests.

TRY THIS 2.6: UNCOVER ASSUMPTIONS Implied by a Statement

In the reference application sent to professors at our college for students who are seeking to enter the student-teaching program, the professor is asked to rank the student from one to four (unacceptable to acceptable) on the following criterion: “The student uses his/her sense of humor appropriately.” Use the three-step procedure for UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS to explore what the authors of this criterion must also already believe—about education, about humor, and about anything else the evidence suggests—if they think this category of evaluation is important.

TRY THIS 2.7: UNCOVER ASSUMPTIONS: Fieldwork

You can practice UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS with all kinds of material—newspaper editorials, statements you see on billboards, ideas you are studying in your courses, jokes, and so forth. Try a little fieldwork: spend a week jotting down in your notebook interesting statements you overhear. Choose the best of these from the standpoint of the implied (but unstated) premises upon which each statement seems to rest. Then make a list of the UNCOVERED ASSUMPTIONS.

Reading Against the Grain Earlier in the chapter we counseled that you should start by reading with the grain. When you begin to UNCOVER ASSUMPTIONS, however, you may discover interesting ways in which a reading seems to say things it may not have intended to communicate.

When we ask ourselves what a work (and, by implication, an author) might not be aware of communicating, we are doing what is called *reading against the grain*. When we ask ourselves what a work seems aware of, what its (and, by implication, its author's) conscious intentions are, we are *reading with the grain*.

Writers can never be fully in control of what they communicate, that words always, inescapably, communicate more (and less) than we intend. Any of us who has had what we thought to be a perfectly clear and well-intentioned e-mail misinterpreted (or so we thought) by its recipient can understand this idea. When we look at the letter again we usually see what it said that we hadn't realized (at least not consciously) we were saying.

Communication of all kinds takes place both directly and indirectly. Reading against the grain—looking for what a work is saying that it might not know it is saying, that it might not mean to say—requires us to notice and emphasize implicit patterns and make their significance explicit. So, for example, in the classic novel *Jane Eyre*, the narrator Jane repeatedly remarks on her own plain appearance, with the implication that physical beauty is transient and relatively insignificant. Reading against the grain, we'd see the novel's very obsession with plainness as a symptom of how worried it is about the subject, how much it actually believes (but won't admit) that looks matter.

TRACKING BINARIES in a Reading

Once you begin looking at chains of thought—UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS—you will often discover that key binaries rise to the surface. We have encountered binaries before—pairs of words or details that are opposites (for example, *open/closed*, *ugly/beautiful*, *global/local*). In Chapter 1, locating binaries was introduced as a key component of looking for pattern using THE METHOD.

The assumption that underlies binaries is that we understand that which is in terms of that which is not. In other words, fundamental contrasts and oppositions are sites of uncertainty, places where there is a struggle among various points of view.

Thus, the swiftest way to apprehend what's at stake in a reading is to discern its organizing contrasts. To track the thinking in a piece is to track how it moves among its various binary formulations.

Writers think through binaries, consciously or unconsciously reformulating them, as we can see when we TRACK THE BINARIES through a reading. Notice how James Howard Kunstler develops his thinking in the following excerpt:

Civic life is what goes on in the public realm. Civic life refers to our relations with our fellow human beings—in short, our roles as citizens. Sometime in the past forty years we ceased to speak of ourselves as citizens and labeled ourselves consumers. That's what we are today in the language of the evening news—*consumers*—in the language of the Sunday panel discussion shows—*consumers*—in the blizzard of statistics that blows out of the U.S. Department of Commerce every month. Consumers, unlike citizens, have no responsibilities, obligations, or duties to anything larger than their own needs and desires, certainly not to anything like the common good. How can this be construed as anything other than an infantile state of existence? In degrading the language of our public discussion this way—Labeling ourselves consumers—have we not degraded our sense of who we are? And is it any wonder that we cannot solve any of our social problems, which are problems of the public realm and the common good? [From James Howard Kunstler, *Home From Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the Twenty-First Century*, (Simon & Schuster, 1996)]

The implicit binary that organizes the thinking in this paragraph is public versus private. Here is a rough approximation of how this binary generates a range of opposing terms as the paragraph progresses:

PUBLIC	PRIVATE
civic life	
our relations with/ fellow humans	labeled ourselves consumers
our roles as citizens	panel discussion tv shows and govt statistics
responsibilities to others	no responsibilities beyond own needs and desires
the common good	
implicitly, adult	infantile state of existence
the public realm	implicitly, the private realm

Kunstler doesn't just settle for a simple binary, he develops and expands and clarifies it by renaming it. In this way, the thinking grows and develops to arrive, at the end, in an explanation of why "we cannot solve any of our social problems."

If you leap too quickly to a binary, however, one that is too general or inaccurate, you can get stuck in oversimplification, in rigidly dichotomized points of view. At that point, you are in the grasp of a reductive habit of mind called either/or thinking. The solution is to keep in mind that the binaries you discover in a reading are sites at which the piece is arguing with itself, figuring out in some qualified way what ultimately it believes.

REFORMULATING BINARIES

We wish now to focus on a related use of binaries, one that takes place in higher order analysis. This move we call REFORMULATING BINARIES.

Thinking is not simply linear and progressive, moving from point A to point B to point C like stops on a train. Careful thinkers are always retracing their steps, questioning their first—and second—impressions, assuming that they've missed something. All good thinking is recursive—that is, it repeatedly goes over the same ground, rethinking connections. And that's why REFORMULATING BINARIES is an essential analytical move.

You know that a writer is REFORMULATING BINARIES when a reading does one or more of the following:

- Discovers that the binary has not been named adequately and that another formulation of the opposition would be more accurate.
- Values both sides of the binary (rather than seeing the issue as all or nothing), but weights one side of the binary more heavily than the other.
- Discovers that the two terms of the binary are not really so separate and opposed after all but are actually parts of one complex phenomenon or issue. (This is a key analytical move known as “collapsing the binary.”)

When you formulate a binary opposition in your own analytical prose—the place where something is at issue—your next step is to immediately begin to ask questions about and complicate the binary. To “complicate” a binary is to discover evidence that unsettles it and to formulate alternatively worded binaries that more accurately describe what is at issue in the evidence (see Figure 2.5).

- 1 **Locate a range of opposing categories (binaries).** Finding binaries will help you find the questions around which almost anything is organized. Use the METHOD to help you uncover the binary oppositions in your subject matter that might function as organizing contrasts.
- 2 **Define and analyze the key terms.** By analyzing the terms of most binaries, you should come to question them and ultimately arrive at a more complex and qualified position.
- 3 **Question the accuracy of the binary and rephrase the terms.** Think of the binary as a starting point—a kind of deliberate overgeneralization—that allows you to set up positions you can then test in order to refine.
- 4 **Substitute “to what extent?” for “either/or.”** The best strategy in using binaries productively is usually to locate arguments on **both sides** of the either/or choice that the binary poses and then choose a position somewhere between the two extremes. Once you have arrived at what you consider the most accurate phrasing of the binary, you can rephrase the original either/or question in the more qualified terms that asking “To what extent?” allows.

FIGURE 2.5

REFORMULATING BINARIES

REFORMULATING BINARIES: An Example Suppose you are analyzing the following topic in a management course: *Would the model of management known as Total Quality Management (TQM) that is widely used in Japan function effectively in the American automotive industry?*

Step 1: There are a range of opposing categories suggested by the language of the topic, the most obvious being function versus not function. But there are also other binaries here: Japanese versus American, and TQM versus more traditional and more traditionally American models of management. These binaries imply further binaries. The question requires a writer to consider the accuracy and relative suitability of particular traits commonly ascribed to Japanese versus American workers, such as communal and cooperative versus individualistic and competitive.

Step 2: Questions of definition might concentrate on what it means to ask whether TQM *functions effectively* in the American automotive industry? Does that mean “make a substantial profit”? “Produce more cars more quickly”? “Improve employee morale”? You would drown in vagueness unless you carefully argued for the appropriateness of your definition of this key term.

Step 3: How accurate is the binary? To what extent do American and Japanese management styles actually differ? Can you locate significant differences between these management styles that correspond to supposed differences between Japanese and American culture that might help you formulate your binary more precisely?

Step 4: To complicate the either/or formulation, you might suggest the danger of assuming that all American workers are rugged individualists and all Japanese workers are communal bees. Insofar as you are going to arrive at a qualified claim, it would be best stated in terms of the extent to which TQM might be adaptable to the auto industry.

COLLAPSING THE BINARY: A Brief Example In an essay called “In Defense of Distraction” writer Sam Anderson argues that contemporary American culture is suffering from what he terms “a crisis of attention.” He initially proposes a binary between attention (focus) and distraction. But as the essay progresses, he comes to argue that the two are not so opposed but in fact comprise one complex phenomenon: focused distraction. He finds value in both, he finds limitation in both, and he discovers that they rely on each other.

Tracking the Thinking Through Complication and Qualification: An Example In the following excerpt from “On Political Labels,” political scientist Christopher Borick complicates the definition of liberalism by tracking it historically. Look in the first paragraph for the historical roots of liberalism as favoring public control over government actions. Then in the second

paragraph see how this emphasis moves almost to its opposite—the belief that “government intervention in society is necessary.” You’ll learn a lot from the excerpt by seeing how it pivots around more than one sense of the word “freedom.”

Let’s look at liberalism for a start. The term liberal can be traced at least back to 17th-Century England, where it evolved from debates dealing with the voting franchise among English citizens. Proponents of including greater numbers of Englishmen in elections came to be known as liberals, thanks in part to the writings of John Locke, whose ideas about the social contract helped to build the philosophical underpinnings of this political ideology. Over time, liberalism has maintained its focus on public control over government actions, but there have been splits that have led to its current manifestation. In the 18th and 19th Centuries, liberalism began to stress the importance of individual freedom and broader rights of the citizenry in terms of limits on government. In essence, this type of liberalism focused on “negative rights” or the restrictions on what government could do to its citizens. The First Amendment of the Constitution includes numerous examples of negative rights. The granting of the right to freedom of speech or the press is achieved through the prohibition of government from creating laws that abridge such freedoms. Thus negating an action of government creates rights for the people.

In the 20th Century, however, liberalism became synonymous with the view that government had to be much more active in helping citizens get to the point where they would be able to truly live a free life. In this expanding view of liberalism, government intervention in society is necessary to create a more level playing field on which individuals can then use their freedom to achieve desired goals. Such beliefs have been at the roots of government expansion into social welfare policies such as public housing, food stamps, and affirmative action, and have formed the core of government agendas such as Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.

As this piece progresses, you can expect that it will either resolve the significant gap between the two historical definitions of liberalism or that it will in various ways show us how the gap has continued to produce tensions or misunderstandings.

In the case of most academic writing, it is usually a mistake to assume that the piece is making a single argument. A smarter assumption is that the piece is interested in exploring an issue or a problem from multiple points of view.

TRY THIS 2.8: REFORMULATING BINARIES: Fieldwork

Locate some organizing contrasts in anything—something you are studying, something you’ve just written, something you saw on television last night, something on the front page of the newspaper, something going on at your campus or workplace, and so forth. Consider, for example, the binaries suggested by current trends in contemporary music or by the representation of women in birthday cards. Having selected the binaries you want to work with,

pick one and transform the either/or thinking into more qualified thinking using the “to-what-extent” formula (step 4).

TRY THIS 2.9: Practice TRACKING REFORMULATED BINARIES in a Reading

In the following paragraph, writer Jonathan Franzen explores a problem by locating, defining, analyzing, and REFORMULATING BINARIES. Track the thinking in the Franzen paragraph. How does it engage readers’ expectations? What happens to the binary public versus private?

Walking up Third Avenue on a Saturday night, I feel bereft. All around me, attractive young people are hunched over their StarTacs and Nokias with preoccupied expressions, as if probing a sore tooth, or adjusting a hearing aid, or squeezing a pulled muscle; personal technology has begun to look like a personal handicap. All I really want from a sidewalk is that people see me and let themselves be seen, but even this modest ideal is thwarted by cell-phone users and their unwelcome privacy. They say things like “Should we have couscous with that?” and “I’m on my way to Blockbuster.” They aren’t breaking any laws by broadcasting these breakfast-nook conversations. There’s no PublicityGuard that I can buy, no expensive preserve of public life to which I can flee. Seclusion, whether in a suite at the Plaza or in a cabin in the Catskills, is comparatively effortless to achieve. Privacy is protected as both commodity and right; public forums are protected as neither. Like old-growth forests, they’re few and irreplaceable and should be held in trust by everyone. The work of maintaining them gets only harder as the private sector grows ever more demanding, distracting, and disheartening. Who has the time and energy to stand up for the public sphere? What rhetoric can possibly compete with the American love of “privacy”? [From Jonathan Franzen, “Imperial Bedroom” in *How to Be Alone* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003)]

APPLY a READING as a LENS

This final section of the chapter discusses how to apply a reading to other material you are studying. Using a reading as a lens means literally looking at things as the reading does, trying to think in its terms.

In college, students are expected to be able to take readings, often complex theoretical readings, and use them in order to understand other material. This is one of the biggest differences between writing about reading in high school versus college. As lens, the reading shapes how we come to understand whatever it is being applied to.

Your first goal when working with a reading as a lens is to explore its usefulness for explaining features of your subject. Because the match between lens and new material will never be perfect, you need to remember that whenever you apply the lens A to a new subject B, you are taking lens A from its original context and using its ideas in somewhat different circumstances for at least somewhat different purposes. Using the lens in a different context upon a different kind of information will often require you to adjust the lens—to refocus it a bit to bring this new content into clear focus.

Let's say, for example, that you have read a smart review essay on the representation of black/white race relations in contemporary films in the 1970s, and you decide to use the review as a lens for exploring the spate of black/white buddy films that emerged in the 1990s.

"Yes, but. . .," you find yourself responding: there are places where the 1990s films appear to fit within the pattern that the article claims, but there are also exceptions to the pattern. What do you do? What not to do is either choose different films that "fit better" or decide that the article is wrong-headed. Instead, start with the "yes": talk about how the film accords with the general pattern. Then focus on the "but," the claims in the reading (the lens) that seem not to fit, or material in your subject not adequately accounted for by the lens.

Because cultural climates and trends are constantly shifting and reconfiguring themselves, particularly in popular culture, you will learn from examining the films how the original review might be usefully extended to account for phenomena that were not present when it was originally written.

Using a Reading as a Lens: An Extended Example In the following example of applying a reading as a lens, one of our students, Anna Whiston, applies her lens (the theories of linguist Deborah Tannen on gender and conversation styles) to her subject: the conversational tactics of male celebrities on late night talk shows. The assignment was to use concepts from two books by socio-linguist Deborah Tannen—*You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* and *That's Not What I Meant: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*—to explore a conversational topic of the student's choice.

In her essay, excerpted here from a longer draft, Whiston shows how to do more with a theoretical reading than use it in a matching exercise. More than simply demonstrating the match between her evidence and Tannen's theories, she extends their range. She also shows how seemingly contradictory evidence actually can be seen to support Tannen's primary claims.

"I think my cooking, uh, sucks:" Self-Deprecation on Late Night Television
by Anna Whiston

In *You Just Don't Understand*, linguist Deborah Tannen explores conversation as a process affected largely by the gender of the speaker. For men, according to Tannen, "...life is a contest in which they are constantly tested and must perform, in order to avoid the risk of failure" (178). This sense of competition often manifests itself in "one-upsmanship," a strategy in which men attempt to outdo each other in order to achieve a superior position within a conversation (Tannen 26). There are, however, certain situations in which being on top of the hierarchy is not necessarily desirable. The interactions between men on late night talk shows provide examples of such situations.

Low confidence is not exactly typical in Hollywood. Celebrities are known just as much for their egos as they are for the movies that they headline and the scandals that they induce. And yet, late night talk shows, such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *Late*

Night with Conan O'Brien, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, and *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, include endless examples of self-deprecation on the parts of both the male hosts and the male celebrity guests.

Self-deprecation is, on the surface, a way of belittling oneself. However, examination of the conversations that take place on these television programs helps show that this strand of apparent humility is actually a much more nuanced conversational technique. Conversations on late night talk shows reveal that self-deprecation does not necessarily pit one man as inferior to another. Instead, it actually serves to maintain rather than diminish a speaker's higher status in the conversation.

In another one of her works on conversation, *That's Not What I Meant*, Tannen discusses framing, the idea that "everything about the way we say something contributes to establishing the footing that frames our relationships to each other" (75). The guests on talk shows are entering a frame, or conversational alignment, that is inherently asymmetrical. Though both guest and host are technically celebrities, the guest is presented as the centerpiece of the program, the one who answers the questions, while the host is simply the asker.

This frame is not always one that is appealing for the guest, who may want to create a persona that is not that of an elite star, but of a likable and approachable everyman. In order to cultivate this persona, the guest can use conversation to downplay his star status and success in order to establish a more symmetrical alignment to the host, thereby changing the frame of the conversation. As we will see, however, this reframing is complicated, since it essentially shifts the asymmetry to a different ground. An example of this technique can be found in actor Paul Rudd's interview with former NBC late night talk show host Conan O'Brien:

Rudd: I'm great, how are you?

O'Brien: I'm very good. You know things are going very well for you. You've been in so many successful movies. You have this new film *Role Models*. People love this movie, very funny, big hit for you, you've gotta be excited. I mean you you're a big, big star.

Rudd: It...I don't know about that, but it's very exciting. Oh God, I'm still out of breath! I swear to God.

By negating O'Brien's compliment, Rudd downplays his fame and thus reframes the conversation. By saying, "Oh God, I'm still out of breath," Rudd draws attention away from his stardom to some goofy dancing that O'Brien and Rudd did at the beginning of the interview. When O'Brien again tries to draw attention to Rudd's star power, Rudd again dodges the compliment.

O'Brien: But I would have to think by now that it's reaching critical mass, so many successful movies you must be getting the star treatment now. I bet you're treated like—

Rudd: I met Bruce Springsteen. I met him but it wasn't a...I snuck backstage at a Police concert and he was there.

Rudd's move, which allows him to segue into a self-deprecating anecdote about his encounter with Bruce Springsteen, represents an effort to resist the frame that O'Brien attempts to establish. Instead of accepting the frame that situates Rudd as a star and O'Brien as an average fan, Rudd strategically reframes the conversation by invoking a third party, a star whom both O'Brien and Rudd admire. Now, the conversation is not taking place between a "big star" and his fan, but rather between two fans.

To help understand Rudd's move, we can use Tannen's conversational categories of "report-talk" and "rapport-talk," the former being a way of "exhibiting knowledge and skill" and the latter being a way of "establishing connections" by "displaying similarities and matching experiences" (*Understand* 77). While men are generally associated with report talk rather than rapport talk, the two categories are not necessarily gender exclusive. Humility, which often takes the form of self-deprecation, can help to remove asymmetry from a conversation. Such a move allows the men to capitalize on their similarities rather than emphasize their differences. We see Rudd do just that by transforming his conversational role from that of the star to that of the fan, a fan that must sneak backstage to meet his musical idols, just like the proverbial rest of us.

[...]

One possible explanation for the desire to dismiss and minimize praise is that compliment-giving is not the selfless act it may appear to be, but is, in fact, pure one-upmanship. According to Tannen, "Giving praise, like giving information, is also inherently asymmetrical. It too frames the speaker as one-up, in a position to judge someone else's performance" (*Understand* 69). Thus, accepting praise may force the man on the receiving end of the praise to surrender supremacy to the praise-giver. By negating or avoiding praise, hierarchy can be reserved.

[...]

If this is so, then perhaps self-deprecating humor functions as a sort of preemptive move in which one man points out his own flaws before the other man has the chance to do so. If a man makes fun of himself, he still has control. He refuses to surrender this power to another man and thus surrender a hierarchical position in the conversation. Take, for example, this excerpt from Senator John McCain's conversation with NBC host Jay Leno:

Leno: And you went up to the mountains too?

McCain: We went up to our place near Sedona and had a very nice time and—

Leno: Now which house is that, number twel—

McCain: You know that's uh let's see it's a very...let's see...twenty-seven.

Leno was on the verge of making a dig about the senator's many homes, but McCain, seeing this coming, beat Leno to the punch, cutting him off before he even finished the word "twelve." McCain then goes on to exaggerate the number of homes that he owns. This shows that McCain not only understands the public's perception of him, he also is aware that his surplus of homes is a funny, and perhaps even embarrassing, subject. Thus, McCain uses self-deprecation to control the conversation, taking away Leno's opportunity to laugh at him before he laughs at himself.

Perhaps the most frequent and telling place in which self-deprecation pops up is in stories. Late night television is an excellent medium through which to study storytelling; in addition to the release dates of the projects they are promoting, celebrities always come equipped with an anecdote or two. Tannen includes a study of the differences found in stories told by men from those told by women. Her findings indicated that "the stories the men told made them look good" while the women were more likely to tell stories "in which they [women] violate social norms and are scared or embarrassed as a result" (*Understand* 177).

The behavior of men on late night talk shows would seem to contradict these findings: the men's stories usually involve them telling of an incident in which, they were, indeed, "embarrassed as a result." When we look at the content of these stories, however, it becomes apparent that these stories function on a more sophisticated level than simple self-effacement.

Whether it is Paul Rudd's story about showing an embarrassing movie at a friend's wedding or Steve Carrell's anecdote about his parents flying on a plane with a Thanksgiving turkey because his cooking "sucks," the men doing the self-deprecating do not ultimately portray themselves in an embarrassing or pathetic light. The stories that they tell at their own expense draw laughs—and the storyteller is laughing with them.

In this regard, the stories told are actually more flattering than they are embarrassing. The stories send the message, or metamessage, that the storyteller is able not only to laugh at himself, but also to draw laughs from his audience, all the while coming across as likable and humble. What appears to be humility or lack of self-confidence actually serves a purpose more akin to a joke. And when a joke is told, conversational asymmetry is unavoidable as one man is doing the joke telling while the other functions as the audience (*Understand* 90). Thus, what seems like a way to put one's self down is, in fact, one-upmanship.

Self-deprecation is a complex conversational tool. On the surface, it seems to be simply a way for the speaker to disparage himself. It also, however, can function as a tool for humility and compromise, a way to create conversational symmetry from a situation of asymmetry. The most subtle and fascinating way in which self-deprecation functions, however, is a bit of a paradox: by putting himself down, a man can actually build himself up. Conversation is not merely a straightforward exchange of words; it is a

skill, that when used strategically and with great awareness, can help a speaker to get ahead—often without anyone else realizing that he is doing it.

Assignments: Reading Analytically

1. Analyze a Piece of Writing Using One or More of the Chapter's Methods:

a. PARAPHRASE × 3

b. Finding the underlying structure by UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS and TRACKING BINARIES

c. Attending to THE PITCH, THE COMPLAINT, AND THE MOMENT

d. PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING

2. Paraphrase a Complicated Passage. Paraphrasing can help you to understand sophisticated material by uncovering the implications of the language. As a case in point, consider this passage from an article about *Life* magazine by Wendy Kozol entitled "The Kind of People Who Make Good Americans: Nationalism and Life's Family Ideal." Try PARAPHRASE × 3 with this passage. Paraphrase each sentence at least twice. Then rewrite the paragraph based on the understanding you have arrived at through paraphrasing.

Traditional depictions of the family present it as a voluntary site of intimacy and warmth, but it also functions as a site of consumption. At the same time capitalism lauds the work ethic and the family as spheres of morality safe from the materialism of the outside world. These contradictions produce a "legitimation crisis" by which capitalist societies become ever more dependent for legitimacy on the very sociocultural motivations that capitalism undermines. (186; rpt in *Rhetorical Visions* by Wendy Hesford, pp 177–200).

3. UNCOVER ASSUMPTIONS and Read Against the Grain. Take a paragraph from an analytical essay you are reading in one of your courses or from a feature article from a newspaper or website such as Slate or aldaily.com—and do the following:

- First, UNCOVER ASSUMPTIONS by reasoning back to premises. Ask yourself, if the piece believes this, what must it also already believe? Answer that question and be sure to share your reasoning (why you think so).
- Try reading against the grain. What if anything is the piece saying that it might not know it is saying?

Or you could also UNCOVER THE ASSUMPTIONS of a policy decision at your school or place of work. This will work best if you have not just the policy but some kind of written manifesto on it.

4. Use a Reading as a Lens for Examining a Subject. For example, look at a piece of music or a film through the lens of a review that does not discuss the particular piece or film you are writing about. Or you might read about a particular theory of humor and use that as a lens for examining a comic play, film, story, television show, or stand-up routine.

5. Put the Tools to work: Compose an Analytical Portfolio. Select a subject—which could be a film, an advertising campaign, a political campaign, a television series, something that you are currently reading for a course or on your own, etc.—and do a series of PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITINGS as a way of generating ideas.