



This is “Setting the Stage for Writing”, chapter 2 from the book [A Guide to Perspective Analysis \(index.html\)](#) (v. 1.0).

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Chapter 2

Setting the Stage for Writing

2.1 Considering your own subjectivity

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss how analysis does not lead to definitive answers but rather to subjective impressions.
2. Discuss how our points of view are influenced by our connections, values and experiences.
3. Introduce the reading/observation journal as a means of initially exploring our reactions.

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 110.

- Kenneth Burke

This often quoted parable reveals how history functions as an on-going conversation, a conversation that we're invited to participate in during the time we have on earth. Likewise, when we write an analysis of a subject, we should see ourselves as participating in a discussion on it, one that will continue long after we've handed in our essays. Just as it's unlikely that what we have to say will be the last word, so we should not allow others to have the final say either. Of course, there isn't just one conversation that goes on in our lives; instead we are involved every day in several discussions, and they all influence each other. Because we do not begin any analysis as a blank slate, we first need to understand why we see a subject in a certain way, by considering how past discussions and experiences inform our reactions.

None of us are raised in a vacuum: our friends, our teachers, and our families influence our beliefs, tastes, and judgments. Though sometimes we may disagree with their perspectives (especially those of our parents), we can never completely escape from them. Likewise, our broader culture exerts a heavy influence. For instance, although you might enjoy shows like *South Park* or *Family Guy* that satirize the American family, you might not have liked them if you were alive (and able to see them) in the 1950s when Americans were more celebratory and less critical of themselves. In addition, personal experiences strongly inform our reactions. At some time, we have all heard a sappy song about a person getting his or her heart broken and wanted to scream at the singer to get over it, only to hear the same song again after being freshly dumped and feeling as though it now penetrates our soul.

This holds true not only for works of art and fiction but also for writing that reveal the author's intentions more directly, such as editorials, documentaries, and essays. For one, we may disagree as to whether the author's stated purpose is the only reason behind the piece. If, for instance, I were to write an editorial arguing that the government should spend more money on education to make it more accessible to the poor and bring about greater cultural literacy, I know what my friends and family would say: "Yeah, right, Randy; you just want a raise." And even if everyone were to agree that the author has sincerely stated the purpose of the piece, the effect of that purpose will vary from person to person due to the different experiences, morals, and beliefs that shape each individual's unique perspective. For instance, a Michael Moore documentary that is critical of American business practices may leave one person (who just received a promotion) seething at him for trying to tear down established institutions, while another viewer (who just got downsized) may applaud Moore for bravely calling our attention to an injustice that needs to be rectified.

I am not bringing this up to suggest that when you prepare to write you should wipe your mind clear of any potential bias. "Objectivity" is an ideal that is largely unattainable, for we all see the world through our own subjective lenses. This is why we need to first acknowledge, understand, and evaluate our subjectivity, especially as it relates to the subject of our analysis. To consider why you react to something as you do, I recommend that when reading a text, viewing a show, listening to a song or recalling an experience, you take the time to pause periodically and record your thoughts in a **reading/observation journal**¹. Your responses will vary in length and type, but should essentially consist of two parts: first summarize what you encounter (if it's a written or visual text, mark the page number or DVD chapter so you can find it again), and then write your reaction to it. The advantage to keeping a reading/observation journal is that it allows you to reflect on your subject as you examine it. Though you might think pausing to write in a journal will take away from experiencing or enjoying your subject, it may

1. A journal for recording your observations or notes about a given subject and your initial responses to the details.

actually help you to encounter it more fully. When a piece inspires a particular thought, your mind may wander through its implications even as you continue reading or viewing, causing you to overlook important details. The journal allows you to pause and record your considerations and then return to your focus with greater attention. On the following page are a few examples of reading observation journal entries for an analysis of a book, a business report, and a travel essay.

Response to Virginia Woolf’s Essay “A Room of One’s Own”

p. 5 Wolfe claims that she had to “kill the Angel of the House” before she felt the freedom to engage in her own writing. She clearly associates this phrase with the expectations laid out for women in this period.

This seems a bit dated to me. Most of the couples I know split the household chores. I also know that I would not like it if my girlfriend asked me to do all the dishes for the next two weeks so she could write.

p. 7 Wolfe also points out that to write anything worthwhile we need to have a “room of one’s own”, free from distractions or expectations.

I would love to have a room of my own, but unfortunately as a student living in Southern California, I can’t afford one. And there are plenty of distractions: My roommate’s TV, the passing traffic, the cat that keeps jumping up on my lap. She’s so aware of the problems with gender, she isn’t thinking about social...

Business Report on Buddies, a Family Restaurant Chain

Quarterly Profits were up by 10% on the Lincoln and Elm location, but down over 5% at the Broadway and Fourth location.

Of course several factors could allow for this. The management team at L&E is more competent, but they are also located in a family neighborhood. B&F is more gentrified and customers want something more upscale.

A suggestion was made at board meeting on 12/7 to increase advertising for B&F location and possibly bring in new management.

I doubt either plan will have much success, other family restaurants tried the same thing but failed in that area. Best scenario is to shut down and move to a more family friendly neighborhood, and then consider...

Travel Journal for a Week in Paris

June 23, 8 p.m. Sitting across the coffee shop from me are two Americans, asking for soymilk. The waiter clearly looks confused, so they repeat their request more loudly. The waiter simply walks away, leaving the Americans to comment, "It's true what they say about the French being rude."

Why don't more Americans understand not everybody should speak English and that raising your voice does not help? I made an effort to order in French and the waiter was very nice to me. Another example of how we create and believe our stereotypes.

June 24, 3 p.m. Amazing view from top of Eiffel Tower, the city stretches on as far as you can see in every direction.

On further reflection, however, I preferred the quieter places in the city. I loved the hidden restaurants, the small art galleries, the...

As you can see from these examples, what you write at this point will probably not appear in your finished draft, at least not verbatim. In this chapter and the next two, I encourage you to write in a more exploratory fashion, using your pen or keyboard to discover and develop your perspectives before you present them more formally. Your initial responses should take the form of **freewriting**², writing that comes out as a stream of thoughts unencumbered by grammar, spelling, or a fear of where it is heading. In addition to freewriting, we will look at several other exercises and **heuristics**³, which are discovery procedures, that will help to get you started—but always remember that if you do not take the time to explore your ideas, then your final draft will most likely seem obvious and boring, no matter how much you polish the structure or style.

EXERCISE

Get a hold of a journal, notebook, or pad, and write “Reading/Observation Journal” on the front cover. Make your first entry about one of the subjects you’re examining for your first essay. Divide the pages between left and right; on the left side, write down what you do, and on the right side, record comments. Your comments might be about what you like/dislike about the subject, how it seems odd or justifiable, how it emerges from social pressures and/or policies, and whether it’s inevitable, modifiable, or avoidable. Make a separate journal for each of your classes and use it to comment on all of your assignments.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Writing about a subject when you first consider it can help you to formulate a point of view and save time down the road.
- Your initial considerations do not have to be stated formally or definitively—they can be tentative and exploratory.
- A consideration of the various implications of a subject results in more original, thoughtful assertions.

2. A type of writing that comes out as a stream of thoughts unencumbered by grammar, spelling, or a fear of where it is heading.

3. Procedures, like freewriting, that help writers to discover their ideas.

2.2 Consulting Other Sources

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain how consulting research may inform and expand our analysis.
2. Discuss effective ways to find sources.
3. Discuss how to evaluate and incorporate relevant sources.

To return to Burke’s parable at the beginning of this chapter, consulting sources is how we invite authors into the mini parlor discussion of our essay where their ideas may support our own or provide points of contrast. Looking at what others have to say may help you to extend and clarify each aspect of analysis. For example, relevant biographical and cultural background can help you to form more thoughtful assertions, especially on the more obscure aspects of your subject. Your explanations will also become clearer and more thorough as you compare and contrast your perspectives with those of others. Finally, looking at other sources can help you to see new dimensions of significance as you learn more about the issues that relate to your subject—issues that were central at the time the subject was formulated or took place as well as issues that we still struggle with today.

I recommend that you begin your research with a detective mindset; be organized and deliberate but also open to the unexpected. And like a good detective, be prepared to take plenty of notes in which you consider both the content and your initial reactions, using the reading/observation journal discussed above. Thinking about the sources as you examine them will save you time down the road when you incorporate them into your analysis. And just as detectives ask for help in conducting investigations, don’t hesitate to consult experts about which sources might be the most useful and where to track them down. In all the years I have been doing research, I have yet to find a librarian who was not happy to assist me. Furthermore, as a detective lets clues lead to new clues, so you should let the sources you examine lead you to new sources. Look at the bibliographies and notes of the essays you consult to see which ones they rely on, and especially look for those that are cited in more than one piece.

Gathering information has become much easier in recent years; in fact, sometimes we often feel buried in it. If I wish to consult **secondary research**⁴, pieces written by others, I can stroll over to a library where I can glance at more texts than I can read in fifty lifetimes, visit a local bookstore to browse through bestsellers and magazines, or stop at a newsstand and flip through papers from almost every major

4. Research based on what others have written about a subject.

city in the world. And thanks to the Internet, I do not even have to leave the house, but can do a Google search for up to the minute news or visit any number of academic websites to see what my fellow scholars have written about my subject. And I do not need to rely just on what others have already written, but can also turn to **primary research**⁵, information that I gather for myself. I can conduct interviews, send out surveys, visit relevant locations, and even set up experimental studies (as long as they conform to proper ethical guidelines). Having so many options, we can sometimes feel like the proverbial donkey that starves to death because he can't choose which bundle of hay to eat from first.

To return to the opening parable, once you have gathered enough research on your subject, you can now participate in the on-going discussion about it. As Burke suggests, you might begin by simply listening to what experts have already said by reviewing the background information that provides a fuller picture of the subject and the circumstances out of which it emerged. You might consult (but do not rely on) a few websites that are specifically devoted to the subject to familiarize yourself with the main issues connected to it. You might then want to examine more specific historical or biographical texts to read about the prevalent issues and concerns for the author or key people involved at the time the event happened or the piece was created. You might also look at interviews and correspondence with these people to learn what they had to say about their influences, affiliations, and concerns.

Once you understand the general circumstances out of which your subject arose, you can more directly examine what critics and scholars have written about it. If your subject is a creative work, then you might want to peruse reviews that came out at the time of its release as well as examine more recent perspectives published in scholarly books and journals in the humanities. If you are analyzing a non-fiction person or event, then you might consult contemporary newspapers, op-eds, and political documents, along with more recent books and journals in the social sciences. When reviewing these, you will soon discover that critics, pundits, and scholars often disagree with each other; keep in mind that if they all held the same opinions, then neither they nor you would have any reason to continue to examine your subject. Finally, you should not only examine the research that focuses directly on your subject but also explore research that focuses on the surrounding significance. For instance, if you were analyzing the diary of a runaway slave from the 1840s, then you might want to read about the debate over slavery during that period. You could consult current historical perspectives as well as documents from the period, such as congressional debates, or testimonials from both slave owners and abolitionists.

5. Research conducted directly by the author of the essay, including personal interviews, surveys, and visits to particular locations.

After examining several sources, you can begin to formulate more specific research questions. For instance, if you were to analyze the current state of the economy, you might ask the question: Are we on the verge of an economic recovery? Keep in

mind that you might get several answers to this question and you shouldn't rely on any one of them to do your thinking for you by picking out one or two of the leading economic indicators and drawing the obvious conclusions from them. Let's say that you look at the New York Stock Exchange and see that it has risen a thousand points in the past six months. You might be tempted to see this as evidence that the economy is strong overall, though this may only be true for a small segment of the population. Likewise, if you were to look at only the national unemployment rate and see that it has risen during this period, you might conclude that the economy is weak overall, though, again, this may be true for only certain types of workers and in specific parts of the country. For a more complete analysis, you should consider both statistics, and explain why you think the economy could be strong in one area and weak in another in light of both current circumstances and historical precedence. Also, you should not rely on others to explain these statistics for you, but reveal why you agree or disagree with their opinions. For instance, it would probably not be enough to write, "*The stock market has risen substantially, a sign, according to Wall Street expert Joe Dollars, that the economy is doing well as a whole.*" Instead you should add your perspective to both the statistics and expert opinion: "*While the stock market has risen substantially, leading some experts like Joe Dollars to conclude that the economy is doing well, the number of unemployed continues to increase in key services throughout the country, leading me to believe that the recession is far from over.*"

The temptation to rely on a singular source becomes even stronger when we come across an author whose point of view is similar to our own. For example, suppose that you are a vegetarian and are analyzing the rise of obesity in the United States. If you read an article on how meat consumption has increased in recent years, you might be tempted to immediately put the two together and argue that the meat industry is solely responsible for this unhealthy trend. But if you stop your research there, you could miss out on a plethora of other causes, such as how technology keeps us from getting adequate exercise. In doing background reading on your subject, you should examine a variety of sources, especially those that take positions that are antithetical to your own. In doing so you show that you are participating in a general discussion as opposed to merely focusing on those whose ideas agree with your own. And if, after examining all of these sources, you are still having trouble formulating more precise research questions, you might try utilizing some of the invention exercises suggested in the next three chapters. These will help you to both read your sources more critically and consider their implications more fully.

Whichever sources you decide to include, make certain that you acknowledge them, even when writing a draft. **Plagiarism**⁶, the attempt to pass off another's ideas as your own, is something that could not only earn you an F on a paper or in a class, but also get you expelled from your school. And many teachers make no distinction

6. Taking credit for another's ideas without proper acknowledgment or citation.

between unintentional plagiarism (simply forgetting to cite a source in an early draft) and intentional plagiarism (purposely taking credit for another's ideas). To be on the safe side, you should cite any ideas that you come across in your reading that are not common knowledge. Though sometimes this may be difficult to assess if you are not well versed in a particular field, you can always ask your teacher when you are in doubt (just make certain that you do so before you hand in your paper). You should also ask your teachers which format they want you to use when citing your sources. The APA, Chicago, and MLA manuals reveal different ways of going about it, so you should consult their respective publications and websites to learn more about their formats and procedures.

Make certain, too, that you integrate these sources into your essay, and that you do not let the authors speak entirely for you. If you do not show what you think, you might leave the impression that you randomly tossed in a few sources simply to fulfill a research requirement, which can be especially problematic if you rely on information that comes from questionable sources. Instead you should incorporate sources as if you were a moderator in a discussion (recall again the opening parable), responding to each and showing how they inform or provide points of contrast to each other and to your own views. To determine whether you should include a particular piece in your essay and if so, how to integrate it, ask yourself the following questions:

When was the piece published?

Using up-to-date sources in your essay is important because they show that you are at the forefront of the academic conversation. You should especially keep this in mind when examining disciplines that are constantly being updated due to recent discoveries or advancements in technology, such as genetic engineering or computer programming. However, it is not necessary to refer only to analyses that were published in the past twenty years as long as you take into account that your source might be limited by outdated cultural attitudes or obsolete scientific theories. In fact, sometimes you might wish to quote a misguided statement as an example of what some people thought about the subject during a particular era, but try not to set it up as the final word on how we should continue to see it today. For instance, you might quote a nineteenth century professor who viewed Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* as being a demented fantasy of a psychotic woman who doesn't know that her place is in the home, in order to show how unenlightened critics interpreted the novel at the time. You should not, however, allow such sexist biases to limit your understanding of the piece today.

What is the author's area of expertise?

Usually at the beginning or ending of an article or book, you can find a summary of the author's special background, education, or training that gives her opinion a sense of weight and authority. Though you should make certain that most of the people you quote or paraphrase are experts in a field relevant to your subject or its implications, you might also include opinions of others so long as you qualify how and why you choose to include them. For instance, if I were writing an analysis of how Americans were affected by the Second World War, I might quote my mother, who was a child when it occurred, to show the effect it had on someone who was not fully cognizant of its broader implications.

What are the author's possible biases?

An author may have a certain perspective not only because he wrote at a particular time and place or because of his expertise, but also because of his beliefs and affiliations. Sometimes authors are blatantly upfront about their political, moral or religious agendas, and other times they strongly imply them through their choice of words or the way they shape their analysis. In either case, it's always a good idea to qualify what they have to say by acknowledging the one-sided or overly opinionated nature of their views and/or by including contrasting perspectives. You do not have to pretend to be objective yourself (I don't believe such a state is possible), but you should leave the impression of a reasonable and thorough scholar who has explored different points of view before arriving at your own opinions.

Even when citing authors who demonstrate more informed, reasonable, and enlightened perspectives, you still need to reveal to what extent you agree or disagree with them and why. Sometimes your opinion will be implied by the way you set up their perspective, especially when the author's point of view echoes your own: *Huckleberry Finn has had an enormous influence on other authors, for, as Ralph Ellison argues, "No Huck and Jim, no American Novel as we know it."* Ralph Ellison, *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Michael Patrick Hearn (New York: Norton, 2001), backcover. Other times, you may need to explain why and to what degree you disagree: *Tom Wolfe's famous definition of the 1970s as being a "me generation" Tom Wolfe, "The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening" in Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter and Vine (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976). has a certain amount of validity, but he fails to take into account that historically nearly all people have been motivated by their own selfish interests and are not overly concerned with the welfare of future generations.*

As you may have noticed, I chose to quote the source in the first case and paraphrase it in the second. Which method you decide to use when you incorporate a source has mostly to do with how much you like the specific words the author uses and how succinctly they are stated. In the first case, I thought that Ellison

summed up the influence of Twain's novel in such a clear, definitive, and succinct manner that I wanted to use his exact words, but in the second, Wolfe's notion of the "me generation" is explored throughout his entire essay, and my response focused less on a specific way he sees this attitude manifested and more on a perspective that he doesn't take into account. If you choose to quote a source, make certain that you put quotation marks around it when it is four lines or less and, when longer, set it off through indentation and spacing.

When incorporating long quotes, use them sparingly and follow them up with almost equally long explanations to justify why you needed to include all of the words, as opposed to providing just a summary of the main ideas. For instance, when I opened this section with a quote from Kenneth Burke, I did not just leave it hanging there for the reader to consider but attempted to integrate it into the main issues I wanted to cover, pointing out that we are all part of an ongoing conversation whenever we choose to do research, and that neither you, me, nor anyone else will ever get the final word. I also chose to quote the parable in its entirety because I like the way Burke invites us into his metaphorical parlor to consider our place within history. Usually, however, you can paraphrase the gist of an author's ideas and reserve direct quotes only for places where his choice of words is especially striking or significant.

Exactly how much you choose to quote or paraphrase will also depend on your subject and the reason you have for writing on it. Just make certain that your finished essay does not seem like a research report (like those forms you filled out in the sixth grade to prove that you read a book) or like a pastiche of long quotes with only a few brief statements tying them together. Instead, your own considerations should primarily drive your essay, with other sources used mainly for support or as catalysts for further reflection. Still, though your research should not completely replace your initial considerations, it most certainly will modify them as it helps you to discover insights that would not have occurred to you had you only analyzed the subject on your own.

EXERCISE

Think of a person or place that is important to you but is not widely known. First, look over what you may have already written about this person or place in the form of letters, e-mails, or diaries. Next, write down a list of people whom you might wish to interview to find out more about your subject, for instance family, friends and colleagues if it is a person, or frequent visitors and caretakers if it is a place. List the main questions you would like to ask the people involved and consider possible follow up questions you could ask depending on their initial answers. Now, consider some of the main issues that you associate with the person or place. Look for a few secondary sources that might help you learn more about these issues.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- It is important to understand and acknowledge personal influences and experiences before beginning an analysis.
- Research can help us learn new perspectives on a subject and engage in a wider discussion about how we see it and why it is relevant.
- Always acknowledge research, even when writing initial drafts, and incorporate it gracefully into the essay.
- Carefully review the research for relevance and bias before introducing it in an essay.
- Research should always supplement but never dominate an essay, and special care should be taken before incorporating long quotes.

2.3 An Overview of the Writing Process

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain how writing takes both time and effort, and discuss effective ways to go about it.
2. Discuss how the writing process is not linear but recursive, moving back and forth from invention to revision.
3. Reveal how learning to write analytically can lead to success in many areas of life outside of the classroom.

Once you've chosen a subject, initially considered how your beliefs, culture, and experiences might influence how you see it, and consulted other sources for background information and differing perspectives, you can begin to draft your essay. But before you can actually sit down to formally write your essay, you have to actually, well, sit down and write. Be careful not to try to produce a formal draft too soon because sometimes you can get **writer's block**⁷ when you haven't taken the time to thoroughly explore your ideas. If you get stuck and do not know where to begin your analysis, go back and write out your thoughts less formally. This will help you to think (and get more excited) about what you want to write. At the same time, don't wait too long to get started, because motivation usually comes after you've begun the process. Often when you force yourself to start writing you will discover new insights that will ignite your desire to find even more. Personally, I seldom feel like sitting in front of the computer and wracking my brain for another writing session, but once I get started and become excited by what I produce, several hours may just zoom by without me even noticing.

Of course, this happens only when I get into the act of writing itself and shut off the voices of self-doubt. Like most of you, I carry a committee of past teachers and critics in my head, a committee that constantly questions every word I write: "Can't you find a better way to put that? You're an English Professor, so you should know exactly what to say the first time through! This piece of writing is terrible and it will prove to everyone that you were an imposter all of these years." Thoughts like these do not, of course, motivate me, but instead make me want to exit my writing program and switch to a more relaxing file like Spider Solitaire. To get anything accomplished, therefore, I first have to make a deal with these voices of self-doubt — if they will be quiet long enough to let me get out a draft, then I will review my essay with a more critical eye later.

7. A psychological state in which one is unable to continue the process of writing, usually due to the desire to produce a final draft before considering the ideas more fully.

I don't want to give the impression, however, that writing is a linear procedure, moving steadily from invention to writing to revising. Instead, writing is a **recursive process**⁸ in which all of these functions may go on simultaneously. I see writing more as an increasingly complicated discussion between writers and their words. As I put the words down on paper or on the computer screen, I take a step back, consider their implications, and add, delete, rearrange, or modify them until they express my view in a clear, precise, and thorough manner. This often takes several drafts. Writing is not a skill (something you can master after a few lessons), but an art, and, like any art, you can never perfect it. In fact, the better you get at it, the more time and effort you need to devote to it. Any child can learn to play "Chopsticks" on the piano before even having a formal lesson; however, a concert pianist must spend hours practicing everyday before being satisfied with a performance. Likewise, when I was in high school, I would write only one draft of my essay before handing it in, but now I often produce as many as thirty drafts before I submit a book or article for publication.

To help your writing go more smoothly, find a good place to work, relatively free of distraction, and set aside a certain amount of time you plan to devote to the assignment. Ideally, I like to spend between two to three hours a day writing because less than that does not give my ideas adequate time to develop, but more than that tends to make me feel like I've exerted my analytical muscles too hard (which is another reason not to wait to begin the essay until the day before the assignment is due). I also try to break the writing into smaller tasks, focusing on one section of my analysis at a time, to avoid the feeling of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the project, reminding myself that the section I work on might appear anywhere in the finished draft and that I do not have to write the essay in the same sequence that it will later be read. I can always change the order after I have a chance to articulate my thoughts more fully.

By this I do not mean that you should write in the exact manner that I or anyone else does. Some writers like to outline their papers before they begin; others like to discover their ideas while composing. Some like to begin their assignments early, and others get added inspiration from the adrenaline of a looming deadline. Additionally, your composing process may vary, depending on your subject and the nature of the assignment. For instance, if you know a subject well, you may not need to do as much additional background reading as you would when tackling one that's less familiar, and if the assignment does not allow you to hand in additional revisions, you might want to start it earlier to make certain that you have the time to fully develop your main ideas.

8. A process, like writing, that moves back and forth between its various aspects without a set sequence or order.

Having said all this, there is a common way that most of us go about forming an analysis, at least initially. As you will see in Chapter 3, once you've learned something about a subject and considered your general feelings toward it, you can

carefully examine the key examples to establish your main perspective or working theses. Afterward, as you will see in Chapter 4, you can modify and justify these perspectives by explaining how you derived them and by considering their broader implications. Finally, as you will see in Chapter 5, you can structure your thoughts into a deliberate and effective essay. Of course, as you go through this process, you may continue to examine and even question your own beliefs and consult additional sources. As Burke implies in his parlor parable, the process is never ending, but eventually we all leave the discussion of our subjects to concentrate on other concerns. Yet at the same time, be careful not to give up too quickly and merely throw out the most obvious statements that occur to you. To contribute something worthwhile to this ongoing discussion, you need to slow down the process of analysis to fully consider the relevance of each of its features. Doing so will not only help you to understand and appreciate the subjects you analyze for your classes, but also can make you more successful in your future endeavors.

Whether you go into business, medicine, law, or any other profession, you will be expected to develop, present, and defend your opinions. Simply having a wealth of factual knowledge will continue to have less and less importance in this information age, where people can get basic answers by picking up their cell phones or searching with Google. More significantly, when people cease to think critically and analyze established knowledge, both social and academic progress stagnates. Just imagine what the world would be like today if teachers had given up on analysis five hundred years ago and continued to allow students only to memorize what we knew then about all academic subjects. We'd still be living in a feudal society, riding around on horses, and facing a life expectancy of around thirty-five.

Furthermore, analysis can also help us to understand and change those parts of our lives that often matter more to us than our careers and contributions to academic knowledge. We don't have to take Socrates' phrase "the unexamined life is not worth living" as seriously as Thoreau did and escape to a cabin in the woods to look at ourselves without distraction. Yet we can all benefit from slowing down from time to time to think about our daily activities, key relationships, and future goals and consider how we might make each more fulfilling. If we learn to examine and avoid the mistakes we made in the past, we are more likely to take control of the present and move toward a more promising future.

EXERCISE

Think of a social issue or personal concern that has been troubling you as of late. Write down all your thoughts without stopping and don't be concerned if your writing seems scattered or informal because you can fix these problems at a later stage. Now look over what you just wrote and underline the five most important words. Next, write a sentence in which you use all five of those words, perhaps in a different order and manner than they initially came out. Now write a paragraph based on that sentence. In the process, how did your writing evolve? Did any sections become clearer? Did your perspective change? Consider how writing is a process that constantly moves you in directions you might not have anticipated.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Writer's block occurs when we become too critical of our thoughts and expressions before we have a chance to develop them.
- Writing is a recursive process of forming, developing, and clarifying our ideas, causing them to evolve in unexpected directions.
- To produce ideas worth sharing, we need to slow down the process of analysis, taking the time to carefully examine each of its components.